



# State of the Southwark Voluntary and Community Sector

Research Findings and Call to Action

**2022-2023**



Community  
Southwark



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# 1. Executive summary

## Background

This report reflects the contributions of hundreds of different voices from Southwark's Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) and its partners. It presents a picture of the sector and proposes actions to support and strengthen it. We are grateful to all those who gave their time, expertise, and thoughtful input. We are also grateful to Southwark Council and many of Southwark's grant funders who have engaged so positively. The Council's 2022 manifesto recognised the importance of community-led action, and its Southwark 2030 work gives a real opportunity to use the findings from this research to work strategically and in genuine partnership with the VCS.

## Southwark's Voluntary and Community Sector

The sections which follow give considerable detail about the challenges faced by the sector in 2022-23. Despite huge demands of austerity, Covid-19, and the cost-of-living crisis, people remain dedicated and committed. The VCS in Southwark is loved and trusted. It is embedded in and respected by communities. Whilst the research gave a chance for people to highlight problems, what came through most strongly was a determination to tackle the issues, including the deep-rooted inequalities in our borough, and to be creative with the solutions.

The research shows Southwark's VCS is vibrant, diverse, and complex – like the borough and its people. It cannot be treated as a homogenous block by decision makers or by the sector itself. Extra care must be taken to ensure that all voices are heard, especially from groups which are smaller or historically under-represented. It is this diversity and complexity which has enabled the VCS in Southwark to be so resilient, and adaptable and to reach those in greatest need.

## Recommendations

The report focuses on issues coming from the research:

- with the greatest impact on the VCS,
- that affect the largest number of groups,
- where the biggest differences can be made.

Funding, premises, and relationships with statutory partners are the areas which meet these criteria and around which the report's recommendations are focused. Other issues, such as staff and volunteer recruitment and retention, are discussed in section 9.

## Call to Action

In this report the VCS has come up with a call to action. A call for:

- Funders to invest in the VCS itself – through core and unrestricted funding, and simpler application processes.
- All partners to come together to tackle the long running challenge of community space and premises.
- The Council and other statutory partners to commit to clear principles for engagement and commissioning.

## Key Recommendations:

### Funding



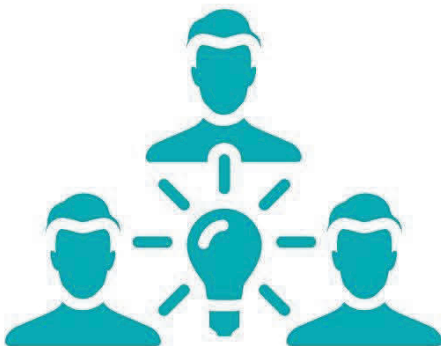
- Top Southwark funders sign up to doing funding differently
- Pilot, test, and share new approaches to funding decisions
- Support fundraising capacity

### Premises



- A genuinely affordable community space in every neighbourhood
- A VCS Premises Advice Service
- Policy changes at the Council's Property and Planning Departments

### Relationships with statutory partners



- A new, simple, and respectful set of principles in the VCS strategy
- A comprehensive review of commissioning with engagement from the VCS

## 2. Methodology

The core objectives of this report are to:

- Provide a snapshot of the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) in Southwark in 2022-23.
- Outline the key challenges faced by the sector.
- Put forward recommendations from the VCS for the VCS, the Council, funders, and Community Southwark to help improve conditions in the sector.
- Inform an evidence-based and transparent agenda for Community Southwark, Southwark Voice, and our partners.

To do this, the research required extensive data collection from over 200 VCS organisations taking place between September and December 2022. Different data collection methods were used and the focus was on the period 2022-23. Chart 1 shows the number of submissions for each of these:

- **Café conversations:** group discussions at a major networking event to highlight key areas of concern and potential solutions for the VCS. Contributions from attendees representing different-sized groups and services were captured on paper and analysed after the event.
- An **online survey** to collect quantitative data to show key concerns of the sector, distributed to the Community Southwark membership (Chart 2 shows a breakdown of survey submissions by income bracket).
- A series of telephone / online / in person **one-to-one interviews** to better understand the experience and ideas of VCS groups and individuals and gather case studies.
- Four **focus groups** exploring possible recommendations with in-depth discussion on how best to address challenges.

A financial contribution was offered to all VCS groups that participated in this research. This was made possible by kind donations from Sea Containers London, United St. Saviour’s Charity and ZS Associates. ZS Associates employees and a local volunteer, Janet Morris, conducted interviews and ZS also analysed interview and survey data in support of this project.

**Chart 1**

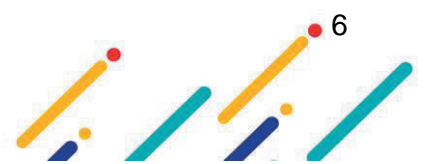
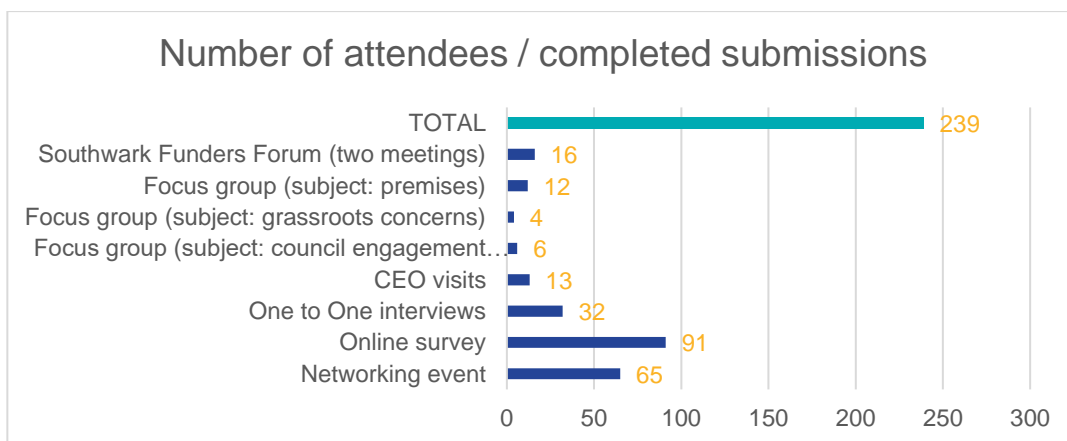
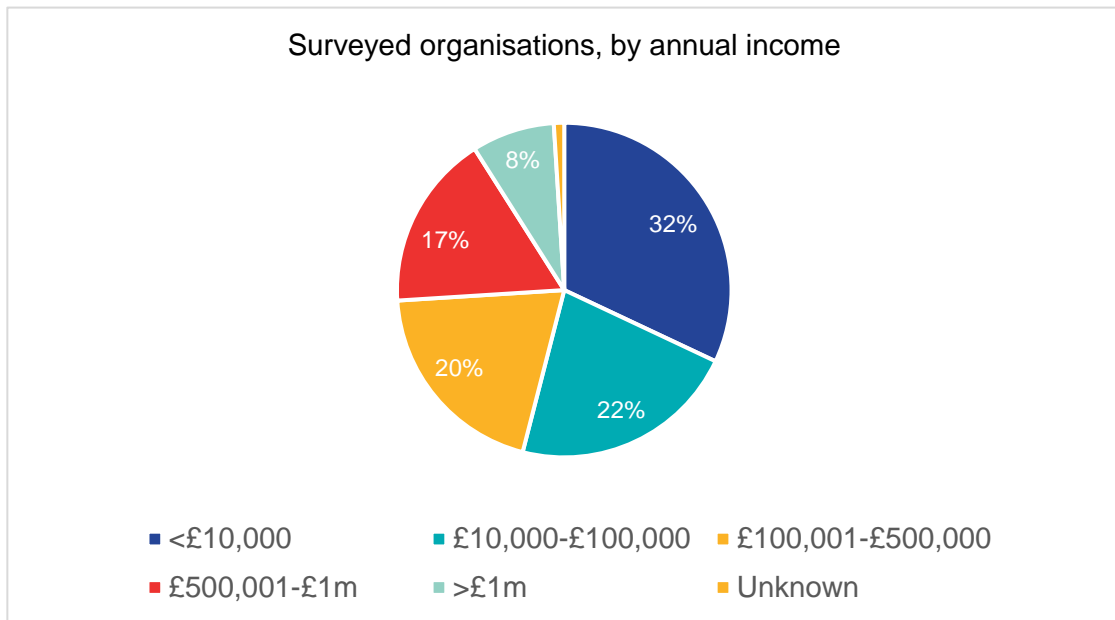


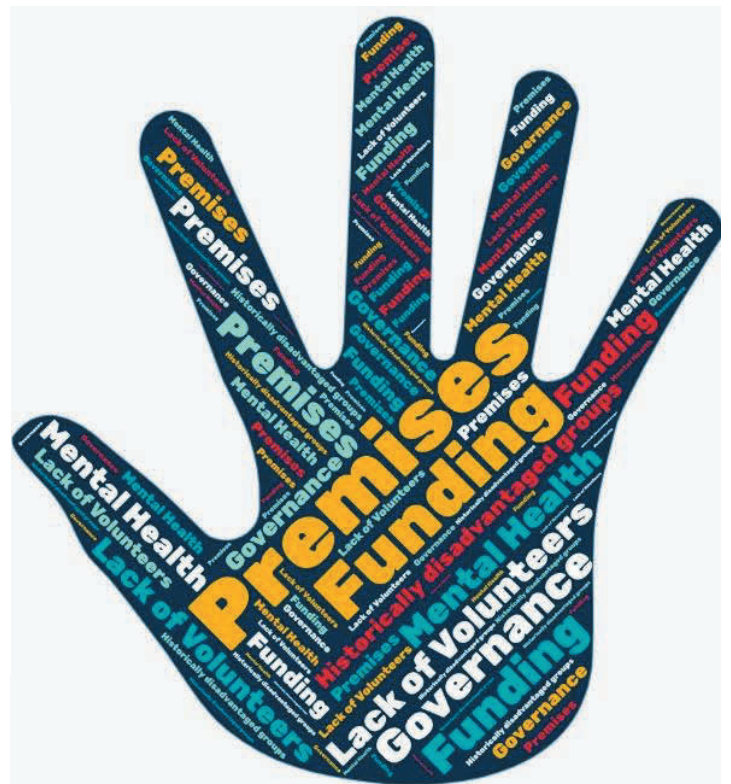
Chart 2



The word clouds below show the words discussed most frequently in the research.

Most common words in one-to-one interviews:

Most common words in the online survey question about 'top challenges':





## 3. Context

### 3.1 Southwark

Southwark is a densely populated inner London borough with a population of 314,000. Almost half the community belongs to an ethnic minority, including the largest Black African population in the UK. It also has some of the highest areas of poverty and deprivation in the UK, with 25,700 children living in poverty (as high as one in three in some wards). Health issues are prevalent in the borough: 55,000 adults have a mental health condition, 41% of children in Year 6 are obese, and there is the second highest level of sexually transmitted infections and HIV in England. Air pollution and poor housing conditions are amongst the worst in England.

These stark figures are symptoms of huge inequalities that were clearly demonstrated during the pandemic. Covid-19 resulted in an increased demand for care, which disproportionately affected ethnic minorities in Southwark, as well as women and those living with disabilities. 29% of Black residents live in the most deprived neighbourhoods, compared to 17% of White residents. Similarly, 46% of Black residents experience food insecurity, contrasted with 9% of White residents.<sup>1</sup>

Despite these challenges, Southwark's VCS is vibrant and plays a vital role in tackling these inequalities and giving marginalised people and communities practical support, advice, and a voice for change.

Southwark is an economically active borough with a thriving business sector. Despite pockets of deprivation, there are also affluent wards and notable development and regeneration projects. Some of these projects have proved controversial because of a lack of input from the local community in their design, an inadequate supply of affordable housing and workplaces, and disruption to the local economy. And yet the wealth, resource, and skills in the borough provide an opportunity for the VCS.

### 3.2 Community Southwark

Community Southwark is the umbrella body for Southwark's VCS and supports charities, community groups, and individuals through capacity building, networks, and training. Community Southwark meets the varied needs of the diverse VCS in Southwark, from small volunteer-led grassroots community groups to more established charities. Our 1,000 members work with a wide range of people and communities from older people, to people with disabilities, to children and families and cover a wide range of different issues including food insecurity, mental health, and social exclusion.

**Community Southwark Vision:** A Southwark in which all communities and individuals can fulfil their potential.

#### Community Southwark's 2022-26 strategy:

1. A more impactful, collaborative, and sustainable Voluntary and Community Sector.
2. A more inclusive, diverse, and equal Southwark.
3. A Voluntary and Community Sector able to influence change.

