



The Great North VCFSE Exchange: Making Relationships with Strategic Authorities Work

Chair: Warren Escadale, Chief Executive, VSNW

THE GREAT NORTH VCFSE EXCHANGE.

MAKING RELATIONSHIPS WITH STRATEGIC AUTHORITIES WORK



Microphones

Please keep your microphone muted until the end of the webinar, to minimise background noise.

Questions

We will hold a dedicated Q&A.

Chat Function

Feel free to use the chat throughout the session. We will monitor it and respond where possible.



Cameras

You are welcome to keep your camera on if you feel comfortable, but it is not required.

Recording

Only the final feedback session will be recorded.

Technical Issues

If you experience technical difficulties, please try rejoining the session. If problems persist, contact us via the chat.

House keeping.



Respectful Participation

Please be respectful in the chat and during discussions. We aim to create a safe, inclusive space for all.

Slides & Materials

Any slides or resources used today will be shared following the webinar.

Timing

We will begin and end promptly. Please stay for the full session if you can.

Agenda



- **Welcome & Housekeeping** Warren Escadale, VSNW
- **CA-VCFSE Working Across the North: Survey Findings** Laura Tilston, VSNW
- **North East VCFSE-CA working** Martin Brookes, VONNE
- **Greater Manchester VCFSE-CA working** Liz Windsor-Welsh, Action Together & 10GM
- **Q&A Session**
- **Breakout Workshops**
 - What's your priority areas?
 - What would you like to know more about?
 - How do you want to work/network across the North?
- **Feedback & Next Steps**
- **Close**

Purpose



- Link to “The Great North”
- Develop Northern VCFSE thinking and voice
- Define effective CA–VCFSE partnership working
- Share experiences, learnings and best practice
- Next steps?



