

South West London Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) Alliance

Report on the learning and future recommendations
for successfully working with the VCSE sector

October 2025

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Foreword



Sara Milocco

South West London Alliance Director

As Director of the South West London (SWL) VCSE Alliance for the past two years, I've seen first-hand the dedication, resilience, and innovation of our voluntary, community, and social enterprise (VCSE) sector. As a sector, we bring deep community insight, reach, and a proven ability to innovate. It's been a privilege to work alongside passionate colleagues across the six boroughs, all committed to improving health and wellbeing in their communities.

The VCSE sector must be recognised as a key strategic partner within the Integrated Care System, not only for its role in shaping, delivering, and improving services, but for its unique ability to build trust and connect with diverse, often underserved communities. Its deep community roots and cultural insight make it essential in tackling health inequalities and addressing the wider determinants of health in ways that statutory services alone cannot achieve.

The Alliance existed to ensure the sector was recognised as a valued and equal partner within the health and care system. While we did not claim to represent all 5,500 organisations in our area, we worked hard to bring their strengths, expertise, and insights into key conversations and decision-making spaces. Over the past three years, the SWL VCSE Alliance became a trusted and active partner in shaping health and care across the region. We built strong relationships with NHS colleagues and secured growing recognition of the sector's impact - both at the grassroots and strategic levels. Together, we established a robust platform for the voluntary sector to co-produce and deliver innovative solutions that help tackle health inequalities.

Although the Alliance will no longer be funded, it remains essential that the VCSE sector is fully involved in the future of health and care integration through Neighbourhood Provider Alliances at Place level.

This report clearly demonstrates how the Alliance's achievements align with the priorities set out in the [NHS 10-Year Plan](#). We hope the foundation we've built will not only serve as a foundation for future collaboration, but also in supporting the NHS in achieving the outcomes and targets outlined in the Plan, and that the learning from the Alliance will help shape new local structures that meaningfully involve the VCSE sector.

Introduction

"The sector has a key role in tackling the wider determinants of health by reaching people who experience health inequalities and removing barriers to accessing services."

- NHS England, working in partnership with people and communities guidance

The South West London (SWL) Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) Alliance was established in 2022 as part of a national drive by NHS England to embed the voluntary, community, and social enterprise (VCSE) sector into Integrated Care Systems (ICSs). Alliances were created across the country in response to NHS England's guidance which included:

ICS design framework (June 2021)¹

Set the expectation that integrated care board (ICB) governance and decision-making arrangements support close working with the VCSE sector as a strategic partner.

ICS implementation guidance (September 2021)²

Provided more detail on how to embed VCSE sector partnerships within ICBs and ICSs. Including working with the sector to shape, improve and deliver services and embedding VCSE partnership in governance structures, strategies and planning processes. By April 2022, the ICP and the ICB were expected to have developed a formal agreement for doing this ideally by working through a VCSE Alliance to reflect the diversity of the sector.

Working in partnership with people and communities guidance (October 2022)³

Set the expectation that NHS organisations should draw on the knowledge and experience of the voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector.

A framework for addressing practical barriers to integration of VCSE organisations in integrated care systems (May 2023)⁴

Advice to organisations working in health and care to recognise and address challenges and barriers that have an impact on their ability to integrate VCSE organisations as system partners.

¹ NHS England (2021) [Integrated Care Systems: design framework](#)

² NHS England (2021) [Building strong integrated care systems everywhere ICS implementation guidance on partnerships with the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector](#)

³ NHS England (2022) [Working in Partnership with People and Communities: Statutory](#)

⁴ NHS England (2023) [A framework for addressing practical barriers to integration of VCSE organisations in integrated care systems](#)

The VCSE sector in SWL is extremely diverse and includes more than 5,500 community organisations delivering across the six boroughs:

5,565 South West London VCSE organisations Approximately 50% are registered charities with total numbers estimated by CVS local infrastructure organisations in 2023	
1,900 in Croydon	575 in Kingston
1,390 in Wandsworth	400 in Merton
800 in Richmond	400 in Sutton
Mainly small to medium in size, with an annual income of less than £100,000	
£448,276,797 external funding in to South West London, 2021/22⁵	

The economic and social benefits of investing in VCSE organisations are well documented, with evidence showing a £3.50 return for every £1 invested⁶. Grassroots organisations also have existing activities and services in place, reaching sections of the community not traditionally using or engaging with mainstream statutory services.

The VCSE Leadership Group comprises of six CEOs from each borough CVS (Council for Voluntary Services or sometimes referred to as Community and Voluntary Services) who are infrastructure umbrella organisations. They provide high quality infrastructure support for VCSE at borough level to support a thriving and influential sector. The four functions of infrastructure organisations⁷ are:

- Leadership and advocacy
- Partnerships and collaborations
- Capacity building
- Volunteering.

⁵ 360giving.org (accessed 2025) [Grants data](#)

⁶ Public Health England (2020) [The older adults' NHS and social care return on investment tool - Final report](#)

⁷ NAVCA (2024) [Four Functions of Infrastructure: a guide for NAVCA members](#)



These six organisations help to provide consistent, diverse and informed representation and expertise across the Integrated Care Board (ICB) in key meetings as well as involvement in the Integrated Care Partnership (ICP) workstreams. A further six more elected representatives sat on key strategic meetings and committees, ensuring that VCSE insights and perspectives are central to system decision-making in SWL.

The SWL VCSE Alliance Director had a seat on the SWL Integrated Care Partnership Board and was an observer on the SWL Integrated Care Board. They were also part of formal engagement on the South West London Joint Forward Plan, ICP strategy and most recently on the NHS 10 year plan. Read more in the [Strategic integration of VCSE sector](#) section.

The Alliance has not only driven strategic influence but also created practical funding routes and collaborations that have enabled even the smallest organisations to access NHS resources and get involved. It has facilitated access and improved collaborative working with smaller grassroots hyperlocal VCSE organisations, who often hold trust with our most disadvantaged and underserved communities.

“The Alliance has helped us better connect and support small and grassroots organisations to be represented as key to work on reducing health inequalities”.
- ICB response, 2025 Impact of the Alliance survey

The Alliance has distributed over £400,000 through local infrastructure between 2022 and 2025. For example, in 2023/24, the Alliance helped distribute £42,500 in small grants to grassroots organisations to support NHS winter operational pressures which helped to shape the SWL

rolling grants programme with other successful funds supporting spring activities. The Alliance has supported projects targeting prevention, mental health, specific health inequalities, cancer awareness and improving the uptake of childhood immunisations in communities that do not typically engage with statutory services. Read more in the [Championing investment](#) section.

Our success has been built on partnership: with the SWL ICB, local authorities, NHS Trusts, and most importantly, with the wide network of VCSE organisations that bring unmatched reach, credibility and trust within their communities.

In our mental health work, our representatives have worked closely with local providers and system leaders to improve pathways, advocate for better commissioning models and promote the role of VCSE-led community-based interventions that are culturally aware and locally trusted. We have begun shaping a South West London Mental Health Provider Collaborative that recognises VCSE organisations as equal partners. Drawing on best practice from across England, to develop a representative model that builds on the strength of existing VCSE mental health forums in all six boroughs. Read more in the [Mental health](#) section.

We've also played a central role in improving digital inclusion including engagement for projects such as GetUBetter app for musculoskeletal support, including VCSE organisations on the digital fellowship programme, and helping the ICB to shape its SWL ICB Data Strategy 2025–2028. We have been pivotal in supporting communities through targeted digital engagement, grant funding and supporting the creation of a SWL ICS section of a London wide map of registered charities and community organisations by support of Superhighways. Read more in the [Digital and technology](#) section.

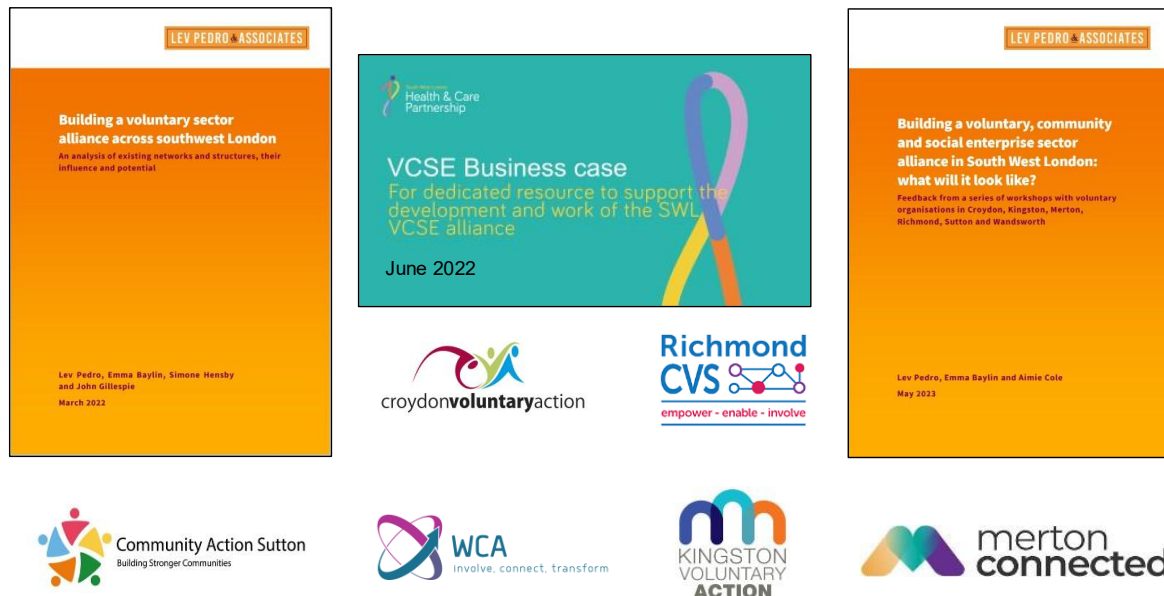
We have been working closely with the ICB workforce team and led on the design and implementation of the apprenticeship pathway programme. This supported 71 VCSE organisations who had an interest in using the NHS apprenticeship level to upskill their employees. £190,000 of unspent levy funding has been reinvested in the local economy funding formal qualifications and training for VCSE staff - many also local residents. Read more in the [workforce development section](#).

