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 enterprises (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 could help us understand current and future needs. Meticulously researched, the project explores the following:

To *reflect* on the impact of the pandemic to 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.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Commencing in June 2021, this five-month project adopted both quantitative and qualitative research methods. An online survey comprising 19 questions was created using SurveyMonkey and circulated to Somerset-based VCSEs. In-depth qualitative data were collected through focus groups and one-to-one interviews with a range of VCSE representatives followed by two online, interactive visioning sessions. 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

Unsurprisingly the pandemic has 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. Yet, the majority of issues that people in the community faced were not new. 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 This has been a longstanding challenge for people in Somerset and a key contributor to mental health decline during the pandemic. It was identified by 64% of respondents to be the second highest priority for Somerset's communities. Due to social withdrawal during the pandemic, this was magnified for many, both young and old. The primary need for people in Somerset during the pandemic was therefore a sense of connection with others.

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. These issues affected people's ability to electronically connect with others and access services which had moved online. People were psychologically isolated during lockdowns with limited ways to connect electronically.

Historically poor transport options. The lack of transport options in Somerset have been compounded by the pandemic, resulting in existing public and community-led transport services being largely suspended. 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 of the pandemic hit our communities hard with 30% of respondents reporting poverty and deprivation as a key theme across the county. The effects included furlough, unemployment, issues with Universal Credit, and rising food and fuel bills. Collectively, these impacted people's financial resilience and this was further compounded by difficulties gaining support and advice with complex applications, and digital exclusion.

Impact on Somerset's VCSEs

Somerset's VCSEs are truly embedded within the communities they support, and overall, they responded swiftly to community need through upscaling of existing work, or new provision.

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, impacting 78% of survey respondents. For some, these changes were positive, with a shift to digital that allowed services to continue, and enabled staff teams to benefit from more flexible working. However, for others, the challenges were often too much, with some organisations reporting a decline in staff and volunteer numbers. A substantial number of organisations experienced a significant decline in their workforce through furlough of paid staff and a decline in the number volunteers, many of whom were encouraged to shield by the government. Others, however, found workforce numbers remained stable or even grew. This was due to the sharp increase in new, often younger volunteers furloughed from work.

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 – many of which 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 numerous 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 lack of dedicated spaces for youths 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 (55%). 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 options 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

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, it has magnified where gaps exist. Four key themes were identified from the interrogation of the data.

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 and a mix of both is therefore encouraged. Networking enables VCSEs to learn about each other's work and promotes inter-service signposting.

Some participants suggested that a robust and detailed directory of VCSEs in Somerset could further support signposting and highlight the unique skills of organisations. VCSEs which operate in similar areas are likely to have shared missions and priorities. Effective collaboration would draw on respective organisational strengths regarding skills or resources. 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 such as skill sharing. Time and financial resources could be saved through collaborative training for common and core topics such as first aid, fire stewards, and also for administrative duties.

Funding. This was the second largest need for VCSEs over the next 18 months (59%). This has prompted organisations to consider additional funding streams to continue delivery of new services, maximise existing funding, and advocate for core costs to be covered by funders.

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 a collective average of 39% across VCSEs. Generally, volunteer numbers are lacking for VCSEs as they reassess their time commitments or are concerned about Covid-19. A county- wide strategy would help support volunteer recruitment, showcasing the benefits of volunteering and raising the profile of organisations. Increasing flexibility within volunteer roles would also encourage more people to volunteer.

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. 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

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 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. 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 support the development of a 'Somerset Volunteer Passport'. This would detail training undertaken and enable volunteers to 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 to VCSEs has put additional strain on their capacity. An overarching body operating on the sector's behalf could broker relationships with statutory agencies and ensure the voices of VCSEs are heard.

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 and prioritising longer-term funding would ensure the continuation of 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 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. Providing support with new policies and procedures and sharing staff and resources have established a basis for further developing collaborative working. VCSEs can 'trade' services and skills, and mentor newly formed organisations. Collaborative working also pools resources which ultimately benefits communities.

Clear pathways for service-users. Open doors in terms of inter-VCSE referrals enable people to engage with, 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 which is well-resourced with an 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 enable more people to participate.

WE HAVE A VISION FOR A RECOGNISED VCSE SECTOR IN SOMERSET

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.

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 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 grassroots 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 roadmap 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 expedited 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 is only the start of the journey. The quantity and quality of contributions made to the research demonstrate the 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.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

FULL REPORT

INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought unprecedented change to people and communities all over the world. Hundreds of thousands of people have lost their lives, while billions have had a 'new normal' enforced upon them, often with detrimental effect. This has become particularly apparent for certain communities or groups of people, seemingly cast by the wayside, forgotten, and overlooked.

While Somerset was not unique in terms of experiencing such drastic change, the geography and diversity of our county means that the pandemic impacted us in ways that are entirely individualistic compared to other regions of the UK.

For many people, voluntary, community and social enterprises (herein abbreviated to VCSEs), became an unwavering source of support. Almost overnight, the doors closed on a multitude of public and statutory services which provided physical, mental, emotional, practical and social support. Scores of people began to fall through the gaps in societal provision. This was further magnified due to the numerous lockdowns which ensued. Nevertheless, the VCSE sector in Somerset listened to the needs of the community and responded accordingly. Their embedded knowledge and established trust meant that they became pillars of support for people. Furthermore, the delicate intersection between VCSEs and statutory services meant that the public sector became increasingly reliant on community groups and organisations.

The aim and objectives of the current project therefore was to identify the implications of Covid-19 through a process of reflecting on our experiences, understanding our recovery needs, and looking to the future to renew and thrive as a sector. These are outlined further below.

AIM

The aim of the project was to identify the implications of Covid-19 on communities and VCSEs based in Somerset, which could help to understand current and future needs that would ultimately lead towards the creation of a shared vision for the sector to thrive as we emerge from the pandemic.

OBJECTIVES

In order to achieve this aim, the project consisted of three research objectives which were to:

Reflect on how the pandemic impacted VCSE groups in Somerset, and the people/communities they support.

Understand the **recovery** needs of VCSE groups in Somerset, and the people/communities they support.

Identify what VCSE sector in Somerset needs to **renew** and thrive as we emerge from the pandemic.

In this sense, the conclusions drawn from the project are co-produced with the input and contributions of individual participants who form potential beneficiaries. Further support and guidance were received with project design and implementation from a steering group of representatives from five key stakeholders based in Somerset - Community Council Somerset (CCS), Diversity Voice, Frome Town Council, Somerset Activity & Sports Partnership (SASP), Somerset Association of Local Councils (SALC), in addition to the funders, Somerset County Council and Somerset Community Foundation.

This report is structured in four distinct sections. Firstly, the methodology section which follows provides an overview of the numerous iterative data collection methods which were employed throughout the project. The findings are latterly broken down into the three core topics of *reflect* (the experiences and challenges of communities and VCSEs during the pandemic)*, recover* (the current and future needs of communities and VCSEs) and *renew* (the vision for the future of Somerset VCSEs). Research limitations and future research directions are offered at the end of this report, prior to conclusions.

METHODOLOGY

Commencing in June 2021, this five-month project adopted a mixed-methodology approach with a series of iterative data collection methods. Each method is summarised below in Figure 1 and explored in more depth throughout this section of the report.
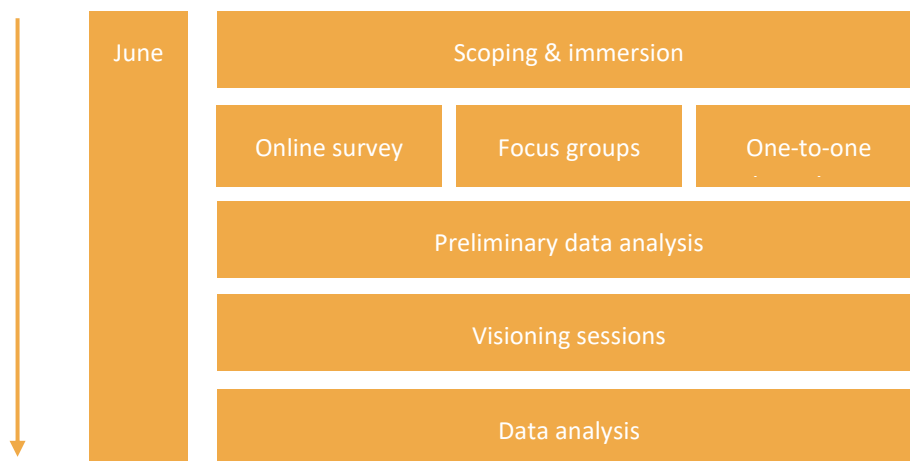

Figure 1 – Overview of data collection

SCOPING

To begin with, a review of existent literature and recently published reports was conducted. One source which informed the development of the project was 'Designing a New Social Reality: The future of the Bristol Voluntary, Community & Social Enterprise Sector Beyond Covid-19'. Published in February 2021, the research team carried out a consultation with the lead researcher of the Bristol project to build on lessons learnt. This helped to inform the planning and methodological underpinning of the Somerset project.

A wealth of information was also gleaned from reviewing findings presented in the 'Somerset VCSE State of Sector Report' published in June 2020 (www.sparksomerset.org.uk/SOTS2020). Contained within this report were findings related to two supplementary surveys which were administered in March and June, respectively. The first was conducted by The Community Council for Somerset and aimed to investigate the extent to which VCSE organisations may have been affected by the demands of the pandemic. The second survey was conducted by Spark Somerset to understand how organisations had adapted their services and identify key challenges in response to the pandemic. Outcomes from these surveys were used to inform the data collection for the current study.

Simultaneously, the lead researcher attended a number of forums, workshops and events alongside informal one-to-one conversations with representatives of Somerset-based VCSEs. This not only allowed contact and immersion within the Somerset VCSE culture, but also stimulated common themes to emerge regarding the impact of the pandemic on organisations.

The collective information, knowledge and findings identified during this scoping work ultimately led to the development of the methodology adopted for this project.

DATA COLLECTION

Drawing on the knowledge gathered from the initial scoping work, the current project employed a range of iterative data collection methods to generate both quantitative and qualitative information.

ONLINE SURVEY

A survey was devised through SurveyMonkey[©] and circulated to VCSEs based in Somerset via email, professional networks, and social media. Due to this method of participant recruitment, in addition to participants having the option to remain anonymous with their responses, it was not possible to fully ascertain response rate.

As summarised in Appendix 1, the survey comprised of 19 questions. To maximise response rate and limit participant burden, we ensured that the majority of questions could be responded with a simple 'tick all that apply'. Items which were included as possible responses were largely informed by our secondary data analysis, along with attending numerous online meetings, events and forums during the initial planning phase of the project. Questions and potential items to be included as responses were then circulated to the project steering group to check for clarity and applicability. All questions were optional and included an open-text response box if respondents wished to add more detail. This kept participation short with an average completion time of 13 minutes.

FOCUS GROUPS

Group discussions were facilitated by the research team to gather in-depth qualitative data. A number of these were 'piggyback' sessions which took place during existing forums and events attended by VCSE representatives. These sessions were selected due to the specific purpose of the existing meeting (for example, district forums, mental health organisations, infrastructure organisations, town and parish councillors etc). Additional focus groups were specially organised to plug potential gaps in representation.

Each session lasted between 40-60 minutes and was facilitated by two members of the research team with a third recording detailed discussion notes in response to the four questions detailed in Appendix 2.

ONE-TO-ONE INTERVIEWS

Interviews were carried out between September and October 2021. To promote flexibility, interviews were conducted via telephone or video call (depending on participant preference), and a date/time which worked best for them. These interviews were informal which allowed for an open and organic discussion of experiences which lasted on average 30 minutes.

A proforma was developed which acted as a loose discussion guide for each interview (see Appendix 3). Proformas were populated as much as possible prior to the arranged consultation through extracting information from the organisation's website. Hard copies of each proforma were made before the interview which allowed notes to be penned during the consultation. These were later transferred to an electronic version prior to data analysis.

VISIONING SESSIONS

Two online visioning sessions were held on the 14th and 20th of October 2021 with attendees from Somerset VCSEs. Invitations to these events were publicised on social media, circulated via email mailing lists, and sent to people who had previously participated in the project. Sessions lasted for 90 minutes and were interactive through combining the use of verbal discussion and electronic contributions with use of Google Jamboard.

DATA ANALYSIS

Quantitative data generated from the online survey were subject to descriptive analysis. In contrast, all qualitative data were analysed thematically in accordance with Braun and Clarke's six stage process. Any potentially identifiable information relating to the participant or their VCSE was omitted to ensure anonymity. MAXQDA software was then used to manage data whilst also retaining the richness and complexity of each participant's contribution. Initial analytical concepts and ideas were developed from each data source before being collated over the complete dataset to establish encompassing themes.

FINDINGS

SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

The total sample size across all methods of data collection was in excess of 300 participants with 190 VCSEs. Some of these took part in more than one method of data collection, or were part of the same organisation, therefore the project gathered the input and experiences from over 270 unique participants representing 190 separate VCSEs in Somerset.

ONLINE SURVEY

A total of 150 participants took part in the survey between September and October 2021. Providing personal or organisational details was optional with 35 respondents choosing to withhold this information. Of the 115 who did include this information, it was possible to ascertain representation from 109 separate VCSEs based in Somerset.

Organisations were spread in terms of where they operate in the county. The majority operated Somerset wide (36.8%), with 28.2% operating in Somerset West and Taunton, 17.1% in South Somerset, 14.5% hyperlocal, 12.8% in Mendip, and 10.3% in Sedgemoor.
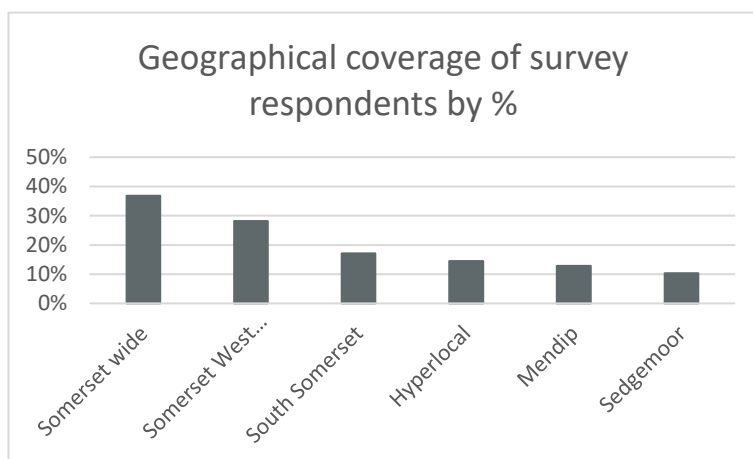
Figure 2 – Geographical coverage of survey respondents

Most VCSEs were registered as a charity (39.8%), Voluntary/Unincorporated Organisation (19.5%), Charitable Incorporated Organisation (10.2%), Community Interest Company or Social Enterprise (10.2%), Charitable Trust (5.1%), Limited Company (3.4%). The remaining were unsure, a combination of structures, part of a national charity, about to become registered, or a statutory/government funded organisation.
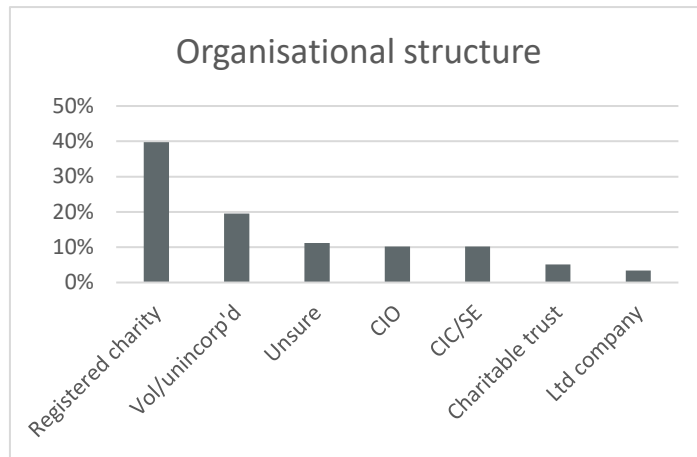
Figure 3 – Organisational structure

