

East Sussex Voluntary Community & Social Enterprise Sector

A diverse vibrant, vital part of East Sussex, but under significant pressure: building a way forward

Research summary report - October 2025



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Executive summary

Context and purpose

This research was commissioned by the East Sussex Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) Alliance between July and September 2025 to provide a critical assessment of the VCSE sector in East Sussex. It takes place at a key moment for the sector given the current economic challenges and the imminent structural changes to the public sector with the local government reorganisation and the NHS 10-year plan.

The evaluation engaged over 150 stakeholders from across the sector through interviews, workshops, surveys and deep-dive analyses to understand the sector's current state and suggested recommendations to help shape a sustainable future.



Approximately 3,500 organisations
operating across East Sussex



£90 million in annual economic value
generated



9,400 direct employees in paid roles



100,000+ volunteers contributing over 14
million hours annually (equivalent to 8,500
full-time employees)

It encompasses diverse organisations from grassroots community groups to established charities, from food banks and youth clubs to environmental initiatives and health support services. The sector serves as the foundation of community resilience, fostering social connections and responding dynamically to emerging needs across education, health, social care, and community development.

Key findings

Enduring strengths:

1

Comprehensive coverage: The sector maintains a stable presence across the county, showing resilience despite significant pressures

2

Strong collaboration: Demonstrated commitment to partnership working within the sector and with statutory partners, with successful consortiums amplifying smaller organisations' voices

3

Adaptability: High staff and volunteer commitment enabling flexible responses to community needs during COVID-19, cost-of-living crisis, and ongoing funding challenges

4

Exceptional value: Deep-dive analysis using HM Treasury Green Book methodology revealed social returns of £2-£8 for every £1 invested, which, if extrapolated suggests sector-wide returns exceeding £500 million

Critical Challenges:

1

Severe funding instability: Short-term competitive funding creates financial insecurity and prevents long-term planning. Multiple organisations report using reserves to fund ongoing operations, including statutory contracts; an unsustainable situation representing managed decline

2

Capacity crisis: Significant staffing pressures including recruitment difficulties, wages 15-20% below public sector equivalents, staff burnout and aging volunteer base with limited succession planning

3

Systemic fragmentation: Confusing governance structures, fragmented statutory systems and limited VCSE strategic input create misalignment between services and community needs. Organisations risk being viewed as "cheap alternatives" rather than equal partners

4

Evidence gaps: Despite clear strategic value, organisations have limited capability to translate impact into robust local assessment, weakening their position in commissioning and strategic influence

Vision for Transformation

Cross-sector stakeholders taking part in the research articulated a clear vision requiring:

- **Sustainable partnership model:** Long-term, adequate funding supporting both core and project costs, moving from transactional procurement to trust-based partnerships that value prevention
- **Enhanced collaboration:** Deeper integration into strategic decision-making, breaking down service silos, sharing resources and establishing community-centred service models through neighbourhood hubs

Call to action

Immediate priorities (0-6 months): Stabilise organisations using reserves through full cost recovery implementation, establishing an emergency resilience fund and putting a temporary freeze on competitive retendering

Short-term transformation (6-18 months): Develop new social contracts, multi-year funding frameworks, VCSE connector roles, and invest in workforce development, leveraging local government reorganisation opportunities

Long-term system change (1-3 years): Fundamental shifts including simplified commissioning, investment in shared infrastructure (buildings and digital), recognition of sector diversity as strength and establishment of prevention-first approaches

The recommended actions represent not isolated initiatives but a comprehensive programme of change requiring sustained leadership, adequate resourcing and regular review.

Success depends on maintaining momentum beyond initial enthusiasm, with clear accountability for delivery and transparent reporting on progress.

It is a culture shift from transactional to relational, from competition to collaboration, from short-term fixes to long-term investment in community resilience.

Without this fundamental change in mindset and practice, even the best-designed initiatives will fail to achieve their potential.

Conclusion

East Sussex's VCSE sector delivers exceptional value, preventing crises and building community resilience.

However, severe funding instability has moved from chronic concern to acute crisis. The sector is not seeking charity but investment commensurate with the value it creates.