<sup>1</sup> [JSNA Annual Report 2022](#), Southwark Council. Pages 9, 13, 14 18, 23, 28, 34 and 45.

## 4. The Voluntary and Community Sector in Southwark in 2022-23

Respondents across all data collection methods highlighted that events in recent years have proved challenging for the sector, but that they have also shown the unique value of the VCS.

The Covid-19 pandemic meant some groups received emergency funds from the Government to help meet the needs of the local community.<sup>2</sup> However, these funds have since been withdrawn, leading to a shortfall in finances to meet needs at the same time as the cost-of-living crisis impacts demand on services, finances, and capacity.

The severity of the challenges often overshadows the contributions VCS groups make. Groups reported that their positive impact is rarely celebrated and, when their achievements are recognised, they are too quickly forgotten. The sector stepped up during the Covid-19 pandemic, for example to distribute food parcels to vulnerable local people. It worked together with the Council through the Community Hub initiative, enabling vital support to be provided to some of the hardest-to-reach individuals and communities.

There are many attributes of the VCS that enable such impactful work to take place such as the sector's responsiveness: "Without going through any bureaucratic process...[the VCS] is able to better understand the communities living in the neighbourhoods" (Chief Executive, InSpire at St. Peters).

Other groups emphasised the sector's ability to work together: "The voluntary sector is made up of different groups, and it is very good at collaborating when needed. Small things really matter here" (member, Southwark Pensioners Action Group). Community Cycleworks CIC highlighted its connectivity, "There is always somebody willing to reply to you if you ask for information...this sector is about trying to connect people" (Director, Community Cycleworks CIC).

The Southwark VCS is vibrant, and diverse, and boasts a longstanding heritage. It also adds economic value. Data from the Charity Commission, Open Giving, and Southwark Council show that:

- There are over 1,324 registered charities in the borough.
- There are a further estimated 3,000 – 4,500 unregistered community groups according to Southwark Council.
- In 2021 there were over 45,086 filled volunteer positions in the borough, 4,626 of which were trustees and 1,066 corporate volunteers.<sup>3</sup>
- Over six million volunteering hours were completed which at the rate of London living wage brings an economic contribution to the life of the borough worth over £65 million.<sup>4</sup>
- One study estimates that £2 is saved for every £1 spent on the VCS, e.g. by providing mental health services that would otherwise cost the government.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> [Respond, Recover, Reset: Two Years On](#) (2022). Nottingham Trent University, Sheffield Hallam University and NCVO. Page 2.

<sup>3</sup> [Appendix 2: Supporting active communities - volunteer strategy for Southwark 21-24](#) (2021). Southwark Council. Page 1.

<sup>4</sup> [Appendix 2: Supporting active communities - volunteer strategy for Southwark 21-24](#) (2021). Southwark Council. Page 2.

<sup>5</sup> Franklin, Graham & Whittaker (2020). [Undervalued and overlooked? The need for better understanding civil society's contribution to the UK economy](#). Pro Bono Economics.

## 5. Grassroots groups

‘Grassroots’ and ‘community groups’ fit within the community sector, which is different from the charity sector although often viewed as part of the whole VCS. Grassroots community groups tend to be more informal often based in a neighbourhood, and without paid staff. Registered charities are more likely to have a hierarchy like professionalised industries, with managers, officers, and volunteers.

The community sector primarily has a ‘horizontal peer social system,’ where people freely associate with one another and, in doing so, form bonds while also working towards a goal that, if achieved, will improve the lives of those in a particular community. Such communities can be based on issues e.g. Covid-19 mutual aid, or geography, e.g. the Old Kent Road Community Campaign for reuse-led (not demolition-led) regeneration. They can also be based on interest or identity, e.g. the SUNBEAM Forum, a network to support Southwark’s Black and Minority Ethnic communities. This sector includes activists and informal networks of individuals focused on community action.

Some organisations are hard to categorise e.g. a group of activists who aspire to be a more formal voluntary organisation. In this respect, it can be difficult to establish which groups are grassroots. One attribute that does indicate whether a group exists in the grassroots of civic life is income, as larger organisations with paid staff tend to receive recurring annual income.<sup>6</sup> The survey for this research included a question about annual income. This provides a useful indication of the experiences and concerns of grassroots organisations, although groups may not always neatly fit into this criterion.

The research also included a focus group with ‘community activists’ from grassroots groups. Much of their input is picked up in the ‘Relationships with the Council and other statutory partners’ section. A key challenge for these smaller, less formal groups is how they can be heard in formal statutory structures. The council committed to investing in community-led action in its 2022 manifesto. Existing community groups are essential if this concept of community-led action is to be realised, but groups must be heard and take part in decisions. There is a feeling that people who regularly contribute and challenge are seen as the ‘usual suspects’. This attitude is perceived by groups as disrespectful to activists who volunteer to improve communities but may have different ideas about how to do so.

Community Southwark historically had two networks: Small Groups and Community Activists. These have been merged into a Grassroots Group. There is no collected data on how many grassroots groups there are in Southwark. National estimates are that total VCS activity carried out by grassroots groups is about three to five times greater than by registered charities<sup>7</sup>. The grassroots membership of networks varies. Southwark Planning Network, for example, has almost 100% grassroots membership. Others such as Southwark Legal Advice Network are made up primarily of registered charities. Southwark Voice (made up of the Chairs of all Southwark’s VCS networks) will consider how each network can explore the extent of grassroots groups in their area of work, and the most useful way for them to realise the following ideas.

- A Community Southwark needs assessment in partnership with grassroots groups.
- Administrative support, from printing facilities to accountancy, to help strengthen grassroots groups.
- A training and development pilot for grassroots activists to come together with peer advice, mentoring and action learning sets to tackle challenges in a collaborative way.

<sup>6</sup> E. Conn (2011), [Community engagement in the social eco-system dance](#). Third Sector Research Centre. Pages 6, 13 and 14.

<sup>7</sup> A. McCabe, J. Phillimore and L. Mayblin. [‘Below the radar’ activities and organisations in the third sector: a summary review of the literature](#), Third Sector Research Centre. Page 3.



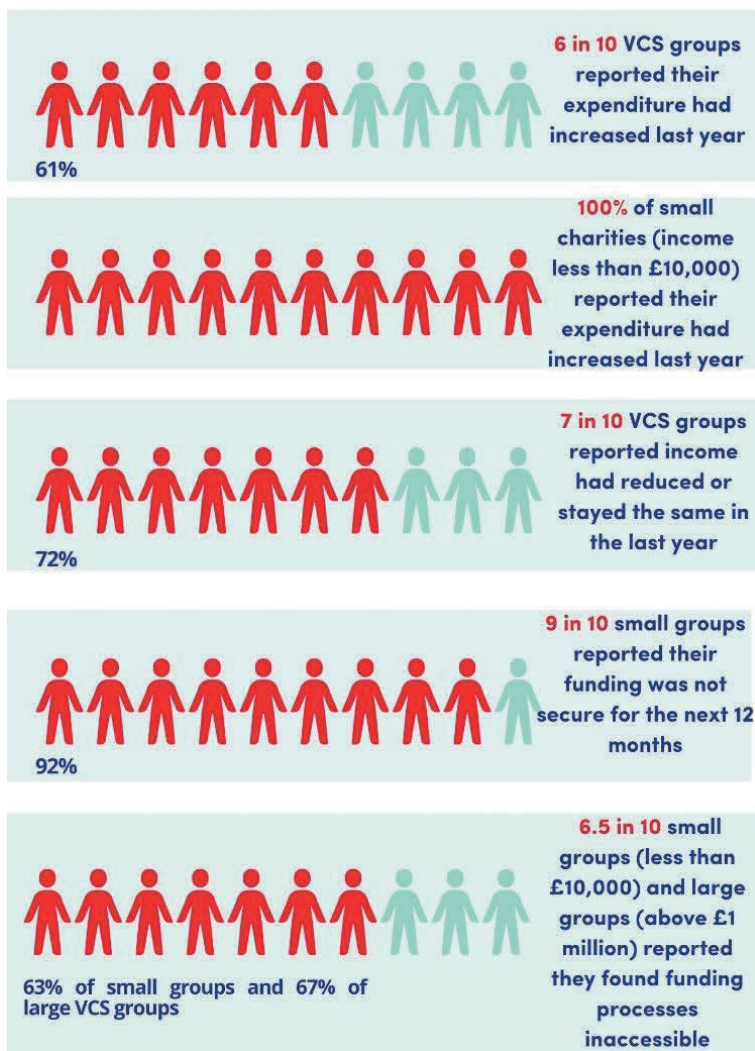
## 6. Funding

### 6.1 Funding introduction

Generating income has always posed a challenge for VCS groups. Events in recent years have exacerbated this issue, resulting in increased competition for pots of funding. In our research, funding was the most frequently cited challenge among the Southwark VCS. This was followed by premises which arguably also links to funding, given the pressure of paying for premises.

- 66% of all groups reported funding as one of their top five challenges.
- 50% of VCS organisations of income between £100,000 and £500,000 raised funding as their biggest challenge.
- This challenge is even greater for smaller groups – often those who have been historically under-represented with 92% of small groups (income less than £10,000) reporting that their funding is not secure for the next 12 months.

Chart 3: Funding insights from the survey



## Key funding issues

<b>Restricted/short-term funding:</b>	<b>Time-consuming application processes</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Funding is often linked to ‘projects’ and it is difficult to get funding for unrestricted funding or core costs.</li> <li>Lack of funding for core costs means that core functions such as finance, HR, and leadership are not given enough priority and affect an organisation’s ability to be sustainable and impactful.</li> <li>Restricted and short-term funding (that is not multi-year) limits community groups’ ability to respond to changing needs and challenges</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The application and monitoring process is often complicated and inflexible, even for small grants. Time is then taken away from delivering services which limits what groups can achieve, their impact, and how they grow.</li> <li>Written applications benefit people with English as a first language or who are educated to degree level, not necessarily those who are best at delivering projects.</li> <li>Because of complex processes, funding may not reach small user-led groups or groups that have the most trusting relationships in their communities and could be highly impactful. They are not part of the ‘establishment’ and do not have strong, existing relationships with funders.</li> </ul>
<b>Decision making/feedback:</b>	<b>Cost-of-living crisis and other issues:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Decisions are often made by what is perceived as an anonymous panel that may not be sufficiently diverse and does not appear to be accountable or transparent.</li> <li>VCS groups spend time on applications but then have little or no useful feedback as to why funding was not agreed and how they could improve their application.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>People running organisations are also delivering frontline services.</li> <li>Current funding systems limit flexibility.</li> <li>As the cost-of-living crisis continues to deepen, VCS groups have reported increasing demand for services but there are fewer resources to meet this need and it is harder to find sustainable funding sources. This situation is likely to worsen.</li> </ul>

## 6.2 Restricted/short-term funding

“ Funding across the VCS is often short-term project focussed funding. At Breathe Arts Health Research we pride ourselves on delivering long-term, sustainable programmes which can be challenging when faced with short-term funding.

**Head of Scalability, Breathe Arts Health Research**

(We need) more core and unrestricted. Flexibility is key if organisations are to survive cost of living, following austerity, Brexit and Covid.

**Founder, Rastafari Movement**

No-one ever funds the Finance Manager

**Director, Pecan** ”



“CAPACITY is the biggest challenge –you need money to pay people to do what the organisation is trying to do. Organisations may know what to do but lack the resources/capacity to do it. Volunteering can only go so far; people only have limited time to volunteer. Organisations need to be self-sufficient, which probably means they need to generate income.”

**Blue Bermondsey BID Manager**

Restricted and short-term funding was a consistent challenge for respondents completing the survey and taking part in interviews. Often, VCS groups are competing for sources of funding that are unlikely to sustain them for long periods of time. One report notes, “Short-term funding is particularly problematic because most charities are dealing with long-term problems.”<sup>8</sup>

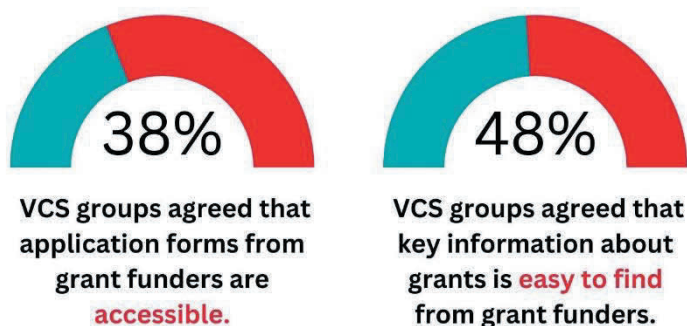
“The consequence of this approach is that VCS groups are continually firefighting without enough time to develop strategy” (CEO, Pecan). This reactive approach, which responds to issues as they are happening, is rarely able to address long-term problems, ranging from chronic staffing issues to systemic inequalities, e.g. disparities in education among Southwark’s BAME communities.<sup>9</sup>

Restricted funding, where core costs and overheads are often not funded at all, causes sustainability issues. Investment in organisations themselves is crucial if they are to be resilient and adapt to both short and long-term pressures.