When asked how long the VCSE had been operating, the majority responded with 11+ years (59.3%), followed by 1-3 years (15.6%), 4-6 years (10.6%), 7-10 years (9.7%), less than a year (2.7%). The remaining 1.8% selected 'I don't know'.
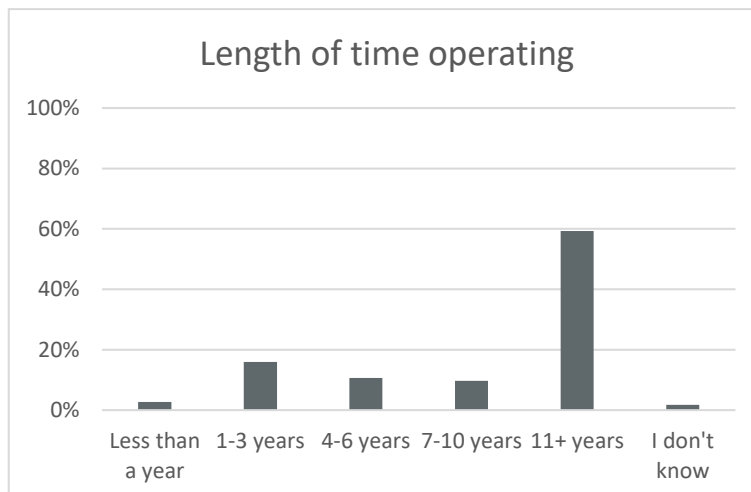
Figure 4 – Length of time operating

Organisation size was based on annual income. Less than £10,000 a year (21.2%), £10,001 - £50,000 a year (12.7%), £50,001-£100,000 a year (11%), £100,001-£1 million a year (22.9%), £1 million-£10 million a year (5.9%), I don't know (12.7%).
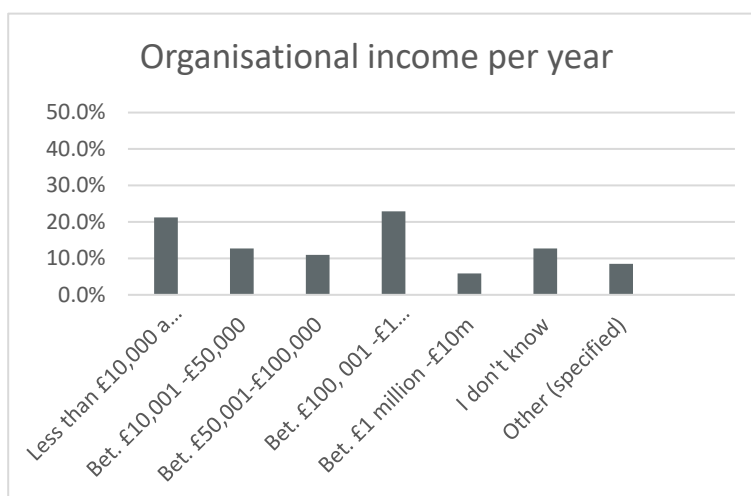
Figure 5 – Organisational income per year

FOCUS GROUPS

In total, 13 focus groups took place through piggyback sessions (n=10) and specifically organised group discussions (n=3). One took place during the Somerset Town and Parish Counsellor Conference in October 2021 (n≈ 50). The remaining 12 data collection sessions equated to 104 participants who represented 52 Somerset-based VCSE organisations. As such, the total sample size for this method of data collection was in excess of 150 participants.

ONE-TO-ONE INTERVIEWS

A total of 24 interviews were carried out with representatives of VCSEs across Somerset. Recruitment was strategic in terms of the sector in which the participant's VCSE operated. Representation of the sample was also achieved regarding the area or district of the county in which the VCSE supported people and communities (e.g. Mendip, Sedgemoor, Somerset West & Taunton, South Somerset).

VISIONING SESSIONS

Across both visioning sessions, a total of 59 participants from 54 separate organisations took part. This was a mix between VCSEs and senior staff from statutory agencies such as Somerset County Council and Public Health, who work closely with the VCSE.

Reflect

The first section of findings focuses on the *Reflect* aspect of the project (research objective 1). This refers to the retrospective experiences and perceived impact of the pandemic drawn from survey, focus group and interview findings. It is presented as two distinct themes;

> i)   the impact of the pandemic on people and communities in Somerset
>
> ii)   the impact of the pandemic on Somerset VCSEs

THE IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES IN SOMERSET

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 most of the 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.
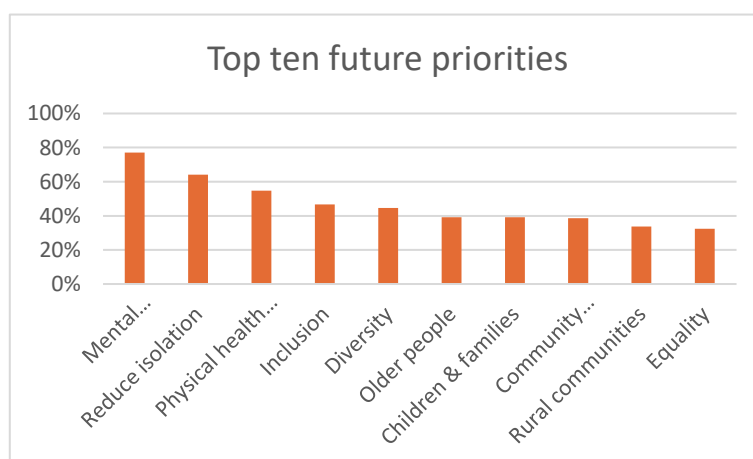
Figure 6 – Top ten future priorities

The most common issue described was that of mental health and wellbeing which has significantly worsened in Somerset's communities. As such, it was ranked as the highest priority for the county by survey respondents (77%) and referred to throughout every focus group and interview. It is not possible to identify one specific aspect of the pandemic as the cause of worsened mental health. Like the multifaceted nature of the pandemic, a person's wellbeing is not dictated by a single cause. However, the data collected suggest a number of factors have had a detrimental impact on mental health.

Isolation and loneliness have been longstanding challenges for people in Somerset and key contributors to the decline in mental health during the pandemic. Poor transport options have historically been problematic which magnified isolation across the county. Public bus routes and services have slowly dwindled over the years, especially for rural communities. This resulted in some areas of the county having weekly (or less) transport access to local towns for their shopping, socialising or medical appointments. Some communities responded to this by developing community bus or transport services. However, when the pandemic hit, both public and community-led transport services were largely suspended, leading to a substantial number of people becoming wholly isolated. Furthermore, not being able to attend medical appointments resulted in deterioration of physical health and mobility. This was particularly apparent for older people, people living with existing health conditions, or those who had delays with undiagnosed illnesses.

"What we did notice in some cases was the high levels of isolation, particularly with elderly people. This accelerated and often worsened existing medical or mental health conditions. Especially for those who were living with dementia."
(Focus group 1 respondent)

Loneliness was further heightened due to the sub-standard internet connectivity, a lack of access to digital equipment, or poor mobile phone reception across the county. 'Digital discrimination' became apparent where people were unable to access services which had largely moved to online. Lockdowns meant that people became both physically isolated due to a lack of transport, but also, psychologically isolated, with limited ways to electronically connect with others. This was reflected in the survey findings. In total, 64% of respondents identified isolation and loneliness as the second highest priority for Somerset communities, followed by supporting rural communities (33.8%), digital exclusion (23%), mobile/internet connectivity (18.9%) and improving transport (14.9%).

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

"Have been more referrals as our key aim is to help with isolation and loneliness and this and mental health clearly exacerbated by lockdowns."
(Survey respondent #75)

The primary need for people in Somerset during the pandemic was therefore a sense of connection with others. This is what the pandemic stole from many people which caused the most significant impact on mental health and wellbeing. Several participants throughout the qualitative data collection commented on how numerous service users or members of their community became very socially withdrawn due to a lack of interaction with others. While Covid-19 anxieties grew, social skills declined.

"People have lost social skills during lockdown. There's definitely some reduction in people being polite and nice to others." (Focus group 1 respondent)

This was especially apparent for children and younger people who were confined to their homes when schools, colleges and places of work closed. Physical interaction with peers stopped and shifted to communication through devices. This was considered to have had a detrimental impact on normal stages of youth development – forcing young people to miss key milestones in life such as birthdays, starting college or learning to drive. Furthermore, being restricted to the family home on a permanent basis caused tension and strained family relationships with parents and siblings.

"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)

At the other end of the spectrum, older people were reported to have experienced similar adverse effects due to social isolation. This is of pertinence when recognising the ageing population of Somerset with many older people living alone. Some of these community members had little to no interaction with others. Befriending services with phone calls or socially distanced house visits therefore became paramount for many people's wellbeing. Yet some people remained 'hidden' or were unable to access this type of support.

"One lady who used to sit outside (location) every day with a coffee. She could not be contacted as data protection didn't allow (VCSE colleague) to get her details. The lady had no family nearby or contact with anyone and died 8 weeks into the first lockdown. When we asked the family how she died, the family replied 'Loneliness'. She had stopped eating and gave up on life." (Interview #22)

Community mental health and wellbeing were also adversely affected by financial hardships imposed by the pandemic. Furlough, unemployment, issues with Universal Credit, rising food and fuel bills – collectively took its toll on people's financial resilience. Alongside this, people found it hard to gain support, guidance and advice with complex application forms. This was especially so for people who were newly seeking support and could not speak to anyone. Many became burdened with their financial worries and unable to gain the help required. Or alternatively, people were digitally excluded through not having the technological equipment or knowledge which many of these services rely on to access support.

"We are now seeing people who have never needed support before, but they now do. How do they know how to access it?" (Focus group 4 respondent)

THE IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON SOMERSET VCSE ORGANISATIONS

Central to all VCSEs are the people and communities who they support. This means that voluntary and community groups are truly embedded within their communities making them able to quickly identify and respond to local need. Being visible, approachable, and accessible, instils a sense of trust and reliance for people in the community. As a whole, VCSEs in Somerset 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. While many statutory and public services closed their doors during the pandemic, the VCSE sector in Somerset remained supportive to the developing needs of the community. The sector's response became a lifeline for thousands of people who live in Somerset. Yet, this was not without its challenges.

Numerous challenges were anticipated by VCSEs towards the beginning of the pandemic and reported through the Covid surveys carried out for the State of Sector Report (2020). These included a decline in income or funding, reduced workforce, decreased service demand, social distancing, and challenges with adapting activities and services. Indeed, while such predicted issues were apparent for many VCSEs, our latest findings suggest a number of positive implications for many groups and organisations.

As listed in Figure7, four overarching themes were developed from synthesising the data from the survey, focus groups, and interviews. These themes frame the key findings from the 'reflect' aspect of the project.
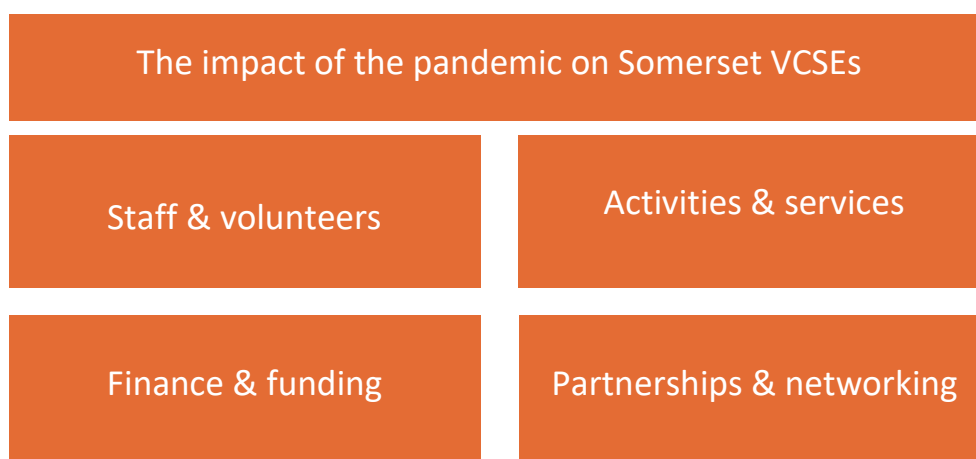
Figure 7 – The impact of the pandemic on Somerset VCSEs

Staff and volunteers

The first theme relating to the impact of the pandemic on Somerset VCSEs is regarding the workforce and ways in which staff and volunteers adapted and responded.

Changes made regarding staff and volunteers
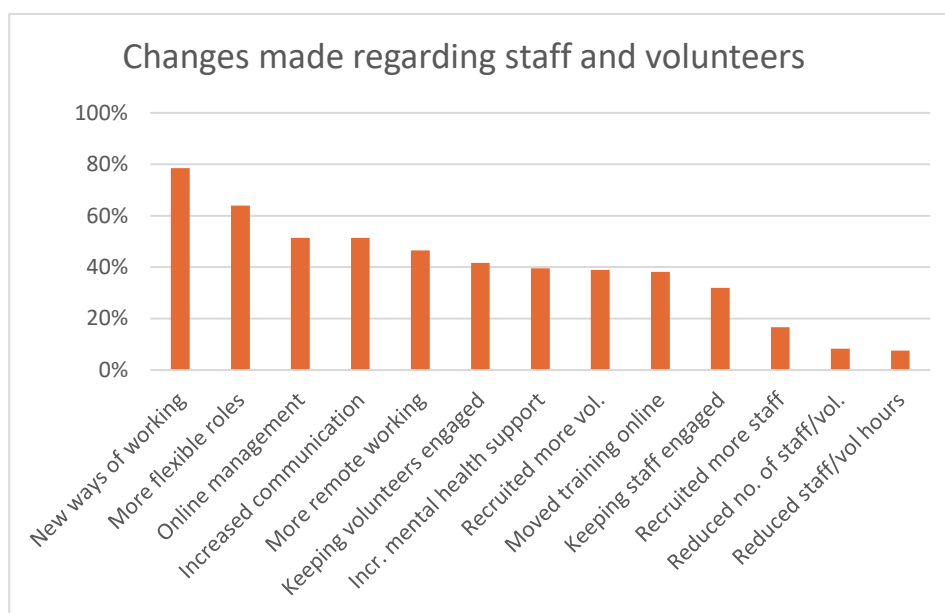
Figure 8 – Changes made regarding staff and volunteers

The most highly ranked item by survey respondents was that new ways of working had been adopted by the organisation to ensure social distancing (78%). For many, new ways of working linked strongly to staff and volunteers utilising online and remote methods of working (51%). This was similarly reinforced by the qualitative sample with 'remote working' being mentioned 42 times throughout the focus groups and interviews. Participants described this shift to be a major upheaval with little time to prepare and source appropriate technological equipment, software, and importantly – training for staff or volunteers. It was therefore a significant challenge for many staff and volunteers to adapt to this new way of working.

"Everything went online, all face-to-face training, events and forums stopped and there was more emphasis on digital."
(Focus group 3 respondent)

While it was essential to follow governmental rules in working from home wherever possible, this had a negative impact on VCSE staff and volunteers in numerous ways. Mentioned frequently was the theme of wellbeing. In some instances, a sense of disconnection between colleagues and peers occurred. This was because of 'normal' face-to-face interaction moving to solely digital means. Opportunities to converse and socialise in the workplace disappeared. While this affected wellbeing in terms of collegiality, it was also reported to impact on service delivery with fewer opportunities to share professional knowledge when supporting service users.