The Alliance's work has advocated and been instrumental in creating the foundation to embed the healthy neighbourhood service - an approach outlined in the [A Neighbourhood Service for London and the Target Operating Model](#). Through its deep community connections and trusted relationships, the VCSE plays a critical role in reaching diverse populations, building trust, and ensuring services are shaped around real, local needs. The Alliance's has set a foundation to a more inclusive, preventative, and equitable models of care at neighbourhood level.

As we move forward, it is vital that any future structures continue to advance equity, foster collaboration and partnership working, and fully harness the strengths of our vibrant VCSE sector. This is key to supporting local communities in building a healthier, more resilient South West London—from the most hyper-local level upwards.

Background and context

Codesigning our South West London VCSE Alliance



The South West London VCSE Alliance was formed in response to the formal establishment of the Integrated Care Board (ICB) in 2022, recognising the need for coordinated, system-level representation of the voluntary, community, and social enterprise (VCSE) sector. The Alliance was hosted by Croydon Voluntary Action (CVA) on behalf of South West London and initially grew from strong partnership working between the six borough-level infrastructure organisations.

Throughout 2023 and 2024, the Alliance led a series of engagement events in each borough, asking local VCSE groups how they wanted their voices to be heard and represented within the ICB structure. These conversations shaped the Alliance's direction and priorities, and the findings were captured in two reports commissioned from Lev Pedro Associates, which provide a foundation for the Alliance's current model and approach:

- [Building a voluntary sector alliance in southwest London: what will it look like? \(2023\)](#)
Feedback from a series of workshops with voluntary organisations in Croydon, Kingston, Merton, Richmond, Sutton and Wandsworth
- [Building a voluntary sector alliance across southwest London \(2022\)](#)
An analysis of existing networks and structures, their influence and potential

Timeline of development

Foundation and planning:

March 2022 🔍 Analysis of existing networks & structures

June 2022 📄 VCSE Business Case for dedicated support

April 2023 👤 Alliance Director appointed

May 2023 🌀 Shaping the Alliance "What will it look like?"

May to October 2023 ⚖️ Governance arrangements agreed (can be found on the [Croydon Voluntary Action](#) website).

These included:

- SWL VCSE Alliance Terms of Reference
- SWL VCSE Alliance Leadership group Terms of Reference
- Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)
- VCSE representative role description
- VCSE representative reimbursement policy
- VCSE representative nomination process and forms

Priorities established:

October 2023 🎯 Mental Health and Workforce Development as key priorities

Engagement:

March 2024 🧠 VCSE Mental Health event with over 60 organisations and community leaders in attendance)

July 2024 👥 First induction for VCSE reps (9 already nominated under different priorities)

June 2025 👥 12 VCSE representatives trained and established.

Summary of key achievements

- Development of the SWL VCSE Alliance with **12 VCSE CEO members** forming a Leadership Group with a further **12 VCSE representatives** regularly attended ICB meetings across **8 partnerships** on themes such as mental health, digital, children and young people and health equity.
- Championing investment for our local communities with over **£400,000** distributed to over 400 community organisations in a range of grant programmes.
- **£190,000** of the NHS unspent apprenticeship levy allocated to **19 VCSE employees** for apprenticeships.
- Piloted four SWL research cafes with community leaders to support understanding and increase diversity of participation in research, published in the [**BMJ Journals**](#).
- Strong mental health VCSE representation including working in collaboration with SWL St George's in early thinking on the [**Mental Health Provider Alliance**](#).
- Testing led by six VCSE organisations on the [**GetUBetter app**](#) usability and roll out supporting people with musculoskeletal health and involvement of VCSE organisations in the [**Digital Pioneers Fellowship**](#).
- Championing the awareness of the mapping tool which compiles [**data about the VCSE**](#) from sources such as the Charities Commission and Companies House.
- [**Strengthening communication and engagement**](#) with the VCSE through local borough VCSE forums, cascading key information and updating on changes to the health and care system.
- Working with NHS England to test and develop the [**Quality Development Tool**](#) – a tool to support leaders with the challenges and barriers in integrating VCSE as system partners.

Champion investment

The Alliance attracted and distributed over **£400,000** for neighbourhood based health initiatives and engagement across South West London between 2022 and 2025.

Creating and evolving sustainable funding models

The VCSE is key in raising awareness of local services, supports behaviour change, gathering insight from engagement through its trusted reach with local people and communities, supporting prevention and early intervention. The Alliance is a trusted delivery partner for grant distribution and has supported many grant programmes, including communicating the fund to the sector, managing the application phase, decision panels, reporting and quality assurance.

The following £400,000 was distributed in grants to the VCSE as a direct result of the Alliance championing the sector and working at a system level across SWL. It includes:

- 2022** ❄️ Winter engagement fund (SWL ICB) - £12,500
- 2023** ❄️ Winter engagement fund (SWL ICB) — £42,500
- 2024** 💎 GetUBetter grants (SWL ICB) — £3,300
 - 💉 MMR grant fund (SWL ICB) — £20,000
 - 👶 Childhood Immunisation fund (SWL ICB) — £22,000
 - ❄️ Rolling grants programme - winter engagement fund (SWL ICB) — £45,000
 - 🧬 RMP Partners HPV vaccine awareness (RM Partners) —£17,500
 - 👤 RM Partners community cancer awareness grant — 20,800
 - 🔍 Research cafes (Research Engagement Network, NHS England) - £25,200
- 2025** 👤 RM Partners cancer awareness grant — £24,000
 - 🔍 Research cafes (Research Engagement Network, NHS England) - £12,000
 - 🌱 Rolling grants programme - Spring Engagement Fund (SWL ICB) — £92,280
 - 🎯 Healthy weight programme (SWL ICB) - £3,000
 - 🧬 Women's health education and awareness (SWL ICB) - £187,000

In 2023 the Alliance championed partnership bids with the VCSE as part of the [SWL Investment Fund](#). This included the Health Inequalities Fund with 29 VCSE organisations funded and the Integrated Care Partnership Priorities Fund with 7 VCSE organisations awarded a total of £567,679.

The Alliance supports the SWL ICB in collecting reports and insight from across the VCSE to include in the [South West London insight bank](#) so that engagement and insight collected from local people and communities can be shared with system partners.

Case study: VCSE led research cafes

The South West London Alliance (SWL) Director was a partner of the SWL Research Collaborative which brings together the NHS, local authority, clinical research networks, National Institute for Health Research (NIHR), Applied Research Collaborative (ARC) and local universities. Through the Alliance we worked with the SWL Health Inequalities Team on a bid from the Research Engagement Network, funded by NHS England to increase diversity and participation in research and pilot VCSE-led research cafes.

The initial model focused on mental health and exploring how to make research more accessible and relevant to communities. The funding encouraged local people to develop skills and confidence to eventually lead research themselves, thereby building trust and improving the relevance and representation of research findings. We worked with 11 peer researchers, ran four research cafes and 4 community researchers who provided training to co-lead the cafes with the researcher.

