

OUR



VCFSE and **combined authority** collaboration across the North of England

Acknowledgements & partners

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North West

- [VS6 Partnership](#)
- [Cheshire & Warrington Infrastructure Partnership](#)
- [Greater Manchester VCFSE Leadership Group](#)
- [10GM](#)
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- [Lancashire Association of CVS](#)

North East

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About

The [Great North VCFSE Exchange](#), held in January 2026, brought together leaders from across the voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise (VCFSE) sector to explore the state of partnership working with combined authorities (CAs) in the North of England.

In preparation for this event, VSNW launched a survey for VCFSE leaders in each combined authority area of the North, to develop a baseline of current VCFSE-CA working. The survey sought to understand how these relationships are developing, how well the sector is represented and what mechanisms are in place to support collaboration, strategic alignment and effective delivery.

What emerges is a picture of significant variation: some areas demonstrate well-established, maturing partnerships, while others remain in early stages of development, still negotiating roles, representation and shared priorities. Of course, this may simply reflect the different start times of individual combined authorities. Nevertheless, across the North there is a shared recognition of the sector's importance and an appetite to strengthen collaboration.

This document outlines the findings from this survey, alongside a summary of best practice for VCFSE-CA partnership working.

Size of the sector in the North

128,185

Number of VCFSE groups

Population of

16.17m

Number of VCFSE employees

217,700

(just under 3% of the workforce)

£12.7bn

Financial value of the VCFSE sector

Number of regular volunteers

890,700

(minimum 72 hours per year)

	Registered charities 2024	Non profit social enterprises	Under the radar groups (unregistered)	Total
North	27,669	8,148	92,368	128,185
England	132,030	29,522	334,666	496,000

Foreword

As combined authorities continue to evolve, it is essential that our sector is not only recognised but meaningfully included as a genuine partner in shaping the decisions that affect communities. Where this collaboration is embedded, through formal representation, strong leadership structures and shared priorities, the benefits are clear: greater trust, more coherent strategies and outcomes rooted in community need.

This matters because the challenges combined authorities are grappling with cannot be solved by public institutions alone. Good growth, economic development that is inclusive and sustainable, depends on the relationships, reach and insight that the VCFSE sector brings. So too does the shared ambition for public service reform: building systems around early intervention and prevention, where communities are supported before needs become crises, rather than after.

At the same time, the report shows where opportunities remain. Too often, engagement can be informal or inconsistent, limiting the sector's ability to contribute its full insight and value. Strengthening structures, clarity and long-term support will help ensure that devolution works with communities as well as for them.

I am grateful to all who contributed to this work. By continuing to build on the strong relationships that already exist, and by being honest about what makes partnerships work well, we can ensure that the VCFSE sector plays its full part in shaping a fairer, healthier and more resilient North.



Warren Escadale
Chief Executive
Voluntary Sector North West (VSNW)

Survey themes

The survey of VCFSE infrastructure leaders across the North focused on a key number of areas thought to best represent the fundamentals of collaborative VCFSE-CA working. These were:

Representation & engagement

Sector organisation

Workstream inclusion & decision making

Strategic alignment and shared priorities

Formal agreements & commissioning

VCFSE delivery across CA priorities

What's working well & challenges ahead

This report also provides an overview of survey findings and a summary of what good looks like:

Overall reflections & opportunities

Best practice summary

Best practice checklist

Representation & engagement

Across the North, the degree of VCFSE representation within combined authorities is inconsistent. In areas where relationships are more mature, the sector benefits from formal seats on CA boards and clearly defined democratic processes for selecting representatives. These structures help ensure that the sector has an established presence in strategic discussions and can act as a legitimate conduit of community voice.

In other areas, however, representation remains informal or ad-hoc, relying on personal relationships or ongoing negotiations rather than embedded processes.

Some CAs involve VCFSE organisations via thematic or partial mechanisms, such as issue-specific programme boards, while others are still developing the formal mechanisms needed to ensure consistent, reliable engagement.

