



Singleton Spaces
at
Singleton Environment Centre

**FIVE YEAR REPORT AND
FIVE YEAR STRATEGY**

2023 - 2028

Five year report and five year strategy

Summary

On taking on the stewardship of Singleton Environment Centre in March 2018 the newly established trust, Singleton Spaces, very quickly confirmed the viability of an important community asset. Great Chart with Singleton Parish Council, as leaseholder, has continued with active support. Ashford Borough Council is the landowner of the site.

The global pandemic interrupted the programme plans but the Centre has survived the financial impact. Having retained management, staff, volunteers and customers the programme of education and community activities has picked-up with renewed vigour.

The strategy for the next five years is considered in the context of external factors (see Appendix). It confirms the current strong purpose and activities.

Singleton Spaces

The vision is a community of well-managed informal natural green spaces appreciated by residents and visitors.

The objects of the charity to be carried out in Singleton and the neighbouring communities of Washford Farm, Brisley Farm, Stanhope, Chilmington Green and Great Chart are:

- 1) The preservation, protection and improvement of the natural environment for the public benefit, in particular but not exclusively by promoting and supporting the creation and maintenance of green spaces within the area of benefit.
- 2) Advancing education for the public benefit in conservation, protection and improvement of the physical and natural environment.

Specific ways Singleton Spaces will achieve this outcome

1. by providing a hub of information and advice;
2. by providing community and school activities such as, but not exclusively, practical sessions and working-parties;
3. by engaging with public, private and voluntary-sector organisations with similar purposes working in the locality.

Five year report

In the first annual report Malcolm Wiffen, chair of the Trust extended grateful thanks to the staff, whose dedication has earned the Centre an enviable reputation in the local community, and to the trustees, volunteers all, whose hard work guides the Centre's environmental mission.

In the period from opening in March 2018 to March 2020, the Centre has hosted many successful events:

	Events
59	Mini Professor sessions – science classes for children
47	Ashford Repair Café sessions – all about reuse and recycling
31	Little Explorer “Buggin’ About” sessions – toddler nature group
16	Environmental Art Workshops
10	“Ecokids” – Pre-school environment activity sessions
9	Nature, wildlife, and environmental talks covering bats, bird, reptiles, gardens, and biodiversity
7	Environmentally themed talks for Cubs, Brownies and Scouts
7	Card recycling workshops
6	Open/Activity days - stalls highlighting and promoting environmental products and services, reptile hunts and environmental children's activities including pond dipping
2	“Fungal Forays” – Learning about mushrooms and fungi
2	KRAG (Kent Reptile and Amphibian Group) newt survey nights
2	Kent Tree & Pond Warden Partnership – training sessions to educate participants about pond life
1	Hedgehog talk by the Kent Mammal Group
1	Wood-working Workshop – Tester session.

The Centre has undertaken the following developments around the site:

- installed two wild bee boxes purely for pollination and biodiversity purposes;
- installed four “minibeast” hideouts as part of our interactive nature trail and education goals;

- installed dormouse boxes and monitoring stations and feeding boxes, hedgehog; houses, created two bee and butterfly gardens, a newt “hotel” and three lizard “lounges”;
- upgraded our allotment area and are in the process of installing raised beds in preparation for educational sessions starting Spring 2021.

In this period the building was enhanced by:

- new signage;
- coffee-making machine replaced;
- Industry standard kitchen ventilation installed;
- window-blinds installed in cafe for the low sun level periods of the year;
- notice-boards installed in the cafe and meeting rooms;
- boiler converted from using wood-chip to wood-pellets;
- additional picnic tables
- “brass-rubbing” animal motifs around the site.
- Improving the ambience within the Centre by replacing white / clinical walls with nature themed pictures.

The story of 2020

For most, 2020 was a very difficult year, as it was for the SEC. The forced closure of the Centre at the end of March to comply with lockdown rules meant the main source of revenue evaporated overnight. Use of the government’s Furlough Scheme enabled the Trust to keep staff and when the initial lockdown period ended, we were able, with all the necessary precautions in place, to re-open in July.

There followed a reasonably successful summer, but just when we all thought things were starting to get a little better, along came a second wave and a second lockdown, forcing us to close again. The light on the horizon was the December transition to a “tiered” system, only to discover that Kent would be in tier three, the most restrictive, which meant our options for reopening were confined to offering just a take-away service. The Trustees deliberated long and hard as to whether this would be viable but decided to take an optimistic approach and give it a go, including the reintroduction of the take-away Sunday Carvery. This proved to be very popular but was to end up being short-lived as a new, more easily spread strain of the virus appeared and plunged us back into lockdown.

