ST HELENS
BOROUGH COUNCIL

Overview and Scrutiny Commission

Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise (VCFSE) Sector

Report

February 2026

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1. Introduction and Terms of Reference

1.1 The Overview and Scrutiny Commission agreed to add a task group review of the voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise (VCFSE) sector, or 'third sector' following the Annual Scrutiny Workshop where the idea was proposed.

1.2 The purpose of the Task Group's review has been to understand the Council's relationships with the Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise sector and consider how the Council might increase engagement with the sector to provide further support to Council service provision.

1.3 The following aims and objectives were identified for the review:

i. To understand the St Helens Together Strategy and its aims for engagement with the third sector,
ii. To examine the extent to which the sector in the Borough is understood by the Council (via the Live Well Directory) and identify any gaps that may need to be filled,
iii. To consider the role the third sector plays in relation to the delivery of services commissioned by the Council,
iv. To understand the current infrastructure supporting organisations within the sector including forums/networks, funding, human capital, and physical assets,
v. To understand the use of household support fund and its contribution to the scale/ quality of service provided by third sector organisations,
vi. To raise awareness of existing good practice within the sector and the benefits to the Council and communities through greater communication,
vii. To understand the needs of organisations within the sector for them to be successful in their stated aims/purposes,
viii. To understand the aims of the Government's English Devolution, Community Empowerment Bill, and the Civil Society Covenant and its potential implications for the Council in its role in supporting the third sector.

2. Method of Investigation

2.1 The Task Group held a meeting with Council officers to discuss the St Helens Together Strategy, Live Well Directory, Household Support Fund and English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill on 27 November 2025. This was followed by a day of site visits on 4 December 2025. The Task Group visited Halton and St Helens Voluntary and Community Action (VCA), Park Farm Community Centre, Café Laziz, and the Hope Centre to speak with leaders from those organisations about what they do, the current state of the sector, their relationship with the Council, and the challenges they are facing.

2.2 The following Members formed the Review Group:

- Councillor Mancyia Uddin (Chair)
- Councillor John Hodkinson
- Councillor Terry Maguire

2.3 The following representatives attended the meetings on behalf of their agencies:

St Helens Council

- Michelle Dennett
- Ben Murray
- Hannah Myers

VCFSE Sector Organisations

- Anne-Marie Lawrence – Halton & St Helens VCA
- David Bishop – Park Farm Community Centre
- Claire Nicholls – Café Laziz
- Julie Hand – Hope Centre

3. Background

National Context

3.1 The Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise Sector in the UK is increasingly recognised as a vital, strategic partner to the public sector, particularly in health, social care, and community development and tackling inequalities. The Health and Social Care Act 2022 created Integrated Care Systems that were encouraged to bring VCFSEs into core planning and service delivery alongside NHS and local government as well as private sector providers. The sector is seen as crucial to addressing social determinants of health (i.e. housing, employment, education). VCFSEs are heavily involved in providing community-based support and play a vital role in reducing social isolation and can play a role in mental health and drug and alcohol support.

3.2 The English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill is expected to have a significant impact on the VCFSE sector as well as local government. It is expected that by shifting power from central government to stronger “Strategic Authorities” like Liverpool City Region Combined Authority more localised decision making will create opportunities for community organisations to be involved in decision making and delivery, as part of local partnerships with local authorities and other public service providers.

3.3 The Bill is expected to introduce stronger “Community Right to Buy”, giving community groups the first opportunity to purchase “Assets of Community Value” (ACVs) such as pubs, shops, community centres, when they are put up for sale. Currently community groups are given 6 months to generate funds to purchase assets and this is expected to be increased to 12 months.

3.4 As the legislation is still in Bill form there is potential for changes and there is currently no limited guidance on how legislation will work in practice and affect local communities.

Local Context

3.5 As St Helens is already part of a devolved strategic authority in the Liverpool City Region, the Bill is likely to have a lower impact on VCFSE in St Helens than areas that are going to see significant changes to local government (e.g. district councils being merged into larger authorities). The latest version of the St Helens Together Strategy was adopted in September 2025 and covers 2025 – 2028. The strategy was co-designed with partners

from across the VCFSE sector and forms the basis of the St Helens Together Partnership's work during the period of the strategy. It is acknowledged within the strategy that the VCFSE sector is a vital part of local communities and its role has increased over the past 5 years following the COVID19 Pandemic, the cost of living crisis and austerity in public services. The pandemic provided a catalyst for change and growth in the role of VCFSE and stronger partnership ties were developed between the sector and the Council.

