



onioncollective
COMMON GROUND IN STONEHOUSE

May 2023

***“Collaboration
is not about gluing together
existing egos. It’s about the
ideas that never existed until
after everyone entered the room.”***

Unknown

INTRODUCTION

In February 2023, Onion Collective were appointed by Stroud District Council (SDC) as part of a wider team to undertake engagement and strategic placemaking work in order to facilitate site proposals for the former Ship Inn site at Stonehouse. This followed a motion at SDC's Full Council to consider non-housing uses for the site in response to community ambition.

Defining outcomes is often the most important thing you can do in securing both impact and funding. It is our experience that effective community empowerment projects and initiatives only flourish when there exists a coherent and shared vision which guides the process - providing a solid understanding of the reason for the work that is founded on a collective view of the change that is sought as a result of any activity. Our role within this process is primarily to undertake stakeholder engagement work with a range of interested parties and to find the common ground around which alternative proposals could be framed and pursued.

Community ownership and stewardship of land and buildings can be a powerful force for social change - addressing cultural, environmental, social and economic objectives at the same time as building community voice, agency and power. At the same time, it can be hard - the time and energy needed to bring successful community projects into existence and the skills and expertise needed to ensure the long-term sustainability and viability of a project are all significant, and are often beset with challenges and hurdles. A shared understanding of the long-term impact of the work is a necessary but not sufficient condition for success, as we explore later in this report. The starting point, however, is to identify a collective vision that parties can get behind as a focus for activity and decision-making, and a driver of partnership-working and hope.

CONTENTS

Introduction	2
About Onion Collective	3
Our approach	5
Theoretical narratives	6
Identifying shared concerns	7
Areas of potential	8
Catalysing positive energy	9
Identifying shared long-term outcomes	10
Identifying shared medium-term outputs	11
Identifying potential activities	12
Connection to nature	13
Social connectedness	14
Economic regeneration	15
Community confidence	16
Moving forward	17
Co-design process	18
Further consultation	19
Resourced support	20
Meanwhile use	21
Social capital	22
Conclusions and next steps	23



ABOUT ONION COLLECTIVE

Onion Collective CIC is a social enterprise which was founded in 2012 in an effort to bring forward community regeneration of key sites in our home town of Watchet in Somerset. Over a ten-year period, Onion Collective have devised, funded (£10m+) and delivered a series of projects - asset-transferring a number of important sites into community use - for heritage, culture and enterprise - everything from a paper mill to artist studios and a boat museum. It is now regarded as one of the country's leading place-based community businesses, with its projects, most notably East Quay, held up as an exemplar for community-led revival, despite a rural, deprived and isolated location.

Alongside our own projects, the collective occasionally supports other organisations including local authorities, funding bodies and community organisations with community development work to advise, catalyse and generate community initiatives capable of transforming the fortunes of places for the new economy. We use our experience of delivery on the ground to help other communities build things for themselves. One of the things that we are often asked to do, as is the case here in Stonehouse, is support community engagement and consultation to find exciting and empowering solutions that communities want. We do this using a well-tested logic framework process which starts by identifying shared outcomes for action to clarify the impact a community desires and to translate that into tangible projects, outputs and goals (and if necessary monitoring indicators, evaluation methods, assumptions and risks). We also work across project development and feasibility, business planning, social impact, funding strategy, evaluation and capital build delivery.

We believe a different kind of economy - one that is kinder, more connected and climate-positive - is not only possible but coming into being and our work is towards that future.





1) Onion's four original founders at the opening of our first capital project in Watchet - an old Brunel-designed boat museum asset transferred from the District Council into community ownership and now operated in a partnership between Onion Collective, a local heritage group and the Town Council.

2) A jubilant community build team on completion of the pavillion at Splash Point - built by hand with 50 community volunteers over three days, bringing an overgrown unloved site back into public use.

3) Celebrating the granting of planning permission for East Quay in June 2018 after a 5-year journey.

4) Directors Jess and Georgie on site during the construction of East Quay, a £7.3m cultural and community building, which opened in 2021, now in community hands - held on a 100 year lease from the District Council and funded through grants from the Coastal Communities Fund, Arts Council and others.

5) View of East Quay across the harbour, designed by Invisible Studio, and now home to two galleries, a print studio, paper mill, eleven workshops/studios, a restaurant, a learning space and five accommodation pods - all revenues returned to the project to secure long-term viability.

6) Poster for a series of symposiums we ran in partnership with Power To Change exploring new models of economic and social development and how community businesses can bring about change.

OUR APPROACH

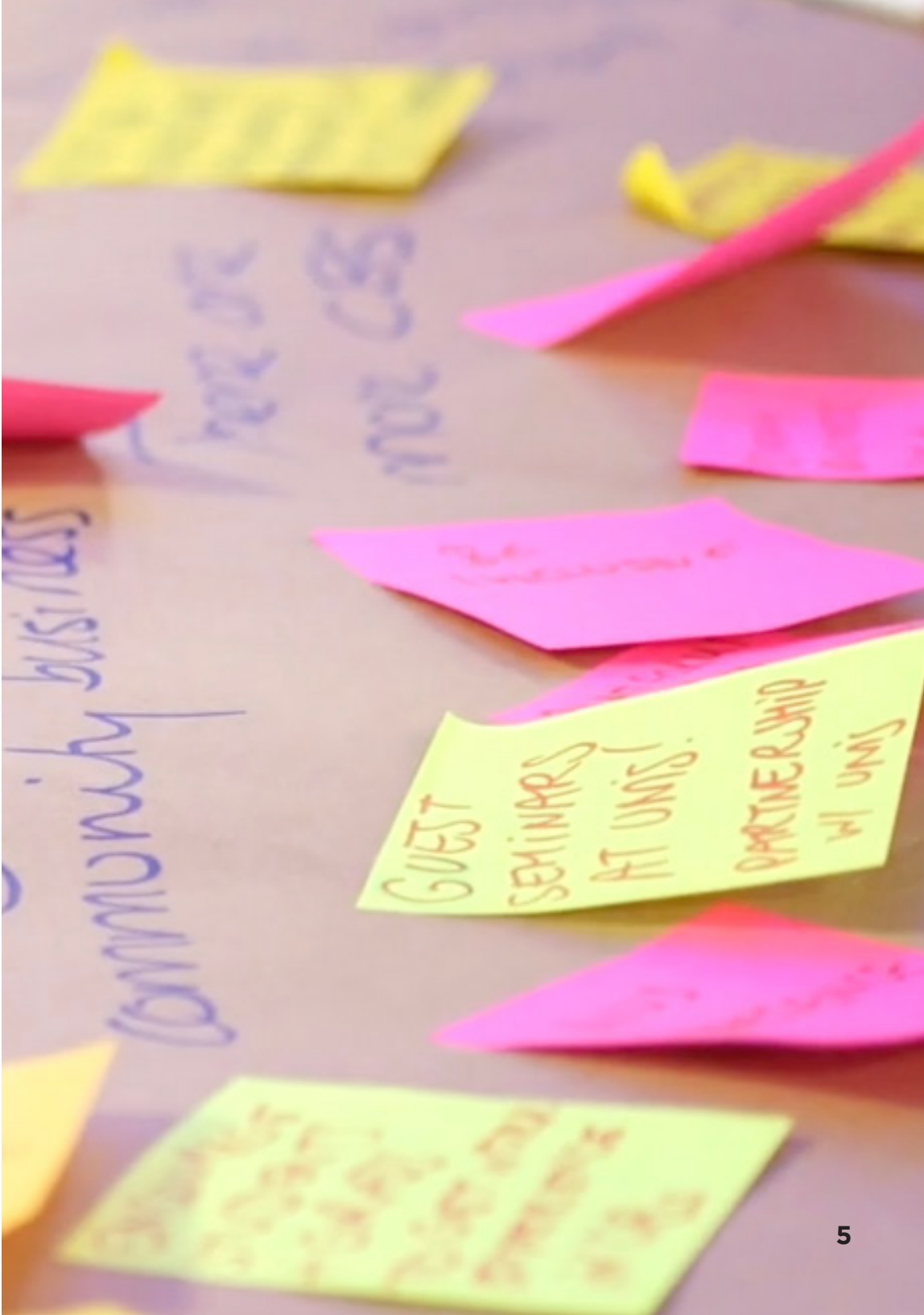
It is our experience that the key to successful community development is genuine inclusion and meaningful empowerment that acknowledges the validity of the community as guardians of shared spaces. Our approach is always to start with an open dialogue and work through a process based on four principles or stages: respect, connect, reflect and direct to seek a shared and deliverable outcome. This staged approach is inspired by the writings of Tyson Yunkaporta in his powerful book *Sand Talk* in which he talks about a process in which public authorities working with Aboriginal communities often started instead by directing activity and only later, through a process of reflecting and connection, came respect the value of community and their knowledge.

