

# Voluntary and Community Sector Infrastructure Support Grant: Funding Approach

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## Introduction

BCC Voluntary and Community Sector (VCSE) Infrastructure Support Grant is part of the City Council's commitment to support a thriving, more equitable VCSE ecosystem and a one city, many communities approach. It is about providing infrastructure support to Voluntary and Community sector organisations so they have access to knowledge and skills, they can work together and there is an organised way for the city to collaborate with a very diverse network of organisations. Bristol City Council understands the vital role of voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) organisations in the life of the city. A thriving VCSE sector contributes directly to the wellbeing of individuals and communities- by redressing disadvantage and inequality; delivering services; promoting inclusion; strengthening voice and influence; and enabling social action.

The diversity, creativity, and impact of Bristol's VCSE sector is one of the city's greatest assets. It supports the council to meet its statutory obligations and strategic objectives. Public services are more effective when local people and VCSE organisations are involved in decision making and delivery. Effective and sustainable VCSE organisations lead to engaged, stronger, and more resilient communities, with greater wellbeing, where people are less reliant on public services.

For the city council to achieve its ambitions and meet the significant challenges that lie ahead it needs a resilient and sustainable VCSE sector. Bristol's communities (of place, practice and equalities) have the track record, passion, skills, resources, experience and knowledge to support each other and continue to evolve new ways of working.

The City Council understands the VCSE is working within a whole city system with public and private sectors and citizens and communities. To get the best outcomes we aim to nurture respectful, trusting and open working relationships where there is mutual encouragement and supportive challenge, transparency and collaboration.

The VCSE sector is incredibly diverse. Organisations range from entirely volunteer led groups with no or minimal funding, through to large organisations with large teams of paid staff and profitable enterprises alongside. It is a dynamic sector with new groups emerging and established groups closing. Most groups go through peaks and troughs as they grapple with external and internal change. These organisations are part of a delicate community ecosystem which needs to be nurtured.

## The approach to funding 2026-2030: Voluntary and Community Sector Infrastructure Support Grant

The council's investment will contribute to:

- building capacity and resilience to improve outcomes for people and communities

- strategic leadership and development of the sector
- bringing diversity and creativity to city development and decision making
- Greater equity within and for the VCSE sector

## Underpinning principles

5 community development principles underpin the approach:

- Equity & Inclusion
- Place based
- Asset based
- Citizen-led
- Relational

### **Equity & Inclusion**

Equity is about recognising that the structures of our society (the way organisations work, the way decisions are made, the services available) affect people and groups differently. There are many Voluntary and Community groups working for equity and increasing access to vital support and services. However, groups led by people who experience systemic inequity such as classism, racism, disablism, heterosexism often face multiple barriers making it more difficult for them to develop and influence decision making. The VCSE Sector Infrastructure Support Grant will contribute to building an equitable city, where VCSE organisations reflecting the diversity of the city take a lead, influence decisions and make change happen. Inclusion means removing cultural, physical, economic and attitudinal barriers so that everyone is welcome and able to participate as equals.

The Voluntary and Community Sector Infrastructure Support Grant will:

- Take positive action to address systemic disadvantage and exclusion
- Support communities experiencing inequity to build thriving VCSE organisations
- Remove barriers to participation, proactively building an inclusive practice to ensure provision for the people who tend to be excluded and under-represented
- Ensure representation and participation of our diverse VCSE sector in important city conversations
- Support VCSE organisations to build excellence in equalities, diversity and inclusion practice and policies

### **Place-based**

Bristol is one city with many neighbourhood communities. Place based means working 'bottom-up' in a way which is appropriate to the unique histories, dynamics, demographics and environment of the local area. VCSE organisations have a vital role in supporting community life and mitigating the corrosive impact of poverty and inequity. A place-based approach recognises the importance of supporting and nurturing neighbourhood communities in building a resilient city.

