BUCKINGHAMSHIRE:
Uncovered
Vital Voices

AI in Buckinghamshire's Charity Sector

Heart of Bucks
COMMUNITY FOUNDATION

Introduction

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is transforming the way we work, communicate, and make decisions – presenting both hopeful promise and real challenges. While the business sector is rapidly adopting new technologies and large resourced charities are doing the same, many Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) organisations have only just begun to explore AI's potential. Without inclusive, ethical and accessible approaches, small charities risk being left behind.

To spark local dialogue, Heart of Bucks hosted its fifth Vital Voices Community Forum at the Buckinghamshire Community Wellbeing Hub in Aylesbury. The forum brought together a diverse group of local charities and funders to discuss AI's role in the sector:

Alternatives to Conflict	Community Impact Bucks	Restore Hope
Brighter Futures Together	LEAP	The Narrator's Lens
Calibre Audio	MoneyHeave	The Rothschild Foundation
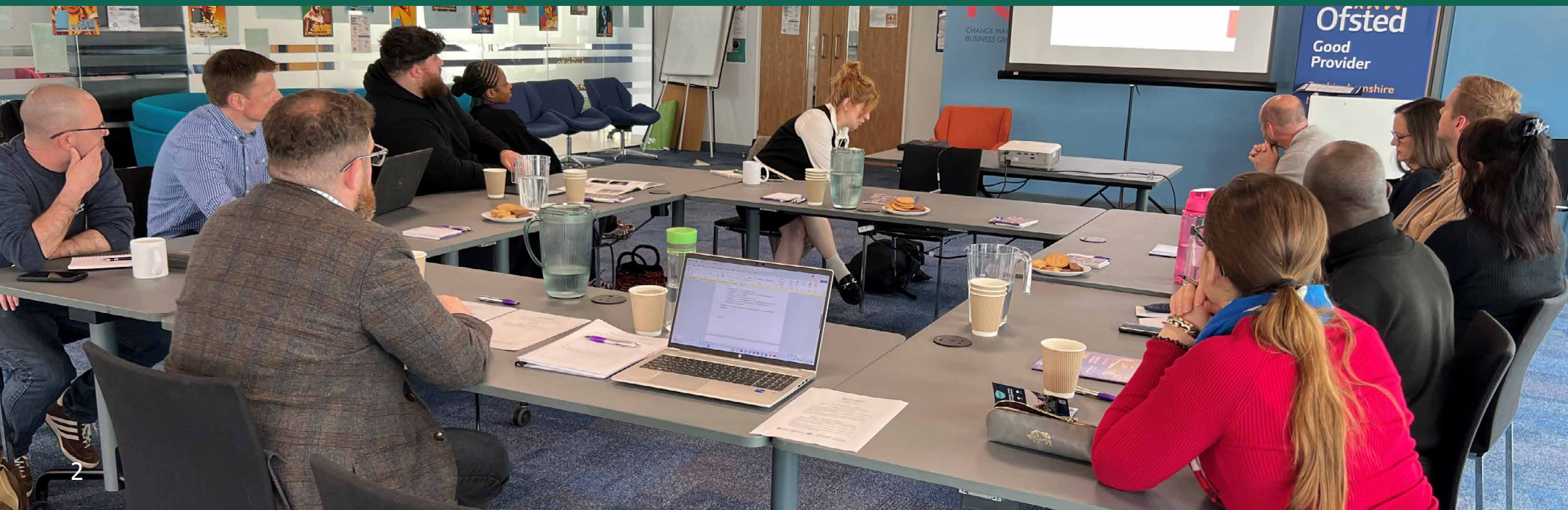
Special guest **Rosie Sowa, Innovation Lead at The National Lottery Community Fund** (TNLCF), provided national context and perspective by sharing the Fund's own journey with AI. Over the past 18 months, TNLCF has transitioned from minimal AI engagement to a sector leader, piloting a variety of AI tools aimed at improving internal processes and grant-making efficiency. Rosie stressed that AI is not just a technical challenge – it is a social transformation that requires ethical, inclusive and human-centred strategies.

