

State of the Sector December 2025



VAST Services (1920)





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1. Executive Summary

This year's **State of the Sector** report captures a powerful truth: Stoke-on-Trent's voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector continues to step up—time and again—for our communities. In the face of rising need, limited resources, and ongoing structural change, our sector remains resilient, innovative, and deeply committed to making a difference.

We often hear the phrase “doing more with less.” But in Stoke-on-Trent, it may be more accurate to say we are doing a lot more with just a little more.



Many organisations have found ways to grow their impact, even as they navigate complex funding environments and increasing demand. This is a testament to the creativity, determination, and adaptability of our sector.

This report also challenges outdated narratives. Stoke-on-Trent is not a “charity desert.” Our sector is growing, diverse, and dynamic. We are home to long-standing anchor institutions and a rising generation of younger organisations—many founded by people with lived experience—who are reshaping how we support our communities. Together, they form a vibrant ecosystem of care, advocacy, and action.

Collaboration is at the heart of this progress. The VCSE City Alliance, our work with statutory partners, and the shared commitment to co-production are all signs of a sector that is not only surviving but striving to lead. We are proud to support this collective effort.

To our colleagues in the statutory sector: we invite you to continue building with us. Let's deepen our partnerships, share power, and co-create solutions that reflect the realities of our city.

To our fellow VCSE leaders: this report is your story. It reflects your challenges, your achievements, and your hopes. It is a call to keep going, to keep speaking up, and to keep believing in the power of community.

At VAST, we are honoured to stand alongside you. Together, we are not just responding to need—we are reimagining what's possible for Stoke-on-Trent.

Lisa Healings, Chief Executive, VAST



2. Ten Talking Points

Our work on this State of the Sector report has prompted a number of reflections, which we are calling our ten talking points.

1

Stoke-on-Trent is home to a compact but growing sector

Our VCSE sector is historically made up of fewer charities than in comparable cities – but this is changing, and we are leaving the ‘charity desert’ caricature behind us.

Read more: [pp 16-21](#)

2

Our sector is a story of anchor charities, and of rising stars

Our city depends on the broad shoulders of its long-established anchor charities who continue to deliver vital services. At the same time, the part played by younger organisations is distinctive: they are attracting an unusually high proportion of grants to the city.

Read more: [pp 20-21](#)

3

Are we doing ‘more with less’ – or a lot more with a little more?

A majority of respondents to our survey report real successes in attracting funding and resources to support their work in the city – yet the context is as challenging than it has ever been, if not more so.

Read more: [pp 56-57](#)

4

While speaking with many voices, we all agree: collaboration is key

Our sector does not always speak as one – rather, it brings a rich diversity of voices. Our VCSE organisations have responded and adapted to challenge in a huge variety of ways. But one thing we can agree on is the importance and value of collaboration in addressing rising need.

Read more: [pp 43-44](#)

5

Room for optimism: Partnership is a growth area

VCSE relationships with one another and with statutory partners are growing where it matters most, though there is much work still to do. Charities and social enterprises recognise and welcome the genuine positive intent in the city and in the health system, and are keen to see words translated into action.

Read more: [pp 43-55](#)



6

VCSEs work hard to keep a skilled workforce in play

Our VCSE workforce is made up of both paid staff and volunteers. Many of our respondents who employ skilled staff have been able to retain them, though recruitment and retention of the requisite skills are a continuing challenge.

Read more: [pp 38, 58-59](#)

7

VCSEs step up for communities despite the challenges

A majority of respondents chose to tell us about unmet need and areas of challenge in their work, as well as how they are responding. They speak of increasing staff numbers, applying for more grants, adapting their services, using reserves to support service delivery, and giving more volunteer time.

Read more: [pp 33-37](#)

8

Our VCSEs enable citizen contribution

Volunteers and charity trustees are communities of contributors, within the communities that make up our city. They are often quiet and unseen, with their efforts spread across a huge number of organisations, both large and small. Our respondents told us that what lies beneath the name of a charity or community group is often a small and dedicated group of givers. They bring their commitment, skills and lived experience to our city – and when a VCSE organisation is lost, so too is the depth of that contribution.

Read more: [pp 58-59](#)

9

VCSEs' strengths are hard to replace

Respondents told us about the irreplaceable value of hard-won, time-served relationships and the qualities that characterise them at their best: trust, hope, cultural competence, and lived experience on the part of staff and volunteers.

Read more: [pp 29-32, 67-69](#)

10

'The soul of the sector?' VCSEs remain optimistic against the odds

Despite the challenges common to charities and social enterprises up and down the UK, a majority of respondents remain confident about the future of their organisations, and are determined to keep delivering for communities.

Read more: [pp 64-65](#)



3. Side-by-side: Sector Sightlines

It's a real privilege to reflect on the role of the voluntary sector in the life of our city.

Stoke-on-Trent is built on resilience, creativity, and community. Nowhere is that spirit more alive

than in our voluntary organisations. From food banks to youth clubs, from mental health support to heritage preservation—these groups are the lifeblood of our neighbourhoods. They step in where others step back. They listen, they act, and they care.

Let me be clear: the voluntary sector is not a nice-to-have. It is essential. It is strategic. It is transformative. That's why we've backed the Stoke-on-Trent VCSE City Alliance—because we know that real change happens when we work together, across sectors, with shared purpose and mutual respect.

As council leader, I've seen first-hand how voluntary sector organisations are helping us tackle inequality, improve wellbeing, and build a fairer, greener, more skilled city. You are not just delivering services—you are shaping futures.

Thank you for your grit, your compassion, and your unwavering commitment to Stoke-on-Trent. We will continue to stand with you, invest in you, and champion your work—because together, we are building a city that works for everyone.

Let's keep going. Let's keep growing. And let's keep believing in the power of community.

**Councillor Jane Ashworth OBE
Leader of Stoke-on-Trent City Council**



The impact of local charities and the wider voluntary sector has historically been very significant in Stoke-on-Trent, providing care

for those in need, helping the vulnerable and also working collaboratively with the statutory sector.

However, the funding landscape for the sector has probably never been so challenging as it is currently. While many organisations in the sector are under pressure, our mission to care and make a difference is still as strong as it ever was.

The sector's reach into local communities is still very strong – for example, the charity that I work for is supporting at any one time over 500 local people who have a variety of needs.

We have a strong sector which is always seeking to work in partnership with our statutory sector colleagues as well as being ready to speak 'truth to power' when we see the danger of the needs of local people being ignored.

**Lloyd Cooke, Chief Executive,
Saltbox; Chair, Voluntary Sector
Chief Officers Group (VSCOG)**



3a. Dr Allison Gardner

Labour Member of Parliament
Stoke-on-Trent South and the Villages

Across Stoke-on-Trent South, VCSE organisations continue to be a vital voice for the community, responding to growing needs with compassion, creativity, and collaboration. From the artist-led Urban Wilderness who help to generate a sense of community through the power of art, to The Gingerbread Centre's support for homeless families, and Affordable Food Stoke's provision of low-cost food, these are just a few examples of the many remarkable organisations making a difference across the city.



Alongside long-established charities, the sector's growth reflects the extraordinary resilience and ingenuity of the people of Stoke-on-Trent, who meet adversity with fresh ideas and collective strength.

This report celebrates the powerful impact of these local groups in supporting vulnerable individuals and strengthening social bonds. Vitally, it also acknowledges the challenges they face - rising demand, funding pressures, and the need to continually adapt, which are being met with a spirit of confidence and determination.



3b. Gareth Snell MP

Labour & Co-operative MP
Stoke-on-Trent Central

Our City is built on kindness and generosity. But all too often, vital services are held together by goodwill and VCSE groups stepping in when everyone else has left the pitch. Without the vital work of the VCSE sector in Stoke-on-Trent, thousands of people would be abandoned.

The model, however, that doing more for less or that, somehow, the VCSE can operate on wafer-thin margins on ever-decreasing public commissions needs to come to an end.

The National Insurance increase hurt lots of local organisations and put even more strain on a sector which was already nearing breaking point and for that I can only apologise again.

I am constantly amazed by the resilience and ingenuity of a sector which is so often closer to and in step with the communities and groups you are seeking to support than any other part of the City. The agility with which the sector reacts to unexpected challenges and utilises its power of convention to deliver positive and pragmatic answers is an exemplar to others in the City for whom preservation of their own fiefdoms trumps the collective good.

Looking ahead, it is imperative that the voices and expertise of the VCSE in Stoke-on-Trent are recognised and utilised by decision makers in a powerful genuine partnership of equals and that opportunities for collaboration are seized and built upon.

The Groups in this report are the thread that hold together the tapestry of our fabric and the guarantors of our social contract. Without you we would, in so many ways, be a poorer and more divided city in which too many people are left behind.





3c. David Williams MP

Labour Member of Parliament
Stoke-on-Trent North

Before entering Parliament, I spent nearly two decades working at the YMCA North Staffordshire. I have seen first-hand the difference our voluntary and community organisations make, not in abstract terms, but in real lives changed, young people supported, and families given a chance when few others were there for them. That experience shaped me, and it means I do not speak about this sector from the outside looking in.



Across Stoke-on-Trent and the wider area, our VCSE organisations continue to stand alongside communities through hardship, uncertainty and rising need. They do it with heart, humility and grit. Many are small, some are young, all are deeply rooted in place and driven by a belief in people's potential.

The challenges are undeniable. Funding is stretched, demand is rising, and the pressures on staff and volunteers are real. Yet what shines through this report is hope — practical, grounded hope — built on partnership, compassion and a refusal to give up on anyone or any neighbourhood.

My role now is to stand with you in Parliament as you stand with our communities here. I will continue to champion this sector, fight for fair funding, and make sure your insight and experience informs decisions at every level. Civil society is not an optional add-on. In a city like ours, it is often the first door people knock on, and we must ensure it is never the last.



4. Since our Last Report

2025 offered a timely vantage point to reflect on times of continuing change and challenge for our Voluntary, Community, and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector. In March, we passed the milestone of 5 years since news broke of Britain's Covid-19 lockdown, and we realised that 3 years had flown by since VAST's last State of the Sector report.

We know that VCSE organisations, alongside health, and local government colleagues, have continued to grapple with the complex legacies of austerity. They also faced the uncertainties associated with the legal and political changes that continue to shape our experience of the current decade: 2022's Health and Care Act, 2023's Procurement Act, 2024's Devolution White Paper, and successive changes in the leadership of both Local and UK government. All this has taken place pending local government reorganisation, and the 'shifts' to prevention and community that form central pillars of the government's 10-Year Plan for the National Health Service.



These challenges are not over: few reminders are needed about the rising cost of living, the increases in the contributions VCSEs must find to fund National Insurance, and the still-uncertain implications of the latest NHS reforms.

However, one of the clearest reasons for optimism in our report is a rising tide of support for increased collaboration. This is evident here in the city through the VCSE City Alliance, in our Health system with the Healthy Communities Alliance, nationally in the form of the new Civil Society Covenant announced last October, and through many other key programmes, like Family Matters and the Locality Improvement Framework.



5. Our Methods, Sources, and Sample

We have drawn most heavily on two surveys: our State of the Sector Survey for 2025, and our City Alliance survey, which has enabled us to deep-dive into one key aspect of partnership and collaboration.

Our report also uses a wealth of data drawn from several sources – a number of other resources are noted in passing and you will find these referenced in the endnotes after this report.

However, some of the key sources are detailed below:

**Charity
Commission**

**Companies
House**

**360
Giving**

UK Civil Society Almanac 2024

We have also cited a range of resources which we hope will offer useful comparators to readers wanting to set our report in a wider context.

Nottingham Trent University VCSE Barometer

Support Staffordshire State of the Sector 2025

In developing our survey questions, we invited **228 stakeholders** from across the VCSE and statutory sectors to review the question set and propose additional questions and areas of interest for potential insight, with 12 engaging keenly to influence the survey at this stage. Our thanks go to them for supporting this report.

Over 450 organisations received direct invitations to complete a survey, while the link was also shared via VAST's social media accounts and mailing lists, with these more 'passive' responses likely accounting for around 25–30% of returns.

In general, survey responses were submitted by people in positions of responsibility within their organisations, who list their titles as Chief Executive, Director, Executive Lead, Chair, Project Manager or Service Manager, to name but a few.



5.1 What kinds of organisations responded to our survey?

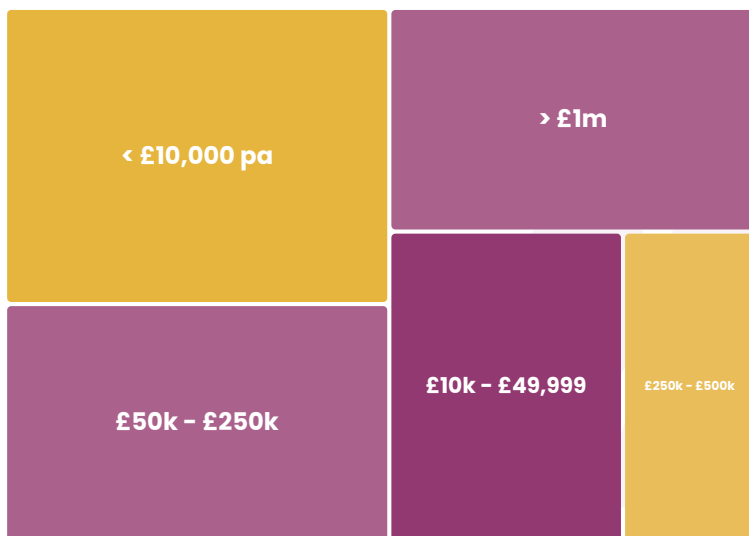
We asked organisations to classify their organisation status when responding to our survey:



- **24%** are registered charities (registered only with the Charity Commission)
- **22%** are charitable companies (registered both with the Charity Commission and Companies House)
- **18%** are Charitable Incorporated Organisations (CIOs)
- **17%** are Community Interest Companies
- **16%** are community groups with a constitution
- **8%** are companies limited by guarantee
- **6 organisations** classed themselves as 'other' and include a Community Amateur Sports Club (CASC), branches of national youth organisations, and those who were unsure.



Responses from organisations by income:



- **25%** of respondents have an income lower than £10k per year.
- **16%** have an income between £10k and £49,999
- **20%** have an income between £50k and £250k
- **9%** have an income between £250k and £500k
- **18%** have an income in excess of £1m

Hover over section to see count (%)

Responses from organisations by area of work:

Unsurprisingly, all but two exceptions (located at the edge of the city's boundary) are working in Stoke-on-Trent, while many are also active in:

- Newcastle-under-Lyme (**49%**),
- Staffordshire Moorlands (**44%**),
- Stafford Borough (**20%**),
- Cheshire (**11%**),
- other areas of Staffordshire (**26%**) or,
- Shropshire (**5%**).



Responses from organisations by staffing levels:



35% of respondents have no paid staff, and a further **34%** of respondents have fewer than 10 staff. A minority (**12%**) employ more than 50.



