



## VCSEA State of the Sector Survey Feedback Report June 2022

### 1. Background and Methodology

In early 2022, Shropshire's Voluntary and Community Sector Assembly (VCSEA) conducted its first 'State of the Sector' survey since 2017. The aim of the survey was to evaluate the current needs of VCSE organisations, as well as to evidence the value of the sector to the county.

While a State of the Sector Survey had not been conducted in several years, other surveys of the VCSE sector in Shropshire have provided important insights during the intervening years. These include the 2019 VCS Value Report, 2021 SALC and Communities Survey, and a 2020 Covid-19 Report, all of which were produced in partnership with the VCSEA and the Shropshire Council Insight and Engagement Team. These previous studies provide some important comparison points for this current report.

Other important comparisons can be made between the findings in this study and some recent national reports with implications for the VCSE sector in the UK as a whole. These include the NCVO Respond, Recover, Reset<sup>1</sup> report, The Value of Small in a Big Crisis<sup>2</sup> report and the ACEVO Home Truths<sup>3</sup> report.

The 2022 VCSEA State of the Sector Survey was conducted in the context of an ongoing, though waning, worldwide pandemic that began in 2020 and at the early stages of a looming cost-of-living crisis in the UK. Additionally, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, causing a European refugee crisis and additional economic concerns for the sector and the UK more broadly. Despite all of these contextual constraints, 47 organisations responded to the lengthy survey questionnaire, and the VCSEA especially thanks them for their valuable time in helping to complete this study.

The survey was open to all voluntary groups, charities, and social enterprise organisations between February 15 and March 31 2022 (six weeks). The survey was promoted through the VCSEA weekly newsletter, social media accounts, the Shropshire Council newsroom, partner networks, including Shropshire food banks and Community Connectors meetings, and a brief advertisement on BBC Radio Shropshire.

Analysis of quantitative results was conducted using Microsoft Excel. Non-responses were eliminated from the analysis or coded as "Not applicable/don't know" where appropriate. Open-ended question

<sup>1</sup> ["Respond, Recover Reset: Two Years On."](#) March 2022. Nottingham Trent University, Sheffield Hallam University and NCVO.

<sup>2</sup> Dayson et al. ["The 'Value of Small' in a Big Crisis."](#) February 2021. Sheffield Hallam University, Lloyds Bank Foundation.

<sup>3</sup> Lingaya et al. ["Home Truths: Undoing Racism and Delivering Real Diversity in the Charity Sector."](#) December 2021. Voice4Change England, ACEVO.

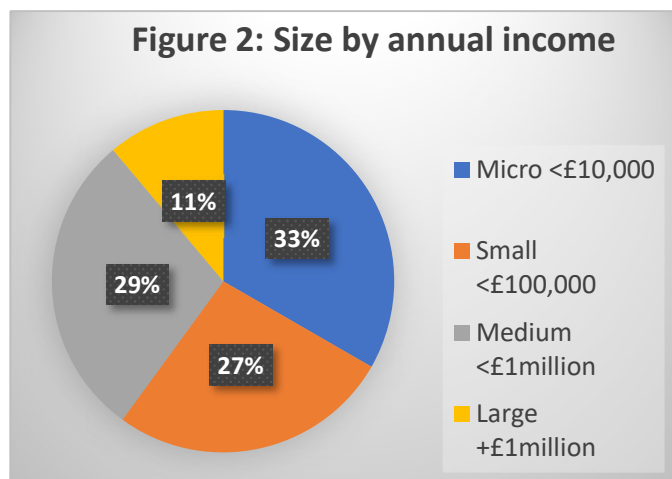
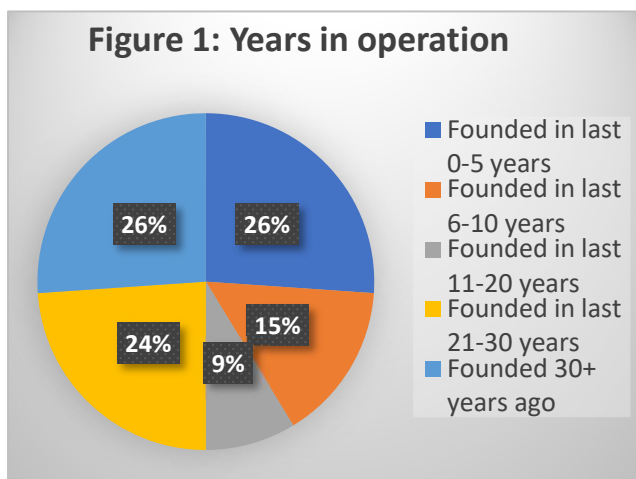
responses were thematically grouped for the purposes of organised presentation and this grouping is explained contextually below. Sometimes one comment is used to illustrate a larger thematic grouping.

## 2. Survey respondents

Overall, 47 organisations responded at least in part to the survey, which is less than 3% of the total number of registered charitable organisations in Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin. While pre-pandemic survey response rates were often much higher (the 2017 survey saw over 100 responses, or 6% of all VCSE organisations in the county), reports produced in the past two years have lower response rates, akin to the numbers responding to this survey. Since distribution methodologies remain similar across all surveys, it is assumed that these discrepancies can be attributed to the pandemic’s impacts on organisational capacity to participate in time-consuming responses to surveys of this kind.

Despite the fairly low response rate, the respondents to the survey varied quite widely in terms of number of years in operation, their size (measured by annual income), and their services provided. As **Figure 1** shows, there were approximately as many organisations responding to this survey who have been operating in Shropshire for over 30 years as there were organisations who only formed in the past 0-5 years (26% each), with a good spread of organisations founded in the years between.

Annual income was less varied, but in line with national trends<sup>4</sup>, with approximately 60% of organisations responding falling into the NCVO classification of a “micro” or “small” organisation, making less than £100,000 of annual income (see **Figure 2**).



There was a range of geographical location of organisations’ activities reported in the survey as well, with organisations operating all over Shropshire (**Figure 3**). Respondents were asked to give open-ended responses to the question “in what geographical area does your organisation carry out its activities?” Coverage of all of Shropshire or all of Shropshire, Telford & Wrekin was most represented among the survey respondents.<sup>5</sup> Regionally within the county, the South of Shropshire had the most coverage among respondents.

<sup>4</sup> Approximately 67% of the 412 panel respondents in the “Respond, Recover, Reset” study fell into these two categories.

<sup>5</sup> Given the nature of the open-ended responses, it was unclear whether “all of Shropshire” or “Shropshire” responses meant the whole of the county area of Shropshire (i.e. Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin) or meant the Council area of Shropshire. That is why these are distinctive in the results shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Geographical Coverage of Activity

