Connected Voice
Connecting People Supporting Action

Summer 2021
Issue N° 7

The magazine for voluntary, community and social enterprise organisations in Newcastle and Gateshead. **ConnectedVoice.org.uk**



Spotlight

Community Action

Featuring:

Volunteer Centre Newcastle and Blue Stone Collaborative

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Stories from Voices of the Pandemic

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Funding and the importance of choosing the right legal structure

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About this magazine

The Connected Voice magazine is published four times a year by Connected Voice. We aim to make sure all information is correct and up to date but we do not accept liability for any mistakes that may inadvertently appear. Views and opinions in this magazine are not necessarily those of Connected Voice.

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Issue 7: Community Action

Welcome to the Summer 2021 edition of Connected Voice Magazine. At the time of publishing it's Volunteers' Week and following an unprecedented year for volunteering, and incredible response from voluntary and community organisations to support individuals and communities through the pandemic, we've decided to focus on Community Action.

We hear from Volunteer Centre Newcastle about their plans for a new 'Volunteer Passport' aimed at making it easier for people to help out in their community, and from Blue Stone Collaborative about how they partner with organisations to improve health and wellbeing in disadvantaged communities through the arts.

Our own Advocacy project turns 25 this year and we learn from Jane Kingston about how advocacy's roots are in volunteering. We also hear from Mark Shilcock about future plans for OurGateshead.org in helping to promote volunteering in a digital age, and Vicki Harris explains how Haref's newest research project is led by people with lived experience.

You can also read highlights from our recent research piece, Voices of the Pandemic, and feedback from organisations that received vital funding through the VCSE Resilience Fund.

Lastly, Jack Summerside and Nicola Dale share useful advice about how choosing the right legal structure can help lead to funding success

Supporting Community Action



Lisa Goodwin
Chief Executive

Community action is changing - our services need to shift to make it easier for people to be involved whilst balancing our duty to ensure it is safe and inclusive

One of our values as an organisation is 'we support action', and supporting community action is a big part of our day to day work. Whether it's providing training for Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) organisations, giving advice and support about aspects of running an organisation, or helping with the bits going on in the background through our finance services, we support community action in one form or another every day.

We wanted to focus this edition of the magazine on community action because it is true to say that our own immediate communities have been in greater focus for us all over the past year and a bit. In this edition we have highlighted some of the ways that local community action is supported, both through our own work and through all the brilliant work of voluntary and community organisations. We hear from Volunteer Centre Newcastle about their pivotal role in supporting people to get involved in community action in many different forms – so vital during lockdown. And we have a contribution from Blue Stone Collaborative about how they catalyse and support community arts activities to improve wellbeing through the Well Newcastle Gateshead Fund.

Community action is changing – people are organising digitally to a far greater extent, and we've seen a huge increase in less formal means of community action through mutual aid groups and other neighbourhood-level support networks. We have a duty to make sure that our services shift to take account of these changes, and more importantly that they make it easier to get involved in community action – rather than asking people to jump through hoops.

However we need to balance that with our duty to support safe and inclusive community action – making sure that organisations who seek our support are aware of the safeguarding and health and safety responsibilities they are taking on, and that they can support others to get involved too. I am really proud of the way the team here approach this dilemma – they know how to properly listen to and support people to do the things that matter to them, not the things that we might think are important.

> **"I gave advice to VCSE organisations for years and I learned quickly that 'knowing your stuff' is only a small part of the picture**

I gave advice to VCSE organisations for years and I learned quickly that 'knowing your stuff' is only a small part of the picture. Being able to pass that knowledge on at the right time and in the right format, and being there for the journey with people who have the passion to start organisations or projects is much more important. We try to foster this nurturing and partnership approach to our advice services, and I hope that is reflected in the experience some of you reading this have had with us (and please tell me if not).

'Small deeds done are better than great deeds planned' is one of my favourite quotes. It is a privilege to be able to support many small deeds across Newcastle and Gateshead every day – and it is amazing to see how COVID-19 has inspired more people to focus on local community action ●

Spotlight: Volunteer Centre Newcastle

Karen Watson
Project Manager

The Volunteer Centre Newcastle is run by Volunteering Matters, a UK-wide volunteering and social action charity.



What does your organisation do?

Volunteering Matters is the UK's leading volunteering and social action charity. We use the unique power of volunteering to resolve some of the country's most pressing social issues.

We have operated Volunteer Centre Newcastle since 2005, acting as a one stop shop for all things volunteering in the city. We connect people to communities by supporting them into volunteering opportunities available across the city. We also provide a wide range of support to VIO's (Volunteer Involving Organisations) including advertising their volunteering opportunities, sharing Volunteer Management good practice, providing infrastructure support and being a critical friend.

Tell us about your key projects?

Currently the Volunteer Centre supports over 2,000 new potential volunteers a year and over 1,000 organisations, ranging from national charities active in Newcastle to small volunteer-led groups, supporting social enterprise and corporate staff engaging with the communities in which they are based.

> **Currently the Volunteer Centre supports over 2,000 new potential volunteers a year and over 1,000 organisations**

During COVID-19, we continued to run the Volunteer Centre and our Project Network Point Newcastle supported Newcastle City Council with their CityLife Line response. We have worked with organisations to recruit volunteers to respond to the pandemic and their various communities. During COVID-19 we were best placed to see the expanding and changing face of volunteering and we supported both the formal charities and newly-created mutual aid groups offering vital neighbour-to-neighbour support.