"Very minimal face to face contact with colleagues which meant less spontaneous sharing of knowledge and expertise."
(Focus group 3 respondent)

Some participants further described how social distancing had altered internal dynamics. Fragmentation within teams had occurred which meant that staff and volunteers were not only physically distanced due to Covid work practices, but also emotionally distanced.

"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)

Challenges with staff and volunteer wellbeing were further magnified when recognising the physical environment of the new workplace for many people. Make-shift offices were created in people's homes which "*blurred the lines between home and work*" (focus group #3 respondent). In turn, this "*has a negative impact for home life with always being 'at work'*" (focus group #3 respondent).

Yet, in contrast, some participants described remote working as having a positive impact on their wellbeing. According to 64% of survey responders, a new sense of autonomy and flexibility with organisational roles developed, whereby work and volunteering responsibilities could be planned around family and home life.

"Work patterns for staff changed to remote working which was hard at first but has now meant that there is flexibility with work and a much better work/life balance." (Interview #11)

With this in mind, digital and remote ways of working were described throughout the focus groups and interviews to bring numerous benefits for staff and volunteers in Somerset VCSEs. For example, 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. This reinforces survey findings with 51% of respondents outlining an increase in communication between staff and volunteers. While there was undoubtedly an initial steep learning curve, it was 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)

While only 8% of survey respondents commented on a reduction in the number of staff or volunteers, this contrasted with the qualitative interview findings and focus groups where a substantial number of participants described a significant decline in their workforce. Notably, many paid staff were furloughed which also caused tension with those who remained in role.

Unsurprisingly, many participants described how volunteer numbers drastically declined. Often this was due to the profile of volunteers who were generally older and retired. As such, they were encouraged to shield by the government which left a gap in workforce for many VCSEs.

"Volunteers dropped off as lots were older and therefore shielding."
(Interview #12)

While some VCSEs struggled to fill this void, others commented on the workforce number remaining stable, or even growing, throughout the pandemic. This was due to the sharp increase in new, often younger volunteers, who were furloughed from their work. Examples of this were apparent from the rise of coronavirus helper networks which supported communities at a hyperlocal level. There was a growth in appetite and enthusiasm for people to volunteer which aligned with individual capacity due to the furlough scheme. Not only did this mean that VCSEs could continue operating and supporting communities, but the profile of the volunteer 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)

However, this was somewhat a double-edged sword. While it was imperative to harness the energy and enthusiasm of new staff or volunteers, it meant that organisational practices needed to be adapted. For example, training packages needed to be quickly developed which could be delivered through remote methods, and in some instances, this had wider consequences.

"Much of the training has moved online which has caused fragmentation in volunteer groups. There's a lack of cohesion and it's impacted the overall group dynamic." (Focus group 6 respondent)

Activities and services

The second theme relating to the impact of the pandemic on Somerset VCSEs is regarding the activities and services provided to the community.

A small number of participants described a decrease in service demand. Often this was due to members passing away during the pandemic, or, that they were shielding and therefore unable to access services.

In contrast, the majority of participants reported a significant increase in service demand from the community. With reference to findings from the survey, 37% of respondents indicated that their membership or people accessing activities and services had grown. Similarly, 30% reported to have seen an increase in referrals. Such findings were reinforced throughout the qualitative dataset with an underlying sense 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, and across the VCSE sector. While not exhaustive, some examples discussed were increased demand on foodbanks, youth services, prescription deliveries, food parcels, care provision, mentoring, psychological and emotional support.

"There was a massive increase in demand for more remote and outreach types of support for people with things like food, prescriptions and clothing. (Interview #2)

Indeed, the demand for one charity who support people with eating disorders had increased by 150%. Not only was it clear that the sheer number of people accessing VCSE services across Somerset had increased, but so had the complexity and challenging nature of cases. People were often accessing services with multiple needs for support which was sometimes beyond the remit and expertise of any one VCSE organisation.

"There was definitely an increase in the complexity of referrals. Our focus before the pandemic was with people living with and beyond cancer or other life limiting illnesses. During the pandemic, people presented with additional anxieties due to Covid." (Interview #11)

Due to this increase in demand while social distancing rules were still in place, 'normal' activities and services were not able to be delivered. Nevertheless, participants frequently described how innovation, flexibility and a 'can do attitude' is a central feature of the VCSE sector. While statutory agencies were confined by bureaucratic red tape which stopped services, VCSEs were able to adapt and develop their work in accordance with governmental guidance to meet community need.
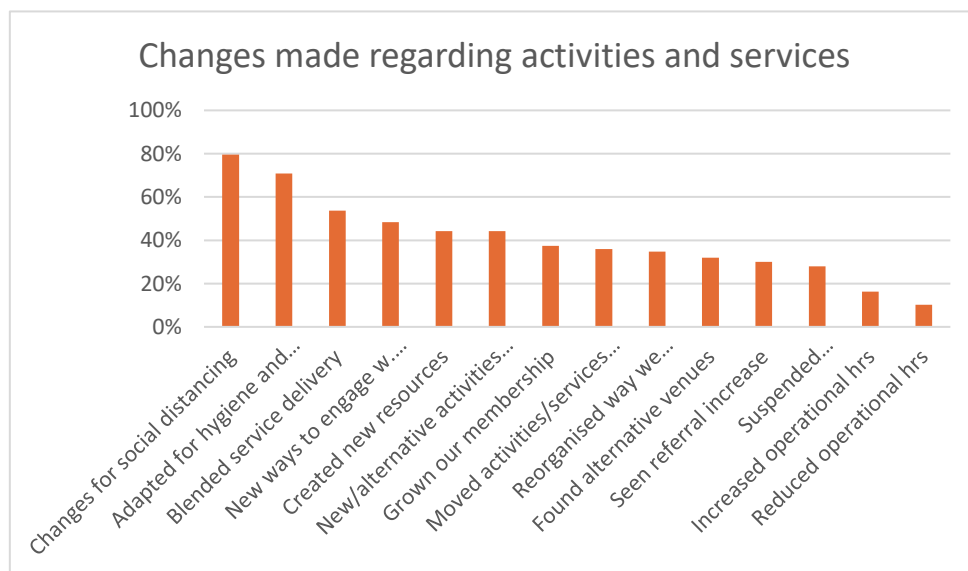

Figure 9 – Changes made regarding activities and services

"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)

As multifaceted as the VCSE sector is in Somerset, the way in which organisations adapted and responded with their work and services similarly varied. Survey respondents most reported that existing activities and services were adapted to ensure social distancing (80%), established alternative ways to keep in touch with service users (48%), and also developed new activities/services (44%). Similar findings were apparent within the qualitative data collected during focus groups and interviews. Adapting existing services or developing new and alternative ways of working was mentioned in excess of 90 times during analysis.

"We adapted our communication methods with young people to things such as WhatsApp groups. This actually increased momentum and engagement with service users. Young people's views and input became much more important to our service development as 'hidden' voices became more easily heard."
(Focus group 9 respondent)

Often, organisations developed innovative and creative modes of online or virtual delivery. Examples included Zoom delivery of singing classes, cookery lessons, gardening workshops, carers groups, youth clubs and virtual cycle rides on Zoom. Membership and the number of people accessing services increased for some organisations during the pandemic due to online accessibility. One respondent explained that her organisation had set up a 'virtual village hall' which provided exercise classes that have collectively had over a million views worldwide on YouTube.

"Online webinars and meetings have increased and are easier to access due to the reduction in travelling required. Speakers and trainers, who would not usually be available, or only with difficulty, has meant that we've reached a wider audience." (Survey respondent #132)

However, these digital platforms and outputs have clear limitations which meant that not all organisations were able to adapt in this way. Often this was due to an organisation's core services being centred upon face-to-face delivery, group activities, or providing a physical space in the community.

"Staff were unable to carry out their normal face to face visits to people's homes. Carrying out these remotely meant that developing rapport was challenging and you couldn't see the full picture of how people were really coping."
(Interview #23)

For these organisations, closing the doors and suspending operations was the only option to limit the spread of infection. This was extremely challenging as there was an awareness that

"when we were needed the most (by the community), we were closed" (Interview #22)

In some instances, in-person meetings and services were moved to outdoor settings which could ensure social distancing. In addition, telephone befriending and pen pal services were created by organisations to help promote social connections and reduce isolation.

"I think one of the things that we asked for volunteers for, was someone to just speak to. That type of friendship and befriending as lack of social connection seemed to be an issue." (Focus group 8 respondent)

Similarly, new platforms of communication between organisations and communities were introduced such as letters, weekly check-in phone calls, email and WhatsApp.

*"We adapted most of our services into online activities. We also set up private
Facebook groups for the various groups of people that we work with so they
could stay in touch with each other. At the same time, we rang our members
twice a week to keep in touch with them and make sure they were doing okay."
(Interview #16)*

A significant proportion of the participants also explained how their organisation adapted in terms of delivering to people's homes. Prescriptions, shopping, food parcels, and activity packs, were commonly described. The action of dropping things off to homes also provided a sense of human interaction for many people, as well as an opportunity for additional assessment of how people were coping.

*"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. The 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.

*"It offered a time to reorganise and reflect as an organisation. We're now
offering a blended model approach with service delivery through online and face
to face approaches. It's about identifying what works best for community we are
serving." (Focus group 9 respondent)*

Finance and funding

The third theme relating to the impact of the pandemic on Somerset VCSEs is regarding the finance and funding of organisations.
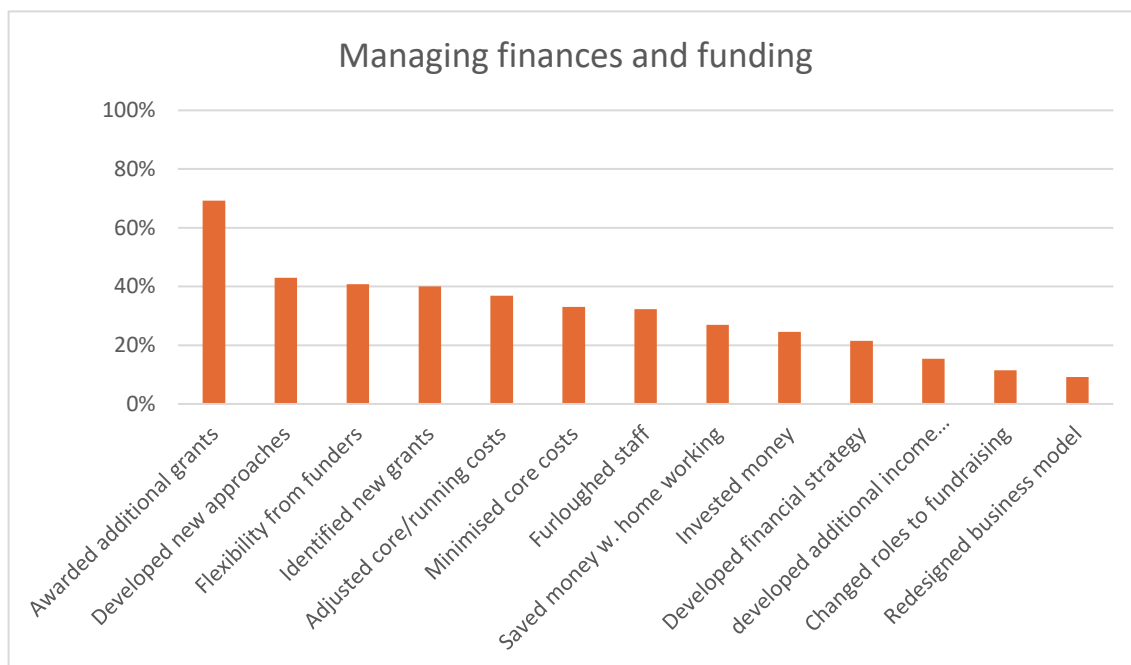
Figure 10 – Managing finances and funding

Described throughout the qualitative data 21 times was that organisations faced significant challenges with income during the pandemic. This was 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 due to social distancing. Often, these were unable to be adapted to remote methods of delivery which therefore provided a shortfall in revenue. Organisations which own or rent a building had previously generated income by hiring out space in the venue. Again, this source dried up almost instantaneously as demand dwindled.

"When the pandemic hit, all of our income dropped to next to nothing."
(Focus group 11 respondent)

This was partly due to community fundraising grinding to a halt when the pandemic hit. A key event in the fundraising calendar which normally generated a substantial amount of income for many Somerset VCSEs was Glastonbury Festival. This was postponed in both 2020 and 2021 to limit the spread of infection. Furthermore, many VCSEs had developed and relied on alternative fundraising events such as marathons, fetes, car shows or activity days. Clearly, these also ceased during the pandemic.

"I feel like crying. Eleven years building up a good service, now have to start almost from scratch or the business goes down the drain."
(Survey respondent #146)

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, car shows and online cycle rides, were just a few examples described.

Simultaneously, many VCSEs were able to claim governmental or local council financial support for costs such as rent or business rates. However, this was not ubiquitous with some VCSEs falling through the gaps with strict, inflexible criteria.

"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)

What became a lifeline for many was the increased prevalence of Covid-19-related grant funding. At 69%, the majority of survey respondents said that they had received additional grant funding, and 40% had identified new grant funders. This helped to tide organisations through a period of reduced income by adapting existing services and activities.

"We were very lucky to get a grant when the pandemic began; that helped tide us over." (Interview respondent #118)

As mentioned earlier, some VCSEs developed new services with receipt of Covid grant funding. Organisations shifted their focus to developing and delivering Covid-specific projects while they were unable to carry out their normal services.

"There was a loss of our normal funding streams, but there was a rise in Covid-focussed funding. This helped us as we got emergency funding through the National Lottery which tided us through."
(Focus group 6 respondent)

While physical venues were closed to the public, many groups had additional capacity to think of alternative ways to support their community. VCSEs cooked meals, delivered food parcels, collected prescriptions and created activity packs. Not only did this allow for Covid grant funding to plug gaps in income until normal services could resume, but it also meant organisations could respond to emerging needs as they developed.

"Our building was closed so we had a major loss of income. We needed to adapt to stay afloat and so we developed a number of different projects which we were lucky enough to get funded by Covid grants" (Interview #17).

Being able to adapt services and create new projects had the added benefit of raising the profile and local awareness of organisations.

"It's increased our profile and reputation as a service due to carrying on running throughout the pandemic with adapted activities. While other organisations ceased, we carried on." (Interview #16).

However, it was clear that not all VCSEs benefited from the rise in Covid-specific grant funding. Some organisations were more fundable than others due to their focus and alignment with the priorities of many Covid grant funders. Additionally, competition between VCSEs was great due to most organisations suffering financial struggles.

"Less grant funds available and more competition. A recent funder told me that they had to close applications early as they had received over 500 applications and only 12 charities would receive funding."
(Survey respondent #25)

A silver lining, however, was that funders were generally very understanding and flexible with work that had already been funded or commissioned. Previously agreed upon plans were often undeliverable in light of pandemic restrictions, yet 41% of survey respondents highlighted funder flexibility if a project or timescale changed. While this was reported across the board, both Somerset County Council and Somerset Community Foundation were explicitly commended on how they supported VCSEs with continued funding where projects or streams of work 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 between funders and VCSEs was therefore a strong theme throughout the qualitative data. Not only in terms of support with changing projects, but also during the earlier stages when ideas were developing. There was a sense that the work and community initiatives being generated by organisations were valued by funders and seen as needed, with decisions on applications being made promptly.

"We were getting very quick turnarounds on grants and applications. Sometimes days and not weeks like before the pandemic. Most funders really stepped up to the plate and not all of the people who work for them are paid but really helped."
(Focus group 6 respondent).

