



**Shropshire Voluntary
and Community Sector
Assembly**

Annual Report 2021

As I write this we are, once again, recovering from the flooding which has affected our county and its people for the third year running. Whether it be floods or pandemic one thing is clear, the voluntary sector has once again sprung into action to help those who need us the most, making sure those who are vulnerable and in need get support and help at a time of crisis, and in a timely way.

The voluntary sector are good at crisis response, we move quickly and flexibly to help when we are needed, but we are about so much more than just dealing with crisis. As a sector we are there every single day to give much needed support, help and guidance to our beneficiaries, but also to each other. The last two years have tested all of us, not only as organisations but as individuals and I have been immensely grateful for the peer support and guidance from fellow colleagues in the Assembly.

Without question we have come together as a sector to join our resources, but also sharing our skills and knowledge, to help each other during these difficult last two years. To anyone who is not a member of the Assembly I would encourage you to join, you will receive lots of support from likeminded colleagues who understand the pressures of trying to manage a voluntary organisation, especially during a pandemic.

I am also very grateful that our statutory partners have recognized and acknowledged the significant role our sector has played over the last few years, and it is very gratifying as Chair of the Assembly to be able to report that we have secured additional funding support from the council and CCG to build up our infrastructure support, particularly to those small organisations who can sometimes struggle with no paid staff to help. Our thanks to our statutory colleagues, not only for their recognition of this need, but also for their support over the last year. I would also like to say a heartfelt thank you to our fantastic support team, fondly known as 'The Sarah's', Sarah Dodds, Sarah Nelsey who left us last year, and Sarah Hampson who recently joined us.

As we look forward to the coming year there are undoubtedly challenges ahead, the energy crisis will put huge additional cost burdens onto those who are already struggling, the impact of global warming is being felt in what now seem to be annual flooding events, potentially more refugees in need of support as the situation in the Ukraine escalates and we do not yet know what the longer term impact of Covid will be on people's health and wellbeing.

What we do know, though, is that, as a sector, we will stand together, support each other and use all our energy and resources to be there for those who need us the most, and the Assembly will be there to support the sector in that mission. If you haven't already please do join us, we would love to have you on board.

Heather Osborne



370+



**VCSA
Newsletter
Subscribers**

24+

**Partnership boards and
groups with VCSA
representatives**

51

**VCSA Newsletters
sent**

47



**VCSA
Special updates sent**

1,929

**Registered charities in
Shropshire, Telford &
Wrekin**

£700m+

**Annual charity
expenditure in
Shropshire, Telford &
Wrekin**

+9%

**More CICs in the West
Midlands than the
national average**

£11m+

**In grants awarded in
Shropshire, Telford &
Wrekin 2020/21**

Over the last year, the VCS Assembly Board has worked in partnership with a wide range of local groups and organisations to explore the following issues. Members of the Board have worked to build new relationships, networks and explore how the voluntary and community sector can support and assist in key areas of service delivery.

Climate Change

In October 2021, the VCSA, led by Green Shropshire Xchange, SALC and Save Our Shropshire organised two climate change [online workshops](#). These were well attended and the presentations provided useful information and ways to support climate action. Practical suggestions were provided to highlight the action we can take as individuals and members of groups or organisations. The briefing Guide, [Net Zero Carbon and the Third Sector](#) is available as a resource to help organizations develop action plans.

Equality and Diversity

Shropshire VCS Assembly Board made a commitment to focus on equality and diversity in 2021 and that commitment has been woven into some of the research projects and other initiatives delivered (including those described within this report). Facilitated by the VCSA Chair, the VCSA Board has considered the findings from ACEVO's 'Home Truths' report. The report highlighted significant concerns about inclusion within the voluntary and community sector; that there is an under-representation of BAME people working in the charity sector. It highlights that "the set way we do things and organisational processes, policies and procedures seen as the 'norm' within the sector can marginalise from different diverse ethnic or cultural backgrounds." To address this, activity has taken place including:

- VCSA Board members encouraged to reflect on diversity and inclusion within their own organisations.
- Work led by the VCSA Chair to engage with local organisations leading on equalities including SEMA, Sand, Churches Together and the Interfaith Forums and FRESH.
- Diversity and inclusion questions have been woven into all research projects.
- Joint work with Shropshire Council's Equalities Officer.
- Regular equalities news and information posts have been included in the VCSA newsletter (also working to promote the diversity calendar produced as a partnership across ICS partners).

