

VOLUNTARY ACTION CAMDEN

STRATEGY 2026





Introducing Voluntary Action Camden

Voluntary Action Camden is an independent, not-for-profit, membership organisation.

We represent the voice and heart of the voluntary sector in the London Borough of Camden working together to build a vibrant local community.

We bring our depth of knowledge together with practical tools and a collaborative purpose to share information, expertise and resources with local voluntary community organisations. We have a long history of serving communities in Camden.

OUR HISTORY

We began life as the Hampstead Council for Social Welfare in 1907, but our origins stem from a historical movement for social reform that began in the nineteenth century.

From the 1930's to 1950's, we shifted our focus from providing relief to the poor, to improving society and quality of life more generally.

We supported air raid victims, refugees and legal services for deprived families during and after the Second World War.

From the 1960's our focus shifted again from running projects to supporting and coordinating Camden's local organisations including Citizen Advice Bureau, Voluntary Workers Bureau, Adventure playgrounds and neighbourhood centres.

Since the 1980's we have been facilitating partnerships, instigating collaborative work and act as an intermediary between the community and the public sector.





OUR PRESENT

Camden boasts an incomparable selection of world class businesses, research and knowledge experts, and creative and cultural institutions. VAC is part of this rich tapestry and is an anchor institution within the local Voluntary Community and Social Enterprise sector (from this point on referred to as simply VCS).

The VCS has endured chronic underinvestment for a sustained period which has inevitably led to limited resources and long-term financial uncertainty. It has been a difficult period for the VCS sector, and some organisations have

struggled to survive. Income from both central and local government, which make up a quarter of all sector income, has declined by 3% and 9% respectively from the previous year (NCVO 2022).

VAC is well positioned as a strategic leader for the local VCS and is integrated in borough-wide decision-making. We are committed to championing and highlighting the needs of the VCS. We can play a significant role in creating a more inclusive and sustainable economy by championing and strengthening effective local VCS infrastructure.

OUR FUTURE

The VCS has continually demonstrated, with limited resources, the important role it plays in keeping people connected and healthy. But this is probably the sector's toughest period because of the Covid-19 pandemic, cost-of-living crisis and record-level inflation.

Despite the mercurial backdrop, there are new opportunities emerging for sector leaders to help shape the recovery landscape, to start new conversations, and to build new and stronger cross-sector relationships.

We will work with our members, strategic partners, and supporters to build on our achievements thus far and set out new ambitions that will drive us closer to our vision

OUR VISION

Camden is a place where everyone can get involved in driving positive change.

This includes:

Creating a fairer Camden – providing equitable access to support, funding, participation and knowledge.

Safeguarding the VCS – leveraging more support to ensure Camden's VCS is robust, cohesive, and well-resourced.

Amplifying the voice of the sector
– speaking to everyone in the sector and representing the range of diverse views accurately.

OUR MISSION

To work with residents, community groups and VCS organisations to develop and support a vibrant civil society that underpins a high quality of life in Camden.





OUR 2023-2026 PRIORITIES

- **Building community resilience and community links** by facilitating and supporting access to the skills and resources residents, community groups, and community organisations need to flourish.
- **Disseminating appropriate information**, through a range of communication channels to support residents, community groups, and community organisations to respond to changing demands, influence policy, campaign, and advocate for their rights.
- **Bringing residents, community groups, and community organisations together** with partners from public, health and private sectors to co-produce solutions to tackle social disadvantage, increase social cohesion and address gaps in wellbeing and health.

OUR IMPACT BY 2030

- **Social cohesion and a sense of belonging are increased** as established and new communities are empowered to take responsibility for their health, economic contribution, welfare and integration.
- **Everyone in Camden feels empowered and has the opportunity to collaborate across boundaries**, present their views, and play an integral part in decision making and the design and delivery of services. The public sector will increasingly value working with VCS organisations.
- **Communities become more sustainable and resilient** as residents, community groups, and community organisations can identify needs and take steps to effectively meet those needs and enrich community life.

OUR VALUES

- We are **EXPERTS** in our field and are trusted to provide consistently high-quality support and insight to the VCS.
- We are ambitious and knowledgeable **COLLABORATORS** for London Borough of Camden, NHS, businesses and wider partners.
- We actively **LISTEN** to community groups and community organisations, anticipating and responding to emerging needs.
- We are **INCLUSIVE** and reflect the diverse and broad tapestry of communities we serve, voices we amplify, and life experiences we aim to enrich.
- We are committed to achieving equality of opportunity through **EQUITY**. This means acknowledging differences and allocating our resources fairly.

