



What's happening in your world?

State of the Sector Survey
Autumn 2025





What's happening in your world?

SAWN (the Infrastructure Partnership of VIN and SNVB) undertook a State of the Sector survey (entitled What's happening in your world) across VCFSE organisations in West Northamptonshire during the autumn of 2025.

The responses received tell SAWN a great deal about the challenges being faced by our community organisations and the environment they are working in.

Most respondents were registered charities, and most of them work and deliver services in Northampton and the surrounding areas.





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Executive summary

The West Northamptonshire VCSE consists of approximately 1660 organisations operating through a range of differing Governance models.



Most are small or even micro, and their ability to subsume huge transformational changes in the landscape and the resultant funding constraints is proving difficult.



Most are experiencing higher demand with less funding.



Organisations demonstrated a clear desire for more infrastructure support, more multi – year funding and less bureaucracy in service delivery and reporting.



Most are working with limited staff and in some cases are reliant on volunteers.



Organisations have a clear tension between growth and internal capacity.



Workforce development and retention is seen as a huge barrier for many.



Organisations are seeking longer term funding and stronger partnerships.



Russell Rolph,
CEO of VIN, states:

“The responses help SAWN to understand what’s happening across our sector in West Northamptonshire. The fragility of the VCFSE is obvious, but the work they undertake is needed more than ever before. It’s an undisputable fact that our sector provides effective solutions to system challenges, is cost effective and can move and flex at pace. Unfortunately, many are beginning to cave under increased demand and less funding. An emphasis on sustainability, different forms of funding and diversification is clearly an important factor for many. Whilst the future of Infrastructure is clearly uncertain in West Northamptonshire, it has never been more vital.”



Helen Barrett,
CEO of SNVB, states:

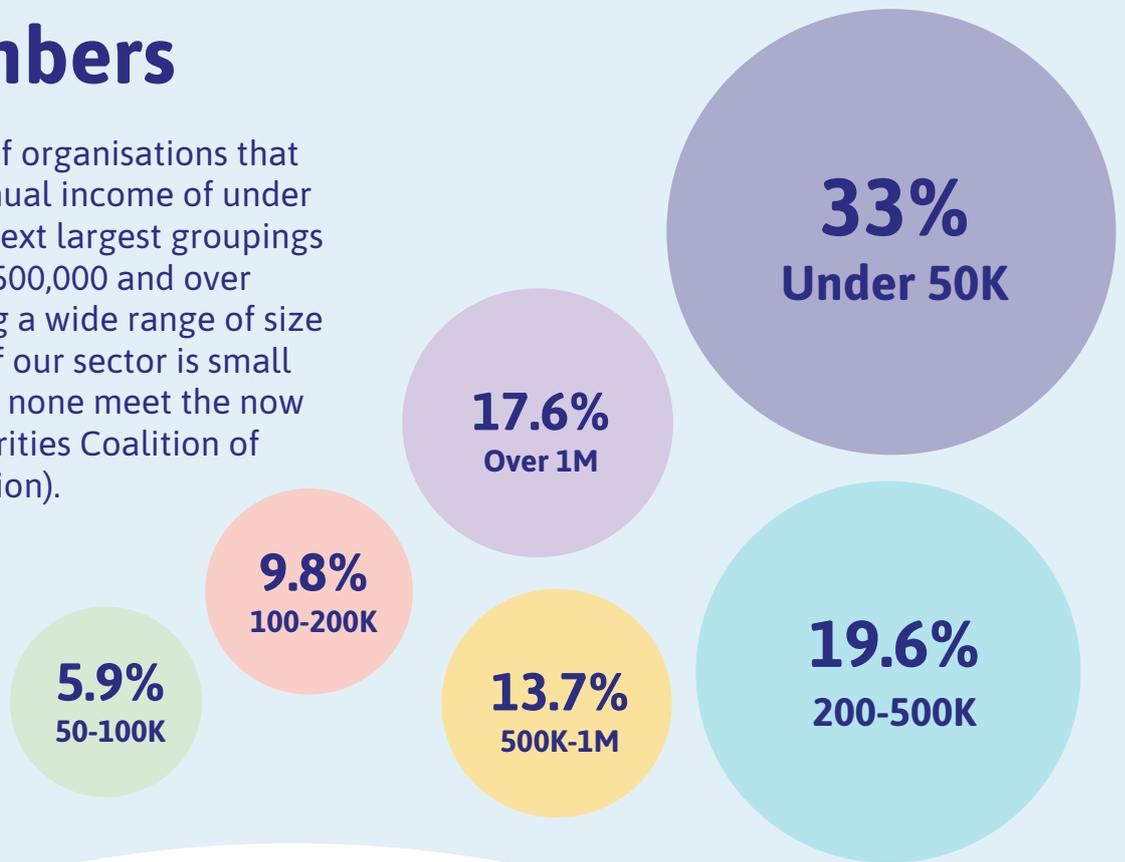
“The State of the Sector makes for interesting reading but confirms many of the issues we see on a daily basis. The VCFSE is a solution to many of the health inequality issues we face, but it must be funded well and for longer periods of time. Infrastructure plays a vital support role in this, giving VCFSE organisations the tools to do their work effectively. In the new world of Placed Based and Neighbourhood health, this will be critical.”



