STREET ANGELS BIRKENHEAD

University of Chester



Presence with Purpose:
An Evaluation of Street Angels Birkenhead

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Introduction

Street Angels Birkenhead is a project hosted and led by Hitched Communities with a base at Make it Happen's Vibrant Village Living Room, working in consultation with Wirral Council for Voluntary Service (WCVS) and other local community organisations. Hitched Communities leads and runs the Street Angels Birkenhead project, and bring to the area their extensive experience of successfully setting up, successfully running and growing the Chester Street Angels project. The Street Pastors initiative was previously active in Birkenhead and this had ceased activity during COVID-19. Due to this gap in provision for the Wirral community, Hitched Communities were awarded a grant by the Step Up Fund to introduce Street Angels to Birkenhead. A team of volunteers patrols the streets of Birkenhead between the hours of 10pm to 3am on Friday or Saturday evenings in the night time economy (NTE). Providing care, support, information and assistance for those in need. ROC Angels is a unifying organisation and the creator of the concept of Street Angels. They bring together community-minded individuals to collaborate in creating safer, stronger, and more resilient communities, particularly within social and night-time settings. ROC Angels offer ongoing support to Street Angels in Chester and Birkenhead, fostering a collaborative exchange of ideas and best practice among all involved.

This report presents an independent evaluation of data collected by Dr. Simone Benhfasi from the University of Chester between March and April 2025. It examines the range of activities carried out by Street Angels in Birkenhead to date and explores the project's potential future impact. Specifically this report has drawn upon the following types of qualitative data:

- Interviews with Street Angels volunteers and community stakeholders
- Nightly reports on interventions delivered
- Observations of interventions delivered
- Observations of full shifts
- Observations of group inductions/training

Hitched Communities

Wirral COUNCIL FOR VOLUNTARY SERVICE

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Make It Happen.

The Vital Role of Community Citizenship in Supporting the Night-Time Economy

The night time economy (NTE) within the UK is a vibrant, busy yet challenging sector (Ross, 2024). The term incorporates a range of customer facing businesses including bars, restaurants, clubs, takeaways, taxi ranks and public transport in the NTE. According to the Office for National Statistics the NTE operates in the United Kingdom between the hours of 6pm-6am (ONS, 2023). While the sector contributes to local economic growth and fosters positive social experiences, it is also frequently linked to rising crime rates and antisocial behaviour, with urban areas often serving as hotspots for violent crime (Philpott *et al.*, 2019). There is increased consumption of drugs and/or alcohol also taking place within the NTE (Miller *et al*., 2012). This affects people's risk of being both a perpetrator (Mayer *et al*., 2023) or a victim of crime (Bryant and Lightowler, 2021). In addition to this, although gender-based violence (GBV) has received increasing attention, there remains a notable lack of research examining this within the NTE as a setting where such gendered violence occurs (Lewis *et al*., 2024).

This evaluation of Street Angels' role in Birkenhead's NTE adopts a zemiological perspective, which focuses on social harm, rather than solely on legally defined crime. Zemiology highlights the significance of harms that may not be criminalised, but still negatively impact individuals and communities. Rather than limiting analysis to illegal activities such as drug use or physical assault, a zemiological lens broadens the scope to include a range of social harms (Bushell, 2023), such as:

- Health harms: including alcohol-related injuries, exhaustion, and sleep deprivation;
- Gendered harms: such as sexual harassment and violence in nightlife settings;
- Psychosocial harms: including the normalisation of binge drinking and feelings of alienation.

Many of these harms are embedded in the cultural fabric of the NTE and often go unquestioned. Examples include hangovers, unsafe sex, recreational drug use, and precarious working conditions for some staff during night shifts. Zemiology challenges this normalisation by asking critical questions: Why are these harms accepted as inevitable? And who benefits from this acceptance? An evaluation grounded in zemiological principles study does not soley identify and describe harm, it seeks transformative social change in line with the ethos of Street Angels. This in turn links to a public health approach and the asset based management approach in operation in building and shaping the community of Birkenhead.

