

Strengthening the VCSE Sector in Telford & Wrekin



Developing a theory of change and activity plan to create the environment for sustainable services for the people who live, work and access support in Telford & Wrekin.

Project delivered by In Kind Direct, 2025.
Commissioned by Lloyds Bank Foundation, shaped by Telford Community Organisations' Group (COG).

Executive summary

The VCSE (Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise) sector is a powerful force for good and one of the most trusted parts of societies. The coming together of charities, voluntary organisations, community interest companies and public bodies is essential to meeting today's need and driving the systemic change that improves people's lives. Across the country, regional VCSE sectors are facing the challenge of increasing need in our communities, less resource at local and national levels, and organisations at breaking point.

Telford & Wrekin shares these common issues, as well as facing specific challenges as a New Town, and numbers of unpaid carers, veterans and an ageing population above national averages. The region has also been less successful in securing funding compared to its neighbours. There is a lot happening well across the region, and a tangible appetite to more sustainably meet the needs of the people who live, work and access support here.

In Kind Direct is a charity based in Telford and London with a UK reach. We believe in a stronger VCSE sector as a route to ensuring everyone can access the essential products, support and services they need to thrive. VCSE organisations are powerful agents for change, armed with evidence of what works and where the current barriers are. In Kind Direct partners with thousands of UK charitable organisations and through the distribution of donated products and sharing of insight, unlocks £30m each year for the sector. At the end of 2024, Lloyds Bank Foundation commissioned IKD to design an action plan with organisations and communities in Telford & Wrekin to strengthen the local VCSE sector.

This report draws on the insight generously shared from over 100 organisations across Shropshire, Telford & Wrekin. In Kind Direct also engaged its UK peers to review and inform the approach, by identifying commonality between regions and sharing success stories.

Key trends quickly emerged around the challenges being faced, and the action needed to strengthen the VCSE sector in Telford & Wrekin, to better support communities. Underpinning any practical activities has been a continual recognition of the need to nurture an environment for collaboration and trust, and properly resource any infrastructure tasked with maintaining that space. A clear action plan has taken shape, focussed on three themes:

Culture of Collaboration

Moving organisations out of fire-fighting mode to look beyond immediate or acute services requires reviewing current commissioning and social prescribing practices, to build partnerships of equals.

Resourcing Change

Reducing duplication and increasing access to expertise, resources and funding to drive innovation, not competition.

Listening for Impact

Reaching all stakeholders and sharing impact that drives the strategic delivery of sustainable and equitable services.

This report walks through the journey taken in the last six months and outlines a future path to strengthening the Telford & Wrekin VCSE sector over the next ten years. Even since

beginning this project, much has changed in the external policy and funding landscapes. Much more is likely to change in the coming years, making continual review and a “test and learn” approach essential. The action plan outlined for Telford & Wrekin has resonance beyond one region. In Kind Direct is committed to sharing these learnings across its UK charitable network.

“it's like you're doing a million-piece jigsaw, but some of the bits are missing and there's no picture on the box...”

About In Kind Direct

We are a UK charity working with charitable organisations and companies to ensure everyone has access to the products and support they need to keep clean and well. We believe everyone deserves access to life's essentials and no usable product should go to waste. We are a practical response to the widening gap in society. Today, we distribute the products every person, home or charitable organisation needs. Looking to tomorrow, we tackle the root causes of too many people going without. We do this by:

- Distributing products to the people who need them today
- Connecting sectors to find new solutions
- Building a strong evidence base of real-time local insight
- Amplifying voices and advocating for change
- Delivering targeted projects to meet the needs of those we exist to serve

As we approach our thirtieth anniversary, we have supported over 15,000 charitable organisations through partnerships with 1,400 companies, unlocking £400m of savings into the UK VCSE sector. We currently reach over 540,000 people every week.

About Lloyds Bank Foundation

The Lloyds Bank Foundation is an independent charitable foundation funded by Lloyds Banking Group. It works in partnership with small and local charities, people and communities, changing lives and working towards a more just and compassionate society.

The needs and aspirations of people drive its work. They strengthen the small and local charities that support the communities they live in, and advocate for a better future.

Through unrestricted funding, support to develop, and influencing policy and practice they help small and local charities thrive, communities grow stronger, and people overcome complex issues and barriers so they can transform their lives. This project is part of the place-based approach being taken in six regions across England and Wales.

About Telford Community Organisations' Group (COG)

Telford COG is an active and independent network of VCSE organisations that are committed to collaboration and mutual support across Telford and Wrekin. The COG facilitates the VCSE to share knowledge, resources, skills, opportunities, space, and research to empower all VCSE organisations in T&W. It showcases T&W VCSE

organisations and their contributions to the local community, highlighting the impact it has and the important role it plays and provide a strategic voice for the sector.

About the project

This project has been delivered by the UK charity In Kind Direct, commissioned by Lloyds Bank Foundation in partnership with the Telford COG. It has:

- Consolidated existing data and conversation from across Telford & Wrekin
- Engaged unheard voices and brought in ideas from other UK infrastructure bodies
- Determined reinforcing cycles that currently weaken the sector
- Shaped an action plan for strengthening the Telford & Wrekin VCSE sector

An initial literature review and desktop research phase consolidated previous work and informed a topic guide for one-to-one interviews. In shaping an action plan, a theory of change approach has been taken. Using a well-established methodology it helps build a visual roadmap to sector-wide change, with an indication of key activities along a multi-year timeframe. A theory of change approach also helps to identify a unifying aim to work towards, as well as identifying “quick wins” alongside long term ambition.

