Connected Voice
Connecting People Supporting Action

Autumn 2026
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The magazine for voluntary, community and social enterprise organisations in Newcastle and Gateshead.
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Strength through Stability

Spotlight

Featuring North Benwell Youth Project and Peace of Mind

Also in this Issue...

From our CEO: The Power of VCSE Stability in an Uncertain World

30 Years of Connected Voice Advocacy



Cover photo: Members of the Connected Voice Team in 2026, at One Strawberry Lane, Newcastle

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About this magazine

Connected Voice Magazine is published twice a year.
We aim to make sure all information is correct and up to date but we do not accept liability for any mistakes that may inadvertently appear.
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Issue 25:Strength through Stability

The Autumn 2026 issue of Connected Voice Magazine, 'Strength through Stability' reflects upon the long-standing foundations held by the VCSE sector in the region, as we approach almost 100 years of Connected Voice.

As the sector continues to face uncertain and challenging circumstances, we want to reiterate our message that we are here to support you - no matter what you need. Please do not hesitate to reach out, together, we are stronger.

We hear from our Chief Executive Lisa Goodwin about the vital - and increasing - role that VCSE organisations have in providing stability for their communities.

For our Newcastle-based Spotlight, we hear from North Benwell Youth Project about their community work that spans generations and their trusted role within the local community.

For our Gateshead spotlight, we spoke to Peace of Mind about their personalised support for refugee families, and their pride at being a safe, consistent point of contact for people in increasingly turbulent landscape.

Elsewhere, we hear Vernon's personal success story of support into volunteering, explore the importance of access to tech and digital skills as stepping stones to stability, and look back at 30 years of Connected Voice Advocacy!

We hope you enjoy this issue and welcome any questions you may have.

The Power of VCSE Stability in an Uncertain World

Lisa Goodwin
Chief Executive



Once again, we are living through turbulent times. Many groups we chat to are experiencing higher levels of uncertainty, and this extends far beyond the VCSE sector. Political change, the rise of new parties, shifting media landscapes, misinformation, and increasingly divisive online content all contribute to a sense of instability. Often, it is the voluntary sector that absorbs the impact of these wider changes.

At Connected Voice, we have been supporting communities for almost 100 years. While our work has evolved, our purpose has remained constant. We are not alone in this. Across our area, organisations such as Citizens Advice services, community centres, disability support organisations, and charitable funders have provided a steady and positive influence through decades of change. Right now, that stability is needed more than ever.

Changes to Local Government

Both local authorities we work with have recently seen changes in administration. For us, this means building new relationships and ensuring elected members understand the scale and impact of the VCSE sector.

Leadership changes inevitably bring shifts in priorities and policy. We welcome the commitment from leaders in Newcastle and Gateshead to meet with us quarterly to discuss issues affecting the sector. To make those conversations meaningful, we encourage our members to share the challenges and opportunities that matter most to them. Understanding your priorities helps us represent and support the sector effectively.

As always, Connected Voice remains independent, with the interests of VCSE organisations at the heart of everything we do .

Changes to National Government

Nationally, the pace of political change has also created uncertainty. In the past decade, the UK has had seven Prime Ministers - making it difficult to achieve long-term policy consistency or build meaningful relationships between government and the VCSE sector.

We are hopeful about the new government's approach, given previous positive signals around support for civil society. However, we are not complacent. We continue to feel the impact of decisions such as increases in employers' National Insurance contributions and reductions in support for vulnerable groups, which can increase pressure on charities and community organisations. Questions also remain about whether new initiatives, including the Civil Society Council, will lead to meaningful and lasting change.

> **Political change... shifting media landscapes, misinformation, and increasingly divisive online content all contribute to a sense of instability. Often, it is the voluntary sector that absorbs the impact of these wider changes.**

Environmental and Community Changes

Political uncertainty is only part of the picture. Recent years have highlighted the growing impact of environmental risks, with many organisations now considering pandemics, flooding, and extreme weather as part of routine planning. Climate change is increasingly affecting how and where we work, influencing everything from day-to-day operations to community events.

At the same time, people are concerned about rising community tensions and polarised debate on issues such as immigration, women's rights, and LGBTQ+ rights. While these concerns are real, my experience at Connected Voice is that support, kindness, and solidarity continue to

The Power of VCSE Stability in an Uncertain World

be far more common than division. Every day we see communities coming together to help one another. Nevertheless, uncertainty about community relations remains an important consideration for organisations planning public-facing activities and engagement.

