CITY OF WOLVERHAMPTON COUNCIL

Voluntary and Community Sector Strategy

2026

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Executive summary

The context: Why the voluntary and community sector matters in Wolverhampton

Wolverhampton's voluntary, community, social enterprise and faith sector (VCSEF) is one of the city's greatest strengths. It is deeply embedded in neighbourhoods, trusted by residents and shaped by lived experience. From hyperlocal volunteer led groups to established charities and social enterprises, VCSEF organisations play a critical role in reducing inequalities, improving wellbeing and supporting residents who are most likely to face barriers to accessing statutory services. They often act as the first point of contact for people experiencing financial hardship, mentalill-health, loneliness, community safety concerns or exclusion related to disability, migration or long-term conditions.

The sector provides prevention, early help, crisis response and long-term community connection, delivering social value that extends well beyond individual services. National and local evidence consistently demonstrates that voluntary and community action achieves strong outcomes, relieves pressure on public services and delivers excellent value for money. In Wolverhampton, many of these organisations operate with modest resources but deliver disproportionate impact, sustained by volunteers, community leadership and strong local relationships. Supporting the health, sustainability and leadership of this sector is therefore essential to achieving the city's wider ambitions for wellbeing, inclusion and resilience.

This strategy sets out the City of Wolverhampton Council's approach to working with and alongside the VCSEF. It is a corporate strategy which defines how we will strengthen relationships, improve partnership working and support the sector to thrive.

It sets out a renewed and more confident approach to partnership, recognising the VCSEF not as a delivery adjunct, but as an equal partner in shaping the future of the city.

The ambition: Our vision for the future

The Council's vision is for a Wolverhampton where strong, confident and connected communities shape the future of the city where strong, confident and connected communities shape the future of the city. A place where the voluntary and community sector stands as an equal partner — trusted, rooted in lived experience, and supported to thrive. Together, we will build a fairer, more resilient Wolverhampton: one where local people lead change, neighbourhoods flourish, and the VCSEF is recognised nationally as the driving force behind inclusive, community led change.

The priorities: what we will focus on

To deliver this ambition, the strategy is founded on five clear priorities:

2.

A collaborative sector which supports each other

Strengthening coordination across neighbourhoods and across sectors, reducing duplication and enabling VCSEF organisations to work effectively alongside the Council, health partners, the Police, businesses and others.

4.

Engagement with the sector which elevates VCSEF voice

Embedding coproduction, amplifying underrepresented voices and ensuring community insight meaningfully shapes decisions, services and investment.

A thriving sector

Supporting VCSEF organisations of all sizes to be resilient, well governed and financially robust, with the skills, leadership and infrastructure needed to innovate and grow.

1.

A sector which reinforces and upholds civil society

Championing volunteering, the social economy and community leadership, and protecting the independence, voice and values of the voluntary and community sector.

3.

The sector and partners learning together

Working together to share insight, learn from communities and each other, and use evidence, lived experience and best practice to shape better decisions, services and outcomes.

5.

What will be different: how we will work together

This strategy sets out how the Council will work differently with the VCSEF. It represents a clear shift in behaviours, expectations and ways of working

A new partnership culture

The Council will work with the voluntary and community sector as an equal partner, based on trust, fairness and mutual respect. VCSEF insight, relationships and lived experience will be valued as expertise, not consultation add-ons. Poor behaviour, unclear expectations or extractive practices will be challenged, and shared ways of working will be reinforced through a refreshed Wolverhampton Covenant aligned to the national Civil Society Covenant.

Earlier and deeper involvement

The Council will involve VCS organisations and communities earlier in shaping policies, services and commissioning intentions. As part of this approach, the Council will take a "VCSEF first" approach when reviewing or designing services, exploring whether community based solutions already exist before creating new provision.

A clearer investment approach

We will move towards funding and commissioning approaches that support stability and long-term impact — including greater use of multi-year funding where possible, clearer communication about funding intentions, fairer commissioning practices and proportionate processes that recognise the realities of smaller organisations.

Stronger coordination at neighbourhood level

Place based partnership working will be strengthened, with VCSEF organisations supported to convene and connect grassroots activity within localities. This is about enabling coordination, relationships and influence, not commissioning delivery, and ensuring neighbourhood insight informs wider systems such as Integrated Neighbourhood Teams.

Shared learning and accountability

The Council and the VCSEF will learn together, share data and insight responsibly, and be transparent about what is working and where improvements are needed. Progress will be monitored through shared governance and clear accountability, ensuring this strategy remains a living, evolving partnership rather than a static document.

Together, these commitments set a new direction for how City of Wolverhampton Council works with its voluntary, community social enterprise and faith sector, one that is bolder, fairer and more confident in the role communities play in shaping the city.

Through this strategy, the Council is making a clear corporate commitment to work in partnership with the VCS in a more consistent, transparent and accountable way.

By investing in relationships as well as resources, and by placing community leadership at the heart of local systems, we will ensure the voluntary and community sector continues to thrive and that every resident feels supported, included and able to flourish.

Introduction

Wolverhampton's voluntary and community sector is one of the city's greatest assets. It comprises a wide range of organisations, including charities, community groups, faith organisations, social enterprises, residents' associations, mutual aid groups and grassroots initiatives. These organisations work alongside communities to provide support, advocacy, information, activities and services that improve quality of life.

The sector brings distinctive value: it is close to communities, shaped by lived experience, and able to respond quickly to emerging needs. VCSEF organisations often support residents who face the greatest barriers or who may be underserved by statutory services. They offer safe, trusted spaces and person-centred support that reflects the diversity of Wolverhampton's communities.

This strategy sets out the City of Wolverhampton Council's approach to working with and alongside the voluntary and community sector (VCS). It establishes how we will strengthen partnership working, support the sustainability of the sector and create the conditions for VCSEF organisations to thrive.

