



Working together for a better Cumbria – The VCFSE Manifesto

Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise

Cumbria's Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise Sector

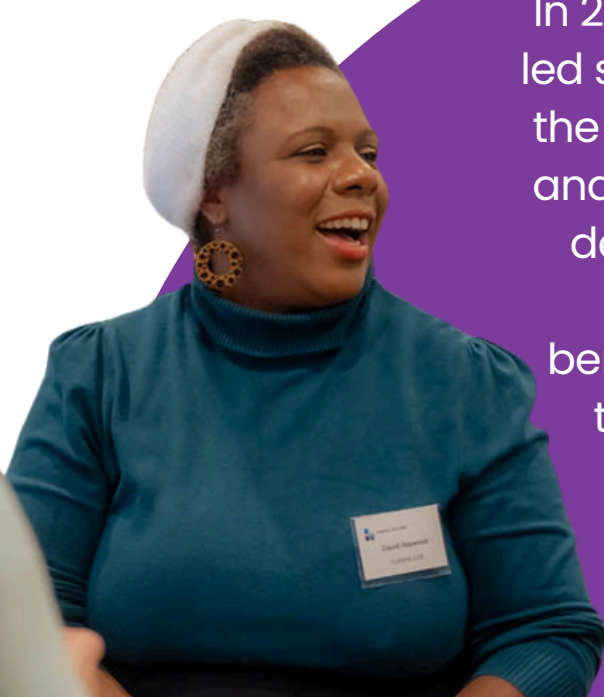
Cumbria has a large and vibrant voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise sector (VCFSE). Also known as the third sector, it's made up of over 5000 organisations that play a huge role in the life of Cumbrian communities. These organisations range from community groups run entirely by volunteers to large local charities and social enterprises, some of which employ several hundred staff and have a multi-million pound turnover each year.

From the volunteers running our village halls and mountain rescue teams, to the specialist staff working in our hospices and children's centres, life in Cumbria quite simply wouldn't be the same without them. The people of Cumbria are at the core – people giving and receiving support, and increasing sustainability of our local economies, environment, culture and heritage. In many parts of the county, voluntary activity underpins and scaffolds the whole community, and the work of the VCFSE sector plays a huge role in prevention, reducing the demand on our statutory sector partners.

The sector in Cumbria employs almost 10,000 full time equivalent staff, and the larger (registered) organisations alone work with more than 50,000 volunteers who give their time for free – a contribution that would cost over £38 million a year if paid at the National Living Wage.

The third sector as a whole brings £508m to the Cumbrian Economy.

[The data we're using mainly comes from the [Third Sector Trends Study](#), led by Professor Tony Chapman from the University of Durham]



In 2024, the faith-led social action in the Westmorland and Furness area delivered **488** activities, benefiting more than **33,109** people

Cumbria's VCFSE is:



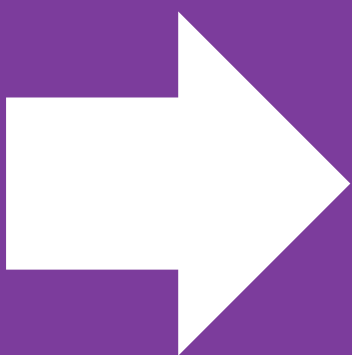
- **A driver of community power**, helping communities to organise, participate, and influence, building skills for sustainability, and delivering a huge range of services that keep people happy and well.
- **A key service provider**, delivering frontline services across health and social care, transport, housing, skills and employment, and many other areas of work.
- **A convenor & connector**, helping people and organisations to find each other, build relationships, and work collaboratively.
- **A strategic partner** in both system design and service delivery, ready to work as an equal partner with Cumbria Combined Authority
- **A catalyst for economic growth**, supporting people into work through volunteering and skills development, and building a circular, sustainable and inclusive economy.

Our Key Asks (and our commitments)

Recognise the value of the VCFSE by formalising our involvement in Cumbria Combined Authority

Create seat for the VCFSE on the Cumbria Combined Authority Board, and ensure VCFSE involvement in all of the Cumbria Combined Authority work streams.

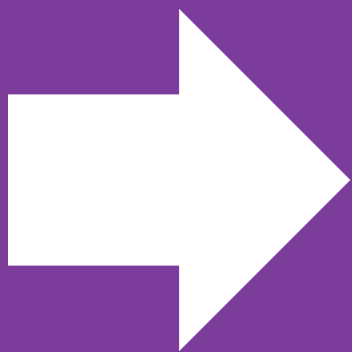
Establish Cumbria Third Sector Network as an Advisory Board to Cumbria Combined Authority.



We'll use our new Cumbria Third Sector Leaders Forum and our third sector networks to support those who take on these roles to engage with the wider VCFSE, and to speak on behalf of a wide range of organisations, by producing briefings on the key issues.

