

MORE THAN VIABLE

DENE VALLEY AND ELDON

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MORE THAN VIABLE WAS A PROJECT COMMISSIONED BY NORTHERN HEARTLANDS,
ONE OF THE GREAT PLACE SCHEME AREAS.

IT WAS DELIVERED BY STEPHEN PRITCHARD BETWEEN APRIL AND OCTOBER 2019.

THE PROJECT WAS FUNDED BY ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND AND THE HERITAGE LOTTERY
FUND.



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

More Than Viable was a project commissioned by Northern Heartlands – a Great Place scheme, supported using funding from Arts Council England and the Heritage Lottery Fund. It took place in the parishes of Dene Valley and Eldon, just to the south east of Bishop Auckland and to the north west of Shildon. The summer-long project explored the hopes and fears people living in the area had about their futures by looking back at the area's past and examining how people were living in the present. The project was delivered as a grassroots community art intervention: placing people first, listening to what people thought and what people said they wanted, and using creative actions to attempt to understand and develop these ideas into feasible realities.

Everyone who took part in the project wanted to make improvements to their lives, their communities and the environment in which they live. There was a common desire to make the area a better place in which to grow up, live and grow old. Many people felt the area had suffered from a loss of status and loss of investment. They commonly attributed this to the Category D status applied to the villages which, although long-since removed, has still left a legacy of underinvestment and social stigma. People wanted to change the perception of the area and its residents and it is this desire that More Than Viable focused upon.

The project sought to help local people to build confidence in their own abilities to make Dene Valley and Eldon a better place. It did not involve large-scale events or spectacular aesthetics. Instead, it began from the point of view of building trust and developing a sense of community. It became clear that many people in the area retain a keen spirit to make their own small changes to make things better for themselves and others. Community spirit, although severely dented, remains strong and it was not difficult to help people rekindle their aspirations and sense of pride.

Whilst the area has two functioning parish councils, two hard-pressed community organisations, a primary school keen to play a bigger part in how the area develops, a self-funded kick boxing gym and some other under-supported community assets, it was clear that they needed to work much more closely together and be supplemented by new community groups, passionate individuals and small businesses.

More Than Viable therefore adopted an approach that sought to bring the local councils together with the existing community groups, schools, social club, businesses, the police, etc. at every stage of its activities. Creative workshops and drop in sessions encouraged local people to not only express themselves creatively but to also begin talking about what it was like to live in the area now and in the past, and to start thinking about what was needed to make the place better in the future. These interventions tried to stimulate self-organisation within local people in ways that brought them together with the area's existing infrastructure. The project was not just about "joining the dots". It was about helping people take the initiative to develop their own ideas and actions – no matter how small they may have seemed – that they could then think about in relation to how they could intersect and interrelate with each other and the existing community infrastructure.

The four most commonly observed concerns people expressed during the project were about the lack of adequate rented housing (both social and private rented), large-scale regeneration with over one thousand new homes being built in Dene Valley (effectively doubling the parish's population), anti-social behaviour (particularly, although not exclusively, involving young people and children), and a lack of facilities and things to do in the area (particularly, although not exclusively, for children and young people. This project followed a "place-guarding" ethos which seeks to put existing people at the heart of planned future development as a means of encouraging cooperative and mutually beneficial ways of living and growing together equitably.

The project began projects centred around several outcomes including:

- Community garden sharing.
- Foundation of an Incredible Edible area spanning Eldon and Dene Valley parishes.
- Potential formation of a community development trust.
- Asset transfer of land in the area for community benefit.
- Possible building of a bike track for young people on dis-/ under-used land.
- Film about the valley's struggles against Category D status and its legacy today.
- Possibility of a community-led archive and museum that could become a unique repository of Category D documentation and attract tourism.

- Category D walking route planned, developed and maintained by local community members and groups that explores the area's lost industry and ways of life.
- Possibility of Shildon Model Railway Club setting up a Dene Valley and Eldon branch in its new building.
- New thinking about sustainable ways of financing mutually beneficial community development.
- Exhibition in a hair salon in nearby Bishop Auckland of portraits of people in the area who are imagining different futures for the area to help change people's perceptions of Dene Valley and Eldon.

More Than Viable started a process that can only continue to grow and develop if local people are trusted and listened to and invested in. This will take time and it will take some money. The project identified ways in which a people-first approach to democratic community development can empower people to make the changes they know are needed for their communities.

This report concludes by looking at how a phased withdrawal approach can be continued over a relatively short period in a way that could become a case study for similar community development initiatives across County Durham and beyond.