Changes to the NHS

The NHS is one of the VCSE sector's most important partners, yet the current level of uncertainty around future working arrangements is unprecedented in my experience.

Following recent governance changes, the VCSE sector no longer has a seat at executive level within the North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board. We continue to be involved across local systems, but there is still limited information about how neighbourhood health plans will connect with NHS commissioning arrangements.

The significant level of staff change across the NHS has also created challenges. Some of our key colleagues, who had good levels of knowledge of the VCSE sector, have left in the latest round of efficiencies. Some organisations are unsure who their commissioning contacts are, have experienced delays in payments, or lack certainty about future contracts.

Even for organisations without NHS contracts, it is essential that health systems recognise the role the VCSE sector plays in preventing ill health and reducing demand on services. Too often, the VCSE activities and support that social prescribers refer people to are expected to be delivered free of charge, while only the navigation element receives funding.

Although there are examples of good practice locally, these approaches are often fragmented and short term. We have many examples of successful partnerships with the NHS, including our own VCSE Alliance, but it is increasingly difficult to sustain progress against a backdrop of continuous change.

VCSE Organisations as Anchors of Stability

Despite all these challenges, VCSE organisations continue to provide stability and consistent support to people and communities. At a time when systems around us are changing, communities often rely on trusted local organisations as a source of reassurance, connection, and practical help.

This is not to suggest the VCSE sector is immune from pressure. Rising demand and increasing costs continue to affect organisations across the region. Yet the VCSE sector's local roots, adaptability and resilience enable it to respond quickly to changing circumstances.

We are often the first to identify emerging needs and respond to them. But we are also something equally valuable: a reliable and enduring presence. In a world that can feel increasingly uncertain, that role has never been more important.

And just as your organisation provides stability within your community, Connected Voice is here for you. We believe the best way to navigate uncertain times is by working together.

Whether you need support, advice or simply someone to listen, please reach out. We will continue to stand alongside the sector, as a stable and consistent partner.

We are often the first to identify emerging needs and respond to them. But we are also something equally valuable: a reliable and enduring presence. In a world that can feel increasingly uncertain, that role has never been more important.

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Spotlight:
North Benwell Youth Project

Tell us a bit about what North Benwell Youth Project does

North Benwell Youth Project CIO is a small, community-based youth project at the heart of the North Benwell community. We pride ourselves on being visible, approachable and responsive to the needs of local children, young people and families.

Our vision is for young people in North Benwell to have the same opportunities and positive start in life as young people across Newcastle. We work to nurture their self-worth, build resilience and empower them to make positive choices about their futures. Through our work, we support young people to develop the skills, confidence and aspirations they need to reach their full potential.

We work with children and young people aged 8–25, providing a range of support including group work sessions, one-to-one support, detached youth work and off-site activities. We are open six days a week, ensuring that young people have consistent access to a safe, supportive and welcoming environment.

One of our key projects is our diverse programme of music sessions, delivered in partnership with GemArts. Through this partnership, professional musicians provide specialist tuition and mentoring, giving young people the opportunity to explore their creativity, develop new skills and build confidence through music.

How long have you been established?

NBYP has been established for 26 years. The project began in 1999 when John Hardy, then Vicar of the Church of the Venerable Bede in Benwell Grove, was facing ongoing issues with young people vandalising the church. Rather than increasing security or involving the police, he chose a more forward-thinking and community-focused approach. He initiated meaningful engagement with local young people and founded a detached youth project – a decision that remains notably progressive even in retrospect.

How does North Benwell Youth Project offer stability for the community you serve?

We provide stability through our long-standing presence and trusted role within the local community. We are recognised as a safe, welcoming and inclusive hub where children and young people can build friendships, develop social skills, and increase their self-confidence and self-belief.

Our connection with the community spans generations. Many parents whose children now attend NBYP were themselves members when they were young, and they value the opportunity for their children to benefit from the same positive experiences, support and sense of belonging.



Photo (above): A group of young boys pose at North Benwell Youth Project

Our staff team has been established within the project for many years and has a strong understanding of the needs and challenges facing the local community. We are also committed to investing in local people by providing employment opportunities and supporting young people to develop their skills and undertake youth work training.

