

Totnes Town Council: Voluntary, Community & Social Enterprise (VCSE) Audit Report

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A. Executive Summary – key points to inform decision-making

Totnes' apparent affluence as a bustling town popular with visitors masks higher levels of deprivation than are seen in other South Hams towns. It has relatively high levels (nationally) of economic inactivity owing mainly to retirement, sickness or disability, and financial challenges linked to low income levels. Its other significant challenge is the quality, access to and affordability of housing. It is however a safe place to live, with low crime and low levels of traffic accidents, and transport links are relatively good for a rural Devon location.

Totnes has a thriving and diverse Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector with an estimated 150 organisations working in the town, addressing a range of needs for residents. The sector is made up of a mix of charities, CICs, community associations, faith groups and unincorporated groups, ranging from informal community groups run by a single volunteer with an annual income less than £5,000p.a. to larger organisations employing several paid staff with income over £250,000p.a. The sector is well-established: 85% of respondents to our survey had been in existence for over five years. Grants make up a significant proportion of sector income, with 40% reliant on grants from a range of sources.

The VCSE sector in Totnes faces several **challenges**:

- organisations reported financial challenges to their long-term sustainability, mainly securing day-to-day running costs combined with increasing demand for services (with no corresponding increase in income).
- organisations face competition for short-term, limited funding that creates financial insecurity and prevents long-term planning.
- following the closure of South Hams Community Action, there is currently no local organisation dedicated to supporting the voluntary and community sector (although Teignbridge/ West Devon CVS is looking to step in).
- organisations experience challenges in recruiting, training and retaining a diverse pool of volunteers (especially younger people).
- the sector would benefit from a range of opportunities to come together in person to network with others, share challenges, and hear updates.
- some struggle to capture and report their impact.
- the larger VCSE organisations have established links between public sector bodies (e.g. primary healthcare) but, overall, Totnes' VCSE organisations

are few solid links with primary healthcare and local authority commissioning, and are not networking outside of the town with wider alliances (compared to many other Devon towns).

- very few VCSE organisations made reference to existing strategic documents: these strategic documents could be better understood and are firmly embedded in the town's VCSE sector.
- the need for appropriate physical location for key services was recognised. There was considerable support for efforts to secure a permanent base from which community organisations could operate and co-locate.

The report sets out a number of options for the Town Council to consider:

- **Renewing Caring Town Totnes:** the VCSE sector would benefit from closer co-operation, sharing ideas and resources, a deeper integration into strategic decision-making processes, improved infrastructural support and better access to physical spaces. The Town Council is well-placed to bolster a renewed Caring Town organisation with funding and leadership support to enable it to refresh, strengthen its role and secure its future.
- **Expanding Community Space:** to explore the possibility of making more physical space in the town accessible to community activity, potentially through a 'community hub'. This could enable organisations based there (both VCSE and statutory) to work together more effectively, as well as providing space accessible to residents for joined-up service delivery. It could also be possible to locate the infrastructure support organisation discussed above here, including rooms for meeting and training.
- **Improving communications:** there is a need for more effective inter-organisational data sharing. This could be through investment in the website/ Directory of Caring Town and by exploring other digital options, as well as by communicating better through well-established ('analogue') routes. More work is needed to explore these communication options.
- **Supporting cross-sectoral partnership:** town-based mechanisms for linking VCSE organisations with public sector bodies, such as a local Health and Wellbeing Alliance, would not only help improve local coordination of services but could also provide a collective 'voice' for the town to support advocacy in the wider system. The Town Council, alongside its VCSE partners, could play a useful advocacy role in highlighting the hidden needs in the town (which often get overlooked by external agencies).
- **Grant-making.** TTC's grant-making pots are an important 'lever' to support the community. One response is to directly fund the provision of activities and services to residents through VCSE organisations. These grants can be smaller contributions to grassroots activities or more substantial funding for key services. Equally, the larger Town Council grants are an essential part of the sustainability of key infrastructure organisations: we outline an option where TTC moves to multi-year funding agreements (while simultaneously maintaining the small grants programme).