This report summarises the key insights from the forum's wide-ranging discussion; highlighting how local charities are already using AI, the benefits they are realising, the risks they may encounter, and the support required for the local sector to harness AI effectively.

Guest speaker

**Rosie Sowa (Innovation Lead, TNLCF):**

Rosie shared how AI has become a central focus for TNLCF; not just as a technical upgrade, but as one of the most significant strategic and social issues of our time. TNLCF has moved from minimal AI engagement to actively testing and developing new tools designed to improve their funding processes and internal workflows.

Rosie emphasised AI's potential to streamline grant-making – particularly for smaller grants where delays can have a real impact and charities often feel the time investment outweighs the award amount. By supporting applicants to express their ideas more clearly and reducing the administrative burden on assessors, AI could help make access to funding quicker and more equitable.

She also warned that civil society cannot afford to fall behind in the so-called "AI arms race", and highlighted the risk that the charity sector could be left out of shaping this transformation if it doesn't act soon. The VCSE sector has an opportunity to lead – not just follow – when it comes to responsible AI use.

Internally, TNLCF has been experimenting with proof-of-concept tools, including an application assistant and project summary generator. These initiatives have been supported by a wider cultural shift, including the development of a Ten Principles framework, new internal policies, and tailored staff training to support responsible and transparent AI use.

Externally, Rosie explained how TNLCF is promoting collaboration on AI across the funding ecosystem – sharing their learnings at conferences and sector workshops to help build collective capacity. She concluded by demonstrating an AI-powered application assistant prototype, which can support applicants by translating content and helping them construct clear, accessible funding bids. The group welcomed this glimpse into the practical steps already underway to integrate AI equitably and inclusively.
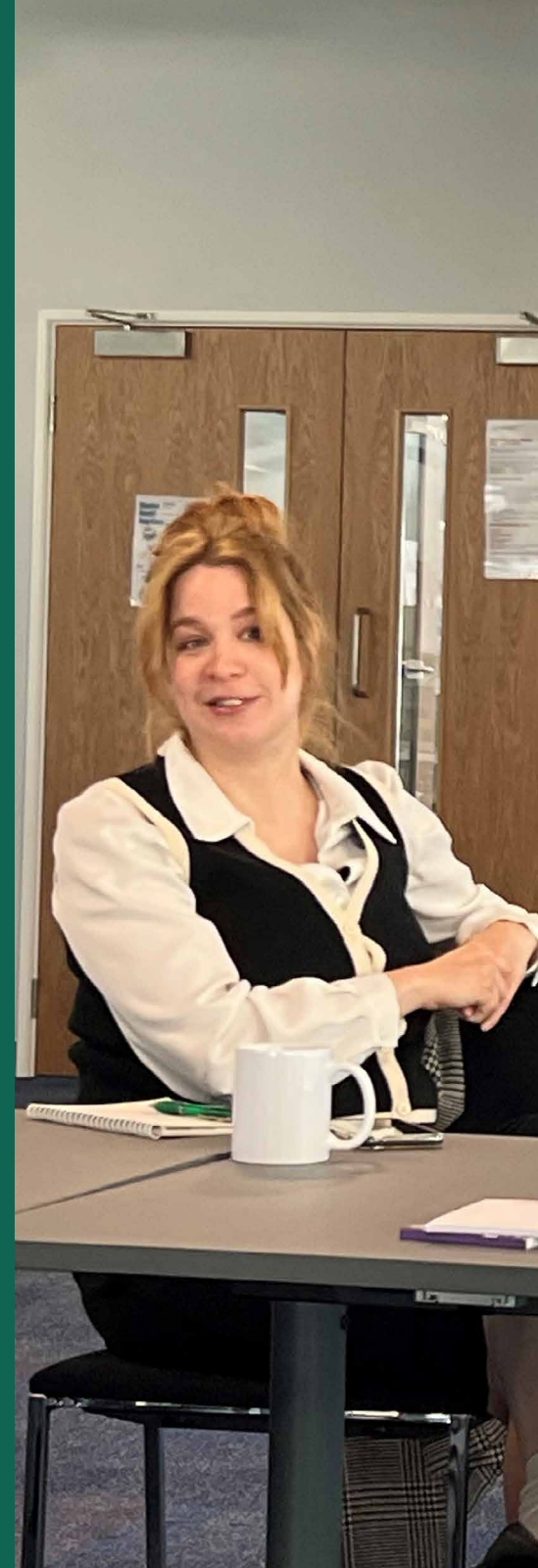
Key Insights