The action plan has three strands to support implementation. Collectively, several approaches were considered for these strands, including location, type of organisation, service users, or social issues such as housing, health and employment. In reviewing the insight shared, a more outcome-based approach has been taken. This reduces potential repetition across the strands and focuses on the shifts in ways of working needed for success. The approaches used are:

- Culture of Collaboration
- Resourcing Change
- Listening for Impact

Throughout this project, we estimate around 100 organisations and individuals gave their time to shape and validate this plan. We are grateful to everyone who shared their insight, whether through attending an event, a one-to-one conversation or completing a survey. In-person interviews and sessions took place between January and March 2025. We thank those organisations listed here, and those who engaged anonymously or as an individual:

Afghan Telford Community
Age UK Shropshire Telford & Wrekin
All Sports Coaching
Anta Education Ltd
Arleston Community Centre
Bromford Housing
Business in the Community
Care Plus Shrewsbury
Citizens Advice Telford and the Wrekin
Community Resource Shropshire

Directory of Social Change
DWP Shropshire
Energize Shropshire
Great Dawley Town Hall
Hadley & Leegomery Community Centre
Healthwatch Telford & Wrekin
Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust
Landau
Lingen Davies
Lloyds Bank Foundation

Locality	Shropshire Youth Association
Meeting Point House	Shropshire Youth Support Trust
NAVCA	Sported – West Midlands
National Lottery Community Fund	Stay Telford
Newport Hub	TACT Telford
NHS Shropshire Telford & Wrekin	Taking Part
Omega	Telford & Wrekin Council
Open Harmony CIC	Telford & Wrekin CVS
Parents Opening Doors	Telford & Wrekin Interfaith Council
Pneuma-Affinity CIC	Telford Crisis Support
Shropshire Community Foundation	Wrekin Housing Group
Shropshire Council	Yellow Ribbon
Shropshire Partners in Care	YMCA Wellington

In addition, we compared responses received during this project to the biannual surveys undertaken with In Kind Direct's UK charitable network. We identified differences and similarities between this region, and our wider UK charitable network.

About Telford & Wrekin

People

Telford & Wrekin was only named a unitary authority in 1998. This presents specific challenges around changing populations, and large cohorts reaching life milestones at similar times. Domestic migration is the key driver of population change across Telford and Wrekin. In 2022/3 10,000 people arrived in the borough and 8,300 left for other parts of the country. Internal movement within Telford & Wrekin is quite limited, mostly for those aged 20-34. This suggests older generations put down roots if they choose to stay.

Young people's services are vital, aligning with the government's ambition to Get Britain Working. The proportion of 16 and 17 year olds not in education, employment or training (NEET) is currently 4.6% (around 220 people) compared to an England average of 5.8%. Child poverty levels in the borough (21.3%, IDACI 2019) are worse than the England average (17.1%). The prevalence of childhood obesity is improving and in 2023/24 the proportion of year 6 children with excess weight (37.3%) was similar to the England average (35.8%). The proportion of physically active is also improving and in 2023/24, 50.8% of young people were physically active compared to the England average of 47.8%.

As an Upper-Tier Local Authority (UTLA), in the ten years to 2023 Telford & Wrekin saw the ninth highest level of population change by age, on a par with Manchester. The greatest increases were seen for those aged 70-89. Overall, with a current population of around 192,000 it is growing at a faster rate than the national average. Over 65s now account for almost 1 in 5 (18%) of the population, and the borough has a sizeable population of armed forces veterans (5.4%), greater than the England (3.8%) average. Also ahead of national averages, over 20% of the population identify as having a disability, and Telford & Wrekin is in the top third (44 of 150) UTLAs for very bad health.

The borough is ahead of the national curve for long-term unemployment levels. Of those in work, the wholesale, retail, manufacturing and motor trade industry are the largest sectors for employment. The number of economically inactive working age people in the borough has shown little change over the last 10 years and between January and December 2024, 22.9% of the borough's population aged 16-64 were economically inactive. These factors will all affect how services are shaped to make predictions about future changes in need

Places

Telford & Wrekin is a broad mix of urban and rural spaces with a clear contrast between affluent areas and those with high levels of deprivation. In the 2019 Multiple Indices of Deprivation, eighteen areas in the borough were ranked in the 10% most deprived nationally. In recent years, T&W has seen a significant number of new housing developments and as a result has seen the largest increase in number of households and population density in the West Midlands. However, the social infrastructure such as schools and healthcare provision has not been expanded to meet the new population need, adding additional pressure to existing services. Public transport is not consistent across the region, with some more rural areas poorly served. This impacts access to services including healthcare and town centre amenities. Pilots such as the Telford-on-Demand bus service could be widely beneficial if rolled out.

The borough's geography and its growing population necessitate a more localised response and service provision. A commitment to people being no more than a set distance from defined services would be an ambitious long-term aim. It could only succeed with a collaborative approach from a strengthened sector. Furthermore, there is a growing need to look beyond the borough's boundaries, to the rest of the Shropshire county and beyond to the West Midlands. Understanding the challenges of other New Towns through engaging existing forums, as well as the national experience of key organisations such as Age UK or Citizens Advice would also expedite learning. Engaging with Locality's Keep It Local network and LBF's other place teams would add value at the start of this journey, and ongoing.

