

Valuing the role of the voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise sector in social care research summary report



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Introduction

The voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise (VCFSE) sector is a major source of health, care and wellbeing support to millions of people in England. It provides a very broad array of services, with and on behalf of statutory health and care providers, such as NHS trusts and local authority organisations. The VCFSE is large and diverse, particularly in social care, with over 31,000 charities working to improve the lives of elderly people, people with disabilities, and people living with mental health conditions, and those with a great many other needs. Many local VCFSE organisations have grown in response to unmet need. They are close to communities and, as such, are experts in identifying the assets, needs and aspirations of the people and communities they support. Organisations within the sector should be considered key partners delivering the National Institute for Health and Care Research's mission to improve the health and wealth of the nation through research and to bring research to underrepresented regions and communities with major health and care needs.

This report presents the findings of a piece of work undertaken by NIHR RDS in partnership with Birmingham Voluntary Service Council (BVSC), to explore VCFSE involvement in social care research. Three listening events were conducted in 2022: two cross regional and one national. The aim of the work was to understand the role of the VCFSE sector in social care research, identify barriers and facilitators to engagement, explore differences in barriers and facilitators for small and large VCFSE organisations, and identify good practice in VCFSE involvement in social care research. We also aimed to identify opportunities for further work.

This summary report sets out how the research community can better engage with the VCFSE sector in social care research. It presents key messages and recommendations heard during our events, and suggests actions that researchers, VCFSE organisations, and research funders such as NIHR can take. A longer version of this report is available which also provides signposting to further resources to support researcher and VCFSE sector engagement.

We know that some researchers and VCFSE organisations already collaborate well. This report suggests how this emerging good practice can be built upon to create productive and sustainable research relationships. We also recognise that not 'one size fits all', and that different communities and organisations will experience different challenges in engaging in research.

Our report and recommendations aim to be a starting point to encourage further engagement with groups that are underserved by current research. We hope that they prompt both discussion and action around how to better engage the VCFSE in social care research.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all the event attendees for their honest, open and insightful contributions to the discussions. We have tried to represent views as faithfully as possible in this report. We would also like to thank the break-out room facilitators and note takers for each of our events.

As well as the authors, the wider team for this work included Catherine Gedling, Sarah Fallon, and Paul Dolby, RDS North West; Dr Chris Poyner, RDS West Midlands; and Bethan Laker, Illustrator.



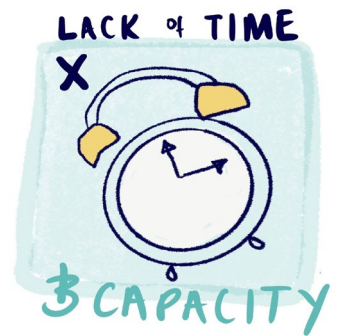
Barriers to engagement in social care research for VCFSE organisations

Time and capacity

We heard that there is often a lack of time and capacity for research among voluntary and community organisations, especially among small and medium sized organisations. Often the focus needs to be on supporting people and responding to frontline need, and this takes priority, especially when resources are strained. Event participants explained that there is a lack of time and space for reflection due to the “reactionary” nature of the sector, and a ‘doing’, rather than ‘thinking’ culture:

“We’re can-do people in the voluntary and community sector...Culture of not sitting back and thinking of ways of doing things differently. There is a lack of time to ask, ‘why did that happen?... Why did that go so well?... Why can they do it and we can’t?’ and vice versa’. Reflective processes really need beefing up”.

Research, or reflective processes that may lead to research, can therefore be treated as an add-on for some organisations, rather than being embedded in everyday practice. Some organisations do have dedicated research activity or capacity, but this tended to be larger organisations.



Lack of dedicated funding for VCFSE research

Event participants explained that space for thinking and reflection requires funding, and this was difficult to access and/or justify due to the financial fragility of the sector. We heard that getting research and evaluation funded within typical income streams (such as service delivery grants) can be difficult. Organisations have different funding bases, and priorities, and this can lead to difficulties in seeking out or prioritising getting funding for research activities.

