North Northamptonshire Council Communities Strategy

2024-2027

Foreword – Councillor Mark Rowley - Executive Member for Housing, Communities and Levelling Up

North Northamptonshire's Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise Sector (VCSE) is vital to the life of our area. Our voluntary and community organisations, and local groups help to connect communities, support individuals, deliver services and bring people together. The sector is innovative, dynamic and resourceful. It does not just fill the gaps in between public services; it's more often the first port of call for people, where they go for friendship, support and to give something back to their local area. Which is why it's so diverse.

What does the phrase VCSE really mean? Voluntary and community groups of every shape and size, and now joined by an emerging social enterprise sector. They have seen huge changes over the last few years, positives and negatives. The pandemic, financial challenges and the cost-of-living crisis have prompted a re-focus within the sector, a fresh look at what is being delivered and achieved, what is needed and what the aspirations are. Quality and sustainability are essential not just for survival, but to thrive. Relationships have changed, but those that have emerged are stronger than ever, with more collaboration, within and across sectors, and greater recognition and valuing of voluntary and community groups.

What makes our voluntary and community groups in North Northamptonshire so special are people. An army of volunteers, staff, friends and neighbours working tirelessly to build their local community and help the most vulnerable, at risk and in need.

And we have never needed them more. Ongoing public sector austerity, the huge impact of the pandemic, the cost-of-living crisis, economic, demographic and social pressures are unprecedented. Voluntary and community groups are best placed to deal with these challenges, and best placed to respond, in the right place at the right time, at the heart of our communities.

But they cannot do this alone, and nor should they simply be given money to respond. As a new and developing Council, we want to foster and enable a new spirit and culture of working together across sectors and communities, a strengths and asset-based approach where we all have a contribution to make, and resources and skills are invested collaboratively, equally and transparently.

Our new Place Development Programme, as part of the Integrated Care System (ICS), seeks to drive this way of working, bringing public services, residents and voluntary and community groups and local businesses together though the four Community Wellbeing Forums and seven Local Area Partnerships, to make positive change happen. And the Sector can play a significant role in helping to shape, influence and deliver our Vision 50 ambitions for North Northamptonshire.

The challenges we face present fresh opportunities, but we need to be brave enough to change how we work, break down our silos and sector barriers and build mutually beneficial relationships.

That is why we have produced this strategy. It's not one just for the 'VCSE', it's a vision for us all to achieve our common goals. I am delighted that North Northamptonshire Council are continuing to invest in the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise sector, not only maintaining the levels of funding from recent years, but enhancing the

offer through new funding streams such as the creation of the Member Empowerment Fund and the allocation of external investment from the Shared Prosperity Fund as well as short term funding such as the Household Support Fund. I am also pleased that through this Strategy we will be significantly increasing investment in VCSE infrastructure support, so that we can continue to raise the profile of the sector by supporting hundreds of groups and organisations to do new activities, deliver services, support volunteers and become more financially sustainable.

Finally, thank you for taking the time to read this strategy and for your continuing support in our vision for to build strong communities in North Northamptonshire, 'a place where everyone has the best opportunities and quality of life'.

Cllr Mark Rowley

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1. About this Strategy

This purpose of this strategy is to emphasise and strengthen the role the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise Sector (VCSE), residents and communities have in delivering the North Northamptonshire Council's Corporate Plan and the Northamptonshire Integrated Care System's Live Your Best Live Strategy.

It is a North Northamptonshire Council Strategy but it also brings together the key themes which underpin a number of national and local agendas into a co-ordinated vision for effective partnership working with the VCSE.

This will be achieved through mutually beneficial relationships between all directorates within the Council, with the VCSE but also can support positive relationships across all organisations, across sectors and with residents and communities, which will drive innovation, collaboration and meaningful co-production.

2. Strategic and Operational Context

2.1. North Northamptonshire's VCSE

The VCSE provides valuable support to people across North Northamptonshire. The range and geographical coverage of organisations in the sector is comprehensive. There are currently 168 VCSE member organisations connected to the VCSE Locality based networks in Kettering and Corby and 200 across Wellingborough and East Northants, many of whom operate successfully without funding from the Council. They range from small volunteer-run community groups to larger charities, some of which provide very specialised work such as debt casework, mental health counselling, support to victims of Domestic Abuse, and drug treatment and recovery.
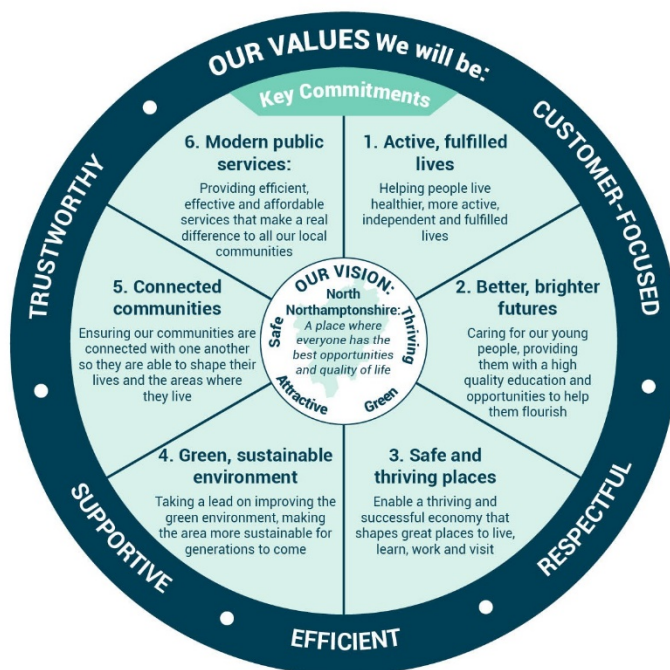
2.2. NNC's Strategic Priorities

Figure 1 - NNC Corporate Plan 2021-2025

As a new Council vested in 2021, North Northamptonshire Council developed and adopted its first Corporate Plan in late 2021. The main focus for the Council is to ensure North Northamptonshire is, **'a place where everyone has the best opportunities and quality of life'.**

