QUAY RESEARCH

North Somerset LEADS

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North Somerset LEADS: Developing the relationship between NSC and the Voluntary Sector in North Somerset

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Glossary and Definitions

ABCD: Asset Based Community Development
BANES: Bath and North East Somerset
BNSSG: Bristol, North Somerset, and South Gloucestershire Integrated Care System (ICS)
CANS: Citizens Advice North Somerset
CIL: Civil Infrastructure Levy
CLES: The Centre for Local Economic Strategies
CVS: Council of Voluntary Service
FAHL: For All Healthy Living
ICB: Integrated Care Board
ICS: Integrated Care System
IMD: Indices of Multiple Deprivation
LCSI: Local Civil Society Infrastructure
LGA: Local Government Association
LIO: Local Infrastructure Organisation
NAVCA: the National Association of Voluntary and Community Action
NCVO: National Council for Voluntary Organisations
NSC: North Somerset Council
NSP: North Somerset Partnership
NST: North Somerset Together
NSWBC: North Somerset Wellbeing Collective
RENS: Race Equality North Somerset
Section 106: legal agreements between a planning authority and a developer that mitigate the impact of development by funding transport infrastructure improvements, environmental improvements and corporate objectives, for example.
SRO: Senior Responsible Owner
SROI: Social Return on Investment
VANS: Voluntary Action North Somerset
VCSE: Voluntary, Community, and Social Enterprise sector
VID: VCSE Infrastructure Dividend
WECA: West of England Combined Authority
WERN: West of England Rural Network

Executive Summary

This report presents the findings of research conducted between September 2025 and February 2026 into the relationship between North Somerset Council (NSC) and the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector. The work responds to a shared concern: **both sectors 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 is 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 ICSs 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 that contains 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. A one-year exceptional council tax increase of 8.99% was also agreed. 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's crucial role in reaching vulnerable communities, preventing crisis, and supporting statutory services. **However, the relationship between NSC and the VCSE sector is operationally important but strategically weak, characterised by fragmented partnership models, incomplete plumbing, short-term, opaque, and competitive funding, and a patchy commitment to co-production of place-based solutions.**

At the same time, VCSE infrastructure delivery is uncoordinated and underfunded. Under the pressure of increased demand and reduced funding, a deficit-based needs assessment frames service design and delivery. Meanwhile, grant and commissioning processes sometimes favour larger organisations and those with an existing relationship, which are better able to absorb financial and contractual uncertainties. There is a disconnect between the risk-averse, procedurally driven culture of local government and the more relational, adaptive culture of community organisations.

Opportunities for Innovation

The report identifies opportunities in Community Wealth Building, improved use of social value in procurement, and exploring CIL/S106 as additional funding routes. To leverage these, structural foundations must be strengthened.

The North Somerset LEADS Framework

The North Somerset LEADS Framework and how it can be delivered is set out in Figure 1.

1. Learn – Strengthen data, mapping, and visibility of VCSE activity.
2. Engage – Rebuild communication structures, reinstate a Partnership Board, co-design strategy, and assign NSC leadership responsibility.
3. Adapt – Make better use of existing structures, processes, and strengths and clarify infrastructure roles.
4. Develop – Build VCSE capacity through training, alliances, and progressive commissioning.
5. Strengthen – Secure sustainable funding, including exploring a VCSE Infrastructure Dividend, and recognise and celebrate the work of VCSEs.

North Somerset benefits from a committed VCSE sector and council officers who recognise its value. This report represents an important opportunity not to be missed by either NSC or the VCSE. An opportunity exists to invest in the local community organisations that enhance social capital and improve the wellbeing of communities, using sustainable sources of funding.

The LEADS Framework provides a practical, mutually beneficial path forward, emphasising partnership, investment, and long-term community resilience.

North Somerset LEADS Framework

Quay Research

Co-Create VCSE Strategy
Learn · Engage · Strengthen · Adapt · Develop
- Governance
- Key Strategic Priorities
- Operational Delivery
- Joint Priority Areas
- Measuring Success
- Risk Management

Framework for Delivery
Learn · Engage · Strengthen · Adapt · Develop
- Map capacity
- Build capacity
- Comms & engagement
- Provide funding
- Capture better data
- ABCD
- Targeted support

Incorporate into NSC Strategies
Learn · Engage · Strengthen · Adapt · Develop
- Corporate
- Community
- JHWB
- Other?

Fix the Plumbing
Learn · Engage · Strengthen · Adapt · Develop
- Partnership Board
- Senior Leaders' Forum
- JHWB
- Locality Partnerships
- North Somerset Together

Coordinate Infrastrucutre Delivery
Learn · Engage · Strengthen · Adapt · Develop
- VCSE Alliance facing NSC
- Clarity on LICs & Anchors
- Roles & Responsibilities

Funding and Investment
Learn · Engage · Strengthen · Adapt · Develop
- Social value from procurement for strategic investment
- CIL & Sector 106 projects / community development

Council Spend
Learn · Engage · Strengthen · Adapt · Develop
- Transparent
- Transparent spend
- Visibility
- Straightforward procurement
- Legacy contracts

Council Owners
Learn · Engage · Strengthen · Adapt · Develop
- Portfolio Holder or SRO
- Update job roles for Directorate leads

Figure 1: North Somerset LEADS infographic

Introduction

Drawing on research conducted in North Somerset between September 2025 and February 2026, this report outlines the current relationship between the Council and the voluntary sector. It presents actionable insights and recommendations that will enable the local authority and the voluntary sector to develop an equitable and sustainable relationship in delivering support to communities in the face of greater demand and significant financial pressures.

The Local Government Association (LGA) is the national membership body for councils in England. It argues that "strong relationships between councils and the local Voluntary and Community Sector… are the bedrock of successful places." A well-functioning relationship between North Somerset Council (NSC) and the local Voluntary, Community, and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector is critical to the maintenance of healthy, resilient communities in North Somerset. A commitment to strengthen the partnership with the voluntary and community sector is contained in the North Somerset Corporate Plan (2024-2028), but fulfilling this commitment requires concerted, coordinated action on both sides. These actions include:

- better definition of the strategic partnership and shared vision
- developing a framework for delivery and governance
- creation of sustainable and transparent funding mechanisms
- improved data collection on impact and outcomes.

Arguments for building strong, collaborative partnerships between local authorities and the voluntary sector are made at a national level by both the LGA and the National Association of Voluntary and Community Action (NAVCA).[1] The LGA points out that:

> "At a time of rising pressure on services and tough financial constraints, it is more important than ever that councils can harness their local strengths and build successful partnerships with their local VCS [voluntary and community sector]."

Meanwhile, NAVCA argues that:

> "if strong partnerships were replicated across the country; if local government and the VCS work together in strategic collaboration; if we recognise the strengths and assets of each sector, we could see the transformation of public service, a strengthened VCS, and thriving communities where individuals have greater agency to take social action."

Undertaking this work is in the mutual interests of NSC and VCSEs. On one hand, a flourishing voluntary sector will help deliver on all four priority areas of NSC's Corporate Plan:

- care and support for children and young people
- caring communities that support each other to live well
- thriving and sustainable towns and villages
- delivery of good value, sustainable services.

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[1] NAVCA is the membership organisation for Local Infrastructure Organisations and accredits both LIOs and Volunteer Centres.

On the other hand, a well-coordinated voluntary sector is a driver of innovation and insight, shaping future priorities, delivery, and lasting investment in communities.

LEADS: Learn, Engage, Adapt, Develop, Strengthen

The emerging landscape of service design and delivery presents opportunities and challenges for the Council and the VCSE sector in North Somerset, reflecting both specific local conditions and national trends. The North Somerset LEADS framework, designed specifically for this report, reflects both the huge potential for a productive collaborative relationship between the Council and the voluntary sector and the need for action on several fronts to achieve this. Objectives and actions associated with the LEARN framework are presented in the second half of this report. The below is a summary of the framework's key themes:

Learn focuses on the quality, consistency, and coordination of data, evidence, and insight in North Somerset. For the Council, this means achieving a greater understanding of what they spend on the voluntary 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 voluntary sector, and – critically - *between* NSC and the voluntary 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 voluntary sector in this.

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

The LEADS framework reflects the conjoined nature of the challenges facing NSC and the voluntary sector but also proposes a positive trajectory for change through which all parties can exercise leadership and create innovation in volatile times.

How to Read this Report

This report begins by explaining our methods, before setting out the wider context of the challenges facing NSC and the voluntary sector. In the next substantive section, we address the aims that guided the project. In so doing, we build a picture of the complexity of the situation in North Somerset.

There are a number of conjoined reasons for the current relationship between NSC and the voluntary sector. They do not have a tidy timeline or a linear logic but have resulted in working practices that are uncoordinated, fragmented, and often characterised by inertia.

In the second substantive section of the report, we look ahead to how to address some of the issues raised in part one. Given the complexity of the situation, it is perhaps not a surprise that the solutions are also interconnected. Enacting one change is unlikely to result in significant transformation in the relationship. However,

whilst enacting several linked solutions requires effort in the short term, the result will be of considerable benefit to the people and communities of North Somerset in the long term.

Other Relevant Reports

The North Somerset LEADS report should be read alongside three other reports that are being produced at around the same time. First is the **State of the Sector** report, which describes the size and shape of the voluntary sector in BNSSG, including data on size by income, reserves, sources of funding, numbers of volunteers, areas of delivery etc. Although this is not ready at the time of writing, it will have important insights that can inform the delivery of the LEADS recommendations.

The second report due at roughly the same time is from the Centre for Local Economic Strategies (CLES), entitled the **North Somerset Council Community Wealth Building Feasibility Study**. As CLES notes, Community Wealth Building is a progressive approach to economics and economic development that aims to retain more wealth and opportunity for the benefit of local people. One mechanism for achieving Community Wealth Building is via generating social value from procurement contracts issued by NSC. This is discussed in detail later this report. Here, it is sufficient to note that joining up Community Wealth Building initiatives with a strategic view of the voluntary sector is an important opportunity that should not be overlooked. We make specific recommendations in relation to Community Wealth Building and social value later on.

Finally, an evaluation of the community-led project, **Power to Pill**, is due in spring 2026. This will be helpful in understanding how to transfer the learning from this project into other areas in Somerset.

Aims and Methods

The research underpinning this report was structured around four project aims with associated research questions (Figure 2). These also structure the report after the overall national operational and policy contexts have been discussed.

The research findings have been used to provide actionable insights and recommendations to inform NSC's future engagement, funding, and support mechanisms for the VCSE sector. This report is also designed to provide a resource for VCSEs to self-organise and represent their need for increased infrastructure support.

The research team took a multi-method approach. This included conducting qualitative semi-structured interviews, examining quantitative data and current reports supplied by NSC, VCSEs, or other reliable sources, running interactive workshops, and fielding a short survey. These methods are detailed in Appendix One.

Aim	Areas of enquiry
1. Understand the role and effectiveness of Local Infrastructure Organisations (LIOs) and Community Anchors in North Somerset, within the wider VCSE sector.	How the VCSE sector currently organise itself through a combination of anchor organisations and Local Infrastructure Organisations and what opportunities and barriers they face.
	How infrastructure functions are delivered for the VCSE sector in North Somerset.
	What local VCSEs feel they need from a Local Infrastructure Organisation.
2. Explore and assess existing relationships and structural challenges between North Somerset Council and the VCSE sector.	The historic and current dynamics between NSC and the VCSE sector, including the status of partnership models, communication, engagement, and trust.
	The Principles of Partnership[2] and how they've been operationalised.
	The current nature of collaboration within the sector – e.g. the VCSE alliance, North Somerset Together.
	How NSC sees its relationship with the voluntary sector, the role of the voluntary sector in the relevant Locality Partnerships in North Somerset (Weston, Worle & Villages and Woodspring).
	The challenges of accessing funding for infrastructure and anchor organisations.
3. Design a joint, strategic approach that supports a diverse, sustainable, and flourishing VCSE sector to better serve communities across North Somerset.	The North Somerset LEADS framework as the basis of a sustainable relationship between the voluntary sector and NSC.
	What is the usefulness of the ABCD[3] approach?
	What do progressive models of commissioning have to offer?

Figure 2: Aims and Research Questions

Context

In this section, we set out the operational, policy, and governance contexts at the local and national scale through which the relationship between North Somerset Council and the VCSE sector can be understood. We also offer some observations about determining the size and shape of the voluntary sector in North Somerset.

A Complex Geography

North Somerset is a unitary authority with a population of 216,700 in the 2021 census. It is located within a complex geography between the large rural unitary authority of Somerset and the local authorities of the West of England Mayoral Combined Authority (WECA): Bath and North-East Somerset, Bristol, and South Gloucestershire (below we review the status of discussions about North Somerset joining WECA).

North Somerset is also part of the Bristol, North Somerset, and South Gloucestershire Integrated Care System (BNSSG), which is soon to include Gloucestershire. BNSSG host a group of Locality Partnerships, which are made up of local health, social care and voluntary sector organisations and groups, working with communities to improve health and wellbeing. Two of these Locality Partnerships are located in North Somerset: Weston, Worle & Villages and Woodspring.

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[2] The Principles of Partnership are discussed here.
[3] ABCD: Asset Based Community Development. The potential of this approach is discussed here.

National Context and Local Impacts

Local authorities and VCSEs in the UK are operating within a complex and constantly evolving national context shaped by financial pressures, policy reforms, social challenges, and a growing emphasis on sustainability and equity (Figure 3). Below, we set out some of the more pressing issues and how they might affect North Somerset. It is important to note that these issues pose risks but also opportunities for innovation, leadership, and transformative change.

Financial Pressures

It is acknowledged by the central government that:

> "the voluntary sector and the social value they create play a crucial role in our journey of transforming how the government delivers smarter, more thoughtful, and effective public services that meet the needs of people across the country."

Getting this right has never been more critical, given the parlous state of local authority finances.

As Clifford (2021) notes, there have been 'revolutionary changes' in local authority financing in England since 2009-2010. Not only has local authority spending fallen, but changes to the funding system mean that councils are more dependent on local tax revenue. Notwithstanding these changes, Kitson (2024) observes that local government is an important source of the charity sector's income, providing 13p in every £1 through grants and contracts. Whilst spending on statutory services has suffered the smallest cuts, discretionary spend has been reduced significantly.

As noted by both the LGA and the Public Accounts Committee, local authorities across England face significant financial constraints due to inflationary pressures, increased demand for social care, housing, and welfare services, ongoing austerity legacies, and changes to 'statutory override',[4] which has excluded some deficits from budgets. At the same time, the cost-of-living crisis has increased demand on public services and the voluntary sector.

North Somerset faces significant financial pressures. Savings, service transformation, and efficiencies have been offset by rising demand and costs. In February 2026, the NSC approved a budget that contains 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. A one-year exceptional council tax increase of 8.99% was also agreed.

This precarious situation could suppress innovation, but later in this report, we outline how innovative use of non-core funding can be used to invest in a flourishing voluntary sector at a time when its contribution to communities has never been more important.

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[4] Statutory Override: a mechanism by which local authorities do not have to include deficits from the provision of Special Educational Needs and Disabilities services when balancing their yearly budgets. Since 2019 these deficits have grown to almost £6bn nationally.

Policy Change	Challenges	Impact on Local Authorities	Impact on Voluntary Sector (VCSE)
Shift to Neighbourhood Health	Integrating health services at neighbourhood level; data sharing; resource allocation	Increased responsibility for coordinating local health initiatives; need for cross-sector collaboration	Greater role in community health delivery; opportunities for partnership but requires capacity building
10 Year Health Plan	Long-term planning amid changing health needs; funding sustainability	Strategic alignment with national health goals; pressure to deliver preventive and integrated care	Potential for sustained funding streams; need to align projects with health priorities
ICB footprint	Implementing clustered Integrated Care Boards (ICBs); governance complexity	New governance structures to manage health and care integration; accountability challenges	Increased collaboration opportunities; risk of marginalisation without formal links
Civil Society Covenant (VCSE)	Ensuring meaningful engagement; balancing power dynamics	Formalising partnerships with VCSE; embedding social value in procurement and commissioning	Enhanced recognition and influence; opportunities for co-production and funding
Procurement Changes	Adapting to new procurement rules; ensuring fairness and transparency	Need to update procurement processes; focus on social value and sustainability	More equitable access to contracts; potential administrative burden
Strategic Commissioning Framework	Aligning commissioning with strategic goals; managing complex stakeholder networks	Shift towards outcome-based commissioning; emphasis on collaboration and innovation	Greater involvement in service design; need for capacity to engage strategically
Local Government Finance Reform	Navigating funding formula changes; addressing funding gaps	Financial uncertainty; need for efficient resource allocation; pressure to deliver services with constrained budgets	Impact on funding availability; increased competition for grants; potential for new funding mechanisms
Planning and Regeneration Reforms	Balancing development with sustainability; community engagement	Increased role in sustainable planning; integrating climate and social goals	Opportunities to influence local development; risk of exclusion if not engaged early
Devolution and Funding Deals	Managing new powers and responsibilities; ensuring equitable resource distribution	Greater autonomy and flexibility; complexity in managing devolved funds	Potential for tailored local funding; need for strong partnerships to maximise impact
Social Support and Welfare Policy Shifts	Responding to changing welfare landscape; addressing increased demand	Increased demand for social services; need for integrated support models	Increased demand for services; opportunities for collaboration; risk of capacity strain

Figure 3: Selected Emerging Policy Changes impacting local authorities and the voluntary sector in England. Local Government Finance Reform proposals, UK Government, 2026. Sources: www.gov.uk; www.longtermplan.nhs.uk; questions-statements.parliament.uk; www.england.nhs.uk; www.countycouncilsnetwork.org.uk; www.nhsconfed.org questions-statements.parliament.uk

Nationally, the voluntary sector in England also faces a range of conjoined pressures, which the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) identify as rising costs, more demand for services, and a decline in both public donations and volunteer rates. The degree to which these pressures are being felt in North Somerset will be revealed in the forthcoming State of the Sector report.

Civil Society

Nationally, there is greater attention being paid to the role, contribution, and development of civil society, defined by the central government as "volunteers, charities, faith organisations, co-operatives, trade unions, philanthropists, social enterprises, social investors and purpose-driven businesses."

Two recent reports from the Department of Culture, Media, and Sport (DCMS) put civil society front and centre. Its research on local civil society infrastructure (LCSI) and the Civil Society Covenant acknowledge the importance of the voluntary sector and the functions needed to support it, and show that central government is listening.

This is good news for those wishing to develop and strengthen the relationship between civil society and local authorities. In January 2026, DCMS's Local Covenant Partnerships fund was launched to invest targeted grant funding to support fifteen local authority district areas across England to develop and implement new 'local covenant partnership' agreements. Areas will be selected using a combination of metrics and evidence, including the Community Needs Index (CNI) and the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD).

Alongside the increased interest in civil society infrastructure is what the Community Foundation calls strong 'political enthusiasm' for engaging the third sector[5] in the delivery of public service contracts. They argue that this policy drive derives from an assumption that third sector organisations could be incentivised to undertake service delivery for government at local and national levels in a 'mixed economy of welfare'.

It is worth noting that during the last 14 years, the VCSE sector has moved from providing 'value-added' services in communities to delivering 'shadow services' to now being able to provide statutory services. There is widespread consensus[6] that, if funded appropriately, the VCSE sector could play an important role in tackling the social determinants of health whilst reducing demand on primary health care and actively participating in improved public service design and delivery.

To date, opportunities tend to attract only a small section of VCSEs, primarily the largest. However, efforts are being made to create more progressive commissioning, such as the Wigan Deal and BNSSG's brokerage platform. However, at the time of writing, BNSSG's brokerage platform has been paused.

The Civil Society Covenant sets out "core expectations that should apply to the relationship between government and civil society." It is based on the following principles:

- recognition and value, for example, recognising the roles, responsibilities and constraints within both government and civil society
- partnership and collaboration, for example, to create the conditions for collaboration and innovation
- participation and inclusion, for example, to remove barriers to active participation to build community resilience

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[5] The Community Foundation use the name 'third sector organisation', which is generally considered to be virtually synonymous with 'voluntary sector organisation'.
[6] See for example reports from DCMS, the Institute of Health Equity, and Locality.

- transparency and data, for example, to engage in open, honest and transparent communication.

These principles also underpin the actionable solutions identified in the North Somerset LEADS work. NAVCA has welcomed the Civil Society Covenant as a helpful first step, but points out that success will depend on local application, building on what works, strengthening local partnerships, and putting local infrastructure at its heart. These instincts also lie at the heart of this report.

The refreshed attention on civil society infrastructure provides two opportunities for the North Somerset LEADS work. First, mobilising the supporting narrative around civil society infrastructure gives weight to the argument that the voluntary sector plays a critical part in the smooth functioning of society. Second, DCMS is clear that a strong and independent civil society is essential for national renewal, a force for innovation, and a source of local knowledge on what works. For these reasons, they urge that the government should lean in to work in partnership with civil society. A strategic, coordinated relationship with the wider civil infrastructure – for example, through a refreshed North Somerset Partnership Board – is likely to improve outcomes, reduce duplication of effort, create innovation, and provide the essential local knowledge and trusted relationships that are needed to support individuals and communities.

Local Government Reform

Local government reform is ongoing in England. For North Somerset, this means becoming a full member of WECA. A public consultation about this move is currently underway, with an outcome expected in 2026. For the voluntary sector, being part of WECA means finding a voice amongst a much larger group of partners. NAVCA notes that the mismatch of size, resource and knowledge between a large local or combined authority and the voluntary sector can mean those relationships either do not form or do not work as well as they could.

The West of England Growth Strategy identifies six actions to deliver economic growth and improve lives for residents:

- contributing to national economic growth helping our businesses succeed and creating jobs
- creating and building homes and communities that are affordable, attractive and sustainable
- making the West of England the home for green jobs and green growth
- connecting the region through better public transport and active travel
- empowering residents with the skills to access the jobs that will shape our future
- lifting children and families out of poverty in the West of England

The VCSE sector is identified as a part of the 'everyday economy' and there is a promise to:

- work in collaboration with the VCSE sector to boost business resilience and sustainability
- work in closer partnership with VCSE organisations who have a deep understanding of the needs of communities, in order to accelerate delivery of the Growth Strategy
- partner across the mayoral combined authority, Local Authorities, the VCSE sector, Integrated Care Boards, and wider partners to improve health and wellbeing levels for children and families in the region through identifying and tackling the wider determinants of health.

Thus, a well-organised, confident North Somerset voluntary sector with a well-defined strategy and clear lines of communication and collaboration with NSC has much to gain from a productive relationship with WECA. Local Infrastructure Organisations (LIOs) will be critical to this: providing an effective bridge between NSC, WECA, and the full ecosystem of VCSE organisations, amplifying voices in the sector, and empowering smaller organisations to work effectively within the system to the benefit of communities in North Somerset. We discuss the definition and role of the LIOs below.

Integrated Care Systems and the NHS

Integrated Care Systems (ICS)[7] are also undergoing an evolution. Some of the original 42 ICSs are being [merged into new clusters](#) to meet 50% cost reductions required by NHS England and harness economies of scale. North Somerset is currently part of BNSSG ICS, run by an Integrated Care Board (ICB). Gloucester is in the process of being added to this grouping.

At the same time as the footprints of ICSs are growing, the scale at which health and care are delivered is being reconfigured with a focus on neighbourhoods and communities, as detailed in the [NHS 10-year plan](#). Of particular importance here is the degree to which new arrangements for Neighbourhood Health Centres and Integrated Neighbourhood Teams are attentive to the heterogeneity of the voluntary sector: different VCSEs require different levels of and approaches to integration. Small-scale voluntary organisations delivering community activities (e.g. cuppa companion cafes, hobby groups, community fridges, support for mental health, among others) are different to large voluntary sector organisations or voluntary sector alliances with some permanent staff participating in service delivery, strategy discussions, and commissioning. Given this heterogeneity, LIOs are critical to the successful participation of VCSEs of all sizes through both strategic and operational support.

