# Reflect

# Recover

# Renew

**Investigating the impact of Covid-19 and creating a shared vision for the future of the VCSE sector in Somerset**

Researcher: Dr Oliver Clabburn

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## PROJECT AIMS

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought unprecedented change to people and communities worldwide, and Somerset is no exception. What is marked, however, is the way in which Somerset's voluntary, community, and social enterprise organisations (VCSEs) stepped up to the challenge. As many other services closed their doors, VCSE sector organisations mobilised to provide practical, emotional, and social support across Somerset.

Two years on, *Reflect, Recover, Renew* is a timely research project which aims to identify the implications of Covid-19 on Somerset's communities and VCSEs, which, in turn, help us to understand the current and future needs of organisations. Meticulously researched, the project explores the following:

To *reflect* on the impact of the pandemic on communities and the VCSE sector throughout Somerset.

To ascertain what communities and VCSEs currently need to *recover*, as we emerge from the pandemic.

To be forward thinking and create a shared vision (or roadmap) for what communities and VCSEs in Somerset view as priorities in order to *renew*, and ultimately, thrive in the future.

Funded by Somerset County Council and Somerset Community Foundation, the project was delivered by Spark Somerset and led by researcher Dr Oliver Clabburn.

Commencing in June 2021, this five-month project adopted both quantitative and qualitative research methods. Conclusions drawn from the project are co-produced with the input and contributions of individual participants from a range of VCSE organisations. In all, 270 people representing 190 separate VCSEs across Somerset shared their experiences

## FINDINGS

The following section is structured so that it considers each research area in turn – Reflect, Recover and Renew.

# Reflect

Retrospective experiences and perceived impact of the pandemic are considered in terms of the impact of the pandemic on people and communities in Somerset, and the impact of the pandemic on Somerset's VCSEs.

## Impact on people and communities

Six main themes were identified from the analysis of the research, regarding the impact of the pandemic on Somerset communities.

**Mental health and wellbeing**. This was the most common issue described and has significantly worsened in Somerset's communities. As such, it was ranked as the highest priority for the county by survey respondents (77%).

**Loneliness and isolation.** A longstanding issue for Somerset communities, this was identified by 64% of respondents as the second highest priority. Due to social withdrawal during the pandemic, this was magnified for many, both young and old.

**Digital exclusion, sub-standard internet connectivity and/or poor mobile phone reception**. 23% of respondents identified digital exclusion and 19% identified mobile and/or internet connectivity as affecting people's ability to electronically connect with others and access services which had moved online during the pandemic and associated lockdowns.

**Historically poor transport options.** 15% of respondents identified poor transport as being an issue which, for some people, meant being totally isolated, missing medical appointments, and a deterioration in physical and mental health.

**Financial hardship**. The financial effects hit our communities hard, with 30% of respondents reporting poverty and deprivation as a key theme across the county.

## Impact on Somerset's VCSEs

Four main themes were identified from the analysis of the research, regarding the impact of the pandemic on the VCSE.

**Staff and volunteers.** New ways of working were adopted by organisations to ensure social distancing, as reported by 78% of survey respondents. For some, these changes were positive, with a shift to digital, that allowed services to continue, and staff teams able to benefit from more flexible working. However, for others, the challenges were often too great, with some organisations reporting a decline in staff and volunteer numbers.

**Activities and services.** A small number of organisations saw a decrease in service demand, often due to members passing away or shielding. Most, however, reported a significant increase in demand, with a growth in membership (37%), and an increase in referrals (30%). Yet, VCSE organisations across Somerset had to absorb this demand as statutory agencies and services largely closed.

**Finance and funding.** Organisations faced significant income challenges during the pandemic as many face-to-face activities and services which generated income were unable to adapt to online delivery. On a more positive note, there was a rise in Covid-19-related grant funding, with most survey respondents (69%) receiving additional funding, and 40% identifying new grant funders. Communication between funders and VCSEs was a strong theme throughout the research, with funders showing more willing to support changing projects. Additionally, time afforded by the pandemic was used by some VCSEs to reshape organisational strategies and revise core spending.

**Partnerships and networking.** The pandemic increased a sense of connectivity within the sector, and 57% of survey respondents saw a rise in opportunities to connect and network via virtual forums, events, and webinars. Interactions also increased with statutory agencies, professional relationships formed between the voluntary and public sector, and common streams of work for specific communities were developed – fostering trust and mutual respect. Collaboration between statutory services and VCSEs was also reported by 46% of respondents and involved sharing knowledge and resources, and this was identified as a key outcome of the pandemic by 67% of respondents.

# Recover

## Perceived current and future needs of communities in Somerset

A range of perceived current and emerging priorities for the people of Somerset were identified, informed by the conversations undertaken during 'Reflect'.

Seven main themes were developed from the analysis of the data.

It's important to note that many of the issues identified were already prevalent in our county. However, the pandemic has magnified both the demand and complexity of these community needs.

**Mental health and wellbeing.** The top priority for people and communities in Somerset is mental health and wellbeing. Anxiety and depression, whilst prevalent prior to Covid-19, have been further exacerbated by successive lockdowns. Many people gained support from social networks or had developed coping strategies which relied on social interaction. These means of support ceased. Lockdowns have similarly interrupted social opportunities for people to connect – increasing loneliness and isolation for people across all ages. VCSEs have developed befriending services but there is significant need to resume social groups.

**Young people.** There are clear and specific calls for better mental health support and provision for children and young people in the county. This ranked within the top five priorities for all districts. The pandemic has restricted opportunities for young people to interact with their peers. Socialisation skills have been hampered and developmental milestones impeded. Furthermore, there is a dearth of dedicated spaces for young people across the county. Reinstating face-to-face interventions and developing new opportunities with specially trained and funded youth workers is needed.

**Care and Carers (paid and informal).** There were reports of a lack of professional training for carers. Where potential care workers have been recruited, centralised training would streamline the process for upskilling or inducting new staff. Informal carers also require respite support and opportunities to meet other carers.

**Physical health.** The pandemic has had a significant impact on the physical health and mobility of people across the county and was identified as the third highest priority across Somerset. Both physical and mental health could be improved by promoting activities which link mobility and exercise with social opportunities. The impact on physical health was especially pronounced for people with pre-existing health conditions.

**Poverty, benefits and housing.** Support relating to benefits was identified as an important gap in existing service provision. Knowing where to go for support was described as important throughout the research, as well as ensuring that the process is accessible and inclusive.

**Transport.** Countless people were isolated through a lack of transport options. This affected both physical and mental wellbeing through reduced activity and fewer opportunities to socialise. It also impacted the viability of community groups and activities due to poor attendance.

**Climate change and conserving nature.** A strong priority for Somerset communities is a need to draw attention to climate change and its impacts through implementing a county-wide initiative to help reduce the county's carbon footprint. A focus on protecting and restoring its natural assets would help communities reconnect with nature and develop associated knowledge and skills.

## Perceived current and future needs of VCSEs in Somerset

Four key themes were identified from the interrogation of the data.

**Joined up working and collaborations with other VCSEs.** The pandemic created major changes within Somerset's VCSE sector. Not only in terms of adapting services and the day-to-day running of organisations, but importantly, additional emphasis on establishing and nurturing relationships, partnerships, and collaborations with other VCSEs. Respondents viewed this collaborative working very positively – highlighting increased efficiency, shared skills, knowledge and resources, and better outcomes for communities - and are keen for this to flourish as we enter the recovery phase.

**Funding.** This was the second largest priority for VCSEs over the next 18 months. This has prompted organisations to consider additional income streams to continue delivery of new services, maximise existing funding, and advocate for core costs to be covered by funders. Issues with funding from statutory services were apparent throughout. This is pertinent as VCSE organisations have experienced a notable increase in referrals and signposting from statutory agencies, without VCSEs always receiving financial recompense.

**Joined up working and collaborations between VCSEs and statutory services.** Across the total survey sample, 48% indicated a need for joined up working between VCSEs and statutory/public sector services. This would facilitate shared priorities and the planning of services. Local government restructuring into a unitary council provides a unique opportunity to reshape the role and involvement of Somerset's VCSEs.

**Volunteers.** Recruitment and engagement of volunteers was the fourth largest need among survey respondents, with 39% of respondents citing this as a priority. Generally, volunteer numbers are lacking for VCSEs as people reassess their time commitments or are concerned about Covid-19. A county-wide strategy would help support volunteer recruitment through showcasing the benefits of volunteering, while simultaneously raising the profile of organisations. Increasing flexibility within volunteer roles would also enable more people to volunteer.

# Renew

This final section of the report focuses on the *Renew* aspect of the project. It offers a collective vision for the future of Somerset's VCSE sector to grow, thrive and best support the county's people and communities. Using data from the Reflect and Recover sections of the research to inform our approach, we held two Visioning sessions with VCSE colleagues. From those sessions, participants identified the following priorities:

## We have a vision for a coordinated VCSE sector in Somerset

A strong, resilient and efficient sector is one that is joined up with mutual priorities and agendas.

**Enhanced opportunities to network and connect within and across sectors.** The development of forums and meetings facilitated through online platforms has created a better-connected sector, and ultimately, strengthened the support available for communities. However, blended approaches for networking with face-to-face and online methods ensure organisations have a range of ways to connect and promote their work. Some participants identified that a robust directory of services would facilitate coordination within and across sectors, and support signposting.

**Meaningful and supportive professional relationships.** A shift away from competing for funds is a widespread ambition for the sector. Accurate mapping of services, effective and widespread methods for evaluating service impact, and developing meaningful professional relationships between organisations and sectors are key elements of the sector's vision.

**Streamlining core organisational procedures and training.** Essential skills such as bookkeeping and IT support can sometimes be difficult to resource. Pooling needs with others in a similar situation would help keep costs affordable. Sourcing and delivering generic volunteer training county-wide would also alleviate time and costs for individual organisations, and crucially, support the development of a 'Somerset Volunteer Passport'. This would detail training undertaken and enable volunteers to concurrently support multiple VCSEs.

**Improved coordination with statutory and public services.** There is a vision for improved coordination with other sectors. The drastic increase in signposting and referrals from statutory services to VCSEs has put additional strain on capacity. An overarching body operating on the sector's behalf could broker relationships with statutory agencies and ensure the voices of VCSEs are championed.

## We have a vision for an appropriately funded VCSE sector in Somerset

There is an ambition that that the funding landscape for VCSEs is improved, so that funding is more accessible, core costs are recognised and sustainability becomes a priority. That the VCSE is not just the 'cheap' option, but that it is often the right one – and therefore needs to be appropriately resourced.

**Sustainability of organisations.** As the plethora of Covid-19 response grants begin to dry up, the long-term sustainability of organisations is in question. The vision is for funding sources to remain accessible, and for ongoing funder flexibility if project plans must change.

**Common priorities shaped by community need.** Future funding opportunities should allow for various VCSEs to work as a group to contribute towards common priorities that are shaped by community need. Further, moving beyond short-term 'flash-in-the-pan' projects with prioritisation of longer-term funding which would promote the continuation of proven successful work.

**Totality of costs recognised.** The vision is for funders to pay core organisational costs for VCSEs, and for statutory agencies to divert funding appropriately to organisations when referrals are made.

## We have a vision for a collaborative VCSE sector in Somerset

There is strength in collaboration. By working together, we can ensure that the sector as a whole is greater than the sum of its parts – and ultimately provide better outcomes for people in need.

**Reciprocity and joint project delivery.** Collaborative working pools resources between VCSEs, which ultimately benefits communities. Providing support with new policies and procedures, sharing staff or resources, are just a few ways which collaborative working could be strengthened.  VCSEs can 'trade' services and skills, and mentor newly formed organisations.

**Clear pathways for service-users.** Open doors in terms of inter-VCSE referrals enable people to engage with organisations and receive optimal and timely support. Collaborating more widely with statutory services would similarly maximise opportunities and outcomes for communities. We have a vision for a community led VCSE sector in Somerset

Ensuring accessibility of support and responsiveness to community need is a central tenet of Somerset's VCSE sector.

**Understanding community needs.** There is substantial diversity in the needs of people within Somerset. It is crucial, therefore, that VCSEs have access to a range of live data to keep abreast of changing needs. The Somerset Intelligence platform provides a foundation to guide the sector's vision to move beyond generalised conclusions. In addition, dynamic consultation with Somerset communities would support appropriate forecasting of community need.