3.6 The strategy reflects the principles in the Civil Society Covenant launched by the Department for Culture, Media and Sports in October 2024. The covenant is built on four key principles:

- Recognition: Ensuring a strong and independent civil society that is valued and respected by the government.
- Partnership: Promoting effective collaboration between civil society and government for better service delivery and policy making.
- Participation: Encouraging active involvement of people and communities in decision-making processes.
- Transparency: Ensuring that both civil society and government have access to the information needed to serve communities effectively.

3.7 The Strategy also outlines 4 key priorities which continue to reflect on the actions and commitments made previously but with a renewed emphasis: 1. Collaborating Together, 2. Communicating Together, 3. Strengthening Communities, and 4. Volunteering Together.

3.8 The strategy is supported by the St Helens Together Partnership which is chaired by the Portfolio Holder Councillor Sue Murphy. The Partnership includes representatives of the Council, health partners and VCFSE organisations such as Halton and St Helens VCA. The Partnerships role is ensuring there is action taken and tangible progress made to strengthen and support the sector. The Partnership reports to the People's Board to keep senior stakeholders informed.

3.9 Currently there are around 1,120 organisations within the VCFSE sector in the Borough with 2,620 paid staff and 25,000 volunteers. It is estimated that the sector contributes £44.8m to the local economy annually. The Council currently invests £6.5m into the sector through contracts commissioned from the VCFSE sector (mostly by Public Health, Adult Social Care and Children's Services).

4. Findings

4.1 The following sections documents the information shared during the review.

Council Engagement with the Sector

4.2 As well as commissioning VCFSE organisations/groups to provide services that supplement Council services or delivery on specific programmes/projects the Council works with the sector to co-ordinate activities, link organisations that can support each other and help with other advice and guidance. The Council created the Community Engagement and Partnerships Lead position to put more resources into increasing the Council's relationships with organisations and groups in the VCFSE Sector. The Council

engages with the Halton and St Helens Voluntary and Community Action as a leading organisation in the sector but also engages in outreach with small community groups across the Borough to ensure inclusion.

4.3 In April and May 2025 engagement sessions were held with VCFSE organisations and wider stakeholders regarding the development of the St Helens Together Strategy. A digital survey was also distributed to residents, gathering views on what support communities need to grow and thrive. The Council also hosted an event at the Town Hall that recognised the vital role VCFSE sector plays in the Borough and gave awards to volunteers who had distinguished themselves in their volunteering during the year to help promote the sector and encourage more people to engage with it.

4.4 Within the Council, the service is making efforts to increase officers' awareness of the role the VCFSE sector plays to encourage them to consider how engagement with the sector could help their services to increase effectiveness and improve outcomes, particularly where there have been funding reductions over recent years and/or demand has increased.

4.5 When the Council has engaged with the organisations/individuals within the sector they have suggested that challenges include:

- Cost pressures – rising utility bills, asset costs and pressure from living wage increases (were organisations have paid members of staff).
- Funding pressures – difficulty accessing funding due to complex bidding processes.
- Volunteering – difficult recruiting new volunteers to carry out the work of the organisations and enable them to grow/meet more demand.

4.6 Key feedback from the sector with regards to its relationship with the Council in general included:

- Avoid using corporate language when speaking to people in VCFSE as they don't understand it,
- The idea that some people or communities are "hard to reach" was challenged as some felt that organisations weren't doing enough to reach people rather than people making themselves hard to engage with,
- There needs to be clearer mapping of the sector and who is doing what to reduce duplication and encourage more cooperation,
- Some believe the social value in procurement isn't being used as well as it could be and some opportunities are being missed,
- Organisations requested more support understanding community asset transfers and community right to buy,
- There is a need to attract a more diverse range of volunteers, particularly younger ones,
- Volunteers are not free and have costs associated with them (such as DBS Checks and training).

4.7 Officers explained how issues raised were being addressed. This included mapping the community and voluntary sector on a place basis using the localities model as well as

mapping on a sector by sector basis (e.g. children's support, refugees, older people, mental heath).

Council Staff Volunteering

4.8 The Council's Leave and Time Off Policy sets out an over-arching framework for dealing with a range of leave and absence situations and applies to all employees with the exception of staff employed by schools. With regards to staff volunteering within voluntary and community organisations, the policy states that employees can apply to take up to 2 days paid time off each year (pro rata for part time staff) for which they will receive their normal days pay for the volunteering leave.

