

2025

EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES IMPACT REPORT

Prepared by Tasha Cobb and Hannah Scuffham
on behalf of the Empowering Communities Partnership



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2025 Interim Report

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2025 Interim Report

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INTRODUCTION

The Empowering Partnership supports the voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) organisations of Norfolk. The Partnership is led by Voluntary Norfolk, with partners Community Action Norfolk (CAN), FUSE Network and Norfolk Community Advice Network (NCAN) and, until April 2025, Norfolk Community Foundation as delivery partners.

Together, we aim to offer a high-quality, easy to access, universal offer of support to Norfolk VCSEs. We also respond to emerging needs of local VCSEs with targeted specialist support in key areas such as volunteering, funding and finance, or marketing and comms. Our goal is to deliver a progressive and impactful programme of support to Norfolk's VCSEs, bringing together different expertise and perspectives and helping the sector learn from each other.

The Partnership is funded by Norfolk County Council and was launched in October 2021.

Strategic Objectives – How does Empowering Communities aim to make a difference?

Our key objectives are:

1. Providing a single, joined-up infrastructure support programme
2. Building VCSE capacity, skills and sustainability
3. Encouraging and enabling wider volunteer engagement
4. Strengthening VCSE leadership and collective voice

These can be linked to the National Association for Voluntary and Community Action (NAVCA)'s Four Pillars of Infrastructure: Partnerships and Collaborations; Capacity Building; Volunteering; and Leadership and Advocacy.¹

This report included the period from October 2021 to March 2025.



KEY STRANDS OF ACTIVITY

We aim to achieve our objectives by:

1. Single, joined-up infrastructure offer:

- A clear, easy to access partnership identity, website and email address
- Monthly partnership newsletter providing updates on the activities of all partners
- Effective collaboration and signposting between partners

2. Capacity-building and skill-sharing:

- Creating and sustaining networks for VCSEs to build knowledge, share learning and develop contacts
- Regular networking sessions for in-person connection, peer support and relationship-building
- Enabling access to a wide range of information, advice and support through newsletters, Padlet boards and signposting
- Regular, accessible workshops to share good practice from both within and outside of the sector
- Access to specialist support, particularly through FUSE and Norfolk Pro-Help ²

3. Growing and supporting volunteering:

- Development and maintenance of volunteering platform Get InVOLved Norfolk, with ongoing support for organisations and individuals to make the best use of the platform's benefits
- Creating and overseeing the Norfolk Volunteer Passport (with Norfolk Adult Learning) to enable wider access to volunteering
- Ongoing promotion of volunteering across Norfolk, raising the profile of the broad range of opportunities available and encouraging the widest possible participation
- Working with VCSEs to improve their volunteering policies, processes and strategies and sharing best practice

4. Enabling sector leadership and voice:

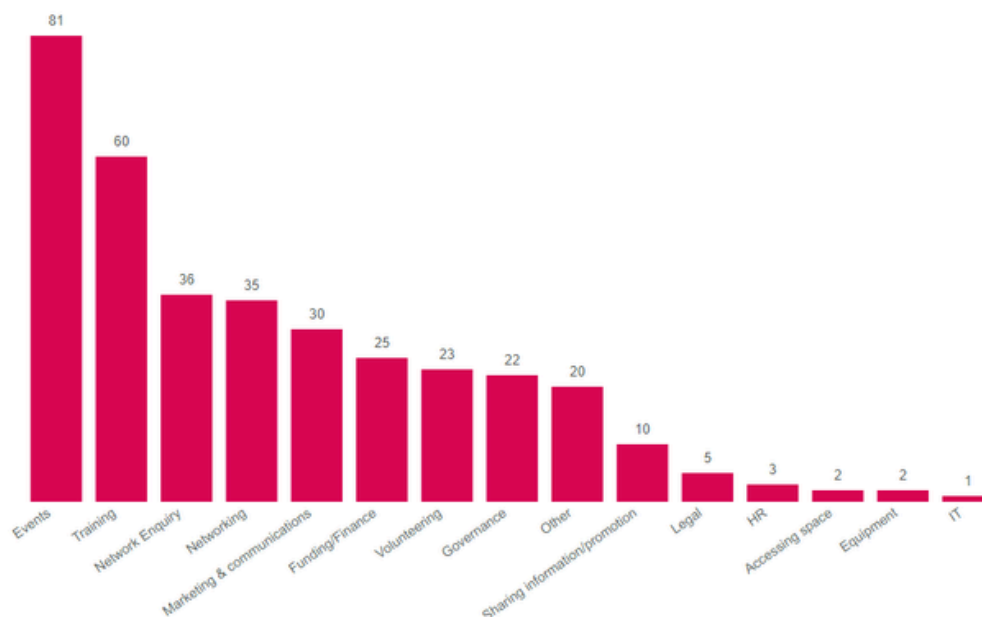
- Establishing and supporting Norfolk VCSE Leadership Network
- Running the Voluntary Sector Forum for Children, Young People & Families and NCAN Strategic Partnership meetings
- Influencing policies and developments in strategic fora on behalf of the sector
- Conducting 'state of the sector' research in Norfolk and acting on evidence and feedback to advocate