Provision

Strengthening the VCSE sector must include strengthening the organisations within it, as well as creating space for them at every table to shape sustainable and needs-led services. Just considering the 379 registered charities based in Telford & Wrekin, half focus on education and training. Compared to the population, there appears to be a higher proportion of these organisations supporting children and young people. However, there was clear evidence of the number of other kinds of incorporated charitable organisations based in the region, and others located outside the region but serving its residents. This included a number of Shropshire and West Midlands organisations.

The NHS in the region is overwhelmed. In February 2025 almost 9,000 patients covered by NHS Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin had to wait over 28 days for a GP appointment. Social Prescribing was initially introduced to the region, including Telford & Wrekin in 2017 as part of the NHS Long Term Plan. In general, social prescribing seeks to connect people to non-medical support and resources in their community to supplement healthcare services. More recently for the region, in the two years to 2023, there had been an increase in referrals of 73%. In tandem, by the end of 2025 the Integrated Care Board (ICB) will see its budget cut

by around 65%. Local health systems will be facing uncertainty and disruption amidst the abolition of NHS England (NHSE). A decade of structural changes has seen partnership working and collaboration affected as colleagues move on to new roles and key relationships and specialist knowledge lost, with those remaining focussed on cutting costs. This presents a challenge to VCSEs struggling to get out of firefighting mode as they must continue plugging the gaps of the health service while grants and contracts are affected. But there is also an opportunity for the sector to be a valued partner with key evidence and insight to inform cuts, and to provide community-first services that present value for money.

Cost saving has been a key priority for Telford & Wrekin Council as well, they project savings of over £184m being made in the period 2023-6. The rising cost of adult social care has been a key driver for these cuts. Council tax has been steadily increasing, and the frequency of services like litter control has been reduced.

Anecdotally, Telford & Wrekin is unusual in having a number of infrastructure bodies that also provide frontline services. This has reinforced some reluctance to seek support from organisations which may then be competitors for funding. Additionally, Telford CVS is not seen by the sector as a traditional CVS (Council for Voluntary Services), which has created a space for other organisations to deliver aspects which CVSs in other regions would provide. This includes activity across the four functions set out by NACVA for infrastructure bodies- advocacy, collaboration, capacity building and volunteering. Telford & Wrekin is unusual in being served by two community foundations, with Staffordshire & Shropshire longstanding, and the currently independent Shropshire Community Foundation being established in 2022. These differences present opportunities for Telford & Wrekin to develop a bespoke infrastructure that works for its people, and the organisations they rely upon.

Key themes

Across conversations, events and surveys, recurring themes emerged on the current state of Telford & Wrekin's VCSE sector. Taken together, they provided the foundation for thinking about the changes needed to strengthen the sector, and the need to centralise local knowledge and expertise in service design and delivery. Across conversations, the role of VCSE organisations was consistently acknowledged as too important to lose.

"It's getting harder and harder. Capacity is so limited, and demand and need so great, we are spending all our time just dealing with the problems and have little time for discussions and miss the collaboration. In the meantime, statutory funding gets whittled away bit by bit."

Stuck in firefighting mode



Too many organisations are eating into reserves or chasing short-term funding to think about long term change or preventative services. Short and overlapping commissioning cycles have exacerbated this. We heard from several organisations where senior leaders had reduced their hours or used reserves to meet the shortfall in public contracts.

Gaps and duplication



With funding as the number one concern raised, chasing short-term funding has driven mission-creep for many organisations. There is a disconnect between perceptions of core-cost funding for both applicants, and funders to the region. Some providers subsidise the public contracts they deliver, which is rarely eligible for grant funding to recover those costs.

Local need driving services



Hyperlocal need is very well understood in the region, and services meeting immediate need shaped by end users was evidenced consistently. However, current public commissioning models and prioritisation frameworks are opaque and isolated from each other, limiting opportunities for proactive collaboration and long-term outcomes to be tracked.

Cross-border working



A hotchpotch of boundary lines has made service delivery across Shropshire, Telford & Wrekin feel more complex, and compounded pre-conceptions of the challenges to work across borders and deliver co-funded services.

Competition eating trust



The impact of 15 years of austerity has pushed organisations of all sizes to the brink of survival. In that environment of competition for funds, contracts and resource, the trust needed for successful collaboration is not guaranteed.

Visibility of existing support



There is great training, resources and networking already happening in Telford & Wrekin. But with no centralised view there is a sense of repetition, which few organisations have capacity for. Particular challenges around governance, volunteering and bid-writing were repeatedly singled out.

Throughout the project, there was recognition and empathy that whilst many smaller organisations were undoubtedly facing real challenge, this is also reflected for organisations of all sizes, and across the charitable and public arenas. The request for partnerships of equals, and mutual commitment to shared aims was frequently heard.

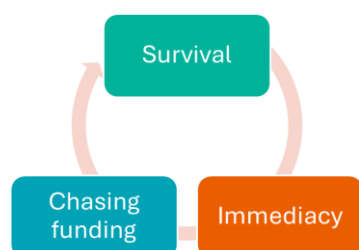
“Charities and community groups have gone beyond the point of tension; a perfect solution can’t stop action at the outset.”

“The T&W Council community team are great, but they have lost staff as well to make savings... They’re in the same boat, trying to do more with less and less.”