**Planning for the future.** Lockdowns have seriously impacted people's lives and the phrase 'new normal' has become part of everyday discourse. Both VCSEs and communities have changed, and the sector therefore needs guidance from communities for a longer-term vision. Platforms for community feedback should adopt blended approaches which support people's preferences and access needs. Co-production, working in partnership with communities, is key. Moreover, shifting the discourse across the county to better support equality, diversity and inclusion, will enable such considerations to be wholly embedded.

**A partnership with volunteers.** There is a vision that communities take pride and ownership of our VCSE sector. This results in a well-resourced and engaged volunteer workforce. Developing a more flexible approach to volunteer recruitment which better fits the available time and skills of would-be volunteers, would likely encourage more people to participate.

## We have a vision for a recognised VCSE sector in Somerset

All across the county, thousands of people's lives are being improved on a daily basis due to the outstanding work provided by VCSEs, their staff and volunteers. Covid-19 has shone a light on the importance of the sector – therefore it is vital for the VCSE to be properly recognised.

**Raising awareness of the sector.** Recognition must first start at the local level, through raising awareness of the sector's high quality service provision within communities. A 'Somerset Kite Mark' which denotes exceptionally high quality and responsiveness to the needs of the community would build trust in the sector. In addition, recognition of core groups or organisations which excel in certain domains could lead to effective collaborative working.

**Recognising the uniqueness of Somerset.** Finally, the sector has a vision which recognises the uniqueness of Somerset. Significant diversity of groups and communities means a one-size-fits-all approach is inappropriate. This too must be recognised by the VCSE sector.

## NEXT STEPS

The research project and this report aimed to *reflect* upon the impact of Covid-19 on communities and VCSEs in Somerset. Through grasping a collective understanding of the current and future *recovery* needs of VCSEs in Somerset, it has been possible to create the building blocks for a shared vision for what is needed for the sector to *renew,* as we emerge from the pandemic.

While this vision is not a solution or 'quick fix', it does provide a collection of principles, which, if adhered to, will contribute towards a strong, resilient, and thriving VCSE sector in Somerset.

But this research is only the start of the journey. The quantity and quality of contributions made to this research demonstrates there to be appetite and enthusiasm for positive change in our communities. To harness this momentum, over the coming months, we will be working with VCSE colleagues to develop a clear 'road map' for the sector, based on the five themes identified. In doing so, the collective vision we have developed can evolve into practical, tangible actions that VCSE organisations, big and small, can understand and be part of.

# MAIN REPORT – ABRIDGED VERSION

## PROJECT AIMS

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought unprecedented change to people and communities worldwide, and Somerset is no exception. What is marked, however, is the way in which Somerset's voluntary, community, and social enterprises (VCSEs) stepped up to the challenge. Drawing on their unique embedded knowledge and established trust, VCSE community groups and organisations supported people in our county in diverse and imaginative ways. As other services closed their doors, VCSE sector organisations mobilised to provide practical, emotional, and social support across the Somerset.

Two years on, *Reflect, Recover, Renew* is a timely research project which aims to identify the implications of Covid-19 on Somerset's communities and VCSEs which could help us understand current and future needs.  Meticulously researched, the project explores the following:

To *reflect* on the impact of the pandemic on communities and the VCSE sector throughout Somerset.

To ascertain what communities and VCSEs currently need to *recover***,** as we emerge from the pandemic.

To be forward thinking and create a shared vision (or roadmap) for what communities and VCSEs in Somerset view as priorities in order to *renew,* and ultimately, thrive in the future.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A steering group pf seven key stakeholders helped shape the project:

> Community Council for Somerset
>
> Somerset Association of Local Councils
>
> Diversity Voice
>
> Somerset County Council
>
> Frome Town Council
>
> Somerset Community Foundation
>
> Somerset Activity and Sports Partnership

Funded by Somerset County Council and Somerset Community Foundation, the project was delivered by Spark Somerset and led by researcher Dr Oliver Clabburn. Conclusions drawn from the project are co-produced with the input and contributions of individual participants from a range of VCSE organisations.

Commencing in June 2021, this five-month project adopted both quantitative and qualitative research methods. Initial work involved a literature review, attending a range of community forums, workshops and events, and informal one-to-one conversations with representatives from Somerset-based VCSE organisations. These allowed for contact and immersion within Somerset's VCSE culture and informed the planning and methodology for the project.

Following this initial work, an online survey comprising 19 questions was created using SurveyMonkey© and circulated to Somerset VCSEs via email, professional networks and social media. In-depth qualitative data were collected through focus groups and one-to-one interviews with a range of VCSE representatives, and two visioning sessions were held with attendees from VCSE organisations. In all, 270 people representing 190 separate VCSEs across Somerset shared their experiences for this project. Descriptive analysis and thematic analysis techniques were used to review quantitative and qualitative data respectively.



**13** focus groups

**7** steering group stakeholders

**185** VCSEs

**24** interviews

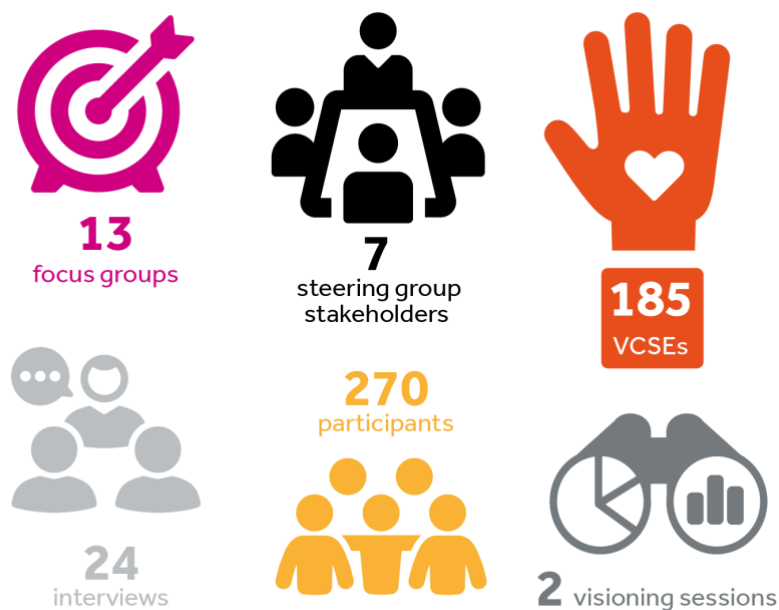**270** participants

**2** visioning sessions

Figure 1 – Project participant statistics

## FINDINGS

This following section is structured so that it considers each research area in turn – Reflect, Recover and Renew.

# Reflect

Retrospective experiences and perceived impact of the pandemic are considered in terms of *the impact of the pandemic on people and communities in Somerset*, and *the impact of the pandemic on Somerset's VCSEs.* Bear in mind, however, that given the informal nature of much of the Somerset VCSE, with a significant number of organisations being user-led, or run entirely by volunteers, the lines between the two are somewhat blurred.

## Impact on people and communities

Unsurprisingly the pandemic had a significant impact on the people and communities in Somerset. Normal routines and ways of life changed drastically in a short space of time. With many statutory and public services falling to near halt, a substantial number of people in the county began seeking help and support from alternative sources. Yet, the majority of issues that people in the community faced were not new and solely prompted by the pandemic. Instead, Covid-19 acted as a magnifying glass to highlight pre-existing challenges faced by people in Somerset, while also increasing the complexity of issues.
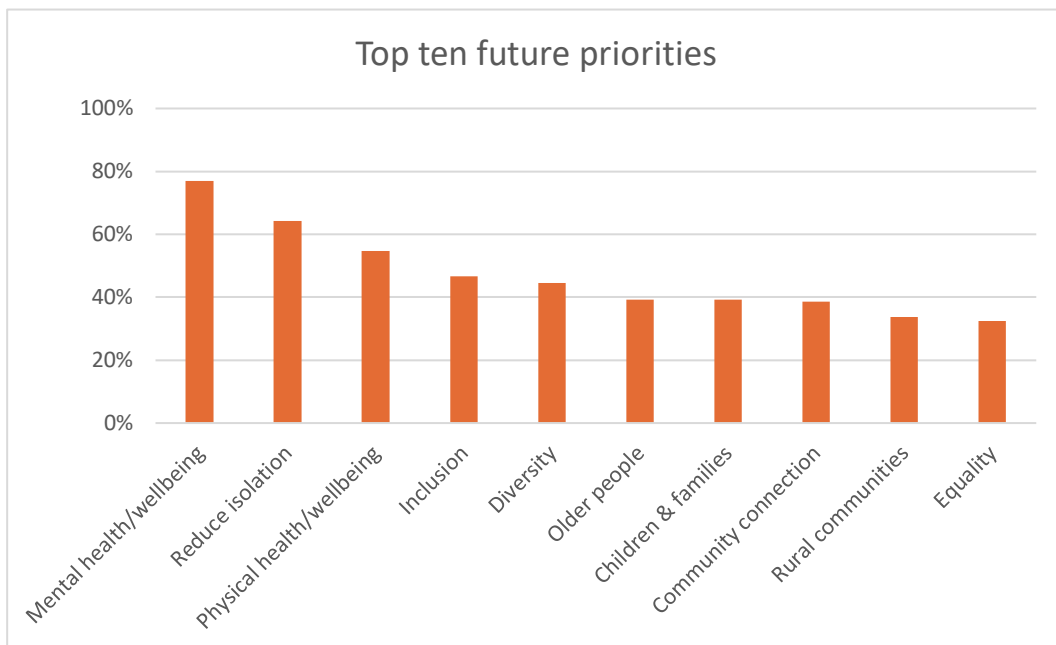


Figure 2 – Top ten future priorities

**Mental health and wellbeing** have been significantly worsened by the pandemic and, as such, 77% of survey respondents ranked these health aspects as the highest priority for the county.  It is not possible to identify one specific aspect of the pandemic as the cause of worsened mental health, however, the data collected suggests several factors have had a detrimental impact on community mental health.

**Loneliness and isolation**. These have been longstanding challenges for people in Somerset and a key contributor to mental health decline during the pandemic. It was identified by 64% of respondents as the second highest priority for Somerset's communities. The primary need for people in Somerset during the pandemic was therefore a sense of connection with others.

*"Loneliness was apparent before, but it has been worsened by pandemic."*
*(Interview #3)*

**Digital exclusion, and poor connectivity**. These issues affected people's ability to electronically connect with others and access services which had moved online during the pandemic and associated lockdowns. People were not only physically isolated during lockdowns, but also psychologically due to limited ways to connect electronically.

**Historically poor transport options**. The lack of transport options in Somerset have been magnified by the pandemic, resulting in existing public and community-led transport services being largely suspended. For some people, this meant being totally isolated, missing medical appointments, and a deterioration in physical and mental health.

**Social withdrawal across the age range.** The closure of schools and colleges left many young people confined to their homes. Physical interaction with peers stopped and shifted to online communications. Consequently, key milestones in young people's lives were missed such as birthdays, starting college or learning to drive. Older people too, experienced adverse effects due to social withdrawal with some having little or no interaction with others. Despite befriending services redoubling their efforts during the pandemic, some people remained 'hidden' and lacked social and emotional support.

> *"Lockdowns for young people meant not being able to see their friends and have those 'normal' milestone moments like starting school or having birthday parties. This has meant fewer opportunities for that type of social support. All the while, being at home with parents and families has impacted on normal adolescent development in terms of attachment – being forced to spend time with parents when they naturally want to become more independent through time with their friends." (Interview #15)*

**Financial hardship**. The financial effects of the pandemic included furlough, unemployment, issues with universal credit, and rising food and fuel bills. Collectively, these impacted people's financial resilience which was further compounded by digital exclusion and difficulties gaining support and advice with complex applications.

## Impact on Somerset's VCSEs

Somerset's VCSEs are truly embedded within the communities they support, and overall, they were able to swiftly respond to community need through their continuation and upscaling of existing work, or, recognising emerging gaps and responding appropriately with new provision. The sector's response became a lifeline for thousands of people in Somerset, yet this was not without its challenges. Whilst some difficulties were anticipated by VCSEs, including a decline in income or funding, a reduced workforce, and challenges adapting activities and services, findings from this project suggest there were several positive implications for many groups and organisations.

Four main themes were developed from the analysis of the research data regarding the impact of the pandemic on Somerset's VCSEs. These were *staff and volunteers; activities and services; finance and funding;* and *partnership and networking*. Each is considered in more detail below.