Over the past twenty years, there has been a growing emphasis on 'active' or 'responsible' citizenship within local public safety initiatives. However, there remains limited understanding of how these projects operate in practice (Steden *et al*.2011). In the UK, contemporary examples of citizen-led patrols such as Street Pastors and Street Angels differ from many international models by prioritising care, compassion, and welfare support over enforcement or surveillance. Both groups are rooted in Christian traditions, with Street Pastors connected to the Church of England and Street Angels aligned more broadly with Christian values. Together, they represent a significant volunteer force, with approximately 13,000 Street Pastors and around 130 Street Angel groups active across the UK (Westall, 2021).

Local Context – Socioeconomic and crime profile of Birkenhead Town Centre

Birkenhead is a town located on the Wirral Peninsula in Merseyside, England.



Population Demographics

As of January 2024, the population of Birkenhead including the neighbouring urban area of Tranmere was estimated at 16,298 (Wirral Intelligence Service, 2024). The age distribution shows that 66.5% of residents are between 16 and 64 years old, while 11.9% are aged 65 and over. Certain communities within the area experience significant levels of multiple deprivation, with a high dependence on welfare benefits, particularly those related to health (Wirral Economic Strategy 2021–2026).



Night-Time Economy

Data specifically focused on Birkenhead's NTE, distinct from the broader Wirral area remains limited. However, a major long-term regeneration initiative led by Wirral Council is currently underway, aiming to transform Birkenhead into a vibrant, sustainable, and well-connected urban centre (Birkenhead 2040 Framework). As part of this vision, the council anticipates a rise in both residents and visitors to the town's night-time economy, driven by planned developments such as new hotels, live music venues, restaurants, cafés, and bars. These changes will be supported by improvements in public transport, enhancing accessibility and overall appeal.



Crime Statistics

In 2023, Birkenhead recorded an overall crime rate of 136 incidents per 1,000 residents, significantly higher than the regional average of 107 per 1,000. The most common offences were violence and sexual offences, which accounted for 6,063 reported incidents that year (Crime Rate, 2024).

Evaluation Findings

This evaluation of Street Angels Birkenhead employed ethnographic methods including interviews and field observations to generate a detailed, context-rich understanding of the initiative's role within the local night-time economy. Ethnography was chosen specifically to illuminate aspects of this work that may otherwise remain obscured or overlooked by more conventional research approaches (Welz, 2009). By capturing lived experiences and on-the-ground dynamics, this method offers valuable insights for stakeholders, local communities, and others interested in adapting or replicating the Street Angels model in their own contexts.

The following section presents the key findings that emerged from this evaluation.

The Street Angels Birkenhead project began operations in December 2024 and is currently staffed by a team of 10 volunteers. Since its launch, the team has completed 8 patrol shifts. An additional three shifts were scheduled but had to be cancelled due to volunteer availability issues. The project is actively managed and continues to build its operational capacity during this early phase. Each shift in Birkenhead typically consists of four volunteers, including a designated shift leader and, where possible, a new recruit participating in a taster session.



Volunteer Profile

The Street Angels Birkenhead volunteer team is made up of a diverse and dedicated group of individuals who embody the positive impact of active citizenship and the transformative potential of community-led engagement. Several volunteers have professional experience in housing, as well as in various voluntary and statutory services across Birkenhead. Others bring valuable lived experience of challenges such as addiction, homelessness, and deprivation with some drawing on both professional and personal insights. This combination of backgrounds enriches the project and strengthens its connection to the community it serves.