There are lessons to be learned from North Somerset's participation in BNSSG that apply to the recommendations in the North Somerset LEADS project. First, up until the end of February 2026 there was a well-developed Voluntary and Community Sector Alliance (VCSE Alliance) facing BNSSG. Although it has been paused whilst changes associated with the new ICS are worked through, the Alliance provides a good model for collaborative service design and delivery, which we discuss later on in this report. Because the Alliance has a number of members from North Somerset, transferring the learning from this experience into the development of the relationship with NSC should be straightforward.

Second, a brokerage system exists that promotes the involvement of a wide range of VCSEs in the delivery of health and care projects and services (this is also paused at the time of writing). This is an example of progressive commissioning underpinned by [a co-designed vision and framework for action](#).

As well as opportunities, there are also risks in the new configurations of local and regional government and health and care discussed here. Most significant is the sheer amount of time and effort it takes to reorganise. Further, operating at a large geographical scale means that local issues might be overlooked. However, these reorganisations may also open up the space for innovation. The changes to 'business as usual' provide an opportunity to reconfigure the relationship between the Council and the

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[7] This is a statutory partnership of organisations that plan, buy, and provide health and care services in their geographical area. North Somerset is covered by BNSSG (see above) ICS, which will soon be expanded to include Gloucestershire.

voluntary sector but only if both parties are self-aware, well-connected, and have a clear vision.

The NHS 10 Year Plan

The clustering of ICSs is not the only change to the NHS. The NHS 10 Year Plan (published in 2025) sets out reforms to address the NHS's ongoing crisis, rebuild public trust, and secure sustainability. It is strongly focused on delivery, and NAVCA argue that the Plan appears to shift engagement away from VCSE alliances that face the ICS to engagement with the individual system in place.

Alongside system reform, there are three key priorities in the plan:

- from hospital to community: a greater proportion of care is provided locally and in people's homes
- from analogue to digital: greater streamlining of appointments, feedback, care plans, and medication management via an app and single patient record
- from sickness to prevention: public health reforms, investment in young people's health and mental health, early disease screening, a shift to prevention, health creation, and tackling inequalities.

There are a variety of risks and opportunities for VCSEs from these changes, which are set out in Appendix Two. The headline cross-cutting implications are as follows:

Opportunities

- VCSE organisations become key health partners, not peripheral add-ons
- increased funding potential, especially around prevention and community support
- stronger integration into local health systems and care pathways
- greater visibility and recognition of community expertise.

Challenges

- higher expectations without guaranteed investment
- need to scale capacity, digital capability, and governance rapidly
- risk that small, grassroots groups are squeezed out by formalisation.

Outstanding questions about local government structures and ICS footprints exacerbate the challenges of North Somerset's complex statutory geography and will continue to shape the ability of the local authority and voluntary sector to engage effectively with each other.

In the next section of the report, we discuss the role and effectiveness of LIOs and anchor organisations in North Somerset.

Determining the Size and Shape of the Voluntary Sector

VCSEs are commonly categorised into small, medium, and large organisations using annual income, a measure that NCVO uses in the Civil Society Almanac, last published in 2024 with the next edition due in 2026.

In 2020/21 (the most recently available data), the voluntary sector as a whole was dominated by micro (annual income <£10k) and small (annual income <£100k) organisations, accounting for 44.14% and 33.20% of the sector respectively (NCVO, 2023) (Figure 4). These groups of organisations with an annual income of less than £100k per annum have recently been referred to as a 'microbiome', analogous to the human body's gut flora: too numerous to count, largely invisible, but critical to the functioning of the human body. Being organic and dynamic enables VCSEs to be highly adaptable, flexible, and responsive to place-based social needs.

The prevalence and heterogeneity of this group of organisations raise issues around how it can be nurtured, supported, and energised in a system dominated by huge organisations like the NHS and the local authority. These big players have significant regulatory, bureaucratic, and governance structures that many small organisations do not have the capacity to engage with.

Income band	Name (categorisation)	Number of orgs	% of all orgs
Less than £10,000	Micro	77,295	47.14%
£10,000 - £100,000	Small	54,431	33.20%
£100,000 - £1m	Medium	25,569	15.59%
£1m - £10m	Large	5,861	3.57%
£10m - £100m	Major	743	0.45%
More than £100m	Super-major	61	0.04%
All organisations	Total	163,959	100.0

Figure 4: Number and percentage of voluntary sector organisations by size in England, 2020/21 (NCVO, 2023).

At the national scale, the Community Foundation's (2023) research shows that there are about 200,000 third sector organisations with incomes below £25 million in England and Wales. These are not distributed evenly across England and Wales (Figure 5). At the regional scale, South West England has the highest proportion of third sector organisations per 1000 population, just behind London.

Third Sector income and expenditure in England and Wales 2025			
	Number of Third Sector Organisations	Third Sector Orgs per 1000 population	Estimated Third Sector Expenditure (£ m)
North East England	7,140	2.6	1,420
North West England	20,760	2.7	3,990
Yorkshire and Humber	15,060	2.7	2,590
East Midlands of England	14,650	3.0	2,050
West Midlands of England	17,500	2.9	3,220
East of England	22,110	3.4	3,710
London	38,860	4.4	16,350
South East England	33,980	3.6	7,460
South West England	24430	4.2	3,750
Wales	10,530	3.2	1,530
England and Wales	205,000	3.4	61,260
Organisations in London do not fit the regional analytical model as well because nearly 50% of organisations work beyond the boundaries of the capital.			

Figure 5: Third Sector income and expenditure in England and Wales 2022 (Community Foundation, 2025).

These national and regional snapshots give a good sense of the heterogeneity of the voluntary sector and the degree to which it is dominated by small organisations of under £100k per annum in income. Determining precise data for North Somerset is a trickier undertaking, which we discuss in the next section.

Size and Shape of the Voluntary Sector in North Somerset

The size and shape of the voluntary sector in a particular geographical footprint are usually determined through a State of the Sector survey or by examining data from the Charity Commission or Companies House. State of the Sector surveys usually cover questions about income, expenditure, number of volunteers, type of service provided, impact, and challenges, among other topics.

The last State of the Sector survey in North Somerset was run in 2022 in the aftermath of Covid by Voluntary Action North Somerset (VANS), resulting in the *Shape of the Sector*

Report 2022: A snapshot of the VCSE Sector in North Somerset. This estimates that there are over 1000 voluntary sector organisations in North Somerset, including registered charities, community interest companies, social enterprises, community sports groups, and community groups; 65% of respondents had been in existence for over 10 years. Most of the activity in the voluntary sector in North Somerset is focused on Weston-super-Mare and, in particular, the two wards of Central and Bournville, which exhibit very high Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) scores. Bournville has recently been selected to receive Pride in Place funding and is discussed elsewhere in this report. These pockets of serious multiple deprivation are in contrast with places like Nailsea and Gordano Valley, which are more prosperous and have very low IMD scores.

At the time of writing, a further State of the Sector survey is in the field, commissioned by BNSSG from Nottingham Trent Business School. When its results are available, the data for North Somerset should be extracted and used to inform the North Somerset LEADS's recommendations, with the caveat that not all relevant organisations will respond to a State of the Sector survey. The new State of the Sector survey will provide a best estimate of the shape and size of the sector in North Somerset.

We now turn to exploring the substantive aims of the North Somerset LEADS project.

Aim 1: Understand the role and effectiveness of LIOs and Community Anchors in North Somerset.

In this section, we explore how the VCSE sector is currently organised, how local infrastructure functions are delivered.

Local Infrastructure Organisations and Anchor Organisations

The voluntary sector in any given locality tends to be supported through the provision of local infrastructure functions, defined by NAVCA as Leadership and Advocacy, Partnerships and Collaboration, Capacity Building, and Volunteering (Figure 6).

Leadership and advocacy
Mobilising and encouraging community action, strengthening our sector's voice and influence on key decision-makers and funders.

Partnerships and collaborations
Creating opportunities and driving effective joint working, by building networks of local organisations and strategic partners.

Capacity building
Providing practical support and development for local people and organisations, to nurture skills and build community resilience.

Volunteering
Building an environment in which volunteers and their communities thrive, by encouraging and nurturing volunteering opportunities.

Figure 6: Four Functions of Infrastructure (NAVCA).

Across England, these infrastructure functions are sometimes delivered to the wider ecosystem of the voluntary sector by a single organisation, such as Spark in nearby Somerset, or by a group of organisations, as in Lancashire, where 12 of the 14 district

council areas have a local Council of Voluntary Service (CVS)[8] which coordinates and collaborates via a VCSE alliance model. VCSEs that deliver infrastructure functions are generally called Local Infrastructure Organisations (LIOs).

It is important to note that LIOs are different from VCSE or community anchor organisations. While several definitions of anchor organisations exist from The King's Fund, Locality, CLES, and the NHS (among others), they all refer to organisations that have a key stake in a place, and a connection to and interest in developing local communities and economies. In this general definition, anchor organisations include local authorities, NHS trusts, universities, trade unions, large local businesses, the combined activities of the community and voluntary sector, and housing associations. Anchor organisations in the voluntary sector have specific characteristics such as being community-led and providing a voice for local people to shape and deliver community services that are holistic, multi-purpose, and tackle local challenges. They sometimes own assets such as buildings that allow them to offer space and services to other VCSEs and the community. They tend to be larger VCSEs with the capacity to support a wide range of people.

In North Somerset, the distinction between LIOs and anchor organisations is blurred. VANS identifies itself as an LIO, pointing out in its State of Ageing report from 2022 that:

> "VANS does not intend to become a service delivery charity. Instead, as an infrastructure support organisation, we are focused on strengthening the system by promoting evidence-based work, encouraging collaboration, ensuring quality delivery and that unmet needs are identified and addressed."

It holds Volunteer Centre Quality Accreditation from NAVCA but is not accredited as an LIO (this is not, however, a necessary condition of being an LIO). VANS acknowledges that it does not exclusively deliver local infrastructure as a strategic function, as it also engages in other service delivery to maintain financial sustainability. This sometimes puts it in competition for contracts or grants with organisations it seeks to support. We discuss funding and investment below.

Other large organisations can be distinguished by their thematic specialism, geographical reach, and/or organisational structure. Several, such as Race Equality North Somerset (RENS) and For All Healthy Living (FAHL), are located geographically in Weston-super-Mare. RENS has a county- and system-wide reach, working with local government, the VCSE sector, and other strategic partners to promote and support global majority communities in North Somerset. FAHL's focus is on Weston-super-Mare, with many of their core services, café, church, and health centre, co-located together in the For All Healthy Living Centre.

Citizens Advice North Somerset (CANS) has a county-wide remit and describes itself as providing shared data and insight for the sector, to show what's working and where the gaps are. It also reports that it represents VCSE perspectives in system spaces, and feeds back what smaller organisations are experiencing.

The local Community Foundation, Quartet, operates across Bristol, North Somerset, South Gloucestershire and BANES. It distributes funding to the voluntary sector and shares intelligence about who they fund and the kinds of activity they see across

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[8] These are a type of umbrella organisation that connects and advocates for local not-for-profit organisations, encourages collaboration, acts as a champion on local issues, provides training and works closely with other service providers such as the local authority. A CVS may or may not be accredited by NAVCA as a Local Infrastructure Organisation but still provide local infrastructure functions to the voluntary sector in its geography.

communities – a classic infrastructure function that takes a system-wide perspective, not just one service. It makes a special effort to reach smaller organisations with its funding.

Two housing associations, Alliance and Curo, are not VCSEs but are community anchor organisations. They provide a mixture of tenant-specific support and community-wide support, some of which is contracted by NSC. For example, Curo delivers Community Connect, a service for people over 50 living in North Somerset who would like information, advice, or guidance to help them stay living independently at home. Alliance delivers the contracts for a home-from-hospital service, Carers' Support, and social prescribing, as well as National Lottery bids to set up Community Hubs.

It is increasingly normal for housing associations to be involved in activities in their wider communities and to offer more than a roof over the heads of their tenants. The National Housing Federation lists 'community services and regeneration' as one of the core functions of its members, including employment support, financial and digital inclusion, health and wellbeing programmes, and improvement to the physical environment. The Social Prescribing Academy have identified housing associations as having a key role in social prescribing.

In the mix of LIOs and community anchors in North Somerset, Alliance Homes and Curo add a further dimension of complexity, occupying a hybrid position as businesses which deliver the services one usually associates with the voluntary sector. They also subcontract some of their work to VCSEs, such as the Village Agent service, provided by the West of England Rural Network (WERN).

WERN is a charity that exists to facilitate sustainable, resilient, and inclusive rural communities. Operating across BANES, North Somerset, and South Gloucestershire, it encourages and supports locally led initiatives and advocates for rural community needs to policymakers and service providers. It also occupies a hybrid position as a regional organisation with local links in North Somerset, delivering a combination of infrastructure functions and project delivery.

The organisations described above all operate across North Somerset and (in some cases) beyond. Anchor organisations with a smaller geographical reach are also important in supporting individuals and communities. North Somerset is a predominantly rural unitary authority dominated by small settlements. Weston-super-Mare is the largest town with a population of nearly 87,000 people (2021 Census). The next largest settlements are Portishead (26,366), Clevedon (21,078), and Nailsea (15,917). About 28% of the population lives outside these larger settlements, in communities of fewer than 8,000 people. Smaller community anchors are a vital part of supporting these communities but are hard to identify in North Somerset. An exception is Pill, a village of nearly 5,000 people. What we can learn from the example of Pill is set out in the following case study.

> *Case Study: Power to Pill*
>
> Power to Pill is a place-based project funded mainly by the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, the ICB and NHS England, focused on the village of Pill, which has high levels of deprivation compared to other places in North Somerset. Power to Pill is hosted by Pill Community Foundation, which acts as a de facto community anchor, although the Foundation itself has minimal core staffing of around five hours per week of paid administration, with everything else volunteer-run.
>
> A significant early strand of work involved systematic mapping and convening of local groups (a project led by Pill Community Foundation with staff employed by WERN). This mapping identified around 90 community groups in a village with a population of 4,953

(2021 Census). The findings fed into the Including You and Including You 2 booklets, an updated website, and a large community fair bringing groups together. Power to Pill also created a steering group including schools, the GP practice, Curo (housing association), the Food Hub, the Salvation Army, and local residents. Community development workers were funded to work on the ground, acting as connectors between organisations and into wider systems.

A major strand of work centred on health and wellbeing, anchored in the Pill Food Hub, an already trusted local organisation. Power to Pill used the Hub to bring in public health staff, social prescribers, Sirona wellbeing workers, and health awareness activities, with an intention to do more around long-term conditions. This approach is explicitly an outreach model: going to where people are rather than expecting residents with clear barriers of cost, transport and confidence to travel to services.

The project has also developed strong relationships at a strategic level, including with Sirona through a wellbeing lead active in Power to Pill, the North Somerset public health team, social prescribing through Curo and local PCNs, and the Woodspring locality partnership board and its locality director. Woodspring, which covers Portishead, Clevedon, Nailsea and Pill, has recently become a [neighbourhood pilot area](#).

Main successes

Power to Pill has been particularly successful at building dense local connections and social infrastructure. It dramatically improved understanding of local VCSEs, making the 90 community groups visible through booklets, an online directory, and community fairs, and has used community development workers, insider knowledge, and existing personal relationships to build links between organisations.

The steering group, bringing together schools, the GP practice, a housing provider, VCSE organisations and residents, functions as a model of shared governance of locality work.

Key challenges

Despite being one of the 13% most deprived areas in North Somerset and the only one outside of Weston-super-Mare, Pill receives relatively little strategic resourcing compared to others. This is a source of considerable frustration, particularly given the existence of strong data on deprivation and health inequalities from the ICB and public health reports.

Power to Pill relies on time-limited project grants. Pill Community Foundation has no stable core funding beyond a modest parish council grant and a small administration post, making long-term staffing and planning very difficult.

Growing the organisation by employing staff brings concerns about line management, HR, and the risk of taking on staff without secure long-term funding. This reflects a classic dilemma: strong local demand and opportunity, but very limited organisational capacity compounded by uncertain funding.

VANS has provided useful services such as a fundraising workshop and policy support, but on a paid basis. This illustrates a broader infrastructure issue: small organisations like Pill Community Foundation need affordable support with governance, fundraising, communications, policy and HR, but the local infrastructure body lacks the funding to provide this at scale.

Much of the local ecosystem depends on a small group of highly committed volunteers, many of whom are older or retired. While the density of community groups is impressive, a small number of people are sustaining many of those groups.

Overall, Power to Pill's successes lie in building connections, raising the profile of VCSE groups, and collaborating with the Locality Partnership and other partners. The way it operates as an anchor organisation in Pill is a good model for other parts of North Somerset. Some of the learning from its successes might usefully be transferred to Bournville's Pride in Place project, and beyond. However, replicating this model and energising more small community anchor organisations also involves addressing the challenges that Power to Pill faces, which are primarily structural: chronic under-resourcing relative to deprivation, short-term and piecemeal funding, limited infrastructure support, over-reliance on a small cadre of volunteers, and the ongoing difficulty of converting recognition into stable organisational capacity.

Overall, the bespoke mixture of LIOs and anchor organisations in North Somerset is not unusual and not in and of itself an issue. What is at stake is whether such a diverse group is effective in delivering local infrastructure functions and advocating on behalf of the sector to NSC and other stakeholders. We turn to this question in the next section.

Delivery of VCSE infrastructure functions

There is clearly an understanding of the importance of local infrastructure delivery amongst the larger organisations in North Somerset, and a willingness to undertake it. However, the research also shows a lack of coverage and coordination.

Alongside interviews discussing the delivery of local infrastructure functions in North Somerset, we also ran a short survey, the questions of which were structured around the delivery of the four functions of infrastructure (Figure 6). Whilst the number of responses was low at 26 (perhaps because of the State of the Sector survey that was in the field at the same time), the data from the survey is corroborated by insights from interviews, conversations, and workshops.

Leadership and Advocacy

In NAVCA's definition, LIOs are leaders in and advocates for the VCSE sector and the communities they work within. They exercise this leadership by:

- convening and/or participating in local strategic groups, forums, and partnerships, where they represent the voluntary sector's voice and influence key local funding and policy decisions
- undertaking strategic planning
- consulting widely to ensure representation reflects the sector's needs, particularly with easily excluded or under-represented groups
- co-designing, developing, and disseminating plans that affect the sector
- understanding and advocating for what the sector can contribute across the breadth of policy and delivery objectives
- developing the skills and experience of the sector with equity, equality, diversity and inclusion at centre stage.

In answer to the question "Which organisations in the voluntary sector advocate on behalf of the voluntary sector to North Somerset Council?", 42% identified VANS (Figure 7). Significantly, however, many other organisations were identified as advocating on behalf of the voluntary sector, including some issue-specific organisations, a town council, and North Somerset Council itself (possibly this is a reference to North Somerset Together, the forum for information exchange and collaboration hosted by North Somerset Council – about which more below). Ten per cent of respondents did not know who advocated on their behalf.

A similar picture emerges in response to the question "which organisations that you know of support community action, such as helping new voluntary sector organisations to form or supporting existing organisations?" (Figure 7 and Figure 8).

Figure 7: Which organisations in the voluntary sector advocate on behalf of the voluntary sector to North Somerset

Which organisations in the voluntary sector advocate on behalf of the voluntary sector to North Somerset Council?
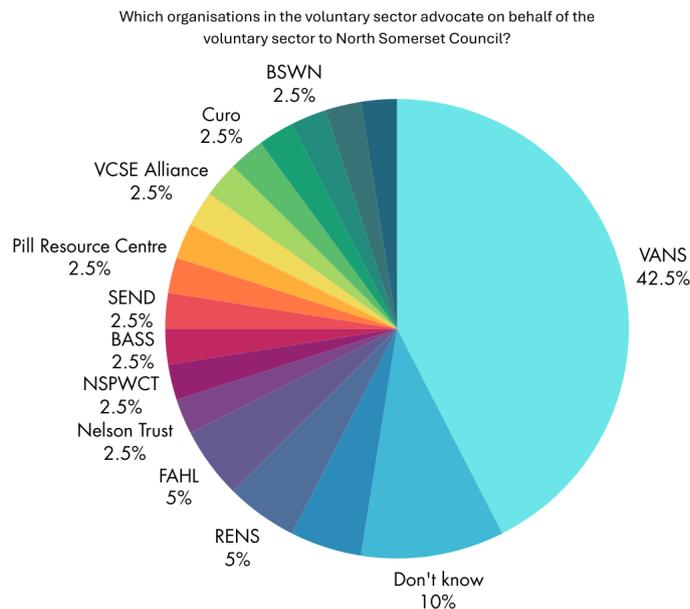
Council? VANS: Voluntary Action North Somerset; NSPWCT: unknown; Flower Bank: unknown; CANS: Citizens Advice North Somerset; WERN: West of England Rural Network; Connect Somerset: partnership between Somerset Council, Somerset NHS, VCSEs, Schools, Colleges and Early Years settings; BASS: Bristol Autism Spectrum Service; RENS: Race Equality North Somerset; Curo: a local housing association; Weston-super-Mare TC: town council; SEND: Special Education Needs and Disabilities; VCSE Alliance: alliance facing BNSSG; Health Watch: now disbanded; North Somerset Council: local authority; Nelson Trust: charity supporting individuals experiencing drug and alcohol use and trauma; Pill Resource Centre: part of Pill Parish Council; FAHL: For All Healthy Living; BSWN: Black South West Network. Full data breakdown in Appendix One.

Which organisations that you know of support community action, such as helping new voluntary sector organisations to form or supporting existing organisations?
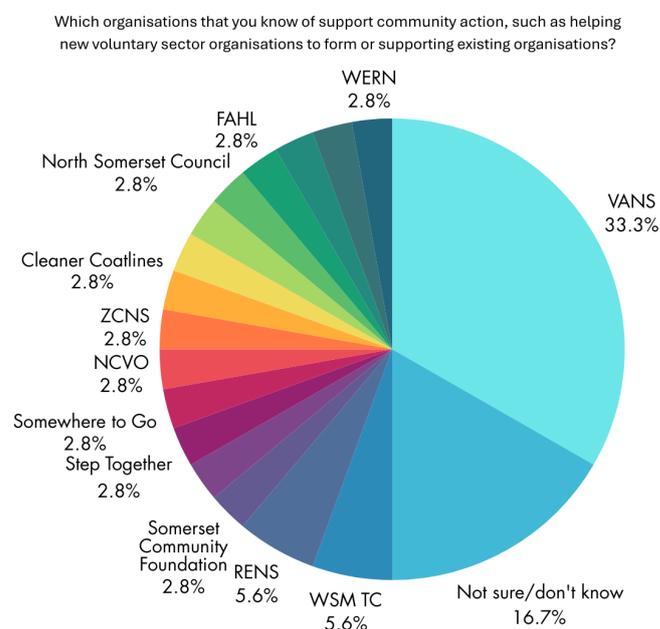
Figure 8: Which organisations that you know of support community action, such as helping new voluntary sector organisations to form or supporting existing organisations? VANS: Voluntary Action North Somerset; Weston-super-Mare TC: town council; Step Together: housing and mental health support; NCVO: National Council for Voluntary Organisations; FAHL: For All Healthy Living; Vision North Somerset: sight and hearing loss charity; RENS: Race Equality North Somerset; CANS: Citizens Advice North Somerset; Somewhere to Go: supports rough sleepers and homeless people; ZCNS: Zero Carbon North Somerset; The Hive: business support; BSWN: Black South West Network; With You: We Are With You – drug and alcohol support for young people; WERN: West of England Rural Network. Full data breakdown in Appendix One.

VANS is the most frequently mentioned, but a range of organisations are also named. Two respondents took the opportunity to use the free-text format of this question to write the following:

> "I don't know of any other than VANS and they are at capacity with little time to help the smallest volunteer-led orgs and groups."

> "In theory VANS but they are not funded to do this so their support is limited because they lack capability. An element of this is also included in [the] community connect service provided by CURO [a local housing association] and commissioned by NSC but it is very unclear how much of this work is undertaken or how successful it is."

These quotes highlight the conjoined issues of capacity, coordination, and funding. Individual organisations lack the capacity to do everything and reach all VCSEs. The delivery of infrastructure functions is largely uncoordinated. Instead, a distributed model of LIO provision has evolved, in which a range of VCSEs fill the gaps but without coordinating with each other. The issues of capacity and coordination are conjoined to funding. Where the local authority does not invest in local infrastructure delivery, LIOs must find alternative sources of funding and work on projects that are more operational than strategic in focus, an issue that we discuss below.

