

Dorset Health and Wellbeing Board

24 September 2025

Thriving Communities

For Review and Consultation

Cabinet Member:

Cllr S Robinson, Adult Social Care

Local Councillor(s):

Senior Leadership Team:

S Crowe, Director of Public Health & Prevention

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Statutory Authority:

Report status: Public

1. Executive summary

1.1 Through work with the Integrated Care Partnership, in June 2023 a brief proposal was presented to the DHWB, to support place-based working in the Dorset Council area. The aim was to develop a plan to grow community support and capacity through the VCS, to support older people to remain living well and independently.

1.2 In June 2024, the Dorset Health and Wellbeing Board (DHWB) approved the development of a Project Delivery and Transition Plan for creation of a Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) led Dorset Thriving Communities Network (DTCN) model to support place-based working in the Dorset Council area.

1.3 The Thriving Communities project, through which the report was developed, was provided support, direction, and guidance from a multi-agency Thriving Communities Reference Group (TCRG). That group included representatives from Dorset Council; NHS Dorset; the VCS and Dorset Fire and Rescue Service.

1.4 The involvement of such a broad TCRG has ensured that Thriving Communities is designed to support the Dorset Council, Communities for All priority whilst also aligning closely with other ICS priorities and programmes.

1.5 Following detailed research and engagement the multiagency TCRG recommended presentation of the Project Report and Forward Plan (April 2024) to the DHWB. That report provided the DHWB with compelling evidence for the development of a DTCN.

1.6 It was identified that, through the growth of a DTCN led by the VCS and supported by a partnership of Dorset Council, NHS Dorset, Public Health Dorset, the VCS and other partners, the relevant VCS infrastructures could be strengthened and the local groups who support older people could become more resilient and effective. The DTCN would also create potential to support the VCS in some of its challenges around leadership, development, governance, and administration.

1.7 The innovative and comprehensive nature of the research phase resulted in an invitation for presentation at the South West Public Health Scientific Conference in March 2025.

1.8 The TCRG recognised that the original budget would not provide longevity of the recommended model and additional funding would be required. Therefore, a proof-of-concept plan entitled Implementing the Foundation Phase (Appendix A), was developed and a lead VCS organisation appointed.

1.9 The TCRG also identified the need for transformation in the way Dorset Council and other partners work with the VCS.

1.10 This paper provides the DHWB with a summary of progress into a Foundation Phase, which is supported by the TCRG, and provides a recommendation for the portfolio holder to provide a further update report with recommendations in 12 months.

2. Recommendation(s)

2.1 The Dorset Health & Wellbeing board note the development of the foundation phase and approve the submission of an update report and recommendations following the first-year evaluation

3. Reason for the recommendation(s)

3.1 The Project Report and Forward Plan presented to the DHWB was developed through detailed research and a comprehensive, cross-sector collaboration on engagement which captured detailed views of over 250 participants and involved 75 VCS organisations. Evidence of effective practice both nationally and locally identified clear opportunities to support the VCS and reduce pressure on health and social care services. The evaluated programmes examined in the research were able to evidence the preventative benefits of their work.

“If the hubs did not exist, 50% of hub members said they would have approached a health care provider for support.”

Source: Cornwall Voluntary Sector Forum, Volunteer Cornwall, Cornwall, and Isles of Scilly Care Board – Community Hub Evaluation Report 2023.

3.2 With substantial growth in the over 65 population in Dorset predicted this decade there will be an inevitable impact on demand for health and care services. Without a significant, positive change in approach our already stretched public services will face substantial increases of demand on resources. Therefore, driving forward a preventative and supportive agenda with the VCS to support older people is vital.

3.3 The DTCN will also provide strong evidence in support of Dorset for Age Friendly Communities.

3.4 The TCRG support the proof-of-concept approach which is to be delivered within the original £309,000 budget. However, it is recognised by the reference group that the full Project Delivery and Transition Plan will require longer term commitment and resources from Dorset Council and ICS partner organisations.

4. The report

4.1 Traditionally, registered charities have been a recognised cornerstone of the VCS, but the landscape is far more diverse and dynamic. The VCS encompasses a wide array of not-for-profit entities, including social enterprises, community interest companies, community benefit societies, and faith groups. In addition, numerous small community groups, micro-providers, and individuals, though lacking formal structures, play an essential and active role within the sector.

