



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 Claburn

Reflect, recover, renew

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

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

- To **reflect** on the impact of the pandemic on communities and the VCSE sector throughout Somerset.
- To ascertain what communities and VCSEs currently need to **recover**, as we emerge from the pandemic.
- To be forward thinking and create a shared vision for what communities and VCSEs in Somerset view as priorities in order to **renew**, and ultimately, thrive in the future.

Conclusions drawn from the project are co-produced with the input and contributions of individual participants from a range of VCSE organisations.

“ Covid-19 acted as a magnifying glass to highlight pre-existing challenges faced by people in Somerset. ”

KEY STATISTICS



13
focus groups



7
steering group
stakeholders



190
VCSEs



24
interviews



270
participants



2 visioning sessions

Reflect

The retrospective experiences and perceived impact of the pandemic on communities and VCSEs in Somerset

COMMUNITIES

"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."

"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."

"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."

Mental health and wellbeing was the most common issue described and has significantly worsened in Somerset's communities

"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."

"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."

VCSEs

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

The majority of participants reported a significant increase in service demand from the community

"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."

"Everything went online, all face-to-face training, events and forums stopped and there was more emphasis on digital."

51% reported new ways of working linked strongly to staff and volunteers utilising online and remote methods of working

"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."

80% of survey respondents reported that existing activities and services were adapted to ensure social distancing

"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."

41% of survey respondents highlighted funder flexibility

"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?"

Organisations faced significant challenges with income during the pandemic (described throughout the qualitative data 21 times)

"When the pandemic hit, all of our income dropped to next to nothing."

69% of survey respondents said that they had received additional grant funding

"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."

Reflect

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

Impact on people and communities

Unsurprisingly, the pandemic 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.

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%). It is not possible to identify one specific aspect of the pandemic as the cause of worsened mental health, however, the data collected suggests several factors have had a detrimental impact on mental health.

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

Digital exclusion, sub-standard internet connectivity and/or poor mobile phone reception ▶ 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. For some people this meant being wholly isolated, missing medical appointments, and a deterioration of physical and mental health.

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

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

Reflect

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.

Staff and volunteers ▶ New ways of working were adopted by organisations to ensure social distancing, impacting 78% of survey respondents. This linked strongly to staff and volunteers utilising online and remote methods of working (51%), yet this was regarded a major upheaval. Some participants described remote working in positive terms with 64% experiencing a new sense of autonomy and flexibility with organisational roles – planning work and volunteering around homelife. Further, 51% experienced increased communication between staff and volunteers with a rise in the use of virtual platforms such as Zoom.

A substantial number of organisations experienced a decline in their workforce through furlough of paid staff and a reduction in volunteers who 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, who were 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 an increase in demand, with a growth in membership (37%), and an increase in referrals (30%).

Eighty percent of survey respondents reported that existing activities and services were adapted to ensure social distancing, 48% established alternative ways to keep in touch with service users, and 44% developed new activities/ services. Using online platforms such as Zoom, WhatsApp and Facebook to deliver services and activities increased accessibility in some instances and helped reduce social isolation. However, those reliant on in-person service delivery were forced to suspend operations.

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. Fundraisers such as festival stewarding, marathons and fetes also ceased. However, 43% of respondents developed online fundraising events.

There was also a rise in Covid-19-related grant funding, with most survey respondents (69%) receiving additional funding and 40% identifying new grant funders. Some VCSEs developed new Covid-specific projects, but competition for funding was fierce as so many groups were experiencing financial difficulties. Communication between funders and VCSEs was a strong theme throughout, with funders supporting changing projects.

Partnerships and networking ▶ The pandemic increased a sense of connectivity within the sector and 57% of 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.

Online forums raised awareness of each other's work and 51% of respondents felt they could better support people in their communities through efficient signposting to local services. Increased connection between VCSEs consequently led to collaborations developing. 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 survey respondents.

Recover

The perceived current and future needs of both communities and VCSEs in Somerset

COMMUNITY PRIORITIES

Mental health and wellbeing

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

Young people

"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."

Climate change and conserving nature

"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."

VCSE PRIORITIES

Joined up working and collaborations with other VCSEs

"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."

Funding

"Identifying, researching, and cascading accessible information about potential grants and funders is crucial."

Joined up working and collaborations between VCSEs and statutory services

"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."

Recruitment and engagement of volunteers

"Recognise talented people willing to share knowledge. Maybe have a directory of those people."

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 (77%). 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) ▶ Where potential care workers have been recruited there is a lack of professional training. 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. This 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 ▶ An important gap in existing service provision is regarding benefits. Knowing where to go and eligibility were described throughout the research as important, as well as ensuring the process is accessible and inclusive. Financial hardship is exacerbated with rising food and fuel costs, high housing costs, and a lack of social housing. People also face digital discrimination as most housing support agencies can only be accessed online.

