

BUCKINGHAMSHIRE:

Uncovered

Vital Voices

**Mental Health and Wellbeing in
Buckinghamshire's VCSE Sector Workforce**



Introduction

Mental health and wellbeing are increasingly recognised as critical issues in the voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) workforce. The very qualities that make our sector so impactful – compassion, purpose, commitment to community – can also create unique pressures. Many who work or volunteer for charities do so to help others, often putting their own wellbeing second.

In July 2025, Heart of Bucks hosted its sixth Vital Voices Community Forum at the Buckinghamshire Community Wellbeing Hub in Aylesbury. Unlike discussions often centred on service users, this forum explored the experiences of the people working to support others every day in Buckinghamshire.

The forum brought together a small group of CEOs, service managers, volunteers and frontline workers, who contributed candid observations on the realities of working in the local VCSE sector. Our thanks to:

Buckinghamshire Community
Wellbeing Hub
Bucks Data Exchange
Bucks Mind

Carers Bucks
Chiltern Samaritans
Mind Over Mountains
One Recovery Bucks

Aylesbury Women's Aid
Community Impact Bucks
Hope After Harm
Youth Enquiry Service



Guest speaker

The session began with a presentation from guest speaker **Tim Bentham from Find Your Mindset**, who introduced the concept of “mental fitness”, framing mental health as something to be actively trained and strengthened – much like physical health. Tim’s approach emphasised prevention and resilience, and highlighted the importance of everyday practises that sustain emotional wellbeing. This set the tone for an open and honest discussion that moved between systemic pressures, the emotional cost of care, and examples of what’s working in local organisations.

This report summarises the key insights from the conversation. It demonstrates both the challenges (including the emotional toll of frontline work, the strain on leadership, and the impact of insecure funding) and the creative practical responses the VCSE is taking. It also highlights opportunities for collective action and the hopes for a more resilient, supported and proud VCSE workforce in Buckinghamshire.



Setting the scene

Tim Bentham, Find Your Mindset



To set the discussion in context, the group first heard from Find Your Mindset, a wellbeing-focused training and consultancy organisation. Drawing on his own experience in health and training, alongside the backgrounds of his co-founders in the military and police, **Tim introduced the concept of mental fitness.** He encouraged the group to think about proactive everyday practises that build resilience and train the mind beyond more reactive approaches to mental wellbeing.

Tim outlined Find Your Mindset's practical framework: Understand, Adapt, Evolve, Overcome. This simple but powerful model guides us to reflect daily on what we are grateful for, to adapt to challenges, take on small tasks to build resilience, and learn from each day. The analogy to physical fitness is core to their approach: just as you wouldn't run a marathon without training, sustaining mental wellbeing requires regular, intentional effort.

Tim also spoke about the **emotional cost of care, particularly in the VCSE sector where people are often driven by a strong sense of purpose and responsibility.** Whilst this is a source of strength, it can also lead to self-neglect and burnout, especially in a sector where staff and volunteers are frequently exposed to distress, trauma, or high-pressure situations. He reminded the group that "you can't care fully for someone else unless you can care for yourself".

Key Insights

These insights are reinforced by the national and regional context of mental wellbeing in the sector. Fair Collective's Breaking Point report (February 2025), based on a survey of over 350 small charity leaders, found that **85% reported their role had negatively impacted their mental health**. 20% described this impact as severe, including burnout, panic attacks, suicidal thoughts, or hospitalisation. Over 90% said their mental health affected their work, yet more than a quarter felt unsupported. The picture is similar locally.

The BOB VCSE Health Alliance report, "A Real Values Thing" (2023), showed that almost one in four organisations in Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Berkshire West provide specific support for people with mental health or learning disabilities, and nearly a third support broader health-related services.

Yet, only **39% of BOB VCSE organisations provided training for their workforce and volunteers**, compared with a national average of 65%. This highlights the challenges faced by a sector that is both essential to local health and wellbeing, and itself stretched to capacity. Most of these organisations are small and/or volunteer-led, and the wellbeing of their staff is key to remaining viable.

Against this backdrop, forum participants reflected on their own experiences and observations, in a sector where passion for the cause can make it harder to maintain boundaries or acknowledge personal struggles.



Pressures on the VCSE workforce

The emotional demands placed on the VCSE workforce are sizeable, and often underestimated. Whilst the group acknowledged their teams' commitment to their work, they spoke of the weight (both emotional and organisational) that comes with this. A number of overlapping pressures were brought up, ranging from job insecurity and financial strain to emotional fatigue and the increasing complexity of service user needs.

