



Report on Doncaster Voluntary Sector Infrastructure Support



Executive Summary

1. The purpose of this research was to develop a picture of what support is available to the wide numbering range of voluntary and community sector bodies operating across Doncaster. We were particularly concerned to find out what was being provided in terms of organisational development support.
2. Information was gathered through an online survey and through a series of interviews with key people, both in the voluntary sector and City of Doncaster Council. This was supplemented by information gathered through a web search of the work being delivered by the City of Doncaster Council and by the strategy being adopted by City of Doncaster Council.
3. Doncaster is a post industrial town with a significant rural hinterland. Poverty and disability levels are high and educational attainment levels are low.
4. Research by Sheffield Hallam University found 535 voluntary and community organisations in Doncaster which can be multiplied by a factor of 3.66 (to include organisations operating below the radar) to add another 1,130 organisations to this figure.
5. Voluntary sector infrastructure support has a long and chequered history which has resulted in the current fragmented provision and very little collaboration. There is a wide range of provision in terms of infrastructure, including Voluntary Action Doncaster, Charity Hub, Chamber Support, Well Doncaster, and organisations with a wider geographical brief, such as SYFAB. None of this, however, offers the sort of organisational development support traditionally provided by Councils for Voluntary Service.
6. This needs to be seen in the context of the local policy background, whereby the local authority has developed strategic partnerships in public, private and community sectors with the aim of reducing health inequalities. This is supported by the VCS Reps who are elected by the VCFS Forum to provide a link between the sector and statutory bodies. The local authority is now contracting out training, volunteer recruitment and DBS checks but there is no sign of any contract around organisational development.
7. Results of the online survey found a fragmented picture of where support came from, with most receiving help from Well Doncaster which is delivered by City of Doncaster Public Health. Support was needed with a wide range of issues, but by far the majority was with funding and grants. Again, most support was received from Well Doncaster but a wide range of other sources of support was cited both within Doncaster and outside. Where organisational development support was needed, it was having to be sought from outside Doncaster.
8. Only low numbers of respondents had applied for the two most accessible forms of funding – South Yorkshire Community Foundation and Awards for All. For some, this would provide too low a level of funding; for the others the process felt too big for a group of volunteers to undertake. A wide list of funders was cited to which successful applications had been made.
9. A number of organisations interviewed “look after themselves”, having national and regional bodies which they can refer to and who provide considerable organisational development support.

10. A gap identified by a number of respondents was the representation of Doncaster “at the wider table” with bodies such as South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority.
11. The geographical nature of Doncaster presents its own challenges. It comprises a wide range of settlements from commuter villages to former mining communities, mostly not linked by any form of public transport. This is enhanced by an attitude of “localism” whereby people’s focus is very much on the neighbourhood.
12. There was a need identified for “a central point of gravity” – a body with a strategic role to bring the sector together and with the ability to hold large contracts on behalf of the sector. Without this, potential contracts with health bodies and government departments could be lost to the private sector.
13. Funding and succession planning were major issues for most bodies with most support being provided by Well Doncaster. There is little provision for this kind of organisational development.

Ann Hindley October 2025

Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this research is to find out what provision is being made within Doncaster to support the needs of Voluntary Community and Faith organisations in terms of organisational development. Organisational development involves providing specialised support in areas such as governance, income generation, organisational development, finance, asset transfer, community engagement, safeguarding, volunteering and quality standards. Community Matters Yorkshire was aware of a number of organisations offering support to voluntary and community organisations in Doncaster and wanted to develop a picture of what is available and identify the gaps in provision, so that the information can be made available to potential funders.

The report below sets out information about Doncaster itself in terms of its history and demography, what the charitable sector looks like and the historical background of infrastructure support as well as present day provision. This is set out against the City of Doncaster policy background. An account is given both of the results of an on line survey and of the interviews carried out with both representatives of the voluntary sector and of City of Doncaster Council.

Methodology

The methodology used was one of giving a voice to as many organisations in the Doncaster voluntary sector to tell us about what support is available, how it meets their needs and what improvements can be made. Methods used included:

- Web search of Doncaster infrastructure organisations and City of Doncaster Council policy initiatives;
- Online survey circulated to the mailing lists of the Charity Hub, the Advice Network, City of Doncaster Council, Doncaster Chamber and to a database of charities taken from the Charity Commission website. Voluntary Action Doncaster was approached to ask for circulation to their mailing list but, after some discussion, felt that they were unable to take part;
- Use of the Charity Commission web site to assess the size of the sector
- Attendance at two events held by Voluntary Action Doncaster and one by the Charity Hub;
- Interviews with a range of voluntary sector organisations across Doncaster.

The interviews included:

Face-to-face meetings with Michele Beck of Doncaster Housing for Young People, and Barbara Booton of Active Independence, and telephone or Zoom interviews with the following:

- Andrew Jackson – Hilltop
- Clynton Johnson – Charity Hub
- Danielle Betts – Doncaster Community and Leisure Trust
- Dave McLeavy – Active Fusion
- Dawn Ashton – Age UK Doncaster
- Emma Nicholas Hernandez – Well Doncaster
- James Wood – Citizens Advice
- Kelly Hicks – peoplefocussed
- Laura Arthur – Doncaster MIND
- Leigh Armstrong – Mindful Activities
- Maria Doherty – Thorne and Moorends Community Regeneration Partnership

- Paul Iwanyckyj - Doncaster Ukrainian Society
- Sarah Eastaff – darts
- Vanessa Powell-Hoyland - Well Doncaster
- Various Parish and Town Councils

We are making no claims for this to be a representative sample of the Doncaster voluntary sector organisations, but simply a snapshot of the state of the sector.