The Centre’s activities were significantly curtailed by lockdowns and social distancing but may be summarised as follows:

	Events
12	Ashford Repair Cafe workshops
3	Card upcycling workshops

Into 2021 with The Brisley Extension

As we moved into 2021 the trustees concluded that, for the time being, the Centre would remain closed, considering our commercial interests secondary to the elimination of the virus. That paints a fairly grim view of last year, but it hasn't been all bad.

As we entered the 2021-2022 financial year, the country was still in an extended lockdown resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic and restrictions continued throughout most of 2021, severely limiting the amount of activity SEC was able to undertake during this time. Once restrictions were lifted there was a slow return to the putting on of events, with some additional activities (Fungal Foray and Wild Bee Meadow Day) taking place off-site. Given the limitations to which we were subjected, the trustees are delighted to report the during the latter part of the year we were able to organise and host many activities.

As our major project for 2020 Singleton Spaces, working with GCSPC and ABC, was able to win significant funding to build a two-storey extension at the lower part of the site. The extension will provide a large, dividable space for classes, meetings, or small functions. Upstairs will be an education / volunteer room, which will eventually offer live wildlife coverage from cameras across the site. Outside this is a sizeable viewing platform which looks out over the nearby ancient woodland and the site earmarked for a new planting of greater than 6,500 trees. We have also been able to include a proper office for the Centre manager, who had previously been using a small cupboard in the main building as his office! With a little delay resulting from the pandemic the Brisley Centre was fully open in summer 2021.

The Trust would like to thank everyone involved in bringing the Brisley extension to fruition, particularly ABC councillor for Roman Ward, Heather Hayward who was instrumental in obtaining the funding and parish council chair, Ian McClintock.

Working with ABC, we were able to negotiate the replacement and re-siting of the car-park lighting, a much-needed project to improve safety.

The Centre chose not to be part of the "Eat out to help out" scheme, choosing to resume our normal offering. This was short-lived as further restrictions were introduced in mid-September which, to all intents and purposes, remained in force for the rest of the financial year. During this difficult period the trustees main concern was for supporting our staff during the various closures. We are grateful to have benefitted from significant support from both the government's Furlough Scheme, which provided more than sixty thousand pounds, and Ashford Borough Council's support funding, which benefited the centre by greater than forty thousand pounds. Without this assistance, it would have been necessary to make staff redundant and we are grateful that this funding was made available.

2022

In January 2022 there were signs of returning to some normality albeit with some cautionary measures in place. The Footprints Cafe was open to customers and Repair Cafe Ashford active again. Room hire enquiries re-started.

	Events
43	'Ecokids' sessions
35	'Mini Professor' sessions
10	Visits to the Centre by local schools
6	Nature and Craft Activity Days ('closed sessions' for specific community groups)
6	Volunteer led Activity/Open days for the public. These included pond dipping, nature trails, nature quizzes, scavenger days, butterfly identification as well as the RSPB 'big garden bird watch'
4	Allotment/Plant Potting workshops
3	Card upcycling workshops
1	Bee talk
1	Fungal Foray (off site)
1	Wild Bee Meadow Day (off site)
1	Art and Craft Nature Themed workshop

It had long been the desire of the Trustees to employ an Education Officer. Appreciating that our finances would not allow us a full-time position, but anxious to make a start we filled the role on a one-day per week basis, starting in November 2021. Over a period of time it became clear that this was the way forward and we have been able to increase the number of days per week to three, commencing January 2023.

There are now several groups that make weekly use of the centre:

- Allotment Group
- Knit and Natter Group
- Woodwork Group
- Sewing Circle Group (which recycles old paddling pools and tents into new items such as bags, pencil cases and other accessories)
- Repair Café Ashford (now fixing a wide range of electrical, mechanical, fabric and ceramic items)
- Accessible Coders (an electronics group using solar power to charge their tools / equipment)

We have installed solar panels on to the roof of the recently completed Brisley Room (lower site extension) and the pond dipping platform has been fully replaced.

Singleton Spaces has been very fortunate to be nominated by Cllr Jenny Webb, Mayor of Ashford, as the nominated charity for 2022/23. This has included a range of fundraising events at the Centre and elsewhere. It has also part-funded the design and installation of six information display panels for the Centre's grounds.

