



**Connecting People,
Supporting Action.**

**Our Strategy
2025-2030**

**Connected
Voice**

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Foreword

On behalf of the Board of trustees of Connected Voice, I am proud to present our new strategy.

In every age, it feels like change is afoot.

In the current age the political, social, technological and economic changes around us raise anxious questions about our social contract with each other as citizens.

In this context having a strong VCSE sector is even more important, because our sector is a manifestation of the things that connect us as humans. The current context also tests the values we live by.

In this strategy, we make it clear that our organisation's values run through all that we do.

Our strategy is based upon four pillars of activity that are recognised nationally as the hallmarks of quality in VCSE infrastructure bodies like Connected Voice.

Being a **leader and advocate** for the VCSE sector, because having a strong sector is good for our society.

Creating and sustaining **strong collaborations** within and beyond the sector.

Building the capacity of the sector to be as effective as possible.

Supporting volunteering, because it is the foundation of independent local action.

I would like to thank the many members and partners, staff and volunteers who have contributed to the consultation process that created this strategy. And I would like to thank the Board too.

Peter Deans, Chair

Our Purpose

We exist to serve voluntary and community organisations in Newcastle, Gateshead and beyond. We work to support the enduring mission of those organisations to benefit society, by reducing inequality and enriching lives.

Our Vision

Newcastle and Gateshead have a thriving voluntary and community sector that is well supported, well connected, and has the ability to achieve its goals.



Our Values

We amplify voices.

From individuals to organisations, we believe everyone has a right to be heard. Trusted to listen, understand and advocate, we strive for excellence. We're open and honest, we stick by people, and give our support to ensure their voices are heard.

We champion equality.

We believe that diversity should be celebrated and valued, and everyone deserves equality. Working towards a fairer future for all, we won't stand still. By making an impact on causes big and small, we want to improve the quality of life across our area.

We inspire change.

Courageous, resourceful and determined, we are not afraid to challenge unfairness and ask difficult questions.

We work effectively and accountably to instil confidence. We aim to become stronger and more sustainable to inspire positive and lasting change throughout our community.

We support action.

We understand from our own experiences the challenges people face. We truly value people and we don't judge or dictate.

Leading independently and side by side with our communities and partners, we share our resources, skills and expertise to enable people to take meaningful action.

We connect people.

At the heart of voluntary and community action for over 95 years, we are immersed and rooted in the North East.

We work collectively and inclusively to connect, grow and strengthen our society. We are warm and approachable. We create opportunities to exchange ideas, learn from and empower one another

Our Work in Context

We will celebrate our 100 year anniversary in 2029. Our work has evolved a lot over the past 96 years, but our early priorities of tackling inequality and supporting local action remain the foundations on which we develop our work today, as we look forward to the next five years.

We know that the pressures on the VCSE sector we support are significant. Organisations continue to experience increased demand for their services, at the same time as finding it more difficult to secure the financial resources needed to meet that demand.

We were established in 1929 as Tyneside Council of Social Services, in response to a research report¹ which highlighted the dire health and social conditions of much of the population of Tyneside at that time. Pre-dating the NHS and Social Services as we know them today, we pioneered support for our local communities, doing everything from running a housing service for single mothers, to establishing bee-keeping and allotment projects for unemployed people.



Photo: Teresa Merz, pictured left, was one of our founding members.



From those early years as a charity at the frontline of supporting people, we gradually evolved into a membership organisation, providing a voice for the voluntary and community sector that had flourished during and after the World Wars.

The work of the voluntary and community sector is needed today more so than ever.

We are proud to support a growing number of member organisations, but we do this in the knowledge that inequality in our society continues to grow, and that an increasing number of people in Newcastle and Gateshead rely on charities and community groups for support.

In 2013, we accepted our first member foodbank. Reviewing the application from Newcastle West End Foodbank, our trustees reflected that it was sad that a foodbank of this scale was required in the city, and that they hoped this would be a temporary situation. That Foodbank is now one of the largest in the country. Issues of poverty, food insecurity and other inequalities have grown at such a rapid rate that many other services providing this type of support also exist, working alongside the now renamed Newcastle Foodbank, which has expanded to cover the whole city.

¹Industrial Tyneside, Henry A Mess, 1928

The voluntary and community sector has always been a place where immediate needs in our communities are met. But we are so much more than that. We are a place of joy, social connection, achievement and community. Whether it is a local youth group, choir, sports club or community centre, the VCSE sector provides places where people come together for connection and fulfilment. Over more than a decade, we have seen the more joyful side of VCSE work eroded in favour of meeting immediate needs. Today, 40% of our members do some work meeting a basic need such as food, warmth or clothing. We have struggled to identify a single youth club that doesn't have provision of food as part of their core offer.