A more implicit experience described was that the pandemic afforded VCSEs a brief moment in time to reflect on how the organisation is run. Some took this as an opportunity to reshape organisational strategies and revised core spending.

"Because our funding changed, it taught us a lot about managing costs. We spent time looking at our fundraising so we're perhaps more robust than when we started the pandemic. It's helped with our organisational resilience in managing core costs so we're now more robust than pre-pandemic."
(Focus group 9 respondent)

"The pandemic 'shook up' things like our procedures, admin and running costs. We reflected on what wasn't working and what needed changing." (Interview #9)

This was pertinent as income levels had drastically reduced and so saving money in other areas was vital. With many VCSEs stopping and suspending services, costs were saved with running and maintaining venues, as well as staff and volunteer travel costs. Clearly, not being able to run normal face-to-face sessions was frustrating, but being able to save money through adapting services and reducing outlays was a blessing in disguise.

"The shift to online ways of working definitely had its merits. Our staff were travelling less which helped with travel costs, as well as having a positive impact on the climate. Online meetings also streamlined things with less time needing to travel in between appointments which meant people had more time for other work." (Interview #23)

Partnerships and networking

The fourth theme relating to the impact of the pandemic on Somerset VCSEs is regarding partnerships and networking.

A key finding was that the pandemic increased a sense of connectivity within the sector. This was multifaceted but frequently attributed to the shift in online meetings. It became easier and more efficient to arrange, meet, communicate and liaise.

"If it wasn't for the pandemic and being forced into these ways of working, how many times would we have met if it wasn't for these technological advancements? Increased productivity between groups has happened from regular meetings, as well as an increase in communication." (Focus group 12 respondent)

There was subsequently a rise in opportunities to connect and network with people from other organisations, as reported by 57% of survey respondents. Various forums and virtual meetings had been developed which tended to be focussed on particular VCSE sectors or district areas.

"More online events/webinars/training available via Zoom, much of which has been free, has been very helpful." (Survey respondent #53)

Organisations were invited to attend, many of which were new groups or had not previously been connected or known by other VCSEs. These meetings provided an opportunity to nurture existing professional relationships.

However, these forums also brokered introductions for people and organisations who were previously unknown to each other.

"We've got connections now that we wouldn't have, if it wasn't for the pandemic." (Focus group 5 respondent)
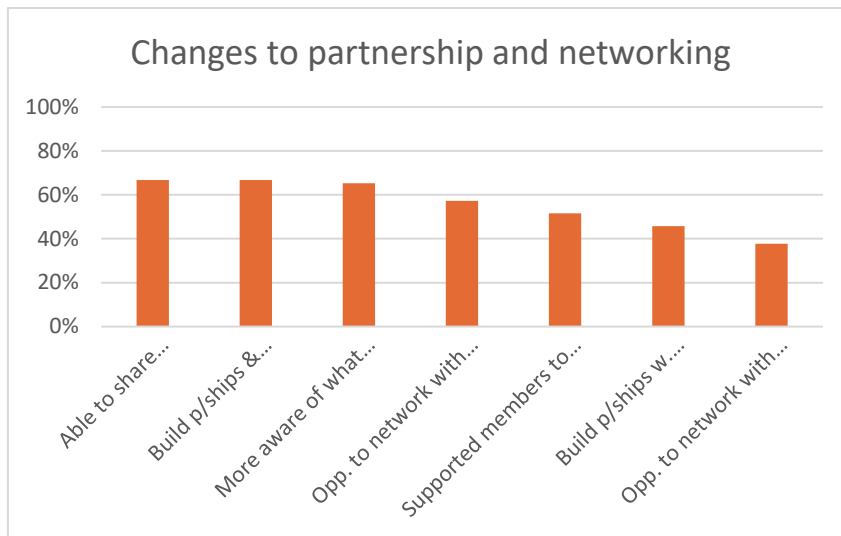
Figure 11 – Changes to partnership and networking

This was not exclusive to just VCSEs as many participants explained that there had been an increase in interaction with statutory or public agencies. Connections were made and 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. VCSE participants elaborated on how such open dialogue with the public sector advocated rebuilding of trust and mutual respect.

"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)

Importantly, online forums encouraged participants to become better aware of what services other organisations provided. This growth in awareness meant that 51% of survey respondents felt that they could better support people in their community through efficient signposting to local organisations, services and activities.

"We developed a local directory and knowledge of support services in our area." (Interview #17)

Increased connection between VCSEs consequently led to partnerships and collaborations developing between local organisations. This was seen as a positive implication of the pandemic. Often this allowed for projects and services to be delivered together, thus drawing on respective skills, knowledge and expertise.

"New networks and relationships have formed which means there's greater energy to solve problems locally like setting up community food banks." (Focus group 3 respondent)

It also encouraged collaborative projects and services to be developed between statutory services and VCSEs. This was reported by 46% of survey respondents and similarly explored during the focus groups and interviews.

*"We developed local partnerships with schools and health to create and deliver
new projects together." (Interview #17)*

Additionally, some participants explained that new partnerships were founded, and projects developed, alongside local businesses to support people in the community.

*"We developed partnerships and relationships with local businesses like
Morrisons, Tesco and FairShare for our foodbank project." (Interview #17)*

Yet, partnerships did not always mean collaboration with service delivery. Instead, sharing knowledge and resources was identified to be a key outcome of the pandemic for 67% of survey respondents. This was explored further, showing that VCSEs began sharing best practice and information which could be utilised within the organisation or cascaded down to people in the community.

*"There has been more opportunity to join online forums and connect with other
local organisations, where(as) face to face meetings are more time-consuming.
Has been a useful way of sharing best practice, and information could be (later)
shared with local residents." (Survey respondent #75)*

Similarly, groups discussed ideas for projects, shared resources like covid related procedures, and importantly, supported each other through raising morale with a sense of being 'in it together'.

*"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)*

Skills were also shared between organisations. Examples included larger VCSEs supporting smaller or newly established groups with developing strategic documents or procedures. This was especially pertinent with complex topics like GDPR and safeguarding. In some instances, staff or workforce capacity were shared. When both statutory and VCSE organisations furloughed staff, some were reassigned to voluntary positions in groups which continued to operate.

*"Partnerships developed with our local council as some of their staff were
redeployed to us to support with service delivery for people who were shielding.
Things like food or prescription deliveries." (Interview #3)*

Recover

This section of findings focuses on the *Recover* aspect of the project. It refers to data collected regarding the perceived current and future needs of both communities and VCSEs in Somerset. As with the previous section, it draws on findings from the survey, focus groups and interviews to comprise of two distinct themes: i) *the current and future needs of communities in Somerset*, and ii) *the current and future needs of VCSEs in Somerset*.

THE CURRENT AND FUTURE NEEDS OF COMMUNITIES IN SOMERSET

These findings relate to the perceived current and emerging priorities or needs for the people and communities in Somerset. As mentioned previously, many of these needs were already prevalent prior to the onset of the Covid-19. However, the pandemic has magnified both the demand and complexity of these community needs. While most of these priorities were ubiquitous across Somerset, there was some variation in terms of particular districts. Where apparent, these are discussed throughout this section.

As summarised below, a total of seven overarching themes were developed from the data. Each theme is explored in more depth through synthesising the survey data, focus group discussions and one-to-one interviews.

The current and future needs of communities in Somerset

Mental health & wellbeing

Young people

Care & carers

Physical health

Poverty, benefits & housing

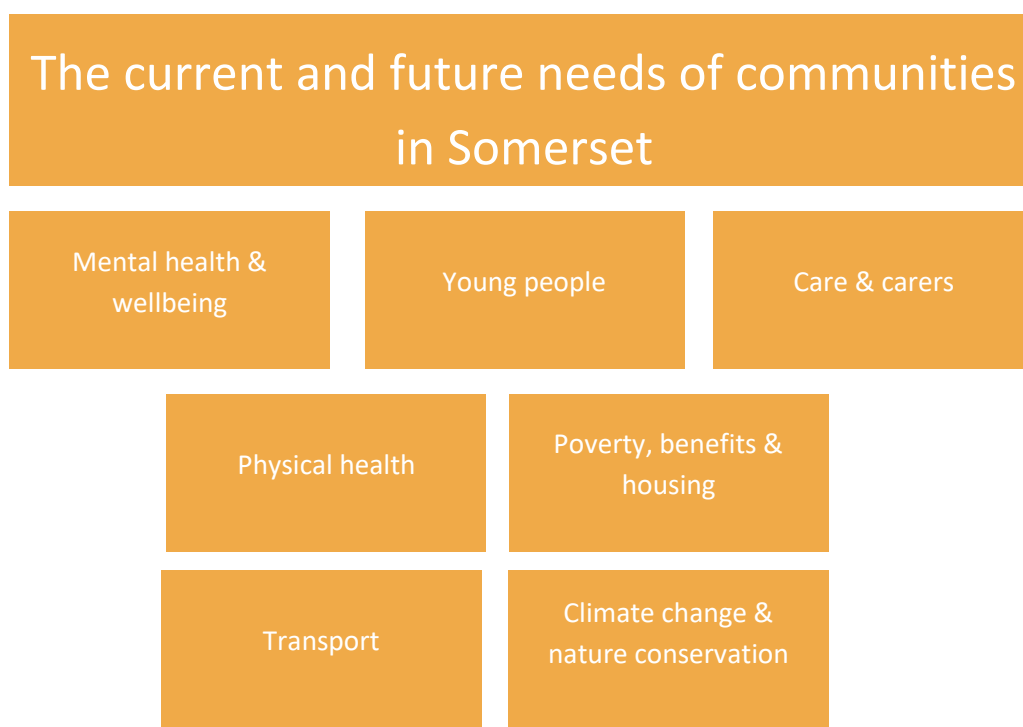Transport

Climate change & nature conservation

Figure 12 – 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. The potency of this was clear from 77% of survey respondents and being identified well over 70 times throughout the qualitative data collected. This need was prevalent before the onset of Covid-19 and has been further exacerbated by the pandemic. As explored previously, the numerous lockdowns and social distancing had a significant and palpable impact on community mental health and wellbeing. Aligned with the diversity and variation in what constitutes an individuals' mental wellness, the needs of communities in Somerset are similarly multifaceted.

"I think there has been an increase in mental health issues which people are in desperate need of help and support." (Focus group 9 respondent)

One area is complex mental health issues such as anxiety and depression. These have become more apparent due to the sharp decline in social opportunities for people caused by the pandemic. Many people gained support from social networks or had developed coping strategies which relied on interaction with others in the community. The cessation of such events, paired with people's reluctance or lack of confidence to re-engage with those that have returned, means that anxiety and depression have heightened across Somerset.

"Lots of people are struggling with depression due to 'social' events stopping." (Interview #1)

Further, 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 recently developed by VCSEs. Loneliness was acutely prevalent across the county before Covid-19. The enforcement of lockdowns and social distancing all but eliminated social opportunities for people, thus creating a significant need for opportunities to connect with others within the community.

"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).

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

While loneliness has historically been thought of as an issue which generally affects older people, the problem is now much wider spread. Regardless of age, older and younger people alike are isolated and lonely within Somerset, which is worsening mental health and wellbeing. There is consequently a need for better awareness and education about the issue of loneliness, whilst also providing appropriate support for people who are feeling isolated.

"Loneliness isn't just older people; it affects all ages and generations." (Interview #3)

Crucially, there is a significant need for resuming social groups and events, in addition to creating new, in response to reducing loneliness and isolation.

"There needs to be a focus on reducing isolation. The pandemic shone a light on the importance of social opportunities for people and we need to make sure that these are picked back up again to help people with their wellbeing."
(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 of survey findings by all districts of the county, it was slightly higher as the second most pressing need in South Somerset with 55% of respective respondents. Again, youth provision in the county is multifaceted, starting with raising awareness of the unique needs of young people throughout Somerset.

"The needs and complexity of young people has increased, but the awareness and emphasis is not currently at the level that it needs to be. We need more attention on children and young people to spotlight that they matter, their needs are catered for, and they're properly supported." (Interview #15)

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.

"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)

Professional support through tailored programmes which support youth mental health are required. Reinstating face-to-face interventions is key, alongside developing new opportunities with specially trained youth workers or health and social care professionals.

"Not only do we need to pick back up face-to-face work with children and young people who are struggling, we need professionals and people who are specially trained to give them the best support possible and stop them falling through the gaps." (Interview #15)

Consideration of the wider ecosystem surrounding young people is also required. Importantly, providing appropriate support, guidance and education for parents and families.

"There needs to be more help and support for parents with their role."
(Interview #20)

Youth workers played a vital role in the past. However, changes to local strategies, cuts in funding and a sparsity in youth work training opportunities, means focused and targeted support is hard to source for young people. For the small number of youth workers who are in post, constant funding threats and struggles with their own wellbeing have led to significant attrition in the sector.

"So many youth workers nowadays are struggling with their own mental health so they can't support children and young people. There's also no youth work training opportunities in Somerset and funding is often time-limited for people who are trained and employed as it's normally linked to specific projects. It's unsurprising why it's not an attractive career prospect for people."
(Interview #17)

With this regard, a top-down approach in terms of developing county-wide strategies which focus on the unique needs of Somerset children and young people is required.

"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).

Care and carers (paid and informal)

Findings suggest that a key need for many communities is professional and micro-provider care as demand for services has dramatically increased across Somerset.

"There are so many people who need care but cannot access it anywhere. Care homes are full and there's a lack of micro-providers to meet the increase in demand." (Interview #12)

Where potential care workers have been recruited, there is a clear dearth in the availability of professional training. There is subsequently a need for this training to be available in a complete and centralised package or service which would not only streamline the process of care workers becoming upskilled, but speed up induction processes and begin to combat the high levels of demand within the community.

"We really struggle to find appropriate training for our carers, especially face-to-face. There needs to be some sort of complete package of training which is centralised." (Interview #15)

For some people, however, care is provided by family members or informal carers, and it is crucial that these carers receive appropriate support when required. 'Support for carers' was thus identified as a need for all communities across the county, but particularly apparent in Mendip with 40% of respondents selecting this as a priority. The type of support needed by informal carers varies, but respite provision was identified as a key area.

"We need to make sure there are respite opportunities to support family carers."
(Interview #16)

Respite, for many, involves meeting other local carers. This provides an opportunity to have a break from their caring responsibilities, time to socialise, vent, and gain valuable peer-to-peer support. With the pandemic and associated lockdowns resulting in fewer opportunities for many carers groups to meet, or time to socialise with family members or friends, a vast number of carers are weary and on the cusp of burnout.

"There's a massive need for carers groups as they give time to vent and talk to others who are going through similar challenges. Lots stopped during the pandemic and haven't started back up again. We need to have those strong and supportive carers communities and develop groups where they don't already exist." (Interview #19)

This need was identified for adult informal carers. Young carers were similarly identified to need both group and peer-to-peer support.

"Young carers have had a really rough time over the past few years in Somerset. Lots of respite groups stopped which meant so many were without that kind of support. There have been groups that have started again, but not enough. We've got loads of young carers that are slipping through the net and remain 'hidden' from getting the support that they deserve and need." (Survey respondent #28)

Support for carers was also described in terms of receiving appropriate information and guidance. Gaining information about the person they are caring for, appropriate signposting of services, and help with forms and assessments, were all identified as key needs for carers.

"Carer's assessments have long waiting lists which often take 6-7 months. This needs to be solved quickly as carers often seek support when at crisis point (…) If they need out of hours help or support about the person they are caring for, it's really hard to find. Some services like palliative care or the hospice have a 24/7 helpline, but why doesn't this exist for other carers?" (Interview #19).

