

Update to Commissioning Intentions – BNSSG VCSE Strategic Investments - 2025/26 and beyond

NHS Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire ICB shared its 'Commissioning Intentions – BNSSG VCSE Strategic Investments – 2025/26 and beyond' with system partners during May and June 2025.

This related specifically to further strategic investments in Voluntary, Community & Social Enterprise (VCSE) structures and developments from 2025/26 and beyond, enabled by the ICB's recurrent investment of £250,000pa in VCSE structures and developments, through the Proactive Care Fund.

The ICB thanks system partners for providing feedback on the commissioning intentions and the support for the direction of travel.

This document includes:

1. Next steps.
2. Changing context for VCSE collaboration, role and integration.
3. Summary of feedback about the commissioning intentions (VCSE Strategic Intentions) from system partners.
4. Update on investments during 2025/26.

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1. Next steps

The plan has shifted as a consequence of feedback received and the changes in our system, and the publishing of the BNSSG VCSE [vision and goals](#). The future investments through the following workstreams will embed VCSE interface and enable VCSE market development and delivery, as the ICB shifts to strategic commissioning, to communities and to prevention.

	Goals	Objectives	Procurement approach
VCSE Structure & Strategy	To have structure within the VCSE system so that the sector can be an equal partner in the BNSSG health and care system.	<p>Provide VCSE structure / interface with VCSE sector and ICS – through culture, planning, decision-making, new models and innovation / improvement.</p> <p>Support co-design and implementation of strategic commissioning and developments, including the BNSSG VCSE Vision, Healthier Together 2040 and neighbourhood health.</p>	To be confirmed.
VCSE Support & Deliver	To have a mature VCSE provider market that can deliver wellbeing / health outcomes through health and care services / activities in BNSSG.	<p>Enable and support VCSE collaborations / partnerships to deliver in neighbourhoods and communities.</p> <p>Test and provide approaches to targeted capacity building / market development support for priority VCSE organisations / communities.</p> <p>Provide service that supports wellbeing / health programmes to reach diverse and mature VCSE market and VCSE organisations to make innovative proposals for delivery.</p>	ICB notices are issued through Find a Tender - www.find-tender.service.gov.uk

These procurement processes are under development and subject to change.

2. Changing context for VCSE collaboration, role and integration

Since the commissioning intentions were developed and shared, there have been many changes that affect the strategic and operating environment for the NHS, ICSs and VCSE sector.

For the ongoing collaboration with and development of VCSE roles in the health and care system, the following assumptions frame the thinking and approach.

- Strategic commissioning includes many disciplines that need VCSE involvement in design, delivery and evaluation.

- Good progress with VCSE integration has been made in BNSSG and more is needed.
- Engagement with and inclusion of diverse VCSE needs proactive, equitable, enabling approaches and leadership.
- Diverse VCSE organisations will be needed in design and delivery of shifts from hospital to community and treatment to prevention, including Neighbourhood Health and Healthier Together 2040.
- Decreased ICB capacity will create greater need for other system partners, including VCSE sector.
- Shifts to community and prevention are more social model than medical model and therefore need non-medicalised thinkers.
- VCSE has untapped potential – reach into, intel from and trusted relationships with excluded communities; wider determinants of wellbeing/health; fundraising potential/inward investment; volunteering.
- BNSSG and Gloucestershire approaches to collaborating with the VCSE sector will need to align and build on strengths.

Policy changes relevant to collaboration with the VCSE sector include the following strengths and positives for VCSE integration, and opportunities to enhance VCSE roles. These are summarised in Appendix 1.

At the same time as these policy and structural changes, our system has been working collaboratively with partners to develop Healthier Together 2040 to provide a clear vision of the future of health and care locally, designed to address evolving needs and ensure the system is equipped for the challenges ahead.

The Healthier Together 2040 Strategic Intentions provide a helpful framing of these changes:

Healthier Together 2040 started from a shared recognition that for people's health outcomes to improve, the health and care system needs to fundamentally change how it approaches delivering, measuring and paying for services. With significant expertise and resource available by working together we sought to reimagine health and care working with people and understanding all their needs, hopes, and what matters most to them.

We identified four groups of the population who are currently or at risk of experiencing the poorest outcomes, then started with a focus on working aged people living with multiple health challenges. Through extensive listening and gathering of insights, we have learned that meaningful change depends on moving beyond reactive, condition-focused services and creating support that is compassionate, preventative, and rooted in relationships.