Rising complexity and emotional demand

Discussion covered the changing nature of service users' needs over the past decade. Individuals are now presenting with multiple, interlinked issues, from addiction and trauma to housing insecurity, poor mental health, and financial stress.

"After 14 years in frontline services, things feel more intense than they used to – people we support are just sicker than before."

"Mental health, trauma, alcohol, drugs, social media amongst other things are all interacting and creating more complexity."

This increasing complexity, combined with sheer demand, means staff and volunteers are being exposed to emotionally challenging situations more frequently with less time to recover. Exposure to safeguarding issues, disclosures of abuse, client deaths or violent behaviour are all risks faced by frontline staff. Concern was specifically raised about the impacts of these complexities on new or inexperienced staff and volunteers, and the impact on retention and talent within the sector.



Instability and job insecurity

Alongside these emotional pressures of supporting service users, systemic instability puts ongoing strain on staff. Short-term contracts, shrinking budgets and repeated commissioning cycles leave staff and volunteers uncertain about the future. Contributors described emerging from commissioning rounds only to face immediate questions about job losses and restructuring.

This unpredictability has knock-on impacts across teams and influences morale, productivity and service delivery. Staff anxiety during recommissioning periods can lead to reduced capacity to engage with service users.

"You spend so much time worrying about whether you'll still have a job or renewed funding that you have less energy to care for the people you're meant to be supporting."

This sense of precarity can extend to volunteers as well; especially in volunteer-run organisations or local branches of national charities.

"If you hear that half the branches are closing nationally, it doesn't instil confidence."



Difficulty switching off

The forum also emphasised how passion for the work – whilst a key strength – can make it challenging to maintain healthy boundaries. Examples were given of colleagues working late into the evening, skipping breaks or responding to emails at weekends; not out of obligation but care.

“We can be victims of our own passion sometimes. We care too much, and it’s hard to stop.”

“In the corporate world, they struggle to get staff to engage. In our world, people are sometimes too engaged which brings its own risks.”

Even when formal support such as supervision and counselling is available, it is often accessed when staff are already overwhelmed.



Hidden costs of emotional risk

The psychological toll of holding risk was also discussed. Safeguarding and crisis situations carry the risk of 'making the wrong call', not spotting a safeguarding concern, or simply feeling responsible when something goes wrong. That risk of internalising responsibility was another recurring theme in the conversation, with frontline workers sometimes carrying a personal sense of blame when outcomes for their service users were poor, even due to circumstances beyond their control.

And for leaders, the risk often includes absorbing both the anxieties of their teams and the organisational risk. One CEO reflected, "I get paid to hold that", but recognised that staff still often internalise the weight of responsibility.

Meanwhile, back-office and finance staff can struggle with feelings of disconnection from impact, questioning whether their work makes a difference. There was a sense that storytelling and communication is key in order to help every colleague, from payroll to fundraising, feel connected to the organisation's mission and see visible links to positive outcomes.

The very passion that sustains the VCSE sector also places it at risk, making the need for systemic and cultural support even more urgent.



Leadership, responsibility and culture

Leadership in the local VCSE sector carries a distinct set of emotional and organisational challenges. Small charity leaders juggle multiple roles and often carry the pressure of keeping the whole organisation going. Charity closures or mass lay-offs seem to be frequent news items. Leaders are also driven by purpose, but are often required to hold a mix of operational, financial and emotional pressures which remain unseen outside of senior roles.

Carrying the weight of the organisation

Conversation outlined the struggle of making decisions that directly affect colleagues' livelihoods and the basic survival of an organisation. In an unprecedentedly challenging funding climate, restructures and role reductions are frequent, and leaders are acutely aware of the personal impact of those decisions.

"We're broadly nice people and we do this because we care, but we're put in positions where we have to make decisions that don't feel nice."

"There are leaders who are constantly having to restructure just to keep the lights on. It's not a nice position to be in."

Some noted that these organisational responsibilities can feel even more emotionally draining than frontline work. Team conflict, HR issues, and redundancy decisions weigh heavily. For those who entered the sector to support people in need, moving into senior leadership can mean stepping further away from direct impact, and further into emotionally complex decision-making; often without adequate training or support.