Key dates included:

- ⇒ 27th January – Holocaust Memorial Day
- ⇒ February – LGBTQ+ Month
- ⇒ 22nd April – Stephen Lawrence Day
- ⇒ 11th July - Remembering Srebrenica Day
- ⇒ 18th July-17th August: South Asian Heritage Month
- ⇒ October – Black History Month
- ⇒ 2nd October - International Day of Older People
- ⇒ 10th October - World Mental Health Day
- ⇒ 22nd October - Show Racism the Red Card Day
- ⇒ 14th -21st November – Inter Faith Week
- ⇒ 3rd December – International Day of Disabled People



Photo by [Marco Verch](#)

Digital Inclusion

On 29th July 2021, Shropshire VCS Assembly benefited from a workshop entitled ‘Digital Technologies, Power and Control: security, privacy, identity and trust in the digital age’. The research workshop was led by Dr Ben Evans, from the School of Psychology & Counselling, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, at The Open University. The workshop explored a wide range of themes and issues. These included:

- The practicalities of getting online and connecting to others and using services online. This includes affordability, accessing the right equipment, understanding and arranging set up, finding the right support, and overcoming any obstacles.
- The additional challenges people can face if they don’t have access to support to get online or have learning difficulties or impairments (such as visual and hearing impairments) that make it more challenging.
- In a very rural county like Shropshire, greater inequalities can develop for people unable to get online and make use of digital technologies and services.
- At the same time there are benefits of digital technologies. People with visual and hearing impairments for example, or people who prefer visual learning, can make use of a wide range of new technologies designed to make things easier. People can overcome challenges using new technology.
- People have learnt new online skills during the pandemic, explored new digital opportunities they wouldn’t have otherwise considered, and have been sharing information and learning with networks has been valuable mutual learning.
- What’s App, Zoom and many other tools have helped people to keep in touch during the pandemic at a time when they may otherwise have been socially isolated. Digital can facilitate social interactions online and overcome face to face social restrictions.
- Although there are benefits of digital there are also risks. People can make comments online that they wouldn’t make in person, people can take advantage of others online, there is a risk of data being stolen etc. These risks or a lack of online confidence can mean people develop insecurities when communicating digitally.
- The benefits of digital have been maximised where people are using digital technology to stay in touch with people or grow their networks.
- The group agreed that digital technology can be beneficial but there was a strong belief that it cannot replace the basic human needs to socialise and be physically with people. Face to face interactions are considered more valuable than remote ones.

VCSA members have also participated in individual interviews and members have been specifically invited to present different groups or sectors to aid the research. The findings will form part of a larger study led by the Open University, one that will be shared nationally and influence future policy. Shropshire is one of two case study areas and will feature heavily in the final national report by the Open University.



Image source: wikimedia commons

ICS Memorandum of Understanding

The ICS has worked to establish a Memorandum of Understanding between the Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin Integrated Care System (ICS) and the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector in Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin. The MoU sets out why the Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin (STW) Integrated Care System (ICS) values the role of the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector in improving health, social care and wellbeing, and explains the importance of working in partnership on shared ambitions. These include:

- Improving health outcomes and reducing health inequalities for the people of Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin (STW);
- Maximising value from our financial resources and focusing on interventions that will make a major difference;
- Building successful partnerships to enable health improvements and create healthier communities;
- Effectively engaging and involving people and communities in the transformation of health and social care in STW;
- Increasing mutual learning and continuous professional development between the public and VCSE sectors;
- Effectively working across sectors to achieve a mutual vision of creating better services and providing greater support for the population of STW.

The VCSA Board Chair is leading work to represent the VCS in Shropshire. A new forum known as the VCSE Alliance has been formed to lead sector representation. Its aim is to link to the ICS Board and deliver a single point of contact with the VCS sector across Shropshire, Telford & Wrekin. The VCSE Alliance will be supported by funding from the NHS England and NHS Improvement (NHS E/I) ICS VCSE system leadership programme.

Pilot Community Asset Grant Fund

The impact of Covid-19 has prompted concerns over the sustainability of some community assets. These community services and buildings are vitally important in achieving post-pandemic recovery, re-building local social networks, and maintaining strong rural communities. Shropshire Council has worked with VCS representatives to implement a pilot small grants scheme to contribute to the work community groups are doing to develop, rescue or sustain community-managed or owned assets. The community assets prioritised for support include community hubs, pubs, shops and social venues. Village halls and community sports facilities may also be supported. To be eligible, applicants needed to be working towards the following:

- Purchasing a community asset (including research, feasibility and business planning)
- Running a community asset
- Renovating an asset or maintenance to bring an asset into community use
- Equipping an asset and/or working to reduce environmental impact
- Preventing an asset from being lost (financial sustainability and business development)
- Initiatives that increase use of an asset by the wider community or by other voluntary and community sector groups and organisations and not-for profit community businesses

Successful applicants will demonstrate how the community is involved in the work, how the funded activity will support community use, and the work taking place to plan for asset sustainability. Assets must be located in Shropshire and predominantly serve Shropshire residents.