OUR APPROACH

We put and will keep members at the heart of our work.

We are a membership organisation.

As such, we believe that our members should play a critical role in informing and directing our thinking and our work. Any VCS organisation based and operating primarily in the London Borough of Camden can become a member.

We listen to our members and provide opportunities for them to provide feedback on our services. Our strategy, communications, forums, partnerships, and investment decisions are informed by our members.

We are committed to keeping members at the heart of our work. To support this commitment, we will conduct annual membership reviews that will help us understand the VAC membership experience, the challenges members are facing, and the opportunities they are pursuing. The responses will be used to build a profile of member needs and ensure that the services we offer addresses those needs.

We are committed to growing our membership and deepening our relationship with our members so that we can truly be an advocate for the whole sector. Most crucially, this includes VCS organisations that

are smaller and often under-represented. To support this commitment, we will invest in our membership offer by creating a new Membership team responsible for fostering and maintaining good relationships with our members. The Membership team will strengthen the services we provide in response to feedback from our members, widen our capacity building offer so that it meets our members' expectations, and support our members with pursuing funding opportunities that are aligned with our priorities.



We are evidence driven and will focus on what works best.

We are experts at gathering community insight

from frontline organisations residents and groups. We use our networks and forums to communicate rich and valuable evidence to strategic partners from other sectors. We are committed to using high quality data collected through robust mechanisms to improve and shape community services. To support this commitment, we will gather our own intelligence, and collaborate with our strategic partners including, London Borough of Camden, Knowledge Quarter, universities, and NHS to build a strong picture of the borough and state of the VCS in Camden.

We are committed to adopting a test and learn approach to improve our knowledge of how community services can best support the needs of residents, and how to drive genuine, long-lasting systemic change. We will do this by embedding experimentation within the culture of the organisation and encouraging and promoting test and learn approaches across the sector.

We will pilot new approaches ensuring we measure our impact and learn from our experience. Where we have robust knowledge of what works best, we will share this with our members and partners.





We build collaborations and will continue to encourage and promote cross-sector partnerships.

We have a long history of partnership working within the voluntary, community sector and collaborating across other sectors. Our partnerships are strategic, transparent, evidence-led, and always aligned with our priorities.

We have a symbiotic relationship with the voluntary, community sector in Camden, and support each other to achieve our shared objectives. We are committed to encouraging and promoting good partnership working and will lead by example. We will support this commitment by continuing to collaborate with London Borough of Camden to develop needs-led solutions to safeguard Camden's VCS. We will continue to partner with the knowledge sector to build more capacity in the VCS and democratise knowledge acquisition and dissemination.

We will continue to work in partnership with North Central London Integrated Care Board on shared objectives to improve population health and tackle inequalities. We will use our position to convene and connect networks of organisations, with the aim of sharing learning, collective problem solving, and identifying opportunities for innovation.

We are an infrastructure organisation so will focus on scaffolding support around our members through partnerships and collaborations. We will lead programmes with the support of our members where there are genuine gaps that we are best placed to fill. Even when we do take the lead, we will involve our members whenever possible.



We identify new opportunities and will respond to changes in a positive, solution-focused way.