Despite this inconsistency, many places have plans underway to introduce more formal arrangements, suggesting a growing recognition of the sector's value in shaping CA policy and delivery.



Sector organisation

Where the VCFSE sector is well-organised, the presence of strong leadership groups and partnerships has created effective, unified entry points into the public sector. These groups often coordinate policy work, sector events and regional advocacy, and they help articulate shared priorities on behalf of the diverse organisations that make up the sector.

The survey findings highlight the benefits of formal link roles, dedicated individuals who bridge the VCFSE sector and CAs, often seconded into the CA itself as a single point of contact. In the few areas where these roles exist, they have proved particularly effective in aligning strategy, fostering trust and enabling the sector to operate as a key partner with dedicated resource. Yet such roles remain the exception rather than the norm and often rely upon much needed, yet often absent, VCFSE infrastructure funding.



Many areas are still developing the leadership structures necessary to present a consolidated sector voice, indicating that further investment and support plays a significant role in strengthening CA-VCFSE collaboration.

Workstream inclusion & decision-making

The survey indicates substantial variation in how deeply the VCFSE sector is embedded within CA workstreams. In some places, sector representatives participate fully in key policy and delivery groups and have built meaningful influence over decisions. In others, engagement has stalled or become sporadic, and representatives report challenges in shaping agendas or accessing important discussions at the right time.



Equalities work is a particular area of variability: while some CAs have well-developed equalities panels and structures, others adopt fragmented or inconsistent approaches, and equalities modelling remains a work in progress across several Northern areas.

Political dynamics are also playing an increasingly challenging role for the sector, complicating progress or shifting priorities on equalities in ways that may limit the sector's influence.

Best practice, where it exists, demonstrates the value of consistent representation across major policy areas, alongside well-resourced equalities structures that embed lived experience directly into the CA's decision-making processes.

Strategic alignment & shared priorities

Across the North, the VCFSE sector has a variety of sub-regional manifestos, “state of the sector” reports and collaborative strategies which help articulate collective ambitions and position the sector as a key delivery partner.



In some CAs these documents have been endorsed at high levels, for example by the Mayor, reflecting a recognition of the sector’s unique role and value. However, the extent to which CAs themselves embed the sector into their own strategies varies. Some explicitly reference the VCFSE sector and include the sector in strategic objectives, while others offer only indirect mentions.

Joint statements, where the sector and CAs speak publicly with a unified voice, remain relatively rare. Where they do occur, they signal a more mature, confident partnership that is moving beyond transactional engagement towards co-ownership of shared priorities.

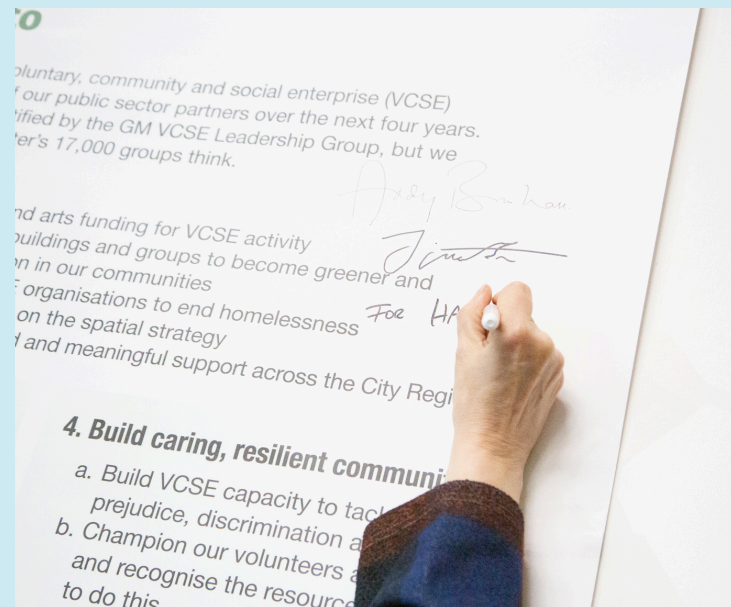
Formal agreements & commissioning

Formal documentation of partnership arrangements is still relatively uncommon across the North. Few areas have written agreements such as accords, compacts or covenants that set out shared principles, expectations and accountability frameworks.