For us, the starting point for any engagement is **respect** for those people with whom you are wanting to build relationships and engagement. This means listening carefully and openly, and allowing people to talk and express their existing ideas or concerns as valid. Secondly, the purpose of conversations is to find ways to **connect** the ambitions, hopes, dreams and fears of multiple voices with regard to a site and wider opportunities. These conversations are open-minded and broad-ranging, and again mindful of the validity of previous experiences. Thirdly, the process aims to solidify collective ambitions by helping parties to **reflect** on common ground in a structured vision built on excitement and hope for a better outcome. A final task is to **direct** - not in the sense of telling stakeholders what to do but by offering tangible roadmaps for action that give direction and momentum that can move beyond possibilities into practical and deliverable ideas.

At this initial stage, engagement work has focused on a defined stakeholder group of individuals and organisations - either those with an expressed interest in the site or those who are working in and around the Stonehouse community in related fields. Small group conversations were held over four days with the stakeholders listed. Certainly, there are some gaps, and we later make recommendations for further engagement work, but we felt comfortable and confident that a good, broadly representative cross-section of viewpoints have been sought and collated. What is also revealed is that there is undoubtedly a huge amount of common ground in terms of both a shared understanding of the challenges and opportunities present in Stonehouse, and of the potential for impact in certain areas, with identifiable commonality around hopes, dreams and change over time.

STAKEHOLDER CONVERSATIONS

- Stonehouse Town Council
- Stroud District Council
- Elected members
- SHIPS
- Community organisations
- Service providers
- Leisure providers
- Environmental groups
- Youth representatives
- Local landowners



THEORETICAL NARRATIVES

SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE

The factors that support economic development are well-known: for example, capital investment, skills and education and most obviously, physical infrastructure. In his excellent book, *Palaces for the People* (2020), Eric Klinenborg argues persuasively for the related importance of 'social infrastructure' alongside physical infrastructure in effective social development and resilience. According to Klinenborg, robust social infrastructure fosters social capital and supports community life. By contrast, degraded, weak social infrastructure inhibits social activity, leaving families and individuals to fend for themselves. A lack of social infrastructure discourages interaction and impedes mutual support while places where casual interaction is a feature of everyday life do better.

Instinctively, we think of social infrastructure as predominantly within the public sector or voluntary and charitable sectors (represented by schools, libraries, hospitals, parks and by churches, community organisations, cultural hubs). But the experience of Covid highlighted a different story — that what matters most is whether something supports associational life and with it community attachment. Local publicans repurposed their kitchens to provide meals for the elderly and those isolating. Greengrocers delivered parcels to doorsteps. Taxis became community cars. Strong social infrastructure was a central factor in creating resilience. As multiple crises loom from the cost of living crisis to climate catastrophe, the implications are obvious.

The pandemic also highlighted that it is not just spaces and buildings that constitute social infrastructure but social capital - an interconnected network of people, organisations, relationships and friendships that matter. Social capital comes in many forms - bonding, bridging and linking - each is important in different ways and supports community thriving.

ATTACHMENT ECONOMICS

At Onion Collective we frame our work in terms of what we call 'attachment economics'. Attachment theory teaches us that as children, good, strong, solid relationships are what enable us to feel safe to explore, investigate and discover our place in the world. Without them, we focus our energy on relationships that are dysfunctional or missing, focused on fear and hurt. For children, the response to weak attachments is usually either to disengage or to lash out - apathy or anger. We argue that the same is true at a societal level.

Three dimensions of attachment are critical to providing a stabilising sense of place in the world for most people. These are attachments to *place*, attachments to *people* and attachments to *nature*. Place-based attachments are a near universal feature of the human experience, giving us roots, directly connecting us to the spaces in which we live and grounding our experiences in territory that we call home. The second area is the relational - attachment to people. This personalises our experience of place and through which it evolves. Thirdly, we are attached to the wider context of our home - to the natural environment, at a very localised but also a planetary scale. A fourth dimension, attachment through *time*, interacts with each of the other three, reflecting ancestry and shared heritage of the places we inhabit, but also, crucially, our commitment to those who follow on after us, representing a care being taken for those that are not yet born or have not yet moved in.

These four layers of attachments taken together create community - nothing more complex than people in a place in the world through time. It is through community that we feel rooted and secure; through community that we belong. Threats to these types of attachment are consequently felt deeply and rife with emotion. This is witnessed in a reduction in belonging, connection and sense of value experienced in many communities, and expressed as resentment and grief, and in anger, division and blame.

COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT

Community empowerment and agency hold immense value in fostering social cohesion, sustainable development, and overall well-being. When communities are empowered, they gain the ability to actively shape their own destiny, make decisions that affect their lives, and mobilise resources and initiatives that address their unique needs and aspirations. Empowered communities possess a sense of ownership, pride, and collective responsibility, leading to increased social capital and cohesion. This, in turn, strengthens social networks, builds trust, and promotes collaboration, resulting in more effective problem-solving and collective action. Ultimately, community empowerment and agency are crucial in creating resilient and thriving communities that can actively contribute to their own development.

Developed in 1969, Sherry Arnstein's ladder of participation is perhaps the most famous conceptual framework that illustrates different levels of citizen participation in decision-making processes. The ladder consists of eight rungs representing varying degrees of citizen power and influence. At the lower rungs, participation is minimal and tokenistic, with citizens having little or no influence. As the ladder progresses, citizens move towards higher rungs, including "informing," "consultation," and "partnership," where their voices are acknowledged and taken into account. The highest rungs of "delegated power" and "citizen control" represent full empowerment, where citizens actively share decision-making authority with institutions.

There is a significant movement in the UK in support of this top rung activity - most commonly now described as community business or community enterprise activity, and supported financially and in national policy by the Power To Change Trust, an off-shoot of the National Lottery Fund. Across the country, community businesses are demonstrating how attached enterprises can bring about change, create jobs, prioritise people and the environment, and rebuild connections between economics and society.

IDENTIFYING SHARED CONCERNS

The stakeholder conversations which we undertook followed a fairly uniform format, inviting attendees to discuss problems and challenges in and around the town, as well as possible opportunities for change. They subsequently explored the former Ship Inn site in more detail to understand how it was viewed in the community, to help identify constraints and difficulties. Finally, groups were invited to conceive a different future - to imagine what the site could become ten years into the future, assuming all hurdles could be overcome. This process helps to reach a common understanding of the change that people would like to see and possible routes to its achievement. Here, we set out identified concerns and possibilities (not always wholly shared); subsequently, we have translated these into shared outcomes, impact and activities that could help to bring about change.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

- Overshadowed by dominance of Stroud on doorstep
- Not enough to obviously attract visitors by comparison
- Development pushed from Stroud/AONB towards Stonehouse
- Limited development opportunities
- Money circling the town
- Low educational attainment and negative employment cycle
- Not a strong enough offer to keep young people here
- Disjointed tourism offer, lack of marketing/promotion
- Limited night-time offer
- Impact of nearby developments, i.e. Great Oldbury

SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE

- Lack of inclusive community spaces - no large venue
- Loss/lack of communal green spaces
- Loss of services such as banking and town hall
- Saturated community facilities - high demand
- Housing affordability, lack of social rented provision
- Greater impact from austerity (compounded by car reliance)
- Limited youth offer (not much to do)
- Educational divide

EMOTION AND IDENTITY

- Fragmented community
- Limited positive identity - no clear 'personality'
- Negative outside perception/reputation
- Grief/sadness about loss of united town
- Sense of community voice not being heard
- Hurt/resentment about unfair treatment of Stonehouse
- Negative perception of authority's motivations
- Lack of trust and confidence on all sides

