

MAPPING CURRENT VCSE PROVISION

North East Economic Inactivity Trailblazer:
VCSE Sector System Reform



Phase one: Mapping and provision

Executive Summary

The North East Combined Authority commissioned VONNE to map voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) provision relating to skills, training and employment support across the region. This initial phase combines analysis of VONNE's CiviCRM data, public registers, Local Infrastructure Organisation directories, and engagement with Employment Leads in Local Authority areas. Through this process, 120 organisations were identified as delivering support at one or more stages of the 'Employment Journey'.

The findings demonstrate that the VCSE sector is a substantial and strategically important contributor to employment support in the North East. Provision spans all Local Authority areas and is delivered predominantly by medium and large organisations, primarily registered charities, many of which operate across multiple localities or regionally. While coverage varies, eligibility for services is typically driven by beneficiary need rather than geographic boundaries.

Provision is strongest for young people aged 18–24, with this group receiving the highest concentration of tailored support. Support for other groups is more limited, including for individuals experiencing homelessness, substance misuse issues, and older workers. Most activity sits within the intermediary stages of the employment journey (pre-employability, skills development and job brokerage) while engagement/outreach and in-work retention support are less developed. This concentration reflects the specialist nature of many programmes and the sector's reliance on referrals from wider services.

The mapping highlights several system pressures relevant to future commissioning. Some organisations previously delivering employment support have ceased operating, suggesting a potential contraction in capacity, reflecting the impact of short-term funding cycles on the stability of VCSE provision. A significant proportion of current provision is itself funded on a time-limited basis, particularly the UK Shared Prosperity Fund ending in March 2026, creating uncertainty around continuity and future workforce planning. Terminology used by providers is increasingly shaped by funder language, such as 'economically inactive', which may impact accessibility for individuals eligible for self-referral.

This report represents a point-in-time snapshot rather than a definitive assessment of all VCSE provision. Service information in this field changes rapidly, and publicly available data varies in completeness. The mapping will require iterative updating as additional organisations are identified and as provision evolves.

The next phase of work will continue to strengthen the dataset to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the VCSE sector's role within the region's employment support ecosystem.

Methodology

VONNE performed desk-based research, mapping VCSE organisations involved in 'Skills and Training' or 'Employment Support' by analysing existing categorised data from its CiviCRM database. This was supplemented with publicly available data from Charity Commission, Companies House, and Local Infrastructure Organisation (LIO) online information directories. Individual meetings were held with Local Authority Employment (LA) leads across five of the seven areas, namely: Gateshead, Newcastle Upon Tyne, North Tyneside, South Tyneside, Sunderland, with the remaining meetings still in progress. This resulted in the identification of 120 organisations delivering this type of support. To ensure completeness, VONNE also engaged its networks to invite additional organisations to self-report relevant data.

Relevant organisations were determined to provide activities to support at least one stage of the 'Employment Journey'. These were categorised chronologically as engagement/Outreach (first contact, building trust, initial motivation), pre-employability/soft skills (confidence, wellbeing, life skills, digital literacy, ESOL, etc), training/skills development (vocational skills, accredited/non-accredited training), job brokerage/matching (CV support, applications, linking to employers, placements, including subsidised work placements as relating to Trailblazer Priority 2.1), and in work support/retention (coaching, adjustments, mentoring to help sustain employment).

Services were then analysed to collect additional information, including annual income to assess the size of each charity, geographical coverage within LA boundaries, thematic focus of support provided, and the target groups or intended beneficiaries.

Summary

The VCSE sector plays a significant role in delivering employment support across the North East, offering services that are both available regionally and tailored to local needs. Dedicated provision exists in each locality, supported by partnerships between organisations to enhance reach and impact.

Despite this strong provision, several gaps were identified. These include varying level of support depending on the target groups served, challenges related to temporary funding that pressures service continuity, and potential themes of volunteering being used as an alternative to employment. Addressing these gaps will be critical to maintaining and improving the effectiveness of VCSE employment support across the region.

Analysis

Profile of Organisations

Employment support is delivered by organisations of varying sizes, with most falling into two main categories: those with an annual income between £100,000 and £1 million (Medium) and those with an annual income exceeding £1 million (Large), as opposed to less than £100,000 (Small). For the larger organisations, employment support is often not their primary focus but rather a subsection of their broader range of services. Most of these organisations operate as Registered Charities, 76, while a smaller proportion are structured as Community Interest Companies (CICs) - 23.

