





# Spark reports reframe the conversation.

*In this edition, we are focusing on skills. The skills we need to thrive, the skills that open doors, and the skills that build better futures.*

*Sparks shine a spotlight on a subject in Norfolk, and through this small but mighty publication, we hope to ignite conversations and inspire action around building and nurturing skills in our community.*

*This Spark captures the work we are doing, alongside our partners, to support skills development across Norfolk. It is a snapshot of the projects, stories, and successes happening right now.*

*We are always eager to hear your thoughts, and we welcome any questions you may have.*

*Please share this report with others who might find it interesting or valuable. Together, we can continue building a brighter future for everyone.*

*Clare MacIntosh*

## SPARK

/spa:k/ noun

1. a quality that makes something interesting, successful
2. an action that causes something larger to happen



We have over **700,000** vacant jobs in the UK and **1.6 million** people unemployed.

We have young people full of **ambition**, yet **few clear pathways** into work.

We have people who **want** to work, but who **cannot** get there because of transport, geography or caring responsibilities.

**It doesn't make sense!**

So what is the **missing** piece?

The answer lies in **communities**.

# WHAT IS A SKILL?

Skills are more than exams or qualifications. They are the things that help us get into and get on with work.

Building skills is key to helping people access meaningful, adequately paid work in our communities. Put simply: skills enable us to reach our potential. Whether it is knowing how to use tools, being able to access opportunities, working well with others, solving problems, or adapting to change, skills come in many forms and shape our lives in countless ways. The skills we build open doors to confidence, to opportunity, and to meaningful work.

This issue explores how people are building the skills that matter, from

practical know-how to the confidence to take that first step. It shines a light on community-led training, tailored support, catching those who fall through the gaps, helping people dream big, and offering mentoring, and volunteering; the local action that is already helping people unlock their potential and shape a future they choose.

People in Norfolk are ambitious. They want to work, grow, support their families, contribute to their communities and take pride in what they do. But for too many, the path to secure, fairly paid work close to home is not straightforward. In some areas, jobs are limited or poorly paid. In others, transport or childcare can make work feel out of

reach. These challenges are real, but so is the desire for something better.

Right across Norfolk, communities are responding. They are bringing the workplace within reach, whether someone is working for the first time, returning after a break or getting the training and qualifications they need to succeed on their path.

This is not about fixing broken systems. It is about recognising the talent and ambition that is already here, and working together to create the conditions for it to flourish. We hope this issue sparks ideas, connections and shared energy for building a stronger, fairer Norfolk. A Norfolk where everyone has the skills to succeed in their reach.





# LISTENING TO THE EXPERTS

Unpicking local challenges with insight from those who know our skills landscape best.

Claire Mackintosh MBE

Norfolk is full of people with ambition. Whether they are school leavers, job seekers, or career changers, many are looking to the future and asking: what is next for me, and how do I get there? Yet for too many, that path is not clear. With a local economy in flux and new industries on the rise, we need to ensure that everyone in our county has the chance to build skills, find opportunity and be part of Norfolk's success.

To understand the challenges and potential of employment in Norfolk, I spoke with three people who each bring a different perspective: Kevin Keable, Chair of the East of England Energy Group, Julia Nix from the Department for Work and Pensions, and Natasha Waller, Policy Manager at The Business Board Network.

Together, they painted a picture of a county full of promise, but not without its hurdles.

For Kevin, the energy sector is one of Norfolk's most exciting frontiers. From offshore wind, gas and nuclear to clean technology, jobs are growing fast. "There is a huge pipeline of opportunity," he says. "But we need to make sure local people are ready to step into those roles." He highlights the importance of early engagement, particularly with young people. "It's about aspiration, visibility and support. People need to be able to see themselves in these industries and know how to get there."

Kevin points to work like the Dudgeon STEM in Schools Fund, delivered through

the Norfolk Community Foundation, which gives students hands-on experience with green technology. This kind of practical, meaningful exposure is often the spark that ignites a young person's ambition. "But technical skills alone are not enough," Kevin adds. "We also need people who are resilient, who can communicate, who can solve problems and work in a team. These are things that develop over time, often through real-world experience and support from community groups. And whilst STEM should actively be encouraged, there are many jobs which do not require STEM subjects, but are equally important to ensure that these huge projects are completed and we must let people know about these jobs too."

That is where the voluntary sector comes in. Local charities and community organisations are already supporting people on the ground to grow these softer, foundational skills. Whether it is building confidence, learning how to prepare for work, or exploring new possibilities, these groups meet people where they are and help them take their next step.

