



Third Sector Trends in England and Wales 2025

**The contribution of the voluntary, community and
social enterprise sector to place: a study of Thames
Valley in comparative context**

**THAMES VALLEY
VCSE ALLIANCE**



June 2026

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The contents of the report express the views of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the commissioning partners.

Third Sector Trends Study

Data in this report are drawn from the Third Sector Trends study which was conceived and originally commissioned by Northern Rock Foundation with research conducted by the universities of Southampton, Teesside and Durham. The Community Foundation North East was a co-founder of the research and is now responsible for its legacy.

The Community Foundation and St Chad's College have worked with partners: Lloyds Bank Foundation England and Wales, Wales Council for Voluntary Action (WCVA) and Millfield House Foundation to undertake the Third Sector Trends study survey in 2025-26

More information about Third Sector Trends can be found here:

[Third Sector Trends in England and Wales - St Chad's College Durham](https://www.stchads.ac.uk/research/third-sector-trends-in-england-and-wales/publications-from-third-sector-trends/)

All publications from the Third Sector Trends study are available free to download at this address:

<https://www.stchads.ac.uk/research/third-sector-trends-in-england-and-wales/publications-from-third-sector-trends/>

Current and previous reports are also lodged on the Community Foundation North East website:

<https://www.communityfoundation.org.uk/knowledge-and-leadership/third-sector-trends-research/>



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We are enormously grateful to the organisations which have contributed to the cost of undertaking the study in 2025: *Community Foundation North East, Lloyds Bank Foundation England and Wales, Wales Council for Voluntary Action and Millfield House Foundation.*

Key statistics at a glance

Sector size and structure

In 2025 there were 9,427 registered VCSE organisations in Thames Valley (Berkshire 2,931, Buckinghamshire 2,536 and Oxfordshire 3,960).

The VCSE sector is comprised of voluntary organisations of varied sizes: 36.9% are micro organisations (income below £10,000), 30.5% are small (£10,001-£50,000 income), 20.5% medium sized (£50,001-£250,000), 7.1% are large (£251,000-£1m) and 4.9 are the biggest voluntary organisations (£1m-£25m). The study does not include major or super-major organisations with income above £25m.

The VCSE sector in Thames Valley has a strong local focus: 38% of voluntary organisation only work at neighbourhood or village level, and a further 31% contain their activities within one local authority area – the remaining organisations work at a wider level, including 15% working nationally or internationally.

VCSE sector workforce

The VCSE sector in Thames Valley has about 49,500 employees (15,420 in Berkshire, 13,330 in Buckinghamshire and 20,840 in Oxfordshire).

The VCSE sector has 188,340 regular volunteers in Thames Valley (56,050 in Berkshire, 49,450 in Buckinghamshire and 82,850 in Oxfordshire), This does not include ephemeral volunteers or those working in other domains.

VCSE organisations' reliance on volunteers is strong: 87% rely on volunteers who work on a very regular basis, 78% rely on those who can work unsupervised and 91% state that they could not keep going without volunteers.

The indications are of slight growth in employment over the last three years in South East England (especially part time staff). While there has been an increase in regular volunteers since 2022, this has not yet met previous levels in many organisations.

Worryingly, 32% of voluntary organisations have not yet fully recovered regular volunteer numbers since the pandemic.

In Thames Valley, the percentages of VCSE organisations having difficulty with recruitment of employees (22%) is lower than the regional average (26%). Volunteer recruitment difficulties in Thames Valley (39%) is just above the regional average (38%). Trustee recruitment difficulties in Thames Valley (34%) are at the regional average, but the indications are that trustee retention problems (14%) are lower than the regional average (16%).

Sector energy and impact

The total value of the VCSE sector in Thames Valley is estimated at £2.9 billion and produces a further £4.5 billion in added fiscal, economic and use value.

The value of the sector's 'intangible value' is estimated to be equal to the energy it expends. This brings the total value of the VCSE sector in Thames Valley to £10.3 billion. This equals £4.6m per 1,000 resident population.

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Section 1

Introduction

1.1 Context and purpose

This report produces statistical analysis of the situation of the local voluntary, community and social enterprise sector (VCSE) in Thames Valley. This research is set in the context of the establishment of geographically reconfigured NHS Integrated Care Boards (ICBs) across England.

NHS Thames Valley Integrated Care Board was established on 1st April 2026 to plan and oversee health and care services. The Board covers Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire an area comprising over 2.5 million residents.¹

NHS Thames Valley ICB exists to oversee the area's £5.6 billion health budget by considering the needs of local communities and deciding where services need to be focused in coordination with hospitals, GP practices, community services, councils and VCSE organisations and groups.

As this report draws upon comparative data for the whole of South East England, evidence from several other ICBs areas will also be reported, including: *Kent and Maidenhead ICB*, *Surrey and Sussex ICB* (given the large population of this area, data on ceremonial counties will be reported) and *Hampshire and the Isle of Wight ICB*.²

Much of South East England is going through the process of local government reorganisation. This has involved a period of consultations about a series of proposals from existing unitary councils. In Surrey, it has been confirmed that two new unitary councils are being established while in Sussex and Kent, ministerial decisions have yet to be made.

In the Thames Valley, a number of changes have been mooted which has or continues to involve extensive consultation.

- In **Berkshire**, there are currently five established unitary authorities: Bracknell Forest Council, Reading Borough Council, Slough Borough Council, Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead Council and Wokingham Borough Council. A local government reorganisation process is still underway in West Berkshire following the submission of proposals in November 2025 and consultation up to March 2026 but Ministerial decisions are not expected until July 2026.
- In **Buckinghamshire**, a unitary authority was established on April 1st, 2020, to include Aylesbury Vale, Chiltern, South Bucks and Wycombe. No further

¹ The new ICB brings together the former NHS Frimley and NHS Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Berkshire West (BOB) Integrated Care Boards into a single organisation and has been renamed as NHS Thames Valley ICB: for more detail on the Boards configuration, resources and vision see: <https://www.thamesvalley.icb.nhs.uk/about-us>.

² NHS South East (2026) *Trusts and ICBSs* (website accessed 20th April 2026), <https://www.england.nhs.uk/south-east/about-us/ccg-trust/>

changes have been made in the current round of local government reorganisation.

- In **Oxfordshire** there is currently a two-tier system where under the aegis of Oxfordshire County Council, there are five districts: Cherwell, Oxford City, South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse and West Oxfordshire. Several proposals, submitted in November 2025 have been put forward for consultation. The conclusion of that process has yet to be reached

In this report, data are drawn from a combined register of all currently active voluntary organisations England and Wales. The report also uses survey data from Third Sector Trends in 2025 and provides comparative evidence to highlight those activities and achievements of the VCSE sector in Thames Valley.³

1.2 Structure of the report

The analysis in this report is divided into four sections

- **Section 2** provides a detailed description of sector structure to include analysis of sector income, employment, volunteering, labour market dynamics and investment in training and development.
- **Section 3** focuses upon sector beneficiaries and VCSE organisations' perceptions of social impact. Financial estimates of sector energy are provided together with estimates of tangible economic, fiscal, use value and intangible aspects of added value.
- **Section 4** examines sector income sources (including more detailed analysis of grants, contracts and earned income) together with an evaluation of current sector property assets and financial reserves. An appraisal of financial wellbeing and resilience is provided alongside current expectations about finance.
- **Section 5** looks at relationships within the voluntary sector together with private sector and local public sector interactions. This section also explores views on local devolution agendas and the willingness of VCSE organisations to engage in influencing local public and social policy.

The concluding section provides a summary of key findings together with a brief discussion of their implications.

For stylistic reasons, terminology to describe the VCSE sector and VCSE organisations varies – to include the terms 'voluntary sector' and 'voluntary organisations'. The more concise terms 'third sector' and 'third sector organisations' (abbreviated as 'TSOs') are also used extensively in tabular data and figures. Specific usage of legal forms of VCSE organisations (such as *Community Interest Company* or *Community Amateur Sport Clubs*) are avoided except when referring to specific configurations of legal forms using register or survey data.

1.3 Research methods and survey sample

Third Sector Trends was initiated in 2008 by *Northern Rock Foundation* in North East England and Cumbria as a longitudinal study to explore the structure and dynamics of the sector in the context of change. Surveys began in North East England and Cumbria in 2010.⁴ The field of study has widened to include Yorkshire & Humber in 2013, the remainder of North West England in 2016 and across England and Wales from 2019. There have been six iterations of the triennial survey.

³ All reports from Third Sector Trends, including detailed technical papers on analytical techniques and research methodology can be located here: <https://www.stchads.ac.uk/research/third-sector-trends-in-england-and-wales/publications-from-third-sector-trends/>

⁴ A separate report is available which details the research methodology employed in the Third Sector Trends surveys. This can be accessed here: [Technical paper on research methodologies, October 2022.](#)

In 2025, the survey was administered using *Online Surveys*⁵ between June and September. A total of 8,680 valid responses were received. Responses were obtained using direct email invitations from listings collated from the Charity Commission register (there were 7,163 returns representing a 5.4% response rate from a sample frame of 133,161 charities). These data were supplemented by 1,517 responses to appeals to participate by local infrastructure organisations and community foundations across England and Wales.⁶

The national sample is fully representative of sector organisations by size (as defined by income levels) and is distributed appropriately across areas of relative deprivation and affluence when compared with Third Sector Trends Combined Register data. The survey dataset has good coverage in Wales and all English regions each with at least 600 responses and apart from London, an average 5.6% response rate measured against the Charity Commission Register sample frame. A much lower response rate in London, as in 2022, stood at 2.8% but due to high organisational density, a credible sample of 713 was obtained.

For this report, some use is made of 2022 Third Sector Trends survey data for comparative purposes. The scope for this is limited because there were many fewer responses in 2022 (total sample 6,070) than in the more recent 2025 survey (8,680). In South East England there were 1,212 responses in 2025 but in 2022 there were 827 responses which means that regional comparisons are reasonably reliable but analysis below this level is not possible.

The Third Sector Trends Combined Register for South East England in 2025 (n=33,979) was more broadly defined (to include VCSE organisations concerned about overseas aid and development) than the 2020 version (n=33,353) and this means that they are not directly comparable for analytical purposes.

Table 1.1(a) Third Sector Trends survey response and combined register data 2025				
Ceremonial county areas	Survey	Distribution	Combined register	Distribution
Thames Valley (when including Milton Keynes)	326 (350)	28.9	9,229 (10,101)	29.7
<i>Buckinghamshire (excluding Milton Keynes⁷)</i>	104	8.6	2,466	7.3
<i>Berkshire</i>	99	8.2	2,852	8.4
<i>Oxfordshire</i>	123	10.1	3,911	11.5
Sussex	266	21.9	6,604	19.4
Surrey	149	12.3	4,642	13.7
Hampshire and Isle of Wight	244	20.1	6,315	18.6
Kent	203	16.7	6,317	18.6
South East England	1,212	100.0	33,979	100.0

⁵ Online Surveys is a powerful platform specifically designed for use by academics by JISC. Details on the platform’s specifications can be found here: <https://www.onlinesurveys.ac.uk/>

⁶ This is a fully representative national sample, as evidenced by comparison with combined register data (including the registers of the Charity Commission, Community Interest Companies, Register of Mutuals/Societies Register and Community Amateur Sport Clubs Register). A separate report which details research methodology, sample structure and characteristics is available here: [Archive of publications from Third Sector Trends - St Chad’s College Durham.](#)

⁷ The ceremonial county of Buckinghamshire includes Milton Keynes which received 24 responses. But as these cases cannot be included in the Thames Valley ICB area the total count is lower at 326 responses.

Table 1.1(b) shows the distribution by size of voluntary organisations to assess how representative the sample is. The survey sample is skewed slightly towards larger and big VCSE organisations when compared with combined register data but not excessively so. The under-representation of micro organisations is compensated for to a large extent by the higher percentage of small organisations. Medium sized VCSE organisations are well matched in the survey with the combined register data.

Table 1.1(b) Third Sector Trends survey sample response and combined register data 2025 by size of organisations in Thames Valley						
	Micro - income below £10,000	Small - income £10,000 - £49,999	Medium - income £50,000 - £249,999	Large - income £250,000 - £999,999	Big - income £1m to £25m	Total
Third Sector Trends Survey responses in Thames Valley 2025 (n=325)	23.4	37.7	21.7	10.6	6.6	100
Combined register (Charity Commission data only, unadjusted n=7,463))	36.9	30.5	20.5	7.1	4.9	100

The wide-ranging questionnaire asks respondents about beneficiaries served and what voluntary organisations feel that they have achieved. The survey also examines TSOs' energy by focusing questions on its people resources, property assets and financial situation. Leadership is a core element of the study too; asking participants how voluntary organisations invest in their *own* wellbeing so that they can serve their beneficiaries more effectively. And finally, it asks about inter-organisational relationships which is the topic of this report.

The current series of Third Sector Trends reports relies almost exclusively upon quantitative data drawn from this and previous rounds of the survey.⁸ However, some interpretative observations originate from quantitative analysis and previous in-depth qualitative studies from Third Sector Trends (and directly related projects) which are referenced accordingly. The most important of these studies ran from 2008 to 2022 with 50 voluntary organisations from the North East of England and Cumbria. The final report from that study, *Going the distance, how third sector organisations work through turbulent times*, has recently been revised and republished to accompany this series of quantitative reports.⁹

1.4 Area context

This sub-section provides a basis for the interpretation of VCSE sector data in subsequent analysis by presenting a brief statement on the demographic profile of Thames Valley.

Population profile

Population data are presented in Table 1.2 for Thames Valley and its constituent unitary local authorities and county council districts. There are notable variations to the extent of ethnic diversity across local authority areas. West Oxfordshire is the least diverse (95% white) while Slough is the most diverse (47% Asian or Asian British).

⁸ The report draws upon a wide range of analytical techniques, the complexity of which cannot be fully explained in this report for reasons of brevity. A full set of explanations on the usage of these techniques can be found here: <https://www.stchads.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/Third-Sector-Trends-in-England-and-Wales-2025-Technical-paper-on-sector-structure-and-analytical-techniques-December-2025.pdf>

⁹ The report is available here: [Archive of publications from Third Sector Trends - St Chad's College Durham.](#)

Table 1.2 Demographic profiles in Thames Valley (Source: ONS 2021)

	Asian or Asian British	Black, African, Caribbean or Black British	Mixed or multiple ethnic groups	White or white British	Other ethnic group	Total population
Bracknell Forest	7.1	2.4	3.1	86.1	1.3	124,605
Reading	17.7	7.2	5.1	67.1	2.9	174,200
Slough	46.7	7.6	4.0	36.0	5.7	158,500
West Berkshire	3.7	1.3	2.4	91.9	0.7	161,400
Windsor and Maidenhead	13.1	1.5	3.4	79.8	2.1	153,500
Wokingham	12.9	2.4	3.1	79.9	1.6	177,500
Buckinghamshire	12.4	2.6	3.5	79.9	1.6	553,100
Cherwell	6.0	1.8	2.9	88.1	1.3	161,000
Oxford	15.4	4.7	5.6	70.7	3.7	162,000
South Oxfordshire	2.9	1.0	2.3	93.1	0.8	149,100
Vale of White Horse	4.0	1.7	2.5	90.8	1.1	138,900
West Oxfordshire	1.7	0.6	1.9	95.2	0.6	114,200
Thames Valley	12.8	2.9	3.4	78.9	1.9	2,281,000

Public health profile

In recent years there has been a shift in policy emphasis in many societies away from life expectancy towards the assessment of 'healthy life expectancy'.¹⁰ In England, data are collected by the ONS on self-perceptions of health.¹¹ Healthy life expectancy is defined as follows:

“The healthy life expectancy measure adds a ‘quality of life’ dimension to estimates of life expectancy by dividing it into time spent in different states of health. Health status estimates are based on the following survey question; ‘How is your health in general; would you say it was... very good, good, fair, bad, or very bad’. If a respondent answered ‘very good’ or ‘good’ they were classified as having ‘good’ health. Those who answered ‘fair’, ‘bad’, or ‘very bad’ were classified as having ‘not good’ health and equate to those in ‘poor’ health.”

Healthy life expectancy statistics provide a useful benchmark for the analysis of spatial variations in public health. Unfortunately, data are only published at upper-tier local authority levels. It is clear that data from indices of multiple deprivation mirror data on healthy life expectancy. It is notable that life expectancy and healthy life expectancy is significantly lower in Reading and Slough than in other areas.

¹⁰ Welsh, C., Matthews, F. and Jagger, C. (2021) 'Trends in life expectancy and healthy life years at birth and age 65 in the UK, 2008–2016, and other countries of the EU28: An observational cross-sectional study', *The Lancet Regional Health*, [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanepi/article/PIIS2666-7762\(20\)30023-5/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanepi/article/PIIS2666-7762(20)30023-5/fulltext)

¹¹ Source: Public Health England, 2017. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/health-profile-for-england/chapter-1-life-expectancy-and-healthy-life-expectancy>

Table 1.4 **Healthy life expectancy in Thames Valley** (Source: ONS 2021)

	Men's life expectancy at birth	Men's healthy life expectancy at birth	Women's life expectancy at birth	Women's healthy life expectancy at birth
Bracknell Forest	81.4	68.3	85.0	67.1
Reading	78.5	66.2	82.9	64.6
Slough	78.6	60.4	82.9	58.6
West Berkshire	81.0	69.0	84.3	69.6
Windsor and Maidenhead	80.8	69.4	84.8	70.3
Wokingham	81.8	70.5	84.7	70.7
Buckinghamshire	81.4	69.5	85.0	67.8
Oxfordshire	81.0	68.0	84.1	66.6

1.5 Spatial analysis

Currently the political geography of Thames Valley is in transition as local government reorganisation takes place as discussed in sub-section 1.1. That being the case, data are presented in a variety of ways. The following geographies will be the focus of analysis of the report.

The project's principal geographical focus will be:

Thames Valley NHS ICB area comprising the ceremonial counties of Berkshire, Buckinghamshire (excluding Milton Keynes) and Oxfordshire.

Local authority areas:

- **Berkshire:** Bracknell Forest, West Berkshire, Reading, Slough, Windsor and Maidenhead, Wokingham;
- **Buckinghamshire:** Buckinghamshire (excluding Milton Keynes);
- **Oxfordshire:** Cherwell, Oxford, South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse, West Oxfordshire.

Comparative regional analysis: prefiguring more localised analysis in Thames Valley, Wales and England regional data will be compared to provide a broad perspective on area variations.

local areas within the South East England region will be compared as follows:

- **Surrey** and **Sussex** will be reported separately but constitute one ICB;
- **Hampshire and Isle of Wight ICB;**
- **Kent and Medway ICB.**

Comparative parallel area studies will be published for Wales, Devon and Cornwall (and ceremonial county areas of South West England), Essex (and ceremonial county areas of East of England) in the early summer of 2026. Equivalent analysis has already been published for the North East of England.¹²

¹² All Third Sector Trends reports will be published here: <https://www.stchads.ac.uk/research/third-sector-trends-in-england-and-wales/publications-from-third-sector-trends/>

1.6 Health analysis

Third Sector Trends surveys collate data on beneficiaries served by VCSE organisations. There are five questions which directly concern health, including, 'physical health', 'disability', 'mental health', 'learning disabilities' and 'carers'. As there are insufficient data to undertake analysis reliably on health-oriented organisations at local level in Thames Valley – national data will be used to inform analysis and interpretation. Many organisations serve more than one beneficiary group associated with health conditions so it is necessary to combine the five questions into a single variable on health – this includes – 3,556 respondents from a sample of 8,680 (41% of the sample).

Beneficiary groups TSOs serve	Number of respondents	Percentage of total sample
People with physical disabilities	1,785	20.6
People with physical health conditions	1,783	20.5
People with mental health conditions	2,036	23.5
People with learning disabilities	1,530	17.6
Carers	1,058	12.2
Combined data for TSOs serving health related beneficiaries	3,556	41.0

While 3,556 VCSE organisations have some commitment to health related issues, that is not to say that this is their central concern. Consequently, it is necessary to isolate those organisations which regard health and wellbeing as a 'primary' focus in their work and achievement in impact terms.

To do this, data from a second set of questions were collated on voluntary organisations' perceptions of impact in core areas of social benefit. These questions include 13 sub-categories ranging from 'employability support' to 'empowerment in the community'. One of these questions on impact determines if '*we improve health and wellbeing*'. Answers are reported on the following scale: 'we have a very strong impact', 'we make a good contribution', 'we make some difference' and 'we do not try to do this'.

As shown in Table 1.7, many TSOs which work with health beneficiaries claim to achieve a tangible impact on health and wellbeing, but also in related areas of impact including: 'physical activity', 'social isolation' and 'improving people's access to basic services',

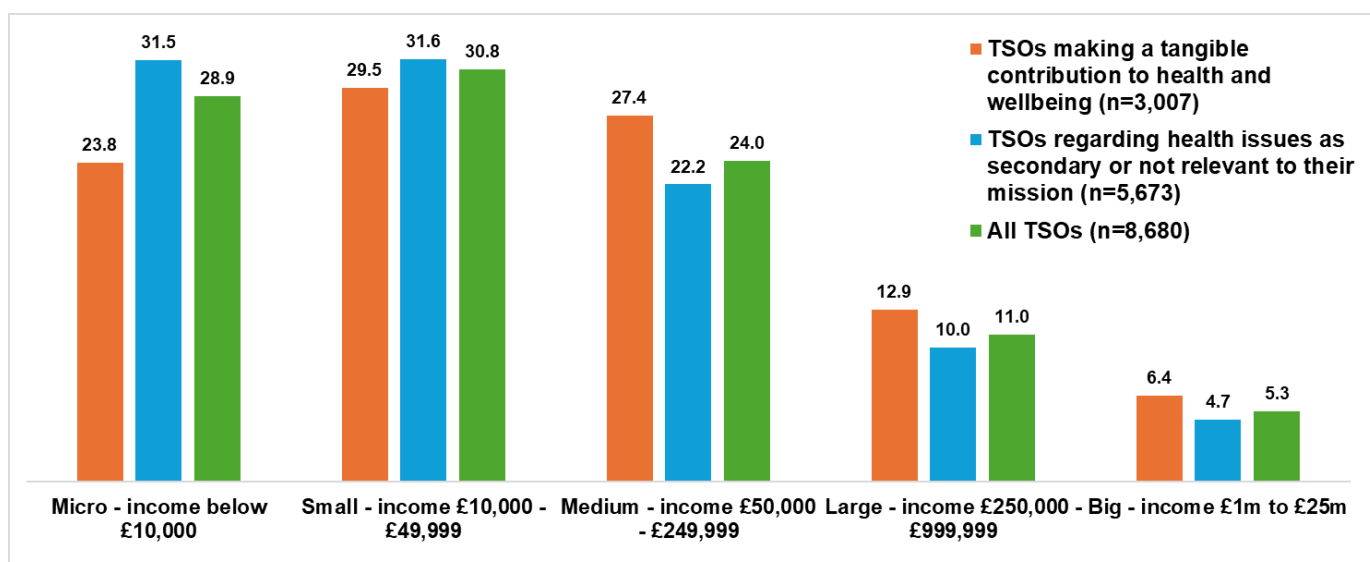
It is apparent that many organisations with health beneficiaries believe that they make a strong impact. Amongst the 3,499 TSOs with health and social care beneficiaries, 72% feel that they make a strong or good contribution to tackling 'health and wellbeing'. A similar percentage of 3,415 VCSE organisations with health beneficiaries feel that they make a strong or good contribution to 'social isolation'. Fewer voluntary organisations with health beneficiaries feel that they make a strong or good contribution to 'physical activity' (42%) as is the case with those addressing 'access to services' (34%).

	<i>TSOs having tangible impact on health issues as a primary concern</i>		<i>TSOs having impact on health issues as a secondary or of no concern</i>		All TSOs which serve health and social care beneficiaries
	We have a very strong impact	We make a good contribution	We make some difference	We don't try to do this	
We improve health and wellbeing	32.8	38.7	22.9	5.6 ¹³	3,499
We encourage physical activity and improve people's fitness	16.6	25.4	24.5	33.6	3,415
We reduce social isolation	37.6	35.0	19.1	8.3	3,482
We improve people's access to basic services	14.5	19.8	23.4	42.3	3,365

A new variable was created on VCSE organisations' contribution to health beneficiaries which combines those organisations which claim to make a 'very strong' or 'good contribution' with those voluntary organisations which serve physical and mental health concerns, people with disabilities, learning difficulties, disabilities and carers. The new variable has a core set of 3,007 respondents which make a 'tangible' commitment to health issues.

To aid interpretation, Figure 1.1 compares the size of organisations which make a tangible contribution to health and wellbeing. It is clear that VCSE organisations attending to health issues tend to be larger. And as may be expected there are comparatively fewer micro organisations that attend to health issues (24%), but the proportion of medium-sized organisations (27%), larger (13%) and big VCSE organisations (6.4%) are higher than amongst non-health oriented voluntary organisations.

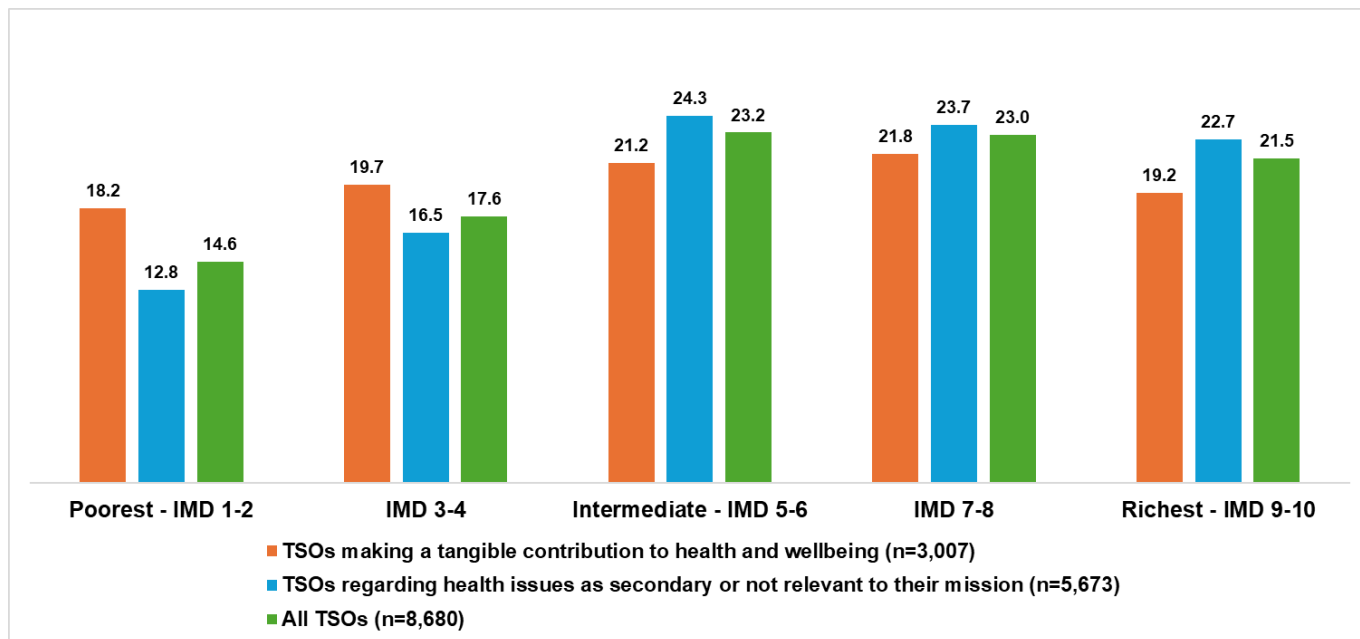
Figure 1.1 **Size of VCSE organisations contributing tangible impact in the field of health and wellbeing** (Third Sector Trends in England and Wales 2025)



¹³ It may seem odd that nearly 6% of TSOs with health beneficiaries do not aim specifically to achieve any tangible impact. These organisations mainly include those which facilitate other voluntary organisations' impact on health such as infrastructure organisations and grant making trusts.

