



VCSE

Commissioning Excellence Programme

2023 – 2025 Summary



VCSE
EAST SUSSEX ALLIANCE

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Foreword

Commissioning shapes the services, support and opportunities available to people and communities. Yet it is often carried out in environments defined by financial pressure, organisational complexity and a legacy of transactional relationships. In such conditions, genuine collaboration can be difficult to achieve, even when intention is strong.

The East Sussex VCSE Commissioning Excellence Programme was created to challenge this reality. Over two years, leaders, commissioners and practitioners from the voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector, East Sussex County Council and NHS Sussex came together, in-person to test a new way of working: one rooted in trust, transparency and shared purpose.

What emerged was more than a programme of workshops. It became a space where people could speak openly, explore new ideas and collectively redefine what good commissioning looks like. The concept of *transparent bravery*, an approach based on candour, vulnerability and shared responsibility, became a defining feature. Relationships deepened. Assumptions were challenged. And practical frameworks for better commissioning were co-designed and tested.

This report is the legacy of that work. It captures what we learned, the tools we developed and the changes we witnessed. It offers insights not only for East Sussex but for any area seeking to build more equitable, collaborative and trusting commissioning relationships.

The Commissioning Excellence Programme has shown that cultural change is possible, even in difficult circumstances. The work started here provides a foundation for continued learning, partnership and innovation across the commissioning system.



Introduction:

Why this programme was needed

Commissioning across the UK is undergoing profound and prolonged change. Rising demand, constrained budgets, workforce shortages and structural reforms have placed significant pressure on both statutory services and the VCSE sector. Increasingly, there is recognition that these challenges cannot purely be addressed through traditional, transactional approaches to commissioning.

In East Sussex, both commissioners and VCSE leaders acknowledged the need for a more collaborative and relational way of working. However, several longstanding barriers made this difficult:

- Short-term and uncertain funding
- Variability in engagement and communication
- Limited shared understanding of each other's pressures
- Risk-averse cultures shaped by regulation and procurement rules
- A lack of time and space for building relationships outside formal processes

The East Sussex VCSE Commissioning Excellence Programme was designed to respond to these challenges. Its purpose was to build trust, strengthen understanding and explore new approaches to commissioning that were more transparent, more participatory and more oriented around shared outcomes.

Running from 2023–2025, the programme brought together leaders and practitioners who would not usually have the opportunity to reflect, learn and problem-solve collectively. Through workshops, facilitated discussions, case studies and reflective practice, participants explored what it means to commission in ways that are relational, equitable and mindful of people's lived experience.

This report draws together the insights from that journey. It describes the conditions required for stronger commissioning relationships, the tools and frameworks co-developed by participants, and the changes already emerging across the system. It offers a model of practice that others can adapt within their own localities.



About the programme

A cross-sector initiative for cultural and system change

The Commissioning Excellence Programme was an ambitious collaboration between the VCSE sector, East Sussex County Council and NHS Sussex. It aimed to shift commissioning culture by focusing not only on processes and models, but on the underlying behaviours, relationships and values that make commissioning effective.

The programme was funded by East Sussex County Council with support from NHS Sussex and was facilitated by Southdown. Its design placed equal emphasis on learning, dialogue, challenge and co-production.

Who took part

A core cohort of around 40 participants took part in eight in-person workshops, supported by wider engagement through surveys and shared learning resources. The cohort included:

- Senior and operational VCSE leaders from across the East Sussex VCSE Alliance
- Local authority commissioners across adult social care, children's services, public health and procurement
- NHS Sussex commissioning and programme leads
- Community engagement and partnership specialists
- Practitioners who work directly with people and communities

This balance ensured a mix of perspectives: strategic, operational and community focused.

A multi-agency Steering Group provided programme governance and shaped the learning themes, ensuring alignment with emerging national and regional developments in commissioning practice.

How the programme worked

The Commissioning Excellence Programme was structured around:

- **Quarterly half-day in person workshops:** Practical, discussion-led sessions exploring themes such as trust, transparent bravery, co-production and risk-sharing.
- **Peer-led facilitation:** Members of the Steering Group and sector leaders co-facilitated sessions, modelling openness and shared leadership.
- **Case studies and real-world examples:** Participants brought current commissioning challenges for reflective discussion.
- **Two Trusting Relationships surveys (2023 and 2025):** Captured cultural change and shifts in behaviours over time.
- **Collaborative problem-solving:** Workshops provided a space for commissioners and VCSE organisations to explore alternative funding, partnership and contractual models.