The numbers

Exactly one third of organisations that replied had an annual income of under £50,000, with the next largest groupings being £200,000 - £500,000 and over £1 million, showing a wide range of size and scale: 33.3% of our sector is small or even micro, and none meet the now defunct Small Charities Coalition of large (over 10 million).

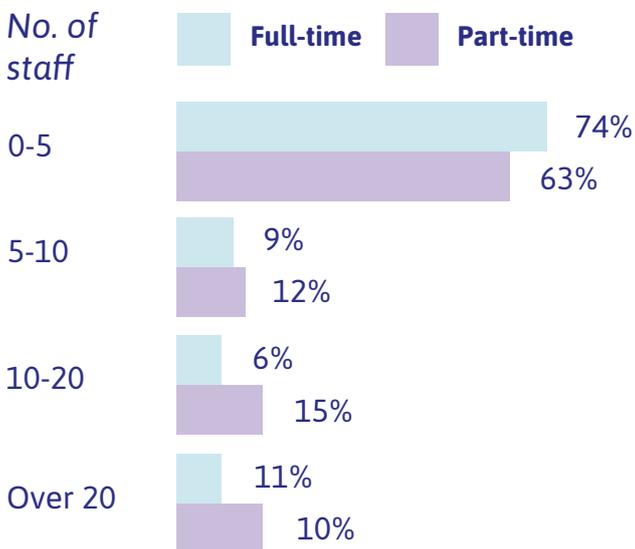
Distribution by income range



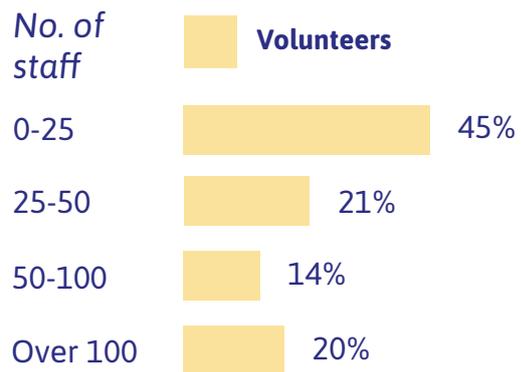
Working with very little

Most respondents are working and delivering services with very little in terms of staff and volunteer resource.

The situation is exacerbated by a Workforce Development crisis where the sector fails to attract potentially excellent candidates due to transformation uncertainties, funding constraints or a lack of future sustainability.



Employment status by number of staff or volunteers



Current situation

Nearly 80% of responses indicated that funding or financial sustainability were their top priorities, demonstrating the overwhelming number of organisations which feel an insecurity over their funding moving forward.