Physical health

The pandemic has had a significant impact on people's physical health and mobility and was identified as the third highest priority across the collective survey sample (55%). However, after further interrogation, physical health was noted to be the second largest need for Mendip communities (87%), just below mental health and wellbeing (93%). With this in mind, there is a distinct need to improve physical health across the county with the provision of activities which not only promote mobility and exercise, but also offer social opportunities which align to the aforementioned need of reducing isolation and loneliness.

"We need activities that reengage communities physically, but also provide social opportunities for people." (Focus group 6 respondent)

The impact on physical health was particularly the case for people who had pre-existing health conditions or issues which developed during Covid-19.

"It's (pandemic) had a negative impact on people's mobility due to staying at home for over a year. People's health has gone downhill as they've not been able to get medical appointments, or where they have, there's not been any transport to get to them." (Interview #13).

Consequently, the needs for many across Somerset are to have prompt access to medical services and facilities within the community context.

"So many people are waiting for medical care which means lots are missing out on getting care for complex or long-term conditions."
(Focus group 5 respondent)

"The problem with GP appointments is that it's had a huge impact on health. People are being asked to 'bear with them'. There's still no face-to-face appointments which means no normality, yet. It's all gone online and people sometimes just need to be seen by someone. This is going to have a serious impact on people's health further down the line and needs to be focussed on."
(Focus group 1 respondent)

Poverty, benefits and housing

Poverty is an issue which is apparent across the county and impacts people and communities in numerous ways. An important gap in existing service provision and clear need within communities is regarding benefits. Knowing where to go, who to approach, and information on potential eligibility, were described throughout the findings. In addition, making sure that information provided is accessible and inclusive for the diverse communities in Somerset.

"Thinking about DWP, there's a lot who are struggling due to the lack of facilities. They need face-to-face contact, rather than it all being online or over the phone."
(Focus group 4 respondent)

This is especially so for people who are not native English speakers, but also for those who struggle with reading, writing, and completing forms. Face-to-face services are thus required which take the time to fully understand a person's unique situation and provide holistic support.

"We spent a great deal of time helping by finding the right information about benefits for people and helping them with application forms. The forms and assessments are often very complex and so having someone 'in the know' to help people, who are already in a challenging place, is really important."
(Interview #12)

To get to this stage of support, however, there needs to be a level of confidence and acceptance on the part of people who are struggling. Yet, stigma remains implicitly high within the community, meaning a great deal of people remain hidden. It is therefore necessary to begin breaking down these assumptions and taboos across Somerset.

"Encourage people in financial debt to seek help, not ignore it."
(Survey respondent #58)

In addition, many people who are struggling financially, will have a plethora of additional and wider co-presenting issues. Rising food costs contribute to financial hardship and were commonly identified as a growing concern for Somerset communities.

"We know there is a large amount of food poverty." (Focus group 8 respondent)

Subsequently, an increasing number of people are relying on support from local foodbanks. Yet, foodbanks are not ubiquitous across the county. Where foodbanks do exist, there are often challenges in terms of stock and supplies.

"Assist to organise surplus from supermarkets for redistribution."
(Survey respondent #24)

Financial hardship is also exacerbated by fuel poverty with many homes needing to find extra money to pay for soaring energy bills often attributed to poorly and inefficiently heated housing. It is necessary to identify those who are struggling with their energy bills and provide them with responsive and appropriate support.

"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)

Developing a localised focus for improving housing standards in terms of insulation and heating would not only have a positive impact on individual household finances, but ultimately, contribute towards climate change mitigation.

"Address fuel poverty and climate emergency (ways of improving housing)."(Survey respondent #41)

"Somerset has some of the worst fuel poverty levels of the country which could be helped with better and more efficient heating of homes." (Interview #8)

Housing was identified to be an important need for people in Somerset on several levels. Affordability of homes was outlined throughout the findings with rent or purchase prices being incredibly high compared to actual income. This means many people are forced to move away from where they call home to more affordable areas. Undesired migration from Somerset is similarly the case for people who are on social housing waiting lists. Ever-changing criteria mean thresholds are not able to be met, even when the need is clear.

"There's been a few queries from people in the town who are on the housing list and trying to move to somewhere here. They get offered somewhere outside of the area because they don't tick the boxes of the criteria to be housed here, so they're forced to move out and leave (town)." (Focus group 1 respondent)

Accessing appropriate housing is similarly problematic for people who are deemed vulnerable or at risk. People who are homeless, care leavers, or community members who require emergency or priority housing are reported to be frequently falling through the net, with a distinct lack of availability across the county. In some cases, when accommodation is secured, living conditions are sub-standard due to a lack of household equipment and appliances. As such, there is a need for infrastructure and services to be in place which can help people who lack essential resources.

"Lots of people are in temporary accommodation and have been moved into empty houses with literally no furniture or equipment." (Interview #14).

It should also be noted that the avenue for accessing many services, agencies and organisations within this context is online and digital. While this negates the need to travel for face-to-face appointments or assessments, there are additional barriers which arise. People without the relevant knowledge and skills to use technological devices experience digital discrimination Subsequently, there is a need for training opportunities to upskill people across the county. Further, high rates of digital exclusion have been identified, with scores of households across Somerset which cannot afford digital devices or an internet connection.

"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)

Where people do have access to devices, there is a clear disparity in Somerset regarding connectivity. Internet speeds and reliability are inconsistent, and mobile phone signals are patchy – especially in 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 for the county.

"Quality broadband (Fibre optic) across the whole of Somerset"
(Survey respondent #123)

Transport

The lack of transport options and poor infrastructure has been a longstanding issue in Somerset. While this is most noticeable for rural communities where public bus services are infrequent, urban communities have similarly seen a reduction in operation. The diverse geography of Somerset means that countless people are isolated due to being restricted by their transport options. This clearly impedes mental wellbeing through not being able to visit family and socialise with friends, but it also negatively impacts physical and mental health due to being unable to attend hospital and medical appointments.

"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)

VCSEs across Somerset offer countless activities and services for people in the community to socialise with others, and these have a positive impact on wellbeing. However, being unable to attend them can have a negative effect on people's health. Poor attendance often leads to services folding, not because people do not want to attend, but as a direct result of not being able to get there. Evidently, more frequent, reliable, and affordable transport options, are in dire need across the county.

"A lot of people can't get to us because of community transport stress."
(Focus group 6 respondent)

"Better transport to help access group." (Survey respondent #137)

Climate change and conserving nature

A strong priority for communities across Somerset is a need to draw attention to climate change and implement action. This was particularly strong within South Somerset and Somerset West and Taunton regions. Both areas reported climate change as a priority by 20% and 17% of survey respondents, respectively. Of importance was for Somerset to develop and implement a county-wide initiative to raise awareness of climate change.

"Climate change has been heightened recently by the media, but there isn't much which links this to our local community. We need to raise awareness of how this impacts Somerset, and what we can do, as a community, to mitigate the effects that it has on us." (Interview #8)

Consequently, Somerset needs to develop localised responses which help to tackle climate change and reduce our overall county carbon footprint. One suggested way is to adopt more of a focus on nature. Our county is incredibly fortunate to have a range of natural beauty. The rolling hills, ancient woodlands, rugged coastlines, and Somerset Levels are all valuable and beautiful natural assets. It is therefore crucial that this is protected, and where necessary, restored. In doing so, communities can reconnect with nature and reap the positive benefits this has on individual mental health and wellbeing whilst simultaneously learning new skills.

"Work towards using available public spaces or vacant spaces to grow trees and or food developing new skills on the way." (Survey respondent #41)

THE CURRENT AND FUTURE NEEDS OF VCSES IN SOMERSET

These findings relate to the perceived current and future needs of VCSEs in Somerset. As mentioned earlier, VCSEs responded quickly to emerging community needs prompted by the pandemic. Although many were able to adapt, it has magnified where gaps exist, and future emphasis must be directed for VCSEs to optimally support the county's people and communities.
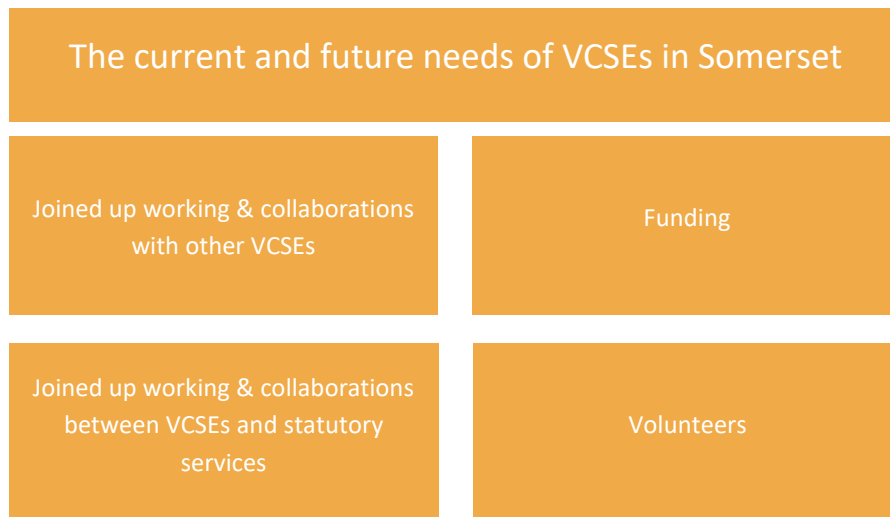
Figure 13 – Current and future priorities for Somerset's VCSEs

Following data analysis, four overarching themes (see Figure 14) were developed using the data collected from the survey responses, focus group discussions and one-to-one interviews.

Most of these needs were detected across VCSEs as a collective. However, some variation was apparent depending on organisation size based on annual income. These differences are discussed throughout this section of the report, where applicable.
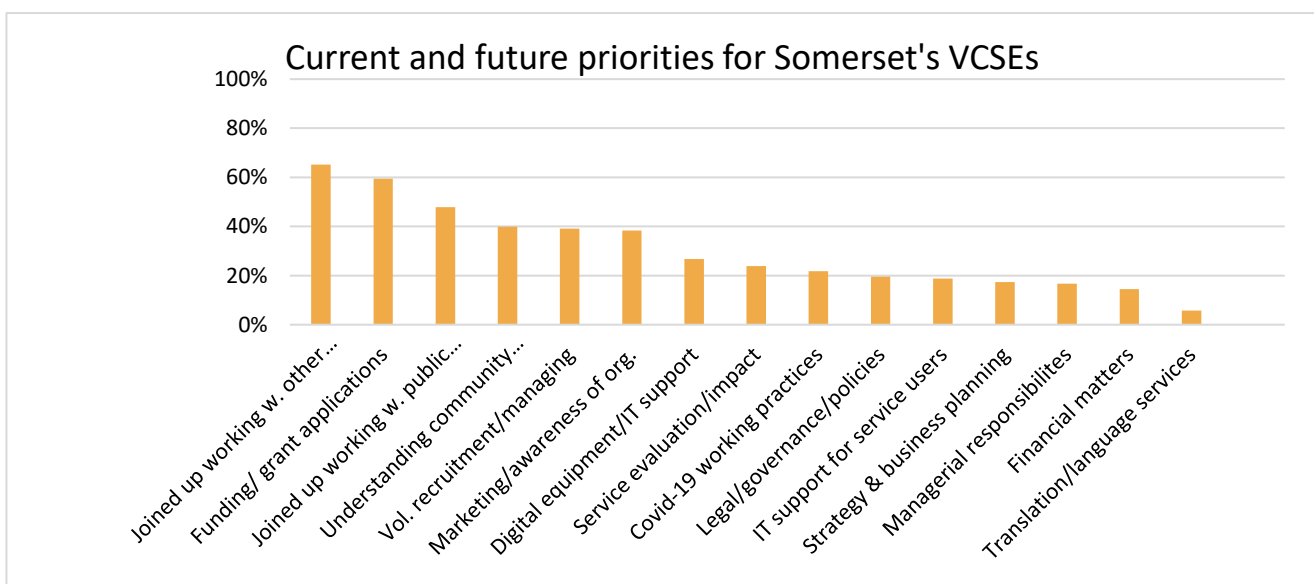
Figure 14 – Summary of overarching themes relating to the current and future needs of VCSEs in Somerset

Joined up working and collaborations with other VCSEs

The pandemic created major change within the VCSE sector of Somerset. Not only in terms of adapting services and the day-to-day running of organisations, but importantly, establishing and nurturing relationships, partnerships and collaborations with other VCSEs in the county. Whilst this was something which occurred before Covid-19, it has now gained much more emphasis.

Collaborative working is incredibly multifaceted. Discussed within the previous chapter **Reflect**, one of the ways in which collaborations developed was through increased opportunities to network and connect with representatives from other local VCSEs. Online forums, events and Zoom meetings were an undeniably positive by-product of the pandemic and there is an overwhelming desire that such networking opportunities continue.

> *"Ensure VCSE organisations have a regular opportunity to connect and get to know each other." (Survey respondent #135)*

Connecting with other VCSEs was therefore considered the top priority for VCSEs in Somerset over the next 18 months. New ways of working have been born, ultimately providing strength to the VCSE sector, as a whole, across Somerset. It is therefore essential that these platforms and avenues to connect with each other remain open and accessible.

> *"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)*

Understandably, online networking opportunities are encouraged by the sector as they reduce financial and time costs. Notwithstanding, there is an appreciation that face-to-face interactions hold a great deal of additional value. With this in mind, networking should adopt a blended approach between remote and in-person opportunities.

> *"Create face to face environments that bring us together safely that allow for natural connections that inspire and motivate." (Survey respondent #33)*

> *"Bring local organisations together a couple of times a year, perhaps with 'speed dating' to facilitate getting to know people and trigger greater cross sector partnership/support." (Survey respondent #64)*

Networking enables VCSEs to identify other organisations and learn about the work and services that they deliver. In turn, this has a positive result on service users or members as it promotes inter-VCSE signposting of services.

> *"Opportunities for VCSEs to get to know each other is something we need more of. That type of networking helps us to know what's going on across the county in terms of VCSEs and the activities or services that are available to our clients which we can signpost people towards." (Interview #9)*

There is a recognition that each VCSE organisation has its own strengths, skills, knowledge and resources, which make it best placed to carry out certain types of work when compared to other organisations. Participants expressed a need for a robust and detailed directory of VCSEs in Somerset to promote joined up service provision. This was especially important when recognising the size and geographical expanse of the county.

"Have an up-to-date directory of all local services
which we could refer people to." (Survey respondent #86)

"Comprehensive mapping – maintained and updated regularly."
(Survey respondent #69)

As an up-to-date resource, this readily accessible database could specify which VCSE is best suited to working with a particular community based on the services and expertise of any given organisation. It is worth noting that, at the time of writing there are various directories already in existence, including Community Connect and District-wide platforms managed by Health Connections Mendip and Spark Somerset. Public Health are currently reviewing existing provision.

"Develop a VCSE 'brain' that can identify the most appropriate service and
deliverer for each circumstance." (Survey respondent #62)

In practice, accurate mapping of all VCSEs in Somerset and the services or activities they offer would not be without its challenges. Furthermore, keeping it up to date would require significant amounts of time, and therefore, high financial cost. Nevertheless, some coordination is required in Somerset to reduce the wide-spread sense of duplication in services and VCSE organisations. The Health Connections Mendip directory of services, with similar in other districts, provides a basis on which to build a Somerset-wide directory. In addition, Somerset Public Health's 'Help You to Help Yourself', is reviewing various resources.

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

"Consider the merits of building on existing services rather than developing 'new'
ones." (Survey respondent #57)

Where VCSEs operate in similar areas through supporting mutual groups of people or communities, there are likely to be shared missions and priorities. Effective collaboration between organisations in Somerset is consequently a delicate intersection between working together on shared community goals, whilst drawing on respective organisational strengths in terms of knowledge, skills or resources.