## STAFF AND VOLUNTEERS

### Changes made regarding staff and volunteers
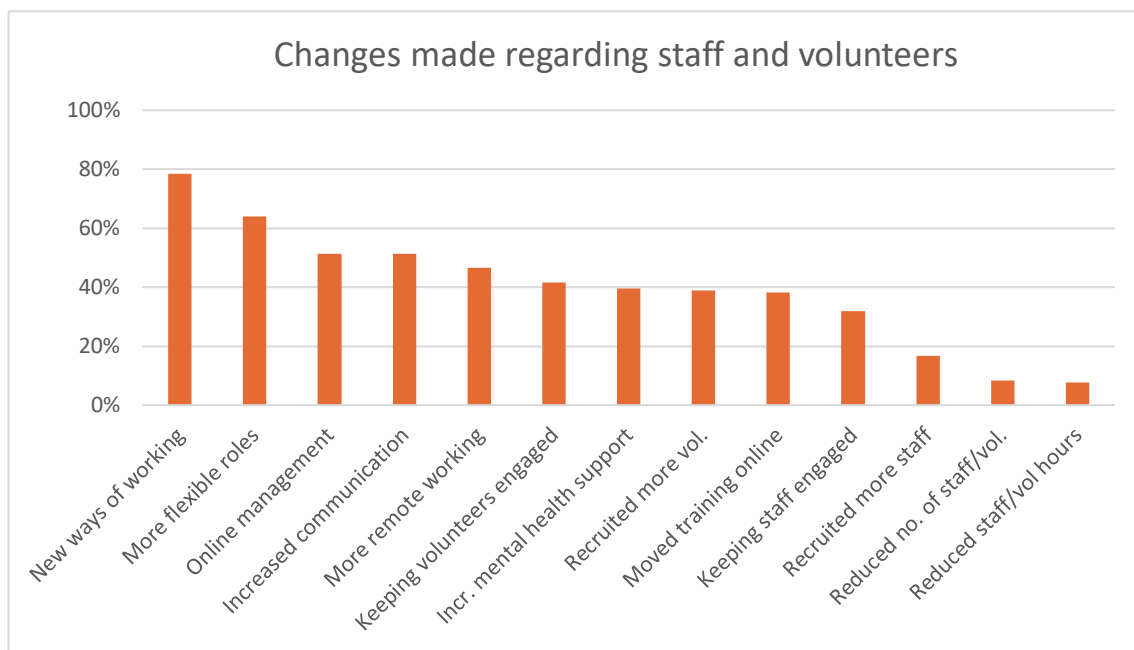
Figure 3 – Changes made regarding staff and volunteers

**Remote working and social distancing**. New ways of working were adopted by organisations to ensure social distancing, impacting 78% of survey respondents. This linked strongly to staff and volunteers utilising online and remote methods of working (51%). This shift was regarded a major upheaval with little time to prepare and source appropriate technological equipment, software, and importantly – training for staff or volunteers.

Governmental rules regarding working from home have had a negative impact on the VCSE staff and volunteers in numerous ways. A sense of disconnection between colleagues and peers was apparent as face-to-face interaction moved to solely digital means. Opportunities to converse and socialise in the workplace disappeared, affecting collegialities and service delivery with fewer opportunities to share professional knowledge when supporting service users. Some participants further described how social distancing had altered internal dynamics with fragmentation within teams leading to staff and volunteers being both physically, and emotionally, distanced. Makeshift offices in people's homes have also blurred the lines between home and work. This has negatively impacted wellbeing for some people due to a sense of 'always being at work'.

*"There has been a decline in wellbeing and (colleague) has noticed that people have poorer communication skills. Everyone is on edge, and many seem to have lost their ability to work as a team. Everyone is very individual and whereas they had to observe physical social distancing, they have now become emotionally distant. Several bubbly volunteers were a shadow of their former selves." (Interview #21)*

Yet, in contrast, some participants described remote working in positive terms. According to 64% of survey responders, a new sense of autonomy and flexibility with organisational roles developed. Work and volunteering responsibilities could be planned around family and homelife. Further, the rise in use of virtual platforms such as Zoom and Teams during the pandemic has brought a realisation that meetings are now easier to organise and more streamlined. As such, 51% of survey respondents described an increase in communication between staff and volunteers. While there was undoubtedly an initial steep learning curve to develop remote working skills and knowledge, it is clear this has become a positive legacy of the pandemic.

*"We are now a tighter and stronger organisation. We've gone paperless, closed our office – it's never going to reopen. But we are a better organisation now. It's a silver lining out of the pandemic, and we've become streamlined."*
*(Focus group 6 respondent)*

**Changes to workforce numbers.** While only 8% of survey respondents commented on a reduction in the number of staff or volunteers, interviews and focus groups found that a substantial number of participants described a decline in their workforce because of the pandemic. Notably, many paid staff were furloughed which was described as a cause of tension with those who remained in role. Volunteer numbers also drastically declined within some organisations. This was often due to the profile of existing volunteers who were generally older and retired, and consequently, were encouraged to shield by the government.

While some VCSEs struggled to fill the workforce void, others found that their workforce numbers remained stable throughout the pandemic, or even grew. This was due to the sharp increase in new (often younger) volunteers who were furloughed from their work. Examples were apparent from the rise in coronavirus helper networks which supported communities at the hyperlocal level across the county. There was a growth in appetite and enthusiasm for people to volunteer which aligned with individual capacity due to the furlough scheme. This allowed for VCSEs to continue supporting their communities while the profile of the voluntary workforce changed – bringing alternative knowledge and skills to VCSEs.

*"Although the workforce didn't increase, the profile of the volunteers changed; more skilled, recently retired groups joined as volunteers like GPs, teachers, lawyers, police, and paramedics."* *(Interview #21)*

The influx of new, enthusiastic staff and volunteers also brought additional work. Organisational practices required adaption. Training needed to be developed quickly and delivered remotely which caused wider consequences for some organisations. In some instances, this caused fragmentation in volunteer groups due to a lack of cohesion between people which ultimately affected group dynamics.
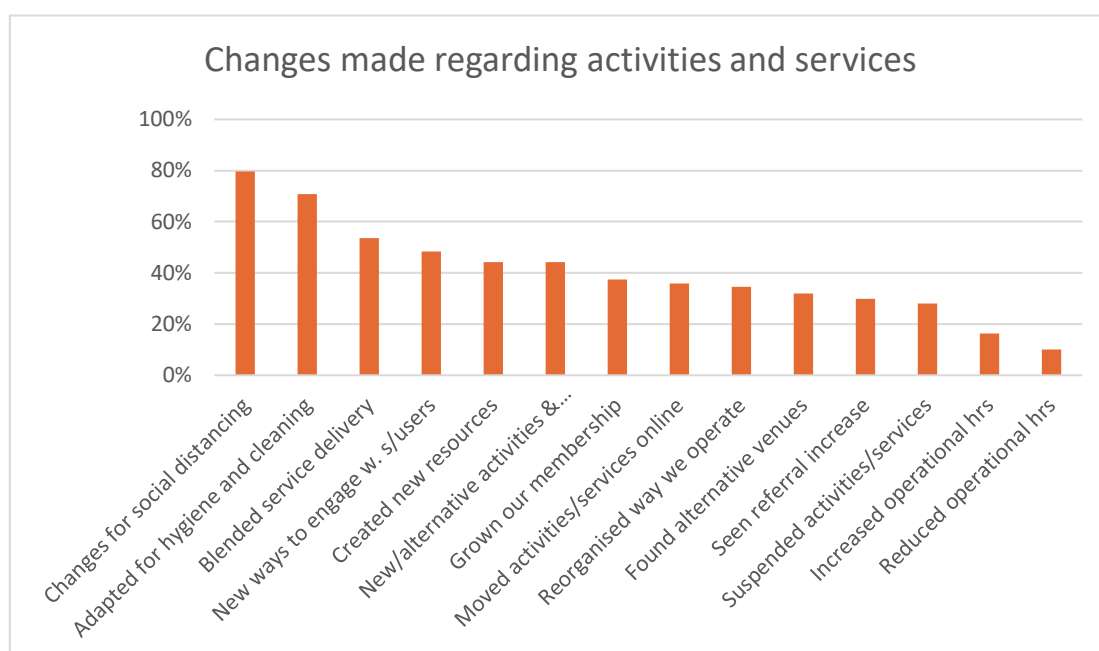
## ACTIVITIES AND SERVICES



Figure 4 – Changes made regarding activities and services

**Increase in service demand and complexity.** A small number of participants described a decrease in service demand, often due to members passing away or shielding, and therefore, unable to access services. In contrast the majority of participants reported a significant increase in service demand, with 37% of survey respondents indicating a growth in membership or people accessing services, and 30% seeing an increase in referrals. There is an underlying sense from the research that the VCSE sector had no choice but to absorb this demand as statutory agencies and services largely closed their doors.

> *"We (VCSEs) were metaphorically 'holding the baby' during the pandemic while lots of other agencies stopped operating and closed. We became the last post of support to people in the community." (Interview #15)*

This increase in service demand was reported within all geographical districts of Somerset. Indeed, one charity saw demand increase by 150%. Other organisations affected included foodbanks, youth services, prescription deliveries, care provision, mentoring, and emotional support. As demand increased across Somerset's VCSEs, the complexity and challenging nature of cases also increased. In some instances, this was beyond the remit and expertise of the organisation making it hard to plan and deliver.

**Adaptable, responsive, innovative.** While 'normal' activities and services were not able to be delivered, participants frequently described how innovation, flexibility, and a 'can do' attitude are central features of the VCSE sector. As such, it was possible to adapt and develop their work whereas statutory agencies were confined by bureaucratic red tape meaning services were stopped. 80% of survey respondents reported that existing activities and services were adapted to ensure social distancing, 48% established alternative ways to keep in touch with service users, and 44% developed new activities/services.

*"The VCSE sector is a lot more adaptable than statutory authorities.*
*We can trial things, we are flexible, and we often have more solutions."*
*(Focus group 12 respondent)*

Most often, organisations developed innovative and creative modes of online delivery. Examples included Zoom delivery of singing classes, cookery lessons, gardening workshops, carers groups, youth clubs and virtual cycle rides. Some participants described that membership and the number of people accessing their services increased due to online accessibility. Online classes, webinars and virtual meetings provided easier access for people to attend through eliminating travelling time. This enabled wider audiences to be reached. However, these digital platforms and outputs have clear limitations, particularly for organisations whose core services are centred upon face-to-face services, home visits, group activities, or provision of physical space within their community. For these organisations, closing the doors and suspending operations was their only option. This was particularly challenging as there was an awareness that they were closed at a time when they were needed most by the community.

**New ways to connect.** In some instances, in-person meetings and services were moved outdoors to ensure social distancing, and new ways of communication established to help promote social connections and reduce isolation. These included telephone befriending, pen pal services, weekly check-in phone calls, and the use of social media platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebooks groups to help people stay in touch. A significant number of organisations also adapted in terms of delivering to people's homes, including prescriptions, shopping, food parcels and activity packs. The action of dropping things off to homes also provided a sense of human interaction for many people who were socially isolated. It also afforded an opportunity for the VCSE organisations to see how people were coping, and where required, offer alternative methods of support.

*"Delivering resources to people's homes also provided an opportunity to 'assess' how families were coping as there was a glimpse into the home. Where needed, we could refer them to social workers for extra support. This wasn't possible prior to lockdowns." (Interview #4)*

Where possible, organisations strove towards blended approaches with online and in-person service delivery. With support from funders and creative thinking by organisations regarding the ways in which services could be adapted, exemplifies the fortitude and flexibility of the VCSE sector in Somerset. This willingness to be innovative meant that people in the community remained connected and received support at a time of crisis.

## FINANCE AND FUNDING

**Income streams.** It was frequently mentioned that organisations faced significant challenges with income during the pandemic – largely due to normal streams of revenue and income stopping as soon as the lockdowns began. Face-to-face activities and services which generated income ceased. It was often not possible to adapt these services to remote methods of delivery.  In addition, organisations which had generated an income by hiring out venue spaces saw this source of income dry up, almost instantly, as demand dwindled.

