

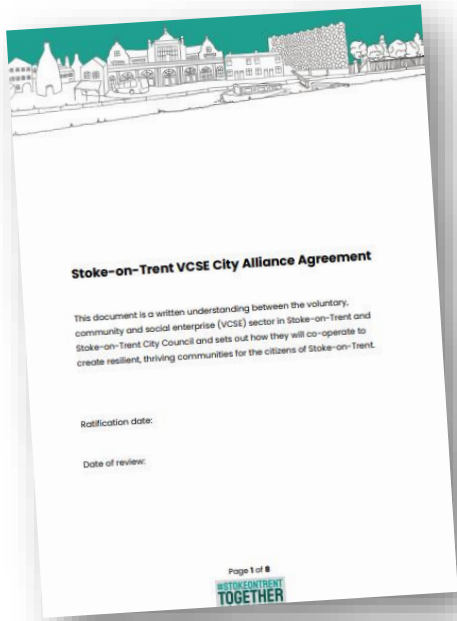
Stoke-on-Trent VCSE City Alliance

Year One Report

VAST Services (1920)
with
Stoke-on-Trent City Council



1. What is the VCSE City Alliance?



The VCSE City Alliance is a written, shared commitment between the VCSE sector and Stoke-on-Trent City Council to work together to build stronger, more resilient and empowered communities within the city.

It has ten core principles, and a set of behaviours (or characteristics) described for each, which are intended to guide our work together in all areas to build stronger, more resilient and empowered communities

within the city. The Alliance agreement is intended to resonate in any areas of work that bring VCSEs and the Local Authority together as partners. The Alliance agreement was signed by Stoke-on-Trent City Council and VAST on 6th December 2024.



Comms activity to mark the signing of the VCSE City Alliance Agreement, December 2024

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2. Priorities 2024–2029

Partnership and Collaboration	Resource Sharing	Evaluation and Learning
Mutual Respect	Flexible and Adaptive Approaches	Clear Roles and Responsibilities
Long Term Planning	Empowerment	Open Communication
Equity and Inclusion	Ten key areas and a set of behaviours described for each	

The VCSE City Alliance was originally co-produced by Stoke-on-Trent City Council and the Voluntary Sector Chief Officers Group (VSCOG), which is a membership group made up of VCSE leaders working in the city.

It has ten principles (as above), plus a set of behaviours or characteristics for each. These are designed to guide cross-sector working.

There are four agreed priorities for the period 2024–2029, which are:

1. Communications and Engagement
2. Commissioning and Procurement
3. Prevention
4. Volunteering

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3. Who has been involved in the VCSE City Alliance during the first year?

Stoke-on-Trent's VCSE sector is a relatively compact one. In total, 252 charities are based in the city, along with 177 social enterprises.

82 VCSE organisations have pledged their support for the VCSE City Alliance in the first year, demonstrating a strong level of goodwill towards the prospect of stronger collaboration with the Local Authority, and an excellent foundation for further expansion.

4. How was support confirmed during the first year?

VCSE organisations can sign up to pledge their support via a link on VAST's website. The 82 VCSE organisations who have committed include the majority of the city's larger and medium-sized charities, and a representative range of smaller organisations that work across a range of thematic areas.

In order to recruit support to the Alliance, VAST actively evangelised for the initiative, engaging with the sector by making one-to-one approaches as well as speaking at several forums such as:

- The Voluntary Sector Chief Officers Group (VSCOG),
- The Healthy Communities Alliance Stoke-on-Trent and North Staffordshire Forum
- Civil Society Covenant Round Table hosted by VAST with Stephanie Peacock MP, Minister for Sport, Tourism, Civil Society and Youth.
- Stoke-on-Trent Youth Collective

VAST also undertook significant promotional work using our own network of member organisations. This took place via LinkedIn, social media and newsletters. Fifteen early supporters took the time to commit to video their hopes and aspirations for an improved relationship going forward.

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All of the VCSE organisations contacted were offered one-to-one introductions to the Alliance principles and to some of the work initially identified for development. In most cases, these sessions took place face to face, and these also gave organisations an opportunity to speak candidly about their views of the relationship.

Some VCSE organisations signed up without hesitation before this conversation, while others sought to confer with trustees or wider leadership teams afterwards. In some cases, this meant that support was committed only after a period, and a handful of organisations did not complete their signup.

Two organisations questioned the Alliance principle of Empowerment (as specifically detailed in the agreement). They stated that this represented an unequal dynamic (i.e. the perceived principle that it is for the LA to empower VCSEs if it so chooses). One also advocated strongly for the idea that Lived Experience should be added to the roster of principles contained within the agreement.

Two VCSE organisations completed the baseline questionnaire but declined to explicitly support the Alliance principles. One reflected back that they simply did not trust the City Council for a range of historic reasons. The second cited more nuanced objections relating to austerity and the pressure that they felt is placed upon VCSEs to deliver services in settings where the public sector has receded.

However, most VCSE organisations approached offered their immediate support. Many cited the Authority's political leadership, along with the well-aligned approach of specific Council officers and teams, among the reasons for their willingness to commit their support.

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5. What was the mood of the VCSE sector during the first year?



Alex Petula from Bentilee Volunteers speaks about the importance of the SOT VCSE City Alliance.



Godefroid Semeinga from Asha Nth Staffs talks about the potential benefits of the VCSE City Alliance



Danny Flynn from YMCA talks about the recently signed Stoke-on-Trent VCSE City Alliance.



Natalie Ornelas from Family Focus discusses the importance of the Stoke-on-Trent VCSE City Alliance.

Watch how VCSE leaders give their backing to the VCSE City Alliance on [VAST Cast](#).

Evidence-wise, the emerging picture was balanced and nuanced. Invited to reflect qualitatively and freely, VCSE organisations tended to balance a sense of positive direction and recognition of 'the good' with advocacy around the need for tangible delivery, the weight of sometimes negative prior experiences, and a consciousness about the need for a continuing rebalancing of power relationships.

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Perspectives collected during the Alliance's first year articulate this. A representative selection is presented here:

"The City Alliance, contact with Local Council leaders and community events such as Burslem Communities Together have started to help us give a voice..."