For volunteers who are employed and motivated to give back to their community, balancing time commitments can be challenging. In some cases, professional responsibilities or workplace policies may also create barriers to participation (Steden *et al*.,2011). The nature of Street Angels' work operating during late-night hours within the NTE can be physically and emotionally demanding, making it difficult for some to maintain a consistent volunteering schedule. As a result, volunteer retention has been mixed. While some individuals have stepped away from the project, their reasons vary widely: some are in recovery, have taken up employment, or are managing financial, health, or family issues. Others simply may not yet feel ready to take on the demands of the role. The project remains committed to offering equal opportunities to all who wish to be involved, recognising the diverse circumstances and contributions of its volunteers.

Hitched Communities works proactively to ensure that each Street Angels shift is staffed with a well-balanced team, combining the skills and experience necessary for a safe and effective presence on the streets. As one volunteer explained:

> *you've got some people who like to hang behind a bit whilst we're out, it's lovely that they're there. You recognise they're less likely to feel comfortable executing an intervention. So you need someone who's really experienced and a mix of females and males.*

Shift planning is deliberate and thoughtful, aiming for an appropriate mix of male and female volunteers, at least one team member with first aid training, a mental health first aider, and an experienced volunteer as shift leader to help lead and guide the group. However, this is dependent on the reliability and numbers of volunteers.

A key finding of this evaluation is the significant and multifaceted impact of the Street Angels initiative—not only in terms of its presence on the streets of Birkenhead, but also in the lives of the volunteers themselves. All volunteers interviewed spoke passionately about the positive, and often transformative, role Street Angels plays within the local community (see Views of Volunteers and the Community of Birkenhead).

Beyond community benefit, many volunteers expressed deep gratitude for the personal support and opportunities the initiative provides. For some, volunteering with Street Angels has served as a vital step in their recovery journey, offering structure and purpose following the completion of addiction treatment programmes. For others, it provides a meaningful way to spend time in a safe, supportive environment or acts as a bridge toward re-entering employment:

> *"Volunteers are from Birkenhead, they may have history in Birkenhead, they're proud to wear the Street Angels tabard and proud to be giving back to their community"*

The strong flow of volunteers into Street Angels from "Made on My Patch" reflects effective collaboration between initiatives led by Hitched Communities. It also highlights a wider recognition that volunteers are often navigating personal journeys of growth, recovery, and reintegration.

Getting ready to go out

At the start of each shift, Street Angels volunteers gather at the Vibrant Village Living Room, a familiar and welcoming community space many already know through the work of "Make it Happen", a well-regarded grassroots organisation in Birkenhead. Over a cup of tea and some biscuits, volunteers catch up, share conversation, and often meet new team members for the first time. The atmosphere is warm, friendly, and light-hearted, helping volunteers feel quickly at ease and confident in their roles.

By the 9:30 p.m. meeting time, the streets outside are already alive with the sounds of the night-time economy. The hum of passing traffic, the occasional siren of emergency services, and the lively voices of people out enjoying their evening fill the air. Roads are busier, signalling the beginning of another active night in the town centre.

Before the start of each shift, the designated shift leader collects a radio from the Community Safety CCTV team, located approximately five minutes by car from central Birkenhead. A radio is issued for each deployment, along with a briefing on key areas of concern within the NTE for that evening. Shift leaders are trained in radio protocol, including how and when to communicate with the CCTV team. They are also shown how to press the emergency button in the event of an emergency, ensuring clear and secure communication during potentially critical situations.

"Gearing up," as one volunteer described it, typically begins around 9:45 p.m. The shift leader distributes the distinctive purple tabards and, weather permitting, hats to all volunteers. These tabards serve a dual purpose: they make Street Angels easily identifiable to the public and also allow the Community Safety CCTV operators to visually track their movements on camera. In addition, the radio issued to the team include GPS tracking in case Street Angels need support during the shift.

Preparation also involves assembling bags of provisions. Led by the shift leader, a brief discussion takes place to decide what items should be packed based on the anticipated needs for the evening. Whilst a standard kit list and packing instructions are available, particularly useful for newer shift leaders, decisions are made flexibly to account for variables such as weather conditions. For example, extra blankets or warm clothing may be included on colder nights, but are often unnecessary in milder weather.