4.9 Employees who wish to volunteer must seek authorisation from their line manager prior to agreeing to any volunteering participation. Employees can volunteer for any organisation that is a registered charity, recognised voluntary organisation or is in response to a community need, a local crisis, or need for local emergency aid within St Helens Borough which demonstrates positive social or environmental benefit. Approval would be subject to operational needs.

4.10 At the time of writing this report, since the policy was introduced in 2023 there has been 44 requests for volunteering leave equating to 323 hours. Based on the estimated potential number of volunteering hours available among Council employees based on average hours available within a year the percentage of volunteering hours taken up each year has been:

- June 2023 - 53.3 hours, estimated 0.29% (for 6 months)
- 2024 - 132.4 hours, estimated 0.37%
- 2025 - 123.3 hours, estimated 0.34%
- 2026 so far - 14 hours, estimated 0.23% (for 2 months of year so far)

Halton and St Helens Voluntary Community Action (VCA)

4.11 The Task Group met with representatives of the VCA at their offices in St Helens Town Centre to understand their perspective on the state of the VCFSE sector, relationship with the Council and the successes and challenges currently within the Borough. The VCA reported having a good relationship with the Council and the introduction of the Community Engagement and Partnerships Lead role has increased the VCA's capacity to engage directly with the Council as a strategic partner.

4.12 Sector representatives have provided positive feedback through the LGA's Corporate Peer Challenge Review noting improved engagement and a willingness from the Council to work collaboratively. The VCA reported that the Borough has a diverse voluntary sector, with many small grassroots groups, volunteer led organisations and a growing number of Community Interest Companies (CICs). It was suggested that CICs have increased as more groups have begun to professionalise and have volunteers become paid employees as they grow and require more resources. The VCA supports groups to understand the various legal entities that can be formed in the sector (e.g. CIC, Charity, community group) and will advise on the best governance structure to meet their needs and ensure due diligence.

4.13 The VCA had received similar feedback from the VCFSE sector as the Council (see 4.5) in relation to challenges being faced. It was suggested that funding remains the biggest issue as well as capacity constraints and rising property and utility costs. It was suggested that despite support being available from the VCA, some organisations are not aware of support available and have set up incorrectly leading to more support being required to fix problems.

4.14 The VCA informed the Task Group that it hosts annual funders' fairs and is developing a "Friendly Funders Forum" to coordinate priorities and reduce duplication between local organisations. This can also help local organisations to be more competitive when bidding for larger contracts on offer from the Council. The VCA also works with commissioners, particularly in health, to identify local organisations that are providing useful services that can complement the public sector initiatives that are taking place (e.g. Healthy at Home, Mental Health Navigators).

4.15 The VCA has links with other enabling organisations such as the Growth Company (supporting startup businesses), Ethical Property Foundation, and Coalfields Trust. The VCA can also support local community groups with succession planning which can often be a significant risk to groups ceasing to operate. Many organisations rely on "anchor" individuals to keep them going and when they retire or leave this can have a destabilising effect. Home Start St Helens was given of an example where a successful transition in leadership had taken place following a proactive succession process supported by the VCA. It was suggested that there was an aging workforce among VCFSE sector and more young people needed to be encouraged into the sector to ensure sustainability over the long term.

Household Support Fund

4.16 The Household Support Fund (HSF) is a government initiative to support communities with essential items with grants of up to £10,000 awarded to voluntary sector organisations to provide for people who need support. A report published by the VCA was shared with the Task Group regarding the impact of household support funding between July 2024 and March 2025. Initially the fund had a focus on supporting people on benefits during the cost of living crisis, however this has since been extended to the wider community.

4.17 Delivered in partnership between the Council and VCA the programme has distributed over £120,000 of HSF with applications received from VCFSE organisations ranging from £850 to £10,000. More than 2,000 individuals have been supported with a wide range of needs addressed from food insecurity to personal hygiene, social isolation and mental health needs. Some spending was in relation to providing immediate relief and other spend was invested in empowering local groups to work compassionately and with long-term impact in mind.

4.18 Some specific examples included local colleges support students in need with food and toiletries to enable them to remain in education and food pantries buying fridges, freezers and storage to provide more capacity to support people. The VCA's report suggested that the HSF has been a "powerful example of community-led crisis response" and has help to restore dignity, build trust and ensure that no one faces hardship alone.