For the past 16 years, NBYP has provided consistent support to the Roma community living in Benwell. Approximately 90% of our service users are from Eastern European Roma backgrounds, including Czech, Slovak and Romanian communities. Through our continued presence and commitment, we provide a stable and trusted environment where families and young people feel welcomed, supported and valued.

What changes have you seen over the past 26 years?

Changes during the past 26 years include: moving to larger premises; introducing work with junior groups ages 8-11; visits to other countries including Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Budapest, Paris and Belfast; offering weekend work; growing from delivering 2 groups a week to 12 groups; the success of our Young Peoples Committee (which gives young people a hands-on role in development of project work); developing our strong relationships with the Roma communities, and an increase in community support i.e. food parcels. SIM cards, hygiene products

Do you have any exciting plans in the future for North Benwell Youth Project?

In October half term we have organised a visit to Krakow, Poland, with a central focus on visiting Auschwitz concentration camp. The young people attending the trip previously took part in a Holocaust-themed project, creating artwork that was exhibited in both the City Library and the West End Library. To contribute towards the cost of the visit, they have been actively fundraising through a raffle featuring more than 20 prizes, a tombola, and by selling hot snacks and drinks from the project.

This visit will offer a powerful and meaningful



Photo (above): A group of young people take part in a craft session

insight into the scale and impact of the Holocaust. It aims to deepen understanding, challenge prejudice, and help prevent future hatred by highlighting the dangers of racism and extremism.

We are also delighted to have received Pride in Place funding, which will allow us to renovate our backyard area. The plans include concreting the space and erecting a larger summer house, creating an additional multi-use room. Young people are leading the design process, ensuring the development reflects their needs and ideas.

What does 'stability' mean to your organisation?

Stability for NBYP is often rooted in funding. We are grateful to all our funders who believe in and support the work we do. Funding provides the foundation for both young people and the organisation itself.

For young people, consistent staff, regular sessions and reliable services help to build trust and create a safe environment where they feel valued and supported. This is particularly important for young people who may experience instability or challenges in other areas of their lives.

For NBYP, stable funding allows the project to plan ahead, retain experienced staff and continue delivering high-quality activities and support. Without longer-term or consistent funding, projects can face uncertainty, reduced services or the risk of closure.

This also enables the project to demonstrate its impact over time, strengthen relationships with funders and ensure that the support young people depend upon remains available when they need it most.

Building Stability Through Support and Development

Chloe Titterton
Support and Development Manager



For charities and community organisations, stability is often associated with funding. While financial security is important, it is rarely the only factor that determines whether an organisation can thrive. Behind every sustainable organisation is a set of strong foundations: effective governance, clear policies, capable leadership and a realistic plan for the future.

When these foundations are missing or underdeveloped, organisations can find themselves facing difficulties even when demand for their services is high. Trustees may lack confidence in decision-making, policies may no longer reflect current legislation or best practice, and opportunities for funding can be missed because systems and processes are not in place.

This is why organisational development support remains such an important part of our work at Connected Voice.

Space to Step Back

Support with governance, organisational development and strategic planning gives organisations the space to step back from day-to-day pressures and look at their longer-term sustainability. It can help trustees understand their responsibilities more clearly, strengthen accountability and ensure that organisational structures are fit for purpose.

Policies are another key part of organisational stability. Funders increasingly expect organisations to demonstrate good practice in areas such as safeguarding, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI), data protection and financial management. Well-developed policies are not simply documents that sit on a shelf; they provide consistency, reduce risk and help organisations respond appropriately when challenges arise.

Consider Independent Reviews

Many organisations can also benefit from independent reviews of their systems and governance arrangements. These reviews can identify gaps, highlight strengths and provide practical recommendations for improvement. Often, they give boards and senior staff the evidence they need to make informed decisions about the future.

Financial sustainability is closely linked to this work. Organisations with strong governance and effective systems are often better placed to secure funding because they can demonstrate that they are well managed and capable of delivering impact. Support with funding strategies, income planning and organisational development can help charities move beyond short-term funding cycles and take a more strategic approach to their future.

Behind every sustainable organisation is a set of strong foundations: effective governance, clear policies, capable leadership and a realistic plan for the future. When these foundations are missing or underdeveloped, organisations can find themselves facing difficulties even when demand for their services is high.