The programme's approach emphasised:

- Relationships over transactions
- Dialogue over instruction
- Shared ownership over organisational silos

- Courage over comfort
- Learning over perfection

What made this programme unique

Three features distinguished the Commissioning Excellence Programme from typical commissioning improvement initiatives:

- **A safe and facilitated space for honesty** – Participants repeatedly highlighted how rare it is for commissioners and providers to speak candidly without the pressure of contract negotiations, tendering or regulatory oversight.
- **Transparent bravery** – This concept, the willingness to speak openly about uncertainty, risk and challenge, emerged early and became a defining cultural theme. It transformed the way participants approached commissioning conversations.
- **Focus on culture, not just process** – While practical tools and frameworks were developed, the Commissioning Excellence Programme's greatest impact came from shifting behaviours, assumptions and relationships, the foundations of system change.



What we learned about changing commissioning culture

Over two years, the East Sussex VCSE Commissioning Excellence Programme uncovered a set of deep, recurring themes about what enables and what limits effective commissioning. These themes appeared across workshops, surveys, case studies and reflective discussions. This section distils the learning into five interconnected insights that together describe the cultural foundations of collaborative commissioning.

Trust and relationships: the foundation of effective commissioning

Why trust matters

Across every workshop and survey, trust emerged as the most important and fragile component of the commissioning relationship. Processes, contracts and

governance structures matter, but they cannot compensate for a lack of trust between commissioners and providers. When trust is weak, interactions become defensive and transactional; when trust is strong, commissioning becomes collaborative, creative and solution focused.

What the surveys showed

The Trusting Relationships Surveys, conducted in 2023 and again in 2025, confirmed significant cultural improvement:

- In 2023, 67% of providers reported good levels of trust.
- By 2025, 100% of commissioners and 100% of providers reported improved relationships.
- Providers described commissioners as more open, approachable and consistent.

- Commissioners reported deeper understanding of VCSE strengths and pressures.

Yet both groups identified persistent systemic barriers impacting trust. These included:

- national and local funding uncertainty
- slow or opaque system-level decision-making
- pressures on workforce capacity
- inconsistent understanding of co-production
- competitive behaviours driven by tendering environments

What changed during the programme

As the Commissioning Excellence Programme progressed, participants described:

- more informal and frequent communication
- willingness to raise concerns earlier
- increased transparency about risk and uncertainty
- reduced defensiveness in difficult discussions
- stronger personal connections underpinning professional roles

One participant summarised the shift:

“ We started talking to each other as people, not roles.”

Key lesson

Trust is built between commissioning cycles, not during them. It requires time, familiarity and consistent behaviour and it accelerates problem-solving when challenges arise.

Transparent bravery: a new way of working together

A defining cultural insight

One of the most distinctive contributions of the Commissioning Excellence Programme was the articulation of 'transparent bravery' – the courage to say difficult things early, to acknowledge uncertainty, and to share risk rather than conceal or shift it. Participants described transparent bravery as:

- "Naming the uncomfortable truths without fear."
- "Being willing to say we don't yet know the answer."
- "Sharing risks, not displacing them."

The concept resonated deeply because it provided a shared language for behaviours that had often been felt but not named.

Why transparent bravery matters now

The commissioning environment from 2023–2025 was marked by:

- static or reducing public sector budgets
- NHS restructuring and financial turbulence
- rising complexity of needs
- pressure on smaller VCSE organisations
- frequent shifts in national policy and expectation

In this climate, traditional commissioning norms (formality, caution, positional negotiation) were no longer sufficient. Transparent bravery offered an alternative grounded in honesty, partnership and shared responsibility.

What transparent bravery looks like in practice

Through case studies and workshop discussions, participants identified consistent behaviours:

- raising challenges early, before they escalate
- discussing risks as shared problems
- acknowledging limitations in data, evidence or capacity
- being open about organisational vulnerabilities
- offering constructive challenge rather than passive compliance
- using plain language instead of technical defensiveness

This shift in behaviour enabled more productive and more relational commissioning conversations.