Such agreements are widely considered best practice because they reduce ambiguity, embed partnership working in structures rather than personalities and protect collaboration from political or organisational turnover.

Similarly, commissioning frameworks that emphasise fair, transparent and locally grounded practices are still under development in many places.

Multi-year funding commitments, essential for sector capacity and stability, are also rare.



Despite this, several areas have plans and desires to introduce such formal structures, indicating growing momentum toward more stable and equitable partnership arrangements.

VCFSE delivery across CA priorities

The survey highlights the significant breadth of VCFSE contribution across CA priority areas. The sector plays a substantial role in skills and employment initiatives, often supporting people with complex needs or those furthest from the labour market.

In transport, VCFSE-led community transport schemes continue to provide essential connectivity, particularly in rural or underserved areas. The housing agenda is another space where VCFSE innovation is prominent, particularly through community-led housing initiatives and contributions to rural housing support.

In economic development, social enterprise and community ownership models demonstrate how the sector can drive inclusive growth and anchor wealth within communities.



The VCFSE sector also contributes meaningfully to community safety, victims' services, regeneration, and the health and wellbeing agenda.

Across these areas, joint proposals are emerging, demonstrating a growing alignment between CA priorities and the sector's ability to deliver practical, place-based solutions.

What's working well & challenges ahead

In areas where partnerships are more developed, relationships between the VCFSE sector and CAs are characterised by high trust, openness and proactive engagement. These partnerships benefit from structured collaboration, proactive leadership and the foundations laid by long-standing networks. Early-stage engagement in other areas also shows promise, particularly where manifestos and shared advocacy structures are beginning to take shape.

However, several challenges continue to inhibit progress. The absence of formal recognition and structured representation can undermine trust and limit influence. Communication between CAs and the sector is often inconsistent, leading to fragmentation or misunderstandings.

Many VCFSE organisations operate under tight resource constraints, reducing their capacity to participate fully in strategic processes.

Delays in funding decisions further strain relationships and can limit the sector's ability to plan or maintain stability. In some areas, key decisions are made without sector input, contributing to a sense of marginalisation. Political factors also affect progress, whether through shifting priorities, differing democratic cultures or changes in leadership.

Despite these challenges, survey respondents emphasise that greater transparency, clear points of contact and formalised representation could significantly strengthen partnership working.

Overall reflections & opportunities

A clear theme from the survey is that each combined authority is evolving at its own pace, and no single model of partnership is emerging across the North. Understanding the ambitions and identity of each CA is essential, particularly given the principles of devolution and the need for “double devolution” - the idea that power should not only move from national to regional authorities but also further down to communities.

Many respondents advocate for a Civil Society Covenant as a framework to anchor shared values and ensure consistent expectations for VCFSE engagement.

Opportunities for deeper partnership lie in prevention, population health, integrated working between statutory agencies, and the use of community assets, both physical and relational, to shape place-based change.

The VCFSE sector is well-placed to lead in these areas, not only responding to priorities but actively shaping them.

As CAs continue to develop, the sector’s role will become increasingly important, and both sides have the chance to expand and strengthen their partnership journey with confidence.

The VCFSE sector is well-placed to lead in these areas, **not only responding to priorities but actively shaping them.**

Best practice summary

Representation & governance

- * Formal VCFSE seats on CA boards, ensuring the sector has a recognised voice in strategic governance.
- * Clear, democratic processes for selecting sector representatives, providing legitimacy and consistency
- * Recognised VCFSE leadership groups acting as the primary point of contact for CA engagement.
- * Routine participation of VCFSE representatives in scrutiny structures and major CA workstreams.