**CA-VCFSSE Working
Across the North:
Survey Findings**

Survey of VCFSE leads across the North

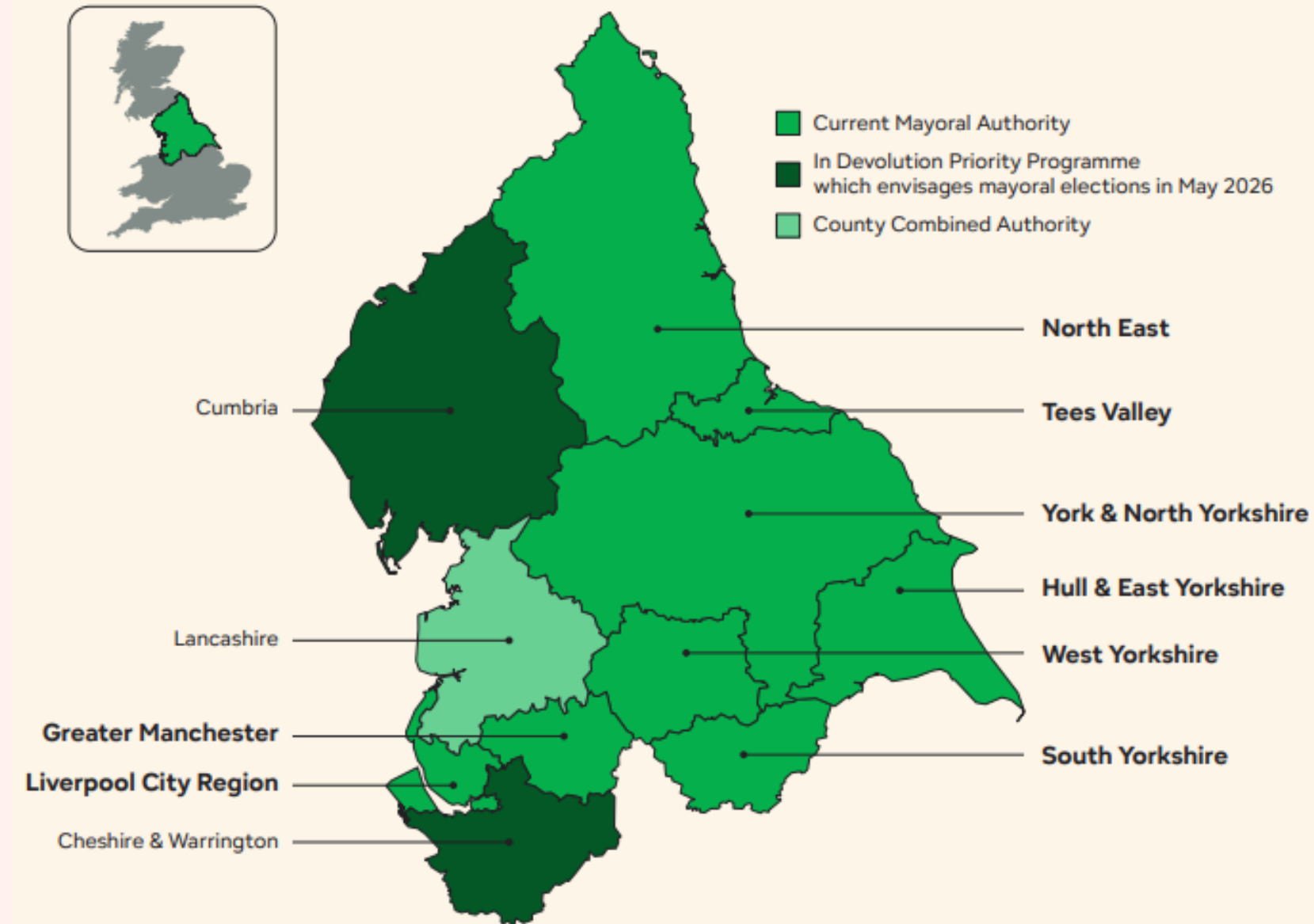
1 Representation & engagement

2 Strategic Frameworks

3 Intelligence and Data Capacity

4 VCFSE Delivery

5 Opportunities



Representation & engagement



Current Reality

- VCFSE representation across CA structures can be inconsistent
- Some areas have formal seats
- Others rely on informal engagement or still negotiating
- Partial arrangements in place e.g., thematic representation
- Some lacking formal mechanisms but plans in motion to develop formal mechanisms

Best Practice

Formal Board representation and clear democratic processes for selecting sector reps including:

- VCFSE seat on the Combined Authority Board
- Formal VCFSE leadership group recognised as key contact point for CA engagement
- Representation on working groups/CA workstreams
- Sitting on scrutiny board

Sector Organisation & Link Roles



Current Reality

- Strong networks and leadership groups exist
 - Unified sector voice
 - Policy and events work
- VCFSE leadership structures still emerging in some areas
- Link roles uncommon but are highly effective where they exist

Best Practice

Established leadership groups and partnerships that act as a single point of contact for the sector

Formal link roles responsible for VCFSE-CA relationships and strategic alignment

VCFSE secondment-liaison role championing the sector from within

Workstream Inclusion



Current Reality

- Comprehensive involvement in some areas
- Some sector representatives embedded in workstreams
- Reports of stalled engagement or struggle to influence
- Approaches to equalities vary & fragmented
- Equalities modelling in development across North
- Political dynamics complicate progress on equalities

Best Practice

Consistent representation across major policy areas and funding discussions + capacity

Equalities panels and networks that embed lived experience and diverse voices in decision-making

CA-VCFSE research and intelligence partnerships and vehicles for influence

Shared Priorities & Joint Statements



Current Reality

- VCFSE Manifestos & strategies outlining ambitions
- Some explicit VCFSE inclusion in CA strategies, with some indirect referencing
- Joint statements uncommon
- When occurring, reflect mature partnership working
- Aspirations for all areas