The report provides the evidence base and practical recommendations for choosing renewal over decline. Without urgent action, we risk losing infrastructure that has taken decades to build and would cost significantly more in crisis interventions to replace.

Key findings: sector strengths

1. Comprehensive VCSE footprint

The analysis identified approximately 3,500 VCSE organisations comprising 1,684 registered charities and an estimated 1,800 "below-the-radar" unregistered groups.

This scale has remained broadly stable since the [2021 IVAR report](#) 'The contribution and value of the VCSE Sector in East Sussex', suggesting resilience despite significant external pressures. However, stability masks important diversity:

Geographic distribution: Significant variation exists across districts. Wealden, Rother and Lewes have 50-60% more registered charities per 10,000 population (34-36 per 10,000) compared to Eastbourne and Hastings (20-22 per 10,000). This distribution is an inverse relationship to the level of deprivation - the most deprived areas have the least VCSE representation.

Focus areas: Education and training remain the dominant purpose (54% of organisations), with children and young people as primary beneficiaries (55%). Notably, organisations serving people of particular ethnic or racial origin increased over the last 5 years from 2.8% to 4%, though this remains relatively low given that 6.1% of East Sussex's population identifies as non-white.

Below-the-radar groups: The estimated 1,800 unregistered organisations provide substantial community benefit through peer support groups, community gardens, informal lunch clubs, and neighbourhood activities.

2. Strong collaborative culture

The sector demonstrates mature collaborative practice evidenced through:

Partnership structures: Successful umbrella grant models allow smaller grassroots projects to flourish within larger structures such as East Sussex County Council's small grants programme operated by Care for the Carers. Cross-organisation campaigns, events and venue sharing demonstrate genuine cooperation.

Strategic voice: The sector contributes authentic insight from residents, informing policy and service planning, while providing healthy challenge to statutory agencies. Where partnerships work well, they amplify voices of smaller VCSE groups and support cross-sector and locality working.

Limitations: While strong in principle, collaboration often depends on personal relationships rather than systematic approaches. The lead provider model for commissioning can create additional bureaucracy and protectionism rather than facilitating true collaboration. There is inconsistent understanding of smaller grassroots organisations' contributions despite their vital service delivery.

3. Resilience and adaptability

Staff and volunteers across the sector display extraordinary qualities:

Commitment and passion: High levels of dedication enable organisations to maintain services when statutory provision contracts.

This commitment extends beyond employment into vocation, with many motivated by lived experience and community connection.

Flexibility: Organisations respond rapidly to emerging needs, demonstrated during COVID-19 responses, cost-of-living crisis interventions and ongoing adaptation to funding pressures.

This flexibility allows the sector to fill gaps left by statutory services, particularly in hospital discharge and early intervention.

Innovation: The sector develops ground-up, community-led solutions that often predict emerging needs 5-10 years before commissioning strategies adapt.

Grassroots organisations working from lived experience can flex locally without waiting for formal strategy development.

Sustainability concerns: However, this resilience should not be taken for granted.

Staff burnout, moral injury from inability to meet need, and emotional exhaustion are widely reported. The sector is approaching the limits of its adaptability without adequate support.



4. Exceptional value

A deep dive analysis of seven diverse VCSE organisations using the HM Treasury's Green Book highlighted the significant value contributed by the sector.

High-level estimates show a social return of £2 to £8 for every £1 invested, which, if extrapolated suggests sector-wide returns exceeding £500 million.

Clear alignment with need: All seven organisations are driven by clear vision, mission and conviction that they make a significant difference to their targeted beneficiaries.

They all have an in-depth understanding of their sectors, going back in some cases over 40 years. They are staffed with employees and volunteers who have deep roots in their community and frequently benefit from the lived experience of their beneficiaries

Low operating costs: The organisations are able to deliver their services at cost levels at or below those of alternative statutory and private sector providers.

Even in those cases where staff costs are benchmarked to the statutory sector, their overhead costs are relatively low. The organisations' cost advantage is further supplemented by their ability to mobilise volunteers.

Significant benefits from prevention (cost avoidance): All organisations offer interventions that act through prevention, mitigating the likelihood of urgent interventions by the public sector, often in the form of crises.