Restricted and short-term funding affects an organisation’s ability to plan for the long term which in turn limits their ability to grow. Under the current model, building capacity by, for example, hiring paid staff or renting larger premises is not realistic for groups reliant on short-term grants.

### 6.3 Time-consuming application and monitoring processes

Chart 4



<sup>8</sup> [Small charities responding to COVID-19: Summer 2021 update](#) (2021). Lloyds Bank Foundation. Page 15

<sup>9</sup> [Appendix 3: Public Health Division Place & Wellbeing](#) (2020). Southwark Council. Page 1.

Lengthy application processes may also deter community groups from using their limited time and resources to complete them in the first place, particularly if grant funders have turned down previous applications. This prevents groups from growing and forces them to ‘live hand to mouth.’

Many groups expressed frustrations about the impact of lengthy applications on frontline work: “Whatever we can do to stop the massive time-sink of fundraising applications will stop money being drained out of service delivery” (Director, Blackfriars Settlement).

Although larger charities might be able to afford a dedicated fundraiser, one group notes, “Smaller organisations can’t afford to have a fundraiser on their team, so you’re doing it by yourself” (Project Coordinator, Step Out).

Another organisation takes issue with how grant funders request information: “It really doesn’t have to boil down to a beautifully written piece. Understanding the idea and looking at the bigger picture would have been very helpful for organisations like ours which is led by people from deprived and migrant backgrounds” (Staff, The Centre for the Advancement of Development and Human Rights).

Several research participants noted that the application forms are complicated and that there are unreasonable monitoring requirements attached to them:

“ The Council Neighbourhoods Fund application is reasonably straightforward, but the documentation requirements once the funding has been awarded, are quite onerous.  
**Treasurer, Bermondsey Street Festival Association**

Monitoring and end of project reports can take up a lot of time for small amounts of funding.  
**Volunteer, Friends of Burgess Park** ”

## 6.4 Decision making and feedback

There were also many examples given of funders taking many months to respond to funding applications, leaving groups with uncertainty in the meantime. It was not uncommon to hear of groups waiting well over six months for decisions. Whilst groups appreciated that funders also have limited capacity, they suggested that reducing the administrative processes for both funders and potential grantees would assist all involved.

Across the VCS, there are few groups satisfied with feedback given for unsuccessful applications, e.g. just 6% of groups in the £10,000-£100,000 income bracket (see Chart 5). If an application takes a long time to complete, a lack of feedback for an unsuccessful application brings even more frustration, particularly for groups with fewer resources.

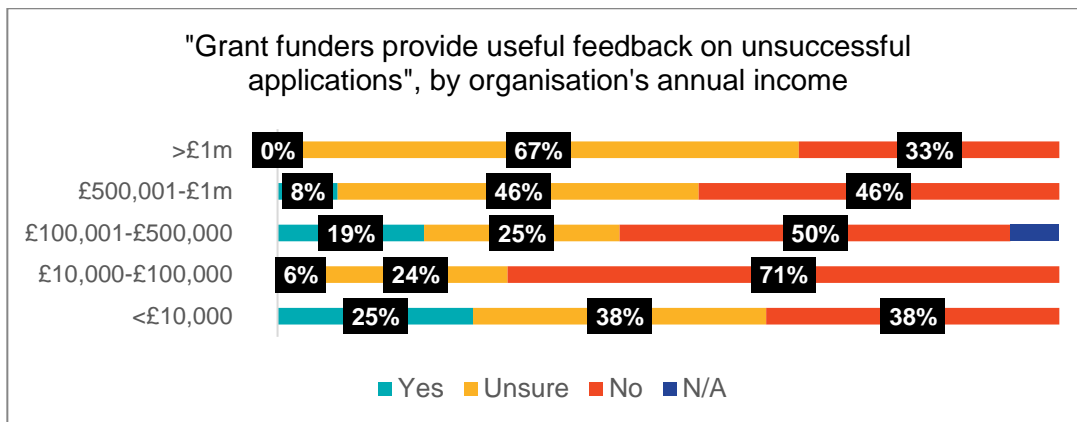
When feedback is provided, it often lacks detail: “Feedback on unsuccessful applications is often vague...Funders could be more specific” (Company Administrator, Theatre Peckham). The advantages of comprehensive feedback are clear: it enables organisations to continually improve their application responses, thereby improving their chances of bidding successfully.



Furthermore, there is also a perception from VCS groups that there is a lack of transparency from those making decisions about grants and a lack of input from those rooted in communities about how funding decisions are made. This has been a particular concern for ethnic minority-led groups and why it is so important that the Council has set aside some ring-fenced Equalities Grant funding.

Participatory grant making (devolving decision-making power to the very communities impacted by funding decisions) has the potential to tackle many of the challenges VCS groups face with regards to fundraising. There are many ways in which it can be done and many examples from all over the UK where funders and communities have worked together to develop a participatory grant making process. In Southwark, The Giving Lab set up by the Social Investment Partnership, enables residents, local organisations, and other service providers in Walworth to work together to change how things are currently done.

**Chart 5**



## 6.5 The cost-of-living crisis

There are many reasons why the issue of funding particularly affects VCS groups at the moment, from the removal of Covid-19 emergency funds to council budget reductions. At present, the cost-of-living crisis is the most significant barrier to sound finances.

“ Raising funds is definitely one of our biggest challenges. The cost-of-living is increasing rapidly and can massively impact the budgets of the organisation. ”

**CEO, InSpire at St Peters**

VCS groups have incurred higher costs because of the cost-of-living crisis, particularly on energy bills. For example, Pembroke House reported an unexpected additional energy bill of £10,000 for which they had not budgeted. 61% of groups reported higher expenditure in 2022 compared to the previous year; however, just 28% of groups reported increased year-on-year income. Higher costs have had a significant impact on groups of all incomes (see Chart 6), but this is not the only effect of this crisis on VCS groups.

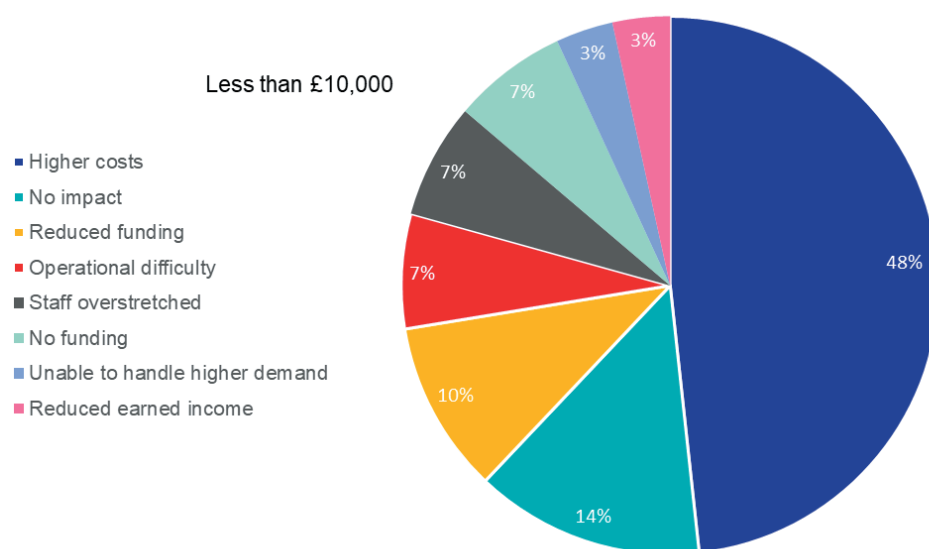


The cost-of-living crisis has also affected service users. According to Southwark Council research, people already in a vulnerable position, for example those on low incomes, are being, and will continue to be, most deeply impacted by the current economic situation. Low-income households spend a higher proportion of total expenditure on food, housing, and energy – areas which have seen the highest inflation; and they have less ability to cut back on essentials (40% for the lowest income group). Also, there is evidence that the increasing cost of living can significantly impact those already affected by other factors such as poor mental health or disability.<sup>10</sup>

The two key drivers of the cost-of-living crisis – fuel poverty and food insecurity – disproportionately affect Black residents of the borough, placing them in a more difficult situation as the crisis intensifies.<sup>11</sup> In October 2022 the Runnymede Trust revealed that Black households are more than twice as likely to be in deep poverty than their White peers.

This has driven demand for services, stretching budgets further. The complications resulting from diminished budgets and increased demand are summed up by The Ernest Foundation, a group that supports people affected by HIV: “The cost-of-living crisis is having a great impact on service-users. They cannot afford essentials and food. The Ernest Foundation has been supporting them with some of these things and when things are out of our reach, we refer them to food banks. We refer those living in Southwark, and who have a fixed address, to Southwark Council for support in paying their energy bills. But most have no fixed address. The issue now is that we have also been impacted with the cost-of-living crisis and can hardly satisfy the people we support.” (CEO, The Ernest Foundation)

**Chart 6: “In what ways has the rise in the cost of living impacted your organisation?” Less than £10,000**

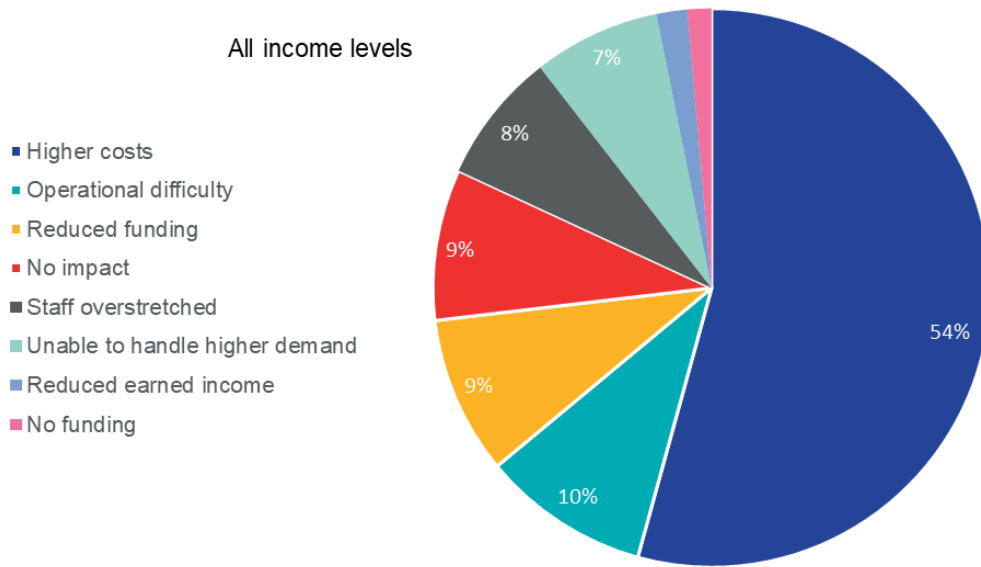


<sup>10</sup> *Cost of Living Crisis: Impacts across protected characteristics* (2022). Southwark Council. Page 3 and 5.

<sup>11</sup> [JSNA Annual Report 2022](#). Southwark Council. Page 20.



**Chart 7: “In what ways has the rise in the cost of living impacted your organisation?”**



## 6.6 Recommendations: Funding

It is unsurprising that funding comes through as the biggest issue for VCS groups in Southwark in 2022-23. It is also one that disproportionately affects smaller groups which don’t have sufficient fundraising capacity or existing relationships with funders. Across all groups there are challenges of complicated application processes, unclear decision making, and not enough constructive feedback.

### Recommendations for Community Southwark:

Community Southwark currently offers advice and training around fundraising, but the research shows that more support is needed by the sector. Community Southwark must:

- Focus more on **helping groups make fundraising applications**.
- Give **more training and make connections** between funders and groups.
- Continue to work with the Council on the **Grants Review of ring-fenced funding for BAME led groups** and lobby for this to be extended beyond one year, given how important it is for BAME communities to be able to access grants where they have historically been under-represented.
- Work with Partnership Southwark, United St Saviour’s, and other funders to **pilot new and different ways of grant making** which involve the VCS in the process. Share the learning from these trials widely.

### Recommendations for Funders:

Whilst we understand that many grant funders and the Council have tried to improve funding processes over recent years, there is still much more to be done. This report acknowledges the Institute for Voluntary Action Research (IVAR) eight principles of Open and Trusting Grant-Making and the Southwark funders already signed up to these.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> [Flexible Funding](#) (2022). IVAR.