In addition to the surplus raised by the cafe operation the Trust has been grateful to receive funding by application to Ashford Borough Council Community Fund for the lighting and Great Chart with Singleton Parish Council for staffing. Other smaller grants have been awarded for items such as the raised beds and picnic benches. Regular quiz nights and raffles at community events raise money. A further source of income is local residents nominating Singleton Spaces in the Ashford Community Lottery and their purchases using Easyfundraising.

January 2023

Plans made for galvanising the education and community programme have reached fruition with a key appointment being made for three-days initially but now confirmed for four days a week. The **Education Officer** has detailed an education action plan with these goals:

1. Schools visits - to host educational visits for local primary schools, to apply for Learning Outside the Classroom (LoTC) mark
2. Community groups - to host educational activities on site for local community groups such as Scouts and Girl Guides, and re-establishing of pre-school group "Buggin About"
3. Educational Events - to host educational events with environmental focus
4. Adult Education - to develop an adult environmental education programme, to offer Climate Literacy course
5. Educational Information - to raise the profile of the Centre as leading source of environmental information in Ashford through informative displays of children's work and social media content

The education action plan should be seen as an adjunct to this report.

March 2023

A Great Chart and Singleton youth club ran very successfully at the village hall for 10 years but had to close a few years ago due to the lack of volunteers to sustain it. An attempt to get the right Youth Worker to restart the youth club was unsuccessful so a decision had to be made about the kit, start-up funding from the Parish Council and the residue of the funds in the youth club account.

It was agreed by the Youth Club Management Team that the kit should be handed back to the Parish Council and shared with the Singleton Environment Centre Education Officer to put it to good use. The residue account, about £3400, will also be made available. The first event will be the Craft in the Cafe session at the village hall.

Five year strategy

A review of the Trust document brings to mind the Charity Commission's refusal to allow "well-being" as one of the objects. The reason given was that it is a term used by the government. We have not been deterred in recognising the **well-being benefits** in many of our activities. The term is now widely understood and used by many environmental and educational organisations. It is considered that the Trust document remains a sound basis and guidance for the operation of Singleton Spaces. We will provide strategic analysis for each of the three specific ways of achieving the organisation's outcomes and include some operational decisions which are pending.

1. Providing a hub of information and advice

By the stated charitable objectives Singleton Spaces runs the Singleton Environment Centre as a means to the ends. The Centre provides a huge draw to the local community and a venue for the community and schools activities. The actual information and advice will also be provided off-site and online to a wider audience.

The building and grounds

It is evident that the building and grounds have reached a maturity with significant points of maintenance. The Trust has acted swiftly in response where there has been an immediate impact on operations. However, it must be recognised that charitable funds should not be used for assets not owned by the charity. The Trust must remain proactive to identify building and grounds issues for the attention of the leaseholder and landowner.

In terms of maintenance, two current examples are the replacement of the interior lighting and the ground lighting on the fruit-tree path around the pond. Both have out-lived their useful purpose and are necessary for the safe functioning of the site. The new **LED lighting** will add to the story of sustainability which is represented throughout the design of the whole building.

The Centre's **pond** has received maintenance over the years but has reached a stage where silting and infilling has reduced the volume and perimeter size. In consultation with the Kent Reptile and Amphibian Group, consideration needs to be given to a significant operation at the correct time of year.

Careful consideration will need to be given to the **solar panels** on the main building and subsidiary buildings. The system relies on a complete circuit going to a single inverter and this may reach the end of efficient life in coming years. It is noted that ABC receives the FIT payment from the electric supplier. We looked at a possible modification in the addition of **battery storage**. Currently these systems are priced at the leading edge of the technology but prices may reduce in due course. It would be consistent with the sustainability design features of the building to add this element for demonstration purposes, however the surplus energy generation made this non viable. The same could be said for having a **wind turbine** on site. This certainly merits further investigation in the

years ahead. Even if the conclusion is negative also regarding the wind turbine, there is a story to tell about energy and sustainability.

Further consideration will be given to the immediate **entrance area** to the main building. The change in use from the large office and reception desk to the tenancy by Kumon has resulted in ambiguity on visitor arrival. The glazed space opposite is also under-used. The corridor desk area as a focus for volunteers could be reconfigured to maximise the use of space for the multiple functions it requires.

The Trust has confirmed the wish to install **wildlife cameras** and display screens. The wif-fi on site has been upgraded to allow for this to work effectively. The Michael Lake room is a key location for displays. The specification and pricing has been researched and funding for the system will need to be identified.