While Healthier Together 2040 started before the NHS 10-year plan publication, many of the elements developed through the design process have aligned with the national policy. For example, the co-creation of personalised wellbeing plans, connecting people to wider support, and embedding specialists locally to reduce hospital reliance. Flexible access, strong employer partnerships, unified digital

systems, and new payment models to enable joined-up, sustainable care, all underpinned by a relentless focus on outcomes that matter most to people.

Our Strategic Intentions: How we want to improve the wellbeing and health of working aged adults with multiple health needs

1. Healthy Neighbourhoods providing whole person care
2. Aligning incentives
3. Data and Community Insights
4. Outcomes that Matter
5. Digital Tools
6. Culture of Relationships and Trust
7. Healthy Workplaces, Healthy Communities
8. Embedding a Learning Health System

These Strategic Intentions, alongside the Design Principles, describe various VCSE roles in the strategic commissioning.

[Read the Healthier Together 2040 Strategic Intentions on the Healthier Together website.](#)

3. Summary of feedback about the commissioning intentions (VCSE Strategic Intentions) from system partners

Feedback received from many diverse system partners is summarised as follows:

Overall positive support

- Strongly positive support across diverse system partners.
- The paper was described as excellent, coherent, strategic, ambitious, and forward-thinking, as was seen as a good example of system-wide sharing and collaboration.
- Appreciation of the significant contribution and commitment of VCSE leaders and system partners in collaboration and relationships between VCSE and system partners.
- Welcome for the approach to long-term investment in VCSE structures.
- Recognition of successful progress and results through engaging with the VCSE sector.
- VCSE Alliance has already become a great vehicle for the statutory sector partners within BNSSG to communicate with VCSE organisations that wish to explore possibilities and opportunities within BNSSG and provided welcomed opportunities for good partnership working across BNSSG.
- Alignment with strategic priorities across the ICS and creation of new opportunities.
- Clear, coherent, and well thought-out proposals that make sense and are realistic.

Support for the VCSE sector and approach to commissioning VCSE structures

- Strong endorsement of:
 - VCSE Integration Principles: positive action to invest in VCSE to address inequalities, designing for smaller organisations, and ‘grant first’ approach.
 - Ongoing investment in VCSE Lead Locality roles (through Sirona and ICB) and in the VCSE Alliance.
 - New investment in VCSE ecosystem development.
 - Inclusion of VCSE Alliance Ambassadors in ICS meetings.
 - Appointment of a VCSE Lead within the ICB.
- High praise for the VCSE Alliance and VCSE Brokerage Framework, with belief that VCSE Brokerage could be transformative if fully embedded.
- Recognition of ICB leadership commitment, investment and support.
- Willingness from multiple system partners to explore collaboration opportunities.
- Desire to continue supporting the work and maintain strong VCSE partnerships.
- Suggestion to allow time for Alliance and Brokerage to embed and evolve, especially given current system turbulence.

Comments on the different workstreams (or services/lots)

- Concern that separating VCSE Alliance, strategic developments, and ecosystem developments into different commissioning processes could cause fragmentation, duplication, and reduced cohesion and preference for a joined-up, centrally coordinated approach via the VCSE Alliance.
- Suggestion to combine the VCSE Alliance System Enabler, VCSE Strategic Developments, and VCSE Ecosystem Development into a single, integrated process.
- Acknowledgement and acceptance of the separate commissioning of the VCSE Brokerage Framework.

Comments on proposed competitive processes

- Request for clarity from the ICB on why a competitive grant process is proposed for the VCSE Alliance, and what benefits are expected.
- Concern that opening the process to non-VCSE or non-BNSSG organisations could lead to awards going to those without local connection.
- Suggestion: use a non-competitive, grant-based funding model (preferably by direct award) – based on a statement of there being ‘no genuine competitors’.
- Surprise and concern that competitive tendering could undermine collaboration by introducing competition within the sector.
- Suggestions that the Alliance could qualify for ‘no competition’ due to their being ‘no genuine competitors’, or under Regulation 32(2)(b)(ii) PCR 2015 or the Direct Award A or B processes of the Provider Selection Regime.
- Emphasis on intentional use of grants vs contracts, as they create different relationships and practices.
- Agreement that VCSE Brokerage should be competitively procured.

The importance of collaboration and co-design

- The history and origins of the VCSE Alliance and collaboration with VCSE sector are significant and should be recognised.
- Expectation of VCSE involvement in shaping the future.
- Concern that commissioning intentions risk setting a negative precedent by taking co-produced, sector-developed solutions and establishing them as long-term system enablers.
- Concern that this process could shift the VCSE Alliance's role from a system partner to a service provider, with potential impact on trust and relationships.
- The need to differentiate between funding to build and sustain the VCSE ecosystem/network and commissioning specific services to deliver defined outcomes.