PHYSICAL CHALLENGES

- Road cutting through the town, isolating Bridgend
- Pollution, safety and noise from the road
- Compounding of road problems from new housing
- 'Forgotten mile' in canal regeneration
- Navigability difficulties (signage, parking, clear routes)
- Access to Bristol via train
- Linear town means no obvious centre focus
- Lack of access and visibility to canal

AGENCY AND POWER

- Pockets of deprivation and disengagement
- Political division/entrenchment
- In-work poverty and social mobility
- Lack of community anchor (beyond TC)
- Youth disengagement (passivity)
- Fall-out of Covid (mental health, anxiety, especially youth)
- Lack of chamber of trade (business disengagement)
- Lack of clear town-wide strategic vision to get behind

AREAS OF POTENTIAL

ECONOMIC POSSIBILITIES

- Focus for visitor economy
- Well-linked central location
- High Street Revival (conviviality and services)
- Few empty shops, open layout, independents
- Substantial business community
- Wycliffe College - prosperity, facilities, investment
- Captive audience of commuters and passing visitors
- Nascent social enterprise sector
- Green and blue gateway opportunity
- Great Oldbury and other developments increasing demand
- Mobile youth and strong post-16 opportunities
- Railway link to Bristol
- Forest Green Rovers

NATURAL CAPITAL

- Canal as the potential jewel in the crown
- Canal regeneration, access and investment in place
- Sustainable and active travel - walking, cycling, boating
- Proximity to the Cotswold Way
- Blue travel/leisure - moorings, wharf, access, services
- Biodiversity, nature and wildlife all around
- Beauty spot at St Cyrs
- Relatively flat (accessible)
- Stonehouse in Bloom
- Urban Arboretum

COMMUNITY STRENGTH

- Unifying collective, social space to bring people together
- Strong, active, lively community with multiple voices
- Will for involvement, ambition and bravery
- Supportive town council prepared to hold assets
- Many well-linked community organisations/groups
- Engagement opportunities within canal project
- Community pride and cultural heritage
- Strong youth provision and support
- Positive attitudes towards young people
- Youth agency - sense of place and ownership of the pod
- Youth engagement potential with Taskforce

CATALYSING POSITIVE ENERGY

It is clear that the former Ship Inn Site has become the focus of all attention both positive and negative. Those who are looking for positive change focus on the site as a potential solution to many of the challenges highlighted above, and as the best available option to take advantage of some of the potential outlined. At the same time a protracted development history and differing viewpoints has seen the site become a focus for hurt, resistance and stalemate.

Whether this site really is the only possible solution to many of the concerns and opportunities highlighted is only half the story. The work the will follow this engagement process will explore the wider strategic and urban design questions that help to answer that. Almost regardless, the former Ship Inn Site is now a focus of community energy - with attachments firmly made to it and its future use. As a result, what happens there now matters in many more ways than its simple land-use potential - it has become a site which is about community voice and that now holds the possibility to be a place in which impactful community empowerment can be generated.

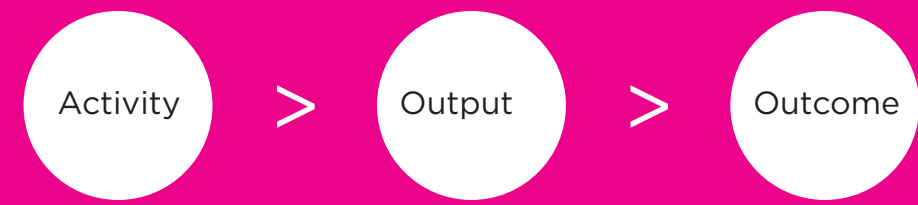
Rather than a source of frustration, the opportunity in this context is to use all the ambition and energy that exists around the site as a catalysing force for powerful community benefit. People here care about what happens to the site and are keen to invest their time, emotion and energy into bringing it to life in a way that helps to address some (not all) of the problems identified and to make the best of the opportunities that exist to build a more resilient community and economy in Stonehouse.

The next part of this report explores what that change might look like - what could be achieved on the site - and sets out a suggested roadmap to help the community achieve its ambitions in a way that aligns with a shared vision.

First, we explore the common ground that exists as regards to the long-term impact that might be achieved on the site - a shared vision for how Stonehouse might be different in the future. Second, we explore the medium-term outcomes that will work towards that aim; and thirdly we explore the short-term activities and projects that could be included as outputs in any concept for community development on the site.

WHAT IS THE CHANGE YOU WANT TO MAKE?

Logic model



We will do this...(activities)
As a result, this will happen...(outputs)
Because of this, things will be different (outcomes).
We will check this by using these tools (mechanisms)
to monitor these dimensions (indicators).

Examples:

We will buy an accessibility-friendly boat.
As a result, more people will be able to access the canal.
Because of this, people will feel closer to nature.

We will build a new youth centre.
As a result, young people will have somewhere to call their own.
Because of this, community belonging will increase.

IDENTIFYING SHARED LONG-TERM OUTCOMES



Connection to nature
People have closer connections to nature and wildlife.



Social connectedness
People are more connected to one another.



Economic regeneration
The local economy is stronger.



Community confidence
Personal and collective agency increases.

ALIGNMENT TO SDC OUTCOMES



Environment & Climate Change
Protecting our environment and leading the district to carbon neutrality in 2030.

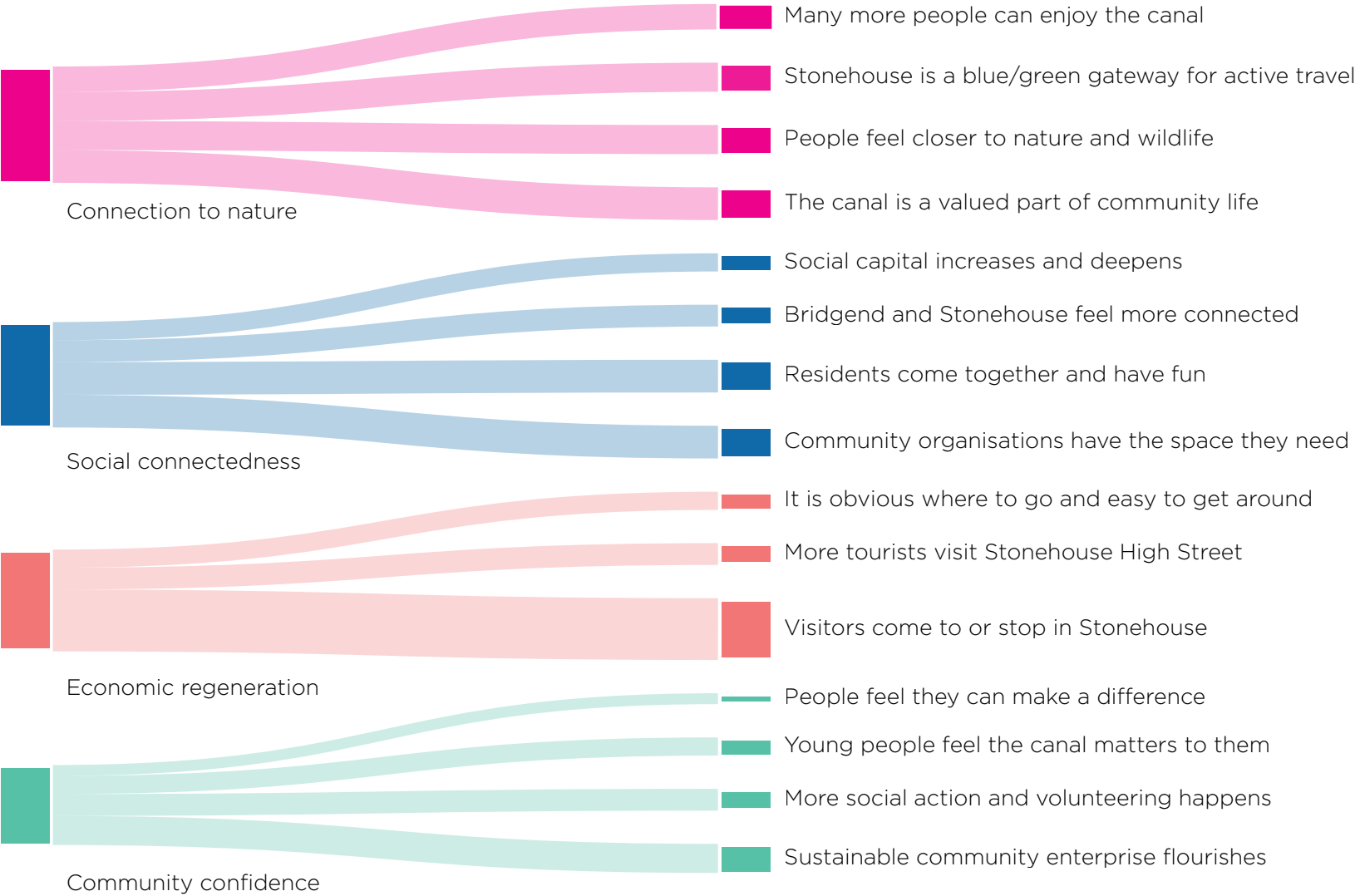


Community Resilience and Wellbeing
Strengthening & supporting our communities so people feel included and connected.