During this challenging time we worked with organisations on redesigning their volunteer programmes, helping them navigate a continuously changing landscape. We scoped out a new project, the Newcastle Volunteer Passport, a innovative response to the barriers highlighted in the recruitment process of volunteers. The Passport pilot in 2021/22 will work with selected groups active during the pandemic, working on shared values and aims; Volunteering Matters will be the gatekeepers providing portability of volunteers within the pilot network. The Passport has been funded by Public Health and we know the value it will bring to Newcastle.

How has Connected Voice supported you?

We have worked in partnership and collaboration with Connected Voice, providing triage to the Voluntary and Community Sector, working together on training, information sharing and strategic support.





Photos courtesy of Volunteer Centre Newcastle

We are really pleased that we will be able to work together more formally again thanks to a new partnership project supporting volunteering across the North of Tyne area. The first few months of this new project are about looking in detail at how volunteering has changed as a result of the pandemic, and what support organisations will need in the future. This will then inform what the volunteering support offer looks like in Newcastle in the future.

> **The first few months of this new project are about looking at how volunteering has changed as a result of the pandemic**

What do people say about your organisation?

We receive lots of positive feedback from members of the public who use the Volunteer Centre:

'Thank you. I managed to volunteer at freeman hospital for 2 years since applying and I now study medicine and will hopefully be a junior doctor in 2 more years (in my 3rd yr) so I managed to get everything I needed.'

'I just wanted to say thank you for putting me in touch with Mental Health Concern in March. I had a great three months volunteering full time with them. We did some good work supporting people who were shielding with shopping, prescriptions and befriending. The volunteering was a great success for all concerned and I want to thank you for setting me up with it. It gave me purpose for those months and I gained so much from the experience. You're doing a great job and keep it up because you'll be making a big difference.'

Organisations also speak highly of the service we provide:

'It's a valuable resource which enables us to do good volunteer recruitment and therefore frees me up to support our volunteers and coordinate our volunteer delivered service for women and girl survivors of sexual violence.'

'Working with the Volunteer Centre helps us understand volunteering and everything related to volunteering better as the centre's updates and meetings are full of important information that we can put to good use in our work. It helps us network. It helps us have faith in our work in the community as there are people to sound off ideas and discuss with'

Voices of the Pandemic



Lisa Goodwin
Chief Executive

Lisa Goodwin talks about our latest research piece which amplifies the voices of those who have been most affected by COVID-19 and the organisations that support them.

Over the past year we have shared the tremendous efforts of local organisations working together to support people through an unprecedented time. For our latest research publication, our aim was simply to amplify the voices of the people hardest hit by the pandemic; to put ourselves in their shoes for a moment and hear what life has really been like over the past year, via the organisations who supported them.

As we could only take a snapshot through a small number of organisations, we focused on organisations supporting specific groups of people who were more likely to be affected by the pandemic: older people, asylum seekers, carers, people from the LGBT+ community, women, people with disabilities and young people.

The full 15-page Voices of the Pandemic report, which can be viewed on our website, details the stories of individuals and captures data around those who were affected. Here we share a few quotes from those stories highlighting people's thoughts and feelings, the struggles they have faced, and the value of the support they have received.

> The past 12 months have been hell to me. When [the] pandemic started everything went down, [I became] seriously ill with [my] mental health, the start of the pandemic took me back to where I came out of
>
> West End Refugee Service

> If you have someone you can turn to you don't feel alone [and] you feel more confident to navigate problems with settling into the community
>
> The Comfrey Project

> I have had a brilliant day today. It's great to meet other people like me and hear about their lives and families even if it is on a screen. It does me a lot of good to talk to other people
>
> Age UK Gateshead

> I was severely depressed in the first three months of lockdown. I did not kill myself as I thought it would be even harder for my child to be rescued as no one would notice I was gone
>
> Gateshead Carers





> The support that I've received from my church, from the people in Search like Adam here, has been nothing but wonderful. They have been able to keep an eye on me over this past many months, and as a result... I am still here
>
> **Search Newcastle**

> There was [to begin with] this stoicism, we've got to get through this... Now we're stressed and exhausted
>
> **Newcastle Carers**

> LGBTQIA+ people already have higher rates of anxiety, depression, addiction, and history of trauma. All of these can be harder to manage while in isolation... Many people from our community are living with family or roommates who they are not out to, who are unsupportive, or just don't fully understand our lives experiences. Online social spaces like NSG can really help!
>
> **LGBT+ Northern Social Group**

> Unfortunately I have had more downs than ups, being a mam is a tough job but with the added stress of being in lockdown, home schooling and a dip in my mental health it has seemed impossible some days. I have literally had to be "mam" 24/7 I know that's what being a parent is, but normally I'm able to concentrate on myself whilst my daughter is at school but now my home is her school and I'm her teacher
>
> **Tyneside Women's Health**

> Well I'm looking forward to seeing friends and a bit of normality – but school's school
>
> **Denton Youth and Community Project**

> It's amazing, he's now able to Google things and call the family [on the tablet]. It's made a real difference
>
> **Disability North**