A total of £125,000 has been provisionally allocated, with the potential for an additional grant sum to be determined before the end of March 2022. Applicants were encouraged to apply for grants of up to £15,000 each. As of 14th January, the closing date for applications, there were 43 applications, totalling over £488,000 in requested funds. A panel from Shropshire Council has been meeting through early 2022 to score and select recipients.

2021 Feedback Report Highlights

Shropshire Association of Local Councils (SALC) worked with Shropshire Council's Feedback and Insight Team to prepare and conduct local research on the impact of the pandemic on local public sector and community organisations. Two separate surveys were prepared, one designed for town and parish councils and one to gather feedback from community groups. The survey was conducted in early 2021 and resulted in 67 responses. Of these 39 were responding to the survey designed for town and parish councils (SALC members survey) and 28 were responding to the community survey. The full report was published in June 2021 and can be accessed via the [Shropshire Council website](#). Among the report's most significant conclusions were the following:

Challenges

- The areas of greatest concern within the survey feedback seem to be around the financial impact of the pandemic (loss of income and increased costs), particularly on village halls, community buildings, community events and activities and voluntary and community sector organisations. Obtaining future income is a concern expressed within the survey results.
- Most survey respondents found that the pandemic had a significant impact within their community and on their town or parish council, parish meeting, voluntary organisation or community group. The respondents also highlighted that the impacts were wide ranging, impacting on the ways in which services were delivered, the types of services delivered (with some activities stopping and others being put in place), the way organisational/group planning was undertaken and changing priorities.
- Some of the community respondents were concerned about increased demand for support and expressed concern over their ability to sustain activities and support services over the long-term.
- Challenges for future consideration include a few concerns from SALC members that a small number of community leaders are relied on to do a lot within their communities (and may need more people to support). Despite this there was positive feedback about community resilience and cohesiveness. Both groups of respondents feel people get on well together in their communities and help-out when asked.

Adjustments

- The majority found that activities moved, as much as possible, online in order to minimise the transmission of the virus and limit the amount of work required to implement social distancing and other types of restrictions and safety measures. Many responses highlighted how important IT infrastructure and equipment became.
- Both SALC members and community respondents indicated that the pandemic response had meant a focus on emergency support for the most vulnerable people and those needing to isolate at home. The provision of food and medicine seems to have been a common response across all the communities within the survey sample.
- Aside from the provision of food and medicine, social media was another area of development because it offered a way of providing community level information, advice and reassurance. Examples include reference to active and expanding social media groups used to connect people without the need for face to face contact.
- When asked about the concerns and priorities for the future, the community organisations seem to focus priorities around ensuring some basic human needs are met; food, income/employment and mental health and wellbeing. Town and parish councils, on the other hand, seem to focus more on population needs and planning for the future, considering issues such as the impact on children and young people, educational attainment and social mobility.

Successes

- Both groups agreed that the pandemic generated some new partnerships at community level and how important that joint working was.
- Many organisations noted working more closely together, more communication, increased volunteering, organisation of practical support, access to grants, and a recognition of the value of local services. Many also commented on the kindness people displayed and willingness to help others at a time of need.
- The survey highlighted that SALC members and voluntary and community sector groups and organisations themselves need some support. The voluntary sector highlights the need for financial support and grants, and access to specialist advice. SALC members mention support planning for the future and climate change is an example given as a future challenge and issue that will require increased knowledge and action.
- The survey feedback demonstrates that there is hope that increased feelings and displays of community spirit and unity may be retained post-pandemic.

2021 Survey on Debt and Financial Support Services

Shropshire Voluntary and Community Sector Assembly, Shropshire Association of Local Councils and Shropshire Council have been working together to better understand the work taking place in Shropshire to provide debt advice and support those people who may have money worries, debt or facing financial hardship. The debt research was led through the Hardship and Poverty Sub-Group, Chaired by Jackie Jeffrey (Citizens Advice Shropshire) reporting to the Social Impact Group. A survey was delivered over Spring 2021 to identify the services and support already in place in Shropshire, to help identify gaps, identify support needs and consider opportunities to develop further partnerships and collaborative working. There were 19 survey responses. 17 were from organisations delivering support within Shropshire and the remainder were from volunteers and community leaders with an interest in debt and financial support services. Organisations involved in the research were:

The Royal British Legion
Landau Ltd.
The Wrekin Housing Group
Gains Park Day Centre (Age UK)
Taking Part
Barnabas Community Projects
Shropshire Peer Counselling & Advocacy Service
Shropshire Council
Shrewsbury Ark

Foodbank PLUS (Barnabas Community Projects)
Riversway Elim Church
Ludlow Food Bank
Homelife
Christians Against Poverty
CAP Bridgnorth Debt Centre
Strettons Food Bank
Bishop's Castle Community Foodbank

Some key messages highlighted by the survey respondents include:

- The need for some support to find funding to ensure service sustainability.
- The need for assistance with volunteer recruitment and support.
- Opportunities to further improve training.
- The importance of signposting.
- Connections to other service types such as employment and skills, food insecurity, housing support.
- The importance of longer term, face to face and home-based support for individuals and families with the greatest level of need.
- The need to support those who are digitally excluded and may need access to digital equipment and support.
- Concerns around future demand and the pressures on staff and volunteers.