We also heard that there is a lack of dedicated funding for research led by the sector, and that organisations struggle to access academic research funding. Often organisations do not “know where to start”, or need to “find their own route in” to access research funding opportunities due to lack of shared information, especially when not linked in to wider networks. There can also be barriers in the process of applying for academic research funding itself, for example funding streams that may require universities or other types of research organisations to lead proposals. Some VCFSE organisations expressed a lack of confidence and familiarity with the application process and writing in a way that academic research funders would value, undermining their ability to engage.



Academic processes

Event participants discussed barriers in terms of other academic processes that prevented organisations engaging; for example, ethics, research recruitment and consent processes that can be time consuming and unfamiliar to some organisations. Some event participants expressed “feeling lost” in academic language, especially around research methodology, and a lack of clarity in what was being asked of them. This can lead to anxiety or research hesitancy, and preparation to ensure research readiness may be required for some organisations.

Some event participants stressed that the typically longer timescales for academic research could be a disincentive for organisations and the people they support as results felt “dated” by time of publication. This could also be prohibitive for organisations funded through short-term funding arrangements.



Costs of involvement and payment processes

Event participants explained there needs to be recognition that supporting research can place a burden on organisations and communities especially if the same organisations are frequently asked, as can be the case for researchers wanting to access marginalised or especially vulnerable groups. One organisation working with migrant groups explained they had received requests for research support from 12 different universities, leading to both the organisation and their clients feeling “bombarded” and a sense of “consultation fatigue”. In this instance it was also felt that researchers did not recognise the additional costs required to support the language, interpretation, and cultural support needs of people, to facilitate their participation in research.

We heard that the financial costs of involvement need to be better reflected in researchers’ funding bids. It was felt that one-off payments for organisations for research participation or collaboration were tokenistic and did not cover the full costs of the involvement (such as recruitment, materials, ongoing consultation, and support to individuals to participate). Furthermore, there was a feeling that the sector was vulnerable to being perceived as ‘cheap’ because of its voluntary nature, and as a result of underestimated costs of research involvement compared to universities or other more research-experienced organisations.

Remuneration and payment to VCFSE participants throughout their engagement in the research process was seen as important. Payment needed to include aspects such as travel expenses, and timings of research activity/sessions needed to be flexible to consider caring responsibilities or work commitments of those involved. Payment processes themselves however were seen as complicated and administratively burdensome. Organisations sometimes received remuneration from universities and would then have to



reimburse participants themselves, which could be complex to manage. Individuals' income from benefits could also be impacted by research remuneration and this could be a barrier. Better understanding of the impact, through liaison with DWP (Department of Work and Pensions), and guidance, could support this process.

Accessibility of research findings

The results of research need to be accessible to VCFSE organisations. Organisations were often not able to access academic journals, and findings are not always made available or disseminated in formats that are useable by communities. There was frustration where organisations were driving research in communities but could not share the eventual outputs in a way that was meaningful to those who had participated, to help them feel that they had made a difference.

Related to this we heard there needs to be recognition of the different motivations for engaging in research. For example, for academic researchers journal publication may be a key objective, while for communities, the motivation for taking part in research may be to achieve local change. Research results therefore need to be repurposed in ways that enable and facilitate wider change and impact for communities.



VCFSE accountability to their communities

We heard that researchers are not always sensitive to the needs of people relying on voluntary sector services and to their communities. This included cultural and language issues, such as non-English speaking clients, as well as the ongoing support needs of people to participate in research. There was also perceived to be a lack of sensitivity by researchers to the relationship between VCFSE organisations and their communities and how this might be affected by their participation in research. Organisations needed to consider if engagement in particular research fitted in with their overall aims and values, and had to choose projects wisely. Some organisations also expressed concerns that the trust they had carefully established with the people they work with may be broken if their research experience was not positive.



Lack of genuine partnership working

A significant barrier was the perceived lack of genuine partnership working between researchers and the sector. Being contacted and approached late in the process was a frequent issue when the agenda and priorities have already been set, leading organisations to feel that their involvement was an “after-thought”. Event participants reported feeling that researchers often just ‘drop in’ and there was a lack of sustained engagement and longevity in relationships.