While shaped by extensive engagement with local organisations and informed by national best practice, this is a Council strategy and a corporate commitment. It clarifies the Council's expectations, responsibilities and ways of working in relation to the VCS, and sets out the practical steps we will take to build stronger, more resilient communities through effective partnership.

> VCSEF plays an essential role in tackling inequalities, improving wellbeing and supporting residents

The strategy is designed to support organisations of all sizes, from emerging grassroots groups to larger citywide providers, and to ensure the Council's approach recognises, values and enables the full breadth of the sector to contribute to Wolverhampton's future.

Despite modest resources, Wolverhampton's voluntary and community sector (VCSEF) plays an essential role in tackling inequalities, improving wellbeing and supporting residents across their lives. The sector is often the first point of contact for people experiencing financial hardship, mental illhealth, youth and family challenges, community safety concerns, isolation, or barriers related to accessibility, inclusion or specific equality related needs. VCSEF organisations provide prevention, early intervention, crisis response and social connection, forming a vital part of the city's wider system.

The strength of Wolverhampton's voluntary, community, social enterprise and faith sector lies in its diversity, with organisations rooted in specific communities, causes and lived experiences. We recognise that this distinctiveness is essential to the sector's impact.

In an increasingly complex funding environment, organisations can face pressure to broaden or adapt their offer in ways that risk diluting their core purpose. Through this strategy, the Council is committed to supporting VCSEF organisations to remain clear about who they are, what they deliver and the unique value they bring, rather than encouraging a one size fits all approach.

This means valuing specialism as well as scale, recognising the importance of trusted relationships and community identity, and ensuring our funding, commissioning and partnership approaches enable organisations to build on their strengths rather than reshape themselves solely in response to funding opportunities.

National research consistently demonstrates that voluntary and community sector activity delivers strong social and economic returns. A 2025 government led Rapid Evidence Assessment reviewing 56 civil society valuation studies found that Social Return on Investment (SROI) methodologies regularly evidenced significant fiscal savings and high social value across sectors including health, employment, housing, domestic abuse, youth work and advice services.

Independent UK reviews show typical SROI ratios ranging from £1: £3–£10 for general community support programmes to £1 : £10–£20+ for specialist or preventative interventions, with some studies demonstrating even higher returns where crisis avoidance or long-term cost avoidance is achieved. These findings highlight the consistently strong value for money associated with community led solutions.

National SROI case studies compiled by Social Value UK further demonstrate that voluntary and community organisations create wide ranging public benefits, including improved wellbeing, reduced pressure on statutory services, increased employability, stronger community cohesion and greater financial stability for residents.

Over the last five years, the Council and wider public sector have collectively invested in excess of £50m into voluntary and community sector activity across Wolverhampton, through a mix of grants, commissioned services and partnership funding.

This strategy signals a clear commitment from the Council to work differently — more openly, more consistently and in genuine partnership with the voluntary and community sector.

Our City: Our Plan

Bigger picture overview

Our City: Our Plan sets out six cross cutting priorities for Wolverhampton.

The voluntary and community sector (VCSEF) is essential to achieving these priorities because it is trusted, deeply embedded in communities, and able to work with residents in ways that statutory services cannot always reach.

Through strong relationships, cultural understanding and community leadership, VCSEF organisations deliver support that improves outcomes and strengthens the city's social fabric.

Social enterprises, cooperatives and community businesses reinvest income locally, creating jobs, driving inclusive growth and strengthening neighbourhood economies. VCSEF led initiatives contribute to regeneration, support local supply chains and help retain the Wolverhampton Pound. The sector's local presence and social value make it a key partner in building a thriving, equitable economy across the city.

VCSEF organisations help build strong, resilient families by providing parenting support, youth mentoring, early help activities, safe community spaces and targeted programmes for children and young people. Their trusted relationships complement statutory services, particularly where families face multiple pressures or need support outside traditional service settings.

The VCSEF creates pathways into employment through volunteering, skills development, mentoring and community learning. Many organisations specialise in supporting those furthest from the labour market, including young people, disabled residents, people with long-term conditions, refugees and carers. Their community-based approach helps build confidence, capability and progression into good jobs and training.

Community groups play a vital role in supporting residents who require additional help to live well. They provide befriending, advocacy, disability support, mental health and wellbeing activities, social connection and peer networks. This relational support promotes independence, prevents escalation of need and combats loneliness, ensuring people feel valued, connected and able to live fulfilled lives.

Housing charities, residents' groups and neighbourhood-based organisations support residents to sustain tenancies, prevent homelessness and improve local environments. They provide advice, advocacy and early intervention, and lead community initiatives to make neighbourhoods safer, greener and better connected. Their local insight helps ensure housing and place-based priorities reflect community needs.

VCSEF organisations lead a wide range of wellbeing, cultural, sports and community-based health initiatives. They reach residents who are underserved by traditional services, delivering culturally appropriate and accessible support. Working alongside NHS Integrated Neighbourhood Teams and other partners, the sector helps reduce health inequalities and strengthen inclusive, community led approaches to wellbeing.

The voluntary and community sector in Wolverhampton

Wolverhampton's voluntary and community sector (VCSEF) is diverse, vibrant and deeply rooted in the city's communities. It includes charities, community groups, social enterprises, faith organisations, resident led groups, mutual aid networks, sports clubs, cultural associations and grassroots initiatives. Some operate citywide or regionally, while others are small, hyperlocal groups led entirely by residents.

This diversity gives the sector its strength. Larger organisations offer specialist services and advocacy, while smaller groups provide early help, trusted relationships and community led activities. Many VCSEF organisations are embedded within cultural, faith or neighbourhood communities, enabling them to offer support that is flexible, relational and culturally appropriate.