Photo (above): Chloe delivers an EDI training session to a table of attendees

Building Stability Through Support and Development

Birtley Community Centre's Experience

The experience of Birtley Community Centre (BCC) demonstrates the difference our support can make.

Since September 2024, Connected Voice has been working alongside Birtley Community Centre (BCC) during a period of significant organisational change. At the time, the centre was operating as an unincorporated charity and faced a number of challenges around governance, property ownership and organisational systems. There were also wider concerns about securing the long-term future of the organisation. A key area of support was BCC's transition to a Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO). Connected Voice supported trustees and staff throughout the process, helping to revise governing documents, navigate requirements from the Charity Commission and Coal Industry Social Welfare Organisation (CISWO) and work through the complexities of transferring assets and responsibilities to the new organisation. The CIO was successfully registered in June 2025, and Connected Voice are continuing to support BCC with the complex task of transferring assets to the new legal structure.

Alongside this work, Connected Voice helped BCC strengthen its organisational systems. Support focused on developing key policies, improving safeguarding arrangements and building a framework that would satisfy funders and support future growth. The impact of this was quickly recognised, with the Ballinger Trust not only renewing its unrestricted funding but increasing its annual grant from £10,000 to £12,500 - citing the progress made across governance and organisational development.

Support also focused on helping staff and trustees think more strategically about the future of the centre. Through ongoing mentoring on community consultation and strategic planning sessions, BCC developed a clearer sense of direction and a stronger relationship between operational delivery and trustee oversight. The recruitment of two new trustees further increased capacity at board level and brought additional skills into the organisation.



Photo (above): The outside of Birtley Community Centre

Financial sustainability has remained an important theme throughout the support. Connected Voice provided advice on funding opportunities, income generation, capital development projects and partnership working. This has helped BCC gain a better understanding of its costs, identify future funding opportunities and begin taking a more planned approach to financial management.

As a result of accessing the services at Connected Voice, Birtley Community Centre is now in a much stronger position than it was at the start of the support journey. It has a secure legal structure and stronger governance arrangements. This has resulted in increased confidence from funders and they are now working towards making a clearer plan for the future, providing a more stable base from which to deliver services for the local community.

BCC's journey reflects a wider reality across the sector. Organisational stability does not happen by accident. It is built through good governance, strong systems, thoughtful planning and a willingness to invest time in organisational development.

While this work often takes place behind the scenes, its impact can be far-reaching, giving organisations the confidence and capacity to continue serving their communities well into the future.

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Dropping Anchors, Making Waves: Why Support into Volunteering Matters

Harley Kuyck-Cohen
Gateshead Volunteering Development Coordinator



People often think volunteering happens through a simple role advertisement. In reality, many residents need support before they can take that first step. As NAVCA's recent campaign states: volunteering doesn't happen by accident.

Vernon's Story

For people like Vernon, the journey into volunteering is one that can offer vital stability and community. Long-term unemployed, I met him while holding a stall at the local Jobcentre, representing Gateshead Volunteer Centre.

Gateshead Volunteer Centre provides a Support into Volunteering service across the borough. Through one-to-one support, we have helped over 100 residents with additional needs overcome barriers to volunteering in the past two years – identifying opportunities that match their skills, interests and support needs.

What Vernon didn't know was that there was a brilliant voluntary organisation right on his doorstep. Pelaw Community Bowling Club does a fantastic job of creating accessible opportunities for local people. Through our existing relationship with the club, we were able to introduce Vernon to a gardening role in March 2026. Together, we explored adjustments that would support him, including shorter sessions to accommodate his arthritis and paper-based forms that he felt more comfortable using. Today, the club benefits from a committed volunteer who helps maintain the green, every week and Vernon benefits from a stable and structured routine that gives him the chance to help others, the chance to meet new people, and mood-boosting time outdoors. In his own words, he 'feels much better in himself.'

Volunteering has become his anchor.



Photo (above): Vernon volunteering as a gardener at Pelaw Community Bowling Club

Supporting the Voluntary Sector

Gateshead Volunteer Centre provides that anchor not just for residents, but for the voluntary sector too. It's our role to promote and support inclusive, accessible volunteering for all. This ultimately increases recruitment for small VCSE organisations who are able to widen the pool of volunteers they can work with - and helps achieve their governance aims of addressing the needs of residents in their community.