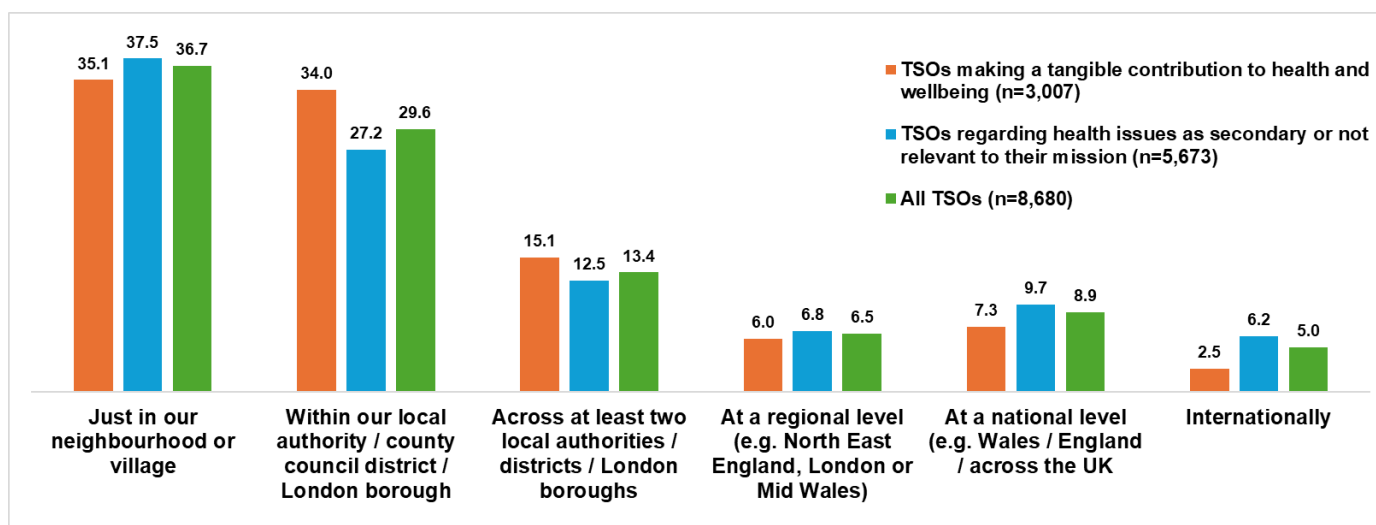
VCSE organisations which focus upon achieving impact in the field of health and wellbeing are more concentrated in poorer areas than voluntary organisations with other interests (Figure 1.2). Nonetheless, it is evident that health interests are catered for quite equally - about a fifth of VCSE organisations in each quintile of social advantage and disadvantage.

Figure 1.2 **Location of VCSE organisations contributing tangible impact in the field of health and wellbeing** (Third Sector Trends in England and Wales 2025)



The spatial range of voluntary organisations working in the field of health and wellbeing tends to be focused locally – though less so at neighbourhood level than VCSE organisations with other objectives (Figure 1.3). In comparative terms, relatively few health oriented voluntary organisations work at regional level or beyond. (16% compared with 23% with other types of beneficiary foci).

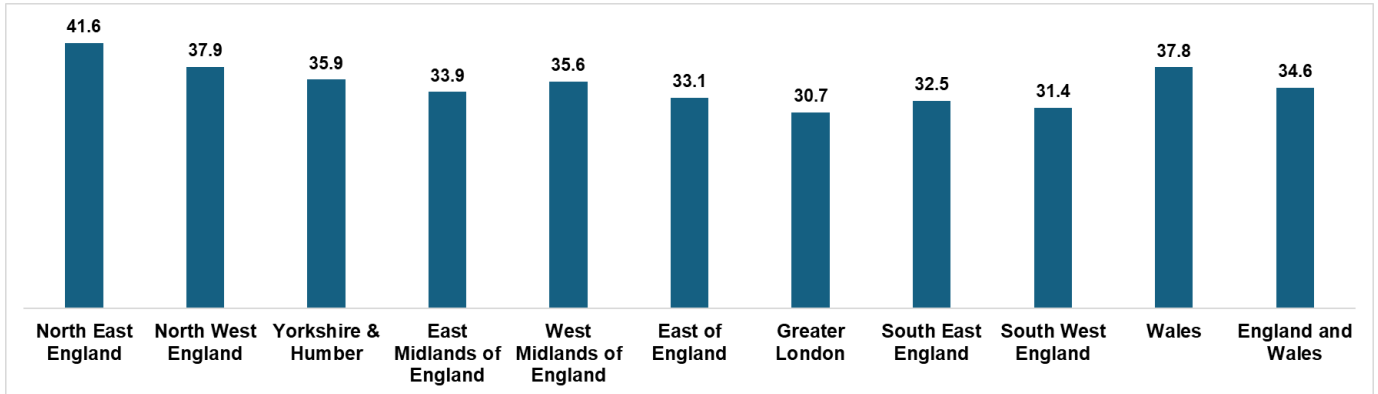
Figure 1.3 **Spatial range of operation amongst VCSE organisations contributing tangible impact in the field of health and wellbeing** (Third Sector Trends in England and Wales 2025)



There are, unfortunately, too few cases in the sample to undertake analysis at the local level. Even at regional level, the scope for convincing analysis is quite limited although it is interesting to note that there is a greater concentration on health issues in less advantaged regions such as North East England (42%) and Wales (38%) than

in generally more affluent areas such as South West England (31%) as shown in Figure 1.4. At national level, however, the sample of 3,007 is sufficient to undertake reliable analysis which can inform interpretation at local level. Evidence will be presented in sections of this report as required to deepen understanding of sector dynamics in the health field.

Figure 1.4 **Percent of VCSE organisations making a tangible contribution to health and wellbeing**
(Third Sector Trends in England and Wales, health oriented TSOs n=3,007, all TSOs n=8,680)



Section 2

Sector structure, income and people energy

2.1 Sector structure

The Third Sector Trends study is primarily concerned with the contribution of the voluntary sector to social, economic and environmental wellbeing of localities. Consequently, the study does not report on data held on major charitable organisations with income above £25million. These data are available elsewhere as NCVO collate substantive data on the activities and resources of larger charities which is reported in their annual *UK Civil Society Almanac*.¹⁴

In England and Wales, it is estimated that there are about 205,000 registered VCSE organisations. These organisations are not distributed evenly across Wales and English regions. Instead, as shown in Table 2.1 there is a higher concentration of VCSE organisations per thousand members of the local resident population in more affluent regions such as South East England (3.6 per 1,000) than in poorer regions such as North East England (2.6 per 1,000).

Table 2.1(a) Distribution of VCSE organisations in English regions and Wales (Third Sector Trends Combined Register 2025)				
	Estimated Number of TSOs	Percentage of TSOs in each region	Population in each region (1,000s) ¹⁵	TSOs per 1,000 population
North East England	7,134	3.5	2,711	2.6
North West England	20,755	10.1	7,600	2.7
Yorkshire and Humber	15,057	7.4	5,594	2.7
East Midlands of England	14,646	7.2	4,991	3.0
West Midlands of England	17,501	8.6	6,086	2.9
East of England	22,108	10.8	6,469	3.4
London	38,861	19	8,945	4.4
South East England	33,979	16.6	9,483	3.6
South West England	24,426	11.9	5,811	4.2
Wales	10,533	4.9	3,164	3.2
England and Wales	205,000	100.0	60,854	3.4

¹⁴ The most recent data from NCVOs Civil Society Almanac is available here: <https://www.ncvo.org.uk/news-and-insights/news-index/uk-civil-society-almanac-2024/>. It was announced in November 2025 that NCVO had cancelled the launch of the 2025 version: <https://www.civilsociety.co.uk/news/ncvo-delays-civil-society-almanac-publication-until-2026.html>

¹⁵ Statista, 2023 <https://www.statista.com/statistics/294729/uk-population-by-region/#:~:text=Population%20of%20the%20UK%202023%2C%20by%20region&text=The%20population%20of%20the%20United,West%20England%20at%207.6%20million.>

Table 2.1(b) shows the distribution of VCSE organisations by unitary authority and county council districts in Thames Valley. The number of VCSE organisations per 1,000 resident population has been calculated to show that there is substantive variation across local authority areas ranging from 6.2 per 1,000 in the City of Oxford to 1.7 per 1,000 in Slough.

Table 2.1(b) Distribution of VCSE organisations in local authorities in Thames Valley (Third Sector Trends Combined Register 2025)			
	Resident population in local authority ¹⁶	Number of TSOs in each local authority	TSOs per 1,000s resident population
Bracknell Forest	124,600	270	2.2
West Berkshire	161,400	690	4.3
Reading	174,200	494	2.8
Slough	158,500	276	1.7
Windsor and Maidenhead	153,500	632	4.1
Wokingham	177,500	569	3.2
Berkshire	949,700	2,931	3.1
Buckinghamshire	553,100	2,536	4.6
Cherwell	161,000	623	3.9
Oxford	162,100	998	6.2
South Oxfordshire	149,100	842	5.6
Vale of White Horse	138,900	836	6.0
West Oxfordshire	114,200	661	5.8
Oxfordshire	725,300	3,960	5.5
Thames Valley	2,228,100	9,427	4.2

Table 2.2(a) shows the distribution of VCSE organisations by legal form in English regions and Wales. It is noted that the percentage of registered charities is higher in more affluent southern English regions (and especially so in East of England) than in the West Midlands, the North and in Wales. The newer legal form of Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIOs) is fairly evenly distributed across English regions but is higher in Wales.

In the more industrial North East, North West and West Midlands of England, the percentage of Community Interest Companies (CICs) is substantially higher than in other English regions. There are, proportionately, relatively few CICs in the South East of England.

Table 2.2(b) presents data for Thames Valley. The proportion of registered charities and CIOs is particularly high, except for Slough, where CICs are proportionately more common (though from a low base as shown in Table 2.1(b)). The distribution of registered societies varies considerably, with the highest proportion in Oxford – as might be expected given the dominance of the university sector in the city.

Community Amateur Sport Clubs, which tend to work at neighbourhood level provide a good indication of the strength of civil society in the domains of sport and recreation. The percentage of CASCs within the local VCSE sector is lowest by some distance in Slough (at less than 1%) and highest in Vale of White Horse (nearly 6%)

¹⁶ Census 2021.

Table 2.2(a) Distribution of VCSE organisations by legal form by English regions and Wales (Third Sector Trends Combined Register 2025)						
Row percentages	Registered charities	Charitable Incorporated Organisations	Community Interest Companies	Registered Societies	Community Amateur Sport Clubs	Registered TSOs in each region
North East England	54.3	16.3	19.4	6.5	3.6	7,134
North West England	59.7	14.9	17.9	4.2	3.3	20,755
Yorkshire & Humber	61.0	16.9	13.4	5.0	3.6	15,057
East Midlands of England	66.2	14.2	12.3	3.7	3.6	14,646
West Midlands of England	61.4	14.5	17.0	4.2	3.0	17,501
East of England	69.4	13.8	10.4	3.0	3.4	22,108
London	63.0	17.2	15.9	2.8	1.2	38,861
South East England	66.9	15.0	10.7	3.4	4.1	33,979
South West England	64.1	14.1	13.9	4.1	3.7	24,426
Wales	59.9	19.1	12.1	5.4	3.5	10,533
England and Wales	63.6	15.5	14.0	3.8	3.1	205,000

Table 2.2(b) Distribution by legal form in local authority areas of Thames Valley (Third Sector Trends Combined register 2025)						
Row percentages	Registered charities	Charitable Incorporated Organisations	Community Interest Companies	Registered Societies	Community Amateur Sport Clubs	Registered TSOs in each area
Bracknell Forest	76.0	13.5	7.3	1.5	1.8	270
West Berkshire	74.2	14.5	5.8	1.9	3.6	690
Reading	68.6	16.9	9.7	2.0	2.8	494
Slough	56.6	19.9	19.9	2.8	0.7	276
Windsor and Maidenhead	70.1	16.5	7.5	2.8	3.1	632
Wokingham	72.4	15.4	7.9	1.0	3.3	569
Berkshire	70.5	15.9	8.7	2.0	2.8	2,931
Buckinghamshire	71.3	14.5	7.1	3.2	3.9	2,536
Cherwell	68.0	11.2	12.1	4.5	4.1	623
Oxford	65.9	12.8	12.8	6.7	1.9	998
South Oxfordshire	72.7	12.6	6.1	3.9	4.7	842
Vale of White Horse	74.5	9.6	7.3	3.1	5.4	836
West Oxfordshire	72.2	9.3	10.1	3.7	4.7	661
Oxfordshire	70.7	11.3	9.5	4.5	4.1	3,960
Thames Valley	70.8	13.8	8.5	3.2	3.6	9,427

Third Sector Trends does not use precisely the same size categories as the Charity Commission or NCVO in its analysis. This is because the study has a strong focus on the local voluntary sector where a majority of organisations have income below £1 billion. If these smaller organisations are not disaggregated into discrete definitional categories, it is not possible fully to understand how different elements of the sector is structured, how they work and how objectives are achieved.

The regional population of VCSE organisations in England and Wales is shown in Table 2.3(a). The structure of the voluntary sector is broadly similar across regions. London is the exception with a much bigger proportion of large organisations. When comparing the structure of the voluntary sector in the relatively poor North East region with the generally more affluent regions it is apparent that variations in middling-sized VCSE organisations are relatively limited – although the proportion of large voluntary organisations in the North East is notably higher (10%) while there

are proportionately more micro organisations in South West England (40%). In South East England, the distribution of VCSE organisations is close to the national average.

Table 2.3(a) Distribution of VCSE organisations by size in English regions and Wales (Third Sector Trends Combined Register 2025)						
Row percentages	Micro (£10,000 or less)	Small (£10,001-£50,000)	Medium (£50,001 - £250,000)	Large (£250,001 - £1m)	Big (£1m – £25m)	Registered TSOs in each region
North East England	34.1	28.4	22.2	10.3	5.0	7,134
North West England	35.4	27.9	22.8	9.0	4.9	20,755
Yorkshire & Humber	36.9	27.9	21.9	8.9	4.3	15,057
East Midlands of England	42.0	29.2	18.8	6.4	3.6	14,646
West Midlands of England	38.2	28.9	20.5	7.9	4.5	17,501
East of England	40.3	29.4	20.2	6.5	3.6	22,108
London	26.5	24.7	24.6	14.2	10.0	38,861
South East England	34.8	31.3	21.9	7.5	4.6	33,979
South West England	39.9	29.7	19.8	7.0	3.7	24,426
Wales	42.2	27.7	18.8	7.4	4.0	10,533
England and Wales	35.8	28.4	21.6	8.8	5.3	205,000

Across Thames Valley (Table 2.3(b)), the proportion of larger and big organisations is much greater in the City of Oxford (12%) and also, though to a lesser extent, in Reading (8%). There are proportionately many more micro organisations in the relatively affluent semi-rural areas of Oxfordshire.

Table 2.3(b) Distribution by size of VCSE organisations in local authority areas of Thames Valley (Third Sector Trends Combined Register 2025)						
Row percentages	Micro (£10,000 or less)	Small (£10,001-£50,000)	Medium (£50,001 - £250,000)	Large (£250,001 - £1m)	Big (£1m – £25m)	Number of TSOs
Bracknell Forest	29.5	39.0	19.0	6.7	5.7	270
West Berkshire	37.4	31.9	20.9	5.7	4.1	690
Reading	21.6	26.3	32.8	11.7	7.6	494
Slough	36.9	24.4	25.0	10.7	3.0	276
Windsor and Maidenhead	32.3	34.3	21.8	5.4	6.2	632
Wokingham	27.9	34.9	26.6	7.0	3.5	569
Berkshire	31.0	32.2	24.4	7.4	5.1	2,931
Buckinghamshire	36.4	34.1	18.7	6.9	3.9	2,536
Cherwell	47.2	27.5	18.5	3.2	3.6	623
Oxford	29.5	22.5	23.0	13.4	11.7	998
South Oxfordshire	42.9	30.9	17.3	5.8	3.2	842
Vale of White Horse	44.1	29.4	17.4	6.6	2.5	836
West Oxfordshire	49.4	26.1	16.8	3.7	3.9	661
Oxfordshire	41.5	27.1	18.9	7.2	5.4	3,960
Thames Valley	36.9	30.5	20.5	7.1	4.9	9,427

Table 2.4(a) compares the distribution of VCSE organisations in each region by indices of multiple deprivation (IMD). Variations in sector distribution clearly reflect comparative levels of affluence and deprivation across regions. In the South East of England, for example, only 6% of VCSE organisations are located in the least affluent quintile, while 35% are located in the most affluent. In North East England, by

contrast, 28% of VCSE organisations are located in the least affluent quintile while only 15% are situated in the most affluent.

In Thames Valley, as would be expected given the general affluence of the area, the percentages of VCSE organisations based in the most deprived quintiles of the Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) are generally very low. But there are some significant exceptions. In Slough, 8% of VCSE organisations are based in the poorest quintile, while in the City of Oxford it is 6%. At the other end of the spectrum, more than half of VCSE organisations are based in the most affluent quintile of the IMD in Buckinghamshire and reaches as high as 78% in Wokingham.

Table 2.4(a) Distribution of VCSE organisations in English regions and Wales by area affluence¹⁷ (Third Sector Trends Combined Register, 2025)						
Row percentages	Least affluent IMD 1-2	IMD 3-4	Intermediate IMD 5-6	IMD 7-8	Most affluent IMD 9-10	Number of TSOs
North East England	27.9	23.1	18.9	15.1	15.0	7,134
North West England	30.4	17.8	17.3	18.8	15.7	20,755
Yorkshire and Humber	25.0	15.0	19.9	21.4	18.6	15,057
East Midlands of England	14.1	18.6	18.9	24.7	23.6	14,646
West Midlands of England	24.4	19.2	22.4	19.8	14.2	17,501
East of England	7.5	15.4	25.8	24.5	26.8	22,108
London	15.2	29.4	24.7	20.0	10.7	38,861
South East England	6.2	11.7	19.7	27.4	35.0	33,979
South West England	9.3	19.9	29.3	22.9	18.6	24,426
Wales	13.8	18.6	23.8	25.5	18.3	10,533
England and Wales	15.5	19.2	22.6	22.5	20.3	205,000

Table 2.4(b) Distribution of VCSE organisations by area affluence in Thames Valley (Third Sector Trends Combined Register 2025)						
Row percentages	Least affluent IMD 1-2	IMD 3-4	Intermediate IMD 5-6	IMD 7-8	Most affluent IMD 9-10	Number of TSOs
Bracknell Forest	0.0	7.6	16.7	23.6	52.0	270
West Berkshire	0.3	1.6	16.9	44.4	36.8	690
Reading	3.0	39.4	26.6	13.1	17.9	494
Slough	7.8	48.4	26.0	17.8	0.0	276
Windsor and Maidenhead	0.0	5.0	12.1	20.2	62.7	632
Wokingham	0.0	4.7	1.6	15.7	78.1	569
Berkshire	1.3	14.2	15.4	23.9	45.2	2,931
Buckinghamshire	0.1	4.2	13.6	28.3	53.8	2,536
Cherwell	4.9	3.3	23.5	38.2	30.0	623
Oxford	6.4	10.9	18.6	35.4	28.6	998
South Oxfordshire	0.0	1.4	10.5	28.0	60.1	842
Vale of White Horse	0.1	0.0	6.1	39.0	54.8	836
West Oxfordshire	0.0	1.9	7.6	35.0	55.5	661
Oxfordshire	2.5	4.0	13.3	35.0	45.2	3,960
Thames Valley	1.5	7.2	14.0	29.8	47.5	9,427

¹⁷ Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) in England and the Wales Index of Deprivation (WIMD) are constructed in slightly different ways and are not strictly comparable. However, both sets of indices are similarly purposed so comparative data has been presented in a single set of quintiles. See: [Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation](#); [English indices of deprivation 2019 - GOV.UK](#).

Many VCSE organisations do not limit their work to the immediate area within which they are based, so this must be taken into account when interpreting statistics. As Table 2.5(a) shows, the spatial patterns of work are fairly similar across English regions and Wales – but some anomalies must be noted.¹⁸ In South East England, working at neighbourhood or village level is high (38%), though not compared with South West England (47%).

Table 2.5(a) Spatial range of VCSE organisations' operation in Wales and English regions (Third Sector Trends 2025 survey data)

	Just in our neighbourhood or village	Within our local authority / county council district / London borough	Across at least two local authorities / districts / London boroughs	At a regional level (e.g. North East England, London or Mid Wales)	At a national level (e.g. Wales / England / across the UK)	Inter-nationally	N=
North East England	33.7	26.7	13.7	20.8	2.9	2.3	659
North West England	34.3	33.2	16.4	6.6	6.1	3.3	798
Yorkshire and Humber	39.6	33.0	13.3	5.5	5.6	3.0	952
East Midlands of England	40.7	30.2	13.6	5.4	6.5	3.6	612
West Midlands of England	38.9	29.3	11.7	5.7	9.1	5.3	736
East of England	44.1	29.4	13.9	3.6	5.5	3.5	1,120
London	12.1	27.3	15.6	10.2	22.4	12.4	774
South East England	37.5	30.8	13.5	3.2	8.7	6.4	1,209
South West England	46.9	26.5	9.8	3.6	8.3	4.9	1,094
Wales	30.2	28.5	13.7	7.3	15.8	4.5	709
England and Wales	36.7	29.6	13.4	6.5	8.9	5.0	8,663

Within South East England there is much variation (Table 2.5(b)). In Oxfordshire, for example, a very high percentage of VCSE organisations work at national or international level – this is primarily due to a concentration of far reaching ambitions of organisations in the City of Oxford. Across the region, however, there is a strong focus on working at neighbourhood/village level and within a single local authority.

¹⁸ The distinction between local authorities / local authority districts and working across two or more local authorities has become less useful over time. This is due to local government reorganisation where several two-tier counties have either become single tier or split into two smaller local authorities. Unfortunately this has undermined analysis between waves of the study as the political geographies are no longer comparable. In analytical terms it makes sense in comparative analysis, therefore, for these two categories to be merged.

	Just in our neighbourhood or village	Within our local authority / county council district	Across at least two local authorities	At a regional level	At a national level	Internationally	N=
Thames Valley	35.1	30.9	13.7	2.9	9.4	8.0	326
Berkshire	35.4	27.3	25.3	1.0	3.0	8.1	104
Buckinghamshire	37.5	35.2	8.6	2.3	9.4	7.0	99
Oxfordshire	32.5	29.3	9.8	4.9	14.6	8.9	123
Sussex	34.0	31.7	15.8	4.2	7.9	6.4	265
Surrey	32.9	30.9	18.8	1.3	8.7	7.4	149
Hampshire and Isle of Wight	41.7	29.8	11.6	4.1	8.7	4.1	242
Kent	44.3	30.5	8.4	3.0	8.4	5.4	203
South East England	37.5	30.8	13.5	3.2	8.7	6.4	1,209

2.2 Sector employment

The voluntary sector in England and Wales employs about 1.15 million people, constituting an average of 3% of employment in English regions and Wales (see Table 2.6). It is estimated that this represents a small increase of around 25,000 employees nationally since 2022. The full cost of employees to voluntary organisations is estimated at around 69% of total organisational expenditure. In the South East, the voluntary sector employs around 178,700 people, constituting about 3.6% of regional employment – which is just above the national average. The cost of employing staff is estimated to be about 76% of sector income which is much higher than the national average and may be related to higher living costs.

	Estimated number of voluntary sector employees	Regional employment ¹⁹	Estimated percentage of regional employment	Estimated sector income (£millions)	Approximate percentage of sector income spent on wages
North East England	37,500	1,211,000	3.1	1,983.0	65.1
North West England	107,900	3,675,000	2.9	5,711.5	68.6
Yorkshire and Humber	72,300	2,693,000	2.7	3,868.7	66.4
East Midlands of England	55,700	2,476,000	2.3	2,944.0	67.5
West Midlands of England	86,500	2,945,000	2.9	4,609.0	67.5
East of England	93,100	3,301,000	2.8	4,946.1	75.0
London	173,700 (372,000)	4,964,000	3.5 (7.5)	19,987.1 ²⁰	82.9
South East England	178,700	4,934,000	3.6	9,548.3	76.1
South West England	101,600	3,027,000	3.4	5,404.3	68.7
Wales	42,600	1,457,000	2.9	2,258.1	67.3
England and Wales	1,148,500²¹	30,683,000	3.1²²	61,260.2	69.1²³

¹⁹ Source: Nomis (downloaded September 27th, 2025)
<https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/reports/lmp/gor/2013265921/report.aspx#tabnrhi>

²⁰ Estimated cost for total London-based organisational employment. Costs will be exaggerated as expense incurred elsewhere in the UK or abroad are likely to be lower.

²¹ Includes London-based organisational employees which are distributed elsewhere in England and Wales.

²² Average regional percentage excludes London-based organisations' employees as it is not known how they are distributed across the UK and abroad.

²³ Average percentage cost excluding London.

Table 2.7 provides estimates on the distribution of the workforce by unitary local authorities and county council district areas.²⁴ It cannot be assumed that all employees work within the boundaries of the stated local authority area.

Table 2.7 Estimated sector income and employee numbers in Thames Valley (Third Sector Trends statistical model 2025)			
	Total number of registered voluntary organisations	Estimated sector income (£millions)	Estimated number of employees
Bracknell Forest	270	76.0	1,421
West Berkshire	690	193.9	3,628
Reading	494	138.9	2,600
Slough	276	77.6	1,452
Windsor and Maidenhead	632	177.6	3,323
Wokingham	569	159.9	2,992
Berkshire	2,931	823.9	15,416
Buckinghamshire	2,536	712.6	13,334
Cherwell	623	175.1	3,276
Oxford	998	280.4	5,248
South Oxfordshire	842	236.6	4,428
Vale of White Horse	836	234.9	4,396
West Oxfordshire	661	185.7	3,476
Oxfordshire	3,960	1,112.7	20,842
Thames Valley	9,427	2,649.2	49,574

2.3 Support from volunteers

National estimates for the number of volunteers in the UK are published annually in NCVO's Civil Society Almanac.²⁵ It is reported that 16% of people volunteered at least once in the previous year with a group, club or organisation in the UK – this represents a decline from a recent peak of 23% in 2019-20. These are still impressive statistics which show that a culture of volunteering, in one capacity or another, is well established in the UK. Third Sector Trends estimates the number of 'regular' volunteers VCSE organisations rely upon to provide practical hands-on support to achieve their objectives.²⁶ This means that several other kinds of volunteers are not included in the analysis:

- Volunteers giving time to public bodies such as local public libraries (unless they are community-run entities) or the NHS (unless they are working directly for a TSO such as RVS).
- Volunteering in schools as governors, as members of informal/unregistered parent teacher associations, supporting teachers in the classroom, school trips and sports days, or general school fundraising activities.
- Volunteering for other public bodies such as the police as special constables, the criminal justice system as magistrates and so on.