*"We had a huge economic loss as we fell through gaps because we don't pay business rates or rent. We finally received £3000, but our income is normally £21,000. We managed to regain some, but not all. We fell through so many gaps."*
*(Focus group 2 respondent)*

**Fundraising.** Community fundraising also ground to a halt. A key event in the fundraising calendar which normally generated a substantial income for many Somerset VCSEs is Glastonbury Festival. This was postponed in both 2020 and 2021. Furthermore, fundraising events such as marathons, fetes, car shows, or activity days also ceased due to the pandemic. As reported by 43% of survey respondents, some organisations developed new approaches to community fundraising which could be carried out online. Virtual marathons, raffles, wellbeing challenges, and online cycle rides were just a few examples described.
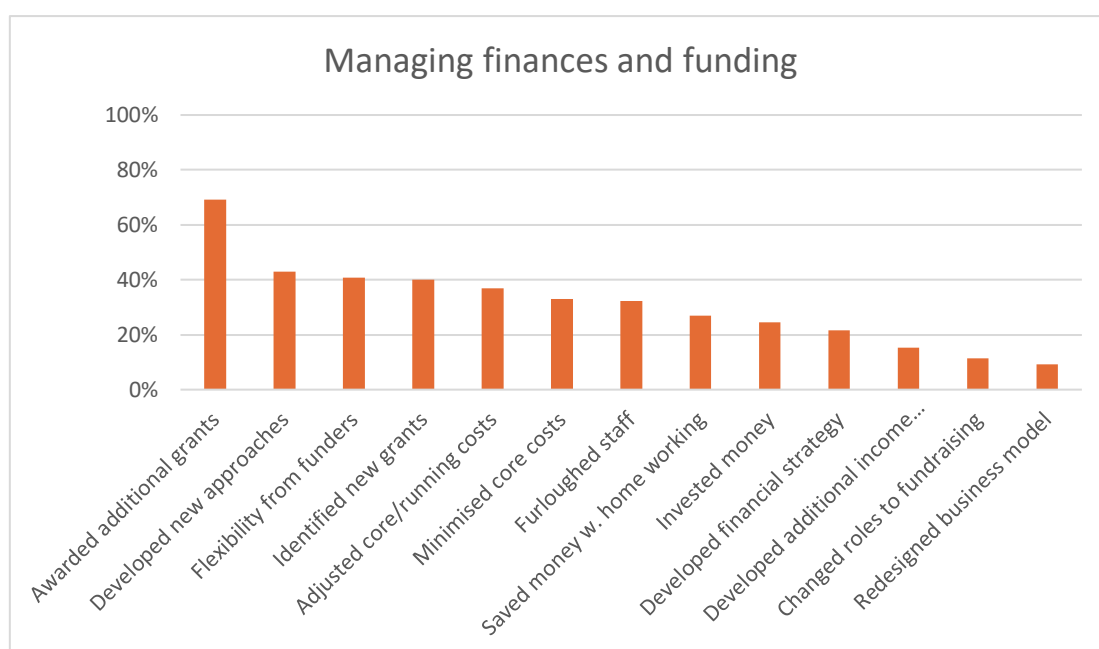


Figure 5 – Managing finances and funding

**Government and grant funding.** While many VCSEs were able to claim government or local council support for costs such as rent or business rates, some organisations did not fit the criteria. A lifeline for many was the increased prevalence of Covid-19-related grant funding. At 69%, most survey respondents had received additional funding, and 40% had identified new grant funders. Some VCSEs developed new services with receipt of Covid grants – shifting their focus to developing and delivering Covid-specific projects while unable to carry out their normal services.  Thus, Covid grants plugged gaps in usual income while also allowing organisations to respond to emerging needs within in their communities.

VCSE organisations which were able to continue to operate by adapting services and create new projects had the added benefit of raising their profile and local awareness. Not all VCSEs, however, were able to align their work with the priorities of Covid funders. Additionally, competition between VCSEs for funding was great as the majority were experiencing financial difficulties.

Fortunately, funders were generally understanding and flexible with work that had already been funded or commissioned. In total, 41% of survey respondents outlined that funders were flexible if a project or timescale changed. Both Somerset County Council and Somerset Community Foundation were explicitly commended on how they supported VCSEs with continued funding where projects needed to be altered due to the pandemic.

*Our funders were really flexible and understanding. They continued to pay for service user delivery costs during the pandemic, so we continued to have that income. There was the attitude of 'we can't allow these VCSEs to fail. What will happen if they don't exist? (Interview #16).*

**Communication.** Communication between funders and VCSEs was a strong theme throughout the qualitative data. Funders offered support when projects changed and provided guidance before grant applications had been submitted.  There was a sense of the work and initiatives being generated by organisations to be valued by funders and seen as needed within the community. This was reflected by decisions on applications being made promptly.

**Time to reflect.** Time afforded by the pandemic was an opportunity for some VCSEs to reflect on how their organisation was run, reshape organisational strategies, revise core spending, review running costs, fundraising strategies, and consider what processes or procedures were not working and required change. This was pertinent given the reduction in income levels, thus, saving money elsewhere became vital. With many organisations stopping and suspending services, costs associated with running and maintaining venues were reduced, alongside staffing and volunteer travel costs. Further, adapting services to online did have its merits – such as less car travel which had a positive impact regarding the climate, as well as freeing up more time for other work.
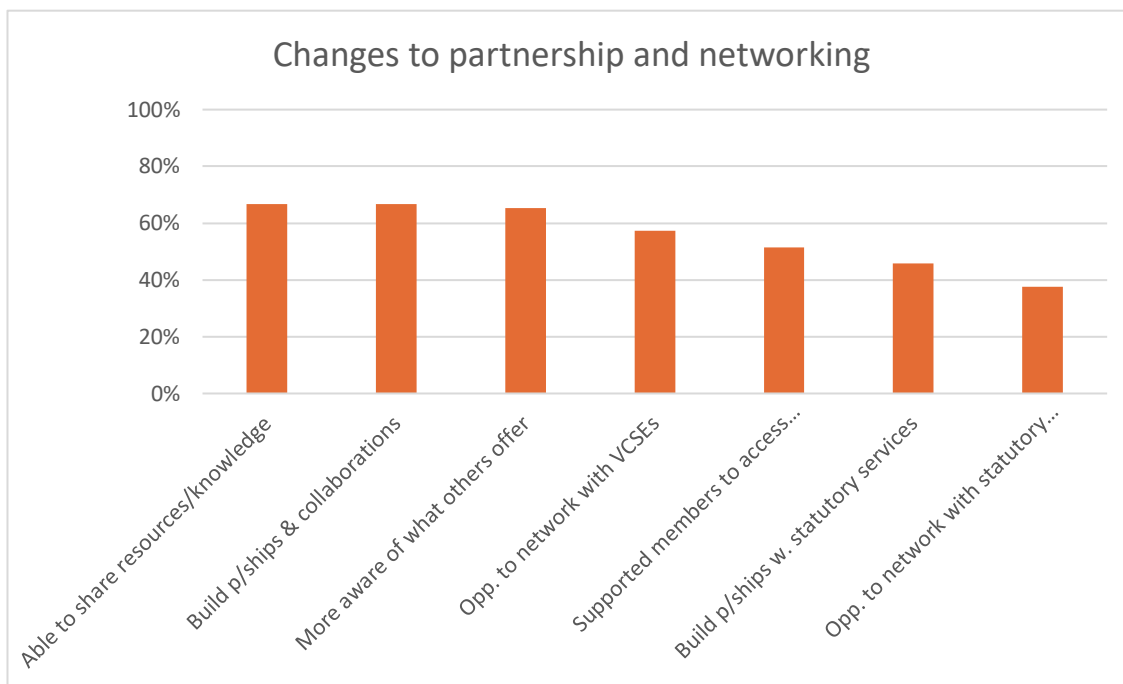
## PARTNERSHIPS AND NETWORKING



Figure 6 – Changes to partnership and networking

**Connecting across the VCSE sector.** A key finding was that the pandemic increased a sense of connectivity within the sector. This was multifaceted but frequently attributed to the technological shift to online meetings. It became easier and more efficient to arrange, meet, communicate, and liaise. There was subsequently a rise in opportunities to connect and network with people from other organisations. This was reported by 57% of survey respondents, with various virtual forums, meetings, event, webinars and training available – many of which were free to attend. Forums brokered introductions for people and organisations who were previously unknown to each other and provided an opportunity to nurture existing professional relationships.

*"Attending the (Men's) Shed specific forums were really useful. We were able to share ideas, hear about what other groups were doing with Covid safety, and more often than not, vent to each other about our frustrations which really helped with morale.""*
*(Interview #5)*

**Connecting beyond the VCSE sector.** Interactions also increased with statutory and public agencies. Professional relationships formed between the voluntary and public sector whereby common streams of work for specific communities could be developed in tandem. Not only did this support a sense of alignment between sectors, but also began to reduce a perception of 'us' and 'them' which had gradually developed over the years, most notably due to austerity. Such open dialogue between the sectors at strategic and local levels fostered trust and mutual respect, with VCSE organisations feeling listened to, valued, and respected.

*There's been an increase in opportunities to be heard at strategic and local levels in terms of youth work and what our common priorities are.*
*It's meant that we've been listened to, valued and heard." (Interview #17)*

**Raising awareness.** Online forums raised awareness of the work other organisations provided. Thus, 51% of survey respondents felt they could better support people in their community through efficient signposting to local organisations, services and activities. Sometimes this was supported by the development of local directories detailing support and services available.

**Collaborating locally and with statutory services.** Increased connection between VCSEs consequently led to partnerships and collaborations developing between local organisations and was regarded a positive implication of the pandemic. Projects and services, such as foodbanks, could be delivered together; drawing on respective skills, knowledge, and expertise, with a greater energy to solve problems locally. In addition, collaboration between statutory services and VCSEs was reported by 46% of respondents. This included local partnerships with schools and developing projects alongside local businesses to support people in the community.

**Sharing knowledge, expertise, and skills.** Collaboration also involved sharing knowledge and resources, and this was identified as a key outcome of the pandemic by 67% of survey respondents. VCSEs shared best practice and information which could be utilised within their organisation, cascaded to people in their community, discussed project ideas, and supported each other through raising morale with a sense of being 'in it together'. In addition, larger VCSEs supported smaller or newly established groups with developing strategic documents or procedures such as GDPR and safeguarding. In some instances, staff or workforce capacity was shared. Furloughed staff from both statutory and VCSE organisations were reassigned to voluntary positions in alternative groups who were still operating.

# Recover

This section focuses on the *Recover* aspect of the project. Perceived current and future needs of both communities and VCSEs in Somerset are considered in terms of *the current and future needs of communities in Somerset*, and *the current and future needs of VCSEs in Somerset.*

## Perceived current and future needs of communities in Somerset

A range of perceived current and emerging priorities for the people of Somerset were identified by participants – many of which were recognised to already be prevalent in our county prior to the onset of Covid-19. However, the pandemic has magnified both the demand and complexity of these community needs. The majority of these priorities were ubiquitous across Somerset, but there was some variation across districts.

Seven main themes were developed from the analysis of the research data. These were: mental health and wellbeing; young people; care and carers (paid and informal); physical health; poverty, benefits, and housing; transport; and climate change and conserving nature. Each theme is explored further below.

The current and future needs of communities in Somerset

| Mental health & wellbeing | Young people | Care & carers |

| Physical health | Poverty, benefits & housing |

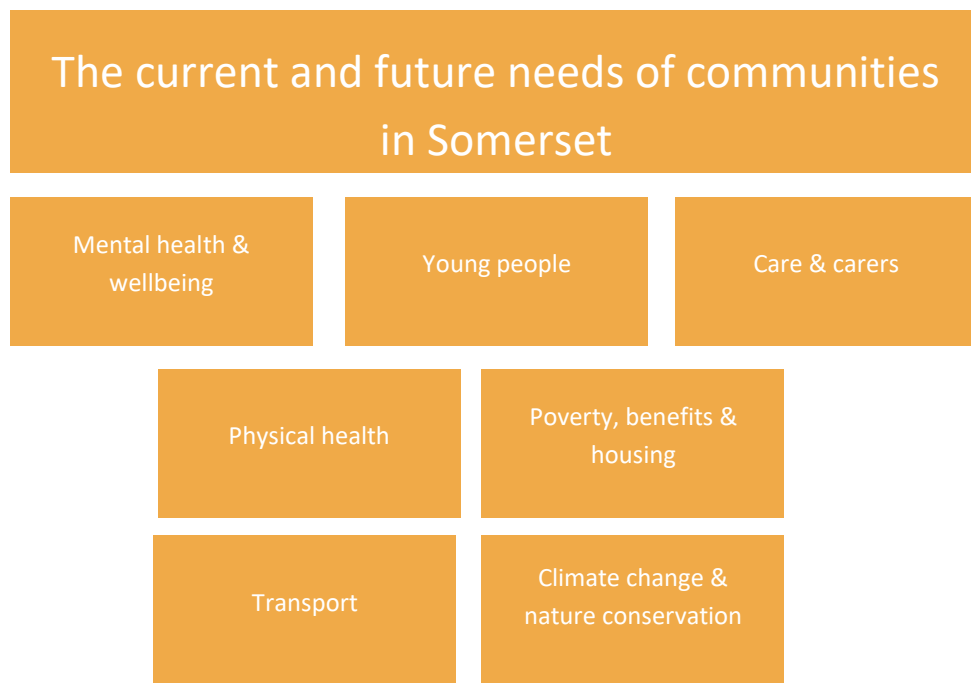| Transport | Climate change & nature conservation |

Figure 7 – Summary of overarching themes relating to the current and future needs of communities in Somerset

## MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Unequivocally, the top priority for people and communities in Somerset is mental health and wellbeing and although concerns regarding mental health were prevalent prior to Covid-19, it has been further exacerbated. As discussed earlier, numerous lockdowns and social distancing have had a significant and palpable impact on community health and wellbeing, with a range of issues identified.