Natasha Waller sees a similar pattern in her work supporting businesses and workforce development. "People often do not realise how varied careers in Norfolk can be," she explains. From agriculture and agri-tech to health and digital, the opportunities are there, but too often, people do not know how to access them. "There is often an outdated image of certain sectors and their jobs. People want meaningful careers, but the routes in may not always be clearly signposted, particularly for adults. The Norfolk and Suffolk Careers Hub have been undertaking great work in schools in recent years. It's so important to keep promoting our key sectors and the pathways into them for all ages."

Natasha believes the charitable sector has a key role in bridging that gap. "I have seen charities open doors for people that would otherwise stay closed. They help individuals identify their interests, build basic employability, and gain confidence in exploring new options. Especially in a rural county like ours, they are able to reach people others cannot."

She also highlights the value of support at the entry level. "Even for elementary



occupations, it is often the basics that matter most: building confidence, understanding how to complete an application, knowing what to expect in the workplace. These are things VCSEs are well placed to support, and they do it well, with patience and personal understanding."

For Julia Nix, District Manager for Norfolk and Suffolk Jobcentre Plus, it is all about giving people the right support to move them towards or into sustained employment. "Our Work Coaches work with customers to identify barriers to employment and remove them. However, we recognise that we cannot do this alone and therefore deliver support to individuals through a multi-agency approach, bringing multiple services together. Our relationship with the voluntary, community, and social enterprise sector is so valuable as our partners can provide additional tailored support to customers, which can make a significant difference".

Julia has worked closely with the Foundation to support people leaving prison and re-entering society. "Helping people achieve a sense of stability is vital in those first few months following release. Work is a key way of creating that stability, but there are so many hurdles to get there. Community organisations help people through those first difficult weeks, providing practical and emotional support to clear some of those hurdles."

All three experts agree that collaboration is essential. The employment landscape in Norfolk is changing rapidly. Energy, tech and evolving agricultural industries are shaping new futures, but without the right support, too many people risk being left behind.

At Norfolk Community Foundation, we are proud to support the organisations that are stepping in to fill the gap. We believe that building skills is not just about qualifications, but about confidence, curiosity, and connection. Local charities are doing this work every day. They are preparing people for work, but more importantly, they are helping them believe that work is within reach.

If we want Norfolk to thrive, we need everyone to have a chance to take part. By investing in skills, supporting communities, and working together, we can ensure that no one is left on the sidelines. So much talent lives in every corner of our county, and it just needs the right opportunity to shine.

*Claire Mackintosh is Chief Executive of Norfolk Community Foundation and former Chair of the Skills Advisory Panel at New Anglia Local Enterprise Partnership.*

# Beyond the NUMBERS

'WHEN DATA TELLS US  
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## DATA ONLY TELLS US SO MUCH.

At the Foundation, we have been using our unique position as a local grant funder and partner to delve beneath the numbers and explore what is happening in Norfolk. As a county-wide funder of community groups and charities, not only do we draw on information from the thousands of applications we receive each year to get an overview of the assets within communities and the challenges they face, but we also actively engage with local community organisations to carry out research and insight projects. By combining this community-centred approach with local data, we can gain a better understanding of what is happening behind the numbers and the action we might want to take.

We took a deep dive into what is holding people back, working with four community organisations in King's Lynn and West Norfolk, to unlock rich insights into work and skills. Two of these groups, The

Garage Trust and Open Road West Norfolk, work primarily with young people. Meanwhile the Purfleet Trust supports people experiencing homelessness, while the Hanseatic Union helps refugees and migrants. Despite the different ages, genders, nationalities and geographies represented by the groups, four common themes emerged: the need for qualifications or existing qualifications to be recognised, the limitations of support from family and friends, practical challenges such as transportation, and personal challenges linked to low confidence, self belief and motivation.

Qualifications are key in many lines of work, and this reality was echoed by all participants in the focus groups. Open Road West Norfolk actively supports young people who are outside mainstream education to gain formal qualifications in English and Maths, as well as vocational skills, recognising the importance of these qualifications in securing work.

Formal qualifications alone are not the full picture, however. Hanseatic Union notes that despite the people they work with often being highly qualified in their home countries, some employers demand exceptionally high standards of English, creating an additional barrier for people to negotiate. Similarly, The Garage Trust reports that softer employment skills, like being able to make a phone call or structure an email, are often not taught – leaving people at an instant disadvantage.

Our early conversations about the skills we need for employment often happen with parents or in the classroom – but what happens when this is not an option? The young people who participated in Open Road West Norfolk's focus group did not feel that they could speak to parents, friends or relatives for advice or support on skills or employment. Meanwhile, the Garage Trust cited the challenge of families where no

one has worked for a long time. Without this kind of support at home, it can be harder to build confidence or know where to turn. They noted, however, that they knew of places where people seeking advice could go when this support is unavailable from family and friends, underscoring the need for independent career advice outside of families, schools or job centres.