Capacity Building through Training

We can take training as an example of the conjoined issues that arise when looking at the delivery of infrastructure functions. Training is part of the capacity-building function delivered by LIOs. Some examples of local authority-funded LIOs that deliver training for free are shown in Figure 9.

Organisation	Area	Council Funding	Free Training Offer
Action Together	Oldham, Rochdale, Tameside	Rochdale Borough Council Public Health and Adult Social Care teams; Oldham Council.	Fundraising, volunteer management, digital marketing, governance and safeguarding.
York CVS	City of York	LIO commissioned by City of York Council and Humber and North Yorkshire NHS ICB; grant conditions require training for staff, volunteers, and trustees.	Free training and events for York's VCSE sector, including Emergency First Aid at Work, Managing Volunteers, and Essentials of Grant Fundraising. Partly funded through UK Shared Prosperity Fund.
Community Action Suffolk (CAS)	Suffolk (county-wide)	Core and project funding from Suffolk County Council, district, and borough councils.	Extensive training calendar with many sessions free to the VCSE sector, funded by individual district councils (e.g. West Suffolk Council). Safeguarding, trustee roles, volunteer leadership and charity setup.
Voluntary Sector Training Alliance / Connecting Communities Berkshire	West Berkshire	Training events supported and funded by the Adult Community Learning Team at West Berkshire Council. Council also separately funds free safeguarding training.	Partnership between Volunteer Centre West Berkshire and Connecting Communities Berkshire. Charity risk management, website building, funding workshops and face-to-face safeguarding training.
Voluntary Action Leeds (VAL)	Leeds	Partner in Funding Leeds alongside Leeds City Council and Leeds Community Foundation, providing infrastructure support for over 60 years.	Open training programme periodically made fully free, covering funding, financial inclusion and online safety. Some courses co-delivered with Leeds City Council's Financial Inclusion Team.

Figure 9: Examples of local authority-funded LIOs that offer free training to VCSEs in their area

Asked to choose all that apply, respondents reported that they source training from peer learning and mentoring and online learning platforms (17.5% each) (Figure 10). The next most popular choices were specialist VCSE support organisations, national charities in their own network, and commercial training providers (11.1% each).

Where do you currently source training for your paid staff and/or volunteers? Choose all that apply.

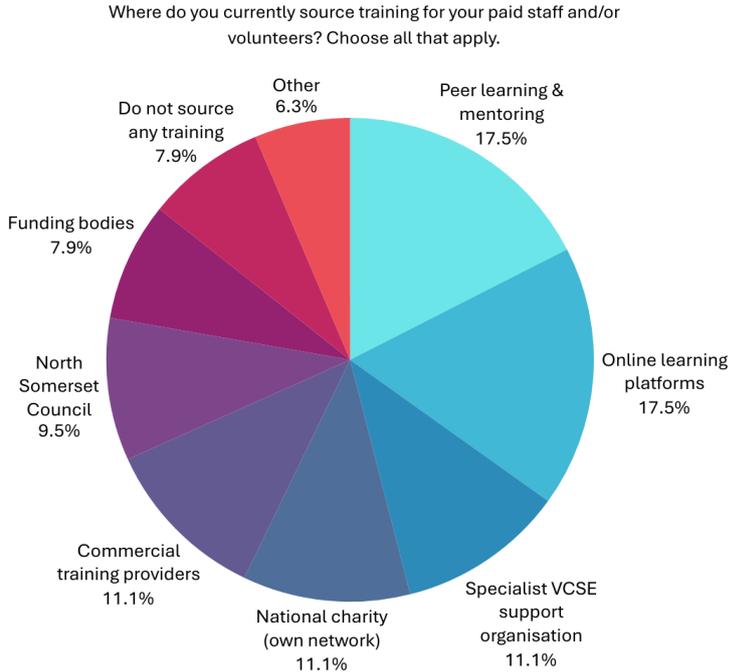
Figure 10: Sources of training for paid staff/volunteers. Full data breakdown in Appendix One.

Asked what kind of training they might need, respondents answered with a diverse range of topics and skills (Figure 11).

What training would you like to receive for your paid staff and/or volunteers?
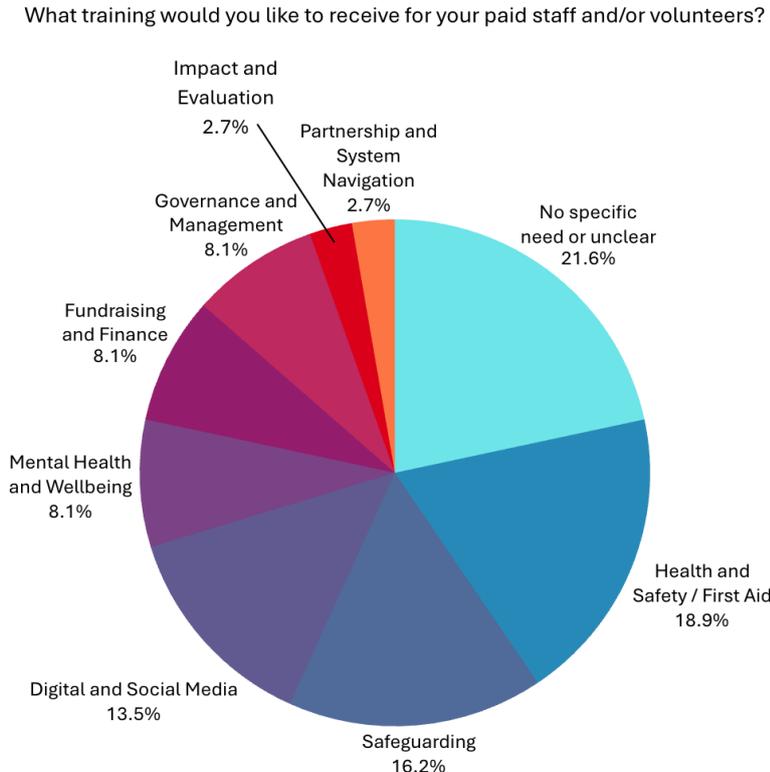

Figure 11: Training that respondents would like to receive. Full data breakdown in Appendix One.

Asked if training should be free for the voluntary sector, over 38% of respondents replied that it should be free of charge with an equal number saying that it should be subsidised (Figure 12). Only 7.7% thought it should be paid for by VCSEs. Some organisations selected 'other' and commented on the time and travel commitment for volunteers attending training and suggested that big VCSEs should pay a subsidised rate for training, but that for small VCSEs it should be free.

What is your view on paying for training?

Figure 12: The view on whether training should be paid for. Full data breakdown in Appendix One.

The example of training illustrates some of the conjoined issues facing North Somerset in the delivery of infrastructure functions. First, where LIOs are not funded, they might charge for training. Second, and perhaps as a result, VCSEs seek out alternatives: peers, online training, and specialised offerings. Third, the range of training needs is large, but the training offering is not coordinated and does not take account of the requirements and capacity of the smallest and largest organisations.

The lack of coordination and investment in training is a missed opportunity for the sector as a whole. Funded, coordinated training delivered by an LIO is a structural enabler of a functioning local voluntary sector - not simply a nice-to-have. Training builds capacity, capability, and resilience in the voluntary sector. It can help VCSEs with business planning, governance, skills development, and financial management, among other things. The benefits of funded training are set out in Appendix Three.

As discussed above, at least some organisations are dependent on peers for mutual learning and knowledge exchange. This raises the question of how VCSEs work together in the absence of coordinated attempts to develop partnership working, capacity building, and collaboration.

Volunteering

There are a number of ways that an LIO can support recruitment:

- **volunteer brokerage:** matching potential volunteers with appropriate opportunities in local VCSEs

- **developing volunteering opportunities**: helping organisations design and develop better volunteer roles
- **good practice development and advice**: guidance, training, and advice to VCSEs on all aspects of volunteer management
- **promoting the voice of volunteering**: being "the voice of volunteering locally" is one of the five formal functions against which Volunteer Centres are assessed under the VCQA standard.

Asked how they recruit volunteers, survey respondents identified word of mouth and existing networks, followed by social media and websites, as their key methods (Figure 13).

How do you currently recruit new volunteers? Choose all that apply.
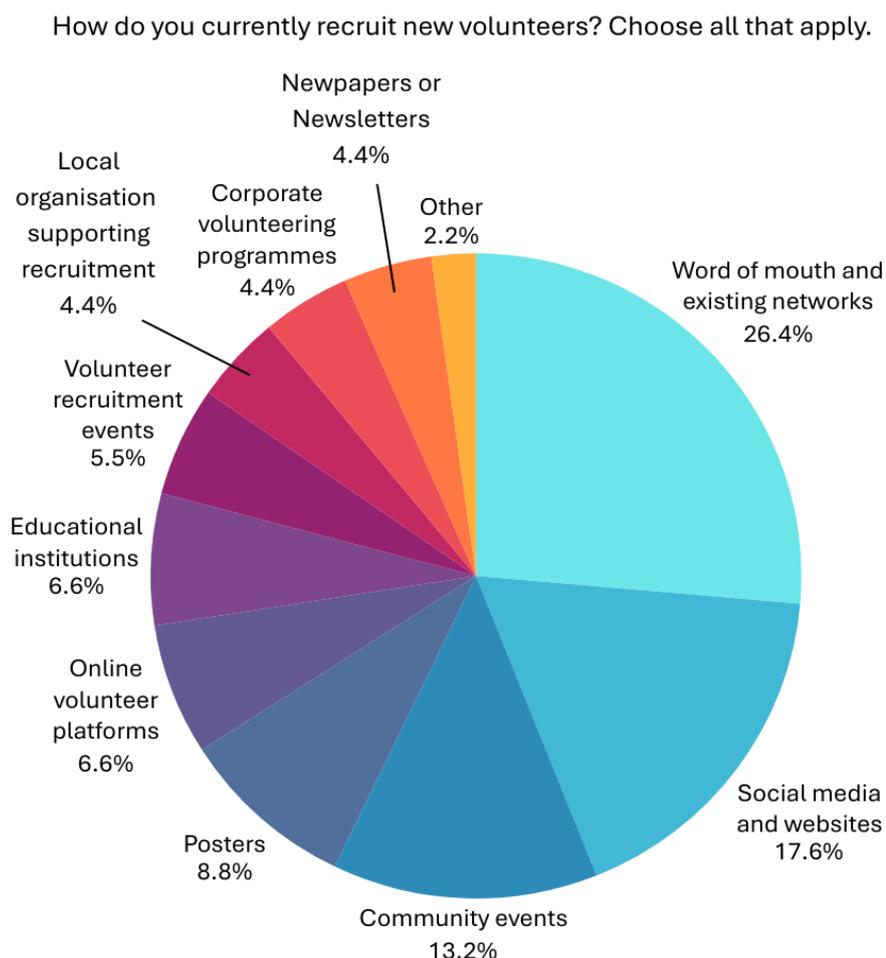
Figure 13: How do you currently recruit volunteers? Full data breakdown in Appendix One.

Only 4.4% selected a local organisation supporting recruitment. VCSE interviewees suggested that support was sometimes hard to get and patchy, with two VCSE interviewees observing that there is a big pool of potential volunteers (younger retirees, early-stage retirees) but no coordinating body actively marshalling that pool across the area. Like training, support for volunteer recruitment is not revenue-generating, but nevertheless critical to a viable voluntary sector.

Partnership and Collaboration

Asked 'how many other voluntary sector organisations do you currently collaborate with?', over 57% of respondents collaborate with between 1 and 3 other organisations and over 34% respondents collaborate with five or more others (Figure 14).

How many other voluntary sector organisations do you currently collaborate with?

- 0 — 7.7%
- 1 — 23.1%
- 2 — 11.5%
- 3 — 23.1%
- 5 — 3.8%
- 5+ — 30.8%
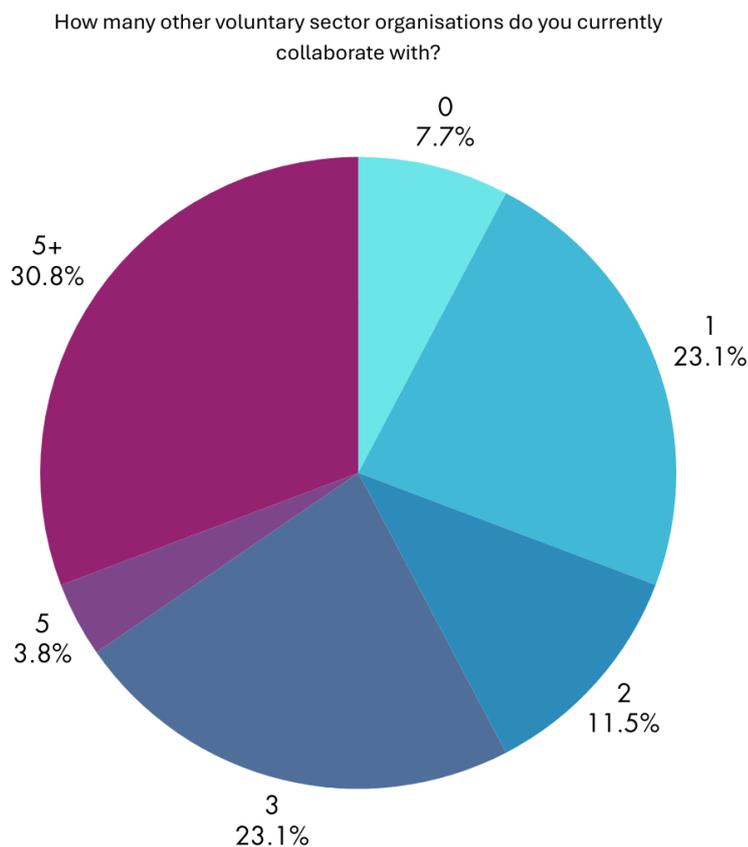
Figure 14: Numbers of voluntary sector organisations that each respondent collaborates with. Full data breakdown in Appendix One.

Whilst this signals a certain degree of collaboration between organisations, it is instructive to look at where they turn to for help in finding other VCSEs with whom to collaborate (Figure 15).

Asked to tick all options that applied, just over 39% of respondents identified organisations working in the same geographical area, whilst over 32% identified other organisations working on the same issue.

Nearly 24% of respondents found new collaborators through attending North Somerset Together meetings, which are run by NSC. Significantly, only 4.3% of respondents said that they sought help from the LIO, suggesting that help from the LIO is not their main way of finding support.

Despite this degree of collaboration, when asked 'do you feel part of a network of local organisations and strategic partners?' respondents were split almost half and half between yes and no.

The answers to the question about the benefits of being part of a wider network of voluntary sector organisations show that these are well understood: no respondents replied that there were no benefits and most respondents identified several benefits. Over 25% of respondents identified 'resource and knowledge sharing' and a further 25% identified 'learn about funding opportunities' as the chief benefits (Figure 16). Over 20% identified 'increased influence and advocacy'. 'Reduced duplication and improved service delivery' and 'professional development and support' were identified by just over 15% and nearly 13% of respondents, respectively.

How do you go about finding other voluntary sector organisations to collaborate with? Choose all that apply.

We find new collaborators through attending North Somerset Together meetings
23.9%

We identify organisations working on the same issue
32.6%

We seek help from the Local Infrastructure Organisation to connect to other groups in the sector
4.3%

We identify organisations working in the same geographical area
39.1%
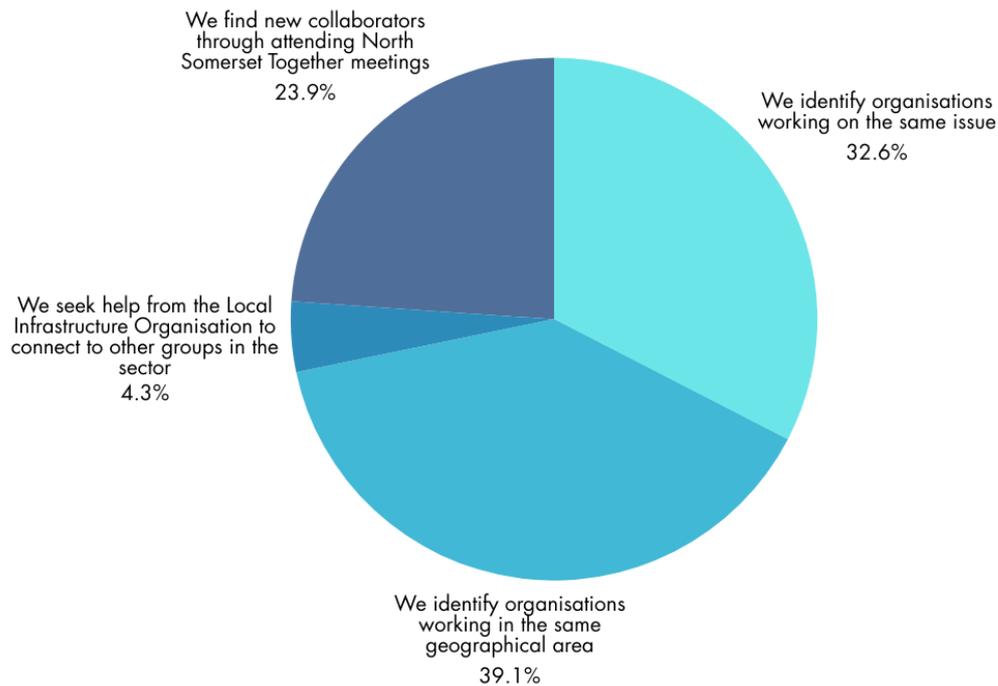
Figure 15: How VCSEs go about finding other voluntary sector organisations to collaborate with. Full data breakdown in Appendix One.

What benefits, if any, would your organisation gain from being part of a wider network of voluntary sector organisations? Choose all that apply.

Professional development and support (peer support, training opportunities, and reduced isolation)
12.8%

Resource and knowledge sharing (learn from each other's experiences, share best practices, access expertise)
25.6%

Reduced duplication and improved service delivery (identify gaps, better coverage of community needs, reduced competition)
15.4%

Increased influence and advocacy (having a strong voice with policymakers and funders, representing the collective concerns of the sector)
20.5%

Learn about funding opportunities (individual and collaborative funding)
25.6%

Figure 16: What benefits would your organisation gain from being part of a wider network of voluntary sector organisations? Full data breakdown in Appendix One.

The overall impression from these data is that the sector has pockets of cooperation organised geographically and/or thematically, but that organisations are self-mobilising, seeking out support from a variety of sources. Whilst the benefits of connection are understood, they are not being delivered in a systematic way.

Some LIOs elsewhere in the UK organise thematic alliances within the voluntary sector. For example, one of Cornwall's LIOs, the Voluntary Sector Forum, hosts one infrastructure alliance and nine other alliances covering specific themes from mental health and disability to housing, climate, and food (Figure 17). Looking ahead, a similar thematic alliance structure in North Somerset could improve priority setting, collaborative delivery, and VCSE development.
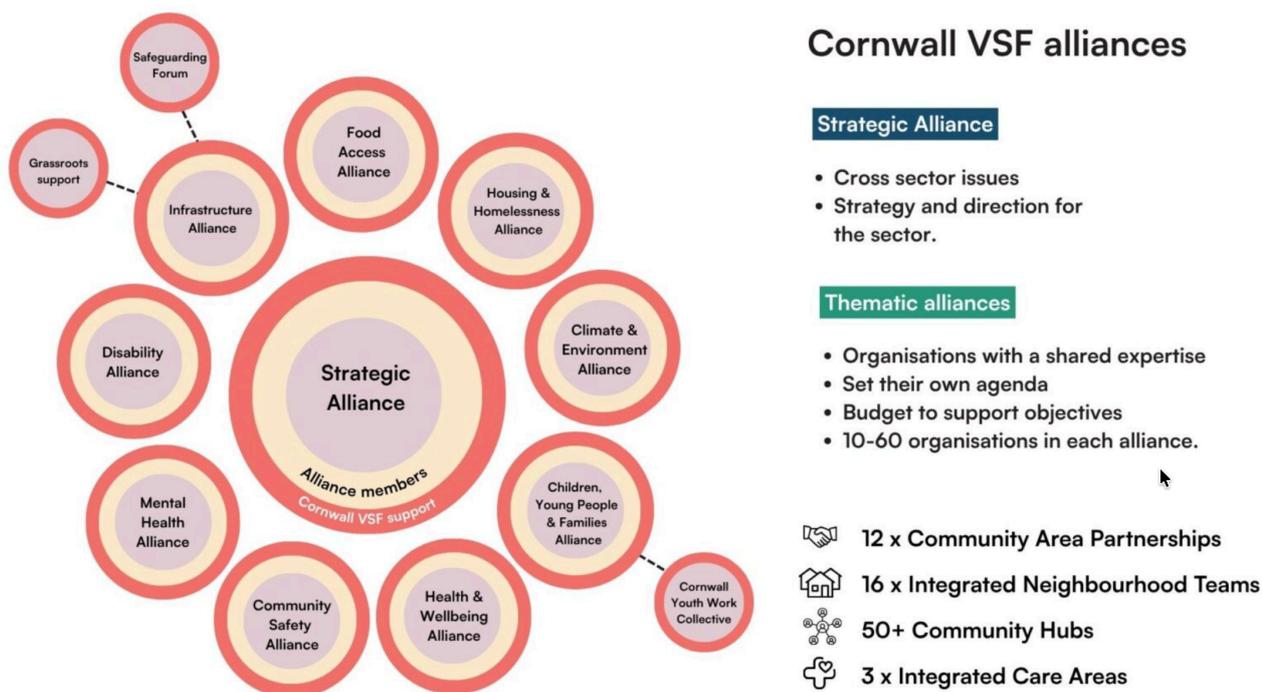
Figure 17: Alliance structure hosted by the Voluntary Sector Forum, an LIO in Cornwall.

The lack of purposeful coordination between LIOs in North Somerset is not only an operational issue. It is linked in part to the absence of a larger vision of how, what, by whom, and where local infrastructure functions should be delivered. Many intervie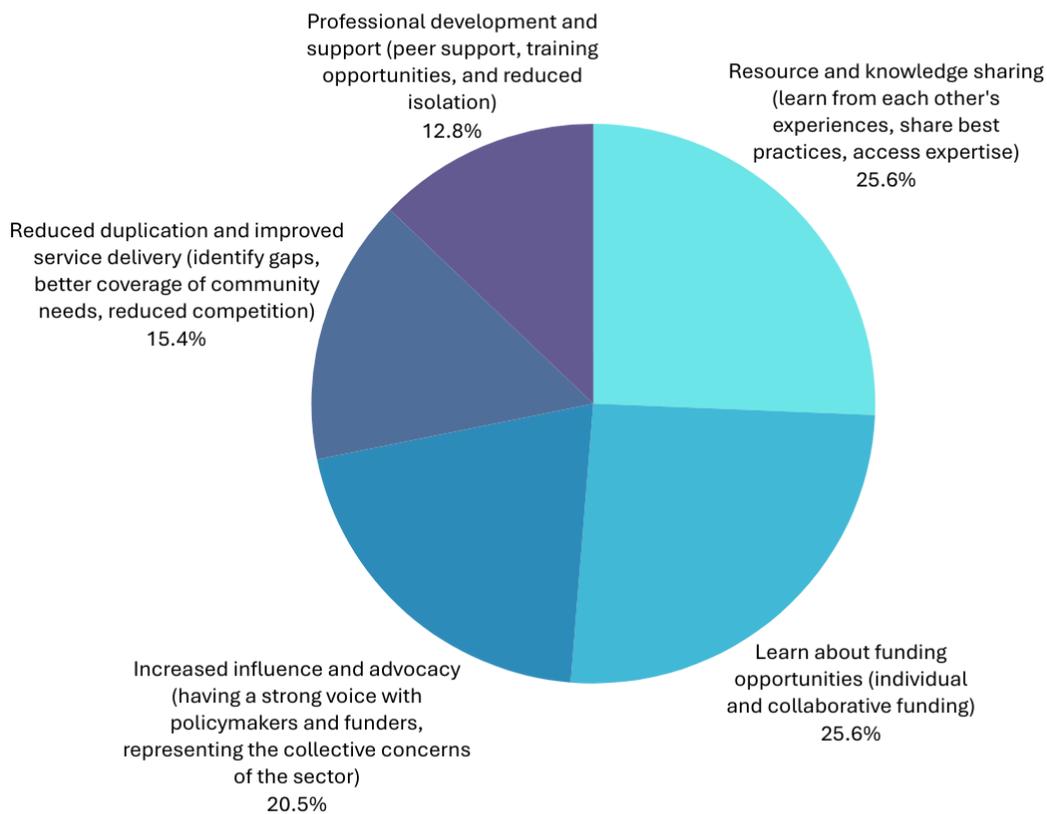wees from within the voluntary sector and the Council noted the lack of a VCSE Strategy or a framework for delivery. We address this issue below. The lack of strategy and framework for delivery feeds into yet another aspect of an LIO's work: as well as supporting and developing VCSEs of all sizes and shapes, LIOs also play an important role representing the sector at a strategic level in discussions, priority setting, and strategy development with other stakeholders. This role is considered next.