One consistent inclusion, however, is sweets. Volunteers emphasised their importance, noting that they can be surprisingly effective in de-escalating tense situations and offering a moment of connection during interventions.

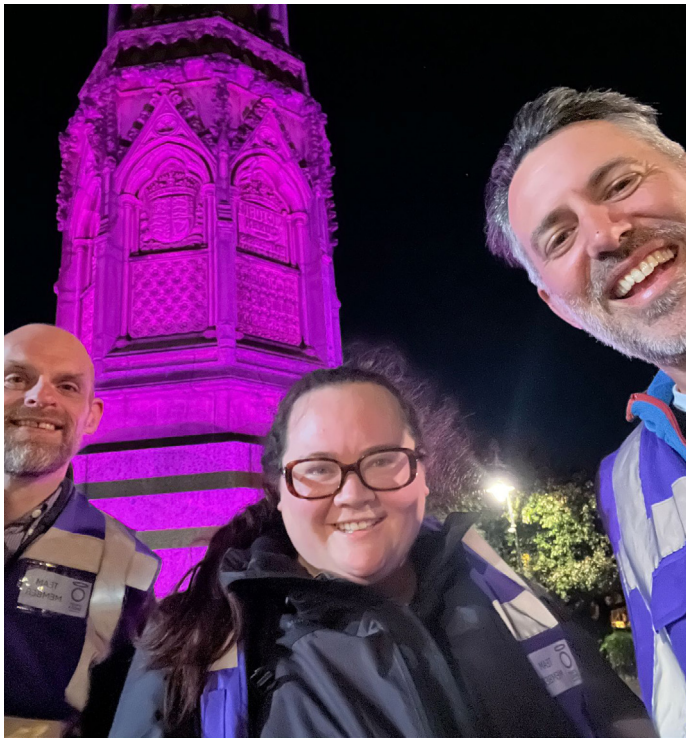


Routes, Rhythm, and Purpose

The route taken during each Street Angels shift is flexible and often influenced by the volunteers on duty. While shift leaders provide general oversight, it is refreshing to see that they are open to input from team members, particularly those with strong local knowledge of NTE hotspots. Despite this flexibility, some locations remain a consistent part of the patrol, most notably the bus station, which has historically been a focal point for criminogenic activity.

On average, volunteers walk over 10 kilometres per shift. One volunteer light-heartedly described the experience as "*a walking club of sorts*." The comparison is apt—not only for the physical activity involved, but for the sense of companionship and shared purpose it fosters. However, on reflection, perhaps it's more accurate to call it "*a walking club of kind people with a purpose*." This sentiment aligns with Bregman's (2020) view that, contrary to cynical assumptions, most people are fundamentally good and naturally inclined to help others. Street Angels volunteers embody this ethos. They are not indifferent to the challenges facing their urban environment; rather, they are motivated by a desire for positive, transformative change. Come rain, heat, or cold, they walk the streets of Birkenhead with a readiness to assist anyone in need.

Birkenhead's NTE is spread across a wide geographic area, which presents challenges for both the public and Street Angels volunteers. Ongoing regeneration work has led to road closures and the installation of temporary pedestrian walkways, some positioned directly in front of key NTE venues. Volunteers navigate these altered routes alongside the general public, weaving through construction zones that change the usual flow of foot traffic.

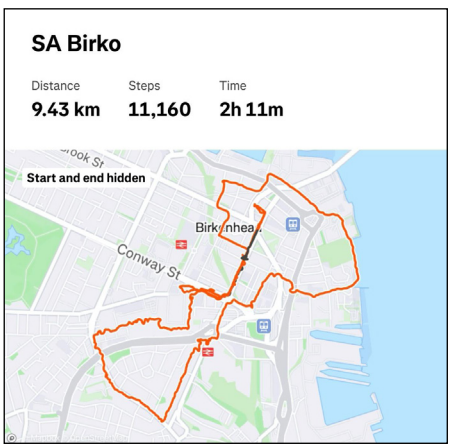


Between some venues lie quieter, more isolated streets, including the market area, derelict buildings, and a mix of housing types. These less-travelled spaces are perceived by some as higher-risk areas for sexual or violent assault, particularly during late-night hours.