Using the IVAR principles and the voices in this research we have set out key principles for funders in Southwark. We understand that some of these are large national charities, and some are smaller and traditional, but it is important that all these funders hear the voices in this research and their consistent call for change.

### Community Southwark will be asking Southwark’s top 20 funders\* to sign up to the following principles:

1. **Give core, unrestricted, multi-year grants.** Invest in VCS groups in communities so they can be resilient and adaptable.
2. **Simplify fundraising.** Make processes less time consuming, reduce bureaucracy, and recognise that making fundraising applications take up staff time which has a significant cost. Complex monitoring reports also take time away from frontline work.
3. **Take risks to reach new groups.** Those best able to write funding applications aren’t always best able to help those in need so think differently about how to work with new groups.
4. **Be flexible and timely.** Waiting a long time for funding is simply not an option for many VCS groups. And organisational needs change over time.
5. **Be open, transparent, and willing to listen to grantees.** Acknowledge the power dynamic and open up relationships with historically under-represented groups. Be open to learning about what works from VCS groups themselves – see the work of funders and grantees as a shared approach to tackling social problems. Making decisions behind closed doors with limited feedback creates distrust so explore having (paid) VCS representatives on panels or making decisions in the open.
6. **All use the same process – shift the burden of research and admin.** During Covid-19, funders in Southwark shared a portal which meant groups didn’t have to spend time researching different funders and submitting several applications.

\* Top funders in Southwark as detailed in the Rocket Science Community Investment Review in December 2021<sup>13</sup> with two additions are:

#### National / large scale Funders:

1. Guy’s and St Thomas’ Foundation
2. National Lottery Community Fund
3. City Bridge Trust
4. London Community Foundation
5. Trust for London
6. BBC Children in Need
7. London Catalysts

#### Southwark based / local funders:

8. Southwark Council
9. United St Saviour’s Charity
10. Alan and Babette Sainsbury Trust
11. Wakefield and Tetley Trust
12. Peter Minet Trust
13. Southwark Charities
14. St Olaves’ Foundation
15. Charterhouse in Southwark
16. Newcomen Collet Foundation
17. St George the Martyr Charity
18. St Olaves, St Thomas and St John United Charity
19. Peckham Settlement
20. Rotherhithe Consolidated Charities

<sup>13</sup> [Community Investment Review](#) (2021). Rocket Science. Page 35.



## 7. Premises

### 7.1 Premises Introduction

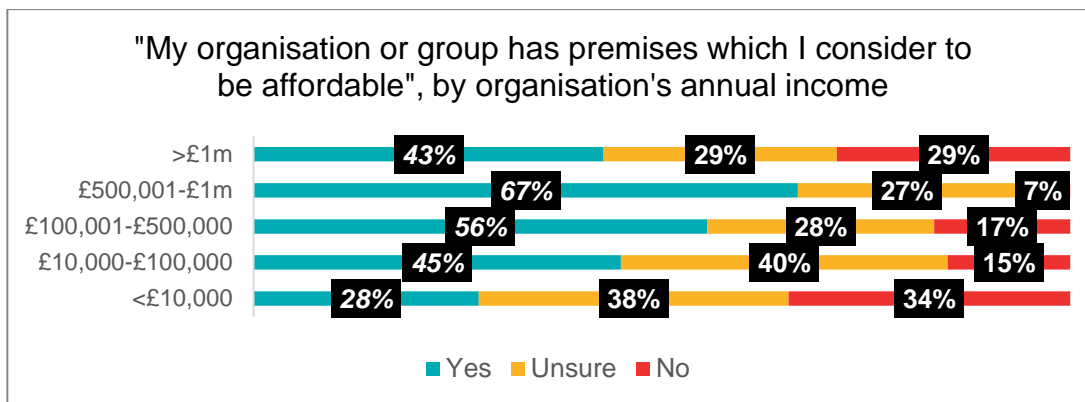
After funding, premises was cited in this research as the biggest challenge faced by the Southwark VCS. The unaffordability, unsuitability, and poor quality of some premises has been an ongoing issue for the sector in London generally, in addition to landlord disputes and a lack of awareness of environmental regulations, e.g. Minimum Energy Efficiency Standards.<sup>14</sup>

There is a danger that premises is seen as an ‘add on’ issue, but a decent place from which to operate is core to the healthy functioning of any organisation, for staff and volunteer morale and retention, and for the quality of services being delivered. It sends a fundamental message about the worth of an organisation and how much the work it does, and the people it serves, are valued. That so many excellent VCS groups operate from insecure, unaffordable, or unsuitable accommodation is unacceptable.

As one group notes, “We are a LGBTIQ+ Centre and provide crisis housing for the most marginalised members of our community. Our project was initially homeless itself - using a tour bus for our pilot shelter and moving between temporary spaces for years. We have gained secure buildings in recent years but for the LGBTIQ+ Centre (our main base) we have had to rent privately costing us over £50,000 per year, including business rates. It feels like the LGBTIQ+ sector is used when the Council wants us for publicity – like during Pride. But when we need help with something as basic as buildings to safely operate it goes quiet. The VCS should be cared for the most, but instead we are made to feel like we should be grateful to use the spaces that nobody else wants or they can’t get a commercial rent for” (Director, Outside Project).

### 7.2 Affordability

Chart 8



The issue of premises intersects with funding and particularly affects grassroots organisations. **Overall, 46% of groups do not have premises which they consider to be affordable.** Worryingly, this rises to 58% for BAME led groups.

<sup>14</sup> R. Papatheofilou, [London Charity Matters Property Survey 2020](#). Ethical Property Foundation.

One VCS director said, “I have applied for various offices. Obviously because of funding, I was not given priority” (Director, Women 4 Women Empowerment).

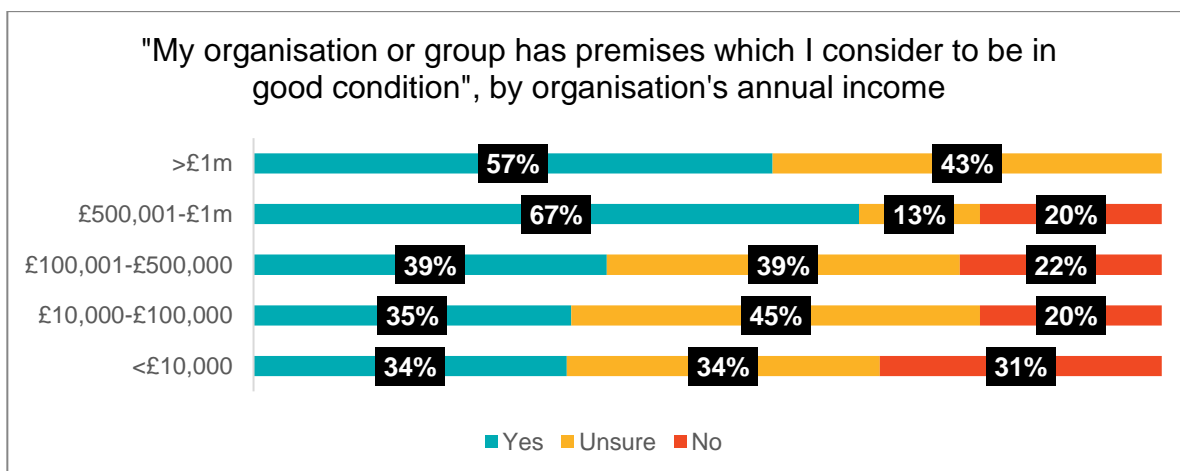
Some cannot afford space in the first place, forcing groups to run their activities from home, thereby making in-person meetings difficult to arrange. Consequently, it becomes harder to reach potential service users who are not accustomed to attending online meetings, or those who would prefer in-person meetings for the opportunity to socialise.

The problem has intensified in recent years with organisations like Southwark Playhouse seeing their rent increase by 77% in the last five years. The Somali Integration and Development Association has seen the rent charged by their private landlord go up by £5,000 in the last two years, a 25% increase. Their need is for a few desks, a confidential meeting area for their advice service, and a larger community space for activities. Other groups like Community Tech Aid need secure space to store equipment and data and to be accessible to those with disabilities. Whilst the type of premises needed can vary, the need for it to be affordable is consistent. VCS groups dependent on grant funding simply cannot afford market rents, yet the work they do brings considerable value and benefit to the community.

In some cases, co-working with other groups can be used to reduce expenditure. Likewise, grassroots networks can develop in some co-working spaces, such as Hatch Hubs at Peckham Levels. However, insufficient space can become an issue: “We are working in a co-working arrangement...this has proven extremely difficult for us as the number of people accessing our services continues to grow” (Staff, The Centre for the Advancement of Development and Human Rights). Additionally, premises such as Hatch Hubs at Peckham Levels are given temporary leases by the Council. Concerns about redeveloping co-working hubs into commercial spaces brings insecurity, particularly when these leases are up for review (as Peckham Levels will be in 2023).<sup>15</sup>

### 7.3 Suitability and condition of premises

Chart 9



**Across the whole survey, 54% of groups do not agree that their premises are in good condition.** This has implications for the safety of staff, volunteers, and service users.

<sup>15</sup> E. Conn, [‘What Should Happen Next?’](#) (2023). *Peckham Vision*.

The Chair of the Salmon Youth Centre set out challenges of a shared building with different legal responsibilities and where the partner was a larger organisation, in their case a housing association. Other groups raised concerns of leaking toilets, rats, and no heating.

An inadequate supply of premises that are fully accessible to those with disabilities also presents a challenge. “We have nowhere that we can afford to go so we can have meetings that are fully accessible...one of the other community groups I deal with recently paid £42 an hour for an accessible venue. That’s not sustainable” (Chair, The Walworth Society). Particularly since the removal of pandemic restrictions, groups have wanted in-person meetings to organise and network in the borough. A lack of safe and accessible premises remains a barrier to doing this.

## 7.4 Transparency

“ For years our group didn’t have a space, my car was like an office. We finally got a space in Peckham Levels....Southwark has spaces, but it’s how to identify the spaces. ”

**Founder, Holistic Well Women.**

Research from Centre of London noted that there are 24,000 commercial spaces going unused, as of 2018.<sup>16</sup> As the quote above shows, some groups do eventually discover premises that are affordable, suitable, and of good quality, albeit often due to luck. However, many spaces go unused for lengthy periods of time. Transparency about the public and private space available is essential to a sustainable and impactful VCS. It is also important for the Council and other landlords to be informed and strategic: understanding the requirements of VCS groups helps ensure these spaces are directed towards groups who most need them.

Without knowing what spaces are available, VCS organisations cannot focus their time and efforts on service delivery. Community Tech Aid described their experience of trying to find premises as “hugely overwhelming” (Staff, Community Tech Aid). They did not know where to begin looking and received no legal advice about signing leases. Finally, over several weeks, their three paid staff members - already working at maximum capacity - were distracted from frontline work to prioritise finding premises.

## 7.5 Southwark Council Planning and Property Departments

There is an urgent need for the Council’s Property and Planning Departments to be more transparent and open with the VCS about existing and potential premises available in the borough and how these are allocated.

<sup>16</sup> [‘Thousands of empty London properties could be used, think tank says’](#) (2018). BBC.



The Council is currently undertaking work on a Land Commission. The VCS needs to be an equal partner in these discussions. Southwark Charities gave a good example of where the Council can work with a charity to find better premises solutions, by exploring the ‘affordable workspace’ commitment in planning applications and how this could be made more genuinely affordable, e.g. by providing less space but at a deeper discount.

Generally, the VCS cannot afford commercial rates, especially given the pace at which land values in Southwark have increased over the past two decades. However, the social value generated by VCS organisations, sometimes hard to measure, brings unique benefits that high rents do not, for example fostering community, promoting altruistic behaviour, and mentoring young people. Other local authorities such as Lewisham Council have Social Value Officers to measure social value and make this more objective.

Southwark Council has been focused on the concept of neighbourhoods and community-led action, including in its 2022 manifesto, and this is welcomed by the VCS. Having accessible community space from where groups can operate is essential to thriving neighbourhoods.

## 7.6 Good practice

Some of Community Southwark’s sister organisations in other boroughs, such as Islington, Bromley, and Brent, manage office space for the VCS. This gives a home to the VCS, managed by the VCS.

The Coin Street Neighbourhood Centre on the borders of Southwark and Lambeth is an excellent example of formerly derelict land being run by the community for the community.

Liverpool has case studies of ‘social incubators’ – spaces where community groups can come together with good ideas in its Land Commission report.