Additional value through wellbeing and local economic activity: The organisations provide additional value through improved wellbeing for all stakeholders, quality of life gains and increased local economic activity notably through volunteer engagement.

Key findings: critical challenges

1. Severe funding instability

The funding environment has deteriorated from chronic concern to acute crisis:

Short-term competitive funding: Organisations face fierce competition for limited funding that creates financial insecurity and prevents long-term planning. Most concerning, multiple organisations report using reserves to fund ongoing operations, including delivery of statutory contracts. This represents managed decline, not sustainable financial management.

Inadequate cost recovery: Current funding rarely covers true delivery costs. Many contracts fail to include adequate provision for overheads, training, development, and organisational sustainability. The push toward full cost recovery remains more aspiration than reality in commissioning practice.

Project vs. core funding: Funders often seek innovation and new initiatives over proven services. Short-term project funding leaves organisations perpetually chasing the next grant while struggling to maintain essential infrastructure. Core funding that sustains organisational capacity remains elusive.

Local government reorganisation uncertainty: The forthcoming reorganisation creates anxiety about future funding relationships and structures. While this could represent opportunity, there is concern that changes will be rushed without adequate VCSE sector voice.

2. Capacity and workforce crisis

The sector experiences interconnected workforce challenges:

Recruitment and retention: Significant difficulties recruiting staff, with high turnover particularly in frontline roles. VCSE wages typically run 15-20% below public sector equivalents for comparable positions, making retention of skilled staff difficult.

Staff wellbeing: Burnout, moral injury and emotional exhaustion are widespread. Staff report being unable to meet community needs with available resources, creating a vicious cycle of stress and departure. One respondent noted: *"I have worked in the third sector for over 25 years and have never experienced such a dire lack of funding and wider resources."*

Volunteer base: While the sector engages 100,000+ volunteers contributing 14 million hours annually, the volunteer base is aging with limited succession planning. Younger generations engage differently, requiring new approaches to volunteer recruitment and management.

Strategic capacity loss: Financial pressures force organisations to cut strategic capacity, leaving them firefighting rather than planning for the future. This loss of capacity to think, plan and develop weakens the entire sector's ability to respond strategically to challenges.

Small organisation vulnerability: Smaller organisations particularly depend on single key individuals, creating additional risk when these individuals leave or face burnout. Succession planning receives insufficient attention amid immediate operational pressures.

3. Systemic fragmentation

The operating environment creates barriers to effectiveness:

Governance complexity: Confusing governance structures across multiple statutory bodies (NHS, county council, district and borough councils) create navigation challenges. Different commissioning priorities, funding criteria, and partnership structures across the county require organisations to maintain multiple relationships with different rules.

Strategic exclusion: Despite rhetoric about partnership, VCSE voices remain marginalised from strategic decision-making. Small grassroots organisations are praised as 'leaders' and 'trailblazers' but rarely invited and enabled to take seats at strategic tables. One respondent noted: *"There's a stuckness and it feels as if there are insiders and outsiders."*

Commissioning barriers: Funding processes require competition and include complex requirements that exclude smaller organisations. Procurement rules designed for commercial sectors create disproportionate burden for community organisations. The minimum 10% social value weighting in major contracts, while well-intentioned, remains poorly integrated into commissioning practice.

Misalignment of timelines: A consistent 5–10-year time lag exists between what communities need and what commissioning strategies address. Grassroots organisations adapt directly to community need, while statutory commissioning cycles move more slowly, creating persistent misalignment.

Infrastructure gaps: Organisations struggle with premises and infrastructure issues including rising costs and lack of suitable buildings. There is insufficient dedicated capacity funding for infrastructure support that enables other organisations to flourish.

Fragmented understanding: Statutory partners often lack clear understanding of the full VCSE ecosystem. One statutory partner noted: *"There are so many VCSE organisations across the county that it is difficult to know what they all do, who they work with, what their expertise is."*

4. Lack of value-added insight at local level

Despite compelling sector-wide evidence, organisations struggle to demonstrate local impact:

Evaluation capacity: Many organisations lack evaluation skills and capacity to make robust cases for their services. While they collect data through routine monitoring, case studies, user feedback and outcome tracking, this information often isn't organised within frameworks that resonate with commissioners.

