

Building Back Better: Embedding Civil Society in Essex's Local Government Reorganisation - September 2025

Joint Statement from Essex Community Foundation and Local Infrastructure Organisations

We, the undersigned, issue this statement as leaders of Essex's local infrastructure organisations, including the CVSS, ECVYS, Rural Community Council of Essex (RCCE), Essex Association of Local Councils (EALC) and Essex Community Foundation (ECF).

As Essex prepares for the most significant reorganisation of local government in a generation, the creation of new unitary authorities presents both a challenge and a rare opportunity.

For the Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise (VCFSE) sector, the stakes are high. The decisions made over the coming months will determine whether community-led work is enabled to thrive, whether local voices are genuinely embedded in the system, and whether public services are equipped to shift towards prevention, wellbeing, and inclusion.

The Structure, Dynamics and Impact of the Third Sector in Essex report by Durham University, states that the VCFSE sector delivers £1 billion in value annually, including volunteer time, and engages over 17,500 staff and 95,000 volunteers in every part of Essex. This is not a peripheral system, it is a vital infrastructure and foundation. Reorganisation must strengthen this sector, not displace or marginalise it.

This is our moment to make the ambitions of the Civil Society Covenant real: placing the VCFSE sector not at the margins, but at the heart of decision-making. Together, Essex Community Foundation and infrastructure organisations across the county call for all unitary proposals to embed five core design principles, grounded in practical experience, the Covenant's values, and the NHS plan's prevention agenda, to secure a healthier, fairer, and more resilient Essex.

1. Community Power to Be Built In

Even in a five-unitary model, larger authorities risk distancing governance from the communities they serve. Proposals must guarantee inclusive, locally rooted structures that uphold subsidiarity. Parish and Town Councils, as the closest tier of democratic governance, and VCFSE organisations, embedded in communities, both play a vital role in sustaining local identity and trust. Their reach and ability to convene diverse voices make them essential partners in shaping neighbourhood governance and ensuring services meet real-world needs.

"Natural communities are not defined only by boundaries; they are defined by belonging." VCFSE Roundtable, July 2025

The Covenant commits to *"involving people in decisions that affect their lives, ensuring their voices are heard and removing barriers to democratic participation"*.

We propose that every LGR proposal ideally should:

- Commit to community-level governance structures across all areas
- Ensure these bodies have clear remits, resources, and real influence
- Reflect natural communities and neighbourhoods, including cultural and thematic identities, not just administrative borders
- Actively connect with parish/town councils, community networks, and trusted local individuals, groups and voluntary organisations

What the VCFSE Sector Adds:

We are the trusted connectors and deliverers who can reach those least likely to engage with statutory processes. Our networks from faith groups to youth clubs are embedded in local life, enabling early dialogue, sustained participation, and culturally competent engagement

2. Embed the VCFSE in Programme Governance

The VCFSE sector brings trust, deep place-based knowledge, and strong relationships with communities whose voices may otherwise be overlooked. This insight must be embedded from the start and not added later as consultation.

Caring Communities Commission report states, *“The future system must reflect community voice, lived experience and a shared vision across sectors. The role of the voluntary and community sector in prevention and early intervention must be better recognised and embedded in place-based systems.”*

To deliver effective change we call for:

- A dedicated VCFSE Transition Taskforce to advise throughout the Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) process
- Formal VCFSE representation on LGR Programme Boards and shadow authorities
- Sustained involvement in governance structures post-reorganisation, including in Combined Authority frameworks and Integrated Care Board (ICB) locality models

“Co-design only works if community insight is structurally embedded from the outset.” VCFSE Roundtable, July 2025

What the VCFSE Sector Adds:

We bring lived experience, place-based knowledge, and insight into communities that statutory systems often can't engage. Our inclusion ensures that governance decisions are informed by real-world conditions, not just data models.

3. Sustain and Grow Strategic Investment

With over two-thirds of Essex VCFSEs operating below £50,000 annually, and many relying on reserves, financial fragility threatens the sector's stability just when it is needed most.

The socio-economic risk of failing to embed the VCFSE sector is profound. The King's Fund, *“What are the priorities for health and social care?”* (2017), highlights that cuts to prevention and community-based services are a false economy and they put people's health at risk and store up problems for the future.

We recommend:

- Multi-year, unrestricted investment for both large anchor organisations and smaller grassroots groups
- Pooled place-based prevention budgets, supported by cross-sector Investment and Impact Panels
- A culture of partnership and collaboration, recognising and resourcing the unique contribution of the VCFSE
- Invest in core funding allowing organisations to respond swiftly to emerging needs, grounded in their long-term understanding of local communities.

“The share of total NHS budgets at ICS level going towards prevention should be increased by at least 1 per cent.”
The Hewitt Review (2023). Targeting part of this investment toward the VCFSE could have a transformative impact on community resilience and system demand.

What the VCFSE Sector Adds:

Every £1 invested in the sector returns multiple benefits and social value, from reducing hospital admissions and building social cohesion to boosting local employment. We leverage philanthropic and social investment alongside public funds, increasing the total system capacity and resources available for prevention.