The Voluntary and Community Sector Infrastructure Support Grant will:

- 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
- Encourage connections and collaboration between VCSE organisations

- Contribute to a one city approach

### **Asset-based**

Asset-based means recognising and building on the assets of people and communities and making the best use of skills, experience, resources, positive relationships, infrastructure and physical assets that already exist. Asset-based is the opposite of deficit-based which starts with everything that is wrong and imposes solutions. Although there are challenges it's about focusing on the potential of VCSE organisations (working with citizens and communities) to draw on their experience, knowledge and resources to collectively problem solve and find solutions.

The Voluntary and Community Sector Infrastructure Support Grant will:

- Tap into the skills, knowledge, expertise and energy of the sector to build capacity and leadership
- Encourage and enable exchange of assets e.g. skills and knowledge
- Enable VCSE organisations to access and make best use of the city's diverse resources
- Build what is strong and fill the gaps, without duplicating work that's happening elsewhere

### **Citizen-led**

Citizen action is at the heart of most VCSE organisations through membership, trustees, volunteers and activists. People within communities have the ability and desire to act on the things they care about. VCSE organisations help to facilitate this. They also work hard to build and maintain trust and accountability with the communities they serve.

The Voluntary and Community Sector Infrastructure Support Grant will:

- Support organisations to encourage and enable citizen-led and social action
- Provide easily accessible support to community groups, particularly those with no paid workers
- Support organisations to be representative of their communities through trustee, staff and volunteer recruitment and retention

### **Relational**

Relational is about building relationships. It is about connecting people with shared interests so they can work together. This could be residents, community groups or paid workers. It is about building strong working relationships of trust within the sector; with the communities they are part of and with the council and other partners.

The Voluntary and Community Sector Infrastructure Support Grant will:

- Foster a culture of strong and collaborative relationships between VCSE groups and with partners within and across communities of place, practice and equalities
- Grow opportunities for connections between VCSE organisations and decision makers
- Support and encourage organisations to be proactive in building positive connections with and between neighbours and communities.

## **Priorities for the Voluntary and Community Sector Infrastructure Support Grant**

The grant will contribute to a strong and resilient ecosystem by embedding the five principles and focusing on the following priorities:

### **1. Practical capacity building support**

The capacity building offer should respond to the changing needs and priorities of the sector. It should be inclusive of and accessible to organisations that are: led by equalities groups; neighbourhoods and places experiencing greatest disadvantage and smaller and emerging community groups. The offer should include free to access support including bespoke, intensive support for organisations who meet strategic priorities, and should cover themes including:

- Best practice in VCSE sector governance, especially in volunteer run, equalities led and small organisations.
- Financial planning, sustainability, fundraising and income diversification which could include contracts and tendering, business and enterprise.
- Assessing, understanding and communicating impact including social value
- Taking on and effectively managing assets and infrastructure.
- Accessing specialist expertise at the right time.
- Proactively avoiding crisis situations through contingency and business planning
- Trustee, staff and volunteer recruitment, retention, and capacity building.
- Leadership development.
- Accessing and making the most of Bristol City Council grant opportunities and social action programmes including The Bristol Impact Fund and Can Do Bristol.
- Support to access local, regional and national assets including funding opportunities (investment, grants, social value, contracts), private sector support, data, policy and practice.
- Support for collaboration and partnerships, consolidation, and mergers, to make the most of existing assets and resources and reduce competition.

## **2. Purposeful networks**

Clearly defined and purposeful networks for information exchange, mutual support, peer learning, building connections, sharing assets (skills, learning, time, money, experience, knowledge, buildings etc.) and collaborating on shared goals. Networks should be representative of the diversity of the VCSE sector, building on recent successful work to address gaps in the sector and contribute to capacity building as well as enabling and facilitating the sector to interact with the city.

## **3. VCSE sector role in decision making and a one city approach**

This work should build the capacity of the VCSE sector, to enable it to:

- a. Work together and with the wider city system for the common good.
- b. Contribute to strategic and operational decision making including in shaping and achieving the ambitions of the City Councils Corporate Strategy and the One City Plan.
- c. Take positive action to address systemic disadvantage.

