

Commissioning Intentions – Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire VCSE Strategic Investments – 2025/26 and beyond

1 Purpose

This paper describes some developments of the strategic partnership with the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector in Healthier Together. It aims to provide an update on progress to date and outline further strategic investments in VCSE structures and developments from 2025/26 and beyond.

Audience

This paper is intended to inform discussions between the ICB and Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire (BNSSG) system partners:

- Local authorities: Bristol City Council, North Somerset Council, South Gloucestershire Council
- BNSSG VCSE Alliance Steering Group
- Locality Partnerships
- Sirona care & health
- VCSE Lead Locality partners
- VCSE Infrastructure organisations
- University Hospitals Bristol and Weston NHS Foundation Trust
- North Bristol NHS Trust
- BNSSG Strategy Network
- Avon & Wiltshire Mental Health Partnership NHS Trust
- One Care (GP federation)
- Care and Support West

Ask

System partners are asked to consider:

- ***Alignment of these commissioning intentions with other system strategies and plans***
- ***Opportunities for collaboration and maximising processes collectively***
- ***Support for the forthcoming commissioning processes.***

Note: this document was used as part of the listening exercise during May and June 2025; it is published on the Healthier Together website for information.

2 Background

The VCSE sector is a fundamental part of our ICS. The *NHS England Integrated Care Systems: design framework* describes VCSE integration as follows.

*“The VCSE sector is a vital cornerstone of a progressive health and care system. ICSs should ensure their governance and decision-making arrangements support close working with the sector as a strategic partner in **shaping, improving and delivering services and developing and delivering plans to tackle the wider determinants of health**. VCSE partnership should be **embedded as an essential part of how the system operates at all levels**. This will include involving the sector in **governance structures and system workforce, population health management and service redesign work, leadership and organisational development plans**.”*

The VCSE sector in BNSSG is estimated to number 8,000 independent, diverse organisations, 80% of which are micro and small (with annual turnover up to £100,000, employing up to 5 people). The VCSE sector brings diversity, connection and reach into communities, local knowledge and specialisms – these both support and complement the work of the public sector. VCSE sector strengths and contributions to wellbeing, health and care are built on VCSE organisations’ reach into and trusted relationships with excluded communities, intel and insights from those communities and their focus on wider determinants of health and prevention activities.

Additional benefits of collaboration with diverse VCSE organisations are described by the Claire Dove CBE, VCSE Crown Representative¹:

“VCSEs contribute to economic growth, making the economy more innovative, resilient and productive. They can open up opportunities for people to engage with their community, foster belonging and enrich lives. Therefore the VCSE sector’s unique role in public services is vital, more now than ever.”

As well as addressing the wider determinants of health in communities, the VCSE sector contributes significantly to the sub-region’s socio-economic development and inward investment. The VCSE sector’s impact in BNSSG is under development. In a similar system, the West Yorkshire Combined Authority area, for example, the sector’s impact² was illustrated:

- 5,200+ VCSEs
- 29,700 FTE employees delivering 49million hours of work
- 121,000 regular volunteers delivering 8.7m hours of work, worth £76m-£118million
- £4.5 billion estimated total added value.

Investments to date

There are several known and significant challenges to VCSE integration. Whilst local authorities have worked with the VCSE sector for many years, the NHS has less developed practice. Some of the challenges are common across all ICS’s; others are specific to BNSSG.

¹ Source: ‘The role of Voluntary, Community, and Social Enterprise (VCSE) organisations in public procurement’, Department for Culture, Media & Sport, August 2022.

² Source: ‘The structure, dynamics and impact of the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector: a study of West Yorkshire Combined Authority, West Yorkshire and Harrogate Health and Care Partnership, and Humber, Coast and Vale Health and Care Partnership areas’, Durham University, September 2021.

The challenges can be overcome, and we have made significant progress in Healthier Together by working collaboratively with the VCSE sector and system partners.

