

BUCKINGHAMSHIRE:

Uncovered

Vital Voices

Connecting Buckinghamshire Charities



Heart of Bucks: Vital Voices

In November 2025, Heart of Bucks brought together representatives from over 40 local charities, community groups and voluntary organisations for a Vital Voices forum focused on connection, shared challenges and opportunities for collaboration across Buckinghamshire.

The session, held at Buckinghamshire Community Wellbeing Hub in Aylesbury, began with a reflection on (and celebration of) our Vital Voices forums to-date, sharing the key insights, feedback and actions that now form the basis of this summary report.

What is Vital Voices?



Spotlight on Local Challenges

- Vital Voices is Heart of Bucks' series of small, invite-only forums that bring together local charities with regional and national leaders.
- Created as part of a wider Lottery-funded *Buckinghamshire: Uncovered* project, the aim is to highlight local challenges, strengthen relationships, and ensure the insights of small charities inform wider conversations.

What is Vital Voices?



Creating Space for Small Charity Voices

- From the start, the aim was to create a space where small, local charities in Buckinghamshire could be heard.
- Small organisations are often closest to their communities. They see emerging needs first and respond quickly. But all too often, their voices aren't as heard in wider conversations about funding, policy, and support.
- Each session has welcomed around 10-15 grassroots organisations. The focus is always the same: practical discussion, honest reflection and creating space for local charity voices

What is Vital Voices?



Building Connections

- Forum topics:
 - Cost-of-Living
 - Funder Relationships
 - Business Relationships
 - Crisis Response
 - Mental Health
 - Artificial Intelligence
- Guests from:
 - The Bank of England
 - The National Emergencies Trust
 - The National Lottery Community Fund

About the November Event Format

This particular forum trialled a new structure in response to previous attendee feedback. The goal was to create opportunities for charities to connect, collaborate & share.

1. Key Insights from Vital Voices

2. Spotlight Session

- Rapid three-minute introductions from local groups, sharing what they do and their immediate challenges or opportunities.

2. Networking & Activities

- Space for conversations, sector connections and contributions to our “Challenges” and “Opportunities” boards.
- This approach aimed to bring more voices into the room and create stronger local links.



Key Insights

1. Relationships & Trust are Everything

The most prominent theme across all forums has been the importance of relationships and trust.

- Partnerships work best when they're built on **long-term, local relationships**.
- Internally, trust shapes **wellbeing, productivity, staff retention and teamwork**.
- AI development has the potential to **erode trust**; between the public/service users and charities, or between charities and funders. But it could also build relationships and enhance communication if used responsibly.
- During crises and emergencies, communities turn first to **grassroots groups they already trust** – not large public bodies or national leaders.

1. Relationships & Trust are Everything

This was perhaps best encapsulated in a quote from one of our national guests, who emphasised the importance of building local relationships (both within the sector and across the communities we serve):

**“Make friends before
you need them”**

- Simon Lewis,
National Emergencies Trust



2. The Funding Challenge

Unsurprisingly, funding pressures were the second overarching theme from all of our discussions. Funding challenges affect small charities' capacity to deliver services, support their communities, recruit and retain staff and volunteers; and affects the wellbeing of those staff and volunteers.

Short-Term Grant Cycle

Charities frequently reported being trapped in competitive, short-term funding or commissioning cycles that limit capacity to deliver services and retain staff. We heard that longer-term, flexible funding would make the single biggest difference to many organisations.

The Double Squeeze

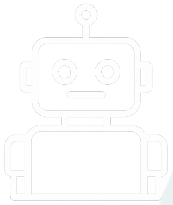
We have also heard how sharp rising demand for services has been driven by the ongoing cost-of-living crisis, whilst staff and volunteers themselves struggle with bills and inflation.

Energy Drain

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

3. Innovation – Despite Overstretch

Charities are embracing creativity and technology - even with limited capacity.



- Attendees shared examples of using **AI tools** for funding bids, streamlining admin, translation and accessibility.
- This is helping small teams stretch limited time and funds.
- Others spoke about **Wellbeing Innovation:**
 - Peer support, walking meetings, wellbeing check-ins.



**“Small steps
can make
a real
difference”**

3. Innovation – Despite Overstretch

Innovation often comes from necessity, but there is a cost.

“There are leaders who are constantly having to restructure just to keep the lights on.”

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

“I find the pace of change overwhelming. We can’t keep up with complex demand for core services, let alone invest time in new technology.”

4. Place & Perception Matter

Although Buckinghamshire is frequently seen as affluent, attendees have emphasised that this hides significant and growing pockets of disadvantage. This perception often reduces access to national funding and leads to local organisations being overlooked in strategic discussion.

As one contributor put it:

“There’s an assumption Bucks doesn’t need support.”