Volunteer perspectives on safety in Birkenhead vary (see Views of Volunteers and the Community). While some express concern about certain locations, others feel relatively safe during patrols. What remains consistent, however, is a strong sense of local pride. Regardless of individual views on risk, all volunteers share a deep commitment to their community and a belief in the value of making Birkenhead a safer, more supportive place for everyone.







Observations from the Street: Everyday Acts of Care and Intervention

During observational fieldwork, it became evident that Street Angels plays a vital role in maintaining public safety and supporting individuals in the NTE. Volunteers were regularly seen picking up broken glass from pavements, debris that could easily harm barefoot individuals late at night or pose risks to others the following day. Glass bottles were also removed and safely disposed of to prevent their potential use as weapons or sources of injury.

Simple items such as sweets, lollipops, and even Easter eggs proved to be surprisingly effective tools in diffusing tense situations. One volunteer recounted a moment when a confrontational individual, initially shouting "*Are you a f***ing traffic warden?*", was quickly pacified by a small gesture and began expressing interest in the Street Angels' work. These moments of de-escalation are carried out with skill and compassion, always supported by the presence and guidance of a team leader.

Volunteers also encounter individuals who appear vulnerable, often slumped over and in need of care. In such instances, they offer water, check on the person's wellbeing, and provide company or assistance in getting home. For lone individuals, Street Angels often accompany them to find transport or wait with them until a friend or family member arrives. Thought is given to how these interactions are approached, recognising that four volunteers surrounding a vulnerable person could feel intimidating, one or two members usually engage first to offer reassurance.

For those experiencing homelessness, volunteers offer practical support, including cereal bars, water, and, when available, warm clothing. But often, what's most appreciated is the human connection: a kind word, a hug, or the familiar face of a volunteer known through other community roles. These small acts reflect the compassion at the heart of the initiative and align with Bregman's (2020) argument that people are, at their core, kind and inclined to help one another.

One poignant moment during observations involved a man in his 60s, encountered in the quiet market area. He shared that he was living in temporary accommodation and was looking forward to his granddaughter's birthday. Volunteers walked with him, providing conversation and companionship—something he seemed to value deeply.

As volunteers themselves reflected, every shift is unique:

> *On Saturday there was a man who was homeless who needed advice, a lady who missed her bus, and a drunk lad trying to get money out to pay for her taxi.*

These diverse encounters underscore the Street Angels' flexible, human-centred approach—meeting people where they are, with empathy and practical support.



Partnerships and Community Engagement

Throughout each shift, the Street Angels team regularly engages with door staff at various NTE venues. While the level of engagement varies from venue to venue, the majority of door staff are receptive and supportive of the initiative. In several cases, door staff expressed enthusiasm for the presence of Street Angels, with one commenting:

> *It's great what you're doing. If you'd have been here the other night, we could've used you. Come back down here around two o'clock—you want to be here when it kicks out. What time are you all finishing?*

Volunteers are mindful of the distinct roles played by door staff and Street Angels. However, those with experience from the Chester Street Angels project highlighted the importance of building collaborative relationships with venue staff, particularly when it comes to sharing information and coordinating support. In Chester, door staff actively communicate via radio to alert Street Angels to potential issues, something the Birkenhead team is working to establish as part of a two-way, cooperative approach.