Following on from previous BNSSG involvement in the NHS England programme *Embedding VCSE into Integrated Care Systems*, the ICB has invested further in VCSE participation in our system. The purpose of such investments is to enable diverse VCSE partners to play their part in integrated care, with a focus on creating the structural and procedural conditions that allow diverse VCSE participation, collaboration and delivery.

Direct ICB investments in VCSE structural developments began in 2023/24 with a £200,000³ investment from the SW Chair's Fund and continued in 2024/25 with £250,000 from the Proactive Care Fund. These ICB grants were made to the BNSSG VCSE Alliance, hosted by a local VCSE infrastructure organisation (Voscur). Headline achievements from these investments are as follows.

Development area	Progress
Established VCSE Alliance , with diverse and engaged membership	Launched Jan 2024, 270+ diverse organisations involved, regular engagement, 450 contacts in the VCSE sector and ICS; Forward Plan 2025-2028 published.
Diverse VCSE Alliance Ambassadors	Incorporating VCSE expertise into system developments is an important part of integrating VCSE. The VCSE Alliance Ambassadors provide insight about community organisations of place, equalities, and practice, and bring diversity of thought and experience into the ICS discussions. 110 VCSE Alliance Ambassadors from 82 organisations (25% small/micro) have been recruited and 50 already deployed into ICS groups/committees and Alliance working groups, including the EDI group. A system leadership programme is underway to build the impact of Alliance Ambassadors.
Inclusion Fund	The Inclusion Fund intends to enable diverse VCSE participation across ICS by providing some remuneration for VCSE organisations, in particular smaller organisations that may not otherwise have the resources for such participation. 38 organisations have been enabled so far. Learning from the Inclusion Fund is intended to inform a potential new VCSE Participation Policy (akin to emerging Lived Experience/Public Contributors Policy) so that diverse VCSE organisations are enabled to participate in system developments.
Launched VCSE Brokerage	The VCSE Brokerage Framework is being co-designed and tested during 2024/25 by a partnership of Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire VCSE Alliance, NHS Bristol, North Somerset and

³ Included £10,000 from the NHS England programme *Embedding VCSE into Integrated Care Systems*; programme has now ended.

Framework test-and-learn pilot	<p>South Gloucestershire Integrated Care Board (ICB) and ICS partners, including Sirona care & health, the local authorities and VCSE sector. The Framework aims to support the integration of thousands of VCSE organisations with public sector bodies in Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire. It offers a fair and simple way for public sector managers to engage diverse VCSE groups, including smaller organisations.</p> <p>Since launching the pilot in July 2024, 150+ VCSE organisations have been quality assured onto framework, 40% of which are small and micro organisations. The framework has enabled diverse VCSE organisations to make 56 proposals worth £1,877,496 resulting in 24 awards (in progress) for £686,408 investment in children and young people's wellbeing, thriving in work, improved cancer diagnosis and approach to preventing prediabetes. VCSE Alliance Ambassadors (alongside other system partners) were involved in the evaluation of proposals: this is a new way of involving VCSE leaders in processes that affect delivery in communities.</p>
Additional funding	<p>One of the strengths of the VCSE sector is the scope and potential for bringing additional resources to BNSSG. As part of our partnership, an additional £75,000 has been secured to develop VCSE system leadership and VCSE data/impact.</p>
VCSE Integration Strategy/Plan	<p>A new Healthier Together VCSE Integration Strategy in under development. It will build on recent developments and describe the vision for the VCSE sector in our system over the next three years.</p>

Our collaboration and developments are resulting in effective partnerships and relationships, with much learning along the way. Additional work is progressing:

- Outcomes/intel/insights relating to prevention – collaboration with health inequalities team, locality partnerships, green social prescribing to develop common outcome measures for preventative activities in communities to feed into Healthier Together Outcomes Framework
- VCSE-related risks – good learning from recent challenges, alongside learning from our collaboration, will lead to incorporation of VCSE risks into corporate, directorate and programme risk management processes.