INTRODUCTION

The project arose from a significant period of research and design in the area taking place during the latter part of 2018 which was commissioned by Northern Heartlands and funded by Arts Council England and the Heritage Lottery Fund. Northern Heartlands subsequently commissioned More Than Viable to develop upon the R&D work and begin delivering creative interventions that might lead to change from the ground up in the area.¹ The main project delivery programme was preceded by a short initial R&D phase in April and May 2019 from which the terms of the main More Than Viable project were agreed.²

The R&D phase of More Than Viable suggested that the main delivery phase should be led by local people of all ages, with special emphasis given to the area's children and young people to encourage creativity and inclusion. The overall objective was to “create a new ‘living community’ in the centre of Eldon Lane and in Eldon that would be owned and organised and looked after by local people”. The idea was to plant “seeds” in the minds of the people of Eldon and Dene Valley that might develop, grow and be nurtured by them, thereby helping to develop a more cohesive sense of community spirit and pride: “A renewed sense of place can only be developed by the people, their way”.³

More Than Viable was essentially a community art project that focused on decline and regeneration. It employed a grassroots, conversational approach that encouraged people to talk about their pasts, presents and futures using a range of creative interventions. The project worked with local primary and secondary school students, and people of all ages from across the two parishes of Dene Valley and Eldon. In total, 326 people took part in the project – some briefly, others frequently. The focus of the project inevitably led to a focus on people, place and planning. People were keen to talk, take part and comment. There was an overwhelming view that people of all ages and all levels of engagement (or disengagement) with existing government and

¹ See *Drift* report (October 2018).

² See *More Than Viable R&D Report & Project Proposal* (May 2019).

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 8-10.

community structures were ignored, “done-to” and often stigmatised on the grounds of the area’s historical Category D designation and on grounds of class.

The project encouraged people to speak out, try new things and think about ways to be more self-organised and self-reliant, whilst understanding the importance of support from local and national government at a level that did not overrule and misunderstand the sense of local pride and strength of community that is still evident in Dene Valley and Eldon.

I was lucky enough to be welcomed by everyone in the area and was able to establish good relationships with many people and organisations in a relatively short period of time. I was trusted by the people of Dene Valley and Eldon and was privileged to have been able to talk so openly with them, advising but never telling anyone what to do. There was no need, because the people living in the two parishes were full of ideas – they just lacked the confidence, the knowledge and influence, and the trust of authorities.

More Than Viable linked Northern Heartlands “cultural landscape” approach – a belief that “landscape and place are shaped by what has happened in the past, what is happening now and what may happen in the future” – with a reimagined form of community art which is rooted in the practice’s rich history. The project put people and socially produced space before place and landscape, understanding that it is people and the relations they have with one another that create spaces (no matter whether temporal or relatively permanent or whether relational or physical).

The project was primarily delivered outside of buildings; in the streets and parks and pathways and gap sites around the area. It recognised everyone who took part as being equally capable of making differences in the spaces and places they called home. It sought to begin to mend rifts and build new connections that could help the people of Eldon and Dene Valley rebuild and reimagine their lives by taking their own actions, irrespective of whether official permissions were obtained. This is not to say that the people involved acted irresponsibly. On the contrary, people began to understand that they could do things to make the area better for themselves, their neighbours and their children.

The crucial factor behind the project was the notion of conversations; be they one person with another, or collective. Creativity stems from conversations. Conversations are, in themselves, an art. The project attempted to create safe spaces – potential spaces in which playful hopes, fears and dreams could grow and flourish. It was from the conversations that emerged during More Than Viable that community members began to take their own actions and to think about acting collectively for everyone’s mutual benefit.

I adopted the roles of “outsider” and “visitor” and “tourist” as well as performing, at times, as a mediator and educator. This approach ensured that my actions were always recognisably in support of those who lived in Eldon and Dene Valley, and that my role in the communities was temporary. The intention was to encourage people of all ages to develop their community their way, with the artist helping as necessary.

This report summarises in the following chapters what the project did, what it achieved, what it did not achieve and what could follow on from it.

APPROACH

More Than Viable was about listening to what people wanted and helping them to try out ways of making their ideas become realities. It was also about leading by example, mediation and even, at times, about having difficult, persuasive conversations. I used traditional community art practice alongside a research methodology rooted in critical ethnography to frame the project as a piece of Participatory Action Research in which everyone co-designed and co-produced the work and as many people as possible became involved in the defining and understanding the knowledge produced.

The project was well advertised both online (primarily via Facebook and Twitter) and with posters and flyers. 1,250 flyers were handed out during the project, with the local school helping to distribute them in every child's school bag. The project's Facebook page was well visited. Facebook marketing was also used during the early days of this project, although it was largely unsuccessful in attracting participants.

I began the project with a series of creative conversations. The first took place at Prince Bishops Community Primary School with a class of year 5 students (20th June 2019). They explored the past, present and future of the area using the life cycle of an oak tree as a metaphor, responding to the afternoon session with enthusiasm. This enabled me to build a relationship with the school and its children. This led mothers, fathers and carers in the village to understand what I was doing and to become interested in the project. I then commissioned Ruth Ben-Tovim and Lucy Neal from Encounters Arts to co-produce a series of events with me over one weekend centred on the notion of a "valley gathering" (5th to 7th July 2019). These events took place at Eldon Village Fair and in the streets around Eldon Lane before culminating in a day-long workshop at Eldon Lane Social Club which was attended by almost 50 people. They were preceded by a meeting where invited guests including the local MP, town councillors, parish councillors, community leaders, police and other residents were able to all sit together and begin thinking about a different future for the area collectively. We also distributed "recipe cards" and received almost 100 responses during the weekend. These creative conversations enabled people from across the two parishes to come together for what was, particularly for community groups, the first time.

There then followed an intensive period of community art activities delivered alongside regular meetings with local councillors, community groups and residents. This summer-long element of the project continued to utilise creativity as a way of exploring life in Dene Valley and Eldon in the past and present, as well as thinking about what the area might be like in the future. The activities were split between Eldon and Dene Valley.

