

State of the Sector Report 2025-26



Understanding the Challenges, Opportunities and Priorities of West Berkshire's Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise Sector



Volunteer Centre
West Berkshire

Charitable Incorporated Organisation No. 1156302

Est 1974

www.volunteerwestberks.org.uk

Our work is supported by



**COMMUNITY
FUND**



Foreword

The voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector plays a vital role in supporting the health, wellbeing and resilience of communities across West Berkshire.

In early 2026 Volunteer Centre West Berkshire undertook a State of the Sector Survey to better understand the experiences, challenges and opportunities facing local organisations. Responses were received from charities, community groups, social enterprises and volunteer-led organisations of varying sizes and specialisms.

The findings highlight a sector that remains resilient, innovative and deeply committed to local communities, despite increasing demand, ongoing financial uncertainty and growing workforce pressures.

This report provides an overview of the key issues identified through the survey and will help shape VCWB's future priorities, advocacy activity and support offer for the sector.

I would like to thank every organisation that took the time to contribute their insight and experience.

Rachel Peters

Chief Executive Officer

Volunteer Centre West Berkshire

Executive Summary

The 2026 State of the Sector Survey reveals a voluntary sector that continues to provide essential services across West Berkshire despite mounting pressures.

Whilst most respondents reported confidence that their organisation would continue operating over the next 12 months, many highlighted growing concerns around funding sustainability, volunteer recruitment, workforce capacity and increasing demand.

Key Findings

Funding pressures remain widespread.

Many organisations reported reductions in funding, increased costs and growing uncertainty about future income streams. Organisations described increasing competition for grants, greater reliance on reserves and difficulties covering core costs.

Volunteer recruitment is becoming more challenging.

Many organisations reported finding it harder to recruit and retain volunteers than in previous years, citing financial pressures, reduced availability of retirees and changing patterns of volunteering.

Demand is increasing.

Across multiple service areas including poverty relief, mental health, SEND services, family support and older people's services, organisations reported increasing demand whilst operating with limited spare capacity.

Rurality continues to create inequality.

Transport barriers, rural isolation and difficulties accessing services continue to affect beneficiaries across West Berkshire.

Organisations value collaboration.

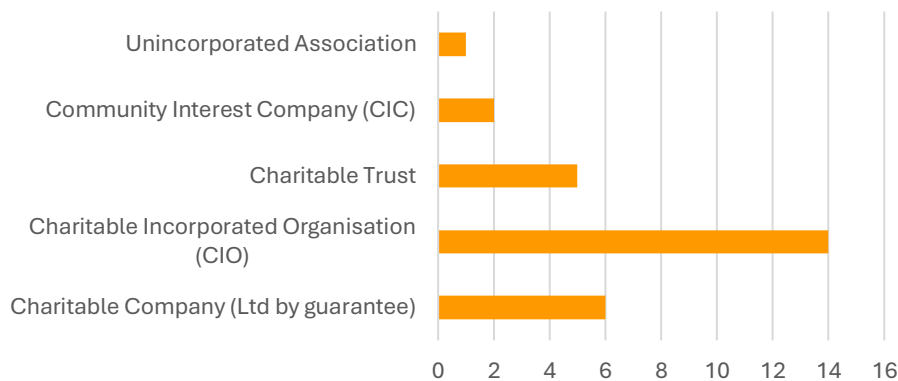
The majority of respondents reported strong partnership working through referral pathways, joint delivery models and shared resources.

Confidence in representation is mixed.

Whilst some organisations feel connected to strategic discussions, others report low awareness of engagement opportunities and limited confidence that their voice is heard.

