



# STATE OF THE NORFOLK VCSE SECTOR:

Findings from the  
2024 Empowering  
Communities survey

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

# Contents

## Introduction - p.3

## Key Findings - p.4

- Demographics
- Key challenges and concerns of Norfolk's VCSEs
- Organisations' Key Priorities
- Financial Position and Sustainability
- Workforce

## Discussion Section - p.12

- Smallest organisations learning from larger organisations?
- Funding remains the No.1 issue
- Support to recruit staff

## What Next? - p.18

## Addendum - p.19

# Introduction

In Summer 2024 the Empowering Communities partnership surveyed Norfolk's voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) organisations to find out their main priorities and challenges, as well as what they think of Empowering Communities and the support they would benefit from going forward. 100 respondents provided their feedback, representing organisations from the smallest community groups through to large regional charities.

Thank you to those who completed the survey – your feedback is helping to build a picture of the key issues affecting our local VCSEs and will be instrumental in shaping our support to you.



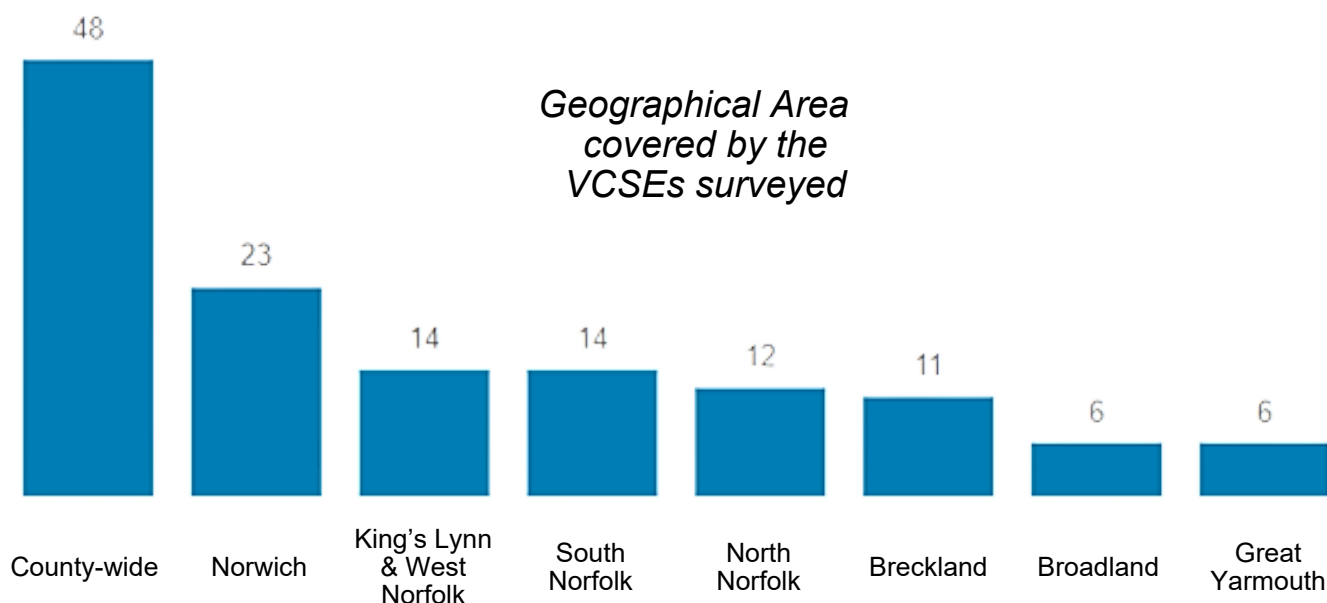
# KEY FINDINGS

## Demographics

92 organisations [1] of varying size, constitution and location were represented in the data. The majority (75%) were registered charities, while CICs and registered companies made up 15% of respondents and 15% were unregistered voluntary or community groups. The remaining respondents represented local or parish councils, educational establishments or other.

Some 19% of respondents considered their organisation to be a social enterprise, while 6.5% said they are working towards this. [2]

Respondents were asked to select the geographical areas their organisation operates in. The results can be seen in the graph below:

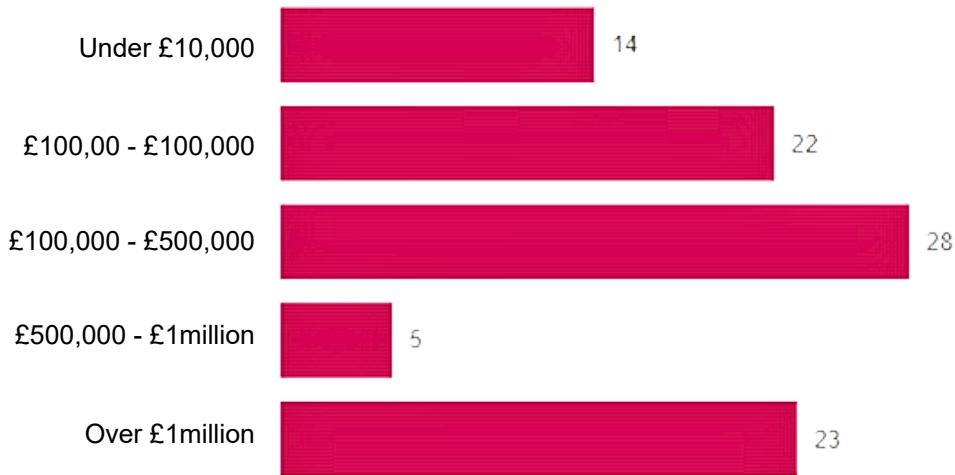


[1] In total there were 100 responses but, since multiple individuals from the same organisation could respond, these responses relate to 92 separate organisations.

[2] We provided the following definition of social enterprise: “an organisation that trades in some way and aims to generate profit to be spent on a social mission”, adapted from Social Enterprise UK.

The survey collected organisations' estimated annual income as a useful indication of organisation size. Interestingly, the majority of organisations surveyed have an annual income between £10,000 and £500,000 and the median income

range was around £200,000, suggesting the average Norfolk VCSE organisation would be classed as "small" or "micro" by many nationally-recognised definitions.[3]



*How the VCSEs differed in annual income*



[3] <https://smallcharitiesdata.org/definitions-small-charity/>



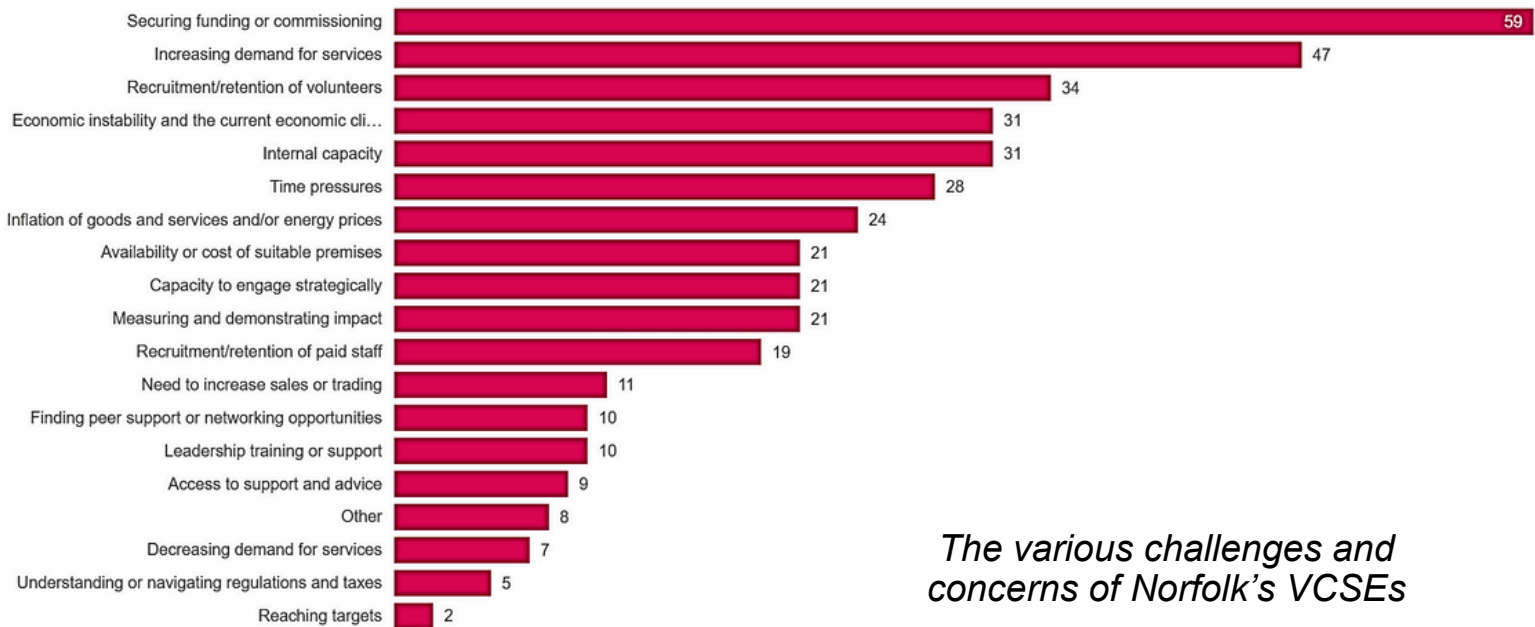
# Key challenges and concerns of Norfolk VCSEs

Respondents were asked to select their five most pressing challenges from a list of 18 options, with the option to add their own.

