



North Somerset LEADS

Extended Executive Summary

*Emily Berridge
Nat Craig
Catherine Leyshon
Michael Leyshon
Miriam Leyshon*



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North Somerset LEADS: Extended Executive Summary

Authors: Emily Berridge, Nat Craig, Catherine Leyshon, Michael Leyshon, Miriam Leyshon

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Contact: Catherine Leyshon

Email: catherineleyshon@quayresearch.com

Telephone: 07813028490

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Glossary and Definitions

ICS: Integrated Care System

LIO: Local Infrastructure Organisation

NSC: North Somerset Council

NSP: North Somerset Partnership

NST: North Somerset Together

SRO: Senior Responsible Officer

VCSE: Voluntary, Community, and Social Enterprise sector

Introduction

This extended executive summary presents the headline findings of research conducted between September 2025 and February 2026 about the relationship between North Somerset Council (NSC) and the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector. The full report, containing the data, more detailed findings, and analysis is available from [Quay Research](#).

The work responds to a shared concern: the local authority and the VCSE sector face rising demand, constrained resources, and increasingly complex social challenges, **yet their partnership – though valued by all parties – is not currently configured to meet these pressures**. The goal of the research was therefore to identify the conditions for a more equitable, coordinated, and resilient partnership, capable of supporting communities in North Somerset sustainably over the long term.

National policy developments, including local government reform and the reconfiguration of Integrated Care System (ICS) and NHS priorities, underline the importance of stronger local government-VCSE collaboration. NSC itself acknowledges this in its Corporate Plan (2024-2028). **However, the practical mechanisms needed to deliver on this ambition remain underdeveloped**. The report therefore proposes a structured, actionable way forward: the North Somerset LEADS Framework (Learn, Engage, Adapt, Develop, Strengthen).

Shared Pressures, Fragmented Systems

North Somerset faces significant financial pressures. In February 2026, NSC approved a budget containing savings worth almost £60m between 2025 and 2030, with £20m planned for delivery in 2026/27. Even with a balanced budget for 2026/27, NSC still faces a forecast budget gap of more than £22.5m for 2027 to 2030. At the same time, the VCSE sector – composed largely of micro and small organisations – is experiencing increased demand and short-term or insecure funding.

Both sides recognise the VCSE sector's crucial role in reaching vulnerable communities, preventing crises, and supporting statutory services. However, **the relationship between NSC and the VCSE sector is strategically weak, despite its operational importance.**

Ten Key Takeaways

The relationship between NSC and the VCSE sector in North Somerset is characterised by fragmented partnership models, incomplete plumbing, short-term, opaque, and competitive funding, and a patchy commitment to co-production of place-based solutions. These structural issues are captured in ten key takeaways.

1. No VCSE strategy exists to guide priority setting and coordinated action.
2. There is little coordination between the VCSEs that see themselves delivering local infrastructure functions.
3. VCSE infrastructure function delivery is chronically underfunded.
4. Under the pressure of increased demand and reduced funding, a deficit-based needs assessment frames service design and delivery.
5. It is not clear how much money NSC spends with VCSE organisations, and this spend is not coordinated or driven by a cogent strategy.
6. Grant and commissioning processes sometimes favour larger organisations and those with an existing relationship.
7. The relationship with the VCSE sector is not built into the work of one portfolio holder and/or Senior Responsible Officer (SRO).
8. There is a disconnect between the risk-averse, procedurally driven culture of local government and the more relational, adaptive culture of community organisations.
9. The needs of the VCSE sector are not coherently understood, and the impact and contribution of the sector are not clearly represented.
10. It is hard to maintain a strong and distinctive voice for VCSEs at the strategic level because there is no clearly identified group of LIOs to communicate with NSC.

Further, the forums do not exist in which high-level strategic conversations can take place (e.g. a Partnership Board).

LEADS: Learn, Engage, Adapt, Develop, Strengthen

The LEADS framework reflects both the huge potential for a productive, collaborative relationship between NSC and the VCSE sector and the need for action on several fronts to achieve this (Figure 1).

Learn focuses on the quality, consistency, and coordination of data, evidence, and insight in North Somerset. For NSC, this means achieving a greater understanding of what they spend on the VCSE sector, whether through grants or contracts. For the VCSE sector, this means developing its evidence base, including size, shape, outcomes, and impact.