"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)

There was a shared assumption that a more joined up approach would not only promote organisations to work more efficiently but could also support community needs more effectively.

"Fragmentation is a real issue. A number of organisations are doing lots of little bits and there's not really a joined-up approach. We need to figure out what we can cluster together to support 'this' area of the community or 'that' specific need. We can then bring together and join up the relevant organisations depending on what's identified." (Focus group 8 respondent)

This feeds into the research finding of needing to reduce a sense of competition between VCSEs in Somerset. Successful collaborative approaches to working would enable organisations to operate in unison. Instead, some participants described an implicit sense of competition in terms of funding, geographical areas, activities being delivered, or the people/communities who are being supported. This creates a hostile and unwelcome environment which could be alleviated through enhanced collaborative working.

"Help people to collaborate rather than compete." (Survey respondent #118)

"Networking events are important, but we still need to shift the idea of competition between VCSEs. Instead, we've got to identify where we complement each other which will support collaboration and partnerships. There's real benefit in working together." (Interview #18)

Successful partnerships developed throughout the pandemic have created numerous benefits for VCSEs. There was an overwhelming hope that this openness and supportive way of working continues.

"A lot more of collaboration and a greater willingness to work together to support each other. Everyone's working for the same outcome and in the same direction. Previously, everyone only had their own objectives in sight. We are more joined up now." (Focus group 2 respondent)

Partnership working can adopt a plethora of forms and bring benefits to VCSEs. A common example described was receiving support from other organisations through sharing good practice or helping to develop GDPR policies and safeguarding procedures. It was particularly useful for newly founded groups or smaller organisations with limited income and staff/volunteer capacity. Thus, it avoided 'reinventing the wheel' when partner VCSEs were willing to mentor and share. This type of collaboration clearly has its merits and was identified from the findings as needing to continue. A central database or 'resource bank' is warranted whereby organisations can be paired with a VCSE which holds specific skills or resources.

"Improve collaborative working and sharing of resources & ideas." (Survey respondent #69)

"Recognise talented people willing to share knowledge. Maybe have a directory of those people." (Survey respondent #136)

Similarly, there is a realisation that time and financial resources can be saved for VCSEs through collaborative training opportunities for common and core topics. Infrastructure organisations are well suited for this delivery and can invite attendees from numerous VCSEs across the county. It would save money for individual VCSEs by negating the need to organise bespoke training. Additionally, it provides an opportunity for networking with representatives from other organisations.

"Those training opportunities which are relevant and needed for all organisations across the VCSE sector, like first aid and fire stewards, to be delivered at the same time with lots of groups there. It's a much more cost-effective approach in being able to help lots of groups in one go."
(Interview #15)

Beyond training, discussion was directed towards VCSEs partnering for commonly required administrative duties. For example, a cooperative HR, payroll or accountancy service whereby organisations are allocated a specific number of hours respective to their organisational needs. This concept was also extended towards a cleaning service for VCSE buildings, offices and venues.

"Create some kind of micro support group of administrators who can help groups with administration work, or help to get processes put in place. We are paying our cleaners £15/£20 per hour, so that's something else which could be pooled and split between groups. The micro administrator could work remotely but support lots of organisations and get paid per task or hour."
(Survey respondent #102)

Funding

The second largest identified need for VCSEs over the next 18 months is funding (59%). 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.

Of importance is ensuring that additional funding streams are identified, and monies obtained to continue delivering new services which were developed during the pandemic. There is a realisation that various Covid-specific grants are beginning to dry up. This leaves a gap in the coffers for many organisations which needs to be plugged as demand for services has subsequently grown. If funding is not achieved, organisations will be unable to continue service delivery, thus leaving communities without.

"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)

VCSEs therefore need support in identifying alternative sources of funding. While larger organisations tend to have dedicated team members in a funding role, smaller and newly formed VCSEs often do not have this resource and capability. Infrastructure organisations play a vital role in supporting these smaller groups. Identifying, researching, and cascading accessible information about potential grants and funders is crucial.

"Assistance with finding finance and grant providers." (Survey respondent #106)

"Help accessing and finding grants." (Survey respondent #23)

In a similar vein, infrastructure organisations are best placed to provide 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 – thus drawing on their respective strengths and skills.

"Shared funding for projects to work collaboratively." (Survey respondent #135)

"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)

Mutual funding for shared projects would similarly acknowledge that funders, like much of society, have increasingly limited financial resources. Competition is therefore high, meaning funding is forecast to be a serious concern for VCSEs.

"Funding will become an issue. People who gave (money) in the past are not going to be able to give again and charities will have to compete for a shrinking pot of money". (Interview #22)

While more funders in the landscape are ultimately desired, along with larger pots of funding available, discussion was directed towards ways in which current and existing pots of money can be maximised to their full potential. One such way is through localised management and distribution of funding. This draws on the success of models like Open Mental Health (https://www.sparksomerset.org.uk/projects/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 alternative VCSE sectors which would ensure funding is embedded within community need and reaches best suited organisations. Importantly, it would endorse cohesion between sectors and better alignment of goals.

"What can we cluster together, that can support 'this' area with 'these' needs?
Then try to bring together the relevant groups and organisations."
(Focus group 8 respondent)

Maximising funding potential was also considered in relation to funding of core organisational costs. Oftentimes funders seek new and innovative projects or streams of work. This certainly has its strengths as it means that the sector is encouraged to grow and thrive. However, it also means that some VCSEs are negatively impacted when they are seeking monies for existing, long-standing, and often proven projects or work.

"Support long term services through core funding." (Survey respondent #82)

Lobbying of funders was further explored regarding the need for longer-term and multi-year contracts. This would promote financial security and resilience for organisations.

"Increase access to multiyear funding for third tier services."
(Survey respondent #113)

It would also encourage in-depth work to be carried out with their communities, instead of 'helicopter projects' with short timescales that often have no legacy or continuation when the funding period ends.

"We need to starting thinking about moving away from 'helicopter projects'
which have no legacy once the funding ends." (Interview #10)

Issues with funding from statutory services were apparent throughout the findings. This is pertinent as there has been a notable increase in referrals and signposting from statutory agencies to VCSEs. Service demand therefore increases without VCSEs always receiving financial recompense. Additional funding is therefore needed to cope with growing referrals and burden on the organisation.

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

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 or public sector services. This need was higher than the collective average for larger VCSEs with an annual income between £100,001 to £1m (56% of respondents) and £1m to £10m (83% of respondents).

"Work across sectors more, health, social care & the third sector delivering together." (Survey respondent #151)

This spans beyond service delivery with collaboration developing to establish shared priorities for the community and planning of services. Networking opportunities between VCSEs and the public sector are an essential first step to forge professional relationships.

"Statutory systems to engage with smaller VCSEs to work together in developing shared priorities. There needs to be those networking opportunities to begin open communication." (Interview #23)

Once this open dialogue has been established, it would become possible to work in more collaborative ways. Firstly, by creating avenues through which the VCSE sector can respond and influence financial spending. In addition, it would streamline processes for providing feedback. Both of which will ultimately benefit the community.

"Open communication whereby the VCSE sector can 'challenge' statutory services regarding decision making and spending. Listening to feedback (and) ensure that things have actually made a difference." (Interview #20)

Being involved in these types of conversations will ensure VCSEs are fully embedded within local governmental plans, thus promoting integration between public and voluntary /community sectors.

"To have voluntary organisations and their services fully integrated within the plans held by local councils." (Survey respondent #101)

"Encourage government bodies to genuinely consult and listen, not lip service."(Survey respondent #126)

The VCSE sector therefore needs recognition by the public sector. This is firstly in terms of the value that the sector provides to our local community. VCSEs often have knowledge, skills and experience which makes them better equipped than statutory services to support communities. What's more, the truly embedded nature of VCSEs within their communities means that they fully understand what people need. The 'social value' of VCSEs needs to become more appreciated and respected by the public sector.

"Momentum and appreciation has grown within the public sector about us (the VCSE). It feels as though they are finally waking up to the value of the (VCSE) sector. The local authority needs to continue to support the social value that we provide." (Focus group 4 respondent)

"To highlight the absolute essential part the voluntary sector play in the community to the non-voluntary sectors." (Survey respondent #89)

Logically, VCSEs should be represented and have an opportunity to influence the setting of local government priorities and agendas.

"We should be linked up with the 'powers that be' and have a seat at the table for when those strategic discussions happen." (Interview #11)

This has become more apparent in light of the restructuring of Somerset's district councils into a unitary council. One Somerset provides a fresh start and new opportunity to reshape the perception, role and involvement of the VCSE sector. This is similarly the case for the newly merged Somerset NHS Foundation Trust and development of the Integrated Care System (ICS). It is vital that the VCSE sector gains much needed representation through an advocating 'voice' as these new local governing bodies are in their infancy and possess an element of malleability.

"Advocate for the sector being at the heart of the Unitary Authority - One Somerset." (Survey respondent #44)

"Establish our place as a key partner for the new local authority and newly merged NHS trust." (Survey respondent #124)

Volunteers

The fourth largest need for VCSEs as identified by survey respondents was volunteer recruitment and engagement. This need was higher than the collective average of 39% for organisations with an annual income less than £10,000 (50% of survey respondents), £10,001 to £50,000 (40% of survey respondents), and £1m to £10m (50% of survey respondents). This should be viewed tentatively due to the distribution of participating organisations within the survey sample. Nevertheless, exploration throughout the research data identified key findings regarding the needs of VCSEs in terms of volunteers.

Across the board, there was a consensus that volunteer numbers are lacking for VCSEs in Somerset. It is undeniable that part of this is due to the pandemic prompting people to reassess their lives, time commitments and willingness to volunteer. Covid-19 and the associated lockdowns resulted in many volunteers having additional time which they have since come to appreciate.

"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)

For those who may still be willing to volunteer, there is reluctance to return due to shielding or fears of Covid-19 transmission. There is subsequently a need, and moreover, a responsibility, for the VCSE as a whole to support these volunteers to feel comfortable and able to safely return.

"Now, lots of our 'traditional' volunteers who were with us before the pandemic have become less eager to come back as some are shielding and others are still very concerned about Covid." (Focus group 11 respondent)

Where volunteering 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 younger volunteers who became involved with organisations and has led to a desire to continue this momentum.

"Provide greater volunteering opportunities for young people."
(Survey respondent #80)

Many of these people returned to work as restrictions lifted. Paired with furlough ending and pre-pandemic volunteers hesitant to return, there is now a sizeable gap in the voluntary workforce.

"A lot of the volunteers we had to start with were on furlough so were lost after
the second lockdown as they went back to work. People's ability to volunteer has
reduced and continues to go down."
(Focus group 1 respondent)

Volunteering in Somerset therefore needs an overhaul and fresh perspective. Firstly, a county-wide strategy for volunteering is needed to increase its prominence within the county. A collaboratively produced strategy between VCSEs and statutory services would promote the importance of volunteering, and importantly, position it as priority.

"Develop a strong case and strategy for the voluntary sector in Somerset so we
can create key and shared priorities." (Interview #17)

Part of this strategy needs to include an element of marketing to convey a message of what volunteering can intrinsically offer people. Reciprocity is key here, that volunteers get as much out of donating their time as the VCSEs do in receiving it. Improvements to wellbeing, social interaction and helping people in the local community, are just a few benefits for volunteers. This should be celebrated alongside presenting case studies or stories of Somerset volunteers.

"Better awareness and marketing of benefits that volunteering has on people. It's
altruistic, but volunteers also get something for themselves in giving their time."
(Interview #3)

"Include more case studies around specific motivations to volunteer and diverse
demographics." (Survey respondent #145)

Numerous participants explained a need for growth in local awareness of their organisation, and explicitly celebrating the role of volunteers could act as a conduit for this.

"We need national (and) local recognition of the role played by volunteers."
(Focus group 3 respondent)

Radio features, social media posts, a Somerset volunteer publication, could all be potential avenues to showcase the diverse work and roles carried out by volunteers, which would simultaneously raise the profile of VCSEs.

"I think what we need to do is promote ourselves as an organisation, so people know about us and our services. It's about increasing that local awareness so people know that we're here and can help." (Interview #15)

Emphasising the different types of volunteer opportunities in the county would also help to reshape what it means to volunteer. Participants elucidated that the current model of volunteer recruitment is no longer fit for purpose. VCSEs commonly dictate what they are seeking from volunteers regarding time commitment, role and responsibilities. The pandemic has highlighted that volunteers appreciate an element of flexibility with what they offer. This needs to be reflected with how VCSEs recruit and harness the energy and motivations of volunteers. Rather than VCSEs outlining their expectations and requirements of the 'perfect' volunteer, it should be the other way round, respecting whatever time, knowledge and skills people are willing to donate to the organisation.

"We shouldn't dictate what volunteers do. We are here to facilitate and so we should respect how they want to do this by understanding the motivation as to why they want to volunteer." (Focus group 11 respondent)

One such method is through adopting a different approach whereby VCSEs flexibly adapt to what volunteers can offer. Indeed, flexibility is a quality already associated with the sector regarding organisation and service adaption. This could similarly be reflected in how it recruits and manages volunteers.

"We have had areas across the UK where the micro-volunteering activity has really taken off. So, the roles and work people do is very flexible with volunteers saying when and how much they do. It could be on a weekly, fortnightly, or monthly basis – whatever they are willing to do. This was a new way of working for us which has worked well." (Focus group 11 respondent)

This could arguably increase the number of volunteers across the county as people could donate as much or as little time as they desire. It could also open the doors to new possibilities regarding what people provide. It might not always be face-to-face service provision, but perhaps other skills or knowledge which the volunteer possesses and are needed by the VCSE.

"Thinking 'outside the box' and creatively to meet particular organisation needs which volunteers can help with. For example, we're in the process of engaging with Duke of Edinburgh students to help out with our IT and social media. It's pragmatic partnership as students need to do volunteering and we have specific service needs. It's also quite an appealing volunteering role as it can be done online without them leaving home." (Interview #1)

Making volunteering accessible with as few barriers as possible is what the VCSE sector requires. While things such as DBS checks and volunteer training are essential for some roles, there are clear ways in which this can be streamlined to optimise volunteering in Somerset. A central volunteer service was described by participants which could not only manage these essential volunteer requirements, but also reduce the burden on individual VCSEs.

Furthermore, a 'Volunteer Passport' could be issued by this service which would allow individuals to support multiple VCSEs at the same time. This would be particularly useful in attending to the wide-spread need of recruiting Trustees with specific knowledge or skills.

"A need for a streamlined volunteer service to vet or screen new volunteers. This could include a DBS service which is transferrable between different roles and organisations. Or perhaps combine volunteer 'roles' between organisations as training could be transferrable." (Focus group 8 respondent)

Renew

This final section of the report focuses on the *Renew* aspect of the project. It extends beyond what has already been presented in the previous *recover* section regarding the needs of Somerset to bounce-back from the pandemic. Renew offers a collective vision and roadmap for the future of the VCSE sector in Somerset, to grow, thrive and best support the people who live in our communities.

