

Integrated Care Board

Date of meeting	27 November 2025
Title of paper	Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise (VCFSE) Alliance/ ICB Partnership Agreement
Presented by	Prof. Craig Harris, Chief Operating Officer & Chief Commissioner & Tracy Hopkins, Chair of the VCFSE Alliance
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Agenda item	16
Confidential	No

Executive summary

In May 2023 Lancashire and South Cumbria Integrated Care Board (ICB) and representatives from the Voluntary, Community, Faith, and Social Enterprise (VCFSE) Alliance signed a Partnership Agreement. The Partnership Agreement reflects a more ambitious way of working between the ICB and the VCFSE sector and sets out the commitment to work together in partnership and meet the diverse needs of our population.

This paper provides background context and outlines the strategic case for supporting the reaffirmation of the Partnership Agreement and strengthening collaboration in order to meet a series of shared objectives which seek to improve the health of our communities, tackle deep-rooted inequalities and support the shift towards a sustainable, community-based healthcare model.

This paper presents a small number of case studies and draws out key learning points to highlight the breadth and scope of the potential of partnership working with the sector. The emerging themes are pertinent to the delivery of the 10 Year Health Plan and to the ICB's role as outlined in the Strategic Commissioning Framework

Public and Stakeholder Engagement

This paper has been co-produced with members of the VCFSE Alliance and draws learning and themes from case studies that have been provided by local VCFSE organisations.

Recommendations

Members of the Board are requested to:

1. Confirm the on-going commitment to the Partnership Agreement and note the contributions made over the past 12 months through collaboration approaches between the ICB and VCFSE sector.
2. Support intentions to strengthen strategic partnerships with the sector as outlined in the paper.

Which Strategic Objective/s does the report relate to:		Tick
SO1	Improve quality, including safety, clinical outcomes, and patient experience	✓
SO2	To equalise opportunities and clinical outcomes across the area	✓
SO3	Make working in Lancashire and South Cumbria an attractive and desirable option for existing and potential employees	✓
SO4	Meet financial targets and deliver improved productivity	✓
SO5	Meet national and locally determined performance standards and targets	✓
SO6	To develop and implement ambitious, deliverable strategies	✓

Implications

	Yes	No	N/A	Comments
Associated risks			✓	
Are associated risks detailed on the ICB Risk Register?			✓	
Financial Implications			✓	

Where paper has been discussed (list other committees/forums that have discussed this paper)

Meeting	Date	Outcomes
N/A		

Conflicts of interest associated with this report

N/A

Impact assessments

	Yes	No	N/A	Comments
Quality impact assessment completed			✓	
Equality impact assessment completed			✓	
Data privacy impact assessment completed			✓	

Report authorised by:

Prof. Craig Harris, Chief Operating Officer & Chief Commissioner

Integrated Care Board – November 2025

Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise (VCFSE) Alliance/ ICB Partnership Agreement

1. Introduction

- 1.1 In May 2023 Lancashire and South Cumbria Integrated Care Board (ICB) and representatives from the Voluntary, Community, Faith, and Social Enterprise (VCFSE) Alliance signed a Partnership Agreement. The Partnership Agreement reflects a more ambitious way of working between the ICB and the VCFSE sector and sets out the commitment to work together in partnership and meet the diverse needs of our population.
- 1.2 This paper provides background context and outlines the strategic case for supporting the reaffirmation of the Partnership Agreement and strengthening collaboration in order to meet a series of shared objectives which seek to improve the health of our communities, tackle deep-rooted inequalities and support the shift towards a sustainable, community-based healthcare model.

2. Context: The Partnership Agreement

- 2.1 The Partnership Agreement, which is included as Appendix 1, was co-produced by the ICB and VCFSE organisations through a series of workshops in 2022-23. The Agreement sets out principles which underpin the ways of working between the ICB and the VCFSE Alliance and outlines a series of commitments from both partners.
- 2.2 Recently published guidance including the Medium Term Planning Guidance (October 2025) and the Strategic Commissioning Framework (November 2025) emphasise the need for system partnerships, including those with the VCFSE sector in order to support the shifts from reactive to proactive care, reduce inequalities and take a population health management approach as part of the commissioning cycle.
- 2.3 The VCFSE sector is a long-standing, strategic partner for Lancashire & South Cumbria Integrated Care Board (LSC ICB). The sector brings local knowledge, trusted relationships, flexibility, community assets, innovation and the ability to reach groups that statutory services often struggle to engage.
- 2.3 A paper was presented to Board in September 2024 which provided a high-level review of the Agreement in order to understand progress against the commitments. Section 3 of the report provides an update against each of these.
- 2.4 This paper provides Board members with examples of the ways in which the principles and approaches embedded within the Partnership Agreement are enabling innovative approaches to meeting the needs of our local communities, supporting the delivery of key performance priorities and aligning with the strategic intentions of the ICB. The Agreement provides a platform for these

approaches to be scaled and systematised by creating the conditions for the sector to be fully engaged as a strategic partner.