Four core themes emerged from the forum's subsequent discussion:

○ **Efficiency and Time-Saving:**

I helps reduce time spent on admin by summarising reports, editing for tone, and tailoring funding applications. This frees up staff capacity.

○ **Accessibility and Inclusion:**

Tools like ChatGPT assist users with dyslexia, low literacy, or limited English proficiency, enabling clearer communication and broader participation.

○ **Equity and Sector Access:**

If developed inclusively, AI can level the playing field, making grant funding more accessible for under-resourced or underrepresented organisations.

○ **Risks and Reputational Concerns:**

Over-reliance on AI risks include impersonal content, low-quality outputs, and ethical challenges around privacy, bias and misinformation.

Overall, participants expressed cautious optimism. Whilst acknowledging AI's limitations, they agreed it holds real potential for supporting smaller teams; provided adoption is thoughtful, transparent, and centred on people not just productivity.

Practical uses of AI in Bucks

The attending charities shared a wide range of real-world examples of how they are already using AI in their day-to-day work. AI is helping to relieve pressure, speed up tasks, and provide inspiration – especially for small teams with limited capacity. None of the charity representatives identified as tech experts, yet most had found accessible, practical ways to experiment with AI tools. This often began by using free platforms like ChatGPT or CoPilot.

Funding applications

One of the most common applications was in writing and editing funding bits. People said that AI helped them clarify their thinking, summarise long answers, and translate internal language into funder-friendly terms. This was especially helpful when tackling restrictive word limits or when adapting an application to suit different funders' priorities and maximise a bid's chances. Some participants said they use AI to break down questions, remove repetition, or structure more coherent responses, all of which saves time and improves confidence. For staff with dyslexia or those who speak English as a second language, AI offers a valuable support tool for communicating clearly or acting as an "interpreter" to transform ideas into formal responses that meet funder expectations.

> "It's a soul-destroying process to reduce word count to an arbitrary amount for an application. AI is fantastic for that."

Comms and engagement

AI is also helping local charities with communications. Attendees shared that they use AI to adjust the tone of their emails, simplify complex language, or draft content for newsletters and social media posts. In some cases, it is also being used to translate publications to reach more diverse audiences. Others mention using AI as a creative partner to brainstorm project names or generate first drafts when faced with writer's block. There was caution about relying solely on AI for public-facing materials, but the group agreed it offers a helpful starting point that could then be refined with human oversight.

"It still requires human nuance and can sound incredibly generic if you don't review it, but the time saving is huge."

Planning and strategy

Several participants described how they use prompts to turn rough ideas into early-stage project plans. One attendee had asked AI to help them build a theory of change; another used it to map outcomes and indicators for a new programme. Again, none treat AI-generated outputs as final, but see it as a useful scaffold that helps people who are "good at doing the work but not always at writing it down" to articulate their thinking.

Research and reporting

For research and evaluation, AI tools are helping local charities navigate dense reports, extract key findings, and synthesise qualitative feedback from service users. Some are using "chat with PDF" functions to interrogate documents or pull out relevant information for trustee updates. Another charity is experimenting with AI to analyse interview notes or thematic data from small cohorts, allowing them to better express impact and outcomes where large-scale data doesn't apply. One organisation supporting young people described how AI had helped a neurodivergent participant articulate their project vision in a way that they previously couldn't.