Action, Not Just Talk





**Your
generosity
can stay
100% local**



**Giving isn't
always about
money, it's also
about your time.**

**Shining a spotlight on the importance
of giving back locally**

Vital Voices is designed to move beyond discussion. We respect the time of our attendees and we understand that, despite the inherent value of coming together to share experiences and connect, it can be frustrating if no further action results.

Several concrete developments have already stemmed from previous sessions.

First and foremost, our **Give Local** campaign, also launched in November 2025, encouraged individuals and business to support grassroots charities in their own communities. This idea came directly from our forum on business-charity relationships, where the group talked about collaborative efforts, shared branding and a coordinated campaign to amplify the message across Buckinghamshire.



Some further examples of actions resulting from the forums to-date include:

Social Media Training for Small Charities

Delivered by Community Impact Bucks following discussion at Vital Voices.

Bucks Data Exchange – AI Blog Series

Created to support local organisations exploring this emerging technology.

National Charity AI Taskforce

Sharing Vital Voices insights to inform policy and maintain small charity voice.

Funding for Community Spaces

Shaped by repeated forum conversations about the importance (and current lack) of shared, affordable local venues.

Forum Insights

We asked our November forum attendees to provide their own perspectives on key challenges and opportunities; for Buckinghamshire's VCSE sector and/or for their own organisations.

The themes captured through this feedback strongly mirrored our presented findings to-date, and further highlight a sector that is collaborative, but operating under increasing pressure.

Challenges

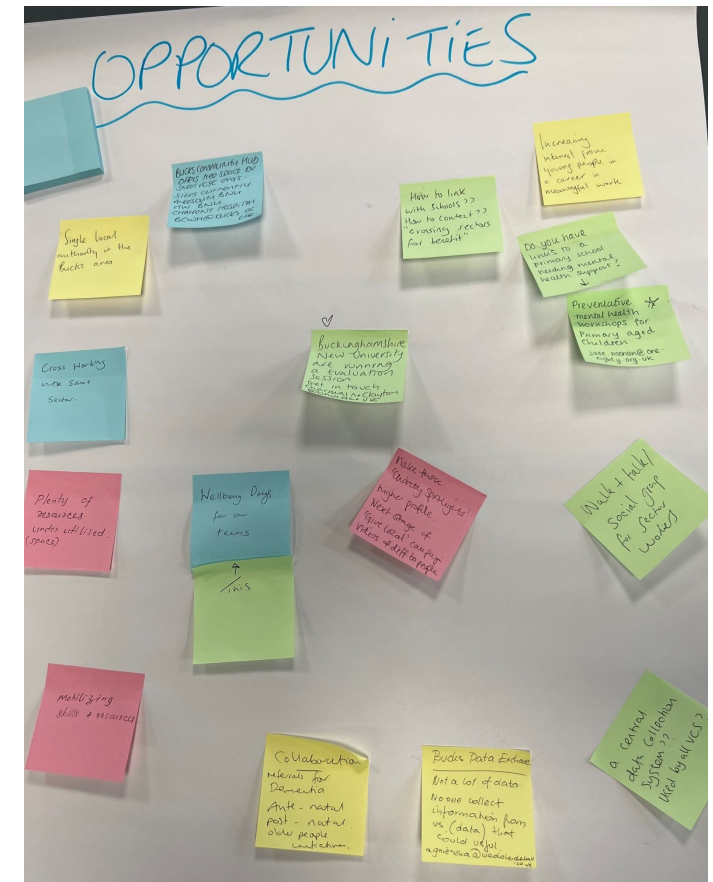
Recurring themes centred around funding and sustainability, with numerous organisations noting difficulty in covering *core costs* and responding to *growing demand for services*.

- Uncertainty and change in local public services and council structures.
- Access to space and the loss of affordable community venues.
- Volunteer capacity and recruitment challenges.
- Cultural and attitude barriers, including dismissiveness between sectors, a lack of understanding of charity work, and pressures for "instant results".
- Systemic issues such as reduced public sector budgets, discrimination, and grassroots organisations' contributions.

Opportunities

Despite these pressures, attendees also identified (and offered) opportunities for collaboration and innovation:

- Building a shared data infrastructure (e.g. through the [Bucks Data Exchange](#)).
- Increasing cross-sector working, including developing links between charities, schools, and health partners.
- Making local charity work more visible and celebrated – for example, by building on the event's short "charity spotlights" in video form, or promoting our Give Local campaign.
- Promoting wellbeing and peer support for charity staff and volunteers.
- Better use of existing spaces through coordination and resource-sharing.
- Capturing the enthusiasm of young people interested in careers with purpose.



Closing Reflections

Vital Voices continues to showcase the strength, commitment and experience within Buckinghamshire's VCSE sector. The forums have revealed both the pressures charities operate under and the remarkable resilience and innovation that continue to shine through in Buckinghamshire.

Our thanks to all the organisations and representatives who have joined us and shared their time and experience to-date.