The next stage of research work is a phase 2 research project led by Citizen's Advice Shropshire. This will seek to survey other providers known to offer money advice, build partnerships and link to other work taking place within Shropshire. There is recognition that other organisations play important roles locally, including:

- Trinity Money Advice Centre
- Drop in for housing support (Sustain Consortium and Connexus)
- Shropshire Towns and Rural Housing, Money Advice
- Digital Dens (Sevenside Housing)
- A4U Action, Advice, Advocacy
- Just Credit Union
- SSAFA (Armed Forces)
- Fair Share Credit Union

Over the last year, Shropshire VCS Assembly has supported a wide range of local consultations and engagement opportunities, providing the voice of the voluntary and community sector but also working to promote opportunities to influence widely through the weekly VCSA newsletter and at sector meetings.

Money Advice Funded Project

The proposed project, put forward for Additional Restrictions Grant (ARG) funding, aims to create a countywide approach to providing money advice for Shropshire residents (with an emphasis on those who are self-employed) impacted by the Pandemic: creating a strategy to identify and meet demand for debt advice; creation of a forum to share best practice and support and to identify opportunities for a sustainable money advice service going forwards. Citizen's Advice Shropshire will work with the organisations listed below, where they have already expressed an interest in getting involved in partnership work. A second list of debt advice and money support services has also been established and those organisations will be invited to participate. Existing organisations committed to partnership work are:



Christians Against Poverty
CAP Bridgnorth Debt Centre
Barnabas Community Projects
The Royal British Legion
Landau Ltd
Taking Part
Shropshire Peer Counselling & Advocacy Service
Riversway Elim Church
Homelife
Bishop's Castle Community Foodbank



The project has two main elements:

1. Development of a County Wide Money Advice Strategy
 - To provide a comprehensive overview of all support in the County to support effective signposting and connections to other service types such as employment and skills, food insecurity, housing support.
 - To set out what demand will look like and what advice people will need including priority debt & housing advice including the importance of longer term, face to face and home-based support for individuals and families with the greatest level of need.
 - To identify the gaps in support e.g. support for the self-employed facing personal debt and what is available for them.
 - To determine how we can support those who are digitally excluded and may need access to digital equipment and support.
2. To set up and support a Money Advice Forum
 - To bring organisations together to discuss and agree partnership working and develop the Money Advice Strategy. Linking to employment and skills advice services to get people back into work.
 - To provide a forum of support to providers across the County including Training and Quality/peer support to help address concerns around future demand and the pressures on staff and volunteers.
 - Building better referral networks and connections and coordinating support to try and avoid gaps and to make best use of resources available.
 - Linking to the housing providers, their support and their ability to implement preventative actions.

VCS Infrastructure Sub-Group

The VCS Infrastructure Group was established as a sub-group of the Social Impact Task Force. The group felt it was important to have a clear understanding of what is meant by infrastructure support. Infrastructure support can come in many forms and at differing levels. The types of infrastructure needed will differ for different groups, depending on size and need. Over the last decade funding for this type of support has become increasingly difficult to access, and much of the support which was once there has been lost.

The group identified emerging key themes including:

- A view that national streams of funding are not always getting down to community level for a range of reasons.
- Instability and uncertainty within the sector, many organisations are using up reserves and there is evidence that support is needed now to avoid significant increase in closures or service reductions.
- There is a certain level of resilience but a risk of burn out due to limited capacity whilst meeting growing needs.
- Increasing demand for infrastructure support (small and large) – some groups will find their own solutions, but a tiny bit of investment shared widely can go a long way, and mistakes can mean groups cease or fail.
- There is a need for specialist back office advice and support e.g. IT or finance.
- There are similarities with the challenges other sectors are facing.
- A growing recognition in the NHS of the importance of prevention, but with increased expectation and demands on community groups to reduce need elsewhere in system, but a lack of clarity on how to resource this.

The group worked to achieve two main aims:

1. Define the meaning and different elements of VCS infrastructure in a way that can be understood by those working outside of the voluntary and community sector.
2. Deliver an action plan and covering report highlighting the two main strands of the group's work: a) back office infrastructure needs of larger VCS organisations and b) the support needs of small groups.

The group defined infrastructure, producing a report explaining the types and terms used within the sector. The group then supported Shropshire Infrastructure Partnership to set out proposals based on local research emphasising the need for local investment in VCS infrastructure services. The objective is to support the large number of small, informal community groups that were formed in response to the pandemic. Support was needed to ensure their continuation and sustainable local impact (this includes governance advice, funding advice, volunteering support etc.). The work proved a success and a new team is now in place working for Shropshire Infrastructure Partnership.