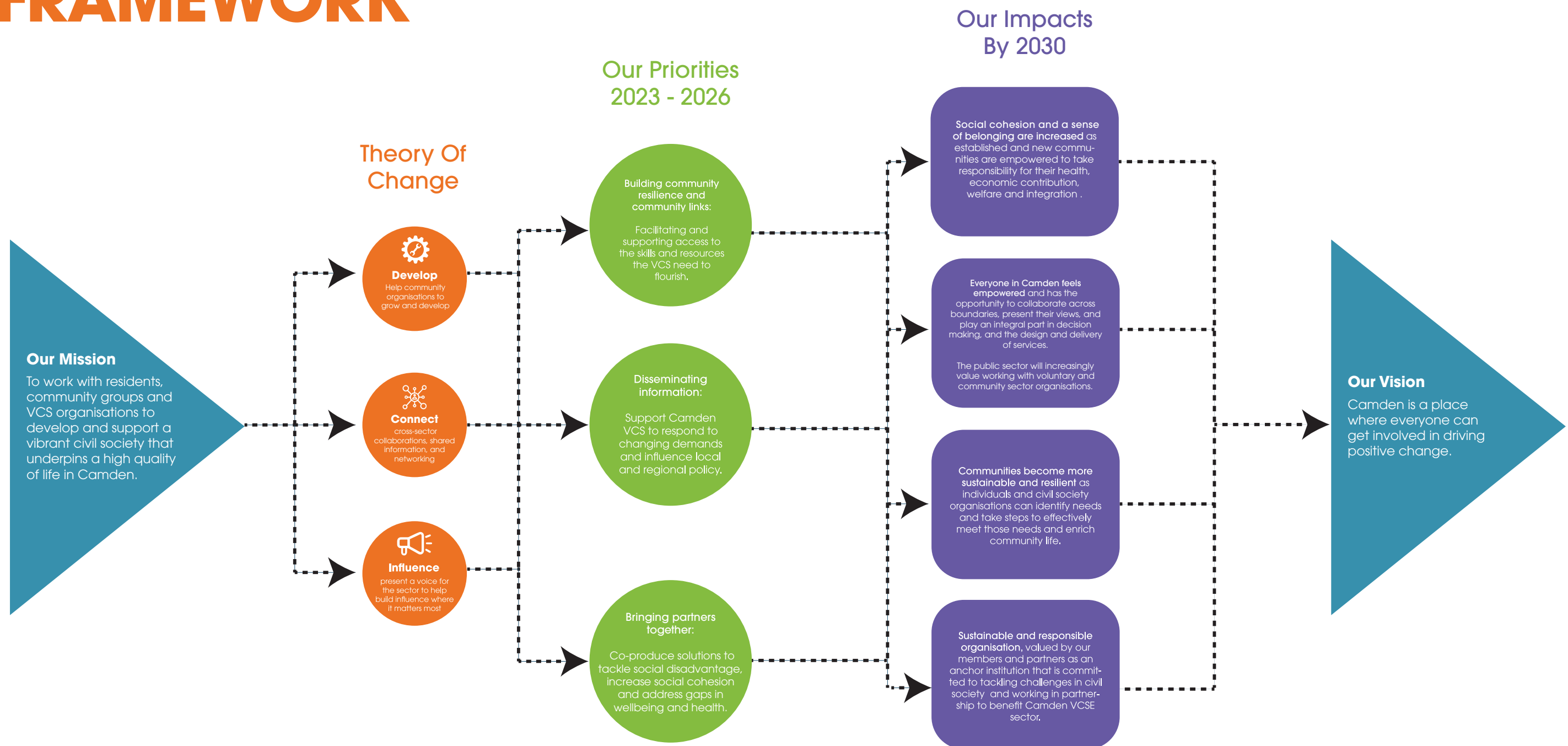
We have the experience, community reach, ingenuity and resolve to tackle crisis situations, and ensure that meaningful support reaches those in need. We are an anchor institution and have worked effectively with the public sector including, London Borough of Camden and NHS to ensure that the voice of the VCS informs and shapes their response. We are committed to strengthening the resilience of the sector by identifying new opportunities to leverage more support. We will support this commitment by identifying and communicating persistent and emerging challenges and working with our members and partners to find solutions.

The VCS has endured chronic underinvestment for a sustained period which has inevitably led to limited resources and long-term financial uncertainty. This, coupled with new global challenges, has intensified the pressure on our members.

During the toughest times of the last few years, we have been standing shoulder to shoulder with our members. We will continue to do so, by shouting about the value of the VCS to civic society, the economy, public health, and social cohesion. We will join local and regional groups to remain informed about decisions that impact the sector, and advocate on behalf of our members. We will scan the policy horizon and share relevant information and new opportunities with our members. We will proactively develop new programmes and initiatives that support our priorities and contribute to us achieving our mission.



STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK



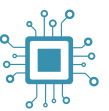


THE CHANGING ENVIRONMENT

Transition to Integrated care system (ICS)

Following several years of locally led development and based on the recommendations of NHS England and NHS Improvement, the government has set out plans to put ICS on a statutory footing. ICS are partnerships of health and care organisations that come together to plan and deliver joined up services and to improve the health of people who live and work in their area. They exist to improve outcomes in population health and healthcare; tackle inequalities in outcomes, experience and access; enhance productivity and value for money; and help the NHS support broader social and economic development.