Best Practice

Comprehensive manifestos and “state of the sector” reports developed with broad sector input and CA/Mayoral endorsement

Collaborative letters and policy pieces issued jointly by the sector and the CA

Strategies that embed the VCFSE as a key partner in delivery and decision-making

Metrics to understand success for CA-VCFSE partnership

Formal Working Arrangements



Current Reality

- Formal agreements are rare but represent best practice
- Eg., Accords, compacts, covenants, fair funding protocols
- Most areas lacking formal agreements and/or commissioning frameworks but plans in place
- Dedicated investment uncommon

Best Practice

Written agreements that set out principles for collaboration and accountability

Formal commissioning principles that prioritise equity, transparency and local delivery

Multi-year sustained funding commitments to underpin sector engagement and capacity building

VCFSE Delivery



- **Skills & Employment**
- **Transport** (community transport)
- **Housing** (community-led housing, Landlord's Charter, rural housing support)
- **Business Support** (Business for Good, Kindred, Community Ownership Hub)
- **Regeneration**
- **Community safety/victims and justice**
- **Community activity/Sport England:** Sport for Good, GM Moving
- **Joint proposals**

What is working well? What are the challenges?



Positive

- Strong relationships harness trust, proactive leadership engagement and structured collaboration
- Early-stage engagement shows promise
- Manifesto and advocacy groups in development
- Building on existing foundations

Challenges

- Lack of formal recognition & structures
- Inconsistent communication
- Resource constraints
- Delays in funding
- Undermining of trust & reluctance to transfer power
- Decisions without sector input
- Political dynamics

Best Practice

Embed representation, formal agreements and financial investment combined with open communication

Transparent decision-making and clear contact points to reduce fragmentation

Key Takeaways



- Every CA is different and will evolve/grow
- Understand the ambitions of your CA
- Devolution and subsidiarity are fundamental to CA identity – *encourage “double devolution” thinking*
- Agree the principles – *(civil society covenant as an enabler)*
- Push for VCFSE partnership in governance, design and delivery
 - Prevention / population health / ramped up Public Health
 - Broker of integrated working (Council / NHS / Primary Care / DWP)
 - VCFSE Places and Spaces – VCFSE estate
 - Inclusive economy / tackling poverty / broader determinants
- **Your CA, your role in growing it**



Partnership building with a new Combined Authority

Martin Brookes, Chief Executive of VONNE

Supporting, promoting and advocating for the VCSE sector

Who is VONNE?

VONNE (Voluntary Organisations' Network North East) is the **membership** and **regional infrastructure body** for the voluntary, **community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector** covering the **North East of England**.

