

The Small and Mighty!

Infrastructure needs of the smallest voluntary, community and social enterprise organisations in Oxfordshire:

Research Report

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A vibrant, resilient VCSE sector supported by strong infrastructure can transform Oxfordshire's communities.

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Executive Summary

Every day across Oxfordshire, thousands of small community groups and charities work to make life better for local people. These groups run food banks, organise activities for young people, support older residents, maintain community spaces, and provide countless other vital services. Most operate on very small budgets—less than £100,000 per year—and many are run entirely by volunteers.

This research looked at what these small groups need to keep doing their important work and how we can better support them. We surveyed nearly 300 organisations and conducted 18 in-depth interviews to understand their challenges and opportunities.

The Current Picture

Oxfordshire has an estimated 6,484 community groups and charities, with three-quarters being small or micro-organisations. Together, they involve over 80,200 volunteers and employ about 24,000 people. The majority of this sector (75%) is made up of the micro and small organisations. This makes the community sector a crucial part of life in Oxfordshire, providing services worth millions of pounds each year.

However, these groups face growing challenges. More people need their services, but they have limited resources to meet this increasing demand. Rising costs, fewer volunteers, and reduced funding make it harder for them to operate effectively.

The landscape of infrastructure support has changed in recent years. Traditional funding from local authorities and statutory organisations has reduced, leading to more project-specific funding rather than core support. This has impacted Local Infrastructure Organisations' ability to provide coordinated infrastructure support across the sector.

What Support Do Groups Need?

Our research identified four key areas where small groups need support to thrive. We framed these under the "Four Pillars of Infrastructure Support":

1. Voice: Having a Say in Important Decisions

Small groups often feel left out of important conversations about their communities. While 47% of groups sometimes hear about opportunities to influence decisions, only 7% of the smallest organisations feel they regularly have real influence. This is particularly true in rural areas, where groups often feel like a "lost voice."

What's needed:

- Better ways for small groups to share their knowledge about community needs
- Support to participate in local decision-making
- Help to speak up about issues that matter to their communities
- Special attention to include voices from rural areas and marginalised communities

2. Volunteering: The Heart of Community Action

Volunteers are crucial for small community groups. On average, each organisation relies on about 35 volunteers, contributing around 56 hours per week. However, groups face serious challenges with volunteering:

- Only 24% of organisations have enough volunteers to run their activities properly
- Many groups rely on older volunteers and struggle to attract younger people
- Volunteer coordination becomes difficult without dedicated staff or resources
- Groups need help with volunteer recruitment, training, and management

The research shows that while many groups understand good volunteer management practices, they need practical help to put these into action. This is especially true for the smallest organisations, which often lack formal systems for supporting volunteers.

3. Working Together: Building Strong Partnerships

Small groups want to work together but often find it difficult. Only 12% of organisations regularly find opportunities to collaborate with others, and this drops even lower for working with larger organisations like the NHS or councils. The picture varies across the county:

- Oxford City shows the strongest partnership working, with 19% of groups regularly finding collaborative opportunities
- Rural areas face particular challenges in connecting with others
- Smaller groups often lack the time and resources to build partnerships
- Competition for funding can discourage collaboration

Despite these challenges, groups see great value in working together. They want more structured opportunities to meet, share resources, and learn from each other.

4. Development: Building Stronger Organisations

While 91% of groups understand what they need to improve, over half rarely or never get the support to make these improvements. This "development gap" affects different areas differently:

- Oxford City and Cherwell show stronger awareness of development needs
- South Oxfordshire faces particular challenges accessing support
- Smaller groups especially struggle to get help with basics like governance and planning
- Groups need practical help with things like funding applications and financial management

The Way Forward

To help small community groups continue their vital work, Oxfordshire needs stronger support systems. This means:

1. Investing in support organisations that help small groups
2. Making sure help reaches rural areas, smaller organisations and low-income areas
3. Creating better ways for groups to influence decisions
4. Developing practical solutions for volunteer recruitment and management
5. Building stronger networks for groups to work together
6. Providing accessible training and development opportunities

Without this support, we risk losing essential community services, particularly in rural areas and communities that need them most. The research shows that while Oxfordshire has a vibrant community sector, its smallest organisations need better support to continue serving local communities effectively.

The good news is that we know what can work. Support organisations like Community First Oxfordshire and OCVA (Oxfordshire Community and Voluntary Action) provide valuable help to many groups across the county. However, the reach of these support services has reduced over time.

By strengthening these support systems now, we can ensure Oxfordshire's community groups continue to thrive and serve local people effectively for years to come.

1.Introduction

1.1 What this research is about

Oxfordshire has a diverse and vibrant voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector that plays a vital role in supporting communities across the county. With an estimated 24,000 employees and 80,200 volunteers, the sector provides essential services ranging from health prevention and social care to community activities and support. This represents a higher proportion of VCSE organisations and employees compared to neighbouring areas like Buckinghamshire, which has approximately 11,000 employees and 46,900 volunteers.

The majority of Oxfordshire's VCSE sector (almost 75%) consists of micro and small organisations - the bedrock of community support. These organisations, operating with annual incomes under £100,000, are often deeply embedded in their local communities but face significant challenges around sustainability, volunteer recruitment and retention, and accessing consistent funding streams.

Infrastructure support - the backbone of assistance that helps VCSE organisations thrive - is provided through Local Infrastructure Organisations (LIOs) such as Community First Oxfordshire (CFO) and Oxfordshire Community and Voluntary Action (OCVA). This support traditionally encompasses:

- Leadership and advocacy to ensure the sector's voice is heard
- Partnership building and collaboration opportunities
- Capacity building through training and development
- Volunteer recruitment and management support

However, the landscape of infrastructure support has changed significantly in recent years. Traditional funding from local authorities and statutory organisations has reduced, leading to more project-specific funding rather than core support. This has impacted LIOs' ability to provide coordinated infrastructure support across the sector.

This research aims to understand the current state and needs of Oxfordshire's smallest VCSE organisations and develop an evidence-based framework for future infrastructure support. Specifically, it seeks to:

- Engage with both formal and informal VCSE organisations
- Understand their current challenges and support needs
- Identify opportunities for improved infrastructure support
- Document the reality of place-based community work
- Propose a clear delivery framework for infrastructure support beyond 2025

For this research, "smallest" VCSE organisations are defined as those with annual turnover under £100,000, further categorised as:

- Micro organisations (under £10,000/year) - representing 36% of registered charities in Oxfordshire and an estimated 95% of unregistered groups
- Small organisations (£10,000-£50,000/year) - representing 28.5% of registered charities
- Larger small organisations (£50,000-£100,000/year) - representing 8.8% of registered charities

This definition allows for nuanced understanding while recognising that these organisations, despite their size, play a crucial role in Oxfordshire's communities. Through surveys and in-depth interviews

this research aims to give voice to these organisations and shape future infrastructure support to meet their needs effectively.

1.2 Why this research is needed

The VCSE sector in Oxfordshire, particularly its smallest organisations, faces unprecedented challenges that threaten the sustainability of vital community services. These challenges have been building over recent years and are now reaching a critical point where traditional support structures are under significant pressure, making this research both timely and essential.

Small VCSE organisations are experiencing mounting pressures from multiple directions. Funding streams have become increasingly narrow and project-specific, moving away from the core funding that helps organisations maintain basic operations and plan for the future. Many organisations report that despite providing universal community services, they struggle to access grants that increasingly target specific demographics or issues. This creates a particular challenge for small organisations that serve whole communities rather than specific groups.

The volunteer landscape is changing dramatically. Organisations across the sector report declining volunteer numbers, with many struggling to maintain essential services. A significant concern is the aging volunteer base - many organisations rely heavily on volunteers in their 70s and 80s with no clear succession plan. The challenge isn't simply about numbers; organisations describe difficulties attracting younger volunteers and managing the increasing complexities of volunteer coordination with limited resources. As one organisation noted, "A passionate few who are dedicated to the organisation take on the lions share and they can easily burn out."

These challenges are compounded by increasing operational pressures:

- Growing service demand alongside reducing resources
- Difficulty recruiting and retaining staff
- Limited capacity for strategic planning while delivering services
- Increasing administrative and compliance requirements

Infrastructure support plays a vital role in helping small VCSE organisations navigate these challenges. However, this support itself has been significantly affected by changing patterns of funding and delivery. Traditional infrastructure support from local authorities has reduced dramatically, with a shift from core funding to project-specific funding for infrastructure organisations. This has reduced capacity for coordinated information, advice, and support, creating a gap in strategic representation for smaller organisations.

The impact on core infrastructure functions has been significant. Support for strategic representation and advocacy has diminished, while training and networking opportunities have become more limited. Community engagement, capacity building, and volunteer support - all critical for small organisations - have been affected by reduced resources and changing delivery models.

This research comes at a crucial moment for several reasons. First, there is an urgent need to understand current infrastructure needs versus existing support, identifying gaps in provision and gathering clear evidence to inform future funding decisions. Second, the sector's sustainability is at stake - addressing volunteer recruitment and retention, developing sustainable funding models, and strengthening organisational resilience are all critical challenges that need evidence-based solutions.

Furthermore, the sector needs coordinated strategic planning. Understanding how infrastructure support can best meet actual sector needs and planning for 2025 and beyond requires careful research and consultation. Perhaps most importantly, this research gives voice to the smallest

organisations in the sector. Their experiences and needs must be understood and documented to enable evidence-based advocacy for appropriate support.

Without this research, there is a risk that future infrastructure support will not adequately meet the needs of the smallest organisations - those that form the backbone of community support across Oxfordshire. By developing a clear understanding of current needs and proposing practical solutions for future infrastructure support, this research aims to ensure these vital organisations can continue their important work in Oxfordshire's communities.

1.3 This research in context

The VCSE sector in Oxfordshire operates within a broader regional and national context that helps illuminate both its strengths and challenges. Recent research conducted by Durham University, funded by Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire, Berkshire West Integrated Care Board (BOB ICB) via the VCSE Health Alliance, provides valuable comparative data showing that Oxfordshire has a particularly robust VCSE presence compared to neighbouring areas.

The scale of Oxfordshire's VCSE sector is significant, with approximately 24,000 employees and 80,200 volunteers contributing to community wellbeing. This represents a notably larger sector than in neighbouring Buckinghamshire, which has around 11,000 employees and 46,900 volunteers. This difference reflects both the diverse nature of Oxfordshire's communities and the strong tradition of voluntary and community action in the county.

However, the size of the sector brings its own challenges. With almost 75% of Oxfordshire's VCSE organisations being micro or small organisations, the county has a particularly high proportion of organisations operating with limited resources. This creates specific infrastructure support needs that may differ from areas with a higher proportion of medium and large organisations.

The challenges facing Oxfordshire's smallest VCSE organisations mirror national trends:

- Declining volunteer numbers following the post-COVID surge in community action
- Growing pressure on services as cost-of-living challenges affect communities
- Increasing difficulty in securing sustainable funding
- Rising operational costs affecting organisational sustainability

However, some challenges are particularly acute in Oxfordshire:

- High living costs affecting both paid staff recruitment and volunteer availability
- Significant rural-urban disparities in access to services and support
- Complex relationship between city, town, and rural provision
- Particular pressure on housing and transport affecting service delivery

Looking toward 2025, the VCSE sector's role is likely to become even more critical. National policy increasingly recognises the sector's importance in delivering community services and supporting public health and wellbeing. The integration of health and social care systems, particularly through Integrated Care Systems (ICS), creates both opportunities and challenges for small VCSE organisations.

The BOB ICS area (Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire, and Berkshire West) presents particular opportunities for learning and collaboration across boundaries. While each area has distinct characteristics, there are valuable opportunities for shared learning about effective infrastructure support models. However, it's crucial that such learning recognises the unique aspects of Oxfordshire's VCSE landscape.

2. Research Approach

2.1 Research aims and key questions

This research project aims to develop a deep understanding of infrastructure support needs for Oxfordshire's smallest VCSE organisations to inform future support delivery. Specifically, the research aims to answer the following questions:

1. How are the smallest VCSE organisations defined?
2. What is the current state of the sector for the smallest VCSE organisations in Oxfordshire?
3. What infrastructure support currently exists and how well is it meeting needs?
4. What infrastructure model will best meet the needs of the smallest VCSE organisations in Oxfordshire in 2025 and beyond?

These research questions are designed to generate practical insights that can inform the development of infrastructure support that truly meets the needs of Oxfordshire's smallest VCSE organisations. The questions acknowledge both the current challenges facing the sector and the need to plan effectively for the future.

2.2 The Four Pillars of infrastructure

This research uses the National Association for Voluntary and Community Action (NAVCA) 'Four Pillars of Infrastructure' framework to analyse and understand infrastructure support needs. This framework provides a comprehensive structure for examining the different aspects of support that VCSE organisations need to thrive and deliver effective services in their communities.

Leadership and Advocacy

Local Infrastructure Organisations play a crucial role in ensuring the VCSE sector has a strong voice and influence in local decision-making. Through this pillar, infrastructure support helps ensure:

- The VCSE sector's voice is heard and influences key decisions and policy development
- Organisations can actively participate in local decision-making structures
- Local partners are better informed about the VCSE sector and communities
- The sector has credible leadership creating links within and across sectors
- Under-represented voices and those with lived experience can contribute to local planning

Partnerships and Collaboration

Strong partnerships strengthen both places and communities. This pillar focuses on:

- Building effective communication and collaboration among VCSE organisations
- Developing partnerships between sectors and with communities
- Enabling organisations to deliver services more effectively through formal and informal collaboration
- Creating networks that enhance service delivery and community impact
- Supporting co-design and co-production of services

Capacity Building

Infrastructure organisations help VCSE organisations fulfil their potential through practical support and development opportunities. This pillar includes:

- Identifying sector strengths and needs
- Providing high-quality support, advice, and training
- Helping organisations develop knowledge, skills, and sustainability
- Supporting organisations to understand and respond to community needs
- Enabling adaptation to changing circumstances and requirements

Volunteering

Volunteering is fundamental to thriving communities, and infrastructure support plays a vital role in nurturing volunteering opportunities. This pillar encompasses:

- Creating a positive environment where volunteering can flourish
- Reducing barriers to volunteering, especially for excluded groups
- Supporting volunteer recruitment and management
- Promoting good practice in volunteer engagement
- Demonstrating and raising awareness of volunteering's value

These four pillars are interconnected, with activity in one area often supporting and strengthening work in others. For example, effective partnerships often enhance both leadership opportunities and capacity building, while strong volunteer support can contribute to organisational sustainability and service delivery.