The second strand of the group's work was the consideration of shared back office functions and/or shared infrastructure. The group agreed this is also an important piece of work but complex and requires a more responsive approach as opportunities arise over a longer timeframe. Key issues and themes include:

- Finance support – charity finance can be complex and is increasingly so. Many organisations cannot afford the high costs of a qualified accountant to support their finance functions and this can be an area of pressure. Some organisations are already beginning to discuss the option of shared finance functions.
- IT/Digital – Covid-19 has highlighted the opportunities that digital technology can offer for smart and cost-effective ways of working. However, many smaller and medium sized VCS organisations do not have the skills sets and knowledge within their organisations to make best use of emerging technology. This is an area where external and possibly corporate support could be helpful.
- Telephony – Many organisations are still working from home and again could possibly harness better technology but systems like Teams licenses can be expensive and organisations cannot afford to make costly mistakes. Advice and combined purchasing power could be helpful.
- Other areas – could include, HR, legal, data gathering & evaluation.

There are a number of significant challenges in taking forward this second strand of work and some commitment of support, either financial or in-kind, will be required before some of this can be progressed.

Hardship and Poverty Group

The Hardship and Poverty Group was established as a sub-committee of the Shropshire Social Task Force. It was set up to identify key issues arising from the pandemic impacting on Shropshire residents and to identify strategies to reduce the impact on those experiencing hardship & poverty. Jackie Jeffrey (CEO of Citizens Advice Shropshire) Chairs the group and participants include:

- Representatives of the VCSA Board
- Representatives of the Food Poverty Alliance
- Marches Energy Agency
- Other VCS Assembly Members (invited as appropriate to support the group's work)
- Representative from DWP
- Representatives from Shropshire Council
- A member of Shropshire Council's Feedback and Insight Team
- Representative from the Economic Task Force

The group identified several key themes based on their sector experience and evidence presented at the Social Task Force meetings and have made a number of recommendations to reduce the impact of hardship and poverty caused by the current pandemic. This was presented and adopted by the Social Task Force in October 2020.

The Money Advice and Pensions Service (MAPS) anticipated a 60% increase in the need for debt advice by the end of 2021 as a consequence of COVID-19 and the economic downturn. Whist Court action was suspended until September 2021, mortgage holidays and the introduction of Breathing Space meant that demand for debt advice was dampened for a time. Following lifting of these measures demand for debt advice increased and is likely to continue to be high as economic changes lead to more concerns regarding family finances and debt.

Unfortunately there is no physical space in Telford for a court desk to offer advice (as seen elsewhere), so alternative approaches is being considered are needed locally to deliver advice. Other areas of work considered within the group include:

- Employment support, working with DWP
- Food poverty, linking to work with the Food Poverty Alliance
- Fuel Poverty, maintaining partnerships and referrals with Marches Energy Agency
- Emergency Support, working with Shropshire Council's Welfare Reform and Support Team
- Supporting people to both prevent and respond to Council Tax arrears, working with Revenues and Benefits
- Partnership working with Shropshire Council's Housing and Homelessness lead officers and with the Housing Forum.

Older People's Sounding Board

The Older People's Sounding Board held a series of meetings in 2021 focussed on Digital Exclusion, which were well attended. There are now a number of forums meeting on this issue and so there are no plans to host any more but thanks are extended to all those who participated. Reflections on the Sounding Board meetings over the last two years of the pandemic suggested that the majority of attendees to the online meetings have been groups and organisations who represent older people's interests, rather than individual older people, with some exceptions of course. This is not surprising given the nature of the meetings and, as the topic for last years meetings was digital exclusion, it may not have appealed to everyone. As a result a decision has been made to focus time and energies for the coming year on outreach work and seek to get out and about to meet up with older people in the places that they meet to re-engage. This does not mean that a Sounding Board meeting if needed won't be held, but it will be issue-focused rather than a series of planned meetings. Hopefully by 2023 it will be possible to start to bring back public Sounding Board meetings on a more regular basis but the focus for 2022 is on outreach.

Shropshire Food Poverty Alliance

Shropshire Food Poverty Alliance (SFPA) completed research into children's food insecurity in Shropshire, published a report and recommendations and reported this to the Health and Wellbeing Board. They are now in the process of putting together a detailed work plan for the next two years and will be doing more detailed work around the findings that have come out of this research. Full details on their [website](#).