This vision is summarised below in Figure 5 and based on data collected throughout the survey, focus groups and interviews. Data identified during analysis which was aspirational, desirable, or forward thinking, provided the initial foundations for this vision. It was then explored further and refined during the visioning sessions. The final iteration is a set of principles which have been co-produced *by* the VCSE sector in Somerset, *for* the VCSE in Somerset. They provide a basis for the VCSE sector to truly renew itself as we emerge from the pandemic through reflection on the lessons learnt and identification of the sector's recovery needs. It should be noted that these are not silo principles. They are equally weighted in importance, interlink, and wholly depend on one another. Consequently, there is an element of synergy and overlap between principles. Recognition and implementation of this vision is required at all levels throughout the VCSE sector to go beyond meeting the needs of people in the community, to creating resilient, inclusive, and thriving Somerset communities.
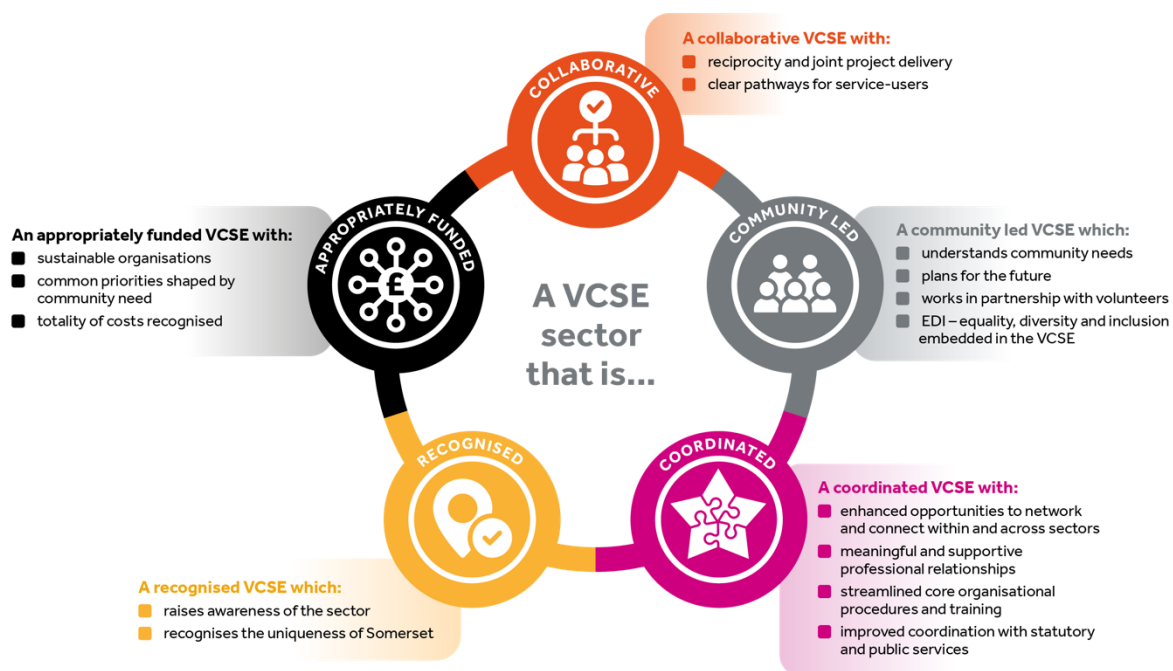

Figure 15 - The five key principles which form the shared vision of the VCSE sector in Somerset

WE HAVE A VISION FOR A COORDINATED VCSE SECTOR IN SOMERSET

Inferred throughout recover as a key need for organisations and identified in excess of 60 times during the visioning sessions was the concept of a better coordinated VCSE sector in Somerset. This spanned numerous areas and recognised that a strong, resilient and efficient VCSE sector is one that is joined up with mutual priorities and agendas. Coordination is therefore required to collate and mediate the focus of the sector, thus harnessing the collective strength of VCSEs in Somerset.

There is subsequently a collective vision that the sector is enhanced in terms of opportunities to network and connect with local VCSEs and statutory agencies. The pandemic led to facilitation of numerous forums and meetings through online platforms. This resulted in the sector becoming better connected and adding strength to the support available for communities in Somerset. It is unsurprising that the sector has aspirations for this to continue with it being mentioned frequently during the visioning sessions.

"Forums during lockdown have been very helpful and this should be continued going forward." (Visioning Session 2 respondent)

Importantly, there was an appreciation of blended approaches to networking which combine both face-to-face and online methods of interaction. Coordination of these events is crucial to ensure that all organisations, regardless of size, geographical area, or type of work, have an equal opportunity to connect with other organisations and promote the work they carry out.

Extending this further, the sector has a vision for coordination in terms of developing a complete and robust directory of VCSE and statutory organisations which currently exist in the county. This would also include detail on the services available to people in the community. In essence, a streamlined process would be developed for signposting those in need to the most applicable organisation and method of support.

"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)

A county-wide directory would also help identify where duplication of services exists. Numerous organisations work within similar remits and deliver comparable services. There are subsequently questions over the benefit in developing 'new' when it is more efficient to build upon and refine what already exists and proven to work. An element of competition therefore comes into play for organisations with similar aims and objectives who all strive towards common funding opportunities. There is subsequently a wide-spread ambition that the VCSE sector in Somerset moves away from feelings of competitiveness. Accurate mapping of what is already in existence across Somerset, paired with a vision in developing meaningful, supportive and reciprocal professional relationships between organisations, is a key feature of the vision.

"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)

Clearly, there will always be an element of overlap between VCSEs. It therefore becomes necessary to emphasis the nuanced differences between organisations and their services. Often this comes down to the knowledge, skills and expertise of individual organisations. Importantly, however, is the effectiveness of each organisation in supporting their community.

With this in mind, there is a vision for the VCSE in Somerset to develop and coordinate a more inclusive and ubiquitous method of evaluation which considers the disparity in organisation size and potential reach, or implementation of work carried out. While some projects and streams of work may impact a *large* number of people, others may have a *significant* impact on a smaller group or community. Both are equally valuable, and this forms a crucial aspect of the roadmap. Coordination of impact and evaluation is required to facilitate a county-wide shift towards social value, instead of just the number of beneficiaries and financial implications.

"VCSE are ably using impact measurement (in financial savings and social impact)
e.g. preventative work & being cost effective."
(Visioning Session 2 respondent)

The VCSE sector in Somerset also has a vision for streamlining and coordinating essential and core organisational procedures. VCSEs regularly need services which are beyond the skills, remit and expertise of their organisation. For example, accountancy, bookkeeping, IT support and venue/office cleaning. This is particularly apparent for small or newly founded VCSEs who may require a small allocation of time for their needs, thus making it hard to find an affordable and willing contractor or provider. Nevertheless, these are essential demands for VCSEs which could be alleviated through pooling needs with organisations facing similar challenges.

"Shared resource/professional partners - IT support/website/HR/finance."
(Visioning Session 1 respondent)

Likewise, the VCSE sector has a vision for organisational training needs to be better coordinated. While the diverse nature of VCSEs across Somerset means that bespoke or highly specific training is required for particular organisations, other training is somewhat applicable and required by all. Sourcing this more generic training is often problematic, especially when financial resources are limited. Therefore coordination across the county to source and deliver training would ultimately alleviate time and financial implications for individual organisations.

"Solid core training for all VCSEs plus bespoke training for different
organisations." (Visioning Session 2 respondent)

Such training and coordination are most apparent regarding the volunteer workforce, and would align essential or core volunteer training across the whole VCSE sector. For example, health and safety, data protection, safeguarding and DBS checks are essential for all organisations. The vision is for a county-wide programme of high-quality inductions and training opportunities for volunteers which would ultimately lead to a respected and accredited 'Somerset Volunteer Passport'. Furthermore, it would enable volunteers and Trustees to move between organisations, or support multiple VCSEs, depending on their capacity or skill set.

"Volunteers bring enthusiasm. Is there scope for having shared
accreditation/valuing/training for volunteers. Everyone can tap into."
(Visioning Session 1 respondent)

Finally, the VCSE sector in Somerset has a vision for better coordination with statutory and public services. Due to austerity and local council budget cuts, numerous statutory services for the community have ceased to operate. This has resulted in a drastic increase of signposting and referrals to VCSEs with capacity to support

people in the community now being strained. Better coordination is required in terms of the roles, responsibilities and capabilities of VCSEs and statutory services.

"We have worked in tandem with statutory sector organisations and have been acknowledged as equal to them in the work that we do."
(Visioning Session 2 respondent)

WE HAVE A VISION FOR AN APPROPRIATELY FUNDED VCSE SECTOR IN SOMERSET

The second most commonly described principle for an ideal future of the VCSE sector in Somerset was in terms of funding, with a vision for a plentiful source of money readily accessible for VCSEs. While it is appreciated that this is not realistic, there is an ambition that the funding landscape for VCSEs in the county can be improved.

The pandemic resulted in a plethora of Covid-19 response grants and funds becoming available. While this provided a lifeline for many organisations at the time, there is an awareness these streams of funding are beginning to dry up. Sustainability of organisations is consequently drawn into question as the county begins to emerge from the pandemic. The VCSE sector therefore has a vision whereby sources of funding become as accessible as they were during the pandemic. Furthermore, that commissioners and funders continue to exercise flexibility and compassion with VCSEs when projects and intended services need to change from the original plan. Ongoing sustainability for VCSEs is subsequently reliant on identifying appropriate funding opportunities and receiving the necessary support to secure financial capital.

There is also hope that funding models which formed during the pandemic will remain ongoing. Many funders and commissioners adapted their application and reporting-back processes with more accessible and condensed forms. The VCSE sector hopes that this remains due to the time and financial cost this ultimately saves organisations – creating capacity to carry out their work with people and communities.

> *"The VCSE has capacity to do its work, balanced by the need to report and apply for funding." (Visioning session 1 respondent)*

The vision for the future of the VCSE sector in Somerset also builds on the observation that funders and commissioners adopted more strategic focuses and community priorities during the pandemic. This made it easier for organisations to identify funding opportunities which particularly aligned with their aims and missions. 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 whole cohort, recognising individual organisation's strengths and what they can offer which other VCSEs cannot. Armed with this knowledge, more substantial funding is allocated to fewer VCSEs which maximises impact and reach in response to the grant remit and community need.

> *"Structured (funding). More bang for your buck in terms of keeping money together to promote impact rather than splitting up money." (Visioning Session 1 respondent)*

Extending this further, the sector has ambitions for funding to move beyond short-term, 'flash in the pan' projects. This type of work is frequently reliant on funding with little consideration of ongoing sustainability. As such, communities are left without services that they have become accustomed to when the funding dries up. Additionally, many of these types of projects operate in silos and do not align with mutual priorities or local strategy.

The vision therefore is for prioritisation of longer-term projects with recurrent funding. This would ensure that projects and streams of work which are proven to be successful, can continue to operate. It would similarly promote financial resilience and sustainability as staffing and core costs could be accurately forecast in light of known revenue and income.

"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)

Recognition from funders and commissions of core costs for organisations is another crucial element for the vision of the sector. Developing new and innovate projects is key to reciprocal growth and evolvement of both the VCSE sector and local communities. However, organisations require financial security with core costs being covered so that innovation can take place. Rent, bills, staff time to write grant applications and administrative duties for setting up new projects, are all 'hidden' costs which are frequently unrecognised by funders. This is especially pertinent for VCSEs who submit applications resulting in an unsuccessful decision. The time dedicated to this submission is lost and a subsequent cost is incurred which ultimately reduces capacity for existing streams of work or ongoing overheads. Similarly, organisations with a successful application will also face a detrimental impact on their finances with the development and setting up of new work.

"There is recognition that core costs are needed to 'keep the lights on' - in order to deliver new projects." (Visioning Session 2 respondent)

The final ambition regarding funding of the sector is in terms of financial recompense from public and statutory agencies. Increased referrals have a significant impact on the financial resources of VCSEs. It is perceived by the sector that statutory services have an implicit assumption that VCSE services are cost-free. This is somewhat true for the public sector as the cost is passed on to VCSE organisations. Subsequently, there is a hope that this power imbalance can be rectified with funding being appropriately redirected to VCSEs when referrals are made.

Moreover, a transition in attitudes and perceived role or purpose of the VCSE sector can be expedited within statutory services. Thus, shifting away from the assumption that VCSEs have the unwavering capacity to act as a 'catch-all' when all options within statutory services have been exhausted. Instead, there is a vision that the VCSE sector is seen as equal with statutory services through reciprocation of funding. The move to a unitary council is arguably an opportune moment to begin such changes to attitudes and ways of working while One Somerset remains in its infancy with an element of malleability.

Extending this further, there is an ambition for the VCSE sector to be involved in decision making regarding the allocating and spending of statutory funding. By respecting the sector for their embedded knowledge and experience regarding Somerset communities, it is logical that their expertise is drawn upon by statutory services. Ultimately, the VCSEs grasp the social value of community projects which warrants a 'seat at the table' when local budgets are set, and community priorities are decided upon.

"Vol sector seen as equal partners and embedded with statutory sector and they understand what we do." (Visioning Session 2 respondent)

WE HAVE A VISION FOR A COLLABORATIVE VCSE SECTOR IN SOMERSET

Discussed widely as a key feature of the vision for the VCSE sector is collaboration. The pandemic spotlighted how working together brings real strength to individual organisations. The whole of the VCSE sector in Somerset is greater than the sum of individual organisations, and it is hoped that collaborative working will continue to grow and thrive across the county.

Somerset's VCSEs have demonstrated their unique strengths and assets during the pandemic and shared information, skills, knowledge and resources. Often, respective strengths are desired by other VCSEs, and this could form the basis of supportive and collaborative working with like-minded organisations whereby large or long-standing VCSEs share policies, procedures or staff time with small or newly formed groups. Organisations can 'trade' assets – saving time and financial cost and promoting reciprocity. Opportunities for mentorship further lead to organisational growth and development. The sector therefore aspires for individual VCSEs to be proud of the skills, knowledge and resources that they possess, and to work in collaboration.

"Having the means to share our resources and ideas - having something bigger than just our own work." (Visioning Session 1 respondent)

Extending this further, the sector has a vision that partnership bids leading to collaboratively delivered projects, will be a permanent feature of the VCSE landscape. This draws upon and combines respective organisations' strengths and experience. This helps create a sense of a level playing field between large and small VCSEs. Often the size of an organisation influences the funding received and subsequent project delivery. This is not to suggest that smaller VCSEs do not have the capability to deliver similarly important and effective work within the community. Instead, it may be resultant of inexperience in applying for funding, gaps in service delivery, or perhaps a too small annual income. Through VCSEs developing collaborations with other organisations, some of these discrepancies can be reduced by pooling expertise and resources. Ultimately, collaborating in this way increases the likelihood that projects can be implemented, thus leading to positive results for the community.

"Help people to collaborate rather than compete. The bigger organisations get the lion's share of funding." (Visioning Session 2 respondent)

The vision for the sector ensures that the interests of people in the community are kept at the heart of all that VCSEs do. Increased collaboration in terms of creating clear pathways for service users between VCSEs is key. Open doors in terms of inter-VCSE referrals means that people in the community can engage with, and receive, optimal and timely support when they need it. Organisations can share data, case notes or histories regarding people in the community.

Collaborations in this way put people in the community at the forefront of the picture in providing them with additional opportunities which partner VCSEs may be uniquely able to offer.

"Sharing clients... a pathway and options for people to explore in alternative interests/areas." (Visioning session 1 respondent)

The VCSE sector in Somerset recognises that old ways of working whereby organisations operated in silos with individualistic goals, is no longer fit for purpose, nor is it desirable. 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 relationships between VCSEs and the public sector maximise the opportunities and outcomes for communities. As such, VCSEs are eager to ensure that the vision for the future features effective and reciprocal collaborative relationships with statutory services. Importantly, attitudes of equality and respect are inherent in these partnerships which provide opportunities for both sectors to voice themselves, champion their agendas, and crucially, influence the decisions which benefit communities.

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

Fundamentally, the VCSE sector shares the vision that collaborations can evolve into alliances. That is, a wide range of collaborations, with numerous VCSE and statutory agencies, that all come together for a strategic purpose which benefits distinct communities in Somerset. Alliances share values and provide all representatives with a platform to be heard and influence decisions regarding a specific community of people. Open Mental Health was widely commended throughout all phases of data collection. This resulted in aspirations for similar alliances to be developed across Somerset adopting the same model. Each alliance would focus on discrete community sectors whilst retaining a sense of equality between participants from various VCSEs and statutory agencies. In recognition of alliance members being highly embedded within, and knowledgeable of, the particular community of interest, decisions made and priorities set would be robust and well-founded.