Reinforcing cycles

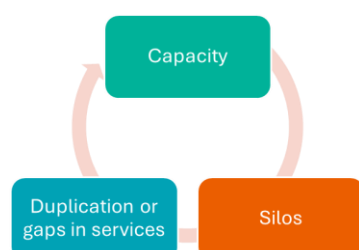
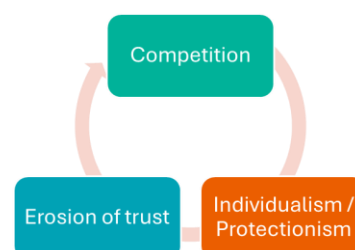
Throughout this project, reinforcing cycles of behaviour have been described and recognised by many participating organisations. The cycles shared below also resonated with other UK bodies delivering similar place-based work in other regions. Creating the environment to break these cycles is therefore fundamental to our action plan. That is not to say it is a

simple step to take. Prioritising the evidenced needs of communities over any one organisation's requirements takes time. The action plan set out in this report acknowledges this and identifies some potential "quick wins" to demonstrate the benefits of working more collaboratively early on.



After fifteen years of austerity, too many organisations are in survival mode. A diminishing volunteer force, ageing population and the rising cost of living all exacerbate this. It keeps many organisations focussed on delivering acute services which provide short-term interventions. As funding shifts more to prevention and long-term social outcomes, organisations are feeling forced to develop "new" projects and chase funding, rather than developing strategic programmes that respond to current and future local need. The disproportionate amount of time spent on unsuccessful funding bids keeps organisations in survival mode.

Organisations of all sizes are in survival mode. This has fostered a feeling of self-preservation. Competition for fewer grants, or the bundling of local services into larger public contracts (which are less accessible to smaller or specialist organisations) has exacerbated this and eroded trust. With less trust, organisations may tend to seek less support and be wary of sharing their future plans to identify areas for collaboration.



Organisations of all sizes have consistently done more with less in recent years. This culture has pushed many organisations beyond their maximum capacity and enabled unreasonable expectations particularly from commissioners for what is possible. The ability to step back and consider strategic activities that could strengthen the sector for the long-term have been relegated as a result. There are a significant number of networks, alliances and informal groups across the region. However, with capacity so tight, it is often the same organisations in most conversations, and reliant on the goodwill of specific individuals. The voices of many organisations and communities are missing, some of which have kindly contributed to this project. Without a full picture, duplication and gaps become inevitable, increasing competition for funding and bids. This further squeezes capacity within organisations.

"There are missed opportunities right now because organisations don't know what other organisations do, or could do, together."

These cycles are not distinct, and breaking any one will go a long way to creating the environment for sustainable change. A focus on shared values and a local by default approach have the ability to build trust, get some organisations out of survival mode, and enable the strategic approach needed for sustainable and equitable services across the region. The uncomfortable truth is that some organisations may not survive the further external shocks which seem likely in the coming years. This report focuses on strengthening the sector as a whole, for the people it exists to serve. We encourage each organisation to consider their role in this action plan, and what is reasonable to contribute over time.

“For an extended period, the sector has operated in competition with itself. There are individuals and organisations that, perhaps understandably, have been protective of their services. The limitations in funding have fostered competition rather than collaboration.

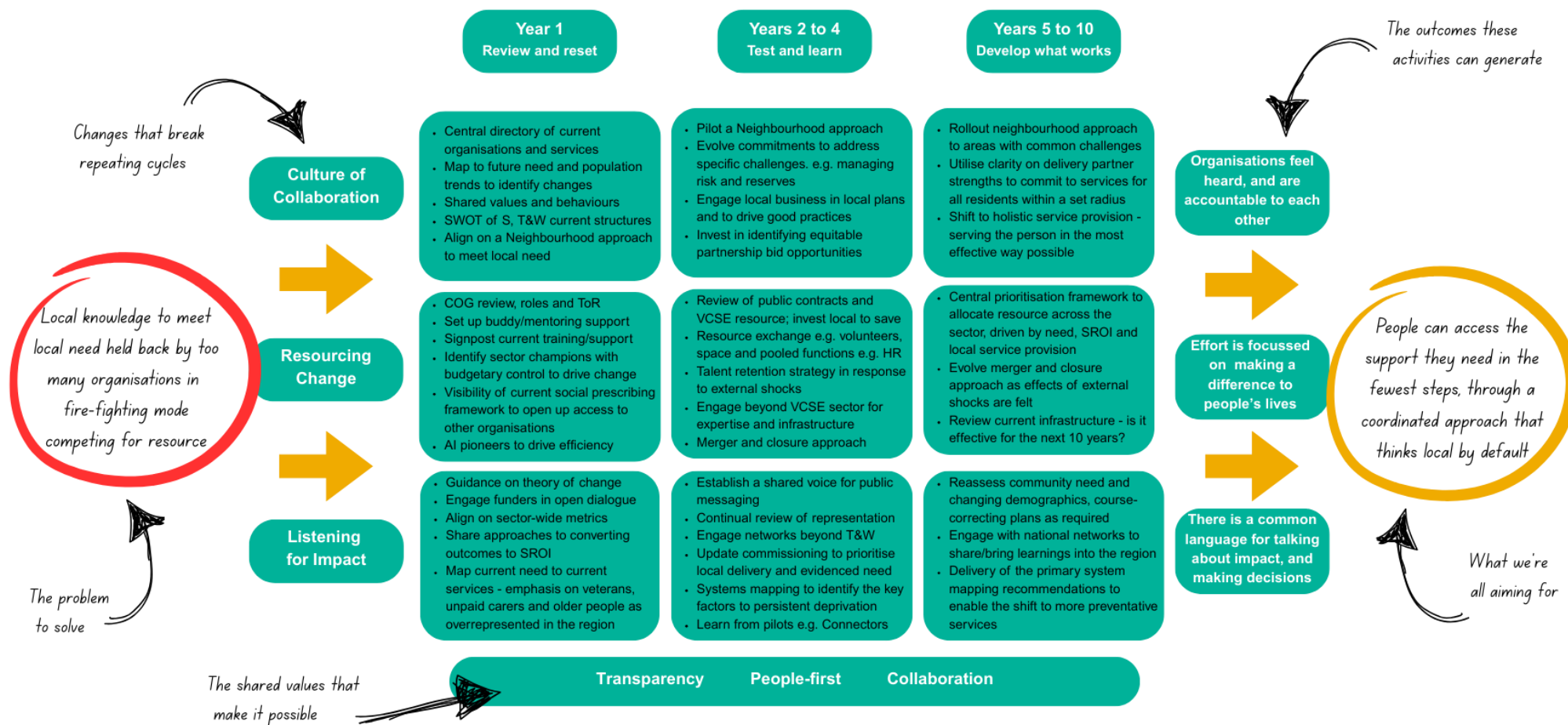
Additionally, short-term funding cycles exacerbate this issue, as organisations must continually seek new opportunities. Despite these challenges, it is crucial for the sector to recognise the necessity of being flexible in its approach to working with statutory agencies. Although these agencies may have greater access to funds, they also have targets that must be met. Occasionally, these targets need to be delegated to the voluntary sector, which may appear unjust. However, if the sector fails to provide relevant feedback, future funding will be adversely affected. The development of the sector can only be achieved by ensuring that all parties work towards a common goal.”