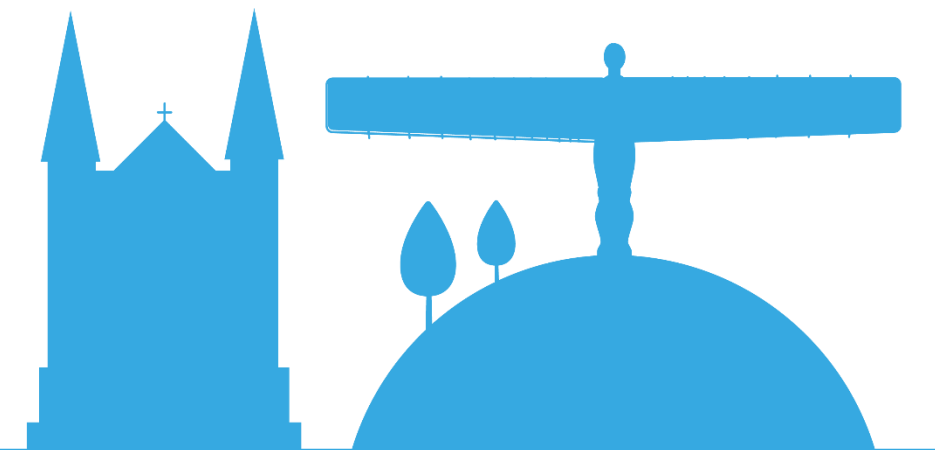
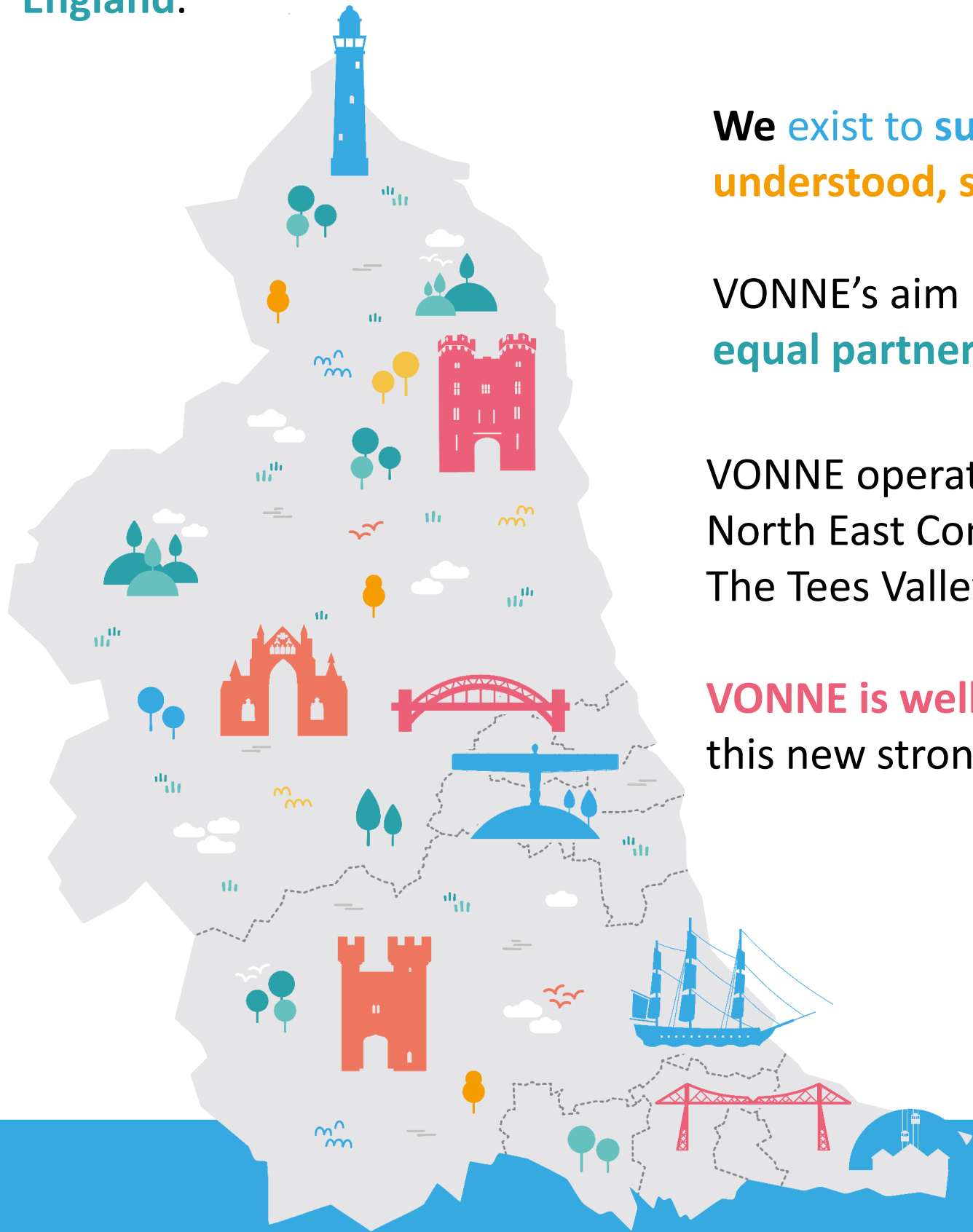


We exist to support, promote and advocate for the North East VCSE sector to ensure it is better **understood, supported and appreciated**.