**Complex mental health concerns.** Anxiety and depression have become more apparent due to the sharp decline in social opportunities. Many people had previously gained support from social networks or had developed coping strategies which relied on interacting with others in the community. The cessation of such events, with many yet to return, paired with people's reluctance or lack of confidence to reengage with those services which are running, have heightened these health concerns.

> *"Friendship, befriending, and social connection seems to be a big issue. We have a large amount of people that suffer from mental health issues because they are lonely." (Focus group 8 respondent).*

**Reducing loneliness and isolation.** The most pressing need to improve community mental health is to reduce loneliness and isolation. This is reflected by the implementation of numerous befriending services by VCSEs across the county in response to the pandemic. Loneliness was prevalent prior to Covid-19 and the enforcement and lockdowns all but eliminated social opportunities for people, creating a significant need for the means to connect with others. While loneliness has historically been thought of as an issue mostly affects older people, in Somerset it affects older and younger people alike. There is consequently a need for better awareness and education about the issue, whilst providing appropriate support for those who require it. Crucially there is a significant need to resume social groups and events, as well as creating new ones to reduce loneliness and isolation.

> *"We need to focus on reducing isolation. The pandemic shone a light on the importance of social opportunities for people." (Interview #9)*

## YOUNG PEOPLE

There are clear and specific calls for better mental health support and provision for children and young people in the county. Ranked within the top five priorities by all districts, it was slightly higher and the second most pressing need in South Somerset with 55% of respective respondents. Youth provision is multifaceted and raising awareness of the unique needs of young people was seen as key to ensure they are properly supported.

> *"One that we come across a lot is a lack of support and provision for youths. Youngsters have been hit hard with the closing down of youth spaces and opportunities for them. That's contributing to much larger issues like county lines because there's no safe or inviting places for them to go."*
> *(Focus group 8 respondent)*

**Impact of fewer opportunities.** Recognising the impact of the pandemic on restricting opportunities for young people to interact with their peers is crucial. Socialisation skills have been hampered and developmental milestones impeded. Furthermore, there is a dearth of dedicated spaces and venues for youths across the county. It was argued by some respondents that the lack of provision for young people has contributed to much larger issues for youths such as county lines.

**Increasing professional support.** Tailored programmes which support youth mental health are required. This is particularly important in terms of reinstating face-to-face interventions and developing new opportunities with specially trained youth workers or health and social care professionals. Consideration of the wider ecosystem surrounding young people is also necessary; importantly, providing appropriate support, guidance and education for parents and families.

> *"We need to develop a strong case and strategy for the youth sector in Somerset. One that not only advocates the importance of youth work in the county, but also spotlights youth mental health as an essential priority." (Interview #17).*

Youth workers have played a vital role in the past, however this type of targeted support for young people is hard to source due to cuts in funding and a sparsity of youth work training opportunities. Further, for those who are in post, constant funding threats and struggles with their own wellbeing due to professional burnout means there is significant attrition in the sector. In this regard, a top-down approach is required to develop county-wide strategies which focus on the unique needs of Somerset's young people.

## CARE AND CARERS (PAID AND INFORMAL)

There is a distinct need of professional and micro provider care as demand for services has dramatically increased across Somerset. Support for unpaid informal carers is also a priority.

**A need for professional training.** a lack of professional training opportunities exists for potential care workers who have recently been recruited. There is subsequently a need for training to be available in a complete and centralised package or service. This would streamline the process for upskilling staff and speed up induction processes.

**Support for informal carers.** For those people whose care is provided by informal carers, such as a family member or friend, it is crucial that appropriate support is available to them when required. This was identified as a need for all districts across Somerset and was particularly apparent in Mendip with 40% of respondents prioritising carers' support. The type of support an informal carer might require varies, however, respite provision is a key need.

For many, respite involves meeting other local carers to provide an opportunity for a break away from caring responsibilities, time to socialise, vent, and gain valuable peer-to-peer support. With fewer opportunities for carers groups to meet, a vast number of people are weary and on the cusp of burnout. Although some groups have restarted, some participants felt that many carers are 'slipping through the net' – remaining hidden from support. The need for a strong and supportive carers' community is therefore paramount and identified by respondents as a need for both adult informal carers and young carers. Young carers were considered to have experienced a really tough time over the last few years in Somerset, with lots of carer's groups stopping completely.

Support for carers was also described in terms of receiving appropriate information and guidance in the form of signposting to services and help with forms and carers' assessments. However, a carer's assessment can have a waiting list of up to 6 months and a carer may only seek support when already at crisis point. Out-of-hours support, such as a 24-hour helpline, is also hard to find.

## PHYSICAL HEALTH

The pandemic has had a significant impact on the physical health and mobility of people across the county.

**Activity with social connectedness.** Physical health was identified as the third highest priority across the whole of Somerset (55%) and the second largest need (87%) in Mendip. This suggests there is a distinct need to improve physical health across the county with activities which not only promote mobility and exercise, but also offer social opportunities which can support social connectedness and reduce isolation and loneliness.

**Accessing timely medical care.** The impact on physical health was especially pronounced for people with pre-existing health conditions, or medical issues which developed during Covid-19. Pressure across the health service has resulted in longer waiting times for appointments. Moreover, reduced public transport links have affected people's ability to attend medical services. In addition, the shift away from face-to-face appointments to online GP consultations is problematic for some people. Consequently, the needs for many across Somerset are prompt access to medical services and facilities within the community context.

## POVERTY, BENEFITS AND HOUSING

**Improving access to benefits.** An important gap in existing service provision and clear a need within Somerset communities is that of benefits. Knowing where to go, who to approach, and eligibility of access were described by research respondents as important. Additionally, that services are accessible and inclusive. Many benefit processes, such as Universal Credit are conducted online which is difficult for people who are not native English speakers or have limited literacy or digital skills. Face-to-face services can provide more holistic support through gaining a better understanding of a person's unique situation. Thus, some community based VCSE organisations find they spend a great deal of time in supporting people to find appropriate information and helping with application forms.

**Financial hardship.** People who are struggling financially may have a plethora of additional and wider co-presenting issues. Rising food costs contribute to financial hardship and is a growing concern across Somerset. This is clear from the growing number of people relying on support from local foodbanks. However, not all communities have access to foodbanks and those that do frequently face challenges with stock and supplies. Financial hardship is also exacerbated by fuel poverty with many homes needing to find extra money to pay for soaring energy bills. Developing a localised focus to improve housing standards by improving insulation and more efficient heating would not only improve household finances, but also contribute towards mitigating climate change.

**Housing concerns.** Improving various aspects of housing were identified as important needs. Rent and purchase prices are incredibly high compared to actual income – forcing many people to move away from the area they call home to find affordable housing. The criteria for social housing can be hard to meet, and there is a lack of appropriate housing for those considered vulnerable or at risk. People who are homeless, care leavers or those requiring emergency housing are reported to be frequently falling through the net. Priority housing is in short supply and, on some occasions, lack essential household equipment and appliances.

*"We need to identify the <u>real</u> issues in the area, not perceived. Heating homes and fuel poverty are more common problems than people think they are." (Interview #10)*

**Digital discrimination**. Most of the services, agencies, and organisations who support people with housing needs are accessed online. While this negates the need to travel for face-to-face appointments, there are clearly additional barriers. People who do not have the relevant knowledge and skills to use technological devices experience digital discrimination. Subsequently, there is a need for training opportunities to develop appropriate skills. In addition, some people cannot afford the digital devices or internet connection which is required.

*"There needs to be discussion around 'digital discrimination' with many people and families not having access to tech equipment, which ultimately, many services rely on, like benefits and housing. Access needs to improve."*
*(Focus group 6 respondent)*

There is also a clear disparity in Somerset in terms of connectivity. Internet speeds and reliability are inconsistent, and mobile phone signals are patchy – especially in more rural areas. With ever-increasing reliance on remote access to services, and the newly emerged need of connecting with family and friends via technology, improving connectivity is a crucial priority across the county.

## TRANSPORT

Lack of transport options and poor infrastructure has been a longstanding issue in Somerset. While this is most noticeable in rural communities which have infrequent public bus services, urban communities have similarly seen a reduction in operation.

> *"People struggle to move around with the lack of transport infrastructure. It's a real issue when you think about the geographical context of Somerset. Lots of villages and areas only having a once or twice weekly bus service to visit the local town for shopping or go to hospital appointments." (Focus group 12 respondent)*

**Restricted options.** The diverse geography of Somerset means countless people are isolated through restricted transport options. This clearly impedes mental wellbeing as people are unable to visit family and friends. Expanding this further, physical and mental health can be negatively impacted when people are unable to attend medical appointments.

**Impact on viability of groups.** While VCSEs offer countless community-based social activities which support wellbeing, transport difficulties affect people's ability to attend. Poor attendance often leads to services folding as a direct result of people not being able to get there. Evidently, reliable and affordable transport options are in dire need across the county.

## CLIMATE CHANGE AND CONSERVING NATURE

**A priority for Somerset.** A strong priority for Somerset communities is a need to draw attention to climate change. While this was apparent across all districts in the dataset, it was particularly apparent for survey respondents in South Somerset (20%) and West Somerset (17%). Qualitative feedback highlighted the importance of developing and implementing a county-wide initiative to raise awareness of how climate change impacts Somerset and what we can do, as a community, in response.

**Developing localised responses.** Consequently, Somerset needs to develop localised responses which help tackle climate change and reduce our overall county carbon footprint. Suggestions include adopting more of a focus on nature and protecting and restoring the county's natural assets such as the Levels, Moors, coastline, and ancient woodland. This would help communities to reconnect with nature and reap the benefits it affords to physical and mental wellbeing.