SAWN has already witnessed the demise of several seemingly well-established organisations (through either closing or reducing services over the last 12 months) and this would suggest that there may be more organisations of all sizes and shapes facing challenging and difficult decisions over the next few years.

Despite this, nearly half (43%) stated that they saw their future as **looking good** or that they felt optimistic about their future, with 47% considering the future to be **challenging or feeling pessimistic**.



80%

**Said that funding
was the top
priority**

We asked groups to define their relationships with the two major institutions of West Northamptonshire Council (WNC) and the Integrated Care System (ICS).

Respondents were generally positive about their relationships with WNC, with 61% feeling they had a good relationship, and 35% feeling this could be better. Responses were more mixed when it came to the ICS, with 25% considering their relationship to be good, 37% feeling that it could be better, and 24% thinking that this did not apply to them.

What does the future hold?

As could be expected, different organisations have a wide range of thoughts about the future. However SAWN was able to identify several common themes.

What do organisations want to do more of in the next 12 months?

01

Sustainability and long-term funding

Many organisations are focused on securing stable, long-term income and reducing their reliance on short-term grants.

Approaches include:

- Securing long-term or multi-year funding.
- Becoming a CIC or CIO.
- Tendering for contracts.
- Developing sponsorships and social enterprise models.
- Covering core and operational costs.
- Strategic fundraising planning.

All these approaches are in some way limited by financial insecurity, a lack of capacity, degrading resource and an inability to transform in the current operating environment.

02

Growth and expansion of services

Organisations want to do more, reach more people, and broaden what they offer.

Approaches include:

- Expanding existing programmes.
- Opening new classes, groups, and workshops.
- Increasing geographic reach.
- Scaling successful models.

All these approaches are in some way limited by rising demand, a sharpened cost of living increase and further vulnerabilities amongst communities.

03

Reaching and supporting marginalised or high-need groups

Responses demonstrated a strong shared commitment to inclusion and equity.

Approaches include:

- Rough sleepers and people in crisis.
- People affected by health inequalities.
- Unemployed individuals.
- Carers, older people, parents, and young people.
- “Hidden” or under-represented communities.

Responses indicated a shared vision around early intervention, holistic support and long-term pathways out of crisis.

04

Workforce Capacity with staff and volunteers

Approaches include:

- Recruiting paid staff to manage existing and future workloads.
- Workforce development and training.
- Volunteer recruitment, retention and recognition.
- Investing in volunteer training and coordination.
- Creating pathways from volunteering to employed and salaried roles.



05

Community engagement and awareness

Organisations want to be more visible, trusted, and embedded locally. Approaches include:

- Raising profile and awareness of the organisation and its mission values.
- Engaging more residents, groups, schools, and businesses.
- Encouraging service users to help shape and lead activities in a spirit of co-production.
- Building stronger local identity and participation.
- Improving the take-up of services especially amongst hard to access communities.

06

Partnership and collaboration

Approaches include:

- VCFSE sector collaboration.
- Partnerships with councils, parish councils, health services and local housing providers.
- Co-delivery of projects.
- Strengthened commissioning relationships.
- Embedding VCFSE voices in policy and health inequality discussions.

Responses indicated a shared belief and vision that collaboration improves impact, efficiency and influence.

07

Health, wellbeing and resilience

Responses indicated a consistent focus on preventative and holistic wellbeing.

Approaches include:

- Mental health and wellbeing sessions.
- Social prescribing.
- Community health creation.
- Debt, benefits, and financial wellbeing advice.
- The building of resilience pathways in individuals and organisations.

08

Strategy, planning and organisational development

Respondents noted an urgent requirement to move from their current reactive setting to one viewed as more proactive. Approaches include:

- Annual or flexible development planning.
- Planned interventions.
- Clearer service pathways.
- Better use of digital technology.
- Improving governance and organisational structure.

09

Education, skills and employability

Respondents felt that Education, Skills and Employability could and should effect long-term change for the better. Approaches include:

- Bespoke and tailored employability programmes.
- Education and training (IT, ESOL and after-school).
- Confidence building and progression into work.
- Structured pathways from crisis to independence.