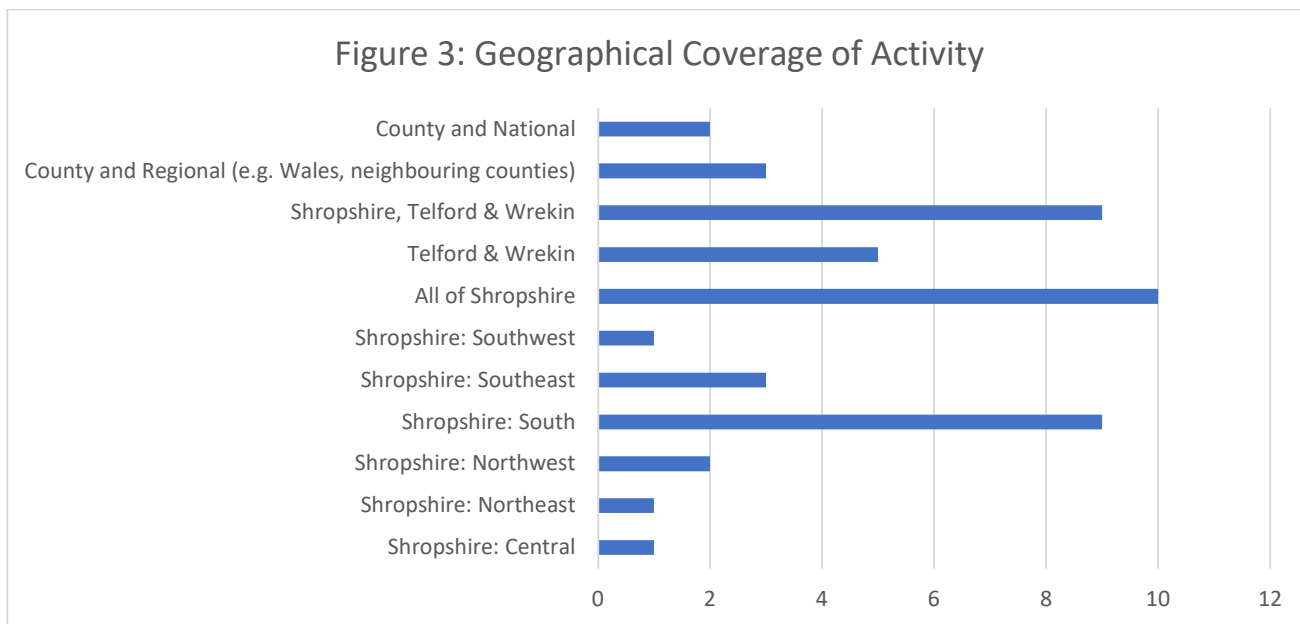
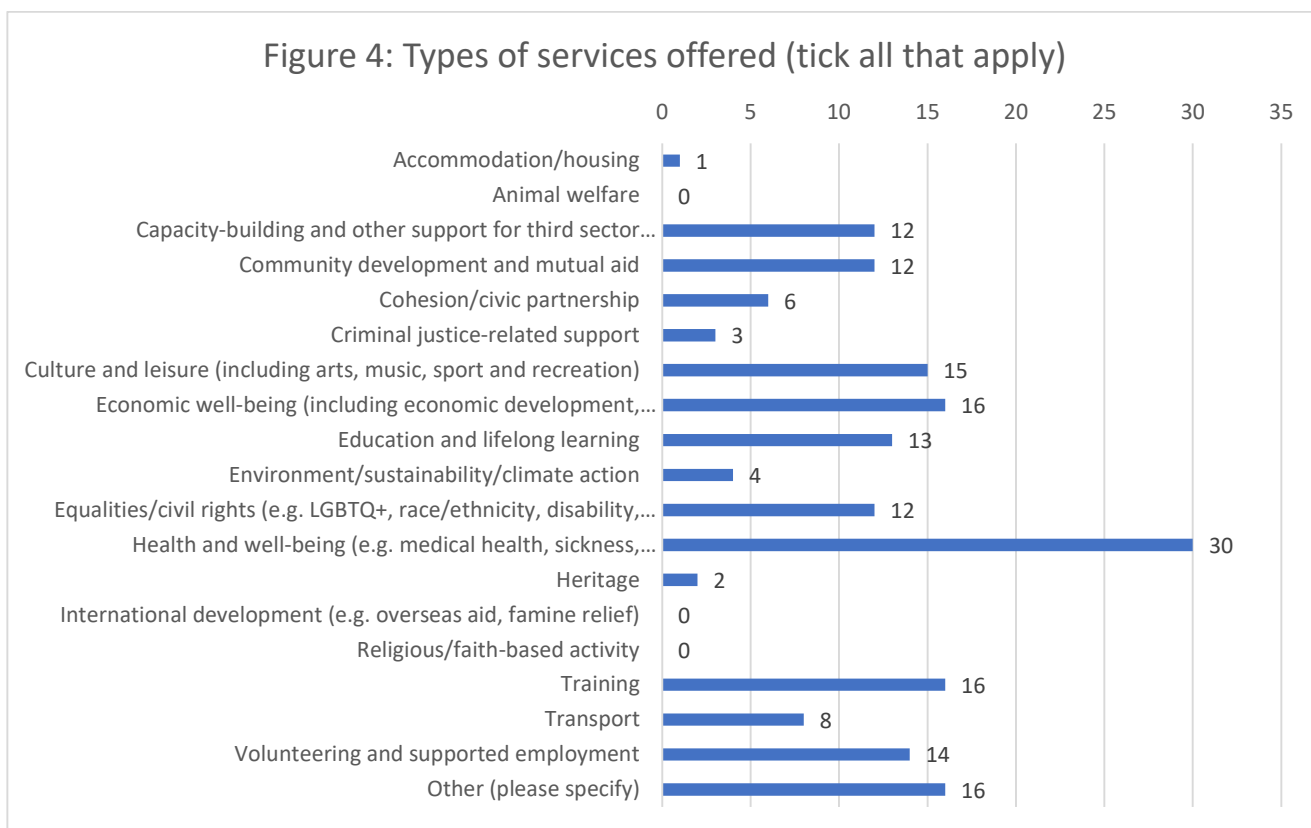


Figure 4: Types of services offered (tick all that apply)



**Figure 4** shows a fairly even distribution of services across the organisations, with a few outliers. For instance, a large majority of organisations (30 total, out of 47) noted that they provided health and wellbeing services. While this is an “outlier” in terms of numbers, it is in fact probably an accurate picture of both the need for large numbers of health and wellbeing services and the large number of organisations meeting that need at least in part with their services. Shropshire’s demographics at the last census indicated an over 65 population higher than the national average, and 18.6% of the population described themselves as having a limiting long-term illness.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> See Shropshire’s [Population Theme Report](#) following the 2011 census.

Meanwhile, gaps in services among respondents are also evident, with no organisations saying they provided animal welfare, international development, or religious/faith-based activities. It is unclear whether these gaps are county-wide, whether they represent gaps in VCSA membership, or are simply due to a low response rate for the survey not picking up these service providers.

Some insight on these gaps can be gleaned from the Charities Commission data for Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin. According to these data, six registered charities are associated with animal welfare, and two are associated with overseas aid, famine relief or religious activities, so it is likely that low actual numbers account for these gaps in the results shown in **Figure 4**. By contrast, 87 registered charities in the Charities Commission dataset identify with religious activities of some kind, so it is possible that this gap is partly related to a VCSA membership gap, rather than simply low numbers of such organisations in the county. It is also possible that some branches of religiously affiliated organisations (such as food banks) may belong to the VCSA but did not list their activities as religiously based, since those branches are not specifically providing religiously based services.

Accommodation and Housing is another outlier, where there are 27 registered charities identified in the Charities Commission data as providing this type of service, whereas there is only one organisation offering this service in this sample. While many social housing organisations partner with VCSA organisations on projects such as money advice and digital support, they often work using a different model to most of the VCSE organisations in Shropshire, and so operate in effect as a separate sector in the county.