Each of the independent organisations featured in this research report has its own experience of the pandemic, and has taken its own approach over the last year; nonetheless, some clear common themes emerged when collating their stories:

- Organisations who were not digital experts found themselves promoting digital inclusion – we have a new wave of digital champions
- When lockdown first began, organisations switched to advocacy mode – helping to raise issues where people were being forgotten about in the rush to close or adapt services
- Many organisations rallied to set up physical meeting spaces and support groups of the summer of 2020, only to find people did not return to them
- There was a high level of creativity and responsiveness within voluntary, community and social enterprise organisations – they did what was needed, not what was in the role description
- The flexibility and speed of making funds available by local funders was a key enabling factor in the COVID-19 response

Read the full Voices of the Pandemic report: Visit our website ●

Coordinating Community Action in the Digital Age with OurGateshead

Mark Shilcock
Support and
Development Manager



If you're a resident of Gateshead or Newcastle then the chances are you will have come across OurGateshead.org at some point when looking up information about local groups online; the site fields about 150,000 visits every year. At first glance, this website might appear to be a directory but a number of clever search and filter features make it easier for residents and local organisations to connect and, through carefully researched language, encourage people to become active in their communities.

OurGateshead originated in the local community and over the last 11 years has always depended on the involvement of residents and community groups to guide the design and functionality. Mark Shilcock in the Connected Voice team has managed the site since 2010. When we asked Newcastle University's Open Lab to help us conduct a detailed user research project in 2019, we learned some interesting things about people's attitudes towards community action and volunteering. Many residents were hesitant about formal volunteering because of perceived long-term commitments but they were still

> **We learned some interesting things about people's attitudes towards community action and volunteering**

eager to help out in their community. For this reason we removed reference to 'volunteering' and replaced it with 'Ways to help'. Similarly, organisations seeking volunteering support can 'Request help'. The site uses the language of local residents in the strapline 'Discover ways to help on your doorstep'.

The research also found that there was more emphasis on formal volunteering with requests for regular support but the site offered little scope for asking residents to help out on a one-off basis. We addressed this by giving listed groups the option to request help for any of the activities or services they have listed. Common examples where this has been used include asking for help setting up and taking down things for events. An unexpected and more unusual example came from Birtley Heritage Group who now regularly ask residents to share any old photos they have of Birtley.

We know the pandemic has motivated more people to help in their community than ever before but at the same time it was not safe for many of the listed activities on OurGateshead to go ahead. As COVID-19 restrictions ease, we're pleased to see the site becoming active again. There are now over 100 regular 'ways to help' opportunities listed and we anticipate the informal requests for help will grow as organisations begin to open up again.

Exciting developments on the horizon for OurGateshead include an app. Whilst the site is mobile-friendly, the app will show you the nearest activities, services and ways to help in your local community. We're also working with local GP practices to display local activities and volunteering opportunities on the screens in waiting rooms.

We believe in the potential for OurGateshead to become a powerful tool in helping people to coordinate community action. Now is the perfect time for you to get involved if you work in Gateshead.

Visit www.OurGateshead.org to see the latest Requests for Help. If your organisation is not already listed then you can register free ●

Spotlight: Blue Stone Collaborative

Rachael Jones
Project Support Officer

Blue Stone Collaborative (BSC) – previously Blue Stone Consortium - began following a merger between Newcastle Voluntary & Community Sector Consortium and the Together Gateshead VCSE Consortium in 2016. Our name came from the historical 'blue stone' that used to be in the middle of the old Tyne Bridge (where the swing bridge is now), to represent the coming together of the two areas on either side of the River Tyne.

What does your organisation do?

BSC is where voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) organisations in and around Tyneside come together to help shape health and care transformation. In collaboration with local commissioners and other stakeholders, we work with our partners to

- Facilitate and broker partnerships and participation in health and care redesign
- Enable new ways of working, integration, and transformation
- Act as an innovation hub, supporting VCSE led prototypes and pilots to improve service delivery

BSC and our partners share a common concern: that models of commissioning and providing services across a range of issues (including health, social care, housing, and employment support) have often not yielded the best value or the best outcomes for the people and communities they serve. We know that silo-working and piecemeal, uncoordinated approaches have encouraged competition not collaboration, resulting in both duplication of resources and in unmet need.

> **"We know that silo-working and piecemeal, uncoordinated approaches have encouraged competition not collaboration**

More recently, progress has been made on establishing integrated approaches to planning and commissioning, and this is accelerating locally as 'place based' system partnerships develop. At the same time there are changes in planning for health and care taking place regionally, in keeping with the Long Term Plan for the NHS. Much of this work is focused on key themes, such as children and young people, mental health, ageing well, complex needs/homelessness, health inequalities and digital inclusion. The VCSE sector plays an important role in all these areas, and by improving how we work together we can contribute even more.

BSC aims to be an agent for change, supporting VCSE organisations to play their part in these developments at a place based level. Through its trustees, staff and partner organisations BSC also has strong connections to the North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care System (ICS) and in the Integrated Care Partnerships that make up our ICS. This is yielding further opportunities for engagement, involvement in service transformation at scale.

Tell us about your key projects?