10

Place-based and environmental improvement

Approaches include:

- Improving village halls and community buildings.
- Improving and clarifying Public Rights of Way.
- Creating welcoming and accessible physical spaces for local communities and vulnerable residents.



What do organisations want to do differently in the next 12 months?

Responses to this question showed some clear themes around internal capacity, systems, and sustainability.

01

Funding, financial security and income diversification

Responses demonstrated a clear desire or aspiration to move from the pressures of short-term funding, even though much of this agenda is set by a funder incapacity to deliver long-term SMART programmes of support. Approaches include:

- Securing long-term and sustainable funding often from non-traditional partners or programmes.
- Diversifying income streams.
- Accessing capital grants.
- Reducing stop-start service delivery.
- Cost-effective operating models.
- Spending less time on funding applications or being clearer about what works in funding and what does not.

02

Staffing, capacity and workload management

Responses demonstrated that most organisations are overstretched and need more or a differing form of capacity. Approaches include:

- Recruiting additional staff and specialist roles.
- Replacing lost senior or administrative roles.
- Back-office and administrative support.
- Better task delegation to staff and volunteers.
- Structuring teams more effectively.
- Reducing headcount due to rising costs.

Responses demonstrated a headline tension between growth, the funding of core costs and overreaching beyond organisational means.

03

Governance, structure and organisational development

Responses demonstrated that organisations are now beginning to examine ways of restructuring for the better. Approaches include:

- Becoming a CIO.
- Recruiting active and skilled trustees.
- Reviewing governance models in best practice.
- Revising business models which account for growth.
- Better and more intuitive financial recording and accountancy.
- Effective risk management and proactive planning.
- Planning for delivery at scale.

04

Systems, processes and efficiency

Responses demonstrated a clear appetite for working smarter and not harder. Approaches include:

- Streamlining internal processes.
- Improving administrative protocols.
- Launching and learning from best practice management systems.
- Reducing duplication.
- Using time and resources more effectively.
- Digital transformation frameworks.



05

Partnerships, collaboration and networking

Respondents demonstrated a repeated plea for collaboration and more partnership working.

Approaches include:

- Stronger partnerships between councils, health and the VCSE.
- Better networking and engagement between statutory and non-statutory partners.
- Improved commissioning and co-delivery frameworks.
- Sharing entrepreneur and funder networks.
- Shared learning between leaders of all sectors.

It was clear from responses that all felt better partnerships increased efficiency, effectiveness, skills and knowledge.

06

Proactive, preventative and community-based approaches

Respondents felt that a crisis led response could not be sustained over the coming years.

Approaches include:

- Earlier engagement with service users.
- Community-based care models.
- Drop-in advice sessions.
- Door-to-door grassroots outreach.
- Intergenerational involvement.
- Broadening cultural appeal and inclusion

Cross cutting tensions:

- Growth vs. affordability
- Digital system implementation vs. time
- Professionalism vs. grass roots campaigning and activism
- Crisis response vs. proactive planning

07

Data, impact measurement and evidence

Approaches include:

- Improving data collection and impact tracking.
- Using data to adapt services.
- Demonstrating outcomes to funders.
- Generating evidence for commissioning.

08

Communication, promotion and visibility

Respondents demonstrated an overwhelming desire to be more connected. Approaches include:

- Promoting services more widely.
- Improving their social media footprint.
- Clearer communication with partners and referral agencies.
- Raising awareness in diverse communities.

09

Volunteers and leadership development

Approaches include:

- Broader volunteer recruitment campaigns.
- More creative volunteer roles.
- Greater responsibility and accountability for volunteers aligned to a better resource and clearer lines of support.
- Volunteer acceptance and recognition.
- Trustee and leadership development.

10

Premises and physical infrastructure

Approaches include:

- Securing permanent buildings for beneficiary use.
- Expanding to other venues which offer effective value for money, reach and location.
- Creating hubs, cafés, and community spaces.