3 Strategic Investments from 2025/26 onward

Our recent collaboration with the VCSE sector has focussed on establishing a new structure to enable VCSE engagement (the BNSSG VCSE Alliance), implementing new VCSE Integration Principles and co-designing a new, inclusive, equitable, proportionate, robust process for making investments in VCSE activities.

The ICB Board has committed a recurrent investment of £250,000pa in VCSE structures and developments, through the Proactive Care Fund. The ICB Execs have recently approved the following strategic commissioning intentions for the deployment of the investments from 2025/26 onward.

VCSE Integration Principles

- invest in VCSE activities as a positive action to address systemic and health inequalities
- ‘design for smaller’ to enable micro and hyper-local VCSE activities
- ‘grant first’ to enable appropriate investment in micro and hyper-local VCSE activities.

Adopted by the ICB Board, July 2024

In summary, these are:

1. Extension of the existing ICB-BNSSG VCSE Alliance grant
2. Putting in place long-term arrangements for the BNSSG VCSE Alliance as a system enabler
3. Putting in place long-term arrangements for the ICB’s VCSE Brokerage Framework as a system enabler
4. (a) Development of strategic approaches (VCSE Integration Strategy and VCSE participating in [Healthier Together 2040](#)), and (b) specific strategic developments arising from those activities.
5. (a) Exploration of support needed and (b) potential subsequent targeted VCSE capacity building/market development support to ensure equitable and diverse participation in the system.

These investments will support the national move to neighbourhoods/strategic commissioning and essential role of the VCSE sector in those developments. The investments will serve to support the move from a testing/developing period into a substantive, longer-term model of delivery of VCSE structures and processes in BNSSG. The processes for making these investments will be in accordance with procurement and financial regulations⁴ and informed by the imminent 10 Year Health Plan, Neighbourhood Health guidance and the Model ICB Blueprint. The approach will enable a stronger emphasis on preventative health and wellbeing, addressing the causes of ill health, as well as building more joined-up person-centred care and support in local neighbourhoods.

The following tables summarise some elements of the workstreams/plans; detail will develop in discussions with system partners, to ensure the workstreams/plans complement other system developments.

⁴ Procurement regulations, including Public Contract Regulations, Provider Selection Regime, Procurement Act 2023, Procurement Guidance and the ICB’s Standing Financial Instructions.

1. Extension of existing ICB-BNSSG VCSE Alliance grant

Summary	Purpose and anticipated deliverables	Process summary
1. VCSE Alliance / Brokerage extension – extend current grant by 6 months to 31/3/26 – value £125,000	Purpose: Further embedding of Alliance across ICS and completion of Brokerage co-design. Outline deliverables (draft tbc): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • VCSE Alliance – grow membership; embed Ambassadors. • VCSE Brokerage – review; finalise Standard Operating Procedure; define information governance; enable VCSE investments through health programmes (e.g. Smokefree BNSSG, Healthy Ageing, Work Well). • Strategic health programmes – support VCSE to participate fully, for example, in HT2040 cohorts, Community Mental Health, Neighbourhood Health. • Support co-design of VCSE Integration Strategy and VCSE-related risks. • Comms and engagement with VCSE and system partners. • Increase VCSE investment. • Collaborate on VCSE outcomes, impact and insights. 	Variation letter (as enabled by current ICB-BNSSG VCSE Alliance grant agreement) – April 2025

2. Putting in place long-term arrangements for the BNSSG VCSE Alliance as a system enabler

Summary	Purpose and anticipated deliverables	Process summary
2. VCSE Alliance – System Enabler – new grant for 3 years from 1/4/26 – value £270,000	Purpose: Operationalise VCSE structure to provide interface with VCSE sector – policy, strategy, practice, new models. Outline deliverables including (to be further developed through Strategy co-design): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • VCSE Alliance – grow membership; embed Ambassadors; comms and engagement with VCSE and system partners. 	Competitive grant process – Sept 2025