"While there is still some way to go; the VCSE is starting to be heard. New blood brought in recently have an understanding of the VCSE organisations. I think the biggest issue is a lack of diversity, also that small organisations are left out of the tendering and commission process and opportunities..."

"I feel that the current City Council is proactive, open and curious. There are a number of partnerships in my field which link LA and VCSE and produce effective and reflective work..."

"Much progress has been made - but we still have some way to go..."

"I feel that the higher levels of the City Council have a renewed drive to engage with the Voluntary Sector. However, there appears to be a culture that is more negative towards the voluntary sector. New initiatives state that they are listening to the voice of the voluntary sector. Later on it transpires that the City Council and partners have a predetermined outcome. How can we learn together if this is the case? If you challenge this way of working, they can simply 'turn off the tap..."

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The complexion of this feedback came as little surprise. There is sufficient evidence to point to an overall tide swell of favourable energy behind the Alliance, together with support for a stronger relationship, building on ever-sounder collaborative principles.



Courageous Spaces – ‘Solidarity, Honesty, Equity, Decency’: examples from a codesigned set of principles for sessional engagement together

6. The developing mood over the first year – in data

When a VCSE organisation signs up to support the VCSE City Alliance, we invite them to rate the current state of collaboration against the ten key principles of the City Alliance, and their associated behaviours or characteristics.

In essence, this is about using the Alliance agreement as a mirror to hold up to our relationship, enabling us to ask how things feel from a range of perspectives.

The results are laid out in full in VAST's [State of the Sector report](#), with responses having been collected throughout the first three quarters of Year One.

Opinions and experiences can and do vary, as might be expected from the qualitative feedback cited above. The VCSE sector does not always speak with one voice, or from a standpoint of singular experience. Yet there is a good level of recognition about the direction of travel in key areas.

It was initially difficult to judge whether the picture presented in relation to the Alliance relationship represents a 'half full' or 'half empty' appraisal. However, having undertaken a separate State of the Sector survey in mid to late 2025, we are able to compare our results with similar evidence drawn from Staffordshire. This provides useful context.

Most State of the Sector respondents felt partnerships to be the key enabler in an effective response to rising need. Furthermore:

77% reference 'good' or 'improving' partnership within the VCSE sector itself.

65% perceive 'good' or 'improving' relationships with the local authority in Stoke-on-Trent.

For comparison, when a similar question was asked by VAST's counterparts in the County, Support Staffordshire, a lower proportion (35-40%) of VCSE respondents pointed to positive local authority relationships in Staffordshire. The higher figure relates to Borough councils and the lower one to the County itself.

The results registered here are therefore an encouraging barometer for the City Alliance as it continues to mature. Moreover, our results suggest that the Alliance relationship is markedly stronger in certain areas (in other words, some principles score more highly when supporters are asked to rate how the Alliance is performing).

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7. Where is the Alliance relationship at its strongest?

By examining its ten key principles with VCSE City Alliance supporters, the VCSE City Alliance agreement has given us an opportunity to understand clearly that the VCSE sector views the direction of travel as most positive in the three following areas of the agreement.

- a) Partnerships and Collaboration
- b) Mutual Respect
- c) Equity and Inclusion

These results are set out below. We also invited responses from the Local Authority’s Senior Management Team but received only a small number of responses; however, these results are presented in brackets (X%) throughout this report, as they may provide useful context.

a) Partnership and Collaboration

1. Partnership and Collaboration

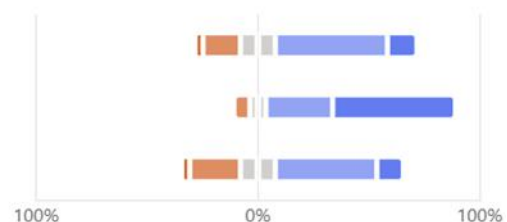
How far would you agree that the below statements reflect the **current** state of collaboration between the VCSE sector and Stoke-on-Trent City Council?

● Disagree strongly
 ● Disagree slightly
 ● No opinion / unsure
 ● Agree partly
 ● Agree strongly

There is a culture of collaboration, recognising that both the VCSE sector and Stoke-on-Trent City Council bring unique strengths a...

There are opportunities for the VCSE sector and the City Council to work together on shared goals and initiatives.

There is collaboration between the VCSE sector and the City Council, to identify problems and barriers, and to co-develop an...



62% (75%) agree ‘strongly’ or ‘partly’ that ‘there is a culture of collaboration, recognising that both the VCSE sector and Stoke-on-Trent City Council bring unique strengths and perspectives to community development.

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85% (100%) agree 'strongly' or 'partly' that there are 'opportunities for the VCSE sector and the City Council to work together on shared goals and initiatives.'

66.8% (50%) agree 'strongly' or 'partly' that 'there is collaboration between the VCSE sector and the City Council, to identify problems and barriers, and to co-develop and co-design solutions.'

b) Mutual Respect

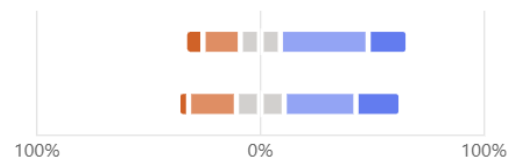
3. Mutual respect

How far would you agree that the below statements reflect the **current** state of collaboration between VCSE sector and Stoke-on-Trent City Council?

● Disagree strongly ● Disagree slightly ● No opinion / unsure ● Agree partly ● Agree strongly

Both parties recognise and value the expertise, knowledge, and experience that both parties bring to the table.

Both parties treat one another with respect and appreciate the diversity of perspectives within the Alliance.



56.1% (50%) agree 'strongly' or 'partly' that 'both parties recognise and value the expertise, knowledge and experience that both parties bring to the table.'

51.3% (50%) agree 'strongly' or 'partly' that both parties treat one another with respect and appreciate the diversity of perspectives within the Alliance.