Green Book application challenges: While the research demonstrated the power of HM Treasury Green Book methodology, most organisations lack resources to conduct this level of analysis. The wellbeing-centred evaluation (such as WELLBYs) requires longitudinal data, validated measurement tools and robust attribution evidence that demands evaluation infrastructure that many organisations lack.

Story vs. statistics: The sector excels at compelling storytelling but struggles to translate qualitative impact into quantitative measures that commissioning processes demand. A single well-analysed case study can demonstrate impact powerfully, yet organisations often lack frameworks to structure their existing narratives for maximum effect.

Hyper-local understanding: The importance of operating at hyper-local level is recognised but poorly supported. Organisations need tools and capacity to understand and articulate their specific neighbourhood impact. It is often difficult to get data from informal groups on their target areas. To fully understand the nuance would take more research, but organisations have limited resources or access to relevant data platforms and many are unaware that resources like East Sussex in Figures, ESCIS, 1Space, and Sussex Uncovered are available.

Strategic positioning: Without robust local impact assessments, organisations enter commissioning processes at a disadvantage. They cannot demonstrate their specific value compared to alternatives, weakening their competitive position and perpetuating cycles of underinvestment.

Deep Dive findings: demonstrating value

HM Treasury Green Book Application

The research applied [HM Treasury's Green Book](#) framework, the established government approach for appraising policies, programmes and projects, to seven diverse VCSE organisations.

- **HARC (Hastings Advice and Representation Centre):** Welfare benefits advice prevents homelessness and ensures benefit entitlement, generating significant savings in crisis intervention
- **Care for the Carers:** Support for unpaid carers prevents carer breakdown and delays residential care admission
- **Amaze:** SEND system navigation prevents school exclusion and family breakdown
- **East Sussex Recovery Alliance:** Long-term addiction recovery support prevents relapse cycles and reoffending
- **Rotherfield St Martin:** Social connection for older people reduces isolation, GP visits and residential care need
- **Community Chef:** Cooking skills programmes improve nutrition, health outcomes and employment pathways
- **Kinship Carers:** Support for relatives raising children prevents care system entry

The Five-Case Model analysis

Each organisation was assessed across the HM Treasury Five-Case Model:

Strategic case:

All seven organisations demonstrated clear alignment with legislative frameworks (Care Act 2014, Children's Act 1989, Equality Act 2010) and national priorities. They possess deep understanding of their sectors, with some operating for over 40 years. Staff and volunteers have strong community roots and frequently benefit from lived experience.

However, challenge arises when targeted beneficiaries don't align with current local priorities, even when organisations deliver exceptional outcomes.

Economic case:

All organisations generated compelling positive social return on investment. High-level estimates identified returns of £2 to £8 for every £1 invested, based on operational costs versus public sector costs avoided.

The preventative focus creates value that traditional outcome measures often fail to capture, particularly in preventing costly crises.

Commercial case:

Established organisations demonstrated relatively strong operations with deep community roots, clear specialised expertise and effective quality and risk management. However, collaboration opportunities remain underutilised.

While strong partnerships exist, they depend more on personal connections than systematic approaches to understanding the full service ecosystem.

Financial case:

This represents the area of greatest concern. With one exception (Rotherfield St Martin, which has diverse income streams and growing reserves), all organisations experienced significant financial pressure, operating at or below break-even.

Organisations dependent on statutory contracts face direct impact from public sector budget reductions while experiencing cost base increases, notably from employers' national insurance rises.

Management case:

Strength correlates with organisational size. Larger established organisations (Amaze, Care for the Carers, HARC, Rotherfield St Martin) have strong governance and performance management. Smaller organisations depend more on single key individuals, creating additional risk.

Common across all sizes is opportunity to strengthen use of digital and data platforms provided by East Sussex County Council and the NHS.

Stakeholder visions and priorities

Vision for the sector's future

Cross-sector stakeholders taking part in the research articulated clear aspirations:

Sustainable funding: The clearest wish from both VCSE and statutory respondents is for long-term, reliable, adequate funding supporting both core and project costs. Organisations seek to move away from short-term, piecemeal funding toward resourcing that allows planning, growth and innovation.