// WHAT WE LEARNED

VCSE COMMISSIONING EXCELLENCE PROGRAMME

Barriers to transparent bravery

Participants also identified what gets in the way:

- fear of damaging relationships
- concern about losing funding
- competitive tendering structures
- organisational cultures that reward certainty
- time pressures that reduce opportunities for reflection

These barriers make transparent bravery a cultural, not merely procedural, challenge.

Key lesson

Transparent bravery is not an individual trait but a *shared practice*. It becomes possible only when trust is present and when leaders model vulnerability and openness themselves.

Co-production: moving from involvement to shared ownership

What we learned

Co-production was one of the most discussed and most inconsistently

understood concepts across the programme. Participants agreed that while the language of co-production is widely used, its application varies significantly. Across discussions, several shared insights emerged:

- co-production is not consultation
- co-production means sharing power and decision-making, not just ideas
- it is a mindset, not simply a method
- it takes more time, but produces services that people trust more
- it requires clarity, intention and honesty about what is and isn't open to influence

A shared definition

Through the Commissioning Excellence Programme, participants developed a practical definition:

A collaborative process where people with lived and professional experience design, shape and evaluate services together – sharing power, responsibility and decision-making.

This definition grounded co-production in values and behaviours rather than technical process.

Challenges identified

Barriers to meaningful co-production included:

- limited time and capacity
- involvement at too late a stage
- lack of clarity about what decisions could realistically be shared
- differing organisational cultures
- anxiety about engaging lived experience meaningfully, safely and inclusively
- inconsistent use of the term “co-production”

What good co-production requires

Participants identified enabling conditions:

- early involvement
- flexible approaches
- inclusive and accessible participation
- willingness to adapt course based on lived experience
- alignment on purpose and decision rights
- appropriate recognition or payment for contributions

Key lesson

Co-production only works when power genuinely shifts. It requires commissioners and providers to practise transparency, humility and partnership, reinforcing the importance of transparent bravery.

Strategic partnering: from contracts to collaboration

Why this mattered within the Commissioning Excellence Programme

“Strategic partner” was a term increasingly used in the local system, but with varied meaning. The Commissioning Excellence Programme clarified and strengthened understanding, ensuring the concept supported system leadership rather than reinforcing hierarchy or scale.

A shared working definition



A VCSE strategic partner collaborates with commissioners and system partners to shape, deliver and review services and policy, using insight, relationships and expertise to drive population-level outcomes.

This definition emphasises system leadership, community insight and collaboration, not organisational dominance.

Behaviours of strategic partners

Through discussion and examples, participants identified the behaviours that distinguish strategic partners from traditional providers:

- advocating for community needs at system level
- consistently practising co-production
- using data and insight — including from the Sussex Integrated Dataset — to influence strategy
- supporting the wider VCSE ecosystem, not only their own organisation

- sharing risk, responsibility and challenge
- acting inclusively and in ways that strengthen community-led organisations
- prioritising collaboration over competition

Examples already emerging in East Sussex

- Mental Health VCSE Compact
- Loneliness & Mental Health stewardship approach
- Mental Health Support Services (MHSS) lead provider collaboration

These examples demonstrate how strategic partnering can shift culture and improve commissioning outcomes.

Key lesson

Strategic partnering is a role the VCSE sector plays within the system, not a status bestowed. It requires behaviours, relationships and shared accountability and is strengthened by trust and transparent bravery.

System barriers and enablers

Persistent barriers

Participants acknowledged that cultural change must occur within real structural constraints. Key system-level barriers included:

- short-term and uncertain funding
- delayed or opaque decision-making processes (particularly within NHS structures)
- capacity pressures within both statutory and VCSE organisations
- competitive tendering that discourages openness
- inconsistent language around collaboration and co-production
- workforce turnover affecting continuity of relationships

These challenges are not unique to East Sussex but shape commissioning culture everywhere.

Enablers that made a difference

The programme highlighted several conditions that can mitigate these barriers:

- dedicated time and space for honest dialogue
- senior leadership support and modelling of transparency
- shared frameworks (e.g., for co-production and strategic partnering)

- cross-sector problem-solving rather than issue escalation
- continuity of staff and relationship-holders
- a willingness to challenge established norms
- mutual empathy for organisational pressures

Key lesson

While structural barriers cannot always be removed, strong relationships significantly reduce their negative impact. When trust is high, system pressures become easier to navigate; when trust is low, even minor issues become major obstacles.