Most rely on volunteers, community leadership and modest funding, yet they play an essential role in tackling inequalities and supporting residents across their lives. Over the last 5 years, over £50m has been invested into the VCSEF by the local authority.

Wolverhampton does not yet have a fully definitive picture of the scale and makeup of its voluntary and community sector. This reflects a national challenge, where there is no single agreed definition of the VCSEF and data collection varies widely across organisations and funders.

The NCVO Civil Society Almanac identifies around 166,000 voluntary organisations across the UK, the majority of which are small or micro-organisations embedded in neighbourhoods.

National reviews, such as the UK Government's Rapid Evidence Assessment of valuation methods, highlight the diversity and complexity of civil society, with sub-sectors ranging from advice and employment support to faith, food provision, domestic abuse, youth work and health. This reflects the likely breadth of activity also present locally, even wherenot formally recorded.

What this means for Wolverhampton is that the true scale of the sector is almost certainly larger than current data suggests.

Many hyperlocal, volunteer-led, community-based groups operate outside formal systems, yet play an essential role in neighbourhood life and in supporting residents facing disadvantage.

Together, the available evidence indicates a large, diverse and active VCSEF ecosystem, with formal organisational data capturing only part of a much broader landscape of community action.

Although data remains incomplete, the available evidence shows that the VCS brings significant financial value into Wolverhampton. The VCSEF Sector Survey 2024, completed by **109 organisations, reported £35.37 million in income across just 46 respondents** and **£36.85 million in expenditure across 54 organisations**, demonstrating substantial financial activity even within a very small sample of the sector.

Surveyed organisations **also secured £2.9 million in new funding over a 12-month period**, with most grants around **£10,000,** illustrating both the diversity and fragility of income streams.

In addition, the survey recorded **189,854 volunteer hours across 5,119 volunteers — equivalent to £4.17 million in economic value** — again from only a fraction of organisations providing data.

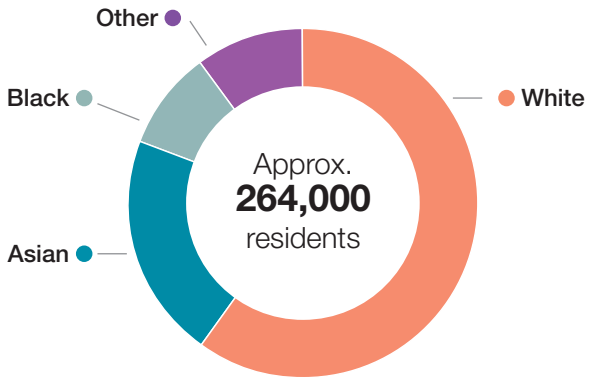
Taken together, these findings strongly suggest that the true financial value of Wolverhampton's VCSEF is far greater than current figures indicate. With more than 1,100 organisations identified locally and national evidence showing the majority of UK voluntary organisations are small or micro groups operating below formal data thresholds, the real economic contribution of the sector is likely to be significantly higher than the amounts currently captured.

VCSEF organisations are often deeply rooted within specific communities and are uniquely positioned to understand lived experience, reach underserved groups and respond flexibly to local need. As such, they are essential partners in tackling inequalities, strengthening inclusion and supporting residents to thrive. Wolverhampton's communities bring significant strengths, including social capital, resilience and cultural vibrancy.

However, these strengths sit alongside structural challenges that require coordinated, inclusive and place-based responses.

Please see some local data for information:

Wolverhampton has approximately 264,000 residents, with a younger age profile than the national average.



Around 60% of residents identify as White, with significant Asian (around 21%), Black (around 9%), mixed and other ethnic communities.

Levels of **disability and long-term health conditions** are above the national average, and some communities experience compounded disadvantage linked to income, health, housing and access to services.

While **Christianity** remains the largest religion, Wolverhampton has **one of the largest Sikh populations** in England alongside established **Muslim** and **other faith communities**.

Different neighbourhoods across the city have distinct demographic profiles, with some communities experiencing much higher levels of ethnic diversity, deprivation and health need than others.

Voluntary & community organisations

Community groups & local participation

- Community anchor organisations
- Community associations / community centres / community groups /community clubs
- Cooperatives (worker, community or multistakeholder)
- Neighbourhood forums
- Small grassroots voluntary groups
- Tenants' and residents' associations

Support, advice & advocacy

- Advice and advocacy organisations
- Food support groups (e.g., food banks, community pantries)
- Informal peer support groups
- Mutual aid groups
- Organised support groups

Faith-based organisations

- Faith-based organisations (all)
- Faith networks

Voluntary sector infrastructure & funders

- Charitable trusts and foundations
- Council for Voluntary Service (CVS) / local VCS infrastructure bodies
- Grant making bodies within the sector
- Local compacts or cross-sector partnership boards
- Umbrella organisations representing specific causes (e.g., disability networks, carers forums)
- Volunteer Centres

Social enterprises, trading models & community businesses

- Charities (all)
- Charities (trading)
- Community Benefit Societies (BenComs)
- Community businesses
- Community Interest Companies (CICs)
- Community transport providers
- Development trusts
- Housing organisations and cooperatives
- Social enterprise networks
- Social firms employing disadvantaged groups
- Socially trading organisations delivering paid for services

Infrastructure organisation

Wolverhampton's Council for Voluntary Service (CVS) / Local Infrastructure Organisation (LIO) provides essential support across the VCSEF sector, helping to strengthen governance, build organisational capacity and create the conditions for a resilient and effective ecosystem. Its role is to ensure that VCSEF organisations have access to the advice, tools and support they need to operate safely, confidently and sustainably.

The LIO offers a wide range of support, including training, governance advice, volunteer brokerage, funding guidance, organisational development and practical resources to help organisations meet legal, safeguarding and quality requirements. This support has directly enabled organisations to formalise their structures, secure charitable and community interest company status, strengthen governance arrangements and successfully access external funding. This support helps VCSEF groups to focus their energy on delivering frontline services while maintaining strong and compliant foundations.