Develop A Cumbrian Civil Society Covenant

Build on the Government's Civil Society Covenant (a set of principles designed to build effective partnerships across government and civil society) and become one of the first areas to develop a local Covenant establishing our VCFSE organisations as well respected and resourced partners. [<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/civil-society-covenant-programme>]



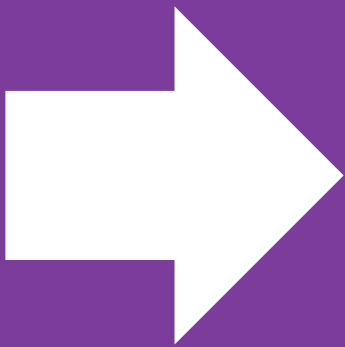
We'll support the VCFSE to engage, and to identify the priority issues to explore in Cumbria, building on previous Cumbria Compact work.

Engage with all of Cumbria's Communities

Cumbria's communities are many and varied, and many have a limited understanding of the role of Cumbria Combined Authority.

This includes:

- A need to engage with first time voters, to build their understanding of, and engagement in, our political system.
- The need for an engagement framework to include minority communities, rural, poverty and sustainability proofing and the sustainability of sparse and isolated communities in all of Cumbria Combined Authority's work.



We've got networks that connect into many of these communities (of geography and of interest); work with us to engage with a wider range of people, both to raise awareness of Cumbria Combined Authority, and to ensure that a wide range of voices feeds into policy development.

In a recent survey of young people, the VCFSE was able to get over **700** responses after the initial public sector survey received less than 20 responses.



Transport and Planning

Housing and transport underpin our daily lives. Gaps in public transport reinforce wider inequalities, making it very difficult for many people in rural areas to access education, work, health appointments and social activities. Housing pressures make it hard for people to remain in the communities they've grown up in or find homes where the jobs are, meaning people leave the county, restricting our local economic growth.

Asks:

- Design and sustain a public transport system that is integrated with community transport and that meets the needs of our varied communities in innovative ways, and supports active travel.
- Support affordable housing development that comes from communities as well as developers and that builds local infrastructure for sustainable communities.
- Define and support sustainable communities for social, economic and environmental longevity.

The lived reality of transport challenges is starker than any statistics. Many places in Cumbria are only 15 or 20 minutes apart by car, but over an hour by bus. We know that people lose their jobs because they can't get home from evening shifts (which are very common in the hospitality industry), bus routes often don't connect people to the places where entry level jobs are, and it's hard to afford driving lessons if you're not in a job.



Skills and Employment

Volunteers are an essential part of most VCFSE sector organisations, and volunteering also allows people to develop new skills and build their confidence – whilst in education, alongside a job, as a pathway into work, and into retirement.

Voluntary sector organisations deliver a wider range of employment support; they're key partners in many of Cumbria's Work and Health schemes, as well as delivering independently funded support, such as targeted support, careers advice and guidance to young people Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET).

In addition, Cumbria's VCFSE sector is a major employer, employing over 10,000 full-time equivalent staff.

Asks:

- Ensure the VCFSE are involved in the development and delivery of Cumbria's Adult Skills Fund, and consider funding for the delivery of sector skills plans, including the VCFSE.
- Build on the good practice in existing work and health programmes, and explore the potential for Cumbria to fund supported volunteering as a pathway into work.
- Explore the potential for joint training across the public, VCFSE and private sectors, as a step towards developing system-wide career pathways and shared roles.
- Lead by example – ensure that Cumbria Combined Authority develops and implements a Employer Supported Volunteering policy, enabling staff to volunteer and use their skills within the local VCFSE.
- Target Cumbria's growing NEET challenge by resourcing the VCFSE to deliver relational, place-based employment support for young people furthest from work.

Through the Better Tomorrows programme, Cumbria Youth Alliance has supported **61** people to qualify as youth workers, generating **22,300** additional hours of youth work provision, and helping young people to develop the skills and confidence they need as they move from education to employment. Cumbria's qualified youth work provision is growing at a time when national roles have fallen by a third.



Cumbria Youth Alliance's data show that the biggest barriers to work reported by young people are confidence and mental health, ahead of work experience and interview skills. A volunteering-first route works well for this group.

Over 5 years, Cumbria Youth Alliance's employment and progression work has supported **716** young people into sustained work and contributed to a **30%** drop in Cumbria's NEET rate, saving an estimated **£74m** in public costs.



Business and Innovation

Social enterprises are businesses that reinvest trading surpluses for social purposes. Cumbria has over 1,400 such organisations, ranging from micro-enterprises to large co-operatives and healthcare providers. They are highly innovative, using local knowledge and lived experience to support vulnerable people and rural communities.



Alston Moor was named the world's first Social Enterprise Place in 2013 by Social Enterprise UK (SEUK), with Cumbria receiving the same recognition in 2018.