Our impact makes waves across Gateshead - helping it be recognised as a great place to volunteer. Whether it's advising on accessible volunteer roles, reviewing volunteer policies, linking organisations with support services, or sharing good practice through the Gateshead Volunteer Coordinators Network, our role is to help volunteering meet the changing tide of volunteers' needs and circumstances, and to help change lives of the residents who use our service. Volunteering may only be one hour a week, but it can be the foundation that leads to a new friendship group, improved confidence, stronger mental health, and even the move into paid work or further education.

As Gateshead's volunteering infrastructure, we have a unique relationship to the borough's VCSE sector - including its needs and successes. This knowledge means we don't just find somebody like Vernon any volunteer role, but the right one.

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Spotlight: Peace of Mind

Tell us a bit about what Peace of Mind does

Peace of Mind began in 2014 with asylum-seeking women supporting one another through isolation, hardship and the challenge of navigating unfamiliar systems.

More than a decade later, that community response has grown into an award-winning, refugee-led charity uniquely positioned within Gateshead's refugee support landscape.

Our lived experience does not replace professional competence. It strengthens it. By combining community trust and cultural insight with professional knowledge of welfare, financial and statutory systems, we have built foundations that remain the source of our stability today.

How long have you been established?

Since 2016, our base at Whitehall Road Methodist Church has provided more than a venue. It has offered continuity: a familiar place, familiar people and the assurance that nobody must begin their story again each time they need help.

Our culturally responsive, trauma-informed approach enables us to recognise barriers that may remain invisible in a conventional assessment. A person may arrive needing help with one letter, but behind it may sit insecure housing, interrupted benefits, difficulty accessing healthcare, a child struggling at school or growing isolation.

These issues cannot be separated neatly. We work across welfare, housing, health, education and safeguarding, turning community trust into practical access to essential support.

peace of mind.
Side by side with refugees

How does Peace of Mind offer stability for the community you serve?

Our weekly drop-in provides a consistent point of contact for practical support with welfare benefit issues, advocacy and supported referrals to appropriate specialist services. English learning builds confidence and independence. Digital devices, connectivity and guidance prevent people from being excluded from appointments, education and employment. Wellbeing sessions, volunteering and family activities reduce isolation and strengthen belonging.

Together, these services provide the stability from which people can begin rebuilding their lives.



Photo (above): Women-only English classes and numeracy skills sessions at Peace of Mind.

Our role has become even more important during a period of political change and increasingly hostile language about migration. When public debate leaves people feeling questioned, unwelcome or unsafe, trusted community organisations become more than service providers. They become anchors.

Peace of Mind remains visible and dependable, challenging division through practical action, strong relationships and spaces where people from different backgrounds can meet as neighbours.

As families' needs become more complex, we continue to strengthen personalised support while preserving the community connection central to our work.

We continue to evolve in response to what we see and hear on the frontline, providing deeper, more coordinated support without losing the accessibility, continuity and trust on which Peace of Mind was built.

> **When public debate leaves people feeling questioned, unwelcome or unsafe, trusted community organisations become more than service providers. They become anchors.**

What does 'stability' mean to your organisation?

For Peace of Mind, the lesson from more than a decade of frontline experience is clear: lived experience creates understanding, consistency earns trust and trust gives people the confidence to move forward.

This is the foundation on which we will continue to support people seeking sanctuary to move beyond crisis and build secure, connected and hopeful futures.

How has Connected Voice supported you?

Connected Voice has strengthened our journey through funding support, practical guidance and valuable connections across the voluntary sector.

Through this support, Peace of Mind has grown in confidence and visibility while remaining rooted in the lived experience and community trust that define who we are.



Photo (above): Digital inclusion work at Peace of Mind



Photo (above): A group photo of drop-In volunteers at Peace of Mind

30 Years of Advocacy, Innovation and Influence

Jane Kingston
Head of Advocacy



Born in the 90s

While Connected Voice Advocacy was formally established as Newcastle Advocacy Centre in 1996, our roots go back further to the Citizen Advocacy movement and the creation of the Newcastle Advocacy Network in 1994. Built on the belief that everyone deserves somebody independent to stand alongside them, those foundations continue to shape our work today. Just before this magazine was published, we held our 30th anniversary celebrations, complete with cake!