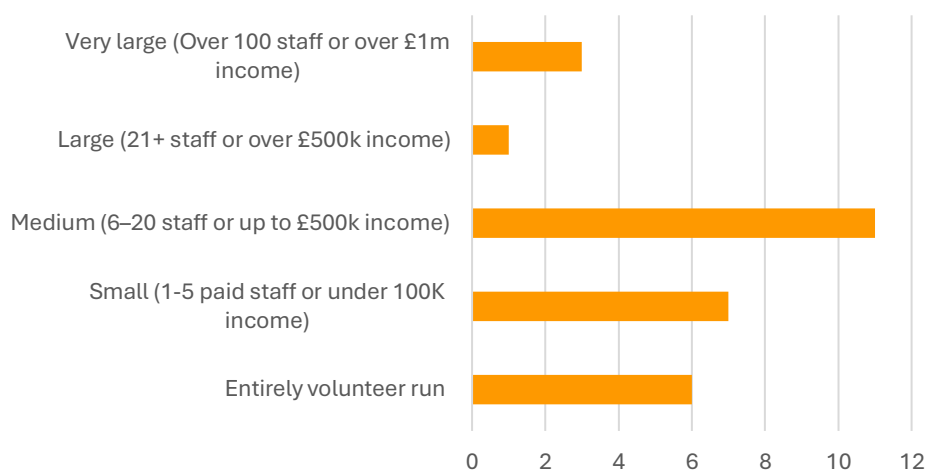
About the Respondents

A total of 28 organisations participated in the 2026 State of the Sector Survey, representing a diverse cross-section of West Berkshire's VCSE sector. Respondents included charitable trusts, charitable incorporated organisations (CIOs), charitable companies, community interest companies (CICs), unincorporated associations and infrastructure organisations working across a broad range of service areas, including children and young people, health and wellbeing, disability and SEND, older people, poverty relief, housing, transport, refugee support and community development.



The survey attracted responses from organisations of varying sizes, although the majority came from small to medium-sized charities and community groups. Medium-sized organisations accounted for 39% of respondents, whilst 25% were small organisations and 21% were entirely volunteer-led. Together, these organisations represented 85% of all responses, providing a valuable insight into the experiences of the organisations that form the backbone of community support across West Berkshire. Larger organisations accounted for 15% of respondents, demonstrating that the survey captures perspectives from both grassroots organisations and larger service providers.

Size of organisation



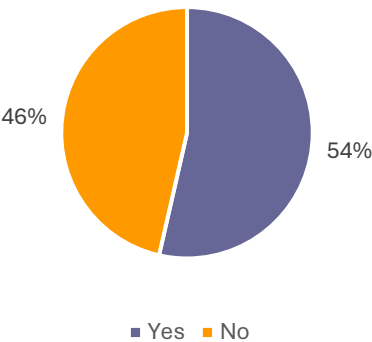
Financial Sustainability

Financial resilience remains a significant concern.

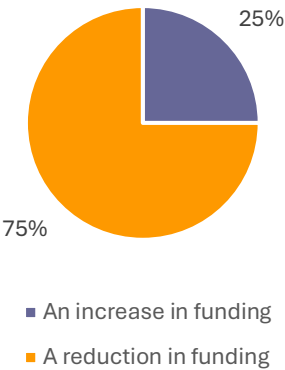
Financial sustainability emerged as one of the strongest themes throughout the survey. While organisations remain committed to maintaining services and supporting local communities, many described increasing financial pressures driven by rising costs, growing demand and uncertainty across traditional funding streams. Respondents reported reductions in income from trusts and foundations, local authority contracts, community fundraising, corporate donations and individual giving, alongside increasing competition for available funding opportunities.

Of the organisations who answered “Yes” to a change in funding, 75% reported experiencing reductions in one or more funding streams during the previous 12 months. The average reduction reported was 19%, although some organisations experienced reductions of 30% or more. Several respondents noted that the challenge is not only the level of funding available but also declining success rates as increasing numbers of organisations compete for the same grants and funding opportunities.

Has your organisation seen a change in funding in the last 12 months



Change in funding



Among the 54% of organisations that reported a change in funding during the previous 12 months, several indicators point to growing financial strain:

Indicator	Result
Organisations using reserves	64%
Organisations expecting expenditure to exceed income	39%
Organisations requesting fundraising support	18%

Many organisations described taking short-term measures to manage financial pressures. Nearly two-thirds (64%) reported using reserves to sustain services, cover core operating costs or bridge gaps in income. Others reported increasing fees, exploring alternative income sources, strengthening fundraising activity, or reviewing

operating costs. While these approaches have helped organisations remain financially viable, many respondents recognised that they offer limited protection against longer-term structural funding challenges.

Financial pressures are also increasingly shaping organisational planning and decision-making. Respondents described delaying recruitment, postponing investment in development projects and focusing greater leadership time on funding applications, financial monitoring and risk management. This reflects the growing challenge of maintaining organisational resilience while securing longer-term sustainability.

“The year ahead looks difficult with some major gaps in funding.”

“Funding is obviously a huge challenge for us all. If not today, then tomorrow looks bleak.”