Practical, not perfect

Whilst the overall tone of discussion here was largely positive, the group were quick to point out that AI is far from perfect. Outputs almost always require editing and review, and attendees emphasised that the tool should not replace human insight or lived experience. Instead, AI is seen as an assistant – a way to extend limited capacity and potentially reduce burnout, while still grounding the work in real relationships and frontline knowledge.
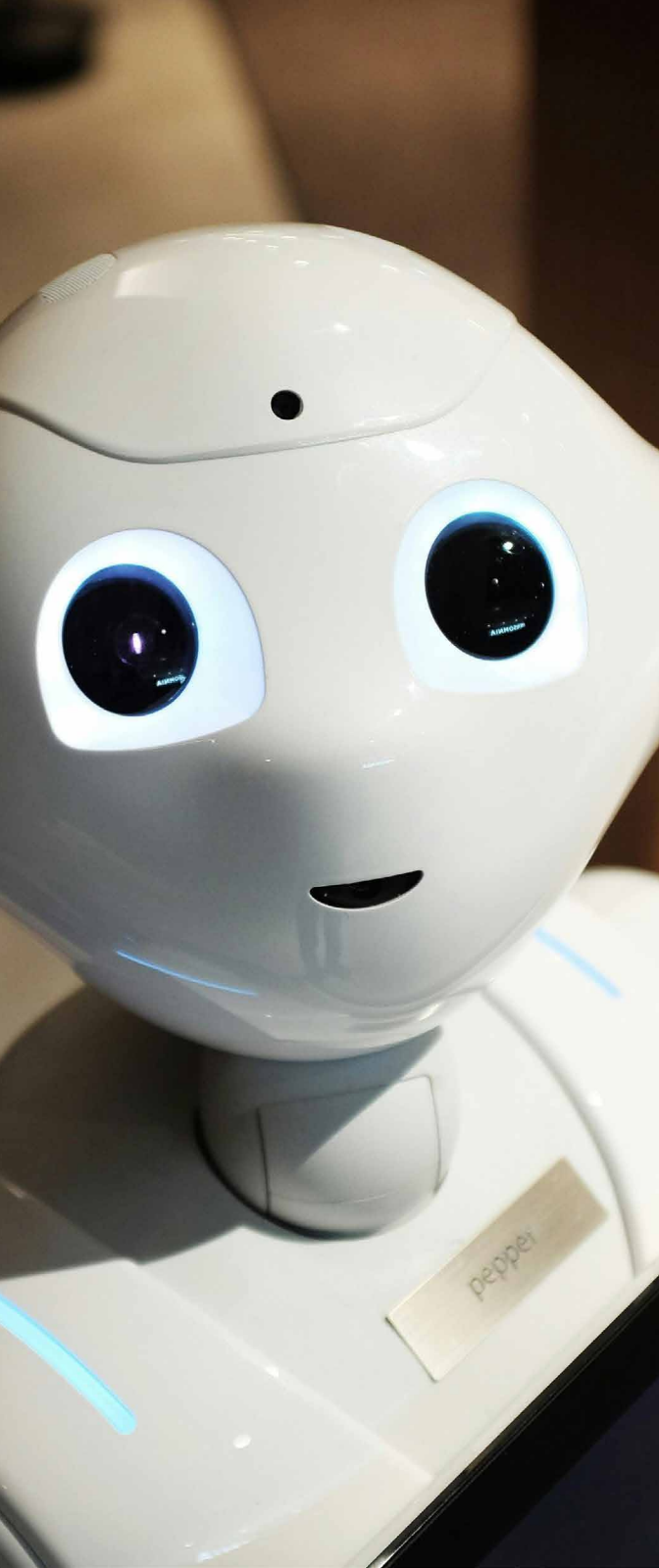
Risks, concerns and ethical considerations

There was clear excitement about AI's potential in the conversation – however the group also voiced significant concerns about how improper use could impact trust, relationships, equity, and values within the VCSE sector. Many of these concerns were rooted in the social and ethical risks of uninformed use, rather than in technical limitations of AI.