Beyond direct support, the LIO plays a critical strategic role. It acts as a bridge between the Council and the wider sector, strengthening collaboration, promoting transparency, and helping ensure activity across the city is aligned with shared priorities. It contributes to system-wide partnerships, amplifies the voice of the sector and supports efforts to coordinate, reduce duplication and improve access to information and opportunities. In 2025 the LIO delivered nearly 200 one to one support interactions with over 100 VCSEF organisations, enabling them to better deliver their core services. The LIO also successfully secured and redistributed £294,000 to 43 different community groups across the city which represents a significant and tangible financial contribution to more than 2400 local people on projects that improved health, wellbeing, volunteering and community engagement. By providing this backbone of support and leadership, the LIO helps create a stronger, more connected and more resilient VCSEF across Wolverhampton It is a key partner in ensuring the sector can thrive, innovate and respond effectively to the needs of local communities.

Volunteering in Wolverhampton

Volunteering is a cornerstone of community life in Wolverhampton. Volunteers contribute thousands of hours each year, supporting food banks, befriending services, cultural activities, neighbourhood cleanups, youth clubs, sports groups and more. Their efforts strengthen social cohesion, extend the reach of community services and reduce pressure on statutory provision.

Volunteering benefits residents as well as communities. It builds confidence, skills, friendships and wellbeing. For many, volunteering provides a pathway into employment or education, particularly for young people, disabled residents, people returning to work, and those who need opportunities to develop experience or reconnect socially.

Wolverhampton has a large and active volunteering population, delivered through Wolverhampton Volunteers (WV), part of the LIO. WV actively supports volunteering in the city by offering brokerage, training, promotion and quality standards for organisations.

Scale and reach of volunteering

Wolverhampton has a large and active volunteering population, supported by a well-established infrastructure. Key current figures include:

- In 2025, Wolverhampton Volunteers recorded 1,071 volunteers registered year-to-date, reflecting continued growth in volunteer engagement across the city.
- Over 200 organisations in the city offer 400+ volunteering opportunities, demonstrating the diversity of roles available — from befriending and mentoring to environmental action, youth work and heritage projects.
- Locally, it is estimated that thousands of dedicated volunteers enable many vital services in Wolverhampton to operate, including food provision, community events and neighbourhood support.

These figures highlight a vibrant volunteering ecosystem and strong appetite among residents to contribute to their communities.

Volunteer demographics and motivations

Local data shows volunteers come from a wide range of backgrounds, with particularly high engagement among:

- **Young adults (19–44)** These figures indicate a shift away from the traditional volunteer profile which tended to show a much greater bias towards older (retired) individuals. The reasons for the increase in younger people volunteering in Wolverhampton may reflect the demand for seeking work experience, confidence building and develop social connections.
- **People experiencing loneliness or isolation**, who often reconnect socially through structured volunteering projects. Wolverhampton's Engage & Connect project specifically supports this group.
- **Residents seeking to build skills**, with many using volunteering to gain experience before entering or re-entering employment.
- **Older adults**, consistent with national trends showing strong participation among residents aged 65+.

It is acknowledged that these figures only capture a proportion of the number of volunteers activity contributing to the social and commercial economies in Wolverhampton. Many organisations recruit and manage volunteers independently, and informal and grassroots volunteering is not consistently recorded. Evidence from local providers suggests the true number of volunteers and volunteer hours across the city is significantly higher. National data also shows that 28% of adults in England volunteered formally at least once last year, which if extrapolated to Wolverhampton would suggest a figure of approximately **78,700 volunteers** being active within the city giving helpful wider context to Wolverhampton's local picture.

Community engagement – Love Your Community

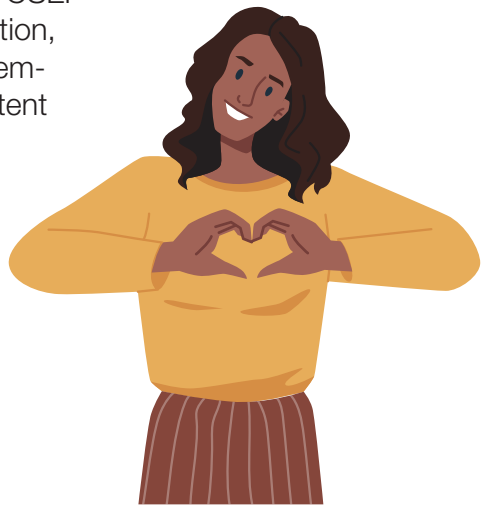
Love Your Community is City of Wolverhampton Council's strategic approach to strengthening relationships between residents, services and communities.

It provides a framework for meaningful engagement across the city, ensuring that residents can shape local priorities, influence decisions and work alongside partners, particularly the voluntary and community sector, to build stronger, more resilient neighbourhoods.

At its core, Love Your Community recognises that the VCS is often the connector, facilitator and trusted presence within local places. The approach is built on connection, visibility and partnership: it creates space for dialogue led by community organisations, celebrates the strengths and leadership already present in neighbourhoods, and promotes a shared responsibility for improving local places. Through regular presence in communities and an emphasis on inclusive engagement, Love Your Community ensures the Council, VCS partners and other agencies remain closely connected to the lived experiences of residents.

This strategy marks a renewed phase of investment in Love Your Community, building on what has worked to date, while strengthening its role as a core approach to neighbourhood working, partnership and community leadership.

The model aligns closely with wider neighbourhood and place-based approaches across the public sector, including NHS Integrated Neighbourhood Teams (INTs), police neighbourhood teams and housing providers. Embedding Love Your Community within these systems strengthens the role of the VCSEF as a key partner in early help, prevention, community cohesion and local problem-solving. It also supports more consistent and joined up engagement, reduces duplication and helps build the trusting relationships that underpin effective community led change.