Impact on Services

Whilst relatively few organisations reported an immediate risk of closure, many described operating in increasingly precarious circumstances. Almost four in ten organisations (39%) expect their expenditure to exceed income in the coming year, reinforcing concerns about future sustainability. A number of organisations highlighted particular difficulties securing funding for core operational costs, noting that grant funding often remains focused on projects and activities rather than the infrastructure required to sustain organisations over the longer term.

For many organisations, these pressures are beginning to affect service delivery and organisational capacity. Respondents described growing pressure on staff teams already working at capacity, alongside greater reliance on volunteers to maintain existing levels of support. Several organisations expressed concern about their ability to continue investing in workforce development, innovation and preventative approaches that could improve outcomes in the longer term.

Some organisations reported that financial constraints may require them to reduce provision, scale back activities, introduce or increase charges for services, or limit the range of support they are able to offer. Respondents highlighted concerns that, if financial pressures continue, the cumulative effect could be reduced access to services and fewer opportunities for individuals and communities to receive support when they need it most.

What organisations said they need to help with their financial sustainability?

Organisations identified support needs including:

- Fundraising support
- Grant bid writing assistance
- Meet the Funder opportunities
- Strategic planning support
- Income diversification advice
- Support with demonstrating impact
- Better access to corporate funding opportunities

Volunteering and Trustees

Volunteers remain the backbone of the VCSE sector.

Volunteers continue to be fundamental to the delivery of services across West Berkshire. Survey respondents collectively reported more than **2,550 volunteers**, contributing more than **864,000 volunteer hours** annually.

The importance of volunteers was evident throughout the survey. Many organisations described volunteers as "vital", "the lifeblood of our organisation", or stated that their organisation could not operate without them. Volunteer-led organisations reported that volunteers deliver their entire service offer, while larger organisations highlighted their role in expanding capacity and reaching more beneficiaries.

Volunteer recruitment and retention.

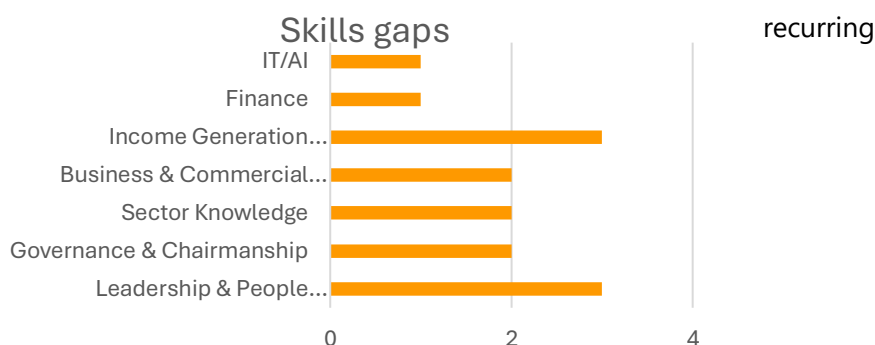
Many organisations reported increasing difficulties recruiting and retaining volunteers. Common reasons included:

- Financial pressures and cost of living
- People working longer before retirement
- Reduced availability and less spare time
- Challenges recruiting people with specialist skills
- Increasing complexity of some volunteer roles

Several organisations reported concern about their future ability to recruit sufficient volunteers to meet growing demand and support planned growth.

Trustee recruitment and leadership succession

Recruiting trustees remains a significant challenge. Most organisations continue to rely heavily on personal networks, word-of-mouth recommendations and existing volunteers when recruiting trustees. However, respondents highlighted difficulties attracting people with leadership, fundraising, governance, financial and digital expertise. Succession planning and leadership continuity were also concerns.