The top issues raised were:

1. Funding: For some 59%, securing funding or commissioning is a main challenge
2. Increased demand for services: 47% highlighted this as a key issue
3. Recruitment and/or retention of volunteers: 34% selected this issue

Both economic instability and internal capacity are also key concerns for around a third of respondents. “Other” challenges entered by respondents included “staff/trustee relations”, increasing level of need among clients due to “lack of mental health support” and rising costs of venue hire.



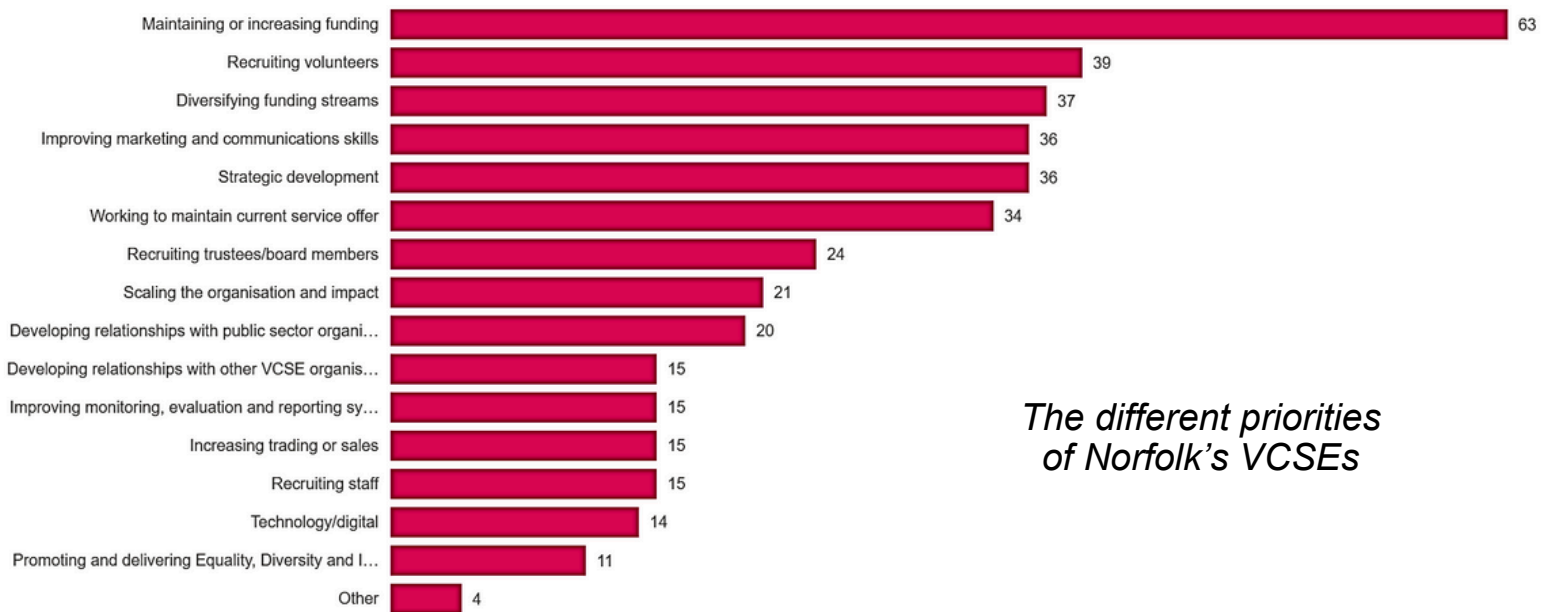
*The various challenges and concerns of Norfolk’s VCSEs*

# Organisations' Key Priorities

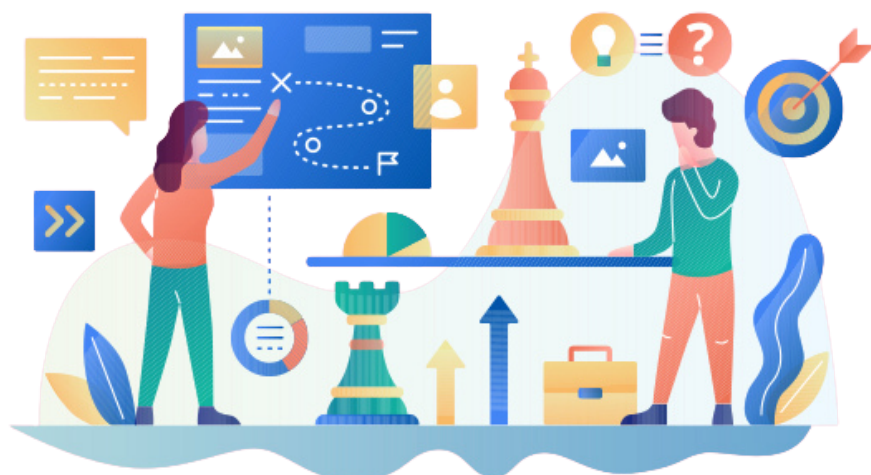
Looking ahead to next year, the overwhelming majority of respondents expect their organisations to prioritise maintaining or increasing their funding as a key area of work.