### 3. Value of the sector

#### Income and expenditure

According to data from the Charity Commission, there were 1,682 registered charitable organisations operating in Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin in 2021. These charities brought in a total annual income of £589,912,052 and spent just a little more - £592,234,634. While these data do not account for the VCSE community sector as a whole (most notably missing charitable enterprises such as CICs), it does help to provide a one measure of the value that the sector brings to the Shropshire economy. In comparison, the Gross Trading Profit of Shropshire businesses in the same year was just under £1.4 billion.<sup>7</sup> Even considering that these two measures are not strictly 'apples to apples' comparisons, it does illustrate that the voluntary and community sector is a major contributor to the Shropshire economy.

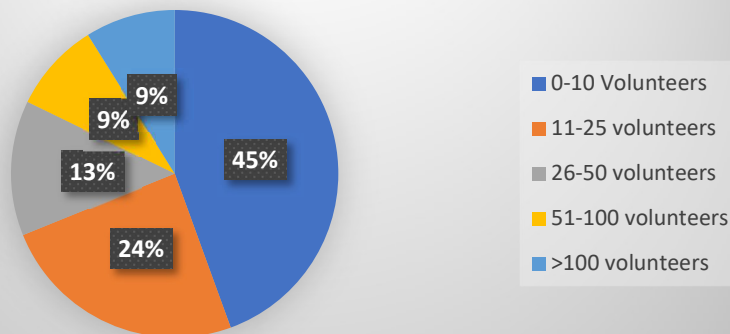
Shropshire Charities:  
£590m income and  
£592m expenditure  
last year

#### Volunteers

Of the 47 organisations that responded to the survey, 45 answered the question of how many volunteers worked for their organisation (**Figure 5**). The majority of respondents are relatively small organisations in terms of their number of engaged volunteers, with 45% of organisations reporting that they engaged 0-10 volunteers per year, and 24% reporting they engaged 11-25. Only 9% of those taking the survey responded that they engage over 100 volunteers per year.

<sup>7</sup> Gross trading profit is the operating profit of private market entities other than sole traders. It is gross (i.e. with no deduction) of capital consumption. Source: Regional Gross Value Added dataset. Accessed 18.5.22. [Regional gross value added \(income approach\) - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](https://www.ons.gov.uk/government/collections/regional-gross-value-added-dataset)

**Figure 5: Number of volunteers with organisation**



Survey respondents reported annual volunteer hours totalling 876,850, or an average of 411 hours (approximately 59 working days) per organisation per year. When considering that these volunteers donated the equivalent of an hourly wage, this equates to £14,090,979.50 in social value for Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin in the last year. If the survey results are averaged and extrapolated to the total number of charities registered in Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin (1,682), it is possible to estimate that charities alone account for 35,947,704 annual volunteer hours or approximately **£578 million in social value per year**.

Shropshire Charities:  
35,947,704 volunteer  
hours = £578m in  
social value

### Employees

The NCVO estimates that in 2021 3% of those employed in the UK were employed by the voluntary sector, so with approximately 151,000<sup>8</sup> employed in Shropshire, we can estimate that the charity sector employs around 4,530 in Shropshire alone (which does not even account for the number of jobs created by social enterprises). This represents over £137 million in social value to the county.<sup>9</sup> While full data are not yet available at the county level for social enterprise, there is data for the West Midlands on Community Interest Companies. These statistics indicate that Community Interest Companies in the West Midlands region are likely to employ around 28,596 people,<sup>10</sup> generating around £868 million in social value for this region.<sup>11</sup>

Shropshire Charities:  
4,530 employees=  
£137m in social value

Among the survey respondents who indicated that they employed staff, in total 592 people are employed, with 290 of those being employed full-time. The small survey sample of 290 full-time staff alone represents over £8.8 million in social value generated in Shropshire.

For those organisations in the survey sample that employed staff, approximately three quarters of them are female, and one quarter male. Only about half of our overall respondents answered the questions about their employees' self-identification as members of the LGBT+ or BAME communities. Of those organisations that did respond (20), 2% of their employees identified as LGBT+ and 4% identified as a member of a BAME community.

<sup>8</sup> [Shropshire at a glance | Invest in Shropshire](#) Accessed 18.5.22

<sup>9</sup> This figure was calculated using the [Social Value Framework](#) from the Shropshire Council website. Accessed 20.5.22.

<sup>10</sup> Compiled from [Regulator of Community Interest Companies Annual Report](#) indicating there are 2383 CICs in the West Midlands in 2021 and <https://www.socialenterprise.org.uk/policy-and-research-reports/> indicating social enterprises in the West Midlands employ about 12 people each on average.

<sup>11</sup> This is again calculated using the Social Value Framework.

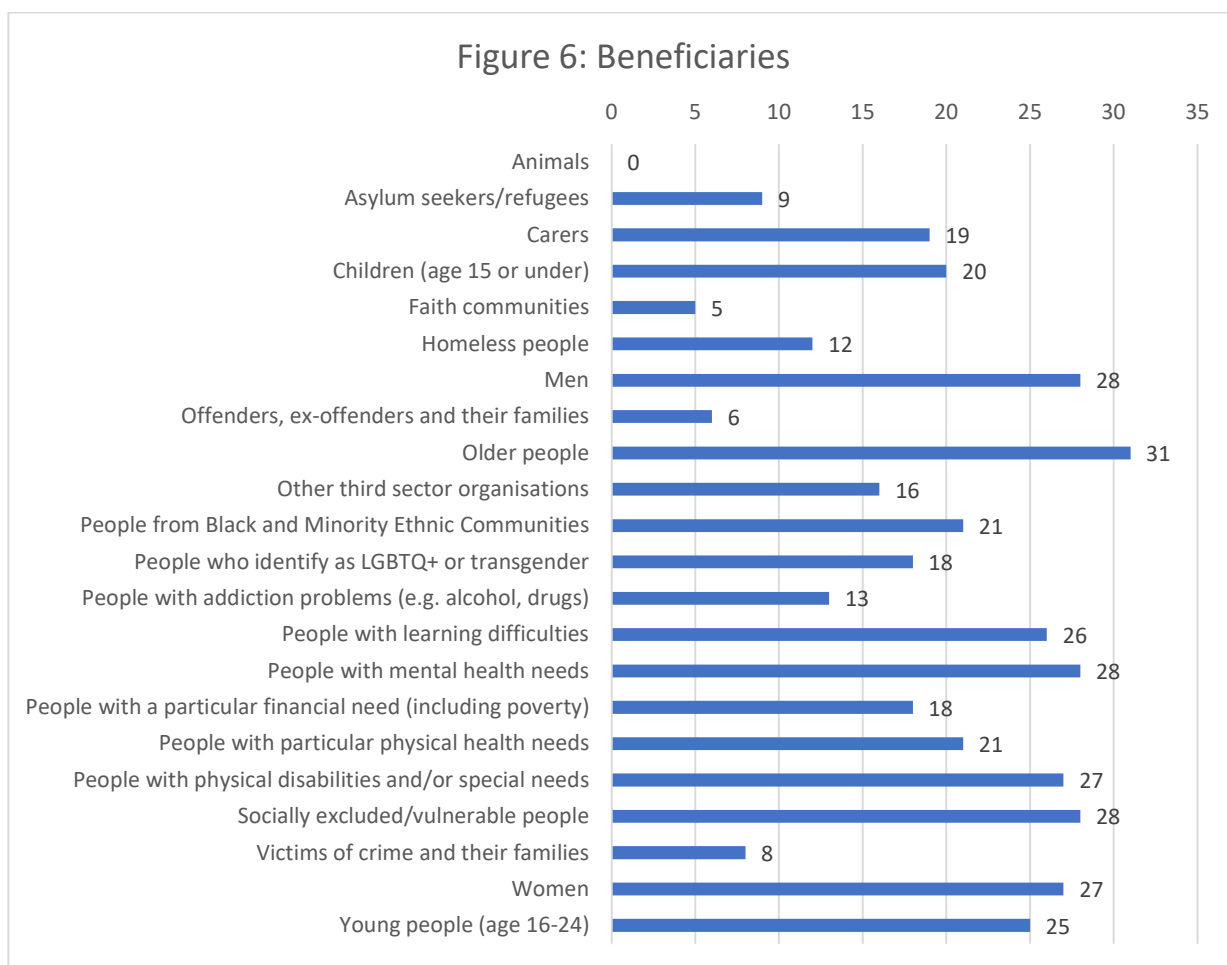
While these measures of personal identification are far from perfect, the VCSA Board felt that it was important to include them in this year's survey in order to compare Shropshire's work on diversity and inclusion with national data. The ACEVO 'Home Truths' Report noted that 9% of the voluntary sector workforce identifies as a member of the BAME community, which is much lower than the 14% of overall UK population that identifies as BAME. While no similar national study has been done on the experiences of LGBT+ identifying employees in the voluntary sector, the Office of National Statistics does estimate that 2.7% of the UK population identifies as LGBT+. <sup>12</sup>