Beyond the NTE, Street Angels Birkenhead has benefitted from strong support across the local community and voluntary sector. Volunteers noted that the enthusiasm of key agencies during the setup phase played a crucial role in getting the project off the ground. The team is continuing to expand its outreach, particularly with the local faith sector. Although Street Angels Birkenhead continues to receive valuable support from several churches, the team remains committed to deepening engagement with the wider faith community. They recognise the faith sector as a powerful ally, and acknowledge that its involvement has not yet reached the level originally envisioned at the project's inception. The leadership team maintains communication with local churches through a WhatsApp group for church leaders and regularly requests prayer support ahead of their shifts. With support from WCVS, Street Angels Birkenhead is actively working to strengthen these relationships and will be attending an upcoming breakfast meeting, where a strong turnout from church leaders is sought.

While some promising relationships are already in place, there is recognition that more can be done to strengthen partnerships across the local landscape. Encouragingly, local services have been instrumental in helping Street Angels connect with wider community events and key stakeholders, providing valuable opportunities for collaboration and increased visibility.

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Potential for Impact

The transformative potential of Street Angels Birkenhead is evident in both the actions of its volunteers and the positive sentiments they express toward the community they serve. Many of the volunteers live on the Wirral and are deeply rooted in the very neighbourhoods they seek to support. As Hoekstra (2019, p.480) notes in her study of local engagement, "*residents are emotionally attached to and engaged with their neighbourhood.*" Street Angels reflects this emotional investment and contributes to a growing number of grassroots initiatives in the Wirral that exemplify aspirational, community-led citizenship.

Through simple but meaningful interventions such as removing broken glass from streets, the volunteers act as active bystanders, directly improving the physical environment and reducing opportunities for crime and harm. This mirrors broken windows theory (Wilson & Kelling, 2010), which posits that maintaining public order can deter more serious offences. By making the environment safer, Street Angels not only reduce immediate risks, but also send a message of care and vigilance that resonates throughout the community.

Beyond community safety, the personal benefits of volunteering are profound. As explored throughout this report, participation in Street Angels fosters a sense of purpose, belonging, and connection. Recent research by Molinas (2024) found that volunteering improves mental health, boosts optimism, reduces social isolation, and can initiate a ripple effect—encouraging further acts of kindness. These findings align with Bregman's (2020) optimistic view of human nature, suggesting that people are inherently good and willing to support others when given the opportunity.

Importantly, Street Angels welcomes volunteers from all walks of life, regardless of their prior experience, personal motivation, or availability. This inclusive approach creates a space where individuals can build meaningful relationships and contribute to something greater than themselves (Vannier, 2020).

Street Angels' presence within Birkenhead's night-time economy offers both symbolic and practical value. As a visible, caring presence on often-deserted streets, the team challenges the bystander effect while also acting as a deterrent. Although it is difficult to quantify, their visibility may well prevent incidents such as violent or sexual assaults, crimes known to be of concern in Birkenhead. This unmeasurable, yet powerful, form of social value highlights the broader impact of Street Angels: not just in what they do, but in what their presence alone might prevent.

Views of Volunteers and the Community of Birkenhead

This project will scale and evolve and flex over time in line with the needs of the community, it's very much a co-production approach

I love Birkenhead and I love the people, its rough and ready but it's served me well and looked after me

I thought it would be a bit busier and would feel more dangerous, but actually people have been lovely, feel safe out there as we're walking around

I saw 30, 40 people I knew on the first shift and can use this to help intervene, whether I was in an uniform or not I would have helped

We've not really seen the real project in action properly, come the summer it will be different, as the town transforms and gets better and more vibrant we'll be there and we'll be established

Nothing needs to change with the Street Angels project, nothing at all

It's a beautiful piece of work , a great project

Street Angels is important, it adds value to Birkenhead

The service is filling a huge gap and it's not even commissioned [Street Angels has received funding from Step Up, so it is commissioned, however this is only to cover core funds of the charity]

If people want us then we'll be there

Views of Volunteers and the Community of Birkenhead

This is for the people of the people to build the community

I wish street angels had been around when I was younger, I really could have used their support