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support VCSE collaboration in Healthier Together 2040 sequential cohorts, Health Care Improvement Groups, Strategic Health Inequalities, Prevention & Population Health Committee, Locality Partnerships and Neighbourhood Health. • Development of Neighbourhood /Community VCSE partnerships/provider collaboratives and the new Commissioning Framework. • Joint fundraising and developing new models (e.g. social investment). • Alignment of VCSE outcomes/data/insights with System Outcomes Framework and Population Data and Intelligence. 	
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3. Putting in place long-term arrangements for the ICB's VCSE Brokerage Framework as a system enabler

Summary	Purpose and anticipated deliverables	Process summary
3. VCSE Brokerage Service – System Enabler – new contract for 3+2 years from 1/4/26 – value £650,000	Purpose: Provide service that supports health programmes to reach diverse VCSE market and VCSE organisations to make innovative proposals for delivery. Outline deliverables including (to be further developed through Strategy co-design): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Core service to support ICB, Locality Partnerships and Public Health investments in VCSE activities. • Extended service to ICS partners, potentially jointly funded. • Charged service to non-ICS partners (e.g. WECA). 	Competitive contract process – Sept 2025

4. Development of strategic approaches (VCSE Integration Strategy and VCSE participating in Healthier Together 2040)

Summary	Purpose and anticipated deliverables	Process summary
4a. VCSE Strategic Developments	Purpose: Support the co-design/development of VCSE Integration	Small awards – from April 2025

4b. Testing new models for strategic approaches with VCSE sector	The co-design/development of the VCSE Integration Strategy/Plan and strategic VCSE developments in Healthier Together 2040 are likely to define specific strategic developments; these, and aspects of the Model ICB Blueprint (e.g. market management/development) will be developed during the year ahead.	Process and timings tbc

5. (a) Exploration of support needed and (b) potential subsequent targeted VCSE capacity building/market development support to ensure equitable and diverse participation in the system

Summary	Purpose and anticipated deliverables	Process summary
5a. VCSE Ecosystem Development – Explore – new grant for 6 months from 1/7/25 – value £25,000	Purpose: To test approaches to targeted capacity building/market development support for priority VCSE organisations. Outline deliverables: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assess need for targeted support for priority VCSE organisations to join Brokerage Framework (and Alliance) – focus on prevention and health inequalities. Explore VCSE support needs and options to participate in prevention and health inequalities. Explore peer support between VCSE organisations. 	3 quote process – June 2025

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify potential for VCSE match funding to increase impact of ICB/ICS investments. 	
5b. VCSE Ecosystem Development – Support – new contract for 2 years from 1/4/26 – value £60,000	Purpose: Targeted capacity building/market development support for priority VCSE organisations. Outline deliverables (to be further developed through Strategy (4a) and Ecosystem – Explore (5a)): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Targeted developmental support e.g. for VCSE organisations to engage and support HT2040 cohorts Enable partnerships and collaborations Roll-out targeted peer support within Alliance and Brokerage VCSE organisations. 	Process and timings tbc