Proposals will need to demonstrate how activities will:

- **Be shaped and influenced by the VCSE sector**, responding to changing priorities;
- **Be inclusive** and reflective of the diversity of the city;
- **Be joined up and collaborative**, taking into account what else is happening in the

city, the region and nationally to ensure best use of time and resource and to avoid duplication or confusion;

- **Clearly and transparently define and communicate a joined-up offer;**
- **Signpost and refer VCSE organisations** between partners to ensure the experience of organisations is as smooth as possible;
- **Be delivered for Bristol**, with the acknowledgement that the Voluntary and Community Sector Infrastructure Support Grant sits within a system which is multilayered (with intersections with WECA, ICB, VCSE alliance);
- **Bring in additional resources (e.g. money, opportunity & expertise)**

### Knowing the sector

Proposals will need to demonstrate in depth understanding of current and longer-term priorities and ambition of the sector. Organisations applying should have proven experience of delivering impact both in terms of effective support to VCSE groups and enabling the sector to work collaboratively with the city council and one city partners. Building on knowledge of the eco system that currently supports the diversity of the VCSE sector applicants will need to demonstrate:

- What support is best delivered city wide, to enable maximum impact across the city and with minimal duplication.
- What support is best delivered in a targeted way to enable support for organisations and communities of place (eg. Local support), practice and equalities (eg. Thematic or tailored support).
- How the city council grant can be best used to enable flexible, innovative and bespoke support that can adapt quickly to changing priorities.

### Proposals

Bristol City Council grant investment through the Voluntary and Community Sector Infrastructure Support Grant is part of a bigger picture of investment of time and resource in VCSE infrastructure and capacity building support in Bristol. Other organisations invest in this work and there are peer and self-led support mechanisms which form an important part of the citywide ecosystem. Proposals will need to show how they will continue to support diversity and sector-led initiative as part of a strategic approach.

In the event the grant is awarded to more than one organisation the city council will require a collaborative approach and offer to the sector.

### Additional social benefits

Grant recipients will be required to demonstrate additional social benefit from the grant investment.

### Monitoring and Impact

Applicants show how they will monitor and evaluate the impact of the grant on VCSE sector organisations and on the wider city.

Conditions and priorities will evolve over the four years of the grant. Applicants will present

an annual work plan to the city council and provide formal monitoring reports every six months.

### Collaboration and Partnership

The city council is committed to building and maintaining a trusting and respectful working partnership with infrastructure organisations. Infrastructure organisations have a key role in enabling purposeful collaboration with the VCSE sector so that together we can improve outcomes for communities experiencing the greatest inequity.

### Value of the Voluntary and Community Sector Infrastructure Support Grant

The Voluntary and Community Sector Infrastructure Support Grant is an annual grant of £316,608 per year over four years from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2026 – 31<sup>st</sup> March 2030.

### Timetable

Application forms and guidance notes published	June 2025
<b>Closing date for applications</b>	<b>15 September 2025</b>
Applications assessed & decision made	September – December 2025
Applicants informed	December 2025
End of Grant impact assessment undertaken as appropriate	January to March 2026
Negotiation of Voluntary and Community Sector Infrastructure Support Grant funding Agreement(s) including monitoring indicators and impact methodology	January to March 2026
Voluntary and Community Sector Infrastructure Support Grant funding agreement(s) commences for successful applicant(s)	1 April 2026

### Background and strategic context

#### Applying learning from the existing Enabling VCSE Grant 2022- 2026

The approach set out in this document is informed by learning gained during the current VCSE Sector Infrastructure Support Grant programme, previously called Enabling VCSE grant, and articulates our ambition to build on what has begun to be established in the current programme. Over the past 4 years, there has been significant learning, and collectively with funded organisations, relationships and collaborative approaches have begun to embed. In 2022 BCC funded both Voscur and Black South West Network to provide support to the VCSE sector. Coming out of the COVID 19 pandemic and informed by Designing a New Social Reality<sup>1</sup> this decision reflected the aspiration of the council to be