4. Simplify VCFSE Commissioning Without Losing Localism

Fragmented funding processes, multiple portals, and short cycles create administrative burdens and competition where there should be collaboration.

The Covenant calls for *“developing collaborative commissioning and procurement arrangements”* that *“remove barriers to participation”*.

The NHS 10-Year Plan urges *“co-designed funding approaches that are proportionate, inclusive, and encourage joint delivery”*.

From our shared experience, we recommend:

- A shared commissioning framework across all new Unitary Authorities (UA)
- Locally devolved grant pots for thematic and place-based priorities (e.g. youth, coastal towns, rural services, health equity)
- Co-designed funding approaches that are proportionate, inclusive, and encourages joint delivery

The Caring Communities Commission warns that short-term, fragmented funding erodes trust and diverts energy from innovation to survival.

What the VCFSE Adds:

We deliver high-value, cost-effective and community embedded delivery with agility, on smaller budgets than public, national charities and larger providers. By making commissioning VCFSE friendly, the system gains innovation, speed of response, and access to micro-level intelligence.

5. Align with NHS and Prevention Agendas

The VCFSE plays a central role in prevention, early intervention, and recovery. Its insight and presence in underserved communities make it a vital partner in health and wellbeing.

The NHS 10-Year Plan's Neighbourhood Health Service is designed to *"co-locate NHS, local authority and voluntary sector services, to create an offer that meets population need holistically"*.

Based on the needs of our communities in Essex LGR proposals should:

- Enable joint commissioning between UAs, ICBs, public health teams and VCFSEs for prevention and early intervention.
- Support data-sharing partnerships to target investment and monitor outcomes
- Invest in VCFSE-led pilots in areas of high need, inequality, or isolation

The Caring Communities Commission highlights that relationships, trust, and rooted local action are the foundations of prevention and resilience.

What the VCFSE Sector Adds:

We have built trust with our communities, making us a frontline partner in prevention and early intervention. Our preventative work from mental health peer support to ageing well programmes reduces pressure on hospitals and improve quality of life.

What's Next? A Shared Commitment to Action

This is a call to action not only for the system, but for our sector. We recognise that if we are to be equal partners in reorganisation, we must also lead as partners; co-producing, acting in unity and moving at pace.

We are already taking coordinated steps to strengthen our collective VCFSE voice. Across Essex, infrastructure bodies, anchor organisations, thematic and place-based networks are working together to ensure the sector is equipped to engage strategically, act collectively, and deliver practical solutions.

This includes efforts to:

- Build a cross-sector leadership model that brings together the VCFSE
- Establish place-based and thematic representation structures that reflect the diversity of Essex's communities
- Build links with new governance structures as they come into being (e.g. ICB reconfiguration, unitary transition boards, the new Mayor and the Combined Authority)

We will step up to support reorganisation that empowers communities, creating a stronger Essex. We are not asking to be consulted. We are offering to partner in the design, transition and delivery of this change, bringing with us community networks, lived experience, knowledge, insight and commitment.

The Civil Society Covenant commits to *"a new model of partnership between civil society and government... where the voices, expertise, and independence of civil society are respected and valued"*.

What's Next?

- We invite local authorities and delivery partners to co-design with us community governance, funding models, and investment structures that embed the VCFSE as a strategic partner to enable effective place-led working.
- We ask that all LGR proposals formally adopt these five principles, with clarity on how each will be delivered.

- In line with the Civil Society Covenant, we are committed to working in partnership with public bodies to deliver long-term, systemic change grounded in mutual respect, trust, and shared outcomes.
- We also look ahead to our role in shaping the new Combined Authority and mayoral structures, ensuring communities are represented at all levels of decision-making from the outset.

To contribute contact: policy@essexcf.org.uk | www.essexcf.org.uk

Let us make this transition a turning point where we build trust, not just structures. Together, we can ensure this reorganisation builds a future where Essex is shaped by its communities, not just for them

Signatories:

Lisa Andrews, Chief Officer, Community Voluntary Services Tendring
 Rachel Brett, Chief Executive Officer, Essex Council for Voluntary Youth Services
 Clive Emmett Chief Officer, Uttlesford Community Action Network
 Diane Fairchild Director, Brentwood CVS
 Jacqui Foile, Chief Officer, VAEF and Director, WECAN
 Tracy Harris, Chief Executive Officer, Castle Point Association of Voluntary Services
 Cristina Huddleston, Chief Executive Officer, Community360
 Lorraine Jarvis, Chief Officer, Chelmsford CVS
 Victoria Marzouki, Chief Officer, Rayleigh, Rochford and District Association for Voluntary Services
 Andy Payne Worpole, Director of Policy and Programmes, Essex Community Foundation
 Anthony Quinn, Chief Executive Officer, Southend Association of Voluntary Services
 Nick Shuttleworth, Executive Director, Rural Community Council of Essex
 Charlene Slade, Chief Executive Officer, Essex Association of Local Councils
 Sharon Summerfield, Chief Executive Officer, Rainbow Services (Harlow) and Director, WECAN
 Mark Tebbs, Chief Executive Officer, Thurrock CVS
 Sarah Troop, Director, Maldon and District CVS