4.19 The Household Support Fund wasn't guaranteed long term funding from the Government as it was a rolling programme. The Government recently confirmed that the Household Support Fund is going to be replaced by the Crisis Resilience Fund (CRF) which will be introduced in April 2026. The Council is looking to deliver a similar grants programme through the CRF as it has done via HSF once that is introduced.

Live Well Directory

4.20 The Live Well Directory is a free to use central directory of adult social care and wellbeing services created in partnership between St Helens, Liverpool and Knowsley local authorities and supported by Healthwatch Liverpool and St Helens Citizens Advice. The purpose of the Live Well Directory is to connect residents to groups and organisations that can provide them with support. There are a range of categories that residents can find support in relation to, such as: health and wellbeing, independent living, care homes, community activities, carer support, homelessness, cost of living and food support and reducing loneliness.

4.21 Services could be added to the directory by residents or organisations by submitting a form to the local authority in the area the service was based. Users can more easily find the activities or resources they're looking for using a range of filters like age, price, day of the week, demographic or ability.

Site Visits

4.22 The Task Group undertook site visits to three community organisations within St Helens that perform different roles to support vulnerable people in our communities. They are just three examples of the many similar organisations and groups that are operating across the borough. As has been mentioned previously, each of the organisations highlighted finance as a significant challenge to their ability to grow and meet demand which was also growing. They also highlighted a limited level of awareness in their communities or beyond a certain section of the local population or cohort of service users. This limited access to volunteers and potential resources but also meant that some people who would benefit from their support were not aware that they could access it.

4.23 Despite some challenges, each of the organisations reported positive engagement with those that did use services and good support from the VCA and the Council. Themes that the three organisations support include:

- tackling food poverty – providing a food bank or cooked meals for local residents (Park Farm), refugees and local residents (Café Laziz) and homeless (Hope Centre),
- advice for accessing financial support – completing forms and understanding what support might be available based on the person's circumstances
- sense of community – bringing local people together to support each other and develop community cohesion
- support accessing public services – e.g. mental health services, job seekers, winter warmth, early help and adult social care.

5. Conclusions

5.1 The Task Group agrees that, based on its findings, the St Helens Together Strategy and the partnership approach being taken is working effectively to coordinate activities in the VCFSE to enable organisations and groups to continue to provide vital services to communities in need in the Borough.

5.2 The Task Group is confident in the Council's approach to engaging with the sector and listening to its views to address issues that need to be addressed. The Task Group appreciates while limited resources is a barrier for many community groups, the Council and the VCA are also operating with limited resources to support the sector which makes it difficult to support everyone. It is clear that while there are many inspiring people within the borough wanting to do positive things for their communities not all of them are aware of the best ways to operate and the support that is available from organisations like the VCA to help them be more successful.

5.3 The Task Group is hopeful that the process of mapping the organisations within the borough is effective in identifying groups that would benefit from support to grow their ability to make a difference to their communities (both geographical and demographical).

5.4 The Task Group is grateful to the organisations that hosted site visits and appreciates the excellent work that they are doing to support the groups that they work with. These are just a few examples of the wide range of organisations that provide excellent services in challenging times. The Task Group appreciates the barriers that organisations and groups face to continuing to provide their services including generating funding and rising costs.

5.5 In particular, the Task Group appreciates the difficulties organisations face in sustaining volunteers as a resource and believes that there is an opportunity for the Council to encourage more members of staff to make use of the volunteering leave available within the Council's Leave and Time off Policy. While the Task Group appreciates the significant workloads that services have and demands on limited resources in difficult times, encouraging more opportunities for staff to utilise volunteering leave supports the Council's vision of 'Working together for a better borough with people at the heart of everything that the Council does by improving people's lives together and creating distinct, attractive, healthy, safe, inclusive and accessible places to live, work, visit and invest' as stated in the Leave and Time Off Policy.

6. Recommendations

6.1 The Task and Finish Group recommends:

a) *That the Council engage in a campaign with staff to promote the staff volunteering leave option within the Leave and Time Off Policy and encourage staff to take opportunities to volunteering with organisations with the St Helens Borough VCFSE sector.*

b) *That the Council continue to work with the Halton & St Helens VCA to continue to support smaller voluntary organisations in the borough, to help them work more collaboratively within the sector including social value opportunities.*