A total of 75 participants from racially minoritised backgrounds attended the sessions. Participants were intentionally selected based on age, ethnicity, location, mental well-being experiences and willingness to engage in mental health research. As part of the research there was enhanced understanding of the research process noted by 95% of attendees with 50% wishing to be involved in commenting on research proposals. The final research was published on the BMJ Open journals.⁸

Five main themes emerged from the café discussions:

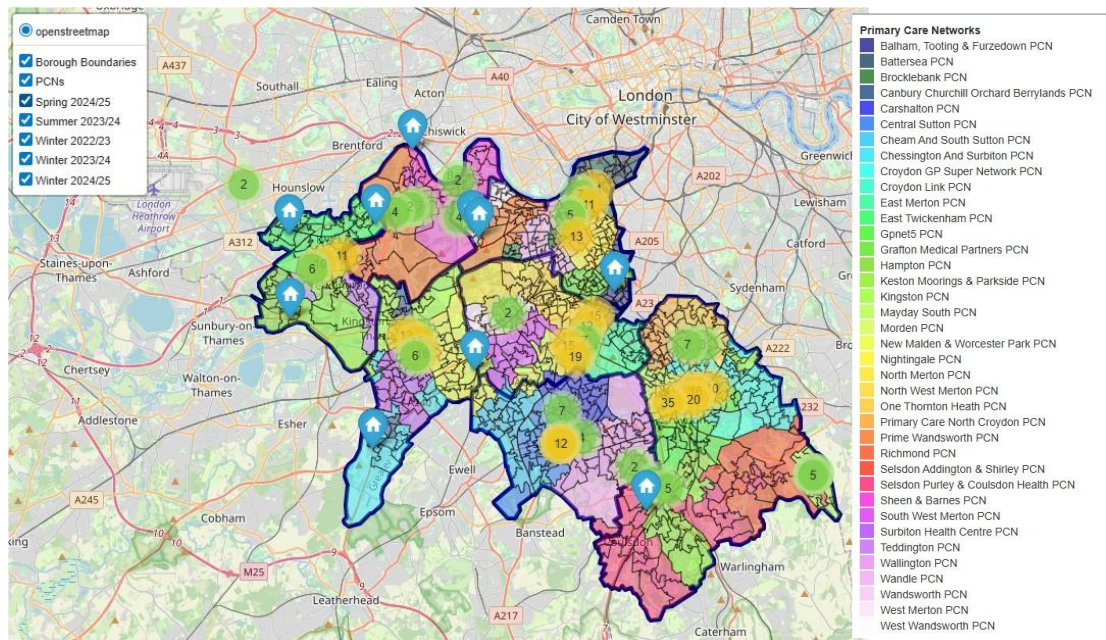
- (1) Systemic barriers to accessing safe healthcare and mistrust of UK healthcare systems.
- (2) The need for cultural competence and sensitivity in healthcare and research.
- (3) Research as a positive step for change.
- (4) Barriers to research participation.
- (5) The importance of incentives and feedback for research participation.

Case study: SWL rolling grants programme

The Alliance worked in partnership with the ICB to launch the SWL rolling grants programme and built on learning to develop a more effective and community-led approach to small grants funding. This was delivered on behalf of the Alliance by the six CVS infrastructure organisations.

Over the three years over 412 community organisations were funded and the below map shows the breadth of organisations working across the six boroughs:

⁸ BMJ Journals (2025) [Using 'research cafés' as a proof-of-concept model for engaging minoritised communities in UK health research: a mixed-methods feasibility study in South West London](#)



This approach, which can now be taken forward by local Providers Alliances, had several key benefits:

- **Local connection and insight:** The importance of local delivery for grant programmes at borough or neighbourhood level for sustainability of local organisations and connecting at a local level. Distributing funding at a borough level helps to identify trusted organisations and support the intended reach of targeted communities. This is important especially in terms of the advice and support for new or emerging VCSE organisations and community groups.
- **Knowledge and relationships:** Each borough's CVS managed the small grants of this programme within their own locality, ensuring decisions are rooted in local context and relationships.
- **Streamlined communication:** Acting as a single point of contact, taking on the responsibility of liaising with groups, offering support and guidance throughout the grant process.
- **Responsive funding:** The CVS infrastructure organisations have the ability to frontload payments where needed ensuring small organisations had immediate access to funds which is essential for delivering time-sensitive community projects.

Case study: women's health awareness and education grants

The Alliance is partnering with the **SWL Gynaecology Clinical Network** and has distributed **£187,000** to local VCSE grassroots organisations for the development of borough based women's health Hubs across South West London. This funding is part of a national initiative that aims to enhance women's health services across the UK by supporting culturally appropriate and tailored education and self-management. It will allow local VCSE organisations, working with the most disengaged communities to deliver a range of initiatives for women in safe and familiar community settings.

Programmes will replicate successful models from South East London, focusing on raising awareness and education on topics such as menopause and menstrual periods and will include:

- Community-based group sessions targeting women who historically do not access women's health services.
- Community champion training to empower local advocates in women's health.

Catalyst for collaborative funding bids

In line with the NHS 10-Year Plan emphasis on collaborative working and integrated responses across health and care systems, the Alliance led multiple cross-sector partnership bids, promoting integrated VCSE-health-local authority collaborations including:

- Workforce Development bid to SWL ICP Priorities Fund (2023) - successful
The Alliance was a partner to an ICP Priorities Fund bid on workforce development and secured £40,000 to work on apprenticeships in the VCSE sector. See the [Workforce development](#) section.
- Get Set UK's Connect to Work partnership bid. (2025) – not successful
- Volunteering for Health programme with 4 hospitals and 7 VCSE infrastructure organisations. (2024) – not successful
- The National Lottery You decide programme. (2025) – not successful

Although some bids were unsuccessful, they strengthened collaboration and helped align sector priorities.

Strategic integration of VCSE sector

“The Alliance simplifies how the NHS works with the VCSE sector in SWL enabling reach into new organisations to improve population health and reduce health inequalities”.

- ICB response, 2025 Impact of the Alliance survey

The VCSE Alliance has streamlined partnership working between VCSE and NHS. The infrastructure of the Alliance is explained in this section. The SWL VCSE Leadership Group and representation of 12 elected representatives who are members of key strategic meetings and committees all help to ensure that VCSE insights, provision of services, local expertise and perspectives are central to system decision-making in SWL.

The following diagram shows how the Leadership Group and wider VCSE networks and forums create the infrastructure in South West London.

VCSE FORUMS AT PLACE IN SOUTH WEST LONDON - as at 1 October 2025

Key:
CAG: Community Action Sutton
CEN: Community Engagement Network
CVA: Croydon Voluntary Action
LA: Local Authority
LA: Local Authority
MC: Mental Connected
RCVS: Richmond CVS
WCA: Wandsworth Care Alliance

	Croydon	Kingston	Richmond	Wandsworth	Sutton	Merton
Structures and Forums at Place	Civil Society Alliance(CVA)	Kingston Health and Wellbeing Network (KVA)	Richmond Health & Wellbeing Network (RCVS)	Wandsworth VS Forum (WCA)	Sutton Voluntary Sector Forum (CAS)	Involve Forum (MC)
	The Partnership (NHS, LA, VCSE) CEO group (CVA) VCSLB (One Croydon Alliance)	Kingston VCSE Forum (KVA) Kingston VCSE CEO Network KVA)	Trustee network (RCVS) Volunteer Coordinators Forum (RCVS)	Children and young people Network (WCA)	Race Equality Group (CAS)	Health & Social Care Forum (MC)
	Croydon Food Poverty Network (CVA) Later Life Network (CVA)	The Good Food Group (Kingston, KVA)	CEO Network (RCVS)	Health and Wellbeing Engagement Group (WCA)	Anti-poverty Forum (CAS)	Youth Partnership (MC)
	Local Community Partnerships (LA & VCSE, CVA)	Kingston Mental Health and Wellbeing Forum (Kingston Health Watch)	Food partnership (RCVS)	Voluntary Involving Organisations Forum (WCA)	Charity and Public Sector Partners meeting (CAS, LA & partners)	
	Croydon Youth Consortium (CVA/Reedham) Croydon Mental Health Alliance (CVA)	Kingston Carers' Forum (RBK & Kingston Carers Network)	Richmond Mental Health & Wellbeing Alliance (LA & VCSE)	Mental Health Providers Forum (CEN)		
	Volunteer Managers Forum (CVA)		Richmond Care and Support Partnership (LA & VCSE)	BME Mental Health Forum (CEN)		
			Community Sport and Physical Activity network (LA & VCSE)			

SWL VCSE Alliance Leadership Group members:

“The strong infrastructure network helps the visibility and strategic voice of the VCSE to be heard across SWL, creating accountable links from neighbourhoods to place to system.”

- VCSE response, 2025 Impact of the Alliance survey

The SWL VCSE Alliance Leadership Group has 12 members and includes six chief executives of local VCSE infrastructure organisations and six chief executives of local community and voluntary sector groups, bringing expertise in mental health, children and young people, long term conditions, frail/old people and workforce development.

The work of the SWL VCSE Alliance is guided by its [South West London Alliance Leadership Group](#), which provides expertise from each of the six boroughs with focuses aligned to local priorities. It brings together the NHS and local voluntary and community organisations to commit to new ways of working between sectors and establishes a framework for collaboration that:

- recognises the interconnectedness of the sectors, as we are serving the same population
- is reciprocal and understanding of our different organisational cultures and contexts
- embrace preventative ways
- is based on conversation at an early stage to allow the sharing of needs/problems/issues and the development of shared solutions.