4.2 This diversity is one of the VCS's greatest strengths, enabling local, tailored, and responsive support across communities. However, it also presents significant challenges for larger public service organisations attempting to engage and fund the sector effectively.

4.3 The existing model for VCS infrastructure support is primarily delivered through infrastructure organisations—charities and community interest companies funded to bolster the broader VCS. However, in Dorset these organisations have not been empowered with a sector-wide mandate for formal representation, which a more centralised body, such as a sector assembly, could provide.

4.4 The Voluntary and Community Assembly (VCSA) now offers a potential platform for everyone in Dorset's VCS to actively participate in addressing key local issues. The VCSA could provide a streamlined entry point into the sector's complex landscape, fostering greater representation, stronger connections within the VCS, and enhanced collaboration with other sectors. Managed by a Governance Board, the VCSA may ensure that the Assembly's operations align with the goals and needs of the VCS. As it matures, the VCSA is expected to bring invaluable clarity to the sector's infrastructure and service delivery layers, enhancing communication, representation, and engagement both within the VCS and with external partners.

4.5 Dorset's VCS is also supported by additional, less formal, layers of infrastructure, all of which are crucial in supporting older people and communities. From well-established infrastructure organisations to individual neighbourhood volunteers, the

VCS provides the foundational support needed to build thriving communities. To do so effectively, these groups require essential resources—from accessible locations and suitable facilities to proportional funding, insurance, training, governance, and the dedication of trusted local leaders.

4.6 Despite its vital role, the VCS faces persistent challenges that hamper its ability to expand capacity and capability. These challenges contribute to sector fragility, isolation, and burnout.

4.7 Through extensive research and a creative engagement collaboration the Thriving Communities initiative has uncovered evidence of effective practices at a national and local level. It has also identified opportunities to alleviate pressure on health and social care services while increasing healthy life expectancy.

4.8 Throughout the engagement process, there was a clear message that local groups and charities are indispensable for maintaining a bright outlook for older people in the area. However, without investment and support, the future could deteriorate, exacerbating challenges in health and social care.

4.9 It was identified that, through the growth of a DTCN, VCS infrastructures could be strengthened and the local groups who support older people could become more resilient and effective. The DTCN would also create potential for further collaborative work and development.

4.10 The development of the DTCN Foundation Phase offers a transformative approach to community support, ensuring that the VCS remains a vital and dynamic force in helping older people and the broader community thrive.

4.11 Delivering the Foundation Phase:

4.12 The Foundation Phase will be initiated for 24 months in 3 geographic areas which will align to and support the development of Integrated Neighbourhood Teams and other relevant programme of work. It will be cognisant of the Day Opportunities programme and will align with and form an integral part of the Age Friendly Programme.

4.13 The Foundation Phase will be delivered in partnership and will have 3 layers

Layer 1. Working with the Voluntary and Community Sector Assembly

The VCSA provides a sound strategic oversight function which could simplify working with the VCS and help deliver the Dorset Council - Communities for All strategic priority. The Thriving Communities Reference Group is supportive of working directly with the VCSA to promote, develop and evaluate the Foundation Phase.

Layer 2. Developing, coordinating and supporting the network

Volunteer Centre Dorset will work with the Thriving Communities Partnership Manager to develop the foundation DTCNs and will then coordinate all

development activity. The coordinating function will provide a single point of contact into the network and will also manage all grants and monitor performance.

A contract has been awarded which provides the Volunteer Centre Dorset with £40,000.00 per annum for a 2-year period to develop and grow the networks.

Layer 3. Support and service at a place-based level

To support local groups working with older people small grants will be provided to provide health and wellbeing services within local communities. There will be a series of requirements for participation which will include adopting an action plan. The total grant pot provided for further dissemination over 2 years is £132,000.00, or £66,000.00 per annum.

The funding provided for grants may be used flexibly to meet costs associated with providing support within local communities but will be subject to control and monitoring.

4.14 Timeline:

July 2025 – Contract awarded to Volunteer Centre Dorset

September 2025 – Foundation Networks commence formation

September 2026 – 12-month evaluation completed Report presented to Reference Group and Dorset Health and Wellbeing Board.