VCS organisations play a critical role within local health and care systems both as service providers and as vehicles for community engagement and voice. They are important strategic partners for ICS in terms of delivering improvements in health and wellbeing and reducing inequalities, which often involves working more closely with communities.



Technology and Artificial intelligence (AI) advancement

Digital transformation has helped to increase fundraising efforts, improve service delivery, expand trust and transparency, enhance marketing and communications, and support the day-to-day operations of charity teams. However, the pandemic revealed deficiencies in VCS digital infrastructure and digital skills. For some, the challenge of transitioning from in-person to digital was monumental. Unsurprisingly, 81% of charities changed how they use digital technology during the pandemic (NCVO, 23 August 2021). Rather than revert, many organisations advanced their digital infrastructure to capitalise on the unexpected rewards, such as remote working. However, in the changing digital and technological landscape, delivering digital equity will remain an ongoing challenge for the VCS and its beneficiaries. In addition, AI has the potential to help tackle some of the world's most challenging social problems. Specifically, there is growing interest in using AI-powered systems to engage local communities in developing plans or solutions for pressing societal and environmental concerns. The use of AI as a community engagement tool is inspired by

community-based participatory research and popular epidemiology, in which citizens directly engage in gathering data and extract knowledge from this data to promote and encourage advocacy and activism (Patterns, volume 3, issue 3, 11 March 2023).

Over the coming years, VCS organisations will need support, resources, and opportunities to improve their digital skills to take advantage of digital and technological improvements, whilst maintaining best practices in security and data protection.



Research and Development

As a result of the pandemic, there is a renewed recognition that knowledge is alive and well in communities. Local groups and partnerships are showing how different engagement approaches, infrastructure and activities are vital and can respond more closely to local and community need. In 2022, the government announced the largest ever research and development budget, worth £39.8 billion as part of their Innovation Strategy (Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy, 14 March 2022).

Over the next four years, UKRI is investing more than £4m to support grassroots groups, community organisations, charities, and local government to produce research collaboratively, and as they partner and connect with research institutions and organisations (The Young Foundation 20 July 2022). This represents a systemic change to R&D (Research & Development led design of community support services. The VCS should be central to driving forward this change.



Workforce Challenges

During the pandemic, despite a decline in the sector's income as well as a decrease in the number of voluntary organisations, the workforce grew by 3%. This growth was in contrast with the private sector, which experienced a 2% decrease in employee numbers over the same period (NCVO, 18 October 2022).

However, recent data indicates that the charity sector in England is facing fresh challenges in retaining and recruiting volunteers and employees. The reason given for these fresh challenges is underinvestment in employees and failure to maintain suitable rates of pay and good working conditions (NCVO, 25 January 2023). The cost-of-living crisis will make this challenge even harder for VCS employers to overcome. Many organisations are also facing challenges in sustaining the energy produced by volunteers. Over a quarter of organisations (26%) have been losing volunteers who joined them during the Coronavirus pandemic (CivilSociety, 14 December 2022).

There are some indications of change in the extent of diversity in organisational leadership, but it is a mixed picture. The percentage of women chairs has increased by 3%. Chairs with disabilities has also increased by 3%. Black, Asian and other minority ethnic chairs have risen by 2%.

There has also been change in the population of chief officers of organisations. The percentage of graduate chief officers has fallen slightly from 70 to 66%. The percentage of women chief officers has fallen from 65 to 62 %. The percentage of chief officers with disabilities has risen from 7 to 10%. The proportion of Black, Asian and other ethnic minority group chief officers has risen only very slightly from 8 to 9% (St Chad's College, 14 December 2022).

Climate Emergency

Climate, extinction and biodiversity crises are systemic and advancing threats to the sector's ability to create the impact it seeks. Climate change will affect different people and places unevenly, and so is likely to lead to the worsening of inequalities that already exists in society. Some people will be more vulnerable to the impacts, as they will be more sensitive to negative effects on their health or wellbeing or may have less capacity to respond.

However, vulnerability is not inherent in particular groups – it is determined by a mix of social, economic, environmental and cultural factors, as well as institutional practices. The sector needs to work towards a just transition to net-zero emissions, strategising and acting now to support a transition that will help protect the communities and places we work with from further harm.