Members are below:

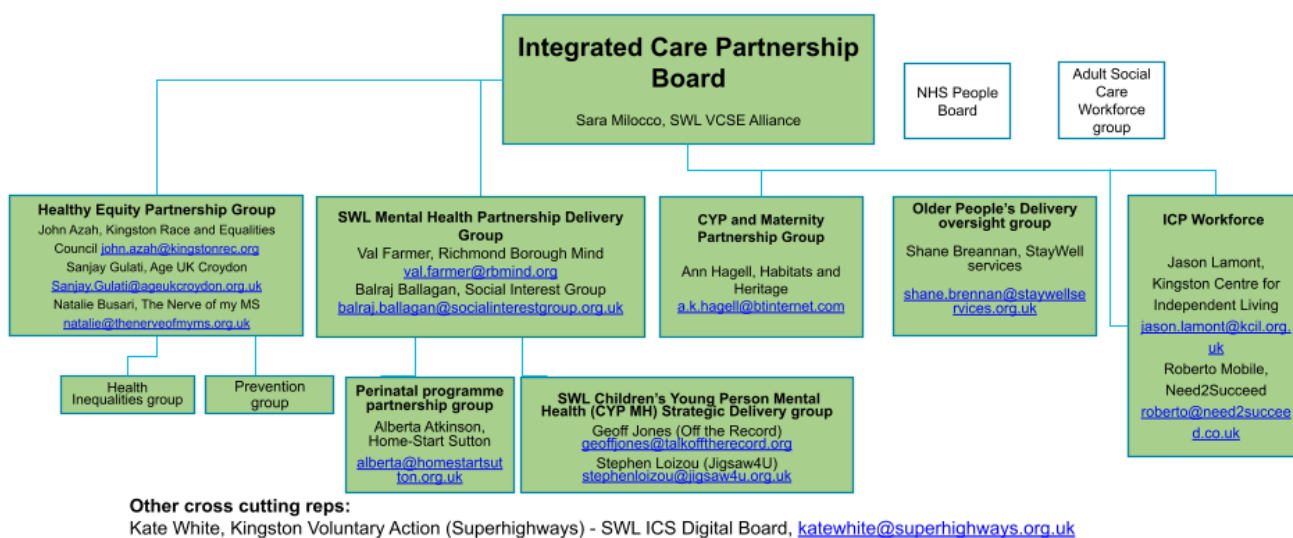
1. Sarah Burns - [Croydon Voluntary Action](#)
2. Sanja Djerić Kane - [Kingston Voluntary Action](#)
3. Tony Molloy - [Merton Connected](#)
4. Kathryn Williamson - [Richmond CVS](#)
5. Simon Breeze - [Community Action Sutton](#)
6. Jason Edgington - [Wandsworth Care Alliance](#)
7. Sanjay Gulati - [Age UK Croydon](#)
8. Jackie Watson - [Tooting and Mitcham Sports Club Ltd](#)
9. Chas De Swiet - [Sound Minds](#)
10. Cathy Maker - [RUILS](#)
11. Anita Maullin - [Sutton Volunteer Centre](#)
12. Rachael Stokes - [Kingston Carers' Network](#)

Previous members who have stepped down include Jason Lamont - [Kingston Centre for Independent Living](#).

Since 2022, the SWL VCSE Alliance Leadership Group has met monthly with regular participation from an NHS representative providing strategic direction for the Alliance. It acts as a space for VCSE leaders to collectively shape how the sector is represented within the wider health and care system at SWL level. The group also plays a key role in modelling collaborative ways of working, helping to build a shared framework for partnership between the VCSE sector and the NHS.

The Alliance infrastructure also had an additional **12 VCSE representatives, each an expert in their field who sit on strategic ICB partnership boards and working groups**. Their role is to contribute specialist insight to ensure the VCSE perspective is embedded in system discussions, and help elevate key issues affecting the VCSE sector. These roles are detailed in the below diagram.

Governance for Integrated Care Partnership delivery workstreams - our SWL VCSE Alliance representatives



Innovation, agility and community reach

The Alliance has been pivotal in **showcasing and connecting the VCSE sector to key strategic programmes of work**. This has included presentations and updates across the system, at both ICB and ICP meetings, SWL Mental Health PDG and SWL ICB Digital Board. The Alliance has laid the groundwork for new collaborations and increasing recognition of the VCSE sector through many conversations with ICB staff and programme leads by connecting VCSE organisations to ICB teams, promoting inclusive collaboration.

Integrated Care Board presentations include:

- November 2024: **[Immunisations in South West London](#)** - including how we communicate and engage with our communities about vaccinations, joined by the Togetherness Community Centre as an organisation who received a winter fund grant.
- July 2024: **[Engaging with our communities who face health inequalities, in partnership with Voluntary, Community, Social Enterprise Sector \(VCSE\)](#)**
- March 2025: **[What matters most to our communities](#)** – with Croydon BME Forum's work on the ICP priorities funding that led on engagement about neurodiversity.

Integrated Care Partnership Board presentations include:

- July 2023: **[The Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise \(VCSE\) Alliance in the Partnership](#)** - including an overview of the VCSE sector in South West London

The Alliance has played a key role in shaping how the system works with the VCSE sector at borough and system level. We provided feedback on the **ICP Investment Fund process**, including what works for the VCSE sector and what hasn't worked previously, providing practical suggestions to improve future funding mechanisms and accessibility to a wide range of VCSE organisations. The SWL VCSE Director also co-facilitated many of the information sessions about the grant schemes for the ICP Investment Fund.

In **mental health**, we brought together local VCSE mental health networks, local authority leads and the SWL mental health representatives to engage directly with St George's Mental Health Trust and South London and Maudsley (SLaM). This early involvement of the sector helped ensure the emerging Mental Health Provider Collaborative considered the role and contribution of the VCSE sector from its outset. See the [mental health](#) section.

Elevating key issues into system-level processes

To achieve the NHS 10 Year Plan's ambition of joined-up, preventative, and community-based care, the VCSE sector must be recognised as a strategic partner. Formal system-level involvement would ensure the VCSE insights and challenges are considered in decision-making rather than after decisions have been made during implementation. The Alliance has taken a leading role in demonstrating how this can be achieved, including:

Challenges to public sector funding impacting the VCSE sector's sustainability and risks associated were flagged by the SWL VCSE Alliance Director in an ICB Board meeting and is now included on the ICB corporate risk register. Given the increasing financial pressures on public sector budgets and a notable reduction in investment, there is a substantial risk that VCSE organisations providing health and care services and community support may face operational difficulties, compromising their ability to continue delivering essential and quality support to communities. This formal acknowledgement by the ICB of the risk demonstrates support in the challenging context.

The Alliance led a coordinated campaign highlighting the **impact of the increase of National Insurance contributions on VCSE organisations**. This was raised both at the system level and at borough level through CVS infrastructure partners, ensuring the sector's financial pressures were understood and considered in wider planning and decision-making.

The Alliance represented and actively advocated for **six medium-sized commissioned VCSE organisations** to address critical contracting and commissioning challenges. Many of these organisations are long-standing, respected local providers. Some of the challenges experienced include:

- delayed payments due to missing purchase orders or unsigned contracts
- unclear communication around contract extensions
- lack information or engagement around forthcoming tenders.

The Alliance supported providers to escalate concerns to senior ICB leadership where needed and worked to ensure issues were raised with the appropriate decision-makers. We also highlighted broader systemic learning from these cases including with the Director of Finance and the Director of Mental Health Transformation. This advocacy role has positioned the Alliance as a trusted intermediary, able to raise concerns sensitively that individual providers may have struggled to escalate alone. The Alliance also advocated for improved commissioning arrangements that are transparent, timely and workable for community-based providers. Read more in the [Recommendations for commissioning](#) section.

Strengthening communication

The Alliance has **enhanced communication between the NHS and the VCSE including smaller grassroot organisations** by using trusted, existing communication channels through the CVS infrastructure organisations and developing partnerships by visiting a range of community leaders in all six boroughs. We have shared system updates, such as the roll out of the SWL ICB Green Plan or national information about how to get involved in the NHS 10 year plan engagement.

In response to feedback from local organisations, we avoided duplicating efforts and instead used established mailing lists to ensure relevant NHS and Alliance information reached frontline organisations and smaller grassroot community organisations. Through this approach, there have been **Alliance newsletters and regular social media updates** for cascading through these channels. We have presented at local VCSE network forums and meetings to help the SWL VCSE Sector stay informed about developments beyond their borough, creating stronger links between neighbourhood action and system-wide strategy.

The Alliance advocated and provided direct support to **five local VCSE mental health organisations experiencing challenges with ICB contracts and funding**, helping to raise and resolve critical issues. Through the Alliance we were able to continue ongoing dialogue between the relevant CEOs and key ICB senior leads, SWL ICB Director of Mental Health Transformation and SWL ICB Finance Director to establish better commissioning mechanisms. The mental health representatives also raised concerns around VCSE mental health providers commissioned by the ICB with contracts ending imminently (within 3 months) that had not received any formal (and in some cases informal) communication and/or decision about their contracts to the SWL Mental Health Provider Design Group.

The **Alliance supported communication to local VCSE** mental health forums across South West London and keep them informed on changes to the central ICB mental health commissioning team, as well as supporting messages of employment opportunities through the workforce team and ICP work programme. Read more in the [mental health](#) and [workforce development](#) sections.

National level contribution

The Alliance was funded by NHS England to pilot and provide feedback on the [Quality Development Tool \(QDT\)](#) helping to influence its final design before national rollout. The framework supports leaders in integrated care systems, NHS providers, local authorities, and the VCSE organisations to recognise and address challenges and barriers that have an impact on their ability to integrate VCSE organisations as system partners.