Some organisations also felt that their full research contribution potential was not maximised, and that their clients in particular wanted to contribute more than just their “lived experience”. Engaging organisations and their clients in change processes and approaches that involved coproduction were highly valued.

A key message was that researchers and voluntary and community organisations want to work together, but that it takes time to build relationships, and the trust and understanding that is needed for genuine partnership working.



“Don’t be the Uncle that only comes to see you for Christmas, build your relationship over time and keep in touch with regular catch ups that involve a wide range of stakeholders even before the research is even thought of!”

Key Recommendations:

- **Increase access to and build awareness of research opportunities for the VCFSE sector.** Our events suggested that researchers and research funders need to develop communication methods for sharing social care research opportunities with the sector, including websites and other online spaces, which do not always give clear details about who to contact or how to access opportunities. We heard that NIHR could promote the work of the James Lind Alliance more widely in developing funding priorities, and the role of the NIHR Research Design Service in facilitating conversations with funders and researchers. Making greater use of social media and other channels accessed by the sector could be valuable.

Researchers/universities could hold local networking events and host research engagement ‘cafes’, ‘drop-ins’ or forums, at both university and community spaces. Researchers may need to be particularly proactive in sharing opportunities with smaller VCFSE organisations. VCFSE organisations can identify networking opportunities and grow and develop their relationships with social care researchers and Universities locally. There is a role for VCFSE infrastructure organisations, such as BVSC, in facilitating such networks and co-hosting networking and engagement opportunities.