This survey indicates that 4% of employees in VCSE organisations that responded identify as part of a BAME community, which is closer to the actual BAME-identifying population in Shropshire (just over 5%)<sup>13</sup> than the national trend. LGBT+ identifying employees were reported in this survey at 2%, which is also just under the estimated population rate. However, both indicators of employee diversity within the sector are still lower than population levels. Implications for the Shropshire VCSE sector's future growth in this area are noted in this report's conclusions.

### Who benefits

Over 47 total organisations, respondents reported a total of 207,522 service users or beneficiaries across Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin in the past year, or an average of 4,415 beneficiaries per organisation per year.

These numbers certainly overlap in capturing service beneficiaries of multiple organisations, as it is not possible to identify individual service users of each organisation with the data available. It should also be noted that beneficiaries of some organisations in the survey could not be tallied in this way, as they do not have "service users" or beneficiaries as such, since their work involves campaigning or other work where collecting such numbers is impossible or impractical.



<sup>12</sup> [Office of National Statistics 2019 Sexual Orientation](#). Accessed 20.5.22.

<sup>13</sup> [Shropshire Council Census Digest on People and Identity: Ethnicity 2011](#). Accessed 20.5.22.

Survey respondents were asked to select all types of beneficiaries of their organisation, so several respondents would have ticked more than one of the categories listed in **Figure 6**. Two survey respondents did not go through the exercise of listing groups, but simply noted that they serve all members of the public.

What **Figure 6** does indicate with some degree of reliability is that there is a breadth of communities and individuals benefitting from the services of VCSE organisations across the county, with older people, people with health needs and those who are socially isolated being among the top beneficiaries. This service provision matches the known demographics and needs of the county, with a population that is largely rural and skews towards older age groups.

Several respondents also noted that their primary beneficiaries were individuals not listed in **Figure 6** or people at the intersections of several identities, needs or communities, for example:

- Anyone affected by sight loss
- Older people who identify as LGBT+
- Carers for people with autism, mental health issues or substance abuse
- Older, lonely, and disabled people
- Schoolchildren
- People with a variety of social care needs
- People on low incomes and/or experiencing food poverty. One organisation noted, “poverty often has many contributing risk factors such as disability, single parents, mental health issues etc.”

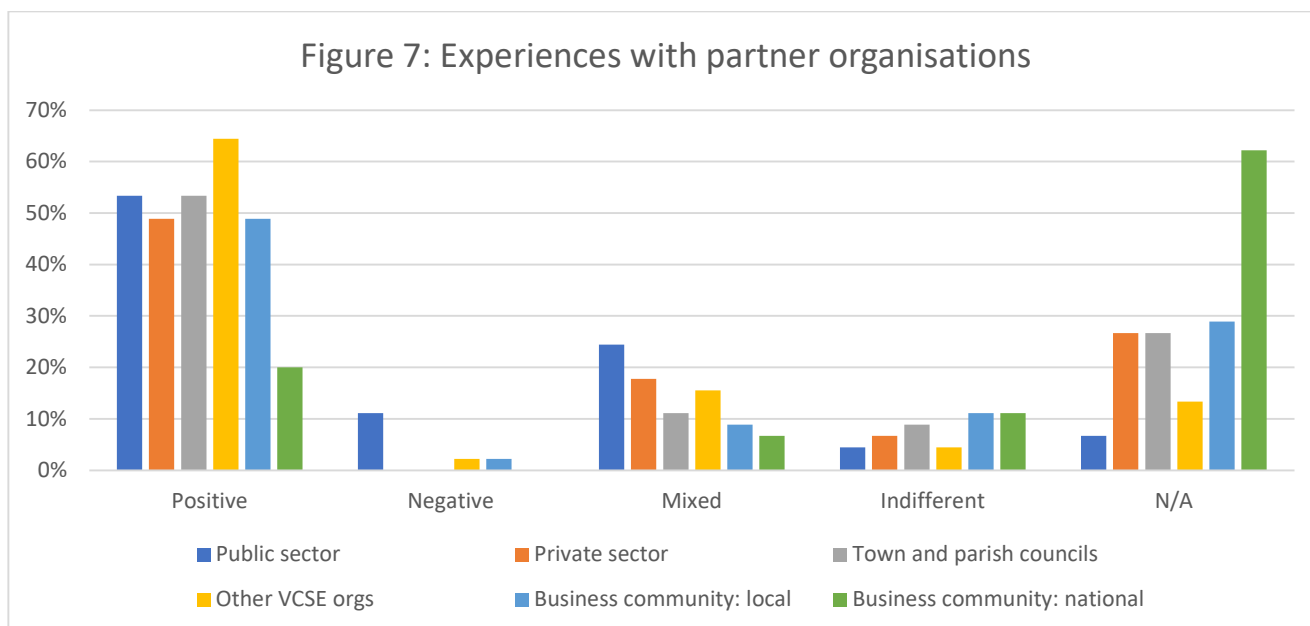
Overall, **Figure 6** and the related open-ended data seem to indicate a large demand for services around health and wellbeing, which aligns well with the emphasis of so many organisations around this theme in **Figure 4**. When coupled, these results indicate that the VCSE sector in Shropshire is heavily engaged in prevention services that add value to the healthcare and public sectors.

## 4. Working with partners

VCSE organisations work across public, private and voluntary sector partnerships on a regular basis, so asking about the relationships with partners is an important way to understand where partnerships are working well and where improvements could be made in how partnering is being done within and across the sector. **Figure 7** summarises the results to a series of questions asking whether respondents had “positive” “negative” “mixed” or “indifferent” experiences working with partners in the public sector, VCSE sector, private sector, businesses (local and national) and town and parish councils. Where organisations did not have experiences with these groups, they were asked to respond “N/A”.

Experiences with public sector and other VCSE organisations stand out as respondents having had the most interactions with these groups, and with these groups gathering the largest number of open-ended comments concerning these experiences.

Figure 7: Experiences with partner organisations



### Public sector

A majority, or 53% of respondents to the survey, indicated that they had had positive experiences with public sector partners over the past year, while a large minority of 24% said that their experiences with the public sector had been mixed and 11% cited their experiences as negative.

By comparison, the last VCSA State of the Sector Survey, conducted in 2017, indicated that 79% of respondents reported having a “positive” relationship and 12% having an “indifferent” relationship. This indicates that while positive working relationships with the public sector continue to be the norm, some VCSE relationships with the public sector may be more strained now than in previous years. More implications of these results are discussion in the conclusion.