Tools, frameworks and case studies

One of the strongest legacies of the Commissioning Excellence Programme is the set of practical tools and shared frameworks co-developed by participants. These resources are designed to support ongoing cultural and behavioural change by providing a common language and reference point for commissioners, VCSE organisations and system partners.

Shared vision statement

Co-designed across the workshops, the shared vision articulates the cultural aspiration for commissioning in East Sussex:

“ Prioritising collaboration and trust to drive innovation and improve outcomes.

This statement reflects a collective desire to replace transactional commissioning with a system built on

partnership, openness and shared purpose. The vision is already influencing:

- approaches to contract discussions
- early engagement in procurement
- stewardship methods for designing services
- relational commissioning roundtables

Its long-term value will depend on embedding it into commissioning principles, service specifications, partnership agreements and workforce development programmes.

Strategic Partner Framework

The Strategic Partner Framework was developed to clarify what it means for a VCSE organisation to act as a *system leader*, not just a service provider. It sets out expectations and behaviours that support more equitable and effective collaboration.

Purpose of the framework

- To ensure a shared understanding of “strategic partnering”
- To articulate the value VCSE organisations bring at system level
- To support inclusive, consistent commissioning practice
- To provide a basis for assessing partnership behaviours and maturity

Core characteristics of a strategic partner

- Bring insight grounded in community experience
- Share leadership to improve population outcomes
- Participate actively in co-design and co-production
- Use data and evidence to shape decision-making
- Support equity within the wider VCSE ecosystem
- Build partnerships rather than compete for position
- Demonstrate transparency and mutual accountability

Why this matters

Without a shared definition, “strategic partner” can become tokenistic or limited to a small number of established organisations. The framework shifts the emphasis from organisational size or history to behaviours, relationships and contribution to system goals. It also provides commissioners with a structured basis for engaging VCSE leaders earlier in planning cycles, clarifying expectations for system leadership and understanding how different VCSE roles contribute to outcomes.

Trust and Relationships Survey insights

The 2023 and 2025 Trusting Relationships Surveys provided a quantitative reflection of cultural change over the programme.

What builds trust

- early communication
- transparency about constraints
- regular informal dialogue
- clarity in expectations
- shared reflection
- senior leadership support

What erodes trust

- funding uncertainty
- inconsistent or inaccessible communication
- competition between providers
- system-level delays
- limited time for engagement

Headline results

- 100% of commissioners and providers reported improved relationships by 2025
- Providers felt more able to raise concerns early
- Commissioners reported better insight into VCSE pressures
- Trust remained vulnerable to national and system-level factors outside local control

These findings helped shape the programme's recommendations and underscore the need for ongoing attention to relational commissioning.

Case studies: transparent bravery in action

Case studies were a core learning tool within the Commissioning Excellence Programme. They illustrate how transparent bravery, trust-building and strategic partnering can transform commissioning practice. Below are refined, concise versions that highlight the most important insights.

Case study 1: Stewardship approach to isolation and loneliness

The challenge

Traditional commissioning models were not effectively addressing loneliness among older residents, and commissioners and delivery partners lacked a shared understanding of emerging community needs.

Transparent bravery in action

- Both parties acknowledged uncertainty about the best delivery model
- Commissioners openly shared limitations in available data
- Age UK East Sussex voiced concerns about capacity and funding
- Both committed to learning together rather than fixing a predefined model

What changed

The partnership adopted a stewardship approach, enabling iterative adjustments based on real-time learning and community insights.

Outcomes

- More agile, responsive support
- Stronger relationship between commissioners and provider
- Increased confidence to raise challenges early
- A model now influencing other areas of commissioning practice

Case study 2: Public Health collaboration – mental health and older people

The challenge

Public Health teams recognised that traditional commissioning cycles lacked flexibility to respond to emerging mental health needs among older people.