In Eldon, they began in the park next to the village's community centre but soon moved to Close House allotments, people's houses and eventually to Vyner Street back lane in Close House. In Dene Valley, the activities took place in an area left blank since the demolition of several terraced streets to the side of Spencer Street in Eldon Lane. The area is known locally as "The Hollow" because it is both a low-lying piece of land and an area "hollowed out" by demolition. Meetings and indoor events mainly took place in Eldon Lane Social Club which was kindly made freely available, although Eldon Community Centre was also used, again rent-free.

The activities began with printmaking sessions which encouraged local people of all ages to try making monoprints, nature prints and letterpress prints as well as demonstrating how dyes could be made from weeds, wildflowers and tea. There then followed sessions that explored pinhole, retro and instant cameras, filmmaking, building "climate-driven drawing machines" from coppiced willow and hemp twine, the construction of a "thought orchard", watercolour painting, charcoal drawing, and walking the land. A total of 23 sessions were delivered, each lasting for between 4 and 6 hours. A pop-up gazebo was purchased and used to provide cover during bad weather. It was a popular attraction, particularly for the area's children and young people, but it was irreparably damaged during a storm towards the latter part of the project.

The summer-time activities proved very popular at both locations, although there were significant demographic differences between those participating at Eldon/ Close House and those at The Hollow. Most attendees at The Hollow were children, young people and parents, with the activities providing something creative for them to do during the summer holidays and weekends. Meanwhile, the people involved at Close House were primarily keen gardeners and allotmenters.

The different make-ups of these two core groups provided the project with two very different sets of dynamics and aspirations which continually informed and directed how the activities developed in each place. Alongside this, the local community groups, parish and town councillors, and Helen Goodman (the area's MP) were involved regularly and kept informed of the ideas and plans each core group was developing. As always, it was the conversations that took place (enabled by people collectively engaging in creative processes) and the relationships that developed between people in the area that inspired the project's aims and outcomes. Whilst there were different aims and outcomes in each core group, the overarching desires centred upon collective working, trust, being listened to, and making the place better together.

As the project progressed, new relationships formed, people became inspired to try out new businesses and to think about developing a tourist-based local economy, to take ownership of land and buildings, to set up youth groups, to ask for amenities like better parks, a bike track and a skatepark, and to begin taking over underused and derelict areas of land to make gardens and to plant wildflowers. More formal, structural discussions and planning to place alongside these grassroots actions. I applied to Durham County Council for the Community Asset Transfer of the land at The Hollow and the mothballed ex-Sure Start centre in Eldon Lane. The council rejected the approach for the centre but are continuing to progress the asset transfer of the land at The Hollow. It is likely that Dene Valley Parish Council will take ownership of the land. I led a series of discussions that succeeded in getting the area's MP, town councillors, parish councillors, community groups and the school to begin the process of setting up a Community Development Trust that could access funding to make significant, community-led developments happen across both parishes.

I was able to talk to council members, planners, cultural sector leaders and others at Northern Heartlands' [RE]Place event at Durham Town Hall. I organised for a minibus to bring people from Dene Valley and Eldon along to the event. This helped raise the profile of More Than Viable and enabled people to understand the issues facing people living in the area. Similarly, I was able to take part in several community development meetings with politicians, leading to my involvement in the Shadow Housing Minister's visit to Dene Valley and Eldon as well as providing project information to the local MP.

This work raised the profile of the project, the long-term underinvestment in the area and the actions taken by local people and community groups to begin taking ownership of how their area and people might develop in the future (from short- to long-term). It also directly engaged with political processes at local, county and national levels, helping people and groups to call for much needed political and financial intervention to reverse years of underfunding and disinvestment.

I worked with the University of Newcastle to set up a paid internship (fully funded by the university) to support the project. Bridget Adams (a history and politics student) worked alongside me and other people involved in the project to help with community art workshops and events. However, her focus was on exploring the extensive Category D archives held in the care of Dene Valley Community Partnership on behalf of ex-shopkeeper and anti-Category D activist, Bob Jackson. Bridget worked with Gary Mottram, an unemployed man from Eldon Lane to produce *Criminally Unjustified* - a film that told the story of the area's struggles against Category D designation and its ongoing impact on the people of the valley today. I offered advice and technical assistance, but most of the work was completed by Gary and Bridget. The film was shown at Durham Town Hall, in Eldon Lane Social Club and outdoors on the side of a building next to The Hollow. It is also now on YouTube.

Bridget and Gary can hopefully use this film as a springboard for future employment and education opportunities. Sharing the Category D film on Twitter led to planners and urbanists from across the UK seeking to find out more about what happened in Dene Valley and Eldon (and across Durham). They asked if there was an archive and a place to visit. When I fed this back to Dene Valley Community Partnership, it stimulated ideas about tourism, a community museum/ archive, walking trails, a digitised Category D archive, and possibilities for future employment opportunities.

I also organised a crowdfunding campaign on Facebook which resulted in £80 being donated to the project. The money was spent providing gardening tools and materials to support the work to turn Vyner Street back lane into a community garden. The crowdfunding campaign was a test to see if people from outside the area would invest in its people and places. Whilst the sum donated was relatively small, it shows that, with more effort and support, other activities could be micro-funded in this way.