Engage covers strategy, delivery, and the 'plumbing': the structures of communication and levels of coordination within NSC, within the VCSE sector, and – critically - *between* NSC and the VCSE sector.

Adapt looks at how to create the conditions for a thriving relationship between NSC and the VCSE sector by developing current strengths, drawing on existing structures of working, and understanding how to create the conditions for ongoing responsive adaptation.

Develop promotes the potential of a strengths-based ABCD approach and Community Wealth Building as methods of developing inclusive, thriving communities, and the important role of a well-supported VCSE sector in this.

Strengthen calls for self-assessment, revised strategies, creation of a LEADS Alliance, sustainable funding, and clarity and fairness in funding.

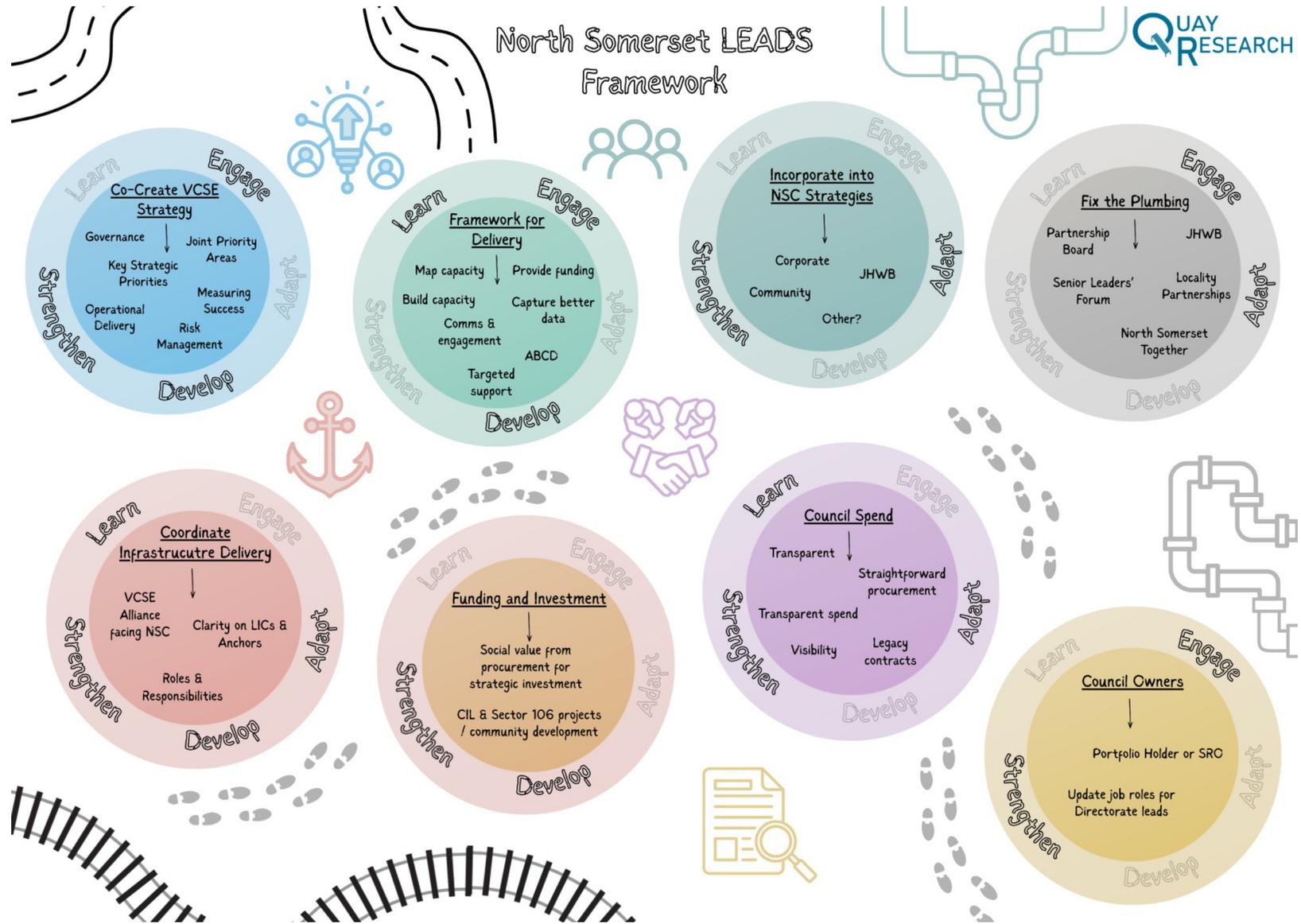


Figure 1: North Somerset LEADS infographic

The LEADS framework reflects the conjoined nature of the challenges facing NSC and the VCSE sector, but also proposes a positive trajectory for change through which all parties can exercise leadership and create innovation in volatile times. Given the complexity of the situation, it is not surprising that the solutions are also interconnected. Enacting one change is unlikely to result in significant overall shifts in the relationship. However, whilst enacting several linked solutions requires effort in the short term, the results will be of considerable benefit to the people and communities of North Somerset in the long term.

North Somerset LEADS Objectives and Actions

The North Somerset LEADS framework is underpinned by objectives and actions structured around the LEADS acronym. It is important to note from the outset that many of these are interlinked and cannot be completed in isolation. For example, for data on the voluntary sector to be routinely collected and curated, there needs to be clarification of a distributed model of local infrastructure provision, which raises the question of how such a model can be funded.