Validating our approach and learning from others

In bringing so many voices and perspectives together, a theory of change approach has been taken to sharing recommendations. There are other models and approaches that can be taken. In speaking to other UK organisations this approach aligned with much of what has worked well elsewhere - setting a strong, values-led foundation, with a clear time-bound activity plan. We have shared below a few examples of other local approaches to strengthening the VCSE sector. We hope this supports further discussion and galvanise support for the activity plan set out on the next page.

- East Sussex Alliance are a step further on their journey to strengthen their local VCSE sector, and published their [One Year On report](#) this year
- Locality’s overview guidance [Principles in Practice: Keeping it Local](#), 2022 shares examples of how a local approach looks like in different places. They published a further report in 2024, focused on local examples of local [VCSE sectors in prevention and primary care](#).
- NAVCA’s report on creating the conditions for VCSE infrastructure to thrive, [Walking a Tightrope](#), 2025

Theory of Change: Strengthening the Telford & Wrekin VCSE Sector



Year 1 - Setting a strong foundation

A stronger Telford & Wrekin borough can deliver the services that meet people's immediate and underpinning needs to live well. No one organisation or service can achieve this. Organisations need to feel the shift from words to action, to build a momentum for more ambitious change. A fundamental shift in culture takes time. Identifying early champions with budgetary control to turn endorsements into action is key. Prevention to save cost in the long term requires a whole-system approach of transparency and shared values. Year one activities across themes seek to:

- Formalise a shared commitment to collaboration and local service delivery
- Gain a comprehensive view of what is currently needed, and being delivered
- Explore where current resource can be shared, and where new resource is necessary
- Identify quick wins that achieve efficiency and build essential capacity

Roles and responsibilities

Many organisations that engaged in the project were not familiar with the remit of Telford COG. There was also a recognition that specialist working groups or alliances had been formed to address very specific issues or geographies, in an attempt to fill gaps in communication. Similarly, whilst many individuals sit on multiple groups, those that do not attend acknowledged their lack of capacity to make a significant time commitment straight away. Rationalising the structure of groups at a regional, local and social issue level will enable all organisations to participate or be represented. This is a visible step to achieving transparency and trust across the sector. Similarly, a central mechanism for cascading relevant information, or making it accessible via a central forum or website would address current barriers and streamline signposting. Seeking local insight can build in the flexibility needed for meaningful dialogue, and an understanding of any barriers to participation.

The exercise to map, consolidate and rationalise roles across Telford & Wrekin may succeed best if led instead by one dedicated infrastructure body - with a goal to maximise resource and centrally track the impact of any changes.

What is the role of public bodies?

The loss of NHS England and budget cuts for Integrated Care Boards and Councils are huge external factors. This action plan can only succeed in collaboration with public bodies. VCSE organisations and public bodies both expressed the need for open dialogue and partnerships of equals. How public bodies engage with this action plan will set a tone for modelling shared values and building trust by unlocking efficiencies. Recognition of current power dynamics - real or perceived- will be essential to set a strong foundation. How commissioning evolves is a factor in the action plan, giving the Council and others the opportunity to lead by example in collaborative working. Similarly, improving representation from smaller organisations in social prescribing provides a meaningful activity for local NHS services and the ICB to take a lead.

Values

It is recognised that other compacts and covenants exist in the region, or within specific sub-sectors. The need for something simpler, and that sets a two-way commitment between VCSE organisations and public bodies has been identified. A values-based approach has been consistently requested, with these most frequently cited:

Transparency



A commitment to sharing insight and opportunities, and sharing the rationale for prioritisation, process and decision-making. A recognition that trust is built through openness and leads to stronger collaboration.