The detached land with the **pond alongside Cuckoo Lane** is occasionally grazed by KWT's cattle but receives very little attention otherwise. Perhaps this low intensity management and use remains desirable. There is also a stretch of dense trees leading from the junction of Cuckoo Lane and up Chart Road to the back entrance of the Centre. The feasibility of creating a path alongside the school fence should be explored. This would provide safe access to this land and safe access for crossing Chart Road to the newly planned Discovery Park (or QE Platinum Jubilee Park).

Footprints Cafe and Bistro

The prime purpose of the cafe is to generate a financial contribution to the charitable purposes, in other words, towards the costs of the education and community programme. It must also provide a quality and service consistent with the environmental mission.

Clearly, the Cafe must continue to serve a valuable **community function**. It is highly regarded as a social and formal meeting place. The Sunday carvery has proved to be very well supported and makes use of the meeting rooms to help meet demand..

The Cafe staff achieve a great service from the space confines of the kitchen. The small room called the Yew Room was converted to a satellite facility for baking. However, an extension would be the only solution to providing a restaurant-type kitchen. This option is unlikely to be taken forward and working effectively within the limitations will be necessary.

Lettings and room hire

Income received from tenants and room hire will continue to make an important financial contribution towards charitable purposes. Rents and charges should be consistent with commercial levels There is a balance between the benefit and the impact on other uses of the Centre. The main downside is the pressure on the **limited car park space**. In due course an approach to ABC will be repeated regarding the proposal to have a dual-use car park in Discovery Park opposite the rear car park entrance.

Outreach activities

The range of off-site opportunities will be continued. These include one-off school-assemblies and evening social groups such as the WI.

The Education officer has completed training by the Carbon Literacy Trust to lead accredited **Carbon Literacy** courses both face-to-face and online. This has potential to develop useful links in the Borough and beyond.

Online engagement

Social media is still a changing world however the Trust aims to maintain the large Facebook reach through regularly posting notices of events and follow-up. Selected posts regarding wider environmental issues and information will be included. These should have a seasonal flavour and may be shared from other organisations such as The Bumblebee Conservation Trust and Butterfly Conservation.

2. Providing community and school activities such as, but not exclusively, practical sessions and working-parties

The Trust has been well aware that the *ad hoc* programme needs a coherent and consistent offer that sustains the interest and needs of users. We can build upon the previous experience gained from the leaders running Go Wild children's sessions, Wild Child Nature Club and EcoKids.

The Education Officer's plan, mentioned above, provides a sound basis for the immediate year ahead - and, with tweaks, is likely to be the basis of implementation for longer.

There is scope for a unifying **project** concept for which the Trust could seek significant funding from external sources. This could cover areas such as Urban Wildlife and/or Citizen Science and biodiversity, The first phase would be to seek local support for such activities. It should be based on evidence of what we know works and is well-received. Suggestions for such a project include an overarching theme of food or energy.

Global and national support for these activities will include membership of the National Association for Environmental Education (UK) and Sustainability and Environmental Education (SEEd).

The volunteer-run events at the Centre, such as the **Open Days** and the Christmas Fair, will continue to provide a valuable opportunity for local residents to engage with the Centre.

A self-sustaining group **Repair Cafe Ashford**, using the workshop, will continue to receive sufficient items for repair and upcycling. Relevant stories and examples will feed into the website and social media. There is potential for additional days and, possibly, Saturday opening. A sub-group of woodworkers also uses the workshop.

3. Engaging with public, private and voluntary-sector organisations with similar purposes working in the locality

The Trust is managing the Centre on behalf of Great Chart with Singleton Parish Council, the lease-holder, and it is imperative that this relationship continues to be sound. As land-owner, Ashford Borough Council has a key responsibility for the building and the site as a whole. The Trust's communication with both ABC Officers and Councillors is vital.

The key **conservation organisations**, locally, are Kent Wildlife Trust and Kentish Stour Countryside Partnership. Singleton Spaces does not have commensurate staff expertise, land-holding or management contracts and does not seek to gain them. Working with these organisations and their volunteer activities is mutually beneficial.

Organisations with different specific purposes but with relevance include Ashford and Tenterden Tourist Association, of which the Trust has membership, and the Ashford Volunteer Bureau.