VONNE's aim is to **support the VCSE sector to flourish**. This requires the sector to be **valued and an equal partner** in decision making to **create a fairer, greener and successful region**.

VONNE operates across **2 Combined Authority** areas and **12 Local Authorities**. The recently established North East Combined Authority (May 2024) **creates the opportunity** and the need for VONNE to do more. The Tees Valley Combined Authority is showing greater interest in the sector.

VONNE is well placed to support the voluntary and community sector **to influence and to benefit** from this new stronger regional government and policymaking.



VONNE and NECA: Creating Regional Impact



Since the launch of the North East Combined Authority (NECA) in May 2024, **VONNE has been a key partner** in ensuring the VCSE sector's voice **shapes regional policy and decision-making**. As devolution deepens, this role becomes even more critical to achieving better outcomes for communities across the North East.

VONNE has **influenced and added value** through:

Strategic leadership & representation	Strengthening policy and programme development	Driving collaboration and practical outcomes
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sit on the NECA Cabinet and Home of Real Opportunity Advisory Board as VCS rep.• Chair the VCSE Leadership Board supporting the sector to understand and engage effectively.• Advise NECA on VCSE representation on all advisory boards.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Support planning around social investment and the VCSE role in inclusive economic growth.• Provide access to our networks enabling consultation with frontline organisations delivering impact.• Deliver NECA programmes to support system reform around engagement and funding of sector on economic inactivity.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Facilitate engagement with VCSE networks to explore funding opportunities.• Deliver regional engagement events generating insight for policy and place-based solutions.• Support the rollout of SHINE Accreditation of employers, promoting fairer employment practices across the region.

Rules of engagement (observations and learning)



- **Have more than one point of contact**
 - **Understand the structure**, have key contacts in multiple departments and know their interests.
- **Give them the benefit of the doubt**
 - Work on the basis that the combined authority's **interests align with yours**.
 - Treat them as **partners, not adversaries**.
- **Offer practical solutions**
 - The answer can't always be to ask for more money!
 - Think about and offer ways to **help them achieve what they're trying to achieve**.
- **Don't be Political**
 - Engagement with combined authorities might change in a Reform led world.
 - Be **clear on your values** and ways of working, without taking a Political position.



Case Study: Economic Inactivity Trailblazer



Scope of project: VONNE leads the VCSE sector reform strand of the Economic Inactivity Trailblazer, working with NECA to engage the VCSE sector to shape future employment support. The project lays strong foundations for system reform by identifying challenges and co-designing practical solutions and priorities for system change.

Strength of VCSE collaboration: Acting as a bridge between NECA and the VCSE sector, VONNE enables genuine co-production and shared learning. The work draws on VCSE organisations' trusted relationships, local insight, and person-centred approaches.

Impact for people and place: Collaboration with the VCSE sector provides deeper insight into the realities of people furthest from the labour market, enabling a more responsive and inclusive system design that meets local needs.

Future partnership working: The Trailblazer will create a sustainable framework for collaboration, including shared principles, a practice change toolkit and ongoing mechanisms for joint working to support long-term system change.