Transparent bravery in action

- Commissioners shared concerns about system barriers and evidence gaps
- Age UK East Sussex provided candid feedback about service constraints
- Both partners agreed to co-design a refreshed approach without fixed outcomes
- Honest discussions enabled realistic expectations and shared ownership

What changed

The relationship shifted from commissioner-provider oversight to joint problem-solving, resulting in a more adaptive and person-centred service model.

Outcomes

- Shared ownership of risks
- Better alignment of services with community needs
- Increased confidence in co-production
- Stronger partnership beyond the programme

Case study 3: Welfare Benefits Independent Review

The challenge

An independent review was needed at a time when relationships were sensitive, timelines tight and the potential for misunderstanding high.

Transparent bravery in action

- Both organisations named potential conflicts upfront
- Commissioners discussed system pressures openly
- The provider set out concerns candidly, including operational risks
- Transparent communication maintained throughout

What changed

Potential tensions were avoided through early honesty, and both parties were able to work collaboratively despite constraints.

Outcomes

- A robust, credible review
- Strengthened trust
- A shared model of transparent problem-solving
- A template for approaching complex commissioning challenges



Legacy, impact, recommendations and the future

The Commissioning Excellence Programme generated tangible learning, deeper relationships and practical tools, but perhaps its most important legacy is the cultural shift that participants consistently described over the course of two years.

This section summarises the changes the programme sparked, the conditions it created for continued progress and the recommendations for embedding collaborative commissioning across East Sussex and beyond.

Legacy and impact of the programme

A shift towards more open, trusting relationships

Across workshops, surveys and reflective discussions, participants described a palpable change in the way commissioners and VCSE organisations engage with each other.

The culture of dialogue has become more open, honest and constructive. Specific changes include:

- More frequent informal conversations, outside contractual processes
- Earlier sharing of challenges and risks, rather than escalation at crisis point
- Greater openness about constraints (financial, operational and regulatory)
- Reduced defensiveness in difficult discussions
- Increased empathy for each other's organisational pressures

Participants repeatedly emphasised that this interpersonal shift was the most important foundation for sustainable system improvement. Representative reflections included:

“ The commissioning relationship has been more open and transparent; it feels more like a partnership.

“ I feel more confident to approach commissioners early with challenges and new ideas.

These changes are subtle but transformative. They redefine the tone of the commissioning relationship and reduce friction that previously undermined progress.

A shared language for collaborative commissioning

Before the Commissioning Excellence Programme, there was wide variation in how key concepts (e.g. co-production, partnership-working, collaboration, system leadership) were interpreted. Through structured discussion and repeated testing, the programme generated a shared vocabulary that has the potential to better support coherence across sectors. Key examples include:

- Transparent bravery, now used widely to signal expected behaviours
- A clear definition of strategic partnering
- A practical, shared understanding of co-production
- A common view of the conditions that build trust

This shared language is a crucial enabler of cultural change: when people use the same words with the same meaning, collaboration becomes easier, faster and more effective.

Commissioning becoming more relational and less transactional

Participants described a shift towards commissioning approaches that focus on relationships, shared insight and joint responsibility. Examples included:

- earlier involvement of VCSE partners in shaping service specifications
- increased collaboration during contract variation and service redesign
- more willingness to test, learn and iterate approaches
- greater recognition of lived experience as essential evidence
- better balance between community insight and system priorities

One VCSE participant reflected:

“Commissioning felt more like a genuine partnership, with a shared commitment to meaningful improvements.”

This shift supports innovation and better alignment between commissioning intentions and community needs.

Measurable cultural change

The 2025 Trusting Relationships Survey provided strong evidence of improvement:

- 100% of commissioners and providers reported improved relationships
- Providers described feeling more able to speak honestly
- Commissioners reported deeper respect for VCSE expertise
- Both groups noted increased shared learning and problem-solving

While structural pressures remain, the local working culture is now more resilient and better able to navigate challenges collaboratively.

A stronger foundation for future collaboration

The programme did not simply improve relationships, it created infrastructure:

- A cross-sector Steering Group that will continue to convene and provide leadership
- Stronger, more consistent VCSE representation across system boards and workstreams
- Renewed commitment to revising the East Sussex VCSE Alliance Commissioning Principles
- A suite of co-designed tools and frameworks now available for wider system use
- A model for relational commissioning that other areas can easily adapt

One participant noted:

“The biggest change is that we understand each other’s worlds better – and that makes everything easier.”