For this extended executive summary, we identify the meta, cross-cutting themes that underpin the conditions in which other aspects of the North Somerset LEADS framework can be delivered. The main objectives and actions associated with these themes are shown in Figure 1 and outlined below, but the exhaustive list can be found in the full report and separate summary on the [Quay Research website](#).

Co-creation of a VCSE Strategy

This will define the relationship between NSC and the VCSE sector, addressing governance arrangements, identifying key strategic priorities and joint areas of focus, the structure of delivery, how success is



measured, and risk management. Based on a shared vision and the existing Principles of Partnership, the VCSE Strategy should:

- Be co-designed
- Identify infrastructure organisations as intermediaries
- Be based on equal partnership and parity of esteem
- Be clear on funding and sustainability commitments
- Commit to sector resilience and capacity building
- Be underpinned by equality, diversity and inclusion
- Be founded on neighbourhood and place-based working
- Contain shared accountability and review mechanisms
- Align with wider strategies.

Co-creation of a framework for the delivery of the VCSE Strategy

This framework will identify specific actions, such as mapping the network and its capacity (drawing on the forthcoming State of the Sector report 2026), funding activities or pilots, capacity-building, agreeing on an evaluation framework and process to capture outcomes and impact, developing collaboration mechanisms, a communication and engagement plan, and target support for priority areas. Critical to this undertaking is devising mechanisms for collecting more robust data on the VCSE sector's outcomes and impact.

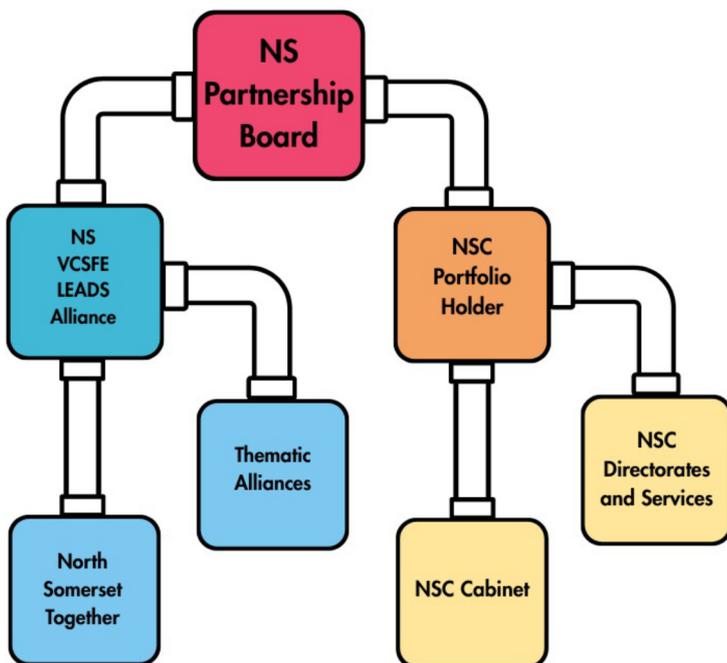


Incorporate the voluntary sector more clearly into NSC Strategies

The value of the VCSE sector and the important role it plays in supporting service design and delivery in North Somerset should be more clearly represented in other NSC strategies, baking a consideration of the voluntary sector into planning, decision-making, and action. As these strategies are refreshed, they should seek to be more explicit about the role that the voluntary sector plays and how it can be facilitated.