LOVE YOUR COMMUNITY

Love Your Community is guided by four principles:

Raising the profile of communities

Showcasing strengths, achievements and community leadership, including the contribution of local groups, volunteers and lived experience led organisations.

Bringing residents together

Creating safe, inclusive spaces for connection and conversation, often facilitated by VCSEF organisations who hold deep community trust.

Creating resilient and self-sufficient communities

Empowering people to access information, support each other and influence local priorities, with the VCSEF playing a central role in building confidence, skills and local networks.

Growing communities

Supporting personal development, wellbeing and long-term capacity within neighbourhoods, working alongside VCSEF partners who are embedded in community life.

By working in partnership with the voluntary and community sector, the Council will continue to embed these principles across locality working and neighbourhood models. Love Your Community aims to ensure that the voices, strengths and ambitions of residents, amplified by the organisations who support them every day, shape priorities and services across the city. Through this shared approach, Wolverhampton can build stronger, more connected and more confident communities.

Community cohesion

Community cohesion supports unity, inclusion and resilience across Wolverhampton. The cohesion team works closely with statutory agencies, community organisations and faith groups to address local concerns, strengthen relationships and promote shared values.

A key part of this work is building strong networks across communities. This includes open forums, faith-based networks and regular engagement that enables residents and partners to share concerns, improve understanding and develop collective solutions.

The team provides early identification of tensions, working with partners to monitor issues, respond to misinformation, promote constructive dialogue and support deescalation. This includes proactive work with young people and with communities affected by national or global events, ensuring people feel heard and supported.

Promoting cultural awareness, supporting community led events and fostering shared identity are central to cohesion. Through targeted initiatives, relationship building and capacity building support, the Council helps create neighbourhoods where residents feel safe, valued and connected.

By working closely with the voluntary and community sector, cohesion efforts are rooted in local insight and community leadership. This shared approach strengthens trust, reduces isolation and contributes to a more united and resilient city.

Social economy

Wolverhampton's social economy includes social enterprises, cooperatives, community businesses and other mission led organisations that reinvest profits locally. These organisations combine a social purpose with a trading model, enabling them to generate income while delivering services, opportunities and support that directly benefit communities.

The social economy plays a vital role in promoting inclusive and sustainable growth. Social enterprises create jobs, offer training and development opportunities, and support residents who may face barriers to entering the formal labour market. They often work in areas such as wellbeing, environmental sustainability, culture, digital inclusion, food security and community development, providing localised solutions that are rooted in lived experience and community insight.

Many social economy organisations are strongly connected to neighbourhoods and are able to respond quickly to emerging needs. Their capacity to innovate, diversify ncome streams and reinvest in communities strengthens Wolverhampton's overall economic resilience. They also contribute to community wealth building, ensuring that resources, investment and opportunities circulate locally and support residents and neighbourhoods directly.

The social economy is therefore a critical part of Wolverhampton's wider voluntary and community sector. By nurturing community led enterprise, encouraging collaborative business models and enabling mission driven organisations to thrive, the city can build a more inclusive, fair and sustainable local economy, one that places people, purpose and community benefit at its heart.

How the strategy was developed

The development of this strategy was grounded in extensive engagement with Wolverhampton's voluntary and community sector and Council officers working with the sector.

This approach ensures the strategy reflects the real experiences, challenges and ambitions of those delivering community support across the city, as well as the insights of teams within the Council who commission, fund, collaborate with and rely on the VCSEF.

Codesign workshops

In January 2026, the Council facilitated seven themed workshops with a broad cross section of VCSEF organisations. These sessions explored:

1. **The key issues facing VCSEF organisations**
2. **Opportunities for improvement and collaboration**
3. **What success should look like over the next three years**

The workshops generated a rich qualitative evidence base, which was analysed to identify crosscutting themes such as:

- Funding stability and core cost pressures
- Clarity of roles and relationships
- System fragmentation and duplication
- Commissioning fairness and resource disparity
- Operational capacity and infrastructure gaps
- Volunteer recruitment and lived experience involvement
- Procurement challenges
- Partnership culture and behaviours

To complement the workshops, the Council invited written submissions from VCSEF organisations and networks. These provided deeper reflections on financial sustainability, system leadership, infrastructure roles, ethical partnership expectations and long-term improvements needed in the VCSEF ecosystem.

These submissions strengthened and validated the themes identified during engagement sessions.

Online consultation

An online consultation enabled organisations who were unable to attend the workshops to comment on the consultation.

This broader engagement affirmed the workshop findings and further highlighted priorities such as fair funding, clearer partnership arrangements, improved system coordination and expectations around behaviour and collaboration.

Internal engagement with council teams

Council officers working directly with the VCSEF provided insight into:

- Procurement, Commissioning and grant processes
- Operational challenges in service delivery
- Gaps in system alignment and coordination
- Pressure on organisations delivering statutory equivalent services

This helped ensure the strategy aligns with service pressures, local priorities and the practical realities of partnership working.

Consultation

In June 2026, the draft document went through an eight-week period of formal consultation.

Further engagement took place with:

- Community and voluntary sector organisations including faith and culturally specific networks
- The Voluntary Sector Alliance,
- NHS partners involved in Integrated Neighbourhood Teams (INTs)
- Other Public Sector Partners

This ensures the strategy aligns with wider system objectives and supports neighbourhood-based approaches across sectors.

Evidence review and benchmarking

The Council reviewed strategies from comparable local authorities, national guidance and established partnership models (including Compact/Civil Covenant approaches) to inform best practice on coordination, commissioning fairness, infrastructure design and sector development.