SFPA also completed stage two of the Shaping Places for Healthier Lives research, looking at food insecurity in South West Shropshire. This was a partnership project with Shropshire Council Public Health, Citizens Advice Shropshire and Healthwatch Shropshire. This research culminated in a funding bid which was successful! Bringing £300,000 to Shropshire to look at the issue for food insecurity with a whole system approach. Final report for this research can be found on the [Healthwatch Shropshire website](#). Emily Fay (former SFPA coordinator) has now taken on a role within Shropshire Council's Public Health team to manage this project over the next 3 years.

Finally, SFPA have launched a new 'Worrying About Money?' leaflet for Shropshire. These are cash first referral leaflets which have been co-produced with the Independent Food Aid Network and local Shropshire organisations. The aim behind these leaflets is to create a straightforward resource for people facing financial crisis, and anyone supporting them, to quickly see the local support and advice services available to them. At the heart of this project is the recognition that insufficient and insecure income is the main driver of food insecurity so these leaflets aim to reduce the barriers to existing financial entitlements to try and reduce the need for emergency food aid. Alongside the leaflets we have run training sessions for frontline staff and volunteers on how to use the leaflet as a resource to approach conversations around money and these have been attended by over 40 people across Shropshire. Leaflets can be accessed online via the [Food Aid Network website](#) and free hard copies can be posted out by contacting [Sophie Padgett](#), Co-ordinator of the Shropshire Food Poverty Alliance.

0-25 Summit

The 0-25 Summit hasn't met during the last year. This was a decision taken pre-Covid as our email, phone and contact in associated meetings are sufficient to ensure good communication amongst those who attend. Obviously, Covid 19 and subsequent lockdowns have had a real impact on the sector which is explored below. We have all become adept at virtual meetings and the summit will almost certainly adopt a virtual approach going forward as it reduces time and cost on travel and is a greener solution in our large, rural county.

That's probably enough about the summit, but what about the sector?

The youth sector in Shropshire has a few big VCSA organisations that employ staff and deliver contracts like YSS, Autism West Midlands, Movement Centre, Energize and SYA. Then there are the big voluntary organisations like Scouts, Girlguiding and Young Farmers and finally a plethora of small voluntary clubs, groups and projects. Collectively these groups and organisations deliver a phenomenal amount of work to support our young people.

Here are a few important statistics from the SYA Annual Report 2020/21:

- 2021 saw the re-opening of the sector, with 98 youth clubs operating compared to pre-covid levels of 120. Although this is a reduction, it is above average compared to the national picture.
- The value of volunteering by these organisations was valued at just under £4M.
- Over 6000 young people regularly attend youth provision.
- They are supported by 2100 adult and 158 young volunteers.
- There are 275 weekly sessions on offer for young people (this doesn't include sports clubs).

Research undertaken nationally and echoed by SYA is that many voluntary organisations are struggling to reopen following the pandemic, this is caused by volunteer drop off and financial difficulties. Members of the 0-25 Summit want to help and support as many organisations as possible to get back to full strength and thrive. We will do this by helping recruit and train new volunteers and help clubs and organisations that are struggling financially to find funding or resources to continue.

Green Shropshire Xchange

Green Shropshire Xchange (GSX) is the environmental forum, and has been actively contributing to the local Climate Change Action Partnerships: Shropshire Climate Action and the Zero Carbon Shropshire Plan, The South Shropshire Climate Partnership with the Next Steps Plan, and The Telford & Wrekin Borough Climate Plan. These partnerships are now working on projects to achieve net zero carbon emissions.

In October 2021, GSX organised two climate change [online workshops](#) with the VCSA, SALC and the Save our Shropshire Charity. These were well attended and the presentations provided useful information and ways to support climate action. The briefing Guide, [Net Zero Carbon and the Third Sector](#) is available as a resource to help organizations develop action plans.

GSX supported the Shropshire Against Pointless Plastic network and the Plastic Free July events and also contributed to the council reviews of the local plans and the local transport strategies.

GSX is a member of Sustainability West Midlands and also attends the meetings of the Marches LEP Energy Steering Group, working to deliver the energy strategy.

Local environmental groups continue to work with the local councils and other partners in the development of sustainable communities, including the reductions in fuel and food poverty, nature protection and pollution issues.

Voluntary Sector Mental Health Forum

The forum continues with the circulation and exchange of information only, introducing new people in post to others and keeping them up to date with current developments. Face to face meetings seem to be a long way away as the premises at Redwoods previously used would no longer accommodate the forum due to COVID requirements.

Despite the pandemic, and anticipating/responding to the pressures placed on everyone, our member charities have done their best to continue actively supporting people across the county. They have shown huge resilience by sustaining their "normal" activities as best they can and, impressively, many have displayed an amazing capacity for innovation, moving all sorts of activities and support into phone and online platforms and by creating wholly new ways of working and partnerships (with fellow charities and with the Council and the NHS) to provide new support systems and processes. The challenge facing all mental health charities is to maintain and grow these valuable services, mostly supported by volunteers, in coming months and years as demand increases and funding remains hard to find.