Alongside our strategic engagement work BSC develops, brokers, hosts and delivers innovative projects such as 'Well Newcastle Gateshead' (WNG).

WNG has been BSC's major project since 2017. WNG is a pathfinder project of Well North, a Public

Image from the 'Doorstep Music' project in Byker with Northern Stage, funded by Well Newcastle Gateshead Arts Fund



> [Well Newcastle Gateshead has] enabled opportunities that would otherwise have been impossible

Feedback from an anonymous survey

Health England funded initiative across 10 areas in the North of England to improve the health of the poorest communities and increase opportunities for people to connect, create, learn, and thrive. Funded by Newcastle City Council and Gateshead Council together with Public Health England, WNG is unique in that it is managed by a VCS organisation. The focus is on improving wellbeing and health outcomes in disadvantaged communities, through participation in the arts and the growth of community assets. This has involved close working with a range of partners, including arts agencies, schools, universities, voluntary sector organisations and representatives from the two local authorities.

The Well Newcastle Gateshead (WNG) Arts Fund has, to date, supported 57 projects across our 4 target areas: Byker, Chopwell, Felling and Inner West Newcastle. All projects either stem from or are developed in collaboration with individuals and groups from the communities themselves. To date, £443,226 has been directly invested into these communities which has helped to lever in a further £445,757 in partnership funding. The number of beneficiaries is currently 38,323.

The principles of using creativity to support engagement and wellbeing, co-production with local people and communities, and the aim to grow community assets and ensure legacy benefits, are at the heart of WNG's approach. In 2020, projects supported by WNG had to adapt quickly to COVID-19. Community engagement with people who may be vulnerable doesn't easily transpose to online and digital formats. However, projects were fleet footed, working with care and commitment, and continued to provide opportunities that many participants described as being a lifeline for them during the stress and isolation of lockdown.

The Well Newcastle Gateshead Art Fund is now in its final year. To find out more, including guidelines, criteria and links to apply, please visit our website www.bluestone.org.uk and look for Well Newcastle Gateshead under 'Our Work'.

How has Connected Voice supported you?

Connected Voice is a key partner to BSC! We both work with and support the voluntary and community sector, though we are distinctly different. The Chief Executive of Connected Voice sits on BSC's Board, and BSC staff regularly make use of the brilliant support services Connected Voice provides. Connected Voice and BSC leaders are currently working very closely in engaging with Collaborative Newcastle and Gateshead Cares

Funding Success: Woven Nest Theatre

Jack Summerside
Support and Development Officer



Structure, focus... Success – Woven Nest Theatre CIC

In this edition, we're devoting the Funding Pages to a single funding success story. It's a brilliant example of how a joined-up way of working with an organisation can result in a funding success.

Woven Nest Theatre CIC is a workshop-led theatre company based here in the North East that works with neuro-divergent audiences and older people – especially those with dementia or living in care homes. They work in three main areas; Intergenerational community linking; Multi-sensory engagement for neuro-diverse audiences; Performance to platform creativity and challenge misconceptions. You can find out more about them at their newly launched website wovennesttheatre.co.uk

With the support of Connected Voice in the early days, Woven Nest was successful in a £31,000 bid to Care Home Friends and Neighbours- Inter-generational Linking. You can read more about their project at carehomefans.org/intergenerational-linking/

Liv Hunt, one of the founders and Co-Artistic Directors: **'Woven Nest started as an idea, a creative partnership back in 2019. Connected Voice, and especially Nicola Dale, have helped us craft that idea into a reality. They really gave us the confidence, built our skills and inspired us to have the drive to get to the point where we are today.'**

Poppy Crawshaw, Liv's fellow Co-Artistic Director, first came along to one of our training sessions on Effective Bid Writing in 2019. **'We'd become aware of Connected Voice in 2018 through some bespoke training we'd received when we were working with another organisation. So when we decided to develop Woven Nest as a project ourselves, coming to them was a natural first step.'** Liv adds: **'One of the things that we realised very quickly was that the first step was to get the right**





> One of the things we realised very quickly was that the first step was to get the right legal structure - otherwise there's no point in writing bids to potential funders

legal structure – otherwise there's no point in writing bids to potential funders.'

When Poppy and Liv came to us for advice and support they admit 'We had no real idea of the different kinds of legal structure, what the pros and cons of each were, or how to choose. Working with Nicola helped us to identify the areas that we needed to do some very focused thinking about, and make clear decisions about what we actually want to achieve.'

Nicola at Connected Voice guided them through this process. 'Both Liv and Poppy are from arts backgrounds, so their thinking was very much from the performance and engagement angle. Working with them, I was able to help them to identify the social outcomes of what they wanted to achieve more clearly. This is essential in helping them to define their 'objects' in such a way that would appeal to funders outside of the arts sector.'

Liv adds: 'One of the things we seek to do with participants in our creative engagement projects is "a series of suggestions and invitations into the world of story". Nicola invited us into the world of legal structures, clearly defining our social outcomes, understanding how these things can be measurable, and helped us to reach our own conclusions that a CIC structure was the clearest fit for us. It was a creative process, mirroring the "suggestions and invitations" approach that we already understood.'

