

Voluntary and Community Sector Strategy

2026

DRAFT



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, mental ill-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:



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.

● 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.

● 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 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.

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:

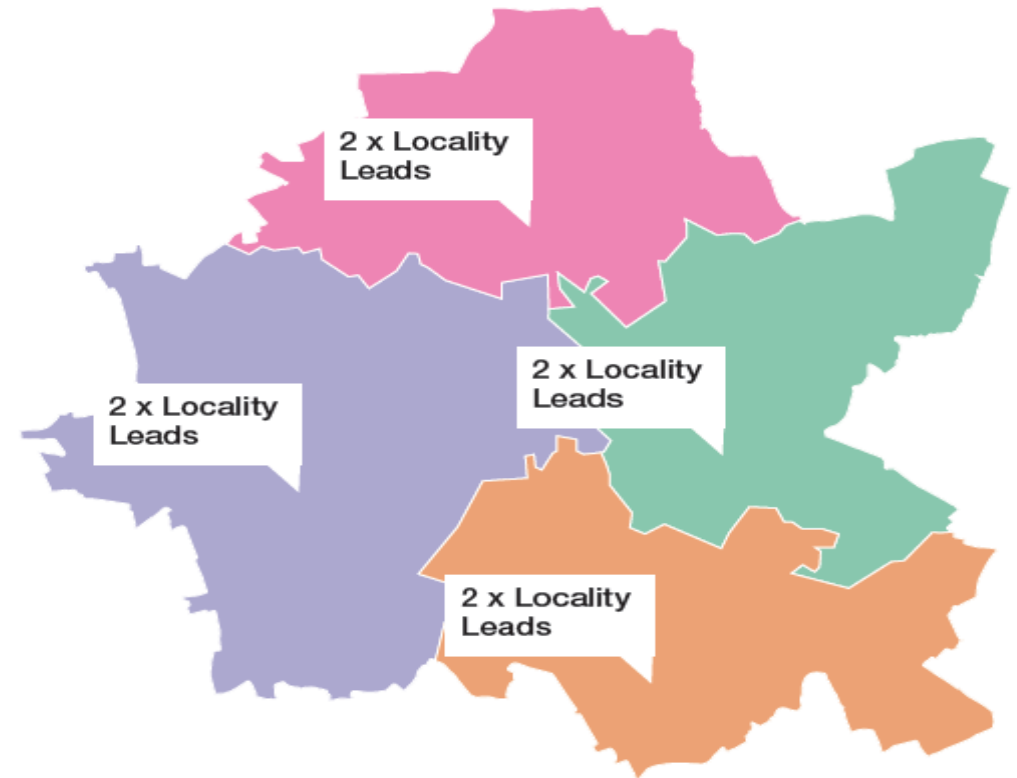
- Supports relationships between grassroots groups and the wider system.
- Pools resources such as staff time, buildings, data and funding to achieve shared goals.
- Strengthens voice and influence by advocating collectively to the Council, NHS partners and funders.

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