Working with the Council and other stakeholders

The Local Government Association argue that LIOs are critical as the interface between the voluntary sector and local government, developing transparent and trusted relationships between strategic stakeholders and the local VCSE sector. In so doing, they should act impartially in the best interests of the sector and work to communicate knowledge of the assets, skills, and needs of local communities. To achieve this, LIOs generally work with representatives from the local authority, the health system, education, and the emergency services. In many local authority areas, common mechanisms for bringing stakeholders together at a strategic level include Integrated Care Boards, Partnership Boards, and Health and Wellbeing Boards, amongst others.

Some of these mechanisms exist in North Somerset but the connections between them and their relationship with a wider strategy are not well developed, an issue that we address later in the report.

The question of maintaining a strong and distinctive voice for the voluntary sector at the strategic level was explored in both our survey and interviews. Asked "to what extent do you feel that the voluntary sector in North Somerset has a strong influence on North Somerset Council?", 50% of survey respondents answered 'weak' or 'very weak' (Figure 18). A further 38.5% thought that the influence was neither strong nor weak. Whilst 11.5% responded that the influence is strong, nobody responded that it is very strong.

To what extent do you feel that the voluntary sector in North Somerset has a strong influence on North Somerset Council?
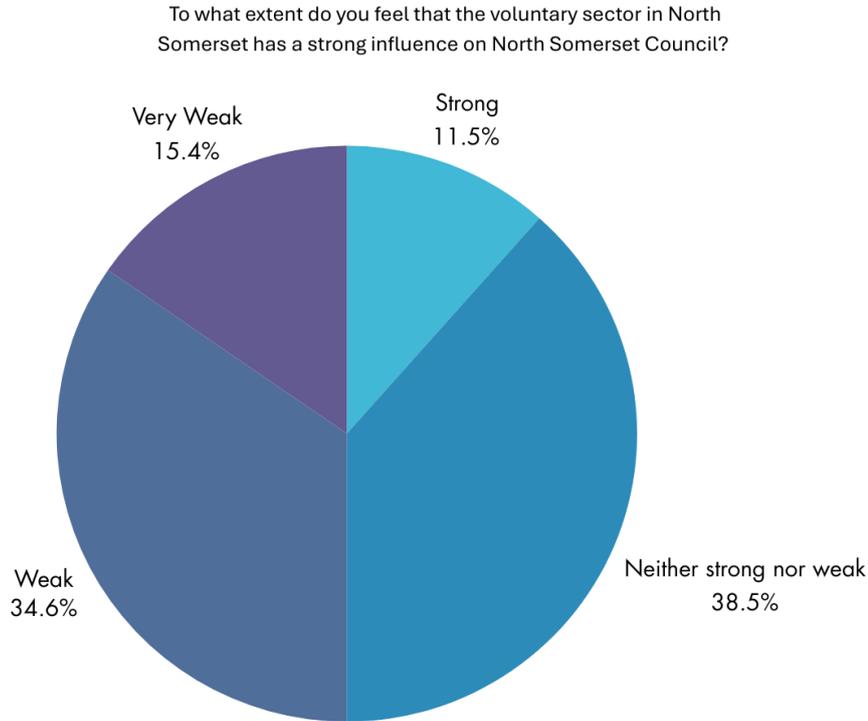
Figure 18: Strength of influence of the voluntary sector on North Somerset Council. Full data breakdown in Appendix One.

Interviewees spoke about their ambitions for convening discussions with politicians, local authority officers, ICB members, private companies, and the voluntary sector around specific strategic themes; acting as an umbrella for the voluntary sector; advocating for the voluntary sector and getting their ideas heard by NSC; creating an impartial, transparent interface between NSC and the voluntary sector; and translating between two worlds. However, none of the VCSEs who currently deliver local infrastructure functions can do any of these things effectively if:

- the forums do not exist in which high-level strategic conversations can take place
- the lack of investment means that LIOs are put in a position where they are taking on operational projects or contracts in competition with the VCSEs that they exist to serve
- there is no coordination between VCSEs that see themselves delivering local infrastructure
- no strategy exists to guide priority setting and coordinated action.

The solutions to these issues are set out in the North Somerset LEADS framework, below.

This disaggregated approach to infrastructure provision has four main consequences for LIOs, anchor organisations, and the rest of the voluntary sector in North Somerset:

- a lack of coordination impacts not only which functions are delivered *by whom* but also *to whom*. Anchor organisations are sometimes, by their nature, quite localised. Although North Somerset is not especially big geographically, there is a concentration of organisations like VANS, RENS, and FAHL in Weston-super-Mare
- a distributed model of LIO provision that lacks coordination may put some organisations in a tricky position. As one respondent from a large organisation noted, "it did feel like they [the smaller orgs] were looking to us for leadership and support, and at that point we were, we were sort of looking at our own financial sustainability, so weren't really able to deliver that for them"
- a fragmented model of LIO provision makes it politically and practically difficult for NSC to fund organisations that provide these functions
- it is hard to maintain a strong and distinctive voice for VCSEs at the strategic level because:
  a. the needs of the sector are not coherently understood
  b. the impact and contribution of the sector are not clearly represented
  c. there is no clearly identified group of LIOs to communicate with the Council.

This current model of delivery of local infrastructure functions is at least in part the outcome of historic relationships between NSC and the voluntary sector, which we now move on to discuss.

Funding LIO Delivery

Research carried out by NAVCA with and for its members and shared with the research team shows that county councils, district councils, metropolitan boroughs, and unitary authorities were the main sources of funding for LIOs in 2024 (Figure 19). The other important source of funding is health systems, with only a small proportion from grant-making trusts and foundations, which often prefer to fund frontline delivery rather than infrastructure.

Source	Proportion of respondents receiving funding
County council	41.5%
District council or metropolitan borough	67.7%
Unitary authority	26.2%
London borough	15.4%
Health system	35.4%
Foundations and trusts	15.4%
The National Lottery Community Fund (TNLCF)	4.6%

Figure 19: Survey of 65 NAVCA members between March and May 2024.

NAVCA notes that funding for infrastructure functions may be only a small proportion of an LIO's overall budget, which often run other services such as social prescribing or community buildings, specific community development or capacity building projects, and working in partnership with other organisations to deliver a wide range of activities for communities and the VCSE sector.

Ideally, LIOs exist solely to deliver infrastructure services, but long-term organisational sustainability sometimes comes from diversifying income streams by delivering other projects and services, putting LIOs into competition with the VCSEs they are intended to serve. This is the case in North Somerset, where all the organisations that deliver local infrastructure functions also deliver contracts of some kind.

The LGA Case for Investing in VCSE Infrastructure Delivery

The LGA sets out the reasons why local authorities find the relationship with VCSEs and the LIOs that support them so beneficial. These are arguably also the reasons why local authorities choose to fund the provision of local infrastructure functions to VCSEs in their area (see Finances, below). First, LIOs help local authorities to secure the benefits of working with the voluntary sector, namely:

- direct delivery of services tailored to meet specific needs through the use of local knowledge and expertise
- the ability to reach groups and communities furthest from council services
- the delivery of activities and events that would not be possible for the local authority
- as a core partner in developing and delivering council strategic priorities and outcomes.

Second, the LGA recognises and has reported on the significant social and economic value contributed by VCSEs, which LIOs help to generate. Third, LIOs support the inherent diversity in the sector, which is of significant benefit to individuals, communities, councils, and the statutory sector.

Fourth, the LGA argue that it is unrealistic for any council to be able to interact meaningfully with all the VCSEs in their area, making working with and through the LIO crucial. They act as an effective interface between councils and the VCSE sector in the following ways:

- building relationships, facilitating partnerships and collaborations: working across specific geographical areas, responding to local needs and interacting with thousands of voluntary and community organisations
- working in partnership with local councils, health systems and other statutory partners: bringing knowledge and intelligence of the assets, skills and needs of local communities.

The LGA concludes that, together, councils, LIOs, and the VCSE sector are all working to benefit local communities and deliver the activities, services, and outcomes they need. This is acknowledged in NCS, with one interviewee stating that doing more of the same "is not going to get us out of the hole". He identifies VCSE infrastructure development and commissioning as a strategic solution to some of the pressures that the Council faces.

Aim 2: Explore and assess existing relationships and structural challenges between North Somerset Council and the VCSE sector.

Historic and Current Dynamics between NSC and the VCSE sector

Interviewees identified several historic influences on the current dynamics between NSC and VCSE. It is hard to attribute specific direct effects to these. It is better to think in terms of the cumulative effect of several factors and to recognise that dwelling on these does not necessarily help to envision a future in which the relationship is stronger, more purposeful, well-supported, and collaborative.

Partnership Models, Communications, and Engagement

A well-structured partnership model might reasonably be expected to address strategic matters through some kind of partnership board, operational matters through theme-based delivery groups, and local delivery through community-based neighbourhood networks and frontline organisations collaborating on service design and delivery and local intelligence. There would also be lines of communication through this model that facilitate flows of knowledge, information, and intelligence across the whole structure. It would be based on parity of esteem, have proportionate reporting mechanisms and governance protocols, and be transparent in the distribution of resources. Actions would be guided by a robust, co-designed strategy, and the partnership would be underpinned by clearly stated shared values.

Whilst there are some recognisable elements of such a model in North Somerset, they are fragmented, often relics of previous efforts, and insufficiently joined up to create a functioning partnership model. Two examples of relics of previous engagement attempts are the Principles of Partnership and the North Somerset Partnership Board, which we now discuss.

How have the Principles of Partnership been operationalised?

The Principles of Partnership were the result of a significant piece of co-production work involving several meetings between NSC and VCSE and comments on draft versions. The final version was produced in February 2025 (Figure 20), but a promised action plan was not produced, and the Principles have not been operationalised. One explanation for this is the departure of a key member of NSC staff who was charged with developing an action plan.

Principle One: Trust We share common goals and a shared purpose	We will be open with planning, and this will be reflected when we monitor impact of funding.
	We will be innovative when looking at how we share data to reduce duplication across the sector.
	We will be transparent with funding opportunities and the allocation of grants and commissioning.
Principle Two: Grow* We support development of our communities and VCSE sector	We will recognise the sectors expertise and ability to adapt and respond
	We support development of the sector and promote training and good practice
*'Grow' was replaced by 'nurture' in a summary slide	We will support VCSE organisations to work in partnership with each other
Principle Three: Engage We use effective communication to ensure meaningful involvement	We will listen to what's important
	We will exchange ideas, thoughts, opinions, share knowledge
	We will develop a consistent set of outcomes
	We will actively promote equity and diversity giving everyone a voice
Principle Four: Respect We recognise all VCSE partners as equal partners	We respect people's time
	We recognise that a sustainable sector requires long term funding
	We recognise the need to be flexible and agile
	We will work as partners sharing risk and reward
	We celebrate the positive impact VCSE work has on communities

Figure 20: Principles of Partnership, February 2025.

NSC and VCSE interviewees alike express frustration that the Principles were never implemented, embedded, or widely communicated. One VCSE interviewee pointed out that "agreeing the principles is meaningless without action" and that NSC was "not ready to act on them". Another said that the report went into a "black hole." This is problematic in itself, but there are further consequences.

First, the process of co-creating the Principles raised expectations that the relationship between NSC and the voluntary sector would change as a result. Instead, the Principles are viewed as just another "nice document" (VCSE interviewee).

Second, the creation of the Principles exemplifies a wider issue identified by some interviewees: that there is a pattern of NSC engaging in consultation but not following through. One interviewee reflected the views of others when they said that NSC:

> "do a lot of talking and workshops and conversations and talk about aspirations and we contribute very generously to those conversations at all levels throughout our organisation. I think the missing bit is that translating into actions and us then being able to see what difference that has made."

Another commented that:

> "in terms of the collaboration with the [voluntary] sector, I think they've kind of got the t shirt...the voluntary sector are called in to endless meetings on performative collaboration… But actually, if all information flow is one way, which it is, there is no collaboration."

One VCSE also reflected that the impact on smaller organisation might be more keenly felt:

> "I think that especially for smaller organisations, that time (spent planning and talking about change) is super precious, and I think that could then alienate people to wanting to engage in the future, because you've given all this time and for what?"

Although the Principles of Partnership were not followed up by the creation of an action plan, they represent a solid foundation from which to work and reflect many of the views expressed in the conversations we have had over the course of this project. It is important, therefore, that the effort that went into developing the Principles of Partnership isn't forgotten or the Principles themselves set aside.

North Somerset Partnership Board

The North Somerset Partnership Board is an obvious venue for high-level strategic discussions between the local authority, the emergency services, education providers, the health sector, businesses, and the voluntary sector. Acting as a non-statutory local strategic partnership, such boards address complex local problems, allocate funding, and discuss strategies and initiatives. They aim to encourage joint working and community involvement, prevent 'silo working', and ensure that resources are better allocated at the local level, with collective accountability for delivery. NAVCA data shows that 68% of LIOs are members of this type of local strategic partnership group.

The North Somerset Partnership Board last met sometime in 2024. There is a strong sense from the interviews that the Council is missing the Board as an overarching strategic group. One NSC representative suggested that the Board "lost its mojo", with meetings dominated by the Council giving reports and updates but without genuine engagement. Another explanation for the demise of the Board is that a key NSC staff member charged with coordination left the organisation.

This exposes a key requirement for any model: someone to hold the space and create the conditions for partners to work together at every level. A good example of a partnership model in North Somerset comes from BNSSG, where the ICS involves the voluntary sector via the VCSE Alliance. The Alliance is currently paused while funding and procurement issues in the newly clustered ICS are worked through (demonstrating

one of the impacts of ICS clustering). When active, the Alliance was run by a small team with a dedicated Director. The three aims of the Alliance are to:

- encourage and enable the VCSE sector to work in a coordinated way to inform policy, strategy and decision-making
- provide the NHS and health and social care colleagues with a simple route of contact, engagement, and links to the community
- better position the VCSE sector to contribute to the design and delivery of integrated care.

Some interviewees from NSC suggested that appointing a Senior Responsible Owner (SRO) is a way to assign responsibility for the voluntary sector within the Council. SROs are generally accountable for a programme or project meeting its objectives, delivering projected outcomes, and realising the required benefits within the policies. SROs generally own the business case and are accountable for all aspects of governance for the projects they oversee.

Equally critical to communications and engagement across the Council and with the voluntary sector is allocating specific responsibility for the voluntary sector to the portfolio of a cabinet member. The current portfolio structure mentions 'community engagement' and 'work with voluntary and community sector partners on health and housing outcomes' across two portfolios, but arguably the voluntary sector plays a role in the delivery of services under several additional portfolios, including but not limited to skills and lifelong learning, the climate and nature emergency, adult social services, sport, and transport.

One NSC employee suggested that the Council has struggled to get the right level of engagement with the voluntary sector. They identified that individual cabinet members and senior officers have not 'owned' the relationship in a way that translates into the voluntary sector being routinely brought into conversations and discussions in the Cabinet and the corporate leadership team.

Other local authorities include responsibility for the voluntary sector in the remit of a specific portfolio holder, most notably West Berkshire Council (WBC). A formal Memorandum of Understanding was agreed with the voluntary sector in October 2025.

The Objectives of the MOU are to:
- support information sharing for the purposes of strategic discussions between WBC and representative organisations from the Voluntary and Charitable sector.
- support the identification of additional capacity and resources to deliver better outcomes for the residents of West Berkshire.
- support better and earlier communication between partners, providing early notice of new initiatives or plans, creating opportunities to shape early thinking and/ or co-produce solutions, and identifying potential for collaboration.
- enable charitable sector organisations to provide feedback to the council and impact the way it operates.
- influence how commissioning activities are undertaken.

Following this, the Council's Leader announced that responsibility for interaction with the voluntary and charitable sector was being added to a Portfolio Holder's responsibilities, explicitly to ensure the sector had "representation at the top table within the Administration."

While there is no SRO or portfolio holder with responsibility for the voluntary sector in NSC, there can be no strategic overview of the sector's contribution, resourcing, or potential. A named SRO and portfolio holder arguably gives the relationship more

legitimacy and accountability, but only if other structures are in place, namely a strategy, a VCSE seat at the table in priority, policy, and decision-making, and the means to operationalise the Principles of Partnership.

Two insights from our interviews starkly illustrate the need. One NSC interviewee commented that the directorates all manage the relationship with the voluntary sector in different ways. This issue is compounded by the lack of a framework within which different roles and activities are made visible and managed in a strategic way. Meanwhile, from the voluntary sector side comes the comment that "There is no transparency, there are no feedback loops, there is no collaborative working. There is just the pretence of collaborative working."

There are examples of good practice in collaborative working in NSC, but they are fragmented. Below, we profile the work of Adult Social Care.

Case Study: Adult Social Care

The Adult Social Care team are one example where considerable effort has gone into building a productive relationship with the voluntary sector. Its reasons for doing so are linked to values, practical needs, and system-change goals. The team has a track record of co-developing specific thematic strategies, for example, on autism, and creating action plans in an attempt to change practice and outcomes.

Their Co-Production Strategy 2024-2027 is structured around five themes of working together to create an inclusive, accessible, and diverse partnership, promote independence and interdependence, ensure people's voices are heard, effectively communicate all possible outcomes, ensure co-production is sustainable with a plan for long-term development.

The team's approach is to develop priorities from the ground up using the expertise of the people, communities, and VCSEs that they work with. This makes the approach strongly person-centred. Working through trusted VCSEs builds a relationship with individuals and communities but it is also recognised that VCSEs can often give practical and emotional support in a way that the Council cannot.

Staff in this team see NSC and the voluntary sector as a "single ecosystem" underpinned by what are described as "repeatable structures" – boards and action plans – so that engagement doesn't disappear when a particular individual moves on. Practically speaking, engagement is achieved through feedback forms, audits, groups, and a people's bank (a network of people with lived experience who want to be involved but not committed to regular meetings). Bank members may get involved with specific pieces of co-production and take part in a one-off or time-limited engagement, thereby matching people's capacity and interest to specific opportunities.

Despite these efforts, there are still issues. Interviewees from the Adult Social Care team noted that they still do not currently provide the voluntary sector with enough information about what the team do, how referrals work, and who to contact for different services. The general public's impression that Adult Social Care only deals with older people and care homes has been hard to break down. There are capacity issues in Adult Social Care and the voluntary sector and patchy engagement with other directorates. As noted elsewhere in this report, the VCSEs involved with Adult Social Care struggle to evidence their impact in ways that can be readily used by the Council. The team also witness the effects of short term and underfunded contracts on the VCSEs they work with.

Overall, there is much to learn from the experience of the Adult Social Care team as a microcosm of the Council's relationship with the voluntary sector overall.

LGA Partnership Assessment Toolkit

The LGA has produced a toolkit which aims to support councils to develop strong relationships with the voluntary sector. It builds upon research commissioned by the LGA and conducted by Locality into the state of strategic relationships between councils and their local voluntary and community sector.

In Appendix Four, we use a lightly adapted version of the toolkit to conduct a preliminary evaluation of the current state of the relationship between NSC and the voluntary sector, using a traffic light system. This clearly reveals that urgent action is required to develop the relationship. These actions are set out in the North Somerset LEADS framework.

Finances

Limited and Opaque Funding and Investment

Funding is amongst the most contentious high-stakes issues, entangled with questions about resource distribution, fairness, value for money, expectations, and the protocols of quality assurance, governance, and reporting. In 2023, the DCMS estimated that, of 250,000 VCSEs active in the UK, between 9,200 and 12,500 engaged in government contracting each year (between 3% and 5% of active VCSEs), though they are unlikely to be funded by that means alone.

The forthcoming BNSSG State of the Sector survey should shed more light on how VCSEs in North Somerset are experiencing the common financial challenges facing the voluntary sector (NCP, 2024), which are:

- less money in the system
- competition
- underfunded contracts (where funders do not recognise the need for organisations to achieve full cost recovery)
- short-term funding

Here, we offer some additional reflections that have arisen in our interviews.

Less money in the system

Cuts to funding mean that there is less money in the system, which everyone must work harder to win. At the same time, demand is rising. This includes demand from individuals and communities facing increasingly complex problems as well as demand on the sector from local authorities and health systems stretched to breaking point. One VCSE interviewee spoke for many when she said:

> "I think as belts have got tightened over the last 10 years or so, there's been increasing reliance and pressure on the voluntary sector, like, suddenly, you know, there's a whole army of volunteers. They're going to, you know, pick up the slack, and that ain't the case effectively, yeah, substitution, yeah. But the voluntary sector doesn't work on fresh air either."

Competition

Less money in the system creates competition and suppresses collaboration. One VCSE interviewee remarked that the "voluntary sector is the most bloodthirsty sector I've ever worked in." Another reflected on the constant need to remain vigilant when money is scarce:

> "But people get very twitchy, don't they, about who owns things and who the money is going to go to, and that sense of, well, we want to keep hold of it… But that stopped people from collaborating."

Some VCSE interviewees identified the lack of a collaborative forum, such as thematic alliances, as part of the issue, commenting that:

> "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."

Underfunded Contracts

The NPC national State of the Sector Report for 2024 identifies as a key risk underfunded contracts held by charities, undermining the delivery of essential public services. It is common for VCSEs to be viewed as a resource which can provide services more cost-efficiently than the statutory sector and potentially access sources of funding not available to statutory agencies. Moreover, 'volunteers' are not free, and they require identifying, recruiting, training, retaining, and paying expenses.

Underfunded contracts and short-term funding are the outcomes of several linked processes. One is the aggressive pursuit of value for money, which creates competition within the sector, causing bidders to cut their tenders to the bone (for an example of an approach that prioritises collaboration over competition, see Wakefield's Third Sector Framework). At the same time, core management costs are sometimes not eligible for inclusion in a bid. Short-term funding is also a consequence of yearly reporting mechanisms and budget-setting in local authorities.

Some NSC departments award grants rather than contracts as a tactic to avoid a service being cut, as contracts usually attract more scrutiny when savings are required. This approach gets the job done in the short term but leads to vulnerability for the sector and the communities it serves. One NSC interviewee reflected:

> "because [grants] are annual, [VCSEs] can't necessarily plan for what it's going to look like the next year. And that can affect development. It can affect taking on roles, or filling vacancies, all those sorts of things. Because if they start a group, and then that funding isn't going to be at the same level, that group will then end, and it will impact on the clients that go to it."

Relying on grants as a funding mechanism reduces the ability of the VCSE to shape service design and delivery in North Somerset.

Short-Term Funding

Short-term funding was ranked as the most pressing risk to the finances of VCSEs in the State of the Sector survey (2024). The LGA (2022) identifies the conjoined risks of short–term horizons and lack of long-term investment as key barriers to successful strategic relationships between local authorities and the VCSE sector. Short-term funding presents several linked issues.

First, staff on short-term contracts experience the stress of precarity, possibly impacting the quality of the support they can provide. Second, staff often start looking for new employment before the end of a contract, causing uncertainty in delivery. Third, if staff leave the organisation at the end of a contract, a great deal of information, insight, and experience tends to go with them. Fourth, short-term funding militates against long-term planning. Finally, the time that could be spent supporting people and communities is instead spent chasing small grants.