The SWL VCSE Director is an active member of the [Alliance42 national network and the VCSE NHS England network](#), and [NAVCA](#), which brings together all VCSE Alliance leads across England. Through these collective networks, we have contributed to national conversations to help shape how integrated care systems work with the voluntary sector at scale.

Digital and technology

Digital inclusion is a key element of the NHS 10-Year Plan, and the Alliance's work has focused on ensuring that the voices of communities and the VCSE sector are represented in the development of NHS digital strategies. This has included active participation in [SWL Digital Board](#) and contributing insights into how digital tools are experienced by local people. Representation from Superhighways, Kingston Voluntary Action attending monthly or bi-monthly on the SWL Digital Board (17 meetings since January 2023). This provides strategic insight on digital inclusion, data use, and VCSE sector capabilities. Their regular engagement with ICB partners has ensured VCSE voices are embedded in digital strategy and inclusion efforts as far as possible.

The digital representative created a network of digital inclusion VCSE organisations to help inform the role held which included key organisations such as ClearCommunityWeb (Croydon) and Power to Connect (Wandsworth).

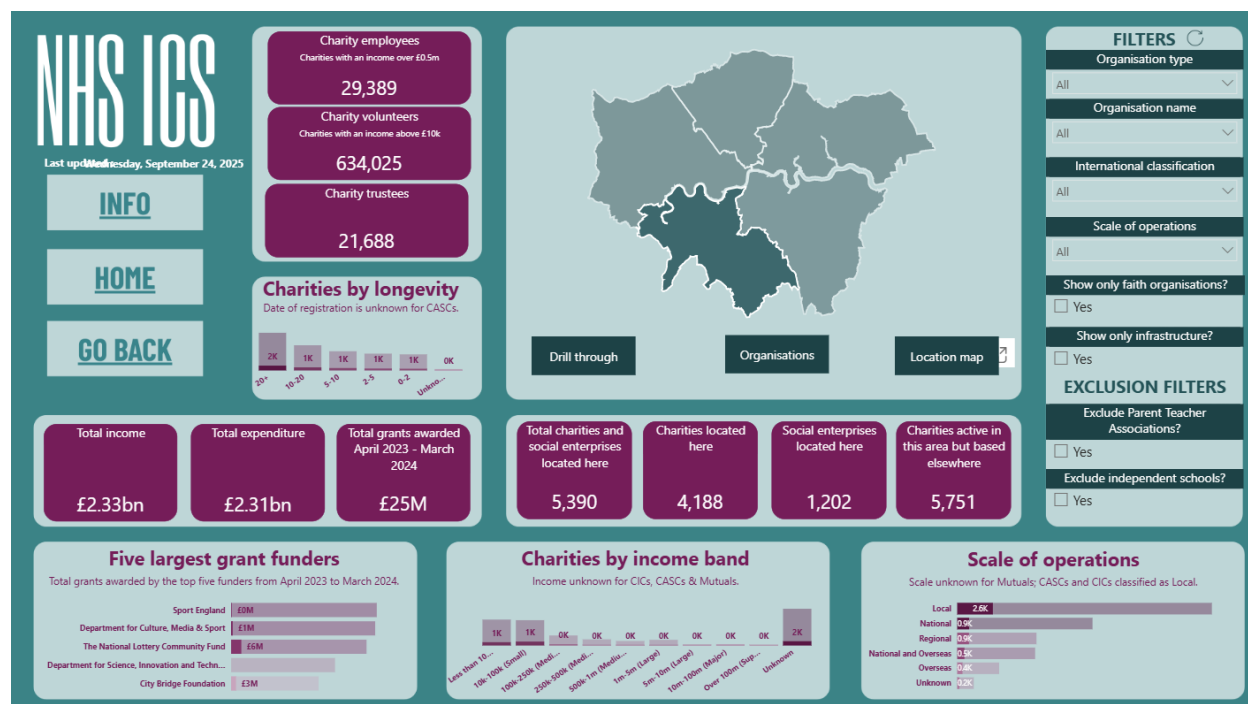
Programmes of work have included inputting into the [South West London ICB Data Strategic Plan 2023-2028](#) and the [SWL NHS Digital Strategy](#) ensuring the VCSE sector's role is reflected in long-term plans and supporting early thinking around a South West London-wide [digital inclusion proposal](#), aiming to unify borough-level efforts and build on sector strengths. Recent discussions to develop a mechanism enabling the VCSE sector to access valuable data from SWL ICS Health Insights platform, along with opportunities for VCSE sector data to feed in to ICB platforms have not materialised.

Kingston Voluntary Action (KVA) on behalf of the SWL VCSE Alliance set up and administered a grassroot funding programme distributing small grants of £550 to voluntary and community organisations to raise awareness and support installation and use of the [GetUBetter app](#) - an app to support long term conditions including musculoskeletal health. The project funded six organisations to support installation on a variety of devices and encourage its use by local communities. Superhighways delivered the pilot supporting VCSE organisations to engage local people with the NHS-backed app providing feedback on usage and accessibility. Feedback from the organisational leads and residents support to use the app highlighted areas for improvement in the app's promotion, usability, and support mechanisms to enhance user experience and engagement.

Accessing the grant enabled organisations to learn more about the app themselves and then set up a mechanism to support awareness raising and adoption of the app within local people and their communities. Some organisations then built this into their day-to-day activities contributing to its sustainability.

“This was a multi faceted project - really showing the VCSE as key to inputting and shaping preventative empowering health tools.”

- GetUBetter app grant programme evaluation feedback



The Alliance championed Superhighways’ mapping tool [Data about the Voluntary, Community & Social Enterprise Sector](#) (funded outside of the Alliance contract via City Bridge Foundation, Cornerstone Fund) which uses Charity Commission, Companies House and 360 Giving data to show VCSE activity across SWL. The dashboard has evolved through feedback from sector professionals, gathered via conversations and co-design sessions, and was launched in July 2025. It incorporates an ICS footprint view, allowing NHS partners to see sector distribution across both the system and by borough. Next steps were to layer Primary Care Networks (PCN) boundaries onto the map, providing a clearer picture of which VCSE groups operate in each Primary Care Network and in line with the Neighbourhood Health Service for London.

Many one-to-one support sessions, device provision and digital upskilling programmes were delivered in every borough, often in collaboration with local partners, for example Richmond AID, Kingston Digital Inclusion Network, Clear Community Web in efforts to support people with booking GP appointments, using the NHS App, and staying connected through digital tools, especially for people experiencing digital poverty. The impact of VCSE led action and support is demonstrated in Sutton’s health check programme which supported over 580 people, helping many to install or re-access NHS digital tools.

There were 4 VCSE organisations who were accepted on the [Digital Pioneers Fellowship](#) – Staywell Servicesm Ruils Independent Living, The Motherhood Group and Superhighways.

This 12-month programme to design and lead health and care transformation projects driven by digital innovation.⁹

In 2025 the Alliance ran a specialist session on the [NHS Data Security and Protection Toolkit](#) helping VCSE organisations contracted by the NHS to meet information governance requirements. This helped to demystify the language as most VCSE organisations do not have inhouse tech leads, updated on changes and expectations, shared approaches such as staff training and signposted to resources, templates and further training.

Recommendations

Recommendations for future work include:

- Further discussion on data access and sharing with the Digital, AI & BI team.
- Data about the VCSE sector dashboard to be utilised by the ICB and partners.
- A codesign approach and input from the VCSE in the digital space to the Digital Inclusion programme.
- Connecting VCSE Digital Inclusion initiatives so there is a coordinated SWL offer – including connecting with the Digital Care-Co-ordinators.
- Lots of support could be available for the VCSE on the NHS Data Security and Protection Toolkit.
- Continuing to trail VCSE involvement (and reach to local people to test) in app usability and roll out.
- Continuing to have VCSE organisations and places at the Digital Pioneer Fellowship sessions.
- Better connections with the digital activity happening at a place level relating to the VCSE and thematically e.g. health inequalities and for example the information coming through the NHS app / digital usage
- Creation of a 'public' blog pulling information, advice and updates for the VCSE.
- A specific VCSE based digital funded role to align to aspirations in the 10-year plan and the shift from analog to digital.

⁹ Digital Health London (accessed 2025) [Digital Pioneer Fellowship](#)

Mental health



Valerie was one of the Alliance's representatives on the **South West London Mental Health Partnership Delivery Group (SWL MH PDG)**. She has been CEO of Richmond Borough Mind for 14 years and chairs the Richmond Mental Health and Wellbeing Alliance. Her organisation provides a breadth of mental health services for people (adults and young people) with low to moderate and more complex needs, including Crisis Cafes in Richmond and Kingston.

"It is important to work with health and local authority leaders to adapt and provide appropriate mental health services. I have a collaborative approach and will always speak out on behalf of the VCSE and on behalf of our service users; I see partnerships and collaborations as more than the sum of the parts but as an enabler mechanism for all organisations, including smaller ones, to have a voice."