3. Progress against actions

3.1 A review of the Partnership Agreement undertaken in the summer of 2024 highlighted a number of areas for development and improvement. These are listed in the table below with a brief update.

Identified Actions	Progress Update
Continued investment in VCFSE leadership	The Alliance has supported a System Leadership programme for 15 of its members during 2025-26. The ICB continues to invest in the Alliance to provide strategic, co-ordinated voice and a mechanism for collaboration with the sector.
Develop consistent approaches across all ICB programmes and teams to commissioning VCFSE organisations in line with the principles outlined in the Partnership Agreement	The Alliance facilitated a session in March 2025 taking an appreciative inquiry approach to VCFSE experiences of commissioning, procurement and contracting. The session was well attended by VCFSE and ICB leads and led to the development of a set of actions which are being progressed and link to the ICB Strategic Commissioning Framework.
Identify non-financial areas of support that contribute to the viability and sustainability of the sector and find a way to embed and mobilise these over the next two years.	This action has not been progressed as much as anticipated due to internal pressures within the ICB. There have been positive developments working with L&SC Hospices Together Forum on developing new models of care, engagement and leadership. This is an area that requires future focus, including opportunities for reciprocal mentoring and capacity building within the wider sector.
Put in place mechanisms that will support and develop individuals who take on a representative role	Proposals developed as part of strengthening governance and leadership. These were paused due to internal pressures but proposed these are reviewed during 2026-27.
Use an action learning approach through schemes such as the UEC Capacity programme to continue to improve approaches to VCFSE/ ICB collaboration and investment	Impact Report produced from the Winter Capacity Fund programme which has provided key insights and learning. The report can be accessed here LSC VCFSE Alliance :: Commissioning & Procurement
Progress programmes of work that strengthen the position of the VCFSE sector as an equal strategic partner	VCFSE engagement a range of strategic developments and programmes including the development of 2026-27 Commissioning Intentions, Integrated Planning Group and Neighbourhood Plans.
Continued development of the VCFSE Alliance to extend its reach and collaboration across the sector	Further development of the VCFSE Alliance website and newsletter as mechanisms for sharing information and updates. Strengthening of the Alliance Leadership

	Group with representation across Place and thematic areas e.g. the Faith Sector Network
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3.2 A joint work plan developed between the Alliance and the ICB will ensure that the actions are taken forward in conjunction with a number of teams. This requires the support of ICB Board and senior leaders across the organisation.

4. The Importance of the Sector as a Strategic Partner

4.1 The Partnership Agreement sets out a clear framework for partnership working between the VCFSE sector and ICB, and articulates the conditions and culture required to maximise the impact of collaboration. The principles outlined in the agreement are being applied to programmes of work in order to unlock the contributions of the sector. There is evidence that these are making tangible and significant differences to communities across Lancashire & South Cumbria and impacting positively on key performance measures.

4.2 A series of impact reports have been developed by VCFSE partners that describe innovative and impactful approaches to delivery against key commissioning priorities including:

- Unplanned admissions
- Timely discharge & patient flow
- Early cancer diagnosis
- Neurodiversity pathways
- Frailty
- Long term condition management
- Mental health support for children & young people
- Weight management for young people

4.3 A number of case studies are highlighted in the following sections which describe the importance of the Partnership Agreement in setting a framework for collaboration leading to innovative solutions that deliver measurable outcomes.

Avoiding Unplanned Hospital Admissions

The ICB's recent UEC Capacity Programme has been highlighted as providing a model of working that could be built on in the future. The model of working has involved ring-fencing a percentage of the budget for VCFSE investment; the co-design of proposals with VCFSE partners and Place teams at an early stage; and a single route for investment via a Managing Agent appointed through the Alliance.

The use of a grant approach with upfront funding has enabled funding to reach community-based, grass roots groups that have connections and trust within some of our most challenged communities. Working through a Managing Agent means that groups received the appropriate level of support, and outcome data has been collated through a single organisation to provide a robust and comprehensive analysis of impact.

This work has highlighted a developing maturity in the relationship between the ICB and the VCFSE Alliance, where trust and a shared vision have been instrumental in targeting investment towards more preventative initiatives. A tangible example of the '*tight, loose, tight*' approach which is currently being advocated by NHSE to balance clarity of direction and a focus on outcome delivery with an empowering and permissive approach that fosters innovation.