Lambeth Council has a new VCS Premises Strategy which includes:

- A coordinated approach to affordable and available VCS property across the borough.
- Improvements to tenure for the VCS to give better sustainability for groups.
- Provision of clear information about accessing premises.
- Better support, information, and training on how to manage community spaces well and setting out clearly all the responsibilities involved.
- The Council / public sector and VCS partners working together to ensure benefits for Lambeth residents are maximised, and inclusion remains central to use of community spaces.
- Working towards greater standardisation of future offers of tenure to provide transparency, fairness and consistency, and building on the partnership approach between the Council / public sector and the VCS sector.
- Looking more creatively at using existing spaces that are currently underutilised.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> [Lambeth Voluntary and Community Sector Strategy](#) (2018). Lambeth Council.



## 7.7 Recommendations: premises

The challenge of VCS premises is long running, has major impact on services and morale, and affects the sector widely, particularly groups which have been historically under-represented in terms of race or other protected characteristics. It is also an area where there is a possibility to make a huge difference through genuine partnership and strategic thinking across the VCS, funders, private, and statutory sectors.

### Recommendations for Community Southwark, funders, Southwark Council, and other partners:

1. **A goal of genuinely affordable community space for the VCS in every neighbourhood of the borough to be agreed by all partners.** Ideally this would be multifunctional community space(s) that can host desks, activities, meetings, and events. It would be either newly built or repurposed from an existing building(s). It could be a collection of facilities or spaces in a geographic area, co-ordinated and run by the VCS or by other partners. The Council or health agencies could rent desks in these community spaces.
2. **A complete map of community spaces.** To achieve the goal of space in every part of the borough a strategic view must be taken of the premises already available across the borough (existing and potential) and where there is space being underutilised. This must be matched against VCS needs for different types of premises, e.g. desk space, activity space, meeting rooms, or events.
3. **Where gaps exist partners should work together to find solutions.** These could include speaking to land owners such as corporate organisations about accessing space, securing funding from trusts and foundations to pay for space, or working with Southwark Planning Officers to secure affordable space in new developments.
4. **The VCS needs a comprehensive advice service** relating to premises, including finding spaces, lease advice, funding rents, disabled access, and community assets.
5. **Southwark’s planning process** should redefine ‘affordable’ workspace for the VCS and look at using funds to improve existing spaces. It should also look at how the Community Infrastructure Levy is used to support community organisations.
6. **A jointly funded senior officer(s) working with the VCS, the Council, funders, and the private sector is needed to make this happen.** They would co-ordinate between the VCS, the Council, and private sector, or other premises like schools, and provide matching services and advice to the VCS. They could be based partly with the VCS and partly at the Council’s offices in the Property or Planning Departments.
7. **The Council should not be seeking to maximise profit from VCS tenants.** The social value they add to the borough should be understood and recognised. The metrics should not be made over-complicated – the Council should trust the VCS to assess their social value as far as possible.
8. **Other ideas should be explored** such as rent-free periods for VCS tenants, co-location within council offices and / or libraries for VCS tenants, a marketing campaign aimed at local commercial landlords with hard-to-rent properties who could make these available to VCS tenants at a low rent (with the advantage to them of low / no business rates).



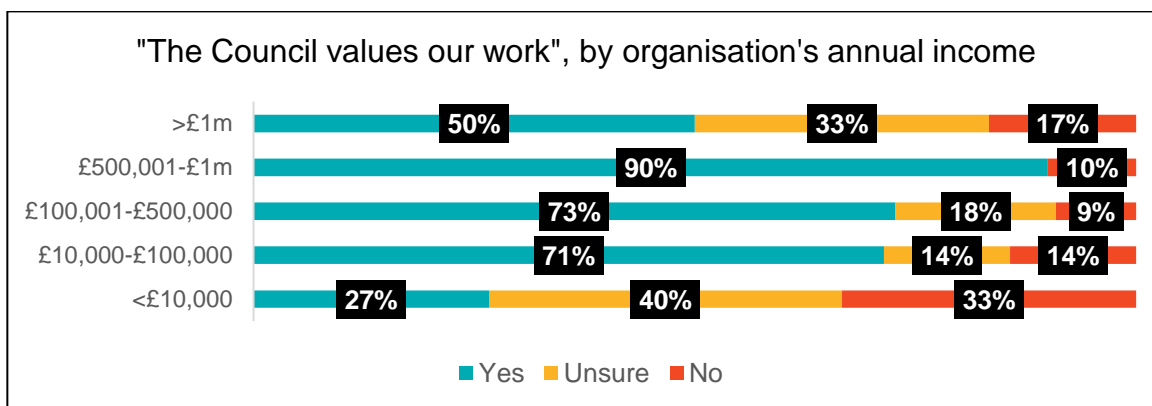


## 8. Relationship of VCS with Southwark Council and other statutory organisations

Opinions about the Council and other statutory bodies differ among the VCS, and it is noted that some negative experiences may be historic. Among grassroots organisations, there is frustration that public institutions – particularly the Council – do not listen attentively enough on a regular basis. From the focus groups in this research, local organisers contend there is a culture within the Council that views some of them as the ‘usual suspects,’ i.e. as a source of undesirable contributions rather than fulfilling an important role as active citizens. This prevents a meaningful dialogue between citizens and council officials which, in turn, means problems in the community often do not get fixed.

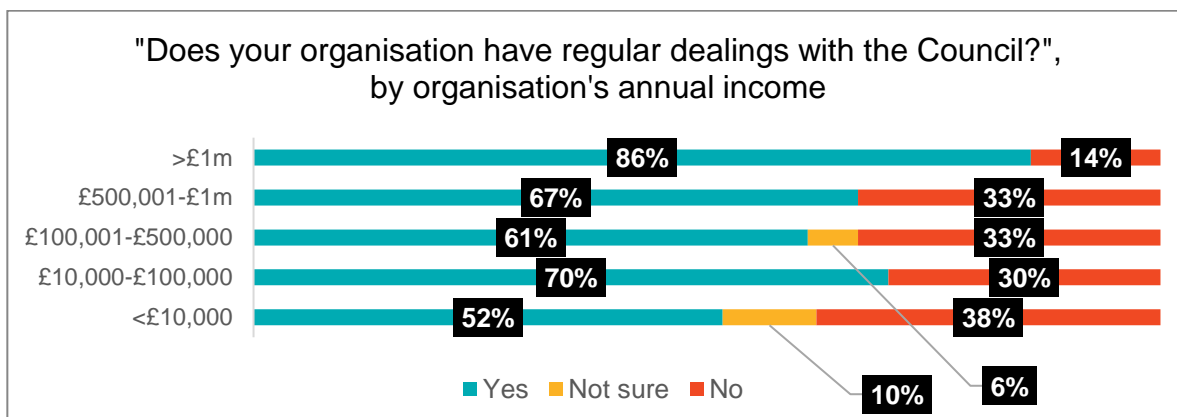
This view is reinforced by survey data. Larger organisations tend to have a more positive or neutral view of the Council. By contrast, grassroots organisations tend to have a significantly more negative experience with the Council, e.g. just 27% of groups with an annual income of less than £10,000 believe the Council values their work (see Chart 10).

**Chart 10**



Overall, 62% of all surveyed organisations reported having regular dealings with the Council, while 33% reported having no regular dealings with the Council. Of all income categories, organisations with annual income of less than £10,000 have the fewest dealings with the Council (see Chart 11).

**Chart 11**



Other organisations acknowledge that Southwark Council is, according to one research participant, “very well-resourced” compared to other councils (Grants Manager, Southwark Charities). Another says Southwark Council is a “very active local authority” that does its best with a decreasing budget (Staff, Southern Housing Group). This has been confirmed by one Southwark Council official: “The main challenge is around money...as a council, we have lost something like £227 million per year to spend” (Community Engagement Manager, Southwark Council).

Section 8 focuses on the Council’s communications and decision making. It acknowledges efforts by the Council to improve relations with the VCS and puts forward recommendations to improve genuine partnership working. Although council relationships are the most common statutory partner for VCS groups, the experiences and recommendations also apply to other statutory partners such as the Metropolitan Police, Integrated Care System health partners, and the Greater London Authority.

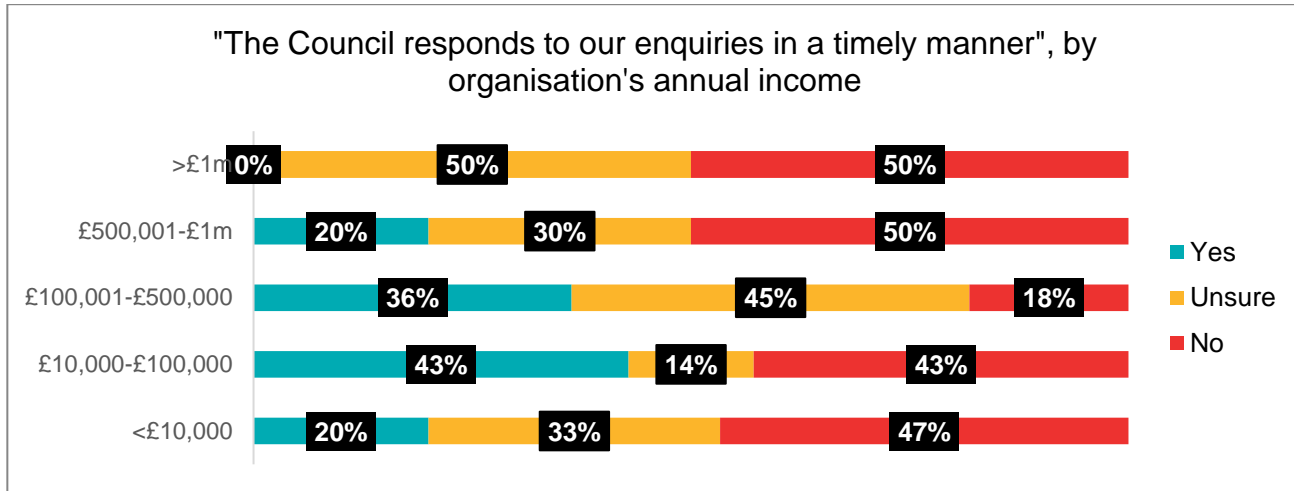
## 8.1 Communications

Issues with communications include listening and following through, inaccessibility, circulating information at short notice, and slow or no responses. There were frustrations about complicated jargon and the expectation that the VCS should respond quickly when this is not reciprocated (see Chart 12). Some examples of these challenges are set out below:

- Listening and following through: “There’s been so many promises from the Council that have not been fulfilled...it took one of the new ward councillors walking around one evening during a campaign to see how bad things are in terms of anti-social behaviour, and some of the young people of the estate not having anything to do. We had scaffolding up on one of the tower blocks and they climb up the scaffolding...A councillor saw this and said, ‘Is this how bad it is?’ I said, ‘It’s worse. You’ve just seen the tip of it.’ She goes, ‘Why is no one doing anything about it?’ I said, ‘Well, because you guys don’t listen. We tell you but you don’t take us seriously.’” – Member, Brandon Estate TRA.
- Inaccessible website: “One of the biggest challenges is getting information from institutional websites: some of them are atrocious...Better resourcing is needed and clearer information.” – Member, Southwark Pensioners Action Group.
- Circulating information at short notice: “The current process for the festival involves different agencies, such as police and licensing, making specific requests to the organisers who have to deal with each of them individually. This requires a lot of time and effort... Could the Council make it easier for volunteers by streamlining the processes and doing more coordination?” – Director, Bermondsey Street Festival.
- Slow or no responses: “Sent out a wide range of communications to council officers but responses are generally very slow in coming back.” – Member, Southwark Pensioners Action Group.



Chart 12

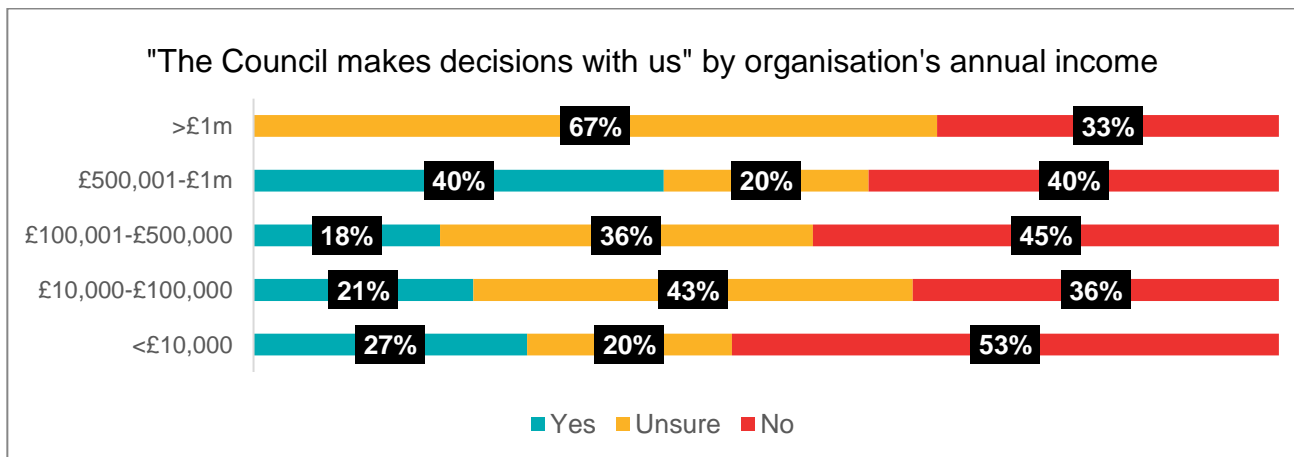


## 8.2 Decision making

The term ‘co-design’ (sometimes referred to as ‘co-production’) is often used by council officials to mean a collaborative approach to creating and implementing policy, as part of a manifesto commitment to “work with tenants, residents and homeowner groups to find new ways to engage so that more people can have their say”.<sup>18</sup> It is meant to represent a shift away from top-down decision making. However, VCS groups reported few interactions in which ‘co-design’ has been properly implemented.