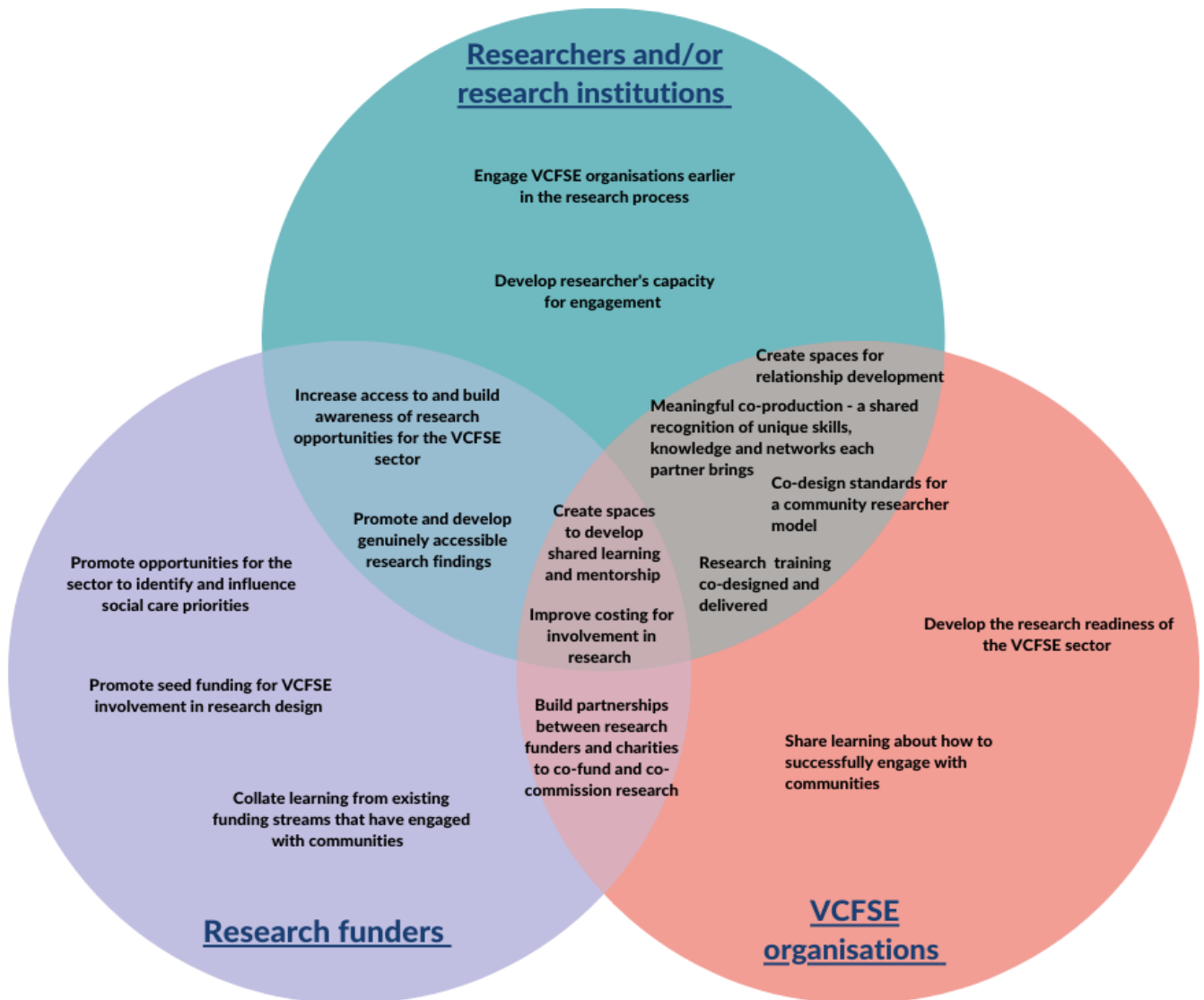
- There is a need for researchers to **engage VCFSE organisations earlier in the research process** to determine research questions, aims and objectives, and ensure research plans are feasible and reflect the priorities of people that use VCFSE services. Researchers could adopt some of the same strategies outlined above, such as research ‘cafes’, ‘drop-ins’, and forums, and improve their outreach to community spaces to facilitate such conversations with VCFSE organisations.
- Funders such as NIHR could **promote opportunities for the sector to identify and influence social care research priorities**. This could take the form of a series of (funded) national and regional events, that also involve local authorities and social care practitioners, to establish research agendas, and promote research partnerships.
- **Promote seed funding for VCFSE involvement in research design.** We heard that the majority of research funding tends to follow successful applications, and that seed funding for VCFSE organisations was required to facilitate VCFSE involvement earlier in research design processes, particularly for smaller VCFSE organisations who find it harder to back-fill time.
- We heard that **Co-production needs to be meaningful** based on an equal sharing of power to shape the research. This can be facilitated through engaging VCFSE organisations as co-applicants/co-leads early on and considering VCFSE support and access needs. There also needs to be **shared recognition by researchers and VCFSE organisations of the unique skills, knowledge, and networks that each partner brings** to all stages of the research process.
- Our events highlighted the value of community researcher and peer researcher models of research, which promote shared learning and dissemination. Researchers and VCFSE organisations could **collaborate to co-design standards for a community researcher model**, sharing mutual knowledge and expertise.