During 2023 the Council has also been developing with its key partners, including the VCSE, its Big50 Future Vision which sets out the vision for 2050 for North Northamptonshire as an area, with the draft priorities for North Northamptonshire being:

- A proud place
- A prosperous place
- A proactive place

The VCSE has a role to work alongside the Council in delivering almost all of its strategic objectives as they relate to outcomes for our people and places, and align with the raison d'etre for many of our VCSE organisations. However it is important to ensure that where the Council is grant funding VCSE delivery, the investment is demonstably contributing to its strategic priorities**.**

2.3. <u>The Integrated Care System</u>

Over the last 18 months the county as a 'system' of partners from across the Public and VCSE sectors, has also developed its approach to integrated health and care through Integrated Care Northamptonshire (ICN). A new 10 year Live Your Best Life Strategy was adopted in late 2022, the ambition of this strategy is for residents to 'live their best life' in all aspects: health and wellbeing, education, housing and employment.

It sets out a collaborative direction of travel for the people of Northamptonshire to achieve our shared vision over the next 10 years to deliver better outcomes for residents throughout their lifetime; from pregnancy to early years, to improved education and employment opportunities, to social connection and better access to health and care services.

It also recognises that, like many areas, North Northamptonshire faces a number of challenges that continue to place pressure on the Council and on health and care services. We face significant demand from our growing older population and working age adults, as well as our children population. These are happening at a time when operating cost pressures are high, with utility costs rising and people feeling the impact of the rising cost of living. It is clear that organisations, and their services, must adapt to ensure that they meet the challenges ahead. We know that through shared working and VCSE and community involvement, we have the best opportunity to respond to these challenges.

The Live Your Best Life strategic objectives are summarised below:

Ambition	Outcome
The best start in life	Women are healthy and well during and after pregnancy. All children grow and develop well so they are ready and equipped to start school.
Access to the best available education and learning	Education settings are good and inclusive and children and young people, including those with special needs perform well. Adults have access to learning opportunities which support them with work and life skills.
Opportunity to be fit, well and independent	Children and adults are healthy and active and enjoy good mental health. People experience less ill-health and disability due to lung and heart diseases.
Employment that keeps them and their families out of poverty	More adults are employed and receive a 'living wage'. Adults and families take up benefits they are entitled to.
Good housing in places which are clean and green	Good access to affordable, safe, quality accommodation and security of tenure. The local environment is clean and green with lower carbon emissions.
To feel safe in their homes and when out and about	People are safe in their homes, on public transport and in public places. Children and young people are safe and protected from harm.
Connected to their families and friends	People feel well connected to family, friends and their community. Connections are helped by public transport and technology.
The chance for a fresh start, when things go wrong	Ex-offenders and homeless people are helped back into society. People have good access to support for addictive behaviour and take it up.

Ambition	Outcome
Access to health and social care when they need it	People can access NHS services and personal and social care when they need to. People are supported to live at home for as long as possible and only spend time in hospital to meet medical needs. Services to prevent illness (e.g. health checks, screening and vaccines) are good, easy to access and well used.
To be accepted and valued simply for who they are	People are treated with dignity and respect, especially at times of greatest need like at the end of their lives. Diversity is celebrated. People feel they are a valued part of their community and are not isolated or lonely.

The approach to delivery for the ICN is all about connecting strategic decision making, from the Integrated Care Board and the county-wide thematic strategic collaboratives, through to place, utilising the new Community Wellbeing Forums (CWF) and Local Area Partnerships (LAPS); and putting communities at the heart of what we do.

*Figure 2 - Northamptonshire ICN Operating Framework*
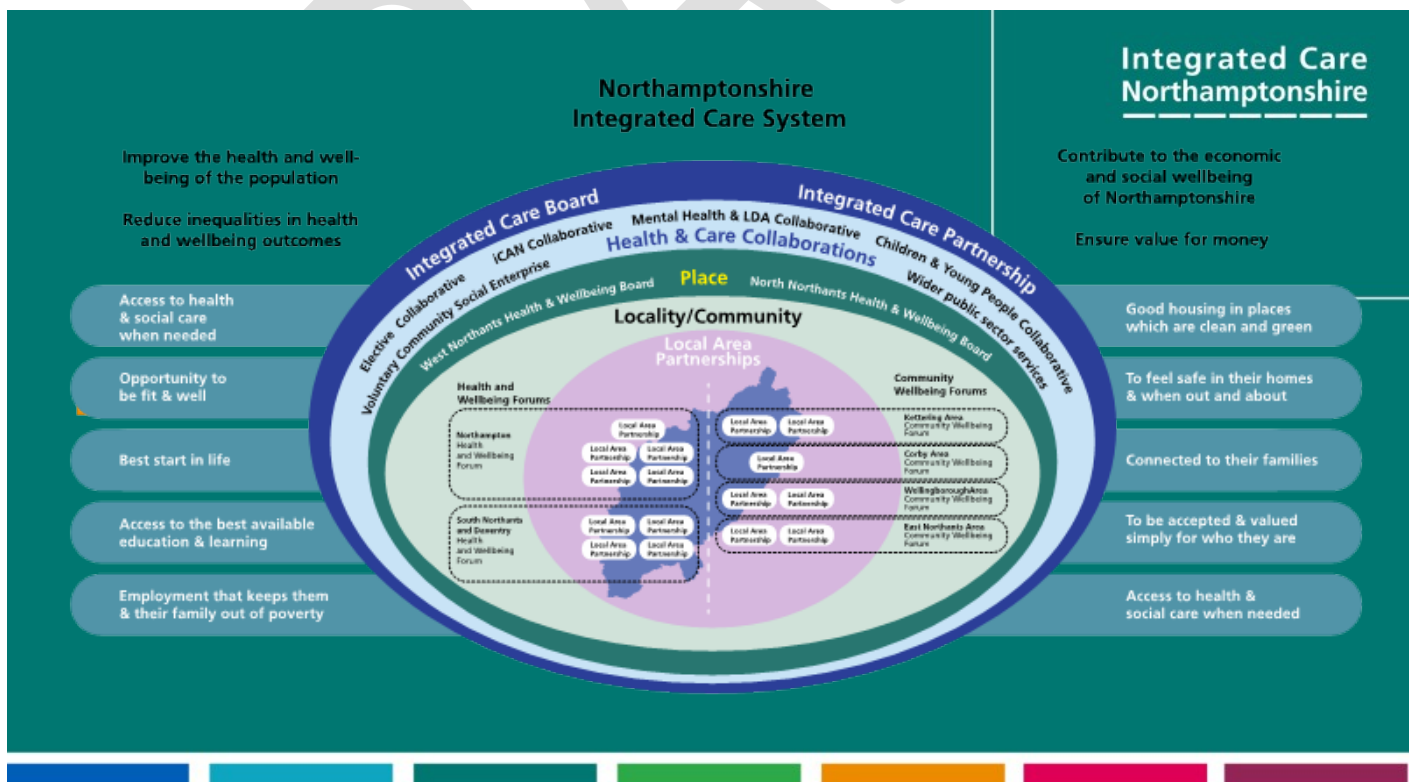
2.4. Community Wellbeing Forums