5.2 Challenges

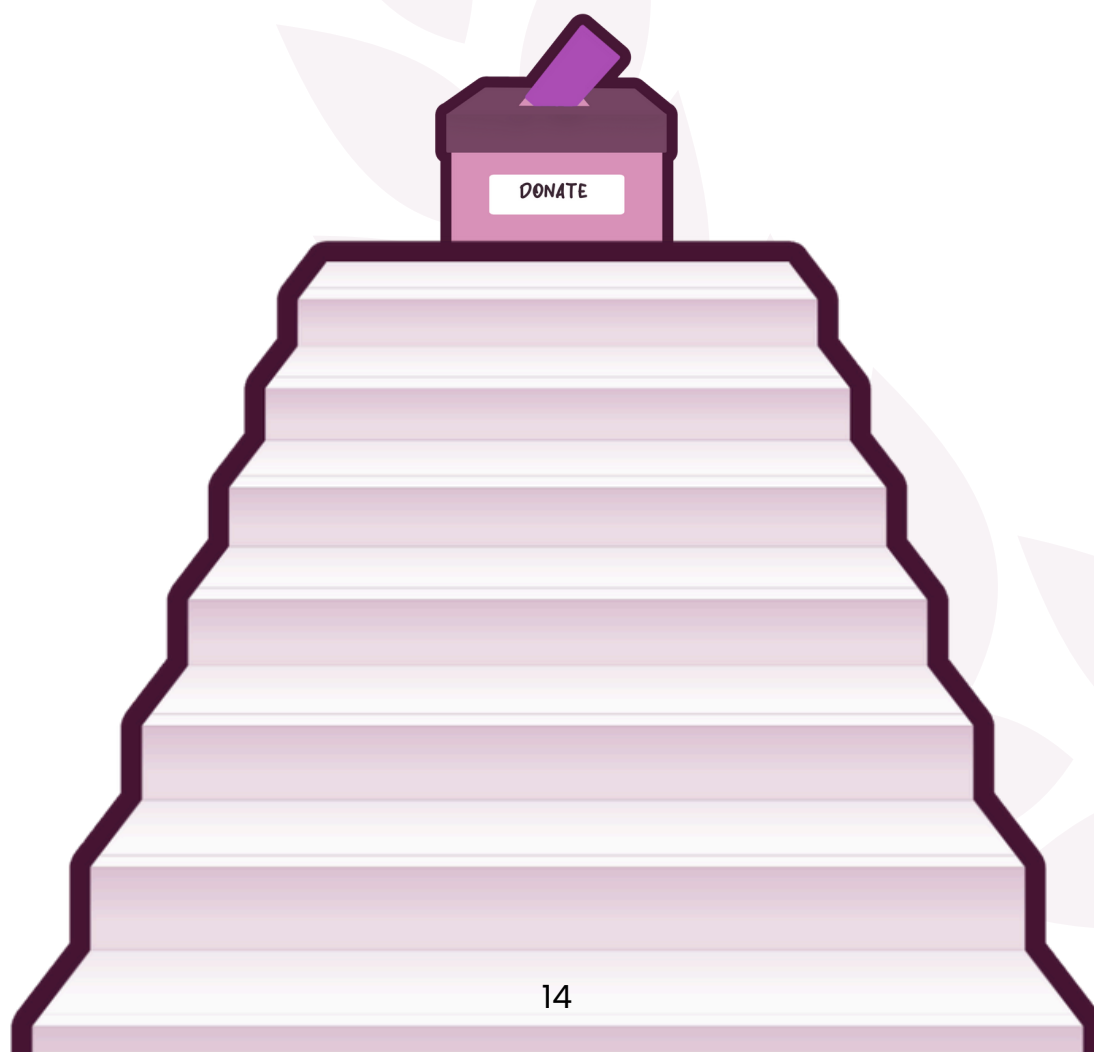
An inevitable challenge for State of the Sector surveys lies in trying to reflect the breadth of experience of the VCSE sector adequately.

Much of our sector is made up of unregistered organisations, while at the same time a relatively small number of large ‘anchor’ charities shoulder a large share of responsibility for deploying resources and delivering crucial services.

We can’t pretend to have achieved a perfect balance. As with most State of the Sector reports, our sample has its shortcomings and limitations, but still offers sightlines and insights across a wide range of experience.

An overall majority of our respondent organisations are well established and have been working in the city for over a decade. A substantial minority (17%) have existed for over 50 years.

At the other extreme, 37% of respondents have existed for less than 10 years – making for an interesting contrast with samples in other areas of the UK.¹ As we will see in the next section, accounting for the experience of this younger segment is particularly important to forming a picture of what is unusual and distinctive about the VCSE sector in Stoke-on-Trent.





6. Sizing up Stoke-on-Trent's VCSE Sector

6.1 A national context

The National Council for Voluntary Organisations' (NCVO) Civil Society Almanac pinpoints **166,000 voluntary organisations** in England, based on published data from the Charity Commission. Meanwhile, the National Association for Voluntary and Community Action (NAVCA) estimates that, across England, the true size of the voluntary sector is closer to **495,000 organisations**.ⁱⁱ

This can be a rabbit hole: estimating the number of organisations in a given local area like ours, let alone nationally, can be more challenging than at first it seems.

Nationally, NAVCA and the University of Exeter have found that 68% of the VCSE sector is made up of small, local 'unincorporated associations' which are not formally registered as charities, limited companies, or industrial and provident societies. These are 'hard to see but essential' groups, who make up what they call the 'unseen but essential voluntary sector microbiome.'ⁱⁱⁱ

Of England's registered VCSEs, 80% have an annual income below £100k, and 44% of these are in turn classed as 'micro' organisations whose work draws on annual turnover below £10k each.^{iv}

As NAVCA continues, 'it's one thing to focus on 'an 'entire 'system'—but there's more: community gardening groups, walking clubs, foodbanks, and lunch clubs [...] where people discuss life, worries, or their finances.'^v

We are confident that a rainbow of diverse experiences is reflected in our survey responses. Within our sample size, the picture cannot be perfect, but this report includes perspectives that are derived from a proportionately reflective range of groups.



6.2 The charities that are 'active' in Stoke-on-Trent vs. the charities that call the city home

Our local context demands some interpretation:

3

9

6

of the charities registered with the Charity Commission have disclosed that they work in Stoke-on-Trent, with a combined income of £157.7m at last recorded accounts, and combined expenditure of £144.7m.

However, this picture distorts our image of the sector. When we focus in on the VCSE organisations that call Stoke-on-Trent postcode areas their home, we can see that the city is host to a much smaller but significant complement of groups, with a very different profile of income and expenditure:

2

5

2

252 registered charities with a combined income of £87.5m and a combined expenditure of £78.4m – including an estimated 71 registered charities which are directly influenced in their work by a religious faith.

1

7

7

177 active community interest companies (CICs) are based in Stoke-on-Trent postcodes .

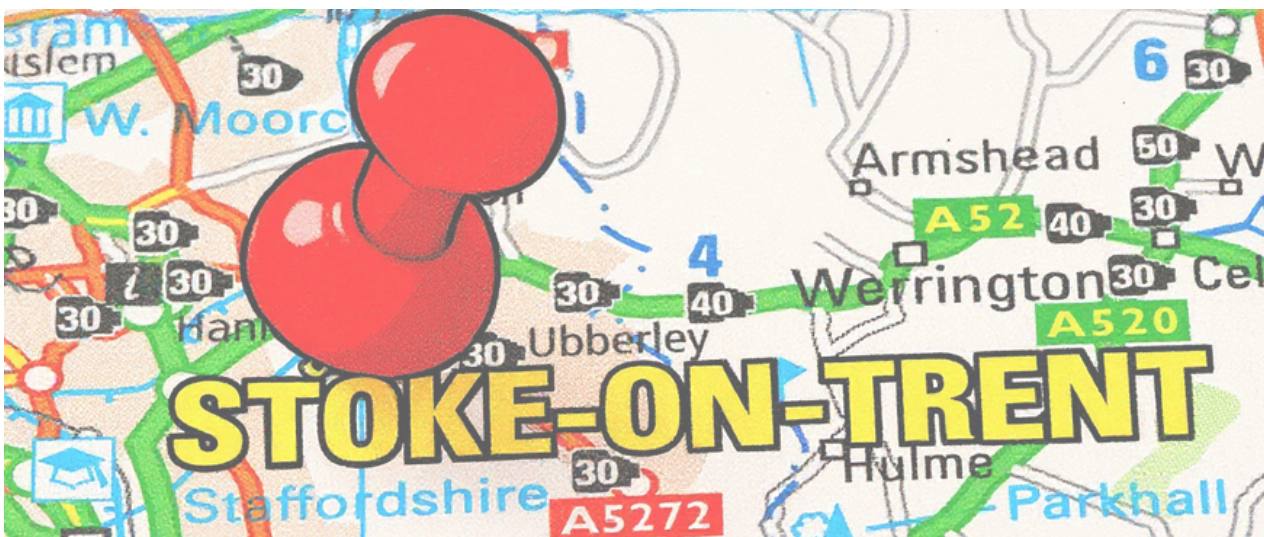
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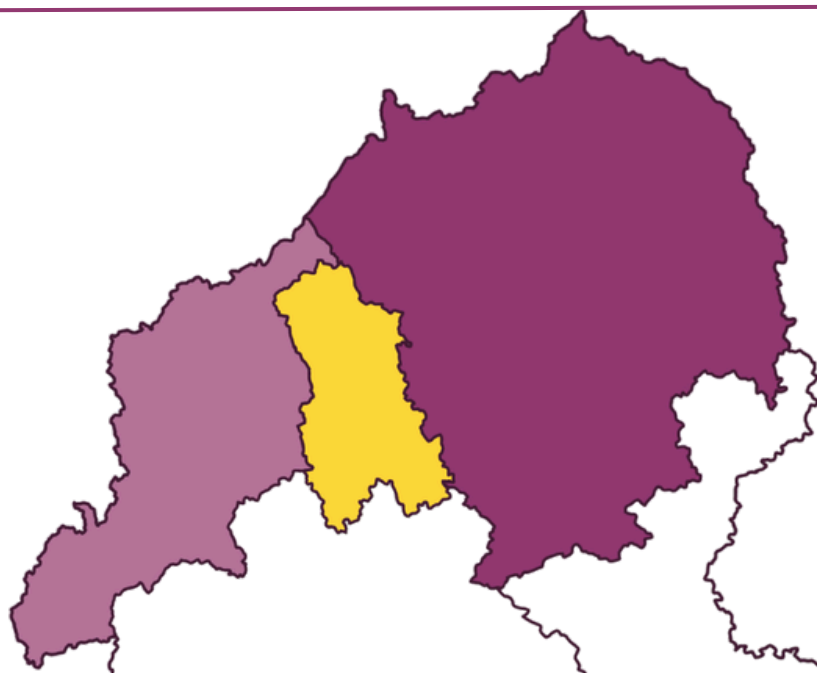
1

81 expired CICs have been established and subsequently become inactive since CICs were established as a viable form of governance under the Companies Act 2004.

Based on the ratios identified nationally by NAVCA and the University of Exeter, there is a local 'microbiome' which we would cautiously estimate is likely to number at least 700 unregistered organisations.

A good proportion of these groups are VAST members, and in many ways our 'bread and butter.' In October 2025, VAST's membership numbered 717 organisations and groups.





6.3 Understanding our sector geography – North Staffordshire and the limits of the data

Within reason, we could suggest that there are ‘270 or 280 Stoke-on-Trent charities’ – and this would certainly be true in spirit.

But an analysis of Charity Commission data necessarily excludes important charities that are based at the periphery of the city and in surrounding areas.

In theory, it would be possible to ‘filter’ some of these organisations back into the data that we have used in this report. Yet our criteria would risk becoming very subjective.

Many of these North Staffordshire groups (and some national entities) do undertake work that benefits Stoke-on-Trent communities enormously. These groups include key players like the New Vic Theatre, and even a handful of long-standing charities who feature the city in their name, like Stoke-on-Trent Lions Club, or even the Stoke-on-Trent Hebrew Congregation.

Some of these Newcastle and Staffordshire-based groups have chosen to respond to our survey. We welcome and value their viewpoints, which are represented in our VCSE-contributed survey data. This means that we are drawing on slightly different samples when defining our geography, than when drawing together the survey data used to gauge feeling in the sector.

For ease and clarity, when assessing the number of Stoke-on-Trent based charities for this report we have opted to use the figures available for charities and social enterprises whose registered addresses are located here in the city of Stoke-on-Trent.

In so doing, we acknowledge that Newcastle-under-Lyme’s ST5 postcode area, many of whose charities also serve communities in Stoke-on-Trent, is home to another 33 registered charities.



6.4 Where are Stoke-on-Trent's 252 registered charities located?

The city's boundaries, and its constituent postcode areas, are the best available template for plotting the distribution of the city's charities.

We are conscious that one of these postcode areas (the village of Brown Edge, in ST6) takes in an area slightly outside the city boundary. However, any numbers derived from this small semi-rural area are likely to be negligible.

ST1 | 83 orgs

- Hanley
- Cobridge
- Sneyd Green
- Birches Head
- Shelton

ST2 | 18 orgs

- Bentilee
- Abbey Hulton
- Bucknall

ST3 | 37 orgs

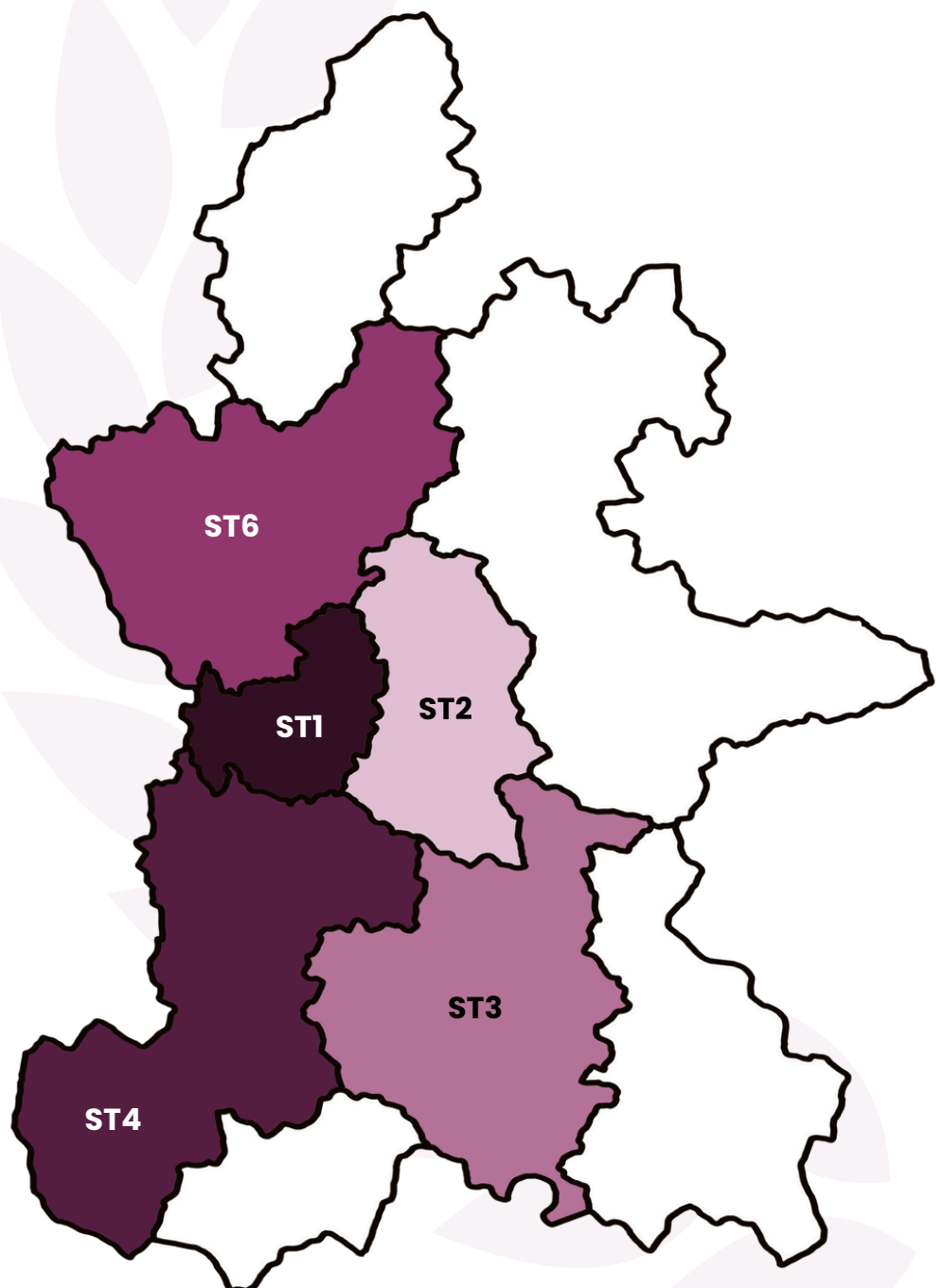
- Longton
- Meir
- Blurton
- Weston Coyney

ST4 | 60 orgs

- Stoke
- Fenton
- Penkhull
- Trentham

ST6 | 54 orgs

- Tunstall
- Burslem
- Smallthorne
- Brown Edge





6.5 Where are Stoke-on-Trent's 177 active community interest companies (CICs) located?



6.6 Other organisations: societies, mutuels, community amateur sports clubs

Other types of organisations sometimes identifying as part of the VCSE sector include Registered Societies (including Sports and Social clubs and Registered Providers of Social Housing), of which 23 are currently active in the city, and Community Amateur Sports Clubs, of which 6 are currently registered with HMRC in city postcodes.^{vi}



6.7 Leaving the 'charity desert' behind

When we size up our sector, we can see that it has grown and developed in a little over a decade.