B. Context for the VCSE Audit

Devon Community Foundation was commissioned by TTC between November 2025 and March 2026 to deliver a community audit for Totnes. We were asked to:

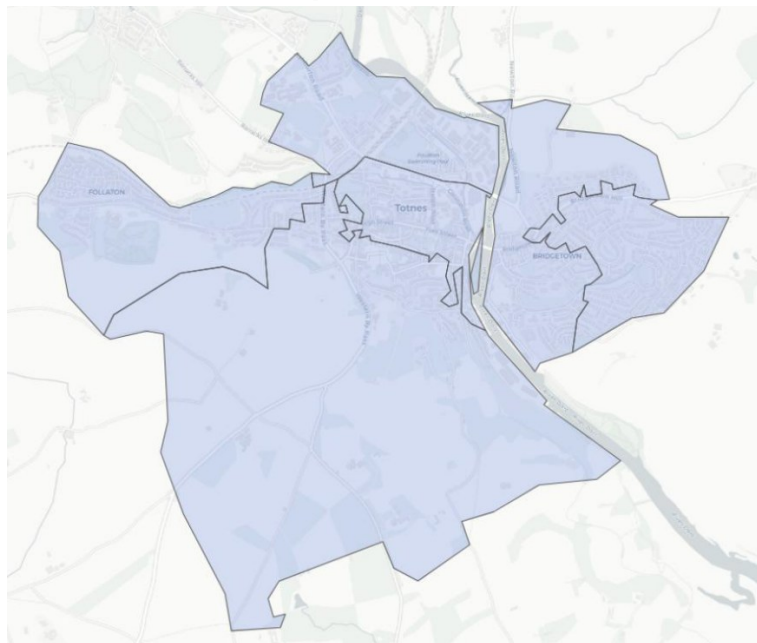
- give an overview of Totnes' community and its needs using quantitative data.
- paint a picture of the nature and coverage of Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) organisations in the town, and its strengths and challenges in responding to this need (and identify any gaps).
- frame a set of questions and considerations for TTC to help it decide how best to use its convening and grantmaking resources to support community-based action in the town.

We have brought together a range of sources of insight to inform this report:

- analysis of population data relating to Totnes (supplied by Health Innovation South West)
- a VCSE Survey (December-January 2026); 46 respondents & analysis¹
- review of current reports, minutes and previous surveys (Caring Town Totnes, Town Council, TQ9 Partnership, Youth Strategy, Cultural Strategy, etc)
- two consultation meetings with VCSE sector organisations, attended by 15 individuals, as well as extensive correspondence to 'sense-check' with sector organisations throughout
- eight face-to-face meetings with key individuals, plus regular meetings with Clerk and Councillors
- we have also drawn on DCF's independent *State of the Sector* surveys, which covered both registered and unregistered groups across Devon, and on our involvement with developing a social health model for understanding place-based community development.

¹ Although results have not yet been shared publicly (and we recommend that they are), the sector saw the VCSE survey as an opportunity to understand the wider issues it is facing. It could be worthwhile repeating this 'state of the sector' survey periodically to help guide, inform and respond to challenges.

C. Overview of Population Data



This section draws on data from Health Innovation SW (see Appendix 1 for a more detailed account). In terms of the area in this study, Totnes (and the IMD/ LSOA areas) comprises of Follaton (bounding Dartington); the area around Ashburton Road, Borough Park and West Bridgetown; East Bridgetown (bounding Berry Pomeroy); Totnes town centre; and the area south of the town centre (to Ashprington).

The Town Council footprint has a population of approximately 9,200 people (4,400 households). Over the next 20 years, the population of Totnes is expected to age (the number of people aged under 20 will decrease, with far more people aged over 80).

The overall picture in Totnes shows a population broadly reflecting average UK communities. The centre of town has mixed housing types, moderate ethnic diversity, intermediate or low-skilled employment, and higher-than-average unemployment, while suburban or edge-of-town locations feature middle-aged, more highly educated homeowners, who are employed in skilled/professional roles, with high car ownership and low ethnic diversity. In Follaton and East Bridgetown, however, a third of the population are classified as 'Semi- and Unskilled Workforce' and in the KEVICCS/Borough Park/West Bridgetown area we also have semi- and unskilled workers, alongside 'Legacy Communities', which refers to older, low-income populations in flats or social housing, with high disability and unemployment rates. In East Bridgetown about a fifth of the residents are retired professionals.

Totnes is notable for its economically inactive population, often owing to retirement, sickness or disability. The proportion of retired people across the town (except Follaton) is in the highest 30% in the country, and is in the highest 20% in Town Centre, South area and East Bridgetown. This is compounded by high level of economically inactive residents who are long term sick or disabled – again, in the highest 30% across the town, and the area covering KEVICCS/Borough Park/ West Bridgetown is in the highest 20% in the country.