A SINGLE, JOINED UP INFRASTRUCTURE OFFER

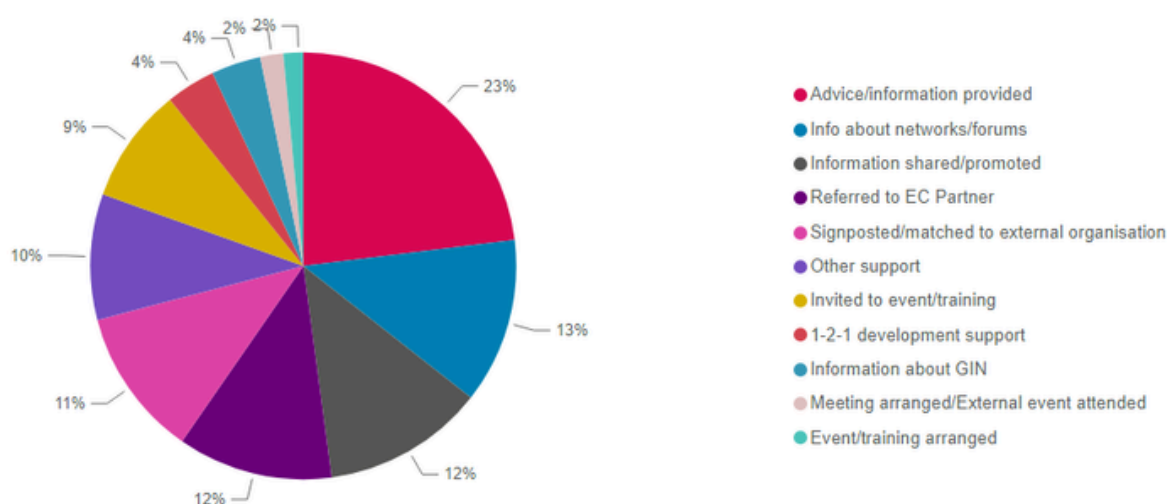
GENERAL ENQUIRIES

Since April 2022, when our enquiry reporting began, we have responded to over **350** general enquiries from Norfolk VCSEs or statutory partners. The topics enquiries relate to can be seen in the graph below:



The nature of our support varies by enquiry – the chart below shows the support received. *

Note that some enquiries will have been supported in multiple ways



“The support and encouragement I have received has been excellent and has really inspired me to carry on with my aims for this role. I feel able to get in touch, ask a question or ask for information.” - Anne Rayner, EACH

EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES NEWSLETTER

The Empowering Communities Newsletter is sent out monthly and includes comment from a partner organisation on topical or seasonal issues and events relevant to the local VCSE community, often linking to Empowering Communities activity.

Some of our most-read comment pieces include:

- Diversifying your VCSE's income streams – linked to Funding the Future event
- The Current Challenges Affecting Small Charities – linked to Small Charities Week
- Norfolk Vision for Volunteering – linked to 1st anniversary of Vision launch

The newsletter also includes a sector digest of useful information affecting the local and national VCSE sector, including government and local government policy changes, new initiatives and resources. Each edition also features a list of upcoming Empowering Communities events, as well as updates on each partner's activities.

This newsletter has a distribution list of **4,278** and an average open rate of **35%** (compared to the Not for Profit Benchmark of 32.8%).³

74% of survey respondents Agree or Strongly Agree that the Empowering Communities newsletters are useful and informative.⁴

"The updates from the team are really helpful in keeping up with areas of development across Norfolk and knowing what is happening in the wider VCSE sector in Norfolk."
- anon, Norfolk VCSE

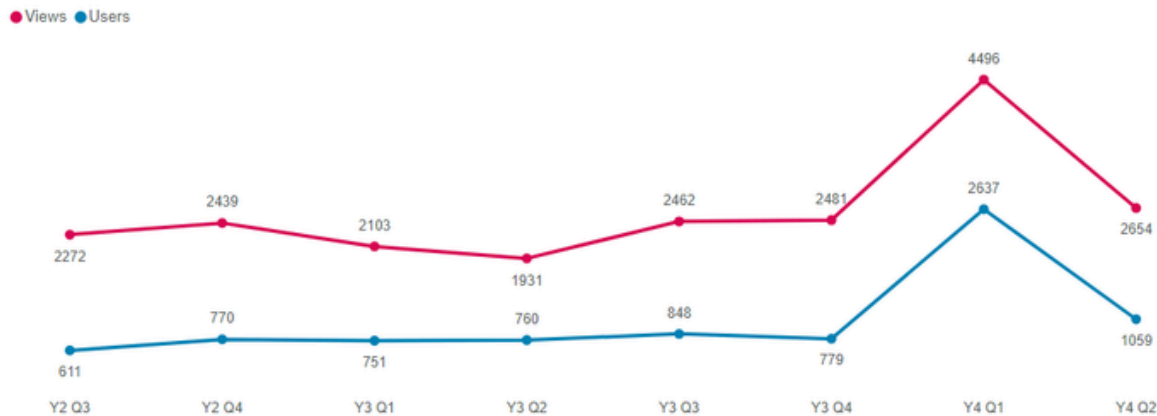
"Receiving regular Empowering Communities and Voluntary Norfolk newsletters ensures we have relevant information that is occurring in the sector." - Sharon Travis, Training & Volunteer Development Coordinator - Home-Start Norfolk



WEBSITE AND SOCIAL MEDIA

The Empowering Communities website was launched in April 2022 and has gradually increased in traffic over the past 3 years.