This research examines how well current infrastructure support delivers across all four pillars and identifies where additional or different support might be needed. The framework helps ensure a systematic approach to understanding both current provision and future needs.

2.3 Methodology

This research employed a mixed-methods approach to gather comprehensive insights into the infrastructure needs of Oxfordshire's smallest VCSE organisations. The methodology was designed to capture both breadth and depth of understanding, while ensuring representation from diverse organisations across the sector.

Research Components

Secondary Data Analysis: The research began with analysis of existing literature and data, which provided context and helped frame the primary research. This included:

- Charity Commission and Companies House data
- Office of the Regulator of Community Interest Companies records
- National and regional sector research
- Local policy and strategy documents

Survey Research: Two complementary surveys were developed and distributed:

- Primary survey targeting the smallest VCSE organisations
- Secondary survey for organisations providing infrastructure support

The comprehensive surveys achieved 297 responses, providing substantial quantitative data and qualitative insights from across the sector.

In-depth Interviews: The interview program was expanded from the original plan to ensure wider representation, particularly focusing on:

- Infrastructure organisations
- Larger organisations working in partnership with smaller organisations
- Organisations led by or working with under-represented communities

This adaptation proved valuable in gathering deeper insights from groups that were initially under-represented in the survey responses. In total, 18 in-depth interviews were held.

Stakeholder Review Draft findings were presented at two review workshops with key stakeholders and participants to:

- Test emerging conclusions
- Identify gaps in understanding
- Develop practical recommendations
- Ensure findings resonated with sector experience

Methodological Adaptations

The original methodology included focus groups, but due to timing constraints and limited sign-up, this element was replaced with additional in-depth interviews. This adaptation proved beneficial, allowing for:

- More focused discussions with under-represented groups
- Greater flexibility in participation
- Deeper exploration of specific themes
- More detailed individual organisational perspectives

2.4 Defining 'Smallest' VCSE organisations

The definition of what constitutes a 'smallest' VCSE organisation requires careful consideration, as it impacts both the scope of this research and its practical applications. While there are various approaches to categorising VCSE organisations, this research adopts an income-based definition while acknowledging other important factors.

Income-Based Definition

For this research, 'smallest' VCSE organisations are defined as those with annual turnover under £100,000. This encompasses three distinct sub-categories:

- Micro organisations (under £10,000/year)
- Small organisations (£10,000-£50,000/year)
- Larger small organisations (£50,000-£100,000/year)

This categorisation aligns with but differs slightly from other common definitions in the sector. For example, National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) uses similar thresholds for micro and small organisations, while the recent BOB ICS-commissioned Durham University report defined small charities as those under £50,000/year.

Beyond Income

While income provides a clear metric for categorisation, the research recognises that size is about more than just financial turnover. Other important characteristics of the smallest organisations often include:

- Reliance primarily or entirely on volunteers
- Limited or no paid staff
- Informal organisational structures
- Strong local focus
- Direct community relationships
- Limited capacity for formal processes

Registration Status

Importantly, this research includes both registered and unregistered groups. This is crucial as many of the smallest community organisations operate informally. While 36% of registered charities in Oxfordshire fall into the 'micro' category, it's estimated that around 95% of unregistered community groups operate at this level.

Why This Definition Matters

The chosen definition allows for:

- Nuanced understanding of different organisational needs
- Recognition of the specific challenges faced by the smallest organisations
- Appropriate targeting of infrastructure support
- Comparison with other research and data
- Clear parameters for support provision

2.5 Limitations of the research

While this research provides valuable insights into infrastructure needs of Oxfordshire's smallest VCSE organisations, several limitations should be acknowledged when considering its findings and recommendations.

Representation Challenges

Despite outreach through established networks and direct contact by email and social media to approximately 2,000 small VCSE organisations, and adapting the methodology to carrying out additional interviews with under-represented groups, some perspectives may still be missing. This is particularly relevant for:

- Informal community groups without formal structures
- Organisations working with marginalised communities
- Groups operating in the most rural areas
- Newly formed organisations
- Organisations that have recently closed

As there is no centralised or complete registry of community organisations (such as the Charity Register), finding 'below the radar' organisations is incredibly difficult. Most of these organisations are volunteer-run and do not have a regular social media presence or the resources to check

emails/read newsletters regularly. This is particularly the case for emerging organisations who may not even have created an e-mail account for the organisation yet. Often community organisations call themselves neighbours or clubs or activists and so may not realise they are part of the VCSE sector.

Timing and Resource Constraints

Timing and engagement challenges meant that planned focus groups were not undertaken. While additional interviews helped mitigate this, they cannot fully replicate the benefits of group discussion and collaborative thinking to explore common issues and opportunities.

Data Gaps

Several data limitations affect the research:

- Incomplete data about unregistered groups
- Limited financial information for smaller organisations
- Gaps in historical trend data
- Difficulty quantifying some types of impact
- Challenges tracking volunteer numbers accurately

Contextual Changes

The research was conducted during a period of significant change, including:

- Ongoing cost-of-living pressures
- Changes in volunteer patterns post-COVID
- Evolving funding landscapes
- Shifting statutory service provision

These changing circumstances may affect the longer-term relevance of some findings.

Geographic Coverage

While the research aimed for broad geographic representation across Oxfordshire, response patterns suggest some areas may be better represented than others. This could affect the applicability of recommendations across different parts of the county.

Methodological Constraints

The focus on quantitative metrics like income levels, while necessary for categorisation, may not fully capture the complexity and diversity of small VCSE organisations. Some important qualitative aspects of organisational effectiveness and community impact may be under-represented.

These limitations should be considered when applying the research findings and recommendations. However, they do not fundamentally undermine the value of the insights gained, particularly given the adaptations made to ensure diverse representation and the depth of qualitative data gathered through interviews.

3. Research Findings

3.1 The size and shape of Oxfordshire's VCSE sector

There are approximately 6,484 VCSE organisations based in Oxfordshire. This is an estimated figure based on conservative methods¹ for approximating the number of unregistered 'below-the-radar' community organisations (Mohan et al, 2010) and could be much higher. Recent research by Chapman and Wistow (2023) identified 3,906 registered organisations in Oxfordshire, but their analysis necessarily focused on formally registered entities, highlighting the significant contribution of grassroots and informal community groups that often operate below the regulatory radar.

Oxfordshire's VCSE sector includes:

- 3,404 registered charities
- 280 community halls and buildings
- 151 community active sports clubs
- 299 Community Interested Companies (CIC) registered in Oxfordshire
- 70 community transportation groups
- 150 Scout groups
- 11 Girlguiding divisions
- 20 Army Cadet detachments
- 2,781+ other unregistered community groups and organisations

Charity Commission data shows that 36% of registered charities in Oxfordshire and an estimated 95% of unregistered groups are micro organisations (turnover under £10,000/year). Small organisations (turnover between £10,000-£50,000/year) comprise 28.5% of registered charities and larger small organisations (£50,000-£100,000/year) represent 8.8% of registered charities. A final 26.7% of registered charities have a turnover above £100,000/year, with most of these under £1mn/year.

The distribution of registered charities across Oxfordshire's seven parliamentary constituencies reveals interesting patterns in the local VCSE sector landscape. Oxford West and Abingdon constituency stands out significantly, hosting 786 registered charities (10.9 per 1,000 residents) despite having a similar population size to other constituencies at 72,004 people. This notably higher concentration could reflect the area's unique characteristics, including its proximity to Oxford University and several major research and business parks. The city's distinctive profile is further evidenced by its concentration of larger organisations - Chapman and Wistow (2023) identified 152 organisations with income over £1 million based in Oxford, reflecting the city's role as a centre of education, research, and innovation.

Henley and Thame constituency follows as the second most charity-dense area, with 540 organisations (7.6 per 1,000 residents) serving its 70,626 residents. The remaining constituencies show more consistent levels of charitable organisation presence: Didcot and Wantage hosts 448 charities (6.0 per 1,000 residents), Witney has 449 (6.4 per 1,000), Oxford East contains 403 (5.6 per 1,000), Banbury houses 402 (5.7 per 1,000), and Bicester and Woodstock has 376 (5.3 per 1,000). In total, these constituencies contain 3,404 registered charities serving a combined population of 499,731, resulting in an average of 6.8 registered charities per 1,000 residents across the county. This constituency-level data from the Charity Commission provides valuable insight into the geographic distribution of formal VCSE sector activity across Oxfordshire, highlighting significant variations between different parts of the county.

¹ Calculated at 3.66 BTR organisations per 1000 people, using Oxfordshire County Council's estimated 2025 population of 759,881 which is a projection based on 2021 census data.

3.2 Capacity vs Needs

Analysis of survey data reveals a significant misalignment between service demand and organisational capacity across Oxfordshire's VCSE sector over the past year. The data demonstrates a clear upward trend in demand, with 70% of surveyed organisations (206 total) reporting increases – 91 organisations experiencing significant increases and 115 reporting slight increases. In contrast, only 18 organisations noted any decrease in demand, while 71 maintained stable levels.

This surge in demand has not been matched by corresponding increases in organisational capacity. Only 42% of organisations (124 total) reported enhanced capacity, with 34 noting significant increases and 90 reporting slight improvements. A substantial portion – 135 organisations – maintained static capacity levels, while 38 organisations experienced capacity reductions, with 33 reporting slight decreases and 5 facing significant reductions.

The disparity between demand and capacity growth varies notably by organisational size. Among organisations with annual turnover under £10,000, 60% reported increased demand, yet only 35% achieved increased capacity. Most concerning is that 54% of these smaller organisations maintained static capacity despite facing greater demand, representing the largest capacity-demand gap across all size categories.

Slightly larger organisations (£10,000-£50,000 turnover) showed somewhat better adaptation, with 76% reporting increased demand and 48% achieving increased capacity. This group demonstrated greater resilience, with no organisations reporting decreased demand, suggesting stable service requirements.

The highest proportion of demand increase appeared in organisations with £50,000-£100,000 turnover, where 80% reported greater demand. However, only 44% of these organisations increased capacity. While notable, these findings should be interpreted cautiously due to the smaller sample size of 25 organisations in this category.

This analysis indicates a sector-wide challenge rather than one confined to specific organisational sizes. However, smaller organisations appear particularly vulnerable, facing greater difficulties in scaling their capacity to meet growing demand. This suggests that resource and infrastructure limitations may disproportionately affect smaller VCSE organisations' ability to respond to increasing community needs.



Case Study 1: Florence Park Community Association

Florence Park Community Association (FPCA) exemplifies both the strengths and challenges facing Oxfordshire's VCSE sector. Operating with an annual turnover between £50,000-£100,000, this Oxford-based charity manages a vital community space while navigating significant operational pressures.

The organisation demonstrates the sector-wide challenge of balancing increasing demand with static capacity. While community need for their services has increased over the past year, their capacity to deliver has remained unchanged. This pressure is particularly evident in their volunteer management - with just 15 active volunteers contributing 22 hours weekly, they report rarely having sufficient volunteer capacity to operate key activities.

"There's just too few people doing too much," the organisation reports, highlighting a critical succession planning challenge: "We are losing long-serving volunteers to older age... Trustees stand down after 6 years. We are losing the treasurer, secretary and chair over the next 2 years."

Infrastructure challenges compound these operational pressures. Despite being "run for and by the community" where "community cohesion is high and the community centre is well loved," FPCA faces significant challenges maintaining their aging building. Rising energy costs particularly impact their sustainability, demonstrating how external economic pressures affect community organisations.

The organisation employs up to two full-time equivalent staff/freelancers, representing a common hybrid model in the sector. While they maintain some partnerships, participating in the Federation of Oxford Community Associations and City Council's Community Association Liaison meetings, they report rarely having opportunities to collaborate with other VCSE organisations. This isolation may limit their ability to share resources and learning with peer organisations.

FPCA's experience highlights several key sector challenges:

- **The urgent need for volunteer recruitment and succession planning support**
- **The impact of rising operational costs on community facilities**
- **The challenge of maintaining service delivery with limited capacity**
- **The importance of infrastructure support for building management**

Their frank assessment - "It's exhausting but essential" - captures both the challenges and vital importance of community-led organisations in Oxfordshire's VCSE landscape.

Regional Variations in Demand and Capacity

Analysis of demand and capacity changes across Oxfordshire's regions reveals significant geographic variations, suggesting different pressures and organisational responses across the county. While increased demand is consistent across all regions, the ability to respond to this demand varies considerably by location.

West Oxfordshire and Oxford City demonstrate the highest proportion of increased demand, with 76% of organisations in both regions reporting either significant or slight increases. However, these regions show different patterns in their capacity response. While 48% of Oxford City organisations managed to increase capacity, they also reported the highest proportion of decreased capacity (21%), suggesting a more volatile environment. West Oxfordshire maintained more stability, with 46% increasing capacity and fewer organisations reporting decreases.

South Oxfordshire presents perhaps the most concerning picture, showing the largest mismatch between demand and capacity changes. While 65% of organisations reported increased demand, only 20% managed to increase their capacity to meet this demand. Nearly half (49%) maintained static capacity levels despite growing demand, suggesting significant strain on existing resources.

Cherwell demonstrates the most balanced relationship between demand and capacity changes. Although 71% of organisations reported increased demand, 48% managed to increase capacity, representing the healthiest ratio between demand and capacity growth across all regions. This suggests that organisations in Cherwell may have found more effective ways to scale their services in response to community needs.

The Vale of White Horse shows the most static picture overall, with 65% reporting increased demand but 49% maintaining static capacity levels. Only 35% of organisations managed to increase their capacity, suggesting potential barriers to service expansion in this region.