Citizens' Advice (CA) says 60% of people who request support are disabled or have a long-term health condition, a third (37%) have multiple impairments, 22% present with a mental health condition and a fifth (20%) have a physical impairment. 80% of CA users are aged 40 or over, and 71% are single people.

As noted in a report to the Town Council in 2025, Totnes is the most deprived market town in the South Hams. Totnes is the only South Hams market town with multiple LSOAs below the 6th decile, with several neighbourhoods falling within the more deprived 40% of areas nationally, meaning inequality and low-income pressures are statistically greater than those in other towns. The CA Impact Report for Totnes notes the high level of demand from residents for financial advice, such as accessing benefits, shopping costs, paying bills and tackling household debt in 2025, with a 25% rise in demand for these kinds of support compared to 2024. This contrasts with the generally low levels of deprivation seen in Kingsbridge, Dartmouth and Ivybridge, where most neighbourhoods fall within the least deprived half of England. The apparent affluence of the South Hams and the busy historic town centre of Totnes mask many of the challenges facing residents. Totnes is then, broadly speaking, comparable to Tiverton and Axminster - towns facing similar pressures around low income, economic inactivity and access to affordable housing.

Unlike the South Hams as a whole, where rates of unemployment and economic inactivity among adults are falling, there are high levels of unemployment, particularly in the KEVICC/Borough Park/West Bridgetown area, East Bridgetown and Follaton.

Of those accessing Citizen's Advice services, 30% are in employment, indicating that in-work poverty can be a challenge for many. According to CA, more people who previously managed their household budgets now seeking support with bills. As the CA Cost of Living Report says:

'[there are] ongoing and elevated levels of financial vulnerability within the Totnes community. Energy affordability remains a dominant issue, with knock-on impacts in debt and food insecurity. Demand has not returned to anything like pre-pandemic levels, indicating continued need for frontline advice, hardship support and targeted intervention funding.'

As in other parts of Devon, lower-than-average incomes in households with children and where people are older is a cause for concern in Totnes. The KEVICCS/ Borough Park/ West Bridgetown area is in the more deprived decile (4) for income deprivation affecting children, while income deprivation affecting older people shows more deprivation in the Follaton, KEVICC/ Borough Park/ East Bridgetown, and South Totnes areas.

Housing quality is a significant challenge. The centre of Totnes is in the most deprived 10% of the country in terms of indoor environment and housing quality (and the south part of Totnes is in the most deprived 30%). This reflects the high number of properties (both historic and modern) with poor insulation, without central heating or in poor condition. Poor quality housing in areas with more of a mix of housing types, including the Follaton and Bridgetown areas, (private/ freehold, leasehold and

rented/ social housing), may not show up so clearly in statistical data, but can still be a problem. CA and Live West know many residents with poor drainage, inadequate insulation, draughty windows and doors, leaks and mould. These issues inevitably push up people's energy bills, and can lead to physical and mental health problems. A third of local renters struggle to heat their homes to a comfortable temperature, and more than two in five private renters had to ration gas and electricity to afford their energy bills last winter (CAB Report: 2024). In contrast, air quality, noise pollution and road accidents involving pedestrians and cyclists are all below average.

Educational deprivation is defined statistically through measuring the proportion of households where no-one has at least a Level 2 qualification (e.g., 5+ GCSEs at A*-C) and no-one aged 16 to 18 is a full-time student. Follaton is in the most deprived 30% of the country for children and young people in this respect. The rate of young people aged 19 and over in FE, training or skills in Totnes is 11% below the national average (although apprenticeships have increased in the previous five years).

Totnes is well connected through transport links. In the central areas accessibility to key services (schools, GPs, libraries, shops, amenities, etc) is good, however, this is not the case in the Follaton and East Bridgetown areas - Follaton is in the most deprived 20% of the country in terms of access to services (similar to the most rural areas in the South West).

Crime levels are very low in Totnes.

D. The Voluntary, Community, Social Enterprise (VCSE) Sector in Totnes

Totnes has a thriving and diverse VCSE sector, ranging from larger, more established charities and social enterprises, to very small, informal community groups. The updated spreadsheet of community organisations that the Town Council holds lists about 150 VCSE organisations working in Totnes.

We sent out a survey to all these organisations in early January and received 46 responses from a range of local VCSE organisations (Charities, CICs, Community Associations and unincorporated groups) of all sizes, from those run by a single volunteer to those employing several paid staff, including garden projects, sports clubs, KEVICC, Caring Town, Citizens' Advice, faith organisations/churches, heritage bodies and food initiatives. As with most of Devon, the objectives of VCSE sector in Totnes are to support community health and wellbeing (in a broad sense), with a tendency towards supporting families and children.