Key local volunteer-led organisations include Ashford Green Gym and Ashford Community Woodland and both have close links with Centre as well as close proximity. These groups need to be sustained. Also nearby are Friends of Singleton Lake and Friends of Washford Community Woodland. The Trust has also been grateful for liaison with and support from environmentalists familiar with the site.

Further local groups which have been supportive include Kent Reptile and Amphibian Group and Kent Bat Group.

Management

The Trust is very fortunate to have a proactive and multi-tasking Centre manager leading dedicated staff. The customer-facing nature of the Centre requires a high level of individual commitment. The Trust should support staff in pursuit of training and development.

The **Trustees** should continue to meet every two-months and remain involved with the Centre on a weekly-basis. Trustees should review their combined experience and ensure the Trust has a wide-range of expertise including business and charities. There should be more distinction between the short-term decision-making, supporting the Centre manager, and the consideration of longer-range issues which should be the concern of Trustees.

A suite of policies and procedures has been developed and these are scheduled for revision. These are:

- Landscape Management
- Safeguarding Policy and Procedure
- Teaching Learning Policy 2022
- Staff Handbook
- Concessions and inclusivity policy
- Equality policy

- Staff Handbook 2022
- Singleton Spaces Reserves Policy
- Quality Manual

The draft Social Media Policy should be completed.

Members of the public are made aware of the community and educational opportunities by the usual **marketing and communication** channels of the local print media, Parish Council newsletter, community noticeboards, the Singleton Environment Centre website, other organisation's websites and an active social media presence on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram.

A customer satisfaction survey was conducted a few years ago. This should be repeated and the collection of data about users' residence, preferences and interests should become routine. It can use various techniques to stimulate worthwhile and valid responses. The Trust needs to have evidence for current **impact and effectiveness** and for the desirability of future projects.

Fundraising

The financial model for generating surplus from the operation of the cafe is beneficial in providing unrestricted funds for the Trust to use for charitable purposes. It allows funds to be added to projects where only part-funding is available. Other sources of unrestricted funds include donations, events (such as quizzes) and wider schemes such as Ashford Community Lottery and Easyfundraising.

It should be possible to identify discrete projects which can attract funding from the general public. Staffing costs, although the key component of the community and education programme, are not tangible enough for some funders.

Conclusion

The Trust should stick to what is important for the charity's objects. Avoid adding expectations without solid justification. Decide what to do and do it better. Improve the Trust's impact measurement and evaluation. Ensure a long-term future with robust management and decision-making.

Managing Board of Trustees

Malcolm Wiffen, chair
Carolyn Perring, secretary
Philip Rogers, treasurer
Aniko Szocs (resigned 25 November 2022)
Jennifer Tippen
Peter Walkden (from 3 October 2022)
Thomas Ackrill (resigned 3 October 2022)

Front-line staff

Centre Manager – John Alexander
Footprints Cafe and Bistro – Susie Farrant, Candy Gibbs & Robert McGinnis
Education Officer - Helen King

Supported by

Grounds management - Peter Walkden
Social media - Sam Tibbenham
Pro bono advisers - Angus Willson, Ian McClintock
Clerk to Great Chart with Singleton Parish Council - Aniko Szocs

Chartered Accountants - Magee Gammon

Singleton Environment Centre
Wesley School Road (off Cuckoo Lane)
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Footprints Café: 01233 668308

Email: centremanager@singletonenvironmentcentre.org.uk

Education: education@singletonenvironmentcentre.org.uk

Repair Café: ashfordrepaircafe@outlook.com

Singleton Spaces.
Registered charity number: 1180577
VAT Registration: 343 8362 92

Appendix - external factors

While most decisions are invested at a local level Singleton Environment Centre - Singleton Spaces operates in a dynamic environment. The NCVO has provided a framework for the voluntary sector to consider these wider threats and opportunities called The Road Ahead 2023.

Five key insights for 2023

The ongoing impact of cost of living: *Look beyond the headlines and explore the key trends you need to navigate the cost of living crisis.*

Rising energy prices, costly consumables and more expensive staff have to be taken into account. There is price sensitivity in cafe sales and the charges for education and community activities. Inflationary costs require more frequent review of costs and prices.

Individual giving is likely to be lower and local government sources will be stretched to go further.

Supporting staff, trustees and volunteers: *Is your organisation doing everything that it can to attract and retain people?*

The Trust is committed to improve channels of communication between the key components of staff, trustees and volunteers.

The Trust is committed to pay staff at or above the National Living Wage.