Concerningly, 34% identified simply maintaining their current services/offer as a key priority. This likely reflects the capacity and funding issues which many respondents have highlighted.

Some 39% are focussing on recruiting volunteers, while over a third are concerned with diversifying funding streams; improving marketing and communications skills; and strategic development.



*The different priorities of Norfolk's VCSEs*

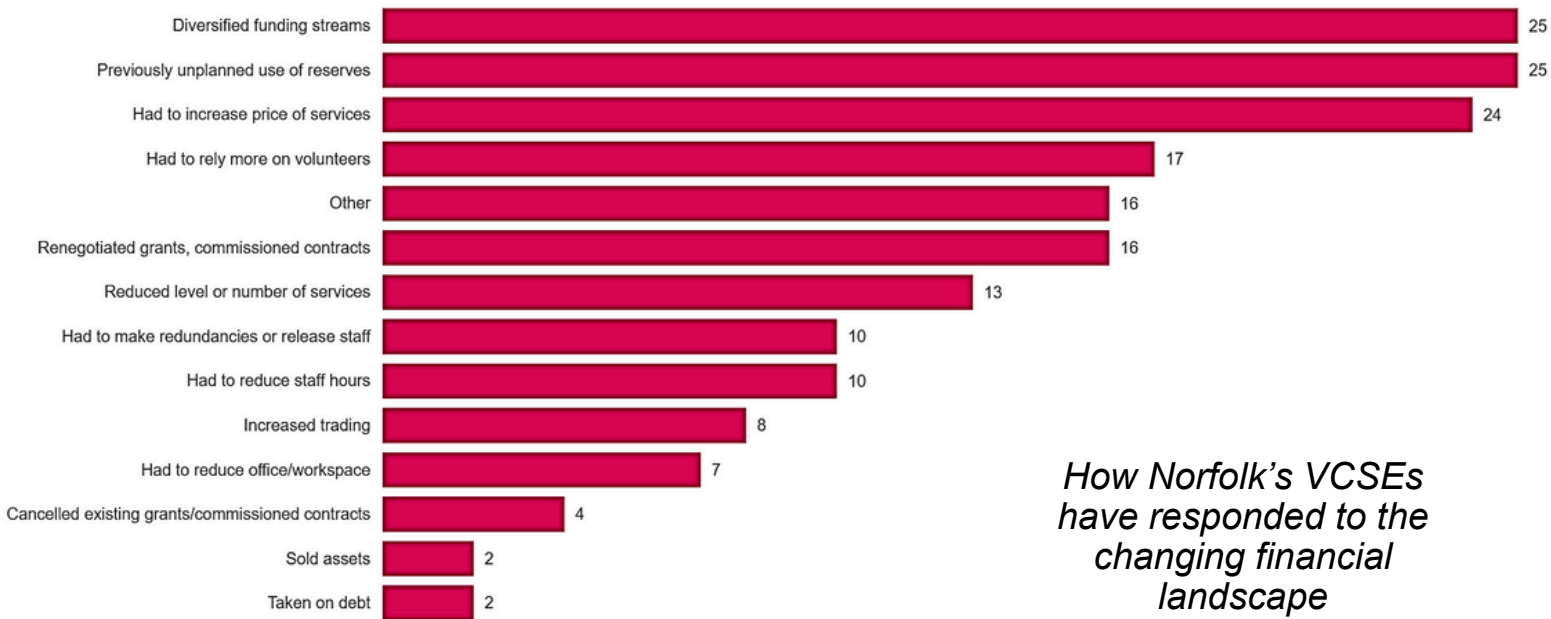


# Financial Position and Sustainability

Just over 50% of respondents stated that their organisation’s financial position has deteriorated as a result of rising costs.

We asked respondents to tell us what – if any – action the organisation has taken to mitigate this. As shown in the graph below, a quarter stated their organisation had diversified its income streams, with an equal proportion indicating an unplanned use of the organisation’s reserves.

An almost equal amount (24%) of organisations have increased the price of their services, and 17% have relied more on volunteers. This deployment of volunteers corresponds with several responses provided under “Other”, which mention not replacing staff who have left or intentionally leaving a staffing gap before recruiting to a vacant role.