²⁴ The accuracy of the estimates produced by the statistical model is reduced at lower level geographies and should be considered as 'indicative'.

²⁵ NCVO UK Civil Society Almanac 2024 <https://www.ncvo.org.uk/news-and-insights/news-index/uk-civil-society-almanac-2024/>. The Almanac was not published as planned in 2025.

²⁶ Regular volunteers are defined as people who provide on average 72 hours of support to a TSO in one year (or an average of six hours per month). Calculations exclude occasional or ephemeral (i.e. 'one-off') volunteering. Ephemeral or occasional volunteering may include people who help with a fundraising appeal, people who are allocated to volunteer through, for example, employee supported volunteer initiatives or by university student volunteer programmes.

- Employee supported volunteers or the provision of pro-bono support by employees or professionals (unless it is facilitated via a TSO such as Pro-Bono Economics).
- Volunteers participating in local or national fundraising appeals (for example, *BBC Children in Need*, *Comic Relief*, *Sport Relief*, or for large national charities such as *Save the Children* and *Oxfam*²⁷ etc.)

It is not being asserted that these forms of volunteering lack value or are of a lesser value than those working directly and regularly for local VCSE organisations. It is simply a question of calculating the practical contributions regular volunteers make, via local voluntary organisations to society. With these caveats in mind, it is possible to calculate the amount of energy which is produced through voluntarism in VCSE organisations (see Table 2.8(a)). In England and Wales, regular volunteers number around 4.3 million people who contribute 308 million hours of work valued at between £3.8 billion and £5.6 billion in 2025.

In the South East of England, the number of regular volunteers is about 708,300 and the hours worked amounts to 51million. The proxy replacement value of volunteers would be between £623m and £969m in South East England. Estimated numbers and proxy financial replacement values for regular volunteers at local authority and county council district levels are provided in Table 2.8(b).

Table 2.8(a) Estimated number and proxy replacement value of regular volunteers in VCSE organisations in English regions and Wales (Third Sector Trends statistical model 2025)						
	Number of regular volunteers	Estimated total hours worked (£millions)	Value at National Living Wage (£millions)	Number of full-time equivalent regular volunteers	80% average median regional wage	Value produced at 80% average regional (£millions)
North East England	148,900	10.7	130.9	6,300	27,506	172.9
North West England	431,500	31.1	379.3	18,200	28,954	527.2
Yorkshire and Humber	310,300	22.3	272.8	13,000	28,072	367.7
East Midlands of England	289,700	20.9	254.7	12,200	28,459	347.9
West Midlands of England	342,400	24.7	301.0	14,500	28,700	414.7
East of England	437,700	31.5	384.8	18,500	31,762	586.8
London ²⁸	903,500	65.1	794.2	38,100	35,501	1,353.7
South East England	708,300	51.0	622.6	29,900	32,415	968.9
South West England	492,800	35.5	433.2	20,800	29,153	606.3
Wales	212,300	15.3	186.6	8,900	28,471	255.1
England and Wales	4,277,400	308.0	3,760.2	180,400	29,899	5,601.1

²⁷ Supporting large national charitable organisations as volunteers in local charity shops would be included providing that federated branches responded to the survey at a local level.

²⁸ Estimates of the number of volunteers may be over or underestimated in London because many larger organisations, such as charitable foundations, tend not to have operational regular volunteers (apart from trustees). Large international organisations by contrast may have very large numbers of volunteers but they may not provide support in England and Wales.

Table 2.8(b) Estimated number and proxy replacement value of regular volunteers in VCSE organisations in Thames Valley (Third Sector Trends statistical model 2025)				
	Estimated number of regular volunteers	Estimated hours worked (1,000s)	Equivalent cost at National Minimum Wage (£millions)	Equivalent cost at 80% median regional wage (£millions)
Bracknell Forest	5,134	0.4	4.5	7.0
Reading	9,436	0.7	8.3	12.9
Slough	5,284	0.4	4.6	7.2
West Berkshire	13,137	0.9	11.5	18
Windsor and Maidenhead	12,120	0.9	10.7	16.6
Wokingham	10,940	0.8	9.6	15.0
Berkshire	56,051	4.0	49.3	76.7
Buckinghamshire	49,446	3.6	43.5	67.6
Cherwell	12,977	0.9	11.4	17.8
Oxford	20,834	1.5	18.3	28.5
South Oxfordshire	17,616	1.3	15.5	24.1
Vale of White Horse	17,528.0	1.3	15.4	24.0
West Oxfordshire	13,890.0	1.0	12.2	19.0
Oxfordshire	82,845.0	6.0	72.8	113.4
Thames Valley	188,342	13.6	165.6	257.7

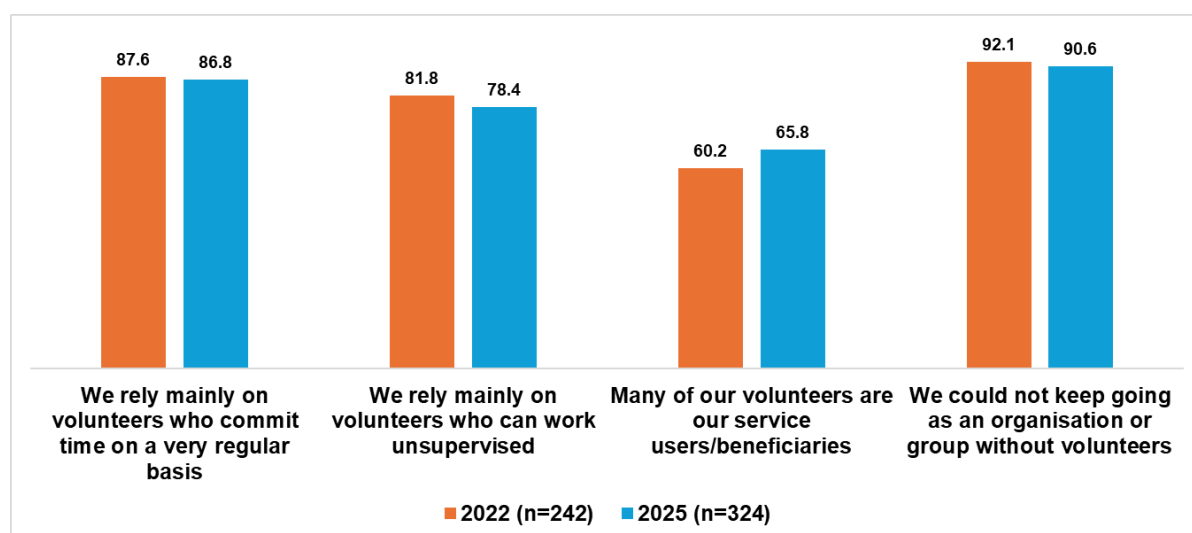
Reliance on regular volunteers is high in South East England (Table 2.9a), but that pattern of reliance is fairly similar to national averages on most criteria. There are, however, fewer beneficiaries working as volunteers in the region (63%) when compared with poorer regions such as the North East (82%). In the South East of England patterns of reliance upon volunteers vary little across localities in most domains (Table 2.9(b)).

Table 2.9(a) Reliance on volunteers by English region and Wales (Third Sector Trends in England and Wales 2025, percentage 'agree' or 'strongly agree' n=8,583)					
	We rely mainly on volunteers who commit time on a very regular basis	We rely mainly on volunteers who can work unsupervised	Many of our volunteers are our service users/beneficiaries	We could not keep going as an organisation or group without volunteers	We have never fully recovered our volunteer numbers since the pandemic
North East England	80.7	71.2	73.8	81.8	38.9
North West England	84.5	76.7	70.4	87.9	44.2
Yorkshire & Humber	87.8	78.4	70.6	90.5	39.4
East Midlands of England	86.3	80.3	62.3	86.5	36.6
West Midlands of England	87.0	82.7	69.3	90.0	39.6
East of England	84.3	77.1	64.2	86.7	38.6
Greater London	81.4	72.5	64.6	84.2	36.1
South East England	86.8	80.3	62.9	90.7	36.0
South West England	86.3	83.2	63.0	89.1	38.0
Wales	83.6	79.0	69.8	84.9	41.5
England and Wales	85.1	78.4	66.8	87.6	38.8

Table 2.9(b) Reliance on volunteers in South East England (Third Sector Trends in England and Wales 2025, percentage 'agree' or 'strongly agree' n=1,120)						
	We rely mainly on volunteers who commit time on a very regular basis	We rely mainly on volunteers who can work unsupervised	Many of our volunteers are our service users/beneficiaries	We could not keep going as an organisation or group without volunteers	We have never fully recovered our volunteer numbers since the pandemic	N=
Thames Valley	86.8	78.4	65.8	90.6	31.8	326
Sussex	87.7	82.1	64.0	91.4	35.8	266
Surrey	84.9	79.3	49.0	90.4	41.0	149
Hampshire and Isle of Wight	88.5	80.9	63.6	92.0	39.7	244
Kent	85.0	80.9	66.2	88.5	35.3	203
South East England	86.8	80.3	62.9	90.7	36.0	1,212

As shown in Figure 2.1, there has been little change in VCSE organisations' overall reliance upon regular volunteers between 2022 and 2025 in Thames Valley. There are, however, indications that more voluntary organisations are involving service users in volunteering activity (rising from 60% to 66%). There is also a slight fall in the percentage of VCSE organisations which state that they can rely on volunteers to work unsupervised (falling from 82% to 78%) – this may well be related to the greater involvement of service users.

Figure 2.1 **Percentage of VCSE organisations relying upon volunteers in Thames Valley 2022 and 2025** (includes those which 'agree' or 'strongly agree', Third Sector Trends in England and Wales 2022, 2025)



2.4 Labour market dynamics

There has been a good deal of turbulence in the structure of the voluntary sector labour force in recent years but patterns of change vary by region. As Table 2.10 shows, the situation in the South East is more stable than in others, such as North East England where it is reported that rising full-time employment is higher than in any other region (32%). There are stronger signs of growth in part-time employment in the South East than for full-time employment – but this still remains below the national level.

VCSE organisations in some regions report significant changes in the numbers of regular volunteers and trustees over the last two years (Table 2.11). In South East England, the percentage of voluntary organisations with rising numbers of volunteers (30%) is just below the national average (33%) as are percentages for trustees.

Table 2.10 Changing levels of full and part-time employment over the last two years in English regions and Wales (Third Sector Trends in England and Wales 2025)

	<i>Full-time employees</i>			<i>Part-time employees</i>		
	Increased	Stayed the same	Reduced	Increased	Stayed the same	Reduced
North East England	31.8	49.0	19.2	36.5	46.0	17.5
North West England	22.3	57.3	20.4	36.7	48.5	14.7
Yorkshire and Humber	26.5	51.8	21.7	38.3	45.2	16.5
East Midlands of England	21.5	55.4	23.1	35.2	46.6	18.2
West Midlands of England	24.4	60.4	15.2	33.9	52.7	13.4
East of England	27.9	57.4	14.7	36.9	52.4	10.8
London	24.9	58.4	16.7	38.0	49.1	13.0
South East England	24.5	58.5	17.0	34.0	51.3	14.7
South West England	21.7	59.8	18.5	32.1	53.7	14.2
Wales	27.4	53.9	18.7	35.7	45.4	18.9
England and Wales	25.5	56.1	18.4	35.8	49.3	14.9

Table 2.11 Changing levels of regular volunteers and trustees over the last two years in English regions and Wales (Third Sector Trends in England and Wales 2025)

	<i>Regular volunteers</i>			<i>Trustees</i>		
	Increased	Stayed the same	Reduced	Increased	Stayed the same	Reduced
North East England	37.5	42.1	20.4	20.3	61.6	18.1
North West England	34.7	45.2	20.0	18.3	63.2	18.5
Yorkshire and Humber	33.9	46.8	19.3	19.4	64.0	16.6
East Midlands of England	32.4	46.4	21.2	21.5	61.1	17.4
West Midlands of England	35.0	45.6	19.4	18.6	64.7	16.6
East of England	32.7	46.9	20.4	19.4	62.0	18.6
London	32.6	50.9	16.5	22.5	64.3	13.3
South East England	30.2	51.8	18.0	17.6	66.4	16.0
South West England	27.9	49.7	22.4	19.1	62.0	18.8
Wales	35.0	44.0	20.9	19.5	61.9	18.6
England and Wales	32.8	47.3	19.8	19.4	63.3	17.3

Recruitment and retention problems have become a matter of concern to many VCSE organisations in recent years. These difficulties vary substantially across regions (Table 2.12).

- In the North East, 41% of TSOs report employee recruitment problems compared with just 32% in South East England where employee retention problems are also comparably low (18%).
- Volunteer recruitment (44%) and retention (23%) problems are widespread in the South East, but are close to the national average.
- Trustee recruitment difficulties are at the national average in the South East of England (35%) but retention problems are lower (14%).

Table 2.12 Difficulties associated with recruitment and retention in English regions and Wales (Third Sector Trends in England and Wales 2025)						
	<i>Difficulty with recruitment</i>			<i>Difficulty with retention</i>		
	Employees	Volunteers	Trustees	Employees	Volunteers	Trustees
North East England	41.0	42.5	37.3	22.3	25.4	16.6
North West England	33.0	42.2	33.9	19.9	25.3	15.5
Yorkshire and Humber	33.2	45.3	35.4	20.5	26.9	16.8
East Midlands of England	34.4	43.0	35.3	19.9	23.0	15.6
West Midlands of England	32.1	45.1	35.7	18.6	25.7	15.8
East of England	31.5	46.9	37.2	17.4	25.0	17.9
London	27.6	34.0	26.7	18.4	22.8	13.3
South East England	32.3	44.3	35.3	17.7	22.8	13.5
South West England	32.1	44.3	38.9	16.9	24.4	18.2
Wales	36.4	44.4	38.0	21.6	27.2	16.6
England and Wales	33.1	43.5	35.5	19.1	24.8	16.0

In Thames Valley, as Table 2.13 shows, the percentages of VCSE organisations having difficulty with recruitment of employees (22%) is lower than the regional average (26%). Volunteer recruitment difficulties in Thames Valley (39%) is just above the regional average (38%).²⁹ Trustee recruitment difficulties in Thames Valley (34%) are at the regional average, but the indications are that trustee retention problems (14%) are lower than the regional average (16%).

Table 2.13 Difficulties associated with recruitment and retention in South East England (Third Sector Trends in England and Wales 2025)						
	<i>Difficulty with recruitment</i>			<i>Difficulty with retention</i>		
	Employees	Volunteers	Trustees	Employees	Volunteers	Trustees
Thames Valley	22.2	38.7	34.2	14.7	19.7	13.8
Sussex	16.4	34.1	28.1	10.8	18.6	13.3
Surrey	20.7	40.3	35.6	10.3	24.3	14.8
Hampshire and Isle of Wight	21.7	38.3	36.8	11.2	20.7	13.3
Kent	19.7	40.1	34.0	11.9	16.5	8.4
South East England	25.5	38.3	34.3	12.0	21.5	15.7

²⁹ There are insufficient data to rely heavily on these findings at sub-regional level in Thames Valley.

It is useful to note that, at a national level, recruitment and retention difficulties amongst VCSE organisations focusing on health are the same as voluntary organisations serving other beneficiary interests (Table 1.14).

Table 2.14 Difficulties associated with recruitment and retention in VCSE organisations in the field of health (Third Sector Trends in England and Wales 2025)						
	<i>Difficulty with recruitment</i>			<i>Difficulty with retention</i>		
	Employees	Volunteers	Trustees	Employees	Volunteers	Trustees
TSOs making a tangible contribution to health and wellbeing (n=3,007)	34.5	44.9	38.0	19.1	24.9	16.8
TSOs regarding health issues as secondary or not relevant to their mission (n=5,673)	32.2	42.7	34.2	19.1	24.8	15.6

2.5 Training and development

Ensuring that people are highly motivated and properly equipped with the skills needed to do their work is generally thought to be an important aspect of organisational effectiveness. And yet, the most important priority set by VCSE organisations is ‘income generation’ (Table 2.15(a)).

Clearly, VCSE organisations need money to rent or buy property within which to work, to buy kit and consumables to deliver services and to pay employees wages. But it is a moot point as to whether developing fundraising skills should be the top priority. Income generation is most clearly prioritised in North East England over all other issues by 77% of VCSE organisations compared with just 64% in the South East of England.

There could be stronger arguments, from an outsider’s perspective, to invest in business planning so as to work out what money is needed for; and investing in the capability of managers and trustees to make sure that they are making the right decisions. In the South East, investing in these areas is at about the national average while in the South West of England the imperative to do so seems to be particularly low: only 24% of VCSE organisations prioritise trustee development compared with 33% in Wales.

As shown in Table 2.15(b) the prioritisation of training in managing employees and volunteers(43%), business planning (43%) and trustee development (30%) in Thames Valley is a good deal higher than regional averages while comparable percentages are much lower in Kent.

Table 2.15(a) Percentage of VCSE organisations in English regions and Wales stating that training needs are a high priority (Third Sector Trends in England and Wales 2025)						
	Managing employees / volunteers	Trustee development and training	Business planning	Income generation	Practical digital skills (e.g. financial accounting software)	Artificial intelligence (AI)
North East England	48.1	31.5	47.6	76.7	27.7	15.9
North West England	44.2	28.5	42.4	67.4	23.6	11.4
Yorkshire & Humber	40.1	28.0	41.0	71.0	22.6	12.3
East Midlands of England	37.6	26.7	35.6	62.9	21.9	7.2
West Midlands of England	36.6	27.4	38.2	66.1	22.0	8.7
East of England	40.4	26.6	36.9	64.3	18.9	9.9
Greater London	48.8	29.1	48.1	71.8	28.9	17.0
South East England	40.8	28.1	39.9	63.6	23.6	10.1
South West England	36.4	24.1	35.8	63.2	20.0	7.2
Wales	47.2	33.3	46.8	72.7	25.8	11.3
England and Wales	41.6	28.0	40.8	67.5	23.1	10.9

Table 2.15(b) Percentage of VCSE organisations stating that training needs are a high priority in South East England (Third Sector Trends in England and Wales 2025)						
	Managing employees / volunteers	Trustee development and training	Business planning	Income generation	Practical digital skills (e.g. financial accounting software)	Artificial intelligence (AI)
Thames Valley	43.1	30.1	42.8	64.7	22.3	12.1
Sussex	42.1	30.2	43.4	65.9	28.3	10.2
Surrey	45.9	26.4	38.9	65.1	28.2	12.8
Hampshire and Isle of Wight	41.2	28.3	37.0	60.5	20.2	8.3
Kent	30.7	23.3	34.3	61.5	20.3	7.0
South East England	39.0	26.8	37.4	63.4	23.1	8.9

Investing in people is generally considered to be beneficial to organisational health and a major contributor to success in achieving objectives.³⁰ Table 2.16 presents headline data for employees and volunteers in Thames Valley on the extent of voluntary organisations’ investment in training, wellbeing (using flexible working arrangements as an indicator) and personal development.

Only the first of these factors, holding a training budget, implies direct financial commitment from VCSE organisations, but other factors will also involve direct or indirect costs.

³⁰ Academic studies of the public and private sectors generally show that investment in people through training, supporting their wellbeing and personal development enhances organisational effectiveness. For a critical view of the literature, see: Burgess, S., and Williams, I. (2009) ‘Investing in your people works—can 40,000 organisations be wrong?’, *Library Management*, 30(8-9), 608-618. The literature on third sector organisational training and development is patchy. See: Egan, T. (2017) ‘Training and development in nonprofit organizations’, in Ward, J. and Sowa, J. (eds.) *The Nonprofit Human Resource Management Handbook*, New York, Routledge (223-249). Routledge. Most literature in this field is generally focused on the wider objective of fundraising or social impact rather than improving organisations capability and wellbeing; see, for example: Green, E., Ritchie, F., Bradley, P. and Parry, G. (2021) ‘Financial resilience, income dependence and organisational survival in UK charities’, *Voluntas: international journal of voluntary and nonprofit organizations*, 32(5), 992-1008.

Levels of investment in employees in Thames Valley is slightly higher than the regional average and is lowest in Kent. For example, 40% of VCSE organisations in Thames Valley have a training budget compared with 37% in Kent.

Providing opportunities for flexible working remains high across the South East where about 56% of VCSE organisations do so – in Buckinghamshire, the percentage is considerably higher (65%). Many VCSE organisations in Thames Valley are making provision for personal development (48%).

Table 2.16 Percent of VCSE organisations which invest in training, flexible working and personal development for employees and volunteers in South East England (Third Sector Trends in England and Wales 2025)			
	We have a general training budget	We offer flexible working arrangements	We make provisions for personal development
Thames Valley	39.5	58.0	47.6
Sussex	39.8	57.0	47.7
Surrey	38.9	56.8	44.6
Hampshire and Isle of Wight	39.3	56.6	45.3
Kent	37.4	48.3	45.5
South East England	39.1	55.7	46.4

It is useful to note that VCSE organisations which adopt health issues as their key priority are more likely to train than other voluntary organisations. This may partly be due to their generally larger size together with statutory requirements which must be met in the field of health and social care provision (Figure 2.2)

Figure 2.2 **Percentage of VCSE organisations with training budgets in the health and social care field** (Third Sector Trends in England and Wales 2025)



Table 2.17 shows the percentage of VCSE organisations which access help to meet their training and development needs and where they generally go to attain support. It should be noted, though, that a majority of TSOs across the South East do this work themselves, in-house. Of those which do access external support, more go to local infrastructure organisations and local charitable trusts and foundations than they do to the local authority or private firms.

Table 2.17 Principal sources of support for VCSE organisations in South East England (Third Sector Trends in England and Wales 2025)						
	From a local infrastructure body	From a local charitable grant-making trust or community foundation	From the local authority, NHS or other public sector body	From a local private sector business or specialist profession	We'd do it ourselves	n=
Thames Valley	13.4	10.9	4.7	9.5	61.5	326
Sussex	17.4	12.2	4.2	7.6	58.5	266
Surrey	12.6	8.8	5.7	9.7	63.2	149
Hampshire and Isle of Wight	14.3	13.6	6.3	11.4	54.4	244
Kent	8.7	7.8	4.1	10.6	68.8	203
South East England	13.6	11.0	4.9	9.7	60.8	1,212

Section 3

Sector purpose, energy and impact

3.1 Sector purpose and beneficiaries

Third Sector Trends collects data on a limited range of broad categories of beneficiary groups. Most VCSE organisations also tend to tackle a range of issues rather than focusing upon just one. While it is not possible to undertake highly nuanced localised analysis using these data below county level, it is clear that sector purpose reflects local regional conditions. For example, emphasis on physical disability or illnesses as beneficiary areas tend to be far higher in northern areas where concentrations of deprivation are greater than in more affluent southern regions.

Table 3.1 presents data for South East England on beneficiaries served in three blocks. The first addresses specific *personal or biographical issues*. It is clear from these data that many VCSE organisations in the region state that they serve ‘people in general’ (53%) while others state they have a more specific focus, such as children and young people or older people. Percentages add up to more than 100% because, as noted, many VCSE organisations serve several purposes. Nonetheless, the data provide some useful indications of variation by areas such as the higher level of focus on children and young people in Kent (48%) than in all other areas.

Table 3.1 Percentage of VCSE organisations supporting beneficiaries (Third Sector Trends in England and Wales 2025)					
Block 1: Personal or biographical issues	People in general	Children and young people	Older people	People of a particular ethnic or racial origin	People with concerns about gender and sexuality
Thames Valley	55.1	38.0	33.0	5.7	3.7
Sussex	56.4	28.9	29.7	5.6	4.1
Surrey	45.6	38.9	30.9	6.0	3.4
Hampshire and Isle of Wight	54.1	34.8	31.6	2.0	2.5
Kent	57.6	48.3	36.9	3.4	2.5
South East England	52.7	36.3	29.8	4.6	2.9

The second block of the table considers how many VCSE organisations address issues surrounding *health and wellbeing*. The focus on health related issues is quite varied across South East England. For example, the focus on physical disability seems to be much higher in Surrey (24%) than in Thames Valley (17%). Concentration on learning disabilities in Thames Valley also seems to be particularly low (12%).

The final block in Table 3.1 focuses on *household and community issues*. This section shows that VCSE sector focus on housing and homelessness issues is stronger in Sussex and Surrey than in other areas – the same applies to related issues surrounding poverty and worklessness. A focus on rural issues appears to be strongest in Kent.

Block 2: Health and wellbeing issues	People with physical disabilities	People with physical health conditions	People with mental health conditions	People with learning disabilities	Carers
Thames Valley	17.4	18.6	18.6	11.7	10.0
Sussex	22.2	20.3	24.8	17.3	11.7
Surrey	23.5	27.5	24.8	17.4	15.4
Hampshire and Isle of Wight	19.3	20.9	20.5	17.2	11.1
Kent	18.7	17.7	20.2	16.7	11.8
South East England	19.8	20.4	21.4	15.6	11.6
Block 3: Housing and community issues	People with homelessness and housing issues	Unemployed/ workless people	People or households living in poverty	People in disadvantaged urban areas	People in rural areas
Thames Valley	8.6	7.4	14.9	8.9	10.6
Sussex	12.4	12.4	16.9	10.2	13.2
Surrey	12.1	11.4	21.5	8.7	8.7
Hampshire and Isle of Wight	8.6	9.8	13.1	11.9	12.7
Kent	8.9	5.4	14.3	9.4	14.8
South East England	9.9	9.2	15.7	9.8	12.0

3.2 Perceptions of social impact

Currently, Third Sector Trends is the only large-scale study which collects substantive data on perceptions of sector impact. New questions were introduced in 2019 on the impact of the sector’s work which were developed in collaboration with *Power to Change*. Respondents were asked “*at a community level, what kind of impact do you think you have?*” across several domains.

For each aspect, respondents were invited to tick one of the following responses: ‘we have a very strong impact,’ ‘we make an important contribution,’ ‘we make some difference’ and ‘no we don’t try to do this’. Response rates to each question were high (never falling below 94% for each statement) which bolsters the reliability of the findings. It was a matter of concern, when this question was first launched in 2019, that people who took part in the survey might be tempted to ‘over emphasise’ the value of their work. But this did not turn out to be the case. Respondents were measured in their assessments of the areas of impact to which they contribute.

Table 3.2 shows the strength of impact that VCSE organisations feel that they have at regional level on each issue. Two findings immediately stand out. Firstly, at national level a higher percentage of VCSE organisations perceive that they have very strong impact on ‘generalist’ objectives such as ‘health and wellbeing’ (25%) or ‘social isolation’ (27%), while fewer make strong claims about more specialised aspects of impact such as ‘increasing employability’ (6%) or ‘improving the local environment’ (8%).

Perceived levels of high social impact in the South East of England are generally considerably lower than national averages in all domains apart from the environment. This may reflect the higher levels of affluence in the region compared with the poorer Northern and West Midland regions and the consequent variations in the structure of the VCSE sector as discussed in Section 2.