Funding vs Investment

One persistent theme in the interviews for the North Somerset LEADS research is a lack of predictable, sustainable funding or investment in both local VCSE infrastructure delivery and the voluntary sector in general. Funding and investment should not be seen as synonymous. *Funding* can be understood as the money spent on time-limited projects, contracts, or commissioned services outside of infrastructure provision. The delivery of the four functions of infrastructure should be seen as an *investment* that builds capacity, resilience, good governance, sustainability, and skills that benefit the sector in ways that go beyond individual projects. Such work puts the sector on a firm footing, ready to support individuals and communities and, indeed, the Council itself.

The distinction between funding and investment is important because not all VCSEs are contracted or commissioned but nevertheless deliver vital support to individuals and communities in North Somerset. Maintaining this support requires investment. We examine some possible sources of funding later in this report.

Tracking Spend

As noted above, North Somerset is not alone in experiencing a long-term decline in public funding with a concomitant effect on the delivery of public services. However, downstream of this is the way that North Somerset tracks spending on contracts, grants, and commissioned projects. One NSC interviewee estimated this spend to be between £3m and £4m, but it has been exceptionally difficult to unpick this in any meaningful way.

The fact that NSC cannot easily articulate what they are spending in total on the voluntary sector translates to being unable to learn from the funding decisions that have been made in the past or how to identify and report the outcomes achieved by funding.

There is recognition by NSC of this, and there seems to be some movement towards drawing up frameworks to try to achieve more consistency in how funding streams are traced and understood, with the aim of creating value for all stakeholders. As one representative of NSC noted:

> "We do give grants, we do commission things, and they're both very different, and sometimes that's from our money, and sometimes that's from a third party. So, trying to pull that together is quite challenging. I think it's part of our financial strategy going forward, though."

The absence of a VCSE strategy compounds the issue, as noted by another interviewee from NSC:

> "I would say a recommendation for me would be that we should have [a VCSE strategy], because I think the current position just shows how mixed an approach [there is]. Are we even making sure we make the same decisions across directorates?"

A different NSC interviewee pointed out that:

> "I think as well, we probably have approached everything in a very piecemeal way. So I think there's lots of desire to do more and to be more supportive of the VCSE sector and to commission more services through them, and to work more closely in partnership. But I think it's very often done service specific or issue specific level, rather than more strategically."

Several interviewees also commented on inertia in commissioning processes, leading to the same organisations winning contracts repeatedly. This seems to be a function of deeply embedded relationships of trust and mutual respect between individuals that go back many years in some cases. The result is that "if there's something that the council

are floating about or they think we can help with, or get involved with, they come to us"
(VCSE interviewee). This situation is by no means unique to North Somerset but is
compounded by the other issues discussed in this report.

Data and Evidence

The lack of transparency in how money is spent diminishes trust, but it is not the only
reason trust is low. Trust is also required to support innovations in funding,
commissioning, or policy, even when robust, North Somerset-specific evidence is in short
supply. Writing towards the end of the Covid 19 pandemic, a report from Pro Bono
Economics noted that:

> "Nearly half a million social sector organisations in the UK play a vital role in
> sustaining our society and economy, but a serious paucity of data is
> preventing the social sector from unleashing its full potential."

The pandemic made this issue especially stark. Despite being critical to so much of the
response, the social sector struggled to make a case for emergency support. By contrast,
the private sector was able to clearly argue its case based on recognised, reliable, and
timely data, resulting in support such as the furlough scheme.

Since then, the cost-of-living crisis, pressure on local authority budgets, and rising sector-
wide demand have made the work of evidencing need and articulating impact even more
critical for the voluntary sector in North Somerset. However, there is no recognised
framework for collecting such data or, indeed, exactly what should be collected, by
whom, and how.

Outputs

There is not currently a means of demonstrating to funders just how big a contribution the
voluntary sector makes in North Somerset to both economic and social value. Capturing
the sheer range and volume of activities and support provided by VCSEs in North
Somerset is an important precursor to evidencing impact, which is a separate
consideration (see below).

Quantitative data can cover a range of metrics, including but not limited to how many
people are being worked with, how many sessions have been delivered, how many
interventions have been completed, and how many volunteer hours have been
contributed. These data can be augmented with qualitative data, including case studies,
pictures, videos, and feedback from organisations working in local communities. One
way to do this is through a simple reporting template that asks for a minimum amount of
information from those organisations that have very limited capacity to engage in this
process.

Impact

Providing data on the impact of the voluntary sector has proved one of the harder nuts to
crack. There are several linked issues at stake here:

- What kind of data should be collected? The VCSE sector is heterogeneous,
  meaning that the measures of impact that are suitable for – say – a forest school
  are not the same measures of impact that a food bank or a church might share.
  Some organisations, like Curo, use Social Return on Investment (SROI), but it is
  worth considering other measures of impact to allow organisation to articulate their
  own achievements. There are several tools available, each with its pros and cons.
  Some examples are shown in Figure 21.
- The long term-sustainability of a coordinated project to capture impact depends on
  a clear idea of how and by whom data should be collected. This raises issues of

veracity (that the data are reliable), consistency (that everyone collects the same data in the same way), and capacity (whether the staff time is available to collect the data).

Tool	Function	Pros and Cons	Find Out More
Social Return on Investment	Assigns financial value to social outcomes to calculate a cost-benefit ratio.	**Pros:** by assigning a financial value, social projects can be directly compared to other kinds of projects.	Institute for Social Value Social Value Engine
		Cons: Several tools exist, are of varying complexity, and require some capacity to collect the data. Some impacts are hard to monetise. Some financial investment required to use extant platforms.	
Outcomes Stars	A visual tool for measuring progress in areas like wellbeing, employment, or recovery.	**Pros:** A very useful way of tracking individual progress and impact. Relatively easy to use. Individual is empowered to track their own data.	Outcome Star
		Cons: Less useful for showing the overall impact of a group of activities. May require financial investment to use extant platforms.	
Most Significant Change	A qualitative technique which captures rich, personal insights.	**Pros:** Very useful for capturing and articulating the impact on individuals with complex circumstances. Can be used to interrogate why change happened, as well as what changed. Values the narratives of participants.	Most Significant Change
		Cons: Can be time consuming and individual accounts can be misrepresented as unhelpfully subjective. May require financial investment to use extant platforms.	
Appreciative Inquiry	An action research method that collects people's stories of what's strong in their communities rather than focusing on what needs fixing.	**Pros:** An excellent tool for community development.	Appreciative Inquiry
		Cons: Can be time consuming. While impact at the level of individuals and other organisations can be identified, impact across the sector and community level may be harder to evidence.	

Figure 21: Tools for Impact.

The problem of how to measure impact is widespread across the sector. Seymour (2019) shows that there are three main challenges which can hinder the sector's ability to develop tools and evaluation methods used to measure their impact.

- a patchwork of support is available from consultancy, infrastructure, and other specialist organisations. This has led to a situation marked by grey literature, conceptual confusions, fragmented evidence bases and uncoordinated support.
- much of the voluntary sector comprises small organisations that are often faced with challenges of choosing a tool which meets their budget, practices and time availability.
- measuring the impact of services often relies on the initiative, technical skills, and knowledge expertise of individual employees and volunteers, resulting in the ad hoc or sporadic development of these activities as well as the creation of multiple information management and evaluation tools.

These are issues which are worth addressing in order to embed the practice of collecting consistent and robust data on the outcomes and impact produced by VCSEs in North Somerset.

Reed et al (2005) show that there is an inherent tension in whether a given evaluation approach should reflect the perspectives and goals of the voluntary organisations and their members, or the needs of the local authority or wider system. They note that the former runs the risk of being insular and self-congratulatory, while the latter may be inappropriate and dismissive of achievements.

Although there are serious practical questions of how to collect, collate, store, and interrogate data on outcomes and impacts, the need to do so is quite pressing. There is a clear expectation that NSC requires evidence to underpin decision-making. One NSC interviewee reflected the views of others when he observed that two things matter to decision-makers in the Council. First, that VCSE activity and investment in the sector demonstrates that it can help the bottom line by reducing or mitigating costs. Second, that the sector can produce clear evidence of better outcomes for residents. Some organisations, such as CANS, were noted as being very good at this. He also noted that NSC itself needs to tighten up on showing a causal link between spend and outcomes.

Further, the absence of high-quality data about the voluntary sector creates a missed opportunity to combine with other reliable sources of up-to-date data about North Somerset to: i) effectively evidence the demand for services; and ii) in some cases, challenge the perceptions of commissioners and funders with evidence from within the sector itself. The North Somerset Open Data platform has the potential to host data on the voluntary sector alongside data on health inequalities, employment, housing, demographics, and so on. However, at the time of writing, several areas of the platform that draw from Power BI are not functional. There is some suggestion that the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment is being redesigned, with the potential to build VCSE data into the information set.

There are several examples from elsewhere in the country where attempts are being made to combine data from the voluntary sector with wide socio-economic and health data for an area.

The Bucks Data Exchange combines a dashboard or map-based platform that helps small charities in Buckinghamshire better understand the needs of the people and places they are serving and show the difference they're making. Data on demographics, education, health, the economy, crime, housing, and services are drawn from Local Insight, a subscription-based platform that provides small-area data to many councils and charities. Similarly, in Somerset, the VCSE Insights Hub brings together national, regional, and local data in one easy-to-access platform. The intention is to provide a one-stop shop for evidence that strengthens funding applications, contributes to the development of new services that meet real community needs, identifies opportunities for collaborations and partnerships across Somerset, and clearly demonstrates the impact of VCSEs to funders, stakeholders, and partners.

There is also some suggestion that even where data are available (for example from CANS and Quartet), NSC does not make good use of it and does not have a mechanism to disseminate it across the Council. This might be because the skills and/or platform are not available to read across multiple forms of data and extrapolate meaningful findings.

As one VCSE interviewee pointed out:

> "if there isn't a sort of institutional-wide understanding of the power and potential of the [voluntary sector], then the instinct to support it to do what it does best, isn't really there."

Another, from a smaller organisation based in one of North Somerset's towns, suggested that she does not know where to share impact stories.

The issues of data and evidence speak to two important findings of this report. First, that the mechanisms for collecting and sharing data are not in place and also that the plumbing (the flows of information, intelligence, knowledge, data, and evidence within and between the voluntary sector and NSC) does not facilitate the use of data to support collaborative decision-making.

Community Wealth Building

A separate report is currently being produced by CLES for North Somerset Council on developing Community Wealth Building approaches. As CLES notes, Community Wealth Building is a progressive approach to economic development that aims to retain more wealth and opportunity for the benefit of local people. Community Wealth Building projects harness the economic and social power of locally rooted institutions, or anchor organisations (local councils, health boards, universities, colleges, housing associations, and the private sector).

Our purpose is not to anticipate the findings of the CLES report (which is due at the same time as this report) but to offer some reflections on how the insights and solutions from the North Somerset LEADS project will help to strengthen the delivery of Community Wealth Building projects.

It is widely acknowledged VCSEs are central intermediaries in Community Wealth Building, but their impact depends on power relations, financing models, and integration with other anchor institutions (Figure 22). VCSEs co-design initiatives, provide community voice, and understand local needs. They help shift citizens from 'bystanders' to active participants in the inclusive, place-based networks that underpin Community Wealth Building.

Function of voluntary sector	Contribution to community wealth
Convening and representation	Channels community perspectives, builds trust, repository of community social capital
Service and asset management	Runs co-ops, social enterprises, food banks, social infrastructure
Financial innovation	Access to and expertise in community bonds, social finance, microfinance, saving groups
Capability building	Training in financial literacy, entrepreneurship, skills for local enterprise

Figure 22: Key contributions to Community Wealth Building by voluntary organisations

Two of the key arguments of our report are that a) the 'plumbing' between North Somerset Council and the voluntary sector needs to be reengineered; and b) that the delivery of local infrastructure functions for the voluntary sector needs greater clarity and coordination. These insights have important consequences for the success of Community Wealth Building Initiatives in North Somerset.

First, Community Wealth Building as a place-based innovation depends on excellent collaboration and coordination. Good 'plumbing' means that priority-setting, strategic-thinking, service design and delivery, and innovation can be shared endeavours. Good communication and collaboration mean that each partner can play to their strengths and utilise resources that only they control. There are some levers – such as procurement – that are in the control of North Somerset Council, and there are others – such as trusted community relationships and flexibility – that are very much in the remit of the voluntary sector. However, to create the conditions in which VCSEs have the bandwidth, skills, and appetite to participate in Community Wealth Building in turn depends on the delivery of well-coordinated, comprehensive local infrastructure functions that support the voluntary sector in building leadership, collaboration and partnership, capacity building, and volunteering.

As noted elsewhere in this report, it is also worth bearing in mind that the voluntary sector is very heterogeneous. It is composed of small organisations by income (<£100k pa) and medium and large organisations (£100k - >£10m pa). Some of these will identify as anchor organisations, likely those over £100k income pa. In developing Community Wealth Building initiatives, it is important to pay attention to the different roles that a diverse range of organisations might play.

Overall, the success of Community Wealth Building in North Somerset depends to some extent on implementing the solutions proposed in our report. Equally, Community Wealth Building may be one of the mechanisms for transforming procurement in a way that builds in a social value dividend for funding the provision of local infrastructure for the voluntary sector. This has wider benefits for VCSEs, individuals, and communities in North Somerset, even where they are not directly involved in Community Wealth Building initiatives. In the next section, we consider what a social value procurement framework can contribute to the development of a thriving voluntary sector.

Procurement

It goes without saying that the squeeze on general revenue requires innovative thinking about how to fund local VCSE infrastructure delivery. This and the following section look at possible innovations around social value from procurement, Civil Infrastructure Levy (CIL), and Section 106 money.

One opportunity for innovation in funding lies in the requirement for suppliers to include social value in their bids. The statutory requirement for local authorities to consider how services procured might improve economic, social, and environmental well-being is set out in the Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012. Social value generation through procurement supports the overall priorities of the Council as described within the corporate plan, which include a commitment to strengthen the collaboration and co-production with the voluntary and community sector. However, at present, the guidance to suppliers on what constitutes a social value outcome that supports this commitment is limited. The example given in official guidance refers to 'footpath vegetation clearance in Nailsea'.

Other local authorities, such as Lancashire County Council, are much more specific about social value outcomes related to the voluntary sector, drawing on TOMS, the UK national standard for Social Value measurement. The outcomes in the National TOMS framework relevant to the voluntary sector are summarised in Appendix Five. Other local authorities have also reimagined TOMS to reflect their own priorities, such as Oxford City Council. Trafford Council is another example of a local authority that has set aside the use of the TOMS framework in favour of identifying social value outputs that directly deliver on its priorities. The Council has customised the Greater Manchester Social Value Framework to its priorities and identified six local themes, amongst which is 'build the capacity and sustainability of the voluntary and community sector'.

North Somerset Council is not currently using the National TOMS framework or a comprehensive bespoke equivalent. The Guidance provided to suppliers is very brief. Should the development of a North Somerset-specific social value framework be considered desirable in the wake of work on Community Wealth Building, it would be beneficial to consider a VCSE Infrastructure Dividend (VID) as a social value outcome.

VCSE Infrastructure Dividend

A VID would be generated by taking a small amount of the social value generated by procurement as a cash contribution and placing it in a centrally held pot or escrow account managed by either the Council or another organisation agreed upon by the

Council and the main beneficiaries. The beneficiaries are VCSE organisations that deliver local infrastructure functions to the rest of the VCSE.

Local VCSE infrastructure functions are not revenue-generating but, as noted by both the LGA and NAVCA, are critical to building capacity and resilience in the sector and achieving market development. This puts more VCSEs in a position to participate in Community Wealth Building and other areas of service design and delivery.

For a VID to be successful, strategic, and transparent, there would need to be in place a working VCSE strategy, an action plan for its delivery that included the use of the VID, and greater coordination of the delivery of local infrastructure functions for the voluntary sector in North Somerset.

Whilst many local authorities have designed bespoke social value outcomes aligned to their priorities, Litchfield District Council have gone further and established a social value fund. It can be used for small or short-term contracts or when suppliers fail to deliver on their social value commitments. It does not do quite the same job as the VID proposed here, but it demonstrates that a fund can be created.

The VID is different from the ways that social value for the voluntary sector is currently expressed as an output, such as funding community projects, in-kind contributions of time, equipment, or space, and contracting VCSEs alongside other local providers. It is an innovation that maximises the impact on the voluntary sector of social value through procurement. The driver and justification, in the shape of the Council strategy, is already in place. This provides the foundation for the development of a bespoke social value framework.

CIL and Section 106

Civil Infrastructure Levy is a standardised, non-negotiable charge on new development introduced by Planning Act 2008. Levied per square metre based on local charging schedules, it supports area-wide infrastructure such as transport, schools, health facilities, and open space. Although cursory research suggests that this Levy is not widely used to support VCSEs or infrastructure at the moment, it is worth exploring further.

Section 106 Obligations (S106) are legally binding agreements under the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 s106. Negotiated case-by-case to mitigate site-specific impacts, it funds affordable housing, schools, highways, healthcare, open space, and environmental mitigation. There are several examples of local authorities that use this funding to support VCSEs (Figure 23).

Local Authority	VCSE Support via S106
East Cambridgeshire District Council	VCSEs can apply for S106 capital funding for community and social infrastructure.
Cambridge City Council	S106 allocated to VCSE-run community facilities.
Harborough District Council	S106 can be transferred to local organisations to deliver community projects.
Bristol City Council	No evidence of CIL/S106 funding for VCSE project delivery.

Figure 23: Examples of local authorities' use of Section 106 to support VCFEs and infrastructure.

Collectively, the imaginative use of social value from procurement, CIL, and S106 could help NSC to support the voluntary sector without drawing on general revenue.

The Current Nature of Collaboration within the Sector

Collaboration is, as noted elsewhere in this report, inconsistent in quality and depth or sometimes quite arbitrary or incidental. The strength, depth, and longevity of collaboration are affected by the combined effects of:

- competition for scarce resources
- a lack of overall strategy for delivery within the voluntary sector
- a lack of capacity-building activities which promote trust, joint-working, and peer support
- the absence of a vertically integrated partnership model

Nevertheless, there are some forums where NSC and voluntary sector partners are brought together in various configurations, which we explore briefly here.

North Somerset Health and Wellbeing Board

A Health and Wellbeing Board is a formal committee of the local authority charged with promoting greater integration and partnership between bodies from the NHS, public health, and local government. They have a statutory duty to produce a joint strategic needs assessment and a joint health and wellbeing strategy for their local population, but otherwise they have very few formal powers.

The North Somerset Health and Wellbeing Board brings together councillors, cabinet members, and representatives of the voluntary sector, the NHS, and public health. It is the only high-level strategic discussion forum that brings these groups together. For one NSC interviewee, this makes it the primary interface of working with VCSE organisations, especially around strategic policy making or prioritisation. The board is thematically focused on health-related priorities (mental health, food and nutrition, drug and alcohol use, being active, determinants of health, healthy places) and aligned with the work of the ICB. This means that it does not take the widest possible view of the needs of North Somerset in the way that, for example, a Partnership Board would do.

The degree to which the Health and Wellbeing Board acts as a productive collaborative space is not clear from the research for North Somerset LEADS. There is some suggestion that the existence of the Health and Wellbeing Board is not well understood amongst the VCSEs that are not part of it. One VCSE interviewee reflected that:

> "I think the real risk is if we don't have a seat around the table… there is a bit of competition there… if we're not having those ongoing conversations, [duplication] probably will happen."

VCSE Alliance

Another health-facing forum is the BNSSG Voluntary Sector Alliance, the origins of which lie in early attempts to embed VCSEs into ICS programmes. Twelve months of non-recurrent ICB funding was awarded in 2023 for the development of the Alliance, hosted by Voscur, an LIO based in Bristol. The Alliance was launched in January 2024 and now has 153 VCSEs as members and 270+ as regular participants. As noted elsewhere in this report, it has recently been paused but still offers a good example of a strategic alliance model.

The Alliance operates a distributed leadership model based on VCSE Alliance Ambassadors to spread the load of attending different meetings within the ICB structure. The Ambassadors are individuals from VCSE sector organisations who advocate for the VCSE Alliance across the Integrated Care System (ICS), share their expertise, and contribute to community outcomes. They achieve this by attending health and social care

system board or network meetings, joining a VCSE Alliance working group, and attending one-off events on behalf of the Alliance. There are currently 150 Ambassadors from 84 voluntary sector organisations. The Alliance also has a Steering Group and a Coordination group in its structure (Figure 24).

Figure 24: BNSSG VCSE Alliance Structure (_BNSSG Healthier Together_)

The VCSE Alliance has been piloting a form of progressive commissioning model in the shape of a Brokerage Framework. This is described as a system-wide approach to enable a diverse range of voluntary sector organisations to deliver health and wellbeing improvements in local communities through investment from ICS health and social care partners. The Framework is focused on the wider determinants of health, including work, housing, education, money, air quality, inclusion, safety, transport, and community connections alongside health and care advice, support, and services. It was co-designed and tested during 2024/2025 by a group of key partners. During its pilot phase, it offered a fair and simple way for public sector managers to engage diverse groups, including micro / small, equalities-led, and hyper-local organisations. The benefits of this system are said to be:

- co-production of new services
- easier funding applications
- fewer entry barriers to the public sector – the process is proportionate to the size of the bidding organisation
- networking and relationship building with VCSE peers
- skill and practice sharing
- greater community voice in public sector decisions
- collaborative system reform and service design.

In October 2025, in the wake of the Government announcement of changes to ICSs, BNSSG ICB published a refreshed BNSSG VCSE Vision and Framework for Action. This sets out the practical means by which the ICB's VCSE Integration Principles and the Healthier Together Integration Strategy will be delivered. The Vision and Framework for Action provides

> "a way forward for investments in system enablers (VCSE Alliance, VCSE Brokerage), VCSE market development and strategic approaches, including to support Healthier Together 2040 and Neighbourhood Health."

The Alliance is interesting for several reasons. First, through partnership working, it is clearly helping to deliver at least three infrastructure functions across BNSSG: Leadership and Advocacy, Partnership and Collaboration, and Capacity Building. This is a distributed model of local VCSE infrastructure delivery.

Second, the Alliance is the outcome of, and supported by, joined-up principles, strategy, and framework for delivery. These work together to define the terms of partnership, its aims, its strategic contribution, and how it will operate.

Third, the management and coordination of the Alliance are funded. This role is currently delivered by Voscur. The operational pause, recently announced for the Alliance and the Brokerage Framework, will reportedly provide time to reflect on learning from the pilot phase and to align with wider commissioning and procurement requirements.

A future model for functions provided currently through the VCSE Alliance and the VCSE Brokerage Framework is expected to be provided through two new 3 to 5-year contracts:

- VCSE Structure and Strategy: providing structure within the VCSE system so that the sector can be an equal partner in the BNSSG health and care system
- VCSE Support and Deliver: creating a mature VCSE provider market that can deliver wellbeing and health outcomes through services and activities in BNSSG, enabled by VCSE Brokerage.

This injects a degree of uncertainty into a set of relationships carefully nurtured through months of work. Nevertheless, VCSEs in North Somerset that are members of the Alliance have valuable experience in working through such a structure. This is learning that could be transferred to the development of a similarly effective structure in North Somerset.

Wellbeing Collective

The Wellbeing Collective is an informal gathering conducted in an open 'campfire' format under Chatham House rules, where trust can be built through frank conversations outside the format of a formal committee. Those familiar with the Wellbeing Collective speak about the soft power it exercises through being less formal and more relational. It has been referred to as part of the informal strategic infrastructure, a loose but powerful cross-sector network, and a practical method of flattening hierarchy and building trust. Members are drawn from across the voluntary sector and the Council.

Though not part of the formal plumbing, the benefit of the Wellbeing Collective is that it provides a space for open, honest dialogue. This is critical, as formal strategic discussions can be high stakes when individuals are invested in their institutional priorities. However, like other initiatives, it is unclear how discussions that take place amongst Wellbeing Collective members feed into and are reflected in shared strategic or operational priorities for Council and the voluntary sector.

Senior Leaders' Forum

The Senior Leaders' Forum is convened by VANS and meets in person and online. Members are drawn from NSC and the senior figures from the larger VCSEs and key anchor organisations. Its current priorities are to strengthen collaboration, support workforce and volunteers, improve systems and funding, foster innovation and learning, and understand the strategic outlook. The Forum is a newly formed group that had its first meeting in September 2025, but seems to be an iteration of a previous grouping.