- Valerie Farmer (SWL MH PDG VCSE rep)

Our mental health representatives have attended and provided expertise to over 15 meetings of the SWL MH PDG. And focussed on three key areas:

- (1) Providing strategic input – challenging the group to think about resources, commissioning and the wider system.
- (2) Representing and advocating for the VCSE sector – ensuring that the voice of the voluntary and community sector is embedded in mental health decision-making.
- (3) Encouraging the group to see the “big picture” in terms of funding, commitments, and opportunities for integration with the VCSE sector.

Our mental health representation is strong with members ensuring a strong sector voice in mental health system planning. The VCSE Alliance Leadership Group also includes a mental health expert from Sound Minds from an adult mental health charity in Wandsworth.

All attendance and representation includes:

SWL Mental Health Partnership Delivery Group (20 meetings, 2023-2025):

- Richmond Borough Mind
- Social Interest Group (Croydon)

SWL CYP Mental Health Strategic Delivery Group (4 meetings in 2025):

- Jigsaw4u (SWL London)
- Off the Record (Croydon, Sutton, Merton)

SWL Perinatal Mental Health Group (20 meetings, 2023-2025):

- Home-Start (Sutton)

The Alliance worked with SWL St George's and ran the **South West London Mental Health Strategy event in March 2024** brought together over 60 VCSE organisations and community leaders to help shape partnership approaches.

A film was made of the event featuring many VCSE mental health leaders detailing the issues in mental health and more broadly the sector, watch the film on South West London's YouTube.



Feedback from the event included enablers for best practice funding, contracting and commissioning the VCSE such as:

- Commitment to longer term funding, realistic timeframe for applications and feedback on unsuccessful bids.
- Longer leading time to tender submission, better communication with commissioning organisations, especially when contracts are about to be extended or put out to tender. Prompt payment of invoices and issuing of PO numbers/contracts to enable payments

We have been working in partnership with South West London St George's in shaping the South West London Mental Health Providers Alliance (4 meetings since 2024). The VCSE has been recognised as equal partners in its development and how to effectively include VCSE representation in the future model that is reflective of the VCSE provider provision to respond to local needs. Work was initiated to create a representative model that integrates existing VCSE mental health forums in all six boroughs into system decision-making, ensuring inclusive and

place-based representation. System-level discussions are informed by national best practice models (Birmingham, Black Country) on embedding VCSE organisations within provider collaboratives. This work engaged local VCSE and local authority led Mental Health Forums and the Alliance's mental health representatives.

The Alliance has been actively engaged in drafting commissioning guidelines for VCSE mental health organisations with a focus on sustainability and equity to push for reforms that create a more stable, inclusive, and collaborative environment for the sector including:

- Longer-term funding
- Proportionate and simplified procurement
- Timely payment and pre-funding options
- Transparent, timely decision-making
- Co-design with VCSE Partners
- Funding for core costs and infrastructure

Key insight

Mental health is a key topic for our local communities in terms of access, long waiting times and varied provision. The Leadership Group regularly gathers information given its local expertise and networks on key themes affecting our communities. These insights have informed and equipped representatives to advocate effectively for the sector at strategic meetings and help strengthen VCSE delivery across the system.

Amongst this, housing insecurity emerged as a consistently significant driver of poor mental health across all six South West London boroughs. VCSE organisations repeatedly highlighted the impact of inadequate, unstable, or poor-quality housing on service users' mental wellbeing, with many individuals experiencing heightened distress, anxiety, and social isolation as a result. The link between housing and mental health was raised as a cross-cutting issue affecting both prevention and recovery.

There is a wide variety of locally rooted VCSE services across SWL ranging from youth counselling and talking therapies to crisis cafés and recovery hubs.

Croydon has seen an increase in people presenting as suicidal in communities, on waiting lists to see GP, hospital, specialist services and often passed around the system. The borough has also seen an increase in people and families impacted by drug and alcohol addictions seeking help in the community. Many people are struggling with isolation and loneliness, looking for local connection and support. The borough offers a range of mental health providers, amongst those working with young people, there are well established counselling organisations like Off the Record and Croydon Drop In as well as young people community groups providing positive activities or mentoring as well as emotional support. Several of them are extremely small and born out of residents' own experiences. Croydon Voluntary Action hosts the [Croydon Mental Health Alliance](#). Amongst those working with adults, we have well established large size groups like Mind in Croydon and Social Interest Group, as well as small, local organisations such as Centre of Change.

In **Sutton**, the mental health VCSE landscape includes a small number of medium-sized specialist providers, such as [Sutton Mental Health Foundation](#) and [People Arise Now](#) which deliver targeted mental health support. In addition, a range of community organisations whose primary focus lies elsewhere, such as [Home Start Sutton](#) supporting families with young children are increasingly responding to rising mental health needs among their service users. Many have begun integrating elements of emotional support into their core services, highlighting the growing importance of mental health awareness and capacity across the broader VCSE sector.

In **Kingston**, [Mind's Journey Recovery Hubs](#) in Kingston and Twickenham play a vital role in providing peer support and accessible drop-in services, including evening hours to accommodate diverse community needs. Despite these valuable resources, local VCSE infrastructure organisations have highlighted a significant gap in mental health services specifically tailored for young people. While [Jigsaw4U](#) offers much-needed support in this area, it remains a relatively small service, underscoring the urgent need for expanded youth-focused mental health provision within the borough.

Wandsworth's recent Mental Health needs assessment highlights several key areas of concern, including an increasing prevalence of mental health issues among young people, notably school-aged children, cultural and ethnic disparities. The [Ethnicity Mental Health Improvement Project](#) aims to address disparities in mental health access and outcomes among Global Majority communities focusing on culturally appropriate services and reducing hospital admissions. Wandsworth is home to a number of well-established VCSE mental health providers with specific expertise in supporting people with their mental health and wider needs. These include organisations such as [Sound Minds](#), which uses creative arts as a therapeutic tool for recovery, and [Family Action](#), which delivers early intervention mental health support in collaboration with settings such as food banks. Alongside these, other VCSE organisations provide mental health support as part of a broader offer for example, [Evolve Housing](#) operates a crisis café supporting residents experiencing emotional distress, while smaller grassroots groups like [Tooting Community Kitchen](#) offer warm meals in welcoming community spaces, often alongside informal emotional support and connection.

In **Richmond**, the local VCSE sector features well-established mental health providers such as [Richmond Borough Mind](#), alongside smaller yet impactful organisations offering community-based mental health and wellbeing support. Additionally, groups with different primary focuses such as [Richmond AID](#) which supports disabled people, and [SPEAR](#), which works with individuals experiencing homelessness also provide vital emotional wellbeing support and peer-led activities that help reduce isolation and enhance mental health.

Merton hosts a mix of medium-sized and smaller VCSE organisations that provide targeted mental health and wellbeing support, including [Merton Mind](#) delivering a range of services including one-to-one support, peer groups, and wellbeing activities and [Jigsaw4U](#) working with young people. Overall, Merton's VCSE sector plays a key role in complementing statutory services, particularly for youth and community-based support, with groups like Tooting and [Mitcham Football Sports Club](#) providing mentoring alongside sport activities to young people,

but there is recognition of the need for further growth and resources to meet rising mental health demands.

Many of the above organisations work and reach local communties across borough boundaries.

Workforce development

The VCSE sector is a key local employer and is therefore a key anchor in local communities. Members have ensured a strong sector voice in workforce system planning. The Alliance's work has provided good examples of integration of the VCSE sector into NHS workforce strategies that foster more effective collaboration, address workforce challenges and ultimately improve health and care outcomes.

VCSE organisations are now an option for GPs in Fellowship Hosts, Integrated Care Support programme and discussions have been underway with St Mary's University in Twickenham about VCSE based placements with the establishment of their new medical training curriculum and building that aims to being closer working with the sector.

The VCSE Alliance delivered a dedicated **VCSE Apprenticeships Pathway Service**, enabling VCSE health and social care organisations to upskill current staff at no cost to utilise the NHS Apprenticeship Levy transfer funding. [Need2Succeed](#) led the project and provided personalised support and guidance on navigating apprenticeship pathways. This was a 15 month ICP Priorities Fund project (January 2024 – March 2025) aimed at developing a South West London Apprenticeships Hub. The hub followed a virtual "hub and spoke" model, designed to bring together system partners across the ICP to improve apprenticeship systems and processes and align them with local recruitment and retention strategies.

The project impact included:

- Delivery of **6 online workshops**, one in each borough with **71 VCSE organisations** who had an interest in using the levy.
- **19 VCSE employees utilising £190,000 of the apprenticeship levy** on various courses and training - many also local residents.
- Improved **knowledge and awareness** in the VCSE sector of apprenticeships.
- **Building sustainability** by capacity building employees in the 6 local CVS infrastructure organisations to continue to provide advice and guidance longer term on how VCSE organisations can access apprenticeships and Levy transfers.

This not only supported development of individuals – people who often work and live locally, but also demonstrates the sector's vital role as a local anchor institution contributing to local economic growth and capacity building.

The Alliance supported the system by sharing workforce development opportunities through our local CVS communication channels, ensuring that even when not directly involved in bids or projects, our communities were informed and encouraged to engage with local employment and training opportunities.