These regional variations could reflect differences in local funding environments, available infrastructure, or the nature of local needs. They also suggest that a one-size-fits-all approach to supporting VCSE organisations may not be appropriate, as different regions face distinct challenges in matching capacity to demand. Particular attention may be needed in South Oxfordshire, where the gap between demand and capacity appears most pronounced, and in Oxford City, where organisations show signs of instability in their capacity to deliver services.



Case Study 2: Enrych Oxfordshire

Enrych Oxfordshire exemplifies both the opportunities and challenges of delivering specialised services across a large geographic area. Operating across all districts of Oxfordshire with an annual turnover between £50,000-£100,000, this registered charity provides vital physical health, mental health and recreational activities for disabled people.

The organisation demonstrates the growing pressure on specialist service providers. Despite experiencing significantly increased demand over the past year, their capacity to deliver has remained static. This creates particular challenges given their county-wide remit and the specific support needs of their service users.

Enrych operates with a mixed staffing model, employing 3-5 full-time equivalent staff while coordinating an impressive volunteer force of 99 active volunteers who collectively contribute approximately 100 hours weekly. However, despite this substantial volunteer base and their commitment to volunteering best practice, they still report rarely having sufficient volunteer capacity to operate their key activities. This highlights how even organisations with strong volunteer programmes struggle to meet growing service demand.

The organisation cites funding as their primary challenge, with grant-writing identified as a key development priority. Despite having strong staff and trustees - identified as their greatest organisational strength - they report rarely having access to capacity building support that matches their development needs. This suggests a gap in specialist support for organisations serving disabled communities.

While Enrych participates in various networks and sometimes has opportunities to collaborate with both VCSE organisations and statutory bodies, these relationships remain largely informal. They provide informal peer support to other VCSE organisations, contributing to sector knowledge-sharing despite their own capacity constraints.

Their experience highlights several key issues facing specialist service providers:

- **The challenge of maintaining consistent service quality across a large geographic area**
- **The complexity of managing a large volunteer base while facing capacity constraints**
- **The need for sustainable funding to support specialist service delivery**
- **The importance of informal sector networks and peer support**

Enrych's ability to maintain county-wide service delivery while managing a large volunteer base demonstrates both the resilience of Oxfordshire's VCSE sector and the pressing need for more sustainable support mechanisms for specialist service providers.

3.3 Challenges

Analysis of survey responses reveals several significant challenges facing VCSE organisations across Oxfordshire. The most prominent challenge is volunteer recruitment and retention, with organisations consistently highlighting difficulties in finding new volunteers, particularly for trustee and leadership roles. Many noted an aging volunteer base and the need to attract younger volunteers, while others stressed the challenge of finding volunteers with specific skills or those willing to make regular commitments.

Financial sustainability emerges as the second major challenge. Organisations report struggling with rising operational costs, particularly increased utility bills and building maintenance expenses. Many highlighted the difficulties in securing long-term, sustainable funding, noting that grant opportunities often prioritise new projects over supporting existing successful services. As one organisation explained: "funding opportunities are often about expanding what you do or starting new projects rather than providing funding for existing services that are already identified as needed and working."

Building and facilities issues represent another significant challenge. Many organisations manage aging buildings requiring substantial maintenance or improvements, particularly around accessibility and environmental sustainability. Rising utility costs are putting additional pressure on already stretched resources, with one respondent noting "The huge utility bills which has hit us hard."



Case Study 3: Benson Community Shed

Benson Community Shed illustrates how lack of suitable premises can threaten even well-supported community initiatives. Operating in South Oxfordshire with an annual turnover under £10,000, this unregistered community organisation provides vital mental health, physical activity and social connection opportunities for older people, men and women in their local area.

Their greatest strength lies in "its members and the support of the local community." This community backing, combined with strong relationships with local authorities, gives them consistent opportunities to influence local decision-making. However, despite these advantages, they face a fundamental challenge: "Finding suitable premises from which to operate."

The organisation demonstrates both the potential and limitations of volunteer-led community projects. While they successfully maintain sufficient volunteer capacity with eight active members contributing approximately 10 hours weekly, their future remains uncertain without appropriate space. As they explain, support is needed in "identifying a suitable site or building from which to operate; potentially obtaining planning consent and building - otherwise the project will not continue."

Their experience highlights particular challenges around developing new community spaces. While they participate in the Men's Shed Association and receive support from both Parish and District Councils, they report rarely having access to capacity building support that matches their development needs, particularly around "fund-raising and the management of a construction project."

This situation illustrates several key issues facing community organisations:

- **The critical importance of appropriate physical space for service delivery**
- **How the challenges linked to premises can threaten otherwise sustainable projects**
- **The complexity of developing new community assets**
- **The need for specialist support with construction and development projects**
- **The limitations of community support without suitable infrastructure**

Benson Community Shed's experience demonstrates why supporting the development of new community spaces, not just maintaining existing ones, is crucial for sustaining Oxfordshire's VCSE sector.

Administrative challenges, including compliance requirements and governance responsibilities, create additional pressure on limited resources. This is compounded by difficulties in recruiting trustees and committee members, with many organisations noting the challenge of finding people willing to take on leadership roles.

These challenges are often interconnected - for example, limited volunteer capacity affects an organisation's ability to pursue funding opportunities, while financial constraints can impact the ability to maintain facilities or expand services to meet growing demand. This suggests the need for holistic support approaches that address multiple challenges simultaneously.

3.4 Strengths

Oxfordshire's VCSE sector demonstrates significant strengths across several key areas. The sector's volunteer base emerges as the most frequently cited asset, with organisations consistently highlighting their "committed," "dedicated," and "skilled" volunteers as fundamental to their operations. As one organisation noted, "It is undoubtedly our team of volunteers" who enable their core functions. Many benefit from long-term volunteer commitment, as evidenced by one group describing themselves as "Well established 6 years and trusted... with a stable well qualified group of volunteers/trustees."

Strong community connections form another cornerstone of the sector's strength. Organisations maintain trusted local relationships, demonstrated through physical presence and established reputations. As one organisation explained, they are "Run for and by the community. Community cohesion is high and the community centre is well loved." Another highlighted their growing strength as "becoming a known, trusted and reliable service."

Partnership capabilities represent another significant asset, with organisations developing robust relationships across different sectors. Organisations emphasised their "Strong links in the community" and their belief that "working together across other supportive groups is vital." Some take innovative approaches, such as one group's "bottom up network approach to tackling the biodiversity and climate crisis."

The sector also demonstrates strong leadership capabilities, from "very pro-active Board[s] of Trustees" to successful policy influence. As one organisation noted, "Our greatest strength is our ability to lobby and make change. We have had many successful campaigns." This is complemented by organisations' expertise in specific fields, with groups highlighting their "expertise in our field, rapport building skills with young people, good networking opportunities."

These strengths often interconnect to create greater impact. As one organisation summarised, they have "Strong community links supported by a passionate and committed set of volunteers and employees." This integration of different strengths creates a robust foundation for the sector's continued development and impact.

3.5 Change

The VCSE sector in Oxfordshire has undergone significant transformation since 2020, shaped by the combined impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent societal challenges. The pandemic initially sparked an unprecedented surge in community action and volunteering, leading to the emergence of new grassroots organisations. However, this period of intense activity and heightened demand has left a lasting impact on the sector's resilience.

Many organisations now report volunteer burnout and recruitment challenges, as reflected in survey responses highlighting "Concern regarding potential burn out of a small group of committed

volunteers." The initial wave of pandemic volunteering has given way to increasing difficulties in securing long-term commitments, with one organisation noting that "People are less willing to commit their time."

The sector faces growing demand for services while grappling with capacity constraints. As one organisation explained, they "struggle to start new projects which seems to be a constant theme in grants - they want something new. But we just need money to cover core costs and continue what we do effectively." This highlights a fundamental tension between funders' priorities and organisations' operational needs.

The ongoing cost-of-living crisis has created additional pressures. Rising operational costs, particularly utilities and building maintenance, are straining already limited resources. One organisation reported that "The huge utility bills which has hit us hard," while another noted challenges in "balancing a charge to keep the club going with the aim of making it self-sufficient and affordable."

Reductions in public services have increased pressure on the VCSE sector to fill gaps in provision, while the closure of national infrastructure organisations has reduced available support. The funding environment has become more competitive, with organisations reporting that "We are finding it increasingly difficult to access funding" and noting challenges in securing multi-year funding that provides stability.

Despite these challenges, the sector demonstrates remarkable resilience and adaptability. However, the cumulative impact of these pressures, coupled with increased demand and reduced resources, suggests 2025 will be a pivotal year for many organisations. The situation particularly affects smaller organisations, who report that "Being a small charity working at grass roots level, it's very difficult to have access to funding."

This evolving landscape underscores the importance of sustainable funding models, effective volunteer recruitment and retention strategies, and robust infrastructure support to ensure the sector's long-term sustainability and effectiveness in meeting community needs.

4. Supporting Oxfordshire's VCSE Sector

4.1 What infrastructure support do Oxfordshire VCSE orgs need?

Survey analysis of Oxfordshire VCSE organisations reveals a clear hierarchy of infrastructure support needs. Voice support ranks highest in weighted scores and combined top-two preferences (61.3%), while volunteer support shows the highest immediate demand with 39.1% ranking it their top priority. Collaboration support places third in weighted scores, with development support ranking fourth despite significant reported challenges around funding and organisational sustainability. This suggests that while strategic representation and volunteer management are current priorities, ongoing support for collaboration and development remains important for sector resilience.



4.1.1 Voice: Having a Say in Issues that Matter

The smallest VCSE organisations in Oxfordshire express a profound need to have their voices heard in decisions affecting their work and communities. Organisations report feeling "powerless and either taken for granted or invisible," with a strong desire to "speak up for them [their communities] on issues that matter to them." This need is particularly acute for organisations with turnover under £10,000, where 25% consider policy engagement "not applicable" to their work - significantly higher than larger organisations (7-8%).

The data reveals a concerning "participation gap" where even when smaller organisations are informed about opportunities to engage (47% are "sometimes" informed), they struggle to convert this awareness into meaningful influence. Only 7% of the smallest organisations report "always" having influence over decisions, while 38% rarely or never have influence. This suggests systemic barriers preventing smaller organisations from effectively participating in local decision-making processes.



Case Study 4: Oxford Friends of the Earth

Oxford Friends of the Earth demonstrates how small, volunteer-led organisations can achieve significant policy impact despite limited resources. Operating across five districts of Oxfordshire with an annual turnover under £10,000, this entirely volunteer-run charity has established itself as an effective voice for environmental action.

"Our greatest strength is our ability to lobby and make change," the organisation reports. "We have had many successful campaigns." This impact is achieved despite modest resources - just 20 active volunteers contributing approximately 10 hours weekly to their activities.

The organisation's experience illustrates both the potential and challenges of maintaining effective advocacy work. While they report sometimes having opportunities to influence key decisions and participate in local policy-making, they maintain consistent collaborative relationships with other VCSE organisations and local stakeholders. This network-building helps amplify their voice despite limited capacity.

However, their experience also highlights significant challenges facing advocacy-focused organisations. "We really struggle with diversity (our members are predominantly old and white)," they report, "and we get a lot of people attending our meetings but not many take on responsibility to help us grow and achieve more things." This reflects wider sector challenges around volunteer engagement and demographic representation.

The organisation demonstrates strong self-awareness about these challenges, identifying diversity and inclusion alongside environmental campaigning as key development priorities. However, they report rarely having access to capacity building support that matches these needs, suggesting a gap in infrastructure support for advocacy-focused organisations.

Their experience highlights several key lessons for effective grassroots advocacy:

- **The importance of consistent collaborative relationships**
- **The challenge of converting interest into active engagement**
- **The need for targeted support to improve demographic representation**
- **The potential for significant impact despite limited resources**

Oxford Friends of the Earth's success in achieving policy change while operating on minimal resources demonstrates both the potential and limitations of volunteer-led advocacy in Oxfordshire's VCSE sector.

These findings differ notably from other recent research in the sector. A 2023 study of the BOB region found that 92% of VCSE organisations feel valued by local public sector bodies, with 69% feeling informed about issues important to them (Chapman and Wistow, 2023). This apparent disconnect between the findings may reflect different research methodologies and reach. While the BOB study provides valuable insight into the experiences of more established organisations, it may not fully capture the voices of the smallest grassroots groups. This contrast emphasises the importance of reaching and understanding the smallest VCSE organisations, whose voices may be missed in broader sector research.

Small organisations particularly emphasise the need for authentic engagement rather than superficial consultation. As one organisation noted, "Community leaders need to be involved in decision-making at the highest level in the county. We need to get beyond tick box consultation to something that is real and effective." Rural communities face additional challenges, as highlighted by one organisation: "no matter how we raise issues for a rural community we are a lost voice."

This nuanced picture suggests that while some parts of the VCSE sector may have established channels for engagement with public bodies, significant work remains to ensure these opportunities are truly accessible to the smallest community organisations that form the backbone of local civil society.



Case Study 5: Transition Lighthouse Empowerment Space

Transition Lighthouse Empowerment Space CIC exemplifies both the vital contribution and distinct challenges faced by organisations led by and serving marginalised communities. Operating across Oxford City and the Vale of White Horse, this social enterprise provides therapeutic healing and recovery support for African diaspora communities experiencing trauma, including survivors of FGM and domestic abuse, as well as addressing the impacts of COVID-19 and Black Lives Matter on community wellbeing.

The organisation's greatest strength lies in its grassroots approach, enabling them to effectively understand and respond to deeply sensitive community needs through culturally appropriate therapeutic approaches. This specialist expertise is particularly crucial given the complex trauma and intersectional challenges their service users face. However, despite this unique expertise and connection to under-represented communities, they report rarely having opportunities to participate in local policy-making or influence decisions affecting their communities. This limited voice in decision-making persists even as demand for their services has increased significantly over the past year.

While they participate in various networks including Community Action Group, Owned By Oxford, International Tree Foundation, Community Research Network, and Oxfordshire Local Nature Partnership, they report rarely having opportunities to collaborate with other VCSE organisations. This isolation limits their ability to build strategic partnerships and amplify their community's voice.