This reflects desire for the VCSE sector to be valued as an essential partner, not a stopgap, with funding flowing fairly, sustainably and inclusively from government, local authorities, NHS, external funders and communities.

Stronger collaboration and partnerships: There is widespread recognition of a future where silos break down, duplication reduces and services are designed and delivered in equal partnership. This requires deeper collaboration and trust both across the VCSE sector and with statutory services, with a whole system approach, including VCSE, at the strategic table.

Close attention must be paid to including small grassroots organisations and groups. Critically, the voice of people with lived experience must be included, currently a vital missing piece.

Workforce and volunteer development: Recognition that people are the sector's greatest asset drives wishes for fairer pay, better training, workforce wellbeing and succession planning to reduce burnout and secure the next generation of leaders.

Particular focus on volunteer development ensures a more diverse and sustainable pipeline, from young people becoming engaged in civic life, to employers giving staff time to volunteer.

Sector recognition and empowerment: Organisations wish for greater recognition of sector value by government, funders, public services and wider community. Volunteering, community action and charitable work should be seen as central to wellbeing, prevention and resilience, not "nice-to-have" extras.

This includes more visibility for sector impact, stronger voice in decision-making, and cultural shift toward valuing community-led solutions alongside statutory provision.

Support community strength and the local focus: Strong support for smaller, hyper-local groups, neighbourhood-based activities and community asset building. Building from grassroots up would help revitalise community spirit and ensure solutions tailored to local need.

Neighbourhood hubs are envisioned as trusted spaces for connection, navigation and collaboration, with calls to increase these across the county ensuring open-access, accessible and preventative services are embedded locally.

Innovation and operational improvement: Organisations seek more room to innovate, embracing new delivery approaches focused on person-centred, adaptive support. Practical improvements include affordable premises and creative spaces, simpler governance, less bureaucracy, and smarter use of data and technology.

What needs to change

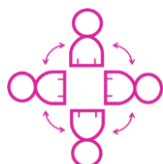
Stakeholders identified fundamental shifts required:



Funding structures and security: Move from short-term project grants to long-term, flexible core funding. Shift from transactional procurement to relational, trust-based partnerships valuing long-term social outcomes.

Recognise systemic blockages in commissioning that are preventing innovation and long-term community-rooted organisations from contributing fully.

Review efficacy of lead provider model and develop alternatives like innovation partnerships and alliance contracting.



System alignment and collaboration: Align strategic priorities and prevention initiatives with local community needs through equal partnership - bring wide sector diversity including small grassroots organisations to strategic tables.

Simplify bureaucracy in developing partnerships, bids and data sharing.

Develop and implement reimbursement approaches for VCSE sector participation in strategic work.



Culture shift and trust: Leadership in both VCSE and statutory sectors must initiate conversations on a new social contract. Statutory partners should champion VCSE beyond just funding - recognising and funding diverse approaches to service delivery.

Embed prevention and early intervention in commissioning.

Build trusting relationships on mutual understanding and appreciation of each sector's strengths and challenges.

Take seriously the emotional state of the sector and avoid adding further demands when organisations already struggle.



Recognition and value: Greater recognition and understanding of VCSE sector value from statutory partners and the wider community is required. Shift perception so organisations of all sizes receive genuine opportunities for influence, collaboration and commissioning.

Acknowledge burden taken off statutory services.

Value preventative, community-based and lived-experience-led work. Employ approaches focusing on building relationships and trust.

The VCSE sector must also build awareness of positive impact, measuring not just outcomes achieved but less conspicuous social value on local economies, wellbeing and infrastructure.

Realise that the VCSE sector is not homogeneous and requires different ways of engaging, communicating with and funding.

The diversity of the sector is not a complication to be managed but a strength to be leveraged

Conclusions and recommendations

Enduring strengths amid crisis

The VCSE sector continues to demonstrate that it is a vibrant vital part of East Sussex:

- Comprehensive footprint of approximately 3,500 organisations
- Strong collaborative networks with genuine commitment to partnership working
- Resilient and adaptable culture enabling flexible response to community needs
- Compelling strategic value with social returns of £2-£8 per £1 invested

These strengths enable the sector to continue delivering despite mounting pressures.