Being able to secure a job is one thing, being able to get there is another. In Norfolk, 30% of people live more than 15 minutes away from an employment centre, and only 6% live close to an employment centre with over 5,000 jobs. All groups discussed problems with transport, such as the cost, reliability or lack of service. While some pointed to creative solutions such as informal lift sharing, others looked to public transport for the solution – even if it was 'bad, unreliable and expensive'. At the same time, groups reported a reluctance amongst their

participants to move away from the security of family to seek work and noted the limitations around the affordability of housing.

It is not just young people who are feeling lost. Whilst we might have assumed that most of these issues primarily affect younger or less experienced people, the focus groups revealed that this was a more universal challenge and sometimes linked to the availability of appropriate work opportunities. Someone from The Garage Trust commented: 'The idea that there are lots of jobs out there seems to be false. There are either low-paid or highly paid, but mid-salary jobs seem to be non-existent and so when middle-aged individuals find themselves out of work there is nowhere to go'.

When data tells us that there are thousands of people not in work, but there are thousands of jobs available, it is easy to jump to conclusions

about why this might be the case. Ultimately, this can lead to policies that fail to address the specific opportunities and challenges in areas such as skills.

We know the figures, but it is our connections with communities that show us what is really going on. Community-led initiatives, whether they are mentoring programmes, training sessions for basic digital skills, or projects which boost confidence, have a profound impact because they are tailored to the specific needs of those they serve. And when these efforts are supported by local funding, they can evolve into solutions that address systemic issues in a meaningful way. This approach provides hope and opportunity for both individuals and their wider communities. By rooting solutions in local insight and ensuring they are community-driven, we can create long-lasting change that goes beyond what data alone can represent.





# Starting with Confidence



**Community projects across Norfolk are helping people grow, volunteer and move towards work, one step at a time.**

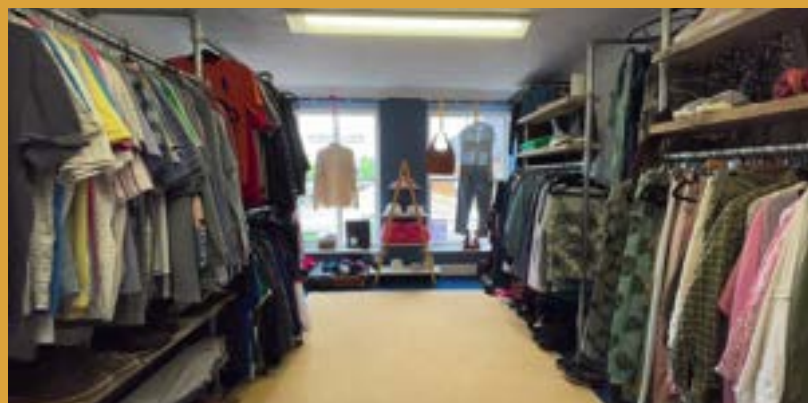
Finding meaningful work is not just about having the right qualifications or experience. It is often about confidence. Whether someone has never had the chance to develop their strengths, has been out of work for a long time, or is struggling with their mental health, the first step can be the hardest. Across Norfolk, community groups are responding to this challenge by creating spaces where people feel safe, supported and ready to grow. These are places where confidence can be rebuilt, not overnight, but through relationships, encouragement and trust.

Direct funding from Norfolk Community Foundation enables community and voluntary groups to build on what they do well to create opportunities for individuals to build their confidence and move closer to the workplace at their own pace and in a way that makes sense to them.

At The Pantry in Kenninghall, support begins with food, but it does not end there. Like many food hubs



*“What sets Love Downham apart is the quality of its relationships. Staff take time to get to know each young person, building trust and offering the right level of support.”*



*“By starting small, they help individuals to build confidence, develop skills and take the next step on their own terms.”*

across the county, The Pantry in Kenninghall is part of a growing network of social supermarkets that offer more than just groceries. For people struggling to feed themselves or their families, it can be one of the only places they feel able to turn to. But once inside, they find a wider community ready to help.

They go beyond being just a sticking plaster, gently guiding people as they work towards their ambitions. Staff and volunteers at Kenninghall offer informal, practical support that meets people where they are. They gave an example of one woman they supported. Moving to the area with a disabled child and no support, she started using the shop for groceries. From there, the team were able to take her on a journey, initially helping her plan meals for the week and

signposting to local services. With time, these everyday interactions helped her build confidence and trust, and she eventually felt ready to volunteer. She then took up some courses, using a laptop at the hub, and soon asked for help building a CV and applying for jobs. She now has a job to support herself and her child, but it all started with something as simple as food and friendly faces. The Pantry, and food hubs like it, open up a pathway to wider skills, support and opportunities.

Meanwhile, Love Downham, run by the Swan Youth Project, is supporting young people to reach their potential. They recently received funding to help those aged 16 to 25 as they prepare for working life. Their social supermarket and adjoining boutique second-hand clothes store gives young people the

chance to gain hands-on experience in a real working environment. Through volunteering placements and tailored 1:1 support, they learn essential skills like customer service, communication, money handling, stock management and timekeeping while also growing their confidence.