Website Total Views and Total Users



Since 2023 we have focused our social media presence on Linked In, which is a growing platform for charities and non-profits.⁵ Regular posts about our events, news and other updates have seen engagement rise by 92% in 2 years and total of over 350 followers.

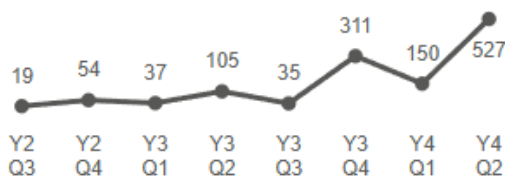
Impressions



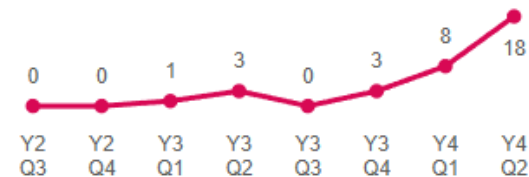
Reactions



Clicks



Comments



CAPACITY-BUILDING AND SKILL SHARING

NETWORKS AND FORUMS

The Partnership runs a range of networks and Forums:

- Voluntary Norfolk Network

Open to any representative (paid or unpaid) of Norfolk-based VCSEs. Key benefits: Information-sharing, connections & peer support

- Volunteer Coordinators Network

Open to anyone managing or coordinating volunteers in Norfolk-based VCSEs. Key benefits: Peer-learning; sharing challenges & solutions

- VCSE Leadership Network

Open to anyone in or aspiring to a leadership role in a Norfolk-based VCSE. Key benefits: relationship-building; peer support; collective influence.

- NCAN Strategic Partnership

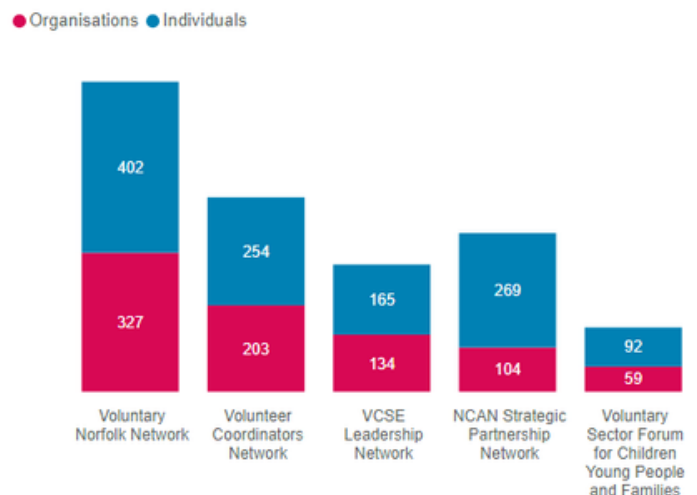
Open to all representatives from local VCSEs, Health & local authorities. Key benefits: information-sharing; access to strategic updates linked to advice sector.

- Voluntary Sector Forum for Children Young People and Families

Open to any practitioner (paid or unpaid) in VCSEs providing support to children, young people and families in Norfolk. Key benefits: 2-way engagement with statutory sector; sharing best practice; raising key issues.

As of April 2025, there are:

826 individuals representing 455 organisations across these 5 networks



There have been 38 meetings of these 5 networks, both in-person and online, with an average attendance of 29 individuals.

“A well-organised and interactive session”

“It was a really interesting and useful event, thank you!”

“[Attending networking sessions] meant we connected with other social enterprises, could share service information and provided a stepping-stone to build deeper connections” - Jess Luce-Rackham, Chief Operating Officer – Your Own Place

PADLET

Padlet is an online tool that allows the creation of easy-to-access, shareable digital bulletin boards to share and organise content such as web links, videos, and files. Empowering Communities manages several Padlet boards to provide resources, highlight events and training opportunities, direct users to relevant information, and serve as an interactive forum for discussions and knowledge sharing. We encourage networkers to share their own updates and ask questions via the boards.

There are dedicated Padlet boards for the Voluntary Norfolk Network, the Volunteer Coordinators Network, funding opportunities for VCSEs, and resources for trustees and board members. These boards have experienced consistent growth in both user engagement and the number of views, demonstrating their effectiveness as a tool for communication and collaboration within the sector. This is shown in comparing the most recent quarter (Jan-March 2025) with the same period one year ago, with the Voluntary Norfolk Network Padlet having a **7%** increase in views, and the Funding for VCSEs Padlet having a **20%** increase in views, and a **31%** increase in visitors.