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c) Equity and Inclusion

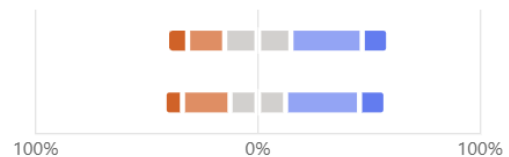
7. Equity and Inclusion

How far would you agree that the below statements reflect the **current** state of collaboration between VCSE sector and Stoke-on-Trent City Council? ^N

● Disagree strongly ● Disagree slightly ● No opinion / unsure ● Agree partly ● Agree strongly

We prioritise inclusivity and equity in decision-making processes to ensure that the diverse needs of the community are...

We proactively address issues of inequality and work towards creating an inclusive and accessible environment for all.



42.7% (75%) agree 'strongly' or 'partly' that 'we prioritise inclusivity and equity in decision-making processes to ensure that the diverse needs of the community are considered.'

43.9% (75%) agree 'strongly' or 'partly' that 'we proactively address issues of inequality and work towards creating an inclusive and accessible environment for all.'

This is a good foundation. However, responses in most areas of the Alliance agreement *are* more balanced between the positive and negative. It is also important to acknowledge that there is some element of 'strong' or 'partial' disagreement in all areas, including those where the evidence suggests the relationship is strongest.

7. Where is there most work left to do?

Overall disagreement was most pronounced in the six following areas of the City Alliance agreement:

Statement	Disagree slightly	Disagree strongly
a) There are open and transparent communication channels to facilitate the exchange of information, ideas and feedback	32.1% (50%)	9.5% (0%)
b) We work together effectively to utilise non-traditional and alternative ways of commissioning where appropriate	26.8% (50%)	19.5% (0%)
c) We work together effectively to explore opportunities for resource sharing, including funding, expertise and infrastructure , to maximise the impact of community development efforts	31.7% (25%)	19.5% (25%)
d) We work together effectively to facilitate access to resources and support for smaller organisations within the VCSE sector	19.5% (25%)	23.2% (0%)
e) We take a long-term view in planning and implementing community development initiatives , recognising that sustained positive outcomes often require ongoing collaboration and commitment	19.5% (50%)	23.2% (25%)
f) We avoid short-term funding arrangements that put short-term gains above longer-term impacts	20.7% (75%)	23.2% (0%)

8. Change and continuity –how is the picture changing early in Year 2?

Early in Year 2, we have had the opportunity to revisit our original questions with all current supporters of the Alliance. The results collected at an early stage from the first 25 surveys returned are suggestive of change and continuity in some areas.

It is important to say that although we have invited responses from all Alliance supporters, it is always possible that the early responses may have been contributed responsively by the organisations who feel most positively engaged. Having said that, most have taken the time to contribute nuanced, balanced perspectives, and this is indicative of good critical engagement.

Partnership and Collaboration

1. Partnership and Collaboration

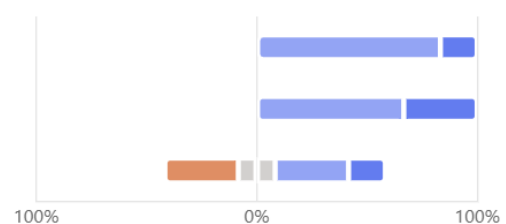
How far would you agree that the below statements reflect the **current** state of collaboration between the VCSE sector and Stoke-on-Trent City Council? ^N

● Disagree strongly ● Disagree slightly ● No opinion / unsure ● Agree partly ● Agree strongly

There is a culture of collaboration, recognising that both the VCSE sector and Stoke-on-Trent City Council bring unique strengths a...

There are opportunities for the VCSE sector and the City Council to work together on shared goals and initiatives.

There is collaboration between the VCSE sector and the City Council, to identify problems and barriers, and to co-develop an...



We are seeing widespread and strong agreement that ‘there is a culture of collaboration, recognising that both the VCSE sector and Stoke-on-Trent City Council bring unique strengths and perspectives to community development,’ and that there are opportunities ‘to work together on shared goals and initiatives.’

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Mutual Respect

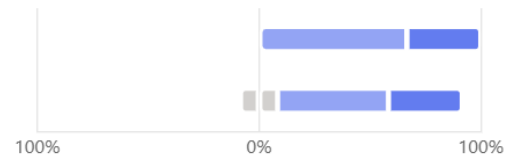
3. Mutual respect

How far would you agree that the below statements reflect the **current** state of collaboration between VCSE sector and Stoke-on-Trent City Council?

● Disagree strongly ● Disagree slightly ● No opinion / unsure ● Agree partly ● Agree strongly

Both parties recognise and value the expertise, knowledge, and experience that both parties bring to the table.

Both parties treat one another with respect and appreciate the diversity of perspectives within the Alliance.



Nearly all respondents also agree also that ‘both parties recognise and value the expertise, knowledge, and experience that both parties bring to the table.’ Closer to 80% agree that that both parties treat one another with respect and appreciate the diversity of perspectives within the Alliance.’

Open Communication

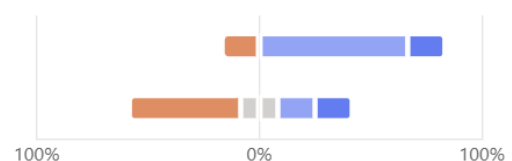
2. Open Communication

How far would you agree that the below statements reflect the **current** state of collaboration between VCSE sector and Stoke-on-Trent City Council?

● Disagree strongly ● Disagree slightly ● No opinion / unsure ● Agree partly ● Agree strongly

There are open and transparent communication channels to facilitate the exchange of information, ideas, and feedback.

Information is accessible to all stakeholders, fostering a culture of inclusivity and openness.



This is an area where change is apparent, but perhaps with qualifications. An increased proportion (again nearly 80%) of respondents agree ‘partly’ that there are open and transparent communication channels to facilitate the exchange of information, ideas and feedback’ but around 60% continue to disagree that ‘information is accessible to all stakeholders, fostering a culture of inclusivity and openness.’

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Resource Sharing

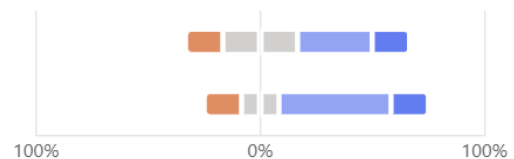
8. Resource sharing

How far would you agree that the below statements reflect the **current** state of collaboration between VCSE sector and Stoke-on-Trent City Council?