> Our creative work aims to 'bring people out of themselves' and that's exactly what Connected Voice has done with us

Liv continues "Our creative work aims to 'bring people out of themselves' and that's exactly 'What Connected Voice has done with us. We'd never have had the confidence to apply to this funder – in fact we would never even have heard of it - nor would we have felt it a fit with an arts-based approach if we'd gone the route we'd originally thought of: an arts organisation

> I actually get a kick out of drawing up a project plan and budget now!

set up as a CIO. I actually get a kick out of drawing up a project plan and budget now!'

The Woven Nest story shows that they foundation of being in a strong position to bid for funds is having the right legal structure that is fit for the purposes you need it for. That doesn't just mean the outputs (the things that you want to do) but also the outcomes (the changes you want for your beneficiaries). Alongside this, there are the practical aspects of whether you want to do these things yourself, need to earn an income from doing this, or want to steer a charity as a trustee.

Just about every enquiry to Connected Voice for funding guidance and support starts with us asking the question "What's your legal structure?" This funding success story is a great example of how important that initial question can be.

Get in touch

Our Support and Development team is on hand to help your organisation. We offer a range of services, from funding advice to governance, legal structures, policies and procedures, and all aspects of organisational development ●

connect@connectedvoice.org.uk

Visit: www.connectedvoice.org.uk/services/support-and-development

Choosing the Right Legal Structure

Jack Summerside and Nicola Dale from Connected Voice Support and Development share some tips on choosing the right legal structure for your organisation

Despite the challenges of the last year, or maybe as a consequence of them, there's been a steady stream of people with new ideas who have contacted our Support and Development team looking to start new organisations.

Some of these have been longer-standing informal groups who now wish to start seeking funds, some completely new. We've also worked with several organisations who've realised their existing legal structure is no longer fit-for-purpose. Sometimes that's because of choosing an inappropriate legal structure at their outset.

Whatever your situation, Connected Voice Support and Development can help you decide whether it's an Unincorporated Community Association, a Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO) or a Community Interest Company (CIC) – or one of several other options - that would be the best fit for what you want to achieve. We've developed a flow-chart that we use to help people and organisations make the right decisions.

Your organisation's legal structure will set the boundaries in which your work will be carried out - so it is important that you choose the structure that will allow you to deliver the services and benefits to the community, and provide you with what you need to be able to run it effectively.

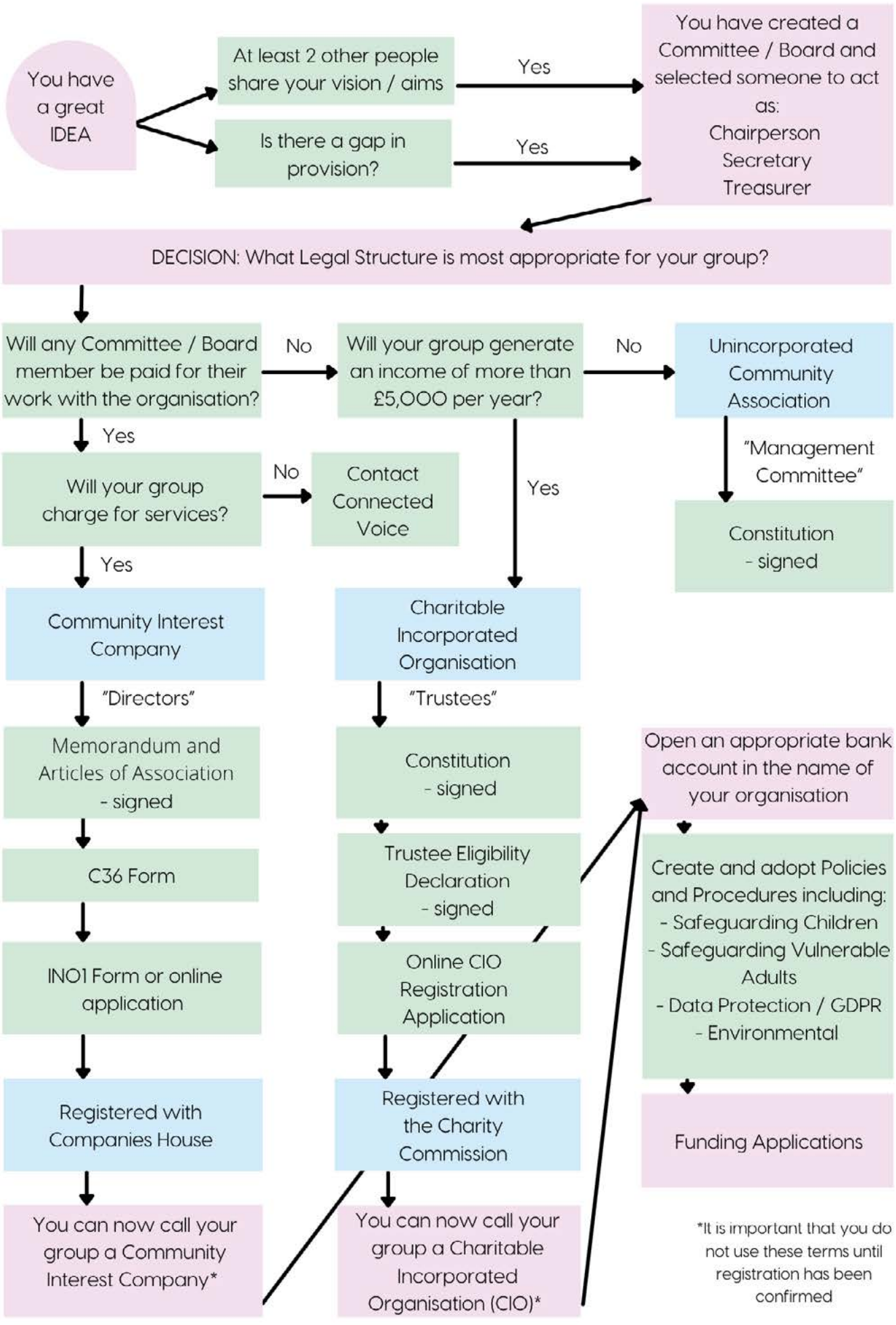
If you have identified a gap in services and have the skills and experience to fill it, there are several points you should consider:

- Are there at least two other people who share your vision and aims?
- Do you need to incorporate? – new organisations with a lower annual income can choose to set up as Unincorporated Community Association. This structure allows you to form a management committee, open a bank account and fundraise for smaller sums while you get an idea of the demand for your service.
- Will any board member need to be paid for their time and expertise, or will they do this on a purely voluntary basis? – this is a key factor in choosing your legal structure as restrictions on how and when board members can draw a wage from the activities of the organisation differ.
- Are you able to generate an income from selling goods or services?
- Will everything you do be exclusively charitable and for the benefit of the public? This can be a difficult question to answer, because not everything that is beneficial for the community is considered charitable.

To help guide you in choosing the right legal structure, we've produced a handy flow chart, which you can see on the next page.

The Connected Voice Support and Development Team are happy to discuss these and other considerations with you, and to provide you with guidance on choosing the legal structure to deliver your aims.

Email us: connect@connectedvoice.org.uk


You have a great IDEA
At least 2 other people share your vision / aims
Yes
You have created a Committee / Board and selected someone to act as:
Chairperson
Secretary
Treasurer
Is there a gap in provision?
Yes
DECISION: What Legal Structure is most appropriate for your group?
Will any Committee / Board member be paid for their work with the organisation?
No
Will your group generate an income of more than £5,000 per year?
No
Unincorporated Community Association
"Management Committee"
Constitution - signed
Yes
Will your group charge for services?
No
Contact Connected Voice
Yes
Yes
Community Interest Company
"Directors"
Memorandum and Articles of Association - signed
C36 Form
IN01 Form or online application
Registered with Companies House
You can now call your group a Community Interest Company*
Charitable Incorporated Organisation
"Trustees"
Constitution - signed
Trustee Eligibility Declaration - signed
Online CIO Registration Application
Registered with the Charity Commission
You can now call your group a Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO)*
Open an appropriate bank account in the name of your organisation
Create and adopt Policies and Procedures including:
- Safeguarding Children
- Safeguarding Vulnerable Adults
- Data Protection / GDPR
- Environmental
Funding Applications
*It is important that you do not use these terms until registration has been confirmed

Peer Research on Mental Health Issues in Our Communities

Vicki Harris
Haref Coordinator



A new research peer research project from the Haref Network

Peer research means putting people with lived experience at the centre of directing and conducting a research project. It's similar to the approach we use in asking our Haref Network members to steer the direction of our work, and it helps us to encourage meaningful action in our local health services and ethnic minority communities.

The Haref Network had already identified mental health as a major concern for ethnic minority communities so we're pleased to undertake this new 16-week peer research project in partnership with Fulfilling Lives Newcastle Gateshead and Mental Health Concern.

This project aims to:

- Develop people's skills
- Build capacity in Haref Network member organisations
- Support collaboration between organisations
- Produce relevant research and resources about mental health

We are working with individuals from four Haref Network member organisations to create, develop, and undertake this research:

- Riverside Community Health Project
- West End Friends
- Rainbow Home
- First Step

Fulfilling Lives provides the peer research training and they supported the group to choose the research questions and design methods. The researchers decided to focus on:

- Understanding of mental health and awareness of services
- The stigma and taboo around mental health
- Different experiences of mental health and services

Some of the project details required careful consideration. For example, there were many discussions around whether using the term 'mental health' in the project title would scare people off before they considered participating. The researchers decided that not using that term would continue to stigmatise the idea of mental health and that they would support participants to understand the importance of the research. The group decided on a combination of surveys and interviews to gather results.

So far, the researchers have been enjoying the process. One participant said: **'We have been given the opportunity to explore and voice our experience of mental health. As a research group, we have been guided and supported by staff but the project itself belongs to us. We have learnt lots about peer research and look forward to gathering our results.'**

While another said: **'I appreciate being a part of this research. Not only am I learning new exciting things, I also get to help someone else. Pure bliss!'**

We will keep you all updated about this important piece of work, especially in light of the impact of COVID-19 on people's mental health.

VCSE Resilience Fund

Giovanni Spatuzzi
Strategic Partnerships
& Operations Manager



Supporting key organisations to continue running their vital services throughout the pandemic

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, Newcastle City Council and the North of Tyne Combined Authority (NTCA) identified the huge financial threat to local voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) organisations. In response, NTCA granted funding of £300,000 to Newcastle City Council and set up the 'VCSE Resilience Fund'. The fund's aim was to enable key organisations within Newcastle to retain staff and continue running their vital services supporting local communities throughout the pandemic.