OUR STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

VAC represents the voice of the sector and has an ambitious vision for the borough. By 2030, we want Camden to be a place where everyone can get involved in driving positive change. To achieve this, we will focus on three priorities over the next three years:

- 1. Building community resilience and community links** by providing access to high quality resources to maximise the efforts of residents, community groups and community organisations to achieve their objectives
- 2. Disseminating appropriate information** through a range of communication channels to support residents, community groups and community organisations to respond to changing demands, influence policy, campaign, and advocate for their rights
- 3. Bringing residents, community groups, and community organisations together** with partners from public, health and private sectors to co-produce solutions to tackle social disadvantage, increase social cohesion and address gaps in wellbeing and health.

Priority 1: Build community resilience and community links

There are over 2,000 VCS groups and organisations making up Camden's civil society. VAC is proud to be a part of this strong and passionate civil society and we continue to stand with our members to tackle emerging and longstanding challenges impacting our sector and communities.

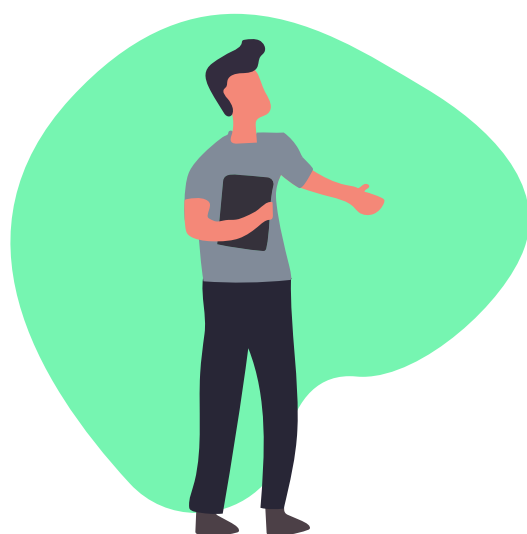
The number of community groups and organisations continues to grow despite the challenges. As an anchor institution within the Camden VCS, we have a responsibility to safeguard the sector and strengthen its resilience. We will do this by developing services and sharing the resources our members need to support their work.



Provide capacity building services that help our members to grow and develop.

We will:

- Launch a new membership offer that is responsive and inclusive. The offer will be critically reviewed to ensure it meets the needs of our members.
- Launch a new series of funding support events including, meet-the-funders workshops, quarterly fundraising group surgeries, and 1-2-1 support.
- Introduce a new and distinct training package that is relevant and responds to the specific needs of the sector.
- Develop new grant programmes that are aligned with our priorities and leverage more investment in the sector.
- Promote and deliver our Community Links initiative for the Camden Care Navigation and Social Prescribing Service in partnership with Age UK Camden – providing an open social prescribing service for Camden residents.
- Launch a new consultancy service that provides a full range of information, advice, and guidance to members on a range of topics including, starting up, raising money, good governance, and measuring impact.
- Promote and deliver our Community Partnership Safeguarding Service - reinforcing good practice and embedding a safeguarding culture within community service delivery.
- Promote and deliver our Cultural Advocacy Project in partnership with Mind in Camden - develop good practice in recognising and breaking down the cultural barriers to diverse communities accessing mental health services.
- Launch a new series of webinars covering a range of relevant topics, informed by feedback from our members. These topics will include, tackling inequality and driving social change, creating a healthy and sustainable workforce, developing a winning communications strategy, and measuring your organisations impact.



Connect the sector through shared information, forums, and networking opportunities

We will:

- Launch a new CEO Network. It is time to invest in our VCS leaders. The Network will be for leaders of VCS organisations in Camden who want to meet to discuss issues and ideas for the mutual benefit of the VCS.
- Launch a new Trustees Network. Trustees are critical to VCS provision in the borough. The Network will bring together trustees from different VSCE organisations in Camden to share experiences, good practice, ideas and offer peer support.
- Work in partnership to contribute to the boroughs refugee response. We will support new arrivals and refugee services in the borough by planning and convening community partnership forums, supporting community events, and providing access to our networks, and training.
- Connect VCS groups wanting to improve their capacity to evaluate their work and conduct community research with appropriate R&D experts who want to improve decision making, innovation and service delivery, through a better understanding of 'what works' locally.