In 2013, IPSOS Mori, commissioned by the Cabinet Office, reported that there were 359 charities and social enterprises in the city^{vii} – that figure has clearly increased significantly. Our total now stands at **429**.

In recent years, Stoke-on-Trent has been unkindly caricatured as a 'charity desert'^{viii} – and in Stoke-on-Trent, it is true that we are home to fewer registered charities per head of population than in most local authority areas.^{ix}

Yet we would contend that this language can be pejorative. It detracts from a more honest and nuanced picture of what is distinctive and emergent about the VCSE sector in Stoke-on-Trent.

The data tells us this: not only are we growing as a sector, but Stoke-on-Trent is especially unusual in one respect. While long-established charities offer their broad shoulders to support a huge range of key services in our city, Stoke now leans more than most places into the energy and activism of younger organisations.



6.8 The contribution of younger organisations

Published data from the 360Giving platform adds a distinctive texture to our picture of the city.

159 of 447 (**36%**) grants recorded as having been awarded to civil society organisations in Stoke-on-Trent between June 2021 and October 2025 have been entrusted to organisations younger than five years old.^x

This proportion far outstrips the figure from similar or neighbouring local authority areas – such as Wolverhampton (30%^{xi}), Nottingham (26%^{xii}), Manchester (22%^{xiii}), or the counties of Staffordshire (24%^{xiv}), or Shropshire (21%^{xv}). In fact, we found very few areas which return a proportion higher than 30%, despite the intriguing contrasts of Sunderland (34%^{xvi}) and Blackpool (18%^{xvii}).



6.9 What does this mean for Stoke-on-Trent?

For us, this figure partly underlines the widespread energy and determination of local founders, people often motivated by lived and shared experiences to establish new organisations that respond to the needs of their communities.

By the same metric, it reinforces what we know to be the vital importance of established, anchor charities, the mainstays of our sector and our communities.

Last but not least, it shines a light into the space where voluntary sector infrastructure organisations like VAST tend to be most active, supporting VCSEs to grow and become sustainable through good governance.



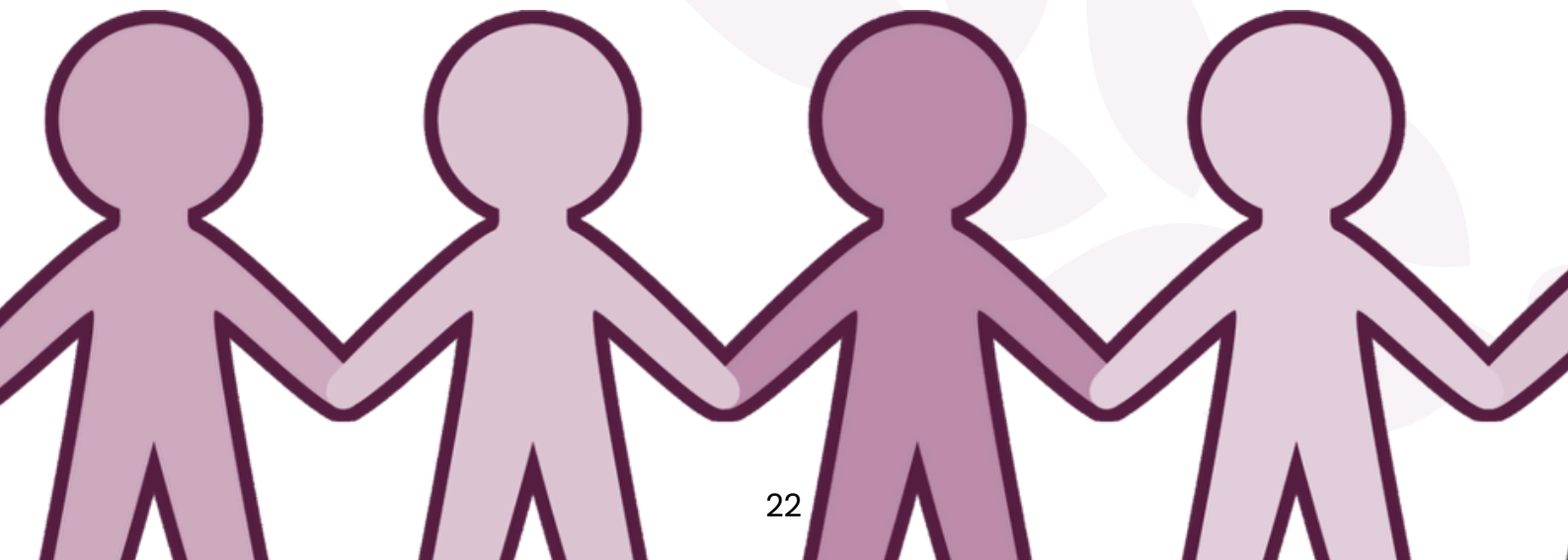
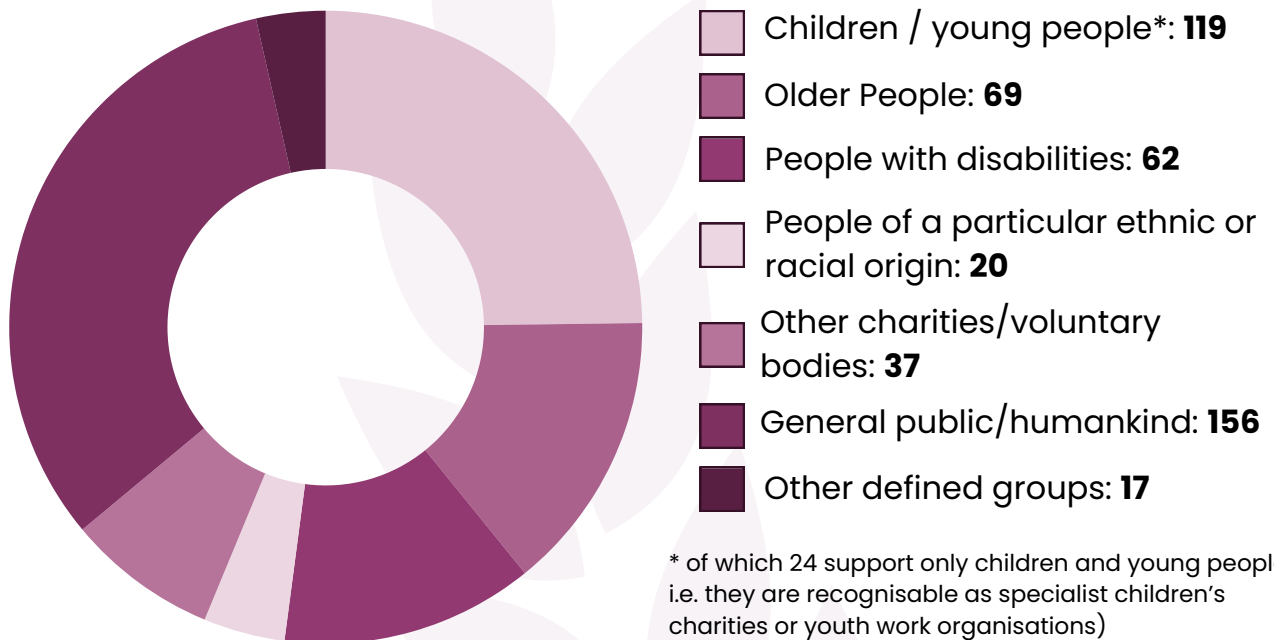


7. Who do our charities help, and how?

7.1 Who do our charities help?

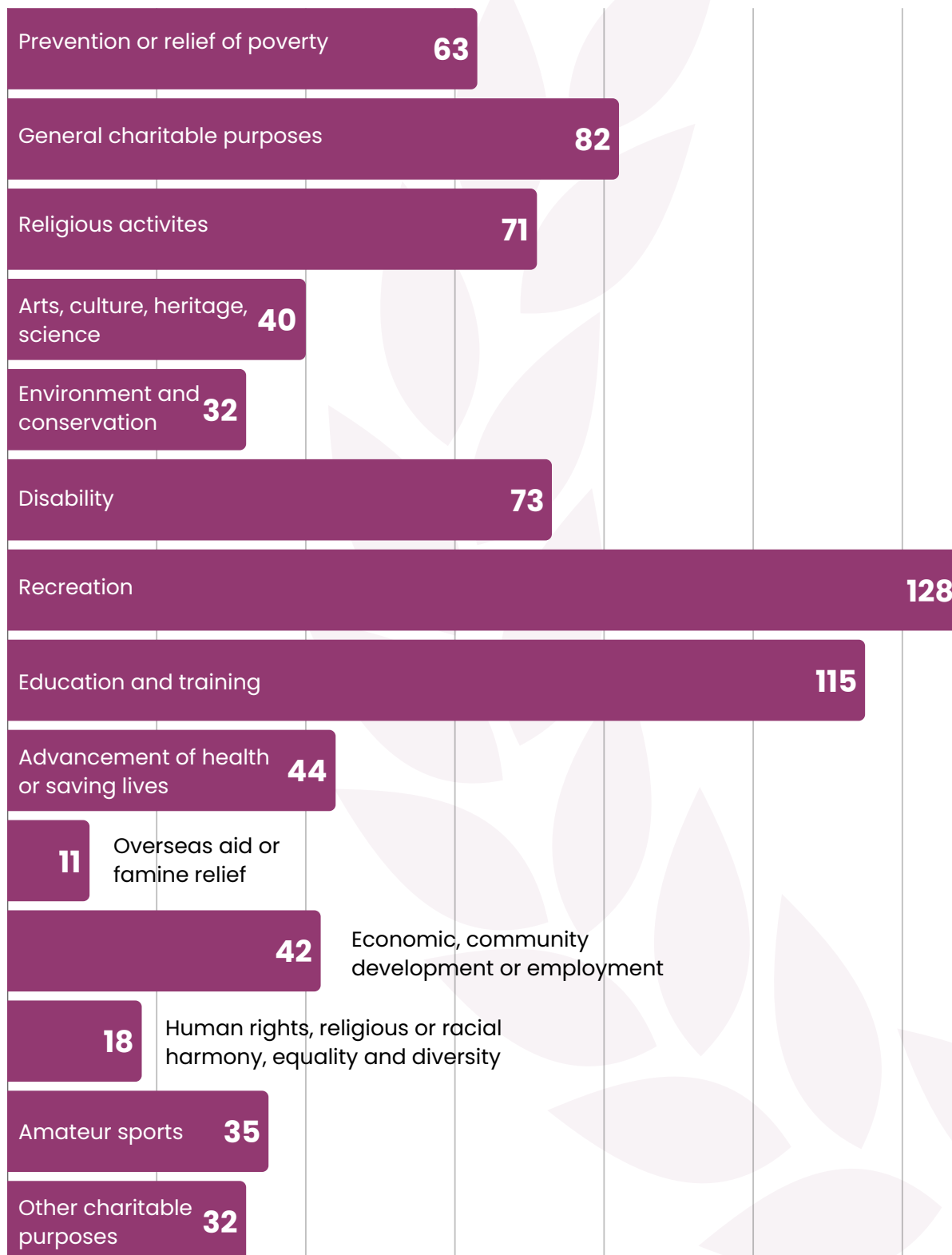
When charities register with the Charity Commission, they must provide information about their work, and about those they help, using a predetermined list of categories.

A simple analysis of this data reveals the below. Unfortunately, data for social enterprises is less simple to interrogate in this way.





7.2 What do our charities do?





7.3 How do our charities help?

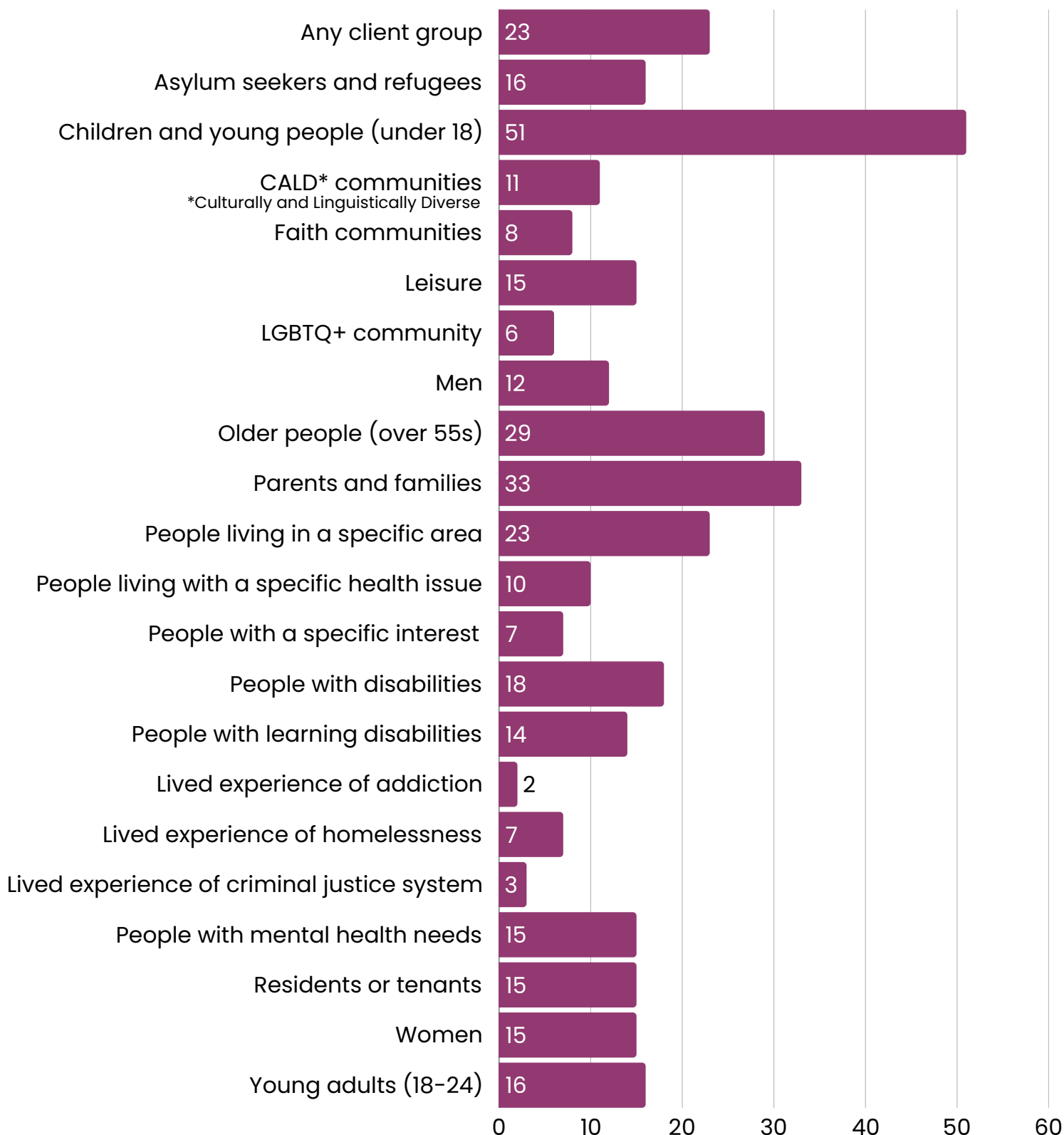
Charities are given a little more flexibility in defining their activities and charitable objects to the Charity Commission. The graphics featured in the next three sections offer a stronger and more nuanced sense of how they see themselves.