A web search was carried out to develop a picture of the work being delivered by Well Doncaster and of the City of Doncaster Council initiative of the Great 8 priorities that is informing their strategic plan.

Doncaster

Doncaster Metropolitan Borough was created in 1974 and covers a substantial post-industrial town that serves a wide area, including a number of former pit villages and commuter settlements. It has been famous for coalmining, railway engineering and a number of industries that have long closed down. It was made a city in 2022 and became the City of Doncaster Council and has had an elected Mayor since 2002. Doncaster comprises 21 wards and 88 communities, some within the conurbation of Doncaster but many are villages of differing sizes and often quite self-contained. It has, in the past, been able to access resources through the Coalfield Regeneration Trust, the EU Objective 1 programme and New Deal for Communities, and has previously been a priority area for National Lottery funds.

The population of Doncaster in 2021 was 308,108, having increased by 6,200 (2%) since the previous census in 2011. 20% of the population are classed as disabled, higher than the national average of 17%. 7% belong to a minority ethnic group which is significantly lower than the national average of 19%. Doncaster has been a dispersal area for asylum seekers for approximately 20 years. Educational attainment levels are lower than the national average, with 23% of residents qualified to level four and 39% to at least level three, compared to with national averages of 34% and 53%. Home ownership is marginally higher than the national average.

In terms of health, the figures for smoking are higher than the national average, as is the prevalence of obesity, particularly prevalent at reception age. This is accompanied by a lower than average life expectancy.

It is the most easterly local authority in South Yorkshire and includes part of the Dearne Valley.

The Charitable Sector in Doncaster

There are 292 charities registered with the Charity Commission with a connection to Doncaster. To this must be added organisations operating as Community Interest Companies, Community Benefit Societies and other forms of governance. Some of those listed by the Charity Commission may only have a tenuous link to Doncaster and there will be others that work in Doncaster but do not fall under this classification. 33 of those charities work just with children and young people, 9 work specifically with older people, 13 are described as working with other charities or voluntary bodies. This last group includes grant giving bodies, Doncaster Volunteers Action Group, Aspire Community Enterprise in Sheffield, Voluntary Action Doncaster, Danum Trust CIO, as well as other quite specialist bodies. The objects of the Danum Trust relate to the advancement of the Christian Faith primarily in the Doncaster area by provision of grants or purchasing of assets and is a relatively new charity. Doncaster Volunteers Action Group seems to be largely concerned with flood relief in Doncaster. Aspire is concerned with reducing electronic waste.

In South Yorkshire, there are 2,900 organisations in the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector employing 16,000 employees and 63,000 regular volunteers (Chapman and Wistow, 2023). Research carried out by CRESR at Sheffield Hallam University (Harris, Damm and McMillan, 2024) gave the following figures for third sector organisations in Doncaster, with the information being taken from the Register of Charities, Companies House, the Financial Conduct Authority and the Community Amateur Sports Club Register held by His Majesty's Revenue and Customs. They found 381 charities, 104 community interest companies, 36 societies and 14 CASCs, totalling 535.

This is likely to be an underestimate and may exclude those working on a regional or national level, including working in Doncaster but registered elsewhere. Research by Mohan et al (2010) estimates that there are 3.66 organisations operating below the radar, i.e. unregistered, per 1000 population. Based on this calculation, there will be an estimated 1130 unregistered Voluntary and Community Organisations. The largest charity in Doncaster is Doncaster Community and Leisure Trust which was initially formed to manage Doncaster's leisure facilities. It has an annual income of £15,664,025 and this is very much in common with other South Yorkshire areas where a similar body is now the largest charity.

The Historical Background to the Support Provided to the Voluntary and Community Sectors

Doncaster Council for Voluntary Service (CVS) was established in 1963, previously Doncaster and District Council of Social Services since 1943. It was closed in 2016 as a result of lack of funding, according to an article in Doncaster Free Press. It was originally based in offices in Netherhall Road but later moved to a base in the yard of Doncaster Railway Station. After 2016, infrastructure support was then provided by a contract from Doncaster Metropolitan Borough Council with North Bank Forum to provide a service called Horizon which was based in offices at what was Robin Hood Airport. This service was replaced by a contract with Voluntary Action Doncaster in 2020.

After the local authority contract with Voluntary Action Doncaster was terminated in 2024, a new system of both voice and representation and voluntary sector support was put in place by the local authority following a strategic review in 2023. The review resulted in organisations saying that they needed three things:

- Opportunities for training;
- Volunteering support and access to DBS checks;
- A two-way process of taking part in decision making.

This emerged from a series of workshops run by Team Doncaster asking people active in the sector what their priorities were. Eight priorities emerged, which have become known as the Great 8, of which more is written below. A new system has been put in place which no longer relies on one organisation claiming to represent the sector, or on the attendance of unpaid people from the voluntary sector at strategic meetings.