Economy, Recovery and Regeneration
Supporting a thriving and resilient local economy.

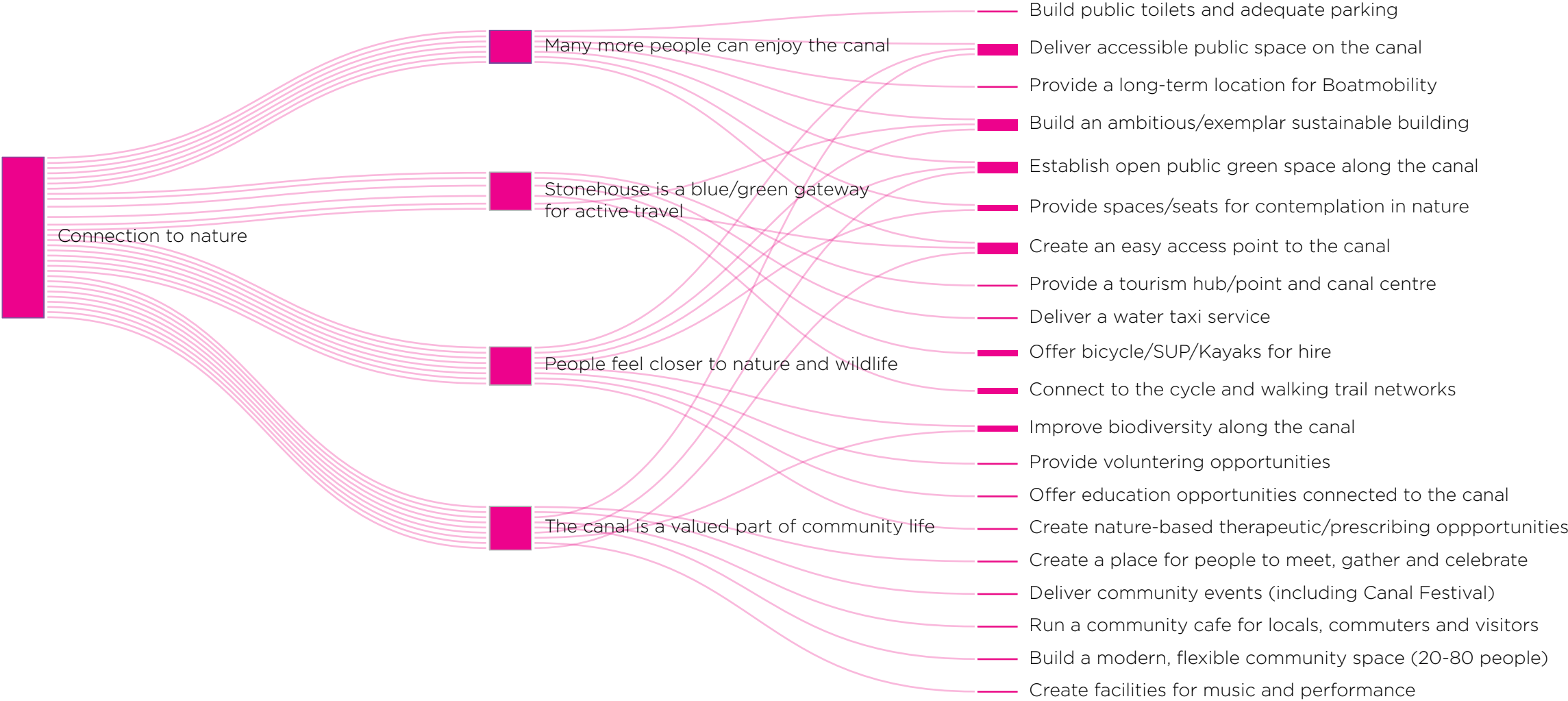
IDENTIFYING SHARED MEDIUM-TERM OUTPUTS



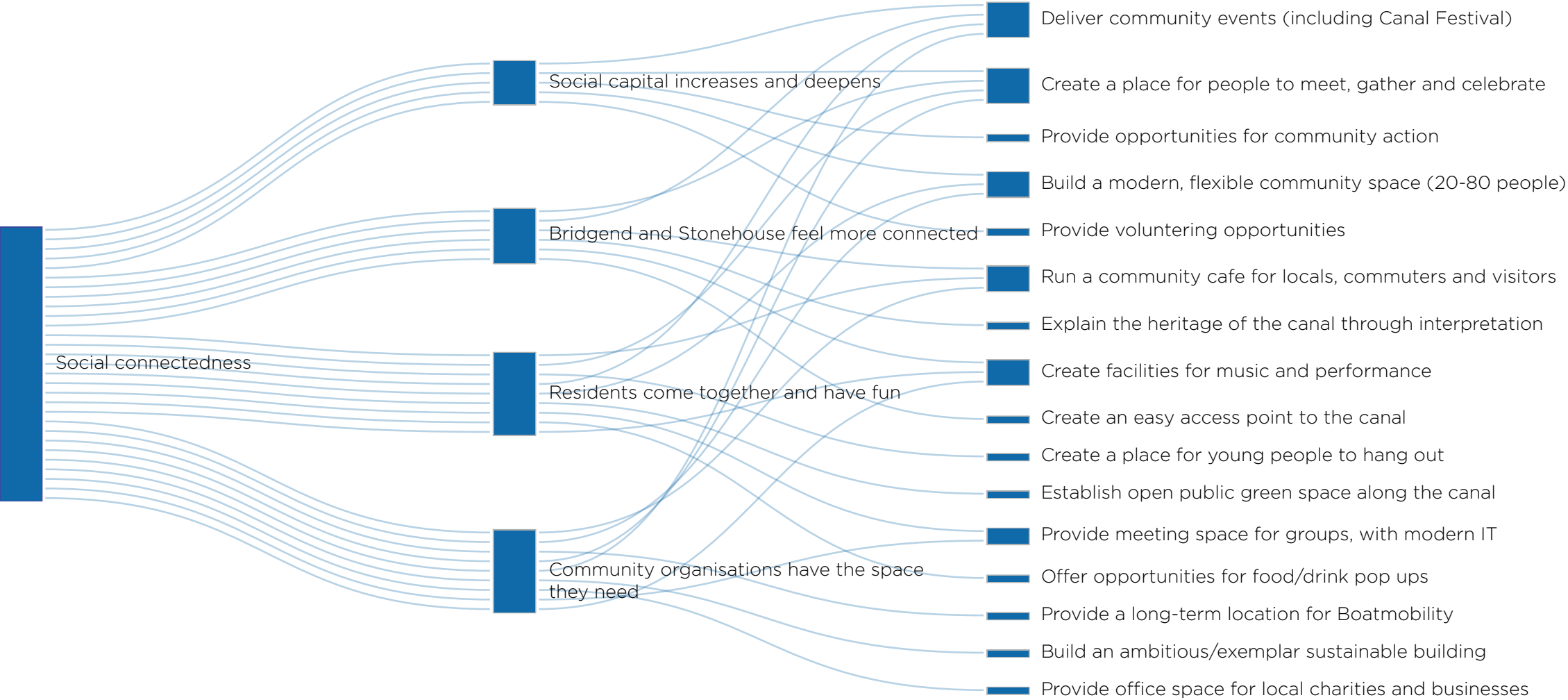
IDENTIFYING POTENTIAL ACTIVITIES



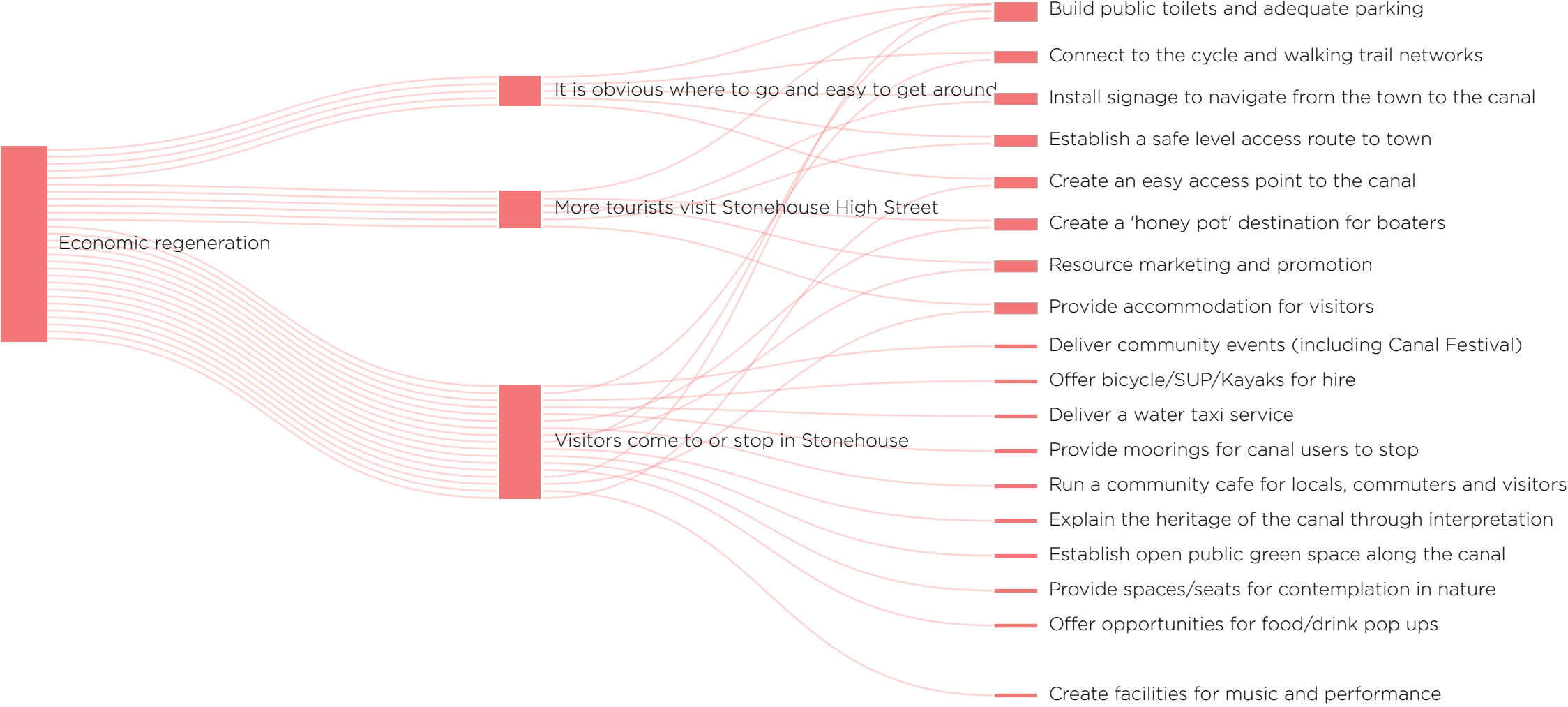
CONNECTION TO NATURE



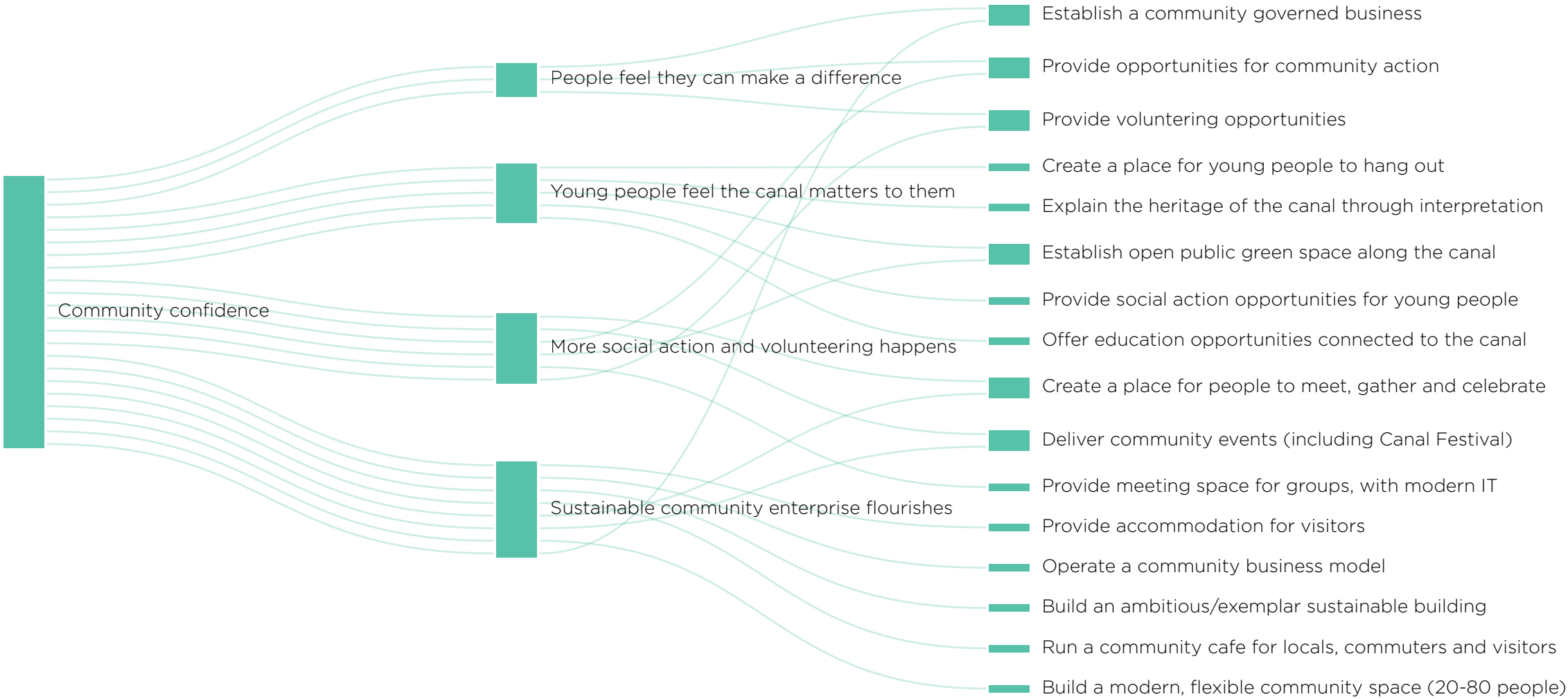
SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS



ECONOMIC REGENERATION



COMMUNITY CONFIDENCE



MOVING FORWARD

Next steps to empowerment

First, it is important to remember that this report represents only a stage in a journey, even within just the processes commissioned by SDC, let alone within the longer-term process that could ultimately see the former Ship Inn site at Stonehouse move to community stewardship. Nonetheless, as set out in our approach, formalising a sense of direction at key points in a journey is helpful in maintaining momentum and providing clarity. In the following pages, therefore, we set out a proposed way forward.

The stakeholder engagement work undertaken has established not only that substantial common ground exists around desired outcomes for Stonehouse as a community, but that this commonality reaches across all different stakeholder groups - from public authorities to informal community groups. Everyone wants a resolution that is positive for the town and most people share a sense of what that might look like, in terms of the change that is sought if not necessarily the detail of any eventual scheme. This offers a solid ground from which to move forward, always coming back to the shared outcomes as a way to ground decision-making and guide action, even when things get tough, emotional, and exhausting, as they inevitably will.