Balancing vulnerability and positivity

There was an interesting discussion about the tension between honesty and optimism in charity leadership. Whilst selective vulnerability can build trust and rapport within a team, leaders can also feel a pressure to project confidence at all times.

"I don't think I'd ever tell my senior team I was a 'two-out-of-ten today'. Part of my job is to bring energy into the room."

This expectation to be an "emotional anchor" for the team can leave leaders without safe outlets for their own stress. This makes peer support networks and external spaces vital.

The squeeze on middle managers

Like many businesses, middle managers were described as sitting in the "squeeze zone" in charities, carrying pressures from above while also supporting teams below. Responsible for both delivery and staff wellbeing, they also often lack peer support or authority to influence wider decisions.

The forum raised this group as particularly vulnerable to burnout, given the dual demands of both accountability and service provision.



Culture and role modelling

Leadership behaviours were recognised as deeply influential in shaping organisational culture. Aforementioned habits such as working through breaks or not taking annual leave set norms for staff, even when unintentional.

"Staff mirror what they see. If we never switch off as leaders, it sets an unspoken expectation."

Simultaneously, leaders acknowledged the challenge of modelling wellbeing authentically. Some prefer flexible working patterns, such as working early mornings or weekends, but worry about the signals this sends. The group agreed the need for transparency: explaining choices and encouraging open dialogue helps to avoid setting unrealistic expectations.

Good practise examples included leaders sharing their own "wellbeing wins of the week" alongside staff and ensuring wellbeing check-ins with their team.

Small but consistent actions were highlighted to help build trust and safety.

The discussion reminded us that leaders are not only strategic and operational decision-makers. They are also cultural tone-setters and emotional anchors. Their ability to sustain both their own wellbeing and that of their teams was seen as critical to the resilience of both individual organisations and the wider sector.

What's working: Wellbeing approaches and support

Evidently, the challenge is significant. The forum reflections emphasise that wellbeing strategies cannot be one-size-fits-all. Different roles carry different pressures within the sector, and intentional effort is needed to bridge gaps and strengthen connection.

However participants shared a range of positive (and often low-cost) approaches that are already making a difference to workforce wellbeing in their organisations.

Embedding wellbeing in the everyday

Simple rituals were marked for being particularly effective in normalising open conversations. Several organisations begin meetings with a quick check-in to provide the opportunity to discuss wellbeing concerns. Others open all-team meetings by rating how they are feeling out of ten.

"This is really effective when the senior leadership model honesty in these moments."

Practises such as "win of the week" celebrations, informal recognition in emails, or even intentional team humour all helped to build a culture where wellbeing is openly acknowledged rather than hidden or insincere. However it was noted that this could take different forms depending on the size and structure of the organisation.



On-the-ground support

One charity had secured funding for a mental health practitioner to work directly with the team (not just with services users). By being available for immediate, informal conversations and advice, this addition helps staff decompress after difficult encounters without the delay of formal supervision.

“If something distressing happens and you then have to wait a week to talk about it in supervision, it’s going to grow and have a much bigger impact on your wellbeing. This way issues can be actively dealt with right away instead.”

Embedded support like this is dependent on funding; but its practical and powerful outcomes on wellbeing speak for themselves and suggest a model for wider sector support.

Supervision and reflective practice

Where formal structures were in place, regular supervision and reflective practice sessions were described as invaluable. These go beyond performance management to include open conversations about emotional load, boundaries and wellbeing strategies. Some teams use coaching-style questions (“where are you at today? What would help you move one point up?”) to guide this reflection. Staff valued the opportunity to step back from the intensity of frontline work and process their experiences in these moments.



Small habits that protect space

Participants also shared simple habits: switching off devices during breaks, taking walking meetings outdoors, leaving on time, and introducing short guided meditations before team presentations. These small interventions help reduce performance anxiety, create space to decompress, and link mental wellbeing with light physical activity.

Peer connection

Across roles one of the most valued modes of support was simply the ability to talk openly with colleagues. Informal peer conversations (checking in with a teammate, acknowledging effort as well as outcomes etc.) were described as the most immediate and powerful forms of emotional support.

"You can't beat talking."



Navigating perceptions of wellbeing spending

A final theme concerned how wellbeing initiatives are perceived by funders or the public. Some worry that spending on staff care could be misinterpreted as indulgent; especially in a climate where charities often seem to be under scrutiny in the press.

"If I take my staff out on a wellbeing day, will we get criticism? Public perception can shift easily if people interpret that as mishandling funds."