People-first



Each organisation tackles injustice and represents the needs and voice of those it serves. A commitment to putting shared aims ahead of any one organisation, making decisions based on greatest impact for people and prioritising local insight, resource and capability.

Collaboration



No one organisation can meet the region's need. Organisations commit to sharing resource and expertise to shape services that respect the resource and capacity of each partner and have measurable outcomes. This can create the space to move out of fire-fighting mode, centralise the needs of people, and move towards preventative services.

Measuring impact

There is a strong understanding of the needs of current service users across the region. However, it has been less clear how well understood those not currently engaging with services are. Similarly, without tracking long term outcomes, it is challenging to establish if any one intervention is more beneficial. Short-term and overlapping commissioning cycles have increased the focus on immediate or acute services. To speak together and prioritise efforts, a common language is needed to talk about impact.

- A set of agreed metrics that map to central outcomes e.g. use of healthcare services, job and learning outcomes, uptake in benefit claims, improved wellbeing.
- Build on existing annual impact reporting by e.g. VCSA Shropshire.
- Upskilling organisations to calculate social return on investment, and undertake their own theories of change. In Kind Direct published an [impact assessment guide](#) in 2019, and many others are freely available. This would support an “invest to save” approach.
- Aligning community needs to the long term ambitions for local commissioners, funders, government and businesses – positioning the VCSE sector as a problem-solver.

Larger charities and infrastructure bodies such as Community Resource, Energize and Citizens Advice, as well as Commissioning bodies including the Council and NHS will hold these valuations and they can be strong supporters for the shift to a cost-benefit approach. Further useful links are at the end of the report. With a shift to partnership bids, opportunities will arise for skills exchange between partners.

Quick wins

- Map current meetings and their membership to **rationalise and deduplicate**. Refresh Terms of Reference that reflect agreed values and cement expectations and representation. An initial suggestion is for a single body to take on this secretariat role and lead any funding bids for additional resource that may be determined.
- Create and launch a **central hub** for information to be shared. This includes cascading outputs from meetings, funding opportunities, training and resources. This needs to be a trusted domain and signposted to by all organisations to establish its reliability.
- Establish a fit-for-purpose **searchable directory** of current services, the needs they address, and the organisations delivering them. Local Authorities will have a duty to do this for some types of services, so may be a natural lead. This could be participation from the VCSE sector to evolve the [Live Well Telford](#) directory, or something new.
- Connect the directory with demographic data to identify potential neighbourhoods for a more local approach. Identify organisations within neighbourhoods able to take a leading role, or existing networks that could be evolved or expanded.
- Identify **Digital Pioneers** who are already using AI and automation to streamline administrative tasks or delivering inclusive online services. Rolling out learning can help build immediate capacity and open up services to those less able to travel.
- Bring together funders, commissioners and training providers to understand the gap between current impact reporting, and requirements for bids and tenders. Identify any **training gap** and roll-out delivery as a baseline, maximising economies of scale or a standalone activity for targeted funding.
- Issue a **One Year On report** to give visibility to the activities and successes of the first year and lessons learnt along the way.

“[We need] strategic prioritisation and focus - leverage online platforms, virtual meetings to save time, streamlined communication, opportunities to comment on shared documents etc. Sharing of the load, build collaborative structures and promote collaborative leadership. We need to be aware of power dynamics.”

Years 2-4 – Piloting new approaches

Building on the first year of activity, years 2-4 focus on piloting new approaches that can create a step-change for the VCSE sector and the communities it represents. During this period, the impact of major external factors will undoubtedly be sharply felt. The NHS England transition period, further changes towards devolution, clarity on national policy for child poverty, digital inclusion and social security, as well as international challenges affecting trade, tariffs and investments may all affect this action plan. What is clear from recent years is that the need for partnership delivery that provides a solution to national spending challenges is unlikely to reduce. Step-change in four areas can support this approach. The specific timing of activities will be guided by what is achieved and aligned on in the first year. 2028 will also see the 30th anniversary of Telford & Wrekin’s formation as a Unitary Authority, offering a public milestone to share achievements and future ambition.

Neighbourhoods

Discussions with stakeholders during this project identified that even as a smaller geography, the needs of residents across Telford & Wrekin are not homogenous. The mix of

rural and urban locations, rapidly growing number of households, and the growing first and second-generation communities with increased international migration requires a more nuanced response. It has also been noted that many services are delivered in specific geographies that do not always obey county, borough or parish boundaries! A neighbourhood approach can help:

- Prioritise the biggest barriers for a particular community or location.
- Make engagement with local residents more accessible and centre their holistic needs in service design e.g. transport or childcare may be barriers to health or employment.
- Consider expanding current “passports” so people only have to tell their story once.
- Map life journeys of residents and service users, including points of transition between services and when support may change or increase. Consolidating this detail can help map wider trends for a neighbourhood, and the region as a whole.
- Enable multiple pilots to run simultaneously across a region, reducing risk and increasing rapid insight on short, medium and long-term outcomes than a single approach.
- Make support from local businesses reasonable and targeted.
- Improve collaboration between services across a geography, rather than because they “do similar things”.

This approach is already being taken for some healthcare provision and has demonstrable benefits for social and wellbeing outcomes, as a precursor to preventative services. It also supports social prescribing, which fosters a whole-person approach to services beyond healthcare. In determining neighbourhoods, building on what exists may be simplest.