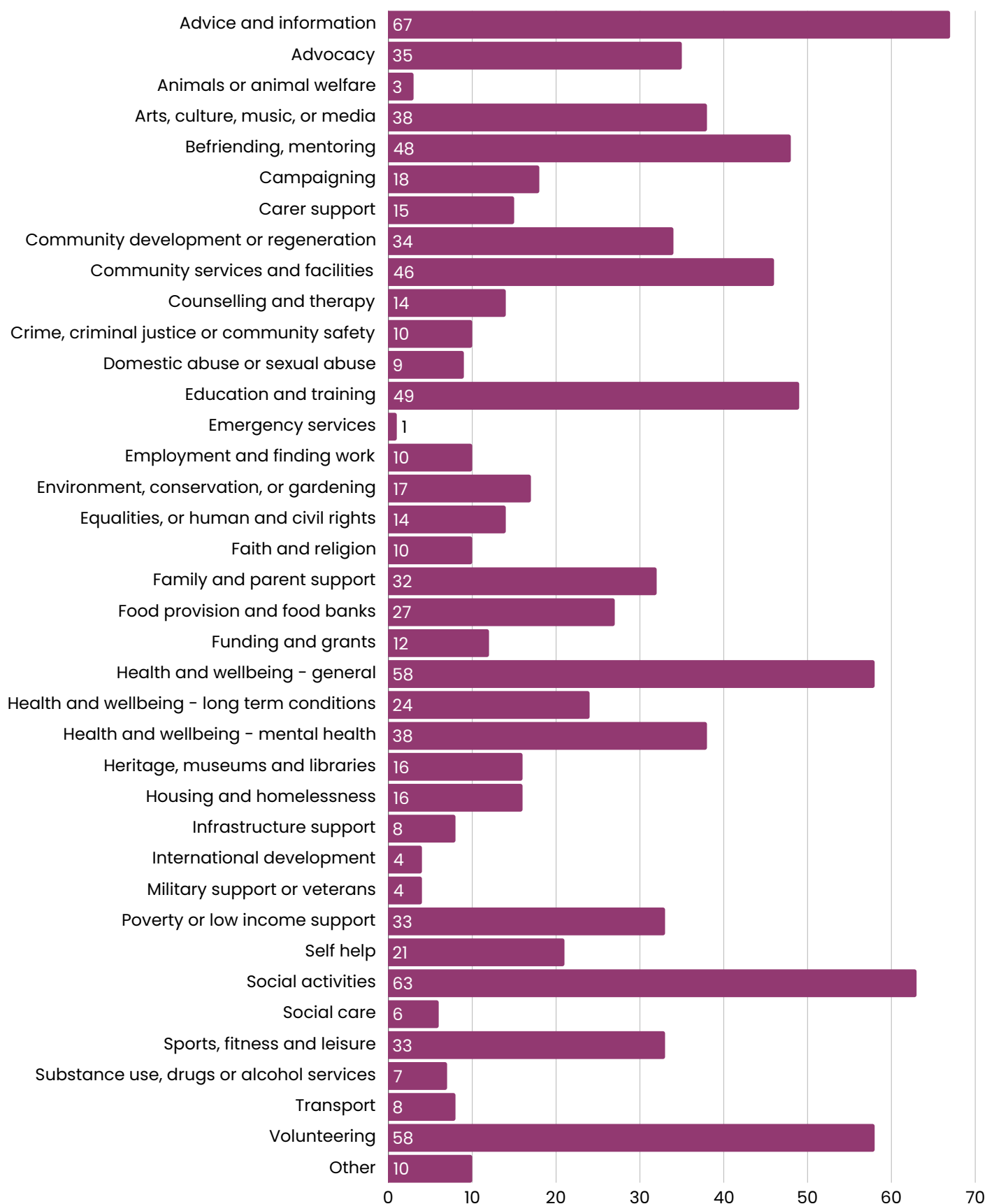
7.6 How this range of work shows up in our survey

We asked survey respondents to tell us about the main beneficiaries of their work.





We also asked about the services they provide:





8. Speaking up for our sector's strengths

8.1 Sizing up our impact

Generalisations based on fixed categories offer limited insights, but our sample is indicative of the range of organisations' beneficiaries and areas of work.

For example, one respondent organisation had worked with 10 individuals in the last year, while two of those with the highest reach had engaged audiences of 180,000 each.

That's why we asked VCSEs what makes them proud – in other words, to spell out their strengths in their own words, with an unashamed emphasis on qualitative responses.

Their responses have a lot to say about what is strong in our sector, and they articulate their work better than we could do through numbers alone.

We have presented a selection here, which speak loudly and proudly for the qualities, range and diversity of their work.



8.2 What makes the VCSE sector proud?

Beat the Cold prides itself on delivering client-led, holistic work. Acting as advocate where required, and empowering communities in their energy matters, we have supported people of Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire for over two decades.

We are actively contributing to reducing health inequalities, and to shaping the health economy. Our highly qualified advisors are passionate about treating our clients as individuals and we will work with them for as long as it takes to meet their support needs.

Fiona Miller, Beat the Cold

We make a difference to people's lives, sometimes by helping them out of debt, other times helping them stay in their own accommodation and not becoming homeless, always seeking to assist people with dignity, respect and an absence of judgement.

**Craig Browne,
Citizens Advice Stoke-on-Trent
and North Staffordshire**

We try to make it easier for people to connect with themselves, with others, and with the good that's already present in their lives. Our projects are small and practical.

Everything we do is rooted in lived experience and designed to be accessible, especially for people who often feel left out of more formal services. We don't aim for scale or speed. We care more about whether what we offer feels meaningful, whether people come back, and whether it makes a difference they can feel. That's what guides us.

Bret Shah, Stoke Your Gratitude



We meet otherwise unmet needs in the community, so every day is different, special and unique. I am really proud of our volunteers.

We have no salaried positions in the company and yet we offer our services every day of the year and everyone works so hard, going above and beyond any expectations that could ever have been imagined.

Paula Rowcliffe,
Birches Head Get Growing

I am most proud of our staff team. Our staff go above and beyond to make a difference for some of the most vulnerable children across our region.

Catherine Cook, Peter Pan Centre

We have supported over 160 organisations this year and many more in the previous years. We have supplied around £500,000 worth of period products during that period. We have been a major factor in removing the stigma surrounding periods and menopause by encouraging people to talk openly and honestly. We have encouraged many businesses to become Period Dignity employers and have worked closely with two local football teams and the local grassroots clubs in encouraging them and facilitating them to supply period products freely. We are activists in encouraging government to supply free products to schools and to eventually follow the Scottish example of free products everywhere. I could go on forever but I'm most proud of our team who all give their time freely.

Linda Allbutt, Period Power



Our strength lies in resilience, grounded in authenticity and a deep belief in our mission: to equip young people, families, and underrepresented communities with the tools to shape stronger, safer, and more compassionate neighbourhoods. These individuals become changemakers in their own right, investing in people, not just programmes.

**Ross Podyma,
Sporting Communities**

We are a movement of hope, building life chances and supporting young people into their futures.

**Yvonne Dyer,
YMCA North Staffordshire**

OLGBT+ is a grass roots peer support group. I am proud of the way the group has grown and of the projects successfully completed. I am proud of the group's partnership and collaboration with other charities. Most of all, I am proud of the way that members have supported each other at times of need without any prompting, and of members' increased confidence to engage with the wider community.

**Maurice Greenham,
OLGBT+ Support Group**

"We are proud of bringing communities together creatively to change perception and experience of overlooked places."

**Isla Telford, Urban
Wilderness CIC**

I am proud that our work engages teenage boys, which can be difficult, proud that we help boys involved with the criminal justice system, proud that we collaborate with other amazing organisations.

**Darren Brookes,
The Foundry CIC**



9. Stepping up despite the challenges

We asked VCSEs about the wide range of challenges they face, about change in demand for their services, and about the barriers they face in responding to them. The following responses stood out from the crowd:



Meanwhile, VCSE organisations report a range of operational and strategic challenges:

77%

cited the challenges of **sustaining services or their organisation.**

59%

cited rising costs, such as **inflation and National Insurance.**

47%

suggest that **volunteer recruitment and retention** is harder than previously and that **planning for the future** is a challenge.

26%

report that **trustee (or director) recruitment and retention** is harder than previously.

24%

report that **staff recruitment and retention** is harder than previously.



9.1 Responding to rising needs

A majority of respondents chose to tell us about unmet need and areas of challenge in their work, as well as how they are responding. This question generated a huge amount of insight, and we have tried to offer a representative sample here:

Increasing housing provision, new youth facilities, £6m spent, open July 25. Massive increase in community pantry needs, Thursday warm zone, open house, housing, biggest waiting list ever.

Daniel Flynn,
YMCA North Staffordshire

We have had to apply for more grants. We are receiving more resources in terms of non-monetary donations. I donate any money from mentoring students to support the shortfall in funding – this also allows for a degree of flexibility in spending too.

Paula Rowcliffe,
Birches Head Get Growing

We have had to restructure our organisation in order to strengthen the team so that we can manage the workload.

We are working with more partners who are able to share the burden and bring in their skills and expertise, and shared resources. We are looking at other ways to generate income also.

Middleport Matters

We have focused more on the needs of the families and looked at more efficient service delivery.

Family Focus

We have been relatively successful with our funding applications and are currently in a position of being able to continue our work for the next few years without any more funding. We have recently negotiated with a local storage facility who are now offering us free storage space, which will allow us to use this money for our core work.

Linda Allbutt,
Period Power



Demand for Project 93's services has grown significantly, particularly for counselling, peer support, and group-based activities. To meet this demand, we've expanded our counselling team by taking on additional placement counsellors—offering training and supervision to ensure quality, while increasing capacity. We've also developed a peer mentor service, led by those with lived experience of HIV, to provide more personalised, relatable support. In response to changing needs, we've broadened our group work, including structured support groups for LGBTQ+ youth, trans people, and those newly diagnosed with HIV. These groups are co-designed with participants, ensuring we remain responsive and inclusive. We've also adapted to hybrid delivery—offering both in-person and remote support to improve accessibility. Where demand has outstripped resource, we've built waiting lists, actively sought funding, and prioritised those in greatest need—while never compromising on care or dignity.

Darren Kempson,
Project 93



The cost-of-living crisis has made families' lives harder across our city and YMCANS has been trying to respond with community meals, warm spaces and food provision. Thursdays have become a day when we work in partnership with many in the faith community, serving families that have been cast into crisis due to wars and violence across the world. Our annual Christmas Hamper campaign raises money to deliver 500 hampers to families across our city. Last year we raised more money than we ever have, showing that the kindness of our city and its citizens is another reason to be proud. Our food pantry delivered over 3,800 food parcels, hosted 100 pantry drop-ins for the community, and alongside the Household Support Fund, worked with 12 different partners to provide support.

Daniel Flynn,
YMCA North Staffordshire





Offered part time staff additional hours. Created waiting list for services. Tightened criteria.

Asist

Through funding and personal finances. Adapted by offering more support hours.

**Tina Kayela,
Cultural Zebra**

We have expanded our delivery team by recruiting additional sessional youth workers and volunteers, many of whom are young people we've supported into leadership roles. We've adapted our services by offering more targeted support—such as one-to-one mentoring for those most at risk of exclusion or harm—and increasing our open-access youth sessions to provide consistent, year-round engagement. Our programmes are co-designed with young people, which allows us to respond quickly and meaningfully to emerging needs.

**Benjamin Gibson,
In2 Health & Wellbeing**

Demand is steady although what people want changes over time - it comes in waves. We are less able to meet demand currently as we have lower grant income. This is partly due to our reduced capacity to apply for grants, as we are all freelance and most of us also have caring responsibilities.

All the Small Things

Referral criteria adapted to meet demands, increased voluntary hours for service facing roles- feeling generally overwhelmed and exhausted but needing to continue for service delivery and the future of the organisation.

Leeanne Clay, Windmills

The lack of Domestic Abuse Counselling, and any sustainable funding, has been identified as a gap in provision at a strategic level through the Domestic Abuse Needs Assessment 2024. We are currently subsidising this service through charitable fundraising and reserves, which is clearly not sustainable.

**Charlotte Almond,
Staffordshire Women's Aid**



We have given more free time and had to become more efficient with that free time.

Charlotte Almond,
Staffordshire Women's Aid

All our ex-staff and current volunteers are drawn from our small community, our bank of service users. There is no shortage of fellows eager to help and support all they can. With a bit of training to maintain professional conduct, safeguarding, EDI, and confidence boost, our service users are enabled to contribute to their communities in a paid or voluntary capacity, and 'live their best life.'

Salwa El Raheb Booth,
Staffordshire Adults Autistic Society

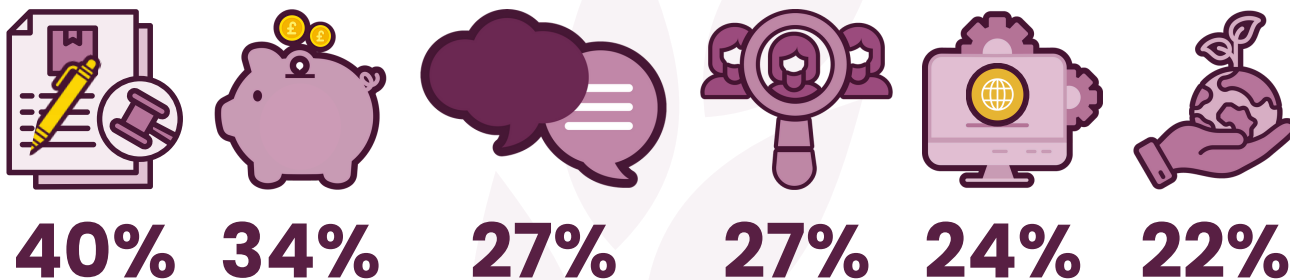
We have largely self-funded additional delivery, drawing on reserves and reinvesting any unrestricted income directly back into our provision. Our volunteers have gone above and beyond, giving extra time to ensure sessions could continue at high quality even when resources were stretched. We have also adapted our delivery model to respond to the changing needs of beneficiaries. For example, where families have told us that cost and travel are barriers, we have worked in more local venues and offered free or heavily subsidised sessions. Where young people have expressed concerns about mental health and wellbeing, we have built in mentoring, wellbeing walks and accessible activities alongside our sport and play provision. By staying flexible, listening carefully, and prioritising what matters most to families, we have been able to sustain and grow our impact.

Matthew Crowe,
Transform Communities Staffordshire CIC



9.2 Bridging the skills gap

We queried the skills shortages that VCSE organisations face in contending with their operational and strategic challenges.



These appear most acute in relation to bid and tender writing (**40%**), fundraising (**34%**), communications and marketing (**27%**), recruiting and supporting volunteers (**27%**), IT and digital (**24%**), and evaluating and showing our impact (**22%**).

A substantial level of need was reported in almost all areas, with the clear and perhaps surprising exception of safeguarding. We would suggest that this indicates either the success of efforts to upskill the workforce in safeguarding during recent years, or a degree of reticence about disclosing this need more publicly.

The impact of these many challenges varies with the specific demands of VCSEs' work. Once again, we have decided to hold space in our report for them to share their experiences in their own words:

Retention of colleagues who we invest in from a training and skills perspective, due specifically to short term contracts, is a significant issue within my charity. They are not good for retention and less so for customer relationships.

Kerry Birtles,
Honeycomb Group

Sometimes we have to use expensive consultants for support.

Middleport Matters

We are reliant on the skillset of a few people to develop future opportunities.

Groundwork West Midlands



Recruiting and supporting volunteers is challenging due to limited time and resources, making it harder to expand services like peer support and outreach. This can lead to longer waits and fewer opportunities for service users. Evaluating and showing our impact is also difficult without dedicated capacity, affecting funding bids and limiting how we demonstrate progress to clients and partners. Both issues reduce our ability to grow and respond effectively to local needs.

**Darren Kempson,
Project 93**

We maintain our own IT infrastructure. This is adequate but not efficient because we aren't IT experts so it can take time to find a solution, which takes staff away from their core responsibilities. A council recently issued a tender for day services for older people. After reviewing the requirements, we concluded that we weren't ready - particular with regard to the IT requirements. The consequence is that we are likely to receive fewer referrals from the council.

**Medium-sized charity, preferred
to remain anonymous**

For a sector so deeply invested in giving, a minority of responses also reflect the physical and emotional toll of these struggles.

Some feedback echoes the findings of Nottingham Trent University's VCSE Barometer, which found that **37% of paid staff and volunteers are adversely affected by cost of living pressures**, and **32% by exhaustion or burnout**, with **34% of volunteers citing cost of living pressures**, and **30% speaking of the pressures associated with absence / caring responsibilities and working outside agreed hours**.¹⁶

At times we feel inadequate and frustrated, and lack confidence, and that's tough to handle.

**Small community organisation, preferred to
remain anonymous**

The team get burnt out and people just don't know we exist.

