

Key Findings and how they have informed our approach to funding.

Between 28th November and 16th December 2024, Bristol City Council ran an engagement survey to gather feedback and input on the priorities and support available through the Enabling VCSE grant.

We sought feedback on the following things:

- Accessibility and visibility of support available
- Capacity building support
- Training
- Networks
- The existing Enabling VCSE priorities
- Potential future priorities
- Support that is currently unavailable

The full list of engagement questions included in the survey and engagement events can be found in the appendix of this report.

Methodology

The methodology for the engagement was composed of:

1. online, open invite engagement conversations
2. targeted group and 1:1 conversations
3. an online survey to receive feedback on VCSE infrastructure and our current funding approach

We sought input from the diversity of community and voluntary sector organisations across the city. Positive steps were taken to engage with small and large organisations, a range of geographic and equalities communities, and those representing equalities groups.

During the engagement, the Community Resources team particularly wanted to hear from:

- Small and large VCSE organisations
- Equalities-led organisations
- Organisations based in areas of multiple deprivation

The results of the engagement presented below show that this was fairly successful and a diverse range of people and organisations gave their views.

Engagement conversations

Between October and December 2024, the Community Resources team held a series of engagement conversations with key stakeholders to shape the proposals that were engaged on.

The team spoke with:

- VCSE organisations working on equalities issues including race equality
- VCSE organisations based in areas of multiple deprivation in North, South and Central Bristol, including those operating as community hubs
- VCSE infrastructure organisations including Voscur, Black South West Network and Locality
- Members of the Bristol Funders Network
- Council staff from other Core Cities managing comparable grants/ contracts
- Colleagues from the Communities service

50 people took part in engagement conversations, of which 12 were internal BCC stakeholders.

Online Survey

An online survey was published on the council's consultation and engagement hub (<https://www.ask.bristol.gov.uk/enabling-the-voluntary-community-and-social-enterprise-sector-grant>) between 28th November and 16th December 2024. The survey included a link to register for two open engagement events.

Respondents could choose to answer some or all of the questions in any order and save and return to the survey later.

A total of 88 people responded to the online survey.

Engagement events

Two online public engagement events targeted at VCSE organisations were held on 10th and 16th December 2024. Those attending events were from a wide range of organisations working in Bristol.

Black South West Network promoted the online events to their network of Black, Asian and Minoritised Ethnic groups. BCC colleagues promoted it to their networks including through the Community Exchange network and the Communities newsletter.

A total of 14 people attended the open engagement events. Of these, at least 6 were Black, Asian and Minoritised Ethnic-led organisations. There may have been other equalities-led organisations present but as we did not ask this question systematically, this was not recorded.

Findings from the online survey, open engagement events and targeted engagement conversations have informed the development of the approach to funding for the Enabling the VCSE grant (EVCSE). Applicants will need to show they have responded to the feedback and findings of the survey and engagement in their proposals.

Clarity of offer of support available

Findings: 76% of respondents to the survey said they were clear about what support is available when their organisation needs it, and where to go to access it, which is very positive. The remaining 24% said they were not clear of the offer. This percentage rose to over 30% for Asian, Black, Black British, Caribbean and African survey respondents, and over 30% of respondents from certain wards: Southmead, Hotwells and Harbourside and

Asheley wards. During engagement conversations, predominantly smaller organisations and organisations based in more geographically isolated locations at the edges of the city stated that they were not clear about the support offer or how to access it.

Analysis of qualitative feedback consistently showed that people felt the support offer could be more clearly communicated.

Response: We have included a key requirement that proposals for the EVCSE grant should “Clearly and transparently define and communicate a joined-up offer”.

We also expect proposals to include a practical capacity building support offer which is clearly communicated, inclusive of and proactively targeted towards organisations that are: led by equalities groups; neighbourhoods and places experiencing greatest disadvantage and smaller and emerging community groups.

The underpinning principles of ‘Equity and Inclusion’ and ‘Place-based’ indicate that EVCSE activities should:

- Take positive action to address systemic disadvantage and inclusion.
- Remove barriers to participation, proactively building an inclusive practice to ensure provision for the people who tend to be excluded and underrepresented.
- Ensure representation and participation of our diverse VCSE sector in important city conversations.
- Strengthen neighbourhood organisations and working, reaching out into particularly geographically excluded or historically less engaged neighbourhoods.
- Strengthen a One City, Many Communities approach, by supporting place-based networks and collaborating with community hubs and anchor organisations who hold trusted relationships in their local communities.

Priorities

Findings: Respondents were asked to consider which of the 5 existing EVCSE priorities they thought should be retained within the grant programme. Each of the 5 priorities received support from at least 70% of respondents to be retained. The most commonly selected priorities were:

‘Support the VCSE sector by accessing local, regional and national assets including; funding and investment opportunities, skills, knowledge, private sector support, data, policy and practice’ (82%)

and

‘Build on the existing business skills and capacity for enterprise. This includes supporting VCSE to access grant funding, find new sources of funding, earned income, income generation and management of assets.’ (80%)

The view that the existing priorities continue to be relevant was echoed during engagement conversations.