● Disagree strongly ● Disagree slightly ● No opinion / unsure ● Agree partly ● Agree strongly

We work together effectively to explore opportunities for resource sharing, including funding, expertise, and infrastructure, to...

We work together effectively to facilitate access to resources and support for smaller organisations within the VCSE sector.



Also signalling positive momentum are our responses under the principle of Resource Sharing. An increased proportion of respondents (40%) agree 'partly' that 'we work together effectively to explore opportunities for resource sharing, including funding, expertise and infrastructure, to maximise the impact of community development efforts.' A higher proportion still (60%) agree 'partly' that 'we work together effectively to facilitate access to resources and support for smaller organisations within the VCSE sector.'

Equity and Inclusion

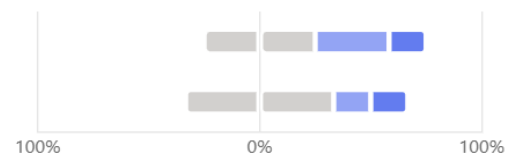
7. Equity and Inclusion

How far would you agree that the below statements reflect the **current** state of collaboration between VCSE sector and Stoke-on-Trent City Council?

● Disagree strongly ● Disagree slightly ● No opinion / unsure ● Agree partly ● Agree strongly

We prioritise inclusivity and equity in decision-making processes to ensure that the diverse needs of the community are...

We proactively address issues of inequality and work towards creating an inclusive and accessible environment for all.



Equity and inclusion continue to be rated well – for example, 40% of respondents agree that 'we prioritise inclusivity and equity in decision-making processes to ensure that the diverse needs of the community are considered.'

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Early signs: Where is the outlook least positive in Year 2?

Markedly lower scores are given in the following areas, although again, it is worth remembering that this dip-check is based on a partial sample that will be updated through Year 2:

Statement	Disagree
a) We avoid short-term funding arrangements that put short-term gains above longer-term impacts	40%
b) We work together effectively to utilise non-traditional and alternative ways of commissioning where appropriate	40%
c) We work together effectively to adapt and evolve approaches based on changing community needs, emerging issues, and the evolving landscape of the VCSE sector	60%
d) We work together effectively to encourage innovation and experimentation in addressing community challenges	60%
e) Information is accessible to all stakeholders, fostering a culture of inclusivity and openness	60%
f) We avoid short-term funding arrangements that put short-term gains above longer-term impacts	40%

The VCSE sector has offered the following in-depth reflections in support of these responses:

“There is a clear strategic intent within the local authority to strengthen its engagement with the voluntary and community sector. However, the consistency and quality of these relationships continue to vary significantly, often depending on the approach and understanding of individual officers rather than reflecting a coordinated, organisation-wide commitment to partnership working.”

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We have established constructive and respectful relationships with some commissioners who recognise the VCSE as an essential system partner, bringing unique insights, reach, and innovation to local delivery. At the same time, we also encounter project-level interactions where the sector's value is less well understood, leading to dynamics that can feel directive rather than collaborative. This variability highlights an opportunity for the local authority to embed a more cohesive strategic framework for working with the VCSE—one that promotes shared purpose, mutual learning, and a culture of co-production. By strengthening internal alignment and championing consistent expectations across all levels, the authority will be better positioned to realise the full benefits of genuine cross-sector partnership and system-wide improvement.”

“Although there is still a distance to travel before we achieve truly rich and effective partnerships, communication, collaboration and mutual respect, I’m encouraged by the genuine progress already taking shape. Even in a climate where finances are stretched and community needs are both high and complex, there is a real and growing appetite for better ways of working, deeper collaboration, and meaningful co-production. Change on this scale never happens overnight. It takes time to turn a tanker. But I’m energised by the direction we’re moving in, and hopeful about what sustained commitment can achieve. Step by step, we’re building something with the potential to make a profound and lasting difference on this long journey.”

“While there are emerging signs of improved collaboration, meaningful and sustainable progress will require a deliberate focus on whole-system transformation. The local authority must first strengthen its own internal structures, culture, and mechanisms for integrated working before it can reasonably expect to model or drive system change across the wider VCSE sector.”

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“A small number of trail blazers are attempting to change the working culture from within the LA in terms of relationship with the third sector and removal of barriers around bureaucracy and commissioning etc, but this is still very much a work in progress. Conversely, elements of the third sector need to acknowledge the scale of this systemic challenge and embrace incremental progress in the interests of long term collaboration.”

“The Strengthening Communities Project is a pro-active and evolving collaboration between the LA and the third sector with a shared ambition of effective bottom up community development”

“Volunteering will likely be the final element of the system to fully mature. While volunteers provide immense social value, it is important to acknowledge that volunteering is not cost-free. Recruitment, safeguarding checks, training, supervision, and ongoing support all require investment. For volunteering to be sustainable and impactful, these real costs need to be recognised and built into funding models and strategic planning, rather than assumed to be absorbed by organisations.”

“A more open flow of information from the local authority—particularly around demand, thresholds, and commissioning pressures—would strengthen mutual trust and support a more aligned approach to prevention. Meaningful progress is fundamentally dependent on trust and integrity.”

We have identified further opportunities to continue gauging our progress with the widest possible audience. These are included in the Next Steps section.

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10. What work has already taken place to address this, and what has been the response to this work?

Proactive work around the City Alliance has so far focused on its four key priorities to 2029, and in the first year has progressed most strongly in relation to Commissioning.

Commissioning and Procurement

This priority is being well addressed, with tangible early outputs (coproduced guidance for commissioners, improved market engagement processes) and good prospects for further impact.

The VAST team meets regularly with the Commissioning and Procurement teams, led for these purposes by a Director and Category Manager, to review progress iteratively and plan further activity that responds to both our learning as an Alliance and to developing Commissioning priorities.

The sessions have been facilitated jointly by VAST and the local authority's commissioning team, working closely with one another.