The Breastfeeding Network

My time is stretched as not many people are able to write bids and apply for funding.

Birches Head Get Growing



10. Sector voice and influence

In a landscape with so many challenges, it is vital that VCSE organisations are able to self-advocate and that they can lean into shared opportunities to do this collectively.

We asked VCSEs whether their organisations feel able to speak out about the issues that concern them.



We also queried whether respondents feel that opportunities are available for their organisation to influence local decision-making processes.



We then asked organisations to expand on the thinking behind their answers, and over half took the opportunity to record their thoughts in some detail.

A handful of respondents expressed an optimistic outlook and sense of agency and efficacy in this area:

We already have the ear of the system. We are capable of influencing the system and the community at large of our cause and our worth.

Salwa El Raheb Booth
Staffordshire Adults Autistic Society

We are in a privileged position of having a seat at the decision-making tables. It is our duty to represent our members and other VCSE organisations to make sure their voice is heard.

VAST Services (1920)

I believe that the opportunities are out there, but charities have to be proactive to define their agenda and seek the relevant spotlight.

Fiona Miller
Beat the Cold



For most, reflections were more finely poised and often nuanced:

To strengthen the voice of the VCSE sector, we would welcome: more structured and regular mechanisms for consultation and co-production, particularly where funding, commissioning, and youth services are concerned;; investment in infrastructure support that helps smaller organisations build capacity to participate meaningfully in strategic conversations without it becoming a burden on already stretched resources; genuine recognition of lived experience and local knowledge as valuable evidence, equal to that of formal data, when shaping services or allocating funding; longer-term funding models that allow organisations to plan sustainably, invest in staff, and innovate with confidence, rather than working in survival mode.

Benjamin Gibson
In2 Health & Wellbeing

There are opportunities to engage and speak with statutory sector stakeholders, how much they listen, and how much we can influence decisions, I am uncertain.

Jason Meredith,
Headway North Staffordshire

I'll be honest -we can happily speak out about issues in various forums but there are still no accountable systems where we actually see any 'proof' of any tangible change that demonstrate voices have been heard and decision making influenced.

Medium sized charity,
preferred to remain anonymous

There still seems to be an idea that some voices represent the entire voluntary sector, which is like saying Tesco represent all supermarkets.

Charlie Odell,
The Dove Service

As third sector organisations, all working toward the same end and frequently supporting the same or similar vulnerable client groups, we are better able to influence policy and funding when we speak with one voice. VAST has a key role to play in facilitating this, especially through the Chief Officers' Group (VSCOG).

Craig Browne, Citizens Advice
Staffordshire North & Stoke-on-Trent



11. Key unmet needs in Stoke-on-Trent

We asked VCSE organisations what they feel are the main areas of unmet need in the city, with 90 offering their own thoughts on this question.

While the responses are as wide and varied as the work of the sector, it is worth noting some of the common threads, with **poverty specifically cited by 21** respondents and **health by 19** respondents.

Our respondents take up the story:

Demand is high for children and family support – we could double our caseloads and our workforce and still wouldn't satisfy the demand.

**Heather Sheldon,
Alice Charity**

We need a paradigm shift towards empowering those who are able, to raise their hope and self-efficacy, so that they can rise out of poverty through access to confidence-building, upskilling, decent work and opportunities. We can leverage our trust-factor to meaningfully contribute towards better life outcomes for people of our City.

**Fiona Miller
Beat the Cold**

"Community Cohesion between cultures."
Better Together Community Support Group

Ageing healthily and feeling well. Dementia advocacy for ageing community members. Co-ordination of services and identifying the ones that slip through the cracks. Comparing locations with decreasing services; we appear to be levelling down as opposed to levelling up to improve and enhance consistency of delivery.

**Sue Read
Beth Johnson Foundation**

The biggest single issue for us is the growing levels of personal debt which grew to £212m in 2024/5, and will have increased sevenfold within two years by the end of 2025. It would be worth exploring whether community or social enterprises could be set up (working in partnership through VAST and the City Council) to help provide local services, as well as employment for people within those communities as part of a social regeneration agenda.

**Craig Browne,
Citizens Advice Staffordshire North & Stoke-on-Trent**

Lack of opportunities and support for those with SEND needs, from children in school to young people and adults across jobs and career development. ASD in particular is not catered for in support in the jobs market.

Dyslexia Association of Staffordshire



12. Relationships with key partners

12.1 Collaboration and Partnership

The VCSE sector doesn't always speak with one voice – instead it is a home to multiple perspectives and experiences on a wide range of issues. However, on one theme, we are close to unanimous: **74% of respondents value partnership** as the key enabler in their response to rising need.

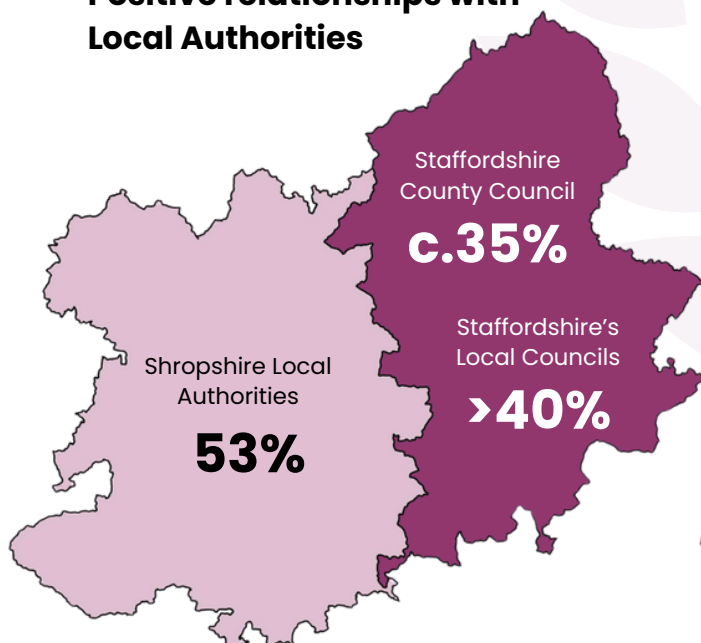


As new relationships form, VCSEs appear more likely to report 'good' or 'improving' partnerships within the VCSE sector (77%) and with the **local authority (65%)** than in the relative complexity of the **Health system (37%)**.

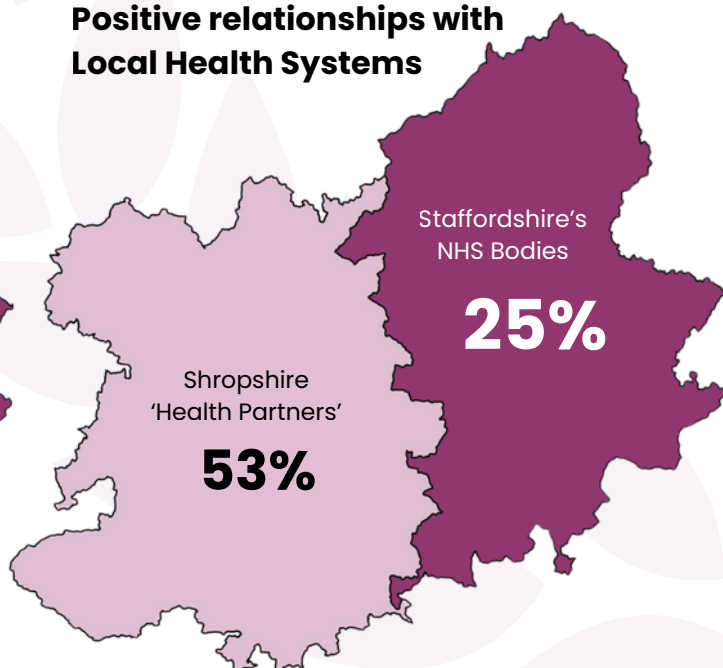
While asking slightly different questions, our colleagues at [Support Staffordshire](#) and [Shropshire Community Foundation](#) have previously found that their respondents reported positive relationships within the VCSE sector in most cases (**nearly 60% in Staffordshire's case and over 80% in Shropshire**).

They have also found that VCSE organisations report positive relationships with Staffordshire County Council in around 35% of cases, Shropshire's local authorities in 53% of cases, Staffordshire's Borough councils in just over 40% of cases, with Staffordshire's NHS bodies in around 25% of cases, and Shropshire 'health partners' in 31% of cases.^{xx}

Positive relationships with Local Authorities



Positive relationships with Local Health Systems



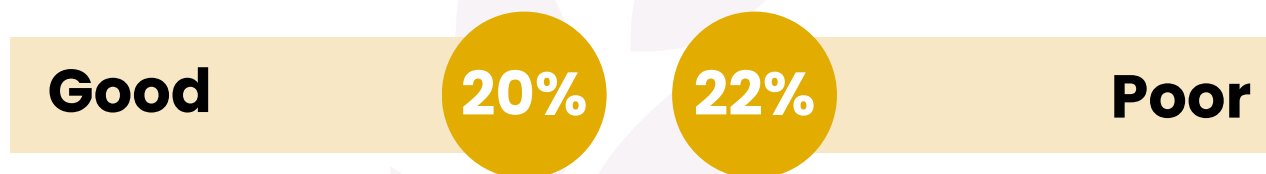


We also asked Stoke-on-Trent VCSEs about their relationships with the Criminal Justice System (**22% poor, 28% good**) and any other government agencies (e.g. DWP - **22% poor, 20% good**).

Criminal Justice System



Department for Work and Pensions (DWP)



Relatively few respondents selected **'unsure / don't know'** in relation to the local authority and wider VCSE sector, but about half of all respondents selected this response in relation to Health, the Criminal Justice System, and other government agencies.

This may be a natural bias, resulting from the fact that some respondents naturally have, or perhaps even need, fewer touchpoints with these services. At the same time, almost all have a relationship with their local authority at some level.

This is borne out by the relatively small number of organisations (3) that list people with experience of the criminal justice system among their beneficiaries.





12.2 Deep dive: The VCSE City Alliance

Another area of VAST's work offers an opportunity to deep-dive into the sector's thoughts on partnerships.

In December 2024, the **VCSE City Alliance** was adopted by Stoke-on-Trent City Council and VAST, and is currently supported by over 80 VCSE organisations.

When committing their support, all organisations are invited both to score and to offer qualitative comment on the relationship as it currently stands. This gives an opportunity to explore the finer grain of the VCSE sector's relationship with the local authority.

The VCSE City Alliance agreement contains a series of principles, which the Voluntary Sector Chief Officers Group and Stoke-on-Trent City Council have agreed should be central to our work together.

It is worth acknowledging that some of this data is 6-9 months older than the State of the Sector survey, with some work having since been undertaken to address the areas that identified for development.



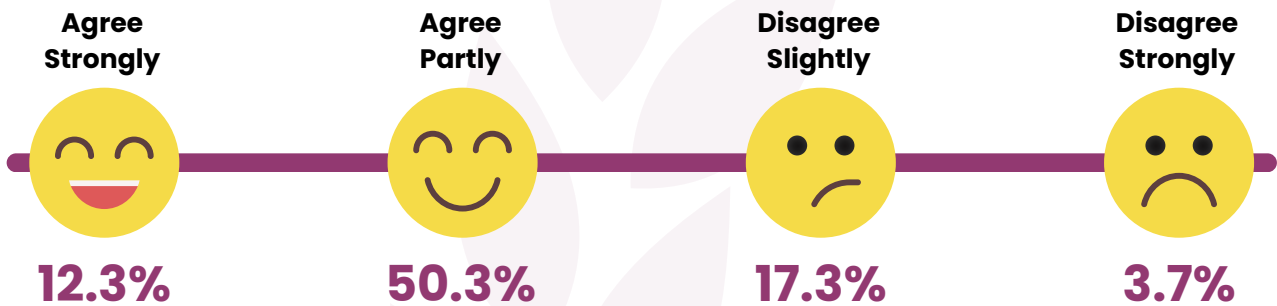


This is what the VCSE sector told us:

Partnership and Collaboration

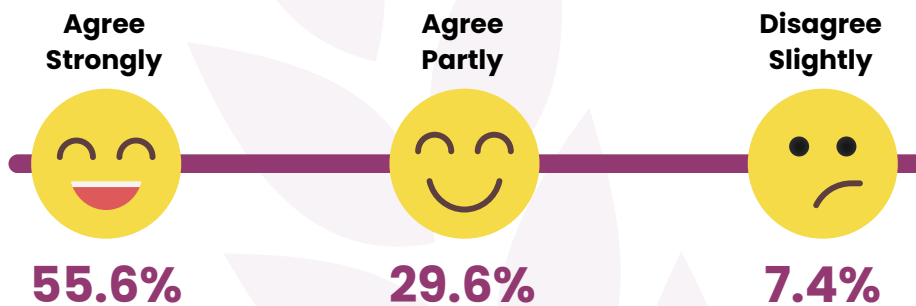
Principle:

There is a culture of collaboration, recognising that both the VCSE sector and Stoke-on-Trent City Council bring unique strengths and perspectives to community development.



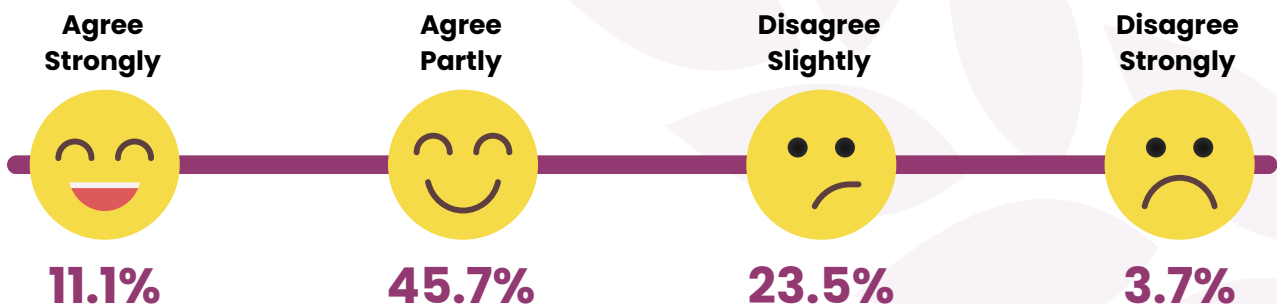
Principle:

There are opportunities for the VCSE sector and the City Council to work together on shared goals and initiatives.



Principle:

There is collaboration between the VCSE sector and the City Council, to identify problems and barriers, and to co-develop and co-design solutions.

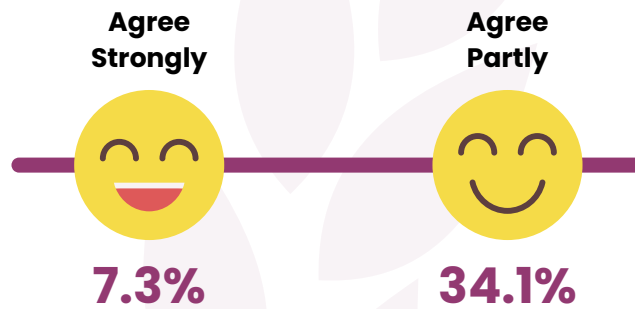




Open Communication

Principle:

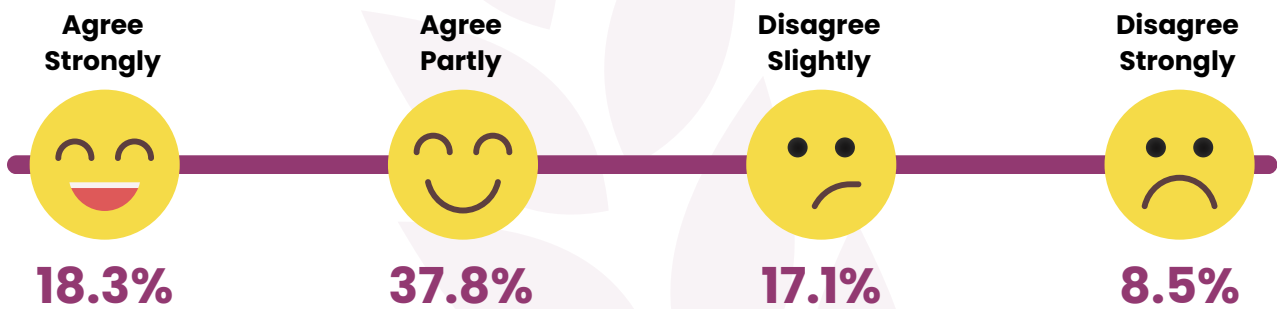
There are open and transparent communication channels to facilitate the exchange of information, ideas and feedback.