Positive comments around working with the public sector included:

- Good experiences in partnering with Shropshire Council and Telford & Wrekin Council on events, such as Get Telford Walking.
- Good experiences with some of Shropshire Council’s specific teams, such as the Shropshire Council Climate Action Team and the Adult Social Care team were also mentioned positively.
- Good relationships with local GP surgeries, town and parish councils, and the NHS and ICS.
- Gratitude for local funding opportunities through Shropshire Council.
- The flexibility and support of Shropshire Council during the pandemic. “They have been flexible and supportive to the delivery of the contracts during the pandemic - and we have worked together to try to maintain support for communities.”

Comments around mixed or negative experiences with the public sector included:

- Criticism for letting organisations down on specific initiatives or commitments: “DWP have massively failed us with funding and agreements,” says one organisation, and another criticises Shropshire Council for failing to help with finding a dedicated venue for their ongoing work.
- Feelings that as service providers, VCSE organisations are “not always viewed as an equal partner to statutory services.”
- Public sector bodies such as the Police and Crime Commissioner, Shropshire Council or the NHS not responding to queries in a timely way or even at all.
- Concerns about significant delays within the public sector. “Promised meetings have been delayed,” says one organisation. Another notes that “local authorities are very slow at responding to queries, processing payments to us as suppliers and providing support for young people with disabilities.” Yet another organisation critiques the inability of Shropshire Council to spend all the Local Authority Delivery (LAD) funds, noting that inaction such as this feels to their organisation like “indifference (or just busyness?)” on the part of the Council



and “public health and NHS bodies towards the effects of [not spending this money] on health.”

### **Other VCSE organisations**

A majority, or 64% of respondents to the survey, indicated that they had had positive experiences with other VCSE partners over the past year, while 16% said that their experiences with the VCSE sector had been mixed and 2% cited their experiences as negative.

By comparison, the last VCSA State of the Sector Survey, conducted in 2017, indicated that 97% of respondents reported having a “positive” relationship with other VCSE organisations. This indicates that while positive working relationships with the VCSE sector continue to be the norm, some relationships within the sector may be more strained now than in previous years. More implications of these results are discussed in the conclusion.

Positive comments around working with other VCSE organisations included:

- Praise for specific groups or organisations, such as the Interfaith Forum, the Community Connector networks, Citizens’ Advice Shropshire, Age UK Shropshire, and the VCSA.
- “Generally other community groups help one another, they understand the difficulties of running volunteer led organisations.”

Mixed or negative responses varied, but included concerns about data sharing, volunteer fatigue and gaps in services:

- “Good relationships with some but others are seemingly more concerned about their own figures rather than possible benefits of the people they should be serving.”
- “There are so many we have dealings with, of course some of those dealings will be negative, but mostly they are positive!”
- Sharing information is “a challenge in all sectors” mentions one organisation. Another similarly mentions an experience with one charity which was “reluctant to deal with request for data relevant to our members.”
- “Volunteers are often worn out, which can cause difficulties.”
- “Many services not delivered how our clients can access them, e.g. home visits.”

### **Forums of Interest**

The questions about how organisations have been engaged with the VCSA Forums of interest were all open-ended, and only about half of survey respondents (18) replied to one or more of these. From these responses, it is possible to gain insights into which forums were more active and which were less active during the pandemic. It should be noted, however, that these results are heavily influenced by capacity issues and the re-direction of funds and services to meet pandemic needs. They are included here, therefore, for informational purposes only, and not meant to reflect the current state of these forums or their future directions.

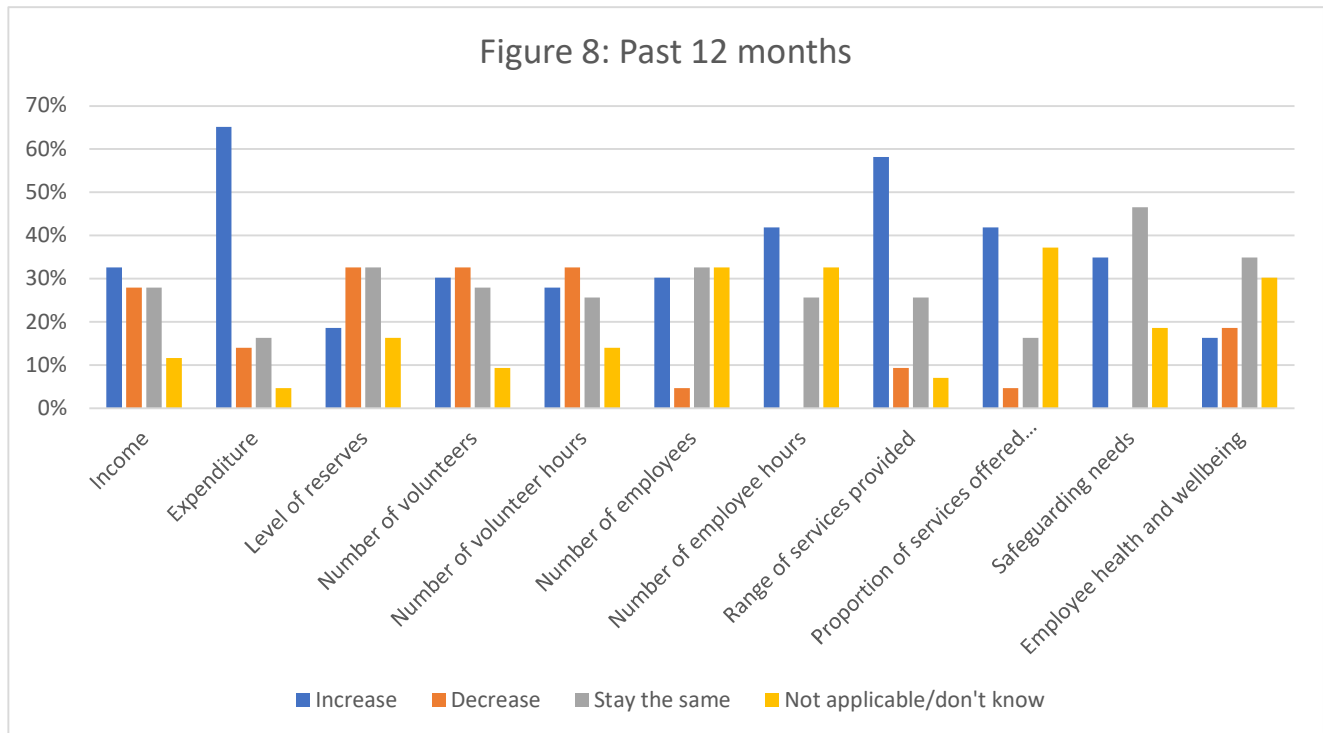
The most active forums over the last year according to these comments were the Shropshire Infrastructure Partnership (SIP), the Shropshire Food Poverty Alliance (SFPA), and the Active Partnership (formerly County Sports Partnership).

Those forums that respondents indicated had become less active included the Older People’s Sounding Board, the Health and Wellbeing Forum, the Mental Health Forum, the Community Transport Forum, the 0-25 Summit, the Pan Disability Forum. Reasons given for reduced activity centred largely around capacity issues, difficulty with online communication methods, or the re-deployment of members to other partnership work (e.g. the Health and Wellbeing Forum members were largely in touch through other emergency planning partnerships during the pandemic).