Alignment with Gloucestershire

- Suggestion to include engagement and partnership with the neighbouring Gloucestershire VCS Alliance across all aspects of the commissioning intentions.
- Questions raised about implications for One Gloucestershire.
- Queries regarding the ICB cluster or potential merger and how these might affect the commissioning plans.

Comments about budget

- Strong support for the long-term investment approach in VCSE structures.
- Suggestion to increase the budget annually in line with inflation.
- Appreciation for the ICB's past and current investment in the VCSE ecosystem.
- Recognition of the intention to continue and expand investment in the VCSE sector.

Policy changes

- Place-based small and micro VCSE organisations will become increasingly important as the 'neighbourhoods' are developed, creating opportunities for sector growth and involvement.
- References to the new South Gloucestershire VCSE strategy and Sirona's VCSE Framework as relevant context and need to align.
- Confidence that the current direction and achievements are well aligned with system partners' own approaches.

Equity and reach into VCSE sector

- The VCSE sector in South Gloucestershire is less developed than in other BNSSG areas, raising concerns about equitable funding allocation, voices being heard and sector capacity.
- Avoid Bristol-centrism by applying a distributed approach to funding.
- North Somerset VCSE is also under-developed and under-supported.
- Need to ensure investment in VCSE structures is equitable and based on factors like population size, health inequalities, sector capacity/strengths/weaknesses, community diversity and increasing reach and impact.

Update on investments during 2025/26

The table below provides a summary update of recent progress towards some of the commissioning intentions.

Workstream (or service/lot)	Recent progress
1. Extension of the existing ICB-BNSSG VCSE Alliance grant.	In place. The grant runs to 31/3/26.
2. Putting in place long-term arrangements for the BNSSG VCSE Alliance as a system enabler.	Under development.
3. Putting in place long-term arrangements for the ICB's VCSE Brokerage Framework as a system enabler.	Under development.
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.	(a) VCSE Vision developed; VCSE focus groups for Healthier Together 2040 completed. (b) under review, pending ICB merger and NHS developments.
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.	(a) alignment with related work in Gloucestershire and North Somerset. (b) under development.

Appendix 1

Summary of policy changes and relevance to VCSE integration.

Strengths / positives for VCSE integration	Opportunities to enhance VCSE roles
Shift to Neighbourhood Health	
Strong VCSE role in design and delivery, including in the recent National Neighbourhood Health Implementation Programme expressions of interest	Needs VCSE Alliance for inclusion of non-place-based community organisations.
10 Year Health Plan	
Recognises VCSE delivery role in neighbourhoods, prevention, personalisation and community care.	Opportunities to enhance VCSE roles: insights/local context; forming local strategies; service evaluation; strong local connections with BNSSG VCSE community assets; patient/ community voice; volunteering national platform (to retain local connection).
Model ICB Blueprint	
Strong VCSE roles: PHM; prevention; strategy/ planning; health inequalities; neighbourhood health; user involvement; evaluation/ insights; strategic partnerships; governance	VCSE needed in co-design of: core payer function; transfer to neighbourhoods; EPPR; RCD; data management.
Civil Society Covenant [VCSE]	
Strong government commitment to “remarkable VCSE organisations that form the backbone of our communities.”	Barriers to address: co-design and co-production; collaborative commissioning; inherent VCSE social value; long-term funding.
Procurement changes	
“The Government wants to ... give SMEs and VCSEs greater access to public contracts.” New target spend with SME and VCSEs in public procurement. New approaches to social value co-designed with VCSE/ suppliers.	Balancing partnerships and collaborative approaches with regulatory frameworks and obligations.

Strengths / positives for VCSE integration	Opportunities to enhance VCSE roles
Strategic Commissioning Framework	
<p>Strong roles for VCSE: starting to differentiate through cycle; insights/ intel in local context and strategy; diverse VCSE delivery; VCSE conduit to people/ SUs in evaluation.</p>	<p>Opportunities to enhance VCSE roles through co-design: appropriate scale decision framework; equity in market development; collaboration in commissioning; contractual forms and payment mechanisms; community / social model leadership; VCSE as conduit for service user/ community insights; decommissioning decisions.</p>
Confirmed merger of NHS Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire ICB and NHS Gloucestershire ICB	
<p>Opportunity to build on different strengths across a wider footprint, building on what works well and learning from different approaches.</p>	

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