It is also clear that everyone needs to take a leap of faith - to start to trust one another and to move from a place of campaign and combat to a place of collaboration and collective effort. Our advice is that this is best achieved through an agreement on all sides to work towards the outcome of the site being passed to community ownership (or at least stewardship). For SDC, this will mean putting in place the procedures and democratic approvals needed to appropriate the site from within the Housing Revenue Account to sit instead within the General Fund, so as to ensure that those in housing need do not lose out. Subsequent to this, over the coming months, the community, working with the Council, need to do the work to explore the potential for the onward handover of the site to the community and in so doing understand the financial and social value implications of such a transfer. There is lots of work to be done to give confidence to the Council that the site will be in safe hands (business planning, funding strategy, risk analysis) and there is lots of work to be done to give confidence to the community that their commitment of time, energy and expertise will be done in good faith. The sooner some kind of 'in principle' agreement over a preferred route to community ownership can be formalised the better. This is not however, to say that there should not be conditions in place on all sides. For example, an agreement in principle might be conditional on further work on governance to establish a constituted body that is fit for purpose, or a detailed business plan being in place. In all of these cases, it is important that the community is suitably resourced and supported towards success; the remaining stages of the already-commissioned work will provide some of what is needed but we make some additional suggestions in the following pages.

The first step, we would suggest, is the establishment of a Working Group for the site with representatives from the Town Council and ShIPS which would ultimately move towards being a constituted community anchor organisation, working alongside key stakeholders as part of that group, for example, including organisations such as SDC, APT, Sunflower Suicide and so on. This group should then take the lead role in moving forward with a range of other activities that are prerequisites to successful community ownership, namely: further consultation as necessary (see later pages), additional feasibility and business planning work; funding and social value calculations; co-design of the site as optioneering processes continue and so on. We further make suggestions for resourced support through these processes. Initial scoping work can be supported under the existing agreement with Onion Collective but we suggest that a more local support organisation should be engaged over the medium- to longer-term. We also suggest that consideration be given to meanwhile uses for the site such that it be brought back into public use in advance of any final resolution - allowing the community to begin to take ownership and as a mechanism by which to galvanise social action and test ideas.

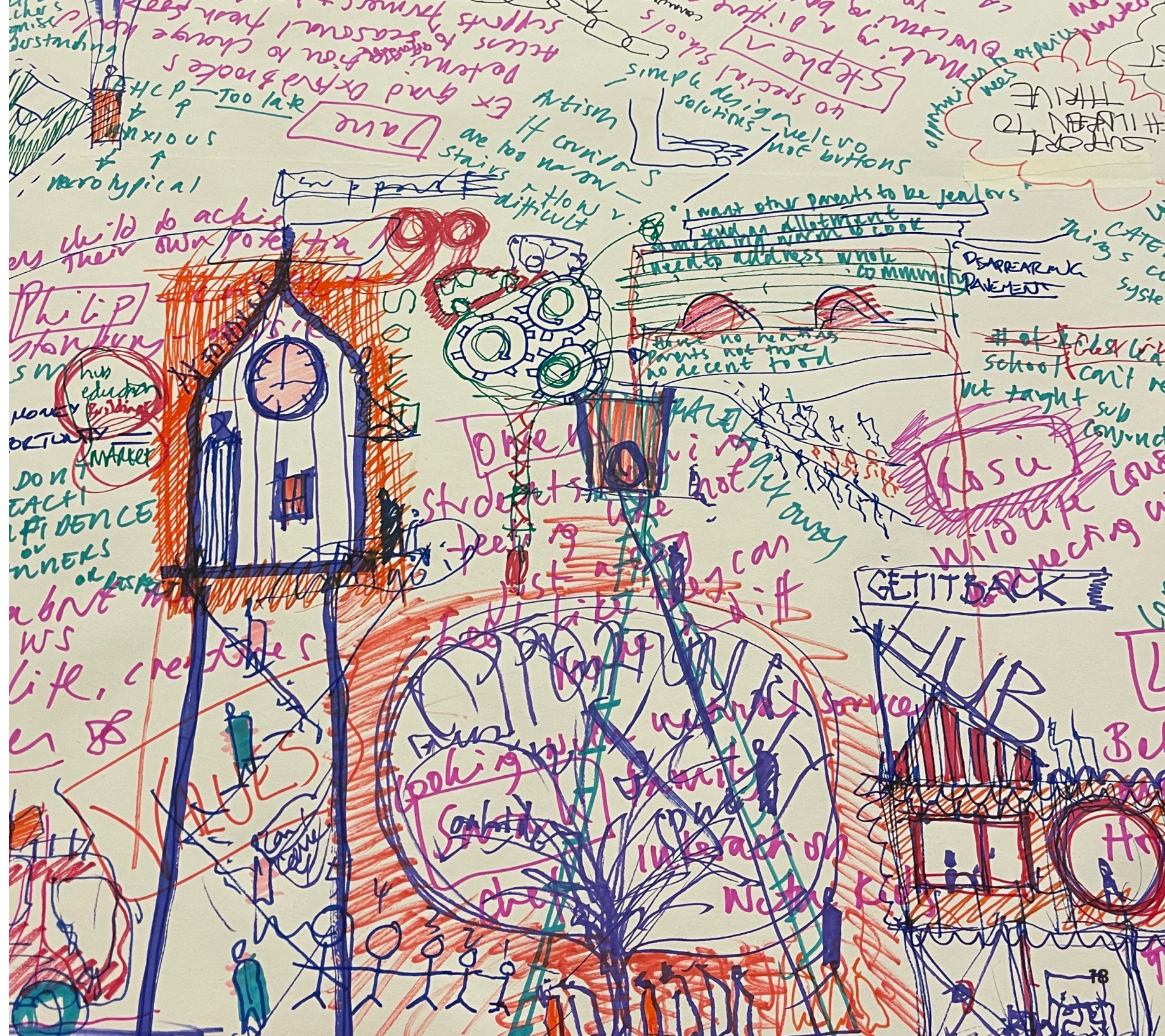
STEPPING STONES

- **IMPACT:** Agree shared community outcomes based on the findings of this report as guiding aims.
- **DEMOCRATIC:** Agree decision trajectory in principle based on SDC's General Fund Account appropriating the site from the HRA at market value. Agree in principle to provide an option to pass the site to the community subject to timetable and conditions.
- **GOVERNANCE:** Establish Working Group (WG) for the site with representatives from Town Council and ShIPS moving towards constituted community anchor organisation, alongside key stakeholders.
- **ENGAGEMENT:** Further consultation with sections of the community who have been insufficiently involved to date: young people, businesses, charities/social sector, community in Bridgend. Open public engagement once concept designs in place.
- **SUPPORT:** Engage a local support organisation to guide consultation, viability/business planning, social value calculations, funding options, risks analysis.
- **CO-DESIGN:** Undertake co-design processes already commissioned with the WG to focus on building concept options to explore scale/potential/phasing to feed business planning workstream.
- **MEANWHILE USE:** Consider licence via Town Council to enable initial clearing and initial build with funds potentially from the canal regeneration project's capital community engagement budget and to allow for social action to begin now and for trust, collaboration and agency to develop.

CO-DESIGN PROCESS

Alongside the engagement work that has been the focus of this report and which has identified common ground around an ambition for the site and shared outcomes to guide next steps, SDC has commissioned urban designers and architects to support the process. This offers a significant opportunity to maintain momentum that will begin to tease out complexities and constraints, but will also be essential in crystallising what is possible - moving from multiple ideas to tangible proposals.

The common ground themes identified here will form part of the brief for strategic design optioneering that can consider the role, capacity, constraints and opportunities of the site and its role in bringing about the wider vision. The intention is to conduct co-design workshops with key stakeholders from the community who have participated up to this stage, but looking in more detail at the former Ship Inn site. Initially, this will explore site constraints that might impact what is possible - access routes, existing infrastructure, natural capital, interactions with the canal, noise muffling, scale of buildings, use allocations, and phasing options. As the process progresses over the summer period, we would expect this design stage to move towards exploring concept options for the site of a building and its design - always working hand-in-hand with the Working Group.



FURTHER CONSULTATION

Ensuring the widest possible input by encouraging open, meaningful consultation to identify interests, ideas and concerns and to develop tailored outcomes is vital. We will always challenge groups and organisations to engage with their communities, users and beneficiaries as a precursor to successful delivery. The process undertaken thus far provided significant input from a host of community organisations, bringing in multiple voices, ideas and insights towards a shared sense of desired outcomes.