I also made several films to support and summarise what More Than Viable was about. I also produced a series of 10 portraits of people from Eldon and Dene Valley who were trying to make changes in the area and who'd taken part in the project. The portraits were exhibited in Trimmers Hair Salon in the nearby town of Bishop Auckland thanks to the support of its owner. Each portrait was exhibited in the salon in each bay, with a short explanation panel next to each one. This enabled some of the story of the work being done by local people in Dene Valley and Eldon to be disseminated to a broader local audience, including businesspeople. Local media also covered elements of the project, notably at its start and finish.

It was the people of Dene Valley and Eldon who took up the challenge of taking small actions to start turning the place around and dreaming of a brighter future. The intention was for More Than Viable to, in some cases rekindle, in others instil a spirit of self-organising, mutually beneficial cooperation and collectivism in the people of the valley: to reignite and light as many little fires of hope as possible; to help them burn brightly and become slowly contagious.

In Eldon Lane, young people asked for a bike track to curb their own anti-social behaviour. They knew what a bike track would do; understood its benefits. They imagined planning, developing, using and maintaining it, together. Yet getting adults to trust them was difficult at first. A young mother and her husband gave up their jobs to start a heritage café in the village, with very positive early signs of future sustainability. People began talking about setting up a youth club and a new nursery. People also started thinking about and having a say about housing needs and regeneration.

In Close House and Eldon, people began a community garden sharing scheme. We worked on clearing the overgrown and litter-strewn back lane to the rear of Vyner Street, turning it into the first part of Close House Community Gardens. Local people joined in, shook our hands and said, "thank you". I invited the council's Community Action Team to support our work, leading to Groundworks agreeing to clear 3 sites in Close House to enable the community gardens to grow. The owners of 2 properties on the Close House Community Garden at Vyner Street back lane have gifted their land to the community to own and the Land Registry transfer is imminent.

The work around community gardening and growing led the people involved to become interested in Incredible Edible – a community food growing network. Following a visit by Incredible Edible founder, Pam Warhurst, the people involved in More Than Viable committed to working together with other local people, the school and community groups to become an Incredible Edible area.

The project gathered qualitative and quantitative data about the project, although this was done quite subtly as people were often not keen on filling in long forms. It was gathered using films, voice recordings, brief forms, online, in field notes, etc.⁴ I also conducted a survey that asked people about what their concerns were now and for the future and what they thought could make things better.

These are some of the numerous, small-scale activities undertaken during More Than Viable. The project ended whilst many of them were still in an embryonic stage and whilst others were still being planned. The approach needs to be sustained, but sustainability is always an issue when delivering arts and heritage projects. Nevertheless, if this approach could be continued for a further period of between 6 months and a year, it would enable the communities of Dene Valley and Eldon to be able to be left with seeds, seedlings and saplings of new individual growth and new collective hope.

The key outcomes and planned future developments arising from More Than Viable are briefly discussed below.

⁴ See Data section of this report for more information.

OUTCOMES AND NEXT STEPS

As mentioned above, many of the outcomes developed during More Than Viable were, at the time of writing this report, still in their early stages and, in some cases, still in planning and due to commence imminently. This section of the report therefore summarises each outcome and, where appropriate, explains what steps are necessary to progress them.

BECOMING AN INCREDIBLE EDIBLE AREA

People, community groups, politicians and the local school have agreed to become an Incredible Edible project. This process is due to commence in December 2019 and will be supported by Incredible Edible founder Pam Warhurst. The potential for widespread community development and involvement at every level and every age is substantial and could well lead to other ways people in the area can work together.

COMMUNITY ALLOTMENT

Dene Valley Parish Council have given an allotment to the community which we will make good and then use it as a mass production facility for vegetable and plant seedlings which will then be freely distributed amongst community members and planted in disused parcels of land around the area. Durham County Council's Community Action Team and Groundworks have committed to clearing and preparing the plot in December 2019. We plan to install a polytunnel (funding permitting) early in 2020, ready for first batch of sowing in February and March 2020. The sowing and growing and sharing process will continue in cycles thereafter. This allotment will form an important part of the development of the area's Incredible Edible initiative.

LAND AT VYNER STREET BACK LANE

We have secured the asset transfer of a large area of land as part of the Close House Community Garden at the rear of Vyner Street in Close House. Land Registry transfer will commence in December 2020 and the area will then be immediately cleared and prepared by Groundworks. The land will be given to the community as part of the

area's Incredible Edible initiative and will be an important new asset to the community. The council's Community Action Team assisted in this acquisition.

CLOSE HOUSE COMMUNITY GARDENS

The lane to the rear of Vyner Street in Close House has been dug, cleared and planted by local community members who have taken the lane into their custodianship. Additional land has been gifted (see above). More lanes and streets will be developed in this way as part of the area's Incredible Edible initiative. The first new plot will be a gap site between two houses on Close House road which will be cleared with the support of County Durham's Community Action Team and Groundworks and be ready to use by local people as a garden in early 2020.

COMMUNITY ASSET TRANSFER OF LAND AT THE HOLLOW

The Community Asset Transfer of the land at The Hollow, off Spencer Street in Eldon Lane was close to completion at the time of writing this report. Dene Valley Parish Council are keen to take ownership for the benefit of local people. They have indicated that a portion of the land will be rented to people living in the houses on Spencer Street that back onto The Hollow for use as gardens and additional car parking. They have agreed to use the remaining portion of land for community as part of the Incredible Edible initiative gardens and wildflower meadows, pending possible future development in the medium-term.