Perhaps the best indications of the work of the Forums of Interest over the past year is included in the [2021 Annual Report](#), where the work of each forum, and the organisations working in partnership within various areas of the sector, are outlined in detail.

## 5. The last 12 months

Survey respondents were asked questions about their experiences over the past 12 months. These questions included asking organisations to talk about their achievements, as well as indicating what had changed or stayed the same in several areas, such as income, expenditure, staff, volunteers, and other needs. Respondents were also asked about organisations' use of reserves and reasons for doing so. Results are summarised in **Figure 8**. Key trends are discussed in further depth below, and relevant comments are highlighted that expand these results further.



### Income and expenditure

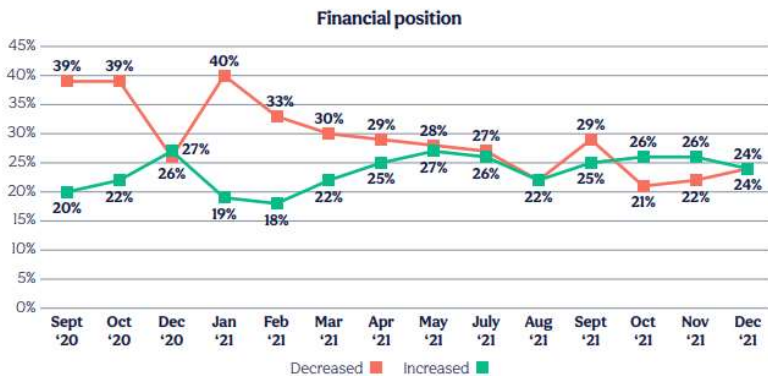
Over the last 12 months, 33% of respondents indicated that their income increased, and 19% were able to increase their reserve levels. On its own, this might seem an indication of increasing financial health in the sector, but this increase must be taken into context with the 65% of respondents who indicated that their expenditure increased during this same period, while only 14% saw their expenditure decrease.

Furthermore, a comparable percentage of respondents (28% of organisations) saw their income decrease, and 33% reported a decrease in reserves, suggesting that around a third of those surveyed are struggling with deficits.

Another important contextual factor for interpreting **Figure 8** is that the pandemic resulted in a great deal of local and national short-term funding initiatives. VCSE organisations benefited from many of these grants, but it is not yet clear whether longer-term funding solutions will still be needed as these short-term grants come to an end.

It is possible to compare this picture of income and expenditure in Shropshire to the larger national image courtesy of the NCVO's "Respond, Recover, Reset" panel series conducted over the course of the pandemic. **Image 1** shows the NCVO data, with 24% of organisations experiencing increases in their finances and 24% experiencing decline at the end of 2021, just before the survey for the VCSEA State of the Sector survey was sent out in early 2022. The Shropshire picture of uneven gains and losses across VCSE organisations, therefore, is roughly comparable to the national trend for voluntary sector organisations.

Image 1: NCVO data on VCSE organisations' financial position during the pandemic



### Services

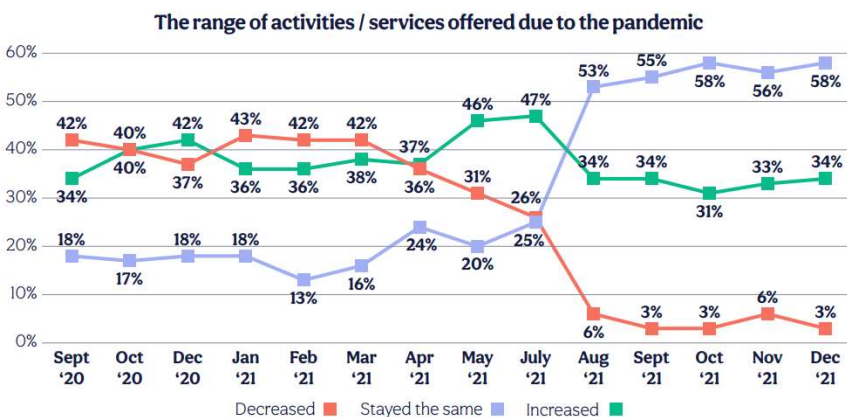
A majority (58%) of organisations responding to the survey reported an increase in the range of services they provided in the past 12 months. A large minority (48%) noted that they had offered a greater proportion of their services online during this period. This transition to online services was not necessarily to every organisation or beneficiaries' advantage. Anecdotally, some organisations have expressed concerns about the way that the transition to online service provision (and its continuing use) can further existing digital inequalities.

Comments in open-ended questions indicate that some organisations needed to make significant internal changes to accommodate these new provisions.

- “We don't have reserves as we are a CIC, but we have used the income we have to cover funding gaps and to meet increased demand for services”
- “Clients present to our staff team with a much wider range of issues which are taking longer to resolve due to the demand on statutory services. Increased volume of work has had an impact on the health and wellbeing of staff overall.”
- “Needs in the community have grown greatly... our income has decreased, it is harder to find a steady income to meet the increased demand for our services.”
- “Covid guidelines from our [national governing body] did not consider people with disabilities, particularly those with learning disabilities and those with poor mental health. Not very well thought out guidelines that impacted on how we could support our service users.”

When comparing changes in service provision to the national data in the NCVO “Respond, Recover, Reset” report (Image 2), it is notable that Shropshire is on trend, with increases in services or service range “staying the same” being the norm among voluntary organisations.

Image 2: NCVO data on voluntary sector organisations' range of activities/services during the pandemic



## Use of reserves

Some survey respondents did not have reserves or are not able to have reserves due to their legal status (e.g. CICs). In all, though, 36 of the organisations surveyed indicated that they have reserves, and 16 of these (44% of those with reserves) reported having used their reserves in the past 12 months.



Those who used reserves were asked to indicate one or more of their reasons for doing so. As **Figure 9** demonstrates, the most frequently given reason for using reserves was to cover gaps in funding (11) and meeting increased demand for services (7).

Indeed, this picture of reserve use complements the picture presented in **Figure 8** (above), where income decreased or stayed the same for most organisations, while expenditure and the range of services provided both increased for the majority of organisations. Given these circumstances, it is perhaps not surprising that of the 36 organisations with reserves, 3 predicted that they would run out of reserves in the next year.

## Staff and volunteers

Both volunteer numbers and volunteer hours appear to have decreased for a significant minority of organisations surveyed (33% each, respectively), but at the same time similar numbers of organisations saw their volunteer numbers and volunteer hours increase (30% and 28% respectively). Again, this seems to suggest that the pandemic had an uneven impact on organisations, in line with the findings of the NCVO in its Respond, Recover, Reset research. Indeed, it is likely that the pandemic had the effect of increasing volunteering, funding and service provision in health and wellbeing areas, while other service areas saw funding, volunteers, and staffing shrink during this period.

## Sector achievements

Finally, organisations were asked to highlight their greatest achievement in the past year. These achievements were varied, but most had to do with pride in their organisations' resilience and efficacy in supporting their community during the pandemic.