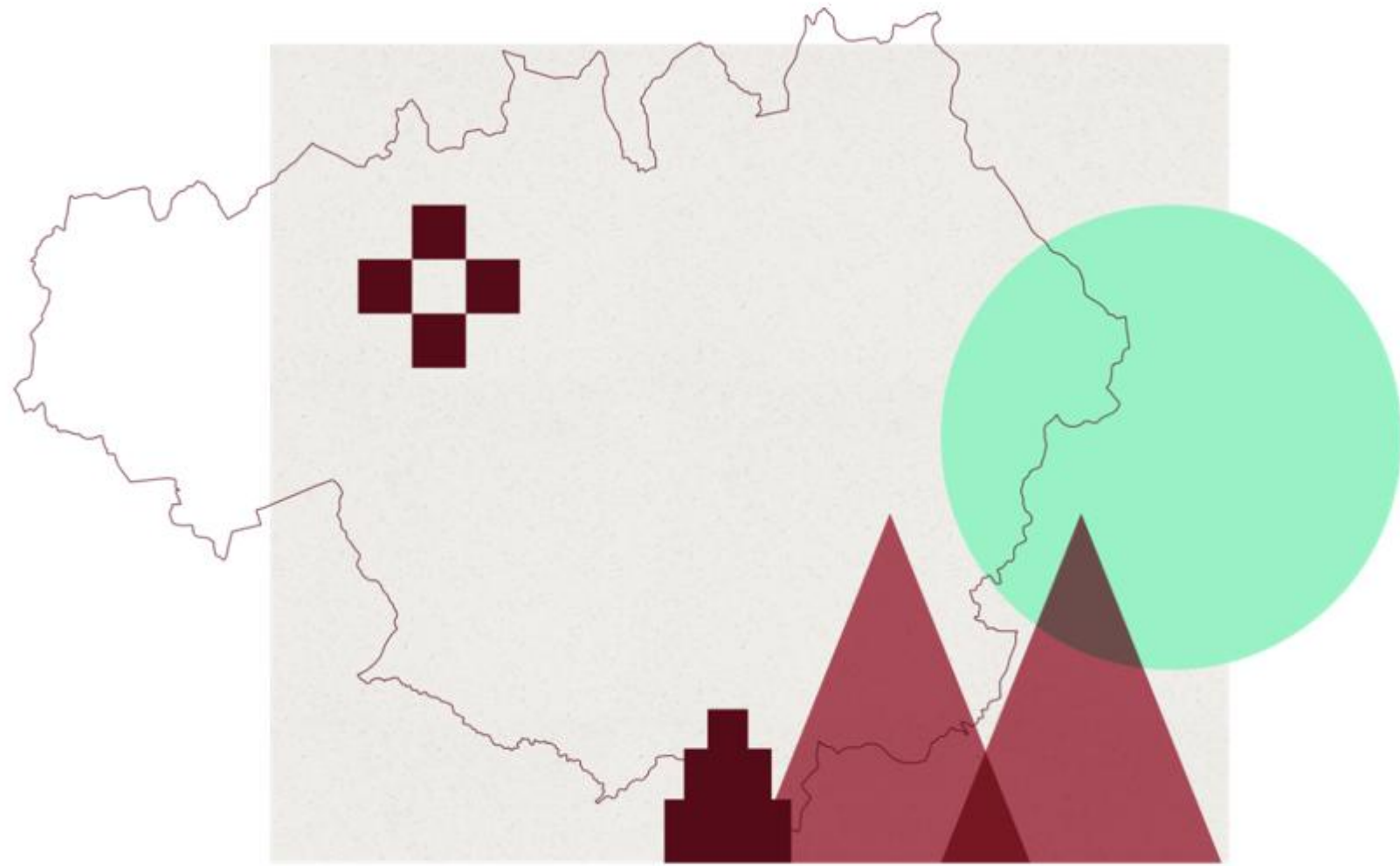




VOLUNTARY ORGANISATIONS' NETWORK NORTH EAST

www.vonne.org.uk





Greater Manchester
VCFSE Leadership Group
The sector's voice in devolution

Greater Manchester VCFSE - Combined Authority Working

January 2026

Our History

In 2015, the devolution agreement between the UK government and Greater Manchester allowed for “devolved control” of the region’s £6 billion health and social care budget.



In **2015**, we formed as the Greater Manchester VCSE Reference Group (now named **GM VCFSE Leadership Group**).