*How Norfolk’s VCSEs have responded to the changing financial landscape*





When asked “What would make the biggest impact on your organisation's sustainability over the next year?”, unsurprisingly 50% of respondents mentioned longer-term funding. Many of these comments also mention the need for funders/commissioners to increase funding in line with inflation. Capacity to meet demand was also a key issue, with many small- to medium- sized organisations struggling to cover their services with limited paid staff.

*“ We have lots of ideas, but not the people to put them into practice ”*

*“ We rely on the goodwill and volunteer time from trustees to keep the organisation going. We would like to develop capacity to employ someone on a more permanent basis ”*

“

*“ We are so busy we can't meet need - we have increasingly vulnerable clients who want home visits - which we can do but they are costly in terms of staff time ”*

“





## Workforce

Over three quarters of those surveyed stated that their organisation employs paid staff, the very smallest VCSEs tending to be entirely volunteer-run. Of those with paid staff, 67% pay a living wage, while 18% state they are working towards this. Unsurprisingly, organisations which have a very small number (0-5) of paid staff tend to have more volunteers than paid staff, whereas those with a medium-sized (16-50) paid workforce are more likely to have an equal ratio of volunteers to staff. Those largest employers of paid staff tend to have the lowest ratio of volunteers to employees, suggesting that, broadly speaking, the smaller the organisation the more responsibility falls to a volunteer workforce.

94% of organisations surveyed have volunteers and the total volunteer workforce recorded in the responses is 9770 people. [4]

Of those organisations with volunteers, 73% have a volunteer coordinator, either paid or unpaid. It is encouraging to see that 63% of these Volunteer Coordinators are paid staff, suggesting organisations are increasingly willing and able to invest resources in volunteer management.



[4] Not all organisations responded to this question and the outliers relating to national charities were removed.