Members have been involved in several aspects of the Community Mental Health Transformation Programme through circulation of minutes, asking questions and attending zoom meetings to discuss items such as 'The Virtual Front Door' and 'Wellbeing on Wheels'. Ten organisations, large and small, rural and urban, expressed an interest in further involvement. We are still awaiting an update on this initiative; it has not been on the agenda for many months. The Wellbeing on Wheels initiative (yet another transformation project many of the forum organisations were particularly interested in this item) again, unfortunately, meetings regarding this came to a standstill/pause. It is not yet known whether the Wellbeing on Wheels discussions will restart, and if so, when.

The forum has a circulation of 64 currently, including colleagues from Midlands Partnership Foundation Trust, Social Care, Shropshire Council, individuals and independent providers. Several have left, due to closure during the year, with new people in a variety of posts being added.

Voluntary Sector Health & Social Care Forum

The Forum has not met over the last year but continued to send out information on health and care issues and developments to keep everyone up-to-date.

A Survey to members of the Forum was issued in October and completed by 11 organisations. The results showed that:

1. Organisations wished to continue being involved in the Forum.
2. Members wanted the forum primarily as an opportunity to engage with other agencies on health and care issues (90%) and to receive information on developments and updates (80%).
3. Meetings should be quarterly and a mixture of online and in person.
4. There was interest in a wide range of topics but the most popular were the development of the Integrated Care System along with service delivery and development.

Meetings will be arranged for 2022.

Shropshire Community Transport Consortium

Shropshire Community Transport Consortium represents not-for profit community transport groups throughout Shropshire. All groups provide local transport for otherwise isolated people, unable to access public transport due to its unavailability or their restricted physical mobility. Historically community transport predominantly focused on providing transport to medical appointments, minibus trips or dial-a-ride type minibus services. A valuable service reliant upon volunteers that helps those that are disabled or elderly, to remain independent and feel a part of their community.

The Covid-19 pandemic saw groups needing to adapt and evolve in response to their members' needs whilst continuing to fulfil school contract obligations. Initially this focused on supporting those that were vulnerable or shielding but swiftly expanded to providing welfare type services – such as befriending and welfare calls. Once restrictions eased there was huge demand for shopping and leisure trips as members longed for social opportunities and to “just get back out again as normal”.

Most groups have continued to provide their additional support services from the pandemic, sometimes as part of a larger Good Neighbour offering, alongside their core services. The vital services provided throughout the pandemic were possible with thanks to the support from local town councils, Shropshire Council, and the government's additional funding for transport operators in response to covid.

Meeting demand continues to be an ongoing concern and our focus to overcome.

Marches LEP VCS elected representative	the LEP Board is comprised of local authority leaders and key sector representatives Sonia Roberts is the elected VCS representative and gives regular reports to the VCSA Board.
Shropshire Council Covid-19 Economic Impacts Task Force	Brings together key partners, stakeholders and organisations from across the County, to tackle the economic impacts of the pandemic. Sonia Roberts represents the VCSA.
Shropshire Council Covid-19 Social Impacts Task Force	Brings together key partners, stakeholders and organisations from across the County, to tackle the social impacts of the pandemic. Heather Osborne, Chris Child, Jackie Jeffrey and Julia Baron represent the VCSA.
VCS Alliance Meeting with ICS	This group meets regularly with members of the ICS for strategic planning purposes. VCSA representatives include Heather Osborne, Julia Baron and Laurel Roberts.
Health and Wellbeing Board and other sub groups.	The VCSA has a seat at the Health and Wellbeing Board and fully participates in the work of the Board and its sub groups. Jackie Jeffrey and Nicola Daniels support this work.
Shropshire Integrated Place Partnership (ICS)	The purpose of SHIPP is to act as a partnership board of commissioners, providers of health and social care and involvement leads in Shropshire, to ensure that the system level outcomes and priorities agreed at ICS and Programme boards are implemented at place level in Shropshire Julie Mellor serves as the VCSA representative.
Digital Strategy Advisory Group (ICS)	Brought together to advise on the ICS digital strategy. Rob Price from Age UK sits on this group and reports to the VCSA Board.
Shropshire Association of Local Councils Executive	Shropshire VCS Assembly maintains an important partnership with SALC, recognising the issues and challenges shared by the VCS and town and parish councils. Chris Child and Richard Parkes represent the VCSA.
Primary Care Networks	A VCSA Board representative was requested to attend by the NHS. Nicola Daniels represents the VCSA.
Food Partnership and Food Poverty Alliance	A consortium of organisations who are committed to work together to tackle food poverty in Shropshire. Sophie Padgett and Jenny Roquette report to the VCSA Board.
Healthy Lives Steering Group	Part of Shropshire Together—a collection of partners working to improve the health and wellbeing of people living and working in Shropshire. Laurel Roberts is the VCSA representative. Jackie Jeffrey also attends.
Early Help Partnership Board	Multi-agency group responsible for the review of the Early Help Strategy. Richard Parkes is the VCSA representative.
Learning Disability Partnership Board	Multi-agency group responsible for the review of the Learning Disability Strategy. Julie Mellor is the VCSA representative.
0-25 SEND Strategic Board	A 0-25 Summit representative attends this group. The group oversees deliver of the strategy for children and young people with special educational needs and/or disabilities and reports to the Shropshire Children's Trust. Jackie Jeffrey is the VCSA representative.
Shropshire Bus Partnership Board for the Bus Services Improvement Plan	Linda Cox or Marie Monk-Hawkesworth attend on behalf of the Community Transport Consortium, a VCSA Forum of Interest.
Mental Health Partnership Board	The Mental Health Partnership Board is a strategic forum to advise and lead the strategic direction of mental health commissioning and service delivery in Shropshire.
And more....	There are a range of other occasional events and meetings attended by VCS Assembly representatives.