A replicable and transferable model

Interest has already been expressed from partners in Brighton & Hove, West Sussex and other Sussex NHS areas. The programme is replicable because:

- its structure is simple and scalable
- the tools are practical and adaptable
- it focuses on cultural and relational change, not structural reform
- it balances reflective space with real-world problem-solving
- it requires commitment, not major resource investment

The Commissioning Excellence Programme contributes to the wider national conversation about commissioning reform and demonstrates the power of culture-led transformation.

The East Sussex Compact as a tangible system outcome

One of the most significant tangible outcomes of the Commissioning Excellence Programme has been its direct contribution to the development and agreement of the East Sussex Compact (2025) – Appendix 1. The Compact provides a shared, system-wide statement of intent for how the VCSE sector and public sector partners will work

together in East Sussex, grounded in trust, integrity, transparency and collaboration.

The principles, language and behaviours articulated through the Commissioning Excellence Programme, particularly around transparent bravery, trust-based relationships, co-production and strategic partnering, are clearly reflected within the Compact. In this sense, the Compact can be seen as a formalisation of the cultural shift that the programme enabled, translating learning into an enduring framework for partnership working.

By embedding relational commissioning principles into a shared agreement, the Compact provides continuity beyond individual programmes, people or commissioning cycles. It offers a practical mechanism for sustaining the behaviours and expectations developed through the Commissioning Excellence Programme and for orientating new partners and system leaders as the commissioning landscape continues to evolve.

Recommendations for the future: a best practice guide

Based on the strengths and learning generated through the programme, the following recommendations provide a practical roadmap for embedding collaborative, trust-based commissioning.

Recommendation one

Embed transparent bravery across commissioning practice

- Create safe, predictable spaces for honest conversations
- Model transparency at leadership level
- Normalise raising concerns early and constructively
- Reward learning, not just successful delivery
- Include expectations of transparent bravery in partnership agreements and specifications

Transparent bravery should become part of East Sussex's commissioning identity.

Recommendation two

Continue to strengthen trust-based commissioning

Trust-based commissioning improves outcomes by reducing friction and enabling earlier problem-solving. To sustain this shift:

- maintain regular informal dialogue between cycles
- use trust surveys to track relational culture over time
- invest time in rebuilding trust after staff turnover
- ensure continuity of relationship-holders
- share data, insight and constraints openly
- cultivate mutual empathy for pressures on both sides

Trust must be nurtured continuously as it erodes without active attention.

Recommendation three

Build and sustain strategic partnerships

To ensure strategic partnering thrives:

- adopt and communicate the Strategic Partner Framework across the system
- include strategic partners in shaping system strategies, not just service plans
- recognise the complementary roles of infrastructure organisations, specialists and community-led groups
- share resources and population-level insight
- reduce unnecessary competition by using collaborative commissioning approaches
- invest in leadership development for VCSE organisations

This approach strengthens the VCSE ecosystem and enhances commissioning resilience.

Recommendation four

Embed meaningful co-production

Co-production will only be credible if it includes genuine power-sharing. Commissioners and VCSE partners should:

- use the co-production checklist consistently
- involve lived experience from the earliest stages
- ensure participation is accessible, inclusive and adequately resourced
- be explicit about what is open to influence and what is not

- jointly evaluate processes and outcomes
- build confidence and capability across organisations

Co-production should become a default expectation, not an optional extra.

Recommendation five

Sustain collaborative leadership and governance

The Steering Group should continue to provide leadership, alignment and accountability by:

- monitoring cultural change and relationship health
- updating commissioning principles and guidance
- convening cross-sector reflective spaces
- acting as ambassadors for relational commissioning
- maintaining a Sussex-wide perspective and sharing learning regionally

Sustained leadership attention is essential for cultural change to become embedded and durable.

Future system context and implications for the programme

The Commissioning Excellence Programme concludes at a point of significant system transition across Sussex and nationally. The relationships, behaviours and frameworks developed through the programme will be tested and, if consciously carried forward, become even more important as structures, roles and responsibilities continue to change.