Operating with an annual turnover between £10,000-£50,000 and up to two full-time equivalent staff, they face significant resource constraints. "Sustainable Funding" is cited as their biggest challenge, while they identify multiple staffing needs including "Leadership development - Paid Staff role, Booker, Project Manager, Events Coordinator, Activities Facilitator." Despite following volunteering best practice, they currently operate with just two volunteers contributing approximately six hours weekly.

Their experience highlights several key challenges facing BAME-led organisations:

- **Limited access to policy influence despite deep community knowledge**
- **Barriers to strategic partnership development**
- **The need for sustainable funding to support culturally competent service delivery**
- **Challenges in volunteer recruitment and capacity building**

The organisation reports rarely having access to capacity building support that matches their development needs, suggesting gaps in culturally relevant infrastructure support. Their experience demonstrates why targeted support for BAME-led organisations remains crucial for building an inclusive and equitable VCSE sector.

4.1.2 *Volunteering: Building and Maintaining Volunteer Capacity*

The research reveals volunteering as one of the most critical needs for VCSE organisations in Oxfordshire, particularly for the smallest organisations. This area had the highest first choice

percentage when organisations were asked about support priorities, indicating its fundamental importance to the sector.

Volunteering is a critical foundation of Oxfordshire's VCSE sector, with organisations taking part in this research relying on an average of 35 volunteers collectively contributing 56 hours per week. This translates to approximately 50 minutes per volunteer per week, though this average likely masks significant variations in individual commitment levels. Recent research provides a broader picture of volunteering's economic and social value in the county, estimating approximately 80,231 regular volunteers contributing around 5.8 million hours annually in Oxfordshire - representing an economic value of £116.4 million when calculated at 80% of average local wages (Chapman and Wistow, 2023). These figures suggest that over 10% of Oxfordshire residents volunteer. While this volunteer workforce represents a substantial contribution to the sector, the data reveals complex challenges around volunteer recruitment, management, and capacity. For instance, 44% of Oxfordshire's VCSE organisations report struggling to retain older volunteers, though there are some positive trends with 15% reporting an increase in younger volunteers under 30, and 21% noting greater ethnic diversity in their volunteer base since the pandemic (Chapman and Wistow, 2023). The critical nature of this volunteer workforce is underscored by the fact that 87% of organisations report they could not continue without volunteer support.

The data shows a striking contrast between organisations' adherence to volunteer management practices and their operational capacity. While 64.6% of organisations report they "always" follow volunteering best practices, only 24.4% consistently have sufficient volunteer capacity to operate their key activities. This disparity suggests that even strong volunteer management practices may not fully address the fundamental challenges of volunteer recruitment and retention.

This capacity gap shows notable regional variations. South Oxfordshire reports the highest proportion of organisations with consistent volunteer capacity (28.3%), while Oxford City faces the greatest challenges with only 18.6% of organisations reporting consistent capacity and 22.9% rarely or never having enough volunteers. These regional differences may reflect varying demographic patterns, local infrastructure support, or community engagement levels.

A concerning knowledge gap emerges around volunteer management best practices, with 12.9% of organisations reporting they "don't know" if they follow best practices. This uncertainty is particularly pronounced in South Oxfordshire (18.9%) and the Vale of White Horse (16.2%), suggesting a need for better guidance and support around volunteer management standards in these areas. As one organisation noted, "we tend to accept anyone who wants to volunteer & they do not always have the skills we require," indicating a need for more structured recruitment and management processes.

The recognition of volunteering's value also presents challenges. Only 22.4% of organisations report that volunteering is "always" recognised in Oxfordshire, while the majority (70.4%) say it is "sometimes" recognised. This limited recognition may contribute to recruitment difficulties and volunteer retention challenges. South Oxfordshire and Cherwell report the highest levels of consistent recognition (around 26.6%), while the Vale of White Horse and West Oxfordshire report lower levels (around 18%), suggesting opportunities for improving volunteer recognition and appreciation across the county.

These systemic challenges are compounded by demographic pressures. Many organisations report an aging volunteer base, with one noting "Our only problem is, we are all getting older. The core team began to do this annual event in their 60's and are now well into their 80's." This creates urgent needs around succession planning and recruitment of younger volunteers, with organisations expressing that "We need to convince the younger members of our community to volunteer."

The data also reveals particular challenges for smaller organisations, where the area of volunteering had the highest first choice percentage when organisations were asked about support priorities. These organisations often lack formal recruitment processes and dedicated volunteer coordination resources, leading to situations where "A few people do a lot of work! A passionate few who are dedicated to the organisation take on the lions share and they can easily burn out." This concentration of responsibility creates risks around volunteer burnout and organisational sustainability.

Beyond basic recruitment, organisations identify significant needs around volunteer development and training. Many require support to "upskill our volunteers (digital skills, writing skills, social media, fundraising, organisational, mental health)." This need for training becomes particularly critical given the capacity constraints many organisations face, with organisations "struggling to fulfil demand with so few volunteers."

The geographic variations in volunteer capacity and management suggest a need for tailored, localised approaches to volunteer support. While some regions like West Oxfordshire and Oxford City demonstrate stronger awareness of volunteer management best practices, they still face significant challenges in maintaining sufficient volunteer capacity. This indicates that improving volunteer management knowledge alone may not be sufficient - organisations need comprehensive support that addresses recruitment, retention, training, and recognition of volunteers, while accounting for local demographic and social factors that influence volunteering patterns.

These findings suggest a need for a coordinated, county-wide approach to volunteering support that can address both the immediate capacity challenges and the longer-term needs around volunteer recruitment, development, and retention, while remaining sensitive to local variations and the particular challenges faced by smaller organisations.

4.1.3 Collaboration: Building Effective Partnerships and Networks

The research reveals a complex landscape of collaborative opportunities across Oxfordshire's VCSE sector, where both organisational size and geographic location significantly influence access to partnerships. While only 12% of organisations report they 'always' have opportunities for collaboration, and 39% rarely or never have chances to work with peer organisations, these figures align with national patterns where nearly half of small charities engage in some form of collaborative activity (Charity Commission, 2010).

Recent research across the BOB region provides additional context, showing that while informal relationships within the sector are strong, with 70% of organisations having useful informal relationships with other organisations, formal partnership working is less common at 26% - lower than the national average of 34% (Chapman and Wistow, 2023). This aligns with the patterns observed in our research where formal collaboration opportunities are limited.

Oxford City emerges as the strongest environment for VCSE collaboration, where nearly 19% of organisations report always having collaborative opportunities, and only 24% rarely or never engage in partnerships. This suggests that Oxford City has developed more robust or known networks and infrastructure for organisational cooperation compared to other regions. Similarly, Cherwell and the Vale of White Horse show encouraging patterns, with approximately 70% of organisations in each area reporting at least some opportunities for collaboration.

However, the picture becomes more challenging when examining collaboration with external stakeholders like the NHS and local councils. The overall figure of only 8% of organisations always having such opportunities masks significant regional variations. Cherwell and Oxford City demonstrate relatively stronger stakeholder engagement, with about 65% and 63% of organisations

respectively reporting at least some collaborative opportunities. In contrast, South Oxfordshire faces particular challenges, where nearly half (48%) of organisations rarely or never engage with external stakeholders. This regional disparity compounds the existing challenges faced by smaller organisations, where over half (53%) of those under £10k turnover rarely or never have opportunities to work with external stakeholders. The BOB region study found that 66% of VCSE organisations participate in formal activities addressing local social and public policy priorities (Chapman and Wistow, 2023), suggesting that while formal mechanisms for engagement exist, access to these opportunities varies significantly by geography and organisational size.

The geographic patterns suggest that more urbanised areas, particularly Oxford City and Cherwell, have developed stronger collaborative networks both within the VCSE sector and with external stakeholders. This might reflect the higher concentration of organisations and infrastructure in these areas, but it also highlights potential isolation faced by organisations in more rural parts of the county. This geographic pattern, where more urbanised areas have developed stronger collaborative networks, reflects broader findings that small charities working exclusively in rural areas are least likely to engage in collaboration (Charity Commission, 2010).

Organisations across all regions express strong interest in developing more structured partnerships to enhance their impact, as evidenced by comments like "We would like to work collaboratively with other organisations to understand what services are available" and "Working collaboratively is needed in order to avoid duplication." The particular emphasis on healthcare partnerships, with organisations noting desires to "Make greater links with NHS Social Prescribers," takes on added significance given the regional variations in stakeholder engagement.

The concerning trend around post-COVID collaboration, where one organisation notes "I have been doing this job for 11 years and there used to be a lot of cooperation among other similar groups but that seems to have evaporated," may be particularly acute in areas like South Oxfordshire, where collaborative opportunities are already more limited. This suggests a need for targeted interventions to rebuild and strengthen collaborative networks, with particular attention to areas where geographic isolation compounds the challenges of post-pandemic recovery.

These regional disparities in collaborative opportunities indicate a need for tailored approaches to building partnership capacity across different parts of Oxfordshire, recognising that solutions that work in urban centres may need adaptation for rural areas, and that strengthening stakeholder engagement may require different strategies in different local contexts.

4.1.4 Development: Strengthening Organisational Capabilities

The research reveals a complex landscape of capacity building needs and challenges across Oxfordshire's VCSE sector, where strong organisational self-awareness contrasts sharply with limited access to development support. While 91% of organisations demonstrate at least some understanding of their development needs (with 39.5% reporting they "always" understand their needs), over half (53%) rarely or never have access to the capacity building support needed to address these needs. Only 7% report consistent access to such support, highlighting a critical gap between awareness and resource accessibility.

This pattern shows notable geographic variations across the county. Oxford City and Cherwell demonstrate particularly strong organisational self-awareness, with approximately 49% of organisations in both areas reporting they "always" understand their development needs. However, even in these better-performing regions, access to capacity building support remains severely limited, with only 7.4% and 9.8% respectively reporting consistent access to such support. South Oxfordshire faces the most significant challenges, where 59.2% of organisations rarely or never have access to capacity building support, despite showing good levels of organisational awareness.

This gap in access to support is particularly pronounced for smaller organisations, with 60% of those under £10k turnover rarely or never having access to capacity building support. These smaller organisations, often run entirely by volunteers, face unique challenges in developing their organisational capabilities. As reflected in the priority areas identified, they particularly need support with foundational aspects of organisational development, from building strong governance structures to developing administrative systems and procedures. The prevalence of these basic operational needs among smaller organisations suggests that without adequate capacity building support, these organisations may struggle to develop the robust organisational foundations needed to deliver their services effectively and sustainably.

Despite these challenges, organisations across all regions demonstrate strong engagement with their communities, with 92.7% reporting at least some understanding of community needs and priorities, including those of seldom-heard and under-represented voices. This community understanding is particularly strong in Oxford City and West Oxfordshire, where 38% and 35.2% of organisations respectively report they "always" understand community needs. This strong community connection underscores the importance of addressing the capacity building gap to enable organisations to better serve their communities.

The research identified clear priority areas for development support, with organisations expressing specific needs around funding and financial sustainability (89 mentions), leadership development (44 mentions), diversity, inclusion and community engagement (31 mentions), operational and facilities management (29 mentions), marketing and communications (21 mentions), and organisational development (19 mentions). These needs span from practical operational concerns like grant writing (48 mentions) and financial management (13 mentions) to strategic priorities like leadership succession planning (32 mentions) and diversity initiatives (18 mentions).

Importantly, capacity building support could help organisations develop their capabilities across other key areas of need identified in this research. This includes building organisational capacity for effective volunteer management, developing skills for advocacy and voice, and strengthening abilities to build and maintain effective partnerships. As one organisation noted: "Need to upskill our volunteers (digital skills, writing skills, social media, fundraising, organisational, mental health)," demonstrating how capacity building intersects with other organisational needs.

Organisations particularly emphasise the need for practical, accessible support: "Training in running a small charity and in developing the team" and "We need centralised administration, someone to help us keep going, access to grant writing support." This suggests that addressing the capacity building gap requires not just increased resource availability, but also careful consideration of how support is delivered to ensure it meets the practical needs and constraints of organisations across different sizes and geographic locations.

The geographic patterns in the data suggest that more urbanised areas like Oxford City and Cherwell have developed stronger organisational awareness and slightly better access to support, though still inadequate. However, the challenges faced by organisations in more rural areas, particularly in South Oxfordshire, indicate a need for targeted interventions that account for geographic isolation and varying levels of infrastructure access. This regional variation in capacity building access and needs suggests that solutions must be tailored to local contexts while ensuring equitable access to support across the county.

In Focus: Support for BAME-Led VCSE Organisations

Organisations led by Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities, leaders and activists face systemic barriers that limit their potential to fully serve their communities. A growing body of evidence has documented patterns of racial inequity in the VCSE sector across the country, and Oxfordshire is no exception.

Infrastructure support can play a vital role in addressing these systemic barriers. Historically, some areas of the country developed dedicated BAME-led infrastructure organisations - in 2010, England had over 50 such organisations supporting nearly 6,000 BAME voluntary and community groups through specialised skills development and capacity building. However, when core government funding ended in 2011, many of these specialist organisations closed, creating gaps in support that general infrastructure organisations have struggled to fill (Kane & Cohen, 2023).

In 2021, 40 organisations in Oxfordshire came together to explore how infrastructure support could better serve BAME-led organisations. Exploratory research identified that these organisations struggled with the same issues as those identified in this report – 62.5% faced difficulties recruiting volunteers and 47% faced capacity challenges in relation to fundraising. Nearly 80% indicated the need for mechanisms that would amplify their influence, noting they felt excluded from key funding and policy decisions. Key priorities include building fundraising and organisational development skills, supporting volunteer recruitment and management, creating opportunities for collaboration, and ensuring Black-led organisations have meaningful input into decisions affecting their communities (Pamoja Oxfordshire, 2021).