“Various infrastructure organisations and statutory services already offer support at different levels. To develop a strategy for supporting the growth of the VCSE sector, it is crucial that these organisations work cohesively and collaboratively towards a common goal. Adopting a place-based approach would be a logical progression, allowing each organisation to leverage its strengths. This approach would address specific user needs or social issues more effectively.”

Social Prescribing

Conversations drew out mixed feelings on current social prescribing in Telford & Wrekin. Some felt healthcare services were working with incomplete organisation information, meaning some organisations were overlooked to support provision. Conversely, those which were well known to the NHS and others, were frequently sought out for “trusted” support, and relied upon to provide additional, often unpaid insight to shape services. Social prescribing was frequently described as a strong model for centring people and VCSE organisations in service provision. This gives a tangible opportunity to evolve it to deliver on the sector’s ambitions. Changes to current practice could include:

- Transparency of the priority end users and social outcomes of social prescribing; connecting to sector-wide metrics to support a “test and learn” approach.
- Building remunerated consultation into budgets and contracts.
- Using a central publicly accessible directory of organisations and services to openly advertise opportunities.
- Understanding current barriers for smaller, community-led organisations to engage with social prescribing, removing red-tape that doesn’t support a “best value” ambition.

- Connecting with a neighbourhood approach to identify and celebrate unlikely partners.
- Providing guidance drawn from examples of effective practice on consulting with service users and co-designing services.

Commissioning

Public commissioning of contracted services was a topic in every conversation throughout the project. Challenges around transparency, timeframes and the cost of delivery were repeatedly cited, and echoes feedback across the wider VCSE sector. It is also inextricably linked to challenges around funding and capacity more broadly, which for Telford & Wrekin, as well as In Kind Direct's UK network, are the primary current challenges. The VCSE sector has fostered an environment where organisations consistently deliver for those they serve, even as contracts fail to increase with inflation, or decrease in value. We heard across conversations that this had been achieved through cost-cutting, salary and recruitment freezes, staff moving to part-time hours, and subsidising costs from reserves. The situation has gone beyond a tipping point for many organisations. But expecting public bodies to find significantly more funding is not a reliable solution. A different approach is needed.

“Charities will do more until the reserves run out, then close, rather than manage a reduction in provision. Core services are the hardest to get full cost recovery for and the national minimum wage increase has a huge impact with Telford being a low salary area. Our council contract covers less than half of the cost to run the service, it's not sustainable.”

Commissioners have the opportunity to be brave and demonstrate their commitment to the sector by centralising local services and social benefit in their scoring of tenders. Rather than relying on longstanding process, they can strive for simplicity that focusses on best value and removes disproportionately onerous criteria that penalise smaller organisations. The promise of greater devolution to local authorities gives Telford & Wrekin the ability to lead the way in setting transparent commissioning practices. This could include:

- Demonstrable local connection and knowledge for any provider.
- An emphasis on collaboration and co-design with local communities and service users, going further than what is already being done.
- Transparent, central posting of commissioning opportunities encouraging multi-agency bids to enable smaller organisations to engage with commissioned services. This could be participation from the VCSE sector to evolve the current register for procurement opportunities, or something new.
- A review of commissioning timeframes and contract lengths to rationalise service provision and allow organisations to plan ahead.
- Transparency of key social outcomes to support VCSE organisations to demonstrate their impact in the most suitable way.
- Learning from other regions, such as East Sussex's Collaborative Commissioning.

Realigning Expectations

Open dialogue requires everyone to have a seat at the table. Realignment between available funding and what is deliverable is overdue. To ensure the survival of VCSE organisations, all parties need to recognise the limitations of current commissioned services to meet the full needs of service users, and where the lines are between statutory services and additional support. Conversation with one funder explained that they would provide support for core costs and projects but could not backfill overspend by charities delivering on public contracts. A short-term limiting of acute service delivery may be necessary to facilitate the shift to a more sustainable funding model in the longer term.

New partners and resource

As public spending and grant giving face challenging futures, the VCSE sector must look beyond these partners for resource to recover and evolve to meet growing local need. This may include:

- Investment in the region presents social value opportunities from procurement processes, and corporate social responsibility more generally. Engaging with commissioners as a voice of communities can support embedding infrastructure requirements in contracts. For example, through section 106 agreements for housing development in the region is steadily increasing.
- Many organisations cited that traditional volunteers are now more often managing their own health, or supporting with childcare, making recruitment challenging. Across the UK, less than 15% of employee volunteering days are generally used each year (London Benchmarking Group). Organisations like Business in the Community and Neighbourly are useful resources to support this.
- As the transition period for NHS England teams becomes clearer, there is the opportunity to bring that expertise into the sector. This could be paid roles, volunteering, or addressing governance challenges through a trustee recruitment drive.
- Succession planning was a concern raised by several organisations, as well as the steady loss of longstanding “allies” in larger organisations and public bodies. There is an opportunity for Telford & Wrekin to pioneer a young leaders programme, drawing on the knowledge and expertise of current leaders, or those preparing to leave the sector.

What became clear during conversations was the level of expertise within the VCSE sector. The mapping activities outlined for year one can support a strong matching programme, where resource is pooled and shared between organisations. There were examples of this happening informally, from sharing of templates and training resources to storage or event space. However, this was largely based on word of mouth, and the impact of such exchanges was not tracked. A central directory or matching platform would support more connections, opportunities for learning, and the ability to track the sector-wide impact of collaboration. This in itself would support the case for local delivery in partnership.