Over the last 30 years, the advocacy landscape has changed dramatically. When Newcastle Advocacy Centre was established, many of the rights and safeguards that people rely on today did not yet exist. The Human Rights Act, Mental Capacity Act, Equality Act and Care Act would all go on to strengthen people's rights and reinforce the principle that individuals should be involved in decisions about their lives.

As legislation evolved Connected Voice Advocacy adapted alongside it. Rather than simply responding to change, we have often helped shape it.

Leading by Example

A defining feature of our history has been a commitment to innovation and quality. In 1996, we developed ANNETTE, an advocacy monitoring tool that went on to be used by organisations across the UK. We also developed local advocacy standards and codes of practice before national frameworks were established. These initiatives reflected a commitment to effective, accountable advocacy. That commitment has been recognised through quality marks, national awards and a reputation for leading practice within the advocacy sector. As advocacy became increasingly recognised in legislation and policy, models of delivery evolved and the role of the Independent Advocate became more formally defined. Through citizen advocacy, community advocacy, rights advocacy and statutory advocacy, we have continued to ensure that people facing disadvantage, discrimination and inequality can access independent support and be heard.

Tailored Services

As society changed, our services expanded to meet new and emerging needs. We tailored services for people experiencing mental ill health, older people, people with physical disabilities, people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities, autistic people, people facing financial hardship and welfare reform, parents involved in family court proceedings, and those navigating complex health and social care systems. We have supported victims of hate crime, people affected by crisis and those whose voices risked being overlooked.



Photo (above): Head of Advocacy Jane cuts a large cake at the Advocacy 30th anniversary celebrations at One Strawberry Lane

Innovation and Expertise

This innovation has also meant finding new ways to help people understand and exercise their rights. The launch of the DIY Advocate® self-advocacy app in 2017, followed by its redevelopment in 2021, provided practical tools to help people speak up for themselves.

More recently, we developed our Know Your Rights training programme, combining practical resources, digital tools and peer support to strengthen self-advocacy skills and confidence. Alongside direct advocacy, we increasingly share our expertise with the wider voluntary, community and social enterprise sector.

30 Years of Advocacy, Innovation and Influence

Our Social Justice Champions training helps organisations strengthen person-centred approaches, improve communication and embed rights-based practice in their everyday work. In recent years, our work with people experiencing life-changing injuries has grown significantly. Since 2016, Connected Voice Advocacy has developed specialist expertise supporting people with acquired brain injuries, neurological conditions and prolonged disorders of consciousness.

Working alongside rehabilitation professionals, case managers, legal representatives and families, independent advocacy helps ensure that the person's wishes, feelings and rights remain central to decision-making during what are often highly complex circumstances. This specialist work demonstrates how advocacy continues to evolve in response to emerging needs while remaining rooted in the principles of independence and empowerment.

Going Beyond Service Delivery

Additionally, we have contributed to policy, research and practice through national reviews, consultations and reports influencing advocacy and safeguarding. During the Covid-19 pandemic we helped rapidly develop advocacy principles alongside organisations across the country, while more recently contributing to work on mental health advocacy, safeguarding and decision-making rights. We will also continue to influence new Codes of Practice as the key Mental Health and Mental Capacity legislation changes.



Photo (above): A group photo of the Connected Voice Advocacy Team

> **One theme runs throughout our story that has been key to our stability: adaptability. Connected Voice Advocacy has continually evolved while remaining true to its purpose.**

Research and Partnerships

Our commitment to social justice has also led to influential research and partnership work. Through projects exploring hate crime, hate relationships and barriers to reporting, we have helped increase understanding of issues that often remain hidden. Working with universities, public bodies and community organisations, we have developed resources that continue to influence practice locally and nationally. Building on our research into Hate Relationships with Durham and Northumbria Universities

And the winner is...

The quality of our work has been recognised through multiple Advocacy Quality Performance Marks and national awards, including Outstanding Advocacy Service, Outstanding Service and Best Equality. These achievements reflect the dedication of our staff, volunteers, trustees and the people who have shaped our services.

One theme runs throughout our story that has been key to our stability: adaptability.