Loss of authenticity

Loss of authenticity in communication was a key concern. Numerous participants noted that AI-generated text often sounds "generic" or "robotic", particularly when used for emotionally sensitive content. This is especially problematic in scenarios like conflict mediation or mental health support. One attendee described a situation where a young woman, involved in a mediation with her ex-partner over their children, was using AI to write emotionally charged messages. Whilst this made her feel more articulate, it posed challenging questions about emotional presence and sincerity in personal communication. As one attendee put it:

"Suddenly everyone's using a different vocabulary. We're losing that authenticity. Communication isn't just an English test – I'd rather someone have spelling mistakes but be genuine."

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Dependency and isolation

Another key concern was the potential for social isolation. One participant shared a worrying example of a woman who stopped attending socially prescribed support groups after becoming dependent on ChatGPT for advice and companionship. She began using AI to answer health questions (such as managing high blood pressure), ask for emotional guidance, and even write personal reflections. This resulted in a withdrawal from real-world interactions and discouraged her from engaging with peers and professionals who could have offered more meaningful support.

Digital inequality and access

Further discussion focused on deepening existing divides. Roughly 1 in 7 people in the UK are currently digitally excluded, and as AI becomes more and more integrated into everyday life, it could leave those without access to digital tools even further behind. Efforts must be made to make AI accessible for everyone, and there is potential for AI to either solve or worsen such divisions depending upon how we utilise it.

For charities working with disadvantaged communities and individuals experiencing poverty or other extremely challenging circumstances, there can also be extra layers of distrust, scepticism and resistance to technology. These are often individuals and communities that feel let down by social systems, government, or statutory bodies. There is significant work needed here to build trust in AI.

Over-reliance and deskilling

The group also raised concerns about over-reliance on AI – particularly by younger or less experienced staff. Some participants observed that junior team members were beginning to default to AI to write emails, generate ideas, or complete tasks without first attempting to do the task themselves. As valuable as AI shortcuts can be, it may also prevent inexperienced staff from developing confidence, communication skills, and strategic thinking. Other concerns centred around using "AI as an intern", with a risk that there will be fewer opportunities for young people to gain work experience or enter the workforce.

> "I'm now deliberately NOT using AI for some tasks – to prove that we still need more people on the team, not fewer."

This tension reflects a broader worry: that AI might be seen as a substitute for adequate staffing levels, rather than a tool to support existing capacity.

Environmental impact

Whilst often overlooked, AI comes with a significant carbon footprint. AI queries consume far more energy than standard web searches, and while a single ChatGPT question may seem trivial, the cumulative environmental impact of widespread AI use is substantial. This raises difficult questions for charities with environmental commitments, and for the sector as a whole in balancing efficiency with sustainability.

Fundraising fatigue

Funders represented at the forum also flagged a notable increase in low-quality, AI-generated funding applications with little or no human input. These applications tend to lack detail, emotional resonance or originality, and are rarely successful. There is a risk that fundraisers are incentivised to churn out applications with AI tools. If poorly used like this, AI could overwhelm funding teams with higher volumes of low-effort bids making it harder – not easier – to distribute grants fairly. In response, funders are considering how (and whether) to detect and manage AI-generated content; but expressed a desire to avoid creating more barriers for smaller organisations.

> "It's a bit of a waste of everyone's time. Poorly written AI applications are not going to be successful and could damage your reputation with a funder – you still have to put some effort in."