Sector organisation

- * Strong, established VCFSE leadership partnerships that coordinate the sector's voice and policy positions.
- * Clear, unified points of contact that streamline communication between the sector and CAs.
- * Dedicated link or liaison roles, including seconded positions, serving as bridges between the sector and CAs. These roles significantly strengthen alignment and trust.
- * Embedded norms of partnership working that ensure the sector's involvement is structured and continuous rather than ad hoc.

Workstream inclusion & decision making

- * Consistent representation across CA policy areas and funding discussions, rather than selective or thematic involvement only.
- * Equalities panels and networks that embed lived experience, ensuring decisions are informed by diverse community perspectives.
- * Joint VCFSE–CA research and intelligence partnerships, building a shared evidence base for policy development and influence.

Strategic alignment & shared priorities

- * Manifestos, strategies and “state of the sector” reports endorsed and valued by CA leadership.
- * Joint letters and policy statements that demonstrate mature, unified public positioning between CAs and the VCFSE sector
- * CA strategies that explicitly reference and embed the VCFSE sector’s role in delivery, governance and outcomes.
- * Agreed metrics or measures to track the success of CA–VCFSE partnerships.

Formal agreements & commissioning

- * Written agreements, such as accords, compacts, fair funding protocols or civil society covenants, that set out shared principles and accountability.
- * Commissioning principles and frameworks that prioritise equity, transparency and locally rooted delivery
- * Multi-year funding commitments that enable stability, capacity building and long-term partnership working alongside grant programmes

Partnership behaviours & culture

- * Stable, high-trust relationships supported by open communication and shared problem-solving approaches.
- * Transparent decision-making processes that reduce fragmentation and reinforce credibility.
- * A shared understanding of CA ambitions and devolution principles— including “double devolution”— that frames the partnership's purpose.

The Great North VCFSE Exchange

VCFSE-CA best practice checklist



Representation & governance

- The VCFSE sector has a formal seat on the Combined Authority Board
- Clear, democratic processes exist for selecting sector representatives
- A recognised VCFSE leadership group acting as the primary contact point for the CA
- VCFSE representatives participate in scrutiny arrangements
- VCFSE representatives are embedded in CA workstreams and major policy areas

Sector organisation & link roles

- Strong leadership partnerships exist to coordinate the VCFSE voice and sector priorities
- A unified point of contact streamlining communication with the CA
- Dedicated link or liaison roles support strategic alignment and ongoing relationship building
- Established sector-led coordination/partnership structures recognised by the CA

Inclusion, equalities & influence

- VCFSE representation is consistent across funding discussions and policy development
- Equalities panels or networks embed lived experience into decision-making
- Joint VCFSE-CA research and intelligence arrangements supporting shared evidence and influence
- Participation is properly resourced to avoid “tick-box” engagement

Strategic alignment & shared priorities

- VCFSE manifestos and “state of the sector” reports shaping shared ambitions and endorsed by CA and Mayoral leaders
- Joint statements or policy letters demonstrating unified leadership
CA strategies explicitly reference and embed the role of the VCFSE sector
- Agreed metrics exist to measure the success of VCFSE-CA partnerships

Formal agreements & funding

- Written agreements (e.g., accords, compacts, covenants, funding protocols) setting out principles for collaboration
- Clear commissioning principles prioritise equity, transparency and local delivery
- Multi-year funding commitments underpinning sector capacity alongside grant programmes
- Investment supporting VCFSE leadership, participation and infrastructure

Partnership behaviours & culture

- Relationships are grounded in openness, trust and proactive communication
Decision-making processes are transparent, reducing fragmentation and uncertainty
- Both the CA and VCFSE partners understand and align with devolution principles and place-based delivery (double devolution)
- Shared priorities guide collaboration and support consistent, long-term partnership working