Several major system shifts are likely to shape the commissioning environment over the coming years:

Local government reform and devolution

Ongoing local government reorganisation and devolution proposals are expected to alter decision-making structures, accountabilities and geographies. While these reforms may create opportunities for greater alignment and place-based working, they also risk disrupting established relationships, resetting institutional memory and fragmenting existing partnership arrangements.

Integrated Care System and ICB change

The evolution of NHS Sussex and Place-based arrangements continues, alongside financial pressure and organisational restructuring. Changes in leadership, roles and commissioning functions risk loss of knowledge and continuity, particularly where relational capital has been built over time. At the same time, there is increasing emphasis on collaboration, prevention and community-based support, areas where the VCSE sector plays a critical role.

Shift towards Integrated Neighbourhood Teams and Provider Alliances

The move towards Integrated Neighbourhood Teams, Provider Alliances and lead provider or stewardship models represents a fundamental shift away from isolated service delivery towards shared accountability for population outcomes. This will require new ways of working, different power dynamics and greater trust between partners. It also demands clarity about roles, responsibilities and decision-making to avoid reverting to transactional behaviours under pressure.

Implications for the Commissioning Excellence Programme legacy

Taken together, these changes will:

- increase the importance of trust-based and relational commissioning approaches
- require continuous investment in relationships as staff, structures and governance evolve
- heighten the risk of losing shared learning unless it is actively embedded
- make transparent bravery essential for navigating uncertainty and system pressure
- demand strong VCSE system leadership to maintain community voice and insight

The Commissioning Excellence Programme provides a stabilising cultural foundation in a changing system. Its tools, shared language and principles offer continuity at a time when formal structures may shift. However, this legacy will only be sustained if actively carried forward through induction, leadership development, commissioning practice and governance arrangements.

The challenge for partners is not simply to preserve what was built, but to apply it deliberately as the system changes, ensuring that new models of integration and

collaboration are underpinned by the same commitment to transparency, trust, shared ownership and equity that defined the programme.

The future of collaborative commissioning in East Sussex

Although the Commissioning Excellence Programme has formally concluded, its work continues. The programme has created momentum, relationships and tools that now require embedding and development.

Key next steps include:

- embedding the shared vision in commissioning strategies and documents
- incorporating relational commissioning expectations into specifications
- using transparent bravery principles in procurement and contract management
- supporting new staff to engage with the Commissioning Excellence Programme tools and language
- building stronger links with wider Sussex partners
- aligning the Commissioning Excellence Programme approach with ICS workforce and leadership development

Regional opportunity

Interest from neighbouring areas provides an opportunity to position East Sussex as a leader in cultural commissioning reform. Shared briefings, joint workshops and cross-NHS System collaboration could create a Sussex-wide community of practice focused on relational, trust-based commissioning.



Conclusion and thanks

The Commissioning Excellence Programme demonstrated that meaningful cultural change is possible, even in challenging financial and operational environments. Transparent bravery, trust-based relationships, co-production and strategic partnering have become defining features of a more relational and equitable approach to commissioning in East Sussex.

As one participant reflected:

“ The biggest shift has been learning to lean into transparent bravery. It’s changed not just how we commission, but how we work together.

This work would not have been possible without the commitment, honesty and openness shown by everyone who took part. We are deeply grateful to all VCSE colleagues, commissioners, system partners and members of the Steering Group who contributed their time, insight and goodwill. Their willingness to engage candidly, challenge constructively and experiment with new ways of working created the foundation on which this report and the programme’s legacy stands.

The challenge and opportunity ahead is to ensure that the learning, tools and relationships developed through the Commissioning Excellence Programme continue to shape commissioning for years to come, strengthening outcomes for people and communities across East Sussex.

The Commissioning Excellence Programme Steering Group

- **Jennifer Twist** – CEO for Care for the Carers and Chair of East Sussex VCSE Alliance
- **Steve Hare** – CEO for East Sussex Age UK and Vice Chair of East Sussex VCSE Alliance
- **Neil Blanchard** – CEO for Southdown
- **Samantha Williams** – Assistant Director Strategy, Commissioning & Supply Management, ASC, ESCC
- **Lucy Layton** – Commissioning Development Manager, ASC, ESCC
- **Richard Watson** – Head of Health, Wellbeing, Partnerships and Integration, NHS Sussex
- **Kay Muir** – Senior Partnership Manager, NHS Sussex (retired September 2024)