COMMUNITY GARDEN SHARING

Linked to the community allotment, community gardens and Incredible Edible initiative, people from around the area and the area's other allotments will be encouraged to share excess plants and produce amongst neighbours and offer them for planting in disused parcels of land. This process will be trialled in spring 2020 and expanded thereafter. Dene Valley Community Partnership and Eldon Parish Council have committed to becoming a partner in this initiative.

COMMUNITY GARDEN TOOL LIBRARY

Donated tools will be housed in a new community space which will be made available in Spencer Street, Eldon Lane. The library will enable people in the area to access

tools for gardening and planting for free. Again, this is an important element of the Incredible Edible initiative. The library will be developed during the first part of 2020 and be ready for use (funding permitting) by spring 2020.

CREATIVE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT TRUST

The community is still discussing setting up a CCDT consisting of a partnership of County Councillors, Parish Councils, Prince Bishops Community Infant School, Dene Valley Community Partnership, Eldon Community Centre, and other local people and businesses. As a first step towards this objective, the 2 parishes have agreed to work together more closely on the area's regeneration agenda. Further meetings planned for early 2020 to move towards beginning the process of constituting as a trust.

CONTINUE WORKING WITH LOCAL COUNCILLORS AND MP TO DEVELOP THE AREA

I have been invited to continue to help in the regeneration of the area and will attend meetings to progress a plan to ensure that the area's existing residents see improvements to homes and facilities in the area that improve the lives of everyone living there.

CATEGORY D FILM

Bridget Adams, a paid intern from the University of Newcastle, and Gary Mottram, an unemployed man from Eldon Lane, researched Bob Jackson's unique archive of Category D materials held at Dene Valley Community Partnership, interviewed local people including Bob, and filmed around the area to produce a film entitled *Criminally Unjustified*. A teaser at was shown at Northern Heartlands' [RE]Place in Durham on 3rd September 2019 to an audience of around 100 people. A full edit of the film was then shown 13th September 2019 as an outdoor projection on the side of a building at the edge of The Hollow which attracted almost 100 people, including many of the area's young people. The film was then shown twice on a large screen in late October 2019 at Eldon Lane Social Club. Each showing was followed by a community conversation. These two showings attracted a combined audience of 59 people. The film has been posted online and had been watched almost 3,500 times across all media streams at the time of writing this report.

EXHIBITION AT TRIMMERS, BISHOP AUCKLAND

Exhibition of photographs of lesser-known local characters who have positive visions and ideas about the future of Dene Valley and Eldon to be displayed in local hairdressers with accompanying text and links. Idea to highlight the people of the area and the things starting to develop in the area. (Install before end of Sept 2019. Exhibition opening in hairdressers.)

MORE THAN VIABLE FILM

I produced a series of films exploring certain elements of the project, summarising the project and giving a glimpse of the *Imagine If...* exhibition. Total impressions for these films across all media was, at the time of writing, just over 5,500.

MORE THAN VIABLE SOCIAL MEDIA IMPACT

The project was promoted on Facebook (via a dedicated page) and via my Twitter account. This resulted in just over 20,000 impressions during the project, of which just over 8,000 were via Facebook; the remainder via Twitter.

COMMUNITY MUSEUM/ ARCHIVE

A partnership of local people and Dene Valley Community Partnership to begin concept design of community-owned and led museum and archive. There is the possibility of purchasing/ Community Asset Transfer of the ex-Sure Start building as home for the project. There would also be employment and training opportunities for local people as well as beginning to develop a local tourism offer based around Category D and the area's rich mining and rail histories. Further discussions and planning due for early 2020, with the possibility of developing project from late 2020.

COMMUNITY HERITAGE CAFÉ

A new business in the café ran by and employing local people in a space below Dene Valley Community Partnership's offices opened in October 2019 and has been successful. I have supported the owners and will continue to do so during 2020, with community art workshops planned in the café subject to funding.

WALKING THE BOUNDS

Some community members are keen to develop an annual community walk around little-used and well-known paths around the area. The idea is to walk and talk together whilst exploring the area's nature and its heritage. A map will be produced. It is possible this annual event could become one of several heritage/ nature walks around the area that could be signposted and marketed to walkers and tourists. It is hoped the first walking the bounds event will be organised in summer 2020.

CLOSE TO HOME

A project to develop audio/ visual electronic music and spoken word expressions about what it means to live in Dene Valley and Eldon now as well as what people hope will make their lives better in the future. Stephen will work with renowned electronica artist Mariam Rezaei (subject to successful funding application). The project would ideally work with two groups: the first being the area's children and young people; the second, local adults and older people. It is hoped that this project could commence in spring 2020.

MASTERPLANNING AND ECO-SOCIAL HOUSING OUTLINES

Subject to funding, Fran Edgerley from Turner Prize winning Assemble (Granby 4 Streets) will visit the area and begin process of creating grassroots masterplans for ecologically sustainable, community-owned social housing in spring/ summer 2020. The initiative could see the development of a pilot home in partnership with the parish council, community groups and other residents.