Improving Early Cancer Diagnosis

Lancashire & South Cumbria Cancer Alliance is extending its reach into communities by working with the VCFSE sector to address the issue of late-stage cancer diagnosis. Through this collaboration, 18 community-led projects have been funded across Lancashire and South Cumbria. These initiatives are delivered by trusted local organisations that can connect with their communities to raise awareness of cancer signs and symptoms and encourage individuals to seek medical advice early. Crucially, the approach empowers local groups to design their own methods of engagement, which is vital to creating meaningful behavioural change and improving early diagnosis rates.

Relatively small amounts of investment in the sector are leveraging additional benefits through connectivity across other programmes of work. For example, the liver surveillance pathway pilot delivers targeted liver health checks to enable earlier detection of liver cancer in high-risk groups. It demonstrates how embedding CGL Inspire's resources at the front end accelerates the shift from hospital-based diagnostics to community settings, extends reach into underserved and priority populations, and frees up valuable NHS capacity by enabling Inspire nurses to undertake initial fibroscans in trusted spaces where individuals feel most comfortable.

Integrated Frailty Pathways

The work on the development of integrated frailty pathways in Blackburn with Darwen (BwD) demonstrates the role that the sector can play when spaces are created for meaningful interaction and co-production. Age UK (BwD) and other organisations have been fully engaged as a member of the BwD Clinical & Care Professional Forum and have played a role in connecting the work back into local communities and those with lived experience through the development of I-Statements which will guide the model.

Voluntary sector organisations such as Age UK work alongside traditional NHS services to provide an integrated approach which offers holistic and person-centred care and support to individual and their carers. These examples, where VCFSE organisations are commissioned as part of an integrated model of care, have the potential to be systematically built into emerging neighbourhood health services to drive improvements in outcomes and manage demand in the community. There are approaches which can strengthen and enable integrated working such as trusted assessor models, joint training and organisational development programmes.

4.4 There are a number of common themes emerging from the Impact & Evaluation reports which articulate the value of the Partnership Agreement as an enabler for collaboration.

4.4.1 Collaboration with the VCFSE sector allows the ICB to tap into one of the important enablers for strategic commissioning- an ability to involve people and diverse communities and understand their experiences through asset-based approaches that facilitate co-production and empower community-driven solutions. Collaboration with the sector is therefore crucial to tackling health inequalities and is an essential part of values-based commissioning.

- 4.4.2 When the sector is invited into discussions at the earliest opportunity, there is greater scope for innovation and creative solutions. The sector has the potential to 'shift the dial' on a range of key performance measure by providing constructive challenge and offering different perspectives which are grounded in a strong evidence base.
- 4.4.3 Commissioning approaches which empower and give permission to organisations to find solutions, innovate and co-design with communities lead to better outcomes. Transformational, rather than transactional approaches to commissioning and the use of different investment mechanisms such as grant funding can be highly effective.
- 4.4.4 The sector is often in a position to lever in additional resource, which can be in the form of additional financial investment, for example through charitable grants, or through social capital such as volunteering and access to wider community assets. There is potential to explore this further in a number of programme areas.
- 4.4.5 Embedding VCFSE organisations as part of integrated pathways and teams can lead to a person-centred and holistic offer for individuals and families which should form part of the core neighbourhood model and new care models.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

- 5.1 This paper has presented a small number of case studies and has drawn out key learning points to highlight the breadth and scope of the potential of partnership working with the sector. The emerging themes are pertinent to the delivery of the 10 Year Health Plan and to the ICB's role as outlined in the Strategic Commissioning Framework.
- 5.2 The Partnership Agreement provides a clear framework for strategic collaboration between the ICB and VCFSE sector. The principles outlined within it will help to create the right conditions to harness the reach, trust and innovation of VCFSE partners to deliver better outcomes for people and a more sustainable health and care system.
- 5.3 The VCFSE sector is not an optional adjunct to traditional NHS services—it is a strategic partner that amplifies the ICB's ability to deliver against core performance targets, contribute to the prevention of ill health, reduce inequalities in health outcomes and deliver personalised, community-centred care. Translating the Partnership Agreement into measurable impact will continue to require senior level leadership and commitment, and the application of commissioning approaches that have been proven to maximise the impact of the sector's involvement.
- 5.4 Members of the Board are requested to:
 - 1. Confirm the on-going commitment to the Partnership Agreement and note the contributions made over the past 12 months through collaboration approaches between the ICB and VCFSE sector

2. Support intentions to strengthen strategic partnerships with the sector as outlined in the paper

Tracy Hopkins, Chair of the L&SC VCFSE Alliance

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