This particularly affects grassroots organisations. Organisations whose income is less than £10,000 were the most likely (73%) to disagree with or be unsure about these statements: "The Council shares key information with us" and "The Council consults us on key issues". Likewise, 53% of groups with annual income of less than £10,000 did not think that the Council “makes decisions with us” (see Chart 13).

Chart 13



<sup>18</sup> [Resident Involvement Review: Co-design Panel Report](#). Southwark Council. Page 7.

There is a perception in the VCS that decisions are sometimes made in the best interests of those who sit in positions of authority, rather than those who are based in the community. This is especially challenging for smaller groups. They are less likely to have representatives among them who can influence proceedings, as one local activist reported in a focus group: “The biggest issue for me and smaller groups is power, we just have absolutely no power...what that leads to is a sense of powerlessness that we just cannot influence any agenda... I know a lot of individual councillors and they are not out to get us, but they just end up in this culture” (Activist, Old Kent Road Community Campaign).

### 8.3 Commissioning

The language of commissioning was rarely used by VCS participants in the research and yet it has a fundamental impact on funding and on relationships with statutory partners. It adds to the problem of smaller groups experiencing less access to funds and a sense of decisions being made by the Council and the former Clinical Commissioning Group (now the Integrated Care System and Partnership Southwark) being made within a closed group. Contracts (as opposed to grants) are commissioned and these are often of a higher value than grants. The Council has worked to address the historic inequalities in commissioning through two welcome independent reviews<sup>19</sup>. However, the jargon, legal technicalities, and cross departmental nature of commissioning make this very difficult for the VCS to engage with.

### 8.4 Efforts by the Council and others to improve relationships

There is a welcome acknowledgement of these issues by statutory organisations, which has prompted some constructive proposals. These include:

- The “We are not going back to normal” events where the Council held conversations with the BAME community and pledged a commitment to work with the BAME community sector on how they could better engage with BAME communities on local issues. Twelve asks from the BAME community to the Council were agreed. One of the asks was ring-fenced funding for the BAME community, the Equalities Grant Review.
- The language around ‘co-design’, ‘co-production’ or ‘lived experience’, although this is not always clearly defined or followed through.
- Recent payments for VCS representation in bodies like the Partnership Southwark Strategic Board and a commitment to review a remuneration policy for VCS representatives at the Council.
- Investment in community-led action and decision making in the We Walworth model.

As previously noted, there is goodwill towards many council officers. From this research, there is also an awareness among council officials that there is more to do to strengthen ties between the VCS and local authorities, which provides a basis for optimism and collaboration: “One of things that would be interesting to explore is how we can have a different sort of relationship. As the Council, where power resides, how can we safely and with comfort move to a place where we can genuinely work together” (Community Engagement Manager, Southwark Council).

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<sup>19</sup> [Cabinet meeting 01/02/22: Grants & Commissioning Review](#). Southwark Council

## 8.5 Recommendations: relationship of VCS with Southwark Council and other statutory organisations

### Principles for the Council and other statutory partners:

In 2003 there was a Southwark Council Compact with the VCS, but this was a lengthy document which has not been updated. We recommend a much more concise and clear set of principles to which all statutory agencies working in Southwark should agree:

1. **Communicate clearly, honestly.** Talk with us, not at us. Come to the VCS, don't expect it to come to you. Use Plain English, visual imagery, and short documents. Give proper notice of meetings, events, and consultations.
2. **Respect regular contributors and reach out to groups you don't already know**, especially smaller historically under-represented ones.
3. **Always feed back**, even when you don't have any progress to report.
4. **Respect and pay for VCS time and expertise.** Understand the VCS does not always operate during 'working hours'.
5. **Don't assume you know best** – VCS organisations are embedded in local communities and often more trusted by them. Engage the VCS in decision making. And if you say you're going to make decisions with the VCS, be sure that is what you intend to do and be prepared to let go of power to do so.
6. **Celebrate the VCS and allow it to be critical** without using your power and money to make that uncomfortable.

### Further recommendations for Community Southwark and the VCS:

In addition to partners signing up to the principles above, the VCS also needs to engage constructively. The reviews of commissioning taking place are an opportunity to tackle some of the challenges outlined in this section and **Community Southwark should explore how to engage the VCS in the work statutory partners are doing to improve commissioning processes.**



## 9. Other significant issues

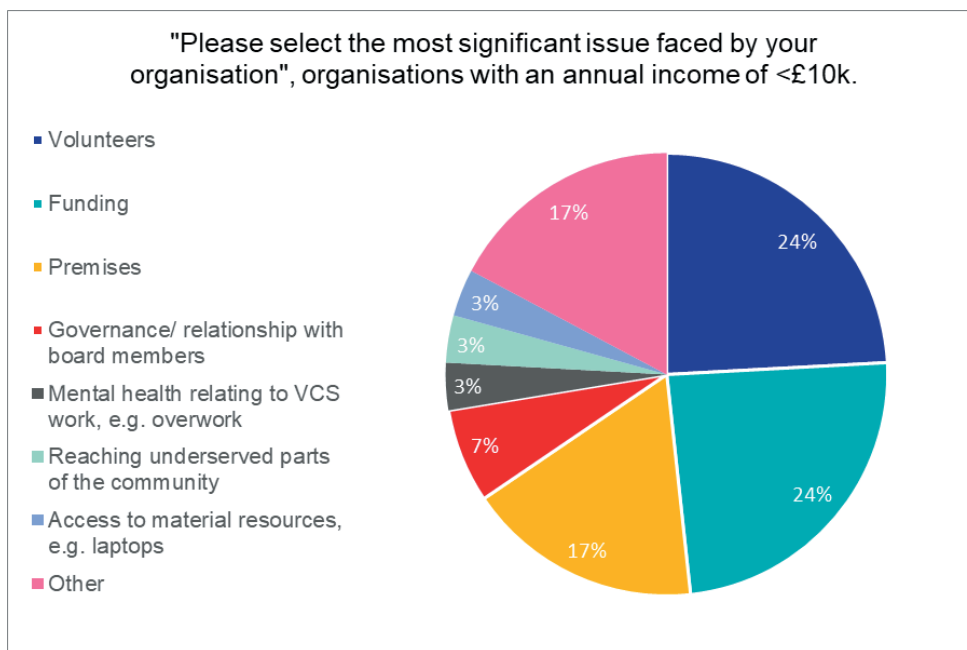
### 9.1 Other issues introduction

Funding, premises, and statutory relationships are inter-connected and form the focus of this report. The VCS, in its participation in this research, also highlighted other issues: volunteer and staff recruitment and retention; mental health; equity, diversity and inclusion; digital inclusion; and the climate crisis.

### 9.2 Volunteer and staff recruitment and retention

Staff recruitment was listed as a top five issue for all income brackets of VCS groups surveyed in our research. Volunteer recruitment and retention was also significant issue: 46% of all groups listed it in their top five challenges. There is a rising demand for VCS services, driven in part by increased cost of living. This coincides with a decrease in applicants for paid roles and volunteers.

Chart 14



### Volunteers

During the pandemic there was a significant increase in volunteers supporting all areas of work, from administration to frontline services. When lockdown restrictions were removed, the number of volunteers dropped as many people could no longer commit to the same number of hours.<sup>20</sup> This has been a particular challenge for grassroots groups (see Chart 14). Funding and volunteer management can interact in a problematic way. As one council officer notes, “As money gets tight, more is expected from volunteers and that can be unsustainable” (Participation Coordinator, Southwark Council). The cost-of-living crisis has exacerbated this as many volunteers prioritise paid work. Consequently, VCS groups struggle to fill gaps.

<sup>20</sup> [Respond, Recover, Reset: Two Years On](#) (2022), Nottingham Trent University, Sheffield Hallam University and NCVO. Page 2.



## Staff

Peckham charity Pecan confirmed that before the pandemic they could get up to 70 people applying for jobs, whereas now it is typically less than ten (CEO, Pecan). A high turnover of staff in the VCS exists for a range of reasons: low pay, stress, unsuitable premises, wanting to continue working from home, poor job security, and a lack of employee benefits.

One research participant notes that “reduced funding has an impact on staff numbers, which leads to more pressure on them,” which is likely to contribute to a feeling of stress or ‘burnout’ (Trustee, Salmon Youth Centre). A reliance on external funding bodies makes it more difficult to negotiate higher wages to keep up with a rising cost of living. For some staff, this makes the private or public sector increasingly attractive.

This is a bigger challenge for smaller charities that do not have the resources to invest in marketing and promotion when recruiting. Many groups also have a limited online presence. Additionally, many funders are not open to cost recovery, the process by which a VCS group recoups excess expenditure if the initial budget was not sufficient. This means VCS groups effectively subsidise the projects of funders and consequently struggle to cover day-to-day costs such as rent and heating. A tighter budget therefore narrows recruitment marketing options further as this is rarely viewed as essential.

## 9.3 Mental health

“ There are different organisations working in the Community and Voluntary Sector trying to address mental problems of young individuals, but it is difficult for small organisations to coordinate this. ”

**Project co-ordinator, Step Out**

Only 7% of online survey participants raised mental health as the most significant issue their organisation faces. The issue, however, came up in many one-to-one interviews and in the community activists’ focus group. It was not always clearly labelled as ‘mental health’ but linked to staff and volunteer wellbeing. Some respondents mentioned stigma: “It is difficult to make the people feel empowered to speak up and not shy away from their mental health issues” (Director, Women 4 Women Empowerment). This may, in part, explain why mental health is not present in many online survey responses.

Supporting residents to access appropriate mental health services is a challenge for VCS groups. Smaller groups sometimes lack the staff and resources to coordinate between service users and mental health support. It is not a matter of simply referring the individual: it involves preparation to support them until they are comfortable sharing sensitive information, e.g. details about their experience, circumstances, and what services they have accessed so far. This is a challenge if the individual has felt let down by services before. If they agree to be referred, then supporting them in that transition can take months. This issue is often exacerbated by lengthy waiting lists for mental health support.

For VCS staff, ‘burnout’ is an issue (as noted in the previous section ‘Staff’). Few VCS groups can afford to provide wellbeing services for staff, meaning staff sickness is likely to increase. This contributes to a cycle that reduces an organisation’s capacity and compromises service delivery, thereby creating additional stress for VCS staff.



## 9.4 Equity, diversity and inclusion

The Southwark VCS needs to reflect the communities it serves. This includes the values of those communities but also demographics, in terms of ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and class. To do this, equity, diversity and inclusion efforts are key. They help bring an awareness of the experiences of different communities. This makes the VCS more effective, as it can tailor its services to their needs. Genuine inclusivity also removes barriers to participation. This encourages people to engage with the VCS, either by using its services or becoming active within it.

One interviewee notes that “establishing partnerships which effectively target hard-to-reach communities” is of huge importance, and there is “more to be done to encourage, mentor, train, support VCS leaders and participants from BAME communities.” They also note the lack of representation on trustee boards, “This is achievable – it doesn’t require huge resources, more important is the will and prioritisation” (Coordinator, Citizens Advice Southwark).

The VCS tends to be made up of smaller organisations that lack the capacity to do in-house training on equity, diversity and inclusion. Therefore, funders, the Council, and other statutory partners need to support VCS organisations to become more equitable, diverse and inclusive. They also need to work harder to reach groups that are historically under-represented and help train and mentor the next generation of BAME leaders. Many of these challenges intersect with the issues of funding, premises, and council relations (explored in the previous sections of this research). The need to support Southwark organisations led by those with protected characteristics runs through all these areas.