4 Strategic Investments – Workstream Allocations

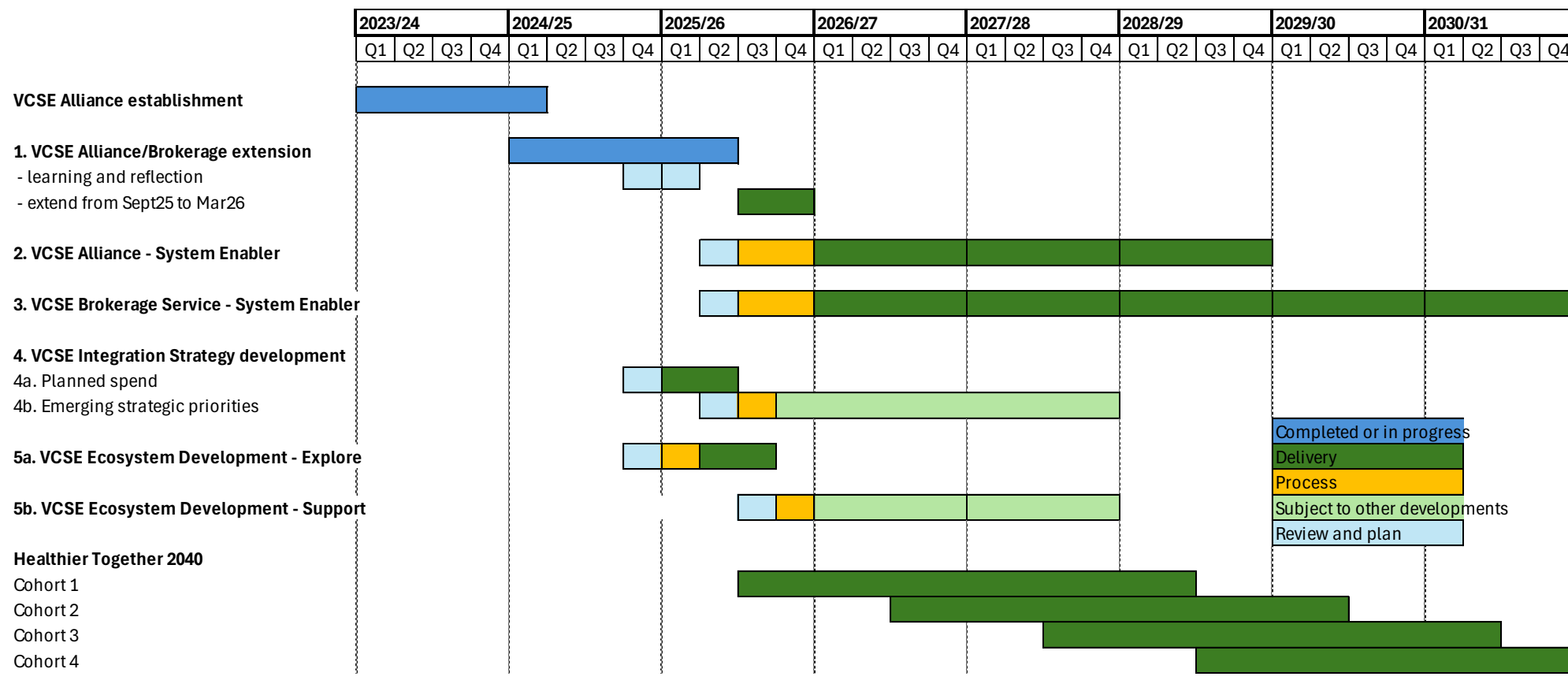
The indicative workstream allocations for these strategic investments are as follows.

	2025/26	2026/27	2027/28	2028/29	2029/30	2030/31	Total
1. VCSE Alliance/Brokerage extension	£125,000						£125,000
2. VCSE Alliance - System Enabler		£100,000	£90,000	£80,000			£270,000
3. VCSE Brokerage Service - System Enabler		£110,000	£120,000	£130,000	£140,000	£150,000	£650,000
4. VCSE Strategic Developments							
4a. Planned spend	£15,000						£15,000
4b. Emerging strategic priorities	£85,000	£10,000	£10,000				£105,000
5a. VCSE Ecosystem Development - Explore	£25,000						£25,000
5b. VCSE Ecosystem Development - Support		£30,000	£30,000				£60,000
Total	£250,000	£250,000	£250,000	£210,000	£140,000	£150,000	£1,250,000
<i>To be confirmed</i>				£40,000	£110,000	£100,000	£250,000

It should be noted that some provisional workstream allocations are shown in *italics* and will be informed, for example, by the development of the VCSE Integration Strategy/Plan and the Ecosystem – Explore (5a).

5 Strategic Investments – Timeline

The summary timeline for the strategic investments is as follows.



Specific timelines will be developed for each process.

Date: May 2025

Author: Mark Hubbard, VCSE Lead, NHS BNSSG ICB.