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<sup>1</sup> Designing a New Social Reality was a piece of research conducted by Black South West Network, with Voscur and Locality, with a report published in March 2021. The research aimed to analyse the impact of COVID-19 on the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) Sector in Bristol in order to assess how to foster greater community resilience in the new operating environment, and ultimately provide evidence for a thoroughly informed overall Sector strengthening recovery strategy. See report: [VCSE Summary.pdf](#)

more intentional about addressing inequity and building the capacity of organisations led by equalities groups. In the first two and a half years of the current programme, there have been some significant highlights for the VCSE sector. Funded organisations have helped leveraged £3,363,400 additional funding into the VCSE sector. 614 individuals have contributed to one city objectives, therefore taking part in city decision making, and over 4600 people have participated in funded activities in total.

The proposed approach is building on learning from the current programme:

- Continue to develop a strategic approach and strong relationships with greater intelligence sharing, alignment and collaboration between funded partners.
- Continue to centre equity within the approach and strategic development. Build on the progress being made through the targeted support to groups led by black and racially minoritised communities and the success of the LGBTQ+ network.
- Build on the collaboration with anchor organisation & community hubs to develop a place-based approach reaching geographically isolated and most deprived parts of the city.
- Continue to offer invaluable, intensive support to some groups at a particularly challenging time or in crises whilst also continuing to encourage long term resilience. There has been a positive trend, especially in Black and Racially Minoritised community led organisations, for people seeking this type of proactive support to build their resilience.
- Further work to develop skills in the sector to assess, understand and communicate their impact. This has multiple benefits for organisations and funders.
- Build upon successful work with funders to diversify their grant funding portfolios, by connecting them with organisations of communities who face structural inequity and increasing the success rate in applying for funding of traditionally excluded organisations.
- Communication of a joined-up offer between organisations providing infrastructure support.
- Ongoing support around acquiring, managing and maintaining community buildings and assets, building on work done through the Community Resilience Fund programme.
- Leadership development, which has built the capacity of leaders in the VCSE sector, thus increasing the resilience of their organisations. This work has led to organisations being better placed to work proactively on things like business planning and long-term vision. A total of 432 people took part in leadership development programmes in the first two years of the current programme.

- Considering the best way to support start-ups and new projects, taking into account the significant resource required, and focusing on building connection and brokering partnerships where possible.
- Continuing to support organisations facing mounting pressures and costs, while supporting the sector to find collective solutions to issues such as competitive funding landscape and staff, trustee and volunteer retention. In the first two years of the current programme 458 organisations have been supported to develop their sustainability and fundraise.
- An asset based approach with a focus on clearly defining the purpose of existing networks rather than introducing new networks, and focusing on the development of existing organisations.

### Survey and engagement key findings and how they have informed our approach to funding

Findings from the online survey, open engagement events and targeted engagement conversations have informed the development of the approach to funding for the VCSE Sector Infrastructure Support Grant. 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 VCSE Sector Infrastructure Support 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 the VCSE Sector Infrastructure Support Grant 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 Enabling VCSE Grant 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)

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 Enabling VCSE Grant 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 the VCSE Sector Infrastructure Support Grant 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 VCSE Sector Infrastructure Support Grant programme could add value to this if support could be offered on location to bolster existing activities.

**Response:** One of the underpinning principles of the VCSE Sector Infrastructure Support Grant 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 the VCSE Sector Infrastructure Support Grant 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.

### Funding landscape

The city council is currently the main funder of VCSE capacity building and infrastructure support for the VCSE sector as a whole in Bristol.