The Alliance contributed to the ICS staff induction programme for health care professions in 2024. Through these training sessions, we reached approximately 75 professionals, including

GPs, social prescribers, front line hospital staff increasing their understanding of the VCSE sector's role and potential as a delivery and workforce partner.

Frail and older people

The SWL VCSE Alliance Leadership Group regularly gathers information given its local expertise and networks on key themes affecting our communities. These insights have informed and equipped our VCSE themed representative, from [Staywell](#) (who sits on the Older People's Delivery Oversight Group) to advocate effectively for the sector at strategic meetings and help strengthen VCSE delivery across the system. This is also shared with ICB colleagues and relevant leads to support better planning and coordination.

Key insight

Across South West London, VCSE organisations continue to play a crucial role in supporting older and frail residents, despite growing pressures and resource challenges. Across the region, the VCSE sector continues to offer vital support, yet many services are under strain due to rising demand, limited resources, and systemic challenges. These local insights ensure that our representatives and partners can engage with accuracy and confidence in shaping responses that reflect the lived realities of older people in our communities.

[Age UK](#) in [Croydon](#) is the primary provider for older people, alongside a number of small, often culturally specific lunch clubs, many of which have struggled or closed following the Council's financial crisis. There is limited transport provision, with Age UK exploring a volunteer-led model to bridge the gap. Dementia support is under threat due to underfunding, with a significant delay between diagnosis and service access. A previously active older people's network is being revived, and while some advice services remain, capacity is stretched. Coordination on seasonal planning, such as winter pressures, has been lacking.

[Kingston](#) is home to a variety of VCSE organisations dedicated to supporting the mental health and wellbeing of older adults. These groups offer social connection, emotional support, and activities that promote healthy ageing, helping to reduce loneliness and enhance quality of life. Key providers include well-established specialist organisations such as [Staywell](#), alongside local community centres and groups that run regular activities such as befriending schemes, exercise classes, and creative workshops tailored specifically for older adults. For example, Kingston's Korean community, particularly those aged over 50, benefits from culturally tailored support delivered by organisations such as [Namaste Kingston](#). A recent [Policy in Practice report](#) noted that over 1,449 household eligible for Pension Credit are not claiming it.

[Age UK](#) in [Sutton](#) and [Sutton Lodge](#) provide key services including day centres and meals on wheels. The borough is home to numerous smaller VCSE groups including Tamil, Hong Kong, and faith-based organisations which provide informal but valuable support to older residents. The [Volunteer Centre Sutton](#) offers befriending and group activities to around 200 people. However, transport access remains a major challenge, particularly for those with mobility limitations.

In **Richmond**, [Age UK](#) leads a community independent living service (CILS), a large partnership delivering services to older people and those with long-term conditions. Volunteer-based neighbourhood care groups offer essential transport and social support, but they are increasingly stretched – both by the complexity of need and the growing expectation for volunteers to remain with residents at hospital appointments. COVID has left a lasting legacy of isolation, and community centres are facing rising demand from people with higher needs than volunteers are equipped to manage. There is also rising concern around ageing unpaid carers who are not receiving adequate support. The Council is currently reviewing its day service model with a view to modernisation.

Merton benefits from [Age UK Merton](#) and a variety of small, active community groups offering everything from Pilates to choirs. Some receive funding through Council, ICB, or London Living schemes. [Merton Connected](#) works closely with the Dementia Hub, and there is a growing interest in exploring the relationship between housing and isolation. Initiatives like [Mitcham Garden Village](#) a voluntary housing scheme for over-55s and upcoming transfers of almshouses highlight the sector's role in promoting healthier living environments for older people.

In **Wandsworth**, [Age UK Wandsworth](#) Community Transport and several local faith groups – including St Michael's Church and the [Furzedown Project](#) provide support. Key concerns raised by local partners include falls, digital exclusion, loneliness, lack of transport for medical appointments, cost-of-living pressures and issues around medication adherence.

Future working and recommendations

The NHS Confed Expo in June 2025 reminded us how by leveraging community assets, promoting inclusivity, and addressing socio-economic challenges, we can create resilient, thriving environments that support holistic health and well-being, ensuring no one is left behind.

The VCSE work with some of the most disadvantaged and underserved communities and have great depth of knowledge and insight of the health and care issues of our local population.

VCSE organisations are in a unique position to support the NHS 10-Year Plan and specifically the evolvement of Neighbourhood health and care bringing in innovation, expertise, experience and resources.

The VCSE can offer and deliver the following:

- **Reach communities due to trust by local people**, especially those often least engaged with traditional services, and therefore well placed to connect NHS services with diverse and under-represented groups
- **Respond quickly and flexibly** to emerging local needs.
- Offer **culturally aware and community-specific approaches** – developed through asset based community development, peer research models and coproduction.
- **Strengthen preventative care** and support NHS ambition to reduce health inequalities
- **Mobilise volunteers and build community capacity**, making services more cost-effective and sustainable in the long term
- **Bridge the wider determinants of health for example health with housing, employment and social support**, key for tackling health inequalities and disparities.
- **Skills and ability to build on lived experience** – this is at the heart of what we do and central to how we design and deliver meaningful services. Working in partnership with the VCSE sector would enhance local accountability and co-production.

NHS 10 year plan and the VCSE sector

There are some key concepts about the VCSE sector in the NHS 10 year plan, these include:

- **Working better together**; the 10-Year Plan calls for deeper integration between the NHS, local government, and the voluntary sector. This will need VCSE organisations to be clearly embedded in place-level structures and involved in decision-making—not only in service delivery.
- **VCSE at the heart of Neighbourhood Health Centres**: the proposed Neighbourhood Health Centres is brought as an example of such collaboration, resulting in holistic services that go beyond clinical care integrating social support like employment advice and debt counselling. VCSE groups are ideally placed to lead or co-deliver these wraparound services, drawing on their grassroots relationships, trust, and agility. We can support the ICB to root Neighbourhood Health Centres in community ownership and design. Each place has VCSE Community Hub models we need to learn from and build,

which operate on a strength-based approach and prioritise community life before formal services; they show us it is important not to overlook the community-led dimension: giving people ownership of the space, enabling them to draw on their own strengths, and then shaping the services that are needed around that foundation.

- **VCSE are enablers in building trust in communities**; the work of the Alliance has clearly demonstrated that VCSE organisations have strong trusted relationships within their diverse and underserved communities. They are essential for public health campaigns, such as encouraging vaccinations and improving immunisation rates.
- **VCSE as innovators on the wider determinants of health**; the NHS 10 year plan acknowledges that the voluntary sector can **drive innovation** in supporting healthier lives. The NHS must create space for VCSE-led solutions especially those addressing the wider determinants of health (housing, food, loneliness, etc.).

The NHS 10-Year Plan presents the Neighbourhood Health Service as a model of care that brings services directly into local communities, unites professionals into patient-centered teams aiming to eliminate fragmentation. In support of this vision, the Alliance has **developed funding mechanisms** specifically designed to reach small, grassroots VCSE organisations. These groups often serve diverse and underserved communities and are trusted local VCSE partners. By ensuring these organisations are funded and involved, the Alliance has helped ensure local community voice is embedded and local planning considers local needs. The Alliance can build on some of its key achievements in the next phases of the 10-Year Plan and specifically in Neighbourhood health and care.

Neighbourhood health and care and the VCSE

The [Neighbourhood Health Service for London](#) recognises that the future of neighbourhood health in London is community-led, prevention-focused, and deeply collaborative. It recognises that many of the most significant drivers of health (such as housing, food, relationships, and digital access) sit outside traditional clinical settings and require trusted, hyper-local responses that only the VCSE sector can provide. is built around two key principles, both having the VCSE sector at their core:

- **Integrated, community based care** - collaboration across primary care, mental health, social services, public health, housing, and voluntary organisations to deliver coordinated healthcare at hyperlocal level is seen as key.
- **Proactive prevention and tailored intervention** - there is a focus on implementing early intervention strategies to reduce disparities in health. An investment in community-based services that are trusted and utilised by local communities would address disparities and improve long-term health outcomes.

This report highlights several opportunities for partnership work, including:

- Strengthening local health services by **integrating VCSE organisations** into primary, mental health, and social care networks.
- **Leveraging VCSE expertise to support preventative health** measures and social prescribing.

- Working with VCSE to **ensure underserved communities receive tailored health support**.
- Supporting VCSE organisations in developing **financially sustainable models** to continue.

As the ICB review progresses, it is essential that the VCSE sector remains embedded in decision-making, particularly in strategic commissioning, governance and service delivery. Working in collaboration with the VCSE sector, place-based structures can unlock the potential to strengthen health pathways, improve patient flow and address inequalities - especially in areas with the greatest need. Our key recommendations are set in the context of such collaborative approaches.