While some areas have successfully established new BAME-focused infrastructure bodies, in Oxfordshire these early discussions highlighted the significant challenges of building a new specialist organisation in a context of shrinking infrastructure funding. Given these resource constraints, a more sustainable approach may be strengthening existing infrastructure organisations' capacity to provide culturally responsive, accessible support while ensuring meaningful involvement of BAME leaders in shaping services. The national experience during COVID-19 demonstrated why this matters - when funders sought to ensure emergency pandemic grants reached communities who needed them most, areas lacking strong infrastructure connections to BAME-led organisations struggled to distribute resources effectively (Kane & Cohen, 2023).

Recent research from Brighton & Hove reinforces these findings, highlighting the importance of strategic, long-term investment in dedicated infrastructure support for BAME organisations. While their research found that some mainstream infrastructure bodies effectively serve BAME organisations through culturally competent staff and targeted programs, creating new BAME-led infrastructure requires careful consideration of resources and sustainability (Ottaway Strategic Management, 2023). Given current funding constraints in the infrastructure sector overall, strengthening existing infrastructure organisations' capacity to provide culturally responsive services, while simultaneously building BAME sector leadership and involvement in shaping those services, may be more achievable than establishing entirely new organisations. This aligns with experience in other regions where collaborative approaches have helped bridge gaps while building toward more sustainable, community-led solutions.

Whether through enhancing existing infrastructure or developing new specialist support, it is clear that BAME-led organisations in Oxfordshire need infrastructure services that acknowledge and respond to the systemic barriers they face. Achieving this would strengthen the entire VCSE sector's ability to meet community needs through organisations that bring deep cultural understanding and community connections.

4.2 What else does the sector need?

While infrastructure organisations play a vital role in supporting Oxfordshire's VCSE sector through capacity building, training, and development support, many of the challenges facing the sector require broader systemic changes or resources that extend beyond what infrastructure bodies can provide. This section explores several critical issues raised in the research that, while they may benefit from infrastructure support, ultimately require different types of intervention or investment to address effectively.

These challenges represent fundamental constraints on the sector's ability to deliver services and meet community needs, ranging from financial sustainability to staffing challenges and physical infrastructure requirements. Understanding these broader issues is crucial for developing comprehensive approaches to supporting the sector that combine both infrastructure support and other forms of intervention.

4.2.1 Sustainable and Flexible Funding

The research reveals funding as the most critical need across Oxfordshire's VCSE sector, with 89 organisations highlighting financial sustainability as their primary concern. This challenge extends beyond what infrastructure organisations can provide through capacity building or grant-writing support.

Organisations face multiple funding challenges:

1. **Core Funding Gaps:** Organisations struggle to secure funding for basic operational costs. As one organisation noted, "Due to our lack of income and turnover we have been largely unsuccessful in applying for grants to enable us to also deliver direct support to parents... though there is clearly a huge need for this direct support." The focus of many funders on project-based funding rather than core costs creates significant sustainability challenges.
2. **Rising Operational Costs:** Organisations report increasing pressure from rising utilities and maintenance costs. This is particularly challenging for organisations managing physical facilities, with many struggling to maintain aging infrastructure while dealing with increased energy costs.
3. **Competition for Resources:** The research suggests increasing competition for limited funding sources, particularly affecting smaller organisations. This challenge is compounded by complex application processes that can disadvantage smaller organisations, as one noted: "Grant givers each have their own rules, and some have impossible response times. None of the grant givers seems to recognise we are a small organisation run entirely by amateur volunteers." Many report being unsuccessful in grant applications despite demonstrating clear community need, highlighting the gap between available funding and sector needs.
4. **Service Delivery Impact Funding:** constraints directly affect service provision. As one organisation explained, "We feed over 40 people every week, we could offer more to them in terms of food education and support but we never have funding for paid hours." This illustrates how funding limitations restrict organisations' ability to meet community needs effectively.



Case Study 6: Mental Health Natters

Mental Health Natters demonstrates the complex funding challenges facing small organisations providing specialist support. Operating across Oxfordshire with an annual turnover between £10,000-£50,000, this Community Interest Company provides vital mental health support to children, young people, disabled people and families, with a particular focus on Abingdon and surroundings.

The organisation faces significant challenges balancing accessibility with sustainability. "Our biggest challenges are securing funding to cover core costs," they report. "To pay staff we charge schools for our support and some parents pay but for families unable to pay/not in school/where schools can't pay we need additional funding as we don't want the ability to pay to be a barrier to receiving support."

This mixed funding model creates particular pressures as demand grows. While they've experienced significantly increased demand over the past year, their capacity has only increased slightly. "We are getting referrals from families all over Oxfordshire and our capacity to meet demand has meant we are having to signpost families and focus on our core areas in Abingdon and surroundings."

Despite employing 3-5 FTE staff/freelancers and maintaining strong partnerships through networks like Oxfordshire Youth Changemakers Network and Oxfordshire Parent Carers Forum Steering Group, they struggle to secure sustainable statutory funding. "Obtaining funding and support to deliver our service has not been supported by the systems within Oxfordshire County Council," they note. "We have had negative experiences of asking for support and using the system in place to secure funding. Funding we have been successful with from the council has been a timely and persistent process."

Their experience highlights how founding passion can create unexpected organisational demands, with their Founder explaining "I didn't set out to run an organisation - I set up to offer parents the support I didn't have, so running a not for profit is something I am very much learning as we grow." This reflects a common journey for small organisations, where service delivery expertise must be balanced with organisational development.

Despite these challenges, they maintain significant strengths: "We have a dedicated team who are passionate about the work we do and go the extra mile. We have also developed strong links with schools and other organisations. Our approach is flexible and responsive to meet the needs of the families we work with." This adaptability is demonstrated by their response to growing demand: "We are starting a second parent support group to meet demand."

Their experience highlights several key funding challenges:

- **The limitations of mixed funding models for ensuring service accessibility**
- **Barriers to accessing statutory funding for small organisations**
- **The challenge of maintaining service quality while managing growth**
- **The need for core funding to support organisational development**

Mental Health Natters' experience demonstrates how funding constraints can limit the reach of vital specialist services, even when organisations have the expertise and community connections to meet growing need.

4.2.2 Staffing and Employment Challenges

The research reveals significant staffing challenges that extend beyond what infrastructure support can address:

1. **Compensation and Retention:** Organisations struggle to offer competitive salaries, leading to difficulties in retaining skilled staff who often move to better-paid positions in the public or private sectors. This creates a continuous cycle of recruitment and training that strains already limited resources.
2. **Workload and Stress:** staff and leaders face increasing workloads, leading to higher stress levels and potential burnout. This is particularly acute in smaller organisations where individuals often fulfil multiple roles. The administrative burden of funding applications and compliance requirements adds to this pressure.
3. **Career Development:** limited resources restrict organisations' ability to offer career progression opportunities, making it difficult to retain talented staff long-term. This particularly affects smaller organisations that cannot offer structured career paths.

4.2.3 Physical Infrastructure

The research identifies significant infrastructure challenges requiring substantial financial investment:

1. **Building Maintenance:** 29 organisations highlighted urgent facility maintenance needs. As one organisation noted, "Getting the drainage sorted on the site and improvement to the surface - it is a RUPP and some two miles long." Such infrastructure challenges require capital funding beyond what infrastructure support can provide.
2. **Energy Efficiency:** Organisations face pressure to improve their environmental sustainability but lack resources for necessary upgrades. This creates a long-term financial burden through higher operating costs.



Case Study 7: Bourton Village Hall

Bourton Village Hall illustrates the acute challenges facing rural community buildings in Oxfordshire's smallest communities. Operating in the Vale of White Horse with an annual turnover under £10,000, this entirely volunteer-run organisation manages a 175-year-old village hall serving a community of just 350 people.

The organisation faces an existential crisis common to aging community buildings. "We desperately need to replace our roof and add PV panels, replace ancient lighting and heating with more efficient versions," they report. "If we do not achieve this over the next few years to get our running costs down and potentially increase our attractiveness as a rental venue, our village hall will have to be sold for commercial redevelopment."

This infrastructure challenge is compounded by limited volunteer capacity. With just six active volunteers contributing approximately 10 hours weekly, they describe having "a small but devoted Committee" managing "a lovely though degrading building." However, they struggle with "recruiting volunteers for the Committee and raising funds for our reroofing and sustainability upgrade project."

The scale of the challenge feels overwhelming for such a small community: "Feels like fighting a losing battle trying to save a 175 year old building in a community of 350 people. There is no earthly way we will raise the funds locally." While they receive some support from Community First Oxfordshire, they report receiving "no other support" and find they rarely have opportunities to influence decisions affecting their community.

Their situation is particularly concerning given declining usage - they report significantly decreased demand over the past year while their capacity has remained static. Despite following volunteering best practice, they rarely have sufficient volunteer capacity to operate key activities, and lack experience in crucial areas: "We need help with fundraising and grant applications as none of us has any experience of this."

Their experience highlights several key challenges facing rural community assets:

- **The urgent need for sustainability improvements to aging buildings**
- **Limited local fundraising capacity in small communities**
- **The burden of complex building projects on volunteer committees**
- **Gaps in support for grant applications and fundraising**
- **The risk of losing vital community spaces to commercial development**

Bourton Village Hall's struggle to preserve their community asset demonstrates why targeted support for rural community buildings is crucial for maintaining Oxfordshire's social infrastructure.

4.2.4 Time and Resource Management

Organisations face fundamental resource constraints that cannot be addressed through capacity building alone:

1. **Administrative Burden:** the increasing complexity of compliance requirements and funding applications creates significant administrative work, straining limited staff and volunteer resources.
2. **Operational Capacity:** Organisations struggle to balance day-to-day operations with strategic development. As one noted, they need "Development of income to increase number of sessions per week as sometimes have to turn families away due to lack of space/staff capacity."

4.3 What infrastructure support exists in Oxfordshire?

Oxfordshire benefits from a diverse ecosystem of infrastructure support, ranging from county-wide generalist organisations to specialist thematic bodies and informal peer support networks.

Core Infrastructure Organisations

The two primary infrastructure bodies serving Oxfordshire's VCSE sector are OCVA (Oxfordshire Community and Voluntary Action) and CFO (Community First Oxfordshire).

OCVA focuses on enabling a diverse VCSE sector to flourish through comprehensive support services including:

- Volunteer Centre Oxfordshire
- Networks and forums
- Group support and development
- Funding advice and support
- Training provision
- News and employment information

CFO takes a community development approach, helping communities identify issues and develop their own solutions. Their work is grounded in Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD), focusing on utilising existing community assets rather than addressing deficits. They provide:

- Specialist infrastructure support for volunteer-led community actions (community buildings/halls, transport and community shops)
- Community planning and Town Planning assistance
- Housing and social action support
- Expertise in inclusive community development
- Community research



Case Study 8: Volunteer Link Up

Volunteer Link Up illustrates how Oxfordshire's infrastructure support ecosystem extends beyond the major county-wide providers. Operating in West Oxfordshire with an annual turnover between £50,000-£100,000, this registered charity demonstrates the vital role that community-embedded organisations play in strengthening local VCSE networks.

As part of the local infrastructure landscape, they maintain strong partnerships with both VCSE organisations and statutory bodies, participating in "a number of arrangements with statutory providers, grant funders and sundry donors." Their community-embedded position enables them to support other local organisations through "network meetings and follow up actions" and occasional volunteer sharing.

Their approach to infrastructure support is grounded in strong local relationships. "Committed Volunteers, Committed Staff Team, Trust within the local network" are cited as their greatest strengths, highlighting how effective infrastructure support depends on deep community connections and sustained engagement. With 140 active volunteers contributing approximately 235 hours weekly, largely through their community transport service, they demonstrate significant capacity for local support.

The organisation shows particular strength in facilitating local collaboration, maintaining consistent partnerships with both VCSE organisations and statutory bodies. This network-building helps strengthen sector resilience at the district level, complementing the work of county-wide infrastructure bodies.

Their experience highlights several important aspects of community-based infrastructure support:

- **The value of locality-based networking and partnership facilitation**
- **The importance of sustained relationships with local stakeholders**
- **The role of regular network meetings in building sector connections**
- **The potential for volunteer sharing across organisations**

However, they also face typical infrastructure challenges around "fundraising and recruiting volunteers." While they can access some capacity building support through their core funding, marketing and fundraising remain development priorities. They note that additional "financial support" would help them "channel funds to appropriate areas to benefit our organisation," highlighting the resource constraints facing local infrastructure providers.

Volunteer Link Up's experience demonstrates the vital contribution that community-embedded organisations make to Oxfordshire's infrastructure support ecosystem. Their success in facilitating local partnerships and supporting sector development provides valuable lessons for strengthening infrastructure support across the county.

Specialist Infrastructure Support

The county also benefits from sector-specific infrastructure bodies that provide targeted support within their thematic areas. Notable examples include:

CAG (Community Action Groups) Oxfordshire which provides specialised support for environmental and sustainability initiatives. As the largest network of its kind in the UK, it supports over 100 community groups working on issues including waste, transport, food, energy, biodiversity, and social justice.

Oxfordshire Youth which offers targeted support for youth organisations, providing specialised guidance on youth work, safeguarding, and youth engagement.

Peer Support and Partnerships

The research reveals significant informal infrastructure support provided by larger VCSE organisations. This takes various forms:

- Practical resource sharing: "Sharing resources - e.g. tools, equipment"
- Knowledge exchange: "We provide guidance and share our knowledge and experience to other local organisations with similar remits"
- Collaborative support: "We lead the East Oxford Youth Partnership and apply for funding for 4 partner organisations"
- Capacity building: "We partner with many grassroots organisations to tailor sessions"

Many organisations provide infrastructure-like support through:

- Reduced-cost venue hire
- Grant-making to smaller organisations
- Volunteer sharing
- Joint funding applications
- Training and development support

National Infrastructure Support

Oxfordshire's VCSE sector also benefits from national infrastructure bodies, including NCVO (National Council for Voluntary Organisations) and various sector-specific national organisations. These provide:

- Policy guidance
- Research and insight
- Strategic development support
- National advocacy
- Specialised expertise

Access Patterns

The research reveals varying patterns of infrastructure support access across the sector. While some organisations actively engage with multiple support channels - "We work with the CVS and will refer to them when needed" - others report limited awareness or engagement with available support.