Geographic Coverage

After establishing the size of each organisation, we explored their geographic coverage within the North East Combined Authority region. This was determined by identifying which LA areas each organisation served. The highest level of dedicated provision was found in Newcastle Upon Tyne, with 26 organisations, while South Tyneside had the least with 11. It should be noted that the mapping process incorporated directories, such as [Frontline](#), a community project that maps local health and wellbeing services in Northumberland. Comparable directories do not exist in the same way for all LA areas. The highest number of organisations operated across the entire Combined Authority region, including those who did not specifically name the areas covered by their organisation. Though there was variation between services available in each area, eligibility for accessing services was typically based on beneficiaries rather than geography boundaries.

Target Groups

Target groups were selected based on alignment with the Trailblazers' priorities and funding criteria, as well as VONNE's established expertise in supporting specific communities of interest within the sector. Economic inactivity was identified as a broad overarching category but explicitly named only when referenced by the organisation themselves. The highest level of service provision was directed towards young people, defined as 18-24 in line with Priority 2.1 of the Economic Inactivity Trailblazer. 40 of the organisations mapped offered specific support for young people, typically focused on post-16 education opportunities and career development, rather than direct entry into employment. Few provisions were named for certain vulnerable groups, including those with substance misuse issues or those homeless/at risk of homelessness, 3 and 4 respectively. Where services centred on vocational skills, these were more commonly targeted at groups for whom traditional public services may be less effective, including individuals with learning disabilities and/or those who are neurodivergent.

Employment Journey Stages

Analysis of employment journey stages, as per the methodology, revealed that most support is centred on the intermediary phases: pre-employability and soft skills, training and skills development, and job brokerage or matching. Approximately 80% of the organisations mapped provide pre-employability support, typically focusing on digital skills, confidence building, and wellbeing. There is notably less provision for initial engagement and outreach, with many organisations expecting that individuals are already considering employment. This may reflect the fact that employment-focused organisations often operate as specialised, secondary services, with initial contact typically occurring through other services not explicitly branded as employment support.

Gap Analysis

During the analysis of VONNE's existing networks, several organisations were excluded from the mapping as they were no longer operational, having been dissolved or removed in recent years. This suggests a potential reduction in available VCSE provision. One commonly cited funder of active employment support services is the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, due to end in March 2026.

To keep the mapping focused and relevant, organisations supporting volunteering were omitted, as the volunteering landscape is complex and individual motivations are often unclear. [NCVO's UK Civil Society Almanac 2023](#) reports that people aged 65–74 have the highest levels of formal volunteering, which may partly explain why there are fewer services aimed at supporting older

workers to remain in employment. In the mapping, provision for young people was nearly six times greater than that for older workers. Support for carers was at a similar level to support for older workers; [Census 2021](#) shows that the highest proportion of unpaid carers is among people aged 55–64, for both men and women, which may further affect the type of employment support required by this age group.

A second parameter that was considered but not included in the mapping activity, was services that support individuals into self-employment or business. These were excluded because such services are more nuanced and specific than the standard employment route and felt that they should be explored in a more open discussion. VONNE plans to explore this further at upcoming workshops.

While not entirely unexpected given current commissioning terminology, the preference for the more specialist term 'economically inactive' is notable. It suggests that organisations are aligning their language with funders rather than with service users, which is surprising given that almost one-third offer self-referral and therefore rely on users understanding the service description.

Considerations

This preliminary summary is intended to outline the scope of the mapping activity performed by VONNE. It is not a comprehensive report on VCSE employment provision within the North East. Subsequent phases of this work will involve ongoing updates to the mapping document as additional organisations are identified. As such, the data presented here is time-limited and subject to change and should be treated as a project update rather than a definitive regional picture.

We acknowledge that this mapping provides only a partial view of VCSE support in the region. Some gaps remain due to limited organisational capacity to contribute and because VONNE's membership does not encompass all providers. In addition, publicly available information varies in quality, and service provision can shift quickly in response to funding cycles, meaning the mapping may become out of date soon after completion.



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