On average, the Funding for VCSEs Padlet has **84** new posts per quarter, and the Voluntary Norfolk Network Padlet has **180** per quarter.

“This is a really useful and updated funding resource for charities and social enterprises in Norfolk” Rebecca White on LinkedIn – permission TBC

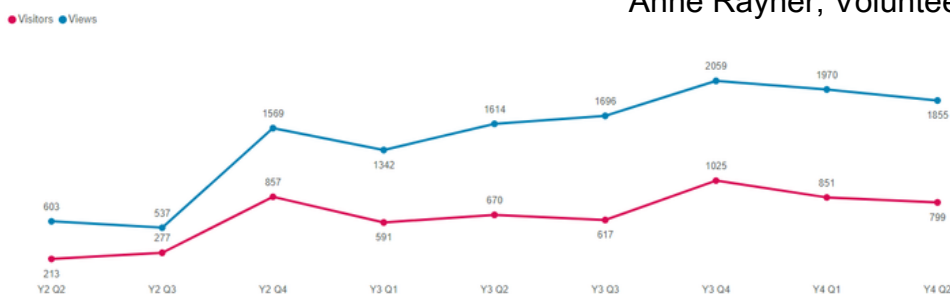
The latest Padlet, Resources for Trustees and Board Members, experienced a **76%** increase in views and a **75%** rise in visitors over the past two quarters. Its creation was driven by feedback from an event held in November 2024, Trustees & Board Members: Getting the Right Support, which highlighted the need for greater support and resources for Trustees and Non-Executive Directors. The sharp rise in engagement since its launch clearly shows that this Padlet is already proving to be a valuable resource.

“[This resource is] genuinely really helpful for someone managing a charity like me to have all these opportunities presented like this. Yesterday I was looking through the fundraising support info and resources and found about 15 opportunities that we are eligible for, so that support is invaluable as a small charity [which] needs every £ you can get!” Roger Bilton-Hall, Manager - Stepping Stones

“We have applied for funding through the Padlet which we would have otherwise not known about and connected with other organisations via this forum to reach out to potential consortium partners for funding.” - Clare Francis, Project Manager - New-U Enterprises

“[As] a result of information from the Padlet, I’ve been able to offer volunteers free training [...] including First Aid training. This is a really valuable resource, particularly for those using volunteering as a stepping-stone towards employment. I have also shared other events from the Padlet... I really like being able to offer something a bit different for volunteers.” - Anne Rayner, Volunteer Coordinator – EACH

Padlet Visitors and Views - All Boards



EVENTS, WORKSHOPS AND TRAINING

There have been **153** Empowering Communities events with a total attendance of **2110** individuals from **563** different organisations.

Of these, **83** were training sessions, workshops or webinars. These training sessions have been important in raising the ambition and skills in the sector to improve sustainability and capacity, with over **347** organisations benefitting from this. Themes addressed include:

- EDI
- Volunteer management
- Leadership and strategy
- Fundraising
- Marketing
- Governance
- HR

On average, attendees rated sessions **4.6/5** stars overall and **4.4/5** for usefulness in their work/volunteering role.

“Free, high-quality training that is relevant to our sector has made a significant difference to us as an organisation. Empowering Communities training sessions have provided opportunities for our team to develop further skills and confidence when they have moved into new roles.” - Jess Luce-Rackham, Chief Operating Officer – Your Own Place

Comments from attendees:

- “What amazing training and the questions you asked added to the whole learning experience” Awareness Training session re Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities
- “There was plenty of opportunity for discussion and idea sharing, which was helpful and informative. The trainers were extremely knowledgeable and offered differing perspectives and ideas to bring into the workplace.” Evolve Workplace Wellbeing
- “It was great to meet other people in the sector, have a friendly and engaging facilitator and take away some top tips and new tools to use.” Marketing Tactics Workshop
- “I liked that it was really engaging rather than lots of talking 'at' people” Selling Yourself and Your Organisation workshop
- “The trainer was well-prepared, confident, and created a safe learning environment” – Introduction to Co-Production
- “Informative, made me think more about my approach to things and our approach as an organisation” – Courageous Conversations About Diversity
- “Please keep running amazing events like this.” – Introduction to Crowdfunding



NETWORKING

In the Empowering Communities 2024 Survey, when asked what types of events they would be interested in attending, the most popular option was networking events at **57%**. Networking is of high importance to VCSEs as it facilitates new connections and partnership working, resource-sharing and peer-to-peer learning.

There were a total of **38** Network Meetings for the Empowering Communities Networks. The total attendance of these meetings is over **1000** (note many of these will have attended multiple meetings), representing more than **166** different organisations.

Alongside scheduled meetings for the Empowering Communities Networks there have been **12** other dedicated Networking events, with over **304** individuals attending from **171** organisations. These have included Social Enterprise networking, location specific networking, an event to bring together VCSEs and business to facilitate corporate volunteering and networking for trustees and board members. Attendees particularly valued face to face networking opportunities and from feedback **88%** rated events a score of 4 or 5 (excellent) overall.