Access to infrastructure support varies by:

- Organisation size: Larger organisations generally report better access to and utilisation of support
- Geographic location: Rural organisations often face additional barriers to accessing support
- Organisational capacity: Those with paid staff tend to engage more consistently with infrastructure support

- Awareness levels: Many smaller organisations remain unaware of available support

Support is accessed through various channels:

- Direct service provision
- Network participation
- Peer-to-peer connections
- Online resources
- Training and events
- Individual consultancy

The research suggests that while Oxfordshire benefits from a robust infrastructure support ecosystem, access to and utilisation of this support remains uneven across the sector. Particular challenges exist around reaching and supporting the smallest organisations, suggesting a need for more targeted approaches to infrastructure support provision.

4.4 Does infrastructure meet sector needs?

The research reveals a complex picture of how effectively current infrastructure provision meets the needs of Oxfordshire's VCSE sector. While some organisations report valuable support that enables them to thrive, others describe significant gaps in provision, particularly for the smallest organisations. This section examines four key areas where infrastructure support is crucial: voice and influence in local decision-making, volunteering support, partnership development, and organisational development. Across these areas, the research identifies both strengths in current provision and opportunities for enhancement. A consistent theme emerges of infrastructure organisations working hard to meet sector needs despite resource constraints, while struggling to provide comprehensive support across the diverse spectrum of VCSE organisations. The effectiveness of support varies significantly based on organisational size, location, and capacity to engage with available services.

4.4.1 Voice

The landscape of voice and influence for VCSE organisations in Oxfordshire reveals a complex picture with significant variations both geographically and structurally. While some formal structures exist to support organisational voice, their effectiveness varies considerably across different areas and organisational contexts, creating distinct patterns of engagement and influence across the county.

Geographic analysis reveals clear regional patterns in how organisations engage with decision-making processes. West Oxfordshire demonstrates consistently strong engagement patterns, with 17% of organisations always being informed about opportunities and 49% sometimes informed. This translates into relatively strong influence, with 53% of organisations having at least some opportunity to influence decisions. Most notably, West Oxfordshire organisations report feeling heard more consistently than other regions, with 72% either always or sometimes feeling their voice is listened to, and the lowest proportion (13%) rarely or never feeling heard.

In contrast, Oxford City presents a more complex and polarised picture. While it shows strong initial engagement, with 18% of organisations always being informed (the highest in the county), this doesn't translate effectively into influence or voice. Only 6% report always having influence, and the region shows an even split (41% each) between organisations having and lacking influence. Most strikingly, Oxford City has the lowest proportion (3%) of organisations feeling always heard, though this is somewhat offset by 68% feeling sometimes heard.

Infrastructure organisations employ various methods to support smaller organisations' voices, including "disseminating comments on policy changes to the smallest organisations affected for their feedback" and holding focus groups when time permits. However, these efforts are often "quite ad hoc," relying on partners hosting listening events, forums, or webinars. While there is "increasing talk of co-production," partners still struggle to engage a wide spectrum of people, though some progress is being made through initiatives like co-production workshops delivered in partnership with Oxfordshire County Council.

The relationship between VCSE organisations and local government is complex and multifaceted, with opportunities for meaningful engagement at all levels. While some organisations report positive experiences with parish councils noting that the "local parish council listen," there are also examples of successful partnerships at district and county level. However, feedback like "Unfortunately district council totally ignore issues raised" suggests there is room for improvement in creating consistent and effective channels of engagement across all tiers of local government. This variation in experience is illustrated in South Oxfordshire, where there is significant diversity in organisations' engagement with policy - 10% report always having influence in policy discussions, while 16-18% view policy engagement as outside their remit.

The current support infrastructure depends heavily on informal networks and personal relationships rather than systematic engagement mechanisms. Organisations report engaging "through networking and forming contacts" and "participation in consultations, communication with Councillors." While some organisations report "Amazing support. Strong local leadership," others struggle to access any meaningful support at all. This disparity is reflected in Cherwell, which despite showing the highest combined percentage (69%) of organisations being at least sometimes informed, reports only 6% always having influence.

Representation remains a significant challenge across all regions. The research highlights that "many will be under-represented" and notes "there is still a lack of representation from Black and minoritised ethnic groups, despite there being lots of sector activity led by these groups." These organisations are "often entirely volunteer-led and struggle to commit time and resource." Additionally, "the majority of those involved are white middle-class so many groups are under-represented or excluded," and "the most deprived are excluded from representation. They, we think, are too busy surviving."

The challenges are particularly acute for smaller organisations. Many report being "spread very thinly" with limited capacity for engagement. As one organisation noted, "my experience is that small local self-help groups can be marginalised when it comes to policy issues." The data confirms this, showing organisations with turnover under £10,000 are significantly more likely to consider policy engagement as "not applicable" to their work.

The Vale of White Horse exemplifies broader systemic challenges. Despite 65% of organisations being at least sometimes informed about opportunities, and 51% at least sometimes having influence, the region shows similar polarisation to Oxford City in terms of influence, with an equal split (41% each) between those having and lacking influence. This pattern, reflected across several regions, suggests that while information may be flowing, the mechanisms for converting awareness into influence remain inadequate.

Where support does exist, local infrastructure organisations play a vital role through various mechanisms. Some report that "through regular network meetings we hear from our network of VCSE organisations and can help amplify their voices, we promote campaigns to support these organisations, and we have developed multi-stakeholder working groups." However, many infrastructure organisations acknowledge they "try to provide support but lack the staff resources to do this on a consistent basis."

Looking forward, organisations across all regions have suggested several improvements to enhance participation and voice. These include funding for dedicated outreach officers, establishing regular meeting structures ("monthly meetings / quarter yearly meetings"), and creating more systematic engagement mechanisms. As one organisation articulated, "I would like to see a change where we are given the opportunity to talk to the decision makers rather than for ever hearing them talking down to us."

The data suggests a need for both county-wide systematic improvements and regionally tailored approaches to supporting voice and influence. Organisations express a desire to "have a greater capacity to engage out in the community to hear more and learn more so that we can support people into decision making spaces and work on meaningful ways to reduce barriers." However, many note that this "needs collaboration and time to make a difference" and stress the importance of being "there at the start of change."

4.4.2 Volunteering

The current landscape of volunteering support in Oxfordshire shows some effective elements but significant gaps, particularly for smaller organisations. Infrastructure organisations play a key role in current support provision, primarily through volunteer recruitment platforms. OCVA and OxonVolunteers are frequently mentioned as useful resources, with one organisation noting "OxonVolunteers is proving a great platform to help us reach volunteers, with new enquiries every week."

However, the 2023 Vision for Volunteering report reveals that many active volunteers remain unaware of these platforms. Even experienced volunteers interviewed were surprised to learn about resources like Oxfordshire Volunteers, suggesting current promotional strategies may be insufficient. The report also identified issues with platform maintenance - volunteer opportunities often remain listed long after positions are filled or withdrawn, creating frustration for applicants and potentially deterring future engagement (CFO & OCVA, 2023).

The Vision for Volunteering report also emphasised challenges around training and verification processes. Multiple storytellers highlighted how good training not only improves volunteer effectiveness but also increases retention by helping volunteers feel valued and equipped for their roles. However, current systems often require redundant checks and paperwork when volunteers work with multiple organisations. As one interviewee suggested, a centralised "passport" system for basic training and checks could reduce duplication while maintaining standards (CFO & OCVA, 2023).

OCVA's role has expanded significantly, now maintaining "the countywide website Oxfordshire Volunteers" and employing a "dedicated Volunteering Development Manager who hosts a monthly Volunteer Co-ordinator Forum." They also manage "the Oxfordshire Trustee Leadership list" and offer "a range of training courses to support volunteering."

However, the effectiveness of these platforms appears to vary by organisation size, with smaller organisations often struggling to compete for volunteers against larger, better-resourced organisations. The research suggests that current recruitment support, while valuable, may be too narrowly focused on advertising volunteer opportunities rather than providing comprehensive volunteer program development. As one organisation noted, "CFO provides advice, but there is no easy answer to recruiting more volunteers," suggesting a need for more strategic support beyond basic recruitment advertising.

Local organisations supplement these formal infrastructure supports through community-based approaches. Some utilise "knowledge of people and skill sets in the local community and networking" while others "circulate information via our notice boards, web-site and informal

networking with local residents." Some sector-specific support networks show promise in providing more comprehensive volunteer support. For example, "Support from local church to recruit and manage volunteers, ensure safer recruitment and provide safeguarding" demonstrates how targeted support can address multiple aspects of volunteer management. However, such comprehensive support appears to be the exception rather than the norm.

For the smallest organisations, current support provision often falls short of their needs. While some organisations have access to "a volunteer coordinator new to post," many report "We have no support to recruit and manage volunteers." Many organisations note they are "limited by our own capacity and have to ensure that we can be consistent in what we deliver." This aligns with findings from the Vision for Volunteering research, which highlighted how smaller organisations struggle with basic coordination while larger organisations often have sophisticated volunteer management systems (CFO & OCVA, 2023). As one participant noted, this creates a "participation gap" where smaller organisations have fewer resources to effectively engage volunteers despite often having the greatest need for support.

The research reveals particular gaps in support for:

- Volunteer management training and development
- Succession planning and demographic diversity
- Volunteer retention strategies
- Support for specialised volunteer roles
- Resources for volunteer coordination in smaller organisations
- Consistent volunteer management support
- Strategic volunteer program development

Where support is working well, it tends to combine practical resources with strategic guidance. Organisations that report success often have access to both recruitment platforms and management support, enabling them to "enhance our volunteer programme" and ensure "volunteers are more engaged and feel like they're part of something bigger."

However, the Vision for Volunteering research suggests that even well-resourced organisations face challenges in adapting to post-pandemic changes in volunteering patterns. The report found that many organisations are struggling with volunteer retention and recruitment in the current economic climate, with one participant noting that "people don't have the energy" they used to have for volunteering (CFO & OCVA, 2023).

The sector shows particular strength in volunteer recognition and celebration, with organisations employing various approaches including:

- "Celebrations within work and with volunteers, working with OCVA on their Volunteer Awards"
- "Regular recognition and Celebration of service"
- Hosting "volunteer newsletters, socials and an annual thank you party"
- Providing practical recognition through "tea/coffee and home-made lunch where volunteer sits with us all"
- Contributing to sector-wide initiatives like "an annual Christmas volunteering calendar"

However, the current support landscape appears insufficient to address the sector's most pressing challenges. Post-COVID changes in volunteering patterns, increasing competition for volunteers, and the particular needs of smaller organisations all suggest a need for more comprehensive and accessible support provision. As one organisation observed, "Society appears to be getting more

fragmented and new volunteers harder to find," indicating that current support structures may need to evolve to address changing volunteering patterns and needs.

Organisations have identified several potential improvements to enhance volunteering support:

- Creating "networking volunteer morning" opportunities
- Developing capacity to "survey our volunteers and publish" results
- Establishing "quarterly volunteering meeting[s]" (though noting capacity constraints)
- Improving support for volunteer expenses: "Pay for mileage"
- "Run[ning] training workshops"

The sector shows growing recognition that volunteering requires proper resourcing and support. As one organisation noted, "Advocating for better volunteer support in general - it's not a free resource." This understanding has led to initiatives like "the Oxfordshire Vision for Volunteering project in partnership with CFO to develop a 10 point plan for the future of volunteering in Oxfordshire."

The research suggests that while infrastructure organisations provide valuable services, there is scope for them to expand their support, particularly for smaller organisations. This might include more targeted support for volunteer program development, resources for volunteer management and retention, and strategic guidance on addressing demographic challenges and succession planning. Current provision varies significantly between large and small organisations, with smaller groups often struggling to access comprehensive support. As the sector continues to evolve, there is a clear need for more accessible, sustainable support mechanisms that can help organisations of all sizes develop and maintain effective volunteer programs.

4.4.3 Collaboration

The current landscape of partnership support in Oxfordshire reveals both established networks and significant gaps in provision, particularly for smaller organisations.

The research identifies several key networks that organisations currently engage with:

1. Infrastructure Organisations:
 - Community First Oxfordshire (CFO) (23 mentions)
 - OCVA (14 mentions)
 - CAG Oxfordshire (13 mentions)
2. Local Government:
 - Parish Councils (13 mentions)
 - District/Town Councils (11 mentions)
3. Sector-Specific Networks:
 - Health and Social Care (NHS/Hospital Trusts, Social Prescribers)
 - Environmental (Wild Oxfordshire, BBOWT, Friends of the Earth)
 - Youth and Education (Oxfordshire Youth, Early Years Network)
 - Food-Related (Good Food Oxford, Food Action Working Groups)

The effectiveness of these networks varies significantly. As one organisation notes, "'Effective' is a difficult word to quantify/qualify. Groups like OCVA, OCF and Community First do their best with limited resources, but the range and breadth of community groups make it rather difficult to have meaningful forums to which people could contribute regularly."

Some organisations report successful local collaborations: "Locally in Wantage we have made our own connections." However, many note that partnerships often arise from funding necessities

rather than organic collaboration: "most partnership working has come out of a need for funding. No real time is given to genuine partnerships unless there is an obvious reason."

