FINAL VERSION

Sunderland
VOLUNTARY SECTOR ALLIANCE

Stronger Sector, Stronger City

A blueprint for the future of Local Infrastructure Support to the voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector in Sunderland

November 2025

INTRODUCTION

This document serves as a proposed strategic blueprint for the future of local infrastructure support to the VCSE sector in Sunderland. It is the outcome of extensive research into best practice elsewhere, as well as drawing heavily from a collaborative team development day in July 2025 and discussions with sector representatives at our Annual General Meeting in October 2025.

The blueprint aims to articulate the shared purpose, vision, values and core functions of Sunderland Voluntary Sector Alliance, providing clarity and direction for how the organisation will build on the work being done now to further champion, strengthen and connect the sector. Designed to inspire confidence and alignment among stakeholders, it sets out a compelling vision for a thriving, inclusive and resilient city shaped by empowered communities and effective collaboration.

Austin McNamara
Interim CEO, SVSA

Sunderland VOLUNTARY SECTOR ALLIANCE

Stronger sector Stronger city

Our purpose as an organisation

SVSA exists to support and strengthen the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector in Sunderland. We provide services to help organisations thrive, and we work actively to ensure the sector's voice is heard by policy makers and funders.

We do this by focussing all our work on four core functions:

- **Leadership and advocacy**
  Championing the sector and amplifying community voices in strategic decision making and public service design.
- **Partnerships and collaboration**
  Driving collaborative working by building networks and partnerships between local organisations and with strategic partners.
- **Capacity building**
  Empowering organisations to deliver great services, to innovate and to grow, through targeted support and skills development.
- **Volunteering**
  Creating an environment in which volunteers play a key role in strengthening communities and driving social impact.

Our vision

A thriving, inclusive and resilient Sunderland where voluntary, community and social enterprise organisations are empowered to lead, collaborate and innovate – amplifying community voices, delivering excellent services, driving equitable change and harnessing the power of volunteering to transform lives.

Shorter version:
"A Sunderland VCSE sector in Sunderland that is empowered to lead, collaborate and create lasting change in communities."

Our values

All our work – as individuals, as a team and as an organisation – is driven by our core values of:

- **Integrity**
  We conduct ourselves with openness, honesty and strong moral principles, and we can be trusted to deliver on our promises.
- **Collaboration**
  We believe that collaboration is vital to our success, and that of the wider sector, as we can achieve so much more together than we can by acting alone.
- **Inclusivity**
  We celebrate and champion diversity, and we treat everyone with respect, empathy and understanding, regardless of background, identity or differences.
- **Challenge**
  We expect the best of ourselves and others, using challenge as a tool for growth and improvement.

Core Functions as a VCSE Local Infrastructure Organisation (LIO)

1. Leadership and Advocacy

Represent the VCSE sector in strategic decision-making, ensuring that community voices – especially those of marginalised groups – are heard and taken seriously.

Influence local, regional and national policy, promote equity and advocate for the sector's role in shaping public services and responding to crises.

2. Partnerships and Collaboration

Cultivate positive relationships between VCSE organisations, statutory bodies and other stakeholders to foster joint working and shared solutions.

Convene networks, broker relationships and support collaborative funding bids, to help create a more connected and resilient local ecosystem.

3. Capacity Building

Strengthen the VCSE sector by providing training, mentoring and organisational development support.

Enable VCSE organisations to operate safely, improve governance, secure funding, adopt digital tools and build resilience, in order to deliver high-quality services and grow sustainably.

4. Volunteering

Promote, coordinate and support volunteering across communities and businesses.

Support organisations to achieve high standards in recruiting and managing volunteers, ensuring inclusive and safe practices.

Contribute to strategic initiatives that shape the future of volunteering.

1. Leadership and Advocacy

Key elements

- **Strategic representation**: representing the VCSE sector in local strategic partnerships, including the City Board, Integrated Care System (ICS), Health & Wellbeing Board and Skills & Employment Board, using a feedback loop to ensure effective communications.
- **Amplifying community voice**: creating mechanisms to ensure the voices of marginalised and under-represented communities are heard in decision-making processes.
- **Policy influence and challenge**: advocating for policies that support the VCSE sector, influencing (and challenging, where appropriate) local authority and health system strategies, and working with other LIOs to influence regional and national decision-making.
- **Convening stakeholders**: bringing together statutory bodies, VCSE organisations and community groups to collaborate on shared goals and to explore potential opportunities.
- **Equity and inclusion leadership**: promoting equity, diversity and inclusion through training, consultation and strategies informed by lived experience, and challenging misconceptions of the sector and the communities it serves.
- **Local intelligence sharing**: providing insight into local needs and assets, helping shape services and funding allocations.
- **Sector promotion**: highlighting and celebrating the value, expertise and impact of the sector to funders, policymakers, other sector organisations and the public.
- **Building sector confidence**: instilling confidence in VCSE groups to engage in strategic forums and to influence local agendas.
- **Leadership development**: actively promote leadership development within the sector, helping organisations become more strategic, resilient and sustainable.
- **Mentorship:** harnessing the skills and experience of larger, more established VCSE partners to support smaller organisations, ensuring they are not left behind.
- **Crisis response coordination**: coordinating VCSE responses and advocating for urgent support during emergencies (e.g. COVID-19, cost-of-living cris