- Enable local statutory and VCSE partners to work together in a place to share organisational priorities and initiatives to improve health and wellbeing of local people through engagement and strengthened relationships with each other and communities.

- Influence and inform the North Northamptonshire health and wellbeing ambitions.

- Review evidence on local health needs, social and economic determinant of health and wellbeing and identify issues that need addressing.

- Provide partnership action to unblock challenges that LAPs feel unable to tackle and where 'at scale' solutions are needed, including joint commissioning / pooled budget arrangements.

- Provide oversight and conduit for effective community engagement.

- Enable local leaders influence policy to access the right resource and capabilities to deliver their functions.

2.5. Local Area Partnerships

- Represent local areas and give a voice to residents, translating strategy into local action.

- Build a local relationship with communities and support them to live their best lives.

- Put community involvement & engagement at the heart of improving health and wellbeing.

- Contribute to system-wide priorities by utilising strong evidence-based information and deep local insight from frontline services and communities.

- Grasp opportunities together to work together on locally identified priorities and projects to improve areas people lives to meet local needs.

- Enable local community design and doing through improved understanding of communities.

Area Community Wellbeing Forums Local Area Partnerships
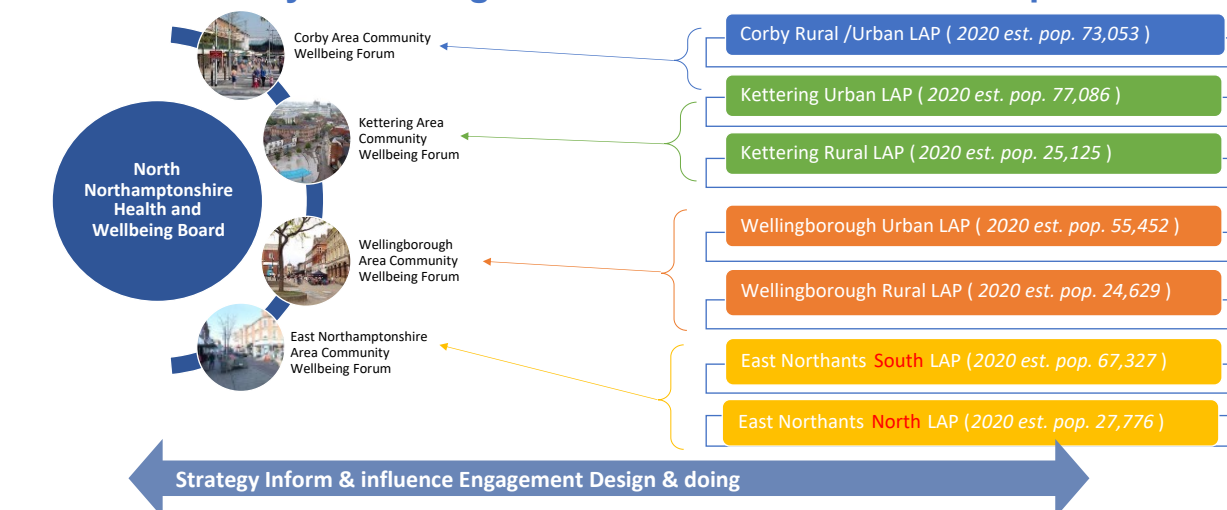
The LAPs have used newly developed LAP profiles, based on a range of Public Health and other data, alongside of local intelligence that LAP members have brought to the table, to identify a number of priorities.

The first round of priorities were identified following a series of community events held in the spring of 2023 and the second round were identified in the autumn of 2023. Partnership task and finish groups have been convened to work on these priorities and actions plans have been developed for each.

Summary of LAP priorities 2023:

LAP	Priority One (Spring 2023)	Priority Two (Autumn 2023)
Corby	Community Transport (lack of medical transport offer)	Support for Cost of Living & wellbeing. Expanding education & training around mental health & wellbeing.
Kettering Urban	Improving engagement with young people who require more targeted support for mental health & wellbeing.	Public and professional awareness of available services.
Kettering Rural	Access to services in rural villages.	Support for anxiety which is a barrier to accessing services.
Wellingborough West	Young People engagement to ensure voice is heard & awareness of local services.	Access to affordable household essentials.
Wellingborough East	Young People engagement to ensure voice is heard & awareness of local services.	Navigating support for substance misuse.

LAP	Priority One (Spring 2023)	Priority Two (Autumn 2023)
East Northants North	Community Transport expansion through volunteer recruitment.	Rural Isolation & awareness of wellbeing support.
East Northants South	Community Transport expansion through volunteer recruitment.	Support for Parents & Carers of Under 18s.

LAPs have also undertaken an asset mapping programme to identify the broad range of physical assets and services across North Northamptonshire, which have been mapped using interactive GIS software.

In response to the development of ICN the VCSE across North Northamptonshire has become stronger, largely due to the emergence of the Integrated Care System (ICS) Place Programme.