Nonetheless, the consultation process has also been constrained by everyday practicalities - people being unavailable or accidentally excluded, or additional stakeholders who have been identified through the process itself. As the project moves forward, it is vital that engagement continues - it is a process that is never complete. At Onion Collective, for example, we continue to undertake widespread regular engagement in our community and with stakeholders using a variety of mechanisms to sense-check our direction, identify gaps and challenge ourselves to improve.

We have identified a number of areas for further engagement work that would benefit the project as it develops which we suggest the Working Group takes forward. We are happy to discuss and advise on suitable processes and approaches to facilitate this but relationship building that comes from meaningful engagement is vital to the success of any initiative and so it makes sense that this work, here on in, is led by the team on the ground.

We also suggest a process of open public engagement later in the process, once concept designs have been developed to ensure that a multiplicity of voices have a chance to take part and as a mechanism by which to build awareness, energy and excitement about what is possible. You want to avoid discovering either a stumbling block or missed opportunity too late in the process.

ADDITIONAL ENGAGEMENT

- **YOUNG PEOPLE:** Through The Door to gather the youth voice.
- **BUSINESSES:** To explore synergies and opportunities for collaboration
- **CHARITABLE/SOCIAL SECTOR:** To explore demand for space/uses.
- **COMMUNITIES IN BRIDGEND:** To explore resident perspectives.
- **OPEN PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT:** Once concept designs are in place.



1) Involving young people in building design processes for a youth pavilion.
2) Community engagement for all ages on the site of a community build in Watchet.

RESOURCED SUPPORT

NURTURING COMMUNITY

Our approach to community support and development recognises that every community contains the ‘nutrients’ it needs to thrive and to find solutions to its own problems. Meaningful and genuine consultation is then able to draw out the collective values, assets, ideas and concerns, to identify shared outcomes and priorities, as here. Providing support builds the capacity of communities to take control of their own futures, beginning to deliver projects, run enterprises and do it for themselves.

It is also important to recognise that what community sector organisations, and especially, nascent groups, often lack is not ambition but confidence to navigate what can be an intimidating and complex world of funding and agencies. What organisations need is tailored, rather than generic, support to assist them to work out what they want to do and how best to do it.

A final key insight is to recognise that just because an organisation needs help, does not mean it will not be just as strong in the end as organisations which are intrinsically more self-reliant. A supportive, enabling, environment with ready access to trusted, empathetic advisors who are willing to help is crucial.

We set out a number of areas in which we believe the Working Group in Stonehouse will benefit from a guiding hand. This is not to suggest that outside advisors should write a business plan or even necessarily funding bids - indeed it is our experience that doing the work is part of the empowering journey, bringing knowledge transfer and collective ownership. But external support can help to give confidence, both to those at the heart of an initiative and those who are being asked to get behind them. We have set out a series of areas for further work where well-resourced support structures would be advantageous.

AREAS OF ATTENTION AND SUPPORT

GOVERNANCE: Deciding what form an organisation needs to take and how it can best be run is often a decision taken by chance rather than by design. Working out what is needed, both now and in the future, taking account of finance, accountability and delivery constraints is a key task.

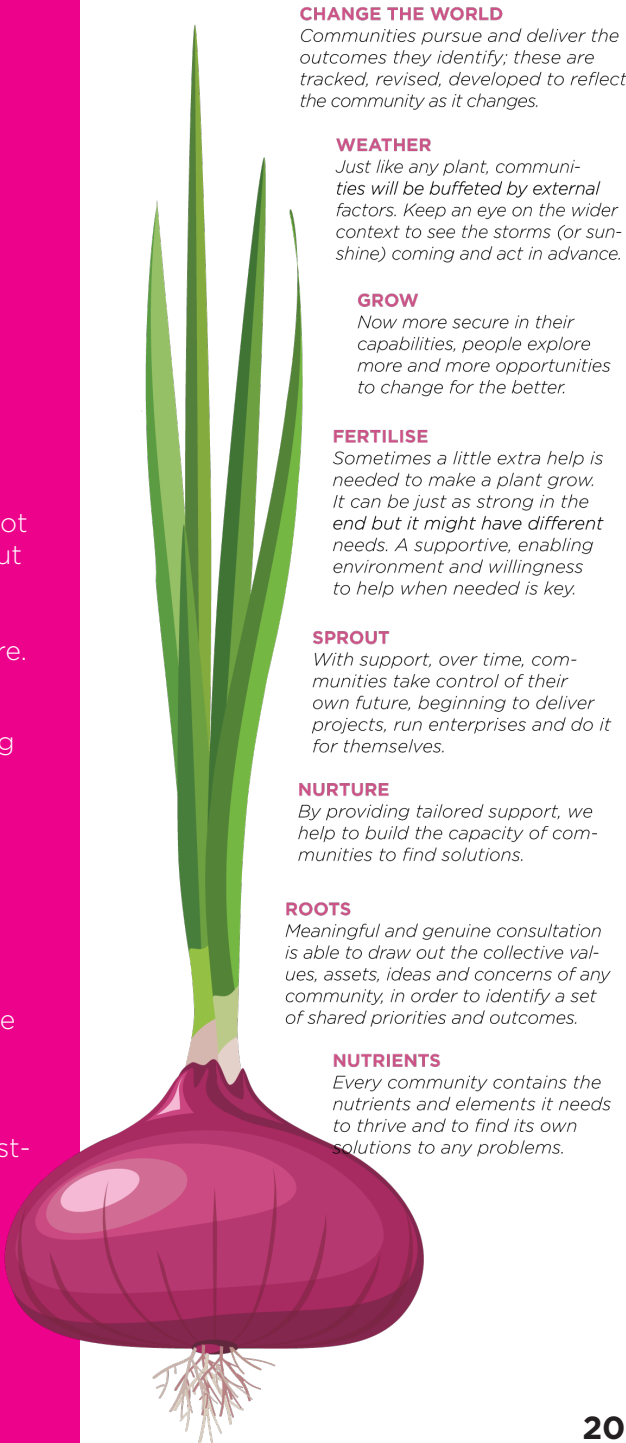
ENGAGEMENT: As above, for most community and voluntary sector organisations, responsiveness is central to success. Yet much engagement is token rather than meaningful and organisations struggle to judge how best to engage and how to ask the right questions at the right time.

BUSINESS PLANNING: Business planning is all about detail. It's about reality not ideals. It's about bottoming out exactly how things will work, in a good year, but also when you are buffeted by the unexpected—in the third consecutive year of rain, when Brexit happens or when you lose your most important supporter. Organisations need help to sense check and risk check their plans for the future.

FUNDING: Despite the climate, a large amount of external funding remains available—from government, trusts, corporates and the public. The key is telling a compelling story well and being able to prove that you can deliver. That, and knowing how to submit a funding bid.

LEGALS: Councils and other public bodies are increasingly transferring assets where community and voluntary organisations can deliver more from them. But the process is seldom simple, and risks on both sides can be substantial. Navigating this path needs support and legal advice.

MONETISING SOCIAL VALUE: Speaking in terms that resonate to a wide range of interested parties is an important part of the process. Calculating monetary values for the social impact that a project will make is a powerful way to demonstrate why public investment is justified. Everything from mental well-being to job creation can be given a financial value allowing for meaningful cost-benefit analyses of outcome delivery.



CHANGE THE WORLD
Communities pursue and deliver the outcomes they identify; these are tracked, revised, developed to reflect the community as it changes.

WEATHER
Just like any plant, communities will be buffeted by external factors. Keep an eye on the wider context to see the storms (or sunshine) coming and act in advance.

GROW
Now more secure in their capabilities, people explore more and more opportunities to change for the better.

FERTILISE
Sometimes a little extra help is needed to make a plant grow. It can be just as strong in the end but it might have different needs. A supportive, enabling environment and willingness to help when needed is key.

SPROUT
With support, over time, communities take control of their own future, beginning to deliver projects, run enterprises and do it for themselves.

NURTURE
By providing tailored support, we help to build the capacity of communities to find solutions.

ROOTS
Meaningful and genuine consultation is able to draw out the collective values, assets, ideas and concerns of any community, in order to identify a set of shared priorities and outcomes.

NUTRIENTS
Every community contains the nutrients and elements it needs to thrive and to find its own solutions to any problems.

MEANWHILE USE

Almost all successful community businesses start with an ambition to ‘just get on with it’. Despite complex and often timely asset processes, the opportunity for meanwhile use can provide a focus for that energy, a chance for social action, for learning by doing and a way to generate community enthusiasm and energy.