Increasingly, the VCSE sector is a safety net for some of the most vulnerable people in our society.

This brings different challenges for us as a support organisation. The extensive consultation we undertook with members and other stakeholders to inform this strategy has told us that we need to take a more flexible approach to providing support. As our members deal with increasing complexity, and increased levels of need, we need to provide a responsive service that provides more opportunities for peer support, and the space for people to come together.

Organisations told us that as demand for their services has increased, they have struggled to make the time and space to connect with like-minded people, and to develop partnerships. We have made encouraging and facilitating partnerships and collaboration a key goal over the next five years.

Thinking about the wider context of our work, uncertainty is a regular theme in the discussions we have with our members. We have significant shifts happening in global, national and local politics, we are dealing with the impacts of a changing climate, and we are trying to keep pace with and navigate new technologies which are developing rapidly.

This means that we will need to work harder in the coming years to advocate for the importance of our sector in a changing society, to build relationships with new stakeholders, and to highlight the impact of our work. It also means we need to increase the flexibility of our training and support offer – to ensure that we are able to respond to need as it emerges, and to support the innovation and agility that the VCSE sector is capable of.

Volunteer time is the fuel for our sector. But we know that it is much easier for some people to volunteer than others. The demographic for volunteers is tilted towards white, middle class and middle aged, and we want to make a concerted impact during the next five years to open up volunteering for under-represented groups.

We want to ensure that those who stand to benefit the most have a chance to volunteer. 81% of volunteers in the UK² volunteer in a local place, for a local cause. Smaller organisations struggle to raise the profile of their volunteer roles, because of their limited capacity.

These are some of the reasons we see the growth of our volunteering support as a key part of our strategy over the next five years.



²Time Well Spent, NCVO, 2019

We know that across the UK small charities continue to close at an alarming rate³. In Newcastle and Gateshead, smaller VCSE organisations are increasingly losing out to larger and national charities in terms of public sector funding. We value and champion the work of all VCSE organisations, large and small, and appreciate that many aspects of charitable work, especially campaigning, and delivery of certain contracts, are better delivered by larger organisations or on a larger footprint.

However, the vast majority of our member organisations are small organisations, working at a local level, and they must remain our focus.

Over the next five years, we want to improve our ability to give them the right support, at the right time, in the communities they work in. We want to tell their stories to decision-makers, and to ensure they get an adequate share of public sector funding by growing the role of our VCSE Alliance.

To achieve our strategic goals over the next five years, we must have strong foundations ourselves, and we must further develop our financial and operational resilience.

Over the past five years, we have made good progress in developing new self-generated income streams. Over the next five years, we aim to grow our earned income further, in the knowledge that this will protect our independence, and enable us to be more adaptive and try new things without waiting for a funding opportunity.

We also aim to influence the funding we get from our key supporters, including local authorities and the NHS, to ensure it provides the flexibility we will need to support the VCSE sector in a way that keeps pace with new challenges and a different operating environment.

People are at the heart of everything we do. To achieve our goals, we know we need a skilled and well supported team that has the right opportunities for development and leadership. That is why within this strategy, we are committed to supporting the wellbeing and professional growth of our staff team, to help us better connect people and support action during the next chapter of our development.

³ Underfunded and Overlooked, CSJ Foundation, 2024



Objective 1: Leadership and Advocacy

Speak Up and Stand With

Connected Voice will continue to develop our leadership role within the VCSE sector, rooted in the strength of our membership and our local knowledge. We will speak with authority, adapt to change, and advocate for individuals and our sector.

Leadership Goals

- 1.1 Sustain and develop our connections within and beyond the VCSE sector through active listening, independent advocacy, and better engagement.
- 1.2 Demonstrate our credibility by maintaining quality services in all areas, sharing good practice and living our organisational values.
- 1.3 Protect influencing capacity, impartiality and independence by ensuring our own financial sustainability.
- 1.4 Tell stories highlighting the transformative potential of the VCSE sector when it is adequately funded and working collectively towards a shared purpose.
- 1.5 Grow our networks and membership, expand our reach, and develop new relationships for the benefit of the VCSE sector within a changing political and social context.



We will strengthen our role as a trusted connector. By deepening partnerships and building understanding, we will unlock resources for the VCSE sector. We will support innovation, and amplify voices which prove the value the VCSE sector brings to our communities.

- 2.1 Improve awareness within other sectors of the value and impact of VCSE organisations, using stories and data to challenge misconceptions and foster mutual respect.
- 2.2 Convene cross-sector partnerships, actively support collaboration, help to reduce duplication, and model trust-based ways of working.
- 2.3 Develop new partnerships with private sector organisations which align with our values and support the wider VCSE sector.
- 2.4 Develop the Haref Network, supporting its role in using lived experience to tackle health inequalities.
- 2.5 Increase partnership funding through our VCSE Alliance, and grow the sector's capacity to support the health and wellbeing of our communities.