Co-delivered VCSE City Alliance Commissioning sessions in full swing

The sessions have included:

- Initial session exploring both VCSE and Commissioners' experiences (42 attendees)
- Market Engagement – Family Matters (15 attendees)

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- Coproduction session to develop a new guidance document (25 attendees)
- Equitable and Accessible Approaches round table session (46 attendees)
- 'Get Commissioning Ready' training (24 attendees)
- Coproduction session to develop a fresh approach to contracts (16 attendees)
- Market Engagement – VCSE Wellbeing Pathways (20 attendees)

This work will continue in 2026, initially with two 'Story Exchanges,' which will see four members of the Commissioning and Procurement teams work with four VCSE representatives in each session. They will use Action Learning based approaches to explore how the best possible conditions for collaboration can be achieved within an orthodox approach to commissioning, as well as what other approaches may be possible.

Throughout 2025's sessions, VCSE participants have commented on what they have valued the most. **A selection of feedback is included here:**

'Enabling my views to be heard'

'De-mystifying the technical language.'

'Having Commissioning and Procurement in the room.'

'Jargon busting and a more comfortable approach to explaining terms, policies, and processes.'

'Being involved at an earlier stage rather than the last minute'

'Having a good number of people from SOTCC as well as VCSE where both parties are seeking to understand and work together.'

'The focused listening time was a great aspect as it gave everyone a chance to talk about their experiences of what works.'

'Felt safe and able to share'

'Open dialogue, safe space'

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'Opportunities to discuss issues face to face with commissioning team.'

'Open discussion and the opportunity to share my thoughts.'

'A really important and valuable session.'

'Very clear and good to understand that the processes have been simplified a lot.'

'Local authority representatives and their clear communication of future plans.'

'I don't think this can be improved – Commissioning and Procurement is a very dry subject so you have to dig into every aspect and not cut corners.'

Commissioners, in turn, have stated that they found the following useful:

'Speaking and listening to those in the voluntary sector'

'Hearing about other views and approaches.'

'Feels genuine and inclusive.'

'The chance to better understand what other providers offer to help collaborative discussions.'

'The chance to express opinion and ask honest questions.'

'It's the only time I get the chance to hear from VCSEs in this way.'

'We don't often get the chance to share challenges honestly like this – it's been like therapy!'

Stoke-on-Trent City Council's Director of All-Age Commissioning said:

'It is an absolute pleasure to work with VAST and the VCSE sector in developing a series of workshops supporting the delivery of the Stoke-on-Trent City Alliance. I'm really excited about the opportunities that will flourish through being open and working more closely in partnership, lots to do, but I know we can do it together. A huge thank you to all involved!'

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Perhaps more than anything else, the most striking learning has been about the alignment between the VCSE sector and commissioners – essentially reaching similar conclusions from contrasting standpoints.

VCSE organisations are keen to encourage early codesign and market engagement activity so that they can help to shape services, and to see the adoption of proportionate processes.

There is no lack of appetite to enable exactly this among commissioners. It reflects their drive to shape the best possible services, delivering the best value for money – so long as the opportunities to make this happen can be carved out from everyday working reality.

In summary, the response to these sessions has been very positive and reflects a sense that people are able to feel connected to change: 74% of attendees say that they are ‘very satisfied’ with the sessions.

Additionally, we ask, ‘on a scale of one to ten, how much do you feel that attending this session will enable you to influence change in a positive way?’ The average score given for this by session participants was 8.28 out of 10.

Looking ahead

This is an iterative process of shared exploration. It is strongly dependent on goodwill, negotiation, and reciprocity and cannot simply be ‘delivered to Commissioning’ by VAST. To their credit, a positive approach from Commissioning colleagues has been strongly evident since day one of the Alliance.

Our ongoing dialogue about what is possible in terms of Commissioning and Procurement is currently the strongest of the Alliance’s four priorities, and there are plans to continue this in 2026.

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Communications and Engagement

This priority is being addressed, but there are opportunities to maximise the overall visibility and progression of City Alliance principles across our work together.

In the first year, VAST worked with Local Authority Colleagues and / or led on a significant amount of Communications and Engagement activity:

- The launch of the City Alliance agreement, which was celebrated by the Communications Teams of both VAST and Stoke-on-Trent City Council
- Civil Society Covenant session with Stephanie Peacock MP
- Co-development of internal e-Learning modules at Stoke-on-Trent City Council
- A series of short films and aligned podcast content (as part of VAST's 'In Case You Missed It' series) highlighting hopes for the relationship and reflections on current examples of positive work
- Two Senior Managers' Forum engagement sessions at Stoke-on-Trent City Council, featuring an introduction to the Alliance (on the first occasion) and an update on the progress of the relationship (on the second)
- Two sessions delivered with our Volunteer Managers Forum, looking at their perception of the interaction between volunteering and the local authority
- Delivery of four VCSE focus groups to help shape the Family Matters Workforce Academy workstream
- Compilation of our State of the Sector report, which is, in part, an effort to make sure that knowledge and insight about our sector is more readily available to Local Authority and other statutory colleagues.

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Despite our joint efforts, we know that out of all the areas of the Alliance agreement, VCSE colleagues are most likely to disagree with the one that states *'there are open and transparent communication channels to facilitate the exchange of information, ideas and feedback.'*

In fact, some VCSE City Alliance supporters have said that communication is the biggest single factor that influences their experience of the Alliance relationship.

For example:

'Where there is consistency in communication and contacts, brilliant. When there is instability in contacts and communication, poor. Where projects are given the time to bed in and achieve what's needed then that can have positive long-term results.'

Looking ahead

Data suggests that Communications and is a key area of mutual interest for our second year. We have not always been successful in our call to action with Local Authority colleagues.

We know that there is strong work to build on. In recent years, the Local Authority and VCSE sector have worked collaboratively to promote shared messaging in relation to the cost-of-living crisis, with room to grow and increase such collaboration in relation to key thematic areas as they emerge or remain current.

Sometimes we are necessarily cautious: for example, it can sometimes be challenging to establish ongoing, responsive feedback mechanisms due to the complexity and sensitivity of our work together.

In-depth conversations with Commissioning and Procurement colleagues have revealed a desire to communicate something more about the processes and challenges that commissioners contend with in order to move from traditional Market Engagement to a changed approach.

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While there is a sense that the listening and coproduction taking place is enabling meaningful change to begin, the outputs of this work can take longer to develop.