Comments from attendees:

- “I really enjoyed the open space format, it felt very inclusive and led to a really non-judgemental approach to discussions [...] I also met some interesting people who I would like to follow up with.” In Person Networking Event in Norwich
- “Really well organised and like the idea of it being really local too, which allowed to network with organisations locally. Plenty of time to chat ourselves but great to have discussion topics to seek our views and help steer conversations too.” North Norfolk Networking
- The event provided an excellent opportunity to network with both existing and new connections, whilst also providing inspiration and insight through the guest speaker's presentation and panel discussion.” FUSE Summer Networking
- “Absolutely loved it. The most I've ever enjoyed a networking event, by far!!” Social Enterprise Coffee Morning
- “[We] have already made some new connections with some businesses who want to engage more with us. I thought it was well-organised and facilitated well.” – Corporate Volunteering
- “Events like these need to be facilitated well in order to get people talking...I thought the team did a fantastic job of making sure people were talking, they kept the conversation going and the time went by so quickly which was so surprising for a webinar that lasted as long as it did.” – Trustees and Board Members Online Networking



FLAGSHIP EVENTS

Vision for Volunteering Launch - November 2023

The Norfolk Vision for Volunteering, developed by Voluntary Norfolk on behalf of the Empowering Communities Partnership, outlines the changing nature of volunteering, the challenges this creates for the local VCSE sector and a bold call for change, with suggestions about how we get there.

The Vision was launched at the Assembly House, Norwich on 21st November 2023. At the event we shared findings and key themes from our research and set out the vision with a wide audience of stakeholders from VCSEs, public sector bodies and volunteers. There was an opportunity for attendees to discuss the vision themes and feed in their views.

77 attendees from 44 organisations came together to help us shape a shared Vision for Volunteering in Norfolk. We invited attendees to make a pledge outlining how they aim to promote and embed the themes of the Vision.

Pledges:

“

*Removing barriers, **supporting volunteer development**, develop a volunteer strategy working group*

”

“

*Continuing to be a young commissioner by effectively educating myself and **making changes** to young people in Norfolk to enable my voice to have an effect on my future*

”

“

***Invest** more time and energy into the volunteer experience and volunteer recruitment*

”

“

*Look to **collaborate at every opportunity**, and will not support or display blocking or duplicating behaviour*

”

“

*Start to pull together people in the care sector to **kickstart more volunteering***

”

“

*Share ideas / strategies with other organisations, **involve younger groups***

”

Feedback:

“There was a good chance to network and brainstorm some questions to which there are no easy answers. I found the speakers informative.”

“I thought it was excellent. A great location, well run, interesting and informative speakers and it ran to time. There were good opportunities to contribute and also speak to other attendees.”

“Thanks for the invite and the opportunity to involve young people in really important discussions”

“Thank you! So helpful to share authentically and a lovely welcome.”

The Vision launch was followed by a series of workshops for VCSEs on volunteer management; engaging young people in volunteering; and developing a volunteering strategy. Representatives from 55 organisations attended the workshop series, with many attending multiple sessions.

“Lots of really useful information and really helpful to look at examples. We are currently looking at our whole volunteering strategy and how we can improve our volunteer experience so perfect timing for us.”

“Really informative and interesting, fast paced and lots of fabulous ideas that I will hopefully progress here over the coming weeks/months.”

“Excellent session, good speakers and lots of new ideas on how to engage and really look after volunteers”

Give it a Go! Volunteering Extravaganza – June 2024

The Volunteering Extravaganza was held in Norwich during Volunteers Week 2024 and aimed to showcase to the public the breadth of volunteering opportunities available in Norfolk. Over **50** local VCSEs were present to demonstrate what they do, involve visitors in engaging activities and chat with prospective volunteers. We also held talks with current volunteers from a range of VCSEs to demonstrate the benefits of volunteering to the individual volunteers as well as the charitable causes. Approximately **1200** visitors attended and **97%** of organisations who took part said they would be keen to attend a similar event in future.

Stallholder feedback:

"I felt there was a great atmosphere with community at the heart. Many people looked round the stalls and seemed to be engaging with lots of organisations." - Shelter

"I really enjoyed this event. We had at least 20 people who were seriously interested in volunteering with us and it was it a great opportunity to see and speak to other organisations." - Age UK Norfolk

Lots of interest, volunteers got to enjoy a day meeting other volunteers , networking , raising awareness of our charity. A feel-good factor for all the other organisations across the county who work alongside us or in a totally different field. Recognising the power of volunteering and the gap they fill. - Home-Start Norfolk

Visitor feedback:

"It was a well-organised event that enlightened me to the huge variety of voluntary positions that are available to us. [...] the people who actually volunteer were on hand to answer my questions and give very honest accounts of what the roles offer and require. I would recommend to anyone who is interested in a volunteer position to attend." - Member of public, now volunteering with a Norfolk charity

Funding the Future: Diversifying Income for Charities & Social Enterprises – January 2025

In January 2025, Empowering Communities partners hosted a day-long event exploring funding diversification as a result of feedback gathered through our Sector Survey 2024, which highlighted funding as of high priority to nearly **70%** of Norfolk VCSEs.