Current Support for the Voluntary and Community Sectors

Voluntary Action Doncaster (VAD) was registered as a Charitable Incorporated Organisation in June 2019 and is described on the Charity Commission website as acting as an umbrella or resource body and providing advocacy, advice and information in Doncaster. They were established to deliver a contract of support funded by the Doncaster Metropolitan Borough Council.

That contract ceased in 2004 but Voluntary Action Doncaster is still delivering support to voluntary and community sector organisations across the area, using reserves to pay a community consultant. Although I attended two events organised by Voluntary Action Doncaster, including their Annual General Meeting, I was unable to secure an interview with their Chair to talk about VAD's role. VAD was funded by City of Doncaster Council until 2024 to provide infrastructure support across the city and its surrounding areas, but had the contract withdrawn at short notice, leading to the resignation of both Chief Executive and Chair of Trustees.

The organisation is still functioning with new trustees and, at the time of writing, supported by an independent community development worker. They deliver regular events including a major event at the football stadium in June 2025, showcasing local voluntary organisations and events to bring members together to network and hear speakers, and a Meet the Funder networking event. Their vision is to nurture an inclusive, thriving voluntary, community and faith-based sector in Doncaster. They have a mission of connecting people and communities with the aim of improving the health and wellbeing and growth of communities in Doncaster. They advertise both job and volunteering opportunities on their website and provide a forum for members to share information. It is a registered charity. There is no paid staff and there is no systematic provision of support for organisational development

The Charity Hub is run by Clynton Johnson and is focussed on third sector networking and training. Clynton is one of the VCS Reps (about which more information is given below) and, as a result, is part of the Executive Board on City of Doncaster Council. The Charity Hub was established in 2023 as a peer support network to provide open lines of communication between the voluntary sector and those with no information about what it does. At the time of interview, the Hub was funded by a Multiply contract from City of Doncaster Council, and was building an online platform and developing sponsorships and partnerships. Since the interview, a hub has also been launched in Rotherham and there are plans to replicate elsewhere. The Hub is also working at placing volunteers, and they provide advice about grants and funding on their website and advertise charity job vacancies. There is no offer of support for organisational development.

The Hub is not a charity; it is a company limited by guarantee. They circulate a regular newsletter which includes Charity Commission information, and information on upcoming events. Events are held once a month and provide opportunities for networking, and moves to different venues within Doncaster. A number of speakers are booked for each event, both from charities and the statutory sector, as well as from businesses with services to offer voluntary organisations. The May event involved a speaker from South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority (SYMCA) about potential support they may be able to provide for charities and community interest companies.

Doncaster Community and Leisure Trust (DCLT) which is a registered charity formed in 2011 and grew out of the body that managed the Dome Leisure Centre. It now manages 14 venues across Doncaster and has a contract with the City of Doncaster Council to run the Doncaster Volunteer Bank, matching volunteers with community organisations, in conjunction with the Social Isolation Alliance. They use an "app-based platform" to enable volunteers to sign up, have produced a volunteer handbook and run volunteer recruitment events. A DBS service is also provided by DCLT for voluntary sector organisations but no support for organisational development.

Doncaster Chamber Support is provided by Doncaster Chamber of Commerce which includes a wide range of voluntary organisations in its membership. One of their partners is Citizens Advice whose current chief officer was previously a non-executive director. He described the Chamber as providing good support of local business and would like to see that replicated for the voluntary sector.

The Chamber has strong ties with the local authority and has a lobbying role on the part of its members. There is no specialist support for development of voluntary and community organisations.

Well Doncaster is an initiative of Public Health within the City of Doncaster Council and is led by Vanessa Powell-Hoyland. Funding is provided by South Yorkshire Metropolitan Combined Authority (SYMCA) to work with and fund community groups as part of their work in reducing wealth and social inequalities. She described Well Doncaster as:

'working in a granular way of funding community ideas and helping community groups to flourish'

It works in the top thirty most deprived communities, adopting a hyper local model.

'working with and for local people using Appreciative Enquiry techniques creating aspirations not expectations.'

Vanessa described their work as *'a lightning rod for change'*. The process is being evaluated as part of the National Institute for Health Research collaborative which in turn is part of the Public Health England Well North work being evaluated by the University of Manchester.

Alongside this runs Community Wealth Builder which was initially funded by the European Regional Development Fund in 2019, which has, as one of its aims, supporting and strengthening the Voluntary and Community Sector and promoting capacity building within the sector. Its focus is on putting wealth back into local communities by helping social enterprises, charities and co-ops to further their ambitions. Community Wealth Builder provides one to one support, training and workshops and policies and toolkits. The help listed on their website includes supporting groups starting up with advice, information and guidance, researching funding opportunities and supporting applications. Their slogan is *"Community Wealth Building puts people at the centre of local economic development"*. Groups are supported in putting together an action plan which is then followed up by access to training, lists of funding opportunities and links to information sheets about legal structures. Other organisations such as South Yorkshire Funding Advice Bureau (SYFAB) might be brought in to provide training or support with funding applications.

"It is very much about building capacity".

Community Wealth Builder also administers Community Investment Funds in the central locality.

.It is now funded by the UK Shared Prosperity Fund which is providing small grants to help small organisations to *"do what they would like to do in their own communities"*. There are four host organisations across Doncaster and each has a funding pot. These are Moorends Miners Welfare, North Doncaster Development Trust in Bentley, Mindful Activities Yorkshire based in Denaby, and the Social Isolation Alliance. They use a participatory budgeting model.