The advent of the ICS Place Programme has seen the sector strengthen its collaboration within and across the sector, and work closely with statutory partners to influence the development of the programme including leadership and co-ordination of the new four CWFs and seven LAPs.

A new governance arrangement for the VCSE has been embedded as part of the ICS, with a strategic Oversight Group reporting into the Place Delivery Board, the four VCSE chairs of the Community Wellbeing Forums sitting on the North Health and Wellbeing Board and a wider North ICS VCSE operational Engagement Group being established to complement the locality VCSE networks that already existed.

Figure 3 - VCSE Place Programme Governance

North Place Development Programme Governance
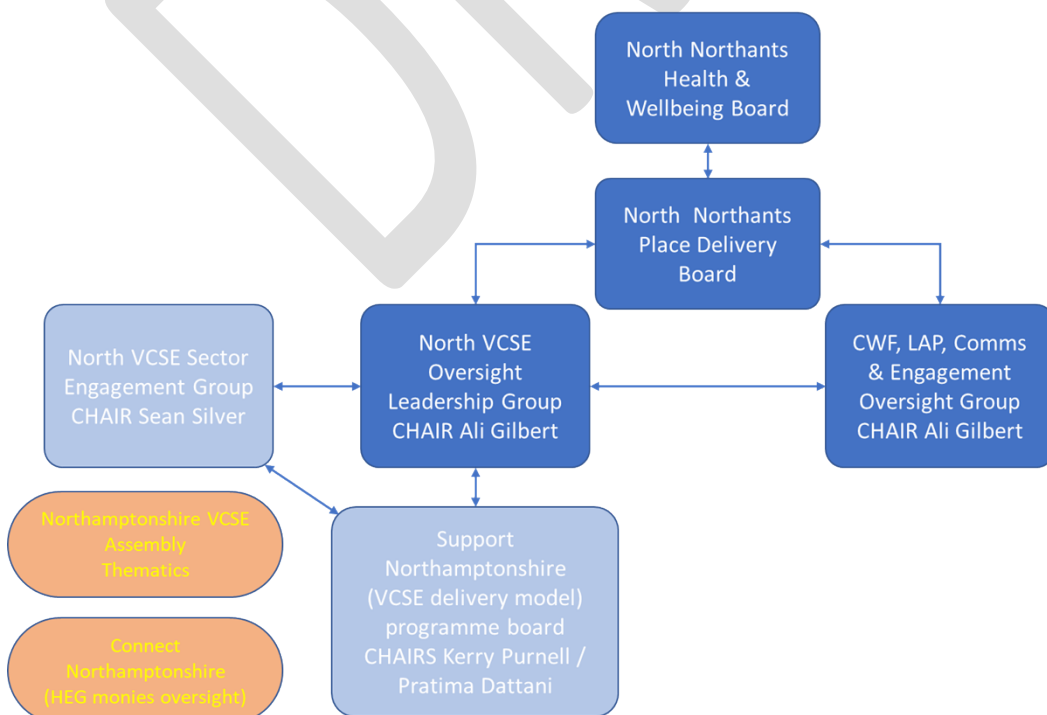
2.6. Shaping Demand - the role of prevention and early intervention

To reduce demand on services we must make substantial cultural changes, placing residents, communities and the VCSE sector at the heart of improving community resilience. A variety of techniques for understanding and managing demand are now emerging across a range of public services, including:

- Customer insight, using tools such as service user panels, customer journey mapping, analysis of multi-agency data sets, risk stratification, to build a clearer picture of how and why people engage with public services.

- Changing the relationship between citizen and state, empowering and enabling residents and communities to take action, devolving services and assets to Local Councils and community groups and encouraging greater community cohesion and resilience.

- Investing in prevention and early intervention, for example through social prescribing, an approach that links patients in primary care and residents with non-clinical sources of support within the community. In North Northamptonshire this includes Primary Care link workers based in GP Practices, Activity on Referral Schemes and SPRING Social Prescribing, a Health and Public Health funded outcomes focussed model delivered by a collaboration of organisations to provide interventions for residents with one or more long term health condition.

- Designing and integrating services around the user by involving users in the design and delivery of services, improving integration of delivery, co-production, increasing self-management, peer-to-peer and community support.

2.7. Support North Northants (SNN)

A new VCSE-led whole-system, early intervention service, Support North Northants (SNN), has been mobilised in the second half of 2023, as a test and learn programme. It has 12 months seed funding from three different funding partners across the System to help the VCSE prove the concept.

SNN is a system-wide collaborative service model with the VCSE, statutory and other agencies to provide earlier intervention and prevention of escalation of issues for adults over 18 and their families. It aims to guide people to the right services, pathways and support networks quickly, and to build greater levels of community resilience by increasing capacity in the VCSE to provide wrap-around support. The key principles are:

- Don't give up on people' and catch people early.

- Person-centred and strengths-based support, based on holistic assessments.

- Build personal and community resilience, invests in and builds capacity within VCSE services to meet identified local needs.

- Help people to help themselves.

- Effective use of public and community assets, skills, talents, resources through effective case co-ordination.

A small SNN team of 11 staff has been recruited, hosted across three VCSE organisations, and additional investment has been made into other VCSE organisations to provide key support services which have been identified as gaps early on, such as benefits checks for all SNN service-users and home repairs and safety where needed. SNN is a practical emerging example of the collaboration within the VCSE and across the sectors, which this strategy seeks to foster.

2.8. Levelling Up in Our 'Left Behind' Neighbourhoods

In 2021-22 a cross party Scrutiny Panel was established by the Council to review and understand the underlying data related to the three neighbourhood areas in Corby, Kettering and Wellingborough highlighted as '*left behind*'.

Engagement activity was undertaken with residents in those neighbourhoods to understand the challenges and opportunities and also to explore the views of partner agencies, including the VCSE organisations, working in those communities. Learning was also considered from programmes already delivered in those areas. Recommendations were made and a Levelling Up Action Plan has been developed, to both set out the Council's strategic intent to level up these neighbourhoods and so that progress against those recommendations can be demonstrated.