The sector is led by the Cumbria Social Enterprise Partnership (CSEP), which has over 750 members and supports more than 100 enterprises annually. Over the past decade, CSEP has helped double the sector's size. In a 2023 study commissioned by Cumbria County Council, and conducted by Centrifuge Consulting, it was found that social enterprises in Cumbria employ around 15,000 FTE staff and contribute over £475 million to the local economy.



Sector development achieves strong Social Return on Investment (SROI), independently measured at **£18** for every £1 invested.

Asks:

- Continue developing the social enterprise sector, aligning business support with Cumbria Combined Authority priorities.
- Build on existing good practice around social value to ensure that large investments into Cumbria benefit our people, communities and community organisations.
- Ensure that commissioning processes enable smaller local organisations, including VCFSE organisations, to participate easily.



We're used to economies of scale, but when it comes to "people" services, there are often economies of localism, because local organisations know what support is really needed.

Community

Cumbria has strong, connected and resilient communities, which still face a variety of challenges. Rural and coastal communities can lack the infrastructure many of us take for granted, young people (and others who can't drive) often find it hard to travel to education and work, even in our more urban areas, and digital exclusion is a growing issue.

Asks:

- Adopt the Engagement Principles from the recent Cumbria Citizens Panel, to ensure that all our communities are involved as Cumbria Combined Authority develops. [<https://zerocarboncumbria.co.uk/leading-change/cumbria-climate-assembly-recommendations/#principles>]
- Invest in community development and resilience, targeting those who need the most support, but ensuring a universal offer, so that all Cumbria's communities continue to thrive.



1 in 4 young people in Cumberland reported that they don't have reliable internet access at home.





Research shows that every **£1** invested in societal resilience to disruption generates **£35.12** of public value.

<https://www.alliancembs.manchester.ac.uk/research/recovery-renewal-resilience-from-covid-19/national-consortium-for-societal-resilience/assessing-the-public-value-of-societal-resilience-to-disruption/>

Investing in youth-led social action can help build communities. In Harrington, the youth club supported neurodivergent young people to take ownership of flower beds, clean ups and murals, and the area saw a **75%** reduction in antisocial behaviour.



Environment

Cumbria has already seen the impacts of extreme rainfall and widespread flooding, and our people, our iconic landscape and our economy all face significant impacts as our climate continues to change. Our natural environment underpins the economy and the health and wellbeing of local communities. Cumbria's natural environment is in trouble with significant declines in wildlife and habitats. There is an urgent need to restore and reverse recent trends; connect more people with their local environment and to develop a Natural Health Service for Cumbria.

Asks:

- Invest in our nature and our natural environment, it's a huge part of who we are.
- Resource the delivery of Cumbria's Local Nature Recovery Strategy, involving all partners including farmers.
- Support the delivery of the action plans developed Zero Carbon Cumbria Partnership to assist Cumbria to reach Net Zero.
- Support the development of a Cumbria Climate Adaptation Partnership and Strategy to ensure we're prepared for the impacts of our changing climate.
- Support the establishment of a Natural Health Service for Cumbria.

Connecting young people to their local environment is an important component of early help mental health support in Cumbria.



Health and Care

Cumbria's VCFSE plays a huge role in wellbeing, health and care, and this will only become more important as the 3 main shifts (Hospital to Communities; Analogue to Digital; Treatment to Prevention) in the NHS Plan are put into practice.

A well-resourced and connected community ecosystem is vital to keep people active and well, reducing the need to access health services, and supporting people to access digital services.

Our voluntary sector organisations are already a key part of Integrated Care Communities and will be vital as Integrated Neighbourhood Teams develop, and in helping to ensure that people receive holistic, coordinated care that meets their individual needs. Many VCFSE organisations are providers of statutory services and do not receive full funding despite saving the NHS millions.

Asks:

- Ensure that the VCFSE is consistently involved across the different parts of our health and care systems, and the development of the Cumbria Combined Authority's approach to health and wellbeing.
- Advocate for the need for longer term, sustainable funding – at risk through NHS restructures – to allow the VCFSE to deliver to its full potential.
- Embed the VCFSE as a key player in work around prevention and also to ensure strong community involvement in service change and improvement.

A photograph showing a hospice worker in a red uniform sitting on a red sofa, engaged in a conversation with an older woman wearing a blue and white checkered shirt. The background is a large, solid purple shape.

Last year, the 2 adult in-patient units in Cumbrian Hospices (Eden Valley Hospice in Carlisle and St Mary's in Ulverston) provided **4,151** nights of care for adults at end of life who would otherwise have been in hospital.



This manifesto was developed through a series of workshops with Cumbrian voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise organisations between December 2025 and June 2026, supported by Cumbria CVS, Action with Communities in Cumbria and Cumbria Youth Alliance.

For more information, please contact info@cumbriacvs.org.uk