Four Community Connectors are employed to work in Bentley, Wheatley and Intake, Balby, Edlington, Conisbrough, Denaby and Stainforth to support people and communities to improve their physical and mental health and wellbeing.

Well Doncaster officers are employed to provide community development support in:

- Armthorpe, Dunscroft, Hatfield, Hatfield Woodhouse and Lindholme and Stainforth and Moorends;
- Hexthorpe, Balby and Town Fields;
- Askern, Bentley, Sprotborough and Roman Bridge;
- Adwick and Carcroft, Highfields and Woodlands;
- Conisbrough, Mexborough and Denaby.

South Yorkshire Funding Advice Bureau (SYFAB) has been in existence since the 1980s and is now administered by the South Yorkshire Community Foundation. It provides a range of services including their Funding News website, an online database, funding training and events, a team of Funding Advisors and a range of online resources. It is currently funded by Sheffield City Council and Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council and was in receipt of a small amount of funding from the Coalfields Regeneration Trust during the time this research was taking place. This was being used to deliver training in former coalfield settlements within Doncaster. Otherwise, there was no funded support available in Doncaster for SYFAB.

Community Matters Yorkshire is based in Leeds but covers the whole of Yorkshire and beyond, providing a hub of learning, support, advice and guidance, largely to those running community buildings but also to the wider sector. Community Matters does provide organisational development support.

Yorkshire Local Councils Association provides support to parish and town councils across the whole community, largely in terms of legal requirements. There are 41 parish and town councils across Doncaster as a district, providing another very local tier of local government. All parish and town councillors are volunteers, although they have statutory duties and powers. They deliver a range of services to meet local needs and improve quality of life and community wellbeing.

Community First Yorkshire describes itself as empowering and strengthening communities across North, South and West Yorkshire, specialising in support of rural work and organisations, inspiring and supporting positive action. They are funded by Defra to provide a rural advocacy service and influencing role. They are based near York but manage a number of projects that help to support communities across North, South and West Yorkshire. Much of their work is based in North Yorkshire, partly because they are funded to be the infrastructure organisation there. Men's Shed development has happened through Community First Yorkshire across North and West Yorkshire. Support is available to rural organisations in Doncaster should they ask for it, but no specific services or support seem to be delivered in South Yorkshire.

The Local Policy Background

Team Doncaster

Team Doncaster is a strategic partnership spanning public, private and community sectors, overseeing delivery and achievements of the Borough Strategy and encompasses a number of boards and partnerships that help progress eight Wellbeing Goals. These boards include the Health and Wellbeing Board whose aim is to reduce health inequalities and has three areas of focus:

- Improving the experience of ageing;
- Closing the gap in women's and child health,
- Creating healthy places to live, grow and play.

A new Borough Strategy "Doncaster Delivering Together" was agreed in September 2021, setting out goals and priorities for the next ten years. It is based on the Wellbeing Wheel and the six Wellbeing Goals of:

- Thriving people and places
- Fair and inclusive
- Safe and resilient
- Prosperous and connected
- Skilled and creative
- Healthier and compassionate
- Greener and cleaner

These are all based on the Great 8 priorities which will be driving delivery over the next ten years. The Great 8 priorities are:

- Tackling Climate Change
- Developing the skills to thrive in life and work
- Making Doncaster the best place to do business and create jobs
- Building opportunities for healthier, happier and longer lives for all
- Creating safer, stronger, greener and cleaner communities where everyone belongs
- Nurturing a child and family friendly borough
- Promoting the borough and its cultural, sporting and heritage opportunities

Alongside this, a new organisation called VCS Reps was formed early in 2025, and each of the eight priorities is staffed by someone representing the voluntary sector, with the aim of giving a wider voice to the voluntary organisations within statutory sector and decision making bodies. It provides a seat on bodies such as the Health and Wellbeing Board, the Mayoral committee, and the Integrated Care Board, with the aim of giving and developing a voluntary sector voice and influence.

The Great 8 representatives are:

- Andrew Jackson: Hilltop Centre, Tackling Climate Change
- Danielle Betts: Doncaster Community and Leisure Trust, Developing Skills to Thrive in Life and Work
- Andy Simpson: refurbish, Best Place to do Business
- Kelly Hicks: peoplefocussed, Healthier, Happier and Longer Lives
- Clynton Johnson: Charity Hub, Safer, Stronger, Cleaner and Greener
- Amy Walker: Growing Together, Nurturing a Child and Family Friendly Borough

- Alex Chadburn: Friends of Clay Lane, Building Transport and Digital Communication
- Leigh Armstrong: Mindful Activities, Cultural, Sporting and Heritage Opportunities

Funding is provided to each of these bodies to act as a link between the VCS and statutory bodies. Their role is to act as a conduit between the statutory boards they represent on and the voluntary and community sector, using a range of media. Leigh Armstrong (chair of the Great 8) described the process of cascading information as one of

'holding open forum meetings and sending out information through Well Doncaster' while also developing their own list.

'They are there to understand what's happening at a higher level and pass it on to organisations working in the sector'.

Monthly meetings are held between the Great 8 representatives and they have a WhatsApp group for communication between times. They are trying to impress upon people the value of being listened to.