Bias in AI systems

Some of the group also highlighted that AI is not inherently neutral. It reflects the data it is trained on, which means it can replicate or even amplify social biases. For example, if a chatbot is trained on mostly white, middle-class voices, it may marginalise or misrepresent the experiences of people of colour, disabled people, or individuals from working-class backgrounds. Without careful co-design and community input, AI risks reinforcing the very inequities many charities work so hard to dismantle.

Pace of change

Finally, many attendees expressed concern about the pace of change. They felt under pressure to adopt AI quickly, without the time or resources to think more critically about implementation. This sense of urgency risks pushing charities into reactive, rather than reflective, decision-making; especially when AI is framed as a magic fix for underfunding or understaffing.

Despite these concerns, participants were not anti-AI. They were deeply thoughtful about how to use it responsibly. The consensus was clear: AI must be guided by ethics, grounded in real-world needs, and deployed in ways that support – not substitute – human relationships. Any meaningful AI adoption in the sector must be accompanied by clear policies, inclusive design, training opportunities, and human oversight above all.

Opportunities for the sector

Alongside a healthy awareness of the risks, forum participants were energised by the potential opportunities AI could offer the VCSE sector – especially for smaller charities that often feel excluded from digital innovation. There was a strong sense that, if adopted thoughtfully, AI could unlock greater access, reduce structural barriers, and allow people to spend more time on the human aspects of service delivery by reclaiming precious spent on admin.

In funding, there was discussion around the potential for AI to mitigate workload for charities due to funders' diverse criteria. Funders use different internal systems, have different application forms, and require different impact measurement and reporting. Sector-wide AI tools could bridge this gap, allowing charities to input their data in their own way, and funders to extract the information they specifically need into their own format.

AI bias is a valid concern – yet the group also reflected on the role AI could play in reducing or challenging biases. This potential lies in its ability to remove subjective, inconsistent human judgement from processes such as grant assessment. Some imagined a future where funding decisions could be partly supported by AI systems that have been trained to identify community impact or alignment with funder values, creating a consistent baseline before human review. For funders genuinely committed to inclusion, this could be a powerful way to back up intention with practical tools.