# Perceived current and future needs of VCSEs in Somerset

VCSEs responded quickly to emerging community needs prompted by the pandemic. Although many were able to adapt, Covid-19 has magnified where gaps exist.
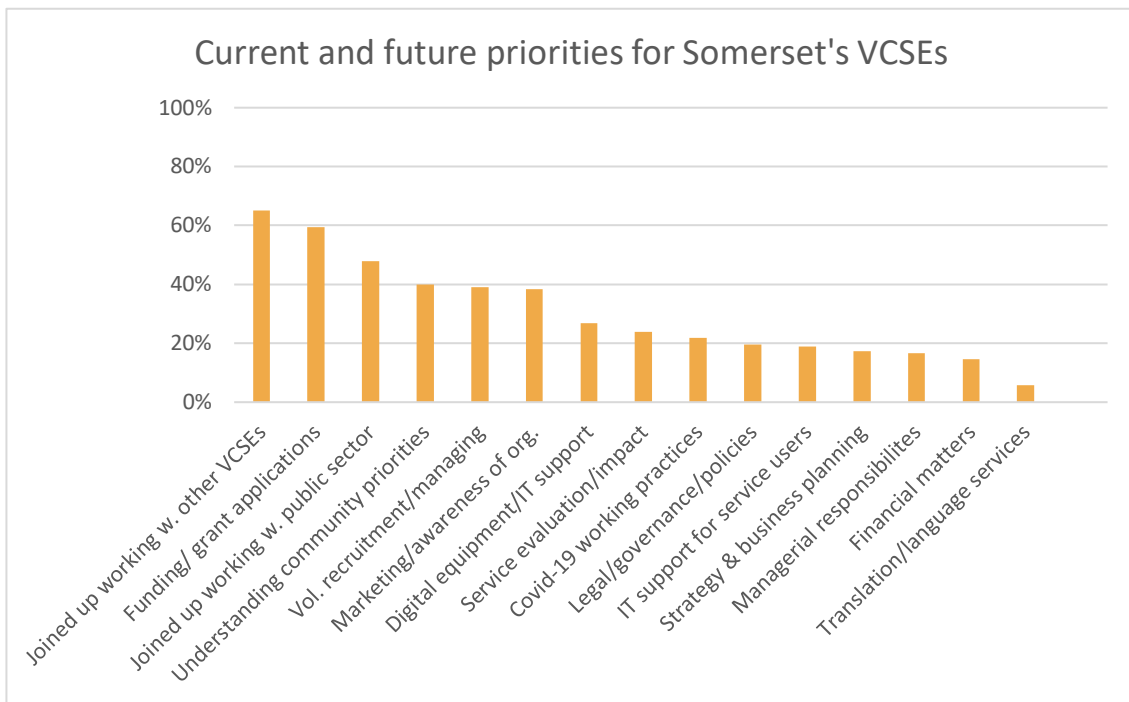


Figure 8 – Current and future priorities for Somerset's VCSEs

Four main themes were developed from the analysis of the research data:

- Joined up working and collaborations with other VCSEs
- Funding
- Joined up working and collaborations between VCSEs and statutory services
- Volunteers

Each theme is explored further below.

## JOINED UP WORKING AND COLLABORATIONS WITH OTHER VCSES

There were increased opportunities to network and connect online with other VCSEs. Face-to-face interactions, however, hold added value. A mix of both is therefore encouraged. Networking enables VCSEs to learn about each other's work and promotes inter-service signposting. A robust and detailed directory of VCSEs in Somerset would further support signposting and highlight unique knowledge, skills and assets within individual organisations. VCSEs which operate in similar areas are likely to have shared missions and priorities.

Effective collaboration would draw upon respective organisational strengths in terms of resources or skills. This would also promote organisational efficiency, as well as supporting community needs more effectively. While collaboration fosters unity, participants also described an implicit sense of competition regarding funding and service delivery. Successful partnerships, however, have flourished during the pandemic, creating numerous benefits for VCSEs.

Time and financial resources could be saved through collaborative training for common and core topics such as first aid, fire stewards, and for administrative duties.

*"It's important that we maintain and enhance the connections between VCSE groups that has developed during the pandemic, as well as make space for new ones to grow and develop." (Interview #10)*

The pandemic created major changes within Somerset's VCSE sector. Not only in terms of adapting services and the day-to-day running of organisations, but importantly, additional emphasis on establishing and nurturing relationships, partnerships, and collaborations with other VCSEs.

**Collaborations.** Collaborative work is multifaceted. One of the ways collaborations developed during the pandemic was through increased opportunities to network and connect with other VCSEs. Online forums, events and Zoom meetings are an undeniably positive by-product of the pandemic. There is an overwhelming desire that such networking opportunities continue. This was identified as a top priority by survey respondents (65%). New ways of working have strengthened the VCSE sector as a whole and it is therefore essential that these platforms and avenues to connect remain open and accessible.

Online networking opportunities have the added benefit of reducing financial and time costs. However, there is an appreciation that face-to-face interactions hold added value. With this in mind, networking should adopt a blended approach between remote and in-person opportunities for representatives of VCSEs to meet and connect.

*"We need to make sure that we're embracing the differences between VCSEs and focus on that intersection between us. Sometimes individuals have specific needs which are not being supported by a group. But if we recognise that other organisations working in the same type of community or sector have common missions, we can work together to make sure that a person's needs could be best met elsewhere." (Focus group 9 respondent)*

**Signposting to services and support.** Networking enables VCSEs to learn about the work and services delivered by other organisations across the county and promotes inter-service signposting. There is a recognition that each VCSE organisation has its own strengths, skills, knowledge, and resources, which make it best placed for certain types of work. There is perhaps a need for a robust and detailed directory of VCSEs in Somerset to promote joined up service provision and delivery between organisations. Moreover, this would encourage efficient referrals to take place between VCSEs as appropriate support for people could be more easily identified.

Undertaking the work to accurately map all VCSEs in Somerset is not without its challenges, however, and would require significant time and financing. Nevertheless, it is felt that some coordination is required in Somerset to reduce the wide-spread sense of duplication between services and VCSE organisations.

**Joined up working.** VCSEs which operate in similar areas; supporting mutual groups of people or communities, are likely to have shared missions and priorities. Effective collaboration between these organisations is consequently a

delicate intersection between working together on shared community goals, whilst drawing on respective organisational strengths, knowledge, skills, or resources.

**Improving cooperation and reducing competition.** Research findings suggest there is a need to reduce the sense of competition between VCSEs. Working collaboratively fosters unity, yet participants described an implicit sense of competition regarding funding, geographical areas, activities delivered, or the people and communities being supported. This has created a sometimes-hostile environment, which could be alleviated through enhanced collaborative working.

Successful partnerships, however, have flourished during the pandemic and created numerous benefits for VCSEs. As discussed previously, some examples include established organisations willing to share good practice or assisting with developing policies. This collaborative aspect was particularly useful for newly founded groups and smaller organisations with limited resources and regarded as important to improve upon. A central database, or resource bank is warranted whereby organisations can be paired with a VCSE which holds specific skills or resources to which other organisations can draw upon.

*"Coordinate by looking for what exists, rather than create something new"*
*(Survey respondent #62)*

**Sharing training and administration.** Time and financial resources can be saved for VCSEs through collaborative training for common and core topics such as first aid and fire stewards. Infrastructure organisations are well suited for delivery and can invite attendees from across the VCSE sector. This would also provide networking opportunities.

Beyond training, VCSEs partnering for commonly required administrative duties such as payroll, HR and accountancy services, were also considered by participants. This concept was also extended towards the consideration of a cleaning service for VCSE buildings, offices, and venues.

## FUNDING

Funding was acknowledged by survey 59% respondents to be the second largest need for VCSEs over the next 18 months. Explored previously, the pandemic has had a significant impact on income generation. This has prompted VCSEs to reconsider their usual methods of creating revenue and acknowledge that changes are required to the wider funding ecosystem.

**Identifying alternative funding sources.** Identifying additional funding streams to continue delivering the services created during the pandemic is paramount as various Covid-specific grants begin to dwindle. Otherwise, services will cease at a time when organisations have seen demand increase. There is a vital role for infrastructure organisations to support smaller and newly formed VCSEs by identifying, researching, and cascading accessible information regarding the availability of grants. In a similar vein, there is a need for a dedicated service which consults with VCSEs regarding potential new projects, writes applications on their behalf, and 'matches up' similar VCSEs to create collaborative bids which draw on their respective strengths and skills.

*"We were able to tap into a large amount of COVID funding, so now we are left with the demand, but now without the funding." (Focus group 12 respondent)*

Mutual funding for shared projects also acknowledges that funders, much like society, have increasingly limited financial resources. Competition is therefore high, and funding is forecast to be a serious concern for Somerset's VCSE sector in the future.

**Maximising existing funding.** Localised management and distribution of funding helps maximise available funding and draws on the success of models like Open Mental Health. Numerous participants commended this format as the alliance is formed of expert individuals and specialist organisations within the area. There is potential to replicate this model for other groups or organisations working within a common theme e.g., young people or carers. This would ensure funding is embedded within community need and reaches best suited organisations.

Participants also highlighted the difficulty of accessing funding for core organisational costs. Often funders seek new and innovative projects or streams of work – overlooking the need to fund core costs, or longer term and multi-year contracts for services with proven success. A commitment to long-term funding would promote financial security and resilience for organisations. It would also encourage in-depth work in communities, in contrast to 'helicopter projects' with short timescales that often have no legacy or continuation when the short funding period ends.

**Adequate statutory funding.** Issues with funding from statutory services were apparent throughout. This is pertinent as VCSE organisations have experienced a notable increase in referrals and signposting from statutory agencies. Service demand increased without VCSEs always receiving financial recompense. Additional statutory funding is therefore required to cope with growing referrals and the burden this brings to VCSEs.


## JOINED UP WORKING AND COLLABORATIONS BETWEEN VCSES AND STATUTORY SERVICES

Across the total survey sample, 48% indicated a need for joined up working and coordination between VCSEs and statutory/public sector services. Larger VCSEs, however, recorded a higher need, rising to 83% of respondents.

**Enhanced collaboration.** A key finding was the need for enhanced collaboration with statutory sectors, such as health and social care. Shared priorities should be co-developed which would not only benefit the community, but aid in the development and planning of services. Networking opportunities between sectors are an essential first step to forge professional relationships. This would create avenues through which the VCSE sector can respond and influence financial spending, as well as streamlining processes for providing feedback to services or community needs. Involvement in these types of conversations will ensure VCSEs and their services are fully embedded within local governmental plans.

> *"I think we need opportunities to build and form partnerships and collaborations. We could then support each other with peer-to-peer support through developing common projects and create collaborative funding applications." (Interview #1)*

**Recognition by the public sector.** The VCSE sector needs recognition by the public sector to promote further integration of services and support, as discussed above. This involves recognising and appreciating the value VCSEs provide to our local communities in terms of knowledge, skills, and experience. They are generally better equipped than statutory services to support communities, and their embedded nature means they are more likely to fully understand people's needs. VCSE representation at the strategic level, therefore, is key.

> *"Statutory services are pushing more and more people to us, but we often lack capacity in the service due to funding." (Interview #11)*

The current local government restructuring into a unitary council for Somerset provides a unique opportunity to reshape the perception, role, and involvement of the VCSE sector. This is also the case regarding the recent creation of the Somerset NHS Foundation Trust and development of the Integrated Care System. It is vital that the VCSE sector gains much needed representation through an advocating 'voice' while these new bodies are in their infancy, so that the sector can be seen as an equal partner with the ability to influence decision-making.

## VOLUNTEERS

Volunteer recruitment and engagement was identified as the fourth largest need among survey respondents.

**Lack of volunteers.** There was a consensus that volunteer numbers are lacking for VCSEs. It is undeniable that one of the reasons is due to the pandemic prompting people to reassess their lives, time commitments, and willingness to volunteer. Others have been reluctant to return to volunteering as they are shielding or concerned about Covid-19 transmission. There is subsequently a need, and a responsibility, for the sector to collectively support volunteers so that they feel comfortable and safe to return to volunteering.

> *"Volunteers have reassessed their time commitments and availability during the pandemic. After not volunteering and having more time, they've realised what's important to them." (Interview #10)*

**A change in volunteer profile.** Where volunteer numbers increased during the pandemic, there was a noticeable difference in the profile, skills, and expertise of these new people. This brought fresh ideas and new energy to the VCSE sector. This was apparent from the increase in younger volunteers, and subsequently, a desire by organisations to continue this forward momentum by providing more opportunities. However, many new volunteers returned to work as restrictions lifted and, with many pre-pandemic volunteers hesitant to return, there is now a sizable gap in the volunteer workforce.

Volunteering in Somerset therefore needs an overhaul and fresh perspective.

**A new strategy for volunteering**. A county-wide strategy for volunteering would increase its prominence within Somerset. Further, a collaboratively produced strategy between VCSEs and statutory services would promote the importance of volunteering, and importantly, position it as a priority.

A new strategy needs to include marketing to convey the message of what volunteering can intrinsically offer people. Reciprocity is key, whereby volunteers get as much out of donating their time as the VCSEs who receive that input of time. Improvements to wellbeing, social interactions and helping people in the community, are just a few volunteer benefits. It is therefore important to showcase the diverse work of volunteers across the county while simultaneously raising the profile of VCSEs.

Emphasising the broad range of volunteering opportunities available can also help reshape what it means to be a volunteer. Participant feedback suggests the current model for volunteering needs to change. Generally, VCSEs dictate what they need from volunteers regarding commitment, role, and responsibilities. The pandemic, however, has highlighted that volunteers appreciate an element of flexibility, and this needs to be reflected in how organisations recruit and harness the energy, skills, and motivations of volunteers.