2017 saw the signing of a [memorandum of understanding \(MoU\)](#) between the Greater Manchester Health and Social Care Partnership and VCSFE.

The commitments were re-affirmed following the pandemic with a **new Accord agreement (2021-26)** between GMCA, NHS GM and VCFSE.

The Accord is currently being refreshed in a **new agreement 2026-29**. Includes the national civil society covenant principles.

About us

We're the voice of the sector in devolution, influencing power and funding as it transfers from national to local governments. We will end inequality in Greater Manchester within a generation.

Our vision is a united and connected VCFSE sector delivering a more equal Greater Manchester.

What we do:

- Create space to meet the public sector
- Share information, link VCFSE representatives and develop responses
- Create propositions to catalyse change
- Campaign and provide a unified voice for the sector
- Improve accountability and governance



GM: Representation and Engagement

- VCFSE Representatives/ policy leads on main strategic partnership Boards including GM Reform Executive; Integrated Care Board; Justice and Reform Board etc.
- Sector convenes and supported via GM VCFSE Leadership Group. GMCA employs a VCFSE Strategic Lead.
- VCFSE Leadership Group members have some paid staff roles and some that have paid time contributions to lead and co-design in priority policy areas e.g. Mental Health, Economy and Skills, Live Well.
- Regular and informal meetings with GMCA, NHS GM etc to identify priorities in Accord.
- Formal 'commitments' meetings with senior execs to review progress against Accord commitments.

GM VCFSE Partnerships and Networks

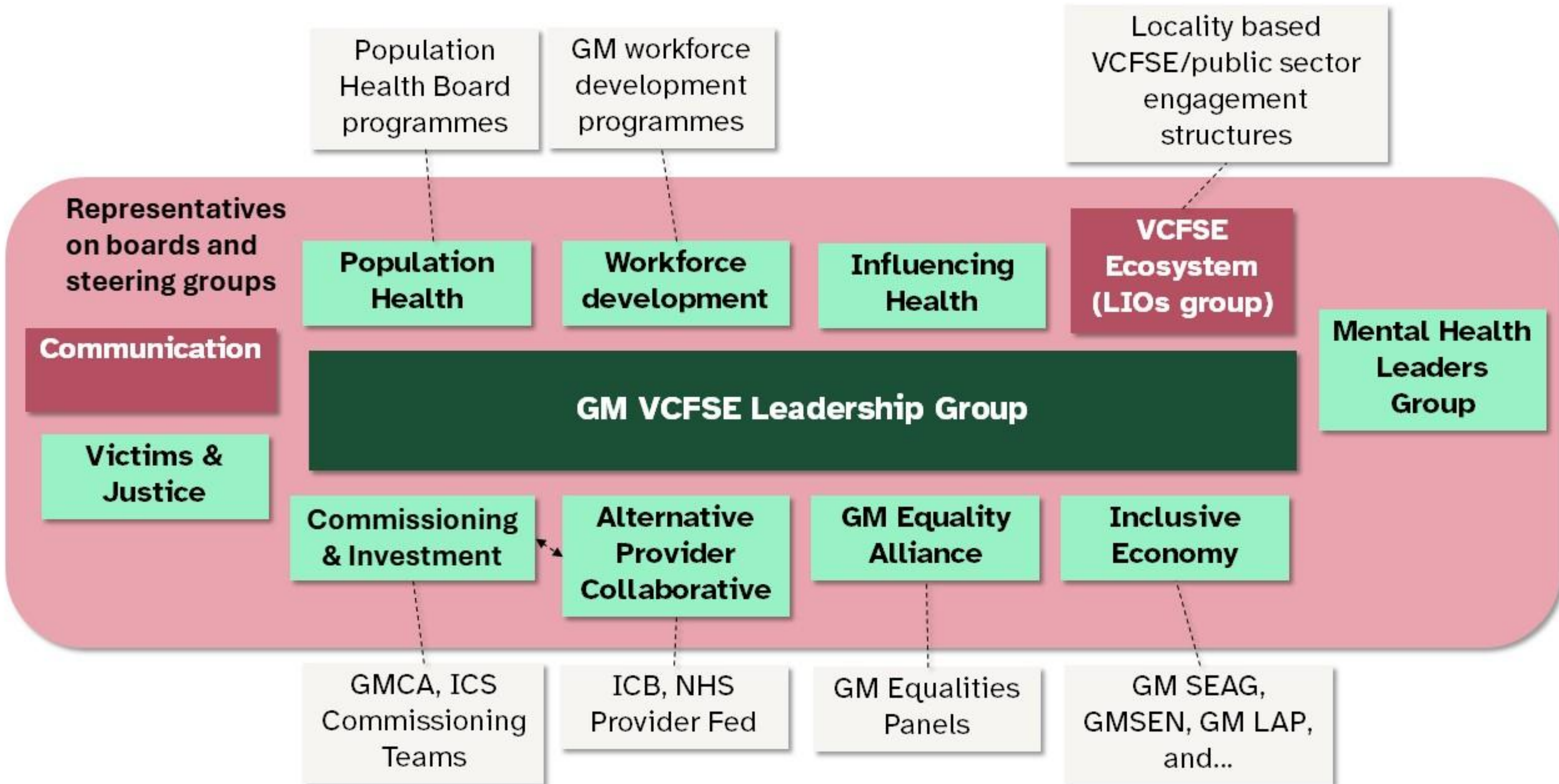
10GM: Partnership of Greater Manchester's local VCFSE infrastructure organisations who support and connect to 17,500 VCFSE groups and orgs.