There is a case for working more intentionally across our Alliance relationship, so that collaboration and the nuance of our relationship can be credited and elaborated evenly and equitably. It is important that we develop a genuinely shared approach to enable this shared understanding.

All in all, this is an opportunity to build on the many areas of strong or promising, meaningful collaboration in our work together. If the City Alliance is a mirror that we can hold up to our working relationship in order to assess both its strengths and weaknesses, then it offers glimpses of Alliance relationships hiding in plain sight.

Great examples may not always be framed explicitly in terms of our City Alliance priorities, but can help to model the principles that we want to see developing in our work together. Some of these values are clearly evident on a programmatic or strategic level – for example, in the Family Matters or Locality Improvement Framework (LIF) work.

There are also relatable areas of smaller-scale work that can help to light the way for colleagues across both sectors, and in a way that may feel more immediate and tangible. These may well feel more relevant to individuals in their day-to-day work and demonstrate that change can also develop from the ground up.

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This requires us to shine a light into our shared strengths. Small, scalable examples might include examples as diverse as:

- a) **Family Hub Champions:** The collaboration between Alice Charity and the city's Family Hubs around the 'Hub Champion' role that has been developed in the city. This is an example of a smaller piece of co-working with clear reciprocal benefits that has strong resonances across several areas of the City Alliance agreement.
- b) **Community Lounges:** The strong reciprocal relationships that have developed within some of the city's Innovation Teams / Community Lounges, and the development of strong working relationships between VCSE organisations and Adult Social Care, which reflect and articulate Alliance principles.
- c) **Commissioning at its best:** We have discovered through our 2025 sessions that the development and iteration of Aiming High contracts within CAFS is felt on both sides of the Alliance to have enabled the Commissioner / Provider relationship to live up to its potential, with many of these qualities again speaking compellingly to the aspirations of the Alliance.

Such examples of positive relationships and synergies do proliferate from day to day across our work together: the City Alliance exists from peer-to-peer, and our excellent colleagues make it so. But too often such work goes uncelebrated, and there is an opportunity for us to do more in this space, by asking colleagues to respond authentically to the question: 'What makes the Alliance tick in our work together?'

This appears in our Next Steps for Year 2.

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Volunteering – state of play, and looking ahead

Work on this priority is well poised but has been paused.

The volunteering element of the City Alliance has progressed less significantly in Year 1. However, Stoke-on-Trent City Council has pledged to sign the citywide Vision for Volunteering during Year 2.

There are numerous opportunities for the Vision to support positive impact, and for Stoke-on-Trent City Council to demonstrate its commitment to developing and nurturing a community where volunteering thrives. We know that there are established volunteer roles in areas as diverse as Museums, Leisure, and Environmental Services, and that these could benefit from strong volunteer brokerage as well as VAST's local quality accreditations.

There is also an opportunity to develop and vocalise our recognition of volunteering and to value the spaces in which volunteer efforts support key services that are delivered either in partnership or by the Local Authority.

In August, VAST invited its Volunteer Managers' Forum to share its reflections and experiences of interaction with the Council. There were both positive stories – like the excellent additional support that Locality Connectors offer to those volunteering at Community Lounges – and areas that the group felt needed to be prioritised.

In terms of areas for development, a strong consensus suggested that additional energy should be committed to fostering a more equitable perception of volunteers, who are often perceived as somehow 'lesser,' but may bring a range of lived experience, knowledge, insight, and skills. This can be achieved by better highlighting and celebrating their unique strengths and contributions.

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Prevention – state of play, and looking ahead

Work on this priority is developing, while there is untapped potential for a greater range of preventive work to help promote the mission and ethos of the Alliance.

Both sides of the Alliance understand the importance of the current 'left shift' to prevention, particularly in the evolving context of neighbourhood health services. In truth, it is challenging to quantify the scale of preventive work undertaken in the VCSE sector, since this work is often dispersed across a huge range of often very small organisations.

They may lack the skills to frame their impact in these terms and are very rarely resourced or funded to do so. Much of the work taking place in the city does have preventive value, while also enabling both sectors to manifest strong features of collaborative working that do speak to the Alliance's principles. This includes much of the work currently taking place under the umbrellas of Family Matters, LIF, and Strengthening Communities, to name a few.

VAST and the VCSE sector more generally are strongly represented on a range of boards, steering groups, and working groups – from Cost of Living to Family Matters, to Infant Mortality. More recently, VCSE organisations have also been accommodated on a series of Future 100 Mission Boards.

We know that many of these groupings are actively assembling the tools required for a more preventive approach, but this work – while vitally important at a strategic level – risks appearing more remote to some of our stakeholders and to Alliance supporters.

As with the Volunteering priority, there is scope for us to do more together, to identify vibrant areas of preventive work where our Alliance principles are most clearly alive, and to celebrate as well as progress this work in the areas of greater deficit.

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11. Developing exemplars – three barometers of an evolving relationship

During the Alliance's first year, and alongside a range of work in which collaboration is already well established, some newer opportunities have arisen to foster relationships and collaborative working in a way that helps to bring to life the progression of our Alliance agreement.

These are areas of work in which the Alliance relationship itself has more space to breathe and to grow than might be the case in faster-moving areas of work where constraints of pace and governance have to be implemented more quickly.

We are continuing to progress together in all of these areas, but we are optimistic about their potential to demonstrate the way in which both VCSE and Local Authority colleagues are actively making the Alliance's values a central part of the way we work.

These are also areas of work where these qualities can become more established, more independent of external pressures. We hope they can begin to demonstrate that collaborative Alliance qualities can take centre stage in our work together.

a) Resource sharing: Community Asset Transfers (CAT)

Community Asset Transfer is a very tangible approach to addressing the Alliance principle of Resource Sharing, also drawing in a range of other traits and behaviours that reflect varying aspects of the City Alliance agreement. Many of the community spaces in question are also key to the Prevention agenda and to enabling Volunteering.

CATs have long been the subject of frustrations on both sides of the relationship, and the local authority's Interim Head of Corporate Property approached VAST during 2025 about the opportunity to socialise its new, more transparent and approachable CAT Policy across the VCSE Sector.