What would organisations like to stop doing?

01

The constant hamster-wheel of reactive working

It was clear from respondents that organisations felt trapped in the vice-like grip of survival which mitigates their ability to concentrate on purposeful and strategic service delivery. Some of the themes identified included:

- An inability to deliver strategically due to the constant pressure of reactive working.
- Procrastination due to pressure and uncertainty.
- Constantly reacting to the present rather than considering the future.
- Repeated restructuring and role realignment.
- Doing more for less.

02

Funding insecurity and grant dependency

Respondents clearly felt a deep frustration with the challenging funding environment and its impact on time, morale, and sustainability. Some of the themes identified included:

- Chasing funding year after year.
- Writing long, unsuccessful grant applications.
- Fighting for small pots of money.
- Over-reliance on traditional funding models.
- Worrying constantly about financial stability.
- Stop-start delivery due to short-term funding.
- Wanting multi-year funding certainty.

03

Unpaid work and unsustainable expectations on VCFSE

Respondents felt that the VCFSE was largely taken for granted, both in terms of the funding it received, and the amount of work it is required to undertake, often on non-inflation indexed or short-term fixed contracts. Some of the themes identified included:

- Being expected to work for free.
- Delivering unfunded services such as social prescription or advice related services.
- Entering projects with no funding but high resource demands.
- Reliance on volunteers without paid staffing.
- VCFSE being expected to be all things to all funders with an expectation that support will be free or discretionary.
- Mission driven exploitation.

04

Inefficient meetings, bureaucracy and system burden

Respondents shared a clear frustration with at scale processes which do not deliver impact or benefit. Some of the themes identified included:

- Too many unproductive meetings.
- A Meetings for Meetings sake culture.
- Bureaucracy blocking action.
- Time spent complying rather than delivering.
- Poor engagement from 'the system' (takes but doesn't give).
- Repeating requests to contractors or councils without resolution.



05

Poor use of time, duplication and lack of focus

It was clear that respondents wanted to protect scarce resource and energy. Some of the themes identified included:

- Unfocused networking.
- Duplicated administration and reporting requirements.
- Attending meetings that do not align with any given strategy (if there is one).
- Spreading efforts and energies too thinly across the organisation and the sector.
- Engaging in dialogue without action.

06

Silo working and competition instead of collaboration

Respondents wanted less isolation and more collaborative working. Some of the themes identified included:

- Services operating in silos should be limited or reduced.
- Poor integration of service pathways does not benefit beneficiaries or the VCFSE.
- Fragmented support for beneficiaries does not align with VCFSE values or missions.
- Desire for cohesive collaborative models which deliver community related impact.

07

Over-reliance on individuals and fragile capacity

Respondents identified a clear concern over individual and organisational resilience in the current operating climate. Some of the themes identified included:

- Dependence on a small number of individuals who drive the organisation.
- Volunteer unpredictability.
- Difficulty recruiting trustees.
- Overstretched teams and a lack of morale.
- Risk when key individuals leave or retire.

08

Administrative and structural burdens

Some of the themes identified included:

- Excessive administration around grants and contracts.
- Governance and compliance pressures.
- Delays in changing governance structures (particularly with the Charity Commission).
- Building and listed-property constraints.
- Constant restructuring due to fragile funding streams.

09

Physical, emotional and health-based strain

Respondents reported an underlying theme of professional burn out and wellbeing impact.

Some of the themes identified included:

- Stress and worry about funding fragility.
- Health-related desire to reduce travel across County and make use of AI and virtual realities.
- Emotional fatigue.
- Rising costs forcing difficult decisions on organisations and people.

10

Desire for strategic clarity and purpose

Some of the themes identified included:

- Doing fewer tasks or activities but achieving better outcomes.
- Aligning activity with mission and vision.
- Reducing the number of distractions.
- Protecting a focus on impact.



What support do organisations need to stabilise, survive or thrive?