Demand, Workforce Capacity and Organisational Resilience

Demand continues to rise

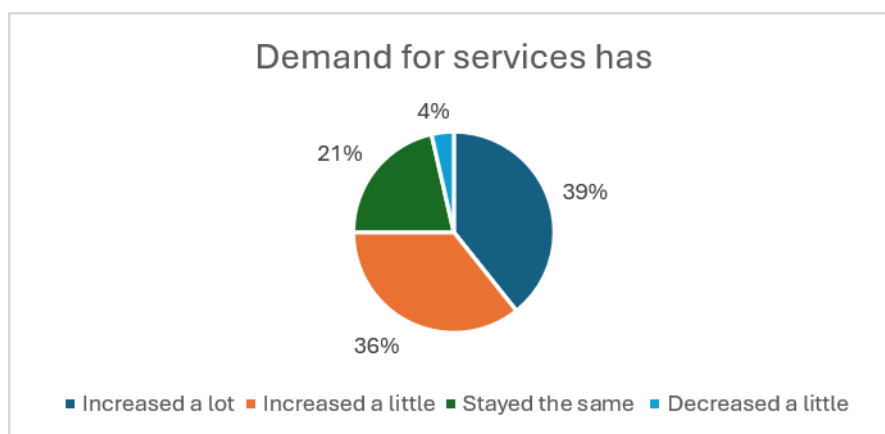
A clear theme emerging from the survey is the growing gap between demand for services and organisational capacity. Seventy-five per cent of respondents reported an increase in demand for their services over the previous 12 months, reflecting both rising levels of need and increasing complexity among the individuals and communities they support. Organisations working in poverty relief, mental health, family support, domestic abuse, older people's services and SEND support were particularly likely to report growing demand and more complex cases requiring additional time and resource.

Workforce and leadership pressures

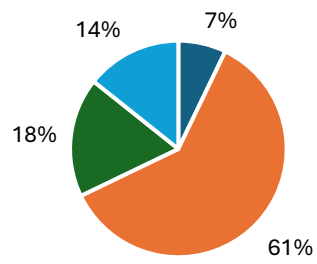
While many organisations remain positive about their future prospects, sustained increases in demand are placing significant pressure on organisational capacity. Respondents described staff and volunteer teams operating at or near full capacity, with leaders increasingly required to take on operational responsibilities alongside their strategic roles. Many reported limited time for service development, partnership building and long-term planning, while concerns around staff burnout, recruitment challenges, succession planning and management capacity were frequently highlighted.

Implications for growth and sustainability

Several organisations reported delaying growth and innovation plans, reducing their ability to respond to emerging needs. Others highlighted an increasing reliance on volunteers to absorb growing workloads and maintain existing levels of support, raising questions about the long-term sustainability of current operating models.



To what extent do you expect to meet demand



- Meet demand with significant spare capacity
- Meet demand with limited / no spare capacity
- Almost meet demand
- Fall significantly short

Inclusion, Rurality and Access

Rurality remains a significant barrier.

Transport and rural isolation emerged as recurring themes throughout the survey. Organisations highlighted the challenges faced by people living in rural areas, particularly where public transport options are limited or non-existent. These barriers affect older people, young people, SEND families, low-income households and those experiencing social isolation.

Respondents reported that transport limitations can directly affect service uptake, contribute to inequalities and reduce opportunities for participation. Several organisations highlighted the need for rural-proofed service design and greater investment in transport solutions.

Underrepresented groups

Groups identified as being underrepresented or facing barriers to access included:

- Fathers
- Boys and young men
- Refugees and asylum seekers
- Digitally excluded individuals
- Low-income households
- Rural communities

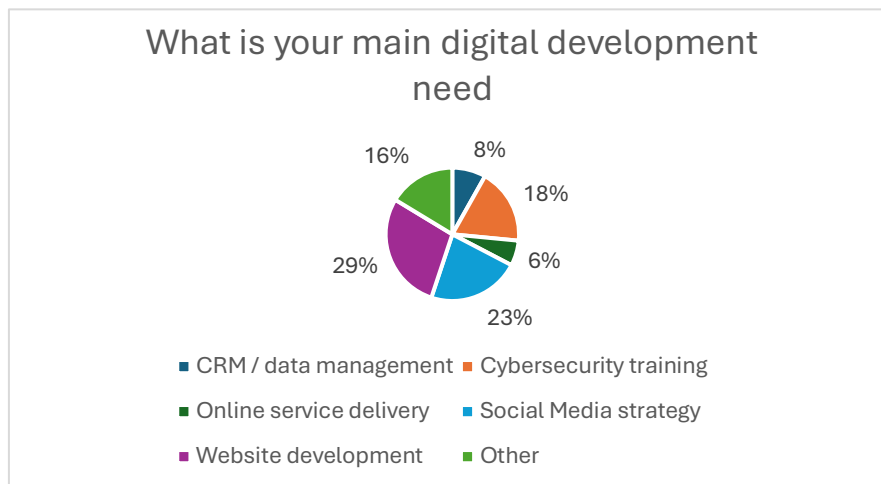
Digital Capability

Confidence is improving but support needs remain.