However, this resilience should not be taken for granted; it is finite and approaching limits.

Critical context

The VCSE sector in East Sussex is not failing but is at risk of being failed by the systems meant to support it

The sector faces four interconnected critical challenges:

1. **Severe funding instability** has moved from chronic concern to acute crisis, with organisations using reserves to fund even statutory contracts
2. **Capacity and workforce crisis** including recruitment difficulties, wages 15-20% below public sector equivalents and widespread burnout
3. **Systemic fragmentation** preventing the sector from achieving its potential through confusing governance, limited strategic voice and commissioning barriers
4. **Evidence gaps** making it difficult for organisations to demonstrate local impact despite clear, sector-wide value

Vision and path forward

The sector is not seeking charity but investment commensurate with the value it creates

Transformation requires:

- **Sustainable partnership model:** Long-term adequate funding supporting both core and project costs, moving from transactional procurement to trust-based partnerships
- **Enhanced collaboration:** Deeper integration into strategic decision-making, breaking down silos, sharing resources, establishing community-centred service models

Recommendations

Immediate priorities (0-6 months): stabilisation

The most urgent need is stabilising organisations currently using reserves to maintain services.

Actions:

- 1. Risk assessment:** Build shared assessment of VCSE organisations and contracts at risk across the county based on NHS, ESCC and District and Borough Councils priorities
- 2. VCSE development programme:** Establish a programme based on the risk assessment including:
 - Short-term commissioning approach acknowledging need for full cost recovery
 - Access to emergency resilience fund
 - Where necessary, freeze on competitive tendering in at-risk areas
 - Explicit support for VCSE use of community assets through peppercorn rents and supportive policies
 - Councillors and commissioners each to visit at least one VCSE partner monthly to witness impact firsthand

Lead organisations: ESCC Partnership Team and ES VCSE Alliance

Short-term transformation (6-18 months):

Success depends on leadership from both VCSE and statutory sectors initiating conversations about new social contracts.

Local government reorganisation and NHS neighbourhood health teams provide unique opportunity to embed VCSE partnership in new structures.

Actions:

- 1. VCSE connector roles:** Develop local capacity to bridge gaps between organisations and facilitate collaboration (ES VCSE Alliance and Voluntary Associations)
- 2. Collaborative funding models:** Create models encouraging partnership, minimising unproductive competition, recognising VCSE organisations as essential infrastructure investment at local grassroots level (ESCC, NHS and private funders)
- 3. Community asset compact:** Ensure that the VCSE sector is actively consulted in decisions around repurposing or disposal of community assets including VCSE sector assets (ESCC SPACES Programme)
- 4. Digital infrastructure:** Actively promote benefits of existing digital infrastructure made available by ESCC, NHS and others to the VCSE sector (ES VCSE Alliance and LIOs)
- 5. Impact demonstration:** Conduct workshops bringing together funders and funded organisations to demonstrate impact and share learning (private funders and LIOs)
- 6. Lived experience engagement:** Systematically engage people with lived experience, running micro-organisations and with front-line volunteering and delivery experience, to ensure services reflect actual needs

Long-term system change (1-3 years): fundamental reform

Sustainable change requires fundamental shifts in how we conceptualise and resource community wellbeing.

What is required now is the courage to move from managing decline to investing in renewal

Actions:

1. **Commissioning review:** Conduct a comprehensive commissioning process review addressing barriers that exclude smaller organisations and stifle innovation
2. **Thematic networks:** Invest in thematic networking groups aligning commissioning programmes with VCSE sector (e.g., mental health networks, children's services)
3. **Shared spaces programme:** Create a programme involving all community assets
4. **Digital infrastructure strategy:** Develop a shared VCSE/statutory strategic approach to a digital infrastructure that supports the VCSE sector
5. **Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL):** Ensure CIL money remains local to areas experiencing development
6. **Developer partnerships:** Recognise developers as community partners rather than simply sources of planning gain
7. **Development finance:** Establish development finance approaches supporting long-term community investment

Implementation and accountability

These actions represent not isolated initiatives but a comprehensive programme of change requiring sustained leadership, adequate resourcing and regular review.