From engagement to strategy

The findings from all engagement activity directly informed:

- The vision and partnership principles
- Commitments around commissioning fairness and multiyear funding
- Clarity of roles and expectations
- Priorities for coordination, shared intelligence and reducing duplication
- Support for volunteers and lived experience involvement
- Proposals for a refreshed Compact/Civil Covenant
- Expectations around ethical behaviour and collaboration

This strategy is therefore the product of collaborative design, rooted in lived experience, shaped by sector voices, and grounded in the practical realities of organisations and officers working across Wolverhampton's communities.

The vision

Our vision is for a Wolverhampton where strong, confident and connected communities shape the future of the city. A place where the voluntary and community sector stands as an equal partner — trusted, rooted in lived experience, and supported to thrive. Together, we will build a fairer, more resilient Wolverhampton: one where local people lead change, neighbourhoods flourish, and the VCSEF is recognised nationally as the driving force behind inclusive, community-led change.

Equalities – A core principle

We recognise that many of the challenges facing residents are best addressed at neighbourhood level. To support this, we will develop a place-based partnership approach that strengthens Voluntary and Community Sector coordination within localities.

Working alongside the citywide infrastructure organisation, we will support established VCSEF organisational leaders to act as locality partnership leads. Organisations would be able to leverage against the expertise of leaders within their locality to strengthen and share opportunities.

Through this strategy, the council commits to:

- Embedding equality, diversity and inclusion principles in all partnership working
- Working with the infrastructure organisation and VCSEF partners to strengthen representation from diverse communities in strategic forums
- Monitoring inequalities and using evidence to inform commissioning, funding and engagement
- Supporting culturally competent, community led approaches that reflect the diversity of Wolverhampton
- Developing an Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) for this strategy, ensuring its commitments address and reduce disproportionate impacts

By working alongside the VCSEF, we aim to build a fairer city where every resident feels respected, included and able to thrive — regardless of background or circumstance.

Place based partnership model

We recognise that many of the challenges facing residents are best addressed at neighbourhood level. To support this, we will develop a place-based partnership approach that strengthens Voluntary and Community Sector coordination within localities.

Working alongside the citywide infrastructure organisation, we will support established VCSEF organisational leaders to act as locality partnership leads. Organisations would be able to leverage against the expertise of leaders within their locality to strengthen and share opportunities.

The Community Partnership Lead would provide:

Leadership & coordination that:

- Builds sustainable, hyperlocal leadership that outlasts funding cycles.
- Aligns community services and reduces duplication across partners.

Community insight & inclusion that:

- Ensures community insight, lived experience and local priorities shape early help, health, inclusion and neighbourhood approaches.
- Shares intelligence about local needs, inequalities, and emerging issues.

System connection & partnership working that:

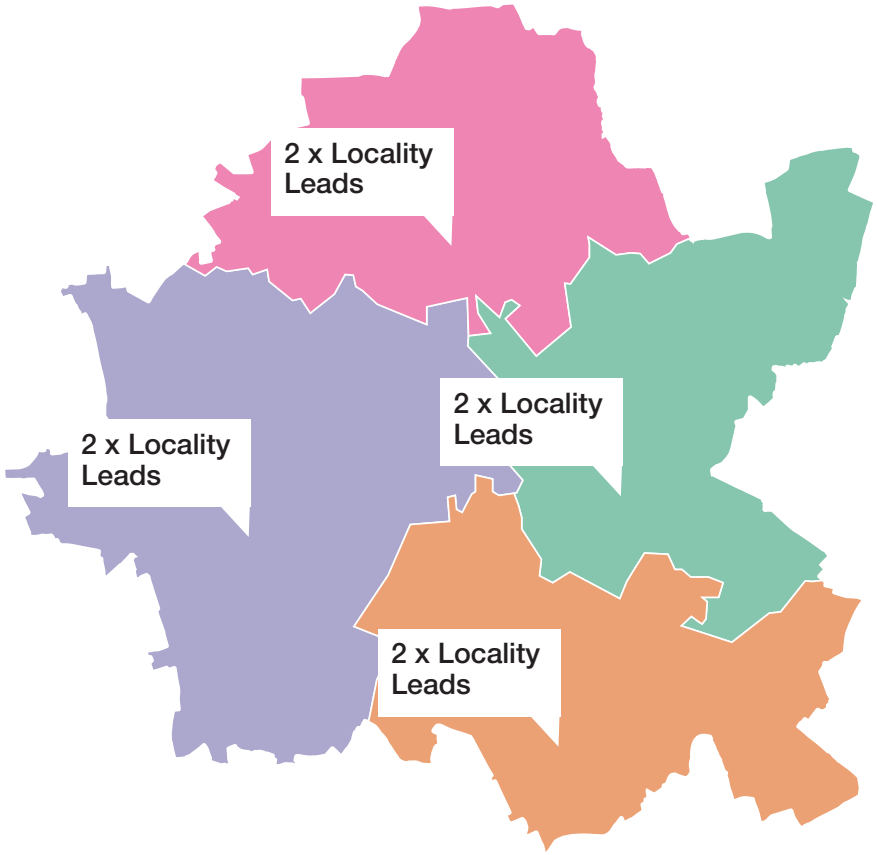
- Supports relationships between grassroots groups and the wider system.
- Pools resources such as staff time, buildings, data and funding to achieve shared goals.
- Strengthens voice and influence by advocating collectively to the Council, NHS partners and funders.

The allocation of 15 days per year is designed as seeded coordination capacity, rather than a commissioned delivery programme. It provides dedicated time for local lead organisations to convene partners, strengthen relationships, share intelligence and support alignment across the locality. Local authority colleagues can utilise the expertise within this model to support strategic plans- such as priorities for public health's Integrated Neighbourhood Model, family hubs and the Pride in Place scheme. This is seeded coordination capacity,not commissioned delivery. The Community Partnership Place Based Model is rooted in the priorities set out in the Wolverhampton Voluntary and Community Sector Strategy. The model provides a practical way of delivering these priorities at neighbourhood level translating those strategic priorities into a practical proportionate approach.