Most organisations rated their digital capability as adequate or good. However, many highlighted a need for additional support in areas such as:

- CRM and data management systems
- Website development
- Social media and marketing
- Cyber security
- Online service delivery
- Artificial intelligence

AI emerged as a new theme within the survey, with respondents expressing growing interest in understanding how technology can support fundraising, administration, governance and operational efficiency.



Collaboration and Partnership Working

A highly collaborative sector

Collaboration is a significant strength of the West Berkshire VCSE sector. Organisations reported extensive partnership working with other charities, community groups, schools, councils, health providers and statutory agencies. Respondents highlighted the value of referral pathways, joint service delivery, shared resources and collaborative funding applications.

Many organisations demonstrated how effective partnerships improve outcomes for beneficiaries, reduce duplication and increase the reach of services. Successful collaborations were frequently described as essential in helping organisations achieve more than they could alone.

What would help organisations collaborate more?

The most common requests were:

- Networking opportunities
- Facilitated introductions
- More time and capacity
- Funding that supports partnership working
- Improved communication between organisations

Home-Start's Collaborative Approach

Home-Start demonstrates the value of partnership working in strengthening support for families. By working closely with the Community Furniture Project and the Foodbank, the charity has established effective referral pathways for families experiencing financial hardship.

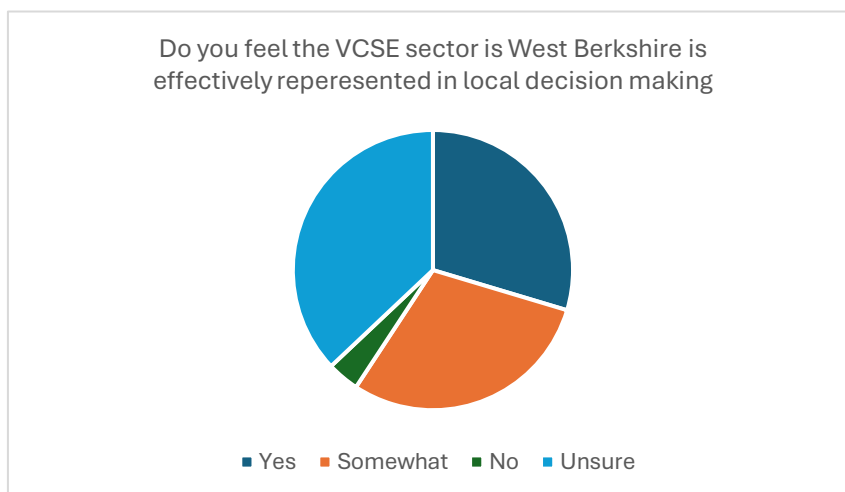
Home-Start has also partnered with Educafe through its Parent Village initiative, helping to raise awareness of its services and generate high-quality referrals.

In addition, collaboration with local Family Hubs has developed organically, creating a joined-up network of support that benefits young families and ensures they can access the right help at the right time.

Representation and Influence

Confidence in representation is mixed.

The survey revealed varying levels of confidence in organisations' ability to influence local decisions. Whilst some organisations are actively engaged in forums, boards and strategic partnerships, many reported little involvement in decision-making processes. Several respondents expressed uncertainty about how to engage, whilst others reported barriers relating to time, capacity and awareness of opportunities.