The formation of the Senior Leaders' Forum is a welcome step in creating space for strategic conversations. It has a great deal of potential as a key connector between strategic partners and the operational context. It could, for example, play an important role in collecting evidence of impact and using the rich evidence base that is collected by CANS.

The ambitions underlying the creation of the Forum are evident. However, these ambitions are likely to be frustrated by several factors. First, the rather blurred distinction between LIOs and anchor organisations means that roles and responsibilities are not clear. In a rural county dominated by small towns, some anchor organisations are likely to be quite small. One VCSE interviewee from a small anchor organisation expressed the view that it was hard to attend such a meeting because of a lack of time and a sense that the discussion is at a strategic level that they are not necessarily involved in. This can be addressed through greater capacity-building activities focused on leadership and growing

understanding of strategy, but that also requires that VCSE infrastructure delivery is funded in some way.

Second, in the absence of a VCSE strategy or framework for delivery, the Forum is essentially shooting in the dark. Nevertheless, the Forum itself is in a position to exercise leadership by initiating discussions about a co-designed strategy. At the time of writing, these discussions appear to have begun.

Third, the 'plumbing' between the Forum and the rest of the sector and NSC, through which knowledge, insights, and evidence can flow in both directions, needs work. It is not entirely clear how discussions in the Forum are influenced by or fed back to the rest of the voluntary sector. The obvious way to achieve this is through North Somerset Together, though that connection is not currently as articulated as well as it could be, especially in terms of how strategic issues translate into operational matters. Equally, in the absence of a North Somerset Partnership Board, it is not clear what the formal connection is to the Council. NSC staff who sit on the Senior Leaders' Forum might feed back where possible, but reaching across all Council functions is very difficult. A designated portfolio holder would help with this, as would a Partnership Board.

North Somerset Together

North Somerset Together (NST) started as a rapid, informal coordination mechanism during the Covid19 pandemic (food, transport, mutual aid) and has since evolved into an ongoing VCSE forum. NST meetings focus on practical, operational coordination and mutual learning among VCSE organisations and some statutory partners – sharing information, contacts and opportunities – rather than on formal governance or high-level strategy.

NST meets regularly online and in person and, in February 2026, about 190 individuals on its mailing list, though not all of these attend meetings. The organisations represented are very diverse, from some of the smallest, hyper-localised VCSEs up to the largest, such as VANS. Some representatives of North Somerset Council also attend, and the group is convened by a member of staff in the Engagement and Partnership team, which is in turn part of Communications, located in the Council's Corporate Services and Transformation directorate.

NST is well run and serves an important function, but is, nevertheless, an example of how arbitrary structures of local infrastructure delivery have developed over time. Covid19 represented an extraordinary challenge, to which a rapid response was needed, and the Council took on coordination. However, logically, a VCSE forum focused on operational matters and delivery should be hosted by an LIO so that it can form part of a clearly defined wider structure of coordination, collaboration, and facilitation within the sector.

With an operational focus, NST could complement the work of a VCSE alliance and a North Somerset Partnership Board (Figure 25). The work of NST and a new VCSE Alliance would be structured around the co-design, delivery, and operationalisation of a VCSE Strategy (see Co-creation of a VCSE Strategy, below).
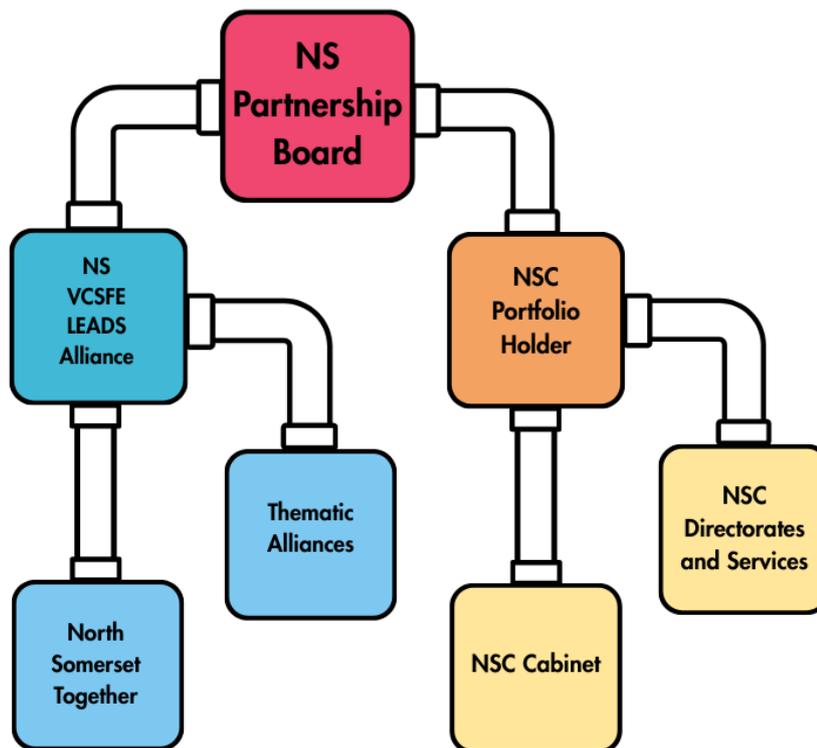
Figure 25: The Plumbing.

How NSC sees its Relationship with the Voluntary Sector

North Somerset Council's relationship with the voluntary sector reflects many of the themes already discussed in this report. In sum, NSC sees the voluntary sector as:

- operationally essential but strategically underdeveloped
- fragmented, with each directorate having different and inconsistent relationships
- a strategic asset

NSC interviewees talk about the need for a good relationship with the VCSE sector, describing it as essential, not optional, because voluntary sector organisations add important dimensions to service design and delivery. These dimensions include being closer to residents, enjoying high levels of trust, playing key preventive and early-help roles, and tackling inequalities. Nevertheless, these sentiments are not necessarily acted upon across the Council. Why might this be so?

First, the benefits of North Somerset Council working in partnership with the local VCSE are only partially understood, and there is limited shared understanding and articulation of these benefits across the Council. Although there are good examples of delivery-focused working relationships between some directorates and VCSE organisations (as demonstrated in our case study of Case Study: Adult Social Care), these are not visible to people working in other directorates.

Second, the nature of the strategic partnership has not been defined. One of the obvious vehicles for creating this strategic vision is the North Somerset Partnership Board, but it is currently moribund.

Third, the benefits of working in partnership are not well articulated through credible and consistent data collection on a) what the Council spends on commissioning, contracts, or grants awarded to the voluntary sector, and b) the size, shape, and impact of the

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voluntary sector on improving people's lives. For example, the [North Somerset Open Data](#) platform has a section on grant awards, but it has not been updated since 2019.

Despite these deficits, there is ample evidence from across the country of robust benefits to local authorities of working with the Voluntary Sector. The LGA sets these out in its [Toolkit for Partnership working with the voluntary and community sector](#) (Figure 26).

Direct Benefits	Delivering better services – commissioning the local VCS often produces higher quality services that deliver tailored support to residents based on deep-rooted connections and knowledge.
	Increasing reach of services – supporting councils to deliver many services across large geographies and diverse communities.
	Delivering important additional services to support effectiveness of statutory services – for example, in adult social care it would be impossible to deliver the required level of care in communities without the VCSE's doing a large amount to support individuals that is beyond statutory services.
	Unlocking untapped resources within the community itself – the VCS can mobilise people and resources in a way councils often cannot.
	Enhancing places – if a council's core duty is to create a better place for people to live, the VCS should be involved as they share the same purpose.
	Representing diverse communities for tailored service provision – the VCS can perform a vital function as local connectors.
Indirect Benefits	Rebalancing power to increase civic participation - in partnership with VCS organisations, councils can create the necessary environment for people to be heard by those with power and influence.
	Increasing aspiration and enterprise through community ownership - community ownership can drive aspiration, enterprise, and transform local services.
	Increasing social capital – by working with the VCS to develop spaces for the community to come together organically to collaborate on local issues, councils can grow social capital and networks.

Figure 26: Direct and Indirect Benefits of Local Authorities working with the Voluntary Sector ([LGA,2023](#)).

One way to understand how the local authority sees its relationship with the voluntary sector is to look at the current status of the voluntary sector in NSC strategies.

Current Status of the VCSE in NSC Strategies

North Somerset's most recent [Corporate Plan 2024-2028](#) contains the commitment to:

> "strengthen our collaboration and co-production with Town and Parish Councils, the voluntary and the community sector to ensure we work well together for the benefits of our residents."

Despite the commitment to strengthen the partnership between NSC and the VCSE sector, the associated actions have not yet been completed. Contained in the [North Somerset Corporate Plan Action Plan](#) (2024-2028), these include (Figure 27):

- co-produce a VCSE Strategy
- produce an associated Action Plan
- develop and implement an annual VCSE sector engagement plan, including regular quarterly meetings and an annual sector celebration event.

> This last action is flagged as one that is particularly relevant to equality groups, enabling NSC to meet its equality objectives. The action was superseded by the Empowering Communities Strategy (discussed below).

Strengthen our collaboration and co-production with Town and Parish Councils, the voluntary and the community sector to ensure we work well together for the benefits of our residents.	Support the Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise sector by co-producing a joint VCFSE strategy and implement the action plan to support the sector.	● Co-produced strategy and action plan by the end of 2024.	● Partnerships for the goals ● Reduced inequalities
	Empower and enable our communities by developing a Community Strategy and action plan	● Developed strategy and action plan by the end of 2024 ● Maintain the number of community living rooms project funded in 2024 and 2025. ● Delivery of Shared Prosperity Fund community grants programme and Rural Prosperity Fund community grants in 2024.	● Good health and wellbeing ● Partnerships for the goals ● Reduced inequalities
Develop and implement an annual Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise sector engagement plan including regular quarterly meetings and an annual sector celebration event 🔟.		● A twelve month engagement plan co-produced and published. ● Explore holding an annual 'North Somerset Stars' celebration event for the sector.	● Partnerships for the goals ● Peace, justice and strong institutions ● Sustainable cities and communities

Figure 27: Excerpts from the North Somerset Corporate Plan Action Plan (2024-2028), pages 18 and 29.

The Empowering Communities Strategy (Figure 28) was co-designed with a wide range of VCSE sector partners, including the North Somerset Together network, representatives from North Somerset Town and Parish Councils, and the North Somerset Wellbeing Collective. It connects to other key North Somerset Council strategic frameworks e.g. the Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy and Action Plan, in relation to its aims and ambitions, which are to enable connected, cohesive, and resilient communities.
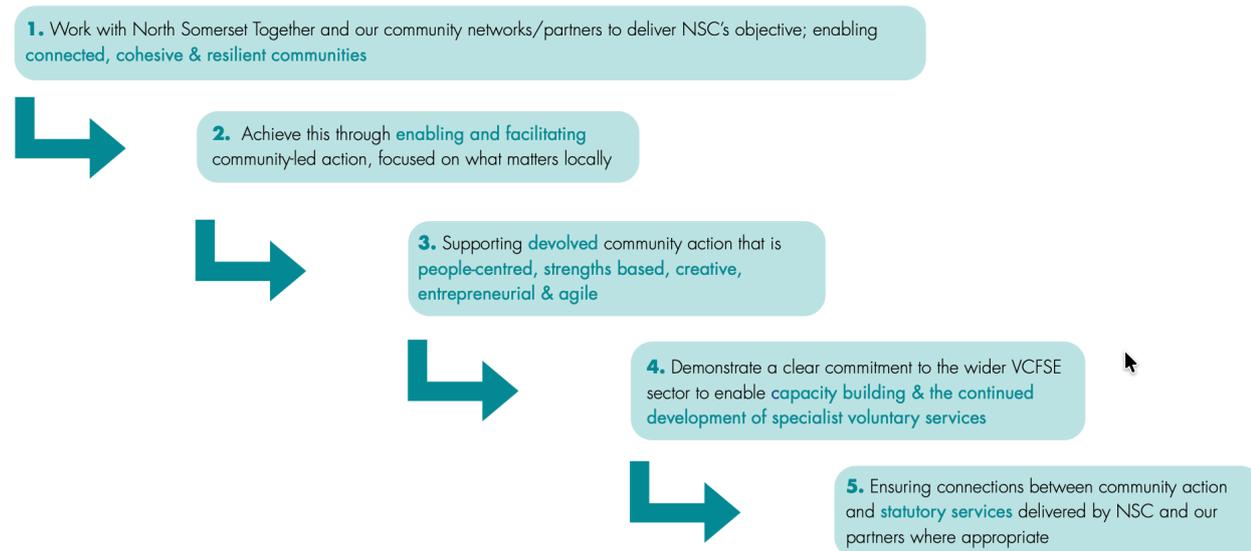
Figure 28: North Somerset council ambitions (North Somerset Council, 2024).

The Empowering Communities Strategy expired 2024 and does not seem to have been updated at the time of writing, likely because some objectives are incorporated into the updated Corporate Plan. Despite this, one NSC interviewee admitted that it was not clear what had happened to the development of a VCSE strategy. Another commented that the lack of strategy leaves the Council in an odd relationship with the sector because while individual services are commissioned, the Council don't commission strategically.

Locality Partnerships

Locality Partnerships work at a local level with their communities to improve health and wellbeing. Each partnership focuses on a given area and population, although the geographies reflect health providers' requirements and not consistent with NSC's own operational boundaries. Within BNSSG, there are two Locality Partnerships (Woodspring and Weston, Worle and Villages) that cover North Somerset. They are made up of local health, social care, and voluntary sector organisations and groups, working with local

people and communities as equal partners to improve health and wellbeing. The current ICS reorganisation will see more emphasis on Neighbourhoods. The implications of this for Locality Partnerships is not yet clear, but there is nevertheless considerable learning to be derived from the relationship between the Locality Partnerships and the voluntary sector.

Interviewees with experience of the Locality Partnerships point out that VCSEs are built into the Locality Partnership Board, which includes two joint leads alongside the chair, who is a GP. Other partners include NSC's Director of Adult Social Care, public health consultants, and Sirona Care and Health.[9]

Although Locality Partnerships, like the Health and Wellbeing Board and BNSSG, are focused on health and its wider determinants, they act as a model of interaction between partners that is instructive when reflecting on some of the issues raised in this report so far.

First, there are people holding the space, creating the conditions in which partnerships can develop. Specifically, these are the Development Managers (one for each locality) and the Localities Director for North Somerset. The Development Managers support the locality partnership. This is important because, as a review in February 2024 highlighted, the Locality Partnerships exhibit most of the challenges that attend any complex system, including fragmentation and complexity and different cultures and paradigms.

Second, interviewees spoke about how the Locality Partnership Board is complemented by several subgroups and communities of practice. These provide a connection between strategic and operational conversations, although as the review pointed out, a focus on outcomes can overlook the quality of processes and relationships as drivers of innovation and improvement. There is a clear relationship with the Health and Wellbeing Board.

Third, there seem to be strong, personal working relationships between individuals based on shared knowledge of the geography, the communities, and the issues they face.

In the next section, we turn to a consideration of the usefulness of Asset Based Community Development as a way to change cultures of working and provide a practical tool for community development.

Can ABCD be useful?

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. At the same time, VCSE infrastructure delivery is uncoordinated and underfunded. Under the pressure of increased demand and reduced funding, a deficit-based needs assessment frames service design and delivery. Meanwhile, grant and commissioning processes sometimes favour larger organisations and those with an existing relationship. There is a disconnect between the risk-averse, procedurally driven culture of local government and the more relational, adaptive culture of community organisations.

So far in this report, the North Somerset LEADS framework has focused on structural solutions such as innovative funding, clarifying relationships, fixing the plumbing, creating a strategy, and identifying a portfolio holder: all practical steps. Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) augments these steps by providing both a culture of shared working and an applied tool through which to identify priorities at the strategic level and

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[9] Sirona is a not-for-profit Community Interest Company providing publicly funded adult and children's community healthcare services.

deliver positive change in North Somerset's communities. Here we offer a brief analysis of how ABCD principles can be deployed.

What is strong, not what is wrong

ABCD rests on strengths-based thinking. It prioritises citizen involvement, placing people at the centre with their stories, skills, networks and associations. Government, business and the VCSE sector play supporting roles. Those working within an ABCD framework act as facilitators, 'alongsiders' or animators. Their task is not to *do for* or *do to* communities, but to create the conditions in which residents can lead change themselves.

Central to the approach is asset mapping. This involves identifying people, physical spaces, associations, knowledge, passions and connections, and making them visible. However, mapping alone is insufficient. If collaborative processes gather information but fail to activate and weave connections, asset mapping becomes data collection rather than community building. Effective ABCD requires relationship-building, trust, and a willingness to step back while still holding responsibility for enabling connections. The emphasis remains on empowerment rather than victimhood. When communities understand their own role in shaping local challenges, they are more likely to identify practical actions they can take together. Strong communities cannot be commissioned or project-managed into existence; they grow from the inside out, when people choose to act collectively.

'Provider State' to Facilitation Role

Interviewees from NSC identified that the Council has historically identified problems itself and designed solutions without consultation or a co-design process. Where ABCD has been used elsewhere, it has repositioned councils from a 'provider state' model toward a facilitating role that removes barriers, connects assets, and supports community-led action (Figure 29). There are abundant examples of this, with numerous reported impacts ranging from improved wellbeing, growth in the voluntary sector, and greater community resilience. These are all benefits that reduce demand on the overstretched services provided by both local authorities and the NHS.

Local Authority / Area	How ABCD Has Been Used	Reported Impact	Website Link
South Gloucestershire	Embedded local initiatives and local frameworks (South Gloucestershire Compact, Town and Parish Charter, Keep it Local), cross-sector ABCD Framework was co-produced, part of the 'Community in Action' strand of the South Gloucestershire Prevention Programme, promoting prevention, self-sufficiency and community-led action.	Revived social groups, increased volunteering, strengthened cross-sector relationships, better recognition of local assets.	ABCD in South Gloucestershire
Leeds City Council	Citywide ABCD programme using community builders and locality pathfinders to map and mobilise resident assets.	Stronger social connections, increased community-led activity, improved wellbeing, and reported social return on investment.	ABCD in Leeds
Gloucester City Council	Embedded ABCD into community engagement strategy; funded community builders and recognised grassroots associations.	Growth of independent local groups, stronger resident leadership, and cultural shift	ABCD in Gloucester

		toward strengths-based engagement.	
East Hampshire District Council	Adopted ABCD within 2024–2028 strategy; stakeholder engagement and asset identification across parishes.	Improved collaboration with local organisations and focus on long-term community resilience and asset transfer.	ABCD in East Hampshire
Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead	Developed and shared an ABCD toolkit to guide strengths-based community work.	Provided structured framework for empowering local groups and embedding asset based thinking.	ABCD in the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead
London Borough of Croydon (via Croydon Voluntary Action)	Neighbourhood-based ABCD programmes led by voluntary sector partners.	Strengthened grassroots networks and influenced local commissioning and engagement approaches.	ABCD in Croydon
Suffolk and Essex (Network/Partnership Approach)	Regional ABCD practitioner networks and training across councils and community organisations.	Built practitioner capacity, shared learning, and supported place-based resilience strategies.	ABCD in Suffolk and Essex

Figure 29: Examples of the use of ABCD by local authorities

Accountability, Impact, and Commissioning

ABCD also reframes accountability and impact. Councils typically measure value through outputs, key performance indicators, and financial compliance, whilst – as the table above shows – VCSE organisations often articulate value in terms of relationships, trust, wellbeing, and social cohesion. ABCD approaches encourage participatory and narrative measures of success, which we discuss in Data and Evidence, above.

Commissioning practices can either strengthen or undermine the ABCD approach. They are often underpinned by complex processes, strict rules, and reporting and quality assurance requirements that do not necessarily align with the ABCD approach. An asset based commissioning approach begins by assuming strengths are already present, even if not immediately visible. Progressive commissioning models that genuinely support ABCD tend to share a few common features:

- fund relationships and capacity rather than outputs
- distribute power to communities
- tolerate the ambiguity that comes with emergent, community-led work

Working beyond silos is essential. The existence of venues for shared working and strong direction from the top are essential to this, making the resurrection of the Partnership Board critical.

Challenges include limited awareness of ABCD, resource constraints, consultation fatigue and concerns about inequalities. Disparities in tangible assets between neighbourhoods may raise fears that ABCD could exacerbate inequality. However, assets include not only money and buildings but also networks, stories, experience and social capital.

Implementation requires asking three key questions:

- what can residents do themselves in association?
- what can they do with some outside help?
- what do they want outside agents to do?

In areas with fewer visible assets, there may be greater responsibility on public bodies to invest and build capacity while still respecting community leadership. For North Somerset, this means sustainable funding infrastructure organisations to build capacity and skills in the voluntary sector.

Ultimately, ABCD does not eliminate power imbalances overnight. It does, however, offer a coherent philosophical and practical framework for shifting relationships in North Somerset from dependency and transaction toward partnership and co-ownership. Its success depends on genuine buy-in from those in positions of power and a willingness to hand over control. Without this, engagement risks becoming tokenistic rather than transformative.

Across Council, VCSE, and community contexts, ABCD invites a reform of commissioning, operational design, and public involvement – all of which are developed in the North Somerset LEADS framework. ABCD challenges institutions to lead by stepping back, to invest in enabling practice, and to recognise that sustainable wellbeing grows from connected, confident communities mobilising the strengths they already possess.

ABCD is arguably closer to what good voluntary and community sector organisations already do intuitively: building trust, working relationally, starting from what people can contribute rather than their deficits. Formally adopting ABCD gives the voluntary sector a framework to articulate that practice, make it legible to funders, and defend it against service-delivery models that treat communities as passive recipients.

The challenge is that ABCD takes longer to show results than a grant-funded project with a 12-month output target. That means both the council and funders need to be willing to measure success differently – looking at shifts in community confidence, local leadership, and network density, not just service delivery numbers. This can be a hard sell and involves accepting a certain amount of risk. However, as the Wigan Deal, one of the most well-known and evaluated examples shows, it is also the only approach that has a realistic chance of breaking the cycle of repeated, ineffective intervention (Appendix Six).

There are examples of de facto strength-based approaches in North Somerset such as Case Study: Power to Pill (featured earlier in this report) and Our Neighbourhood Network (ONN), a community movement based in Weston-super-Mare. These projects have some of the features of ABCD, such as bringing communities together, building stronger networks, promoting community growth, and creating opportunities to improve health and wellbeing. However, they are standalone and not underpinned by a fundamental change of philosophy and approach from the Council.

Case Study: Bournville, Weston-super-Mare

One current opportunity to develop some of the recommendations of the North Somerset LEADS approach is in the area identified by MHCLG as Weston Bournville, in Weston-super-Mare, which was recently awarded Pride in Place funding of £20m over the next 10 years. This funding has been awarded to 146 'doubly disadvantaged' neighbourhoods across England. Each Pride in Place area is represented by a single Middle Layer Super Output Area (MSOA) – a geographic unit used by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) to report local-level data. Two OCSI research-led datasets, the Community Needs Index and the Index of Multiple Deprivation.

Weston Bournville is made up of part of South Ward (Bournville and the Potteries) and a small part of Uphill Ward (Coronation). Weston Bournville faces a range of conjoined issues, set out in Figure 30. It represents a timely opportunity for operationalising the North Somerset LEADS framework for a couple of reasons. First, the LEADS framework

is a means of delivering on the three stated objectives of Pride in Place as a community-led neighbourhood improvement scheme: building stronger communities, creating thriving places, and empowering local people to take back control.