2.9. Northamptonshire County Association for Local Councils (NCALC) Community Asset Mapping project 2021-23

NCALC received Community Renewal Funding to deliver a project aimed to be an investment in communities and place. It included:
- developing a robust devolution framework in partnership with the two new Unitary Authorities, Parish and Town Councils across Northamptonshire and NCALC;
- building capacity within the Parish and Town Council sector across Northamptonshire through capacity funding to enable them to map all assets, services, functions and facilities within their parish;
- generating a comprehensive register of all assets, services, functions and facilities owned and managed by both the Unitary Authorities and the Parish and Town Councils across Northamptonshire;
- enhancing the confidence, knowledge and skills of Parish and Town Councils to generate effective business cases to achieve successful bids through the Community Right to Bid process for community assets.

The project resulted in Local Councils across North Northamptonshire being better informed about and prepared for and future devolution of assets and services. Some of the "*nuts and bolts*" of devolution were put in place, such as the Statement of Intent from North Northamptonshire Council (NNC) which states:
- NNC "understands that the appetite for and capacity of towns and parishes to take on increased roles in local service delivery and place-shaping varies significantly between individual local councils."

- NNC "wants to support communities when they wish to take on additional responsibilities; but the Council is not looking to force assets onto towns & parishes."

- "The Community Asset Transfer Policy is there to enable NNC to respond if / when town or parish councils want to explore taking on an asset or service."

- **The transfer of assets or services is an opportunity and there will be a place-led approach which responds to local demand or aspirations from communities.**

The policies on Asset Transfer and Assets of Community Value have been adopted by the Council. ''Listening Events'' which were held with NNC Officers and Councillors went some way to establishing a meaningful dialogue between NNC and the Local Councils in its area. There is further work to do to ensure that if there are any devolution of assets and services, the process is well-managed, thoughtful, and fair. This will therefore form a theme for this strategy.

Whilst all these strategic and operational approaches contribute to building strong communities, there is a broader recognition of what makes a strong community, beyond a specific service or theme. All people who live and work in the community can contribute, in particular the VCSE sector and residents.

This new Communities Strategy seeks to promote the whole view of what builds strong communities, and the roles different organisations, sectors and residents can play in achieving this.

3. Roles of the VCSE and Communities

3.1. <u>VCSE</u>

The changing financial, social and demographic environment places increasing emphasis on collaboration with and delivery by the VCSE sector to achieve the strategic goals of the Council and its strategic partners. We must continue to recognise the importance of this sector, and work with its members to ensure there is sufficient capacity and sustainability within it.

In preparing this strategy, the current VCSE Infrastructure Organisations have engaged with organisations across the VCSE locality networks, and the first sector-wide engagement event was held in person at the end of September 2023, where over 100 VCSE organisations were represented. These sessions highlighted the vital role the sector plays in delivering commissioned, grant-funded and voluntary services, often to people in the most vulnerable situations. The sector is seen as innovative, dynamic, flexible and responsive, making it a key partner in delivering effective and efficient services.

At the engagement event the sector was asked to consider the following questions:

- What are the biggest challenges facing the VCSE locally currently?

- What are the opportunities?

- What support do you think should be offered under future VCSE infrastructure arrangements?

- If NNC could only invest in a few strategic priorities for the sector, what would they be?

The feedback is summarised in the table below:

Challenges	Opportunities	Infrastructure	Investment Priorities
Funding support: longer term funding; more streamlined applications & monitoring; too short notice for bids	Libraries & other assets as core community hubs	Shared back-office functions - HR, recruitment, training, finance, admin, legal, procurement, insurance, Equality Impact Assessments, comms, marketing, PR, GIS, safeguarding, health & safety, DBS, risk management and Business Continuity	Youth Offer
Complexity of clients & struggle to get referrals to other agencies met	Collaboration across VCSE	Funding support, bid writing, funding fairs and collaborative applications	Social Isolation for older people
Sustainable workforce	Asset mapping to increase awareness of local offers	Promoting best practice	Financial Inclusion (cost of living)
Cost of back-office functions	Quality multi-purpose hubs in each town centre	Networking & information sharing	Life and employability skills. ESOL training
Increase in core costs to run	Use SNN & Social Prescribing to identify service gaps	Commercial upskilling	Family / Community hubs
Lack of commercial skills	Collate better data on sector to show impact	Leadership & co-ordination - CEO network & leadership development	Physical activity
Communication across sector & with partners	Make use of collective experience	Volunteering best practice, database, portal	Low level mental health / wellbeing
Fragmented sector, overlap and duplication of services	Release public assets to sector	More engagement events for sector and with NNC and other statutory partners / commissioners	Community Transport
Current infrastructure support not agile enough	VCSE knowledge 'hub' for local areas	Ensuring VCSE voice is heard locally & nationally	Social & affordable housing & homelessness prevention
VCSE is picking up some statutory work due to overstretched services	Customer /person-centred (empowering customers to help themselves)	Shared values, treat sector as equal partner	Equalities and Prevention/Tackling Discrimination

Getting residents voice into decision making	Confidence of sector is increasing	Policy frameworks	
Too much jargon		Governance support	
		Providing or contributing to an annual state of the VCSE report in North Northants	

The engagement also identified the important role the sector plays in enabling engagement with the people of North Northamptonshire, often acting as broker between public services and communities. Through its proximity to local people, the sector can build more trusting, open and strong relationships.

Relationships are regarded as relatively strong between the VCSE and public sector agencies, but the need to strengthen partnership working and to provide more clarity on organisational aims and priorities, given the Council and the ICS are still relatively new, was identified.

However, relationships between the VCSE and private sector are not perceived to be as strong, nor is there as much investment in the VCSE from businesses as might be possible. To date there has not been much reach by the Local Area Partnerships into local business communities and greater problem solving with businesses is one of the recommendations made in the Levelling Up Scrutiny report. This all reinforces the need for this to remain as an area of focus for the new strategy.