'The community is in the middle of the circle and the voluntary and community sector and then central and local government.'

Other Support for the Voluntary Sector from City of Doncaster Council

There are a number of initiatives within Doncaster offering a range of support to voluntary, community and faith bodies. These include those who are contracted by City of Doncaster Council to deliver specific contracts and other organisations with a variety of funding and providing a range of services.

These include:

- The Social Isolation and Loneliness Alliance was formed in 2019 with Doncaster Metropolitan Borough Council (DMBC) cabinet approval. The aim of the Alliance is to reduce social isolation and loneliness in Doncaster through a network of voluntary, community and faith sector organisations by offering community-based activities, access to advice and support, skills development, mental health and wellbeing support, information about financial support, and specific support services. Doncaster Communities and Leisure Trust was democratically elected by members of the Alliance to serve as the lead organisation. Their role is to support the members within the group to reduce loneliness in Doncaster, including support with funding applications, group compliance and allocation of funds. The network brings organisations together to gather data and to help influence priorities, explore potential collaboration, share good practice and promote what is available.
- The Doncaster Fairness and Wellbeing Commission carried out a short focussed enquiry in 2024 leading to a Fairness and Wellbeing report. It gathered evidence on the experiences of people who live and work in Doncaster with the aim of better understanding the challenges and opportunities they face. Recommendations were made for tackling the nature, extent and causes of inequalities in Doncaster. Many of the recommendations provide scope for involving the voluntary, community and faith sectors in the work needed to achieve them.
- VCFS Forum is the body that chooses the Great 8 representatives described above. The Forum has been co-produced by Well Doncaster with the sector. It is open to all Voluntary Community and Faith organisations supporting residents across Doncaster. Representatives are chosen by and from this Forum.

Doncaster Voluntary Sector Infrastructure Report

- Doncaster Health and Wellbeing Board provides a forum where political, clinical, professional and community leaders from across the care and health system come together to improve the health and wellbeing of their local population and look to reduce health inequalities. They aim to recognise further opportunities to shape and influence the wider system to drive long-lasting improvements to population health and wellbeing.
- Doncaster Advice Network is a group of charities, partner organisations and community-based groups working in the field of advice and support provision established to improve awareness of and access to advice and support. It is led by Citizens Advice and provides opportunities for collaborative working, campaigning, sharing resources and expertise and promoting volunteering.

The Results of the Research

The Results of the Online Survey

The following local organisations took part in the online survey:

Active independence	Hatfield Woodhouse Methodist Chapel
Artistic Spectrum	Highwoods Community Base
b:friend	Jackdaw Wood CIC
Breaking Beats	Life Church Doncaster
Central Family & Young Peoples' Action Group	Life Skills Education Charity
Central Family & Youth Action Group	Live Inclusive
Changing Lives	Local Doncaster Mencap
Chime In CIC	Mindful Activities Yorkshire CIC
Church Of God Of Prophecy	Moss and Fenwick Village Hall
Citizens Advice Doncaster Borough	Norton & Campsall Lunch Club
Conisbrough and Denaby PAG	Open Minds Counselling Services Ltd
Dadesley Crafting CIC	People Focused Group
darts	Pioneer Social Enterprise Ltd
DN6 Foodbank Askern, Norton & Campsall	Sheffield Philharmonic Chorus
Doncaster & District Deaf Society	South Yorkshire Refugee Law and Justice
Doncaster Conversation Club	Sprotbrough Community Library
Doncaster District Netball Association	Squirrel Wood Scout Camp
Doncaster Ethnic Minority Regeneration Partnership	Sultania Mosque
Doncaster Mind	The Hill Top Centre/Helping Hands Community Centre
Doncaster Pride	Town Field Community Group
Doncaster Samaritans	Woodlands Community Library
Friends of Clay Lane	Yorkshire Bike Shack

Analysis of the Online Survey

The online survey was made available to the voluntary community and faith sectors in Doncaster since the beginning of 2025 and has been circulated to a number of mailing lists in Doncaster, including City of Doncaster Council, Doncaster Community and Leisure Trust, the Advice Network and Charity Hub. Voluntary Action Doncaster declined to circulate it. The aim of the survey was to find out what recent help and support had been accessed, where from and what for.

47 responses were received from a wide range of organisations with differing income levels, therefore representing different sizes of organisation. The following table provides some idea of the size of organisation that responded in terms of their annual income.

Doncaster Voluntary Sector Infrastructure Report

	Annual Income
£0-£9,999	10
£10,000-£49,999	17
£50,000-£99,999	12
£100,000-£499,999	13
Over £500,000	5
TOTAL	47

Respondents were asked where they received support from. By far the most used source was Well Doncaster (24 responses), one cited Voluntary Action Doncaster, and 14 gave a variety of responses including Charity Hub, Chamber of Commerce, SYFAB, Peninsular (for Human Resources (HR) support), Making Music, mentors, and Charity Commission newsletters. By far the biggest issue people were seeking help with was funding (32 responses), with other issues being finance (5), governance and constitutions (2), HR and employing people (3), managing a building (2), quality standards (2), safeguarding (2). Eight organisations of different sizes claimed not to have asked for help.