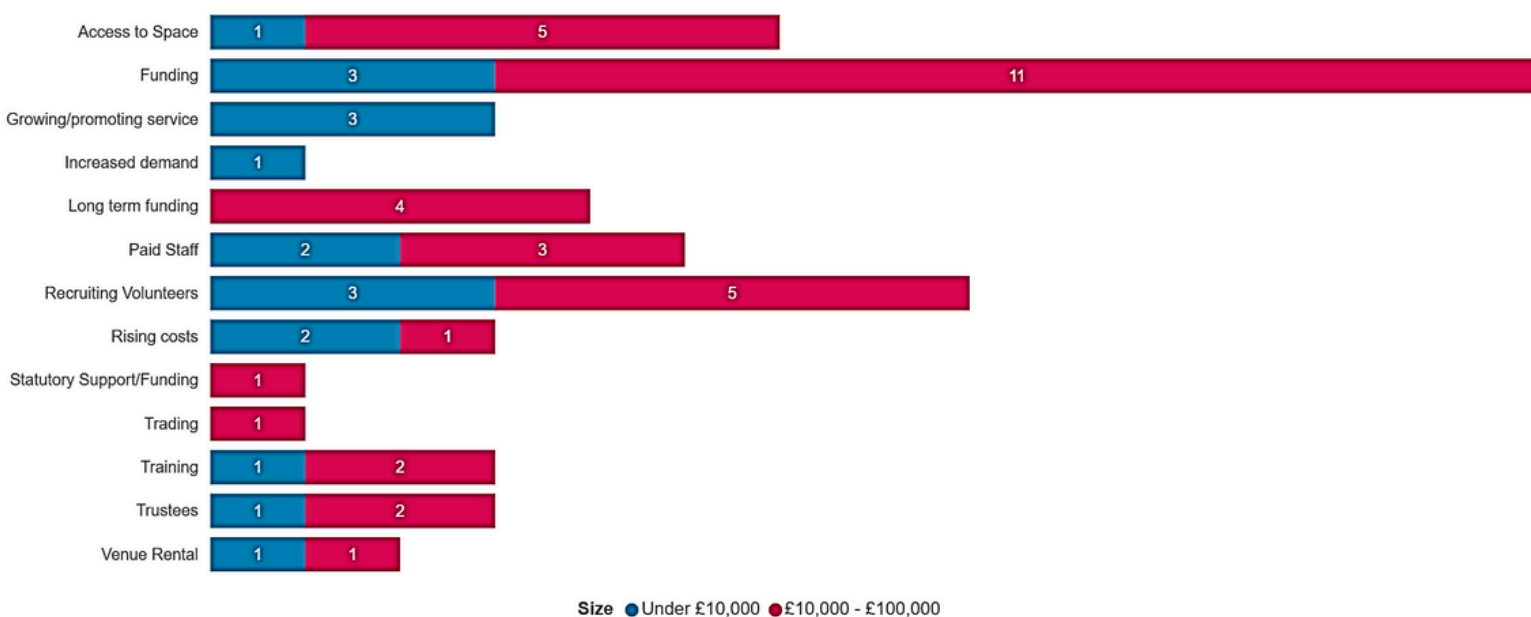
# DISCUSSION SECTION

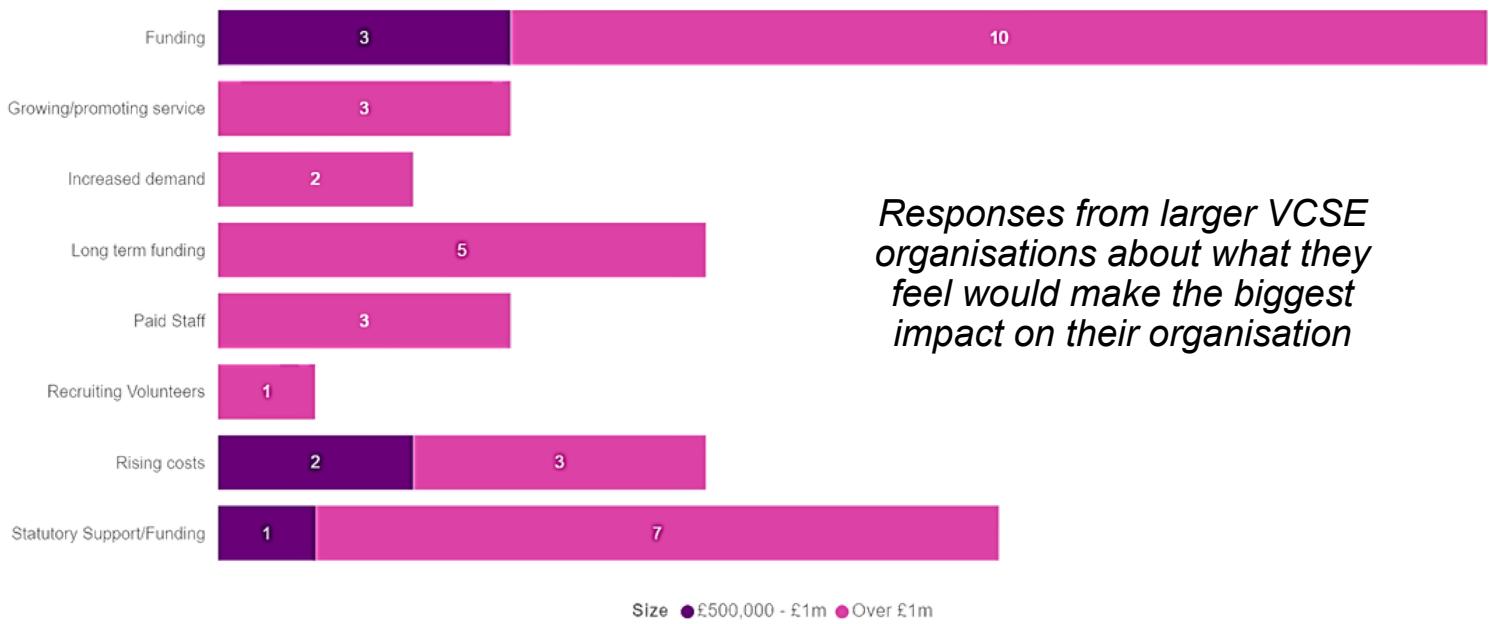
## Smallest organisations learning from larger organisations?

When analysing the data by organisation size, some interesting details emerge. In the free-text response to “What would make the biggest impact on your organisation's sustainability over the next year?”, the larger the organisation, the less likely to mention the need to recruit volunteers; recruit or up hours for paid staff; and gain access to space.

In fact, the priorities of the smallest organisations as compared to the larger organisations are notably different – with the exception of funding, which is of the highest importance to organisations of all sizes.

*Responses from smaller VCSE organisations about what they feel would make the biggest impact on their sustainability*