The day featured a variety of talks and workshops with expert guest speakers and local VCSEs sharing their knowledge and experience, including:

- Keynote speech - How can we fund the future in a landscape where sources of funding are fast diminishing?
- Talk - Corporate Sponsorships and Donations
- Roundtable Discussion – Exploring Trading Models
- Panel Discussion and Q&A – What Does Good Crowdfunding Look Like?

The agenda also included time for networking and a number of funders and Empowering Communities partners hosted stalls for attendees to browse.

57 individuals attended from **42** Norfolk VCSEs. **75%** said they would be interested in attending a similar event again if the format were repeated annually.

Attendee feedback:

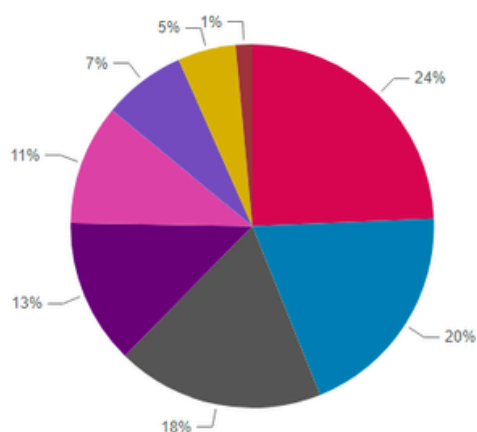
"A lot of relevant information which we are able to implement straight away. It was also useful hearing about others' experiences and frustrations with funding in the sector, as sometimes it's easy to feel isolated!"

"I learnt about crowdfunding and felt very well supported by the organisers for offering such an event for the sector to come together and discuss challenges and ideas."

"The speakers on the whole had an excellent understanding of the funding environment we are working in and, although it is a bleak picture, it still felt positive. [...] a great networking opportunity too."

PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT

Norfolk ProHelp was set up to match professional staff from a wide range of businesses with VCSE organisations requiring support and specialist expertise. There have been **275** successful ProHelp cases providing **170** organisations with support.



Nature of enquiry or support needed

- Accessing space
- Funding/Finance
- Marketing & communications
- Governance/Structure
- Legal
- HR
- IT
- Policies & procedures

“Running a small not-for-profit means there are inevitable skills gaps in our team and knowing the ProHelp scheme is there as a backup has given us confidence in business-critical decisions. I cannot express my gratitude enough!” – Village Orchard East CIC

“Thank you so much for all the support through ProHelp. [ProHelp member] was amazing with the booklet, he really understood who we are as a charity and took time to consider what we wanted to convey. The design itself was great and everyone thought it looked really professional but still with the friendly small charity essence.” - Community Chaplaincy Norfolk

“Without the support of donations of time and advice from professionals, charities would not be able to survive.” - Open Road West

“ProHelp support has been excellent. The service we received was so quick and very professional acting on the brief provided. Also, it took the worry out of what could have been a costly process which, as a charity, is often a sticking point. Thanks for your help in linking us up.” - Citizens Advice Diss, Thetford & District

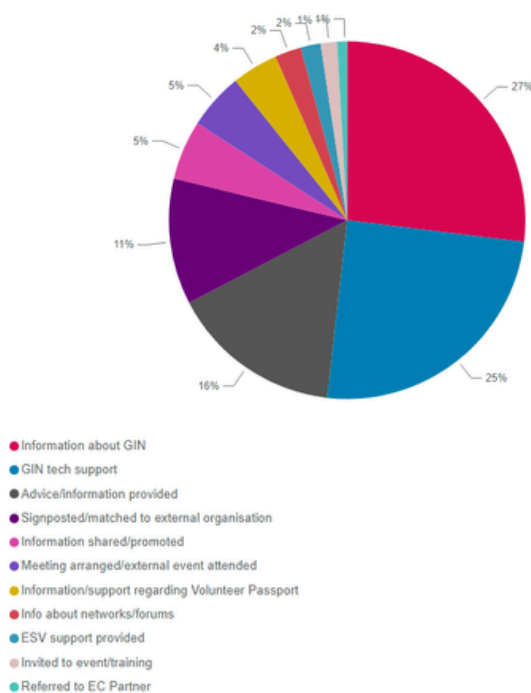


GROWING AND SUPPORTING VOLUNTEERING

VOLUNTEER CENTRE

The Volunteer Centre at Voluntary Norfolk deals with enquiries from both organisations and individuals about a range of topics, including volunteering opportunities, volunteer recruitment, support with the Get InVOLved Norfolk (GIN) platform and other support around volunteer management. We have dealt with: over 840 enquiries from individuals and over 920 from organisations.

Nature of Support Provided - Organisations



The Volunteering Newsletter is distributed monthly to over 7,000 individuals across Norfolk. It highlights new volunteer opportunities available on the Get InVOLved Norfolk platform and explores a dedicated theme each month. Previous themes have included Art, Culture, and Heritage, trusteeship, education and learning, group volunteering, and practical volunteering roles. Featured roles consistently see an increase in engagement on the platform through newsletter clicks and the newsletter has an average open rate of 50%.