Connected Voice administered and distributed the fund to 18 organisations across the city. A panel consisting of Connected Voice, Newcastle City Council, Community Foundation and a nominated VCSE representative made decisions on funding distribution. Grants up to £19,000 were available to cover core running costs plus expert consultancy for areas where organisations identified they needed extra support. This was useful in helping organisations to address how the pandemic changed their operations and ability to deliver services.

Impact

The fund ran from July 2020 to March 2021 and achieved two key things:

1. Helped VCSE organisations cope with the immediate loss of income they experienced during lockdowns and afterwards
2. Helped organisations review, remodel and adapt their services appropriately for the future, aiding their longer-term sustainability

A pool of consultants provided expert advice on areas including service design, change management, organisation review, new service propositions, communications and marketing, and financial re-forecasting and re-modelling.

In addition, there were 96 full time equivalent direct jobs safeguarded; 553 residents supported into volunteering; and, 27,120 residents supported by organisations receiving the grant.

Feedback from Organisations

Rather than documenting all the differences the fund made, I thought it would be more powerful to leave you with a choice of quotes from organisations:

'The grant has made an enormous difference to the Ouseburn Trust during the last year. We suffered a loss of trading income and the



Photos courtesy of Ousburn Farm

grant together with other support we have received has ensured we remain resilient to continue engaging our community in the Ouseburn Valley'. Ouseburn Trust

'The grant has been extremely important to us in helping to keep the pool & leisure centre going despite the recurring restrictions and lockdown'. Elswick Community Pool & Leisure Centre CIO

'Search has found the resilience grant to be a vital fund in a difficult time, allowing the organisation to meet the demand for our services and increased delivery costs'. Search – Service for Older People CIO

'The grant was a lifeline to the organisation at a particularly difficult time in the pandemic... Overall, Ouseburn Farm has maintained its financial sustainability as a result of this grant, safeguarding services for our beneficiaries, jobs and volunteer opportunities'. Ouseburn Farm Charity Ltd

'The funding provided helped us off set the rising cost of cleaning materials and staff time to ensure that the community centre was a Covid safe space. It also helped with core running costs at a time where our income has been greatly reduced'. Heaton Community Centre

'The grant was crucial in giving encouragement to staff that their roles could be supported until March 2021, this allowed us to forward plan at a time when we were of the understanding the Job Retention Scheme would no longer be available. Without this



Photos courtesy of Ousburn Farm

grant we could not have provided this much needed reassurance to those involved'. Footsteps Children's Services Ltd

'Without this grant we would have hit extreme financial difficulty, possibly even have had to dissolve the organisation, so it has been invaluable'. Bind Food Waste Innovation CIC

With little or no support from the national government COVID-19 support schemes, VCSE organisations have had to think creatively and act quickly in order to survive. The VCSE Resilience Fund has provided a lifeline to local organisations that would have otherwise struggled to meet the needs of their community ●



Advocacy: 25 Years of Community Action

Jane Kingston
Connected Voice
Advocacy Manager



A brief history of Connected Voice Advocacy and the importance of our volunteers

We are so proud to say that our Connected Voice Advocacy service has been running for 25 years this year.

Over the years we've relied heavily on volunteers to deliver one-to-one support to people but also to help fundraise and steer services, recruit staff and ensure service users have a voice in what we do and how we do it. A lot has changed in legal frameworks to prioritise and recognise the valuable role of Independent Advocates, with Independent Advocates across the country qualified to a national standard. Advocacy services are also now assessed to national quality standards and commissioned by local authorities as part of a legal duty.

> **The early advocacy movement relied on community action**

However, the advocacy sector has not always been so professionalised. The early advocacy movement relied on community action from people to volunteer their time and expertise to help others. The Citizen Advocacy model took hold in the UK in the early 1980s following the American model within disability groups to ensure unpaid citizens protected a person's interests if there was no family member able to do this avoiding any conflict of interest. When our advocacy service began in 1996 it was known as Newcastle Advocacy Centre, later Advocacy Centre North, and relied solely on volunteers to develop a steering group and bring together interested parties in an advocacy network.

In 2021 Connected Voice Advocacy has grown into a thriving team of 45 people, a mixture of paid staff and volunteers, to deliver the full range of services we offer today. With no interruption to services during a global pandemic Connected Voice Advocacy continues to provide one-to-one advocacy to people in the community or institutions who need support to have their voice heard in important decisions around their care and treatment or to challenge where they face discrimination.

Volunteering remains a key part of our annual work plan and we value the contribution our volunteers make. We offer volunteering opportunities both in the traditional advocacy role and also for service users to give back through a Service User group which aims to plan and shape projects. We invite users of our services to sit on interview panels, participate in quality audits or give us feedback on how our website and communications look. Without their input our services would not feel as authentic and meaningful.

> **Supporting the clients as a volunteer makes me feel that I am contributing to and giving back to the system that helped me out**

Some volunteers have loved advocacy so much they have gone on to take paid roles within our service. A recent news item showed the journey Tracy took to secure her dream job in lockdown.