The Trust will support volunteers to prioritise their wellbeing and look for ways to show we value them. We will review the volunteer strategy, to ensure we've thoroughly considered all aspects of the volunteers' experience.

Keeping up the pace on equity, diversity and inclusion: *What can we do this year to strengthen our commitment to tackle inequality in our organisations and society.*

The Trust will review the policies for Concessions and Inclusivity and Equality and propose specific measures for implementation.

Adapting to political change: *How will the latest and upcoming political changes affect how your charity campaigns?*

Staying lawful and managing conflict of interests

"As charities, it's our job to speak out for the causes we support. As we head towards an election, consider how to engage with political parties and contentious issues while staying politically independent and focused on your purpose."

Responding to new laws and regulations: *Discover the new laws and regulations that will change how charities can operate.*

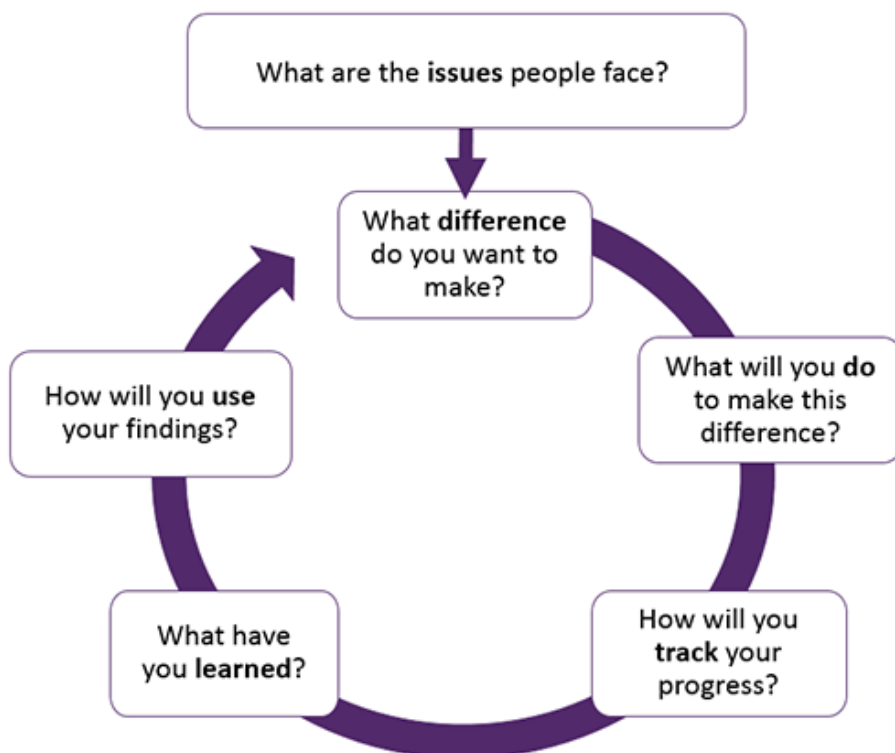
Mailings from the Charity Commission and NCVO help in this respect.

Appendix - How having a strategy can help your organisation

Developing and following a strategy can help you to:

- **Make better decisions** – when deciding what actions to take, or how to spend your money and time, a strategy provides a basis for making good decisions.
- **Adapt to change** – by understanding what's changing around you and how you need to respond, you can make sure your organisation's set up well to respond to change.
- **Focus on what you're best at** – by identifying your strengths, you can deliver more impact.
- **Collaborate** – by identifying organisations to work with, you can achieve more together.
- **Inspire and motivate** – a strategy can inspire your staff, volunteers, supporters and partners, helping them to move towards a shared aim.
- **Demonstrate your impact** – a strategy provides a starting point to understand and communicate the change you're making.

Appendix - The evaluation process



References

National Council for Voluntary Organisations, The Road Ahead 2023

<https://www.ncvo.org.uk/news-and-insights/news-index/road-ahead-2023-cost-of-living>

NCVO Help and Guidance

<https://www.ncvo.org.uk/help-and-guidance/strategy-and-impact/#/>

Charity Commission for England and Wales - entry for Singleton Spaces

<https://register-of-charities.charitycommission.gov.uk/charity-search/-/charity-details/5113180/charity-overview>

Being a charity trustee

<https://beingacharitytrustee.campaign.gov.uk/>

Status	Author - Angus Willson 19 March 2023
Approved by	Singleton Spaces Trust Meeting
Date approved	24 March 2023
Date for Review	March 2024