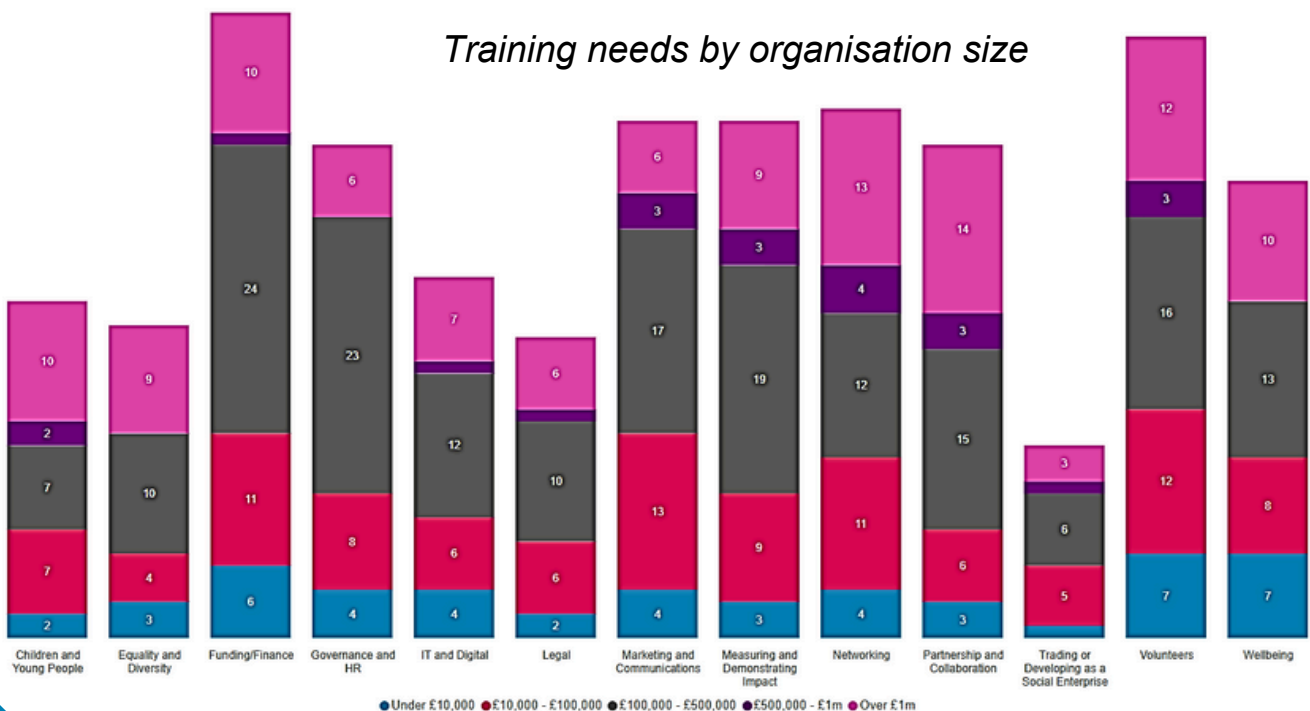


*Responses from larger VCSE organisations about what they feel would make the biggest impact on their organisation*

This suggests some possibilities for the largest organisations to share resources such as space with smaller organisations, and for smaller organisations to learn from the expertise of these larger VCSEs when it comes to recruiting and managing volunteers and paid staff.

Training needs also vary greatly between differently-sized organisations. Whereas respondents

from the smallest organisations are more likely to need training in wellbeing, funding/finance or marketing and comms, respondents from larger VCSEs are most likely to value events with a focus on partnerships/collaboration, or networking. Interestingly, training in volunteer recruitment or management was important to those at both ends of the scale.





While some training needs are clearly common across the sector as a whole, there may be opportunity for larger organisations to provide training on certain topics to smaller VCSEs. While Empowering Communities has already brought together VCSEs of all sizes to learn from each other through its “good practice” workshops on topics such as Good Volunteer Management and Making Volunteering Accessible, opportunities could be explored for large VCSEs to share their internal training with small- and micro-organisations on topics such as staff/volunteer wellbeing and marketing/comms.

Work is underway to set up a training platform associated with Get InVOLved Norfolk (the Norfolk-wide volunteering platform set up by Voluntary Norfolk/Empowering Communities) which will allow for training to be shared across VCSE organisations, as part of a new funded project Volunteering for Health. Although targeted at volunteers, some training could be accessed by paid staff and this is a model we could look to expand to support the paid workforce in future.



## Funding remains the no.1 issue

As already mentioned, maintaining or increasing funding remains the top issue for organisations of all sizes, which is especially unsurprising as over 50% of organisations report a deterioration of their finances due to rising costs. As indicated above, there may be opportunity for those 37% of organisations looking to diversify their funding streams in the year ahead to learn from the significant proportion (25%) who state they have already done this. A recent Empowering Communities event, Funding the Future, provided a starting point for this knowledge-sharing, bringing together local VCSEs to learn from peers who have successfully engaged in crowdfunding, trading and other funding methods.

Of those 25% who stated they have had to draw on their financial reserves, a significant proportion are small organisations with income of £10,000-£500,000. This is a concern, as it seems fair to assume these organisations will have relatively low reserves to draw from, however this group is also the most financially versatile, with income from a wide variety of sources.

Almost 50% of those organisations with income of £1m+ also stated they have drawn on their reserves in unplanned ways. This group has the largest proportion of contracts, commissions and grants from government or local authorities, totalling 69% of their overall income, and many of these respondents highlight the issue of funding not meeting their full delivery costs. Clearly, more needs to be done to ensure that commissioners are funding the full cost of projects and, where possible, uplifting funding in line with inflationary and staffing costs.