Maintaining organisational identity within place-based working

While strengthening coordination at neighbourhood level, this approach is not intended to reshape or standardise the role of individual VCSEF organisations. We recognise that the effectiveness of the sector lies in its diversity, with organisations bringing different specialisms, relationships and community leadership rooted in their own purpose.

Through this model, the Council will support collaboration and connection without expecting organisations to dilute their mission or adapt their identity to fit a single model of delivery. Instead, placebased partnership working will build on the strengths of existing organisations, enabling them to contribute in ways that reflect their unique role, expertise and trusted relationships within communities.



Our priorities

How the priorities were shaped

The priorities in this strategy were shaped through a collaborative process involving VCSEF organisations across Wolverhampton. Over several weeks, we invited all members of the Council's VCSEF Leaders Network to take part in seven interactive workshops, an online survey and the option to submit written reflections. Together, participants explored three key questions: the biggest issues currently facing the sector, the practical actions that would make the greatest difference, and a future focused vision imagining what a thriving VCSEF should look like by 2029.

This rich engagement surfaced clear themes: the challenges organisations face, the solutions they believe are most achievable, and the criteria they associate with genuine success. These insights directly informed the priorities set out in this strategy. A summary of the emerging priorities was then shared back with the VCSEF Leaders Network in February 2026 for final discussion and refinement before being woven into the strategy document.

A thriving sector

Nurture talent and leadership

Working together with our VCSEF partners, we will nurture the development of skills, leadership and workforce capacity across the sector. We will work collaboratively to widen access to training, strengthen peer learning networks and support leadership development opportunities for people at all levels.

Consider VCSEF delivery before recruiting or launching new services

Taking a collaborative, 'VCSEF first' approach when designing or reviewing services, while recognising that any commissioning or procurement decisions must comply with procurement legislation. Working alongside VCSEF organisations from the earliest stages, we will explore whether they are already delivering, or could deliver, services before creating new in-house provision or commissioning external alternatives where appropriate. This includes open dialogue, transparent communication and fair consideration of local knowledge, expertise and community reach.

Strengthen infrastructure organisations

Working in partnership with local infrastructure bodies to ensure they have the stability and resources needed to support the wider sector. Recognising their essential role in coordination, capacity building, volunteering support and advocacy, we will collaborate closely to understand emerging needs and respond together.

Supporting financial robustness

Supporting sustainable funding approaches that help VCSEF organisations plan for the long term. This includes offering multiyear funding where possible, simplifying grant processes, ensuring timely payments and being open about future funding intentions where the Council has the ability to do so. We will also support partners to explore blended funding models and support organisations to strengthen and diversify their income.

Strengthening relationships between the VCSEF and local businesses

Bringing VCSEF organisations and local businesses together to build purposeful, mutually beneficial partnerships. This includes promoting shared community goals, encouraging skills and resource exchange, supporting employee volunteering and enabling investment that strengthens the sector's ability to deliver for communities.

Supporting safer, greener, cleaner neighbourhoods

Collaborating with VCSEF organisations and local communities to create neighbourhoods that are safe, environmentally sustainable and well cared for. This includes supporting community led safety initiatives, promoting environmental stewardship, encouraging active travel volunteering opportunities, and working together on projects that improve local spaces. By empowering residents and partnering with the VCSEF, we aim to build neighbourhoods where people feel connected, proud and able to thrive.

Reinforcing and upholding civil society

Promoting the social economy

Working together with our VCSEF partners, social enterprises, cooperatives and community led organisations, we will champion the growth of an inclusive and resilient social economy. We will collaborate to widen access to markets, strengthen social value in commissioning, and create opportunities for community owned and mission driven organisations to thrive as part of a fairer local economy.

Improving and sustaining volunteering

Working collaboratively with our infrastructure organisation and partners to build a resilient, accessible and rewarding volunteering ecosystem. This includes supporting high quality volunteer management, removing barriers to participation, expanding inclusive volunteering opportunities and celebrating the contribution that volunteers make to our communities.

Developing and promoting the national Civil Society Covenant and the Wolverhampton Covenant

Upholding these shared principles in the way we work with VCSEF partners, using them to guide our relationships, decision making and engagement. Together, we will coproduce and refresh the Covenant previously known as or Wolverhampton Compact with VCSEF organisations to ensure it reflects shared values, mutual expectations and the lived realities of partnership working. By committing to these principles collectively, we will strengthen trust, transparency and accountability across sectors.

A collaborative sector which supports each other

Building partnerships across sectors

Together with our VCSEF partners, the public sector, businesses, health organisations, Police, and educational institutions, we will foster meaningful and purposeful collaboration. We will create regular opportunities for cross sector dialogue, support joint initiatives and encourage shared problem solving. By breaking down silos and aligning resources, we will build partnerships rooted in trust and collective action that deliver better outcomes for residents.

Shared ways of working

Working alongside VCSEF partners to uphold a culture of respect, fairness and accountability across all sectors. We will listen to concerns about poor behaviour, discrimination or unfair treatment. We will maintain clear and accessible routes for raising concerns, act transparently when issues are reported and collaborate to resolve problems constructively and improve practice.

Embedding coproduction

As a shared way of working, we aim to ensure that residents and VCSEF organisations are involved from the earliest stages of shaping policies, services and strategies. This includes creating inclusive and accessible spaces for collaboration, valuing lived experience as expertise, and working as equal partners — reflecting the principles set out in the Council's Co Production Charter.

Our approach is rooted in the Charter's commitments to welcome and meaningful involvement, shared understanding, open and honest dialogue, and recognising the unique skills and knowledge that every participant brings. This means providing information in accessible formats, allowing time to prepare and participate fully, and ensuring conversations happen transparently rather than "behind closed doors."