Overall, Council officers and VCSE partners identified the need to work more collaboratively, building better relationships and making better use of assets, funding and resources, better understanding of expertise and mapping of services, alongside increasing volunteering, developing social enterprise and improving communication.

The North VCSE Oversight Group leaders from the sector have proactively helped to shape this strategy, by engaging with the VCSE through their networks, specifically to influence the focus for the new VCSE Infrastructure offer. They have offered constructive comment on the initial drafts of the Strategy.

In addition, a series of co-production meetings have been held with VCSE partners delivering across the emerging themes identified as priorities for future investment through the VCSE Strategic grant funding the Council distributes. These meetings have been open, frank and transparent to inform what needs to be funded and why, what is currently working and why and challenges and opportunities for VCSE partners to collaborate even more effectively, to ensure the Council an maximise the reach and impact of its financial investment.

3.2. Role of Communities

There is a joint role for public services, the private sector and the VCSE, alongside individual residents and other local stakeholders, in building strong communities. When we refer to community, we see this as everyone who lives and works in that place, regardless of 'sector' or as a collective group of individuals with commonality i.e. the BAME community or refugee

Strong communities are ones where individuals and families have opportunities to improve their health and wellbeing, achieve their aspirations through education and employment, feel safe, can enjoy their environment and can play an active part in their local community.

Local people are often best placed to support each other and take positive action to improve their area. Individual residents can take action that has a huge impact on their family, friends and neighbours, from volunteering with a local group, improving their own health and wellbeing, or just by being neighbourly.

We have a strong network of VCSE groups working with all ages, in all areas, on a wide range of issues. They offer the activity, advice, information and support that help individuals and families stay strong, recover from crisis, and thrive. Communities, in the broadest sense, provide the first response to challenges, often long before statutory agencies are asked for or are required to help.

In recognising that community resilience delivers strategic outcomes, the Council's role is to encourage and enable residents and communities to take action, in addition to delivering core services. It makes people safer, healthier and wealthier and as such reduces demand on public services enabling them to focus on those most in need.

The private sector also benefits from a strong community, in terms of access to an educated, skilled and healthy workforce, a safe and attractive environment surrounding its premises and a stronger consumer base, and as such has a role in supporting local community action. We see this through the increasing use of Corporate Social Responsibility, Social Value, employee volunteering and business engagement.

Again, mutually beneficial relationships across organisations and sectors and with communities will be vital to success. Strong communities cannot be achieved by working alone or in silos.

4. Aims and Outcomes of the Strategy

4.1. Aims

- Emphasise and strengthen the role the VCSE sector, residents and communities have in delivering the Council's corporate objectives, and within the context of the countywide Live Your Best Life Strategy for the ICS;

- Develop a co-ordinated vision and framework for effective partnership working on equal terms, and, wherever possible, co-production with the VCSE groups and Town and Parish Councils;

- Set out the Council's approach to financial investment into the VCSE, which promotes sustainability, through access to a range of funding sources, including strategic and small grant giving by NNC; and future infrastructure support into the sector;

- Strengthen the ability of the VCSE sector to deliver services and connect communities through engaging residents, leading community action, supporting volunteering, supporting people in the most vulnerable situations, and brokering relationships between statutory bodies and communities; *and*

- Provide a framework to support innovative approaches which facilitate necessary change, given the shifting needs of local communities in the wake of the pandemic and the current economic climate.

4.2. Outcomes

- Improve sustainability and increase growth in the VCSE sector, developing fit for purpose, sustainable organisations able to deliver high quality services with diversified income streams and less reliance on grants, with a more social enterprise focus and which are flexible and adaptable to change;

- Strengthen the ability of the VCSE sector to deliver services and connect communities through engaging residents, leading community action, supporting people in the most vulnerable situations and brokering relationships between statutory bodies and communities;

- Encourage mutually beneficial relationships across sectors and communities that use smarter ways of working and collaboration to achieve what we cannot alone:

- Provide clarity about the role of sectors in building strong communities; *and*

- Align key themes underpinning current strategic thinking, including place-based working, asset-based community development, devolution of assets and services to communities, shifting the focus to early help and prevention; and shaping demand to reduce costs in statutory services.

4.3. What Will Success Look Like:

- All organisations, businesses, voluntary, community and social enterprise groups and individual residents see themselves as having a valued role in maximising community assets, taking positive action within communities and providing solutions to local challenges, creating and maintaining strong communities;

- North Northamptonshire has a thriving voluntary, community and social enterprise sector, with a significant role in achieving strategic priorities by delivering services and connecting communities; and

- There are strong relationships between people across sectors and communities, based on equality, trust and effective collaboration, not defined by sector or service, which ensure we are working together in partnership for the benefit of North Northamptonshire and all its residents.

5. Current VCSE Infrastructure Arrangements and Grant Programme

5.1. Current VCSE Infrastructure Arrangements

Part of the current VCSE strategic grant arrangements relate to infrastructure support to the VCSE by certain VCSE partners. Infrastructure arrangements, normally funded

by Local Authorities and delivered through contractual arrangements, include functions such as:

- Capacity building in the sector to ensure back-office functions and governance arrangements are robust and organisations are commissioning-ready should they wish to bid for grants and contracts;

- Improving sustainability and increasing growth in the VCSE sector, developing fit for purpose, sustainable organisations able to deliver high quality projects with diversified income streams and less reliance on grants, with a more commercial focus and which are flexible and adaptable to change;

- Funding and bid-writing support;

- Volunteering best practice;

- Supporting networking, collaboration and co-ordination across the sector and with statutory partners to ensure the VCSE has a voice in strategic and operational decision making through genuine co-production;

- Supporting the sector to promote and enable social and community action; *and*

- Supporting the sector to demonstrate impact and return on investment and contribute to the social value agendas.

However, the infrastructure arrangements inherited by NNC from the former sovereign councils are relatively light touch and constitute a total investment of only £58,000 across North Northamptonshire, through two providers, SERVE for Wellingborough and Groundworks across Corby and Kettering. East Northants currently has no funded infrastructure support.