## Support to recruit staff

As already highlighted, capacity issues are second only to funding issues. Around a third of respondents selected both “internal capacity” and “time pressures” as their main concerns/challenges, and 24% of respondents mentioned the need to recruit new staff or bolster existing staff contracts as key to their organisation’s sustainability. While the viability of this will be largely reliant on increased funding and income security, future training and 1:1 support could focus on advising and upskilling VCSEs - particularly those with income under £1m - on recruitment of paid staff. In addition, it might be possible to seek infrastructure funding specifically for VCSE staff recruitment and development which could be shared with the sector.

It is encouraging that 18% of organisations with paid staff are “working towards” becoming a living-wage employer. Again, perhaps more support could be sought from local businesses and statutory partners to help these organisations achieve their goal.

As a partnership, we have already engaged with Norfolk County Council’s Economic Development department on a new Economic Strategy for Norfolk, feeding in the views and priorities of Norfolk VCSEs, and we now have VCSE representatives on the Norfolk Business Board. Underpinning this work has been the desire to afford the VCSE sector due recognition for its role in economic development, particularly its employment of a considerable portion of Norfolk’s population. All too often the role of paid staff in delivering the vital work of charities and social enterprises is overlooked, but with volunteer numbers at their lowest in decades and those who do volunteer seeking more flexible and casual roles, the importance of paying staff to ensure a high-quality, consistent service has never been higher.

Linked to this is the need to retain skilled and passionate staff, which is often undermined by short-term contracts and precarious funding arrangements. Many respondents mention losing staff because funding either does not cover salary uplifts; funding is too short-term to enable job security; or late decisions from funders renewing contracts cause too much uncertainty. The knock-on impact for those staff who do stay is often a decrease in morale and wellbeing and an increased workload, which in turn impact on retention. This obviously has an impact on the capacity of Norfolk's VCSE organisations to deliver important support to their clients and service users.

Particularly in light of rising costs of living, funders and commissioners need to be aware of the impact of these factors on VCSE organisations. Where possible, we will continue to bring this to the attention of statutory partners and funders and use our collective influencing power through forums and networks to keep this on the agenda.



# WHAT NEXT?

This data will be vital in shaping the support offered by the Empowering Communities Partnership to Norfolk's diverse VCSE sector. We are currently reviewing our impact from the first three years of the partnership and are beginning to plan our offer going forwards. The priorities and challenges identified by survey respondents, and the suggestions put forward above, will directly influence our focus for Year 4 and beyond, including topics for our events and workshops, training sessions and networking opportunities, as well as resources, collaborations and campaigns.

We would also like to explore opportunities for the local VCSE sector to further shape delivery of the Partnership. This might include focus groups, more in-depth consultation and feedback sought at existing events, or further surveys which drill down into specific training and support needs. If you have thoughts on how this may work most effectively, please get in touch with the Partnership.

In light of the developments brought about by a change in government and policy since the gathering of this data, we updated our findings by asking

respondents to let us know if their organisation's financial position changed as we approach the end of financial year 2024-25. In particular, we were interested to hear how the increases to employers' National Insurance Contributions announced in Autumn 2024 and coming into effect from April 2025, along with proposed cuts to public sector commissioning budgets, are impacting local VCSEs' ability to plan ahead, recruit and retain staff and maintain current service levels. The figures from this survey can be found in the addendum (p.19). We will use this report and the new data to build a more complete picture of the state of Norfolk's VCSE sector in 2025.

We will also be sharing this report with our statutory partners and contacts and will use these findings to advocate on behalf of the sector for improved, more robust support from statutory funders and commissioners.

Responses to questions relating to the Empowering Communities Partnership, our training and events etc., will be analysed and published in the forthcoming Empowering Communities 3 Year Impact Report.



# ADDENDUM

Earlier this month (February 2025) we wrote to the organisations again to see if the situation had changed materially six months on from when we did the original survey. From the 28 responses we received, it remains apparent that Norfolk's VCSE sector continues to face significant challenges as organisations struggle to meet increasing needs with dwindling resources. Volunteers are in short supply, with a "shrinking critical mass" unable to match rising demand. Organisations are operating on minimal staff, relying heavily on trustees and volunteers. Despite efforts, many are depleting reserves to stay afloat, with costs ranging from insurance, utilities to wages all rising. The shortage of available venues and a lack of community interest in taking on trustee roles compound the strain. Food donations are insufficient to meet demand with one charity even purchasing supplies to meet demand from those in need.

With the challenges still the same, the need for statutory partners and funders to provide certainty to the sector remains of paramount importance if Norfolk's VCSE sector is to continue to support the people who need help the most across the county.

We welcome any questions, comments or feedback on this report, its findings, or the work of the Empowering Communities Partnership. Please get in touch via [enquiries@ecnorfolk.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@ecnorfolk.org.uk)