What sets Love Downham apart is the quality of its relationships. Staff take time to get to know each young person, building trust and offering the right level of support. For one young man, known to the team for several years, volunteering in the shop helped him emerge from a long period of low confidence and social anxiety. At first, even speaking to customers felt daunting. But through patient support, encouragement and training, he not only grew into his role but he also began to mentor others. He now

speaks confidently, helps train new volunteers, and is beginning to explore next steps like apprenticeships. This kind of change was only possible because they could match opportunities to his pace, when he was ready.

A similar sense of steady, person-centred support runs through the work of Feathers Futures, a charity that supports women in Great Yarmouth. For those experiencing low self-esteem, isolation or the effects of trauma, volunteering or employment can feel far out of reach. That is why Feathers Futures starts by helping women rebuild their sense of worth.

We helped to fund their course, “It’s All About Me”, which was originally co-designed with the women they support. The six-week course helps a

group of women build self-esteem, challenge negative thinking, recognise their strengths, and take positive steps towards their goals with the support of others. Through discussion, peer support and guidance, the group are supported to see their own value and begin to believe in what is possible again. For one participant, the course helped her move from feeling invisible and overwhelmed to starting her own baking business and gaining regular local wholesale clients. Others have gone on to volunteer at Feathers Futures, passing on the same sense of encouragement and belonging that helped them.

All three projects demonstrate the power of starting small, being patient, and focusing on the person first, not just their CV. Whether it is through offering a listening ear at a food hub,

creating a safe space for emotional healing, or providing a stepping stone into work through volunteering, their success lies in working *with* people, not *on* them.

Charities offer flexible, responsive support in welcoming, local settings, recognising that growth takes time, and that no two journeys are the same. By starting small, they help individuals to build confidence, develop skills and take the next step on their own terms.

Ultimately, these projects show that change must be nurtured, not forced. And when we empower communities to come together and build on their existing strengths, we can create ‘virtuous cycles’ where people feel empowered to support one another.



## THE SPACE IN BETWEEN

*For people leaving prison, the future begins with the right support at the right moment.*

Leaving prison should mark a new beginning, but for many, it is the start of another difficult journey. The moment someone steps outside the prison gates, they face a complex set of barriers that can feel overwhelming. Finding a job, securing housing, accessing healthcare and reconnecting with family are all challenges that come at once, often without the stability or support needed to face them.

Developing the right skills is key to breaking the cycle. Skills open doors to employment, independence and self-belief – all crucial after time in custody. But without the basics in place, many prison leavers are not in a position to take up work or training straight away. They may leave with nowhere to live, no money, no phone, and little or no access to mental health support. It is a fragile and critical time. If support is not available quickly and consistently, the risk of reoffending increases dramatically.

This is where the New Life Fund at Norfolk Community Foundation is making a difference. A concept originally envisioned by Charles Watt during his time as High Sheriff, the fund ensures that people leaving prison can access urgent, personalised support that helps them begin again safely and with dignity. It is a partnership between the Department for Work and Pensions, Norwich Prison, Probation Services, philanthropists and local partners, cared for by the Foundation.

The fund works through trusted frontline organisations that are already in contact with people preparing for release or returning to the community. These organisations understand what is needed in those early days and weeks. They are able to act fast, helping individuals

overcome the immediate challenges that might otherwise derail progress.

For some, that could mean getting hold of essential ID or a phone to stay in touch with appointments and job opportunities. For others, it might be support with food, clothes, a travel pass or emergency accommodation. The New Life Fund allows support workers to respond quickly and flexibly, with fewer barriers or delays.

What makes this approach powerful is that the benefit of the fund is felt directly by the individual. It is not about general service delivery or long-term programmes. It is about meeting someone at a crucial turning point and removing the practical obstacles in their way. The support is discreet, appropriate and focused entirely on what that person needs to take the next step forward.

The New Life Fund also connects prison leavers with longer term community support. The people it helps are not simply handed emergency aid and left to cope. Instead, they are already connected with organisations that offer longer-term guidance and encouragement – from accessing housing and healthcare to building skills and finding employment.

This joined-up approach recognises that rebuilding after prison is not a single event but a gradual and often complex process. Having someone there in those early moments who can offer stability, respect and practical help makes all the difference. It gives people the space to focus on their development, not just their survival.

The fund is helping people build a foundation for lasting change. It is giving them the tools, trust and time to grow, regain control, reconnect with their communities, and move forward with purpose. In doing so, it also supports safer, stronger communities for everyone.

By recognising the importance of the transition out of custody, and focusing on people rather than process, the New Life Fund is showing what is possible when support meets people where they are, not where we think they should be.