Infrastructure organisations employ various strategies to support partnership working:

- Hosting regular network meetings: "One example is that we convene quarterly network meetings for all community food services (food banks, larders, fridges etc) to encourage collaboration and best practice"
- Leading joint funding applications: "As a small organisation with more resources than many grassroots organisations we try to support as a lead in joint funding applications"
- Facilitating information sharing: "Having made contacts through the Community Stakeholder collaboration meetings we are able to share information and help each other"
- Providing spaces for collaboration: "Provide a space for open conversations on a topic - bring people together without expectations"

However, significant barriers to effective collaboration persist:

- Resource constraints: "Like many small organisations we are resource and time poor and those are two essential items to making partnerships work"
- Competition for funding: "There is a culture of competitiveness and protectionism - at least among the larger environmental NGOs. Probably due to meagre funding"
- Limited capacity: "Time pressures, particularly as we are a volunteer led initiative"
- Organisational priorities: "Most of us are fully engaged in trying to keep our own enterprises working"

The research identifies several key gaps in partnership working:

- Rural communities
- Migrant women
- Domestic abuse organisations
- "Those that are new, those that may not have a well-known leader, and those who appear to have specific affiliations for example religious groups"
- "The smallest ones"
- "Seldom heard groups by definition"

Organisations suggest several improvements to enhance collaboration:

- Creating central coordination points: "We need a central co-ordinating point of contact, place to meet"
- Providing resource support: "Sessional wages for time spent on this or get volunteer to do this"
- Improving information sharing: "Have a list of all the VCSE organisations in our local area and details of who needs support/partnerships"
- Building systematic support: "Host more collaborative sessions based on themes, geography"
- Developing structured networking: "If we had more capacity, we could hold further networking meetings in areas of the county"

Where support works well, it tends to combine formal networking opportunities with practical collaboration input. For instance, some organisations report successful liaison with multiple partners: "Liaison with Oxford Universities, schools, Mind, Restore, Ark-T etc., to deliver outreach events." The OX4 Food Crew partnership demonstrates how smaller organisations can benefit from

the infrastructure and resources of larger partners while maintaining their independence and community connections.

However, many organisations, particularly smaller ones, report that current support provision falls short of their needs. As one organisation noted, "It could be improved - groups which do not have paid staff tend to miss out." The research suggests several persistent gaps in current support provision:

- Limited structured support for cross-sector partnerships
- Insufficient resources for maintaining long-term collaborations
- Lack of systematic support for smaller organisations
- Geographic disparities in access to networks
- Limited support for partnership development with statutory bodies
- "Asset-owning organisations aren't always in a position or feel they aren't in a position to share use of assets"

The research suggests that while infrastructure organisations provide valuable networking opportunities, there is scope to develop more structured support for partnership development, particularly for smaller organisations. Success requires addressing both practical barriers like resource constraints and structural challenges like competition for funding. As one organisation noted, support needs to be "bottom up rather than top down" to be truly effective.

4.4.4 Development

The current landscape of capacity building support in Oxfordshire shows some valuable provision but significant gaps, particularly in long-term development support.

The research identifies several key providers of capacity building support:

- OCVA and Community Matters: Primary providers of training courses
- Community First Oxfordshire: General support and guidance
- Oxfordshire Youth: Targeted development support for youth organisations
- Oxfordshire Community Foundation (OCF): Information and advice about current issues

Infrastructure organisations employ various approaches to identify and address development needs:

- Direct engagement: "Asking them what they want or need - often we do a mapping piece, or look at existing information before we identify the strengths etc."
- Regular consultation: "Through our network meeting we identify the strengths and needs of our network and then look at how we can support given our capacity and resources"
- Mixed methods: "Surveys, attending events, looking at trends in requests that we see as an organisation"
- Informal dialogue: "Just through informal dialogue with our network and by making our support as available as possible in our comms"

Some organisations report positive experiences with existing support: "Oxfordshire Youth have offered amazing support from setting up our organisation and to meet ongoing development needs" and "Community First Oxfordshire is amazingly helpful and informative." Online training resources are generally considered accessible, with one organisation noting "Access to online training and support is plentiful."

Infrastructure organisations take varied approaches to supporting community needs assessment:

- Trust-based approach: "I think we often trust the small organisations to know the needs and priorities because they are part of the communities themselves"
- Information sharing: "We try to support with sharing information where we have it, such as the Public Health Joint Strategic Needs Assessments"
- Targeted training: "We have developed and delivered training for example around MECC and also on food poverty, healthy start and Play:Full (HAF activities)"
- Network learning: "We provide info and support on this and hold network meetings so that we all can learn from the things we do and don't do"

However, the research reveals significant limitations in current provision. While basic training is available, organisations report that "Longer term funding for growth and development is much harder." Many organisations end up being "internally driven" or "self-sufficient," with some reporting they "pay our contractors for advice" due to gaps in available support.



Case Study 9: Banbury Larder

The Banbury Larder exemplifies both the resilience and vulnerability of small organisations addressing poverty in Cherwell. Operating as a social enterprise with an annual turnover under £10,000, this social enterprise combines food poverty alleviation with community development, environmental action, and mental health support.

Despite experiencing increased demand over the past year, they face fundamental sustainability challenges: "No funding to pay overheads and running costs." While they employ up to two part-time staff, their operation relies heavily on "The volunteers - we have 15 consistent individuals" who collectively contribute around six hours weekly.

The organisation maintains active partnerships with local groups including "Bridge street community garden, Banbury mosque," demonstrating their community embeddedness. However, they report rarely being informed about opportunities to participate in local policy-making, and despite having opportunities to influence decisions, feel their voice is "rarely/never" listened to.

Their experience highlights particular challenges around accessing support. "We don't have support and can't afford to pay OCVA a monthly fee so any support is appreciated," they explain, illustrating how even modest membership fees can create barriers for small organisations. They identify several urgent development needs including "Grant writing, training for volunteers, leadership development" but report rarely having access to capacity building support that matches these needs.

Their priorities for future support focus on sustainability: "Training for volunteers, Grants to pay a larder manager." This reflects a common challenge where organisations need both immediate operational funding and support to develop long-term sustainability.

The Banbury Larder's experience highlights several key issues:

- **The challenge of covering basic running costs**
- **Financial barriers to accessing infrastructure support**
- **The relationship between voice and resource constraints**
- **The need for accessible capacity building support**
- **The importance of sustainable funding for community food projects**

Their situation demonstrates why accessible, low-barrier infrastructure support is crucial for ensuring small organisations can continue addressing food poverty and related challenges in their communities.

Access to capacity building services appears inconsistent. Organisations report varying levels of engagement:

- Limited access: "Not enough"
- Geographic constraints: "No, we are a local Abingdon-centred charity"
- Variable engagement: "Some do, but there are plenty more that don't!"

- Informal access: "Only as part of the informal networking and collaboration we offer"

The effectiveness of current support varies significantly:

1. Training Provision
 - Short courses and workshops are relatively accessible
 - Online resources provide basic support
 - Limited provision for specialised skills development
 - Geographic barriers to accessing in-person training
2. Organisational Development
 - Some support through Communities of Practice
 - Limited long-term development support
 - Gaps in support for strategic planning
 - Variable access to expertise
3. Resource Development
 - Focus on short-term interventions
 - Limited support for sustainable development
 - Gaps in support for core capacity building
 - Insufficient help with long-term planning

Organisations suggest several improvements to enhance development support:

- Creating centralised resources: "A library of experiences"
- Improving accessibility: "I would like one place for the smallest orgs to go or at least the first few steps mapped out for them"
- Practical support: "If we could sort out setting up a bank acct that would be an added bonus!"
- Knowledge sharing: "Share our resources and know-how, where possible"
- Local development: "We would like to do more local development and support but lack the resources"

The research suggests that while basic training and support are available, current provision falls short of sector needs, particularly for smaller organisations. Some organisations note they "don't know enough about this area in terms of what is currently available to community groups," indicating a need for better communication about available support.

The data indicates that effective capacity building support needs to be:

- More accessible to smaller organisations
- Focused on practical implementation
- Sustained rather than one-off
- Tailored to organisational size and capacity
- Supportive of long-term development needs
- Better communicated to potential beneficiaries

This analysis suggests that while valuable support exists, there is significant scope to enhance and expand capacity building provision to better meet the sector's needs, particularly for smaller organisations requiring more sustained development support. As one organisation noted, "Nothing without investment" - indicating that addressing these gaps will require dedicated resources and strategic planning.

4.5 What challenges impact infrastructure support?

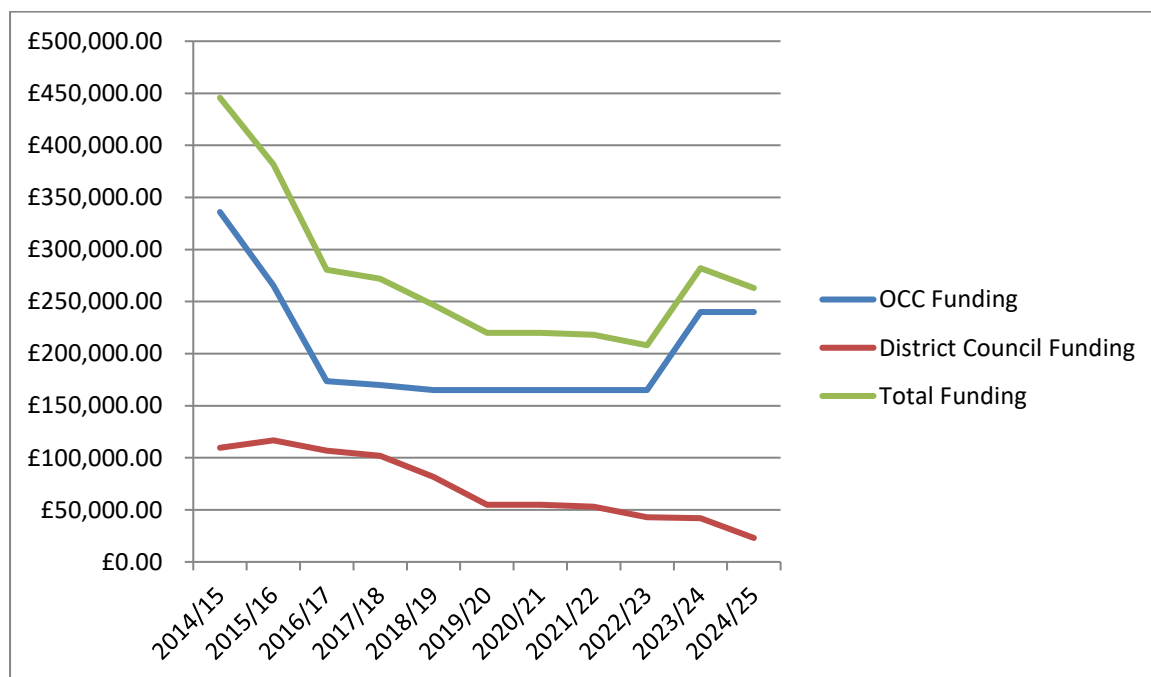
The research reveals significant systemic challenges facing infrastructure support in Oxfordshire, reflecting concerning national trends documented in recent sector analysis. Recent research by 360Giving shows that while the voluntary sector grew by 20% between 2011-2020, infrastructure spending remained stagnant or declined in real terms (Kane & Cohen, 2023). These challenges fundamentally affect the sector's ability to provide comprehensive support to smaller VCSE organisations.

Funding and Resource Constraints

A critical challenge facing infrastructure support is the significant decline of funding over the past 10-15 years. Following a worrying national trend, many local and national infrastructure bodies have experienced significant loss of funding in recent years. This constraint is particularly problematic given the breadth of support needs identified in the research. Infrastructure organisations report being "stretched so tight that it can all fall apart very easily as volunteer time commitments change," highlighting how resource constraints affect both service delivery and sustainability.

This local experience mirrors national patterns. Analysis shows that infrastructure organisations typically receive only about 25% of their income from government sources (both grants and contracts) and 8% from other grant makers. For local general infrastructure bodies like those in Oxfordshire, government funding dependency is even higher, with nearly half (46%) of income coming from public sources (Kane & Cohen, 2023). This creates particular vulnerability when public funding declines.

The chart below highlights the changing levels of funding for infrastructure provided by Oxfordshire County Council and District Councils to Community First Oxfordshire and OCVA. At the time of writing, funding from all but one district council is due to end in 25/26 and a funding agreement with Oxfordshire County Council has yet to be agreed.



Historically, local infrastructure organisations like CFO and OCVA have been predominantly funded by the public sector (local councils and NHS). This dynamic creates particular challenges for

infrastructure organisations. This funding structure can compromise their ability to fulfil one of the sector's highest priority needs: advocacy and voice. Councils are unlikely to fund organisations to help other organisations raise their voices about engagement with the public sector. This creates a fundamental tension between funding dependencies and the sector's advocacy needs.

Complexity of Need

The research reveals extraordinary diversity in support needs across the sector. Organisations vary significantly in:

- Size and capacity
- Operational longevity
- Thematic focus
- Geographic reach
- Resource levels
- Volunteer capacity

This diversity makes it challenging for infrastructure organisations to provide appropriately tailored support. The challenge is particularly acute in rural and low-income areas, where organisations often face additional barriers to accessing support. As one respondent emphasised, "There needs to be more public investment in supporting voluntary organisations, especially in low income areas."

National research indicates this challenge is particularly acute for infrastructure organisations supporting marginalised communities, which often face a double bind - they are most reliant on grant funding yet face the greatest challenges accessing sustainable funding streams. This compounds the difficulty of providing appropriately tailored support across such diverse needs (Kane & Cohen, 2023)

In Focus: Diversity of Need

The VCSE sector encompasses organisations at different stages of development, with varying levels of experience and distinct support requirements. Understanding these differences is crucial for providing effective, targeted support that helps organisations thrive and remain sustainable.

The following typology of needs emerged during the research and was validated through feedback sessions with:

Seedling Organisations These are exciting new initiatives born from passionate community response to local needs. They might be just one passionate individual with an idea, or a small group beginning to explore what's possible. Many are at the pre-registration stage or have just registered as a CIC or charity. Their founders bring fresh perspectives and deep community connections, often spotting opportunities others have missed. While they may be small in size - perhaps just 2-3 people meeting in someone's living room - they have the advantage of agility and innovation. Their energy and commitment create strong foundations for impact, though they urgently need guidance on basics like choosing a legal structure, setting up a bank account, writing policies, and understanding their obligations. Without early support, they risk making serious governance mistakes, becoming overwhelmed by bureaucracy, or simply giving up before their idea can take root. Their potential for positive change is significant when connected with appropriate support and mentoring, particularly around funding applications and basic organisational development.