There is longevity in the local VCSE sector – 85% have been in existence for five years or more. Annual income ranges from less than £5,000p.a. to organisations with an income over £250,000p.a. Grants make up a major part of the income of all organisations (78.3%), with 40% heavily reliant on them. Just over half (55.6%) had

had a TTC grant, a quarter had not (24.4%). Volunteers are important to nearly all organisations, large or small.

The majority of VCSE organisations have links with multiple partners (with all but one respondent mentioning partners). Key organisations and projects in the town are Totnes Caring, the Town Council, Caring Town Totnes, TRAYE, schools/ education providers, sports clubs, SHDC, Transition Town, CAB and Bridgetown Alive! It is worth considering organisations that do not feature in the list of partners, e.g. the police are mentioned once, while social housing providers (LiveWest), social prescribing services, arts and cultural organisations, care home settings and NHS services/ the GP surgeries in Totnes are not mentioned at all. However, our subsequent 'sense-checking' with key organisations reveals that Totnes Caring does have extensive links with GP surgeries (South Hams PCN and South Dartmoor PCN) and the social prescribing contracts which cover these areas; with all the local hospital teams; local social workers refer to Totnes Caring; they offer a transport service to primary care appointments; and they are part of the 'Wellbeing and Home from Hospital' project.

Since the closure of South Hams Community Action last March, Teignbridge CVS and West Devon CVS are working in partnership with South Hams District Council to support the VCSE in South Hams. Totnes Caring is one of the partners in the South Devon Wellbeing Partnership along with Dartmouth Caring, Kingscare (Newton Abbot), Moorland Community Caring (Moorlands) and Volunteering in Health (Coastal).

D1. Strengths

Addressing a range of needs: many VCSE organisations in Totnes contribute to the health and wellbeing of residents by supporting social connection and providing opportunities for healthy and creative activity, or by providing health and social care services. Others address issues around financial hardship, including access to benefits or affordable food, or debt advice. There are others that facilitate access to services, such as through community transport. Some organisations work with specific demographics – older people or young people, for example. We did not identify any obvious 'gaps' in terms of aspects of provision, which is very positive.

Good VCSE collaboration: we noted very few tensions between organisations, and there is a healthy level of collaboration, although the momentum for this does tend to rest with a very small number of people and is, therefore, personal rather than structural. There is a general sense of **shared values** (although these have not been shared between organisations nor, for some, articulated publicly). Where provision overlaps, for example with community transport, youth services or food projects, partnerships are in place and communication is good. Some successful thematic, multi-partner networks exist, such as the TQ9 Cost-of-Living Partnership (although there are opportunities to develop these further). The Caring Town digital Directory was felt to be a strength in supporting communication and collaboration between

VCSE organisations, and explaining the 'offer' to residents, though it is in need of updating, and might be easier to manage if it focused solely on organisations that are active in the town – other listings already exist (e.g. Devon Connect) for general services.

Resilient and adaptable culture: Staff and volunteers across the sector display high commitment, passion and resilience, responding flexibly to community needs even during challenging circumstances, such as COVID-19, the Cost-of-Living Crisis and ongoing funding challenges. This adaptability has enabled organisations to maintain services when statutory provision has contracted and in the face of severe funding pressures. However, the VCSE sector is now in a precarious situation (see 'Funding Instability' below).

D2. Challenges

Funding instability: All organisations reported financial challenges to their long-term sustainability, mainly securing day-to-day running costs combined with increasing demand for services (with no corresponding increase in income). Organisations face competition for short-term, limited funding that creates financial insecurity and prevents long-term planning. It is concerning that many organisations report having no or very limited reserves, and struggle to cover the basics, such as rent and volunteer expenses. The wait for funding to arrive into bank accounts once it has been agreed causes cash-flow problems for the sector. The current funding environment can also lead organisations to adapt projects to fit funding criteria rather than community needs. Apart from the Caring Town 'We Care' programme, we are not aware of joint funding bids and strategic alignment between VCSE organisations. These forms of cooperation could open up new opportunities with funders who are seeking to maximise the impact of their resources.