Connected Voice Advocacy has continually evolved while remaining true to its purpose. As we celebrate this milestone, we are proud of the role we have played in strengthening advocacy.

Thirty years on, our commitment remains the same: championing rights, promoting social justice and ensuring that people's voices are heard when it matters most. Here's to the next 30 years.

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How Strong Financial Management Unlocks Future Success

Richard Maxwell
Finance Manager



Let's be honest: nobody starts a charity, a community project, or a social enterprise because they just can't wait to play around with a spreadsheet.

You do it because you want to change things. Whether you are running a youth club, a mental health group, or a foodbank, your passion is what gets you out of bed.

But, passion alone won't pay the heating bill or cover next month's payroll. In the voluntary, community, and social enterprise sector, having your financial ducks in a row isn't about being corporate or boring. It is about survival. It is about making sure that the brilliant thing you built today is still around to help people five years from now.

Financial Stability – what is it?

When big commercial businesses talk about "financial stability," they are usually talking about profitability and shareholder equity.

In the VCSE sector, financial stability is the ability to maintain predictable, diverse income streams that consistently cover operating costs and ensure long-term service delivery. In essence, it means peace of mind. It means knowing you can keep delivering your services without waking up in a cold sweat every Sunday night wondering if a delayed grant is going to sink the whole ship. At its core, a financially stable VCSE organisation should consider (or have) the following things:

- **Diverse Income: Multiple funding sources, such as public contracts, grants, and private donations, rather than just one.**
- **Healthy Reserves: A pot of money tucked away that isn't tied to a specific project, ready to be used when real life happens.**
- **Full Cost Recovery: Ensuring that contracts or grants cover the true costs of running them, including overhead and fair staff wages.**
- **Accurate Forecasting: Predicting future income and spending accurately so leadership can spot any shortages early.**

Organisations should also be aware of potential threats to financial stability. These include:

- **Short-Term Contracts: Relying on year-to-year funding makes it hard to plan long-term projects or keep skilled staff.**
- **Public Spending Cuts: Local council budget crises or formal spending restrictions can instantly cut non-statutory VCSE funding.**
- **Rising Demand and Costs: High inflation increases the cost of running services and paying fair wages, while community need grows.**

> **Passion alone won't pay the heating bill or cover next month's payroll. In the voluntary, community, and social enterprise sector, having your financial ducks in a row isn't about being corporate or boring. It is about survival.**



Photo (above): Some of the Connected Voice Business Services team (L-R, Richard, Eve, and Doug)

How Strong Financial Management Unlocks Future Success

Simple Health Checks

You don't need a degree in accounting to keep your organisation healthy. If you look at your books, there are just a few simple benchmarks that can tell you exactly where you stand.

First up is your operating reserve, otherwise known as the "rainy day fund". A basic rule of thumb is to aim for three to six months of running costs kept in an unrestricted pot. If your organisation costs £10,000 a month to run, you ideally want £30,000 to £60,000 sitting in reserve. This is the cushion that stops a late grant payment from turning into an organisational emergency. Operating costs vary hugely, so ensure you understand your monthly costs to set and appropriate reserve.

Next is the 33% rule for income. Check where your money came from last year. If more than a third of it came from one single place - like one specific government grant or a single major funder - your risk is higher. If that one funder cuts their budget, you are left with a massive hole to plug.

Mixing it up with a blend of small donations, community fundraising, trust grants, and maybe even trading your own services (like running a café or selling training) builds a much stronger foundation. This is much more challenging in the current economic climate, but still worth aiming for.

Stability vs. Sustainability

While the two terms are often used interchangeably, we need to draw a clear line between them:

- **Financial Stability is about the present moment. It means you have enough cash flow to cover this month's payroll, next quarter's project costs, and minor unexpected emergency expenses safely.**
- **Financial Sustainability is the strategic future. It means having a multi-year business model, recurring donor retention programs, and resilient income sources capable of adapting to changes over decades.**

When your finances are messy, you are constantly stuck in "crisis mode." You spend all your energy chasing pots of money just to plug immediate gaps. It is exhausting, and it takes your focus away from the people you are trying to help.

But when you get organised - when your cash flow forecasts are up to date and your board can see exactly what is coming in and going out - you can pivot and shift from a defensive panic to a positive strategy.