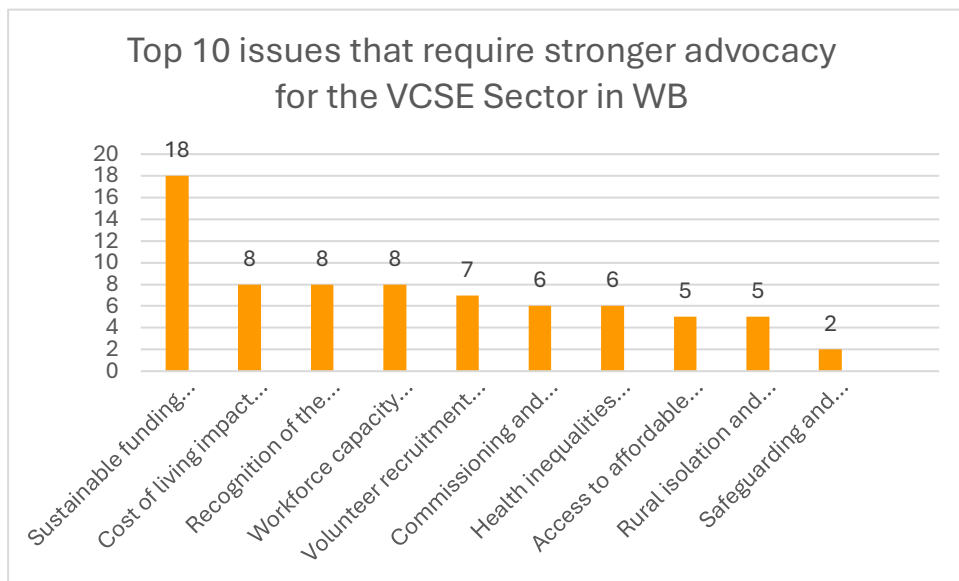
Smaller organisations and specialist charities were particularly likely to report lower confidence in influencing local priorities and policy discussions. Respondents frequently called for greater involvement of grassroots organisations and better communication about opportunities to engage.

Priority Issues for Advocacy

Respondents identified several issues requiring stronger advocacy over the coming year.

The most frequently cited themes included:

1. Sustainable funding and grants (24%)
2. Workforce capacity and burnout (11%)
3. Recognition of the value of the VCSE sector (11%)
4. Cost of living impacts on communities (11%)



There was a strong desire for continued advocacy to ensure that the contribution of the VCSE sector is recognised within local decision-making and future service planning.

VCWB Infrastructure Support

VCWB is valued as a trusted connector and source of support.

Feedback from organisations demonstrates that VCWB plays an important role in strengthening the local voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector. Respondents consistently highlighted the value of VCWB's ability to bring organisations together, facilitate connections, share information and provide practical support. Many described VCWB as an accessible and responsive organisation that understands local needs and helps organisations navigate challenges through advice, signposting and knowledge sharing. Responses frequently referred to VCWB's role in helping organisations feel connected to the wider sector and reducing isolation among charity leaders.

Volunteer recruitment remains one of VCWB's most valued services.

Volunteer recruitment emerged as the service most identified as having a positive impact. Organisations highlighted the effectiveness of volunteer advertising, volunteer fairs and volunteer brokerage in helping them attract new volunteers and maintain service delivery. Several respondents also referenced the value of VCWB's support in promoting job and trustee vacancies. Given the wider challenges around volunteer recruitment and retention identified elsewhere in the survey, this suggests that volunteer infrastructure continues to be a critical area of support for the sector.

Networks, events and information sharing are highly valued.

Networking opportunities, peer connections and sector events were repeatedly identified as valuable aspects of VCWB's offer. Organisations highlighted the benefits of meeting other charity leaders, sharing best practice and developing collaborative relationships. Funding-focused events, particularly "Meet the Funder" sessions, were frequently cited as useful in helping organisations better understand funding opportunities and build relationships with funders, even where immediate funding outcomes did not result. Respondents also valued VCWB's newsletters, funding updates and training information as important sources of intelligence and awareness.

VCWB is recognised as an important voice for the sector.

Many organisations acknowledged VCWB's role in representing the sector and maintaining constructive relationships with local partners. Respondents described VCWB as a strong advocate for voluntary organisations, helping ensure sector issues are heard and championed within local systems. Several highlighted the importance of continuing this advocacy role, particularly at a time when organisations face growing demand, financial pressures and uncertainty associated with local government reorganisation and public sector funding constraints.

Opportunities for further development

While feedback was overwhelmingly positive, respondents identified several areas where additional support would be welcomed.

The strongest theme was a desire for increased support around funding and financial sustainability. Organisations requested more opportunities to engage with funders, greater intelligence on available funding opportunities, support with fundraising and income diversification, and advocacy for sustainable funding models, including funding for core costs.

Respondents also highlighted demand for:

- More affordable training opportunities, particularly for smaller organisations.
- Trustee development and governance support.
- Greater corporate engagement to support volunteering, fundraising and skills-sharing.
- Continued facilitation of networking and collaboration opportunities.
- Stronger links between the VCSE sector and local decisionmakers.
- Additional opportunities for volunteer recruitment and promotion across different parts of West Berkshire.
- Practical resources, templates and organisational development tools.

