

Caring Communities Commission meeting – Why Essex’s new vision needs the voluntary sector

Held at Baptist Church, Chelmsford - 01/05/2025

Speech by ECF Director of Policy and Programme, Andy Payne Worpole.

I want to start by congratulating the commission on a comprehensive report and with a couple of sentences from our Thriving Communities report from 2021, developed using over 35 interviews with voluntary and community leaders - our first community listening project.

Thriving communities are not ones without problems, but ones capable of responding to problems in a timely and appropriate manner, equipped to offer quality support within the community. The ability to understand the needs of the community is key to this, as well as the ability to nurture trusting relationships over time.

The Caring Communities Report sets out a bold and timely challenge to build those thriving communities I just described. A vision for care that’s built on relationships, not transactions, where people feel they matter. It calls for decisions and solutions to come from communities themselves, supported by long-term, local investment.

The Challenge – A System Under Strain

Public services are stretched and demand is rising. Despite the best efforts of many, traditional service delivery models are no longer sustainable or sufficient. It’s time to ask bigger questions and build new systems that are rooted in the community.

However, locally, the picture in Essex for voluntary and community organisations, which could help deliver this shift, is just as stark:

- Nearly **a third** are using reserves to stay afloat.
- **40%** have diverted funds from staff development and tech upgrades.
- **85%** of larger community organisations say the recent budget has slashed their ability to innovate.

The work of ECF

At ECF, our work already reflects this vision.

Our new strategy aims to invest in community organisations - providing stability and leadership support, inspiring giving to grow community assets and to be a bold voice for the voluntary sector. As an independent voice we are focused on three core pillars.

1. **Sustainability:** We wish to build a sustainable sector through increased core and multi-year funding.
2. **Recognition:** Highlighting the sector as a cornerstone of thriving communities and a vital contributor and partner to reducing pressure on statutory services.
3. **Investment:** Strengthening investment in the sector. To be an innovator, driving prevention, well-being, and systemic change outlined in this report.

The report highlights the central role of civil society and the vast variety of community groups, however these groups we rely on to create connection and care are also struggling to keep up with rising need and uncertain funding. To fulfil their potential in building thriving communities, they don't just need recognition, but real, sustained investment. They need space and support to innovate, to take risks, and to lead proactively, not just respond to crises.

To put this in context: there are approximately **5,000** registered VCSE organisations in Essex. Many are small, deeply embedded in their communities, they employ **17,500** full-time staff and have **95,000** volunteers. Together, they form the social infrastructure that holds our county together, responding where others can't, and adapting faster than formal systems.

Reform as Catalyst

Devolution and local government reform must be more than reshuffling structures. It provides great uncertainty, so we must be transparent and keep on talking and listening to each other during these changes. The reforms should be used to embed community insight and leadership at every level of design and delivery. So, let's not waste this moment purely as the introduction of a new administrative system, when we could use it for real transformation.

Closing

If we're serious about care, we must be serious about community. The Caring Communities Report is a roadmap, and the voluntary and community sector is ready to and is already building the future it describes.

For example, CHESS Homeless in Chelmsford has just created 24 homes, where people feel safe, valued, and have a sense of belonging. They didn't wait for instruction—they acted with boldness and belief.

I'm proud that Essex Community Foundation was able to support this. It shows what's possible when local philanthropy, local and national government funding, and the energy from community organisations come together.

We urgently need a shared agenda to respond to the issues highlighted in the report; we need to act now. Let's give our communities the trust, investment and tools to lead the way.