STEM Club students at the Scillitoe Bros garage.

# Engineering Ambition

The Rural Students  
Breaking the Mould

At Alderman Peel High School in Wells-next-the-Sea, something quietly revolutionary is happening. Students are staying late after lessons, not because they have to, but because they want to. They are building, collaborating, and solving real-world problems. And crucially, they are beginning to believe that their futures could be filled with opportunity.

This is the STEM Club. The initiative has been supported by the Norfolk Community Foundation through several of its funds, including its JP Blanch Fund and the Dudgeon STEM in Schools Fund and the Sheringham Shoal Community Fund (operated by Equinor), which are investing directly in the potential of Norfolk's young people...





The STEM Club connects young people with businesses they could one day be employed by.

"We're working in areas where ambition runs high, but access to opportunity does not always match this," says Gemma Rivett, who manages the Dudgeon STEM in Schools Fund for Norfolk Community Foundation. "Our goal is to bridge that gap so students in Norfolk, no matter where they are, know that careers in engineering, renewable energy, and tech are not out of reach."

The STEM Club at Alderman Peel has been helping students discover science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) pathways for several years, but keeping it going is not without its challenges. Design and Technology teacher Amanda Moffat explains, "Subjects like ours are resource-intensive. Without external funding, we simply wouldn't be able to run this kind of additional programme. And the difference it makes both in terms of technical skills and self-belief is huge."

Students like Archie and Heath agree. Heath said, "It gives you life skills. It's preparing us for the future."

#### Opening New Horizons

Archie echoed Heath's sentiment. The club helped secure work experience at Lotus, where he was one of the only state-school students on the scheme. "One of the key things I put in my

application was my involvement in this club," he says. "I've grown in confidence, learned how to lead a team, and improved my communication and organisation massively."

The statistics show the need. Across Norfolk and Suffolk, we need around 88,000 new recruits in energy, ICT, construction and engineering roles by 2030. At the same time, areas like Wells-next-the-Sea show lower levels of access to higher-paid employment. Many residents rely on seasonal, lower-wage work in tourism and hospitality. The unemployment rate in the region has fluctuated in recent years, and for young people without access to further education or transport, it can be hard to see a path forward.

That is why projects like this matter. "We've got a skills gap and projects that address those skills gap are the most exciting for me," says Sophie Skipp, Stakeholder Manager at Equinor. "They are competing against some of the most expensive schools in the country. And watching those young people be really proud of the work that they have done and to hold their own against maybe schools that have deeper pockets is something that Norfolk Community Foundation has really helped us to."

#### Building momentum

The aspirations of students have continued to grow, and the club has had to expand to meet them. Through community funds, Amanda and her colleagues have been able to repurpose a disused groundskeepers' hut into a workshop where students have been building electric racing vehicles to race against other Norfolk schools, as well as invest in additional equipment for their extracurricular club. They have also been able to reach out beyond the school gates, not only engaging with local primary schools to start STEM education early, but also with local businesses to bring students into contact with future employers.

#### Building from strength

Amanda has been successful in bringing in support from local businesses and volunteers who are passionate about helping young people succeed. When she found herself running the club solo and faced a technical hiccup with one of the student-built cars, she turned to Kieran at Scillitoe Bros for help. "The students had followed the manual, but they'd fitted a part of the axle incorrectly and we could not fix it ourselves," Amanda recalls. "I called Kieran and he came straight down, took the car away, repaired it, and brought it back ready to go."

Since then, he and a colleague have been regular volunteers, supporting the club both at school and even clearing a space in their garage for the students to work." The team has grown to include parents, community volunteers, and even former students, one of whom now helps with marketing after gaining experience working at Wells Maltings. "It's a real team effort," Amanda says. "I couldn't do it without them."

Students have also met with engineers at Lotus and, through engagement days, Amanda has also helped them meet local boatbuilders, architects, and RAF engineers. They were even visited by Sophie's team from Equinor to engage with real-life STEM tasks, such as a challenge to design a flat-pack toilet for use on offshore wind farms.

Amanda reflects on the long-term impact: "One of our students has already gone on to an apprenticeship with a local business. And many more are now considering careers they never would have thought of. That's the power of raising aspirations and of saying, 'yes, this is for you too'."

Through its partnership with Equinor, Norfolk Community Foundation is planting the seeds for a local workforce ready to thrive in the sectors shaping our future, from offshore wind and green hydrogen to advanced manufacturing.



Teacher Amanda Moffat and STEM Club member Heath.



STEM Club member Archie says taking part helped him get work experience at Lotus.



Going beyond the classroom, students get a deeper understanding of STEM.







IT'S NOT  
ROCKET  
SCIENCE.