## 9.4 Digital inclusion

Adapting to new forms of technology presents a challenge for the VCS, particularly for grassroots organisations that don’t have the same resources as larger charities, e.g. reliable IT support. Modernising technology is often additional to frontline work to which they commit most of their time. Volunteers might also have day jobs, meaning they do not have enough time to develop new IT skills, or improve the technology at their disposal.

Having to work remotely because of the pandemic accelerated some of these changes. VCS groups “needed to adjust,” according to one interview respondent, which meant “moving some databases to the Cloud” so that they could be accessed by all staff in the organisation (Chief Executive, Power2). For other groups, there are still concerns around data protection, as one interviewee notes, “To make people feel more confident, it is important to reassure them and let them know what you are going to do with their information and that their privacy is safe” (Director, Women 4 Women Empowerment).

Training is key to digital inclusion. Investing in training would help all groups adjust to an increasingly digital world. However, as noted in the funding section of this report funders are often less keen to fund core costs such as training and IT, even though these are essential for staff morale and to deliver high quality and efficient frontline services.

## 9.5 Climate crisis

One critical issue is notable by its absence in the survey and interview data. At times of economic difficulty, surviving is the priority for VCS groups and initiatives to reduce carbon emissions are often not implemented, or are paused or slowed down. This poses a challenge: how does the VCS promote tackling the climate emergency during a cost-of-living crisis?





Community research from 2021, supported by Impact on Urban Health and The Social Innovation Partnership, helped understand this issue better. Focusing on air pollution, one survey respondent noted that they “feel like my voice won’t make a difference.” The research also uncovered that just 7% of respondents engaged in activities related to combatting air pollution, despite 72% expressing interest in the issue. This raises questions of how to build a network of VCS groups that feel invested in tackling environmental issues collaboratively.

For this, the 2021 Impact on Urban Health community research recommends:

- Providing funding to enable grassroots organisations and policymakers to work together to address challenges such as air pollution.
- Increasing collaboration between local environmental groups and other VCS groups.
- Advocating for MPs and councillors from under-represented backgrounds whose communities may have been affected by air pollution.
- Engaging local businesses in air pollution reduction efforts.<sup>21</sup>

## 9.6 Recommendations: other significant issues

The issues raised in this section vary widely from mental health, to volunteer / staff recruitment, to diversity and digital inclusion. A common theme running through them all is the need to invest in and support the resilience and adaptability of the VCS. Supporting the people working and volunteering for the VCS and giving them the tools and training they ask for is the only way to create a more impactful and sustainable sector. This, yet again, emphasises the need for:

1. Funders to give core, unrestricted and multi-year grants so groups can meet this variety of issues.
2. All those in power or authority to respect and appreciate the stretched capacity, particularly of small VCS groups.
3. Community Southwark to continue to deliver training, events, and networks led by what VCS members tell us they need, specifically in the areas outlined in this section.

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<sup>21</sup> [A Breath of Clean Air: Insights from Lambeth and Southwark](#) (2021). Impact on Urban Health and TSIP. Page 21, 25 and 40.

## 10. Conclusion

Across all the issues and recommendations, three clear themes come through powerfully and persuasively.

### 1. The diversity, resilience, and adaptability of the sector – and the need to support and sustain this.

**Supporting this determination and resilience by investing in the VCS itself is the key to ensuring the sector, and by extension, our residents and communities thrive.**

The recommendations in this report centre around investing in and supporting groups and organisations better so that they may then support Southwark communities. Funding is, of course, a key part of this, but it isn't just about funding. It is about long-term support, premises, staff training, volunteer support, and trust, respect, and recognition.

### 2. Being strategic

**Whether it is around funding or premises or making the borough more inclusive, we can only tackle these issues effectively by having a clear strategic overview of the challenges, needs, and opportunities.**

This is particularly the case when it comes to corporate relationships or unpicking the premises issues. The VCS needs to approach issues with a wider lens. Partners need to think about how to include the voices in this report in their own strategies. We are pleased that Southwark Council will be reviewing its VCS strategy in 2023 and we hope and expect that the recommendations in this report will be a key part of it.

### 3. Partnerships

Wide engagement from our members and partners has not only shaped what goes into the report, but it is key to the recommendations coming from it. The only way to meet the challenges for the VCS and for our communities is through partnership with the Council, funders, health agencies, the private sector, and so many more.

The recommendations in this report will only happen with genuine partnership working together, sharing experiences and expertise. No single organisation or sector has all the answers. **We call on statutory agencies to take action in response to this research and redouble efforts to treat the VCS as genuinely equal partners.** There are significant challenges around power dynamics, and these need to be dealt with honestly and openly.

The actions arising from this State of the Southwark Voluntary and Community Sector report are for all partners – only then will this research be more than a document filed on a shelf.



## 11. Call to Action

The recommendations in this report do not lend themselves to an easy summary of individual responsibilities and timescales. The answer to the challenges for the VCS lies in partnerships and strategic thinking. No one partner can solve the complex and multi-faceted problems of funding, premises, and relationships with the Council and other statutory partners. And yet all partners need to solve these problems if all Southwark residents are to fulfil their potential.

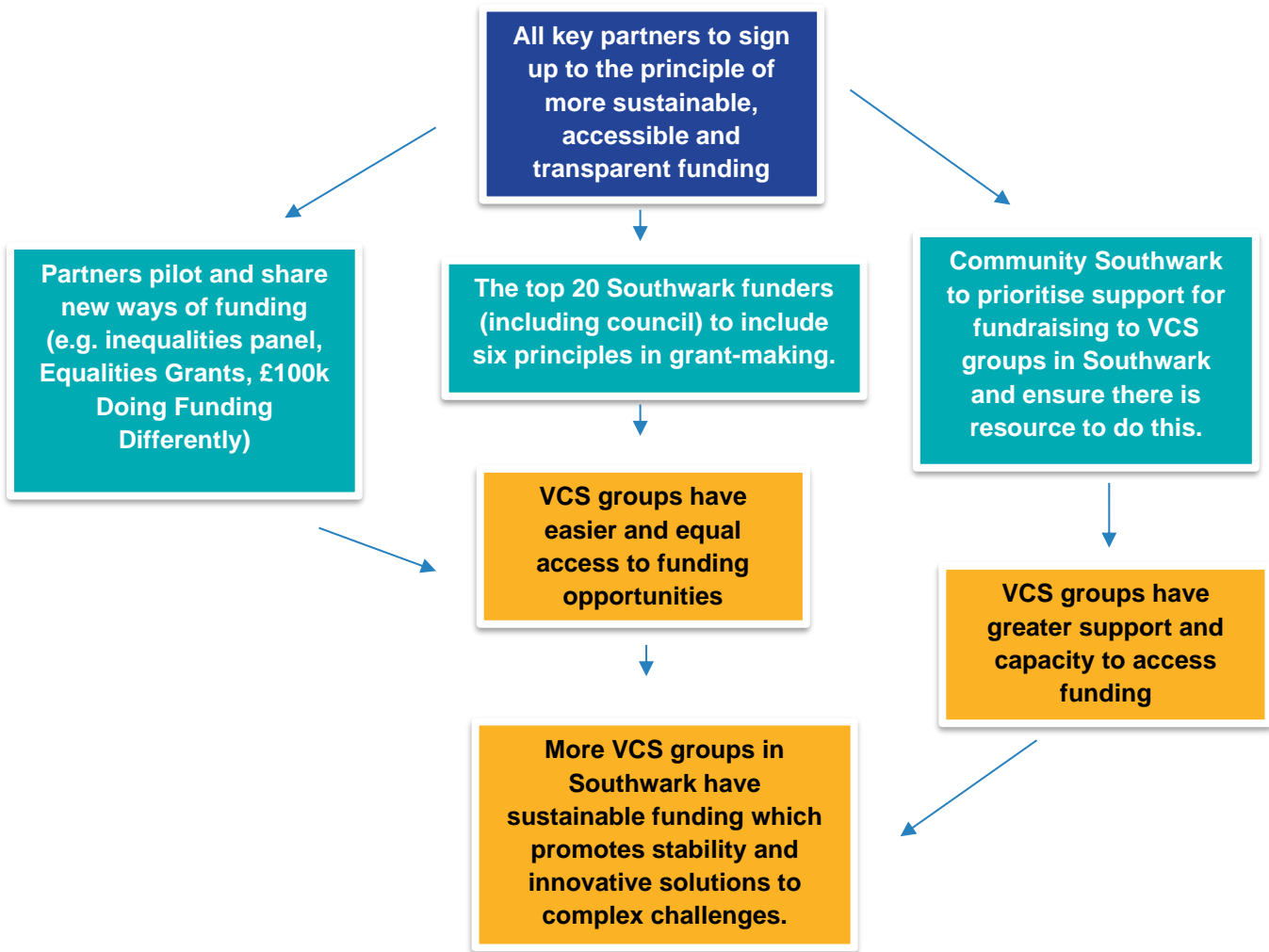
There are exciting opportunities to collaborate with the Council through several projects including Southwark 2030, the Land Commission, and a new VCS Strategy. The new Integrated Care System arrangements also present an opportunity for the VCS to engage with health partners and health commissioning. However, the VCS must be seen as an equal partner in these relationships and given the support and space to fully engage, despite its very different scale and hierarchy.

The recommendations from the three key sections are set out below as action plans. They should all begin immediately. The dark blue is for short term actions, the light blue is for medium term, and the yellow is the long term. They all have in common the need for all partners to sign up to them from the start.

**Southwark Voice is a network facilitated by Community Southwark which brings together the Chairs of all the borough's VCS networks. We will ask Southwark Voice to monitor the progress of these action plans, setting up a working group for each action plan involving network members, Community Southwark staff, council officers, and other partners.**



## 11.1 Action Plan: Funding

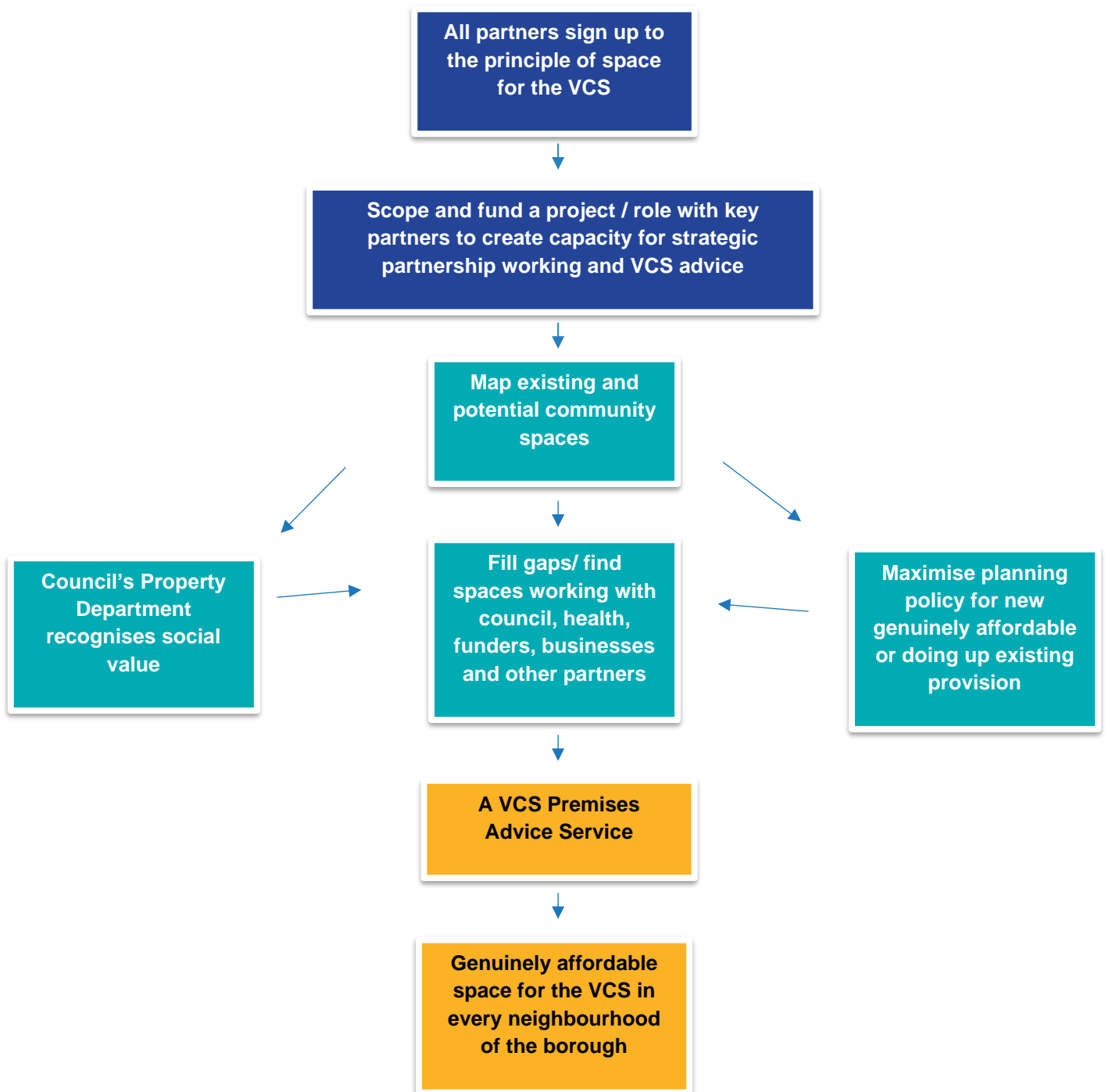


## Six principles for funders:

1. **Give core, unrestricted, multi-year grants.** Invest in VCS groups in communities so they can be resilient and adaptable.
2. **Simplify fundraising.** Make processes less time consuming, reduce bureaucracy, and recognise that making fundraising applications take up staff time which has a significant cost. Complex monitoring reports also take time away from frontline work.
3. **Take risks to reach new groups.** Those best able to write funding applications aren't always best able to help those in need so think differently about how to work with new groups.
4. **Be flexible and timely.** Waiting a long time for funding is simply not an option for many VCS groups. And organisational needs change over time.
5. **Be open, transparent, and willing to listen to grantees.** Acknowledge the power dynamic and open up relationships with historically under-represented groups. Be open to learning about what works from VCS groups themselves – see the work of funders and grantees as a shared approach to tackling social problems. Making decisions behind closed doors with limited feedback creates distrust so explore having (paid) VCS representatives on panels or making decisions in the open.
6. **All use the same process – shift the burden of research and admin.** During Covid-19, funders in Southwark shared a portal which meant groups didn't have to spend time researching different funders and submitting several applications.