Mutual Respect

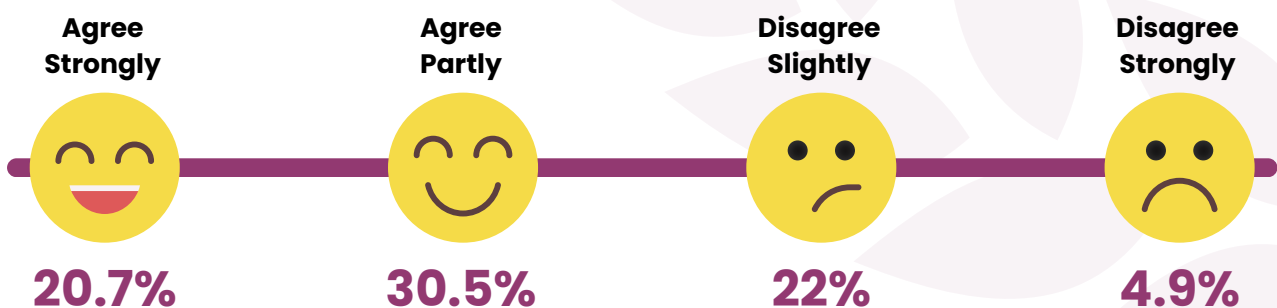
Principle:

Both parties recognise and value the expertise, knowledge and experience that both parties bring to the table.



Principle:

Both parties treat one another with respect and appreciate the diversity of perspectives within the Alliance.

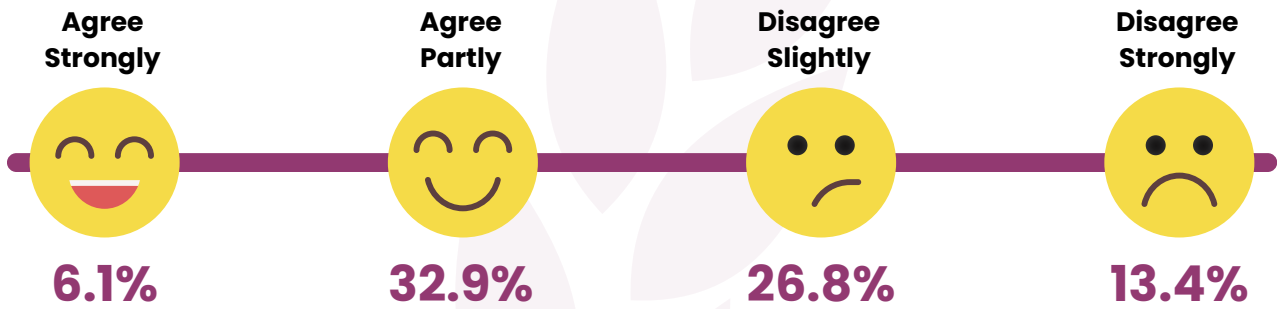




Empowerment

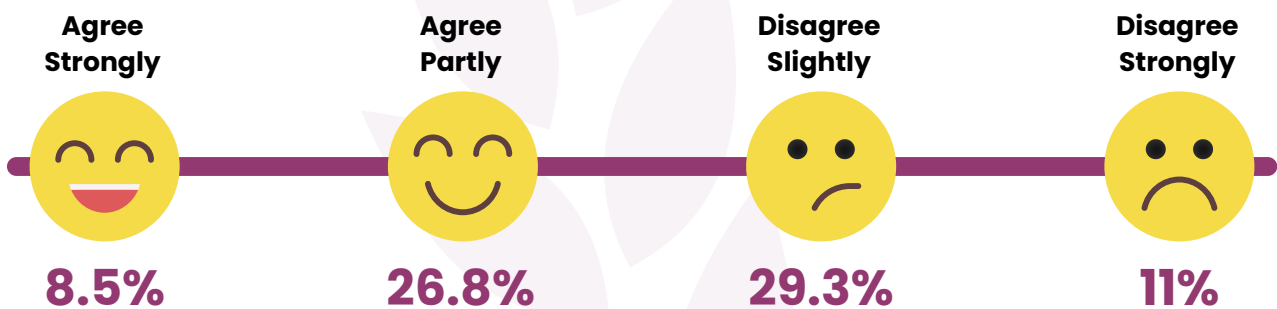
Principle:

VCSE sector organisations are empowered to play a meaningful role in decision making processes.



Principle:

We work together effectively to ensure that there is support for capacity building within VCSE organisations of all sizes to enhance their effectiveness and sustainability.

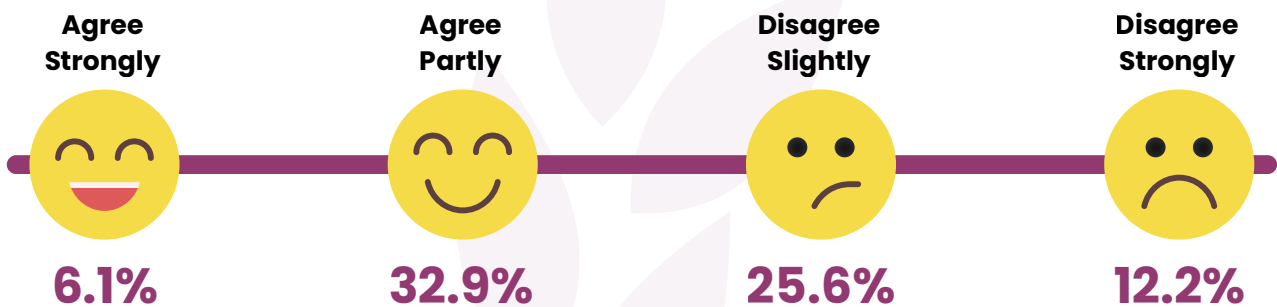




Flexible and adaptive approaches

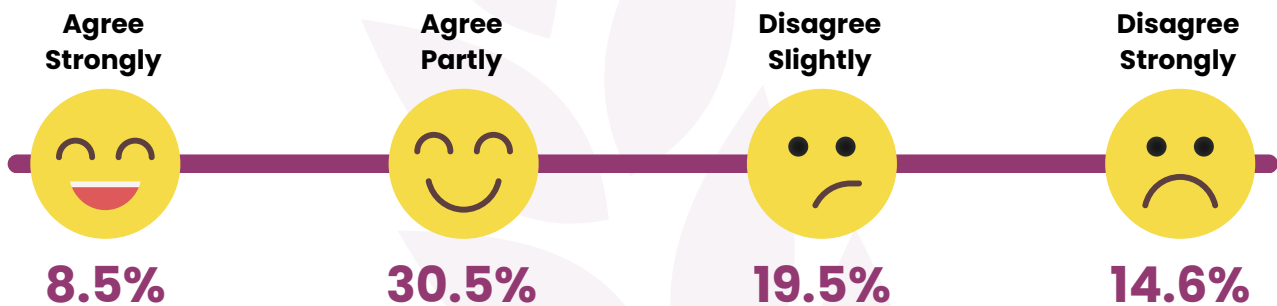
Principle:

We work together effectively to adapt and evolve approaches based on changing community needs, emerging issues, and the evolving landscape of the VCSE sector.



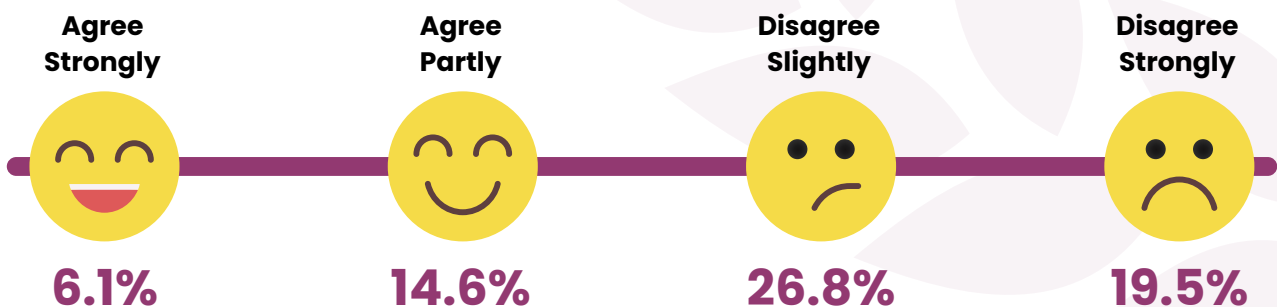
Principle:

We work together effectively to encourage innovation and experimentation in addressing community challenges.



Principle:

We work together effectively to utilise non-traditional and alternative ways of commissioning where appropriate.

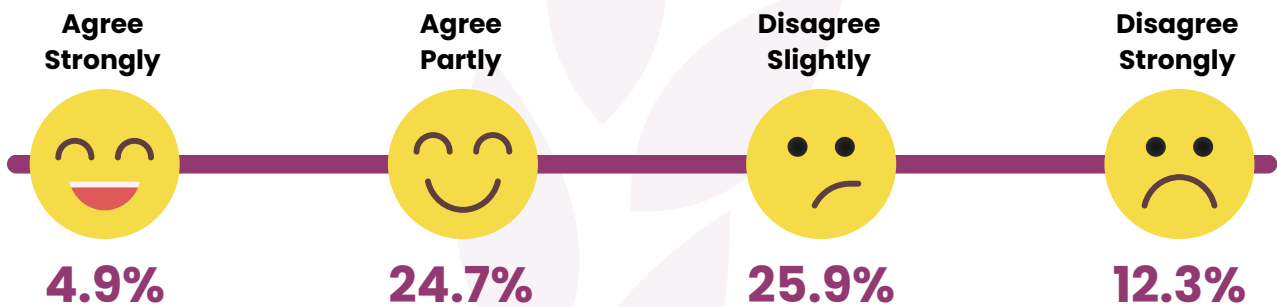




Clear roles and responsibilities

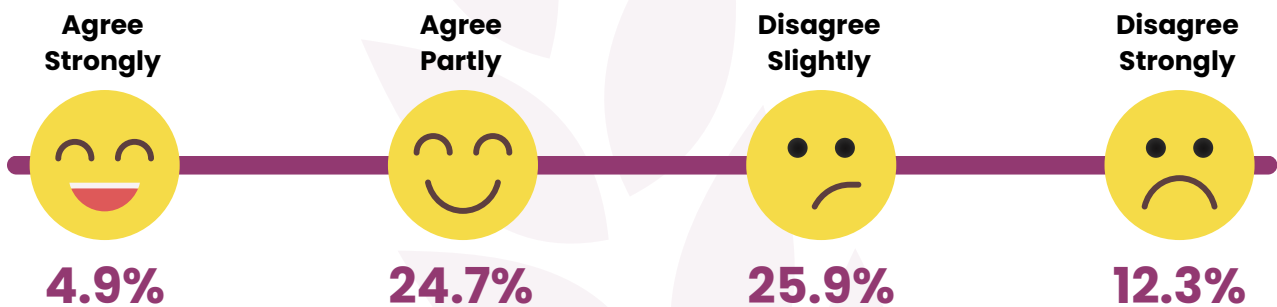
Principle:

There are clearly defined and communicated roles and responsibilities for both the VCSE sector and Stoke-on-Trent City Council in collaborative initiatives.



Principle:

There are established mechanisms for accountability to ensure that each party is fulfilling its commitments.

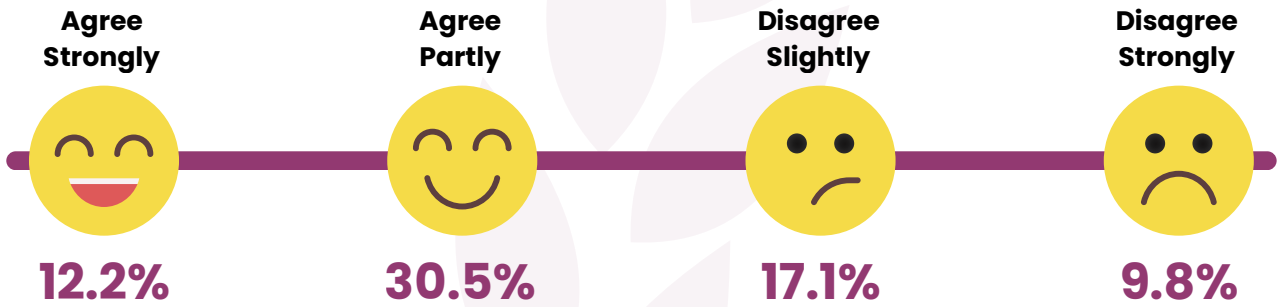




Equity and inclusion

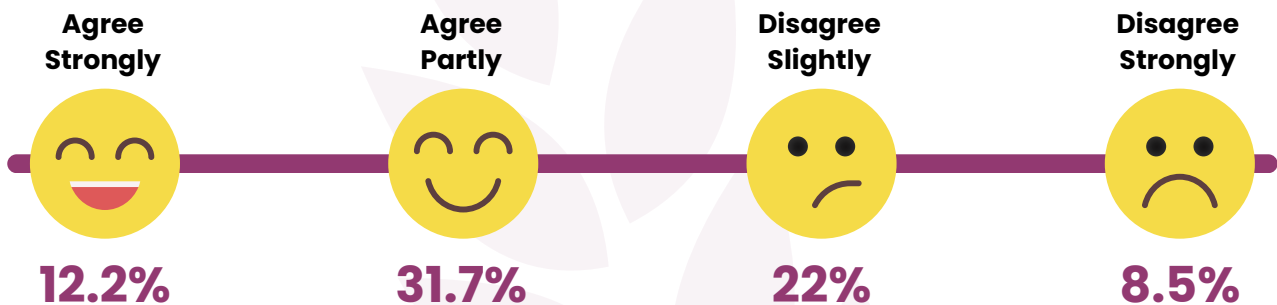
Principle:

We prioritise inclusivity and equity in decision-making processes to ensure that the diverse needs of the community are considered.



Principle:

We proactively address issues of inequality and work towards creating an inclusive and accessible environment for all.

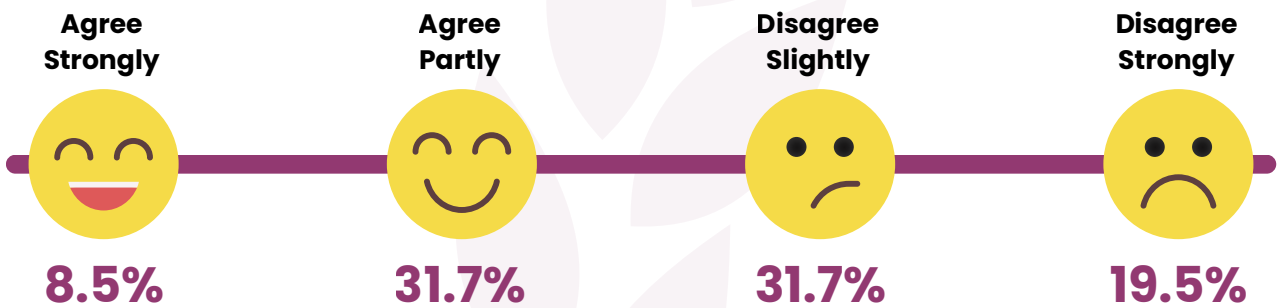




Resource sharing

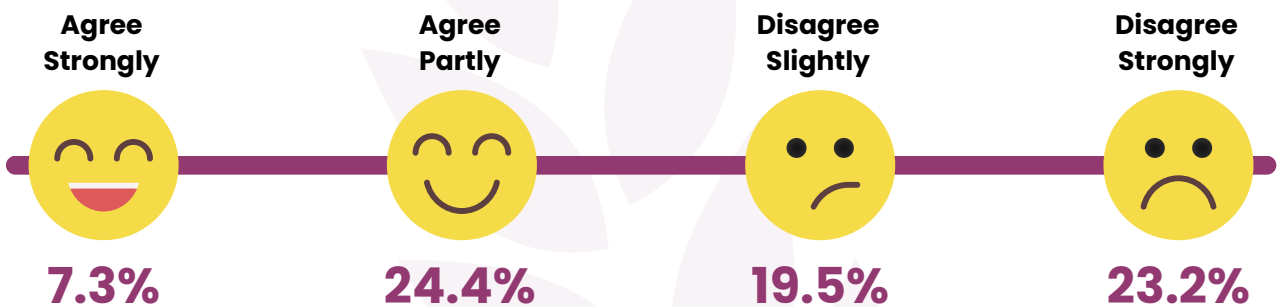
Principle:

We work together effectively to explore opportunities for resource sharing, including funding, expertise, and infrastructure, to maximise the impact of community development efforts.