With public health and safety at the forefront of our delivery this year we had to curtail the way we deliver our services. Some advocates have met service users remotely by phone or video to keep within government guidelines. During this time our volunteers have stayed loyal to service users and kept in touch when possible. We took a break from our regular volunteer training schedule as the pandemic took hold, but with light at the end of the tunnel we are ensuring our advocates are vaccinated and take protective measures to meet service users again.

We are planning a programme of training and networking events to bring our volunteer advocates together again to review interesting topics such as 'how to keep professional boundaries', 'dilemmas in casework' and 'safeguarding and risk'.

> **Volunteering for Connected Voice Advocacy is hugely fulfilling. It's great to be able to provide one to one support and make a difference for someone who struggles with health issues**

We welcome new volunteers into Connected Voice Advocacy at any time and have a full induction training package for all new starters.

Hate Crime in the Pandemic

We've been funded for the last five years by Northumbria Police and Crime Commissioner to give a voice to people who feel victimised because of their disability, race, religion, sexual orientation or transgender identity across the North East, through Hate Crime Advocacy.

Each year our targets have risen due to the increase in demand for our service. This year we have doubled our annual targets and **supported 160 people** who needed help to navigate the criminal justice system and used a rights-based approach to seeking justice. 2020/21 brought significant changes in the way people live. Lockdown measures resulted in a surge in referrals to the Hate Crime Advocacy Service. **Racial tensions in communities has led to a significant increase in our referrals** from people experiencing racial harassment. Our service has been stretched to respond to the growing need.

The Law Commission opened a consultation in England and Wales to review the Hate Crime and Hate Speech laws. **We responded and welcomed the new proposals to widen criteria** and to equalise the offences across the strands. In particular we champion the proposals to include in future Hate Crime criteria: 'sex or gender'; communication and/or online offenses; football chanting; and to reform 'stirring up hatred' offences to improve prosecution.

Launch of DIY Advocate®

Connected Voice is excited to launch our new version of DIY Advocate®, a fully customisable decision-making app that gives people the tools they need to make their voice heard.

DIY Advocate® can be customised to suit any organisation with a focus on **improving service user experience and casework efficiency.** For organisations looking to improve the quality of their services and how people are able to communicate their needs, purchasing DIY Advocate® is an affordable way to introduce innovative technology with a track record of making a real difference.

> **I found it very useful, plenty of information, no jargon, easy to access. I think it is very useful for professionals and clients alike. In these challenging unprecedented times we will be needing to access more information online**

If you would like to know more please contact Sally Adams at:
sally.adams@connectedvoice.org.uk

Common Finance Challenges

Michelle Wright
Finance Team Manager



Three common finance and accountancy challenges and how to fix them

The theme for this edition is community action and in the Business Services team we're proud to work with countless organisations that make a positive difference in their community. We think it's important to offer a flexible service so that organisations can focus on what matters most to them. This has been particularly important in the last year and a bit when many organisations have been faced with cuts to their revenue at the same time as having to adapt to an ever-changing situation.

We've shared three stories that highlight how we solved some common finance and accountancy problems faced by organisations:

Challenge one: using a complex and time-consuming Excel spreadsheet

Many organisations can relate to this. We received funding from Community Foundation Tyne & Wear and Northumberland to offer free QuickBooks training to a number of local organisations to support them during the pandemic. One such organisation was Gibside Community Farm CIC. Their old Excel system was accurate but time-consuming and could only be accessed by one of the Directors. QuickBooks has sped up the data entry, reconciliation and fund tracking, also allowing the Director to generate reports at the touch of a button. Future Directors can easily be trained in the new software.

Challenge two: existing system on Sage does not present data in the format needed

In March 2020 we set up and trained a medium-sized organisation on QuickBooks. Their previous outsourced system could not keep the data in the format required. It was not set up in line with the budgets and obtaining management reports was difficult. We trained them in QuickBooks, set up the budget function, and showed them how to generate management reports and carry out the end of year preparations. The Chief Executive and trustees are up to date with the financial monitoring, and there is far less confusion around where transactions have been posted, and what the fund balances are.

Challenge three: a fast-growing organisation in need of bookkeeping support

A large organisation we work with had grown quickly and found it difficult to implement a finance system that could accurately record data and produce reports. We set up a system then agreed budgets, timescales for management reports, and reviews to update the board and key staff. We then trained their staff in the new system and gradually handed over the task of entering day-to-day transactions, whilst still managing the other aspects relating to budgets, reports and reviews. Working in this way has allowed them to upskill an employee and keep a close eye on all of their projects and funds. They have made some strategic decisions based on these figures, as they now know the impact of making changes.

If you face a similar or different challenge in your organisation then get in touch with the Business Services team.

Call 0191 235 7020
or email sally.adams@connectedvoice.org.uk

Connected Voice
Connecting People
Supporting Action

Contact us

Connected Voice Support and Development

Expert support services that enable voluntary, community and social enterprise organisations to set up, be sustainable and informed, achieve their objectives and come together.

connect@connectedvoice.org.uk
0191 232 7445 (opt1)

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advocacy@connectedvoice.org.uk
0191 235 7013

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cbs@connectedvoice.org.uk
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Connected Voice Haref

Working with communities and organisations throughout Newcastle and Gateshead to reduce health inequalities linked to ethnicity and culture.

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