“Our organisation relies on voluntary leadership, which presents challenges for our long-term sustainability. Building a robust framework and succession planning are critical priorities.”

A number of organisations indicated they are reaching breaking point, and unlikely to survive for the long-term without major change. As a sector, a people-centred approach necessitates honest conversations about the protection of key services and retaining talent, rather than the survival of every VCSE organisation. Activities that can feed into that include:

- Embedding shared values and a common impact language in year one.
- A set of considerations or principles around merger and closure.
- Guidance and resources to support organisations to have those conversations internally and collectively. A neutral external party such as Lloyd’s Bank Foundation may have a role here.
- A focus on governance support and strengthening trustee recruitment.

At the end of this report, we have shared links to networks, training, resources and templates for VCSE sector organisations.

Systems Mapping

The shift from prioritising acute services to longer-term and preventative interventions can be visualised through a system mapping exercise. It is likely this will be most successful once the four areas outlined in this section have been considered. Systems mapping is a visual analysis tool that helps you to ‘zoom out’ to understand wider systemic factors to societal issues, and their multiple connections and causes. It benefits from wide engagement across stakeholder groups, and co-design and validation with those with lived experience. Throughout, recommendations on short and long term interventions can be considered and compared for their relative impact on people. In Kind Direct’s [systems map for hygiene poverty](#) is here as an example.

Years 5-10 – Building on what works

It has been acknowledged throughout this project that looking out further than a few years is difficult, but essential. By this point, there may have been at least one general election, and likely other major external changes that affect all UK regions in different ways. What we know from Telford & Wrekin’s Local Plan is:

- An even higher proportion of the population will be over-65s
- The Council’s efforts to be carbon neutral by 2030 are likely to influence decision-making
- Significant land development is planned by 2040, to create up to 17,000 new jobs
- Commitments have been made for more new homes that are affordable and accessible
- Investment is pledged for infrastructure including schools, transport and GP surgeries

Returning to the activity plan, in year one the focus is on setting a strong foundation for collaboration to flourish, alongside quick wins to demonstrate its benefits. Years two to four

move into implementing pilot programmes and taking a values-based approach to improving current practices to reduce competition and increase open dialogue. In years five to ten, the focus will be on rolling out local approaches and reviewing priorities to ensure they remain representative of current and future trends and need.

If a systems mapping exercise is undertaken, the outputs of that work will drive the prioritisation of communities, activities and allocation of resources. By this point, the ambition is for many organisations to have navigated out of fire-fighting mode, supported by a stronger VCSE sector and an improved dialogue with statutory partners and commissioners.

Continuing to streamline processes and embed learning from previous years will remain important to nurture a culture of collaboration. As pilot projects and partnership working build a growing body of evidence of what works, this gives the opportunity to establish evidenced frameworks that support rapid and transparent decision-making. Having been shaped by collaboration, these frameworks should support an approach that centres the people all organisations exist to serve and move away from current feelings of competition.

If the need for additional funding is identified during early stages, this may also impact the prioritisations of actions in the latter stages of the activity plan. Where resource and funding are secured from may also drive strategic decision-making. For example, if local business becomes a key partner, prioritising employment outcomes or being aware of negative external factors for businesses may become more relevant. In any event, the need for proactive horizon-scanning and an understanding of the impact of national and international policy change and events will be essential. A systems mapping approach is strong here as it can be reviewed and updated as systems change over time.

A shift to reporting impact more consistently, and in financial terms will position the VCSE sector as a solution to the challenges the region may be facing from 2030. The commitments of the Local Plan to 2040 also present opportunities for harnessing infrastructure improvements and new business development as routes to funding, ensuring people are at the heart of any planning. Using statutory investment to have the maximum social benefit will be a strong collaborative route. The VCSE sector is the voice of its communities. As it strengthens, it can speak with one voice with confidence for all Telford & Wrekin residents.

Useful links

UK organisations engaged in the project, delivering placed based projects, support or analysis:

[BitC](#) (Business in the Community)

[DSC](#) (Directory of Social Change)

[Locality](#)

[NAVCA](#) (National Association for Voluntary and Community Action)

Free and paid memberships offering networking, training, resources and templates:

[NCVO](#) (National Council for Voluntary Organisations)

[ACEVO](#) (Association for Chief Executives of Voluntary Organisations)

[Charity Comms](#) (comms best practice and networking)

[Charity Excellence](#) (funding, policies, help and resources)

[Charity Governance Code](#) (recommendations for small and large organisations)

[Cranfield Trust](#) (free charity management resources and pro bono support)

DSC also offer a [free Governance App](#) for trustees to improve their governance, together.

Locality welcomes new regions and councils to join the [Keep it Local](#) community.

Most charitable organisations can register with [In Kind Direct](#) for free in minutes. You can also read our [Impact Assessment Guide](#), published in 2019, and [view a webinar](#) with us talking about measuring social change.

The quotes shared in this report are provided anonymously and are representative of multiple voices that participated in the project. Demographic data is largely drawn from [Telford & Wrekin Council's Insight hub](#).

All details correct at time of publication, June 2025.

For any questions relating to the project, contact Charlotte Walshe, Partnerships & Impact Director, at research@inkinddirect.org.