Organisations were asked what issues they might need help with over the coming year. The greatest need was for help with funding and grants (20), but a wide range of others was listed, including:

- a review of our charity
- setting up a consortium model
- quality standards
- community outreach
- employment issues
- finding a suitable building
- gaining referrals
- land lease management
- linking with business
- marketing and promotion
- media development
- networking
- policy reviews
- trustee development
- becoming tender ready
- securing volunteers
- sustainability
- training

One respondent was conscious that we had only allowed them to tick one option for support needs and stated that she had

“actually discussed various different things with other CEOs. In terms of the next year, these included finding core funding, support with redundancies and understanding processes for insolvency if we do not secure funding”.

35 of the respondents had received help with funding over the previous two years. The greatest source of help mentioned was provided by Well Doncaster (20), with other sources of support being provided by SYFAB, Charity Hub, Community Fund, Doncaster Ethnic Minority Regeneration Partnership, Voluntary Action Doncaster and, in one instance, the local parish council. While 15 respondents had attended training about funding in the past two years, 32 had not. Reasons for not attending training ranged from personal reasons restricting the time available to not feeling the need to do so.

“Whenever we’ve requested funding, it has been approved”.

Doncaster Voluntary Sector Infrastructure Report

The help needed with funding concerned finding appropriate funders and being aware of upcoming funds (9). Others (7) wanted actual support with writing applications. Some needed more complex support with issues such as helping them to develop income streams from the use of their building, or understanding the needs of their community. One plea was made for a better sharing of tender opportunities when they go live and another wanted to see a change in culture from the funders.

“We need help with advocating for systemic changes in the funding sector – we need help in getting funders to understand that the heavy burden of fundraising is not a good use of our time and resources, especially when the need for the work we do is growing.”

However, the majority of respondents (41) were aware of receiving information about grant funding. Again, the most used source of information was Well Doncaster with 21 organisations citing it, followed by 14 getting information from SYFAB and others using Charity Excellence Framework, Community Fund and Voluntary Action Doncaster and Voluntary Action Rotherham (VAR).

Funding Applications Made

Respondents were asked about making an application to National Lottery Awards for All in the previous two years. Only 16 had done so. Reasons for not doing so included not knowing about the fund and ranged from the funding level being too low to it being too big a process for a group of volunteers.

A similar question was asked about South Yorkshire Community Foundation (SYCF). 19 had applied. Reasons for not applying, again, included lack of awareness and the restrictive funding programmes it offered.

However, a wide list of funders was cited that respondents had successfully applied to. These included:

- Arts Council
- Asda
- Brelms
- Children in Need
- Coalfields Community Regeneration Trust.
- Community Wealthbuilders
- Co-operative Community Fund
- Good Things Foundation
- Henry Smith Foundation
- Lions
- Liz and Terry Bramhall Foundation
- Lloyds Bank Foundation
- Lottery
- Postcode Lottery
- Rotary
- South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority
- Sport England
- Well Doncaster

Results of the Interviews

The first point to be made is that there is some excellent professional delivery of services taking place in Doncaster including Housing for Young People, Active Fusion, darts, Active Independence, MIND, Age UK, Helping Hands Community Centre in Edlington, the Ukrainian Society, Citizens Advice; all of different sizes and with different aims. Many of these organisations '*look after themselves*', a number of them, both big and small, having national bodies they can refer to and who provide considerable support.

1. It was clear from the interviews that there is currently a strong focus in Doncaster on reducing health, wealth and social inequalities which has led to '*collective working with the sector*' (Vanessa Powell Hoyland) and a '*network of people supporting people*'. There is an indication coming from City of Doncaster Council of wanting to work collectively with the sector and some real support for that from a number of people interviewed. There were, however, some sceptical voices who felt that communication between the VCS Reps and some of the larger voluntary organisations was not as good as it might be, with some interviewees unwilling to be involved despite having been invited to and others who were unaware of the initiative.

"In terms of feedback to statutory partners, 'we' tend to develop our own relationships but what we don't get is information feedback downwards".

Those involved in the VCS Alliance can see a difference between Sheffield, Rotherham, Barnsley and Doncaster and a feeling that Doncaster is a weak link and that Doncaster can get forgotten about at SYMCA meetings with no-one taking the lead on their behalf.

Doncaster Mind is a local mental health charity supporting anyone over 11 years old with mental health difficulties. Doncaster Mind prominently works across Doncaster, they are also a partner of Mind in South Yorkshire and work across the South Yorkshire area. Well Doncaster provided support and funding to deliver their Mental Health Community Connector Project which is funded through the Mental Health Transformation Fund but this funding comes directly from RDaSH and is now commissioned by them however they also receive funding is through locality commissioning. They receive support with organisations development internally mostly through National Mind and from other local Mind Associations with other support coming from Well Doncaster, SYFAB and the Independent Commissioning Board.

They belong to the Health and Social Care Forum and Voluntary Action Doncaster. We also have and have involvement with the Crisis Alternative Alliance of which they are partners.

2. There is a significant range of bodies providing support with some feeling that '*there is space for all*'. Some of those interviewed were members of Voluntary Action Doncaster but rarely used their services, if ever. Nor did they attend their events. Others were appreciative of the Charity Hub while a number used Chamber Support provided by the Chamber of Commerce as the most appropriate body.

“The Charity Hub allows charities to be greater than the sum of their parts”
(DM)

While there is a range of provision made around volunteering, networking and funding, there does not appear to be any organisation offering accountancy or payroll which a number of groups have had to go outside Doncaster for.