Infrastructure: Following the closure of South Hams Community Action, there is currently no local organisation dedicated to supporting the voluntary and community sector (although West Devon/ Teignbridge CVS are in discussion with SHDC about providing CVS services in the area). It is here, rather than in terms of organisational spread, that we observed gaps:

- around three-quarters of organisations experience *challenges in recruiting, training and retaining a diverse pool of volunteers* (especially younger people). A collective approach to this could be more effective and reduce the burden on organisations.
- organisations of all kinds told us they would benefit from a range of *opportunities to come together in person to network with others*, share challenges, and hear updates from TTC and other local services. Some important networks currently exist (for example the TQ9 Partnership) but these are not necessarily known about by everyone who would find them useful (e.g. the housing associations do not attend). In addition, these

networks can rely very heavily on a small number of individuals, and it can be particularly difficult for the smallest groups to participate in partnerships and collaborations on the same terms as much larger organisations.

“I agree, we are not well connected. I am often googling or using AI to find out about services in Totnes. We need to meet up. We need an online digital hub. I’d love to be well-connected to better support our residents”.

Local VCSE Organisation working in Housing.

- while individual organisations contribute to improving people’s lives, some struggle to *capture and report their impact*. In addition, an understanding of the collective value of the whole and sub-sections of the VCSE sector in the town is limited; for instance, despite the delivery of vital services, it is difficult to articulate the impact of all the youth-focused work or food projects across the town. As elsewhere in the county, organisations have limited capability to translate their evidence base into robust assessment of local impact, and they rarely have the resources to effectively ‘tell their story’. This is likely to weaken the position of some organisations in securing funding (e.g. applying for grants) and being involved in public commissioning processes. Overall, this reduces the VCSE sector’s influence on strategic decision-making. Improving the collection and analysis of impact data, for example through guidance on evaluation and communicating the sector’s impact could be a role for a centrally funded infrastructure organisation. The report done by the Torbay VCSE Network is a good example of a collective Impact Report (albeit at the level of unitary authority rather than a town council) [see Torbay VCSE Network Report March 2025](#).

Connection with the public sector: key organisations (Totnes Caring, CA, Food in Community) do have good links with public sector bodies (especially primary healthcare), with Citizens Advice being a key intermediary between primary care and the local VCSE sector. However, these are on a bilateral, rather than a collective basis, and tend therefore to focus on specific operational connections – referral of individual service users into a particular organisation, for example – rather than structural or strategic issues.

“At present, we have two professional referral pathways into our service - through our Professional Referral Form and through the Joy app... While we do get referrals from our local primary care partners in the Totnes/ South Hams area, they are not many. For the period between Sept 2025 and March 2026, we average between 3-5 referrals a month from social prescribers/ primary care organisations in the Totnes and South Brent areas. This would include referrals from our local PCNs and local ‘caring’ organisations”. Local VCSE Organisation

It is time- and labour-intensive for both parties for multiple VCSE organisations to maintain individual relationships with public sector bodies. Some suggested it can be hard for people to decide to commit effort in this respect when there could be limited respective understanding. One respondent said:

“To be honest it’s probably a mixture of all of them for us. We haven’t had much time to build those relationships, but also there is a slight reluctance to do so without having a funded worker to resolve the issues that are raised. That said, we did a year-long pilot with [our staff] placed at GP surgeries in South Hams and West Devon about eight years ago. This project was able to demonstrate the impact the VCSE sector can have in supporting a reduction in demand on primary care providers. However, there has not been any follow up (at least in the South Hams) by primary care providers other than the social prescribing contracts, and even those make limited referrals to us”. Local VCSE Organisation.

“The main area where I feel there could be improvement in the working relationships is promoting awareness of our services to the primary care sector - the majority of our referrals come from Citizens Advice rather than primary care. I would appreciate any opportunity to do this, such as attending meetings or a VCSE / health care fair, or being given contacts to send information to more primary health care services. For example, I feel sure that there must be more patients discharged from hospital who struggle to buy the fresh fruit & veg they need for their recovery, and I am surprised that we do not receive more referrals from maternity services and health visitors”. Organisation working in food insecurity.

A few organisations reported that the number of referrals were very low as social prescribers were not actively reaching out to the town’s VCSE sector. On the other hand, other organisations had good links with social prescribers (mostly via Totnes CAB):

“We have a certain amount of success with local organisations as far as referrals go. 24 out of 30 referrals since the beginning of November 2025 have come from Citizens Advice”. Organisation working in food security.

“My working relationships with the primary care staff who have contacted me have been straightforward, and particularly good with the social prescriber who sends me the most referrals. As social prescribers usually have more time to spend with their patients than a GP, their referrals are often more holistic, looking at the wider factors that affect their patients’ health & wellbeing”. Organisation working in food security.