Under the former Councils the arrangements were delivered through annual grant agreements. For a Unitary Authority with a population the size of North Northants these legacy infrastructure arrangements are not sufficient nor robust enough to build capacity in the sector as set out above, under the proposed ambitions of this Community Strategy.

National best practice is for Councils to formally tender VCSE Infrastructure contracts, to run for at least three years, to ensure these contracts deliver against strategic priorities for the Council, as well as meeting the needs of the sector, and to embed collaboration across and strong leadership of the sector into these contractual requirements. It is intended that for NNC, that the new Infrastructure contract will have a significant role in delivering the Communities Strategy, with and on behalf of the Council, and with the sector and wider partners.

5.2. <u>Current VCSE Grant Programmes</u>

The Council does not have a statutory duty to fund the voluntary sector or commission projects from organisations within it. However, in recent years, financial cuts both nationally and locally have put significant pressure on the organisations within the sector. In some cases, organisations have been forced to use their reserves to continue operating, which of course is not sustainable in the long-term.

The current strategic grant funding arrangements with VCSE organisations were inherited from the former District and Borough Councils and involve a mixture of grants, service level agreements and contracts. Some of those arrangements have been in place for some considerable time (since 2017 in some cases) and most have extensions to the original agreement periods to support their transfer into NNC from 1 April 2021.

In March 2022, the Council's Executive agreed to extend the grants inherited from the former sovereign councils for a further two years until 31st March 2024, when the current arrangements come to an end.

The current funding arrangements with VCSE organisations created by the sovereign councils were subject to an application process and were awarded accordingly. Whilst, overall, the current arrangements are performing well, and grant agreements are monitored, they are out of date, offer a somewhat scattergun approach to what services are funded, and where, and as such do not provide the consistency and transparency to which the Council might now aspire. In addition, they do not necessarily reflect the Council's corporate priorities, and are not aligned with other system-wide ambitions for the area such as the 10 Live Your Best Life Strategy ambitions and the emerging local priorities being determined by the Local Area Partnerships.

The current strategic VCSE grant arrangements total £671,771 per annum. It should also be noted that the strategic grant arrangements are not the only grant funding NNC provides to the VCSE. Currently also NNC invests in the VCSE through programmes such as Discretionary Small grants, Shared Prosperity grants, the Member Empowerment Fund, Household Support Fund, Multiply and the Well Northants programme, The Council's investment into the VCSE during 2023-2024 will be circa £1.82m.

The funding envelope for the VCSE Strategic grants will remain at £671,772 in recognitions of the Council's continued commitment to valuing and supporting the VCSE, but new grant arrangements will be put in place for April 2024.

6. Communities Strategy Themes

To achieve our vision of strong communities, through a thriving and sustainable VCSE sector, improved partnership working across sectors, and empowered and active residents, we have identified eight key themes:
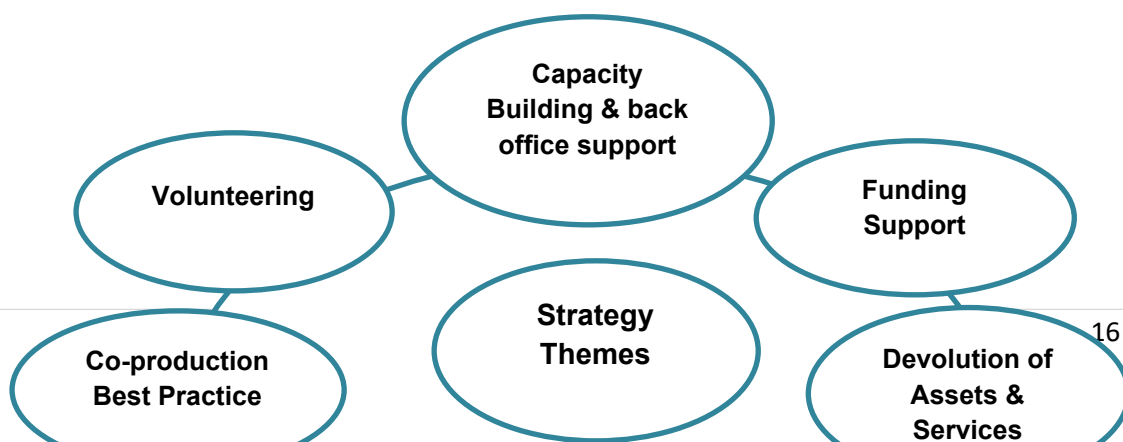
6.1. Theme 1

Building quality and capacity within the VCSE sector and providing back-office support to enable sustainable growth, demonstrate return on investment and social impact, maximise resources across the sector, all to achieve positive outcomes for our communities.

Outcomes

- Increased sustainability, skills, quality, governance and capacity within the VCSE sector to meet community needs;

- A VCSE sector which can demonstrate its impact on residents and communities in North Northamptonshire and is valued by other sectors and stakeholders;

- Increased understanding of the size and scale of the sector, creating a vision for growth and optimising collaborative networking, communications and marketing across a range of media;

- A robust governance within the sector at appropriate levels, to build strength, consistency, trust and confidence;A co-ordinated approach to business continuity planning in preparation to support the Council's Emergency Planning;

- An established VCSE CEO Network and improved support for Trustee recruitment and retention (introducing and encouraging wider breadth of experience and diversity); *and*

- The VCSE are able to evidence Social Return on Investment (SROI).

6.2. Themes 2 & 3

Building mutually beneficial relationships across sectors, with commissioners of services, and with communities by creating equal partnerships by promoting co-production and asset-based community development best practice, sharing information, skills, assets and resources, creating spaces to come together, utilising evidence and celebrating success.