Active Fusion has existed for over 20 years and works with children and young people across South Yorkshire around sport, movement and physical activity with the most disadvantaged groups. They raise money both through trusts and foundations and by trading services with schools. In terms of support, they have used Voluntary Action Sheffield, Voluntary Action Doncaster and Barnsley CVS and are a part of other charity hubs. They are a member of Chamber Support and find that they can access networks through them. It has helped them to develop a board with HR and other skills.

“The interface between the voluntary sector and the local authority can sometimes be challenging, largely due to limited funding and resources. However, we believe there is real opportunity to strengthen these relationships through greater collaboration. By working more closely with local businesses and showcasing the value our sector brings to communities, we can build partnerships that are not only positive but also sustainable. This is where we see exciting potential for growth and impact.”

3. Many organisations are locally and community based. According to work carried out by Chapman and Wistow (2023) looking at the contribution of the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector in South Yorkshire:

“...the VCSE sector has a strong local orientation - about a third of organisations confine activity to local neighbourhoods or villages and about 70% limit the range of their work to the local authority where they are based.”

There is a clear recognition of the geographical nature of Doncaster, particularly by Well Doncaster which has based workers in the 30 most deprived communities. Despite this and SYFAB having recently delivered funding training in some of the former coalfield areas, there is a feeling that organisations based there have had little contact with infrastructure bodies generally. What is left of Miners' Welfares will be supported by CISWO but there was no specific support for village halls, for instance. This is attributed by some to an 'attitude of localism' within some of the local settlements where people's focus was very much on the neighbourhood in which they lived, which is not helped by public transport links which are not regular and run in and out of the centre and not linking the settlements.

arts is a creative arts and health organisation and is a national portfolio organisation of the Arts Council with an annual turnover of over £1m. They are starting to look at being commissioning partner with statutory organisations. Sarah Eastaff identified a number of challenges being faced in Doncaster, one of which is that have not been designated as a priority place for the Arts Council, as Rotherham is, and therefore fails to attract the level of funding they do. Another is the increasing child poverty figures across the area. She also identified the level of disconnect of the villages with the centre and attitude of localism with people belonging to their local community rather than feeling part of Doncaster itself. Her approach to this is to work with 14 family hubs around the district which enables them to meet people hyperlocally, while also partnering with community centres, churches, etc. and run sessions in those venues.

4. There is a strong feeling that Doncaster is being left out, of Doncaster having little or no relation to the other South Yorkshire areas. Set out below are quotes from interviewees that bear this out:

“Someone needs to be Doncaster’s voice.”

“What is missing is a more formal organisation for voluntary organisations to belong to”.

“Doncaster can get forgotten about at SYMCA meetings.”

5. Much support appears to be obtained from outside Doncaster which is not surprising as organisations such as SYFAB, South Yorkshire Community Foundation and Citizens’ Network have existed for a long time and act to serve the wider area. Many, both large and small, also use their wider national bodies for information and support. What is interesting though is that there are those who use Voluntary Action Sheffield or Voluntary Action Rotherham.

Doncaster Ukrainian Society is an example of a longstanding small organisation delivering to a very specific population. Until recently, they relied solely on the Association of Ukrainians in Great Britain who provide seminars on funding and information on compliance. They have run a Ukrainian club in the city since 1979. Since the war in Ukraine started, they have received local authority support to provide help to refugees. Well Doncaster has given advice on grants and involve them in monthly calls to a range of bodies.

6. Interviewees identified a need for a ‘*central point of gravity*’ – a body with a strategic role to bring the sector together. Examples given included the need for IT infrastructure support to enable local case management systems to be put in place which would be properly secure, with information sharing agreements that can also include smaller groups.

Doncaster Voluntary Sector Infrastructure Report

Some of the bigger organisations identified the need for a body of a significant size and with the staffing and expertise to hold large contracts on behalf of the rest of the sector. Bodies such as the Independent Commissioning Board (ICB) will be looking at contracting with one organisation who would then subcontract to other significantly sized organisations in the area. This was flagged up in particular relation to mental health where current contract holders may be unwilling to hold a large contract and sub contract parts of it out to other charities. A strong infrastructure body would be able to offer this service.

Similarly, organisations are aware of government policies looking at getting economically inactive people back into work and know how much the voluntary sector has to offer in terms of training, volunteer opportunities, mental health support, confidence building, etc. They know that the DWP will only want to contract with one body who will then be able to sub contract (as happened with Building Better Opportunities programmes). There is concern that Doncaster is losing out with such contracts because there is no such body in place that can take such a strategic role. The central point of gravity referred to above would give it coherence.

The Helping Hands Centre is based at Hilltop in Edlington in a former school. The centre provides a range of services including a family hub, advice, therapy, crafts and input from Citizens Advice, NHS and City of Doncaster Council as well as room hire. Andrew Jackson, chair of trustees, described it as “*the largest community building in Doncaster*”. Andrew is also a representative on the Great 8 holding the brief for climate change.

Helping Hands is in a good position to provide support into employment through skill development, opportunities for volunteering, confidence building and mentoring. Andrew is aware that the Government has plans around skills and employment “*but the journey is often too far for people*”. He feels that anyone under 25 can be helped to gain skills in the voluntary sector and the journey is easier to start in that environment. There is a need for a body to bring organisations together to approach the DWP to promote what they can offer, and there is currently no-one who can do this.