Table 3.2(a) Percent of VCSE organisations stating that say they ‘have a very strong impact’ by English region and Wales 2025 (Third Sector Trends in England and Wales 2025)

	We develop knowledge and skills through education and training	We improve health and wellbeing	We reduce social isolation	We encourage physical activity and improve people's fitness	We increase employability	We tackle the consequences of poverty	We improve people's access to basic services
North East England	20.8	32.0	37.7	17.3	9.7	13.4	14.4
North West England	18.1	29.2	30.2	14.9	5.2	12.5	13.0
Yorkshire & Humber	16.4	28.3	28.1	13.9	6.6	8.9	12.1
East Midlands	15.0	19.9	22.1	11.0	5.7	7.6	7.5
West Midlands	14.8	23.1	26.5	12.2	5.8	8.9	10.7
East of England	16.1	25.5	28.5	10.6	5.7	9.4	11.3
Greater London	22.6	23.9	27.0	12.8	9.0	12.6	9.6
South East England	14.4	20.5	21.7	10.6	4.8	7.8	8.7
South West England	13.0	19.3	20.3	10.7	3.6	7.1	6.4
Wales	18.6	27.5	30.8	13.8	5.5	11.3	13.0
England and Wales	16.7	24.6	26.8	12.5	6.0	9.7	10.5

Table 3.2(a) Continued/...	We give people confidence to manage their lives	We enhance the cultural and artistic life of the community	We improve the local environment	We promote community cohesion	We empower people in the community	We increase people's pride in their community	N=
North East England	26.9	14.7	9.4	22.3	25.3	18.8	661
North West England	23.5	15.8	8.8	21.0	20.8	15.7	800
Yorkshire & Humber	22.1	14.3	7.3	19.3	19.3	16.7	953
East Midlands	15.6	14.9	7.8	15.7	11.7	11.3	613
West Midlands	20.3	15.3	8.7	19.5	16.6	13.9	739
East of England	20.5	15.2	9.0	19.8	18.9	13.9	1,122
Greater London	22.6	16.8	6.3	18.2	21.9	12.9	774
South East England	17.0	13.8	8.3	14.8	14.1	10.2	1,212
South West England	12.8	14.1	8.7	14.0	11.5	10.6	1,097
Wales	23.8	18.9	10.0	22.9	21.2	16.8	709
England and Wales	20.1	15.2	8.4	18.4	17.8	13.8	8,680

Within South East England, there are some variations in the extent to which the local voluntary sector feels it achieves higher levels of impact (Table 3.2(b)). Specifically, voluntary organisations in Thames Valley tend to be less likely to attribute strong impact to their work across a wide range of social, personal and community issues. And perhaps, surprisingly, only 17% state that they have a strong impact on health and wellbeing in Thames Valley compared with over 20% in all other areas (rising as high as 24% in Sussex). In other domains, such as tackling poverty, the percentage in Thames Valley (8%) is about the same as the regional average.

Table 3.2(b) Percent of VCSE organisations stating that they ‘have a very strong impact’ in South East England (Third Sector Trends in England and Wales 2025)

	We develop knowledge and skills through education and training	We improve health and wellbeing	We reduce social isolation	We encourage physical activity and improve people's fitness	We increase employability	We tackle the consequences of poverty	We improve people' s access to basic services
Thames Valley	13.6	16.8	17.0	7.6	3.9	7.6	8.2
Sussex	14.1	23.3	22.8	9.6	4.8	7.1	9.1
Surrey	11.4	20.8	25.2	11.5	4.3	7.9	14.7
Hampshire and Isle of Wight	15.5	21.8	23.1	11.1	7.1	9.4	5.4
Kent	17.0	21.6	24.1	15.7	4.2	7.4	8.5
South East England	14.4	20.5	21.7	10.6	4.8	7.8	8.7

	We give people confidence to manage their lives	We enhance the cultural and artistic life of the community	We improve the local environment	We promote community cohesion	We empower people in the community	We increase people' s pride in their community	n=
Thames Valley	16.2	12.3	8.2	12.4	10.9	9.3	326
Sussex	18.3	16.8	8.2	16.2	15.5	9.1	255
Surrey	18.4	11.4	6.6	15.9	18.7	5.7	140
Hampshire and Isle of Wight	15.6	13.0	7.8	12.6	13.2	11.5	238
Kent	17.6	15.2	10.4	18.8	15.6	14.6	194
South East England	17.0	13.8	8.3	14.8	14.1	10.2	1,212

3.3 Financial estimates of sector impact

The approach to defining sector value by Third Sector Trends involves four steps.³¹ The first step is to estimate the 'added value' the voluntary sector contributes. This involves the identification of the amount of 'energy' which the sector has at its disposal to achieve its objectives. Rather than over-labouring the process of defining sector energy, a relatively simple approach is taken to include financial or proxy financial values under four headings:

- **The value of financial expenditure:** it is possible to make good estimates of sector expenditure. This sum captures the economic value of employee wages, spending on rent and consumables and the disbursement of grants to individuals or other VCSE organisations together with contributions to local and national taxation.
- **The proxy-replacement value of volunteer time available:** in Section 2, calculations on the number of regular volunteers and the work time they invest were presented. Replacement values were attributed to this energy at National Living Wage and at 80% of median regional wages. A mid-point estimate is used to define the value of volunteering.
- **The proxy value of additional in-kind support:** in-kind support from the private sector and public sector is estimated. This support includes the free or low-cost use of facilities and services, pro bono advice and technical expertise, employee volunteer support and the provision of free goods such as surplus consumables.³²
- **The proxy value of self-generated income:** this estimate is based on the regional share of the national value of income gained from retailing of pre-used goods. This represents the production of financial value from redundant articles and is not covered in the expenditure category (which would include income from other types of voluntary sector trading).³³

As shown in Table 3.3, these combined financial values reach substantial sums. But these statistics do not fully reflect the whole value of the economic and social impact the voluntary sector produces. Instead, they simply signal the resource 'energy' that the sector has at its disposal.

³¹ See Section 5, *Technical paper on sector structure and analytical techniques*: <https://www.stchads.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/Third-Sector-Trends-in-England-and-Wales-2025-Technical-paper-on-sector-structure-and-analytical-techniques-December-2025.pdf>

³² A report on the substantive contribution of business to the third sector has been produced as part of the Law Family Commission on Civil Society. See Chapman, T. (2021) *Going the extra mile: how business works with the local third sector*, London: Pro Bono Economics. Currently there are no equivalent studies of local public sector investment in the third sector using in-kind resources. However, it is likely that the non-financial contributions of public bodies such as NHS trusts, health authorities, police, fire and rescue and other agencies is likely to be at least equal to private sector investment. In-kind support would include the contribution of officers with responsibility for third sector liaison, research and intelligence and advice and guidance – but exclude contracts to the third sector to provide infrastructure support as this will be counted under third sector expenditure. Other forms of in-kind support would include free access to venues and equipment for third sector usage and beneficial arrangements such as peppercorn rents.

³³ The evidence from the Charity Retail Association suggests that charity shop retail produces about £331m in profits in 2018/19. On this basis, estimates were generated for Yorkshire and the three study areas. For further discussion of the value produced through charity shop recycling and retail see also, Osterley, R. and Williams, D. (2019) 'The social, environmental and economic benefits of reuse by charity shops', *Detritus* 7(1) 29-35. <https://digital.detritusjournal.com/articles/the-social-environmental-and-economic-benefits-of-reuse-by-charity-shops/244>. For further analysis on the value of charity shop retail, see Harrison-Evans, P. (2016) *Shopping for good: the social benefits of charity retail*, London: Demos <https://www.demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Shopping-for-Good-the-social-benefits-of-charity-retail-.pdf>. While charity retail declined during the pandemic due to lockdowns and closures, there are indications that business has bounced back in 2022: [Charity shops reveal surge in interest with sales 22% higher than pre-pandemic due to cost of living crisis \(inews.co.uk\)](https://www.inews.co.uk/news/charity-shops-reveal-surge-in-interest-with-sales-22-percent-higher-than-pre-pandemic-due-to-cost-of-living-crisis/).

Table 3.3 Estimates of the VCSE sector's financial value in Thames Valley 2025

(Third Sector Trends Statistical Model 2025)

	Estimated sector expenditure (£millions)	Proxy-replacement value of volunteer time mid point estimate (£millions)	Proxy value of additional in-kind support in each area (£millions)	Proxy value of additional sources of self-generated income in each area (£millions)	Total financial value of sector energy expended by the Third Sector in each area (£millions)
Bracknell Forest	72.7	5.8	4.0	0.4	82.9
Reading	132.9	10.6	7.3	0.8	151.7
Slough	74.3	5.9	4.1	0.4	84.7
West Berkshire	185.5	14.8	10.2	1.1	211.6
Windsor and Maidenhead	170.0	13.6	9.3	1.0	193.9
Wokingham	153.0	12.3	8.4	0.9	174.7
Berkshire	788.4	63.0	43.4	4.8	899.5
Buckinghamshire	681.9	55.6	37.5	4.1	779.1
Cherwell	167.5	14.6	6.7	0.7	189.6
Oxford	268.4	23.4	10.8	1.2	303.8
South Oxfordshire	226.4	19.8	10.5	1.2	257.9
Vale of White Horse	224.8	19.7	9.4	1.0	254.9
West Oxfordshire	177.8	15.6	7.8	0.9	202.0
Oxfordshire	1064.9	93.1	45.2	5.0	1,208.2
Thames Valley	2,535.2	211.7	126.1	13.9	2,886.8

The second step in the process is to define types of 'added value' that the voluntary sector contributes to local economy and society. No claim is made that these distinctions are entirely original – instead, the approach draws upon the large policy and academic literature on the appraisal or measurement of impact which implicitly or explicitly embrace one or more of these notions of impact value.³⁴

- **Economic value:** is defined as the economic contribution that the local voluntary sector makes to the area through 'multiplier effects' driven by: organisational expenditure on local businesses; the spending of employees in the local economy and productivity from self-generated trading activities.
- **Fiscal value:** is defined as the savings gained by local public sector agencies and government departments because of voluntary sector activity (either by delivering services under contract more efficiently or cheaply, or by reducing service need via voluntary sector generated activity).
- **Use value:** is defined as the direct and immediate personal or social benefits gained by voluntary sector service users which in turn incentivises, empowers and facilitates greater socially, economically or environmentally beneficial

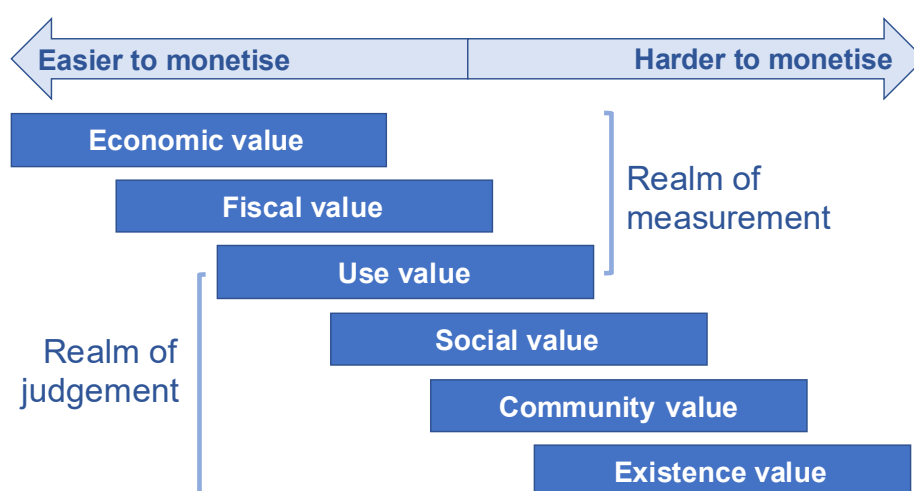
³⁴ There is a large academic and policy literature on the definition and measurement of value. A useful contribution has been offered by Mulgan, G., Breckon, J., Tarrega, M., Bakhshi, H., Davies, J., Khan, H. and Finnis, A. (2019) *Public value: how can it be measured, managed and grown?* London: Nesta. There are many methodologies on offer to measure value, such as descriptive models of causation adopted in 'theories of change' which may result in impact; complex manipulation of evidence and predictive modelling in social return on investment strategies, and so on. Whichever approach is adopted, results can be contested depending on the value position of the observer. For further discussion, see Third Sector Trends discussion paper: *Measuring Impact: easy to say, hard to do*. Newcastle: Community Foundation North East. <https://www.communityfoundation.org.uk/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Measuring-Impact-easy-to-say-hard-to-do.pdf>

activity by the resident population in employment, self-employment, unpaid caring, running private businesses/social enterprises and volunteering.

- **Social value:** the alleviation of the impact of specific social problems and investment in personal wellbeing to generate or embrace new opportunities to strengthen economy and society locally.
- **Community value:** strengthening the quality of life, enriching culture, and encouraging cohesion, tolerance, trust and belief in civil society through the collective contribution of the voluntary sector working in neighbourly, complementary or collaborative ways.
- **Existence value:** when the voluntary sector invests in social and community wellbeing which is valued by the general population though not necessarily 'used' personally. Existence value also includes extant voluntary sector capacity and latent potential to produce energy and momentum to tackle unforeseen local challenges or crises.

As Figure 3.1 illustrates, some of these types of value are easier to 'measure' and 'monetise' than others. Economic, fiscal and use values are *more* amenable to measurement and monetisation. Social, cultural and existence values cannot easily be monetised or measured – but this does not mean that shared judgements cannot be reached about their value.

Figure 3.1 **Realms of measurement and informed judgement**



The third step in the analysis is to apply standardised multipliers to each aspect of value. The multiplier estimates are more 'conservative' than those often adopted in evaluation work. This is because specific assessments of voluntary sector practices attribute success within defined practice boundaries – but without necessarily considering how other interventions may have contributed to overall impact.³⁵

It is accepted that the estimates may be 'too low' or 'too high'. And similarly, the possibility is not dismissed that there could be considerable levels of variation when looking at different aspects of sub-sector activity.³⁶ It would be expected that the

³⁵ For a brief overview of the limitations of approaches to economic impact analysis, see Westall, A. (2009) *Economic analysis and the third sector: overview of economic analysis in relation to the third sector*, Birmingham: third sector Research Centre Working Paper No. 14. http://epapers.bham.ac.uk/801/1/WP14_Economic_analysis_and_the_third_sector_-_Westall_Dec_09.pdf. See also, Harlock, J. (2013) *Impact measurement practice in the UK third sector: a review of emerging evidence*, Birmingham: third sector Research Centre Working Paper No. 14, http://epapers.bham.ac.uk/1800/1/WP106_Impact_measurement_practice_in_the_UK_third_sector_-_Harlock%2C_July_2013.pdf

³⁶ There is a growing body of research literature on the social value produced by sub sectors. See for example Sport England's measuring impact guidance <https://www.sportengland.org/how-we-can-help/measuring-impact>. A review has also been produced for arts and culture activities, see: See also, Reeves, M. (2003) *Measuring the economic and social impact of the arts: a review*, London: Social Value UK, <https://socialvalueuk.org/report/measuring-economic-social-impact-arts-review/>. For a more critical analysis of arts measurement, see Holdon, J. (2004) *The value of culture cannot be expressed only with statistics, audience*

estimates, as given, may be subject to challenge as the quality of evidence on sector impact improves – but this would be welcomed if it helps to produce informed debate about voluntary sector economic impact. The resulting economic values, once multipliers have been applied to sector energy estimates are presented in Table 3.4.

Table 3.4 Estimates of tangible added value produced by the VCSE sector in Thames Valley (Third Sector Trends Statistical Model 2025)					
	Total financial value of sector energy expended by the third sector in each area (£millions)	Economic multiplier value (mid-point estimate 65%) (£millions)	Fiscal multiplier value (mid-point estimate 55%) (£millions)	Use value multiplier (mid-point estimate 35%) (£millions)	Total contribution of multiplier contribution excluding direct financial value (£millions)
Bracknell Forest	82.9	53.9	45.6	29.0	128.5
Reading	151.7	98.6	83.4	53.1	235.1
Slough	84.7	55.1	46.6	29.7	131.3
West Berkshire	211.6	137.6	116.4	74.1	328.0
Windsor and Maidenhead	193.9	126.1	106.7	67.9	300.6
Wokingham	174.7	113.5	96.1	61.1	270.7
Berkshire	899.5	584.7	494.7	314.8	1394.3
Buckinghamshire	779.1	506.4	428.5	272.7	1207.6
Cherwell	189.6	123.2	104.3	66.4	293.9
Oxford	303.8	197.5	167.1	106.3	470.9
South Oxfordshire	257.9	167.6	141.8	90.2	399.7
Vale of White Horse	254.9	165.7	140.2	89.2	395.1
West Oxfordshire	202.0	131.3	111.1	70.7	313.1
Oxfordshire	1,208.2	785.3	664.5	422.9	1,872.7
Thames Valley	2,886.8	1,876.4	1,587.7	1,010.4	4,474.6

The fourth step involves making observations on how to value aspects of voluntary sector activities that cannot easily be defined, let alone measured. It may not be possible accurately and consistently to measure value which is created through the individual and accumulated action of the voluntary sector, but it does not mean that such value does not exist.

Dredging for 'data' to collate, categorise and count and then shoehorn into statistical models rarely looks convincing. It is better to recognise that making shared judgements about the value of sector activity that is already happening. There are two simple ways of recognising this. Firstly, by taking into account the fact that a majority of VCSE organisations are awarded grants and gifts from time to time, by trusts and foundations, local public bodies which operate small community grants, local parish councils, faith organisations, businesses or philanthropists, public giving and so forth. This shows that through the use of judgement, much of the work of the sector has already been assessed and invested in by people.

numbers give us poor picture of how culture enriches us, London: Demos: <https://www.demos.co.uk/files/CapturingCulturalValue.pdf>. Similar research has also been undertaken widely in the health and social care field, for an introduction to the field, see: https://www.health.org.uk/topics/community-and-voluntary?gclid=Cj0KCQjw6NmHBhD2ARIsAI3hrM1eO53eusFbSpDO2pvaHqxGNvJRKr31zlf2ucWS48sGtAQIvQ tNoaApJQEALw_wcB

Secondly, and as importantly, the low levels of closures among voluntary organisations indicate that continuity and sustainability is the norm, not the exception. What this shows is that that VCSE organisations are relevant, purposeful and produce social and community activity that people value, contribute towards and use. It is a simple point to make: if the community did not value the work and sustain the resolve to keep it alive and active - the voluntary sector would not exist. If accepted, in principle, that the added social, community and environmental value that the voluntary sector accumulates is at least of equal value to the energy the sector expends - that is far as financial evaluation exercises on intangible sector-wide impact need to go – the results of which are presented in Table 3.5.

Table 3.5 Estimates of total value produced by the VCSE sector in Thames Valley 2025
(Third Sector Trends Statistical Model 2025)

	Actual financial value of the third sector (£millions)	Added economic, fiscal and use value (£millions)	Added intangible social, community and existence value (£millions)	Total value (£millions)	Resident population in local authority ³⁷	Value per 1,000 resident population (£millions)
Bracknell Forest	82.9	128.5	82.9	294.3	124,600	2.36
Reading	151.7	235.1	151.7	538.4	174,200	3.09
Slough	84.7	131.3	84.7	300.8	158,500	1.90
West Berkshire	211.6	328.0	211.6	751.3	161,400	4.65
Windsor and Maidenhead	193.9	300.6	193.9	688.5	153,500	4.49
Wokingham	174.7	270.7	174.7	620.1	177,500	3.49
Berkshire	899.5	1,394.3	899.5	3,193.4	949,700	3.36
Buckinghamshire	779.1	1,207.6	779.1	2,765.8	553,100	5.00
Cherwell	189.6	293.9	189.6	673.0	161,000	4.18
Oxford	303.8	470.9	303.8	1078.5	162,100	6.65
South Oxfordshire	257.9	399.7	257.9	915.4	149,100	6.14
Vale of White Horse	254.9	395.1	254.9	904.9	138,900	6.51
West Oxfordshire	202.0	313.1	202.0	717.1	114,200	6.28
Oxfordshire	1,208.2	1,872.7	1,208.2	4,289.0	725,300	5.91
Thames Valley	2,886.8	4,474.6	2,886.8	10,248.2	2,228,100	4.60

³⁷ Statista, 2023 <https://www.statista.com/statistics/294729/uk-population-by-region/#:~:text=Population%20of%20the%20UK%202023%2C%20by%20region&text=The%20population%20of%20the%20United,West%20England%20at%207.6%20million.>

Section 4

Income, assets and financial wellbeing

4.1 Income sources

Dependence upon a single income source can be risky for voluntary organisations. Consequently, most voluntary organisations prefer to rely upon a mix of income sources such as grants, earned income, gifts and legacies, subscriptions and so on. Headline data on income sources can conceal underlying variations. Figure 4.1 compares perceptions of the value of income sources by size of organisations at national level.³⁸

- **Grant funding** is generally regarded as a ‘most important’ or ‘important’ source of income, but this varies by size of VCSE organisations. Nationally, only 42% of micro organisations feel that grants are of importance to them compared with 79% of larger organisations.
- Nationally, income from **contracts to deliver services** is valued by 63% of the biggest organisations, but only by 5% of the smallest.
- The size of VCSE organisations affects how **earned income from self-generated trading** is valued - rising from 23% of micro TSOs to 42-43% of the biggest organisations nationally.
- Nationally, few organisations highly value **income from investments** - ranging from 12% of small to medium-sized VCSE organisations to 16% of larger organisations. Over a quarter of the biggest organisations highly value investments (26%).
- **Contributions in kind** are valued more highly as organisations grow in size, rising from 28% of micro to 35-36% of medium-sized and larger VCSE organisations. In-kind support is considered to be of lesser value by the biggest VCSE organisations (23%).
- **Gifts and donations** are most highly valued by medium-sized organisations nationally (63%). Micro organisations are most likely to value subscription income (38% nationally, 35% North East); percentages fall steadily to 14% of the biggest VCSE organisations nationally.
- **Borrowing money** is not considered to be an important source of income by most VCSE organisations: 10% of the biggest organisations nationally state that borrowed money is of importance to them while fewer than 1% of the smallest do so.

As shown in Table 4.1, there are distinct variations in the extent to which income sources are valued by region (variations within South East England are also shown but due to small sample numbers, reliability is undermined to a large extent). For example, in North East England, a relatively poor region, grants are much more highly valued (73%) than in South East England (51%). Reliance on contracts also is much lower in the South East (16%) than in poorer regions such as the North East (29%).

³⁸ There are too few data to undertake this analysis convincingly at regional level.

Figure 4.1 **How sources of income are valued by organisational size in England and Wales**
 (Third Sector Trends in England and Wales 2025, percent 'most important' or 'important', n=8,576)

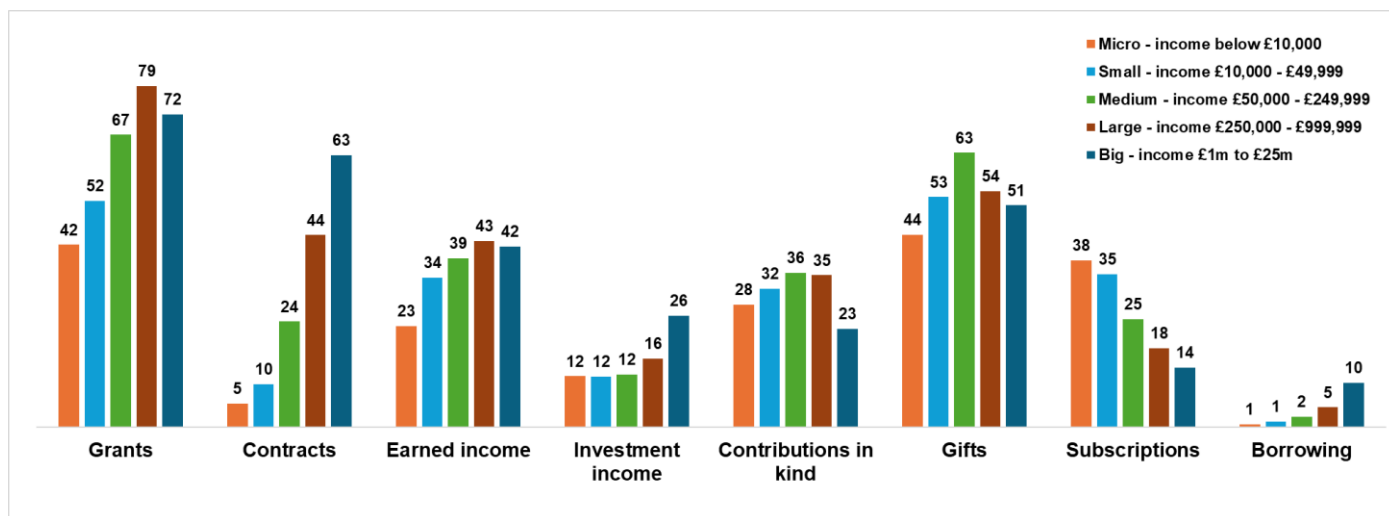


Table 4.1(a) **Percent of VCSE organisations highly valuing income sources by English regions and Wales** (Third Sector Trends in England and Wales 2025, n=8,576)

	Grants	Contracts	Earned income	Investment income etc.	Contribution in kind	Gifts and legacies	Subscriptions	Borrowed money
North East England	73.3	28.5	36.4	9.4	34.8	49.8	26.6	2.9
North West England	60.2	22.8	35.4	10.3	33.0	53.8	30.1	1.8
Yorkshire and Humber	59.0	22.5	38.1	10.6	32.5	52.8	29.8	1.8
East Midlands of England	51.2	15.6	31.2	12.8	29.1	46.7	31.8	3.2
West Midlands of England	54.3	14.7	32.0	12.4	32.3	53.8	31.8	1.8
East of England	56.3	18.0	33.0	13.7	32.1	52.7	31.0	2.2
London	53.9	21.4	31.4	16.5	35.8	61.5	33.1	2.9
South East England	50.5	15.5	31.0	15.7	30.2	55.6	33.2	2.6
South West England	49.8	12.1	34.8	15.4	27.8	50.2	30.4	1.2
Wales	68.1	24.4	36.1	10.9	32.2	49.9	28.4	1.6
England and Wales	56.9	19.1	33.9	13.1	31.8	52.9	30.8	2.2

Within the South East of England, the evidence suggests a similar level of reliance on grants. Percentages within Thames Valley are more varied but this is likely due to the effect of small sample sizes. The extent to which contracts are highly valued varies considerably in the South East. Only 12% of VCSE organisations in Kent place high value on contractual income compared with 18% in Thames Valley.

Earned income is valued fairly equally across the South East (29-31%) although Sussex is an outlier in this respect (35%). Variations in the extent to which investment income, gifts and legacies and subscriptions are subject to relatively minor variations across South East England. The propensity of VCSE organisations

to highly value borrowed money, as in all other regions, is extremely limited – nonetheless, there is a market place for borrowing – albeit small. There are quite wide variations in the extent to which borrowing is valued in the South East, with higher value placed on this in Thames Valley (4%) than all other areas – and appears to be strongest in Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire. In Surrey and Kent reliance on loans is of negligible importance.

Table 4.1(b) Percent of VCSE organisations highly valuing income sources in South East England (Third Sector Trends in South West England n=1,212)

	Grants	Contracts	Earned income	Investment income	Contribution in kind	Gifts and legacies	Subscriptions	Borrowed money
Thames Valley	50.7	17.5	30.0	16.2	31.7	54.2	32.4	4.2
Sussex	50.2	13.2	35.0	15.3	30.7	59.5	33.1	2.7
Surrey	51.0	20.7	29.9	15.5	26.9	56.8	33.6	0.7
Hampshire and Isle of Wight	48.4	14.9	29.2	15.1	30.3	56.0	31.4	2.9
Kent	52.5	12.2	30.7	16.1	29.1	51.3	36.7	1.0
South East England	50.5	15.5	31.0	15.7	30.2	55.6	33.2	2.6

Relationships with grant funders

Grant funding, as shown above, is the mainstay of income for many voluntary organisations in most regions. In 2019, Third Sector Trends introduced new questions to explore the ‘quality’ of relationships with grant makers. It is now possible to compare responses over three waves of the study: before, during and after the Coronavirus pandemic.