Recommendations for Neighbourhood health and care

The SWL VCSE Alliance has already laid strong foundations for integrated neighbourhood health and care. Building on what we've achieved so far and learnt from the Alliance we suggest neighbourhood health and care should:

- **Embed VCSE organisations as core delivery and design partners**, not just add-ons or referral routes. This will help recognise that trust and continuity - the VCSE sector excels and are essential to early intervention and reducing pressure on NHS services
- Be **shaped around place-based partnerships with the VCSE sector**, coordination and learning shared at system level. It is essential that Neighbourhood Health structures meaningfully include VCSE infrastructure and VCSE organisations, ensuring representation that is genuinely diverse, inclusive, and reflective of the communities served.
- **Focus on prevention, inclusion, and personalisation** - meeting people where they are, with services that are culturally aware and sensitive.
- Use **shared data and insight** (e.g., PCN-level VCSE mapping, data on community engagement, local service directories) to make sure decisions include underrepresented local people and communities, views, lived experiences and preferences. Mechanisms should be put in place to channel rich data from key local VCSE providers into the SWL ICB Health Insights platform.

Local Provider Alliances are expected to be key to enabling the local ICB and INTs to deliver their core purpose. It is therefore imperative to strengthen Place-Based Infrastructure around Provider Alliances in a way that it includes the VCSE as an equal partner from the start to achieve effective neighbourhood based delivery.

Representation of the VCSE sector

Provider Alliances should include local CVS infrastructure organisations as key partners.

This would enable Alliances to better involve other VCSE organisations and community groups aligned to priorities on crucial areas such as prevention, early help, and self-management. CVSs have long-standing relationships with these local organisations and have a deep insight

into the needs and strengths of their communities. They understand which groups are best placed to support delivery within Integrated Neighbourhood Teams (INTs). A resourced CVS can:

- Act as convenors, connectors, and capacity-builders within local areas.
- Quickly mobilise and co-ordinate community responses.
- Link Provider Alliances to the wider VCSE networks and forums they already run, using established communication channels to engage grassroots groups.
- Serve as trusted distributors of small grants, ensuring funding reaches those working at the hyperlocal level.

Provider Alliances need to develop a structured mechanism to engage small, community-led and grassroots groups as well as larger more established VCSE groups - particularly those trusted by Core20 populations and other underserved communities - as larger charities that already have established links with INTs. However, the model must remain focused and manageable; involving too many organisations directly could reduce its effectiveness. Three mechanisms piloted successfully by the Alliance offer a strong foundation for this:

- (1) **Peer-led partnership model:** one successful mechanism has been the development of a naturally-formed partnership between VCSE organisations. The partnership that led the creation of the SWL VCSE Alliance, between local CVSs, was not imposed through external structures but emerged from the CVS organisations choosing to work together as peers and wider involvement of the sector.. This approach created a genuine partnership dynamic, grounded in trust, mutual accountability, and shared purpose. By coming together across the six boroughs voluntarily, organisations can establish their own peer quality assurance, set collective priorities and ensure that collaboration feels authentic rather than transactional.
- (2) **Elected representation:** - the Alliance developed a process for selecting VCSE representatives through open elections or nomination. The Alliance has role descriptions, an election framework, and induction materials that can be readily adopted. A reimbursement system was also put in place to support and incentivise meaningful engagement. Importantly, these representatives are not expected to advocate solely for their own organisations, but to act on behalf of the wider VCSE network. By selecting representatives from organisations that are active in local networks, this model also enables strong two-way communication and accountability ensuring broader input and effective feedback loops. A clear and transparent system of election or nomination should be in place to also avoid situations where individuals represent only their own organisation or interest.
- (3) **Funding model for small grant programmes** - the Alliance also trialled a funding mechanism that enabled the distribution of small grants to grassroots organisations through trusted intermediaries (the local CVSs). Through this mechanism, you could allow community-based groups to participate in Provider Alliance discussions and co-design efforts. Replicating this approach will help maintain a strong emphasis on prevention, inclusion, and personalisation, which are key priorities across the system.

Integrating VCSE expertise into system leadership

The role of place based Providers Alliances will be crucial in managing funds to ensure impactful spending and a shift towards neighbourhood health. In this strategic role, each Alliance and the SWL ICB will have to deepen their understanding of how contractual and commissioning arrangements impact local VCSE service delivery.

Provider Alliances should create space for the VCSE sector to shape how commissioning is approached across the sector - including embedding learning from previous system-level commissioning and contracting processes, which often proved challenging to the realities of VCSE organisations. There is now a valuable opportunity to co-develop more effective approaches, drawing on that experience to create commissioning models, practical guidance and shared principles that reflect the VCSE sector's strengths. This influence could extend to decisions about how funding flows are managed within the VCSE, ensuring they are accessible, transparent, and designed to support smaller and grassroots organisations.

Provider Alliances to consider working with established VCSE organisations to manage contracts - VCSE organisations have the infrastructure, relationships, and trust needed to act as intermediaries, supporting smaller groups to deliver and report in ways that meet ICB priorities without losing what makes grassroots provision unique.

Commissioning practices

The NHS 10-Year Plan outlines a shift in the role of Integrated Care Boards (ICBs), positioning them as strategic payers rather than traditional commissioners. They will focus more on setting broad priorities, allocating budgets, and driving long-term health outcomes across systems and will enable providers and local partnerships to decide how best to deliver services, fostering innovation and greater local accountability. In this context, it is crucial for the ICB to commission the VCSE sector effectively, as it plays a key role in reaching diverse communities, driving prevention, and addressing health inequalities.

There is the real opportunity to build real partnership through commissioning practices. VCSE organisations in South West London are specialised, skilled and dynamic but mainly small to medium in size, with an annual income of less than £100,000 with one third of charities with an annual income of less than £1m are operating with no reserves at all.¹⁰ Commissioning and funding arrangements can therefore have a significant impact on the VCSE ability to deliver effectively.

Recommendations for commissioning

The VCSE Alliance has collated considerable feedback from the VCSE sector including smaller providers in the last two years and would summarise a key set of recommendations to the ICB to take forward.

Contracting and commission:

- **Consider VCSE providers as potential partners in all contracts** and ask *"what part of this contract can you deliver?"*
- **Focus on outcomes rather than outputs**, allowing room for innovation and for the provision to adapt as more is learnt about what works. **Jointly agree contract outcomes.**
- **Be proportionate** when designing the application process and monitoring and evaluation requirements.
- **Provide time** to VCSE organisations to apply; if you are asking for partnership bids, add extra time to allow collaborations between partners.
- Always try to **offer long term contracts**. Provide a PO number at the same time as providing contract documentation. **Pay invoices within two weeks** as contract payment timelines, receiving payment on time and managing cashflow on public contracts can be challenging for the VCSE.
- **Clear and continuous communication with the provider is an essential** element of your contract management. More equal partnership working is based on relationships and will also increase the VCSE sector's understanding of ICB processes and consequent limitations. Really important if re-commissioning or extending an existing commissioned service.

¹⁰Healthy London Partnership (2017) [Unlocking the value of VCSE organisations for improving population health and well being: the commissioner's role](#)

- If re-commissioning or extending an existing commissioned service, **provide the existing provider with 4 months' notice of your intention**. The VCSE organisation you are commissioning will need to give 3 months' notice to its employees if they have no certainty their contract will continue; they will not be able to guarantee continuity of service if they lose skilled and trained members of staff.

Grant funding:

- **Be proportionate** when designing the application process and monitoring and evaluation requirements.
- Always try to **offer long term funding arrangements** – for example the National Lottery Community Fund moved to grants of up to 5 years for several of its fund and up to 10 years for the UK Fund.
- **Provide time** to VCSE organisations to apply; if you are asking for partnership bids, add extra time to allow conversations between parties.
- **Pay invoices within two weeks**. Contract payment timelines, receiving payment on time and managing cashflow on public contracts can be challenging for VCSEs.
- **Utilise local CVS infrastructure organisations** to reach small grassroots groups; if you are distributing small grants, check with your [local CVS or the SWL VCSE Alliance](#) if they are willing to manage the process for you.
- **Focus on outcomes rather than outputs**, allowing room for innovation and for the provision to adapt as more is learnt about what works.

In summary and across all fundings regardless of contracts and grants:

- If you are designing a new service or thinking about changing, even slightly, an existing funded service, **engage with the VCSE sector or present provider as early as possible** to identify gaps in services and consider how potential solutions might work as precursor to procurement. This will allow you to build in learning, develop an understanding of needs and how to meet them within service delivery. VCSE providers can bring in the views of the residents they work with as they regularly collect insights.
- **Co-design should be embedded as a principle** in all instances of commissioning to demonstrate that stakeholders have been involved in understanding the problem and guiding, informing and shaping the development of either a proposed or several solutions.
- **Use local providers** – and make provisions for this in process and procurement where possible. There is much added social value by working with existing locally based VCSE organisations. Although liaising with national and London wide VCSE organisations can appear easier, smaller SWL based VCSE organisations often have grown out of local communities to meet specific needs, they can contribute invaluable insights, have established and embedded links and are trusted by the local population.

The VCSE sector and the social value they create play a crucial role in our journey of transforming how the government delivers smarter, more thoughtful and effective public

services that meet the needs of people across the country.. The Department for Culture, Media and Sport commissioned some analysis on the role of the VCSE in public procurement.¹¹

¹¹ Department for Culture, Media & Sport (2022) [The role of VCSE organisations in Public Procurement, 2022](#)).