Second, Pride in Place has been awarded at the time when there is a confluence of reports and activity associated with UK SPF funding: the North Somerset LEADS report, the Community Wealth Building report, and the Power to Pill evaluation. Together, these drive a progressive, collaborative, and redistributive vision of community development that goes beyond 'business as usual' in terms of neighbourhood-scale regeneration. In particular, they extend a traditional notion of economic development to show how capacity building and community development can be achieved in a more holistic way than a project-based approach.
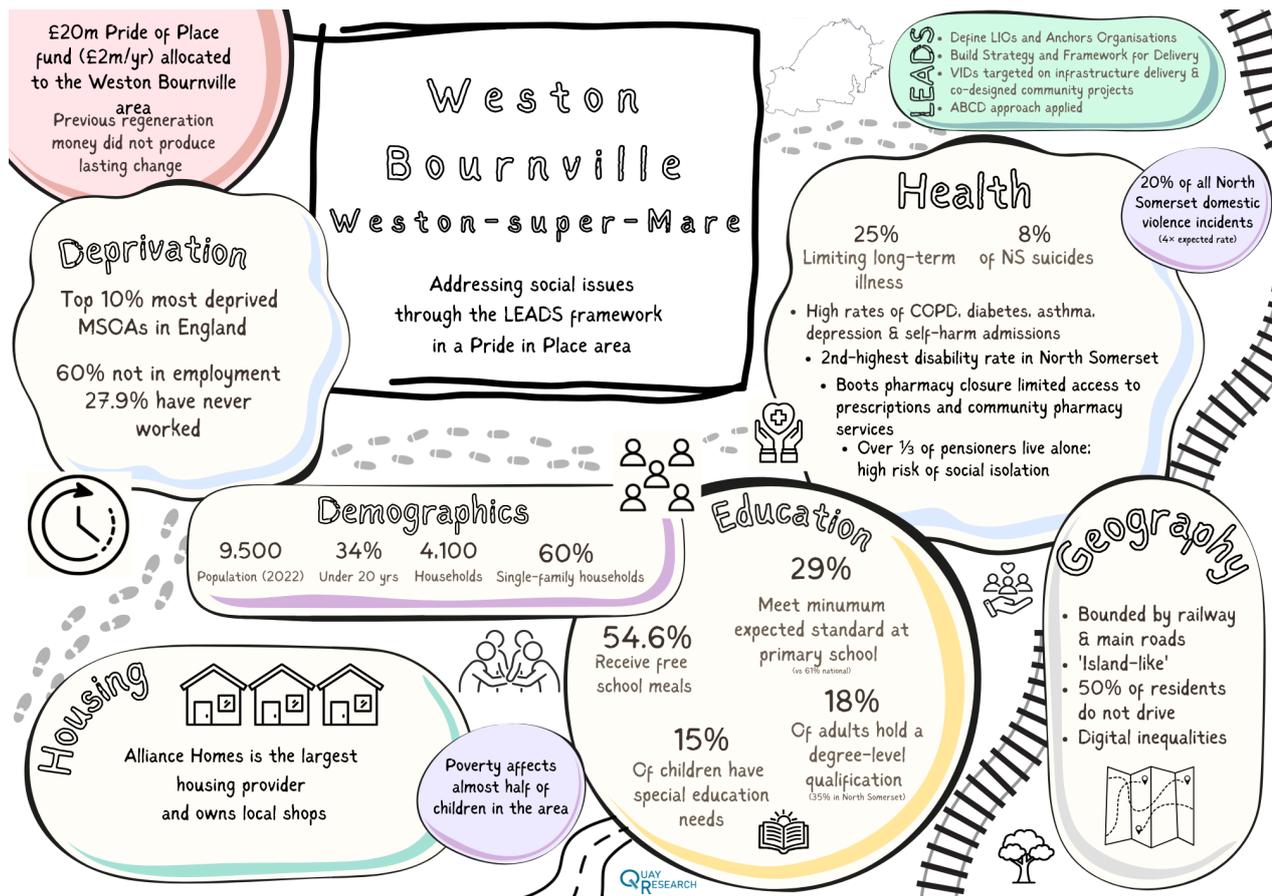
Figure 30: The issues that face Bounville that could be addressed through the North Somerset LEADS framework

It is precisely the connected nature of these challenges that demands a multi-layered approach that addresses strategy, funding, infrastructure delivery, and other key aspects of the North Somerset LEADS framework. Combined with applying the principles of Community Wealth Building, the potential exists for transformative change in Bournville.

In the next substantive section of this report, we set out how the insights we have identified above translate into actions in the North Somerset LEADS framework.

Aim 3: Design a joint, strategic approach that supports a diverse, sustainable, and flourishing VCSE sector to better serve communities across North Somerset

North Somerset LEADS framework

This section translates the insights from the rest of the report into 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, in order 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 reason, the tables below may contain some duplication.

In addition, we have also identified some meta, cross-cutting themes that underpin the conditions in which other aspects of the North Somerset LEADS framework can be delivered. These cross-cutting themes, shown in Figure 32, are briefly discussed here.

Co-creation of a VCSE Strategy

This will define the relationship between NSC and the voluntary sector, addressing governance arrangements, defining key strategic priorities and joint areas of focus, the structure of delivery, how success is measured, and risk management. There are many examples of codesigned strategies between local authorities and VCSEs, some of which are shown in Figure 31.

Area / Org	Document / Resource	Link
Greater Manchester	VCSE Accord and Fair Funding Protocol (GMCA)	greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk
Stockport	VCSE Strategy (Sector3 / Stockport Council)	sector3sk.org/stockport-VCSE-strategy
Suffolk	VCSE Resilience Charter (Suffolk and North East Essex ICS)	sneeics.org.uk
Sandwell	Sandwell Compact	sandwell.gov.uk/voluntary-community-sector-support/sandwell-compact
Hackney	VCS Strategy development (Cabinet decision report)	hackney.moderngov.co.uk

Figure 31: Examples of VCSE strategies.

These strategies tend to have certain things in common:
- Based on a shared vision and principles
- Co-designed
- Identify infrastructure organisations as intermediaries
- Based on equal partnership and parity of esteem
- Clear on funding and sustainability commitments
- Commitment to sector resilience and capacity building
- Underpinned by equality, diversity and inclusion
- Founded on neighbourhood and place-based working
- Contain shared accountability and review mechanisms
- Align with wider strategies.

Co-Create VCFSE Strategy
Governance.
Key Strategic Priorities.
Joint Priority Areas.
Operational Delivery.
Measuring Success.
Risk Management.

Framework for Delivery
Map capacity.
Provide funding.
Build capacity.
Capture better data.
ABCD.
Comms & engagement.
Targeted support.

Incorporate into NSC Strategies
Corporate.
JHWB.
Community.
Other?

Fix the Plumbing
Partnership Board.
JHWB.
Locality Partnerships.
Senior Leaders' Forum.
North Somerset
Together.

Coordinate Infrastructure Delivery
VCSE Alliance
facing NSC.
Clarity on LIOs &
Anchors.
Roles &
responsibilities.

Funding and Investment
Social value from
procurement for
strategic investment.
CIL & Sector 106 for
projects/community
development.

Council Spend
Transparent.
straightforward
procurement.
Transparent spend.
Visibility.
Legacy contracts.

Council Ownership
Portfolio
Holder or
SRO.
Update job roles for
Directorate leads

Figure 32: Cross-Cutting Actions for the North Somerset LEADS framework

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

This framework would identify specific actions, such as mapping the network and its capacity (drawing on the 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.

Incorporate the voluntary sector more clearly into NSC Strategies

The value of the voluntary 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 NSC, within the voluntary sector, and critically, *between* NSC and the voluntary sector. This cross-cutting action has several dimensions, which are set out in the Engage section.

Three key steps stand out. First, reinstate the North Somerset Partnership Board to provide a venue at the highest strategic level to coordinate work in a place-based way on complex problems, give communities a voice, ensure accountability, balance power, and build trust whilst avoiding duplication.

Second, review and articulate the connections between North Somerset Together, the Senior Leaders' Forum, the Health and Wellbeing Board and the Partnership Board (if reinstated).

Third, identify a portfolio holder and/or SRO to develop the relationship with the voluntary sector on behalf of the Council. Ideally, NSC would also edit key job roles in directorates to include responsibility for the relationship with the voluntary sector, so that a consideration of the role of VCSEs is baked in.

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 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 funding. Despite squeezed budgets, there is significant scope for innovation, discussed in Figure 36, below. Two headlines from this section are that, first, we call attention to the difference 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 the infrastructure requirements.

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 requires

oversight of what is currently spent and where, the nature of legacy contacts, and how commissioning and procurement work in relation to the voluntary sector.

Ensure Council Ownership

Advancing all of the actions listed here also requires that NSC identify a portfolio holder and/or SRO and write responsibility for the relationship with the voluntary sector into key job roles in directorates, so that consideration of the role of VCSEs is baked in.

The North Somerset LEADS section also takes as its touchstone the Principles of Partnership, drawn up in February 2025 and discussed above (see How have the Principles of Partnership been operationalised?). As a reminder, the following concerns were identified:

- Partnership and Collaboration
- Capacity and Skills
- Equity and Inclusion
- Funding and Commissioning

To tackle these concerns, four Principles of Partnership were developed:

- Trust
- Nurture
- Engage
- Respect

Underpinning these four principles was the agreement that NSC and the VCSE share common goals and a shared purpose, that the development of communities and the VCSE should be supported, that effective communication should be used to ensure meaningful involvement, and that all VCSE partners should be recognised as equal partners.

In addition to the cross-cutting actions set out above, the North Somerset LEADS framework contains additional, specific actions.

Learn

Using the insights from the research presented above, this section identifies key objectives and associated actions focused on how the voluntary sector and North Somerset Council can better learn from each other's work, processes, contributions, and impact (Figure 33).

One of the underlying issues in North Somerset is that the size, shape, and geography of the voluntary sector are not clearly understood. This means that it is currently not possible to compare data on the size, shape, and geography with evidence of demand or need.

As noted elsewhere in this report, in North Somerset, the distinctions between LIOs and anchor organisations are blurred. There are also several organisations delivering local infrastructure functions, but not in a way that is coordinated. Meanwhile, data on the sector's outputs and impacts are inconsistent and fragmented. Some of the actions here focus on developing mechanisms to collect data, but a certain amount of trust is required to develop the strategy, framework, and funding structures while these mechanisms are put in place.

It is currently very hard to determine how much spend there is by NSC in the voluntary sector, either through grants, commissioning, or contracts. Greater clarity on the finances will help to show, first, whether spend is aligned to strategic priorities within the Council,

and second, inform the development of a VCSE Strategy and Framework for Delivery. Arguably, transparency is also necessary if NSC want to map spend to outcomes and impacts.

Theme	Objective	Actions
Framework for Delivery	Assemble more robust data on the size and shape of the voluntary sector.	• Extract North Somerset-specific data on the size and shape of the voluntary sector from the 2026 State of the Sector survey.
	Generate consistent data on outcomes and impacts.	• Development of a bespoke but simple to use evaluation framework that can be used across the sector.
	Make data on the size and shape of the voluntary sector and VCSE outcomes and impacts visible on existing platforms.	• Improve the functionality of the North Somerset Open Data Dashboard. • Incorporate data from State of the Sector survey and impacts and outcomes into the NS Open Data Dashboard. • Map the distribution of VCSEs and statutory service provision against other factors, e.g. Indices of Multiple Deprivation and health inequalities.
	Ensure that data, knowledge and insight flow through the system.	• Reinstate NS Partnership Board. • Review SLF terms of reference, taking into account the outcome of the exercise to identify more clearly LIOs and anchor organisations (see Learn, above) • Review the ownership of NST within NSC and align to delivery of infrastructure functions. • Review and articulate the connections between NST, SLF, HWBB, Partnership Board.
Coordinate Infrastructure Delivery	Clearer identification of LIOs and Anchor organisations.	• Mapping exercise, drawing on data from State of Sector report.
	Decide on a centralised or distributed model of VCSE infrastructure delivery.	• A full audit of infrastructure functions, leading to a coordinated plan for delivery.
	Clarify the distributed model of infrastructure provision.	• Map the current delivery of infrastructure functions.
Council Spend	Clarity of spend by NSC in the voluntary sector.	• Review of grants, contracts, and commissioning, including legacy contracts. • Incorporate spending plans into Framework for Delivery.

Figure 33: Objectives and actions linked to "Learn".

Engage

[NAVCA](#) identifies working with communities and co-design of services and support as two areas where local authorities and the voluntary sector should be focused. This entails finding ways to engage and communicate well, understanding people's concerns and priorities, drawing on all the information and knowledge about a place and its needs, and working with VCSEs at an early stage to define problems and design services. This requires good plumbing to enable routine, reliable connection and regular flows of information, insight, and investment between North Somerset Council and the voluntary sector at all scales, from the smallest to the largest VCSEs (Figure 34).

Theme	Objective	Actions
VCSE Strategy	Create the scaffold to support engagement.	• Complete a full assessment using the LGA tool and build an action plan, incorporating

		the suggestions of the NS LEADS framework. • Co-design VCSE strategy. • Co-design Framework for Delivery. • MOU between NSC and the voluntary sector.
Framework for Delivery	Engage in co-production activities to develop Framework for Delivery.	• Map capacity. • Comms and engagement plan
The Plumbing	Improve the connections between different scales of activity.	• Reinstate NS Partnership Board. • Review SLF terms of reference, taking into account the outcome of the exercise to identify more clearly LIOs and anchor organisations (see Learn, above) • Review the ownership of NST within NSC and align to delivery of infrastructure functions. • Review and articulate the connections between NST, SLF, HWBB, Partnership Board.
	'Bake in' consideration of the role and contribution of the VCSE across the Council.	• Appoint Portfolio Holder. • Appoint SRO. • Review key job roles in directorates. • Learn from good practice in the Locality Partnerships and parts of the Council.
Council Ownership	Improve engagement across NSC.	• Identify portfolio holder and/or SRO.

Figure 34: Objectives and actions linked to "Engage."

Adapt

The next objectives are based on adapting some of the structures and good practice that currently exists in order to improve the relationship between NSC and the voluntary sector (Figure 35). This is important because the prospect of starting with a blank sheet of paper is likely to be very daunting for people who are already busy. For example, as noted above, there are already a range of organisations delivering infrastructure functions, and it is more appropriate to clarify and adapt this delivery rather than rebuild it from the ground up. This means having much greater clarity over who does what, where resources are distributed, and how to organise efficiently around a distributed model of infrastructure delivery.

Theme	Objective	Actions
Extant NSC Strategies	Adapt current NSC strategies.	• Incorporate a consideration of the voluntary sector into revised NS Strategies.
The Plumbing	Adapt and connect current fora.	• Reinstate NS Partnership Board. • Review SLF terms of reference, taking into account the outcome of the exercise to identify more clearly LIOs and anchor organisations (see Learn, above) • Review the ownership of NST within NSC and align to delivery of infrastructure functions. • Review and articulate the connections between NST, SLF, HWBB, Partnership Board.
	Embed consideration of voluntary sector across Council	• Appoint Portfolio Holder. • Appoint SRO. • Review key job roles in directorates.

		• Learn from good practice in the Locality Partnerships and parts of the Council.
Coordinate Infrastructure Delivery	Clearer identification of LIOs and Anchor organisations.	• Mapping exercise, drawing on data from State of Sector report.
	Decide on a centralised or distributed model of VCSE infrastructure delivery.	• A full audit of infrastructure functions, leading to a coordinated plan for delivery.
	Clarify the distributed model of infrastructure provision.	• Map the current delivery of infrastructure functions.
Spend	Utilise social value from procurement.	• Adapt the current guidance on social value from procurement to create a VID.

Figure 35: Objectives and actions linked to "Adapt."

Develop

This section reviews objectives for the development within the voluntary sector of organisational skills, knowledge, confidence, capabilities, and capacity. It also addresses funding and investment (Figure 36).

Theme	Objective	Actions
VCSE Strategy	Build an improved strategic relationship.	• Complete a full assessment using the LGA tool and build an action plan incorporating the suggestions of the NS LEADS framework.
Framework for Delivery	Develop ABCD approaches.	• Develop ABCD approach in pilot areas for ABCD, e.g. Bournville. • Apply learning from other strength-based approaches. • Embed in VCSE and Council strategies.
Coordinate Infrastructure Delivery	Clarify the distributed model of infrastructure provision.	• A full audit of infrastructure functions, leading to a coordinated plan for delivery.
	Build capacity in the voluntary sector.	• Map the current delivery of infrastructure functions. • Needs analysis of the voluntary sector, related to the four functions of infrastructure.
	Develop thematic alliances.	• Identify thematic areas for joint working and form smaller VCSE alliances around them.
Funding and Investment	Build capacity in the voluntary sector.	• Training in participating in commissioning, writing grants, and finding new sources of funding.
	Sustainable funding.	• Develop Community Wealth Building approaches, drawing on recommendations of the CLES report.

Figure 36: Objectives and actions linked to "Develop."

Strengthen

The objectives below focus on how to strengthen the relationship between NSC and the voluntary sector through better coordination, funding, and baking in a consideration of the role and value of the voluntary sector into the Council (Figure 37).

Theme	Objective	Actions
VCSE Strategy	Build an improved strategic relationship.	• Complete a full assessment using the LGA tool and build an action plan incorporating the suggestions of the NS LEADS framework.
Extant NSC Strategies	Strengthen the presence of the voluntary sector in current NSC strategies.	• Incorporate a consideration of the voluntary sector into revised NS Strategies.

Coordinate Infrastructure Delivery	Clarify the distributed model of infrastructure provision.	• A full audit of infrastructure functions, leading to a coordinated plan for delivery.
	Strengthen the NSC-facing forum.	• Create a specific VCSE LEADS Alliance facing NSC, based on learning from the VCSE Alliance facing BNSSG.
Funding and Investment	Sustainable funding for the voluntary sector.	• Develop VID scheme via social value from procurement. • Make use of CIL and Section 106 funds to support community-based projects.
Council Spend	Clarity and fairness in commissioning and procurement processes.	• Review commissioning and procurement processes alongside review of spend. • Review legacy contracts.
Council Ownership	'Bake in' an awareness of the voluntary sector across directorates.	• Identify portfolio holder and/or SRO.

Figure 37: Objectives and actions linked to "Strengthen."

Conclusion

This report demonstrates that 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: unimplemented partnership principles, the absence of a functioning strategic forum, inconsistent delivery of infrastructure functions, opaque funding arrangements, and a lack of shared data on VCSE activity and impact. These gaps not only limit collaboration but also impede the ability of both NSC and the VCSE sector to make evidence-informed decisions or to demonstrate the collective value generated across communities.

Despite this, there is a shared recognition – across interviews, workshops, and survey responses – 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.

Next Steps

The immediate next step is for NSC and the VCSE sector to jointly identify a small number of priority actions drawn from the North Somerset LEADS framework. These should be realistic, time-bound, and co-owned. Candidates include: reinstating a strategic Partnership Board; co-creating a VCSE Strategy and Framework for Delivery; mapping infrastructure roles; developing a shared approach to data and impact, and exploring the innovations in funding set out in the report.

Once priorities are agreed, both sectors should commit to working through them collaboratively, with transparent communication, shared leadership, and mutual accountability. By taking these steps together, North Somerset can move from a fragmented system to a coordinated, resilient partnership that is better equipped to support its communities now and into the future.

Appendix One

Methods and Data

This appendix contains details on our methods, the survey questions, and data tables. An information and consent form was sent to all interviewees and was included in the survey.

Method	Description	Number
Qualitative semi-structured interviews	- Open-ended and conversational. - Analysed using content and discourse analysis. Content analysis asks how many times a theme arises (e.g. funding) whereas discourse analysis asks how something is spoken about (e.g. short-term funding as a barrier to innovation in the voluntary sector). - The participants were from voluntary sector organisations, NSC, BNSSG, and other relevant stakeholders.	22 interviews with some additional follow-up interviews
Quantitative data and reports	- Quantitative data and current reports from CANS, RENS, VANS, Alliance Homes, For All Health Living and Power to Pill. NSC shared their Principles For Partnership. - Quantitative financial data were challenging to access. This has restricted our ability to conduct financial reviews of VCSE spend by NSC. This issue of being unable to evaluate spend is raised in the report.	N/A
Interactive Workshops	- Two NST workshops. - Used Padlet to gather insights from participants. - An interactive workshop was held with senior leaders in the VCSE sector.	3
Survey and follow up interviews	- Ran for five weeks from mid-December 2025 to January 23rd 2026. - Twenty-six responses. 3 follow-up interviews with 5 respondents explored the issues arising in the survey. - Low response rate may be due to the fact that the BSNNG State of the Sector survey was in the field at the same time.	26 responses 3 follow up interviews with 5 respondents

Survey Questions

Leadership and Advocacy Questions	Capacity Building Questions
• To what extent do you feel that the voluntary sector in North Somerset has a strong influence on North Somerset Council? • Which organisations in the voluntary sector advocate on behalf of the voluntary sector to North Somerset Council? • Which organisations that you know of support community action, such as helping new voluntary sector organisations to form or supporting existing organisations?	• Where do you currently source training for your paid staff and/or volunteers? • What training would you like to receive for your paid staff and/or volunteers? • What is your view on paying for training? • What other forms of practical support would your organisation benefit from?
Partnership and Collaboration Questions	Volunteering Questions
• How many other voluntary sector organisations do you currently collaborate with? • How do you go about finding other voluntary sector organisations to collaborate with? Choose all that apply. • Do you feel part of a network of local organisations and strategic partners? • Who supports you to achieve effective joint working? • What benefits, if any, would your organisation gain from being part of a wider network of voluntary sector organisations? Choose all that apply.	• How do you currently recruit new volunteers? • From where do you currently receive support to help you recruit new volunteers? • What support would you like to receive to help you recruit new volunteers?

Understanding North Somerset's Voluntary Sector: Survey Data Summaries

Which organisations in the voluntary sector advocate on behalf of the voluntary sector to North Somerset Council?

Option / Response	Count
VANS	17
Don't know	4
Weston Super Mare TC	2
RENS	2
FAHL	2
Nelson Trust	1
NSPWCT	1
BASS	1
SEND	1
Pill Resource Centre	1
Flower Bank	1
VCSE Alliance	1
CANS	1
Curo	1
Health Watch	1
BSWN	1
WERN	1
Connect Somerset	1

Which organisations that you know of support community action, such as helping new voluntary sector organisations to form or supporting existing organisations?

Option / Response	Count
VANS	12
Not sure/don't know	6
WSM TC	2
RENS	2
Somerset Community Foundation	1
CANS	1

Step Together	1
Somewhere to Go	1
NCVO	1
ZCNS	1
Cleaner Coastlines	1
The Hive	1
North Somerset Council	1
BSWN	1
FAHL	1
With You	1
Vision North Somerset	1
WERN	1

To what extent do you feel that the voluntary sector in North Somerset has a strong influence on North Somerset Council?

Option / Response	Count
Our influence with North Somerset Council is neither strong or weak	10
Our influence with North Somerset Council is weak	9
Our influence with North Somerset Council is very weak	4
Our influence with North Somerset Council is strong	3

Total responses: 26

How many other voluntary sector organisations do you currently collaborate with?

Option / Response	Count
More than 5	8
1	6
3	6
2	3
0	2
5	1

Total responses: 26

How do you go about finding other voluntary sector organisations to collaborate with? (Choose all that apply)

Option / Response	Count
We identify organisations working on the same issue	17
We identify organisations working in the same geographical area	18
We find new collaborators through attending North Somerset Together meetings	12
We seek help from the Local Infrastructure Organisation to connect to other groups in the sector	3
North Somerset Council help us to connect to other voluntary sector organisations	2
Other (e.g. word of mouth, chance encounters, joint commitment around diversity)	4
NA / Do not seek to collaborate	2

Total responses: 26 (multi-select; counts reflect individual option selections)

Do you feel part of a network of local organisations and strategic partners?

Option / Response	Count
No	14
Yes	12

Total responses: 26

What benefits, if any, would your organisation gain from being part of a wider network of voluntary sector organisations? (Choose all that apply)

Option / Response	Count
Resource and knowledge sharing (learn from each other's experiences, share best practices, access expertise)	22
Learn about funding opportunities (individual and collaborative funding)	20
Increased influence and advocacy (having a strong voice with policymakers and funders)	14
Reduced duplication and improved service delivery (identify gaps, better coverage of community needs)	11
Professional development and support (peer support, training opportunities, and reduced isolation)	13
Other / Unsure / Caveated response	3

Total responses: 26 (multi-select; counts reflect individual option selections)

Where do you currently source training for your paid staff and/or volunteers? (Choose all that apply)

Option / Response	Count
A specialist voluntary sector support organisation (tailored training on topics like governance, fundraising, safeguarding, and volunteer management)	7
A national charity linked to your organisation (providing specialist training)	7
Online learning platforms (e.g. Charity Learning Consortium or specialist providers)	11
North Somerset Council (e.g. safeguarding, first aid, mental health awareness, equality and diversity)	5
Funding bodies (training offered as part of their support to grantees)	4
Peer learning and mentoring (informal knowledge-sharing through networks, conferences, webinars etc)	9
Commercial training providers (for specialist needs)	6
We do not source any training	4
Other (e.g. NCVO, Parish Council, word of mouth)	3

Total responses: 26 (multi-select; counts reflect individual option selections)

What is your view on paying for training?