Alternative Provider Collaborative: Social businesses including VCFSE Providers

VCFSE equalities networks and equalities providers operating on the Greater Manchester footprint, e.g. GM=EqAI, GM Ethnic Communities Network, Coalition of Disabled People.

Specialist action /influence networks e.g. VCFSE Mental Health Leaders Group, Homeless Action Network etc.

GM VCFSE Leadership Group Structures



GM Strategic Frameworks

- **GM VCFSE Accord** - Formal working VCFSE-CA agreement (currently being refreshed) - £600k pa grant (50/50 CA and NHS)
- **GM VCFSE Manifesto 2024-28** – outlining sector priorities
- **“Together we are Greater Manchester” Strategy 2025-35** – VCFSE sector identified as key partners
 - Pledge to “increase value of services commissioned by third sector”
- **GM Fair Funding Protocol** – building a financially resilient VCFSE sector (Accord priority)

GM: Investment

- **GMCA fund the VCFSE sector across a variety of areas:**
 - UK-Shared Prosperity Funding
 - Housing and Regeneration
 - Economic inactivity
 - Homelessness
 - Green
 - Public Service Reform
 - Business Support
 - Community Ownership
 - Victims and Justice
 - Poverty/Inequalities
 - Prevention Demonstrator (Joint initiative with NHS/Public Health)
- **Joint proposals/bids in collaboration e.g., Live Well**

Good practice, challenges & opportunities

Positive

- Relationships with senior leaders
- Connected into formal structures
- VCFSE reps
- Commitment to Accord
- Feel like partner in wider strategy

Challenges

- Not full VCFSE involvement in all policy areas
- Budget setting and commissioning inconsistent
- Inherent social value not measured
- Limited data on VCFSE and definition skews it
- Separate 10x LA and CA governance and decision making

Opportunities

- Maximising VCFSE integrated settlement role
- Expand opportunities in less developed areas, e.g., transport, green agenda
- Improve ways of working through new Accord
- Work together to address community cohesion
- Challenge national decision making together



Breakout Workshops

Opportunity to network, discuss, share ideas and best practice.

- What are your priority areas?
- What would you like to know more about?
- How do you want to work/network across the North?