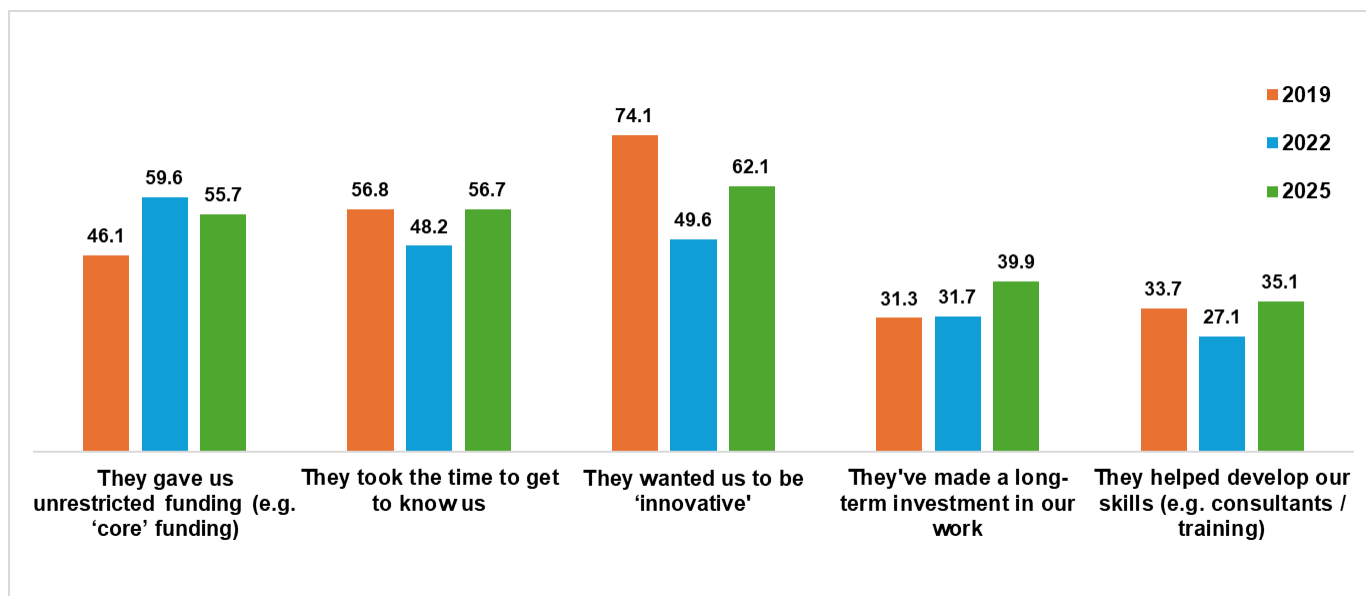
Figure 4.2 shows the percentages of VCSE organisations at national level which ‘agreed’ or ‘strongly agreed’ with a series of statements on relationships with grant makers from 2019-2025. Those voluntary organisations which have no relationship with grant-making trusts and foundations are excluded. This analysis produces some remarkable findings. In 2019 only 46% of VCSE organisations stated that they received unrestricted or ‘core funding’ but the percentage rose to 60% in the extraordinary circumstances surrounding the Coronavirus pandemic. While the evidence suggests that some grant-makers have tightened up on unrestricted funding, 56% of VCSE organisations continued to receive unrestricted grants in 2025,

Many grant-making foundations are committed to getting to know their grantees. During the pandemic, the percentage of VCSE organisations reporting that this was so fell to 48% from a pre-pandemic level of 57%. Following the loosening of pandemic restrictions, grant-makers have reverted to previous practice – 57% of voluntary organisations now report that grant makers take the time to get to know them.

During the pandemic, grant makers adopted a ‘lighter touch’ approach when working with voluntary organisations and pressurised them less about being ‘innovative’: indeed, the percentage dropped from 74% in 2019 to 50% in 2022. Some grant funders have since gone back to demanding that innovation is a requirement – but many have not: in 2025, 62% of VCSE organisations state that innovation had been expected as a condition of grant funding.

For many years, voluntary sector organisations have complained about the short-term investment they receive from grant-making foundations. Before and during the pandemic, about 31-32% of VCSE organisations reported that they received long-term investment. That has now risen to 40%. Many grant-makers commit to help voluntary organisations to develop their skills by appointing, for example, consultants or providing training sessions. Provision was received by 34% of voluntary organisations pre-pandemic, but support fell to 27% in 2022. The evidence indicates that support is now slightly higher than pre-pandemic levels (35%).

Figure 4.2 **Voluntary organisations’ working relationship with grant-making trusts and foundations in England and Wales: 2019-2025** (Third Sector Trends in England and Wales, , percentage 'agree' or 'strongly agree' 2019, n=4,083, 2022 n=5,978, 2025, n=8,350)



The situation in the South East of England is fairly close to the national average in relation to 'restricted funding' (54%), but there are wider variations on other aspects of relationships with trusts and foundations. Only 54% of VCSE organisations in South East England state that grant makers took time to get to know them compared with a national average of 57% and 62% in the North East. VCSE organisations were also considerably less likely to feel that grant funders wanted them to be innovative in South East England (59%) than on average (62%). Pressure to innovate was highest in Yorkshire and Humber (66%), Wales (67%) and especially London (69%).

VCSE organisations in South East England were the least likely to report that grant funders had made a long-term investment in their work (33%) compared with 48% in the North East and 47% in London. Skill support from trusts and foundations is also at the equal lowest level in South East England (with the West Midlands) at 29-30%. The provision of skills support by grant makers is highest in Wales and North East England (38%).

Table 4.2(a) VCSE organisations' relationships with trusts and foundations in English regions and Wales (Third Sector Trends in England and Wales 2025 n=8,620)					
	They gave us unrestricted funding (e.g. 'core' funding)	They took the time to get to know us	They wanted us to be 'innovative'	They've made a long-term investment in our work	They helped develop our skills (e.g. consultants / training)
North East England	59.4	62.4	64.6	48.1	38.3
North West England	48.9	58.0	63.6	39.5	35.3
Yorkshire and Humber	56.4	55.0	66.0	36.0	37.3
East Midlands of England	49.8	53.6	59.2	39.7	33.5
West Midlands of England	54.1	49.4	54.5	37.0	29.3
East of England	58.5	60.2	60.6	41.1	35.9
London	59.6	60.9	68.9	47.2	34.6
South East England	54.0	53.8	58.8	32.9	29.6
South West England	60.3	57.2	56.1	41.0	38.4
Wales	51.7	53.3	66.9	37.9	37.5
England and Wales	55.7	56.7	62.1	39.9	35.1

Within the South East region, however, there appear to be some serious inconsistencies in the extent to which VCSE organisations relate to trusts and foundations. In Thames Valley, VCSE organisations are the most likely to report the receipt of unrestricted funding (58%) and that trusts and foundations took time to get to know them (60%). Expectations of innovation are also higher than in most other areas (63%).

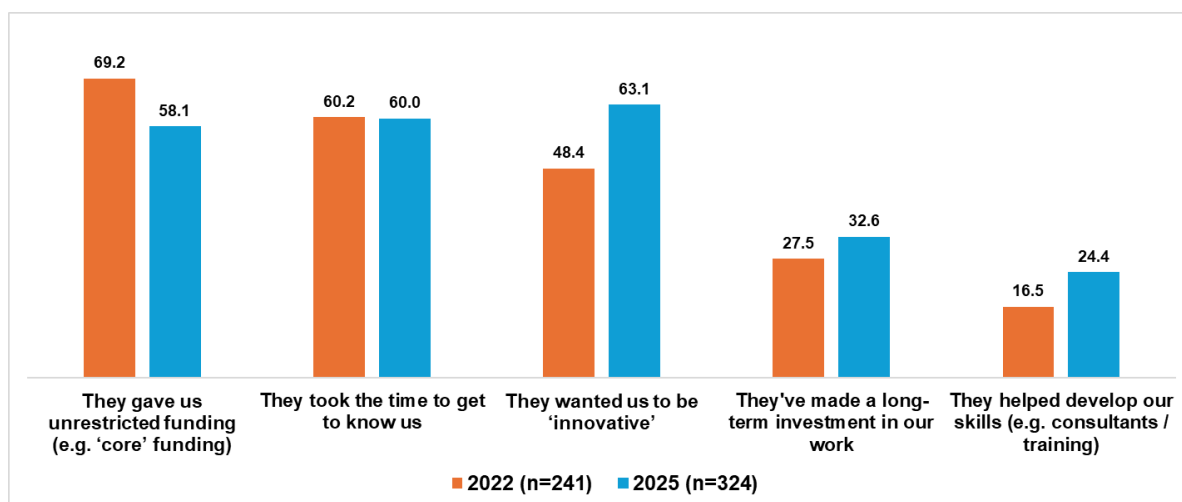
In Thames Valley, relatively few VCSE organisations state that trusts and foundations have made a long-term investment in their work (33%) compared with 41% in Kent. Skills support from grant makers is relatively weak across all areas, but is lowest by a considerable margin in Thames Valley (24%). This does not imply, however, that 'demand' for skills support is either unmet or equally strong across all areas.

Table 4.2(b) VCSE organisations' relationships with trusts and foundations 2025 in South East England (Third Sector Trends in South East England, n=1,121)					
	They gave us unrestricted funding (e.g. 'core' funding)	They took the time to get to know us	They wanted us to be 'innovative'	They've made a long-term investment in our work	They helped develop our skills (e.g. consultants / training)
Thames Valley	58.1	60.0	63.1	32.6	24.4
Sussex	60.0	53.8	55.0	31.8	29.0
Surrey	53.4	50.0	59.3	30.4	28.8
Hampshire and Isle of Wight	40.0	46.0	63.0	30.4	32.5
Kent	55.1	54.3	49.2	40.9	38.3
South East England	54.0	53.8	58.8	32.9	29.6

While the volume of available data are limited for Thames Valley in 2022, there are some indications that grant making practices have changed to some extent, post-pandemic in Thames Valley (Figure 4.3).

- The provision of unrestricted funding in Thames Valley was much higher during the pandemic (69%) than in 2025 (58%).
- There is no change in the extent to which trusts and foundations have taken time to know VCSE organisations in Thames Valley (60%).
- Since the pandemic, there have been higher expectations of innovation in Thames Valley from trusts and foundations (rising from 49% during the pandemic to 63% in 2025).
- There are some indications that trusts and foundations have been more willing to make longer-term investments in Thames Valley since the pandemic (rising from 28% to 33%).
- Skills support from grant makers has increased substantially in Thames Valley from 17% to 24%).

Figure 4.3 **Changing relationships with trusts and foundations in Thames Valley 2022 and 2025** (Third Sector Trends in England and Wales surveys 2022 and 2025)



Public service delivery contracts

Historically, government policy on the procurement of service delivery from VCSE organisations has lacked critical awareness of market demand for such work and mistakenly believed that sector capacity can easily be built. Current procurement policies differ little, in essentials, from previous incarnations of two decades ago.³⁹ The percentage of VCSE organisations bidding for or delivering public sector contracts rose between 2022 and 2025 in the South East from 5% to 7%, contrary to the general trend in Wales and most English regions (with the exception of the East of England). But this rise is from a very low base compared with the West Midlands and Northern English regions (Figure 4.4).

³⁹ For further discussion, see: *Relationships, influencing and collaborative working*, Section 4.5 and Section 5.3: <https://www.stchads.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Relationships-influencing-and-collaborative-working-Third-Sector-Trends-in-England-and-Wales-2025-October-2025-1.pdf>. Recent detailed analysis of the processes surrounding procurement can be found here: National Social Value Taskforce VCFSE Working Group (2026) *Guidance: How better procurement can unlock the third sector's potential*: <https://www.socialvalueportal.com/news-and-insights/guidance-how-better-procurement-can-unlock-the-third-sectors-potential>. A shorter review of findings can be found here: Legraien, L. (2026) *Guidance published to help not-for-profits overcome barriers to win more contracts*, *Civil Society* (1st June) https://www.civilsociety.co.uk/news/guidance-published-to-help-not-for-profits-overcome-barriers-to-win-more-contracts.html?utm_source=New+Main+List+From+Live+CIVIL+Site&utm_campaign=6b77fd9fa8-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2026_06_01_12_00&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_-6b77fd9fa8-87693569.

Figure 4.4 **Percent of VCSE organisations bidding for or delivering public sector contracts 2022-2025** (Third Sector Trends, 2022 n=5,967, 2025 n=8,547)



In the South East England, the preparedness of VCSE organisations to engage in public services under contract is very low. As shown in Figure 4.3(a), engagement with contracts varies substantially by region. In North East England 11% of VCSE organisations are bidding for or delivering contracts compared with fewer than 5% in South West England. Indeed, nearly half of VCSE organisations in the South East (46%) will not consider this option.

Table 4.3(a) **VCSE organisations’ engagement with public service contracts by English region and Wales** (Third Sector Trends in England and Wales, n= 8,547, South West n=1,054)

	<i>Ambivalent</i>						
	We are not aware of these opportunities	We are aware of these opportunities but they are not relevant to our organisation’s objectives	We are aware of these opportunities but need more information	We are interested in this option but would need extra support to do this	We are interested in this option but feel there are barriers in the tendering process	We are already bidding to deliver public sector services	We are already delivering public sector services for which we have tendered
North East England	32.3	35.3	5.4	7.9	8.5	2.0	8.6
North West England	31.2	42.4	4.7	6.0	6.6	2.7	6.5
Yorkshire & Humber	31.9	44.5	3.0	5.8	6.4	2.3	6.1
East Midlands of England	36.3	45.4	2.8	5.0	5.0	2.0	3.6
West Midlands of England	35.5	45.4	3.2	5.4	4.4	1.1	5.0
East of England	36.3	43.4	2.5	5.5	4.5	1.2	6.6
Greater London	34.8	39.9	3.8	7.2	6.4	1.7	6.3
South East England	35.3	46.4	2.8	3.9	5.1	1.8	4.9
South West England	37.5	49.1	2.2	3.2	3.5	1.5	3.0
Wales	34.4	36.6	4.6	7.1	7.1	2.4	7.7
England and Wales	34.7	43.4	3.3	5.5	5.6	1.8	5.7

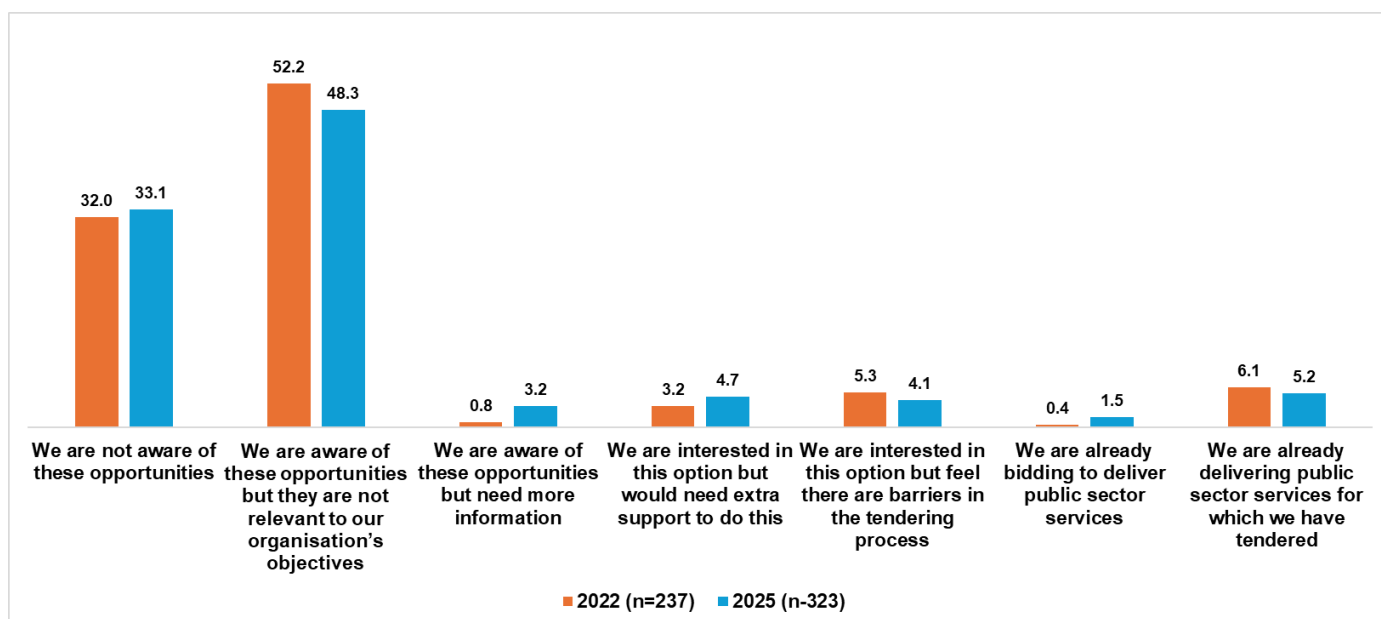
As shown in Table 4.3(b), enthusiasm to deliver public service contracts is muted in most areas of South East England. In Thames Valley, a third of VCSE organisations are not aware of such possibilities and 48% will not consider such engagement.

Nonetheless, the second highest percentage of VCSE organisations in Thames Valley (after Sussex) are delivering public service contracts in the region.

Table 4.3(b) VCSE organisations' engagement with public service contracts in South East England (Third Sector Trends in East of England n=1,121)							
	<i>Ambivalent</i>						
	We are not aware of these opportunities	We are aware of these opportunities but they are not relevant to our organisation's objectives	We are aware of these opportunities but need more information	We are interested in this option but would need extra support to do this	We are interested in this option but feel there are barriers in the tendering process	We are already bidding to deliver public sector services	We are already delivering public sector services for which we have tendered
Thames Valley	33.1	48.3	3.2	4.7	4.1	1.5	5.2
Sussex	36.0	47.1	1.9	2.3	5.7	1.1	5.7
Surrey	34.7	42.2	0.7	4.1	9.5	4.8	4.1
Hampshire and Isle of Wight	37.3	42.3	3.3	5.8	5.0	1.2	5.0
Kent	35.8	50.2	4.0	2.0	3.0	1.5	3.5
South East England	35.3	46.4	2.8	3.9	5.1	1.8	4.9

While survey numbers are quite small in 2022, there are some indications of change in attitudes towards contracts in Thames Valley (Figure 4.5). There has been a slight rise in the percentage of VCSE organisations stating that they may get involved if they had more information or support to engage with public service delivery under contract, and indeed, the percentage bidding has risen slightly. This suggest there may be some potential to grow the marketplace for contract delivery in the area.

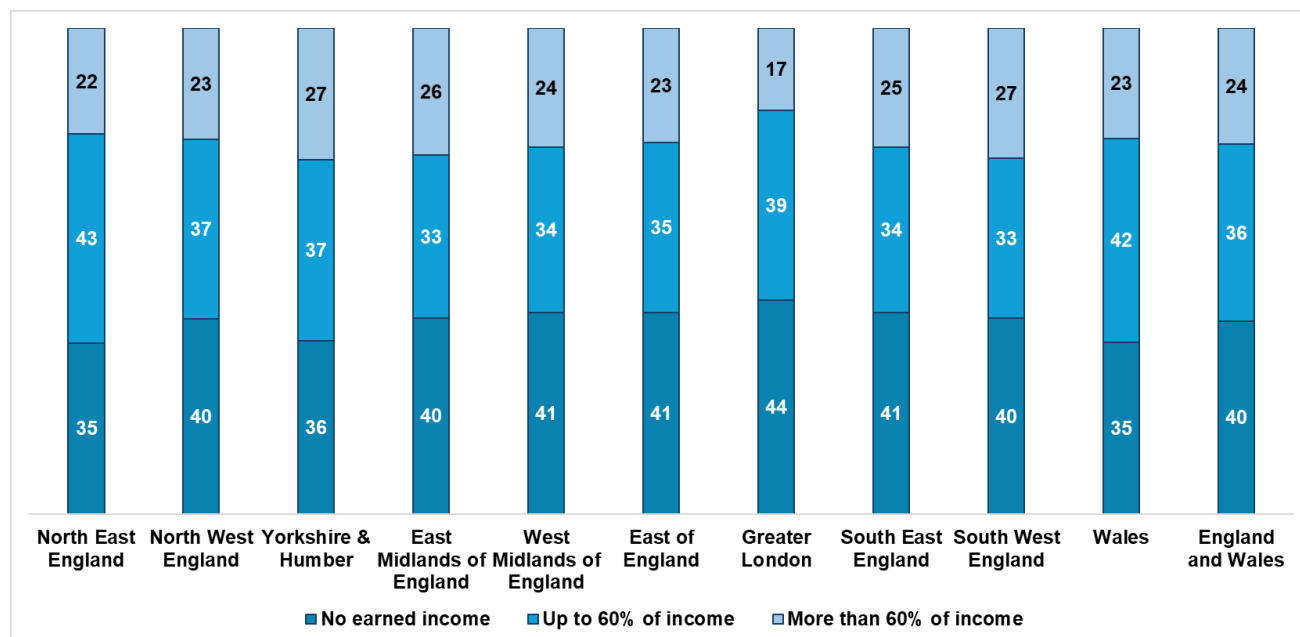
Figure 4.5 **Changing attitudes about delivering public service contracts in Thames Valley 2022 and 2025** (Third Sector Trends in England and Wales surveys 2022 and 2025)



Earned income

In 2025 almost 60% of voluntary organisations in the South East of England earned a proportion of their income by trading (by delivering contracts or engaging in self-generated trading of goods and services). A quarter of VCSE organisations are heavily reliant upon trading (25% earn more than 60% of their income). National reports have demonstrated that heavier reliance on trading income has declined over recent years (Figure 4.6).

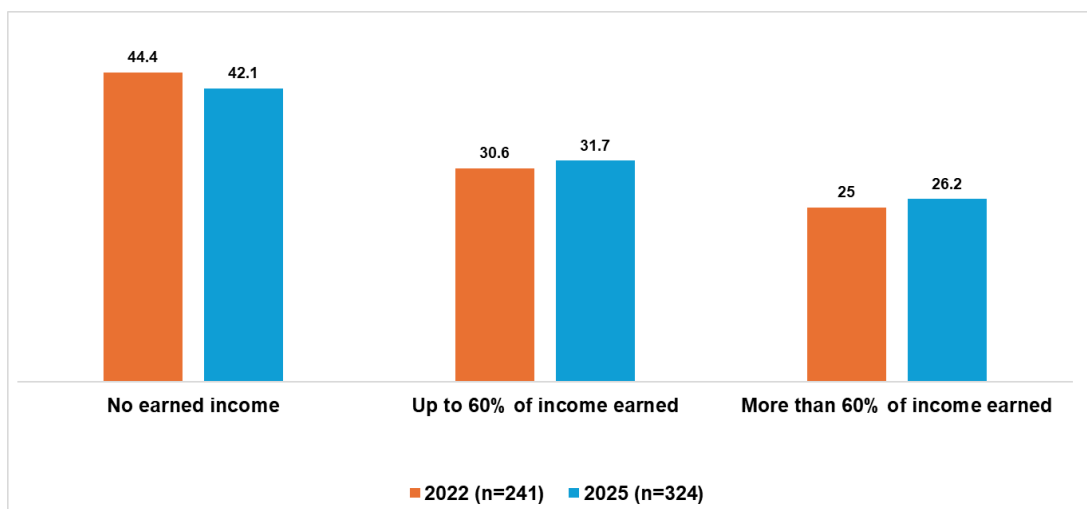
Figure 4.6 **Percent of VCSE organisations’ income from trading by English region and Wales 2025**



There is a good deal of regional variation in the extent to which VCSE organisations earn income (Figure 4.6). While VCSE organisations in North East England are most likely (together with Wales) to earn some of their income (65%), they are least likely (after London at 17%) to earn above 60% of their income (also the same as Wales at 22%). VCSE organisations in Yorkshire & Humber and South West England earn the biggest proportion of their income (27%). Within the South East only minor variations in the extent to which VCSE organisations trade are evident (Table 4.4). There is very little indication of change in practices surrounding earned income between 2022 and 2025 as shown in Figure 4.7.

Table 4.4 Percent of VCSE organisations earning income from trading in South East England (Third Sector Trends in South West England n=1,121)				
	No earned income	Up to 60% of income earned	More than 60% of income earned	N=
Thames Valley	42.1	31.7	26.2	326
Sussex	38.5	38.1	23.4	266
Surrey	39.6	36.2	24.2	149
Hampshire and Isle of Wight	42.1	31.8	26.0	244
Kent	44.8	33.5	21.7	203
South East England	41.0	34.0	25.0	1,212

Figure 4.7 **Extent to which VCSE organisations engage in trading in Thames Valley 2022 and 2025** (Third Sector Trends in England and Wales surveys 2022 and 2025)



4.2 Assets and reserves

Assets

As Table 4.5(a) shows, the most common forms of property tenure or usage nationally in 2025 are renting (41%), followed by ownership (29%) and free use of space in a building (30%). Ownership includes properties adopted via community asset transfer. There is little change from 2022 although ownership and asset transfer percentages have risen slightly. Tenure patterns are quite similar across regions, with the exception of community asset transfer: nearly 10% of VCSE organisations have acquired property in this way in the North East which is substantially higher than all other regions.

In the South East of England, variations are quite limited, but there are some clear indications that levels of property ownership are lower in Thames Valley than in other areas (21%) and especially so in Oxfordshire (19%). Gaining property via the transfer of community assets is very low in Thames Valley (below 2%).

Table 4.5(a) VCSE organisations' property tenure by English region and Wales (Third Sector Trends in England and Wales 2025)					
	Own a property	Rent a property	Asset transfer	Free use of space	N=
North East England	31.9	48.2	9.5	30.9	624
North West England	28.9	45.9	4.6	28.0	755
Yorkshire and Humber	27.9	39.1	6.4	28.6	899
East Midlands of England	30.0	40.1	4.9	29.1	594
West Midlands of England	30.7	37.3	5.6	30.0	701
East of England	30.1	42.3	4.8	30.1	1,068
London	18.9	40.2	3.7	32.9	736
South East England	25.2	40.3	3.5	29.4	1,156
South West England	30.6	36.3	5.1	27.6	1,048
Wales	35.0	46.7	8.2	29.6	672
England and Wales	28.7	41.3	5.4	29.5	8,253

Table 4.5(b) VCSE organisations' property tenure in South East England (Third Sector Trends in South West England 2025, n=1,048)					
	Own a property	Rent a property	Asset transfer	Free use of space	N=
Thames Valley	20.7	42.8	1.8	25.2	326
Sussex	23.1	39.3	4.9	31.2	266
Surrey	23.2	41.4	5.9	39.7	149
Hampshire and Isle of Wight	27.2	41.7	3.6	29.3	244
Kent	34.4	35.2	2.6	27.1	203
South East England	25.2	40.3	3.5	29.4	1,212

Reserves

Holding reserves is regarded as a good indication of VCSE organisations' financial wellbeing. As shown in Table 4.6, most voluntary organisations in 2025 held reserves (82%), more than half of which did not draw upon these reserves in the previous year. About 16% of organisations used reserves to invest in new activities, while about 27% have used reserves for essential purposes such as rent, bills and wages.⁴⁰

Holding reserves is much more common amongst larger voluntary organisations: 97% of the biggest VCSE organisations have reserves compared with 71% of micro VCSE organisations. Medium (34%) and larger sized organisations (40%) were the most likely to be drawing upon reserves for essential costs in 2025.