Others shared more positive experiences and examples of funders explicitly supporting workforce wellbeing because they recognised its importance. The group agreed that clarity and confidence in communicating the purpose of wellbeing spending was essential.

These examples show that while systemic challenges remain to be addressed, there is already a strong base of practical and creative action across the local sector. These initiatives are not a substitute for structural change, but they do help to create a healthier, more sustainable working culture within organisations.





Opportunities for the sector

The positive examples shared so far focused on individual or organisational practice, but participants were clear that broader structural/systemic action is needed if workforce wellbeing in the VCSE sector is to improve in the longer term. The group highlighted a number of opportunities here:

1. Create cross-organisational support spaces

There was strong interest in developing structured, non-managerial spaces for peer connection between organisations. Ideas included joint drop-in sessions or “unbranded” peer supervision open to staff from any charity. These would allow people to share experiences and decompress outside of the pressures of internal dynamics (available to frontline workers, CEOs and everyone in between), and would be especially valuable for smaller organisations with limited in-house provision.

2. Encourage funders to explicitly support workforce wellbeing

Participants agreed that funders have a vital role to play in legitimising and resourcing VCSE workforce wellbeing. Suggestions included allowing budget lines for staff care in funding applications, recognising workforce wellbeing in commissioning decisions, funding collaborative wellbeing initiatives (such as those outlined in point 1), or simply validating that time spent on staff/volunteer wellbeing is an essential aspect of quality service delivery. Examples were shared of donors who already fund staff wellbeing, with the challenge being to identify and engage more of these funders.



3. Champion sector pride and celebration

A recurring theme revolved around the need to reclaim pride in charity work and to celebrate collective achievements more visibly. Staff and volunteers in all roles – including those not directly delivering services – benefit from recognition that their work is making a difference.

“We need to up the levels of pride – not just in the organisations, but in the whole sector.”

More opportunities to share success stories, visibility of sector impact, and celebrate contributions across the sector could boost morale and challenge narratives that undervalue the work of the local VCSE workforce.

4. Address perception challenges through open communication

Concerns about how wellbeing spending might be perceived externally, particularly by private donors or the media, could be mitigated by positive, transparent communication. Organisations that explained the rationale behind their wellbeing support found it easier to secure buy-in. The group felt that collectively challenging narratives that frame workforce wellbeing support as wasteful would strengthen confidence across the sector.



5. Strengthen coordination of training and resources

Participants highlighted the potential to collaborate on training and shared wellbeing initiatives (as mentioned in point 1). Shared opportunities would help reduce duplication, make provision more accessible for charities of all sizes, ensure consistency in quality, and better equip more organisations with adequate tools.

These sector-wide opportunities – shared infrastructure, cross-organisation collaboration, and funder support – will be central to effective service delivery. There was a strong desire to move beyond reliance on individual resilience and address the wider structural and cultural issues.

Voices of the sector

"It was great to hear all the different perspectives and meet others in the sector. We don't often get that opportunity as voluntary staff."

"I appreciated having a space where we could all be open and honest. We all agreed communication is key for workforce wellbeing, so seeing this actually modelled by everyone in the room is good."

"I'm going to make a point of asking staff how they are on a scale of 0-10. It was good to listen to everyone's perspective."

Final thoughts

Mental health and wellbeing are not peripheral issues for Buckinghamshire's VCSE sector – they are central to the ability of organisations to deliver consistent and compassionate support to our communities in need.

The Vital Voices forum highlighted both the scale of current pressures and the creativity and commitment already present in the sector. Participants spoke candidly about the emotional costs of frontline work and the impacts of financial and systemic instability. They also shared practical and hopeful examples of what can be done differently, from small wellbeing rituals to cross-sector peer support and funder engagement.

A clear message that carried throughout was that wellbeing cannot be treated as an optional extra, but must be woven into the everyday culture of organisations of all sizes, with space for honest conversations, leadership that models healthier practices, and structures that share emotional load.

As Buckinghamshire's VCSE sector continues to navigate rising demand and a challenging funding climate, the wellbeing of its workforce continues to face uncertainty. This forum extended an invitation to all to build on what is already working, collaborate across organisations, and ensure those who dedicate themselves to supporting others are themselves supported.

Sustaining the drive, connection and purpose of the local sector means applying the same values inward, and recognising that caring for the people who deliver change is fundamental to the change itself.

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