There was also a welcome receptiveness to exploring how an upgraded monitoring process for CATs could look and feel for both asset managers and VCSE organisations. This presented an opportunity to broker engagement between sectors based on City Alliance principles – in particular by learning from our successes and failures (principle of evaluation and learning) and with a view to establishing better mechanisms for accountability (principle of clear roles and responsibilities).

This led us to work together on delivering a session in July 2025, where we were pleased to welcome 22 organisations to our *Introduction to Asset Transfers*. This was hosted at Just Family CIC's Goldenhill Community Centre. The session also enabled coproduction to take place around the proposed annual review process.



Introduction to Asset Transfers session, Goldenhill Community Hall

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Although we were able to develop an understanding of what the VCSE sector can offer in support of articulating impact and accountability, the Local Authority has not yet been able to prioritise progressing this work further. However, this remains a shared aspiration and is clearly in sight.

It is clear there is a need to resolve dependencies before we can progress. The team at VAST has therefore worked more pragmatically with the Local Authority on 'snagging' three legacy CAT arrangements in which relationships between the Council and VCSE tenants had initially fallen away, compromising both property management and funding.

In the two cases that remain open, the team continues to support the necessary relational working to resolve issues that have arisen gradually or over several years. Meanwhile, an improved CAT process is fundamental to reducing the reoccurrence of these issues in future.

b) Prevention: Ageing Well in Whitfield (Northern Frailty Pilot)



Equitable dialogue, collaborative problem solving: Ageing Well in Whitfield

In May 2025, Stoke-on-Trent City Council convened a conference to discuss preventive approaches to frailty in the city. VAST was able to help ensure that a representative range of VCSE organisations was represented alongside statutory sector colleagues, including several that reported never having previously had the opportunity to engage readily with statutory sector organisations.

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The conference generated a call to action for more preventive work around frailty. VAST worked with both the Local Authority and with Health partners to convene a series of workshops exploring this, paying particular attention to the Whitfield PCN area. We did this in part with a view to centring VCSE City Alliance principles from across the Alliance agreement at every stage, with the summer's initial workshops in due course becoming a monthly breakfast session in which all partners are engaged in equitable coproduction conversations that resonate with nearly every aspect of the Agreement.

We know that this work still comes up a little short in terms of a few key Alliance principles – namely, that 'we work together effectively to utilise non-traditional and alternative ways of commissioning where appropriate,' and potentially in terms of 'resource sharing, including funding, expertise and infrastructure' – although the work to date has absolutely been founded on shared expertise and infrastructure, convening expertise from across the VCSE sector and statutory partners, usually at VCSE venues at the heart of our communities.

In the context of this evolving work, a flexible and proportionate Commissioning approach may also provide an opportunity to reduce barriers for both the end users of services *and* the VCSE providers themselves, of which at least 22 are delivering activities that support the pilot. It may also help to 'facilitate access to resources and support for smaller organisations,' building capacity and helping the Local Authority to grow its market.

If we are able to progress this work to a conclusion that reflects partners' shared input, then Ageing Well in Whitfield has the potential to be a powerful and scalable demonstrator for Alliance principles, as well as in other evolving areas such as Neighbourhood working. Currently, this proposition rests on key dependencies around the Better Care Fund, with constructive dialogue ongoing into the financial year 2026–2027.

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c) Prevention: Stoke-on-Trent Food Partnership

Stoke-on-Trent Food Partnership is an equitable, diffuse partnership led by a steering group of seven discrete organisations, including Stoke-on-Trent City Council and Health partners, who take their place on the Steering Group.

Its origins lie in conversations about the cost-of-living crisis, and early beginnings in a shared dialogue between YMCA North Staffordshire, Stoke-on-Trent City Council's Public Health team, and VAST, which developed into a series of co-production workshops jointly facilitated by the three early partners.



Cross-sector partners demonstrate Alliance principles through Stoke-on-Trent Food Partnership

Early sessions explored how governance might look, where power might rest, and how decision making and influence could be shared in a distributed and equitable model, one in which Alliance principles could be maximised: 'culture of collaboration, recognising unique strengths and perspectives,' and 'enabling VCSE organisations to play a meaningful role in decision making.'

A steering group was elected by the wider membership ahead of 2025, which sees decision making shared by partners working across a rich variety of backgrounds, including the VCSE sector and local authority. Several working groups create opportunities for over 100 members to play to their respective strengths.

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The Local Authority offers valuable support to this process as a partner among equals, bringing its community development, Public Health, and research insight to assist the Food Partnership as it makes headway.

It has also entrusted VCSE colleagues with a role in managing Household Support Fund funding – via The Community Foundation for Staffordshire & Shropshire and by appointing Food Partnership delegates to a funding decision panel.

12. Key reflections

VAST would offer the following key reflections about the Alliance's first year:

- a) Engagement with the VCSE City Alliance has been strong so far, with room to grow further.
- b) Progress *as a result* of Alliance priorities is most pronounced by far around the Commissioning and Procurement priority, where there is a strong sense of shared mission with the relevant Council team. Those involved with discussions participate in healthy numbers and state that they feel well connected to change.
- c) Great work embodying Alliance principles can happen anywhere within our relationship. Great work has the power to help progress the Alliance, and to make it a more immediate reality for a wider range of colleagues. We have not yet explored the potential of this, but can increase our efforts to do so in Year 2.
- d) Some work takes place in more complex or sensitive areas. While the learning from our conversations is consistently rich, it can be difficult to play this back to our colleagues in a way that states simply and sequentially, 'you said, we did.' This hinders clear, responsive communication about our Alliance journey together. More recent engagement with Procurement and Commissioning teams has identified an aspiration to encourage greater understanding of the mechanics they must work with as they work to support change.

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- e) Data and feedback do show that change is taking hold, and that this is viewed in positive terms by a majority of VCSE organisations. Yet the effects are not felt equally or immediately in all areas of our work together. This means that there continues – and will continue to be – a balance of positive and negative responses in relation to the Alliance principles. We need to ensure that new attitudes and approaches, which help to bring Alliance principles to life, are visible to all and celebrated across sectors.
- f) City Council adoption of the Vision for Volunteering offers a simple way to kick-start our work together in the relevant priority area. There is room also to celebrate the roles that volunteers play in supporting or enabling council services, directly or indirectly.
- g) We can also take a rounded view of volunteering – by paying due respect to and celebrating the role volunteers can and do already play in supporting and enabling wider shared agendas.