2. Partnerships and Collaboration

Key elements

- **Facilitating cross-sector partnerships**: acting as a connector between VCSE organisations and statutory bodies, enabling and advocating joint working on shared priorities.
- **Brokerage and convening**: brokering relationships and convening forums, networks and working groups to foster collaboration across sectors.
- **Building trust and relationships**: investing in long-term relationship building, acting as neutral facilitators when necessary to overcome barriers between organisations.
- **Strategic alignment**: helping to align VCSE activities with local authority, health system and regional priorities, challenging unnecessary duplication of provision and ensuring community needs are fully reflected
- **Supporting collaborative funding bids**: facilitating joint funding applications to increase access to resources, especially for smaller VCSE groups.
- **Inclusive engagement**: ensuring diverse voices – including minoritised and marginalised communities – are included in collaborative efforts.
- **Knowledge sharing and insight generation**: gathering and sharing local intelligence to inform collaborative planning and service design.
- **Infrastructure development**: supporting the development of local VCSE ecosystems, strengthening the capacity for collaboration, and building strong relationships with other LIOs in the region.
- **Creating collaborative spaces**: establishing and maintaining platforms (forums, networks, digital hubs) for ongoing dialogue and joint action.
- **Crisis response collaboration**: during emergencies, working alongside our statutory partners to help coordinate multi-agency responses, ensuring VCSE organisations are part of the solution.

3. Capacity Building

Key elements

- **Training and skills development**: delivering and arranging training for staff, volunteers and trustees on issues such as governance, safeguarding, fundraising and digital skills.
- **One-to-one support**: offering tailored advice and mentoring to help VCSE organisations survive, adapt, grow and become more sustainable.
- **Safety and security**: strengthening the safety and resilience of VCSE organisations by equipping them with the knowledge, systems and support needed to create secure environments for staff, volunteers and service users.
- **Organisational development**: utilising 'Health Checks' to support organisations with strategic planning, business development and change management.
- **Funding and income generation support**: helping organisations to identify funding opportunities, write bids and develop income strategies.
- **Volunteer brokerage and management**: matching volunteers with opportunities and supporting organisations to manage and retain volunteers effectively.
- **Community participation and empowerment**: promoting inclusive community participation and helping to build the confidence and skills needed for active engagement in shaping services and achieving social change.
- **Corporate social responsibility (CSR)**: building relationships with local businesses and contractors, encouraging them to invest in the VCSE sector and supporting them to maximise the impact of their CSR commitments.
- **Digital inclusion and infrastructure support**: assisting in the adoption of digital tools to improve organisations' online presence and service delivery.
- **Peer learning and networking**: facilitating forums and networks for sharing ideas and best practice, and for strengthening collaboration and mutual support.
- **Monitoring, evaluation and impact measurement**: supporting VCSE groups to demonstrate their impact through effective evaluation frameworks.
- **Equity and inclusion capacity building**: providing training and resources to help organisations become more inclusive and representative of their communities.
- **Crisis resilience building**: helping organisations to prepare for and respond to crises, such as pandemics or cost-of-living pressures.

4. Volunteering

Key elements

- **Voice of volunteering:** representing the needs and aspirations of volunteers and volunteer-involving organisations locally and regionally.
- **Recognition and promotion**: raising awareness of the value of volunteering and taking a strategic role in leading, shaping and promoting volunteering locally.
- **Support for volunteer-involving organisations**: providing guidance and resources on the recruitment, management and retention of volunteers.
- **Promotion of best practice**: championing high standards in volunteering across the sector to encourage effective, trusted and safe volunteer practices.
- **Developing opportunities**: co-creating and promoting inclusive and meaningful volunteering roles, tailored to the local needs of volunteers, organisations and businesses.
- **Trusteeship**: promoting and celebrating the integral role that trustees play within the sector, and recognising this as an essential and rewarding volunteering role.
- **Volunteer brokerage**: developing systems to match individuals with volunteering opportunities based on their interests, skills, and availability.
- **Training and development**: mapping and offering training for those working alongside volunteers to improve skills, confidence and effectiveness.
- **Inclusive volunteering**: working to make volunteering accessible to all, including people with disabilities, older adults, young people and minoritised communities.
- **Strategic volunteering initiatives**: proactively contributing to regional and national strategies to help shape the future of volunteering, and highlighting the value of volunteering to funders and decision makers.
- **Data and impact measurement**: collecting and analysing data on volunteering trends and impact, to inform local policy and improve services.
- **Social value and corporate responsibility**: promoting volunteering as a key driver of social value, supporting businesses to create purposeful volunteering opportunities that achieve long-term benefits for organisations, communities and the wider economy.
- **Emergency response coordination**: mobilising and coordinating volunteers to support local responses at times of crisis.