Table 4.6 VCSE organisations' ownership and use of reserves by size of organisation (Third Sector Trends in England and Wales, 2025, column percentages)						
	Micro income below-£10,000	Small income £10,000-£49,999	Medium income £50,000-£249,999	Large income £250,000-£999,999	Big Income £1million - £25million	All TSOs
No, we don't have any reserves	29.4	19.9	12.2	6.7	2.9	18.4
No, we have not drawn on our reserves	43.9	48.7	43.3	41.4	40.7	44.8
Yes, we have used our reserves to invest in new activities	6.2	8.4	10.4	13.0	23.1	9.5
Yes, we have used our reserves for essential costs	15.3	16.3	27.1	29.2	21.1	20.3
We have used our reserves for both investment and essential costs	5.2	6.7	6.9	9.7	12.3	7.0
N=	2,481	2,654	2,067	955	455	8,612

There is relatively little variation in the use of reserves between 2022 and 2025 nationally (Table 4.7(a)). In South East England, however, the indications are that slightly fewer VCSE organisations held reserves for essential purposes in 2025 than

⁴⁰ To calculate the percentages of TSOs using reserves for investment the third and fifth row of the table are added, for the use of reserves for essential costs, the fourth and fifth row are added,

in 2022. Data are provided for counties in South East England in Table 4.7(b) and the indications are that there is relatively limited variation in experiences across areas – with the exception on Kent where a higher percentage of VCSE organisations lack reserves (21%).

Table 4.7(a) VCSE organisations' reliance on reserves by English region and Wales: 2022 & 2025

	No, we don't have any reserves		No, we have not drawn on our reserves		Yes, we have used our reserves to invest in new activities		Yes, we have used our reserves for essential costs		We have used our reserves for both investment and essential costs		N=	
	2022	2025	2022	2025	2022	2025	2022	2025	2022	2025	2022	2025
North East England	19.1	19.4	42.7	42.0	9.1	10.6	20.6	20.6	8.4	7.3	606	659
North West England	18.3	19.7	44.5	44.6	8.7	6.9	22.0	21.0	6.6	7.8	728	796
Yorkshire and Humber	14.1	18.6	46.6	46.1	9.5	10.2	23.3	19.4	6.5	5.7	644	943
East Midlands	15.3	18.6	40.4	46.5	8.0	9.7	28.8	17.1	7.5	8.1	399	607
West Midlands	16.9	19.3	43.8	44.1	8.7	10.1	21.8	20.6	8.7	5.9	504	732
East of England	15.0	17.4	48.4	48.2	7.8	9.8	22.1	18.0	6.7	6.6	566	1,113
London	16.6	19.5	43.7	41.0	7.0	9.2	25.2	23.8	7.5	6.5	531	770
South East England	13.6	16.3	48.8	44.7	9.6	10.7	22.2	21.3	5.8	6.9	811	1,195
South West England	15.4	17.4	47.9	46.4	9.0	9.4	22.1	18.8	5.6	8.0	779	1,093
Wales	20.5	20.5	40.3	41.5	9.8	8.1	22.3	23.0	7.1	7.0	439	704
England and Wales	16.3	18.4	45.2	44.8	8.8	9.5	22.8	20.3	6.9	7.0	6,007	8,612

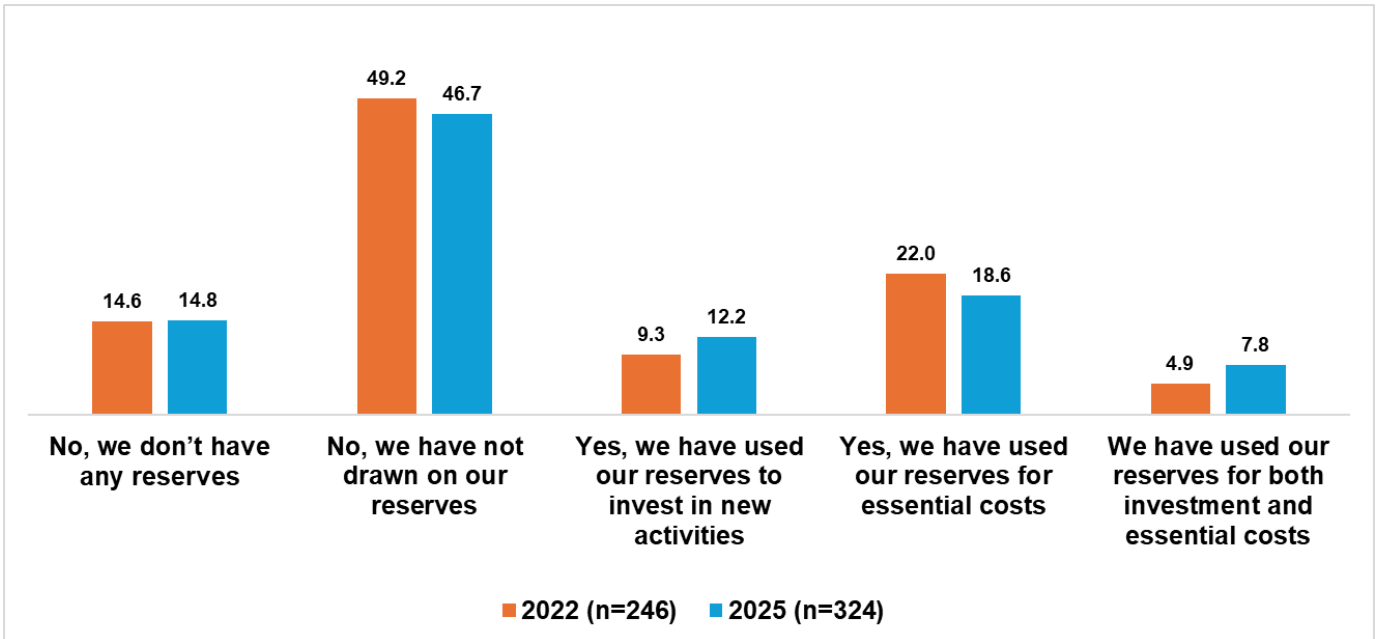
Table 4.7(b) VCSE organisations' reliance on reserves in South East England

(Third Sector Trends in South West England 2025, n=1,095)

	No, we don't have any reserves		No, we have not drawn on our reserves		Yes, we have used our reserves to invest in new activities		Yes, we have used our reserves for essential costs		We have used our reserves for both investment and essential costs		N=
	2022	2025	2022	2025	2022	2025	2022	2025	2022	2025	
Thames Valley	14.8	14.8	46.7	46.7	12.2	12.2	18.6	18.6	7.8	7.8	326
Sussex	14.5	14.5	40.5	40.5	10.3	10.3	27.9	27.9	6.9	6.9	266
Surrey	14.6	14.6	51.4	51.4	10.4	10.4	18.1	18.1	5.6	5.6	149
Hampshire and Isle of Wight	17.8	17.8	45.0	45.0	8.3	8.3	21.9	21.9	7.0	7.0	244
Kent	20.8	20.8	41.6	41.6	11.9	11.9	19.3	19.3	6.4	6.4	203
South East England	16.3	16.3	44.7	44.7	10.7	10.7	21.3	21.3	6.9	6.9	1,212

In Thames Valley there are some indications of minor change in VCSE organisations' financial fortunes since 2022 (Figure 4.8). The percentage of VCSE organisations using reserves for investment has increased slightly from 9% to 12%. The use of reserves for essential costs remains similar at about 27%.

Figure 4.8 **Ownership and use of reserves by VCSE organisations in Thames Valley 2022 and 2025**
 (Third Sector Trends in England and Wales surveys 2022 and 2025)



4.3 Expectations about finance

Third Sector Trends surveys ask respondents to make an assessment of their prospects over the next two years. It has been shown in previous rounds of the study that voluntary organisations of all sizes tend to be ‘over optimistic’ in their projections about future finances. This should not be seen as a ‘bad thing’, optimism drives sector enthusiasm and commitment. But when hopes are dashed, it can make people in the sector feel disappointed. In 2025, voluntary organisations in South East England were, on balance, feeling quite upbeat about their prospects (Table 4.8).

- In general terms, the voluntary sector in the South East of England is cautiously optimistic. In Thames Valley 86% of VCSE organisations believe that income will remain either the same or increase – only 14% expect income to fall.
- In South East England many more VCSE organisations are more optimistic than pessimistic about financial support from private sector business. In Thames Valley VCSE organisations are amongst the most optimistic in this respect (25%).
- Future grant funding from trusts and foundations is considered in quite an optimistic light in Thames Valley with 25% of VCSE organisations expecting that funding will increase while only about 20% think it will fall. VCSE organisations in Kent and Surrey are somewhat less optimistic (~18%).
- Only funding from statutory agencies is regarded less positively in Thames Valley, with 30% of VCSE organisations expecting support to *decrease* over the next two years and only 15% expecting an increase. VCSE organisations in Surrey are by far the most pessimistic.

Table 4.8 **VCSE organisations' expectations about future finance in South East England**

(Third Sector Trends in South East England 2025, n=1,121)

	<i>Income will...</i>		<i>Financial support from private businesses will...</i>		<i>Grants from charitable foundations will...</i>		<i>Funding from statutory agencies will...</i>	
	Increase	Decrease	Increase	Decrease	Increase	Decrease	Increase	Decrease
	Thames Valley	30.1	14.0	25.0	13.8	25.6	20.2	14.9
Sussex	29.2	14.6	20.9	11.8	23.2	22.2	14.2	35.5
Surrey	26.0	16.4	22.2	14.4	18.8	19.8	5.9	39.7
Hampshire and Isle of Wight	29.0	13.3	28.7	12.5	30.9	20.6	15.9	38.1
Kent	24.4	15.4	17.5	14.4	17.8	21.5	11.8	31.2
South East England	27.7	14.7	22.9	13.4	23.3	20.9	12.5	34.8

Section 5

Relationships and influencing

5.1 Relationships within the voluntary sector

Taking the voluntary sector as a whole, there is a great deal of informal and formal interaction; and even when collaboration is absent, there is often a willingness to do so should opportunities arise (see Tables 5.1(a) and 5.1(b)).

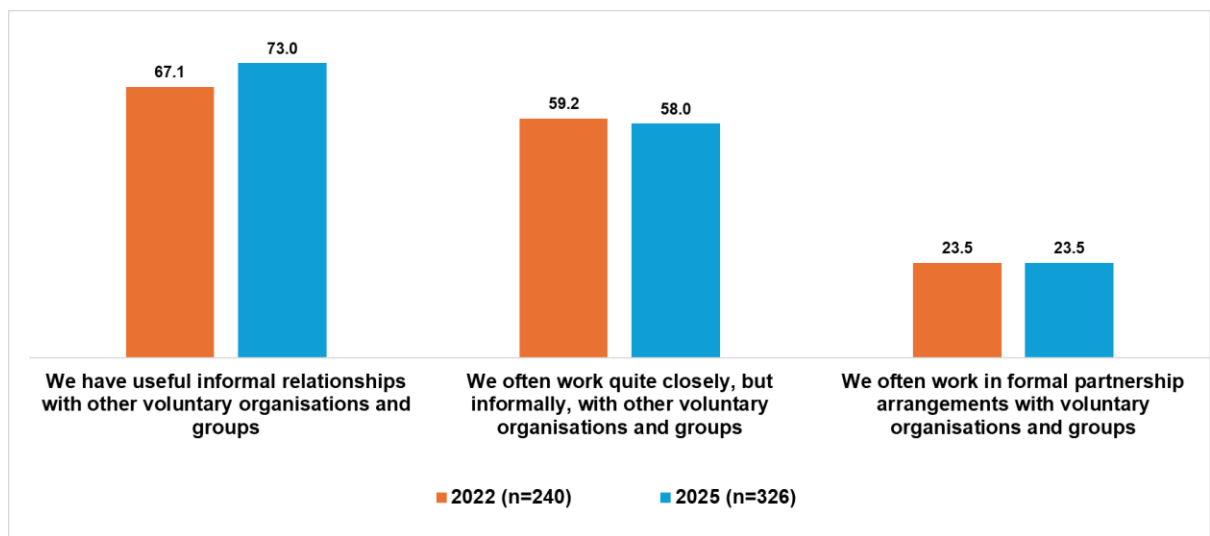
- Nationally, 72% of VCSE organisations have useful informal ‘complementary’ relationships with other voluntary organisations and groups. North East England has the highest level of informal working (80%) while the South West of England is substantially lower than the national average (67%) while the South East is about the same as the national average (72%).
- 62% of VCSE organisations nationally work ‘collaboratively’, but informally, with other voluntary organisations. Again, VCSE organisations in North East England and Wales are the most likely to do so (69%) while South East (59%) sits below the national average (62%). In Thames Valley, VCSE organisations’ engagement in collaborative working is just below the regional average.
- Currently, 28% of VCSE organisations work in formal ‘partnership’ arrangements with other voluntary organisations nationally. VCSE organisations in North East England are by far the most likely to do so (39%) while the percentage doing so in South East England is amongst the lowest (24%). Collaborative working in Thames Valley is at the regional average.

Table 5.1(a) Relationships within the VCSE sector by English region and Wales (Third Sector Trends in England and Wales 2025, n=8,604)				
	We have useful informal relationships with other voluntary organisations and groups	We often work quite closely, but informally, with other voluntary organisations and groups	We often work in formal partnership arrangements with voluntary organisations and groups	N=
North East England	79.6	69.3	39.0	656
North West England	69.7	62.8	30.4	792
Yorkshire and Humber	73.1	64.8	28.3	940
East Midlands of England	68.8	58.1	24.2	605
West Midlands of England	70.5	59.9	24.5	733
East of England	71.6	60.4	25.1	1,111
London	76.2	63.1	32.6	768
South East England	71.7	58.7	24.4	1,203
South West England	66.9	58.3	20.6	1,091
Wales	76.0	68.9	33.5	705
England and Wales	72.1	62.0	27.6	8,604

Table 5.1(b) VCSE organisations' relationships in South East England (Third Sector Trends in South West England 2025, n=1,091)				
	We have useful informal relationships with other voluntary organisations and groups	We often work quite closely, but informally, with other voluntary organisations and groups	We often work in formal partnership arrangements with voluntary organisations and groups	
Thames Valley	73.0	58.0	23.5	326
Sussex	75.4	63.4	27.9	266
Surrey	71.6	61.9	30.6	149
Hampshire and Isle of Wight	69.5	54.8	19.0	244
Kent	67.5	56.2	23.4	203
South East England	71.7	58.7	24.4	1,212

As Figure 5.1 demonstrates, there has been little change in working relationships within Thames Valley since 2022 in relation to collaborative and formal partnership working patterns. However there is some evidence of an increase in levels of informal complementary working within the sector (rising from 67% to 73%).

Figure 5.1 Comparing levels of VCSE organisations' interactions in Thames Valley 2022 and 2026 (Third Sector Trends 2022, 2026)



As Table 5.2 indicates, formal collaborative working is more common in areas of deprivation in *all* regions including South East England's poorest areas (43%) which is considerably higher than in the South West (38%) and the East Midlands (34%). This suggests that the culture of the VCSE sector in the South East is as strong as it is at national levels while in some regions, especially South West England and the East Midlands it is much weaker.

Table 5.2 Percent of VCSE organisations in English regions and Wales working in formal collaborative relationships by area affluence (Third Sector Trends in England and Wales 2025)						
	Poorest IMD 1-2	IMD 3-4	Intermediate IMD 5-6	IMD 7-8	Richest IMD 9-10	N=
North East England	47.9	40.3	40.0	33.0	23.6	648
North West England	43.6	31.7	22.3	23.8	22.7	789
Yorkshire & Humber	43.0	35.3	22.1	18.5	23.9	936
East Midlands of England	34.2	30.3	22.5	21.1	20.1	604
West Midlands of England	39.8	29.3	21.3	19.1	19.6	727
East of England	45.8	33.5	23.7	19.0	20.7	1,109
Greater London	39.2	38.2	34.2	23.1	27.5	767
South East England	43.8	38.5	26.2	21.1	18.2	1,193
South West England	37.5	26.7	18.4	18.0	15.0	1,079
Wales	52.6	42.8	29.1	26.9	18.6	702
England and Wales	43.5	34.5	25.2	21.4	20.2	8,552

The low level of formal partnership working recorded for South West England is not because of variations in sector structure. VCSE organisations of all sizes in the region are (with only one exception) the least likely to work in formal partnerships than in all other regions as shown in Table 5.2(b).

Table 5.2(b) Percentage of VCSE organisations in English regions and Wales working in formal partnerships by organisational size (Third Sector Trends in England and Wales 2025)						
	Micro - income below £10,000	Small - income £10,000 - £49,999	Medium - income £50,000 - £249,999	Large - income £250,000 - £999,999	Big - income £1m to £25m	N=
North East England	22.3	22.7	49.7	57.3	68.1	648
North West England	13.0	22.6	37.9	61.7	63.8	789
Yorkshire & Humber	15.2	21.2	36.2	51.5	64.6	936
East Midlands of England	10.9	21.2	32.1	45.8	64.0	604
West Midlands of England	15.6	20.1	35.3	36.5	65.4	717
East of England	12.5	18.4	30.0	51.5	57.1	1,109
Greater London	21.3	21.7	32.9	49.1	58.0	767
South East England	12.1	18.9	31.6	45.1	54.1	1,193
South West England	10.4	17.6	28.6	44.4	48.0	1,079
Wales	19.1	21.6	42.6	56.5	60.0	702
England and Wales	14.3	20.1	35.4	50.2	60.1	8,552

National data indicate that VCSE organisations which focus specifically on health and wellbeing are much more likely to engage in complementary working (79%), collaborative arrangements (70%) or formal partnerships (34%) than voluntary organisations with other interests.

As shown in Table 5.3, formal partnership working in the South East happens more often in health oriented VCSE organisations (31%) than those operating in other fields (21%). Furthermore, a higher percentage of VCSE organisations engaged with health issues are interested in involvement in formal partnership working (22%) when compared with those working in other fields (16%) in South East England.

Figure 5.2 **Percent of health and wellbeing oriented VCSE organisations working collaboratively** (Third Sector Trends in England and Wales 2025)

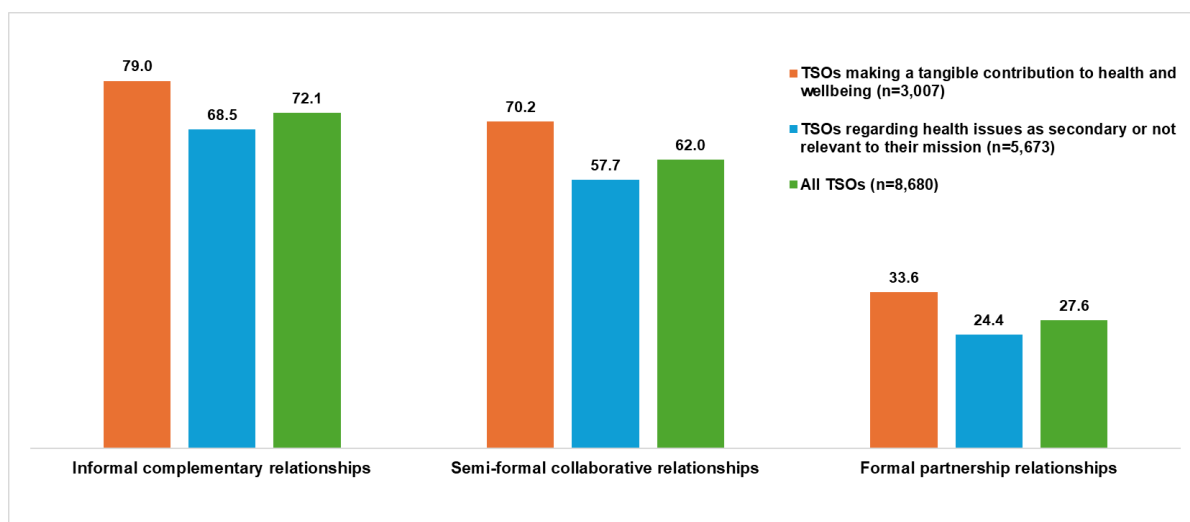


Table 5.3 **Participation or interest in working in formal partnership arrangements amongst health oriented VCSE organisations in English regions and Wales** (Third Sector Trends in England and Wales 2025)

	<i>VCSE organisations with a strong focus on health</i> (n=2,959)		<i>VCSE organisations focusing on other social issues</i> (n=5,593)	
	Yes, this is how we work now	Not at the moment, but we'd like to work this way	Yes, this is how we work now	Not at the moment, but we'd like to work this way
North East England	41.0	20.7	37.6	18.7
North West England	31.2	23.2	29.9	16.1
Yorkshire & Humber	36.0	26.8	24.0	21.2
East Midlands of England	30.0	17.7	21.2	17.2
West Midlands of England	32.9	23.6	19.8	16.8
East of England	31.2	21.6	22.0	15.9
Greater London	42.1	22.6	28.4	20.9
South East England	30.7	22.5	21.3	15.8
South West England	24.9	17.8	18.6	15.2
Wales	40.0	23.8	29.5	20.4
England and Wales	33.6	22.1	24.4	17.6

5.2 Relationships with business

Private sector businesses can support voluntary organisations in several ways.⁴¹ Third Sector Trends surveys distinguish empirically between four types of assistance (see Tables 5.4(a) and 5.4(b)).

- **Financial support:** money given to VCSE organisations in various ways such as sponsorship of events, one-off financial contributions to support projects and initiatives, more regularised payments to sustain activities, and so on. Financial support is offered to half of voluntary organisations, about 33% of VCSE organisations nationally state that this income is of some or great importance to them; the South East of England sits well below that level (30%) while the North East has the highest score of 38%. Within South East England, Thames Valley has the lowest level of support (27%).
- **In-kind support:** use of facilities (such as meeting rooms, minibuses, plant or studios), gifts of new, used or surplus goods (such as DIY products, food and drink, stationary, computing equipment) and free services (such as printing leaflets, catering services). In-kind support is received by 43% of voluntary organisations – 27% of VCSE organisations state that this is of some or great importance to them nationally, but the percentage is highest in the North East (32%). South East England sits just below the national average (25%). Thames Valley's VCSE organisations are at the regional average.
- **Employer supported volunteers:** where companies allocate paid time for their employees to undertake tasks for VCSE organisations on an occasional or regularised basis – but not necessarily using their work-related skills. Volunteering activities may include, for example, decorating a community centre, fundraising, environmental work, marshalling at events and so on. Employer supported volunteering is of some or great importance to 17% of VCSE organisations nationally and is highest in London and the North East (21%). Support in the South East of England (14%) is amongst the lowest. Within the region, Kent is least likely to get employer volunteer support (9%), while in Thames Valley support is much higher (16%).
- **Pro bono expert advice:** where business owners, partners or qualified employees provide unpaid professional or technical support to VCSE organisations with, for example, book-keeping and accountancy, architectural and design services, mentoring, business and management consultancy, public relations and media support, amongst other things. Pro bono expert advice: is of some or great importance to 20% of VCSE organisations nationally, but to 25% in London and the North East. Pro bono support is equal lowest in South East England (16%) alongside South West England. Within the region, pro bono support for VCSE organisations is strongest in Thames Valley (18%) and Surrey (19%) and lowest in Kent (13%).

⁴¹ A critical literature review on sources of support from business is provided in Chapman T. (2019) *Going the Extra Mile*, how businesses support the third sector in England and Wales, London: Power to Change (Chapter 1), available here: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/353379534_Going_the_extra_mile_how_businesses_support_the_third_sector_in_England_and_Wales. A more textured understanding of the kinds of support given and how it is valued was gained from qualitative interviews in the TSO50 study and other directly related projects, see: <https://www.stchads.ac.uk/uncategorised/going-the-distance-how-third-sector-organisations-work-through-turbulent-times/> and <https://www.stchads.ac.uk/research/research-news/trading-interactions-amongst-community-businesses-bradford-hartlepool-middlesbrough/>.

Table 5.4(a) **VCSE organisations' relationships with business by English region and Wales** (Third Sector Trends in England and Wales 2025, percentage reporting 'some' or 'great' importance, n=8,573)

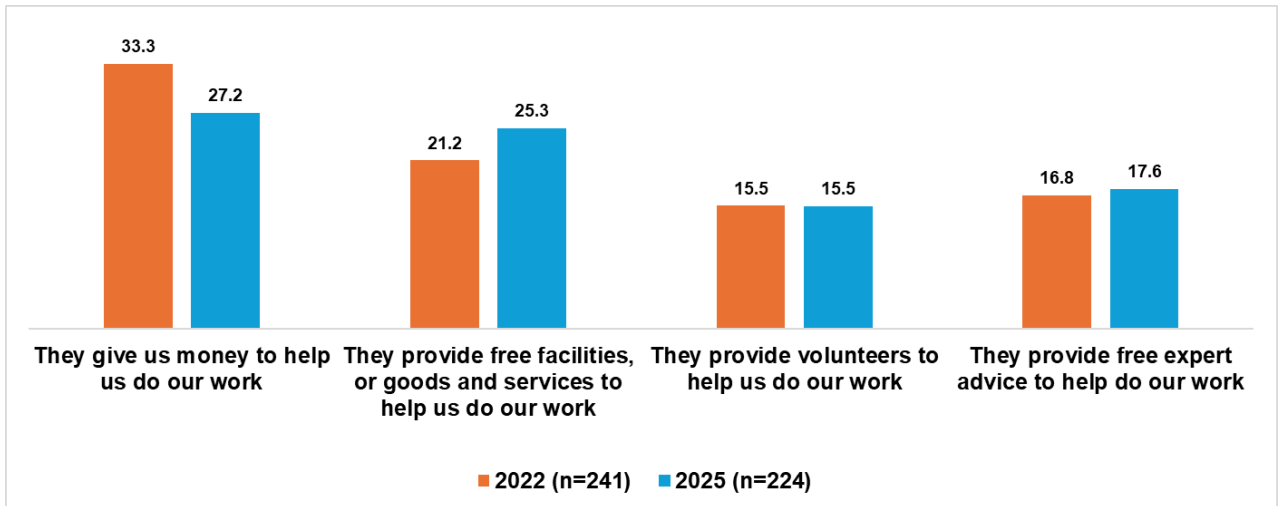
	They give us money to help us do our work	They provide free facilities, or goods and services to help us do our work	They provide volunteers to help us do our work	They provide free expert advice to help do our work	N=
North East England	37.7	32.4	20.6	24.9	650
North West England	37.7	30.1	19.5	21.4	788
Yorkshire and Humber	36.9	30.1	19.9	22.8	935
East Midlands of England	32.3	27.2	16.8	18.3	603
West Midlands of England	33.1	26.8	16.2	17.9	728
East of England	31.1	26.5	15.5	19.5	1,114
London	36.8	31.2	20.9	24.9	767
South East England	29.7	24.7	14.0	16.5	1,197
South West England	27.7	21.9	12.0	16.3	1,089
Wales	30.9	27.4	15.5	18.0	702
England and Wales	33.0	27.4	16.7	19.8	8,573

Table 5.4(a) **VCSE organisations' relationships with business in South East England 2025** (Third Sector Trends in South West England 2025, percentage reporting 'some' or 'great' importance, n=1,121)

	They give us money to help us do our work	They provide free facilities, or goods and services to help us do our work	They provide volunteers to help us do our work	They provide free expert advice to help do our work	N=
Thames Valley	27.2	25.3	15.5	17.6	326
Sussex	29.0	23.8	11.9	16.3	266
Surrey	32.4	25.2	15.6	19.3	149
Hampshire and Isle of Wight	30.2	26.1	17.7	16.6	244
Kent	32.5	23.1	8.6	12.6	203
South East England	29.7	24.7	14.0	16.5	1,212

As shown in Figure 5.3, there is evidence of both continuity and change in the extent to which business supports VCSE organisations in Thames Valley between 2022 and 2025. The percentage of organisations getting money from business has fallen from 33% to 27%, while the provision of free goods has risen from 21% to 25%. The provision of employer volunteer support and pro bono help is largely unchanged.