One key local VCSE organisation felt, from their experience, there was reluctance at the NHS commissioning level to invest in grassroot VCSE organisations because of commissioners’ concerns over accountability and governance:

“We have long standing links with Leatside Surgery and we have had some connections with Catherine House. Martin... has attended many meetings in the past and we are confident that we can reconnect at any time. We also have had close links in the past with the social prescribers. We tried hard to engage the strategic commissioning services a few years back... however, the frustrating conclusion we all came to was that they did not trust the governance to local community groups, even though VCSE groups were delivering the kind of provision that was both preventative and at times meeting acute needs. Our view was that developing a partnership with the statutory health sector would add huge value to the work of the [VCSE sector in Totnes]”. Local VCSE organisation.

There is a need for collective advocacy about the specific needs of the town, along with a collective voice that can support credibility and accountability for the town’s VCSE sector (see also the section above on understanding impact), at the same time as promoting practical connection and information sharing across all organisations, not just a few. Doing this at a collective level would avoid excessive duplication of effort, and have greater impact.

Without effective platforms to link with the public sector, as a town with moderate, but not severe, deprivation and health inequalities data, within an NHS trust area that covers Torbay, there is a danger of Totnes’ priorities being overlooked in the broader context of deprivation and need outside the town’s boundaries. Totnes for example lacks a town-level Health and Wellbeing Alliance – a model that brings together organisations across sectors to focus on problem solving and offers opportunities for connection and collaboration – Totnes falls outside of the boundary for the South Devon Health & Wellbeing Alliance. Local GP practices are part of The South Dartmoor & Totnes PCN (whose website has not been updated for a year or more) and the PCN does not appear to support a local Alliance.

Lack of strategic context: very few VCSE organisations made reference to existing strategic documents, such as the Totnes Town Council Strategic Plan, Totnes Neighbourhood Plan, the Town Economic Strategy or the Cultural Strategy for Totnes (although the Youth Strategy was mentioned by several youth organisations). As the role of the community and voluntary sector in supporting the health and wellbeing of residents features in all these strategic documents, it is important that they inform the sector’s objectives and ambitions. These strategic documents could be better understood and more firmly embedded in the town’s VCSE sector.

Physical Spaces: the need for appropriate physical location for key services was recognised. There was considerable support for efforts to secure a permanent base from which community organisations could operate and co-locate. Those offering youth services reported that they ‘worked out of the boot of their cars’ - they were keen to secure a permanent base, for office space and a venue that young people could ‘make their own’.

E. Current TTC Grant-making

In April 2022 the Town Council awarded £24,900 to 11 projects, ranging from £550 to £7,000 (£25,394 was requested; 98% of application value). The total value of all the projects that applied was £58,538, so TTC funded 42.5% of the overall project costs.

In October 2022, £25,042 was awarded to 11 projects, ranging from £800 to £7,000 (£78,240 was requested; 32% of application value). The total value of all the projects that applied was £168,005 so TTC funded 15% of the overall project costs.

In June 2023 £24,953 was awarded to 8 projects ranging from £500 to £6,626 (£65,834 was requested; 38% of application value). The total value of all the projects that applied was £99,120, so TTC funded 25% of the overall project costs.

In June 2024, £41,072 was awarded to 14 projects ranging from £750 to £8,000 (£103,576 was requested; 40% of application value). The total value of all the projects that applied was £551,120 so TTC funded 7.5% of the overall project costs.

In June 2025, £31,000 was awarded to 13 projects ranging from £600 to £5,000 (£98,250 was requested; 31.5% of application value). The total value of all the projects that applied was £551,735 so TTC funded 5.6% of the overall project costs.

The much larger overall project sums in June 2024 and June 2025 are partly due to the skatepark, Stepping Stones and St. Mary's Church projects. Nonetheless, there is a clearly a significant increase in requests in the amount of grant funding from TTC.

Many grants are 'repeat customers'. The majority of grants fund ongoing running costs or regular activity/service delivery. A smaller number support festivals and events, and a few contribute towards larger capital projects (though these are often paid from reserves rather than the grant making budget).

The amount contributed is usually a significant proportion of total costs, especially with larger grants, which are an essential part of the funding for core VCSE organisations, such as Totnes Caring, TRAYE, CAB and Caring Town. Without the TTC investment each year, these organisations would not continue to operate at their current level in the town and could risk closing altogether. TTC is almost never the sole funder. The Town Council small grants are seen as a supportive tool for local projects but small grants are not seen as 'make or break' - that is to say, small grants are very welcome but VCSE organisations know that they cannot rely on TTC grants.