One participant shared hopes for sector-specific tools developed through collaboration. Rather than relying on the already-available generic platforms, they imagined tailored resources that reflect the VCSE context – such as application coaching tools, sector-wide funding application templates, or even grant portals that give real-time feedback on draft responses. These tools, co-designed with frontline users, could improve access, reduce duplication, and ensure ethical safeguards are built in from the start. Examples and pilots of such tools are already starting to appear in UK grant-making.
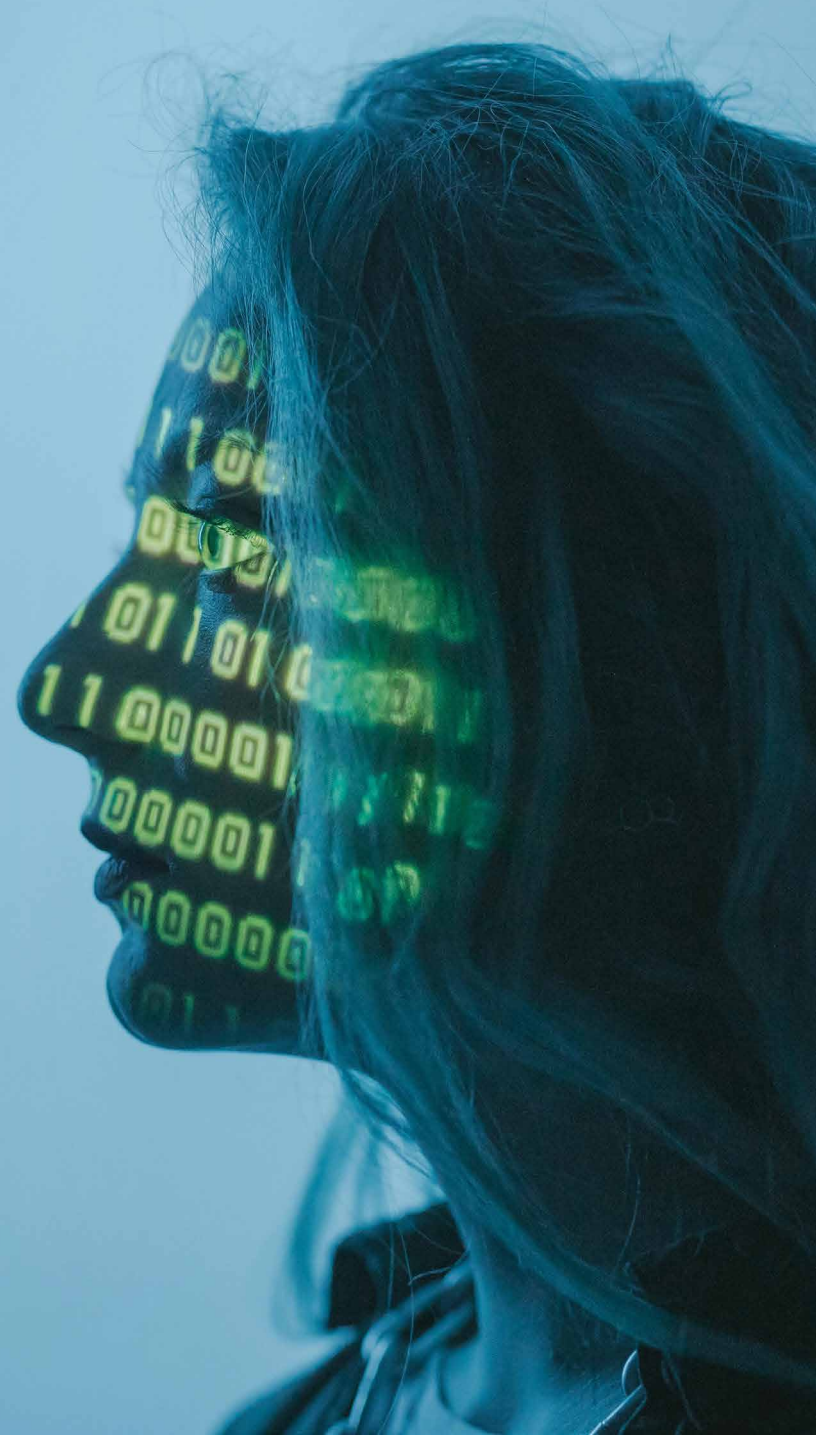
Culture change and capacity building

Tools and technologies were a major focus for the discussion – however the group were inspired by Rosie Sowa's emphasis that adopting AI isn't just a technical challenge, but a cultural one. For AI to be used meaningfully in the VCSE sector, organisations will need to build internal confidence, develop ethical frameworks, and embrace learning and experimentation.

Confidence was a recurring theme in this space: many staff feel unsure about how to start using AI, worried they will do it wrong or expose sensitive information. Others simply don't have the time to explore new tools on top of their existing workload. Individuals spoke about the need for supportive environments where non-experts can try out AI tools without judgement; places where it is safe to get things wrong, ask questions, and learn by doing. Some suggested local peer learning groups or informal internal sessions as a good starting point.

At the same time there was a clear call for structure. As more staff start using AI independently, charities risk inconsistent practises and blurred boundaries if they do not have internal guidelines to clarify how and when AI can or cannot be used. This includes setting expectations about human oversight, especially for sensitive work involving conflict, trauma or lived experience. AI may be useful for summarising a report, but it shouldn't replace human empathy in drafting communications about grief or abuse for example.

The concept of keeping a "human in the loop" came up repeatedly. AI works best as a support tool, not a decision-maker.

> "There's this danger that all our communication will end up AI-to-AI. Service users will use AI to communicate with charities. Charities will use AI to apply for funding. Grant-makers will use AI to assess those applications."