**Improving accessibility to volunteering.** An approach which allows organisations to adapt to what volunteers can offer in terms of time and skills is micro-volunteering. This flexible approach fits more closely to the needs of volunteers and has the potential to expand the range of roles available, including online roles that can be performed from home. This could arguably increase the number of volunteers across the county as people could donate as much or as little time as they desire and draw on their specific strengths such as IT or social medial skills.

Making volunteering accessible, with as few barriers as possible, is key. While DBS checks and training are fundamental for some roles, the process could be streamlined by creating a central volunteer service. This service could manage essential volunteer requirements and reduce the burden on individual VCSEs. Furthermore, issuing a 'volunteer passport' would allow individuals to support multiple VCSEs in Somerset at the same time. This aspect could be extended to the widespread need of recruiting trustees with specific knowledge and skills.

# Renew

This final section of the report focuses on the **Renew** aspect of the project. It offers a collective vision and roadmap for the future of Somerset's VCSE sector to grow, thrive and best support the county's people and communities. Data collected during the research process considered aspirational, desirable, or forward-thinking provided the initial foundation for this vision, which was further refined during visioning sessions.

The final version is a set of principles which have been co-produced by Somerset's VCSE sector and provide a basis for the sector to truly renew as it emerges from the pandemic. These five interlinking, interdependent principles – each of equal weight – consider a VCSE sector in Somerset which is *coordinated; appropriately funded; collaborative; community led;* and *recognised*.



Figure 9 – An overview of the five key principles which form the shared vision of the VCSE sector in Somerset

Recognition and implementation of this vision is required at all levels throughout the VCSE sector to create resilient, inclusive, and thriving Somerset communities.

# We have a vision for a coordinated VCSE sector in Somerset

A better coordinated sector was identified over 60 times during the visioning sessions. This spanned numerous areas and recognised that a strong, resilient and efficient sector is one that is joined up with mutual priorities and agendas. These are considered below.

## ENHANCED OPPORTUNITIES TO NETWORK AND CONNECT WITHIN AND ACROSS SECTORS

**Blended networking.** Pandemic-induced constraints led to numerous forums and meetings being facilitated through online platforms, resulting in a better-connected sector and adding strength to the support available for communities. It is no surprise that there are aspirations for these to continue. Importantly, there was an appreciation of blended approaches for networking which combine face-to-face and online methods of interaction. Coordination of these events is crucial to ensure that all organisations, regardless of size, location, or theme of work, have an equal opportunity to connect and promote their work with other VCSEs.

> *"That the VCSE knows who does what, so that individuals and groups get the right help they need, as quickly as possible." (Visioning Session 1 respondent)*

## MEANINGFUL AND SUPPORTIVE PROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIPS

**Less competition and celebrating difference.** A shift away from competing for funds is a widespread ambition for Somerset's VCSEs. Accurate mapping of services and support, paired with a vision of developing professional relationships between organisations and sectors which are meaningful, supportive, and reciprocal is a key feature of the vision. Clearly, there will be elements of overlap between VCSEs. Thus, highlighting the nuanced differences between organisations, and their services, is necessary. Often this relates to the knowledge, skills and expertise of individual organisations, but the effectiveness of each organisation in supporting their communities is also an important element.

**Inclusive methods of evaluation.** There is a vision for Somerset's VCSEs to develop and coordinate a more inclusive and ubiquitous method of evaluation; one which considers the disparity in organisation size and potential reach of their work. While some projects impact a large number of people, others have a significant impact on a smaller group of people. Both are equally valuable, and this appreciation forms a crucial aspect of the roadmap. A county-wide shift towards social value is required which takes evaluation beyond the number of beneficiaries and financial implications.

## STREAMLINING CORE ORGANISATIONAL PROCEDURES AND TRAINING

**Generic services county-wide.** VCSEs regularly require essential services which are beyond the skills, remit, and expertise of their organisation, e.g., accountancy, bookkeeping and IT support. This is particularly apparent for small or newly founded organisations who require just a small amount of support. Pooling needs with others in a similar situation would help keep costs affordable. Likewise, organisational needs could also be better coordinated across the county. Whilst bespoke training is required for some organisations, other training is more generic across organisations, yet finances can often be a limiting factor. Sourcing and delivering generic training at a county-wide level would ultimately alleviate time and financial implications for individual organisations.

**A Somerset Volunteer Passport.** A county-wide programme of high-quality inductions and training opportunities for volunteers would align essential requirements and core volunteer training across the sector. Examples include, health and safety, data protection, safeguarding and DBS checks. This could lead to the creation of a respected and accredited 'Somerset Volunteer Passport', enabling volunteers and trustees to move seamlessly between organisations, or support multiple VCSEs depending on their capacity or skill set.

## IMPROVED COORDINATION WITH STATUTORY AND PUBLIC SERVICES

**Championing the voice of the sector.** There is a vision for improved coordination with statutory and public services. The impact of austerity and local council budget cuts has led to a drastic increase in signposting and referrals to VCSEs due to numerous statutory services ceasing to operate. This puts added strain on the capacity of VCSEs to support people and communities.

Better coordination regarding the roles, responsibilities, and capabilities of VCSEs and statutory services is required. Furthermore, an overarching body or union operating on behalf of Somerset's VCSE sector could broker relationships with the public sector and ensure the voices of the county's VCSEs are championed.

*"Somerset looks like an equal partnership of public, private and VCSE working*
*smoothly together and it's hard to spot the joins."*
*(Visioning Session 1 respondent)*

# We have a vision for an appropriately funded VCSE sector in Somerset

There is an ambition that that the funding landscape for VCSEs is improved and identified as a high priority across Somerset. This covers a range of areas.

## SUSTAINABILITY OF ORGANISATIONS

**Post-pandemic funding streams.** There was a plethora of Covid-19 response grants and funds available which provided a lifeline for many organisations at the start of the pandemic. However, as these grants begin to dry up, the sustainability of organisations in the long term is drawn into question. The vision of the sector is that funding sources remain accessible, with continued support to identify and access appropriate funding opportunities. Furthermore, that commissioners and funders carry on exercising flexibility and compassion towards VCSEs shown during the pandemic when projects and intended services need to change from the original plan.

> *"Long term planning takes place so that longer term projects can take shape and deliver bigger outcomes over time. Somerset has moved towards this, away from short term funding cycles." (Visioning Session 1 respondent)*

**Maintain newly formed funding models.** Many funders and commissioners adapted their application and reporting-back processes during the pandemic with more accessible and condensed forms. Time and financial costs were saved by VCSEs because of this which created capacity to further support communities. It is hoped that these simpler procedures will remain.

## COMMON PRIORITIES SHAPED BY COMMUNITY NEED

**A strategic focus.** It was observed that funders and commissioners adopted more strategic focuses and community priorities during the pandemic. These made identifying funding opportunities, which aligned with VCSEs' aims and missions, far easier. Moving forwards there is an ambition that similar 'structured' funding opportunities are developed whereby various VCSEs contribute towards common priorities that are shaped by community need. Funders, therefore, assess applicants as a group – recognising individual organisation's strengths. This provides for the allocation of more substantial funding to fewer VCSEs which maximises impact and reach in response to the grant remit and community priorities.

**Prioritising longer-term projects.** The sector has ambitions to move beyond short-term, 'flash-in-the-pan' projects where funding has little consideration for ongoing sustainability, and ultimately, leaves communities without services to which they become accustomed. These types of projects often operate in silos and are not aligned with mutual priorities or local strategies. Prioritisation of longer-term projects with recurrent funding would ensure successfully proven projects can continue to operate. This would promote financial resilience and sustainability, as staffing costs can be better forecast in line with known income.

## TOTALITY OF COSTS RECOGNISED

**Funding core costs.** Recognition from funders and commissioners regarding core costs for organisations is crucial, and part of the county's VCSE vision for the future. While the development of new and innovative projects is key to the reciprocal growth and evolvement of both VCSEs and local communities, financial security regarding core costs is necessary for innovation to occur. 'Hidden' costs include rent, administrative tasks, writing funding applications and setting up new projects. Yet these are frequently unrecognised by funders. Further, submitting funding applications which are subsequently unsuccessful, still take time and therefore incur costs for VCSEs.

**Financial recompense from statutory services.** financial recompense from public and statutory agencies is required. Increased referrals have a significant impact on the financial resources of VCSEs, yet they are generally regarded by statutory services as being cost-free. There is hope that this power imbalance can be rectified with funding being appropriately redirected to VCSEs when referrals are made.

**Changing attitudes through One Somerset.** Moves towards a unitary council is an opportune moment to develop new ways of working and shift changes in attitude towards the VCSE sector. Having a 'seat at the table' would enable the sector to share their embedded knowledge and experience of community working and be involved in decision-making regarding allocating and spending statutory funding. This ambition is shared across Somerset's VCSEs. A transition in attitudes and perceived roles or purpose of the VCSE sector is also required on part of the statutory sector. It is assumed that VCSEs have an unwavering capacity to act as a 'catch-all' when all options within statutory services are exhausted. Instead, the vision is for the county's VCSEs to be held in equal stature to statutory services through reciprocal funding.

# We have a vision for a collaborative VCSE sector in Somerset

Continued collaboration is a key feature of the vision for Somerset's VCSE sector. The pandemic spotlighted how working together brings real strength to individual organisations and illustrated that the sector as a whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Collaboration adopts many forms, some of which are highlighted below.

### RECIPROCITY AND JOINT PROJECT DELIVERY

**Sharing knowledge skills and resources.** During the pandemic, VCSEs demonstrated they can share their individual strengths with each other. Providing support with new policies and procedures or sharing staff and resources have established a basis for further developing collaborative working. For example, VCSEs can 'trade' assets – saving time, financial costs, and promoting reciprocity. Opportunities for mentorship can further develop organisational growth and development.

**Collaboratively delivered projects.** Partnerships bids which lead to collaboratively delivered projects is a key aim for future community work. This draws upon and combines respective organisation's strengths and experiences, creating a sense of a level playing field between large and small VCSEs. Often, the size of an organisation impacts the funding received and subsequent project delivery. However, while smaller VCSEs may well have the capability to deliver similarly important and effective community projects, they may lack experience in applying for grants, have gaps in service delivery, or perhaps too small an annual income making them ineligible to apply. Collaborative working helps reduce some of these discrepancies by pooling expertise and resources, which ultimately benefits communities.

### CLEAR PATHWAYS FOR SERVICE-USERS

**Inter-VCSE referrals.** The vision for the sector ensures that the interests of people in the community is at the heart of what VCSEs do. Open doors in terms of inter-VCSE referrals supports people to engage with, and receive optimal and timely support, when they need it. Organisations can share data, case notes or histories of those they have supported. This type of collaboration puts people at the forefront – providing them with additional opportunities which partners VCSEs can uniquely offer.

### CLOSER WORKING RELATIONSHIPS WITH STATUTORY SERVICES

**Effective, reciprocal, collaborative.** Somerset's VCSE sector recognises that operating in silos with individualistic goals is no longer fit for purpose. Collaborative approaches provide a multitude of strengths for people and communities, as well as VCSEs. This is similarly the case for statutory services. Closer working between the two sectors maximises opportunities and outcomes for community members.

*"Work <u>with</u> and not <u>for</u> statutory services." (Visioning Session 2 respondent)*

As such, Somerset's VCSEs are keen to develop effective and reciprocal relationships with statutory services. Cultivating attitudes of equality and respect are an integral part of these future relationships; providing opportunities for both sectors to champion their agendas and, crucially, influence decisions which benefit communities.

**From collaboration to alliance.** Somerset's VCSE sector shares the vision that collaborations can evolve into alliances which include a wide range of VCSEs and statutory agencies- all working towards a strategic purpose. Alliances share values and provide all representatives with a platform to be heard and influence decisions. The Open Mental Health VCSE Alliance was widely commended throughout all phases of data collection and has resulted in aspirations for similar alliances to develop across Somerset. Each alliance would focus on discrete community sectors and retain a sense of equality between VCSEs and statutory agencies. By its nature, alliance members are highly embedded within their communities. This facilitates robust and well-founded decision-making and identifying of priorities.

# We have a vision for a community led VCSE sector in Somerset

Ensuring accessibility of support and responsiveness to community need is a central tenet of Somerset's VCSE sector. A key feature of the vision, therefore, is for community needs to be appropriately mapped and understood. This involves various aspects which are discussed below.