The audit indicates there is some confusion about when people can apply for larger TTC grants, how much is available and how they apply. For example, participants in the audit asked if there is a different set of criteria for larger grants as opposed to smaller grants, and who was eligible for larger grants and who was not. Some were unsure whether they needed to first go through a 'friendly' Town Councillor who could 'sponsor' their application, and others had missed application deadlines

because they had missed information about the grants process. As one contributor said:

“We make an application to TTC as part of their grant application process each year. I'm not really sure if we apply for the larger or the smaller grants. Every successful organisation received a proportion of what they'd asked for last time”. Local VCSE Organisation.

F. How might TTC support community-based action in Totnes?

It is not within TTC's gift (or its responsibility) to single-handedly improve access to affordable, decent housing, or to lift households out of poverty, or to tackle deep-seated health and wellbeing challenges. But the Council is well-placed to support the thriving ecosystem of local community-based organisations working to improve the lives of Totnes residents in a targeted way that responds to the challenges set out above.

Having a clear vision for how to do this now, in a broad sense, is excellent preparation for being able to accommodate any challenges or opportunities local government reorganisation (LGR), and the reconfiguration of local health services might present. It is tempting to jump straight to thinking about solutions and actions. But time spent thinking about what you would be aiming to influence, and how best to do this, is well spent.

DCF has been exploring with partners the conditions necessary to enable place-based communities to work together effectively, to align funding for maximum efficiency and to build 'socially healthy' communities for everyone's benefit. This work has indicated that it is important for communities to have the following elements, and these conditions have guided our analysis:

Coordination: information is shared effectively, resources and energy are pooled for efficiency, groups are brought together, momentum is maintained, action is catalysed/ incubated and smaller organisations are supported in difficult times.

Resources: access to stable, predictable funding with local decision-making. Resources are distributed strategically for long-term social health of the community.

Space: Social assets (places and spaces) are identified, designed and used effectively for community connection.

Voice: A pro-active interface between place and system locates local work within the 'bigger picture' and amplifies less-heard voices

In considering the 'bigger picture' of community wellbeing, it could be helpful to think about how TTC could act to enable these conditions. Some important questions to consider might be:

- What are the key challenges facing Totnes residents?
- Which ones should the town prioritise?

- Who else plays a key role in the town (DCC, SHDC, NHS, LiveWest, etc)? What do they do? What could they do more of?
- Which aspects are least likely to be addressed by other agencies?
- How could TTC help – what is TTC's 'USP' here?
- How well do people and organisations in Totnes currently add to the overall 'social health' conditions?
- What could be done to strengthen these conditions and respond to current and future challenges?
- What role / mechanisms does TTC have with which to address the challenges?

Sitting above a single community, it is also important to consider:

Investment collective: working together as 'fiscal hosts', funders align resource streams to invest strategically into communities to enable places to create the conditions for good social health

Insight: community action is a shared vision informed by appropriate data and insight, which, when shared, generates new understanding.

Obviously, some of these elements (currently) sit further from TTC's sphere of influence. But commissioning studies like this one from outside the community contribute to this insight strand, and building local alliances to influence funders supports pressure for a collective investment approach.

F1. Possible Mechanisms

Renewing Caring Town Totnes: As explained above, the VCSE sector would benefit from closer co-operation, sharing ideas and resources, a deeper integration into strategic decision-making processes, improved infrastructural support and better access to physical spaces.

One way to support these aims could be by revitalising Caring Town Totnes as a local but strategic VCSE support organisation. As CTT is currently looking to secure new trustees, there are opportunities for a revitalised CTT to act as a central point for coalescing local services and funding, and for supporting many of the infrastructure needs outlined above. A renewal of this kind requires sustained funding to help it get established, to develop its activities and to demonstrate its value. The Town Council is well-placed to support a renewed Caring Town organisation² over the next few years to enable it to refresh, strengthen its role and secure its future.

Expanding Community Space: A further option is to explore the possibility of making more physical space in the town accessible to community activity, potentially through a 'community hub'. This could enable organisations based there (both VCSE

² We would recommend a name-change: Caring Town Totnes is too easily confused with Totnes Caring, and wrongly suggests the organisation is exclusively focused on caring/adult social care.

and statutory) to work together more effectively, as well as providing space accessible to residents for joined-up service delivery. It could also be possible to locate the infrastructure support organisation discussed above here, including rooms for meeting and training. Paignton Library provides an interesting example.