Fix the plumbing

Critical to both the development of a VCSE Strategy and Framework for Delivery is 'the plumbing': the structures of communication and mechanisms of coordination within and



between NSC and the VCSE sector.

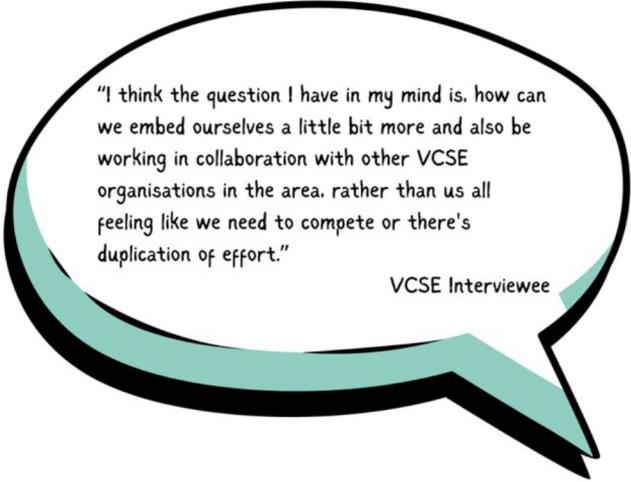
Key actions include reinstating the North Somerset Partnership board (NSP), reviewing and articulate the connections between North Somerset Together (NST), the Senior Leaders' Forum, the Health and Wellbeing Board, and NSP board (if reinstated), and creating a VCSE Alliance specifically to face NSC.

Coordinate Infrastructure Delivery

Linked to fixing the plumbing is the issue of a more coordinated approach to infrastructure delivery. If a distributed model of infrastructure delivery by several different organisations is to be pursued, it should be clarified. This involves making clear the distinction between anchor organisations and LIOs and setting out roles, responsibilities, and expectations.

Funding and Investment

The creation of a strategy, a delivery framework, and a clarified model of infrastructure delivery all need to be underpinned by sustainable financial arrangements. It is important to distinguish here between funding and investment. Funding is related to supporting defined, time-limited, thematic projects and programmes. Investment is about making a strategic decision to support local infrastructure requirements. Despite squeezed budgets, there is significant scope for innovation to support funding *and* investment through three mechanisms: Community Infrastructure Levy, Section 106 money, and the creation of an Infrastructure Dividend derived from social value from procurement.



"I think the question I have in my mind is, how can we embed ourselves a little bit more and also be working in collaboration with other VCSE organisations in the area, rather than us all feeling like we need to compete or there's duplication of effort."

VCSE Interviewee

Council Spend

NSC should review their total spend on the voluntary sector through grants, commissioning, and contracts. This information is not currently easily visible either within NSC or externally. The development of a Strategy and a Framework for Delivery require oversight of what is currently spent and where, the nature of legacy contracts, and how commissioning and procurement work in relation to the VCSE sector.



Doing more of the same "is not going to get us out of the hole."

NSC Interviewee

Ensure Council Ownership

Advancing all of the actions listed here also requires that NSC identify a portfolio holder and/or SRO to develop the relationship with the VCSE sector on behalf of NSC. Ideally, NSC would also edit key job roles in directorates to include responsibility for the relationship with the VCSE sector, so that a consideration of the role of VCSEs is baked in.

Conclusion

The relationship between NSC and the VCSE sector is marked by strong shared intentions but weakened by fragmented structures, inconsistent communication, and insufficiently coordinated investment. Both sectors face acute pressures: rising community need, shrinking public budgets, and increasing demand for early-help and preventative services. Yet the research also shows that North Somerset has significant assets – committed organisations, strong local knowledge, and successful examples of collaboration – that can be mobilised more effectively through a clearer, jointly owned strategic framework.

The analysis highlights several systemic issues, but there is a shared recognition that neither sector can meet current or future challenges alone. A more purposeful, equitable partnership is therefore essential. The North Somerset LEADS framework provides a practical route forward, offering actionable steps to build coordination, strengthen infrastructure, and enable long-term investment in community capacity.