Creative Answers to Care: a  
Bold New Approach to Norfolk's  
Health Crisis

Norfolk's ageing population is growing fast. By 2036, over one in four residents will be over 65, placing huge pressure on already stretched health and social care systems. With staff shortages, rising complexity and increasing isolation among older adults, new solutions are urgently needed.

The Apollo Fund put forward a bold proposition: invite voluntary and community groups to help reimagine the future of care. It recognised the unique potential of these groups to tackle two of the sector's biggest challenges: improving how we recruit into care roles and helping unpaid carers take steps into paid employment.

Delivered with Norfolk and Suffolk Community Foundations and funded by East Coast College, Apollo supported grassroots organisations to test new ways of recruiting, training and retaining the people who keep our care system running. Bridging the gaps, it created new jobs and provided a roadmap for other places to overcome the sector shortage.

From cafés and community centres to refugee support groups and charity shops, Apollo-funded projects brought care careers to life and gave people the confidence to believe they had something to offer. They turned barriers into starting points.

The results were striking. Over 5,000 people benefited, with 329 gaining care qualifications and 774 staff receiving further training. But more than the numbers, the programme showed the power of locally rooted solutions to deliver meaningful change.

Many Apollo-funded projects focused on equipping people with the confidence and skills to enter or return to care roles. Access Community Trust worked in Great Yarmouth and Gorleston, taking a hyper-local approach. Instead of expecting people to sign up for formal programmes, staff met potential recruits in cafés and community settings, breaking down barriers with warmth and informality.

This approach saw 58 people gain care-



Access Community Trust

related qualifications, with 10 securing employment. For many of them, care had never seemed like a realistic option before. But with the right support, it became a pathway to purpose and employment.

Similarly, New Routes supported refugees and asylum seekers to overcome language barriers and lack of recognised qualifications. With English classes and tailored employment support, one Syrian man went from feeling stuck to landing a job in a residential care home. These stories show how charitable organisations are well placed to offer support. They were able to reach those sometimes overlooked by mainstream employability services by taking the whole person into account, meeting them where they were, and taking them on a journey at their own pace towards addressing a vital skill gap in our region.

Apollo also recognised the value of those already delivering care informally. It may seem illogical to look to those already caring for family to work in care roles, but with 1 in 3 NHS workers already acting as unpaid carers, this is

not a niche intervention but a systemic opportunity.

Carers Voice Norfolk and Waveney were enabled to co-produce training and employment guides with input from unpaid carers and local employers. The training reached around 60 employers across 45 organisations. It helped employers see how they could support carers in their workplace, and helped unpaid carers recognise the value of their skills, too.

This work unlocked potential employees as well as sparking bigger changes. The programme informed conversations at Norfolk County Council and the Integrated Care Board, while the practical guidance produced was shared with more than 570 employers. Their innovation demonstrates how taking a different view and working directly with communities unlocked a hidden but powerful asset, transforming what was perceived as a challenge and turning it into an opportunity.

Nationwide, over 100,000 care posts remain vacant, yet while recruitment remains vital, retention also poses a

significant challenge. Last year, Skills for Care reported that the turnover rate for staff in adult social care was almost 25%, highlighting a serious retention problem within the sector.

Age UK Norwich used Apollo funding to deliver mental health support training to their team. Twelve staff qualified as Mental Health First Aiders, and managers felt better equipped to support staff wellbeing and retention. The training helped shift workplace culture, enabling better care from happier, healthier teams.

Apollo clearly shows that voluntary and community organisations can play a powerful role in shaping the future of care. These groups are not a substitute for statutory services, but they offer something unique: trust, reach and deep local knowledge. They meet people where they are and work with them as individuals.

**Apollo did not just fill short-term gaps, but helped to build a more inclusive, skilled and resilient care system, rooted in the strengths of Norfolk's people and places.**





**Ria Day always knew engineering was her path, but it was not until she received a gift from the JP Blanch Fund that doors truly opened for her.**

Where is the helping hand for those with ambition and potential, but without the opportunities to take the next step? The JP Blanch Fund was created to answer that question. Each year, alongside supporting local skills-based charities, it sponsors two students for an Arkwright Scholarship, the UK's leading programme for young people with promise in science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM). It helps talented individuals like Ria to dream bigger, aim higher and turn ambition into action.

STEM remains a field where women remain underrepresented. They make up only 35% of STEM graduates and just 25% of the workforce, with even lower representation in IT. With IT becoming crucial to Norfolk's economy, the need to bring more women into the field has never been greater.

Now a DevOps engineer at Aviva, Ria credits the Arkwright Scholarship with helping her discover and pursue her passion for engineering and technology, leading her to where she is today.

"My job," explained Ria, "is to make sure that the code developed by the team gets deployed efficiently. I work within the cloud—basically using external data centres to scale technology in a sustainable way." Reflecting on her journey, Ria candidly acknowledges the gender imbalance in her field. "In my field of work, it's still predominantly male. Aviva are working really hard to change that, and I have been lucky enough to work with some great teams, but it's noticeable that women are underrepresented in roles like DevOps."