## UNDERSTANDING COMMUNITY NEEDS

**Intelligence gathering.** The pandemic has highlighted substantial diversity in the needs of people within Somerset. Moreover, with cases and referrals to VCSEs increasing in number and complexity, so too are county-wide needs. It is crucial that VCSEs have access to live data from both local and national government to keep abreast of changing community needs. This must be further reinforced through local intelligence gathering and shared between Somerset's VCSEs in an accessible format. The Somerset Intelligence platform provides a good foundation to guide the sector's vision to move beyond generalised conclusions. Identifying the diverse and *real* needs of the community through regular, in depth and robust consultation with the communities of Somerset is key.

**Active and dynamic consultation.** Existing models which illustrate dynamic consultation include Somerset County Council's Consultation Hub. A VCSE version would facilitate local intelligence gathering and provide a platform for community feedback, thus allowing appropriate forecasting of community need and intervention before communities are at crisis point. Healthwatch practices offer another good example in a health and social care context.

## PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

**A longer term vision.** It is evident that the pandemic and associated lockdowns have had a serious impact on people's lives. While the phrase 'new normal' has become part of everyday discourse, for many people, the current normality is neither welcome nor desired. As VCSEs have changed, so have communities. The sector therefore needs guidance and direction from communities regarding what *they* need to move forward. A community-focused, longer-term vision, such as a five-year plan, will allow VCSEs to develop the appropriate support.

**Defining what 'good support' looks like.** Remaining responsive to community needs is dependent on accurate feedback. An aspiration of the sector is having clear definitions and guidance as to what 'good support' from VCSEs looks like. Moreover, providing follow-up evidence that VCSEs have listened to this feedback, and responded appropriately, ensures that support provided by organisations remains community led.

This reinforces the notion that VCSEs are here to support communities and are subsequently shaped by what people need, rather that striving towards individual organisational agendas. As such, VCSEs in Somerset have a vision whereby open and accessible platforms for communities to provide their feedback are available. As described throughout this report, such methods should adopt blended approaches with online and face-to-face opportunities, thus honouring the diversity and individual preferences of people in our county.

*"Groups can do as much as possible but if there is no feedback from the community, how do you know that it's needed?" (Visioning Session 2 respondent)*

**Supporting equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI).** Developing open and accessible platforms for community feedback should adopt blended approaches which support people's preferences and access needs, with both online and face-to-face opportunities. Moreover, shifting the discourse across the county to better support equality, diversity and inclusion will take the VCSE sector beyond tokenism and lip service, and for EDI to be wholly embedded. This approach celebrates the diversity of people across Somerset, treats people fairly, and ensures equal access to the support and services appropriate for people's needs. Extending this ethos to Somerset's statutory and public services would also create a shared vision where EDI is celebrated and championed across Somerset as a whole.

*"Everyone can access the services that they need. Accessible for all."*
*(Visioning Session 2 respondent)*

## A PARTNERSHIP WITH VOLUNTEERS

**A role for the wider community.** There is a vision that communities take pride and ownership of the VCSE sector. The strength and capability of VCSEs to optimally support people is reliant on the input and contribution of the wider community. Of pertinence is the valuable contribution of volunteers, with a wide-spread appreciation by VCSEs of the time and effort donated. Without this support, the sector is substantially weakened with a reduced capacity to support people and communities. The future vision for Somerset subsequently features a well-resourced and engaged volunteer workforce to encourage development of the VCSE sector. This would ultimately lead to growth in service capacity as community needs evolve.

**Modifying the volunteer model.** There is an acceptance across the sector that existing models of volunteer recruitment and management need to change. Historically VCSEs have dictated the role, responsibility and commitment required by volunteers. While this makes it easier from a VCSE perspective, it is less appealing for volunteers and does not consider their personal circumstances. A more flexible approach, such as micro-volunteering, increases opportunities for people to volunteer; empowering them to outline the time and skills they are willing to donate. Developing this approach throughout the VCSE sector could arguably increase the uptake from younger people or those with highly specific knowledge and skills. Implementing a Somerset Volunteer Passport – as discussed earlier – also facilitates movement between VCSEs whereby volunteers can utilise their skills in numerous settings.

# We have a vision for a recognised VCSE sector in Somerset

The final principle for the sector's vision is recognition and awareness. All across the county, thousands of people's lives are being improved on a daily basis due to the outstanding work provided by VCSEs, their staff and volunteers. A future hope is that Somerset establishes a national reputation for quality VCSE provision and becomes a leading authority. Somerset-wide streams of work, alliances or 'centres of excellence' could spearhead the way towards national recognition of Somerset's VCSE sector. Several related points are considered next.

## RAISING AWARENESS OF THE SECTOR

**VCSEs as the logical place for support.** Recognition must first start at the local level, through raising awareness of the sector's high quality service provision within communities. This would lead to VCSEs being perceived as the logical place to seek support when the need in community arises.

*"That the VCSE is a 'provider of choice' - default thinking - the VCSE has built its reputation to provide good quality work." (Visioning Session 2 respondent)*

**High quality providers of community support.** Developing a symbol for VCSEs, such as a 'Somerset Kite Mark', could denote exceptionally high quality and responsiveness to the needs of the community. It would also build trust in the sector through ubiquitous appreciation. This awareness and faith in the sector would likely encourage communities to support and champion the work carried out by VCSEs. Consequently, there is a vision of working closely with communities to help raise awareness and recognition of the sector's work. Publications, a community radio station, coordinated social media initiatives, strategic marketing and PR are avenues for achieving this aim.

**Celebrating people and projects.** Celebrating the work of individual VCSEs has the benefit of raising their own profile, while simultaneously adding to sector-wide growth in appreciation. Specific projects, volunteer stories, case studies and testimonials from beneficiaries have been suggested as ways to recognised and nurture the sector. Moreover, a 'Pride of Somerset' event could spotlight exceptionality within the sector by celebrating the work and contributions of people from the VCSE workforce. This would help people to feel valued, raise the profile of the type of work VCSEs engage in, and grow local interest and appetite.

*"Celebrating the diverse groups and communities (the richness and joy) we have in Somerset to help ensure that every community has a voice."*
*(Visioning Session 1 respondent)*

**Highlighting diversity and excellence across the sector.** Recognition holds substantial value. There is a vision for VCSEs to exchange stories, successes and failures between one another; providing learning opportunities for growth and development. Furthermore, this establishes a consensus that Somerset's VCSEs are diverse, each with distinct expertise and specialisms. It also facilitates recognition of core groups or organisations who excel in certain domains and could therefore lead to effective collaborative working.

**Recognition from Somerset's statutory and public services.** The VCSE as a sector has a wealth of embedded knowledge, skills and experience, which statutory services often lack. Furthermore, the adaptability and agility of VCSEs means they can respond at speed to community needs. This is a key strength. The vision held by Somerset's VCSEs is that statutory services begin to recognise that community-based organisations can often support people in ways which they cannot. The development of One Somerset provides an opportunity to reshape the way in which VCSEs are perceived and involved in local government.

## RECOGNISING THE UNIQUENESS OF SOMERSET

**Diverse geography, diverse people.** Finally, the sector has a vision which recognises the uniqueness of Somerset. As highlighted previously there is significant diversity within Somerset's borders, with disparities between rural and urban communities, and diverse groups and communities of people who call Somerset home. A one size approach, therefore, does not fit all. This too must be recognised by the VCSE sector. A fundamental shift is required whereby such diversity is celebrated and used as an asset. All the while, ensuring inclusivity and responsiveness to community needs to secure the best outcomes.
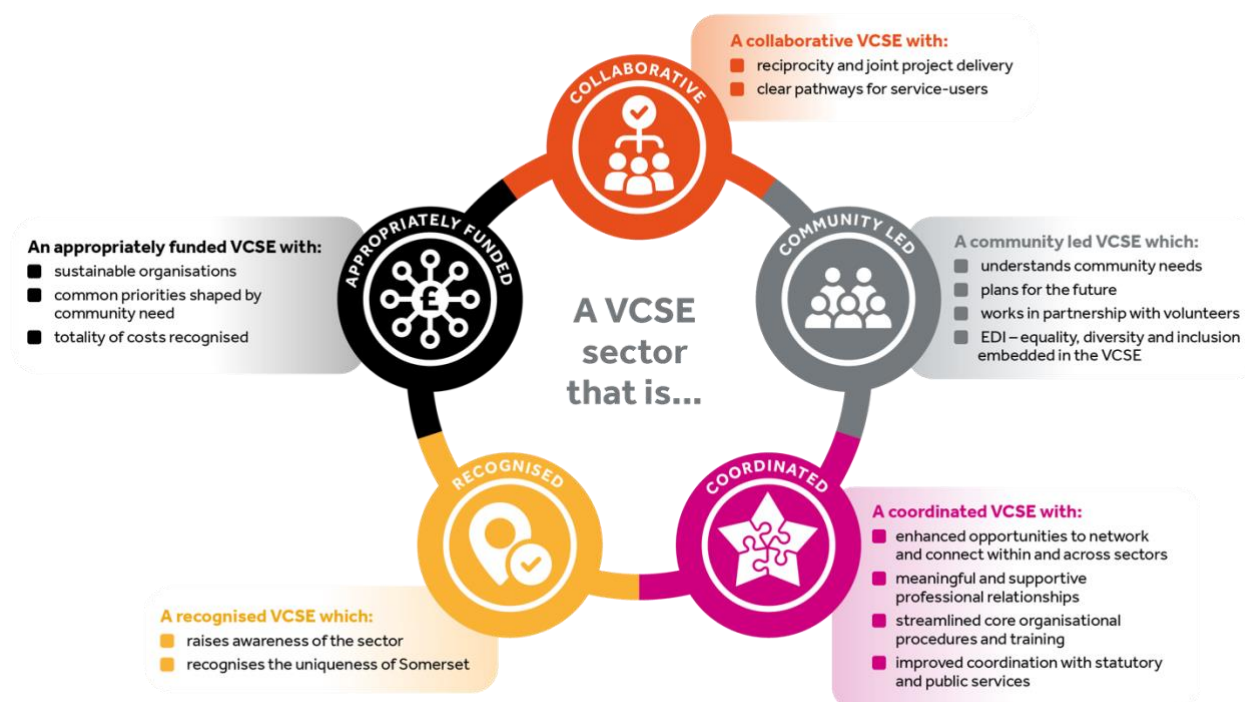


Figure 10 – The five key principles which form the shared vision of the VCSE sector in Somerset

## CONCLUSION

This research project and subsequent report aimed to *reflect* upon the impact of Covid-19 on communities and VCSEs in Somerset. Through grasping a collective understanding of the current and future *recovery* needs of VCSEs in Somerset, it has been possible to create the building blocks for a shared vision for what is needed for the sector to *renew,* as we emerge from the pandemic.

Empirical findings were developed from a robust research methodology which adopted both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods in the form of an online survey, focus groups, one-to-one interviews, and two visioning sessions. Importantly, a balance in perspectives has been drawn from all districts of Somerset, as well as variation in terms of the size and scale of participating VCSE organisations.

From grassroot community organisations, to long-standing and well established VCSEs, a wealth of experiences has been gathered which outlines the impact of the pandemic on VCSEs, and the communities of people whom they support.  Such findings ultimately informed the generation of a vision for the future of the VCSE sector in Somerset.

While this vision is not a solution or 'quick fix', it does provide a collection of principles, which, if adhered to, will contribute towards a strong, resilient and thriving VCSE sector in Somerset.

While the project has outlined distinct themes in which modification is required, it is also clear that the pandemic has expediated significant and positive changes in numerous ways. During a period of unprecedented demand and substantial challenges faced by VCSEs in Somerset, so too has there been a growth in awareness and recognition of the valuable contributions which the sector provides to our communities.

Where the VCSE sector is able to promptly and appropriately respond to the evolving needs of the community, better outcomes are possible for the people who call Somerset home. The future health and happiness of communities therefore depends on the collective strengths of VCSEs in Somerset.

But this research is only the start of the journey. The quantity and quality of contributions made to this research demonstrates there to be appetite and enthusiasm for positive change in our communities. To harness this momentum, over the coming months, we will be working with VCSE colleagues to develop a clear 'road map' for the sector, based on the five themes identified. In doing so, the collective vision we have developed can evolve into practical, tangible actions that VCSE organisations, big and small, can understand and be part of.



**Thank you for reading this report. If you'd like to read the Full Report or work in partnership with other VCSEs in Somerset to take the five visions identified by this research forward to the next stage, please visit our website.**