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 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 skills.

Recover

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.

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. 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.

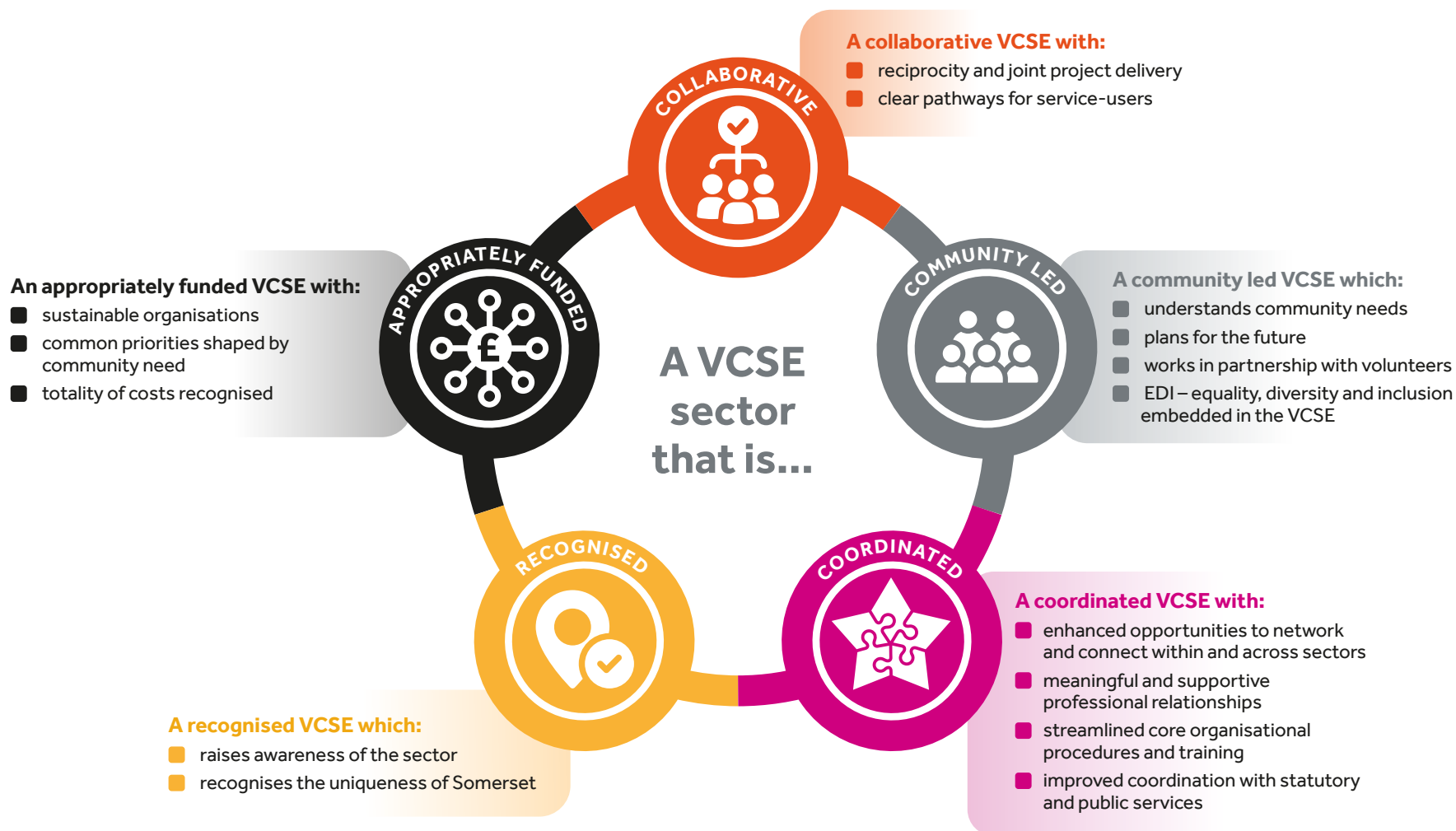
Funding ▶ This was the second largest need for VCSEs over the next 18 months (59%). This has prompted organisations to consider additional funding streams to continue delivery of new services, maximise existing funding, and advocate for core costs to be covered by funders.

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

A collective vision for the future of Somerset's VCSE sector to grow, thrive, and best support the county's people and communities



Renew

This final section of the report focuses on the **Renew** aspect of the project. It offers a collective vision for the future of Somerset's VCSE sector to grow, thrive, and best support the county's people and communities.

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 are often beyond the expertise of VCSEs. 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

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.

Renew

We have a vision for a collaborative VCSE sector in Somerset

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

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. Moreover, shifting the discourse across the county to better support equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) will enable EDI 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

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

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

Next steps

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

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

But this 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.

If you'd like to read the Full Report or find out more about working 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](#).