Option / Response	Count
Training for the voluntary sector should be free of charge	10
Training for the voluntary sector should be subsidised	10
Training for the voluntary sector should be paid for by the organisations receiving it	2
Other / Nuanced view	4

Total responses: 26

How do you currently recruit new volunteers? (Choose all that apply)

Option / Response	Count
Word of mouth and existing networks (current volunteers, staff, service users, and trustees)	22
Social media and websites (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter/X, and LinkedIn etc)	17
Online volunteer platforms (e.g. Do-it.org)	7
Community events (local fêtes, festivals, or other community gatherings)	13
Posters (libraries, community centres, noticeboards)	7
Educational institutions (universities, colleges, and schools)	6

Newspapers or newsletters (parish magazines etc)	4
Volunteer recruitment events (open days, information sessions etc)	5
Corporate volunteering programmes (volunteering days or micro-volunteering)	4
A local organisation supporting volunteer recruitment	4
Other	1

Total responses: 26 (multi-select; counts reflect individual option selections)

Appendix Two

Opportunities and Risks for VCSEs arising from the NHS 10 Year Plan

NHS 10 Year Plan Priorities	Delivery	Opportunities and Risks for VCSEs (where relevant)
From hospital to community	Establish a Neighbourhood Health Service with more care delivered locally and in homes	**Opportunity:** VCSE organisations become essential partners, contributing wellbeing, social support, and condition-specific expertise **Risk:** poor collaboration and codesign of services, lack of funding, increased referrals, overwhelm
	New Neighbourhood Health Centres (NHCs) in every community Local one-stop hubs, co-locating GPs, community services, diagnostics, and mental health support	**Opportunity:** Co-location improves visibility and streamlines referrals **Risk:** increased demands re: safeguarding, workforce training, data reporting, and evaluation with particular pressures on volunteer-led organisations
	Enhanced GP access	**Opportunity:** Increased demand for social prescribing and community support (loneliness interventions, lifestyle programmes, peer support, mental health groups, carer support) with associated funding for community-based prevention **Risk:** increased demand without commensurate funding or support
	Expanded personal health budgets and care planning	**Opportunity:** People can choose to use budgets on VCSE-delivered services **Risk:** may favour larger VCSEs rather than hyper localised groups
	Integrated services with VCSE, social care, and local authorities	**Opportunity:** long-term contracts, clearer referral pathways, stronger recognition of VCSE as equal partners in health systems **Risk:** Operating inside integrated neighbourhood models means meeting NHS standards for safeguarding; workforce training; data reporting; evaluation
From analogue to digital	A digitally accessible NHS powered by the NHS App as a "doctor in your pocket"	**Opportunity:** VCSE services could integrate with the NHS App ecosystem, receiving referrals or sharing outcomes; digital tools may make it easier to reach specific groups (younger people, carers, people with mobility issues) **Risk:** integrating with app may favour larger VCSEs with IT support; may add an additional cost or require extra capacity; increased referrals may create overwhelm
	Patients manage appointments, feedback, care plans, and medications digitally	**Opportunity:** VCSEs can support patients to understand this information more easily because it is all in one place **Risk:** Organisations will need upgraded IT systems, cybersecurity training, and capacity to input/receive data from NHS systems; meeting standards for data protection, consent, and interoperability may be demanding for smaller charities

	A Single Patient Record will underpin integrated, predictive, and personalised care	**Opportunity:** support provided by VCSEs can be built into the single patient record **Risk:** Lack of access to the single patient record for VCSEs will hinder the support they can provide and VCSEs are 'out of the loop' in terms of coordinated patient care; need for data governance protocols and training
	Use of AI scribes to reduce admin, and wearables for real-time monitoring	**Opportunity:** Community organisations supporting long-term conditions can play roles in coaching people to use devices; interpreting data; reducing digital anxiety; offering hybrid (in-person + digital) support **Risk:** increased demand from those experiencing digital exclusion: lack of smartphone, data literacy and affordability barriers
From sickness to prevention	Public health reforms: tobacco control, obesity strategy, food policy reform	**Opportunity:** VCSE already excels in prevention; work on housing, food security, mental health, youth development, exercise, arts, environment, and community cohesion becomes core to the NHS mission rather than peripheral; stronger funding case for social and community interventions **Risk:** Funding cycles often remain short-term despite long-term prevention ambitions
	Investment in young people's health, school meals, and mental health support	**Opportunity:** Prevention budgets could create long-term contracts for: youth health programmes; community mental health initiatives; food and nutrition interventions; smoking cessation support; community-based physical activity **Risk:** Prevention requires proof of impact; VCSE organisations will need better data collection; outcomes frameworks; evaluation capacity
	New genomics-based population health service and early disease screening	**Opportunity:** VCSE may be essential in outreach, trust-building, and engaging communities in early detection programmes; VCSEs can support people to attend screening appointments through community transport etc. **Risk:** community transport schemes experience increased demand without additional funding
	Shift focus to prevention, health creation, and tackling inequalities	**Opportunity:** VCSE groups often serve populations with the highest health inequalities; this becomes a strategic priority for the NHS **Risk:** Prevention and "health creation" might pressure VCSE groups to align with biomedical priorities at the cost of holistic social missions

Cross-Cutting Implications

Opportunities

- VCSE organisations become key health partners, not peripheral add-ons.
- Increased funding potential, especially around prevention and community support.
- Stronger integration into local health systems and care pathways.
- Greater visibility and recognition of community expertise.

Challenges

- Higher expectations without guaranteed investment.
- Need to scale capacity, digital capability, and governance rapidly.
- Risk that small, grassroots groups are squeezed out by formalisation.

Appendix Three

Benefits of funded training provided by an LIO for the voluntary sector

Benefit of funded training	Description
Removes the cost barrier	Small and micro voluntary groups (60%-80% of the sector in most places) often have no training budget. Funded training gives them access to the same quality of learning as larger charities, directly addressing the market failure where commercial training is priced beyond grassroots organisations.
Designed for the sector	Training is built around how voluntary organisations actually work – not imported from corporate or public sector frameworks. Content on safeguarding, trustee responsibilities, and fundraising is more relevant and immediately applicable.
Builds a shared knowledge base	When multiple organisations in the same area attend the same training, they develop common understanding of practice, language and standards, making collaboration, referrals and joint bids significantly easier.
Enables peer learning and relationship-building	Coordinated training creates structured opportunities for people from different organisations to meet and build trust. The informal learning that happens around a training day is often as valuable as the session itself, particularly in areas where voluntary organisations are isolated.
Responds to locally identified need	An embedded LIO understands what the sector actually needs, shaping training around locally identified gaps rather than what a national provider happens to offer.
Provides continuity and a trusted relationship	Unlike a one-off commercial provider, a LIO can follow up after training, connect people to further support, and track whether learning has been applied. This is particularly valuable for small organisations implementing new practices.
Supports governance and reduces risk	Funded training can systematically reduce governance risk around trustee responsibilities, financial management, safeguarding, and employment law across a whole local ecosystem, protecting both beneficiaries and organisations.
Strengthens credibility with commissioners	Organisations that can demonstrate consistent training standards are better placed to bid for and deliver commissioned services, improving the sector's competitive position and commissioner confidence.
Avoids duplication and inefficiency	A coordinating body can negotiate block access to quality providers, share course development costs, and prevent individual organisations from independently sourcing inferior or duplicated provision.
Improves workforce resilience and volunteer retention	Staff and volunteers who receive training feel more valued, more confident and more likely to stay - a significant benefit in a sector that depends on voluntary commitment and competes for paid staff.

Appendix Four

LGA Self-Assessment Tool NSC Scorecard

This assessment uses a slightly adapted version of a toolkit produced by the LGA. It builds upon research commissioned by the Local Government Association and conducted by Locality into the state of strategic relationships between councils and their local voluntary and community sector.

Self-assessment tool

The LGA toolkit evaluates:

- the benefits of partnership working with the VCSE
- the main types of relationships between councils and the VCSE
- the principles for successful relationships.

The aim of this is to help councils to understand the strengths of their own strategic relationships, identify weaknesses, and plan ways forward.

It is important to note that we offer only a preliminary evaluation of how North Somerset performs against these three criteria. The LGA emphasises that councils should not just come to their own view on what local relationships look like without proper engagement and involvement from local partners. This exercise should be completed in more depth by NSC, the voluntary sector, and ideally the wider group of stakeholders who would make up a reinstated Partnership Board, and even town and parish councils and WECA. Whole area collaboration creates the most comprehensive picture.

The toolkit uses three main areas of self-assessment. A full exercise would use the questions associated with these areas as prompts for discussion. We use a traffic light system for our preliminary analysis. It should be noted that this analysis is based on the research undertaken in the North Somerset LEADS project, which may not have captured all the activity that contributes to this exercise.

🔴 Not well developed

🔴 Some areas not well developed, some partial development

🟠 Partially developed

🟠 Some partial development, some full development

🟢 Fully developed

Assessment one: The benefits of partnership working with the VCSE

A key principle identified by the LGA research is the importance of having a clear understanding of why strategic relationships with the voluntary sector matter. Commitment to working with the voluntary sector can often be the preserve of particular departments or a few key individuals, so an important starting point for any self-assessment is to develop a common view of the benefits of working with the VCSE across the Council to drive a shared commitment.

Key Criteria	Current Performance
Are the key benefits for NSC of working in partnership with the voluntary sector well understood?	(red/amber)
Is there a shared understanding of these benefits across NSC?	(red)
Are there areas where NSC is currently realising these benefits?	(red/amber)
Is NSC benefiting from working with the voluntary sector?	(red/amber)
What is the state of VCSE capacity?	(amber)
Is the Council harnessing existing strategy effectively?	(red/amber)

Assessment two: The type and scope of relationships

The LGA explored the many ways in which councils and VCSE organisations interact with each other. They identified five key 'types' of relationships and produced a typology to help understand the main ways in which relationships are formed, rather than serving as an exhaustive list of potential relationships.

Type	Shaping relationships (red)	Ongoing relationships (red/amber)	Neighbourhood relationships (amber)	Commissioning relationships (red/amber)	Delivery relationships (amber)
Summary	Formalised structures through which councils engage VCSE on strategic direction.	Practical mechanisms for working together on a day-to-day basis.	Neighbourhood level structures for local engagement and where powers, funds, or service delivery can be devolved.	Working together throughout the commissioning cycle. Planning strategically based on local needs, assets, aspirations, and priorities. Co-designing the services to be procured, and the process for doing so. Monitoring and evaluating based on agreed, meaningful, and illustrative metrics.	Local VCSE participating in tenders, winning contracts, and delivering local services.
Example	VCSE Partnership boards and VCSE strategies.	CVS and other infrastructure, compacts, Community Foundations.	Community councils, Area Arrangements, Place Partnerships, Community Networks.	Co-design of commissioning strategies and/or services, being part of a public service framework, community asset transfer.	Winning contracts, forming delivery consortiums, participating in alliance contract.

Key Criteria	Current Performance
Does the Council provide the VCSE with a say over the direction of Council strategy and policy?	(red)
Does the Council support the regular and embedded engagement of the VCSE in everyday working, for example through local infrastructure organisations?	(red)

Does the Council target engagement on a neighbourhood-by-neighbourhood basis?	🔴
Does the Council meaningfully engage the VCSE in commissioning opportunities?	🔴
Does the Council facilitate the delivery of Council services by the VCSE?	🔴🟠

Assessment three: Evaluate how strategic relationships are

The LAG points out that there are no set criteria for what makes a relationship 'strategic' or 'non-strategic', but the four principles for strategic relationships defined in their research suggest a set of qualities which can either be seen to be present or absent.

Together, councils and the local VCSE should have:
- Shared foundations: clarity of purpose, values, and roles, built on shared understanding, knowledge and a commitment to partnership working
- Relational culture: behaviours and ways of working that enable the power of community to flourish, with both sides giving generously to the process and being open to receiving feedback
- Effective structures: systems, mechanisms and processes that are fit for purpose and enable innovation and sustain long-term commitment
- Capacity and resources: having the wherewithal to take action.

Principle	Questions	
Shared foundations	Does the relationship rebalance power through collaborative partnerships, with parity of esteem, trust, and mutual respect?	🔴
	Is there a knowledge and understanding of the value of all parties?	🔴
	Is the relationship supported by senior leadership?	🔴
Relational culture	Does the Council seek to use the relationship to enable and empower the VCSE organisations to contribute their strengths?	🔴
	Is there also an understanding from the VCSE of the areas in which they need to step up to deliver more?	🔴🟠
	Do all parties approach the relationship with a view to learn and understand the position of others?	🔴🟠
Effective structures	Does the wider system maximise the opportunities and benefits of council-VCSE working?	🔴
	Do suitable mechanisms exist through which relationships can thrive, e.g., managed networks, forums, and programmes?	🔴
	Are their appropriate, consistent, and useful processes in place to facilitate good relationships and decision-making?	🔴
Capacity and resources	Is there a shared commitment to prioritising and supporting each other with capacity to develop the relationship?	🔴

Principle	Questions	
	Does the Council support the VCSE to access commissioning opportunities?	◑
	Does the Council support local organisations representing marginalised groups to tackle entrenched issues of inequality in capacity and resource?	◑

The final question is about the degree to which the relationship is strategic in intent and delivery.

Strategic in both intent and delivery – action not needed	✗
Strategic in intent but not in delivery – action needed to bring delivery in line with intent	✗
Strategic not in intent but in delivery – action needed to ensure delivery is understood, valued, and supported at a strategic level	✗
Strategic neither in intent nor delivery – action may or may not be needed depending on plans and opportunities for relationship	✓

Appendix Five

TOMS outcomes related to VCSEs

Theme	Outcome	Measure	Units	Target Guidance	Definition	Unit Guidance
Work	Developing skills and experience for future work	Support for students at local educational institutions	no. staff volunteering hours	(1) Forecast number of staff hours. (2) Description of the types of curriculum support activities to be delivered. (3) Names of proposed educational establishments if known.	This Measure covers staff volunteering with pupils and students of local educational institutions. Qualifying activities include corporate presentations, preparing and delivering career talks, curriculum support, literacy support, and specific industry talks. They can take place virtually as well as onsite. Recorded hours of staff time can only include time spent preparing and conducting the activities. An employee's volunteering hours can only be recorded if they have been allocated time during paid working hours or time off in lieu.	Volunteering Hours; No. volunteering hours per employee per event.
		Support for enabling visits of school children or local residents	no. staff volunteering hours	(1) Forecast number of staff hours. (2) Description of the types of activities to be delivered. (3) Names of any proposed partner organisations if known.	This Measure covers educational visits to project sites for local school children and residents. Qualifying sessions must be informative and organised in conjunction with the educational institution. Recorded hours of staff time can only include time spent preparing and conducting the activities. An employee's volunteering hours can only be recorded if they have been allocated time during paid working hours or time off in lieu.	Volunteering Hours; No. volunteering hours per employee per event.
Community	Building resilient communities	Support for local community projects through donations	£ invested	(1) Forecast resources to be invested. (2) Description of the types of initiatives planned.	This Measure covers financial and in-kind contributions to a range of initiatives aimed at improving the welfare and wellbeing of a community. These include financial and in-kind contributions to community projects and can be run in partnership with a VCSE or as part of a company programme.	Total £ invested; Including cash, equipment, and use of assets (e.g., space).

			(3) Names of any proposed partner organisations if known.	Each of the types of support offered should be recorded separately in the appropriate categories.	
		Support for local community projects through volunteering	no. staff volunteering hours	(1) Forecast number of staff hours. (2) Description of the types of local community activities to be delivered. (3) Names of any proposed partner organisations if known.	This Measure covers staff volunteering on local community projects. Qualifying activities include a range of initiatives geared at improving community wellbeing. These can be run in partnership with a VCSE or as part of a company programme based on local need. Recorded hours of staff time can only include time spent preparing and conducting the activities. An employee's volunteering hours can only be recorded if they have been allocated time during paid working hours or time off in lieu.	Volunteering Hours; No. volunteering hours per employee per event.
	Building community wellbeing	Support for community health or wellbeing interventions	£ invested inc. time, materials, equipment etc	(1) Forecast resources to be invested. (2) Description of the types of initiatives planned. (3) Names of any proposed partner organisations if known.	This Measure covers support for a range of initiatives aimed at promoting and increasing health and wellbeing in a community such as fitness programmes, nutrition support and smoking, alcohol, and drug abuse reduction initiatives, etc. These can be run in partnership with a VCSE or as part of a company programme. Recorded hours of staff time can only include time spent preparing and conducting the activities. Each of the types of support offered should be recorded separately.	Total resources invested; Including cash, equipment, use of assets (e.g., space) and employee time (valued at the prevailing volunteering or expert hours rate).
		Support for initiatives focused on strengthening community networks	£ invested inc. time, materials, equipment etc	(1) Forecast resources to be invested. (2) Description of the types of initiatives planned. (3) Names of any proposed partner organisations if known.	This Measure covers support for a range of initiatives aimed at the most vulnerable in society. These include elderly social clubs, digital skills training sessions, fitness programmes for persons with disabilities, etc., and can be run in partnership with a VCSE or as part of a company programme. Recorded hours of staff time can only include time spent preparing and conducting the activities. Each of the types of support offered should be recorded separately.	Total resources invested; Including cash, equipment, use of assets (e.g., space) and employee time (valued at the prevailing volunteering or

						expert hours rate).
Planet	Promoting environmentally sustainable procurement	Expert support on carbon reduction to SMEs in the supply chain	£ invested inc. time, materials, equipment etc	(1) Forecast resources to be invested. (2) Description of the types of initiatives planned. (3) Names of any proposed partner organisations if known.	This Measure covers the costs associated with the provision of expert-led climate change and carbon reduction training for sub-contractors which are Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). Supported initiatives must be expertly designed and qualifying recipients are those within these organisations with decision making capabilities and who are in a position to drive organisational change. Examples of training courses are: Supply Chain Sustainability School bronze or higher certificates or the Carbon Literacy Project etc. and can be run in partnership with a VCSE or as part of a company programme. Recorded hours of staff time can only include time spent preparing and conducting the activities. Each of the types of support offered should be recorded separately.	Total resources invested; Including cash, equipment, use of assets (e.g., space) and employee time (valued at the prevailing volunteering or expert hours rate).
	Protecting and restoring biodiversity and ecosystems	Support for green spaces, biodiversity or ecosystems	£ invested inc. time, materials, equipment etc	(1) Forecast resources to be invested. (2) Description of the types of initiatives planned. (3) Names of any proposed partner organisations if known.	This Measure covers support for a range of greenspace creation and development schemes which preserve or enhance natural land or vegetation. Examples are funding urban parks and gardens, street planting, brown space regeneration, etc., and can be run in partnership with a VCSE or as part of a company programme. Recorded hours of staff time can only include time spent preparing and conducting the activities. Each of the types of support offered should be recorded separately.	Total resources invested; Including cash, equipment, use of assets (e.g., space) and employee time (valued at the prevailing volunteering or expert hours rate).

Appendix Six

The Wigan Deal

The Wigan Deal is a citizen-led approach to health care that emphasises collaboration with local communities to improve public services and health outcomes while managing financial constraints. It has been operating since 2012 and has led to improved outcomes despite significant budget cuts.

- Wigan Council faced over £140 million in cuts due to national funding cuts since 2011, resulting in a workforce reduction of about 1,000 employees.
- Key metrics indicate improvements in healthy life expectancy, social care quality, and hospital discharge support.
- The Council's transformation focused on working with local people, fostering independence, and creating a culture of innovation.
- The Wigan Deal represents a new type of relationship between public services and citizens, emphasising community strengths.

Origins of the Wigan Deal

The Wigan Deal emerged from the necessity of budget cuts and a desire to improve public service delivery.

- Wigan Council faced a 40% budget reduction over ten years, prompting a shift from incremental cuts to fundamental operational changes.
- Leaders recognised the need for upfront investment in prevention and early intervention to manage demand effectively.
- A collaborative approach to budget-setting encouraged departments to innovate rather than simply reduce existing services.
- Financial reserves were used strategically to fund transformation rather than support ongoing operational costs.
- The Council's leadership cultivated a new culture that emphasized collaboration and community engagement in service delivery.

Training and Cultural Change in Wigan Council

Wigan Council has implemented training programs to instil a culture of innovation and community engagement among staff.

- Ethnographic training rolled out to all council staff to encourage different conversations with residents.
- Staff are empowered to innovate and take risks in service delivery.
- A focus on positive risk-taking has been established to balance potential harms and benefits.
- The council promotes a culture of learning from failures rather than punitive measures.

Investing in Community Development

Wigan Council has committed to strengthening the local voluntary sector and community initiatives through targeted investments.

- The Deal for Communities Investment Fund supports grassroots projects with investments up to £10,000.

- Over £10 million invested from 2013 to 2018, yielding a social return of £1.63 for every £1 invested.
- Funding has facilitated the establishment of community hubs and diverse services tailored to local needs.
- Successful projects include Sunshine House and Greenslate Community Farm, enhancing community engagement and support.

Collaborative Commissioning with the Voluntary Sector

Wigan Council has adopted a collaborative approach to commissioning, fostering partnerships with local organisations.
- The Council works closely with voluntary sector organisations to improve service quality and reduce duplication.
- Emphasis on a strategic relationship rather than traditional contract management.
- Funding is often conditional on collaboration, promoting shared goals and community engagement.
- The Council supports new social enterprises and encourages partnerships among local organisations.

Challenges and Resilience in Implementing Change

Wigan Council has faced significant challenges in implementing its new approach but has maintained its commitment to change.
- Workforce reductions due to austerity have led to restructuring and the introduction of new roles.
- Initial resistance from unions and the public regarding service changes was addressed through dialogue and transparency.
- Political support across party lines has been crucial in sustaining momentum for the Deal.
- Service user stories have been instrumental in demonstrating the positive impact of changes on local lives.

Role of Community Link Workers

Community link workers play a crucial role in connecting residents with health resources and support.
- Introduced in 2015, there are currently 16 full-time equivalent community link workers in Wigan.
- They provide health coaching and support referrals from various health and social care professionals.
- Plans are in place to double the number of community link workers due to their success.
- Community knowledge officers assist link workers by mapping local assets and needs.

Measuring the Impact of the Deal

Wigan is assessing the impact of the Deal through qualitative insights and quantitative metrics.
- A shared outcomes framework has been developed to monitor performance across health and care services.

- Key objectives include improving wellbeing, increasing independence, and enhancing user experience.
- The 'Making it Real' quality assurance framework evaluates the embedding of the Deal's principles in services.

Positive Outcomes for Health and Social Care

The Deal has led to improvements in adult social care services and overall population health in Wigan.
- 82.6% of adult social care locations are rated as good or outstanding by the Care Quality Commission.
- Delayed transfers of care are significantly lower in Wigan (4.8 per 100,000) compared to the national average (10.7).
- 90.8% of older people receiving re-ablement services remained at home 91 days post-discharge, exceeding the national average.

Improvements in Population Health Metrics

Wigan has seen significant improvements in healthy life expectancy and reductions in premature mortality.
- Healthy life expectancy increased by 31 months for women and 19 months for men from 2009-11 to 2015-17.
- Rates of physical activity rose from 48% in 2012 to 55% in 2015, while smoking rates have decreased.
- School readiness has improved, with metrics catching up to the national average.

Financial Sustainability and Savings

The Wigan Deal has contributed to improved financial stability for the council, particularly in adult social care.
- The council achieved a balanced budget in 2017/18 after projecting a £6.9 million overspend in 2011.
- Approximately £30 million in recurrent annual savings has been delivered in adult social care.