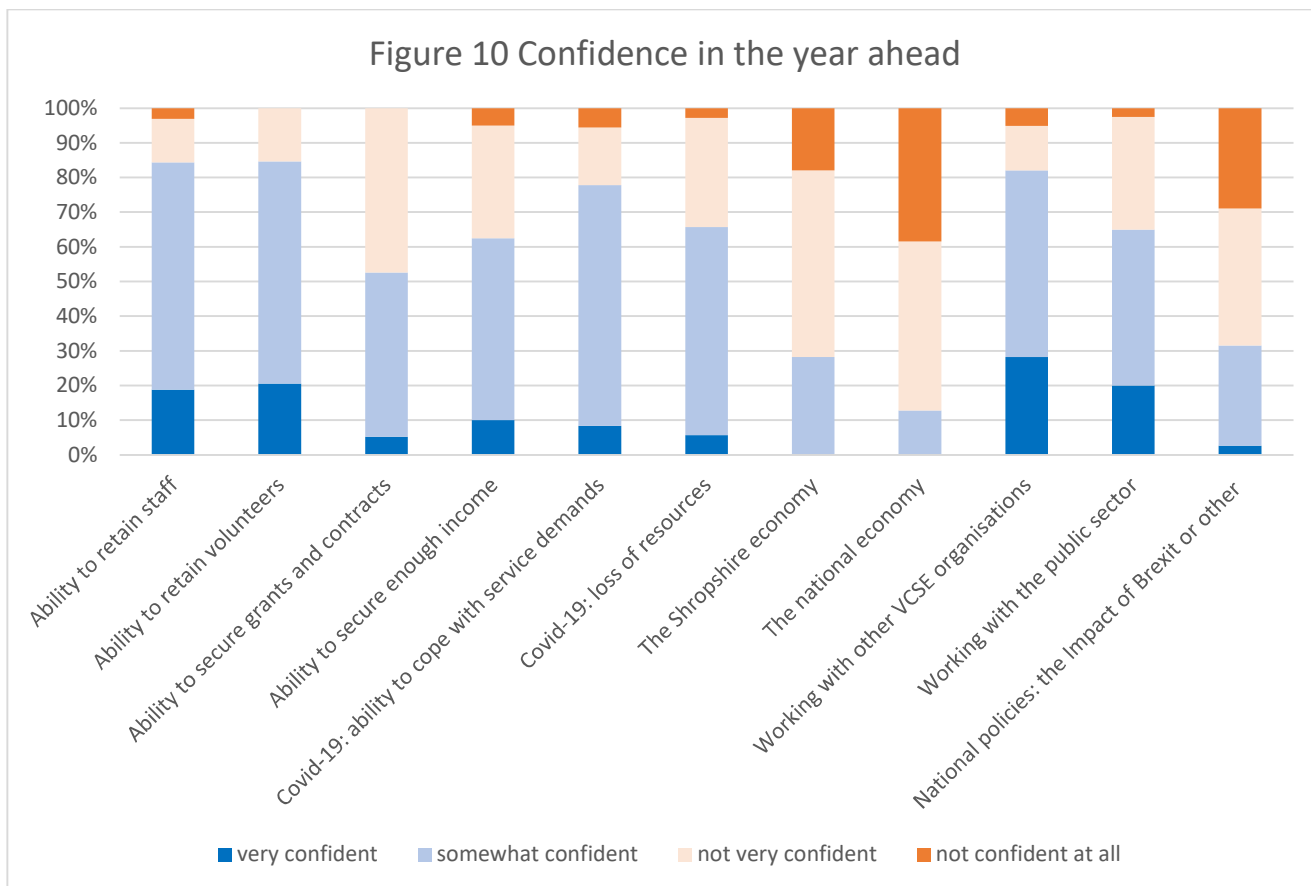
- "Helping and supporting people through Covid who were most in need. Growing as a business through such challenging times."
- "Staying open, at least until November 2022."
- "To continue running ... classes during the pandemic either via zoom or in person after lockdown."
- "Maintaining a weekly service throughout the pandemic."
- "The support and cover we gave to the community during Covid - meal deliveries, befriending, meaningful volunteering opportunities etc."
- "Providing emergency food and signposting to local people in crisis."

- “Coping with a 100% increase in demand.”
- “Able to ensure day nursery continued during lock down and financial difficulties.”
- “Keeping lots of voluntary youth clubs open.”
- “Keeping all our services going despite the ongoing pandemic. Supporting our beneficiaries to help them cope with the impact.”
- “We worked with our local GP Practice ... [to be a] hub for covid vaccinations last year, turning over our buildings and recruiting and organising volunteers.”
- “That we continue to deliver our services and support some people in a very holistic way with positive outcomes. We have become a very flexible, adaptable organisation due to COVID but continue to deliver.”
- “The response to covid, being able to deliver remote services and our client satisfaction scores have gone up, changes to service delivery mean the most vulnerable can access our service. Our audit scores for quality continue to remain high.”
- “We were able to flex our delivery models to continue to support the community despite the pandemic. We were able to recruit and deploy over 800 volunteers to support the vaccination programme, at pace, at the start of 2021.”
- “Maintaining and being innovative around our core and outreach services throughout the pandemic while recruiting and training new volunteers, increasing volunteer numbers and fundraising successfully.”
- “Our resilience in adapting our services to provide online workshops and resources to members and new referrals.”
- “The way [our organisation] has responded to Covid; to be in many cases the only organisation which kept in touch with people and helped them through a very difficult time. We have done everything from deliver library books to PPE, activities at home to a friendly voice on the end of the telephone. I feel very proud that our staff and volunteers were able to still make such a difference in the community even from their homes.”
- “Continuing to provide support to those people who rely on our services during very difficult trading times, while conforming to covid restrictions.”

Other organisations mentioned receiving specific awards such as a Queen’s award or a large grant award as their biggest achievements. Some hosted large conferences or created meaningful partnerships within the sector or with public sector partners. For some, renovations that allowed them to maintain or improve their activities were the highlight of their year. Still others noted that they had managed to raise the profile of their organisation or cause over the course of the year or had made significant progress on one or more campaigns to better their community. Overall, responses to this question were enthusiastic and filled with positive stories of organisational and community achievements, indicating that most organisations surveyed came out the past 12 months with a sense of accomplishment.

## 6. The year ahead

Organisations were asked to indicate their confidence levels concerning several issues that will or may impact them in the year ahead. These included issues such as recovering from the Covid-19 pandemic, Brexit or other national policies, as well as feelings around staff and volunteer retention, finances and more. **Figure 10** summarises these results. Blue shades indicate more positive levels of confidence, while red shades indicate more concern or lack of confidence among organisations surveyed.



### Confidence in the future

Figure 9 overall shows a fairly healthy degree of confidence in the ability to handle the issues facing organisations in the year ahead. In particular, there is a great deal of optimism around the ability to retain staff and volunteers (85% responded to both questions that they were “somewhat confident” or “very confident” about this). A large majority (82%) said they were somewhat or very confident about the prospect of working with other VCSE organisations and 77% were similarly positive about their ability to cope with the increased service demands in the wake of the pandemic. These results do not quite fit with the financial responses (below), but may indicate that organisations feel a sense of accomplishment in their achievements during the pandemic (see previous section, above), providing them with a sense of their own resilience.

### Concerns about finances

Where organisations seem to be most lacking in confidence for the year ahead is around finances. Large majorities of respondents expressed a lack of confidence around the local and national economy (87% reported feeling “not very confident” or “not confident at all” in the national economy in the next 12 months), with only slightly fewer respondents showing similar lack of confidence in the Shropshire economy (72%) and the impacts of Brexit (68%). Large minorities were also concerned about their organisational finances specifically, with 47% of respondents said they were “not very confident” in their ability to secure grants and contracts, and 38% said they were “not very confident” or “not confident at all” about their ability to secure enough income for the year ahead, and 34% felt a lack of confidence in their ability to cope with a loss of resources from the Covid-19 pandemic.