There is a mindset in the VCSE sector that charities shouldn't hold onto money. Some people worry that if they have a healthy bank balance, it looks like they aren't spending enough on their cause. As long as you follow a clear reserves policy, it is good to have funds in reserve.

Ultimately, good organised financial management and true stability will protect your mission, allowing organisations to make proactive strategic choices rather than having to be reactive.

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Need support?

Our Business Services team is here to help you with all of your financial needs, drawing on more than 30 years of expertise. Get in touch with Richard on the details above for more information.

Digital Skills: The Stepping Stones to Stability

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Imagine for a moment that you are unable to access the internet. You have no phone, laptop or tablet to reach for.

It is hard to believe in this seemingly endless online world, but only 1 in 3 adults are comfortably online*. When we consider how much of everyday life now takes place digitally – from work, to school, and socialising - this technology gap has significant impact on the lives of those who are excluded.

Life-Altering Implications

Not having access to digital services can negatively impact every aspect of a life, causing considerable anxiety and instability. Those who are digitally excluded or facing digital poverty can struggle to access online banking for regular financial management, face limited access to jobs or educational opportunities, barriers to essential services such as the NHS, and much more. It's an increased admin burden that can have far-reaching consequences – for example, being able to pay bills easily online can be the difference between mounting debt and the possible loss of a home, and a safe, stable home environment.



Photo (above): A group photo celebrating the launch of Gateshead Tech4Communities, with laptops and tablets in the foreground

The North East Gap

Worryingly, data shows that the North East is one of the areas that is most – if not the most – impacted by digital exclusion.

The Good Things Foundation's Digital Nation 2026 report gives important insights about digital inclusion in the UK: 82% of people say the internet helps them connect with friends and family; 74% say they use online tools to help them manage their health; 74% have better opportunities for learning or employment; and people with higher digital financial capability save £815 more per year. These are the strengths and benefits of being able to access the digital world when, where, and how a person needs and choses to.

In my role as Gateshead Digital Inclusion in Health and Social Care Project Manager at Connected Voice, I have been working to improve digital inclusion in Gateshead for three and a half years through a meaningful range of local and national partnerships, including the Digital Poverty Alliance; Gateshead Council, and VCSE organisations.

Gateshead Tech4Communities

One of the projects that is supporting this mission is the Gateshead Tech4Communities Project, which sees refurbished devices donated by Gateshead Council and Gateshead people given back to Gateshead communities in digital poverty. Devices that cannot be refurbished re-enter the circular economy through parts or recycling.

Devices also come with free connectivity when needed, and digital skills support is available also in person thanks to Gateshead Libraries Digital Team. The pilot is currently midway through, and the first donations have been processed and distributed.

*Source: www.goodthingsfoundation.org/discover/our-news/our-news-2026/digital-nation-2026-data-launch

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I worked with the organisation Hope Beyond Borders to support digital skills sessions for their group last year. They support people whose first language is Spanish, and that are migrants or seeking sanctuary. Twenty of the families they are supporting have recently received the donation of a laptop.

Hope Beyond Borders have reported that Tech4Communities: "has had a very positive impact on our community. Families have told us that having their own device has helped them continue practicing the digital skills they learned during our sessions."



Photo (above): An example of a donated laptop being unboxed.

A high proportion of donations have gone to children, supporting their education. Every parent felt that their or their child's digital skills had improved because of receiving a device through Tech4Communities.

In particular, parents shared stories of how the new device had helped their child become more digitally confident. One parent said:

"[The device] has helped my children to always [be] eager to learn new things."

Another parent commented:

"[My daughter] is learning PowerPoint and last night made a slide show all about lions in twenty minutes before dinner."

These two comments demonstrate how technology can foster potential. Devices are reported as being used for schoolwork, but also for accessing government support, news, hobbies, and wider educational platforms.

This renewed access to reliable devices, connectivity, and support is increasing skills and confidence, breaking down barriers and making Gateshead communities stronger and more stable.

Being comfortable online is something that all communities have a right to, and we will continue to work to ensure we support as many people as possible in this goal.

> **"Tech4Communities has had a very positive impact on our community. Families have told us that having their own device has helped them continue practicing the digital skills they learned during our sessions."**
>
> **Hope Beyond Borders**

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Can you help?

If you are interested in getting involved in digital inclusion in Gateshead, please contact Alessandra on the details above.

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