4.15 Clear performance, reporting and development criteria will be created for members of the network with simple processes and standards implemented.

4.16 Project measurements:

Network Development & Engagement

- Number of locality-based Thriving Communities Networks established in the 3 priority areas (Weymouth, North Dorset, Purbeck)
- Number of Community Stakeholders and VCS organisations recruited into the network
- Percentage of new or emerging organisations (under 3 years old) supported through the network
- Number of collaborative events (forums, workshops, peer mentoring sessions) delivered per quarter
- Satisfaction rate from participating VCSOs

Impact on Older People

- Estimated number of older people engaged or supported by network member activities

- % of funded organisations delivering early help or preventative activities
- % of projects offering multigenerational activities
- Case studies collected from funded organisations showing impact on health, wellbeing, or independence

Capacity Building & Support

- Number of VCSOs with completed Action Plans
- % of VCSOs showing progress against at least one goal in their Action Plan (based on reviews)
- Number of organisations accessing training, mentoring, or specialist support via the project
- Number of locality-based infrastructure support sessions delivered (online or in-person)

Grant Distribution & Management

- Total value of small grants awarded
- Number of VCSOs receiving grants
- % of funded projects meeting their outcomes (based on monitoring returns)
- Average time from application to grant award

Collaboration & Integration

- Number of partnerships formed or strengthened between VCS and health/social care professionals
- Number of referrals or signposts made between network members and statutory services
- Representation at INT meetings across all 3 areas
- Number of joint initiatives or referrals developed with INTs, PCNs, or community-based health teams

Communication, Learning & Evaluation

- Quarterly monitoring reports completed and submitted to Dorset Council
- Number of VCS insights or trends shared with the Council
- Number of learning reviews held
- Annual evaluation report produced and shared with stakeholders
- Feedback from VCSA, INTs, and Dorset Council confirming project alignment with strategic goals

5. Alternative options considered

- 5.1 A series of options were presented to the Dorset Health and Wellbeing Board in the Project Delivery and Transition Plan

6. Legal considerations

6.1 The Foundation Phase contract has been awarded through a competitive “Request for Quotes” process. Should the programme expand following evaluation there may be a requirement for a full commissioning process.

7. Financial implications

7.1 The Joint Public Health Board agreed to invest part of the shared service underspend from 2021/22 into place-based working. The shared service is funded by contributions from both BCP and Dorset councils’ public health ring-fenced grant. The same conditions apply to any underspend held in reserves as apply to the original grant.

7.2. For the Dorset place-based partnership the share of these funds was £309k. The aim was to support a focused programme of work in line with health and wellbeing priorities.

7.3 The project budget is currently overseen by the Thriving Communities Reference Group with the budget being tightly controlled and as a result the spend of the £309,000 is currently on track and the project will be delivered within budget.

7.4 deliver effective long-term; place-based support, there would need to be a more sustainable longer-term model of funding.

7.5 It is predicted that the original budget will enable the creation of a network of approximately fifteen groups and charities and will provide 24 months support.

8. Natural environment, climate & ecology implications

8.1 Supporting people to stay well and live independently by building strong community networks of support close to their homes should reduce travel and healthcare utilisation - both of which also have the benefits of reducing travel time and costs and in turn have a positive impact on the environment and reducing emissions.

9. Well-being and health implications

9.1 Collaborating with people to understand what keeps them well and healthy, and building capacity in the voluntary and community sector to offer support around these needs, should improve healthy life expectancy – keeping people living for longer in good health. Working in this way to develop person centred approaches should also have benefits for people’s personal sense of wellbeing.

10. Other implications

10.1 Capacity needs to be identified to support this programme through to the completion of the transition process and then in a monitoring capacity.

11. Risk implications

11.1 HAVING CONSIDERED: the risks associated with this decision; the level of risk has been identified as:

Current Risk: LOW

Residual Risk: LOW

12. Equalities

12.1 An Equality Impact Assessment with resultant action plan has been completed.

13. Appendices

13.1 Appendix A: Implementing the Foundation Phase

14 Report sign-off

14.1 This report has been through the internal report clearance process and has been signed off by the Director for Legal and Democratic (Monitoring Officer), the Executive Director for Corporate Development (Section 151 Officer) and the appropriate Portfolio Holder(s)