**"The financial side of the scholarship was invaluable."**

Her passion for STEM subjects started at school, where she developed her love for science, maths, and engineering. But the journey was not easy, as Ria explained: "I have quite bad arthritis. During my GCSEs, I could not even walk. I thought all my doors had closed." Ria recalled the moment she learned about the scholarship: "My school noticed my passion for these subjects and pushed me to apply for the scholarship. I was not sure I would get it because the aptitude test was challenging, but I gave it my best shot. The interview at Cambridge was daunting, but was a massive confidence boost." In October 2019, Ria was awarded the scholarship, an achievement that would dramatically shape her future.

"I was building up my CV from the minute I got my scholarship," said Ria, "I was suddenly part of a network. Arkwright would send newsletters, opportunities, and invitations for events tailored to young engineers. I worked on a three-day design course where we developed a sustainable building project in Norfolk. That experience really showed me that engineering was something I wanted to pursue long-term."

The scholarship also supported Ria financially, enabling her to invest in resources that furthered her studies. "The financial side of the scholarship was invaluable," she explained. "I used it to buy a graphical calculator and books for my coursework. When learning becomes more accessible, you naturally become more passionate about it. I even used part of the bursary to purchase a 3D printer, which I used to work on personal engineering projects at home."

**"It's amazing to think that he left not just his money but also his passion for engineering to others."**

Ria's story shows how with a little assistance, aspiration and motivation can transform a life. When asked if she believes she would have taken the same path without the scholarship, she confidently says, "I really don't think so. The Arkwright Scholarship gave me access to so many opportunities. It wasn't just the financial support, but the work experience and the connections I made. Without it, I don't think I would have explored as many areas of engineering or even known what I was capable of."

"I think it's incredibly admirable for someone to leave a legacy that opens doors for others. JP Blanch's donation has given so many students the opportunity to see the world of possibilities in engineering. It's amazing to think that he left not just his money but also his passion for engineering to others."

For Ria, the Arkwright Scholarship was more than just an award. It opened a door into a field she had not fully realised she could be a part of. Today, she's thriving in her role at Aviva, where she continues to build her technical skills in cloud computing and hopes to one day mentor others. "I'm working towards becoming a senior engineer, and I want to help others get to where I am."

THE BURSARIES HELPING YOUNG PEOPLE ACHIEVE MORE





# LEGACY, REIMAGINED

A legacy is not about what you leave behind. It is about what carries on.

When James Blanch passed away, he left behind more than a quiet life in rural Norfolk. He left behind a passion.

James was a wheelwright by trade and a lifelong lover of classic cars. He lived simply, rarely drawing attention. But after his death in 2008, something remarkable was discovered. Hidden across his property was a collection of vintage cars, some more than eighty years old. A Riley Lynx. A Willys Overland. Two Swifts. Each one spoke of a man with deep enthusiasm and care for the craftsmanship of engineering.

The cars were auctioned and raised a significant sum. His executors wanted that money to honour the life he had lived and the things he had loved. They turned to Norfolk Community Foundation to help create a lasting legacy that would reflect his spirit and offer something of real value to future generations.

The result was the JP Blanch Grassroots Fund. Set up in 2010, it began by supporting young people into apprenticeships in automotive engineering and coach building. It was a perfect fit. But as the world changed, so did the needs of employers and the skills young people required to succeed.

Rather than allowing the fund to fade, the Foundation worked to evolve it. We expanded its focus to support a new generation of engineers. Through scholarships and training, the fund now helps young people with big ambitions take their next steps into careers that James could never have imagined, but would surely have admired.

That same commitment to keeping legacy relevant is what brought the Elizabeth Laura Stuart Memorial Trust to our care.

The original trustees of the trust had long been committed to supporting young people in Norfolk. But over time, they found it increasingly difficult to know how to identify young people who needed support. Worse still, the professional and administrative costs of running the small trust were eating into the limited funds available. Every year, more money was spent on running the trust than on delivering its purpose.

When they approached us, we offered a new path. By transferring the fund to Norfolk Community Foundation, the trustees were able to preserve the intent of the gift while reaching those who needed support the most. We are

able to help identify young people and grassroots organisations who are already working to tackle disadvantage and build skills for life. The fund can finally continue doing what it was meant to do.

We also removed the burden of administration. No more accountancy fees. No more legal costs. Instead, the trust could now be part of something greater. Under our care, it is protected, professionally managed, and directed to make the biggest possible difference.

This is what legacy left to the Norfolk Community Foundation can do. It is a passion carried forward and a gift that grows in impact. Whether hidden in the form of vintage cars or written in the pages of an old trust deed, these legacies are part of the fabric of our county and the wishes of those who established them will continue to live on.