Respondents to the survey were also asked to identify from a list of 14 options which areas of VCSE infrastructure support they saw as a high, medium or low priority and which were not a priority at all. Of this list, the options that were more commonly selected as a high priority were:

- Voice and influence, advocacy and policy shaping (66% selected as high priority)
- Help with accessing funding (65% selected as high priority)
- Networks (57% selected as high priority)
- Support building partnerships (53% selected as high priority)
- Strategic support e.g. enabling your organisation or a group of organisations to work together to influence policy or advocate for yourselves (53% selected as high priority)

The options that were least commonly selected as a high priority and more commonly selected as a low priority were:

- Digital and IT support (25% selected as high priority, 36% selected as low priority)
- Practical operational support e.g. with facilities management, event planning or volunteer recruitment (25% selected as high priority, 38% selected as low priority)

An analysis of the qualitative feedback showed that the things people found most useful about the support and training they received were: bespoke and tailored 1:1 support for their organisation; access to specific expertise when needed; governance and policy advice and support; and fundraising support. Similarly, during engagement conversations people expressed priorities including business and financial planning, partnership brokerage and good governance.

Feedback showed that people felt networks were useful, but that there were too many, and that there was sometimes a lack of clarity of purpose.

There were some comments suggesting training, retaining and recruiting trustees was a priority for organisations.

Although building/ asset acquisition, management and maintenance was not highly prioritised by survey respondents, multiple people mentioned that recent support on this theme had been beneficial for their organisation at a critical time.

When asked what was missing from the current offer, some of the themes raised were democratic engagement specifically with ward councillors, amplification of the VCSE sector's own voice in strategic forums (supporting them to speak for themselves and increase their influence), brokerage of relationships/ connections with consultants, wellbeing support for leaders, information sharing and briefings and support to challenge systemic inequity/ exclusionary structures.

It was clear from engagement conversations that the needs of organisations vary depending on their size and stage of development. More established organisations were interested in

support with voice, influence and policy shaping as well as support accessing specialised technical expertise.

Response: There are three key priorities set out in our funding approach for the 2026-2030 grant programme, which have been designed to reflect learning from the current EVCSE programme as well as feedback gained through the survey and engagement:

1. Practical capacity building support which should cover themes including:
 - a. Best practice in VCSE sector governance
 - b. Financial planning, sustainability, fundraising and income diversification
 - c. Assessing, Measuring, understanding and communicating impact
 - d. Taking on and effectively managing assets and infrastructure
 - e. Accessing appropriately skilled consultants and other specialist expertise at the right time
 - f. Proactively avoiding crisis situations through contingency and business planning
 - g. Trustee, staff and volunteer recruitment, retention, and capacity building
 - h. Leadership development
 - i. Accessing and making the most of Bristol City Council grant opportunities and social action programmes including The Bristol Impact Fund and Can Do Bristol.
 - j. Support to access local, regional and national assets
 - k. Support for collaboration and partnerships, consolidation, and mergers
2. Purposeful networks
3. Voice and influence

All proposals should be shaped and influenced by the VCSE sector, including taking feedback from this engagement process into account in developing the offer.

Delivery of support

Findings: Our analysis of the qualitative feedback and comments gathered through engagement conversations identified the following prominent themes which were raised in several comments:

1. **Timing of support:** Several comments were made about the need for support to be timely and responsive. Some organisations felt that they were often better placed to follow up a query or issue, or to pursue a strategic priority themselves due to delays or lack of timely response from infrastructure organisations.

Response: We acknowledge that EVCSE is part of a bigger picture of investment of time and resources in VCSE infrastructure and capacity building support in Bristol. Sometimes, peer and self-led support mechanisms are the best option. A clearly defined and communicated offer will help organisations to go to the best place for support, with confidence they are eligible to receive it. Improved systems of signposting and referrals should reduce delays and ensure the experience of organisations is as smooth as possible.

2. **Location:** Qualitative feedback referred to the need for face-to-face training and meeting organisations at their premises. This aligns with discussions during targeted engagement conversations when several organisations talked about the capacity building support they already provided within their specific geographies, and how the EVCSE programme could add value to this if support could be offered on location to bolster existing activities.

Response: One of the underpinning principles of EVCSE is 'place-based'. We know there has been a conscious effort to do more outreach as part of the existing programme and expect this to be built upon, to strengthen a One City, Many Communities approach, by supporting place-based networks and collaborating with community hubs and anchor organisations who hold trusted relationships in their local communities.

3. **1:1, bespoke support and follow up:** There was a lot of positive feedback about 1:1, bespoke support which was tailored to the needs of the organisation. Several comments about capacity building support referred to the need for wrap around support and clear written follow up. Several comments and discussions centred around signposting to other services and follow up support and resources when infrastructure organisations are not in a position to support.

Response: One of the priorities of EVCSE is practical capacity building support. We have specified that the capacity building offer should include free to access support including_bespoke, intensive support for organisations who meet strategic priorities.

4. **Referrals and join up between infrastructure organisations:** It was clear from engagement conversations that organisations would appreciate a clear and transparent system for referrals between infrastructure organisations, the council, and ideally other organisations including funders. This would mean regardless of where they made their first point of contact, they could be guided to the right source of support and advice. Some organisations were unclear about how infrastructure organisations worked together and which organisation they were 'eligible' to contact.

Response: We have specified that proposals will need to demonstrate how activities will signpost and refer VCSE organisations between partners to ensure the experience of organisations is as smooth as possible.