Amplify the voice of the sector to help build influence where it matters the most

We will:

- Conduct an annual review of our membership offer by asking members to give feedback on their experience of using our service. The feedback will help to improve our support to VCS organisations and identify general gaps in our support for capacity building.
- Produce an annual state of the sector report in partnership with Camden Infrastructure Alliance and London Borough of Camden. The report will analyse the changing operating environment for Camden's VCS. It will identify and explain local and regional forces and trends that are shaping the sector and identify key priorities for organisational development and support.
- Explore the benefits of a new operating model that will support and enable VCS organisations to inform and influence borough-wide integrated care structures. A new operating model would provide its own leadership of the sector by the sector, reaching small groups that often lack the confidence, capacity, or support to participate in leadership forums.
- Increase the number of small and specialist / BAME VCS organisations that participate in our networks and meetings to influence policies locally.
- Continue to develop significant and useful data that can be used to improve local health and care services, and address longstanding challenges including, health inequality, accessibility, and recruitment and retention of health professionals.
- Use our position in strategic and decision-making forums to represent the diverse views of VCS organisations, provide insight and appropriate challenge for the benefit of the communities they serve.



Priority 2: Disseminate appropriate information

We have over 1,500 subscribers to our weekly newsletter and are becoming a growing presence on social media. Maintaining an open channel of communication with the sector keeps us informed about the operating environment. It also keeps the sector informed about changes to public policies and legislation, and opportunities such as job vacancies, funding, and local development. We will do this by investing more in our communications, and being clear about the value we add.

Provide capacity building services that help our members to grow and develop

We will:

- Develop a pipeline of community research networks made up of VCS groups, organisations, and research bodies. The networks will explore how to expand the capacity of VCS organisations to conduct community research.
- Adopt a culturally competent approach to both our operational and strategic work with a view to sharing our learning and promoting leadership & organisational change in the sector through the lens of a cultural competency framework.
- Share the learning from a pilot programme focused on supporting new partnerships of VCS organisations and residents to design and conduct community-led action research in the borough. Building the social capital to bridge different parts of the VCS and knowledge sector.
- Renew our communications strategy to improve how we keep in touch with our members and the wider VCS. As part of this, we will broker expertise in communication and marketing for the benefit of the sector. This will strengthen the sector's approach to communication and extend its reach.



Connect the sector through shared information, forums, and networking opportunities

We will:

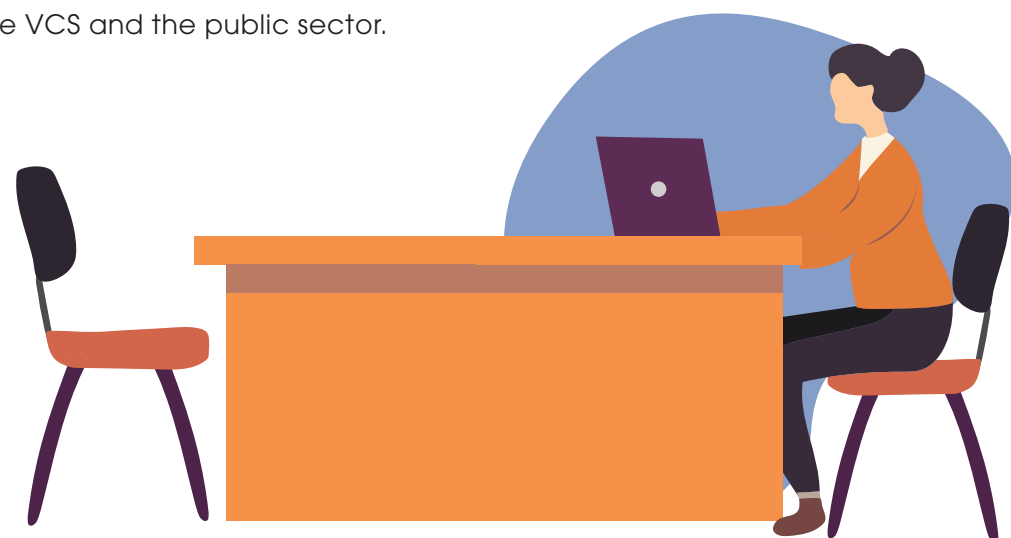
- Enhance the capability of our free service directory so that it continues to be accessible, accurate, and useful. Our online directory provides a comprehensive list of VCS groups and organisations in the borough. You can use this directory to find and connect with services and activities delivered by community groups in Camden.
- Maintain the quality of our newsletter, ensuring that it retains its value to the sector. We will continue to fill it with relevant and up-to-date information about changes to public policies and legislation, and opportunities through new jobs, funding, and local development. We will improve how we use our newsletter to tell stories about the positive impact of the sector on communities.
- Ensure our website remains accessible and continue to develop key content on 'Our Services' and 'News & Events' pages.
- Continue to host forums and provide a collaborative space for cross-sector partners to meet and discuss emerging challenges impacting the VCS. We will involve our members in deciding the topics for our forums.