At Norfolk Community Foundation, we ensure that what matters to you makes a difference. We match funds with real people in real need, today and into the future. We treasure your story and help it continue, supporting causes that inspire, empower and change lives.





# »»»»»»»»»» SKILLS EXCHANGE ««««

Connecting charities with local businesses to share expertise

Words: Sophie Berry, Corporate Giving Manager

We all strive to grow. Whether we are developing our careers, learning something new, or stepping out of our comfort zones, most of us want to progress and contribute. When challenges arise, we dig deep to overcome them. Individually, we are always

pushing to improve, adapt and stay at the top of our game.

But no one succeeds alone. Behind every achievement is a network of support: colleagues, mentors, friends and communities. In Norfolk, we're all part of that shared effort, working towards thriving neighbourhoods, a strong local economy, and opportunities for everyone.

**Charities at the Heart of Community**  
A huge part of that local support comes from voluntary and community groups. These organisations quietly hold communities together, tackling isolation, helping people find work, and building confidence and connection. They understand local challenges because they live them and often step in where no one else can.

Yet despite their essential role, charities are often under-recognised. Faced with limited funding and stretched resources, many cannot invest in developing the skills and training their teams need to grow. Without that investment, opportunities for innovation, improvement and impact are harder to grasp.

So, how do we help charities build the skills they need to thrive?

**Businesses Backing Charities from Within**  
Local businesses are stepping forward to help strengthen the voluntary sector from the inside out. Across Norfolk, companies are rich in expertise, from finance, HR, marketing and leadership to digital transformation, legal advice and more. And many are using those skills to support local charities in meaningful, practical ways.

Many businesses are eager to play a positive role in the impact economy. Their motivation is often driven by a combination of factors: a sense of responsibility to support their local communities, alignment with Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) goals, and, perhaps most importantly, a genuine belief that it is simply the right thing to do.

“Many businesses are eager to play a positive role in the impact economy.”

When I became Corporate Giving Manager last year, my goal was simple: to connect businesses offering real skills with charities that need targeted, timely support without pulling those charities away from the work that matters most. The answer? Skills.

**Proven Models That Work**  
We first saw the power of this approach in 2017, when Norfolk ProHelp was revitalised under Norfolk Community Foundation. It connected charities with businesses offering pro bono expertise ranging from legal support to IT guidance, all tailored to specific, real-world needs.

That experience laid the groundwork for Good for Good, an initiative that captures and celebrates the many ways businesses support their communities, whether through donations, volunteering or professional skills. Businesses gain clarity and purpose. Charities gain trusted support. Communities gain resilience. Everyone benefits.

**Skills Exchange: Building Confidence and Capability**  
In 2024, we launched Skills Exchange: a programme that matches the needs of charities with the know-how of businesses. At its heart is a belief that everyone, no matter their role or background, has something to offer and something to learn.

We're already seeing results. Earlier this year, St Faiths Sunflowers, a volunteer-led group near Norwich, wanted to reach more people through a new Facebook page. Founder Fiona had the passion but lacked the confidence to make it happen. Through Skills Exchange, she was connected with

Sam Teal, a marketing specialist from Gasway.  
  
Sam didn't just give advice. He listened, coached, and helped Fiona build the skills to run the page herself. In June 2025, the new page launched. It was professional, community-focused, and sustainable. Fiona now runs it confidently and knows she has someone to turn to if needed.

**Real Impact, Real Value**  
Skilled volunteering generates around seven times more social value than traditional volunteering. For Sam, the experience was not only a chance to give back using his own skills, but was also personally meaningful.


“A lot of what I did was just create an environment that fostered confidence,” Sam says. “Fiona already had a strong sense of what she wanted to achieve. She just needed a bit of reassurance and support to get there.”

That's the ethos behind Good for Good. It's about investing in people already making a difference and helping them go further. Businesses, in return, gain insight, perspective, and stronger community ties.

**Join the Skills Movement**  
If you're a business in Norfolk with skills to share, now is the time to act. Join the Skills Exchange. Support the organisations working at the heart of our communities. Help build a Norfolk where talent is nurtured, potential is realised, and everyone gets the chance to thrive.

Because when we grow together, we all go further.





'Not About the Bike' provides a fully equipped bicycle workshop to the whole community. Through the delivery of courses, drop-in sessions, and after-school clubs, they promote self-reliance and the passing on of new skills - it really is 'Not About The Bike'.

*Thank you for joining us in this important discussion. We hope we have helped to tell the stories behind the numbers, given space to discuss the issues, and highlighted some of the local solutions making a difference.*

*Please share this Spark with those who you think would also find it of interest and continue to work with us to achieve even more.*

*Together, Norfolk shines brighter.*





Together, Norfolk shines brighter

### Find out more or get in touch

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