"Happy to report that we had 3 new volunteer applications immediately after you featured our Service in your newsletter and we're currently processing them and looking forward to many more. A huge thank you to you for promoting our service as fosterers are a vital resource for us to provide this service." Cats Protection Lifeline East Anglia

"Thank you for running the article. We have indeed had 4 enquiries we know of as a direct result of the article, and 2 of those people have signed up to begin the training next week. We are still getting enquiries coming in, so it was definitely worthwhile and much appreciated. thank you for helping us boost the numbers of trainees, it has made a real difference" Community Chaplaincy Norfolk (CCN)

Supporting VCSE organisations in the recruitment and management of volunteers has been a key strand of work for Empowering Communities. In the Empowering Communities 2024 Survey, 52% of respondents requested events to support them with 'Volunteers', the second most popular topic after funding. When asked about the main challenges facing their organisation, the third most pressing at 34% was the retention and recruitment of volunteers. Overall 159 different organisations have engaged with our events supporting volunteer recruitment and management.

GET INVOLVED NORFOLK

The online volunteering platform Get InVOLved Norfolk was launched by Voluntary Norfolk in July 2022. The site is a platform for organisations to promote volunteering opportunities and enables potential volunteers to easily identify and apply for suitable roles.

The platform has continued to grow and be successful. In January 2024, when compared to other counterparts in the country registrations of interest in opportunities on the site were **94%** higher.⁶

439 organisations are signed up, a total of **2,061** volunteering opportunities have been posted and there have been **2,527** accepted volunteer applications. The total number of volunteers registered is **8,195**, with a record **1,104** signing up in the most recent quarter.

In the last year Get InVOLved Norfolk saw a



The website has had a total of **1,710,934** views and **336,005 visitors**. The reach and popularity of the site is continually growing with a **36%** increase in visitors and a **14%** increase in the number of views in the past year.

Get InVOLved NORFOLK

Comments about Get InVOLved Norfolk:

"In the short time that we have been with Get Involved Norfolk we have recruited two new volunteers through them and have another 5 lined up for next month, so I am happy that it is bringing results."

"We have recruited the majority of our volunteers this way"

"We have reached new volunteers through Voluntary Norfolk's Get Involved website which has given us fantastic individuals with many skills to share that have benefited our organisation."

Clare Francis, Project Manager - New-U

"We have used the Get InVOLved website for almost 3 years now and in that time, it's been a fantastic aid to us in finding suitable and passionate volunteers for our various projects. The website is easy to use and understand and the team behind it is incredibly helpful, they've always been very supportive in all things volunteering."

Abbie Kendall, Equal Lives
(permissions TBC)

Get InVOLved Norfolk and the Voluntary Norfolk team have supported corporate organisations and VCSEs with Employer Supported Volunteering by providing 1-2-1 support, a dedicated section on the Get InVOLved Norfolk platform and events such as Corporate Volunteering: Good for business, good for the community.

Over 50 corporates have been connected with volunteering opportunities, generating benefits that extend beyond the hours contributed. Such partnerships strengthen relationships between the corporate and VCSE sectors, creating long-term positive impact. Additionally, a report from Pro Bono Economics estimates that annual productivity gains from people in professional/managerial occupations volunteering amount to at least £4,551 per person.⁷

Get InVOLved NORFOLK

VOLUNTEER PASSPORT

The Norfolk Volunteer Passport is a training course run in partnership between Voluntary Norfolk and Norfolk Adult Learning which helps volunteers gain foundational knowledge to support their volunteering journey.

Courses are delivered both online and face to face and a total of 20 courses have so far been delivered, with 104 participants successfully completing the course.



Comments from participants:

"For me the course achieved its aims, and my expectations. It was an introduction to principles, parameters and behaviours of volunteering. I now understand the basics, and have greater insight into my own strengths and weaknesses - a good launch pad for a future within the sector."

"I think the course was really engaging and enabled me to learn some valuable skills. I think specifically the areas of safeguarding and the person-centred approach and what I learnt about these from the course will enable me to find a volunteering role that fits what I am looking for and will enable me to use my skills to help others."

"I've already approached a local charity that I've identified as a good fit for my skills and experience, and I'm hoping to begin my volunteering role with them in the next few weeks. Additionally, due to my continued mental health improvement, I'm also applying for part-time employment, and already have an interview lined up for a role that I think is a perfect fit for me."

ENABLING SECTOR LEADERSHIP AND VOICE

VCSE LEADERSHIP NETWORK

The VCSE Leadership Network supports individuals in leadership roles within Norfolk's VCSE sector by fostering collaboration, peer support, and the sharing of lived experiences to build collective strength and confidence. Meeting quarterly, the Network provides a space for leaders to connect, share challenges, and develop their effectiveness and influence through guest speakers, panel discussions, and facilitated conversations.