We suggest that the opportunity to licence use of the former Ship Inn site even while wider processes are underway be actively considered. The site offers a central opportunity within the live canal regeneration project to bring engagement, activity and life to the canal-side. It would seem illogical to wait.

There appears to be some potential for funding within the canals project to support some capital works to assist with clearing the site and installing simple infrastructure as well as the expertise within the team to assist. We would recommend this opportunity be taken before it is lost.



1



2



3



4



5

- 1 and 2) Members of the community build a community BBQ and public pavilion on derelict public land - using social action to build amenities and relationships.
- 3) The community enjoys a children’s performance in the completed pavilion.
- 4) Repurposing a shipping container into studios and gallery space - all undertaken by a volunteer workforce with a limited budget.
- 5) The meanwhile use studios in full swing; ultimately leading to the building of East Quay.

SOCIAL CAPITAL

UNDERSTORY

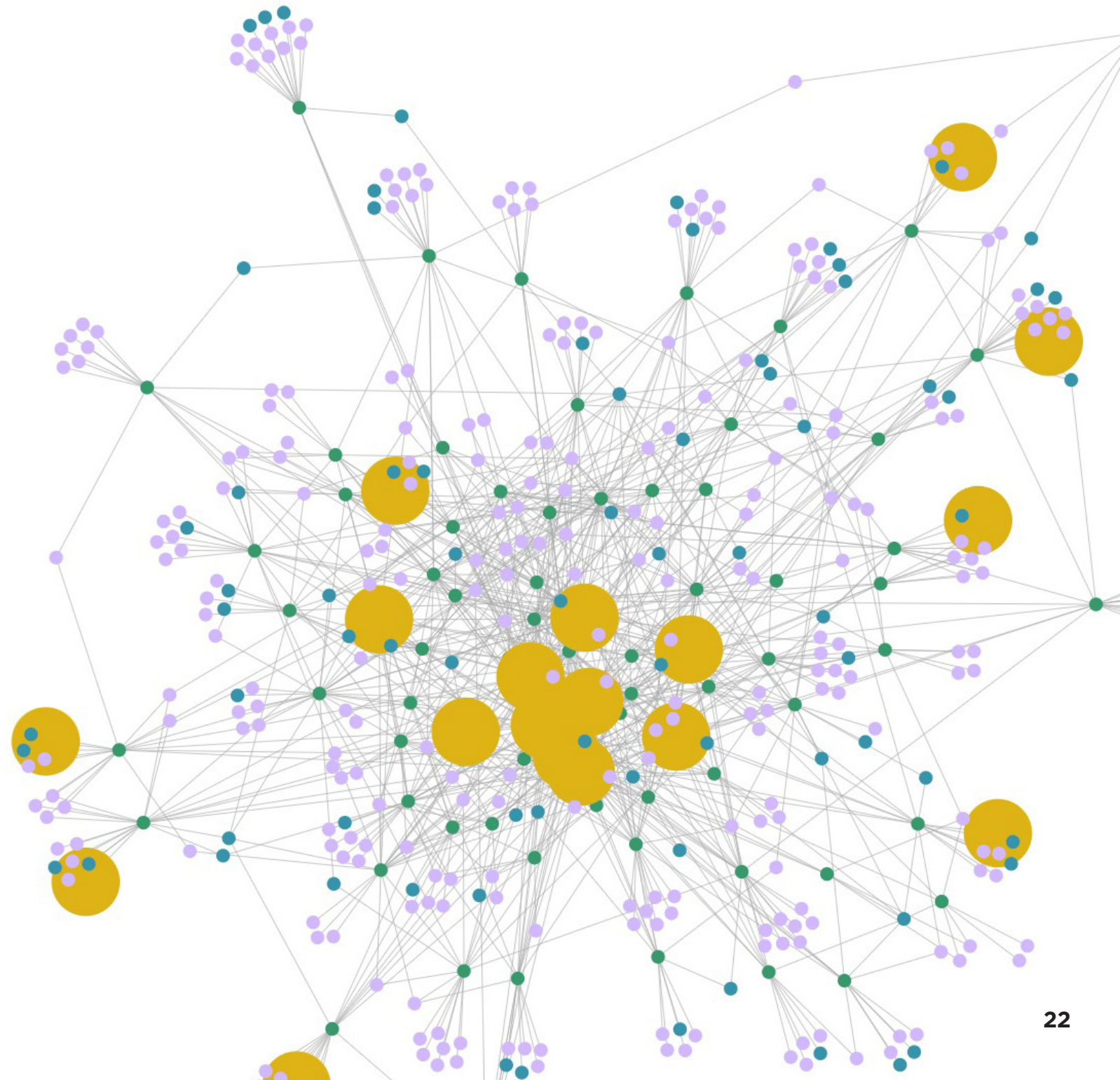
For the past few years, Onion Collective has been working with social gaming studio Free Ice Cream to develop Understory. Understory is a digital mapping tool that allows communities to reveal the hidden connections that bind them together. Understory works to bring together those who are involved in community action in a place by revealing the hidden web of social capital that ties a community together and is central to community resilience.

The way it works is that in a single session representatives of community action will create a network map and by the end of the session participants will be able to explore the web of relationships between people and organisations that build resilience.

Understory's mapping tools enable communities to explore interdependencies between sectors; the community's goals and how these change over time; the organisations that are collaborating effectively and those that are working in silos.

It is for anyone who cares about people, thrives on connections and desires a collective approach to change.

To support the continued development of Stonehouse's community, Onion Collective would like to invite the community to be part of our current Understory programme. Funded by the National Lottery, we are mapping 20-30 communities over two years. There will be no cost to the community for this work and you will be supported throughout by our team.



CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

This report and its findings represent only the beginning of a journey, with many more stages to come, including of course the other work that has been already commissioned as part of this process, namely strategic site optioneering with urban designer input and the development of design options with an architectural practice. On top of this work, as we have set out, there are a host of other work streams that will be needed if the site is ultimately to be passed into community stewardship, including comprehensive business planning, funding strategy, social value calculations and so on. At the same time, there is of course a democratic decision-making process that needs to take place. In all of this, the establishment of a Working Group committed to a shared understanding of the outcomes sought is a vital first step.

What is clear from the process is that considerable common ground exists about the opportunities that are present in Stonehouse generally - grouped in four headline areas as we have set out: enabling connection to nature, growing social connectedness, driving economic regeneration and building community confidence. Within each of these headline areas of impact, a number of medium-term ambitions are also broadly shared. Even where attendees had no strong views about the detail or history of the Ship Inn site, or found it hard to move past the procedural and practical problems it presents, we found broad agreement on the changes that people would like to see as a consequence of any community activity there.

In terms of what any detailed vision for the former Ship Inn site might be, it is simply too soon to be certain. There are lots of proposed activities and projects for the site, as we have set out, which offer the scope to feed into and drive the outputs and outcomes identified. There are many more that were not included, either because they were mentioned only rarely or because they did not obviously drive the outcomes sought. Among the list included as potential uses, some will prove impractical (for space reasons say); others will fall by the way side as business planning progresses; new activities will emerge as engagement continues. Nonetheless, the list offers a building block from which to progress the work streams identified and a lens by which to consider site and building design.

The process of engagement has also gathered a huge amount of detail that it would be illogical to include in this report, the purpose of which is to establish common ground around potential impact and a way forward, rather than to set out every detail. Nonetheless, the team will of course share further materials gathered as appropriate, for example, questions raised around site constraints; suggestions of other sites in the town that could be brought into either housing or community use; specific offers of support from organisations in the process; and expressions of interest for use of spaces in any future community building.

Finally, the very clearest common ground is that all stakeholders are keen to see a positive resolution. People on all sides and none care a great deal about the town and its future and are meaningfully attached in varying ways to the former Ship Inn site. This means it is a site that matters to the community and which therefore offers a genuine and potentially very powerful opportunity for a re-setting of relationships in advancement of community empowerment and towards shared outcomes that are to the benefit of Stonehouse and its residents.



Onion Collective CIC
Harbour Studios, Harbour Road,
Watchet, Somerset, TA23 0AQ

Company n°: 08323538

© Onion Collective CIC, 2023

jess@onioncollective.co.uk