Lot of real strong morals within people in Birkenhead, if they see things that aren't right they're more likely to vocalise that thought and they love to see Street Angels…that's someone wanting to do something to make things better and the community loves that

People of Birkenhead, there is so much challenge there, but they are some of the nicest people you'll ever meet

I give my time up [volunteering for Street Angels] to benefit the wider community. Sometimes I do feel knackered after I've done a shift… but if it benefits my family which is Birkenhead then that's all that matters

It's all about what is actually being done to help the people of Birkenhead? Birkenhead has been left like it was for a long time, the people of Birkenhead see money being poured into it… but it's not for them, it's for big fancy new housing

The people of Birkenhead constantly see projects come and go. This is what churches can offer that the community and voluntary sector can't - that sustainability and consistency. Services change every few years and the level of impact goes up and down with funding

People in Birkenhead are struggling and need help but it's not as rough as people think it is. There's a lot more respect in this area than people are being given credit for, things can usually be deescalated… people just want to feel loved and part of a community.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Street Angels Birkenhead is making a valuable and visible contribution to the local community, responding to a clear gap in support within the NTE. Though still in its early stages, the initiative has already demonstrated its potential to build trust, foster collaboration, and promote safer streets through compassionate, community-led action.

As the project develops, continued consistency will be vital in strengthening relationships with local stakeholders including residents, NTE businesses, statutory services, and the faith sector. Street Angels Birkenhead exemplifies the power of active citizenship and offers a replicable model for community-driven intervention.

To support the continued growth and sustainability of the initiative, the following recommendations are made:

Recommendations

- **Strategic Deployment Based on Local Intelligence**
  Ensure shift scheduling is informed by knowledge of upcoming events, local trends in footfall, and NTE activity, allowing Street Angels to be present when they are most needed.

- **Trial Earlier Start Times on Fridays**
  Consider piloting earlier shifts on Friday evenings, particularly during warmer months when people tend to socialise earlier.

- **Strengthen Business Engagement**
  Deepen relationships with NTE venues and businesses to foster two-way communication. This would enable better use of Street Angels as a resource and encourage venues to alert volunteers to emerging issues.

- **Volunteer and Shift Leader Recruitment**
  Expand the pool of volunteers and identify new shift leaders to ensure sustainability and coverage. Acknowledge the challenge, but explore targeted recruitment strategies, including outreach in local colleges.

- **Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Partnerships**
  Explore whether local organisations on the Wirral might support Street Angels through CSR initiatives—enabling employees to volunteer as part of their community engagement.

- **Collaboration with Community Connectors**
  Identify opportunities for partnership working with the Community Connectors programme, especially where they have evening and weekend capacity. Co-deployment on shifts could bring mutual benefit.

- **Dynamic Shift Planning Linked to Weather Protocols**
  Coordinate shifts in alignment with the activation of Severe Weather Emergency Protocols (SWEP), ensuring support is available when vulnerable people are most at risk.

- **Regular Liaison with Local Policing Teams**
  Establish routine communication with Merseyside Police to share intelligence on hotspots, times of concern, or emerging patterns, allowing for proactive deployment.

- **Inter-Agency Shadowing Opportunities**
  Explore opportunities for volunteers to shadow or collaborate with other community and statutory organisations. This could enhance volunteer confidence and skills, while promoting cross-agency learning and stronger partnerships.

- **Consider trialling the use of further tracking software**
  Street Angels Chester utilises the WalkSafe application and Street Angels Birkenhead are in the process of setting up a profile to then be used regularly on shifts. There may be other types of tracking software which could be utilised or developed to enable contact and communication from the public whilst Street Angels are on patrol.

As Street Angels Birkenhead evolves, these recommendations aim to support the development of a responsive, resilient, and embedded community initiative, one that continues to demonstrate the powerful impact of people helping people.

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For more information about the work of Street Angels and/ or if you would like to volunteer please contact us on the following:

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