Key implications for VCWB

The findings suggest that VCWB's greatest value lies in its role as a sector convenor, trusted source of information and champion for local organisations. Looking ahead, there is a clear opportunity to build on these strengths by expanding support around funding sustainability, workforce and volunteer development, trustee recruitment, governance and sector advocacy. As financial pressures continue and demand for services grows, respondents highlighted the importance of a strong infrastructure organisation that can connect organisations, amplify sector voices and help build the resilience of the VCSE sector across West Berkshire.

Conclusions

Conclusion

The voluntary, community and social enterprise sector in West Berkshire continues to demonstrate resilience, innovation and a deep commitment to supporting local communities. Organisations are responding to significant challenges while continuing to deliver essential services, often reaching individuals and communities who may otherwise struggle to access support.

However, organisations are operating within an increasingly challenging environment characterised by:

- Growing demand
- Funding uncertainty
- Workforce pressures
- Volunteer recruitment challenges
- Transport and access barriers
- Increasing complexity of need

The survey highlights not a sector in crisis, but a sector under increasing pressure. While many organisations remain optimistic about their future, financial constraints, workforce shortages and growing levels of demand are limiting their ability to innovate, invest in development and respond proactively to emerging needs. Concerns around long-term sustainability, core funding, recruitment and organisational capacity were recurring themes throughout the survey.

At the same time, the findings underscore the importance of strong infrastructure support. Organisations consistently highlighted the value of VCWB's role in volunteer recruitment, networking, information sharing, governance support, funding engagement and sector representation. VCWB is widely regarded as a trusted connector and advocate, helping organisations build relationships, access opportunities and navigate an increasingly complex operating environment. Respondents also identified opportunities to strengthen support further through expanded training, fundraising and sustainability support, corporate engagement, and greater influence with local decisionmakers.

Maintaining the health and sustainability of the VCSE sector will be critical to ensuring that communities across West Berkshire continue to receive the support they need in the years ahead. As financial pressures and demand continue to grow, investment in both frontline organisations and the infrastructure that supports them will be essential to building a resilient, collaborative and effective sector capable of meeting future challenges and opportunities.

Recommendations

Delivering these recommendations will require collective action across the VCSE sector, local authorities, NHS partners, funders and wider stakeholders. Infrastructure organisations have a key role in coordinating support, sharing good practice and amplifying the voice of the sector, while funders and statutory partners can help create the conditions for sustainable, effective and collaborative working.

Recommendation	What can be done?	Who can do it?
1. Strengthen Sustainable Funding Support and Advocacy	Advocate for longer-term funding arrangements; provide fundraising training and bid-writing support; facilitate relationships between funders and VCSE organisations; promote collaborative funding bids.	Infrastructure organisations (e.g. CVS), local authorities, NHS partners, funders, VCSE leaders.
2. Develop a Volunteer and Trustee Action Plan	Run volunteer recruitment campaigns; provide trustee training and mentoring; create trustee matching services; support succession planning and governance reviews.	CVS/infrastructure bodies, volunteer centres, charities, local businesses, educational institutions.
3. Expand Organisational Resilience and Leadership Support	Deliver leadership development programmes; offer wellbeing support for staff and volunteers; provide workforce planning advice; facilitate peer support networks and coaching.	Infrastructure organisations, funders, local authorities, training providers, sector leaders.
4. Strengthen VCSE Representation in Local Decision-Making	Increase VCSE representation on strategic boards; establish regular consultation forums; improve communication between decisionmakers and the sector; support smaller organisations to participate in strategic discussions.	Local authorities, Integrated Care Boards (ICBs), NHS partners, infrastructure organisations, partnership boards.
5. Champion Rural Access and Inclusion	Advocate for improved transport solutions; ensure rural proofing of policies and services; support outreach and mobile delivery models; invest in community-based provision.	Local authorities, transport providers, NHS partners, funders, rural charities and community groups.
6. Support Digital Development and Innovation	Provide training on cyber security, CRM systems and AI; offer digital grants and equipment; facilitate knowledge-sharing of digital best practice; support digital transformation planning.	Infrastructure organisations, funders, digital specialists, local authorities, technology partners.

7. Facilitate Greater Collaboration and Shared Learning

Organise networking events and forums; create opportunities for cross-sector partnerships; share examples of good practice; support collaborative projects and consortium working.

CVS/infrastructure organisations, local authorities, funders, VCSE organisations, strategic partnerships.

Appendices

The following appendix is available as a separate document:

Appendix A: survey data