The Integrated Care Board (ICB) has invested a total of £450k since 2023 to support a VCSE Alliance across Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire (BNSSG)<sup>2</sup>. Voscur hosts the Alliance and lead its co-creation. Current funding runs until September 2025 and is for building capacity of the sector to engage with and deliver services on behalf of the ICB. It includes the set up of a VCSE brokerage framework to streamline the process for VCSE organisations applying to deliver health and care contracts. A further £75k was secured from the NAVCA-Assura community development fund in Sept 2024. This is a one-off grant and is for upcoming Alliance Ambassador leadership training programme and BNSSG wide VCSE data and insights work.

The City Councils Enabling VCSE Grant currently provided to Voscur, is a vital building block for the work of the Alliance and the ICB.

The Local Access Programme, launched in 2021, invested a total of £2.8 million over 4 years. The programme will come to an end in April 2025. This programme provided support through Voscur, Black South West Network and School for Social Entrepreneurs.

From 2022-2026, the Quartet One City Health and Wellbeing Fund invested an additional £432,000 in VCSE infrastructure organisations Voscur and Black South West Network. This funding came to an end in March 2024 for Voscur and will come to an end in March 2026 for BSWN. The City Council is working with the Bristol Funders Network with the aim of increasing funding for infrastructure support. Bristol and Bath Regional Capital currently

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<sup>2</sup> [VCSE Alliance - BNSSG Healthier Together](#)

have some funding available as loan finance for Social Enterprises, and are seeking to grow this initiative.

Other infrastructure support and funding is available through West of England Combined Authority (WECA) via their Growth Hub<sup>3</sup>, and Social Economy West project<sup>4</sup>, and Bristol Business & Enterprise Support (BrisBES)<sup>5</sup>.

### Local Context

The VCSE Sector Infrastructure Support Grant is about building the capacity, sustainability resilience and voice of the VCSE sector in Bristol. It is one part of the support offer available to VCSE organisations and is part of a complex system which operates in neighbourhoods, as well as at a city, regional (eg. WECA, BNSSG VCSE Alliance) and national (eg. Government policy, work of NAVCA) level. For smaller and equalities led organisations this can be a challenging system to navigate and the VCSE Sector Infrastructure Support Grant offers specific practical support within Bristol- seeking to simplify connection, partnership building, access to resources etc.

Investing in VCSE infrastructure supports Bristol City Council in achieving goals set out in the Corporate Strategy 2022-2027<sup>6</sup>. The strategy places emphasis on the importance of early intervention and prevention to address ongoing effects of inequity in our city following COVID-19 and the cost of living crisis and further challenges posed by the climate crisis, public sector financial pressures and increasing demand on services, loneliness and social isolation. It also recognises that community building activities led by VCSE organisations which enable social connection, self-organisation, access to support and being part of decision-making are a crucial building block for city resilience and our ability as citizens, communities and anchor organisations to meet these challenges. There is a need to work with citizens and communities to transform services and to encourage and nurture active citizenship and democratic engagement. All of this is made possible when the VCSE sector is well supported and sustainable.

Local Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) organisations are also under significant pressure, facing rising costs and rising demand<sup>7</sup>. It is more important now than

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<sup>3</sup> [Growth Hub - Growth Hub](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Social Economy West - West of England Combined Authority](#)

<sup>5</sup> Bristol Inclusive & Sustainable Business and Enterprise Support (BrisBES) is a programme designed to deliver high quality, inclusive and sustainable support to Bristol's entrepreneurs and business.

YTKO provides fully funded support to pre-start, start-up and growth businesses across Bristol.

BrisBES is funded by the West of England Combined Authority and Bristol City Council and is being delivered by YTKO. The programme will help to boost the local economy and create employment for people in the city.

BrisBES is funded specifically to support start-up and existing businesses, or social enterprises located within the City of Bristol boundary served by Bristol City Council. This includes those who have an idea for a business, have recently started one or have a business which is already trading. Read more on the BrisBES website here:

[Bristol Business & Enterprise Support - West of England](#)

<sup>6</sup> Corporate Strategy 2022-2027: [Corporate Strategy 2022-27](#)

<sup>7</sup> Voscur Taking the Pulse Survey (webpage currently unavailable)

ever that continued investment is made in capacity building, networks and voice and influence which enables them to build resilience.