Amplify the voice of the sector to help build influence where it matters the most

We will:

- Play a critical role within local health and care systems both as a service provider and a vehicle for community engagement and voice. We will enable VCS groups, both large and small to influence and inform decision making at system level. We will build capacity in the VCS to contribute to North Central London Integrated Care Board focus areas.
- Critically analyse how existing community networks are shaping policy. The intelligence and community insight that the VCS collects can inform the public sector and shape public services so that they reflect the needs of residents. We will support existing networks with sharing their insight, and where there are gaps, we will support the development of new networks and encourage operational collaboration between the VCS and the public sector.
- Continue to sit on the Health and Wellbeing Board to represent the views of the sector and promote the work that VCS organisations are doing across the borough that contributes to the borough's Health and Wellbeing Strategy.
- Improve the position of the VCS in the Integrated Care System and enable VCS organisations to contribute to the design and delivery of integrated care. We will do this by co-chairing the Community Connectedness and Friendship Steering Group, and the Social Prescribing Focus Group, and representing the views of the sector at other strategic and operational meetings.



Priority 3: Bringing residents, community groups and organisations together

We bring together residents, groups, and organisations from across the VCS and public sector to help share ideas and best practice and collaborate on local challenges. In 2022, we hosted 11 forums and networking opportunities, bringing together over 220 people on issues including, cost-of-living, health inequalities, and refugee response.

The sequential crisis of the pandemic, cost-of-living and record-level inflation has enervated the sector. However, opportunities are emerging for sector leaders to help shape the recovery landscape, to start different conversations and to build new and stronger cross-sector relationships. We will fulfil our important role to keep the sector connected and encourage and promote partnership working.

Provide capacity building services that help our members to grow and develop

We will:

- Work with local commissioners, public bodies, and the VCS to develop and lead new partnerships, ensuring that additional funding is leveraged into parts of the sector that need it most, and where partnership approaches would create better outcomes.
- Encourage and promote large scale partnerships of VCS organisations to deliver solutions to entrenched issues including, inequality, community safety, poverty, digital exclusion, the climate emergency, and loneliness and social isolation.
- Raise our profile as contract brokers and partnership managers, ensuring the sector has full confidence and trust in our ability to develop and lead consortiums where there is consent and added value.
- Participate in and support partnership bids across the VCS and other sectors that align with our priorities and brings us closer to our vision. We will do this particularly where this presents new opportunities to build capacity in the sector for VCS organisations with less resources.

- Continue to support the Camden Mental Health Resilience Network Alliance, established to lead, coordinate, and deliver early intervention and prevention services to Camden residents.
- Develop a new Bi-annual 'Spirit of Camden Award' ceremony that recognises the selfless and tireless contributions of community groups and organisations. The award ceremony will celebrate and reward groups in the VCS who often get little recognition, and it will spotlight activities that contribute to a vibrant civil society.



Connect the sector through shared information, forums, and networking opportunities

We will:

- Move to a purpose-built building that is accessible and available to host activities and events aligned with our priorities. Our new home will facilitate our return to delivering more capacity building support, and offering operational services including, hot desking, meeting rooms, and office resources.
- Develop community of practice shared learning spaces in the form of face-to-face meetings and web-based collaborative environments. These spaces will focus on sharing best practices and creating new knowledge to advance a domain of professional practice. They will encourage a commitment to critical inquiry, reflection, collective learning and participation.

Amplify the voice of the sector to help build influence where it matters the most

We will:

- Strengthen partnership working and collaboration between Camden's infrastructure organisations through the Camden Infrastructure Alliance (CIA). The CIA is a partnership of infrastructure organisations supporting Camden's VCS.
- Through the CIA, increase opportunities for residents to participate in local volunteering and social action, and maximise opportunities for the community to shape and deliver services, ensuring community voices are heard.
- Through the CIA, maximise strengths and assets to provide capacity development for local organisations, and co-produce a new model of support that increases collaboration and partnership working across the sector.





WORKING TOGETHER

If you would like to work with Voluntary Action Camden to develop and support a vibrant civil society that underpins a high quality of life in Camden, please get in touch with us:

E: info@vac.org.uk

www.vac.org.uk