01

Sustainable, long-term funding

Some of the themes identified included:

- Multi-year and longer-term funding.
- Core funding for staff and running costs.
- Capital funding.
- Funding for proven programmes.
- Aligned funding streams for infrastructure support.
- Reducing constant reapplication and redesign to suit funders.
- Support from councils, DWP, funders, and policymakers.
- Clearer guidance on eligible grants.

02

Fundraising, bid writing and financial skills support

Some of the themes identified included:

- More assistance with fundraising.
- How to write winning grant applications.
- Bid writing support.
- Understanding funding sources.
- Financial management and planning.
- HR and finance support.
- Secretarial and administrative support.

03

Governance, trustees and organisational structure

Some of the themes identified included:

- Recruiting the right trustees in a challenging environment.
- Growing and strengthening boards.
- Governance support.
- Developing into a CIO or CIC.
- Secretarial and managerial support.
- Business planning and strategic thinking.
- Support to implement multi-year strategic plans.

04

Volunteers: recruitment, coordination and development

Some of the themes identified included:

- Recruiting more volunteers.
- Assigning and organising work effectively.
- Volunteers who understand organisational culture and values.
- Hands-on practical support.
- Training and development opportunities.
- Encouragement of volunteering through policy initiatives.



05

Digital, IT and systems support

Some of the themes identified included:

- Advancing IT systems for benefit.
- Digital tools for data management and engagement.
- Training on digital systems.
- Infrastructure support for small charities.

06

Partnerships, collaboration and sector connectivity

Some of the themes identified included:

- Better communications across the VCSE sector.
- Awareness of what other charities are doing.
- Networking and partnership opportunities.
- Stronger links with housing, health, councils, and agencies.
- Peer learning and shared capacity.
- Continued close working within local support ecosystems.

07

Infrastructure and physical resources

Some of the themes identified included::

- Dedicated buildings and spaces.
- Access to materials, technology, and equipment.
- Capacity to host daily activities, classes, and events.
- Physical presence at events.

08

Training, development and workforce support

Some of the themes identified included:

- Training in trauma-informed practice, safeguarding, and de-escalation.
- Volunteer and staff development.
- Managerial support for new roles.
- Capacity building for leaders.

09

Communications, publicity and raising awareness

Some of the themes identified included:

- Publicity and marketing support.
- Social media exposure.
- Awareness raising.
- Sector-wide messaging.
- Making the strategic case for the VCFSE.
- Opportunities to promote work outside standard working hours.

10

Moral support, peer support and recognition

Some of the themes identified included:

- Moral support and encouragement.
- Peer support for leaders.
- Feeling valued and recognised.
- Shared knowledge and reassurance.
- Support to maintain in the face of adversity.



What does SAWN conclude?

This State of the Sector Survey demonstrates beyond any reasonable doubt how fragile our VCFSE is within West Northamptonshire.

For many the pressure of surviving, yet alone thriving, is tangible. Given that most of our sector is small, even micro in size, SAWN would argue that the need for infrastructure support is greater than ever.

This is unlikely to come via the Local Authority, who are struggling with financial issues and constraints of their own. Much could come from external partners and funders around the concept of Place and Neighbourhoods, and SAWN is keen to explore these areas over the next 12 months.

With our traditional partners there is much to build on: 61% of those who responded said they had an effective workable relationship with West Northamptonshire Council, so there is hope for closer more collaborative working in the future.

What is abundantly clear to all funders though is a requirement for a slicker, neater and more intuitive funding process which allows VCFSE the time away from bureaucracy and into the deep dive of delivery.

What is also clear is that VCFSE has some of the solutions within its own gift, and so greater partnership and collaboration is required from them, without a fear of losing territory or brand funding.

The future for our sector is turbulent and change sensitive, as it is in many parts of the UK. The VCFSE needs to continue to evolve, develop and take advantage of the health inequality debate, whilst making difficult decisions about staffing, the mitigation of core costs and the programmes it delivers.



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