Outcomes

- Improved understanding of local needs and assets, opportunities and challenges, and ways to address them;

- Provision of an annual State of the VCSE report for North Northamptonshire to inform gaps in support and barriers to excellence across all parts of the sector, so that this strategy and delivery plans can remain agile and fit for purpose;

- Reduced barriers to engagement and participation by residents, businesses and organisations;

- Infrastructure support provided to the Sector is inclusive, and demonstrably covers all localities and all-inclusive communities across North Northamptonshire;

- Robust projects that bring together a range of organisations and people from across sectors and communities and deliver long term outcomes for North Northamptonshire;

- Information and resources are shared across the North Northamptonshire VCSE and wider System;

- Delivery of a clear vision, inclusive culture, and inspiring messages, through effective structures for communication;

- Ensuring statutory partners understand the structures, routes to engage, work with and support the VCSE;

- VCSE organisations state they are treated as equal partners;

- Strategic priorities are aligned with local communities to deliver joint action; *and*

- Local people have the tools and support to take action.

6.3. <u>Theme 4</u>

Innovative income generation and investment into VCSE to ensure financial sustainability in a mixed model and enterprise culture, encompassing commissioning, maximising national and regional opportunities.

Outcomes

- Effective, and where appropriate collaborative, bid writing and project development which levers in new funding into North Northamptonshire and delivers innovative solutions to local issues;

- Innovative and creative responses to opportunities and challenges are embraced and encouraged;

- The grants, funding and commissioning delivered by NNC addresses inequalities and ensures that all our inclusive communities are served, and that when VCSE organisations are funded or commissioned that they meet equality outcomes and can evidence this;

- Increased involvement of the private sector in supporting local communities and the VCSE sector and in delivering against North Northamptonshire's strategic and local area priorities;

- Increased inward investment into the Council area from external sources;

- Increased number of collaborative applications for funding;

- A VCSE sector that is responsive to outsourcing of public services, personalisation, co-production, integration and has an enterprise culture;

- Increased partnership, co-ordination and collaborative working within the VCSE sector to maximise value, efficiency, resources and skills;

- Reduction in the number of organisations that face financial difficulty which puts residents and communities at risk;

- Increased third sector growth in terms of mutuals, cooperatives and social enterprises; *and*

- Strong connectivity between the VCSE and public sector commissioners, co-design and production of services, to ensure that services, which are developed and delivered, focus on improving outcomes for individuals and communities, not organisational structures.

6.4. <u>Theme 5</u>

Developing our people assets, by increasing resident action and taking a strategic approach to volunteering, providing a platform for opportunities, brokerage, data collection and impact monitoring.

Outcomes

- Increased numbers of VCSE organisations and residents participating in local decision making and co-production of services and evidence of their involvement making a clear impact;

- A co-ordinated best practice support offer for volunteering, which meets the needs of volunteers, organisations and businesses across the Council area;

- Increased amount and quality of volunteering and social capital within our communities;

- Establishment of employee volunteering schemes across public and private sector organisations; *and*

- Improved range of positive activities and vocational opportunities which support personal & vocational development.

6.5. <u>Theme 6</u>

Developing our physical assets and services through Town and Parish Councils and community involvement and through asset transfer.

Outcomes

- An established working group with Town and Parishes Council representatives, NCALC and NNC officers to discuss opportunities, challenges, risks and dependencies relating to the transfer of assets and services and challenges relating to devolution and town twinning;

- A co-produced process map which details the necessary steps to be taken for the transfer of assets and services to Town or Parish Councils, should there be a wish in the future for devolution to take place.

- Improved awareness and valuing of community ownership and resilience; *and*

- Increased numbers of community groups managing community assets, where appropriate.

6.6. <u>Theme 7</u>

Co-ordination of the North Northamptonshire VCSE to embed the sector in the ICS and the Place programme, through ongoing leadership and support to Community Wellbeing Forums and Local Area Partnerships and representation at Executive Board level.

<u>Outcomes</u>

- A strong network of VCSE engagement with the ICS, through attendance at LAPs and active contribution to LAP projects, events and activities, creating a new way of working into the future;

- CWF's and LAP's remain with VCSE at the heart, advocate, trouble shoot and motivate a continued engagement; *and*

- Increased representation in ICS structures where VCSE contribution is beneficial.

6.7. <u>Theme 8</u>

Co-ordination of investment into the VCSE through the delivery of a range of strategic and smaller grant programmes into the VCSE, based on robust and transparent policies, procedures and governance to include:

- New VCSE Infrastructure contract arrangements, at a £200,000 investment per annum for 3 years, which will play a key role in supporting the delivery of this strategy;

- Small (Discretionary grants) grants up to £25,000 per award (£120,000 per annum for 2024-2027);

- Member Empowerment Fund (£156,000 per annum);

- Shared Prosperity Funds (£618,00 2024-2025 only); *and*

- New VCSE Strategic grant arrangements (£671,771 per annum for 2024-2027) to cover emerging strategic themes such as community transport, financial inclusion, race equality, older peoples' social isolation, low level mental health support within communities, building VCSE capacity and community resilience.

Outcomes for this investment (outside of Infrastructure which is covered in this strategy) will be set out in the relevant Grant Application processes and/or project briefs to be funded and will be monitored through robust Grant Agreements.

7. Delivering the Strategy

There are a number of key NNC services, partners projects that will drive delivery of the themes, and elements within themes. For example, NNC facilitates the VCSE grant programmes under Theme 8 but the VCSE organisations deliver against the grant agreements. Town and Parish Councils will play a lead role, along with NCALC to help NCC deliver against Theme 6.

There is a crucial role for the VCSE organisations as future Infrastructure contract holder/s, to lead delivery of specific themes, namely Themes 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 7. These include capacity building, funding support, volunteering and co-ordination of

the VCSE role within the ICS, to name a few. The details and scale of this contract will be explored and delivered through a robust procurement process.

8. Governance

Governance of the strategy will primarily sit with the Council, but from a partnership viewpoint.

The new VCSE Infrastructure contract and VCSE grant arrangements will be robustly monitored. Annual Delivery Plans will be produced, with milestones, outputs and outcomes tracked by the Communities and Welllbeing team at the Council.

Practical delivery of collaborative projects within communities will be delivered through the Local Area Partnerships, and informed and supported by the partners at the Community Wellbeing Forums. This work is governed by the North Place Delivery Board as part of the ICS Operating Framework.