Impactful Accelerators These dynamic organisations have proven their concept and are experiencing rapid community uptake. They typically have 1-2 paid staff or are about to make their first hires, with an active volunteer base and growing service demand. Their successful programmes and strong community engagement are driving expansion of their services and reach. Many are transitioning from purely volunteer-led to employing staff, or from single-funded to multiple income streams. While their growth trajectory is promising, they face significant risks - a major grant ending could wipe out their momentum, or rapid growth could overwhelm their systems and processes. They urgently need support with HR policies, financial management systems, impact measurement, and governance structures that can handle growth. The complexity of managing multiple funders, staff and volunteers, and increased regulation can be particularly challenging. With strategic support, these organisations can successfully navigate their expansion while maintaining quality and impact.

Community Anchors These established organisations have demonstrated remarkable staying power through years of community service. Typically operating with 5-10 core volunteers, often retirees who have been involved for decades, they run regular activities like lunch clubs, social groups or community facilities. Led by deeply committed volunteers with extensive local knowledge, they provide consistent, reliable support to their communities. Their longstanding presence has built trust and understanding of local dynamics. However, they face serious risks around volunteer succession - many have trustees in their 70s and 80s with no younger people stepping forward. They may be using outdated systems and processes, struggling with digital transformation, or finding it harder to meet modern governance requirements. They often operate in isolation from the wider sector, seeing themselves as neighbours or campaigners instead of volunteers, missing opportunities for collaboration or funding. While they excel in their core activities, they urgently need support with volunteer recruitment, modernising their operations, and planning for leadership succession. Their wealth of experience makes them valuable mentors for newer organisations, but without support to adapt and bring in new people, they risk sudden closure when key volunteers can no longer continue.

By and For Organisations Recent research in Oxfordshire and neighbouring counties reveals concerning patterns in sector leadership diversity. Only 5% of chairs and chief officers come from minority ethnic or mixed ethnicity backgrounds - lower than national VCSE averages of 8-10%. Similarly, people with disabilities are significantly under-represented in leadership roles, holding just 3% of chair positions and 5% of chief officer roles, compared to national figures of 10% and 8% respectively (Chapman and Wistow, 2023).

Many organisations serving marginalised communities are relatively new, emerging as these communities gain safer spaces for public organising. However, historical barriers to establishing formal organisations mean these groups often lack access to traditional support networks and resources. These organisations play a vital role in addressing gaps left by mainstream services and longstanding charities, ensuring support reaches communities that have been historically marginalised or underserved by the wider VCSE sector. Led by and serving specific communities, they bring unique insights and trusted relationships that enable effective service delivery where traditional approaches have failed or been inaccessible. They may be at any stage of development - from newly emerging groups to well-established organisations - but share common challenges stemming from structural inequalities and systemic barriers.

Their leaders bring deep understanding of community needs and innovative approaches to meeting them, often pioneering solutions that could transform practice across the sector. However, they face distinct challenges that transcend organisational size or stage. These include navigating funding systems that don't recognize their ways of working, dealing with institutional barriers that persist despite equality policies, language barriers and managing additional translation or cultural adaptation work that goes unrecognised and unfunded. Their leaders often shoulder extra responsibilities beyond their formal roles, acting as cultural interpreters and advocates while managing standard organisational demands.

While they excel at creating culturally appropriate services and building trust with communities who may be wary of mainstream provision, they commonly face barriers accessing the networks, relationships and resources that other organisations take for granted. They need targeted support that recognises their distinct challenges - from help accessing unrestricted funding that values their unique approaches, to support building equitable partnerships with mainstream organisations, to advocacy that challenges systemic barriers. Without appropriate support that recognises and addresses these structural challenges, these vital organizations risk remaining marginalised within the sector, perpetuating the very gaps in provision they emerged to address.

Their potential for creating systemic change is significant - not just in serving their immediate communities but in demonstrating new ways of working that could benefit the entire sector. However, realizing this potential requires the sector to address its own structural inequalities and ensure support services actively dismantle barriers rather than reinforce them.

Awareness and Communication

A significant challenge is the lack of awareness about available infrastructure support. Many organisations, particularly smaller ones, remain unaware of existing support services. As one organisation noted, "We are in the process of re-establishing links with OCVA and various voluntary organisations," suggesting a disconnect between available support and potential beneficiaries.

The funding constraints faced by infrastructure organisations further compound this issue, as they have limited funds to deliver this type of support and therefore have limited resources to promote themselves and what they can offer as much as needed. Moreover, much infrastructure work

happens invisibly - "there are quite a few quiet conversations that we have with the smallest orgs that we don't report on, they just happen. It's those supportive conversations that need to be quiet that are so important." This invisibility makes it difficult to demonstrate impact and secure sustainable funding.

While Covid-19 emergency funding provided some temporary relief to infrastructure organisations through 2020-21, analysis shows this largely came through one-off emergency grants rather than sustainable funding for core support work. This masks the underlying challenge of securing long-term resources needed to build awareness and demonstrate impact (Kane & Cohen, 2023).

Blurred Boundaries

The research identifies an increasingly complex dynamic between infrastructure and delivery organisations. Infrastructure organisations increasingly need to take on delivery projects to secure funding, while larger delivery organisations often provide infrastructure-like support to smaller partners. This blurring of boundaries creates several challenges:

- Risk to specialised infrastructure expertise
- Competition for limited resources
- Confusion about roles and responsibilities
- Potential gaps in systematic support

This blurring of roles reflects a documented national trend where infrastructure bodies increasingly need to diversify income through trading and service delivery. While this helps address immediate funding gaps, research indicates it can mask reductions in capacity for core infrastructure support and advocacy work that smaller organisations particularly rely upon (Kane & Cohen, 2023).

Recovery and Resilience

The research highlights ongoing challenges related to sector recovery. As one respondent noted, "many of the smaller groups, as well as some larger organisations, are still trying to recover from the impact of the COVID lockdowns. This had a big impact on volunteering and the ability to raise funds."

Strategic Implications

These challenges have significant implications for the sector's future sustainability. The research suggests a need for:

1. More sustainable funding models for infrastructure support
2. Better mechanisms for identifying and reaching organisations in need of support
3. Clearer delineation of infrastructure and delivery roles
4. More targeted support for smaller organisations
5. Enhanced capacity for advocacy and voice
6. Improved geographic coverage and accessibility

5. Conclusion

5.1 Summary of Key Findings

This research demonstrates that a strong, sustainable infrastructure support service is not only desirable but essential for Oxfordshire's VCSE sector to thrive. Infrastructure organisations, such as Community First Oxfordshire and OCVA, are the backbone of the support system, providing resources, training, advocacy, and networking opportunities that enable VCSE organisations to deliver services effectively. However, infrastructure support has been significantly reduced at a time when the sector's demands have increased. Below are the key findings, with an emphasis on how enhanced infrastructure could address these issues:

1. Volunteering Challenges:

- Volunteer numbers are declining across the sector, with many organisations reporting an aging volunteer base and difficulties recruiting younger and more diverse volunteers.
- Volunteer recruitment and retention are especially pressing for micro-organisations, which lack the capacity to coordinate volunteers effectively.
- Infrastructure organisations could expand their volunteer recruitment services, offering targeted outreach campaigns, brokerage services, and training programmes to address the evolving needs of volunteers. By focusing on succession planning and supporting organisations in volunteer retention strategies, infrastructure could help ensure a steady and engaged volunteer base.

2. Funding and Financial Instability:

- Core funding has been significantly reduced, replaced by narrow, project-specific funding streams that fail to meet basic operational needs.
- Smaller organisations, particularly those led by marginalised communities, struggle to access competitive funding opportunities and often feel excluded from decision-making processes around funding priorities.
- Infrastructure organisations could provide direct grant-writing support, training in financial management, and advocacy for the return of core funding models. They can also play a critical role in convening funders and lobbying for long-term, flexible funding streams tailored to small and micro-organisations.

3. Capacity Constraints:

- Organisations across Oxfordshire face increasing service demand but lack the capacity to scale effectively. This capacity gap is particularly acute for volunteer-led organisations operating with minimal resources.
- Access to capacity-building support is inconsistent, and smaller organisations often lack the skills and resources to plan strategically or adapt to changing circumstances.
- By offering tailored capacity-building programmes, infrastructure organisations could help smaller groups develop governance structures, strategic plans, and resilience. Additionally, they could establish mentoring

schemes to share expertise across the sector and provide region-specific support to isolated areas.

4. Regional Disparities:

- Rural areas, such as South Oxfordshire, face greater challenges in accessing infrastructure support compared to urban centres like Oxford City. Geographic isolation exacerbates capacity and collaboration gaps.
- Infrastructure organisations could prioritise outreach and engagement in rural areas, establishing local hubs and tailored forums to bridge the gap in support. Funding should be allocated to ensure equitable access to infrastructure services across Oxfordshire.

5. Barriers to Collaboration:

- While informal networks remain strong, formal partnership opportunities are limited, especially for emerging organisations and those serving marginalised communities.
- Competitive funding dynamics and resource constraints discourage collaboration and instead foster siloed working practices.
- Infrastructure organisations can act as conveners, fostering networks, coordinating cross-sector partnerships, and creating opportunities for collaboration through workshops, regional forums, and shared project platforms.

6. Voice and Advocacy Gaps:

- Many smaller organisations feel excluded from policy and decision-making processes. Representation is particularly lacking for organisations led by Black, Asian, and other marginalised communities.
- While infrastructure organisations make efforts to amplify voices, resource constraints limit their ability to provide consistent, systematic support.
- Infrastructure bodies must amplify the voices of under-represented groups by advocating for inclusive policies and facilitating co-production workshops with local authorities. Infrastructure organisations should also work with marginalised groups to develop advocacy skills and ensure their representation in policy forums.

5.2 Recommendations for Future Infrastructure

The findings of this research reinforce the need for robust and consistent infrastructure to address the sector's challenges. Infrastructure organisations should be adequately funded to provide:

1. Volunteer Support:

- Act as hubs for volunteer recruitment, management, and training
- Develop campaigns and outreach programmes to attract younger and more diverse volunteers
- Provide specialist support with trustee recruitment

- Offer succession planning tools and mentorship for organisations reliant on an aging volunteer base
- 2. **Funding and Sustainability:**
 - Provide grant-writing workshops and one-to-one funding advice to smaller organisations
 - Advocate for the restoration of core funding models and coordinate applications for large collaborative grants
 - Offer targeted financial management training for micro and small organisations
- 3. **Capacity-Building Initiatives:**
 - Deliver tailored training programmes in governance, strategic planning, and compliance
 - Create a network of mentors to support emerging and volunteer-led organisations
 - Offer bespoke support to organisations led by marginalised communities, helping them access resources and navigate systemic barriers
- 4. **Fostering Collaboration:**
 - Establish regional networks to bring organisations together for shared learning and resource pooling
 - Act as facilitators for cross-sector collaboration, including partnerships with statutory bodies, funders, and private sector organisations
- 5. **Voice and Representation:**
 - Host co-production workshops to ensure VCSE organisations, especially the smallest and those led by marginalised groups, have a voice in shaping local policy
 - Amplify sector-wide advocacy to influence local and national funding and policy decisions
- 6. **Address Inequalities:**
 - Establish an outreach campaign to increase awareness of infrastructure support available to underserved organisations
 - Focus outreach efforts on rural and underserved areas, ensuring no organisation is excluded from accessing support. An accessibility audit of current services would be a useful starting point
 - Partner with community hubs and established VCSE organisations in isolated regions to act as local infrastructure anchors
 - Work collaboratively with BAME-led community organisations to establish an infrastructure offer which is accessible and culturally relevant

5.3 Vision for a Strengthened VCSE Sector in Oxfordshire

A vibrant, resilient VCSE sector supported by strong infrastructure can transform Oxfordshire's communities. Infrastructure organisations provide the essential foundations for:

- **Equitable Access to Services:** By supporting VCSE organisations, infrastructure ensures that every community, regardless of geography or demographics, has access to vital services
- **A Culture of Collaboration:** Infrastructure fosters partnerships across sectors, enabling organisations to work together to address shared challenges and achieve collective impact
- **Sustainable Growth:** Through training and advocacy, infrastructure organisations equip VCSE groups with the tools they need to grow, adapt, and thrive

Without infrastructure, the sector risks fragmentation, inefficiency, and inequity.

5.4 The Cost of Inaction

The findings of Kane & Cohen (2023) reveal a concerning trend: the closure of local and national infrastructure organisations over the past decade has created a "fragile ecosystem" of infrastructure support, even as the demand for VCSE services has grown. This fragility is reflected in Oxfordshire, where infrastructure bodies are stretched to capacity, risking their ability to provide critical services.

If action is not taken to bolster infrastructure in Oxfordshire:

1. **Essential Services Will Be Lost:**
 - Volunteer-led organisations, such as grassroots groups in rural areas, will face closure, leaving vulnerable communities unsupported. Emerging organisations responding to urgent needs will struggle to survive without infrastructure to guide and stabilise them.
2. **Marginalised Voices Will Be Silenced:**
 - Black and Asian-led organisations, as well as those serving under-represented groups, will lose the support needed to access funding and advocate for their communities. This will perpetuate inequities and leave significant gaps in service provision.
3. **Volunteer Fatigue Will Deepen:**
 - Without proper support, volunteer recruitment will stagnate, and existing volunteers will burn out, leading to a diminished volunteer workforce and reduced organisational capacity.
4. **Inequalities Will Widen:**
 - Rural areas such as South Oxfordshire will face even greater challenges in accessing resources, exacerbating disparities between urban and rural communities.
5. **The VCSE Sector Will Fragment:**
 - Collaboration and resource-sharing will diminish, resulting in inefficiencies and duplication of efforts. The lack of coordinated infrastructure will weaken the sector's collective impact and leave Oxfordshire's communities underserved.

Infrastructure is the scaffolding that supports the entire VCSE sector, enabling organisations to build, grow, and adapt. Without urgent investment, this scaffolding will collapse, leaving Oxfordshire's communities exposed to rising inequalities and unmet needs. Protecting and strengthening infrastructure is not just a necessity; it is a moral obligation to ensure a thriving, inclusive future for all.

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