By embedding these principles into how we work with the voluntary and community sector, we aim to co design solutions that reflect real experiences, strengthen trust, and improve outcomes for communities. Coproduction will be a consistent expectation across this strategy, ensuring the voices of residents and VCSEF partners shape decisions, influence priorities and drive meaningful, long term change.

Council-owned community assets

The Council recognises its community centres and community buildings as important local assets that support connection, activity and neighbourhood resilience. These spaces are often at the heart of community life and provide a vital base for VCSEF organisations to deliver services, run activities and engage residents.

We will work in partnership with the VCSEF sector to ensure that Councilowned community centres are welcoming, accessible and responsive to the needs of local communities. This includes shaping how spaces are used, supporting community-led activity, and ensuring these assets contribute to thriving neighbourhoods and strong local networks.

Engagement which elevates VCSEF voice

Sharing information and data

Working with VCSEF partners to develop clear, accessible and secure ways of sharing information and data. Together, using data sharing agreements, we will improve the flow of insight between sectors, reduce duplication and enable better, evidence informed decision making. Our aim is to create a shared understanding of community needs and opportunities that strengthens the work of all partners.

Championing the sector

Promoting the value, impact and innovation of the VCSEF within local, regional and national systems. Working alongside partners, we will advocate for the sector in strategic discussions, highlight achievements and aim to ensure contributions shape policy development. We will support VCSEF organisations to tell their own stories and strengthen their collective voice.

Leading designated forums

Working with partners to provide strong, facilitative leadership for designated cross sector forums, ensuring they are purposeful, inclusive and action focused. These forums will be spaces where relationships are strengthened, activity is coordinated and partners move forward together on shared priorities

Amplifying unheard voices

Actively collaborating with VCSEF organisations to reach and elevate the voices of marginalised and under-represented communities. Working with partners who hold trusted relationships within these communities, supporting participatory and co-productive approaches to decision making and ensuring lived experience meaningfully shapes policy, service design and strategic priorities.

The sector and partners learning together

Engaging with service users and the VCSEF before awarding contracts

Working with service users and VCSEF organisations as appropriate to encourage meaningful discussions before any contract is tendered. Together, we will listen to lived experience, understand community needs and draw on the expertise of frontline organisations. This shared insight will help shape more effective, person-centred commissioning.

VCSEF representation on strategic boards

Working with the sector to secure strong and diverse VCSEF representation on key strategic boards and decision-making groups. This means ensuring VCSEF voices are not only present but influential, with clear and supported routes for feeding in insight and shaping priorities. We will collaborate with partners to identify representatives and appropriately assist confident and effective participation.

Recognising VCSEF data and insights

Valuing and utilising the rich data, intelligence and lived experience insights held by VCSEF organisations. Working together, we will incorporate community level evidence into planning and decision making, recognising the sector's unique reach into marginalised and under-represented groups. VCSEF insight will be treated as a component of a balanced evidence base.

Peer review and best practice sharing

In partnership with VCSEF organisations, we will promote a culture of continuous learning, supporting peer reviews and the sharing of best practice across the VCSEF and public sector. This includes creating opportunities for organisations to learn from one another, facilitating thematic learning networks and encouraging honest reflection about what works. Our aim is to strengthen collective capability and drive improvement through openness, collaboration and shared learning.

What success will look like by 2029

- VCSEF organisations report fairer, more transparent relationships with the Council underpinned by a consistent approach
- Examples of strong partnership working across the sector with organisational collaborations to deliver services
- Increased numbers of volunteers within the city
- Increased capacity building and learning opportunities through the Place Based Partnerships
- Organisations report the benefits of the place Based Partnerships model
- Earlier involvement in service design
- Clearer local coordination at neighbourhood level
- Volunteers and lived experience playing a visible role in shaping services

How the priorities will be monitored

Delivery of this strategy will be monitored through clear governance, shared accountability and a whole Council approach to implementation. The strategy will be embedded within existing statutory and cross sector partnership structures, ensuring that progress is visible, coordinated and firmly aligned with citywide priorities.

Embedding within statutory boards

Oversight of the strategy will sit across Wolverhampton's key statutory and strategic boards, including the Wolverhampton Health and Wellbeing Board, Wolverhampton Safeguarding Together, and the Safer Wolverhampton Partnership. These boards collectively span health, community safety, safeguarding, and wider wellbeing, ensuring that the strategy is recognised and championed at the highest level.

Shared ownership with the voluntary and community sector

Both the Council and voluntary and community organisations will formally sign up to the strategy and its partnership principles. This reflects a shared commitment to collaboration, fairness, respect and joint problem solving, with expectations clearly set out for how partners will work together.

A whole council corporate commitment

This will be adopted as a corporate policy, rather than a programme owned by a single service area. All Council directorates will contribute to the delivery of the strategy, with work programmes developed to embed its principles across commissioning, engagement, neighbourhood working, governance, volunteering, equalities and partnership development. This ensures consistency, reduces duplication, and strengthens alignment across the organisation.

A delivery plan to turn strategy into action

A detailed delivery plan will be developed following publication of the strategy. This plan will translate strategic priorities into practical actions, with timescales, responsible leads, resource requirements and success measures. The delivery plan will be reviewed and updated annually to ensure it remains responsive to emerging needs, system changes and sector insight.

Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)

A set of Key Performance Indicators will be developed to measure progress against the strategy's priorities.

Performance will be monitored through statutory boards and routine reporting mechanisms, with regular feedback loops to VCSEF partners.

Transparent reporting and continuous learning Progress will be reported openly to partners, with a commitment to sharing insight, celebrating achievements and learning from challenges. This ensures the strategy remains a living document — evolving in partnership and grounded in real experience across the city.

You can get this information in large print, braille, audio or in another language by calling 01902 551155 or emailing translations@wolverhampton.gov.uk

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