"Open Mental Health alliance is a great example of an approach that has worked - and this approach would be useful in other areas - it is easier and more effective relationship for commissioners and VCSE to work together." (Visioning Session 2 respondent)

WE HAVE A VISION FOR A COMMUNITY LED VCSE SECTOR IN SOMERSET

As explored earlier in the report, central to the VCSE sector is ensuring accessibility of support and responsiveness to community need. It is therefore unsurprising that a key feature within the vision for the sector is that community needs are appropriately mapped and understood so that the VCSE can provide support accordingly.

"Services delivered by the voluntary sector are what communities need."
(Visioning Session 2 respondent)

The pandemic has highlighted substantial diversity in the needs of people within Somerset communities. Moreover, with cases and referrals to VCSEs increasing in number and complexity, so too are the county-wide needs of people in the community. It is crucial that VCSEs are kept abreast of changes in community need through having access to live data from both national and local government.

This information and knowledge must be further reinforced through the intelligence gathered and shared between Somerset-based VCSEs. Importantly, all information must be collated into an accessible format which can be cascaded through appropriate streams to make it usable by the VCSE sector. The foundations for this are already in place with resources such as Somerset Intelligence (www.somersetintelligence.org.uk/).

The sector consequently has a vision which goes beyond conclusions drawn from published reports and white papers. Identification of the diverse and *real* needs of the community is desired through regular, in-depth, and robust consultation with the people who live in our county.

"That we are inclusive and people don't get forgotten. There aren't pockets of deprivation and it's great all around the county because there is equal access based on the diversity of people, but also geography."
(Visioning Session 1 respondent)

Platforms for this active and dynamic consultation to take place with people in the community are subsequently desired by the VCSE sector in Somerset. They could gather local intelligence, thus allowing appropriate forecasting of community need before people or communities are at a point of crisis. Healthwatch is a good example of this in practice for health and social care contexts. There is scope for this to be implemented within other VCSE sectors.

"Create a platform for community feedback from those using the support and services of VCSE, maintain responsivity to the community."
(Visioning Session 1 respondent)

Collating community information enables VCSEs to make informed decisions about their operation. In turn, this prompts better outcomes for people in the community. However, 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. In the same way that VCSEs changed throughout the pandemic, so too have communities. The VCSE sector therefore needs guidance and direction from communities in terms of what they need to move forward from Covid-19. A community focussed, longer-term vision, will allow VCSEs to develop the necessary support which people desire.

"5-year plan of how community moves forward from covid -19 with feedback.
High level observation of how communities have changed."
(Visioning Session 2 Respondent)

Building upon this further, it is recognised by the VCSE sector that all organisations, and the services they provide, must gather accurate feedback to make sure that they remain responsive to the community. The sector therefore aspires to 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 than 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)

Consequently, it is essential that discourse changes throughout the sector to incorporate issues of equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) at all levels. It must go beyond tokenism and lip service within VCSE organisations. Instead, it becomes wholly embedded within the sector with the ultimate aim and vision of Somerset being nationally recognised as leading the way in EDI. Regardless of community diversity in terms of rural living, age, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, internet connectivity or disability- all people are recognised as equal in Somerset and have access to support and services appropriate to their wants and needs. This ethos would similarly be reflected by our statutory and public service peers, creating a ubiquitous vision that EDI is something that we celebrate and champion in Somerset.

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

Finally, VCSEs in Somerset have the vision that communities take pride and ownership of the sector. The strength and capability of VCSEs to optimally support people is reliant on the input and contribution of the wider community. It is therefore a reciprocal relationship which relies on the support of one another. Of pertinence, is the valuable contribution of volunteers to the VCSE sector. There is a wide-spread appreciation of the time and effort which people in the community donate to VCSEs. Without this, the sector is substantially weakened resulting in reduced capacity to support people within the community. As such, there is clear correlation between the community led involvement of volunteers, and the extent to which the VCSE sector can optimally support local communities.

The future vision for Somerset subsequently features an amply resourced and engaged volunteer workforce to encourage development of the sector. This would ultimately lead to growth in service capacity in responses to evolving community need and improved societal outcomes.

"Comfortable to fulfil our remit. Volunteers are more valuable than funding in
some ways." (Visioning Session 2 respondent).

Moreover, there is an acceptance amongst the sector that existing models of volunteer recruitment and management require modification. Historically, VCSEs have dictated the role, responsibility and commitment required by volunteers. While this makes it easier for VCSEs, it often makes it less appealing for potential volunteers which can result in reduced willingness. Work or family life may clash with what is being requested by an organisation. This does not mean that a person does not want to volunteer, but barriers which are put in place by VCSEs mean that it is not a viable option. A more flexible approach is desired which reverses the existing power imbalance. Volunteers subsequently become empowered to outline what time or skills they are willing to donate to VCSEs. Micro-volunteering therefore becomes more prominent throughout Somerset which could arguably increase the uptake from younger people or those with highly specific knowledge and skills.

With implementation of the earlier mentioned 'Somerset Volunteer Passport', appropriately trained volunteers could easily transition between VCSEs, utilising their skills in numerous settings. Furthermore, individual willingness and enthusiasm to volunteer remains high due to a sense of empowerment regarding what and how they contribute to the VCSE of their choosing, and importantly, their local community.

"Aware of what volunteers can provide or what their limits are, and how we can support them give their time." (Visioning Session 2 respondent)

WE HAVE A VISION FOR A RECOGNISED VCSE SECTOR IN SOMERSET

The final principle in the vision for the VCSE sector in Somerset is recognition and awareness. Across the county, thousands of people's lives are being improved on a daily basis due to the outstanding work that VCSEs and their staff or volunteers provide. The hope for the future is that Somerset establishes a national reputation for quality VCSE provision, thus making it a leading authority which other areas of the country aspire towards. In more detail, there are aspirations for Somerset-wide streams of work, alliances, or 'centres of excellence' to become localised priorities that could spearhead the way towards national recognition of the sector in Somerset.

Clearly, recognition must first start at a local level through raising awareness of the VCSE sector within Somerset communities. This would lead to VCSEs being perceived as the logical place to turn when people need support due to there being a universal awareness of high-quality service provision.

"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)

As such, a 'Somerset Kite Mark' for VCSEs denotes exceptionally high quality and responsiveness to the needs of communities. Trust is founded as people know that they can rely on the unwavering support of the sector when they need it. This awareness and sense of security is reciprocated from communities through ongoing support and championing of the Somerset VCSE sector. People therefore become proud of the county due to the work carried out by VCSEs. Consequently, there is a vision of working closely with communities to help spread the word and raise awareness of the VCSE sector in Somerset. County-wide publications, a community radio station, coordinated social media initiatives, and strategic marketing or PR initiatives, are all ways in which recognition and awareness of the sector can be nurtured.

"Working with communities to encourage/promote/raise awareness of the VCSE role." (Visioning Session 2 respondent)

While awareness is desired for the whole sector across Somerset, celebrating the work of individual VCSEs can have the benefit of raising their own profile, whilst simultaneously adding to sector-wide growth in appreciation. Specific projects, volunteer stories, case studies and testimonials from beneficiaries, have all been suggested as ways to outwardly help the VCSE sector to be recognised. Moreover, a 'Pride of Somerset' event could spotlight exceptionality within the sector. While not explicitly focussed on staff and volunteers, there would be an element of celebrating the work and contributions of people from the VCSE workforce. Subsequently, making people feel valued and concurrently raising the profile of work carried out by the sector which could grow local interest and appetite.

"Celebrating the value of volunteers collaboratively (celebrating each other) so that they feel valued." (Visioning Session 1 respondent)

Regardless of the size, reach or impact, recognition holds substantial value. There is an ambition that VCSEs begin to exchange stories, successes, and failures, between one another. This offers learning opportunities for organisations to grow and develop using fellow VCSEs experiences. Furthermore, it begins to establish a consensus that VCSEs in Somerset are diverse, each with distinct expertise and specialisms.

This forms an additional feature of the vision, that the sector recognises core groups or organisations who excel in certain domains. Respect and understanding subsequently develops which could lead to effective collaborative working.

"Respect (and understand) each other's specialities/expertise."
(Visioning Session 2 respondent).

Extending this further (and linking to the earlier described vision principles), there is a vision for recognition from public and statutory services. The VCSE sector has a wealth of embedded knowledge, skills and experience which statutory services often do not possess. Furthermore, the adaptability of VCSEs and the services they provide means that quick responses are possible to community needs. This contrasts with public services and is thus a strength of the VCSE sector. As such, the development of One Somerset provides an opportunity to reshape the perception and involvement of VCSEs in local government.

"Advocate for the sector being at the heart of the Unitary Authority - One
Somerset." (Visioning Session 1 respondent)

Finally, the sector has a vision which recognises the uniqueness of Somerset. There is significant diversity across the county in a plethora of ways. From the county's geography which features disparities between rural and urban communities, to the 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 by the VCSE sector. All the while, ensuring inclusivity and responsiveness to community need so that the best outcomes possible are available to people in the community.

"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)

STUDY LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This five-month research project collected data from a wide range of VCSE representatives across Somerset. Strong conclusions have been drawn about the impact of the pandemic on VCSEs in the county, in addition to ascertaining the current and future needs of communities and the organisations who support them. Nevertheless, these conclusions must be viewed in light of some key research limitations.

Firstly, the sample size for the project represents a relatively small proportion of the total VCSEs which exists in the county. In excess of 270 participants who represented around 190 VCSEs in Somerset, took part in the project. While these are relatively small numbers in comparison to the total number of VCSEs registered in Somerset, it remains a substantial sample size for the scope and scale of the project. It is argued that providing numerous opportunities for people to contribute towards the important findings generated by the project, will have had a substantial impact on increasing response and participation rates.

Designing the project to have a range of data collection methods, with each varying in the time and input required, was a clear strength of the project. It provided participants with autonomy in deciding which element of the project they were able to contribute towards. Such approaches would be wise to consider for future research within this context.

It should also be noted that the methods of participant recruitment drew upon the existing relationships, networks and reach which Spark Somerset and members of the steering group possessed. Subsequently, trust and rapport were already established which will have undoubtedly promoted participation. Nevertheless, future research would warrant careful consideration in how sample sizes can be more representative of the total population of VCSEs in Somerset.

Building upon this further, challenges were faced in terms of collecting data with particularly 'hidden' or diverse communities. This was most notable with VCSEs associated with different religious denominations, as well as those who support communities where English is not a first language. To reduce these challenges in the future, it becomes clear that the principles described in *Renew* for the collective vision for the future of the VCSE sector in Somerset, must be recognised and adopted. Many organisations in Somerset focus their work upon diverse communities in the county, and therefore, have effective streams of communication and robust relationships already established. In essence, collaborative working with these organisations to provide a 'foot in the door' for future research projects is key.

Additional limitations of the current project lie in the spread of the sample between the different districts of Somerset. Based upon project findings, it is clear that many of the challenges and experiences faced by VCSEs are shared across the county. However, it is also apparent that Mendip, Sedgemoor, Somerset West & Taunton and South Somerset, all have individualistic challenges. Unfortunately, it was not possible to pinpoint these with great confidence due to the scope and scale of the current research. Instead, what this report has outlined is the county-wide and collective experiences of VCSEs in Somerset. As such, further research is warranted which adopts district-specific foci.

This is similarly the case with the length of time in which participating organisations had been operating. The majority of respondents in the survey voiced the experiences of VCSEs which had been established for 11 years or more (59.3%). In contrast, only 2.7% had been operating for less than a year. The experiences and challenges faced by organisations clearly varies according to the length of time in which they have been serving their community. Further research to unpack this is subsequently required.

Regardless of these limitations, this project has drawn some important conclusions regarding the VCSE sector in Somerset. To build upon this further, comparisons with alternative counties in England would elucidate whether the findings are wholly isolated to Somerset, or whether such issues identified within this report are much wider spread.

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 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 roadmap 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 fortitude of VCSEs in Somerset.

Thank you for reading this report. If you would like to read the Abridged 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.

APPENDIX

APPENDIX 1: SURVEY STRUCTURE

Survey Question(s)	Topic/theme	Research objective
1	Key priorities for community	2 - recover
2-5	Impact of the pandemic on organisation	1 - reflect
6	Needs for the organisation over next 18 months	2 - recover
7	Vision for the future of the VCSE sector in Somerset	3 - renew
8-19	Background information to the organisation	(Demographic)

APPENDIX 2: FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

What are the current needs and priorities of Somerset-based communities as we emerge from the pandemic?

What has been the impact (challenges) of the pandemic on community groups/ organisations in Somerset?

How have community groups/organisations in Somerset adapted and responded? (e.g. positives/strengths/assets focussed)

What are the needs for community groups/organisations? (e.g. areas for investment)

APPENDIX 3: INTERVIEW PROFORMA

Thank you for your time and input to the project today. This interview will be relatively informal with just a few questions that I'd like to ask you. It shouldn't take any longer than 20-30 minutes and will be more like a conversation. With this in mind, please speak openly and honestly. Don't worry about the length of your answers- the more detail, the better, for this sort of thing.

While we're speaking, I will be taking notes of what is discussed. These notes will be used for the later data analysis. Once we've finished, I can send you a summary of our conversation if you'd like to check it before it is included in the analysis. This is entirely optional, so please let me know at the end of our chat today if you'd like to see a copy.

Before we get started, I wondered if you have any questions about the project or your participation today?

(wait for response)

Great, if you're happy, we'll get started?

(consent)

Background/intro

As you know, 'Reflect, recover, renew' is focussed on hearing from people who represent voluntary, community and social enterprise groups in Somerset. We want to reflect on what has happened during the past 18 months, and more importantly, focus on what we need to do as a sector to reflect, recover and renew. We want to include recommendations and potential solutions to some of the problems and needs of groups which are identified from the project. If you have any thoughts or ideas about this during our chat today, I'd love to hear them.

Before we get started, can I start off by asking you to introduce yourself and your organisation?

Name of organisation, where they are based, what they do, who they support, how long have they been operating, size of organisation

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Community

The first question I'd like to ask you is in terms of the community and people who you support. How did the pandemic impact and affect those who you support?

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As we emerge from the pandemic, what are the current and future needs of the community and people who your organisation support?

Potential topics – transport, loneliness, mental health, digital exclusion, housing, climate change, carers, diversity, county lines, education/training, migrant communities etc

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Group/organisation

The next few questions are about your (community group/voluntary group/social enterprise). What has been the impact of the pandemic on your organisation?

Potential topics- loss of workforce, unable to adapt services, lack of funding, decline in wellbeing,

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How did your (community group/voluntary group/social enterprise) adapt and respond to the pandemic (positives)?

Potential topics – increased workforce/volunteers, developed new services, shift to online, additional funding/income, partnerships/collaborations with other groups, flexibility with organisation and workforce roles, increased awareness of organisation etc

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As we emerge from the pandemic, what are the current and future needs of your group/organisation, so you can best support your community?

Potential topics – infrastructure support (governance, funding, IT, marketing, business planning, Covid practices), collaborations/partnerships, language services, transport, volunteer/trustee recruitment

Future

Thinking ahead, what does the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector look like in Somerset? What are our shared strengths, goals and ambitions?

Potential topics – coordination between groups, shared goals, county wide priorities, sharing knowledge/skills/assets between groups

Thank you, that's all of the questions. Just before we finish, I wondered if you had any other closing thoughts or comments?

That's everything, thank you for your time. If you have any additional questions, please feel free to contact me directly.