Principle:

We work together effectively to facilitate access to resources and support for smaller organisations within the VCSE sector.

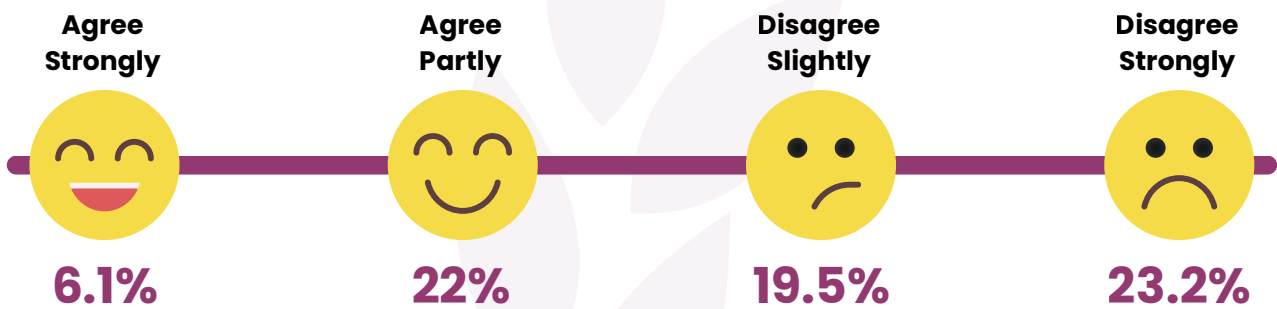




Long-term planning

Principle:

We take a long-term view in planning and implementing community development initiatives, recognising that sustained positive outcomes often require ongoing collaboration and commitment.



Principle:

We avoid short-term funding arrangements that put short-term gains above longer-term impacts.





Evaluation and learning

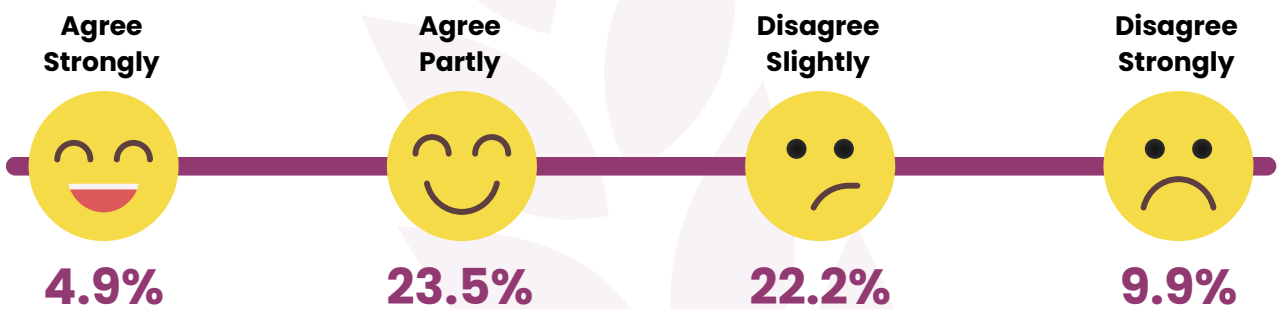
Principle:

We work together effectively to establish mechanisms for continuous evaluation of collaborative initiatives, to assess their impact and identify areas for improvement.



Principle:

We work together effectively to promote a culture of learning from successes and failures, adjusting strategies accordingly.





12.3 The direction of travel

With the City Alliance now approaching its first anniversary, we know that there is still work to do.

VCSE organisations tend to balance a sense of positive direction and recognition of 'the good' with advocacy of the need for delivery, the weight of sometimes negative prior expectation based on previous experiences, and a consciousness about the need for a continuing rebalancing of power:

The City Alliance, contact with Local Council leaders and community events such as Burslem Communities Together have started to help us give a voice.-

Peter Mellish
Number 11

While there is still some way to go; the VCSE is starting to be heard. New blood brought in recently have an understanding of the VCSE organisations. I think the biggest issue is a lack of diversity, also that small organisations are left out of the tendering and commission process and opportunities.

Paul Smith
PPE4Community

Much progress has been made - but we still have some way to go...

Changes Health and Wellbeing

There is some fantastic work taking place in the city and I'm keen to be involved with opportunities like the Alliance where collaboration and empowerment is key within the communities we work with.

Gemma Machin,
Staffordshire FA

I feel that the current City Council is proactive, open and curious. There are a number of partnerships in my field which link LA and VCSE and produce effective and reflective work.

Fiona Miller
Beat the Cold

I feel that the higher levels of the City Council have a renewed drive to engage with the Voluntary Sector. However, there appears to be a culture that is more negative towards the voluntary sector. New initiatives state that they are listening to the voice of the voluntary sector. Later on it transpires that the City Council and partners have a predetermined outcome. How can we learn together if this is the case? If you challenge this way of working, they can simply 'turn off the tap.'

Medium charity, chose to remain anonymous



13. Resources – funding, staffing and sustaining the sector

13.1 To recap....

396 of the charities registered with the Charity Commission say that they work in Stoke-on-Trent, with a **combined income of £157.7m** at last recorded accounts, and **combined expenditure of £144.7m**.

The city itself is home to **252 registered charities** with a **combined income of £87.5m** and a **combined expenditure of £77.4m**.

Registered Charities working in Stoke-on-Trent (396)

Combined
Income



Combined
Expenditure



Registered Charities based in Stoke-on-Trent (252)

Combined
Income



Combined
Expenditure



13.2 'More with less' – or doing a lot more with a little more?

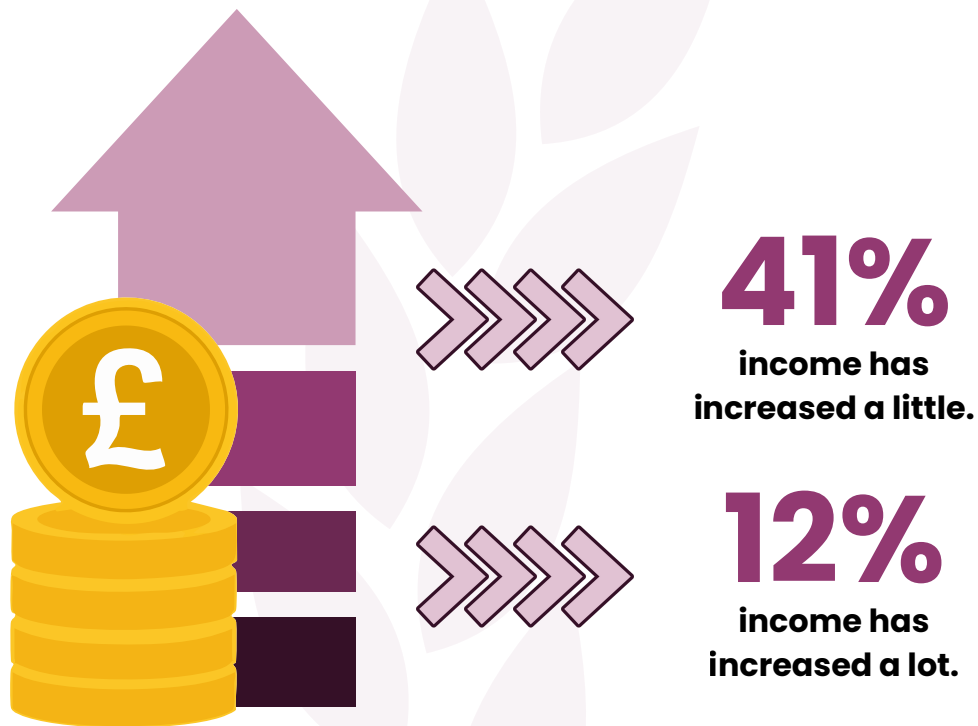
Received wisdom in the VCSE sector suggests that we are 'forever doing more with less.' Yet VCSEs are nothing if not proactive about finding ways to address need in our communities.

Organisations working in the VCSE 'microbiome' may well be doing a lot with nothing, or with a little, or making the most of in-kind resources – from the respondents to our State of the Sector survey, **eight have no sources of income**, and **31 rely on one or two sources** of income.

At the other end of the spectrum, **21 of our respondents are drawing on more than 10 income sources**, while **19 are drawing on between 6 and 10 income sources**. 47% say their current funding covers all of their costs, and 44% maintain that it does not.



Our findings suggest that many organisations have been very successful at achieving a growth in resources, and that the idea of ‘forever doing a lot more with only a little more’ may be just as valid as ‘doing more with less,’ since 53% of respondents report that their income has increased a lot (12%) or a little (41%).



Of course, it’s important to set this against the context of wider change, and in particular of government cuts. While VCSE organisations may well be doing ‘a lot more with a little more,’ they are doing it in a context of need unforeseen 15 years ago – against a background of the UK’s highest levels of fuel poverty,^{xxi} some of the country’s most severe youth service cuts, and cuts to local government budgets amounting to £270m between 2010 and 2024.^{xxii}



13.3 Staff and Volunteers

Many survey respondents were keen to acknowledge the selflessness and dedication shown by often unsung volunteers and trustees.

11 of our respondents reported supporting over 100 volunteers each, with one managing over 300.



47 of our respondents reported much smaller numbers – fewer than 20 and in many cases just a handful of dedicated local people.



Their roles frequently require skills and aptitudes that are too rarely acknowledged. Volunteer and trustee contributions are often relatively unseen.

In some settings, frequently people prefer to support charities where they can feel they are directly 'giving' something to people in need. But some roles require a big up-front commitment from the volunteer in terms of training. The work isn't always easy and sometimes it involves conveying a message clients might be reluctant to hear. We are reliant on our amazing volunteers, but they may be more reluctant than paid staff to want to do this.

Larger charity, preferred to remain anonymous



We meet otherwise unmet needs in the community, so every day is different, special and unique. I am really proud of our volunteers. We have no salaried positions in the company and yet we offer our services every day of the year and everyone works so hard, going above and beyond any expectations that could ever have been imagined.

**Paula Rowcliffe
Founder, Birches Head Get Growing**



The contribution revolution is huge but hard to see: England and Wales' 185,000 charities have 923,000 trustees, 1.3m employees, and nearly 6.9m volunteers.^{xxiii}

The Government's Community Life Survey in 2024-5 suggested that around 9% of adults in Stoke volunteered formally once a month – marginally lower than the 10-12% reported nationally for the city's statistical neighbours – but with closer to a quarter volunteering 'informally.'^{xxiv}

Conclusive figures for volunteer and trustee engagement in Stoke-on-Trent are difficult to glean due to incomplete current data, the many forms of 'informal' volunteering that go by other names, and the difficulty of determining the scale of volunteer engagement outside the city's registered charities.

Some 'would-be' trustees may be otherwise engaged as committee members with unregistered organisations, or as directors in social enterprises, and there is no formal declaration of volunteer numbers in the social enterprise sector.

However, based on an aggregation of Charity Commission data, we can draw a very conservative estimate from the 252 registered charities who are specifically resident in the city. **They have a total of c.1,419 trustees (an average of 5.6 each), and between them support a conservative estimate of 6,248 volunteers, as well as 1,445 staff.**

7% of respondents have made redundancies in the last year, and 70% have kept them at bay. The remainder selected 'not applicable / prefer not to say.'

In general terms, it is probably fair to suggest that charities do tend to spend their money on supporting communities rather than excessive staff costs: **only 17 of the charities working in the city (and 10 of those based in the city) have one or more employees receiving benefits worth over £60k.**





13.4 Funding Data

Published data enables us to gain a useful overview of the Civil Society funding being brought into the city by VCSE organisations.

The 360Giving platform does not offer an exhaustive dataset, but at the time of writing aggregates data from an impressive 333 funders, meaning that we are able to achieve a convincing overview of what is going on in the sector.

Compared with the situation a decade ago, the data suggests that a greater range of funders is now active in Stoke-on-Trent. It appears that they are awarding more grants, with a greater value, to more organisations than ever before. A spike in numbers for 2020 can be explained by the number of urgent grants awarded during the coronavirus pandemic.

It is challenging to obtain complete confidence here, as the dataset from some funders does not provide total coverage of the period in question. In addition, some funders (e.g. Staffordshire Community Foundation and indeed VAST) are absent from the record.

13.5 Best available data: funding awarded to VCSE organisations 2015 to 2023

Year	# Grants	Value (£)	# Funders	# Unique Recipients
2015	29	£2.1m	8	26
2016	34	£3.3m	6	31
2017	91	£4.7m	12	69
2018	66	£2.5m	16	54
2019	93	£6.4m	20	60
2020	211	£9.3m	29	138
2021	121	£10.4m	22	88
2022	154	£12.2m	22	96
2023	126	£12.8m	20	89



Looking specifically at the best available data and how far funding is spread, the most active funders investing in the city's VCSE organisations over the last decade are as follows.

Funder	# Grants	Value (£)	# Recipients
The National Lottery Community Fund	386	£24.4m	179
Co-operative Group	132	£361k	71
Department for Culture, Media, and Sport	126	£9m	76
Sport England	75	£1.9m	53
The Coalfields Regeneration Trust	48	£244k	36
BBC Children in Need	47	£2.0m	20
The National Lottery Heritage Fund	28	£10.7m	20
Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government	23	£5.3m	5
Lloyds Bank Foundation	17	£531k	13
Henry Smith Foundation	16	£1.4m	9



13.6 The National Lottery Community Fund

In terms of overall value and number of grants awarded, the most active civil society funder in the city is The National Lottery Community Fund. During the time period relevant to the data, the majority of this funder's grants were up to **£10,000 (Awards for All)** or **£500k (Reaching Communities/Partnerships)**.

The chart in the next section (13.7) compares the number and overall value of these specific grant programmes, on a year-by-year basis, and explores the relative success (or otherwise) of Stoke-on-Trent organisations in achieving funding.

The figures suggest that Stoke-on-Trent's relatively small sector punches at - or in some years, above - its weight in achieving funding (particularly larger grants). The level of support offered by the largest available community funder remains broadly healthy and proportionate. Smaller grants have remained steady, alongside a doubling in value of larger grants awarded between 2016 and 2023.





13.7 The National Lottery Community Fund

In assessing where grants go, we've included some of our regional and statistical neighbours, as well as a large local authority area, for comparison.

We have also excluded the year 2020 from the below results, as this data would be skewed by the high number of emergency awards made during the pandemic, and to Coventry during its term as City of Culture in 2021.