## 11.2 Action Plan: Premises

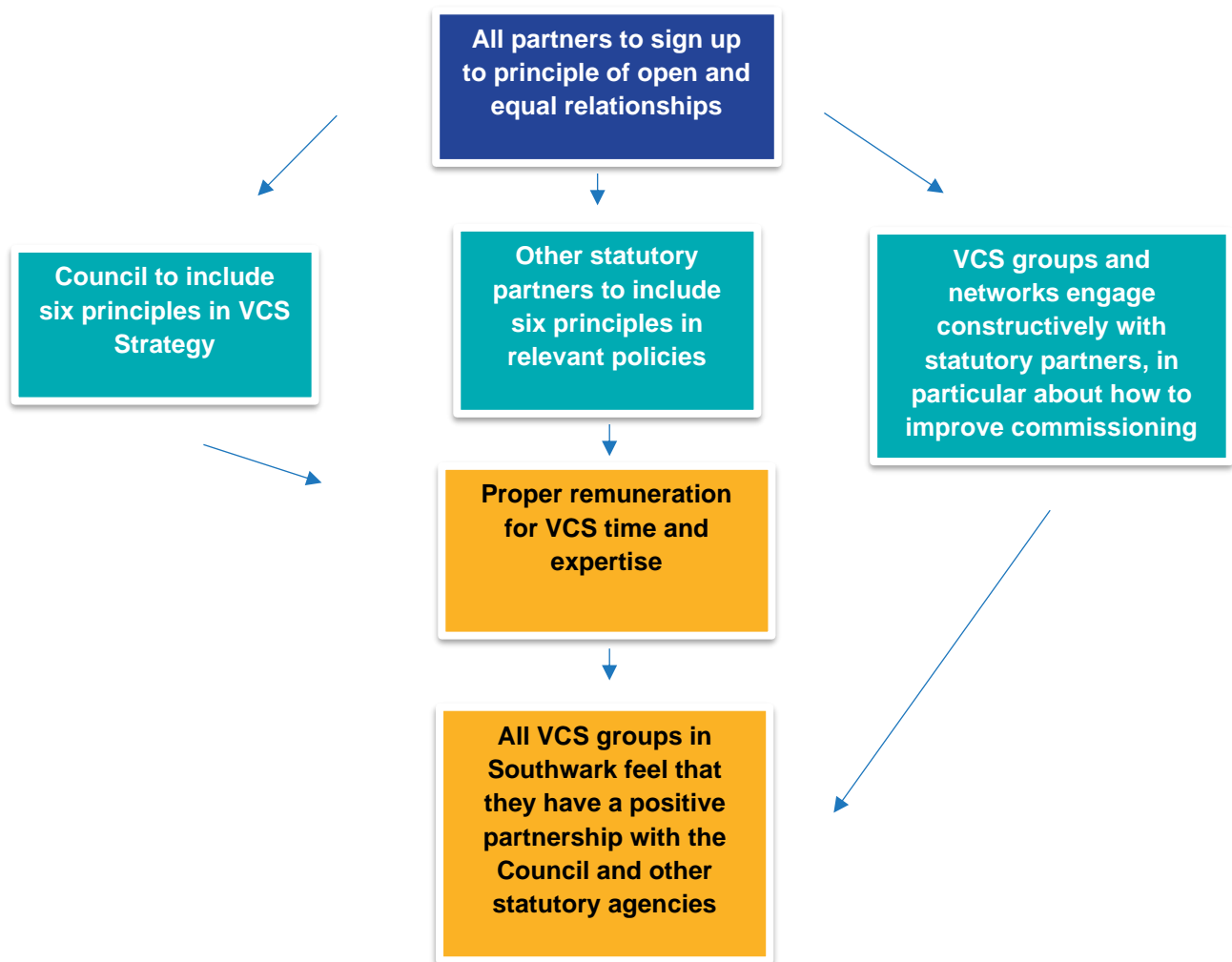


## Premises Recommendations for Community Southwark, funders, Southwark Council, and other partners:

- 1. A goal of genuinely affordable community space for the VCS in every neighbourhood of the borough to be agreed by all partners.** Ideally this would be multifunctional community space(s) that can host desks, activities, meetings, and events. It would be either newly built or repurposed from an existing building(s). It could be a collection of facilities or spaces in a geographic area, co-ordinated and run by the VCS or by other partners. The Council or health agencies could rent desks in these community spaces.
- 2. A complete map of community spaces.** To achieve the goal of space in every part of the borough a strategic view must be taken of the premises already available across the borough (existing and potential) and where there is space being underutilised. This must be matched against VCS needs for different types of premises, e.g. desk space, activity space, meeting rooms, or events.
- 3. Where gaps exist partners should work together to find solutions.** These could include speaking to land owners such as corporate organisations about accessing space, securing funding from trusts and foundations to pay for space, or working with Southwark Planning Officers to secure affordable space in new developments.
- 4. The VCS needs a comprehensive advice service** relating to premises, including finding spaces, lease advice, funding rents, disabled access, and community assets.
- 5. Southwark’s planning process** should redefine ‘affordable’ workspace for the VCS and look at using funds to improve existing spaces. It should also look at how the Community Infrastructure Levy is used to support community organisations.
- 6. A jointly funded senior officer(s) working with the VCS, the Council, funders, and the private sector is needed to make this happen.** They would co-ordinate between the VCS, the Council, and private sector, or other premises like schools, and provide matching services and advice to the VCS. They could be based partly with the VCS and partly at the Council’s offices in the Property or Planning Departments.
- 7. The Council should not be seeking to maximise profit from VCS tenants.** The social value they add to the borough should be understood and recognised. The metrics should not be made over-complicated – the Council should trust the VCS to assess their social value as far as possible.
- 8. Other ideas should be explored** such as rent-free periods for VCS tenants, co-location within council offices and / or libraries for VCS tenants, a marketing campaign aimed at local commercial landlords with hard-to-rent properties who could make these available to VCS tenants at a low rent (with the advantage to them of low / no business rates).



### 11.3 Action Plan: Relationships with statutory partners





### Six principles for statutory partners:

1. **Communicate clearly, honestly.** Talk with us, not at us. Come to the VCS, don't expect it to come to you. Use Plain English, visual imagery, and short documents. Give proper notice of meetings, events, and consultations.
2. **Respect regular contributors and reach out to groups you don't already know**, especially smaller historically under-represented ones.
3. **Always feed back**, even when you don't have any progress to report.
4. **Respect and pay for VCS time and expertise.** Understand the VCS does not always operate during 'working hours'.
5. **Don't assume you know best** – VCS organisations are embedded in local communities and often more trusted by them. Engage the VCS in decision making. And if you say you're going to make decisions with the VCS, be sure that is what you intend to do and be prepared to let go of power to do so.
6. **Celebrate the VCS and allow it to be critical** without using your power and money to make that uncomfortable.



## 12. Acknowledgements

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BermondseyStreet.London	Fast 58
Bermondsey Street Festival Association	Friends of Burgess Park
Better Bankside	Friends of Galleywall Nature Reserve
Big Local Works	Future Men
Bizzie Bodies CIC	Generations 4 Change
Black Mama Earth	Get Rid of and Donate
Blackfriars Settlement	Haberdashers' Company
Blue Business Improvement District	Headway SLNK
Blue Youth Club	Holistic Well Women
Bolivian Latin Age Association	Illuminated Arts
Bradfield Club	Impact on Urban Health
Brandon Estate TRA	Independent Dance
BREAKTHEBARRIER CIC	InSpire at St. Peters
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Charterhouse-in-Southwark	Latin Elephant
Cherry Garden TRA	Latin M Group
Citizens Advice Southwark	Link Age Southwark
Civil Society Consulting CIC	London Funders
Clean Slate Training & Employment CIC	London LGBTQ Community Centre
Community Cycleworks CIC	London Plus
Community TechAid	Love North Southwark
Computing and Programming Academy	Lovo
Copleston Centre	Media Community Network Ltd
Creative Lives	Melanin Health & Wellness
Culture Tree	Mental Fight Club
Daughters of Divine Love Training & Assessment Centre	Merchant Taylors' Company
Docklands Settlement Community Centre	Money4YOU
	National Lottery
	Nicki Day Nursery Ltd.



Off the Curriculum  
Old Kent Road Community Campaign  
Panjshir Aid  
Partnership Southwark  
Paxton Green Time Bank  
Pecan  
Peckham Platform  
Peckham Settlement  
Peckham Vision  
Pelican Developments Ltd.  
Pembroke House  
Pempeople  
Peter Minet Trust  
Power The Fight  
Power2  
Rastafari Movement UK Food and Wellbeing  
Refugee Access  
Restorative Justice for All (RJ4All)  
Riverside Parents and Carers Association  
Rotherhithe & Bermondsey Choral Choir  
Royal National Institute of Blind People  
Salmon Youth Centre  
Samaritans of Lewisham, Greenwich and Southwark  
SE5 Forum for Camberwell  
Sea Containers London  
Shad Thames Area Management Partnership  
Shad Thames Residents' Association  
Siobhan Davies Studios  
SL Creatives Project CIC  
Smileys PlayTime  
Somali Integration and Development Association  
South Bermondsey Partnership  
Southern Housing Group  
South London Mission  
Southwark Bahdja Academy  
Southwark Charities  
Southwark Council  
Southwark College  
Southwark Day Centre for Asylum Seekers  
Southwark Disablement Association  
Southwark Funders' Forum  
Southwark Group of Tenants' Organisation  
Southwark Gymnastics Club CIC  
Southwark Law Centre  
Southwark Park Association 1869  
Southwark Park Cricket Club  
Southwark Park Gallery  
Southwark Pensioners' Action Group  
Southwark Pensioners' Centre  
Southwark Planning Network  
Southwark Playhouse  
Southwark Refugee Communities Forum  
Southwark Safer Neighbourhood Board  
Southwark Travellers Action Group (STAG)  
Southwark Unified Network of Black, Ethnic and Minorities Forum (SUNBEAM)  
Southwark Works  
Superhighways  
Spring Community Hub  
St Faith's Community and Youth Foundation  
St George the Martyr Charity  
St Peter's Church (Walworth)  
Step Out  
StephTogether CIC  
Synergy Gymnastics  
Team London Bridge  
The Bright Morning Star Prison and Homeless Outreach  
The Ernest Foundation  
The Felix Project  
The Feminist Library and Information Centre  
The Outside Project LGBTIQ+ Centre  
The Pen Theatre CIC  
The Purple Ladies  
The UK Sapphire Foundation  
The Walworth Society  
Theatre Peckham  
Theatre Troupe  
Three Cs  
Time and Talents Association  
Toucan Employment  
United St Saviour's Charity  
University of Arts London  
Walworth Garden  
Waterloo Community Counselling  
We Walworth  
Westminster Befriend a Family  
Wheels for Wellbeing  
Women 4 Women Empowerment  
ZS Associates



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