Figure 5.3 Comparing levels of VCSE organisations’ productive relationships with businesses in Thames Valley 2022 and 2026 (Third Sector Trends 2022, 2026)



5.3 Relationships within the public sector

This section looks at aspects of interaction between the voluntary sector and the local public sector. Tables 5.5(a) and 5.5(b) compare levels of positive interaction regionally in 2025.

- 89% of VCSE organisations in South East England agree that they feel valued by local public sector agencies – which is higher than the national level (87%). The weakest relationships are reported in North East England (85%) where local government reorganisation has been taking place due to the establishment of a new combined authority. Within South East England, there is little differentiation – but is highest in Thames Valley and Hampshire and Isle of Wight (90%).
- VCSE organisations in Yorkshire and Humber are most likely to agree that local agencies inform them about issues of interest (68%) compared with 63% in the North East and 64% nationally. South East England sits just below the national average in this respect (62%). Within the region, VCSE organisations in Thames Valley are most positive (65%).
- Relatively few VCSE organisations in feel involved appropriately in developing or implementing local public policy nationally (42%) and the percentage is slightly lower in South East England (40%). Voluntary organisations in North West England (46%) and Yorkshire & Humber (48%) are the most positive. In the South East, VCSE organisations feel most positive in Sussex (44%) and Thames Valley (42%) and lowest by a considerable margin in Kent (34%).
- In some regions, VCSE organisations report that local public agencies are more likely to act upon their opinions, especially Yorkshire & Humber (47%). VCSE organisations in the South East, South West and North East of are the least confident (40-41%). There is wide variation in opinion across the South East region. In Hampshire and Isle of Wight only 34% of VCSE organisations feel that their opinions are acted upon compared with 43% in Sussex while Thames Valley sits at the regional average.

Table 5.5(a) VCSE organisations' relationships with the public sector by English regions and Wales (Third Sector Trends in England and Wales 2025 percent 'agree' or 'strongly agree')

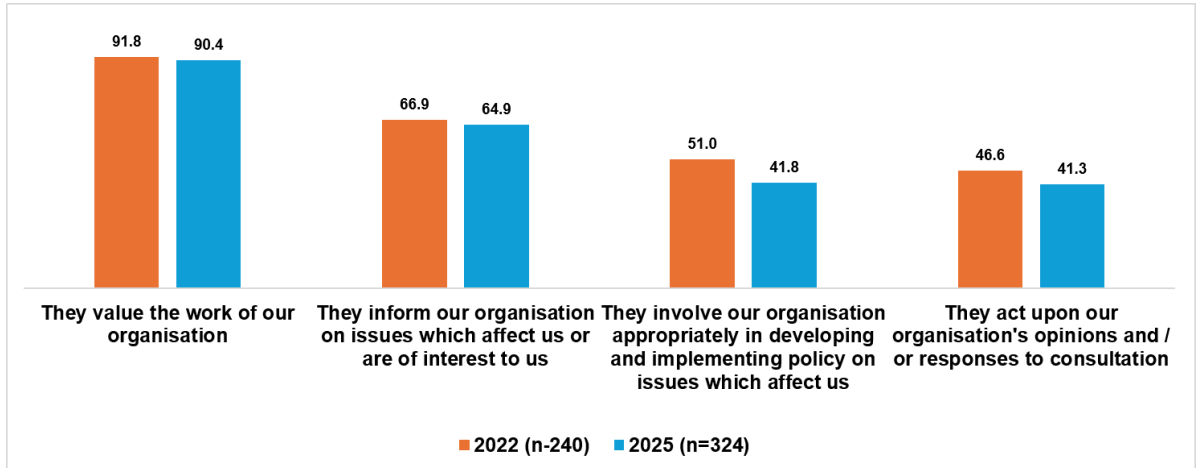
	They value the work of our organisation	They inform our organisation on issues which affect us or are of interest to us	They involve our organisation appropriately in developing and implementing policy on issues which affect us	They act upon our organisation's opinions and / or responses to consultation	N=
North East England	84.8	62.9	37.7	41.2	654
North West England	88.0	65.4	46.0	45.0	793
Yorkshire and Humber	88.0	68.2	47.8	46.6	946
East Midlands of England	87.9	60.9	39.0	40.4	609
West Midlands of England	87.6	62.1	39.3	44.1	734
East of England	88.5	65.5	41.9	41.5	1,113
London	85.6	64.3	40.4	45.4	770
South East England	88.6	61.5	40.1	40.9	1,205
South West England	87.5	60.9	37.5	40.7	1,091
Wales	85.9	64.7	44.2	45.0	703
England and Wales	87.4	63.7	41.5	43.0	8,618

Table 5.5(b) VCSE organisations' relationships with the public sector in South East England (Third Sector Trends in South West England , percent 'agree' or 'strongly agree', n=1,121)

	They value the work of our organisation	They inform our organisation on issues which affect us or are of interest to us	They involve our organisation appropriately in developing and implementing policy on issues which affect us	They act upon our organisation's opinions and / or responses to consultation	N=
Thames Valley	90.4	64.9	41.8	41.3	326
Sussex	85.9	58.3	43.5	43.4	266
Surrey	86.3	64.4	41.4	38.1	149
Hampshire and Isle of Wight	90.2	58.9	38.3	33.9	244
Kent	88.7	61.2	33.9	41.4	203
South East England	88.6	61.5	40.1	40.9	1,212

There is some evidence to suggest slight slippage in VCSE organisations confidence in the quality of relationships with the public sector in Thames Valley (Figure 5.4). This may be tested further in areas where local government reorganisation is occurring. While a sense of being valued and informed by public bodies has held up well, considerably fewer VCSE organisations feel that they are being involved appropriately in developing and implementing policy (falling from 51% in 2022 to 42% in 2025). Similarly, fewer VCSE organisations think that local public bodies act on their opinions (falling from 47% in 2022 to 41% in 2025).

Figure 5.4 **Comparing levels of VCSE organisations’ productive relationships with the public sector in Thames Valley 2022 and 2026** (Third Sector Trends 2022, 2025)



Tables 5.6(a) and 5.6(b) compare VCSE organisations’ attitudes about the impact of devolution strategies across regions.

- VCSE organisations in South West, South East and North East England are the least positive about improving levels of collaboration with the local public sector/NHS (52-54%) while in Yorkshire and Humber they are most positive (60%). In South East England there are wide variations, ranging from 65% in Surrey to 49% in Kent.
- Comparatively few VCSE organisations in North East England feel that policy makers now give them more notice about new initiatives (26%) while South East England sits at the national average (31%). Within the region, VCSE organisations are most positive in Hampshire and Isle of Wight (36%) and the least in Kent (26%).
- A similar finding is reported on policy makers’ receptiveness to VCSE organisations arguments in the North East, again with the lowest percentage with a positive attitude (35%) while voluntary organisations in the South East is at the national average (39%). VCSE organisations in Yorkshire & Humber are the most positive (43%). Voluntary organisations in the South East of England are most positive in Hampshire and Isle of Wight (45%) and the least in Kent (33%).
- Nationally, 39% of VCSE organisations feel that public sector organisations are working together more effectively – especially so in Yorkshire & Humber (44%). VCSE organisations in London are the least positive (34%); voluntary organisations in the South East (37%) sit just below the national average. VCSE organisations are the least positive in Kent (27%) and the most in Sussex (48%).
- A clear majority of VCSE organisations in all regions state that they have been asked more often to improve engagement with local people and the North East and London are most likely to say so (64%); South East England sits at the national average (61%). There are wide variations across the region, Organisations in Surrey (69%) are most likely to have been asked to help with local engagement while those in Hampshire and Isle of Wight are the least (56%).

It would be unwise to make too much of these findings at this stage because this is the first time the question has been used. Data therefore represent a ‘baseline’ position from which future comparisons can be made. Even when sector opinion is

currently very positive – that may change in the context of widespread local government and NHS ICB reorganisation.

Table 5.6(a) VCSE organisations' engagement with public organisations and policy makers by English region (Third Sector Trends in England 2025, n=8,557)					
	Opportunities for effective collaborative working have increased (e.g. with local council / NHS)	Policy makers give us much more notice now about new initiatives	Policy makers are more receptive to our arguments even if they don't always agree	Public sector agencies seem to be working together more effectively	We're asked more often to help improve engagement with local people
North East England	52.4	25.7	34.6	37.6	63.6
North West England	56.7	32.0	40.0	42.6	62.8
Yorkshire and Humber	59.8	33.8	42.5	43.7	63.2
East Midlands of England	58.9	33.5	35.4	35.5	57.4
West Midlands of England	55.3	29.3	39.4	40.6	59.6
East of England	57.6	33.1	41.6	40.6	59.7
London	52.7	31.0	37.2	33.7	63.7
South East England	54.2	31.1	39.1	36.7	60.6
South West England	54.1	29.2	38.0	37.2	55.2
England	56.0	31.2	39.1	39.0	60.8

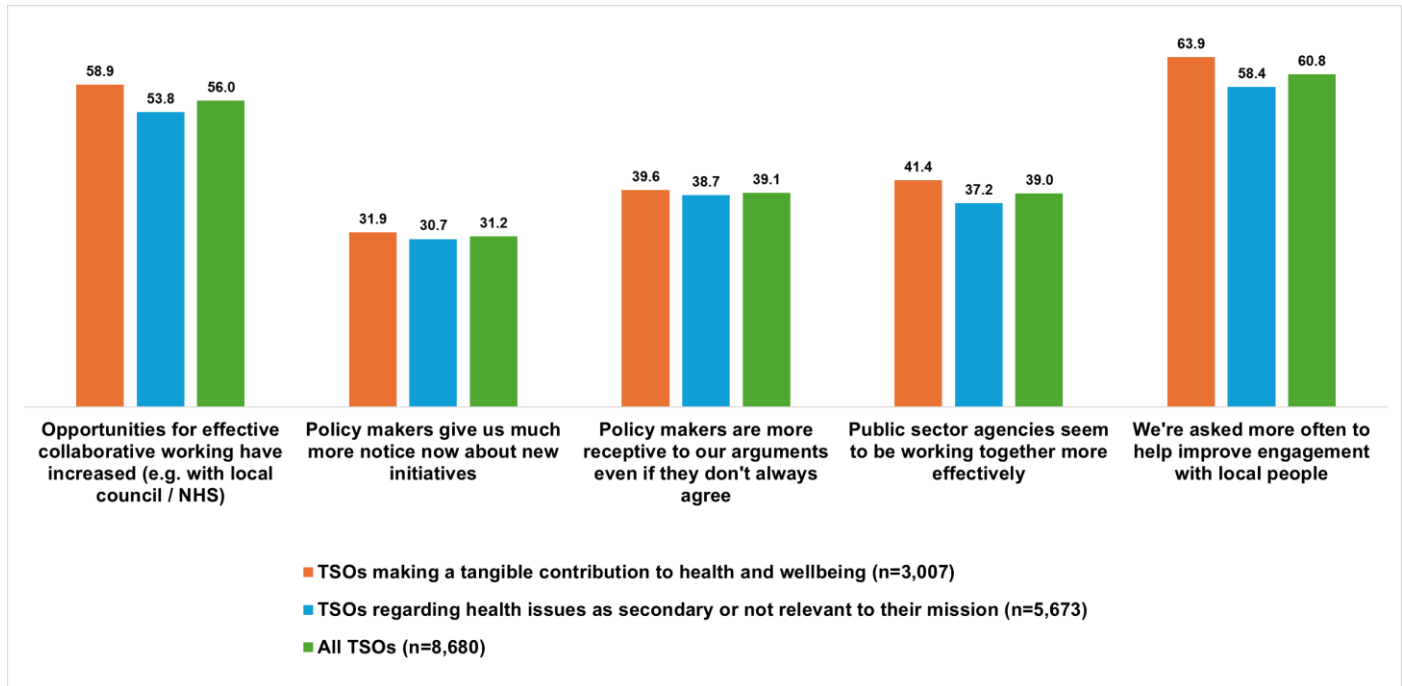
Table 5.6(b) VCSE organisations' engagement with public organisations and policy makers in South East England (Third Sector Trends in South West England 2025, n=1,121)					
	Opportunities for effective collaborative working have increased (e.g. with local council / NHS)	Policy makers give us much more notice now about new initiatives	Policy makers are more receptive to our arguments even if they don't always agree	Public sector agencies seem to be working together more effectively	We're asked more often to help improve engagement with local people
Thames Valley	52.4	27.6	38.9	31.2	62.0
Sussex	54.0	33.3	39.8	47.9	59.2
Surrey	64.6	34.1	38.4	30.8	68.8
Hampshire and Isle of Wight	55.0	36.3	44.9	43.5	55.9
Kent	48.5	25.5	32.6	27.0	59.8
South East England	54.2	31.1	39.1	36.7	60.6

It is useful to note how VCSE organisations which are concerned with health and wellbeing feel, at a national level, about engagement with public organisations and policy makers (Figure 5.5). It is apparent that they are more likely to feel that there have been more opportunities for effective collaborative working (59%) and that they are asked more often to help improve local public engagement (64%) than voluntary organisations with other interests.

In other respects, such as the willingness of policy makers to give notice of new initiatives or their receptiveness to ideas - variations are minimal. Health oriented VCSE organisations are more likely to feel that public organisations (such as the NHS and local authorities) are working together more effectively (42%) than other voluntary organisations (37%). How these responses hold up in the context of local

government and NHS Integrated Care Board reorganisation remains to be seen – but that can be tested when the survey returns in 2028.

Figure 5.5 **Health-focused VCSE organisations’ engagement with public organisations and policy makers in England in 2025**



5.4 Sector influence on local social and public policy

Assessing levels of trust and interaction between VCSE and public sector bodies (primarily the NHS and local authorities) helps to gauge the prospect for successful collaborative activity. As Table 5.7(a) and 5.7(b) show, however, the voluntary sector in the South East is not especially keen to engage directly in ‘political’ issues (77% ‘steer clear’ compared with just 66% in Wales). Within the South East, VCSE organisations are least likely to engage in political dialogue in Kent (82%) and around three quarters avoid politics in all other areas – including Thames Valley.

- VCSE organisations’ level of engagement with local meetings and events is lower in South East and South West England (66-67%) but lowest in the East Midlands (63%). These percentages are far below that of the North East (79%). Voluntary organisations in Thames Valley sit just above the regional average (67%).
- Campaigning to further the interest of beneficiaries is strongest in North East England (57%) where issues surrounding deprivation are the most severe. In the South East, VCSE organisations are most likely to campaign in Thames Valley and Sussex (66%) which is marginally higher than the regional average (65%).
- Many voluntary organisations trust a local infrastructure organisation (LIO) to engage in influencing of local social and public policy on their behalf (31% nationally). Reliance on LIOs varies considerably by region ranging from 25% in the South East and South West to 39% in the North East and Wales. In the South East region, confidence in LIOs is strongest in Hampshire and Isle of Wight (27%) and lowest in Kent (20%)
- The willingness of VCSE organisations to work behind the scenes to influence local social and public policy also varies widely across regions; lobbying in Wales (48%) and the North East (49%) is more common than in the East Midlands (34%) where this option is taken relatively rarely. South East

England (40%) sits close to national average (41%). Within the region, the propensity for VCSE organisations to engage in lobbying is highest in Thames Valley (45%) and lowest in Kent (33%).

Table 5.7(a) VCSE organisations' attitudes about influencing social and public policy in English regions and Wales (Third Sector Trends in England 2025, percentage 'agree' or 'strongly agree')

	We tend to steer well clear of political issues	We try to go to relevant meetings/events which relate to our kind of work	We campaign to further the interests of our beneficiaries	We trust a local third sector support agency to do this on our behalf (e.g. a CVS)	We tend to work behind the scenes to influence policy
North East England	69.8	79.3	56.7	38.5	48.9
North West England	69.7	71.6	50.9	38.1	45.8
Yorkshire & Humber	72.4	70.6	47.4	35.8	42.7
East Midlands of England	80.7	62.6	40.5	28.2	34.1
West Midlands of England	74.4	69.5	51.3	26.8	39.6
East of England	73.5	71.2	46.0	31.6	42.4
Greater London	66.7	68.2	50.8	29.6	45.0
South East England	76.9	66.9	44.7	24.6	40.2
South West England	77.7	65.8	42.2	24.9	37.2
Wales	66.0	72.2	51.6	39.1	47.5
England and Wales	73.1	69.6	47.7	31.2	42.1

Table 5.7(b) VCSE organisations' attitudes about influencing social and public policy in South East England (Third Sector Trends in South West of England, percentage 'agree' or 'strongly agree', n=1,121)

	We tend to steer well clear of political issues	We try to go to relevant meetings/events which relate to our kind of work	We campaign to further the interests of our beneficiaries	We trust a local third sector support agency to do this on our behalf (e.g. a CVS)	We tend to work behind the scenes to influence policy
Thames Valley	75.1	67.4	46.2	21.4	44.6
Sussex	74.1	69.1	45.9	30.1	42.7
Surrey	76.9	66.2	41.3	24.1	37.1
Hampshire and Isle of Wight	78.0	65.5	44.9	27.1	39.6
Kent	82.4	65.2	43.1	20.3	32.5
South East England	76.9	66.9	44.7	24.6	40.2

Section 6

Summary, discussion and implications

6.1 Summary of key findings

Sector size and structure

The VCSE sector in Thames Valley is large and productive. There are 9,427 registered voluntary organisations in the area, that is about 3.6 per 1,000 resident population. The density of voluntary organisations is highest in Oxford, Vale of White Horse and West Oxfordshire (at about 5.8-6.2 VCSE organisations per 1,000 residents while in Slough it is lowest at 1.7 per 1,000 residents).

In more socially advantaged and less urbanised areas, there tends to be a greater concentration on micro and small organisations than in less affluent urban areas. For example, micro VCSE organisations in West Oxfordshire constitute 49% of the sector, while in Reading, it is 22%.

The proportion of big organisations (with income above £1million) is greater in major urban areas such as Oxford (~12%) and Reading (~8%), many of which focus on critical and pernicious social needs across a wide spatial area. In semi-rural areas, such as Vale of White Horse only 2.5% of VCSE organisations have income above £1million.

The focus of the local VCSE sector reflects its purpose and practices. In more rural areas, voluntary organisations tend to concentrate their attention at neighbourhood or village level while in larger urban areas, they are more likely to work across a wider spatial area – often crossing district and local authority boundaries.

Sector finance

Sector income in Thames Valley is estimated at about £2.65 billion. This report has shown that the voluntary sector, in general terms, is in a reasonably good position financially, where most VCSE organisations (85%) hold reserves and around 47% have not needed to draw upon them in the last year. Some have been experiencing some financial problems however – over a quarter of VCSE organisations (26%) have had to use reserves for essential costs such as salaries, bills or rent.

The sector values grant funding above all other types of income sources at present, but most VCSE organisations manage financial risk by relying on a wide variety of income sources such as gifts, subscriptions, earned income, contracts and investments – very few choose to borrow money.

Trusts and foundations are very supportive of the sector in Thames Valley where 58% of VCSE organisations received unrestricted income and 33% enjoyed long-term investment from grant makers. Similarly about 60% of voluntary organisations in Thames Valley stated that trusts and foundations took time to get to know them, while 24% got support in the development of their skills. Expectations of 'innovation' by grant makers remains high amongst 63% of voluntary organisations.

Sector impact

The voluntary sector in Thames Valley is highly productive and impactful over a wide range of social issues. There is a particularly strong focus on the promotion of health and wellbeing, tackling social isolation, giving people confidence to manage their lives and empowering people in the community.

It is estimated that the total value of sector energy expended in Thames Valley was about £2.54 billion in 2025 and that it produced about £4.47 billion in fiscal, economic and use value. When intangible aspects of social value are added into the equation, it is estimated that total sector contribution was £10.3 billion which represents about £4.6m per 1,000 resident population.

Labour market dynamics

Sector employment is around 49,600 in Thames Valley and constitutes 3.1% of the total workforce. While there are signs that a sizeable minority of VCSE organisations are struggling to recruit (22%) or retain (15%) employees in the area – the indications are that overall employment has risen marginally since 2022.

Regular volunteers number about 188,342 in Thames Valley and they deliver around 13.6 million hours of productive work. The proxy replacement value by employees would be between £166m (at national minimum wage) and £258m (at 80% of regional average wage).

Reliance on regular volunteers is high in Thames Valley, 87% of VCSE organisations rely mainly on volunteers who support them on a regular basis and 91% of organisations could not survive without their support – and indeed, 78% of organisations relied on volunteers to work unsupervised.

Currently, volunteer numbers in Thames Valley have yet to recover to pre-pandemic levels in 32% of VCSE organisations. It is a mixed picture as 39% of VCSE organisations are struggling with recruitment and 20% with retention of regular volunteers. Similarly, 34% are struggling to recruit trustees and 14% find it hard to retain them.

Organisational wellbeing and development

The success of VCSE organisations is contingent upon their ability to make good decisions about purpose, practice, finance and investing in people development. And yet the biggest priority of most VCSE organisations in Thames Valley (65%) is to get support for income generation. This suggests that investment in other aspects of organisational wellbeing is, at best, a second-order priority.

By contrast, only 43% a third of voluntary organisations seek to invest in business planning and just a 30% on trustee development and training. This may be a cause for concern as raising income is not always the answer to VCSE organisations' problems – indeed it can cause them if finance is gained for purposes that the organisation is not in a position to deliver successfully. The percentage of VCSE organisations in Thames Valley with a training budget (40%) is just above the regional average (39%).

When organisations identify training and development needs, about 62% attempt to tackle these in-house in Thames Valley; but many mainly seek support externally from local infrastructure organisations (13%), trusts and foundations (11%), private businesses (10%) or local public authorities (5%).

Sector interactions

Working relationships within the VCSE sector in Thames Valley are strong: 73% of VCSE organisations work together in informal 'complementary' ways, 58% in semi-formal 'collaborations', and 24% work in formally constituted 'partnerships': these percentages are similar to the national average (72%, 62% and 27% respectively). There has been an increase in complementary informal working in Thames Valley since 2022, rising from 67% to 73% while collaborative and formal partnership working levels remain about the same.

Relationships with the private sector are widespread in Thames Valley: 27% of VCSE organisations are given money by business to help them work; 25% are provided with free use of facilities or provided free goods; 16% get employer volunteer support; and 18% were in receipt of *pro bono* expert advice from businesses. The evidence indicates that financial support from business has fallen from 33% of VCSE organisations in 2022 to 27% in 2025. But the provision of free facilities or goods and services has increased from 21% to 25%.

Public sector relationships are strong in Thames Valley. 90% of VCSE organisations feel valued by public bodies and 65% feel well informed about issues that affect them. Fewer feel involved appropriately in the development and implementation of policies that are relevant to them (42%) but many VCSE organisations believe that local public bodies act upon their opinions or responses to consultations (41%). While the percentage of VCSE organisations feeling valued and well informed by public bodies have held up well since 2022, the extent to which they felt involved has fallen substantially from 51% to 42%.

This may reflect uncertainties surrounding local government and NHS reorganisation in parts of the Thames Valley area – but that is not certain as the evidence is mixed. In response to questions about local devolution, 52% of VCSE organisations in Thames Valley feel that opportunities for effective collaborative working have increased and 28% feel that public bodies are now giving more notice about new initiatives. Furthermore, 39% of VCSE organisations in Thames Valley thought that public bodies are becoming more receptive to their arguments, while 31% believe that public sector bodies are working together more effectively. These baseline data will be useful at local level when local government reorganisation and the configuration of NHS Integrated Care Boards are fully established.

The VCSE sector itself is keen to influence local social and public policy (although 75% of organisations in Thames Valley avoid 'political' issues). About two thirds (67%) of voluntary organisations will go to relevant meetings or consultations and around 45% will lobby behind the scenes to influence policy. The willingness to campaign to further the interests of beneficiaries is strong in the area (46%). By contrast, some organisations in Thames Valley rely on local infrastructure organisations to take charge of influencing (21%).

6.2 Discussion and implications in comparative context

While it may not be possible to make firm predictions on what will happen next, leaders of voluntary organisations were asked in 2025 to say how they felt about some key issues. It has been possible to look at 'sector vitality' and 'optimism' in the South East of England (Table 6.1).

- Many more leaders in Thames Valley were 'excited' about current bidding to do something brand new (44%) than those who were 'worried' (21%).
- Most leaders felt 'excited' about collaborative working arrangements in Thames Valley (46%) and very few were worried (3%).
- Of those leaders whose voluntary organisation engaged in campaigning to get the general public to see things their way in Thames Valley, many more were 'excited' (48%) than 'worried' about it (12%).

Table 6.1 Sector vitality and ambition in South East England (Third Sector Trends in England and Wales 2025, n=1,121)

	Percent of leaders 'excited' or 'worried' about bidding for funding to do something brand new		Percent of leaders 'excited' or 'worried' about working collaboratively with other voluntary organisations		Percent of leaders 'excited' or 'worried' about campaigning to get the general public to see things our way	
	Excited	Worried	Excited	Worried	Excited	Worried
Thames Valley	44.3	20.7	45.8	3.4	47.7	11.8
Sussex	40.1	31.3	47.9	5.2	47.4	16.0
Surrey	42.6	29.8	44.8	7.6	39.8	19.3
Hampshire	42.3	22.7	41.0	3.2	40.7	12.1
Kent	40.1	24.6	35.4	4.8	39.1	17.4
South East England	42.1	25.2	43.5	4.5	44.0	14.6

This report has also demonstrated that many leaders in the voluntary sector in Thames Valley are feeling optimistic about the future. That should not be so surprising because the financial position of the sector is currently quite sound, as indicated by the widespread ownership of financial reserves and the ability of many organisations to leave them untouched since 2022. Indeed, 30% of survey participants in Thames Valley believed that their income levels would increase (30%) or be sustained (56%) over the next two years.

But there is evidence of underlying anxiety too, leading many voluntary organisations to sit on their reserves rather than to invest wholeheartedly in new developments and secure their own wellbeing by strengthening governance, strategic skills and enabling their employees and regular volunteers. Leaders of voluntary organisations know from experience that their financial position is fragile because of uncertainties in their working environment. That is why they try to ensure that they don't keep all their eggs in one basket in financial terms.

Nonetheless, this report shows clearly that sector mood about the reliability and relative value of income sources is shifting further towards grant funding and away from self-generated trading and income garnered from public service contracts. But as the pot of finance available to grant makers is finite – there could be trouble ahead.