Bristol's One City Plan 2023<sup>8</sup> recognises the huge value of connections in the VCSE sector which led, for example, to the establishment of more than 100 welcoming spaces during the cost of living crisis. The plan recognises that VCSE organisations need to continue to have a voice in the city, as key players in developing our economy, wellbeing and resilience. VCSE infrastructure provides space for this continued connection and amplifies the voice of the sector. VCSE partners and VCSE infrastructure organisations hold seats on several of the One City boards and are seen as a key partner in delivery of the plan. Following the success of the welcoming spaces network, Bristol's VCSE organisations and One City partners came together to adopt a 'One City, Many Communities' approach in April 2023. This is about recognising that power, connection and inclusion in communities drive equity, wellbeing and sustainability. The Voluntary and Community Sector Infrastructure Support programme connects VCSE organisations, builds their capacity and resilience and enables them to take their rightful place in shaping the city. By prioritising capacity building support in communities which experience the greatest inequity, this approach seeks to build connection, develop community assets and empower those communities most impacted by systemic inequality.

### National context

Connecting Locally, a 2022 report for NAVCA<sup>9</sup> describes VCSE infrastructure as the scaffolding or glue which holds together and unlocks the potential of the VCSE sector. High quality infrastructure is seen to be that which provides practical support, and which enables connection and relationships, while also amplifying the influence of the sector.

The new Civil Society Covenant<sup>10</sup> from government sets a goal of "a strong, diverse and independent civil society that can act as a constructive friend and willing partner who can provide insight, innovation, expertise and challenge to drive sound decision-making" "a strong, diverse opportunities for VCSEs to influence decision making. and independent civil society that can act as a constructive friend and willing partner who can provide insight, innovation, expertise and challenge to drive sound decision-making". This approach to Voluntary and Community Sector Infrastructure Support will enable this goal to be achieved, strengthening the sector and providing opportunities for VCSEs to influence decision making.

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<sup>8</sup> [One City Plan 2023](#) This is the forth iteration and most recent refresh of the One City Plan, which is constantly under review. The document sets out ambitions for the city by 2050.

<sup>9</sup> The National Association for VCSE Action (NAVCA) commissioned the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research (CRESR) at Sheffield Hallam University to undertake a survey of its members, and to analyse the response and report on the findings. See report: [Connecting Locally - final report Nov 2022.pdf](#)

<sup>10</sup> Civil Society Covenant Framework: [Annex A: Civil Society Covenant Framework - GOV.UK](#)

The messages about the value and importance of building resilience of the VCSE sector through appropriate support and capacity building resonate with findings of 'Designing a New Social Reality'<sup>1</sup> which challenged us to work more collaboratively and build partnerships, support the sector around income diversification, financial planning and sustainability and enable organisations to better plan for the long term.

### Core Cities

Bristol is part of a network of a network of 11 Core Cities in the UK. A review of the VCSE infrastructure investment of the other 10 cities in this network (Belfast, Birmingham, Cardiff, Glasgow, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Nottingham and Sheffield) was carried out to contribute to informing our approach to the VCSE Sector Infrastructure Support Grant. 9 of these cities invest in infrastructure support via a contract or grant arrangement, ranging in value from £833,000 to £51,000 with an average investment of £269,000 per annum. Contracts and grants are with single organisations in some cases and multiple organisations in others. One local authority have taken VCSE infrastructure support in house and now provide this through their Communities team. Practical capacity building is the key priority for the majority of VCSE infrastructure investment programmes, with most funding an offer which includes an element of free support. Many programmes cover four main areas: capacity building, voice and influence, networks and partnerships and volunteering. The common priority outcomes across Core City VCSE infrastructure programmes are building resilience and working collaboratively.