Objective 3: Capacity Building

Support the VCSE Sector's Potential

We will support our members to plan for the long-term, and build their confidence in areas where their skills or capacity require development.

We will help members to develop sustainably, supporting them to overcome operational challenges and grow their impact.

Capacity Building Goals:

- 3.1 Promote high standards in organisational development and governance, leading by example.
- 3.2 Support member organisations to work with us as a strategic partner in their planning and development.
- 3.3 Invest in strong relationships with our local public sector, to benefit VCSE organisations and our communities.
- 3.4 Enhance and increase our training and financial support offer, supported by funding that enables collaboration, peer support, and good practice sharing.
- 3.5 Be present where we are most needed, enabling us to provide the right support at the right time.



Objective 4: Volunteering

Champion Inclusive Participation

We will champion volunteering. We will support people to participate meaningfully in their communities, and support organisations to create inclusive, high-quality opportunities. We will grow supported volunteering, help to remove barriers, and help people to see the value of volunteering.

Volunteering Goals:

- 4.1 Promote high standards in volunteering, strengthen brokerage and broaden the range of good quality opportunities available.
- 4.2 Support organisations in other sectors to engage more effectively volunteering, highlighting our role as a 'sector connector'.
- 4.3 Champion and grow supported volunteering, sharing evidence of its value for individuals, organisations and communities.
- 4.4 Help VCSE organisations to remove barriers to volunteering, especially for groups currently underrepresented, including young people and marginalised communities.



Objective 5: Financial & Operational Resilience Be Resourced to Succeed

We will strengthen our financial and operational foundations to ensure we remain resilient and effective in the context of a changing climate, increased pace of technological change, and lack of stability in local, national and global politics. We will secure funding that is more flexible, use technology to enhance our work, and develop internal systems to better support collaboration and sustainability.

Operational Goals:

- 5.1 Strengthen our financial position by growing self-generated income, and seeking new funding that supports our long-term sustainability.
- 5.2 Work with local authorities to influence our core VCSE infrastructure contracts, and, where possible, to support more flexible roles in facilitation and brokerage.
- 5.3 Continue our progress with achieving environmental quality standards, and reducing our environmental impact.
- 5.4 Invest in tools and systems that enable learning, improve insight, improve data collection, and collaboration.
- 5.5 Explore emerging technologies to improve our services and enhance our efficiency.



Objective 6:

People & Culture

Grow a Purposeful Workplace

We will nurture our values-led culture, so staff feel safe, supported, and able to grow. We will maintain our focus on staff development, and create space for learning and progression. We will address causes of stress, to support a healthy and purposeful workplace. We will continue to be a place where people can build careers, test ideas, and contribute to the wider VCSE sector.

People Goals:

- 6.1 Nurture a culture of openness, accountability and safety, supporting the role of our staff council to enhance wellbeing and act as a conduit for issues to be shared.
- 6.2 Enrich job roles and create the conditions within which staff are supported to learn, develop, and feel that their work is purposeful and productive.
- 6.3 Strengthen equity, diversity and inclusion across the organisation, ensure our EDI action plan is delivered, and ensure our staff, leadership and board reflect the communities we serve.
- 6.4 Support staff wellbeing and monitor the impact of this support.
- 6.5 Support career progression, encourage leadership development, and celebrate our colleagues who go on to make a wider impact.

Connected Voice

Support and
Development

Expert support services that enable voluntary, community and social enterprise organisations to set up, be sustainable and informed, achieve their objectives and come together.

connect@connectedvoice.org.uk
0191 235 7021

Connected Voice

Advocacy

Free support to individuals to help them be aware of their rights and choices, make informed decisions, advocate for themselves and facilitate their voices being heard.

advocacy@connectedvoice.org.uk
0191 235 7013

Connected Voice

Business
Services

Quality and cost-effective financial support services that meet the growing needs of charities, community organisations and social enterprises.

cbsteam@connectedvoice.org.uk
0191 235 7020

Connected Voice

Haref

Working with communities and organisations throughout Newcastle and Gateshead to reduce health inequalities linked to ethnicity and culture.

haref@connectedvoice.org.uk
0191 235 7022

Connected Voice

Health Equity

Connecting charities and community organisations to health services to improve digital inclusion.

0191 235 7022

Connected Voice

Volunteering

Supporting volunteering across Newcastle and Gateshead through employee volunteering, promoting volunteering opportunities and offering advice.

volunteering@connectedvoice.org.uk
0191 235 7038 (Gateshead Volunteer Centre)
0191 235 7039 (Sector Connector)
0191 211 3940 (Volunteering Newcastle)

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