Success depends on:

- **Maintaining momentum** beyond initial enthusiasm
- **Clear accountability** for delivery
- **Transparent reporting** on progress
- **Culture shift from transactional to relational**, from competition to collaboration, from short-term fixes to long-term investment

Without this fundamental change in mindset and practice, even the best-designed initiatives will fail to achieve their potential.

Final reflections

This research reveals a sector continuing to deliver exceptional value despite operating under unprecedented pressure. The timing coinciding with local government reorganisation and NHS 10-year plan implementation provides a unique opportunity for reform.

The evidence is clear. The path is identified. Commitment from both sectors is evident.

The diversity of the sector is not a complication to be managed but a strength to be leveraged

The VCSE sector has demonstrated remarkable resilience through multiple crises, adapting and innovating while absorbing cuts, managing increasing demand and supporting communities through unprecedented challenges.

This resilience, however, is not infinite. The sector now needs systems and structures that support rather than strain it, investment rather than extraction and genuine partnership rather than rhetoric.

The recommendations represent requirements for a functioning civil society; the collective wisdom of hundreds of stakeholders who understand both the value of what exists and the risk of losing it.

Implementation will require political will, financial investment and cultural change. This report provides the evidence, framework and practical steps needed to choose renewal over decline.

It is now for VCSE leadership, statutory partners and political leaders to build plans and identify resources, financial and non-financial, that will enable these practical steps.

The communities of East Sussex deserve nothing less than full commitment to building the resilient, connected and empowered voluntary sector that this research shows is needed and possible.

Report prepared by Colligo Labs and Ideas Alliance, October 2025

Based on engagement with 150+ stakeholders including 42 in-depth interviews, 45 workshop participants, 66 survey responses and deep-dive analysis of 7 organisations

There is a real proactive energy and partnership presence in the VCSE in Hastings and Rother area. And a keenness to work closely with ESCC'
(Statutory partner)

'Community ownership, energy and passion are good, especially in rural communities where people feel a sense of belonging'
(VCSE partner)

'There are lots of organisations we can signpost to, collaborate and work in partnership with to help our local residents' (VCSE partner)

'I am most inspired by the micro initiatives that set themselves up locally, who are fuelled mainly by a personal passion and a desire to make things better for others'
(Statutory partner)

'Our colleagues across the sector are really struggling with fundraising being the most competitive I have ever known in 25 years of work and experienced staff leaving the sector due to poor pay and working conditions.'
(VCSE partner)

'We are in a fortunate position of having private philanthropic funding to maintain our operations so are bucking the trend of having stable income.'
(VCSE partner)

'There is a lack of understanding about the value of these smaller grassroots organisations. They play a vital role in terms of relationships and trust within their communities, but their value comes from remaining relatively small and in focusing on the passions, interests and priorities of the community (rather than bending to the priorities of funders)' VCSE partner

'Three-year funding would be most helpful to help gain momentum with the residents, secure posts so staff and volunteers are invested in the organisation plus funding to help with running costs' (VCSE partner)

'Our volunteers inspire me day in, day out. They are truly marvellous. They provide high quality, accredited advice that lifts people out of hardship and poverty' (Statutory partner)

'I worry that some elements of VCSE are over optimistic about local authority funding in the future. We need to support and partner in other ways' (Statutory partner)

'The VCSE 'strategic partner' model needs to be adopted more consistently, along with earlier consideration of co-production with experts by experience' (Statutory partner)

'VCSE play a critical role in health and social care and the wider determinants of health. As there is an increasing focus on prevention and proactive measures to support people in the community, there is increasing emphasis on what the VCSE can offer' (Statutory partner)

'The statutory sector needs to work in a more localised/community-based way alongside the VCSE and residents. This will then encourage a culture of respect and trust based on shared values' (Statutory partner)

'The flexibility, creativity and agility of the sector are real strengths - but we have to have caution that our commitment is not abused or taken for granted' (VCSE partner)

'Our families inspire us to continue to do what we do. When we receive feedback on how we have helped that is what makes the difference.'
(VCSE partner)



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