Board Members

Heather Osborne	Chair
Nicola McPherson	Health and Social Care Forum
Chris Child	County Sports Partnership
Laurel Roberts	Social Prescribing and Volunteer Forums Representative
Linda Cox	Compact Champion
Julia Baron	Shropshire Infrastructure Partnership
Heather Osborne	Older People's Sounding Board
Marie Monk-Hawksworth	Shropshire Community Transport Consortium
Catherine Kevis	Co-opted Board Member for Criminal Justice
Jackie Jeffrey	Co-opted Welfare Reform Lead
Currently Vacant	Pan Disability Forum
Richard Parkes	0-25 Summit
Tony Green	Green Shropshire Xchange
Dee Plozay	VCS Mental Health Forum
Sophie Padgett	Food Poverty Alliance
Lynn Cawley	Healthwatch Shropshire Representative
Sonia Roberts	Marches LEP VCS Representative

Elected Champion, Shropshire Council Portfolio Holder:

The VCS Assembly would like to extend thanks to: Councillor Cecilia Motley, Portfolio Holder for Communities, Culture, Leisure & Tourism and Transport.



Support Team

Shropshire VCS Assembly is supported by Shropshire Council through officer support, in-kind support and a small budget for key events. Support is provided by:

Sarah Dodds, Feedback and Insight Team Leader
 Sarah Hampson, VCS Insight and Engagement Officer
 Charlotte Green, Support Officer, Feedback and Insight Team

The Year Ahead/Priorities for 2022



We look forward to another year working together to highlight the work of the voluntary and community sector in Shropshire. We will continue to undertake work designed to ensure the sector has an active role alongside other local partnerships and organisations at strategic planning meetings and within the development of local policies and programmes.

Each year the VCS Assembly Board undertakes work to assess priorities for the year ahead in advance of the Annual Assembly. The Annual Assembly is a great opportunity to obtain feedback from the wider membership and understand key local issues and suggestions for areas of focus. The priorities set out below will be further considered and developed based on feedback from the membership at the Annual Assembly meeting in April 2022, and we encourage all members to keep in touch and share information through the weekly newsletter, forums, VCSA events and by speaking to any member of the VCSA Board or support team.

This year, the VCSA will focus on:

- Increasing and strengthening existing opportunities for collaboration in the sector.
- Working to address inequalities highlighted by the pandemic, including health and financial inequalities, loneliness and rural isolation.
- Working to embed the ICS within the VCS.
- Developing VCSA membership, bringing new voices to the table and highlighting the work of the sector.
- Increasing inclusion – diversifying our general membership, Board membership and the voices that are being heard from within the sector.
- Supporting and sustaining the VCS to ensure that it remains vibrant and robust in the wake of the pandemic.

Other priorities may be added following discussion at the VCS Annual Assembly and as new issues emerge through 2022/23.

About the VCS Assembly



Shropshire VCS Assembly works for the benefit of voluntary, community and social enterprise groups and organisations working in Shropshire. The Assembly was established in 2007 and is based on the belief that collective representation is more influential than a series of individual voices; and that cooperation generates shared strength through a pooling of energy, ideas and resources. The Assembly provides a means for voluntary and community organisations throughout Shropshire to meet and exchange information, ideas and good practice. Shropshire VCS Assembly is a partnership body focusing on engagement and joint working across sectors. Shropshire Council hosts the VCSA and supports it in working to engage other public sector partners.

Key functions of the VCSA include:

- Communication and information provision
- Networking and mutual support
- Representation and awareness
- Influence and policy development
- Cross sector working

To find out more about the VCS Assembly and access our key publications please visit: www.vcsvoice.org

You can also email us at vcsassembly@shropshire.gov.uk

Telephone: 01743 250094 or 01743 258519