These results are particularly important for partners working with the VCSE in the coming months, as it is noteworthy that the sector is feeling particularly financially vulnerable at this time. Public commissioning, grant-giving bodies, and private enterprises partners should note that sustainability and long-term investments will be particularly important for the sector to maintain its health moving forward.

## Working with partners

A sizeable minority (33%) of respondents reported being “not very confident” and said they were 3% “not confident at all” about working with the public sector in the year ahead. Additionally, 13% reported being “not very confident” and said they were 5% were “not confident at all” about working with other VCSE organisations.

These results are still overall optimistic, in that the majority of respondents report feeling confident about working with partners in these sectors. However, these large minorities of concerned respondents in **Figure 10** should be taken together with the reported experiences of working with public sector and other VCSE organisations overall in **Figure 7**, which show a drop in positive experiences since 2017. The implications of these results and opportunities for growth are discussed further in the conclusion.

## 7. Infrastructure needs

The Shropshire Council Insight and Engagement Team worked closely with the newly developed Shropshire Infrastructure Partnership Voluntary and Community Development Team (SIP Team) in early 2022 to develop questions for the 2022 State of the Sector Survey. The intention for these questions was that they would follow up on the questions asked in a previous infrastructure needs survey conducted in 2014. Additionally, these questions were designed to help inform the work of the SIP Team moving forward.

### Need for infrastructure support

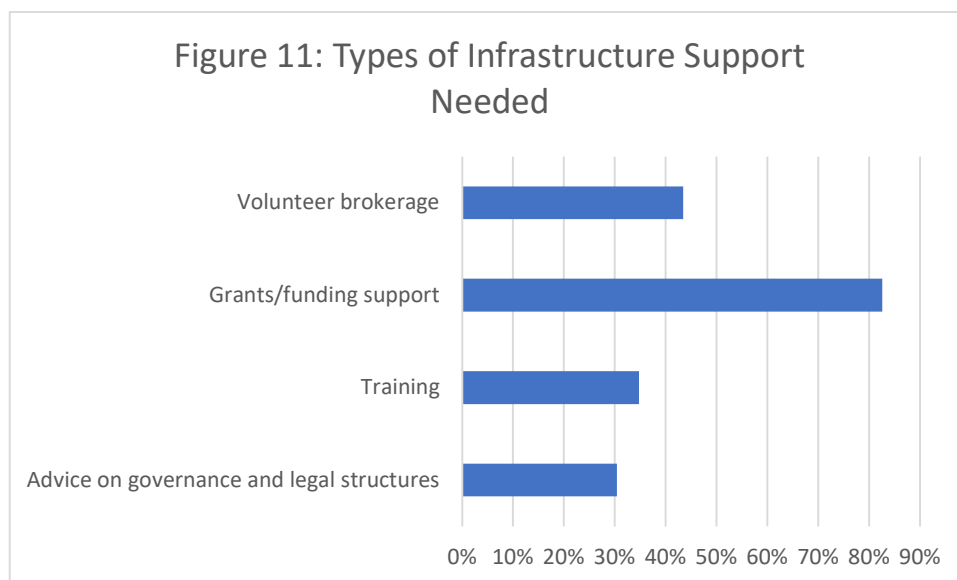
40 organisations responded to the question “Does your group or organisation require infrastructure support?” (see **Table 1**). Of these, 42% (17) answered “No”, 40% (16) “Yes, and 18% (7) said they didn’t know. When asked what kinds of support their organisation could use right now or in the next 12 months, many of those responding that they didn’t know whether they needed support completed this question, possibly indicating that they may also need support, but had not yet considered seeking it.

**Table 1: Need for infrastructure support**

	No	Yes	Don't know
<i>Does your organisation require infrastructure support?</i>	42% (17)	40% (16)	18% (7)

### Types of support needed:

By far the type of support listed as most needed was help with grants and funding, though all areas of support had robust demand (see **Figure 11**). Evidence for support needs around funding becomes stronger when the survey data from **Figure 11** is aligned with the confidence indicators in **Figure 10**, where organisations indicated some insecurities around being able to secure enough income and with securing grants and contracts in the coming year. It is also important to put alongside the trends in **Figure 8** with regard to declining income among some organisations, increased expenditures among most, and declining reserves among those that have them.



## 8. Conclusion

The 2022 State of the Sector Survey took place in a unique historical context, with Shropshire's VCSE sector reporting their experiences of the past year in the wake of a global pandemic and their concerns for the year ahead facing the greatest cost-of-living increase in more than a generation. Despite these challenges, the sector continues to deliver in its mission to the county. Below is a summary of some opportunities for improvement in the year ahead.

### Sector resilience, but finance concerns

Based on its reporting in this survey, the Shropshire VCSE sector is resilient and reports having weathered the pandemic remarkably well thus far. Volunteer and staff turnover is manageable for most, and several organisations viewed their resilience, adaptability and continued service delivery during the pandemic as their greatest achievement in the past year.

However, future finances are a particular concern moving forward, and some organisations may need much more help than others to recover. Increased demand for services, increased expenditure, and the use of reserves and/or shortfalls in income over the past year threaten to deepen financial difficulties for many in the year ahead.

Long-term strategies with an emphasis on sustainability for the sector are needed in the coming months and years, and organisations continue to recover from contextual difficulties such as the pandemic and cost of living crisis, but short-term funding made available to respond to these crises dries up.

Moreover, there is an opportunity for improving the financial and infrastructure support for VCSE organisations in Shropshire. Most organisations indicate the need for infrastructure support, particularly help with grants and funding moving forward.

### Working with partners

Partnership work has continued throughout the pandemic, both among VCSE organisations and with public sector partners, with significant benefits for the county.

There is an opportunity for improving the experiences of VCSE partners working with the public sector, as some respondents indicated negative or mixed feedback in their work with partners such as the NHS and Shropshire Council. Comments indicate that a focus on shared objectives and mutually beneficial outcomes is key to working effectively with the sector, rather than asking the VCSE sector to simply respond to public sector-led needs.



Within the sector, there is also a slight drop from 2017 in positive working experiences. Comments indicate that improved capacity for communications and partnership work across the sector are needed to address some of these concerns.

VCSA forums of interest have been mixed in their ability to work over the past year, with some forums becoming very active and others becoming less active. There is an opportunity for improvement to the functioning and networking opportunities provided by revived forums.

### **Member diversity and inclusion**

Responses to the 2022 State of the Sector Survey indicate that Shropshire may be doing better in its employment of members of the LGBT+ and BAME communities as a percentage of the county's population than the national average of charities. However, both indicators of employee diversity within the sector are still lower than population levels. This result, coupled with the very low response rate to this survey (particularly to this question in the survey), suggests that there is an opportunity for diversity and inclusion within the VCSA and the VCSE community in Shropshire more broadly to be studied in further depth and over a greater length of time to get a better picture of these trends and how they impact the sector in the county.

Comparison of the 2022 State of the Sector Survey responses with the Charities Commission data for Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin also indicate that there may be opportunities for membership growth within the VCSA.

### **Low survey response rate**

The State of the Sector Survey will now be conducted on an annual basis, with much of the demographic data being collected through VCSA membership processes, rather than the survey itself. This will support the opportunity to increase survey uptake in the coming years.

Given the difficulties in responding to a lengthy survey at the time that this questionnaire went out, the VCSA especially thanks those organisations who took the time to respond to this survey. The responses provided valuable data for comparison with other local and national data to provide a more complete picture of the VCSE sector and its value, activities and needs in Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin.

Analysis and report produced for the VCSA by the Feedback and Insight Team, Shropshire Council. June 2022.