YOUNG PEOPLE CREATIVE DEVELOPMENT SESSIONS

Creative design sessions with young people starting with development of ideas for MTB/ BMX track on half of The Hollow. These sessions would ideally take place in either the kickboxing gym in Eldon Lane or in the new Heritage Café. It is hoped that the sessions could start in early 2020. The sessions are not limited to designing a track, however, and could easily develop into art workshops. The young people of the area are particularly interested in watercolour painting. It was amazing to see how calm and collected they became when we did some watercolour teaching/ experimentation.

MTB/ BMX TRACK

The young people want a bike track and we have worked out outline costs and designs. They initially thought about building it on the land to be asset transferred to the community at The Hollow, but some residents are unhappy with that idea. They suggested the field to the rear of the park in Eldon Lane. There is a large area of grass field running towards Close House that could be turned into a bike track. The young people are keen to help design and maintain the track. They understand that this would give them “our own place hangout and organise races”. The track, with start ramp and jumps, berms, etc. could be built from soil, rubble and clay. It would be relatively quick to build and would cost between £12,500 and £15,000. Funding could be sought from the local council, businesses in nearby Bishop Auckland and from Linden Homes (to developer of the new housing estate in the area). It is possible that this project could be completed, with support from Durham County Council in terms of planning, etc., by late summer 2020.

SHILDON MODEL RAILWAY CLUB

I have talked to the modellers who moved into the ex-Quakers’ Meeting House in Close House. They have agreed that, once the building has been made safe for public use (immanent) they would happily organise introductory sessions in the new building in to encourage local young people and adults to join the club and develop a Dene Valley section. They are also happy for local people to use other spaces in the building for other events and activities, and possibly as office spaces. The sessions are likely to commence in spring 2020.

ARTWORK FROM EXHIBITION TO BE EXHIBITED AT NEW BISHOPS PARK HOUSING DEVELOPMENT

There is the possibility of Linden Homes exhibiting work from the *Imagine If...* portrait exhibition in the show homes and marketing suite of its new estate. Discussions could lead to a successful outcome in early 2020.

DATA

I collected a substantial amount of data during More Than Viable – both qualitative and quantitative. My approach was to collect data when appropriate and to not push people into completing any forms or giving any responses if I thought it would deter them from taking part in the project in any way. I used field notes to keep notes on some very simple demographic data which I collected during each session, using my experience to determine gender and age groupings.

I have presented the data in five sets for the purposes of this report:

1. Quantitative data relating to participants split into a simple analysis of total numbers of individual participants and of total number of engagements (i.e. individuals who participated on more than one occasion), and a more detailed analysis of data provided by individual participants.
2. Quantitative analysis of responses by participants to simple questions about what they thought was needed to start making improvements to the area and to people's lives.
3. A qualitative analysis of a survey I conducted with participants asking them what the main issues were affecting them now and what they thought would overcome them. (This data was obtained as both a follow on from the quantitative responses to the questions mentioned above and via conversations, with responses recorded in my field notes.)
4. Individual feedback about participants' experiences during the project in the form of narrative responses.
5. Feedback from social media in the form of written responses and comments.

1. QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS OF PARTICIPANTS

A. SIMPLE ANALYSIS OF PARTICIPANTS

FEMALE PARTICIPANTS:	265 (68%)
MALE PARTICIPANTS:	124 (32%)
TOTAL NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS:	389
PARTICIPANTS AGED UNDER 5:	18 (5%)
PARTICIPANTS AGED 6 TO 11:	42 (11%)
PARTICIPANTS AGED 12 TO 16:	22 (6%)
PARTICIPANTS AGED 17 TO 25:	9 (2%)
PARTICIPANTS AGED 26 TO 35:	15 (4%)
PARTICIPANTS AGED 36 TO 45:	36 (9%)
PARTICIPANTS AGED 46 TO 55:	65 (16%)
PARTICIPANTS AGED 56 TO 65:	109 (28%)
PARTICIPANTS AGED OVER 65:	73 (19%)
TOTAL NUMBER OF ENGAGEMENTS:	923

B. DETAILED ANALYSIS OF PARTICIPANTS

A total of 93 people provided data via forms, many of which were completed by me by asking people questions whilst they took part in the project, although most people were happy to complete the form.

The data presented below therefore represents the responses of 24% of the total number of participants.

GENDER

FEMALE:	47 (51%)
MALE:	46 (49%)

LIVING IN THE AREA?

YES:	72 (78%)
NO:	21 (22%)

LIVED IN AREA IN YOUR LIFE?

YES:	53 (57%)
NO:	47 (43%)

ETHNIC GROUP

WHITE:	83 (90%)
TRAVELLER/ GYPSY:	4 (4%)
MIXED:	3 (3%)
ASIAN:	2 (2%)
BLACK:	1 (1%)

AGE

PARTICIPANTS AGED UNDER 5:	2 (2%)
PARTICIPANTS AGED 6 TO 11:	21 (23%)
PARTICIPANTS AGED 12 TO 16:	8 (9%)
PARTICIPANTS AGED 17 TO 25:	4 (4%)
PARTICIPANTS AGED 26 TO 35:	8 (9%)
PARTICIPANTS AGED 36 TO 45:	12 (13%)
PARTICIPANTS AGED 46 TO 55:	17 (18%)
PARTICIPANTS AGED 56 TO 65:	11 (12%)
PARTICIPANTS AGED OVER 65:	10 (10%)

2. QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS OF PARTICIPANTS' RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS ABOUT COULD MAKE THINGS BETTER IN THE FUTURE

Total of 165 people took part in this survey (98 on recipe cards and 67 in face-to-face surveys). People were able to make multiple responses. Similar responses have been grouped.