Cllr Jane Ashworth, Leader of SOT City Council talks 'City Alliance' after signing agreement.

Cllr Jane Ashworth, Leader, Stoke-on-Trent City Council, welcomes the launch of the VCSE City Alliance, December 2024.

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Stoke-on-Trent City Council has the following key reflections about the Alliance's first year:

One year on the Alliance agreement has begun to shift the relationship between the City Council and the VCSE, from one of often transactional to more relational, collaborative and collective.

The agreement has started to resolve some of the long-standing issues through a clear framework of trust building, shared intent and developing relationship, there is still more to do.

There has been tangible early impact through improved relationships, with improved open dialogue, greater willingness to acknowledge past tensions and learn from them and sense that the VCSE is a strategic partner rather than just a delivery arm.

The Agreement has allowed an opportunity to reset the relationship and permission for officers to work differently.

In the coming year, building on the first years progress a greater emphasis on practical delivery in commissioning, strengthening the communication approach and pushing on with volunteering and prevention activity will show continued commitment to the Agreement.

11. Next Steps: Year 2

In Year 2, VAST is already well positioned to undertake the following core activity, which will expand the reach, visibility and presence of the Alliance, while exploring potential synergies with the Civil Society Covenant work taking place at a national level.

Collaborative working with key officers in these areas is already well developed, and co-delivery of engagement work is well underway thanks to the generous support of local authority colleagues.

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Work already agreed and underway

- a) **Vision for Volunteering:** In early 2026, VAST will work alongside Stoke-on-Trent City Council to support its adoption of the Vision for Volunteering.
- b) **Expansion of VCSE City Alliance:** In early to mid 2026, VAST will work with our voluntary sector membership to expand the supporter base for the VCSE City Alliance Agreement to at least 120 members.
- c) **Commissioning & Procurement:** In early to mid 2026, VAST will continue its work with the Commissioning and Procurement teams. Two Story Exchange sessions will be delivered, harnessing VCSE and commissioner experiences to identify new ways in which we can work together to best support the conditions for collaboration within new and existing commissioning practice.
- d) **Commissioning and Procurement:** In April 2026 a further Commissioning and Procurement session will be delivered, which will offer local authority colleagues a VCSE sounding board as they seek to develop a fresh approach to Social Value.
- e) **Learning Offer:** In June and July 2026, VAST will work with the Commissioning, Procurement and Property teams to re-run the popular 'Introduction to Asset Transfer' and 'Get Commissioning Ready' sessions.
- f) **Insight:** By reaching out to City Alliance supporters and at each 'in person' session, VAST will review and update our baseline evidence for Year 2, building up our insight about the character and speed of change.

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Work requiring further local authority support and joint development

A joint, or shared approach is intrinsic to Alliance working, with further work needed to socialise the City Alliance across the Local Authority workforce and to engage collectively across its principles. We have the opportunity to work together in the following areas:

- a) **Identifying the best of our Alliance:** In line with the adoption of the Vision for Volunteering, VAST proposes to work with the Local Authority and its Communications Team to identify and actively celebrate good practice that already exists within the Local Authority, in addition to new areas for growing or further developing volunteering activity.
- b) **Celebrating the best working relationships:** Our VCSE City Alliance principles are alive in many aspects of our work together – these go beyond the Alliance’s four immediate priorities, and most are under-celebrated, but can help bring its principles to life. We will work to celebrate great examples of working relationships that epitomise Alliance principles, whether they showcase work taking place at a strategic level or – no less importantly – shine a light on examples drawn from our everyday work together.
- c) **Further Commissioning and Procurement Activity:** We will explore the scope for further workshops with the Commissioning and Procurement team, beyond mid-year. Note: this will depend on the appetite of both the VCSE sector and commissioners, as well as evaluation of the earlier sessions, and may include further Story Exchange sessions as well as some new areas of market engagement activity.
- d) **Toolkit:** Representatives of smaller organisations taking part in the Contracts and Get Commissioning Ready sessions requested a toolkit (and ideally practical support) in order to become more truly ‘commissioning ready.’

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They cited the barriers of time and resource required to apply for tender opportunities, and were keen to see further enabling measures, which could be developed through the Alliance, with potential for fresh approaches to be adopted in specific areas of work (such as Ageing Well in Whitfield), and possible opportunities for VAST to support smaller VCSE organisations into this space.

e) **Asset Transfer:** VAST will work with the City Council's incoming Head of Property Services to progress the work resulting from our previous dialogue about annual reporting for CAT tenants.

Evaluation and further iteration of the City Alliance relationship, and potential progression of the Alliance with a Local Covenant Partnership (LCP)

In order to gain further real insight about the progress of the City Alliance, and to further bring to life its principles, we would propose to bring Local Authority and VCSE colleagues together during April to examine how our relationship measures up. We have the opportunity to do this in the terms laid down by government for its Civil Society Covenant.

Government launched the Civil Society Covenant in 2024 as:

"...a new principles-based foundation for resetting the relationship between the UK Government and civil society. The Covenant symbolises the government's recognition of civil society as a trusted and independent partner in tackling the deep-seated challenges of our time. It underpins a strong, sustainable, and independent civil society capable of collaborating with government alongside a responsive government that works with civil society to achieve its mission."

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The advantages of using the Covenant as a benchmark are two-fold:

- 1) Working with a national benchmarking framework will afford us a lingua franca for describing our impact in more widely recognised terms, and to position the city as a place where complementary initiatives might build on promising foundations to deliver strong impact.
- 2) In summer 2026, Government plans to work with a programme delivery partner to deliver the Local Covenant Partnerships Fund, which will see over £10m shared between 15 areas nationally, to be identified post-April. We have an opportunity to align our work and to position the city (and City Alliance) for potential investment, support, and impact.

A sensible and proportionate option is to use this engagement opportunity, both to support the evaluation of the City Alliance, and to work towards a situation in which we are able to articulate our readiness to support, as well as the prospective impact that could be delivered through, a Local Covenant Partnership, should the necessary range of partners be amenable and supportive.

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