- **Create spaces for relationship development and partnership building activities.** Dedicated time and opportunities to focus on relationship/partnership development need to be built into research projects. Researchers and VCFSE could make use of engagement events and regular engagement spaces (cafes/drop-ins/forums) to develop relationships, and continue engagement between projects. NIHR Centre for Engagement and Dissemination could lead on collating examples of good partnership practice and case studies in social care research, highlighting how problems were solved, and ones which remain unresolved, to improve community engagement and make these accessible to VCFSE organisations and researchers.
- Our events identified a need to **provide research training and extra support** for some VCFSE organisations who may be less research experienced. However, it can be expensive for VCFSE organisations to employ University researchers to deliver this. There is a need to think about ways in which such **research training can be co-designed and co-delivered** by researchers and VCFSE organisations to improve accessibility, and support research capacity-building.
- **Promote and develop genuinely accessible research findings.** Our events identified a need to consider how research findings will be disseminated and used from the outset of proposal development, and to consider this from a perspective of co-design. NIHR has clear expectations regarding social care research impact. Funding application guidance could include recommendations regarding the co-design of dissemination strategies and research outputs so that they are genuinely meaningful for VCFSE organisations and communities.
- Our event participants suggested that both researchers and VCFSE organisations **need to get better at costing involvement in research.** VCFSE organisations must be realistic about staff time and the different types of activities required to support research. This might include networking activities, developing materials, supporting people that use VCFSE services to take part in research, and supporting dissemination. Researchers need to provide appropriate remuneration for VCFSE partners and account for the full costs of their time and input. Research funders including NIHR could provide clear guidance and expectations within application processes to facilitate this.
- **Develop the research readiness of the VCFSE sector.** Larger organisations may have dedicated organisational resource and/or staff for research, but this may be more challenging for smaller VCFSE organisations. VCFSE organisations could build on existing reflective processes and evaluation practices (such as holding listening conversations with people that use services and/or questionnaires), to promote a ‘research minded’ culture, and strive to embed research as a core part of organisational mission. VCFSE organisations could also develop research champion roles to promote research, as part of staff CPD.
- **Create spaces to develop shared learning and mentorship between VCFSE organisations and the research community.** For example, we heard that Autistica provided mentoring opportunities for academic staff. Universities could promote opportunities for community researchers or secondments to the VCFSE sector as part of CPD activities and researchers could sit on voluntary sector networks to improve understanding. We also heard that some Universities provide students with the opportunity to conduct a research project with a local VCFSE. This provides the charity with a finished product to demonstrate the benefits

of research. NIHR could promote and resource such activities as part of standard funding applications where appropriate, develop this aspect of its Fellowship schemes, and make wider use of initiatives such as the Link and Learn scheme to promote community research mentorship.

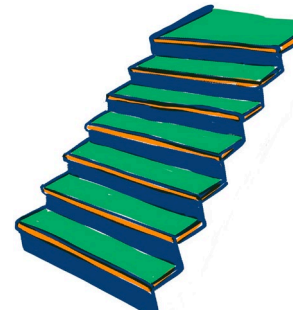
- NIHR could **collate learning from existing funding streams that have engaged with communities** to understand lessons learnt and consider ways to adopt learning and practices across social care funding streams. This could promote changes at different levels including the ways opportunities are shared, application processes and eligibility criteria, to facilitate VCFSE engagement.
- **Build partnerships between research funders and charities to co-fund and co-commission research.** We heard about one such example of Autistica working in partnership with NIHR RfSC programme to fund research around neuro-diversity. NIHR could build on this initiative, collate learning from the experience, and expand opportunities to work in partnership with charities and VCFSE organisations to create research calls and establish research priorities in different areas of social care.
- **Develop researchers' capacity for engagement.** There is a need to consider barriers to (especially long-term) engagement activity for academics/researchers who are on short/fixed-term contracts, or who are early-career, and may face additional career development pressures. Further exploration and discussion of these issues could be facilitated by research funders through e.g. a discussion paper, or organisation of a seminar.

An overview of the key recommendations for researchers and/or research institutions, research funders and VCFSE organisations to facilitate better engagement of the VCFSE sector in social care research.



Next steps

Based on the above recommendations, we suggest the following actions could be taken by researchers, VCFSE organisations and research support organisations:



- Localities/regions could scope existing networks and activities in the field of VCFSE and community-based research for social care, to pool resources and avoid duplication
- Academic researchers and VCFSE organisations could come together to co-design and deliver a shared Community Researcher Training Programme based on best practice, creating a local/regional toolkit of training delivery, that enables delivery in a range of settings and leads.
- Development of a Community Research Hub within regions/localities which brings together best practice toolkits, information, training, and dissemination pathways for health and social care.
- Develop and disseminate a comprehensive suite of available training opportunities for academic researchers, NHS and social care practitioners and VCFSE organisations, to share best practice, develop relationships/networks, and start to develop shared understanding across and between organisations working in health and social care.
- Based on existing research activity, understand the key priorities identified by communities and by VCSFE organisations, and ensure they have agency in influencing the social care research agenda, synthesising learning from various activities already underway.