When asked what they valued about the VCSE Leadership Network meetings responses included:

- "Connection and listening to smart and invested colleagues!"
- "Chance to link with people we wouldn't meet otherwise"
- "An opportunity to understand the voluntary sector challenges and priorities"
- "Improving my own understanding of VCSE decision making/representation structures"

STATE OF THE SECTOR REPORT

In 2024, Empowering Communities conducted a survey to understand the key priorities, challenges, and support needs of VCSE organisations across Norfolk, receiving 100 responses from a broad spectrum of groups—from small community organisations to large regional charities. A follow-up survey in January 2025 provided an updated perspective from the same cohort.



The network has 165 members representing 134 organisations. There have been 9 network meetings with a total attendance of 236 people.

Meeting themes have included;

- 'Collective Influencing to Effect Change', recognising that the sector represents a wealth of experience, expertise and innovative ideas which could be leveraged to influence policy locally, regionally and nationally with a speaker from the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO).
- 'Shaping the new Norfolk Economic Strategy', in partnership with the Economic Development Team at Norfolk County Council.
- 'Looking to the Future Together', bringing together VCSE, local government and statutory colleagues to discuss key challenges affecting our communities and potential ways forward, with panelists from the Norfolk & Waveney VCSE Assembly, the local ICB and Norfolk County Council.

Findings were published in the State of the Norfolk VCSE Sector 2024 report and State of the Norfolk VCSE Sector: Interim Report 2025, shared with both voluntary and public sector partners to highlight local VCSE needs and sector-wide issues. The report has played a vital role in shaping conversations and is informing the development of a collective list of VCSE 'asks'—practical recommendations rooted in the Civil Society Covenant. Once finalised, these 'asks' will be shared with statutory partners, local authorities, funders, and decision-makers across Norfolk, with a request for responses on how they will implement or support improvements in the identified areas.

VOLUNTARY SECTOR FORUM FOR CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND FAMILIES

The Voluntary Sector Forum for Children, Young People and Families enables two-way engagement between Norfolk VCSEs and statutory partners, offering a space for members to raise key issues affecting the sector and the communities they serve. Elected Forum representatives sit on multi-agency boards and steering groups, ensuring the VCSE voice is heard and bringing back updates and insights to members through quarterly meetings. Boards include; Children & Young People Strategic Alliance, Health & Wellbeing Board, Vulnerable Adolescents Group.

The 13 meetings during this period have seen a total attendance of 247 people.

Discussion topics have included strategic reflection, future planning and updates on funding for the Children & Young People sector, safeguarding developments, and the future direction of Children's Services.

All meetings explore ways to strengthen collaboration between the VCSE and statutory sectors.

NCAN STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP NETWORK

To support the coordination and improvement of advice provision in Norfolk, NCAN holds Strategic Partnership meetings. These meetings bring together strategic leads from NCAN-accredited and affiliate member organisations, spanning the advice and VCSE sector, Public Sector, Norfolk County Council, District Councils, Health services, and commissioners.

The meetings are consistently well-attended, with an average of 58 participants at each session.

The meetings feature expert speakers and provide a platform for in-depth discussion on key issues affecting advice services. Topics have included the cost-of-living crisis, housing and homelessness, youth services, and hunger in the UK, improving referral quality, and working with migrant communities. These meetings also provide opportunities for collaboration, updates from key partners, shared learning, and raising sector-wide challenges and developments.



LOOKING BACK AND LOOKING FORWARD

Through the different strands of Empowering Communities activity, over 1200 organisations have been engaged with and/or supported in one or more ways since October 2021.

The VCSE sector continues to face complex and overlapping challenges - including the decline in volunteer numbers, increasing competition for smaller amounts of funding, the cost of living crisis, and resultant impact on staff capacity and wellbeing. While these challenges are felt by trustees, leaders, staff, volunteers and their beneficiaries across Norfolk, the need for robust, responsive and adaptable VCSE support is higher than ever.

In our recent State of the Norfolk VCSE Sector survey, a diverse range of organisations fed back to us their needs and priorities for the next year - these ranged from maintaining or increasing funding (59% prioritised this) to recruiting volunteers (of high importance for 39%) and marketing/communications (a priority for 36%). These results underlined the multiple areas of development and support our sector requires - much of which we aim to provide as the county's key infrastructure partnership.

However, our own capacity and resources are limited and many of the challenges felt by the sector are mirrored in our own organisations. We are

therefore considering how we develop the Empowering Communities Partnership in ways make best use of our skills and resources while providing maximum impact to the organisations we support. We are mindful that there are many skilled individuals, networks, groups and organisations across Norfolk which already provide excellent support to VCSEs, and we are keen to strengthen, promote and link with these initiatives rather than duplicate our activities.

Our work to date has developed in conversation and consultation with local VCSEs, and we will continue to seek their views and respond to the needs of the sector. Over the next year, we aim to develop new ways of bringing in VCSE voices to the Partnership, to ensure our offer is as relevant as possible and to strengthen our accountability. Working with and for the sector remains central to the principles of Empowering Communities.

Our vision and ambition is a Norfolk VCSE sector that is sustainable, empowered, well-networked and resourced to provide outstanding support to our communities. In addition to championing the power and benefits of volunteering, we wish to enhance recognition for the sector as a key employer, contributing in multiple ways to the economy and wellbeing of the people of Norfolk.