Working together across all ages/ helping each other/ sharing	126
Youth clubs/ things for young people to do	113
Natural colour/ nicer environment/ use land/ litter picking/ cleaner	105
Deal with absentee landlords/ regeneration (everyone benefits)	94
Things for families to do	83
Social housing/ community-owned housing	75
Less anti-social behaviour/ stop bikes on lawns	70
Better policing/ make place safer	58
More local pride/ increased community spirit/ improve area's reputation	58
More investment	54
Listen to what people want	51
Better parks	46
Community garden/ sharing produce & seeds/ Rewilding	45
Improve transport/ train halt	41
Unite parishes/ Heal divide/ Communities cooperating	40
Nursery/ childcare/ parent toddlers	37
More facilities across both parishes/ cheaper facilities	37
Community-led events	37
No big population increases	37
Good/ more local shop(s)	36
Listen to children and young people	32
New bike track/ trails	31
More places to socialise/ coffee shop	29

Sports days/ games/ exercise/ running	28
Community day trips	28
Make roads safer/ improve roads	27
Things for adults to do	26
More jobs/ better opportunities	26
Better health/ wellbeing/ education	25
No new large housing developments	25
Positive thinking	24
Skatepark	24
Small/ family businesses/ start-ups	24
Neighbourhood plan/ community plan	23
More affordable homes for sale	20
More homes for older people	20
Community celebrations	19
Gym/ climbing facilities	19
More new houses for sale	19
Community produces own food	17
Bigger population (good)/ more new housing developments	17
Local walks need improving & extending	16
Arts and crafts	16
Less offenders housed in area	16
Understand local history & stories better & blend with future	13
More diverse community	9
Fire pit	8
Movie nights/ cinema	6
Friendship	6
Energy efficient housing	4
Bigger school due to increased population	3
Youth workers	3

3. QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF A SURVEY CONDUCTED WITH PARTICIPANTS

It was astonishing to note how important issues around housing, anti-social behaviour, regeneration and the lack of facilities in the area, particularly for children and young people, were for people living in the area. Interestingly, there was one thing that people surveyed felt would help the people of Dene Valley and Eldon overcome these issues and make the place better in the future. The survey involved 67 people with ages ranging from 9 to 83 years old.

HOUSING

99% of people thought that housing was a primary source of problems in the area. There were concerns about absent landlords, poor quality rented property and management of rented properties (some local landlords respected, however), about people being moved into the area having been displaced from other parts of the country, about paedophiles and people with other criminal pasts being “dumped” in the villages, etc. People were, however, attracted to the area to live because of low house purchase prices and were investing in renovating their properties, intending to stay in the area permanently.

ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR

96% of people were concerned (mostly very concerned) about anti-social behaviour in their communities; even many of the perpetrators were themselves concerned. It was clear that young people were blamed by some older members of the community for much of the anti-social behaviour. They, in turn, blamed paedophiles and “wrong-uns” for leading them to become a sort of vigilante group. This is perhaps partly true, but lack of things to do, sometimes inadequate parenting, and frequent mistrust and castigation by older community members and some community groups deeply undermines the self-esteem of the children and young people in the area. All that said,

anti-social behaviour is often petty, and the area feels quite safe. Clearly, the area is stuck in a vicious cycle, but equally clearly, this cycle can be broken with a little care and investment in some basic facilities. The young people know themselves what will help, but people will not trust them and will not invest in what they want.

LACK OF FACILITIES

95% of people felt there was little or nothing to do in the area. It is not enough to say that people can travel to other towns to access facilities because many residents do not have either the means or the drive to go elsewhere and, given the area had many facilities and shops in the past, why should people want to travel on inadequate and infrequent public transport? Many long-term and older residents remember the area as being “one of the best villages in County Durham” and that’s rather sad. People remember the dance nights and the cinema, the jazz bands, the carnivals, the sports clubs, the heated swimming baths, the numerous shops (“you didn’t need to go anywhere – we had everything we needed here), the youth clubs, the community centre, the trips to the seaside and elsewhere (“there were buses queuing up around the village and everyone went”), the allotments, the social clubs and pubs, and more. All of which have pretty much gone now.

REGENERATION

83% of people were either concerned or very concerned about the new housing developments around the area. 1,000 new homes are being built, with further plans in the pipeline. There are no plans for additional social housing and limited numbers of “affordable” housing being built (although, of course, affordable housing isn’t affordable to many people, particularly those most in need). People in the area feel that the new developments will not benefit them in any way and are worried that they might lead to poorer people and travellers being displaced from the area as it perhaps undergoes some form of rural gentrification. Nevertheless, people are keen to be part of a form of regeneration that benefits everyone and welcomes newcomers into the area.