Alongside confidence and clarity, capacity building was mentioned. The charities called for practical, affordable local training that speaks to the realities of small teams and stretched resources. Ideally this training would come from people who understand the VCSE sector – not generic tech trainers. The group also discussed the importance of local networks, where charities can share what's working, ask questions, and test ideas together. Some suggested developing a shared set of prompts, VCSE-focused prompt creation workshops, or sector-wide tools to reduce duplication and ensure consistency.

Rather than rushing into AI because it is novel or topical, attendees want space to explore whether it truly adds value to their specific context. They also recognise the need to involve all staff in small organisations.

Culture change within the local charity sector is a vital foundation for an effective approach to AI that reflects its values.

Recommendations – what next?

To ensure AI is adopted ethically and effectively across Buckinghamshire's VCSE sector, participants identified several priorities for local action:

- There is a clear need for accessible, practical training. Local infrastructure bodies and funders can play a key role in supporting peer-led workshops, creating prompt libraries, and demystifying tools like ChatGPT—especially for small organisations without digital teams.
- Trusted local leaders can signpost to relevant resources, cutting through the overwhelm some charities feel when heading online to look for guidance.
- Local charities would benefit from shared guidance on ethical AI use. Simple, sector-relevant policies covering data protection, consent, and emotional boundaries would help organisations feel more confident about when and how to use AI.
- Funders should explore how to make their own processes more AI-friendly without disadvantaging those who don't use it. This includes reviewing application formats, offering feedback tools, or developing co-designed support platforms.

Finally, cross-sector collaboration is essential. Local charities, funders, and community groups should share what's working, test new ideas together, and co-create tools that reflect the values of the sector. Local coordination will be key to ensuring AI supports equity and inclusion—not just efficiency.

Hopes for the future

As the forum drew to a close, participants shared their hopes—not just for how AI might transform processes, but how it could reshape the values and culture of the sector in more inclusive, empowering ways.

There was a shared optimism that, if used wisely, AI could be a force for good—one that frees up time, amplifies community voices, and levels the playing field for smaller and underrepresented groups.

Some of the collective hopes expressed included:

- **More time with communities, less time on admin**

  Charities hope for a future where AI handles the bureaucracy so they can focus on what matters most: relationships, care, and impact.

- **AI as an enabler of inclusion, not just efficiency**

  Tools that help neurodivergent individuals, non-native English speakers, or those with lived experience engage more confidently and meaningfully in funding and service delivery.

- **Fairer access to funding and support**

  A sector where thoughtful AI design removes barriers and biases—rather than reinforcing them.

- **Leadership from the VCSE sector**

  Not just catching up with the AI wave, but leading the way with values-driven innovation that puts people first.

Conclusion

This Vital Voices forum made one thing clear: AI is not a distant future—it is a present reality, already reshaping the ways charities in Buckinghamshire and beyond work, communicate, and connect.

We heard inspiring examples of innovation, real concerns about harm and exclusion, and powerful visions for what AI could enable when rooted in the values of trust, inclusion, and human connection.

For a sector often under-resourced and overstretched, AI offers real promise—but only if approached with care. We must resist the urge to adopt technology for technology's sake. Instead, we must focus on what AI can do to amplify what charities do best: supporting people, building relationships, and changing lives.

The VCSE sector is uniquely placed to shape the conversation around responsible, inclusive AI—grounded not in profit or efficiency alone, but in ethics, empathy, and equity. Charities' commitment to tackling inequalities, supporting disadvantaged groups, and promoting ethical AI use highlights the sector's capability to bring everyone along on this journey, rather than leaving it in the hands of a select few.

This report is just one snapshot of Buckinghamshire's 2,500+ VCSE organisations, but it reflects a growing appetite for local leadership, learning, and collaboration. The choices we make now will determine whether AI divides or connects our communities.

Thank you to all the charities and groups that took part in our Vital Voices community forum:

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