As in all other English regions and in Wales – the structure and dynamics of the voluntary sector in Thames Valley responds to and is shaped by local social, spatial, political and economic conditions. And this explains why there is a higher

concentration of VCSE organisations per 1,000 members of the local resident population in more affluent areas such as the Thames Valley (4.2) than in less affluent regions such as North East England (2.6).

In wealthier areas right across the country, there are more VCSE organisations per capita because local people have more disposable income and productive free time; they are better connected, richer in social capital and are, consequentially, more willing and able to buy-in to a lifestyle that embraces civil society at its core. Most of their VCSE organisations are small, relying wholly or mostly upon regular volunteers to achieve their aims and most are relatively financially resilient – often relying more heavily upon their own resources than calling upon outsiders to support their work.

That is why, in the richest areas, 69% of voluntary organisations across England and Wales had no relationship with trusts and foundations in 2025 compared with just 32% in the poorest districts. That is not to say that these organisations *never* bid for grants, but indicates that they do so on an occasional basis rather than relying upon them heavily to keep going. In poorer areas there are comparatively fewer VCSE organisations *per capita*; they are more likely to address issues associated with financial insecurity, poorer health, educational disadvantage and limited access to or use of public services than in affluent areas. VCSE organisations in these localities are more reliant upon employees than in more affluent districts and that is why they need more money.

The balance between richer and poorer areas differs substantially across regions and that shapes the way that the voluntary sector works. In Thames Valley, fewer than 2% of VCSE organisations are based in the poorest areas (the least affluent quintile of the Indices of Multiple Deprivation or IMD). There are local variations – for example, in Slough, 8% of voluntary organisations are based in the poorest quintile while in West Oxfordshire there are none.

National data demonstrates that voluntary organisations based in poorer areas tend to work similar ways - whether they are based in poorer regions such as North East England or in the more affluent South East. But it is clear that, at the other end of the social spectrum, 35% of VCSE organisations in the South East (and 48% in Thames Valley) are located in the most affluent quintile of the IMD compared with just 15% in the North East. Irrespective of region, in these wealthy areas, the focus and structure of the local sector is strikingly similar.

Interestingly and perhaps counter-intuitively, the report also shows that in poorer areas the spatial focus of VCSE organisations is *wider* than in affluent areas where more voluntary organisations concentrate their activities at neighbourhood or village level.⁴² To some extent, that is due to the specialist foci of many VCSE organisations in poor areas on discrete aspects of service delivery which tend to be funded by large grants or contracts to deliver services over a wider spatial area. In more affluent areas, by contrast, much more of sector activity is locally focused and self-funded (by subscriptions, for example) or is facilitated by smaller, occasional grants.

Because the boundaries around areas are not impermeable, generalisations such as these should be read with caution. Not all VCSE organisations based in the very poorest areas concern themselves with local issues associated with critical need; just as in the wealthiest areas, many VCSE organisations are fervent in their support for people struggling in adverse conditions in communities often far from their own. And while in several statistical areas of Thames Valley, there are no neighbourhoods which fall into the poorest quintile of the Indices of Multiple Deprivation – that does not mean that poverty, social exclusion or spatial isolation are entirely absent.

⁴² Sometimes, historians and social commentators adopt somewhat romantic notions of the 'mutuality of the oppressed' and over play their hand about community resilience and self help within poor communities. That is a dangerous assumption to make about hard-pressed areas where managing to keep going on a day-to-day basis in socially stressed communities consumes people's energy physically and emotionally. To assume that adopting middle-class values associated with civic voluntarism will get such communities out of hot water using their own mettle can be both unfair and unrealistic.

While localities undoubtedly shape sector purpose and structure to some extent and help to account for spatial variations in sector wellbeing and impact, other factors also come into play derived from national political decision making which shape the prospects of VCSE organisations. Often the impact can be direct – when, for example, government shifts policy direction and invests heavily in one aspect of social life to the detriment of others.

On other occasions, national government decisions on how it works with local and regional public sector agencies, such as the NHS or local authorities can have a profound impact on voluntary sector activity. One such challenge, highlighted in this report, is the government's squeeze on public finances which has the effect of lowering the value of contracts offered to VCSE organisations to deliver public services. This could, potentially, upset the financial dynamics of the voluntary sector now that some VCSE organisations are losing interest in, or have already withdrawn from delivering public services.

When this issue was raised in previous reports in this series, the emphasis was on what government should do if *it* wants the voluntary sector to remain engaged in public service delivery.⁴³ Here, the issue is the potential knock-on effect of big VCSE organisations withdrawing from contracts for grant finance on the voluntary sector as a whole over the next few years.

It is useful to take a 'medium-term' view of the situation because, realistically, the most likely response of many VCSE organisations currently engaged in public services will be to 'bide their time' and see what national politicians do if they awaken to the potential consequences of voluntary sector withdrawal from this arena. Nonetheless, a likely response is that leaders of big VCSE organisations will already be looking for alternative ways of sustaining their activity.

On this matter, the evidence from Third Sector Trends is crystal clear – leaders in 94% of VCSE organisations which were delivering contracts in 2025 stated that they intended to bid for funding 'to deliver something brand new' (compared with 68% of leaders in organisations which have no intention of delivering public services). They may be small in number, but they are amongst the largest voluntary organisations in the area and employ many staff – so their financial needs are substantial

Increased competition for grants could upset the current equilibrium in funding opportunities in Thames Valley, especially for middling-sized VCSE organisations in a marketplace with finite resources. But the extent to which that happens may vary by region because, the percentages of organisations delivering contracts has actually risen in the South East of England since 2022 (though, admittedly, from a lower base than in the industrial north and midlands). In Thames Valley, however, the indications are that engagement with contracts has fallen slightly since 2022 from 6% to 5% of voluntary organisations (the percentage bidding for contracts has risen from less than 1% to 1.5%).

More competition is potentially bad news for many other VCSE organisations which are heavily dependent upon grants in the South East. But to reiterate an earlier point, the voluntary sector in the region is currently in quite good shape with relatively few VCSE organisations using reserves for essential costs.

While the VCSE sector in South East England generally and Thames Valley in particular, is currently in a strong position and most leaders are confident and optimistic about their future outlook, there are some issues on the near horizon that could affect sector wellbeing. The first of these is local government reorganisation which, as shown in the introduction of this report, could have a significant impact upon the shape of administrative boundaries across Oxfordshire. Similarly, the

⁴³ The reason why contracts have become detrimental and what consequences that may have for government have already been explored in this series of reports, see Section 4.5, *Third Sector Trends in England and Wales 2025: relationships, influencing and collaborative working*, Newcastle: Community Foundation North East, <https://www.stchads.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Relationships-influencing-and-collaborative-working-Third-Sector-Trends-in-England-and-Wales-2025-October-2025-1.pdf>

redrawing of NHS ICB boundaries to include East Berkshire unitary authorities may produce unforeseen consequences.

From previous studies by Third Sector Trends, it is clear that local government reorganisation can be a mixed blessing for the voluntary sector. When county councils are split up into unitary authorities it can lead to 'boundary hardening' as councillors seek to vary their policies and practices from adjacent areas. For voluntary organisations which work across these boundaries, that can produce the duplication of activities in many domains – not least in having to develop productive relationships with several local authority officers and directorates rather than just one.

In other respects, relationships with public sector organisations may be simplified through the extended boundaries of the new NHS Thames Valley ICB as this may help to facilitate the work of larger VCSE organisations working across former ICB boundaries.

This report has shown that many VCSE organisations are engaged directly or indirectly with issues concerning health and wellbeing – but determining who does what in the VCSE sector will always be hard to disentangle. That is because approaches to practice are sometimes shared, definitions of purpose are diverse and constituencies of beneficiaries are complex. At best, it is only possible to define general areas of activity. At the local level in Thames Valley, however, there are positive signs that many VCSE organisations are working together collaboratively or in formal partnership arrangements.

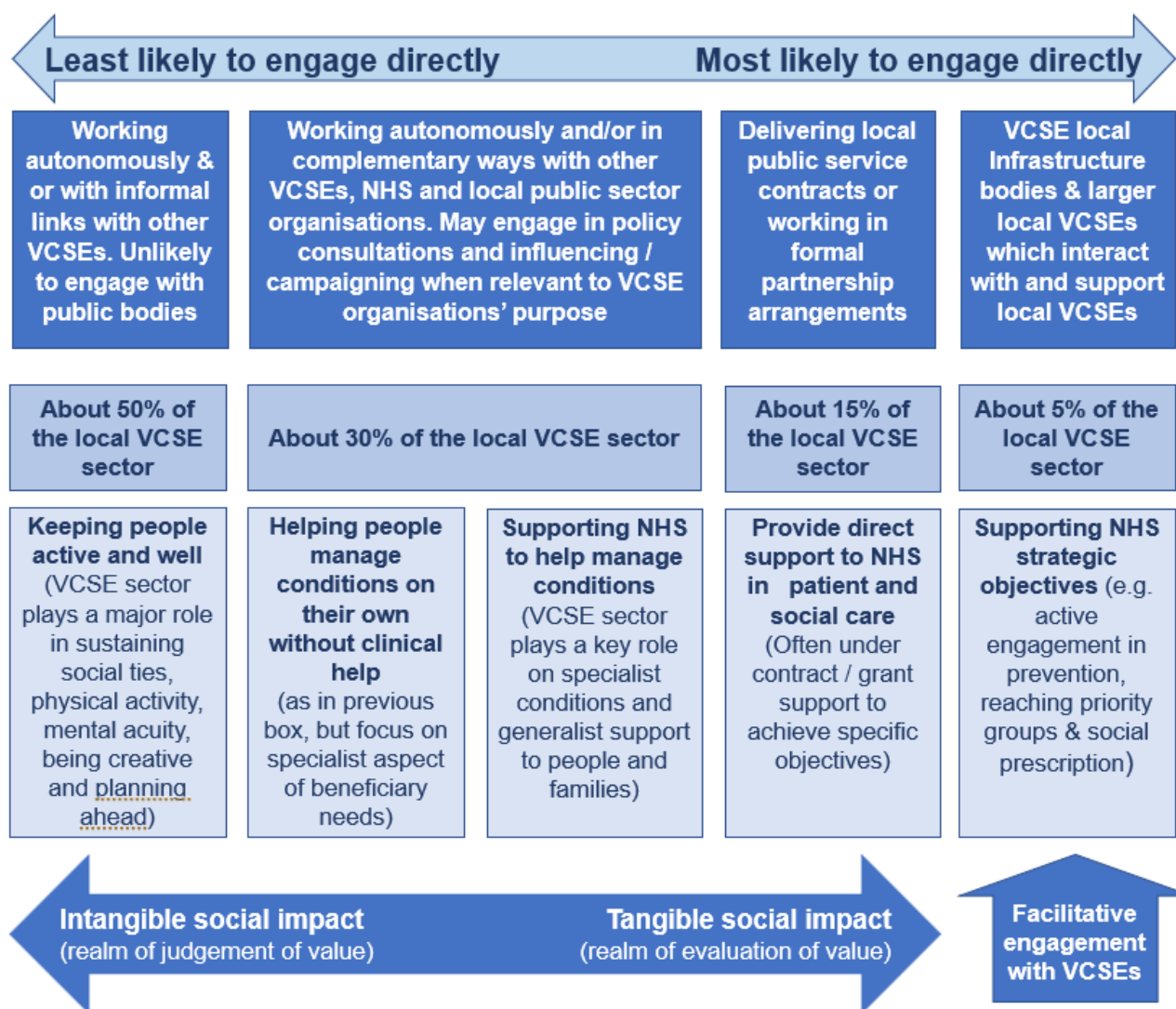
It is crucial to note, however, that much of the activity of the VCSE sector addresses 'intangible' aspects of social value which is of great importance to public health – and particularly so in the realm of prevention or in complementary but autonomous aspects of activity which contribute to the avoidance or alleviation of health conditions.

This can be a good thing from an NHS point of view because it means that the VCSE sector is already finding the resources to create the energy to tackle issues on its own terms which contribute to the greater public good (see Figure 6.2). Consequently, the NHS and local authorities can learn how to value and work creatively and flexibly with that contribution and factor it into thinking about the purpose of ICSs.

This is a complex environment for both the VCSE sector and for NHS Integrated Care Boards to understand, navigate and negotiate. But if the objective to improve prevention of health conditions is to move closer to centre stage, as indicated in NHS England Integrated Care System strategies and in the Hewitt Review⁴⁴ and the 10-year plan to shift resources from 'illness' to 'health', then recognising and valuing what is happening on the ground now in the VCSE sector is vital.

⁴⁴ (2023) *Hewitt Review: an independent review of integrated care systems*, London: OGL, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-hewitt-review-an-independent-review-of-integrated-care-systems>

Figure 6.2 The contribution of the VCSE sector to public health



Rationalisation of NHS ICB boundaries in Thames Valley is a good idea. But it should not be forgotten that the imperative to change boundaries (or to abolish *NHS England* itself⁴⁵) were not just about smoothing and strengthening interactions but also to save money.⁴⁶ ICB cuts have been severe and resulted in the loss of many dedicated staff across the country who worked hard to build positive relationships with the local voluntary sector and between other health providers within the NHS and the private sector.

As Figure 6.2 indicates, about half of VCSE sector organisations are very unlikely to engage directly with ICS policies at a strategic level. Indeed, many may not recognise, nor be interested in articulating how their work adds value to public health. That may not matter to them, but it does not mean that their contribution should not

⁴⁵ NHS Confederation (2025) Abolishing NHS England: what you need to know (13th March) <https://www.nhsconfed.org/publications/abolishing-nhs-england-what-you-need-know>

⁴⁶ From a government perspective, the rationale was to redirect funds to front-line patient care: Department of Health and Social Care (2025) Billions to be redirected back into patient care with NHS reform (Press release, 11th November) <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/billions-to-be-redirected-back-into-patient-care-with-nhs-reform>; but these decisions were made apparently without regard to other core policy objectives of improving public health through preventative measures and instigating well-accepted rationale from the Marmot Review of investing more heavily in poorer areas; Marmot, M., Allen, J., Boyce, T., Goldblatt, P. and Morrison, J. Health Foundation (2020) *Health Equity in England: the Marmot Review 10 years on*, London: Institute of Health Equity: https://www.health.org.uk/publications/reports/the-marmot-review-10-years-on?psafe_param=1&qclid=Cj0KQCQjwr82iBhCuARIsAO0EAZwSgDf6T2TZPnb8NZx3gzniFTM1VhUHsJtsc_vlzHwugnMWJcJl4bEaAq6aEALw_wcB. Other commentators have taken a different perspective: Launder, M. (2026) 'ICB cuts an "absolute shit show", say leaders', *Health Service Journal* (10th March): <https://www.hsj.co.uk/integrated-care/icb-cuts-an-absolute-shitshow-say-leaders/7041248.article>

be valued in holistic terms. And in some cases, they may have a more direct role to play, if they are enticed to do so, by – for example, an effective link worker with their ear to the ground on new avenues for social prescription. That work can not be done effectively in the context of dramatic cuts to local ICB budgets and the government's apparent loss of political interest in and practical commitment to investing substantively in preventative health initiatives.

6.3 Issues for wider debate in Thames Valley

Third Sector Trends is an independent comparative study of continuity and change in the structure, dynamics, purpose, energy and impact of the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector (VCSE). This report on Thames Valley, as a sub-region of South East England, constitutes one of five area studies – including *North East England, Wales, Essex* (in the context of East of England) and *Devon & Cornwall* (in the context of South West England).⁴⁷

Parallel comparative area studies help to make sense of local conditions by holding up a mirror to 'similar' or 'different' places. This makes it easier to formulate a list of issues about local policy and practice from a 'position of distance', which the voluntary sector (and stakeholders in the public and private sectors which support it) may choose to debate.

Making critical observations from a distance can help people working in the locality to draw back from 'taken for granted' beliefs and expectations about what is happening in their area. That can sometimes be an uncomfortable and unwelcome experience. But the observations offered below, on policy and practice priorities in Thames Valley, we hope, will be taken in the right spirit as 'talking points' on issues that might sometimes be overlooked.

Five points for debate are offered, which are based on the analysis of Thames Valley data collated in this report by Third Sector Trends and from a previous report written in 2023 based on the 2022 survey data.

- **Local government reorganisation and new boundaries for NHS Thames Valley Integrated Care Board – an opportunity to consolidate and enhance existing good practice**

Many voluntary organisations in Thames Valley make direct contributions to public health by delivering public services under contract for local authorities and the NHS. Local government reorganisation can disrupt established understandings and arrangements with the local VCSE sector in unpredictable ways (as may be the case now in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire and previously in Buckinghamshire).

Similarly, the redrawing and widening of NHS Integrated Care Board (ICB) boundaries may be unsettling for those areas previously situated in other ICBs but could also present opportunities to reframe, consolidate and enhance aspects of effective practice.

VCSE sector public service delivery in the fields of health and social care is delivered primarily by larger voluntary organisations working within or across political geographies. Running against national trends, there are indications that voluntary organisations' participation in the delivery of public service contracts in Thames Valley is increasing – albeit from a much lower base than in comparative regions such as North West or North East England.

⁴⁷ Studies of North East England and Wales using 2025 Third Sector Trends data have already been published and are available now. Reports on Essex and Devon & Cornwall, to be published later in 2026 will also be available here: <https://www.stchads.ac.uk/research/third-sector-trends-in-england-and-wales/publications-from-third-sector-trends/>. Many other comparative studies from previous rounds of Third Sector Trends are also available in the archive.

This suggests that interactions between the VCSE Alliance, local authorities and the ICB have been successful in raising awareness of such opportunities and helping interested voluntary organisations to engage. This finding should not necessarily raise expectations that interest in delivering public services under contract will increase further or even be sustained at the current level.

Nationally, the evidence indicates that in a tight fiscal environment, local authority and NHS contract values remain too low for many voluntary organisations to enter or to remain active in this field. Certainly, the decline of middling-sized voluntary organisation involvement has been shown to be significant.

The responsibility to increase the value of contracts ultimately resides with central government. Self imposed fiscal constraints currently disallow such a policy shift, and instead government has taken action only to reform procurement practice to ease engagement the VCSE sector. Third Sector Trends time-series analysis strongly suggests that this policy is mistaken because the number of eligible voluntary organisations which will no longer deliver public service contracts has grown substantially.

In these circumstances, ICBs, local authorities and voluntary organisations alike are caught in a bind that will be very difficult to resolve. To retain organisations already delivering contracts (and those which remain 'ambivalent' about whether to do so) will involve sensitive debate. This may require procurement officers to draw back from explicit or implicit expectations that voluntary organisations should or must 'add value' to their contractual work.

An open discussion on the value of 'additionality' (which is less often produced by private sector firms) needs to be had to reach an adequate recognition of how much this costs voluntary organisations to do (see third bullet point on volunteering). That is not to say that local authorities or the NHS can pay for it – but to urge them to play an active role in assisting the VCSE sector to gain access to alternative sources of finance to support it (see next bullet point on the 'soft power' of NHS anchor organisations).

■ **Strengthening public sector understanding of the value of the VCSE sector's 'intangible' contributions to public health**

As stated above, the focus of ICBs on 'systems' tends to concentrate attention on aspects of *direct* engagement with specific aspects of health and social care provision. Certainly, this report shows that many aspects of VCSE sector activity contributes to public health directly and is funded to do so via public service contracts and grants.

That work barely scratches the surface of the contribution the VCSE sector makes to public health in less tangible ways – such as the provision of social support to beneficiaries with health conditions; or, as importantly to the improvement of public health by encouraging physical activity, mental acuity, tackling social isolation and enhancing access to services. Most of this work is not funded from the public purse but comes mainly from grants from charitable trusts and foundations or philanthropic awards.

Research for NHS England has demonstrated that the NHS and local authorities act as 'anchor organisations' which make significant indirect contributions to the local economy, employment, skills and labour force development. NHS and local authority resources have undoubtedly been tightened but there is, nonetheless, a debate to be had amongst stakeholders in Thames Valley ICB, local authorities, and the VCSE Alliance as to whether the 'anchor role' of major public institutions can be strengthened.

For example, Thames Valley, the ICB could extend its financial and institutional influence as a core sub-region wide stakeholder to encourage other funders such as trusts and foundations and local authorities to invest in

those parts of the VCSE sector that support public health which are not under the direct purview of health institutions.

We suggest that it would be unwise for the ICB to become too 'systematic' and 'target driven' in this influencing role with other funding institutions which work in the locality. Charitable trusts and community foundations are independent-minded entities which often work in complementary ways with other agencies – but most would resist being corralled into making direct financial contributions to another organisation's agenda. Instead, the ICB could capitalise on its 'soft power' as a major actor whose activities converge or coalesce with those of local authorities, charitable trusts and foundations and the local VCSE sector.

■ **Recognising the value of regular volunteering in the context of the cost the VCSE sector incurs in their management, recruitment and retention**

Volunteers are not a 'free resource' who turn up and serve like clockwork. They need support, care, training and management – and that is costly for VCSE organisations. And yet, debates on volunteering in policy circles rarely concentrate on these issues and instead focus upon increasing local volunteer capacity. Wider debate on this issue may need to take place in Thames Valley to help inform public bodies to consider how to support or invest in voluntary action.

For years, policy and funding initiatives on volunteering have focused primarily upon recruitment. Often this is underpinned by assumptions that there is a 'reservoir of untapped talent' bursting to volunteer - if only they were asked or could find out where to access opportunities. Such beliefs are often mistaken – many people do not want to volunteer because they give their all by going the extra mile in other aspects of their lives as teachers, shopkeepers, emergency service workers, medical staff, taxi drivers, hairdressers, and so on.

Volunteer recruitment policy can also be misdirected when it is assumed that in poorer areas, there can (or *should*) be proportionately as many volunteers as in rich areas. In hard-pressed areas, where many people's lives are constrained by aspects of critical need, it is often too much of a stretch to divert attention to voluntary work.

This report has shown that there is an inherent preference in VCSE organisations to take on regular volunteers who are skilled and require limited supervision, provide regularised and reliable support. That is understandable, as – with an effective group of volunteers - organisational leaders can plan their practice effectively. And while ephemeral volunteers are extremely helpful in certain contexts (such as marshalling at events or fundraising) regular contributors are the most highly valued.

Striking an effort bargain with volunteers is not one sided, as government and think tanks so often seem to assume. To be productive, volunteers need training and continual support and encouragement so that they are not pushed too hard (and driven away) nor feel undervalued and insufficiently challenged (and driven away). These are delicate and time-consuming issues for voluntary organisations to manage.

While a great many volunteers can be trusted to be 'autonomous', 'reliable', 'productive' and 'effective', some VCSE organisations see it as their duty to include those people who benefit personally from being a volunteer even if they consume more energy than they produce. In the mental health field, for example, voluntary organisations are often the only places providing such opportunities for people whose problems might otherwise intensify and leave them personally and socially adrift.

Debates about volunteering need to be balanced so as to move away from totting up the volumes of new volunteers who have been recruited and towards how to sustain those who currently contribute effectively and the social and fiscal costs of not engaging with those people for whom volunteering is a personal lifeline.

■ **The role of local voluntary sector infrastructure organisations in anticipating change, shaping debates and championing sector achievements**

Collectively, local infrastructure organisations (LIOs) already work closely together in the *Thames Valley VCSE Alliance* (now incorporating LIOs supporting voluntary organisations in Bracknell Forest, Slough, Windsor & Maidenhead).

This achievement in Thames Valley should not be undervalued. In many similar-sized areas around the country, relationships between LIOs are less collaborative and are sometime quite fraught during local government reform and the establishment or reconfiguration of combined authorities.

It is important, however, to communicate to the ICB that there will never be ‘one door’ to the voluntary sector and that policy frameworks about how to engage with and support voluntary organisations need to be flexible with multiple touchpoints rather than unidimensional.⁴⁸

There may, of course, be some advantages to work with the new ICB to consolidate aspects of infrastructure support and debate the costs incurred to avoid unnecessary replication of roles (where, for example, specific nodes of proven expertise could be more widely adopted).

But this is not to argue that LIOs’ core local VCSE sector support activities can or should be streamlined to cover larger geographies in consistent ways. As this research report shows, local demographics, social, cultural and economic conditions shape the way the local VCSE sector is configured (according to levels of affluence or deprivation, or issues such as the density of minority ethnic residents).

Expert localised knowledge remains a vital source of VCSE strength and justifies the varied foci that LIOs adopt to serve particular area needs. And wide-ranging though this research report is, it does not cover informal civil society activity by unregistered less formalised groups that lay beneath the radar of the formal registered sector that LIOs support.

It is recognised that ICBs around the country are under financial pressure following a significant reduction in funding and that this may incentivise developing more ‘streamlined’ and ‘systematic’ approaches to engage with the voluntary sector. By doing so, arguably, more may be lost than gained because the ‘soft power’ of ICBs can only be strengthened through its access to and retelling of discrete stories of change produced by voluntary organisations in communities.

■ **Building the base of small-scale philanthropy and rekindling relationships with private business**

A key point to debate collectively by the ICB, local authorities and LIOs, is how to communicate the strengths and wellbeing of the local voluntary sector to the private sector. This is especially important because financial support from business has lapsed in recent years following the pandemic and a range of global and national economic and fiscal challenges. Explicable though the lowering of business support may be – that is not a good reason to accept the

⁴⁸ For further discussion and guidance, see Third Sector Trends (2018) *How to work effectively with the Third Sector*. Durham: Institute for Local Governance: <https://www.stchads.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/ILG-How-to-work-effectively-with-the-third-sector-discussion-paper-March-2019-.pdf>

situation because in some areas, such as North East England, business support to the VCSE sector has *increased* rather than decline.

This was achieved by communicating positive and inspirational messages about the local VCSE sector and arranging inviting and enjoyable informal interactions and events where voluntary organisations could meet up with business people and get to know each other. It is better, when staging such events, not to be too 'strategic' about leveraging from business what the VCSE sector 'wants' - but rather, to think more broadly about how business and voluntary organisations' interests are shared and coalesce.

Third Sector Trends qualitative research shows that most business/voluntary organisation relationships are ephemeral and are more likely to happen by accident than by design.⁴⁹ LIOs, together with local community foundations and public bodies supporting interactions have been shown to reap rewards from staging events that help to 'court serendipity' not 'arranged marriages'. That is because people need to get to know each other and enjoy each other's company and be stimulated by the ideas they produce.

Messaging needs to be carefully framed because people in business generally want to feel good about making a contribution whether that involves financial support, pro bono advice, volunteering by their employees or in-kind support (such as the use of space, use of equipment or goods).

When enough of that happens, positive stories about philanthropy on a small scale can circulate and travel through the business community. LIOs, local councillors, the ICB, charitable trusts (and especially community foundations) can help the business community to contribute by making small-scale philanthropic giving easy to do by offering to manage funds.

Business support for the VCSE sector has declined recently in Thames Valley. That can be reversed if positive action is taken.

While the critical points made above may be contentious from the perspective of some readers, we offer them as constructive observations for debate. And when set in context, of course, these statements are offered against a backdrop of a highly positive assessment of the energy, ambition and vitality of the voluntary sector in Thames Valley and the enormous social benefit it produces.

⁴⁹ See: *Going the extra mile: how business supports charities*. <https://www.stchads.ac.uk/research/research-news/going-the-extra-mile-how-business-supports-charities/>

THAMES VALLEY
VCSE ALLIANCE