PEOPLE WANT TO GET INVOLVED IN MAKING THEIR COMMUNITIES FLOURISH

Whilst things may seem tough in Dene Valley and Eldon, many people want to help others and some people want to take ownership of elements of developing their communities. For example, Krystal has taken on the café underneath the One-Stop-Shop and invested a great deal of her own time and money into making it a success. Katurah, Mike and others have set up a community garden sharing project and made good a back lane that was once a dumping ground, turning it into a community garden that may become a blueprint for other disused and neglected places and spaces around the area. Young people want to take responsibility for things for them to do. What's left of the local community groups, supported by the MP and local councillors, want to make a difference but lack the ability to raise funds and be trusted to manage community investment programmes. But they are committed to working more closely together, putting aside past differences and divides to begin talking about setting up a community development trust.

4. FEEDBACK FROM PARTICIPANTS

I asked people who took part to comment on the project. Here are some of the comments received. They have been anonymised.

WHAT WAS GOOD?

“The project brought people together and we’ve met new people in our community.”

“Incredible Edible is an amazing opportunity for us. Pam was an inspiration. Together we can be part of something much bigger and put our place on the map.”

“It was great having things to do in the summer holidays. We usually have nothing to do so it was good to have something to look forward to.”

“We felt listened to.”

“I felt inspired to do something to help my community. It’ll take a while, but we have to try.”

“The students loved Stephen’s afternoon at our school. They worked so hard and really enjoyed it.”

“It was lovely seeing the community engaging in a positive way. It was also evident that the local people share a real passion for the area.”

“Something positive was happening in this area.”

“I only hope that the seeds you have sown, take root and grow. This community does deserve better and I will certainly help support them.”

WHAT COULD HAVE BEEN BETTER?

“I would have loved to see the barrier between Eldon and Eldon Lane squashed once and for all. You certainly did try.”

“More liaison with Dene Valley Community Partnership. More information about what was actually happening in the area and when.”

5. FEEDBACK FROM SOCIAL MEDIA

We received a great deal of positive comments on social media. Here are a few quotes to give a flavour.

“Oh brilliant. I’m glad you’re doing this!”

“Making Changes Together!”

“I hope more people climb aboard on what should be a great journey.”

“I didn’t know anything about Category D planning in County Durham. There’s nothing really written about it in academic literature. It would be able to know where to go to find out more.”

“Trimmers Salon were pleased to be involved in the presentation of the artwork.”

“This is really up my street.”

“It all sounds very interesting.”

“We need to get involved!”

“Your project has instigated a lot of interest in the D area I have found it all moving to realise what was going on there.”

“So much for these little villages to look forward to and get involved in, love it x.”

NEXT STEPS

As mentioned earlier and outlined throughout the report, More Than Viable concluded at a point when several important initiatives were beginning to come into fruition. Whilst the next steps are outlined above, it is important to understand that many of them will not happen without continued support for a further period of between 6 and 12 months. I have continued to keep in touch with participants, community groups, the school, parish councillors, town councillors, the area's MP and Durham County Council. I have also continued to work with the Community Action Team and Groundworks as well as with Incredible Edible to develop the project. This has been done voluntarily but a further phase of rather limited investment of £9,900 has been requested from Northern Heartlands. It is understood that Northern Heartlands has a limited budget remaining for its initial phase of work and that it faces future uncertainties, however a final funding award would allow the seeds sown during More Than Viable to Grow and develop into self-sufficient futures for the people of Dene Valley and Eldon.

The funding would enable me to continue to support the initiatives such as all the gardening and growing activities which are now coalescing around the brand of "Incredible Edible Dene Valley and Eldon" and which are kindly being supported by Durham County Council's Community Action Team. This initiative can also link with other forms of community development including the Community Development Trust and ongoing social/ community housing and regeneration planning. The funding would also support further arts provision and potentially enable other funding to be accessed.

The requested funding would enable visits of one day per week to be made for a period of 32 full days of work on the project, equating to 32 weeks of continued project engagement. This would cost £8,960 (based on a daily rate of £250 per day plus £30 travel expenses). The remaining £940 would be used to purchase and install a poly tunnel on the community allotment at Close House allotments, fence the allotment in line with parish council requirements, provide topsoil, seeds and native hedging and trees.

This last phase would bring together the successful outcomes and ideas from More Than Viable and leave the area able to begin growing again collectively.

CONCLUSION

More Than Viable was, for me, a successful project that was the something beautiful. But it was not the end. I have always believed it is important to leave people to develop their places their way but that needs to be timed carefully to ensure that new shoots don't starve or be killed-off by old blights.

The people in Dene Valley and Eldon deserve better. They have ideas but need help in beginning to feel confident about realising them themselves. My approach has always been to leader by example and to help people overcome their doubts and structural obstacles (real and imagined) that are holding them back. People can self-organise and become relatively self-governing (thereby re-engaging with democracy and, indeed, developing new forms of more participatory democracy), but they need support. This project has stimulated a raft of new possibilities for the people and places that make up Dene Valley and Eldon. It is hoped that sufficient funding (modest in comparison to many community development and/or art/ heritage projects) can be made available to enable this next period of work to happen, because it is the next few months or year which can make many of the hopes and dreams of people living in the area become realities.

My approach is about people-powered development and, as such, I am keen to withdraw as and when people in the area feel confident about their own capacities to build new lives and new communities together. This point isn't that far off. But it will only happen through mutual cooperation, investment based on people's needs, and, most importantly, trust.

Stephen Pritchard,

29th November 2019.