Improving digital infrastructure: There are some very good mechanisms for communicating with residents (Totnes Library, TQ9 Partnership, Totnes Pulse, the Climate Hub, notice-boards, the Caring Town website, etc), which need supporting and maintaining. There is a need for more effective interorganisational data sharing, including both referral data on service users, but also organisational material: e.g. impact data and governance documents. This might be through investment in the website of an infrastructure organisation (CTT), through exploring other digital means (e.g. piloting a social prescribing app or using the existing Joy App). However, there are disadvantages as well as advantages in any form of communication channel, for example one respondent criticized the Joy App:

“The one exception to this is the social prescribers who send referrals via the Joy system. Unfortunately, this does not provide all the information I need so I frequently have to contact the social prescriber after receiving the initial referral to ask for additional information. This makes the process a little slower & less streamlined”. Organisation working in food insecurity.

More work is needed to explore which communication channels are the most useful (and will continue to be long-term) to both residents and VCSE organisations.

Supporting cross-sectoral partnership: Town-based mechanisms for linking VCSE organisations with public sector bodies, especially, but not limited to health and social care, could not only help improve local coordination of services, maximising value, but could also provide a collective ‘voice’ for the town to support advocacy in the wider system for things that matter to Totnes residents. Health and Wellbeing Alliances, often coordinated by the VCSE sector, are one model for this and we have found such an Alliance is lacking in the Totnes area. As we have noted, there is a need for clear advocacy about the specific needs of the town and this is something the Town Council should be involved in (but not alone).

F2. Grant-making

TTC’s grant-making pots (both the individual strands and the larger central one) are an important ‘lever’ it has to pull in supporting the community, and the aims above. One response is obviously by **directly funding the provision of activities and services to residents** through these organisations. This can include everything from supporting events and festivals that promote wellbeing and community cohesion, to contributing funds to organisations that provide practical support and advice for those in financial need. These grants can be smaller contributions to grassroots activities or more substantial funding for key services.

Another option is to move to providing **focused investment in infrastructure mechanisms** that add value to what individual organisations do, addressing some of the issues described above (while simultaneously maintaining the small grants programme).

Given the significant past demand on TTC's grant-making budget, it is sensible for the Council to consider a more strategic approach to grant-making, informed by the needs of residents and of community organisations (as outlined above). We suggest TTC considers these questions:

- what long-term outcomes would it like to see from its grant-making?
- where can TTC support be most impactful? (i.e. what would it most like to see happen that is least likely to be enabled by funding from elsewhere?)

We suggest that TTC considers stratifying more clearly its approach to grant-making into two strands:

- a series of **smaller grants** aimed at contributing to practical activity advancing overall council aims (e.g. community cohesion), as well as specific strategic strands (environment, particular demographics, cultural activities). These can be applied for through an 'open call'.
- a set of **larger, multi-year grants** that provide selected organisations with a robust base for resident services deemed critical to retain or develop in the town and/ or finance infrastructural support for the whole VCSE sector. The criteria for awarding these multi-year grants (ideally for 3+years) would need to be clearly expressed and would likely need to mirror an SLA agreement. As these grants would be to deliver specific, strategic outcomes, they would not, therefore, be awarded through a tendering process.

To thrive, the VCSE sector requires long-term, adequate funding that supports both core and project costs. The Town Council alone is unable to provide this funding, however, it is in a position to lead and enable this funding to flow into the town and to influence how it is spent. The Town Council could facilitate a shift from short-term projects or transactional procurement to trust-based partnerships that value collective working, prevention and community-led solutions. The Town Council itself can take a lead in sustaining the sector and breaking the short-term funding cycle for organisations delivering core services by introducing multi-year funding agreements, whilst seeking to enhance their investment from external sources.

This more stratified approach will require the Town Council to amend its current Grants Policy and to clearly describe the criteria, expectations and terms and conditions for both strands of grant-funding. The Policy should also set out some simple ways of gathering impact and insights from VCSE activities in the town so that collective conclusions can be drawn about the value of the TTC investment.

Appendices:

Appendix 1 – Totnes Ward population ONS Data Summary

Appendix 2 – VCSE Survey Results

Appendix 3 – CAB Cost of Living Report

Appendix 4 – VCSE Totnes organisations (updated)