Reaching Communities

	Stoke-on-Trent Pop: 260k IMD Rank: 15 Charities Active: 396	Sunderland Pop: 289k IMD Rank: 33 Charities Active: 789	Wolverhampton Pop: 264k IMD Rank: 19 Charities Active: 984	Coventry Pop: 345k IMD Rank: 81 Charities Active: 1060	Nottingham Pop: 331k IMD Rank: 10 Charities Active: 657	Birmingham Pop: 1.18m IMD Rank: 6 Charities Active: 2540	Middlesborough Pop: 143k IMD Rank: 16 Charities Active: 488
2016	Awards: 4 Value: £1.6m						
2017	Awards: 5 Value: £1.8m						
2018	Awards: 4 Value: £1.2m						
2019	Awards: 13 Value: £2.1m						
2021	Awards: 6 Value: £1.7m	Awards: 9 Value: £1.4m	Awards: 5 Value: £949k	Awards: 12 Value: £4.0m	Awards: 11 Value: £3.1m	Awards: 30 Value: £8.0m	Awards: 9 Value: £1.3m
2022	Awards: 14 Value: £3.2m	Awards: 14 Value: £2.1m	Awards: 6 Value: £1.4m	Awards: 6 Value: £1.3m	Awards: 13 Value: £2.9m	Awards: 31 Value: £8.0m	Awards: 9 Value: £1.8m
2023	Awards: 10 Value: £3.2m	Awards: 8 Value: £1.9m	Awards: 5 Value: £1.4m	Awards: 4 Value: £1.4m	Awards: 16 Value: £4.1m	Awards: 29 Value: £10.4m	Awards: 6 Value: £1.1m

[Click here to see an expanded version of this data.](#)

Awards for All

	Stoke-on-Trent Pop: 260k IMD Rank: 15 Charities Active: 396	Sunderland Pop: 289k IMD Rank: 33 Charities Active: 789	Wolverhampton Pop: 264k IMD Rank: 19 Charities Active: 984	Coventry Pop: 345k IMD Rank: 81 Charities Active: 1060	Nottingham Pop: 331k IMD Rank: 10 Charities Active: 657	Birmingham Pop: 1.18m IMD Rank: 6 Charities Active: 2540	Middlesborough Pop: 143k IMD Rank: 16 Charities Active: 488
2016	Awards: 42 Value: £396k						
2017	Awards: 40 Value: £360k						
2018	Awards: 40 Value: £382k						
2019	Awards: 43 Value: £383k						
2021	Awards: 43 Value: £376k	Awards: 67 Value: £639k	Awards: 39 Value: £359k	Awards: 53 Value: £499.8k	Awards: 93 Value: £890.2k	Awards: 278 Value: £2.7m	Awards: 23 Value: £216k
2022	Awards: 60 Value: £531k	Awards: 73 Value: £667k	Awards: 54 Value: £508.3k	Awards: 59 Value: £555k	Awards: 103 Value: £1.0m	Awards: 304 Value: £2.9m	Awards: 29 Value: £278.5k
2023	Awards: 46 Value: £410k	Awards: 57 Value: £510k	Awards: 34 Value: £335k	Awards: 58 Value: £520.3k	Awards: 94 Value: £913.7k	Awards: 269 Value: £2.6m	Awards: 47 Value: £416.2k

[Click here to see an expanded version of this data.](#)

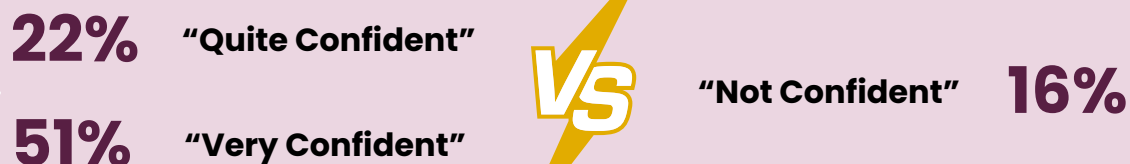


14. The soul of the sector: optimism against the odds?

14.1 Challenges in funding: confidence for the future?

Despite the challenges, our sector chooses to define itself by its optimism and determination – in spite of the odds, and perhaps because of the stark consequences if they are not able to continue their work.

A slight majority (**51%**) of respondents feel **'quite confident'** about their organisation's future, and **22% very confident**, with only **16% expressing feelings to the contrary**.



Stoke-on-Trent's spirit of confidence is not unique to the city and seems to be a hallmark of the sector: amongst their members, Support Staffordshire reports an even greater degree of **high confidence (28%)** and a slightly lower proportion of organisations who say that they are **'quite confident' (47%)**.^{xxv}

In more concrete funding terms, the picture is evenly split. **47%** of our respondents are comfortable enough to describe their funding situations as **'stable,'** while **41%** are not.



Looking ahead to the next year, 31% say that their incomes are hard to predict, 24% predict no movement, while 33% foresee **slight (21%)** or **significant (11%) increases**. 14% anticipate **significant (8%)** or **slight (6%) reductions**.

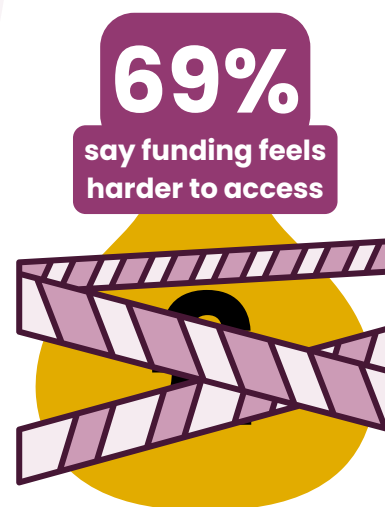




We do know that charities frequently face financial uncertainty, sometimes with so-called 'cliff edges' which can be associated with the end of contracts or commissions, or of grant-funded project work.

The VCSE sector appears evenly split in terms of rating its relationship with grant funders, **29% reporting that it has improved** (compared to 9% in Staffordshire) and **28% that it has got worse** (compared to 19% in the county).^{xxvi}

On one hand, this may reflect challenging realities, while on the other it may simply reflect the fluctuating fortunes, anxieties and struggles that 'come with the territory' when pursuing funding year after year.



14.2 Reserves: what are charities' responsibilities?

According to the Charity Commission:



Deciding the level of reserves that a charity needs to hold is an important part of **financial management and forward financial planning**. Failure to do this may result in reserves levels which are either:

- £ higher than necessary and may tie up money unnecessarily.
- £ too low, increasing the risk to the charity's ability to carry on its activities in future in the event of financial difficulties.

All charities need to develop a policy on reserves which establishes a level of reserves that is right for the charity and clearly explains to its stakeholders why holding these reserves is necessary.^{xxvii}



This guidance places an onus on charities to justify the retention of reserves. Although there is continued debate about the best way to balance risk and reserves with the needs of communities, it continues to describe orthodoxy in the VCSE sector.

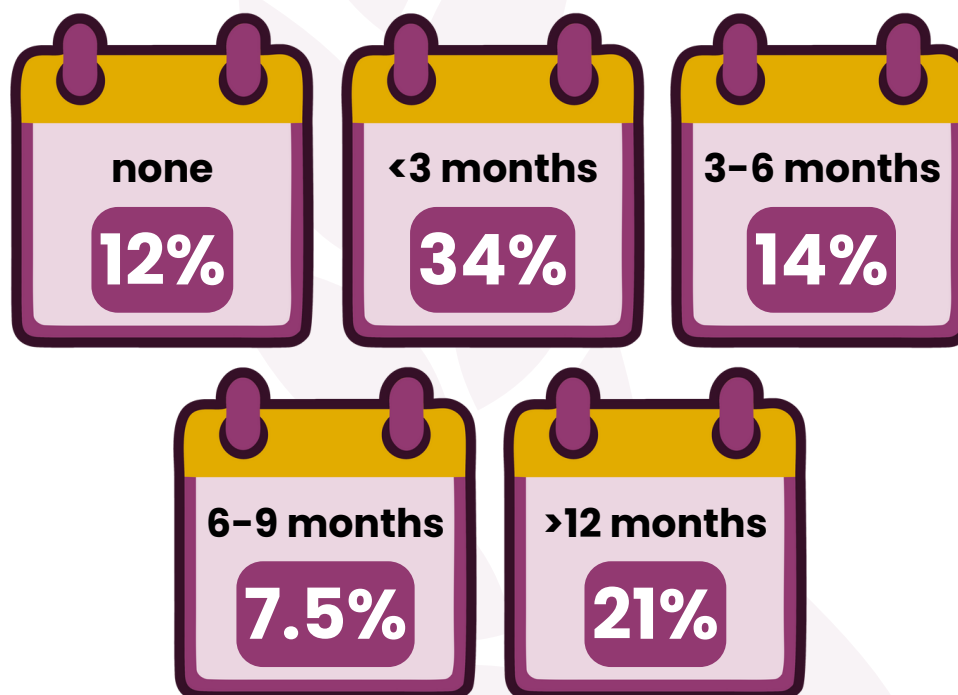


According to Charity Finance Group (CFG), ‘the law does not require charities to keep any reserves, in fact the presumption works in the opposite direction; one should only keep reserves if there is justification for not spending the money immediately. Nor are there a minimum number of months of operating costs which the Charity Commission requires you to keep or even views as best practice. This myth persists.’^{xxviii}

We hope that this insight offers useful context for understanding our sector’s financial position on a local level.

14.3 Reserves positions

Unsurprisingly then, the most common reserves position amongst our respondents is **up to 3 months (34%)**, with lower figures reporting **3–6 months (14%)**, and **6–9 months (7.5%)**. As implied above, these answers are both expected and broadly consistent with trends identified elsewhere.



For readers unfamiliar with the VCSE sector, this may sound like a lack of prudence. However, even before the pandemic, analysis by Third Sector found that even the UK’s best known charities retained an average of four months’ spending.^{xxvix}

Around **21% of respondents report more than 12 months’** reserves, and **12% have none**, although neither of these figures need be problematic – the extremes may simply reflect the fact that organisations without staff, buildings or other significant fixed costs (and potentially very small incomes to sustain) are altogether less likely to need reserves.



Having said that, reserves remain important. Around **25% of respondents report using their reserves to support their organisation's day-to-day operations** in the last 12 months, compared with 39% in Staffordshire. **24% expect this to be the case in the next 12 months**, compared with 48% in the county. ^{xxx}

Only **45% expect their organisation to have a 'healthy' level of reserves in 12 months' time** (compared to 23% in Staffordshire), with **33% 'unsure' or preferring not to say**.

14.4 Heading off the worst-case scenario

In the last 18 months, the city has lost two high-profile anchor charities in **Age UK Staffordshire** and **Savana**, who were both very active in supporting local communities.

It is a challenging task for another charity, even a well-established one, to step into the gap left behind by a charity closure.

We have seen a significant increase in referrals across Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent. Demand far outstrips capacity and we have a waiting list [which places pressure on] charitable fundraising and reserves.

Charlotte Almond,
Staffordshire Women's Aid

At the time of writing, only **1** of the organisations responding to our survey **expects to close**, although **4 report having merged** in the last year, and **10 are considering doing so**.

15
organisations

- 1** expects to close.
- 4** merged in the last year.
- 10** considering closing.



Mindful of scenarios which for many charities are only an adverse funding or contract decision away, we asked, 'if your organisation closes or stops providing a service, could / would other organisations pick up your work?' We also asked what problems and challenges might occur in this turn of events.

The responses to this question were bold and emphatic, often emphasising a combination of unique work, scale of volunteer contribution, and depth of relationships and trust.

The biggest challenge any of these organisations would face in trying to pick up our services is the lack of adequate resources to meet the scale of the challenge. For example, levels of personal debt among the clients we see have risen from £30m (2023) to £110m (2024) and are already at £98m for 2025 even though we are only five months into the year.

Craig Browne,
Citizens Advice Staffordshire North and Stoke-on-Trent

Nobody could pick up the work that we do, we have a vast outreach and it appears that everybody is already at capacity. To manage 90 volunteers takes a significant amount of time even though we are a volunteer led model.

Alexandra Baines,
Father Hudsons Caritas

The services we provide are specialised. I am not aware of other providers in the area with experience of acquired brain injury.

Jason Meredith,
Headway North Staffordshire

We meet otherwise unmet needs, so it would be difficult for other organisations to pick up this work.

Paula Rowcliffe,
Birches Head Get Growing

As we are a hyper-local organisation, I'm not sure other organisations would pick up our work, although some projects could be offered in other areas, local people might not travel to access them.

Middleport Matters

No one would put in the work to fill the void.

The Hive

Yes, however ASIST has a positive reputation locally and long standing relationships with the residents of Stoke on Trent and Staffordshire.

Asist

It's about our organisation's reputation and credibility within the local community. This has been developed over many years. The trust that the African Caribbean people have with us cannot be built with anyone. Some people would not engage with statutory organisations.

Carole Burt,
SCIPE CIC



The mental health services that we provide are aimed at early intervention and prevention - supporting people to stay well in their homes, jobs and schools within local communities. Times for charities are really tough at the moment but without services like ours, the pressure on NHS and other local services would be even greater. Sectors and organisations coming together collaboratively within our local health system ensure that we all work in harmony towards common health goals. We work actively with VAST to facilitate these partnerships.

Kate Boundy,
North Staffordshire & Cheshire Mind

The result would be an increase in loneliness and isolation...which are the concerns that the group has tried to combat since its inception

Maurice Greenham,
North Midlands OLGBT+

While other organisations might be able to deliver elements of our work, it would be extremely difficult for them to replicate the depth of relationships, trust, and specialist knowledge we have built within the communities we serve.

Ben Gibson,
Engage Communities CIC

There would be a significant gap in support for LGBTQ+ individuals and people living with HIV across Staffordshire. While other organisations may offer some overlapping services, none provide the same depth of specialised, person-centred, and community-rooted care that Project 93 does. Few local services are LGBTQ+-led or HIV-informed, and most mainstream providers lack the cultural competence or lived experience needed to build trust with our client base. Many of our beneficiaries tell us we are the only place they feel safe, heard, and affirmed.

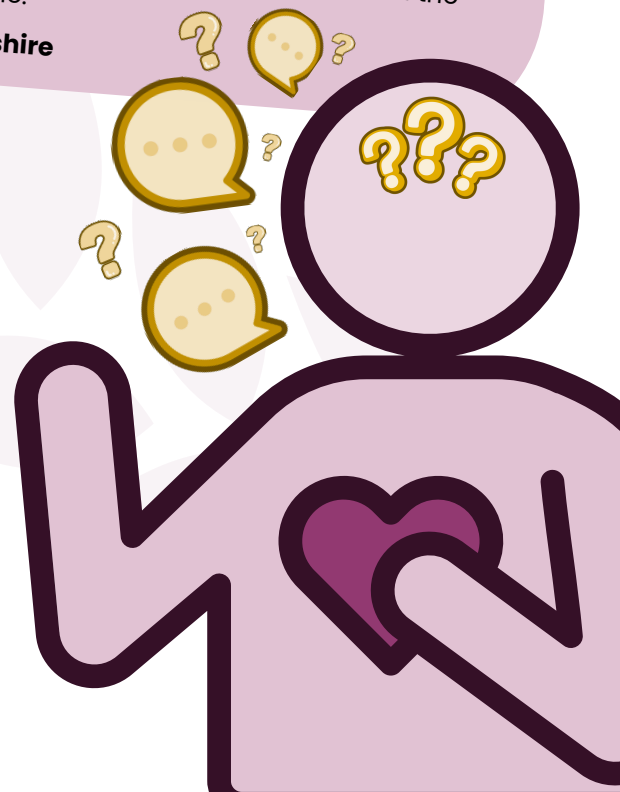
Darren Kempson, Project 93

NO! What we do is by no means easy. It is very immersive and emotionally and psychologically demanding. Unless we can impart our experience and expertise that we have acquired through years of trial and error to others, we remain the only people doing what we do and if we close the burden on mental health services and the demand for formal diagnoses will increase.

Salwa El Raheb Booth,
Staffordshire Adults
Autistic Society

If we closed it would be unlikely that another organisation would pick up our work and it would be more likely that a commercial enterprise would 'cherry pick' any potentially profitable elements. This would lose the free elements that we offer along with the independence and the access to services for local people.

Dyslexia Association of Staffordshire





14.5 Are we achieving our purposes?

We asked VCSE organisations whether they feel that they are able to successfully meet the needs of their communities.

70% say that they are 'definitely' or 'mostly' able to do so, with 25% reporting that they are less able than they used to be, or 'struggling' to do so.

For comparison, in Staffordshire, nearly 50% of respondents say that they are definitely achieving their purpose, and 44% that they are mostly doing so.^{xxxi}





16. Follow-up

Lunch and Learn Sessions:

Ten Talking Points and Key Takeaways

Following the launch of this report, we're hosting a number of 'Lunch and Learn' sessions online in early 2026.

Join us at one of our sessions as we share key takeaways and insights from this report, building on sector experiences collected during 2025 from over 100 local VCSE organisations.

Book your **FREE** space for:

- [Wednesday 7th January 2026](#)
- [Wednesday 4th February 2026](#)
- [Wednesday 11th March 2026](#)

If you would like to discuss anything within this report, please call 01782 683030 or email tom.pine@vast.org.uk.

What do you think?

We would love to know your thoughts on this report, as well as any feedback or suggestions on how we can make this more useful in the future. If there is anything you would like us to include in the next State of the Sector report, please scan the QR code to let us know in [this feedback form](#).





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- xviii: 94 of 537.
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Published December 2025
by **VAST Services (1920)**.

Registered Charity Number: 1049663

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