7. Funding is a major issue for most bodies, along with succession planning, both issues hugely pertinent to the future of the sector. Some of those interviewed had never heard of SYFAB but it is also important to note that SYFAB is not funded to work in Doncaster. The greatest and most used support at present is from Well Doncaster.

Doncaster Voluntary Sector Infrastructure Report

8. There would appear to be little support for organisational development

Local parish councils often manage community buildings and support community activities. While training is provided by Yorkshire Local Councils Association to equip them in that role, a gap around information and other support was highlighted. One key gap in the outlying and more rural areas of Doncaster is the absence of a Village Halls Network as exists in other parts of Yorkshire because there is no infrastructure body to support it. Such a network would enable a real sharing of experiences

Conclusions

1. Doncaster comprises 21 wards and 88 communities. It covers 16.8 square miles and has a population of 87,455 at the 2021 Census. It has a background in coalmining and heavy engineering, most of which has now gone, but most outlying communities grew up initially around these industries, and were, at one time, self-sufficient in terms of community support from the National Coal Board, Coal Industry Social Welfare Organisation (CISWO).
2. The research shows that there is a vibrant sector at all levels and across Doncaster, addressing a range of issues varying from big well funded organisations with national links to small community-based ones. Doncaster has a high level of need and high levels of poverty and needs and deserves a well-functioning and well supported voluntary community and faith sector.
3. Infrastructure support has had a chequered history in Doncaster. Doncaster has not been fortunate enough to have had the same stable infrastructure as in Sheffield, Rotherham, and to a slightly lesser extent Barnsley. There are now multiple sources of support. Support is provided by City of Doncaster through Well Doncaster. Other support is provided by a range of organisations such as DCLT, VAD and the Charity Hub and more widely by SYFAB and sometimes Voluntary Action Sheffield, Voluntary Action Rotherham and Community Matters Yorkshire. None of the Doncaster based infrastructure bodies provide organisational development support.
4. Funding and succession planning are issues identified by a number of respondents, both in the interviews and in the online survey. Funding and other advice is largely being sought from Well Doncaster and SYFAB or from national bodies, rather than Voluntary Action Doncaster or the Community Hub. SYFAB possibly has an uncertain future. While funding is identified as a significant issue, it is interesting that a number of respondents had not heard of Awards for All or South Yorkshire Community Foundation, both of which are providers of small start-up grants that would aid small and new organisations.
5. Like Barnsley and Rotherham, and to a lesser extent Sheffield, Doncaster has an urban core with an extensive rural hinterland, with transport links radiating in and out of the centre but not linking the settlements. While some settlements are served by Community Connectors employed by Well Doncaster, not all of them are. During the course of the research, training sessions were provided by SYFAB in some of these outlying areas, specifically those that were covered by the Coalfields Regeneration Trust. Apart from this, provision of organisational support was patchy and was delivered in areas where there existed bodies and personnel with the community development skills to do so.
6. There is a level of disconnect between the villages and the centre. Public transport tends to run into and out of the centre and not between settlements, thus leaving outlying settlements also disconnected from each other and largely inwardly focussed, fostering an attitude of localism. This often results in organisations within villages having little contact with infrastructure bodies. The work of the Well Doncaster Community Connectors is therefore valuable in providing localised support in some of those areas. However, despite the rurality of much of outlying Doncaster, there is no Village Hall Network, such as there is in East Yorkshire or North Yorkshire, to develop and provide mutual support for community buildings.

Doncaster Voluntary Sector Infrastructure Report

7. A number of respondents raised the issues that voluntary sector infrastructure needs to have a strategic role as well as a support role, providing a basis for managing big contracts and raising the sector's profile.

Doncaster needs to have an effective voice at the South Yorkshire table and not everyone is convinced that they have. Respondents felt that Doncaster's voluntary sector could be more strategic. There were three particular areas of concern:

- A need for IT infrastructure support to enable local case management, with information sharing agreements;
 - A need for a central point of gravity;
 - A body that could hold a contract with a statutory body on behalf of a number of subcontractors in the same way that infrastructure bodies with Building Better Opportunities contracts with the Big Lottery and the European Union were managed.
8. In terms of organisational development support, provision is very patchy and, apart from community groups in communities where the Community Connectors are based, is largely obtained from a variety of sources largely outside of Doncaster and therefore depends very much on the knowledge and connections of individual organisations.

Doncaster Voluntary Sector Infrastructure Report

References:

Chapman, T. and Wistow, J. *Local health and social wellbeing: the contribution of the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector in Yorkshire and the Humber*. 2023. Durham

Harris C., Damm C. and Macmillan R. *South Yorkshire VCSE: Understanding Value and Impact*. 2024. Sheffield

Innovation Unit and Team Doncaster. *Working together to ensure that Doncaster and its people thrive: Insights into the experience of the health and social care landscape for voluntary, community and faith sector organisations*. Undated. Doncaster.

Mohan, J., Kane, D., Wilding, K., Branson, J. & Owles, F. (2010: 3). *Beyond 'flat-earth' maps of the third sector: Enhancing our understanding of the contribution of 'below-the-radar' organisations – Briefing Paper*. Third Sector Trends Study. Northern Rock Foundation. 18 <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/>