

### **Review of Voluntary Sector Support Services Grant**

#### **Aim of Review**

The Council is committed to ensuring that communities have access to services that meet their needs. This review will evaluate current arrangements and will identify and review future options. The review aims to ensure that grant funding is used as effectively as possible to meet the needs of the community and support the local community and voluntary sector.

#### **Current position**

The Council currently provides grant funding through a Service Level Agreement (SLA) to VCAEC to:

- Provide 'a 'one stop shop' which delivers quality services (including the delivery of a social car scheme and volunteer gardening scheme) through volunteers, to local people; and advice and information to voluntary and community groups and volunteers.
- Act as an umbrella organisation providing generic infrastructure support to voluntary and community sector organisations within East Cambridgeshire.

In 2024, a grant of £39,530 was awarded to VCAEC for 2024-26. The grant is not guaranteed to VCAEC beyond 31 March 2026.

#### **Previous grants to VCAEC and performance updates to Members**

ECDC has awarded grants to VCAEC in previous years. Reviews of those grants have been undertaken and presented to Members.

#### **Review Scope and Approach**

This review identifies the services included in the 2024-26 SLA, assesses the performance of VCAEC using performance monitoring reports provided by VCAEC during 2024-26, identifies similar or identical services to those listed within the SLA that are delivered by other organisations, includes an Options Appraisal setting out the advantages and disadvantages of the options available to the Council, and includes the details of a procurement exercise undertake to determine best value for money and evaluate responses of bidders against a tender specification (which sets out the Council's requirements going forward).

#### **The services included in the 2024-26 SLA**

The 2024-26 SLA includes the following services:

- Deliver training events and/or networking/themed events to member organisations.
- Respond to community and voluntary sector enquiries.
- Provide advice and support to local voluntary and community groups on a range

of subjects including funding, recruitment of volunteers, setting up a group, constitutions, and performance management.

- Impact the development of local and national voluntary and community sector policies.
- Conduct research into unmet or emerging social needs in the area and provide ECDC with a summary of current and developing issues for the sector and its members.
- Promote services via website, social media, newsletter, attendance at local events and other means of communication.
- Undertake activities to recruit new volunteers.
- Respond to volunteer enquiries and seek to find suitable placements for prospective volunteers.
- Deliver a social car scheme and gardening programme for local people using local volunteers.
- Conduct an annual survey of all member organisations.
- To provide a variety of engagement methods.

Prior to the commencement of the 2024-26 SLA, VCAEC confirmed that they could achieve the targets.

### **Assessment of VCAEC's performance during 2024-26 SLA term**

During the 2024-26 SLA term, Operational Services Committee received performance update reports in March 2025, June 2025, and January 2026 setting out how VCAEC were performing against the SLA. The updates included a report containing a table setting out expected and actual performances, VCAEC's reasons for any negative variance and what was being done by VCAEC in response to any variation. This section has been informed using those performance updates.

#### Provide support to the community and voluntary sector

During 2024-2025, VCAEC met or exceeded a number of their targets regarding community and voluntary sector support, such as delivering 7 training courses and delivering 22 promotional activities. VCAEC were also involved in consultation and research with multiple public sector organisations and charities to develop campaigning work. As well as this, VCAEC attended 23 events and sat on 11 multiagency partnerships to represent the community and voluntary sector.

VCAEC provided explanations of some targets that were missed during 2024-25; for example where they fell short on responding to general community and voluntary sector enquiries and providing advice and support to voluntary or community groups, they explained that this as being due to most information being available online, so voluntary organisations or members of the public did not need to contact them as they can obtain information online or from other sources instead.

In efforts to achieve these missed SLA targets in the future, VCAEC explained they would improve engagement in the community as well as update some of their online

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services to improve efficiency. This included committing to update their website to improve interactivity and online experience for the visitor, advertising their services more on social media e.g. Facebook to improve visibility, and attending events to increase community engagement, such as Aquafest and Soham Carnival.

In their 2025-26 six-month performance report submitted to the Council in October 2025, VCAEC were on track to meet almost all targets set as part of the agreement, including those not met in the previous year, with some targets having already been met at the six-month stage. This is an improvement on previous years and their numbers for this period can be viewed in the 26 January 2026 committee report.

For the six-month targets that VCAEC did not reach, VCAEC provided explanations for any negative variance. For example, VCAEC have delivered one training course instead of the two expected, due to having to cancel three planned courses offered. Whilst the cancelled courses were in response to topics requested by the community and voluntary sector, had initial demand, and were advertised, VCAEC deemed that they did not have viable numbers to run.

### Increasing volunteering opportunities and volunteering projects (car scheme and gardening scheme)

During 2024-25, VCAEC met their target of undertaking 10 promotional activities to recruit new volunteers, however VCAEC did not meet the rest of their increasing volunteering opportunities and volunteering projects targets, such as supporting volunteers into obtaining placements and signposting volunteers to available placements. These numbers can be viewed in the 23 June 2025 committee report. VCAEC explained this negative variance was due to a lack of volunteers, and that most volunteers will access their volunteering online and through VCAEC's website, rather than engaging with VCAEC directly. VCAEC highlighted to ECDC that the figures may appear lower than they are, due to volunteers not submitting feedback. VCAEC provided 7,807 volunteer hours through their office, gardening, car scheme and trustees, however this was below their target of 8,980 volunteer hours.

VCAEC stated that the qualitative data collected through case studies and feedback indicates that volunteers and service users have experienced improvements in their own well-being. This includes giving volunteers a sense of purpose, and increasing confidence, employability skills, and communication skills.

VCAEC have stated in performance update meetings and monitoring reports that the decline in this service delivery in recent years is caused by factors outside of their control, such as a lack of volunteers to meet demand and cancelled car scheme journeys due to hospital strikes. VCAEC have stated that volunteer shortages are a local and national issue, which was supported by articles, reports and surveys shared by VCAEC. It is recognised that despite efforts, some of VCAEC's targets are reliant on the willingness of the public and group to engage with them which can be beyond VCAEC's control.

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To improve performance, VCAEC sought to improve online access to volunteering through their new and more interactive website. VCAEC also signed up to the NHS volunteering website to promote relevant opportunities on a different platform. To improve community engagement, service promotion, and volunteer recruitment, VCAEC routinely advertised their services on social media and attended community events. VCAEC hosted two outreach surgery days in March 2025, however nobody attended. VCAEC engaged with schools to promote volunteering to local young people and led on 'The Volunteering Together – East Cambridgeshire' campaign. VCAEC made efforts to promote their services directly to local community and public sector organisations, such as at the Parish and Community Forum.

VCAEC's 2025-26 six-month performance report demonstrated that they are on track to reach or exceed their volunteering targets, such as volunteer gardening hours and assisting volunteers to obtain a placement. VCAEC provided explanations for the targets not reached during this period. For example, VCAEC were unable to meet the expected driver hours due to a lack of available drivers in the daytime, and last-minute hospital cancellations. VCAEC are trying to overcome this by seeking to recruit more drivers. The other six-month target VCAEC did not achieve was the number of volunteer hours provided in-house as VCAEC lost twelve weekly volunteer hours due to one of their admin staff taking on a paid role within the organisation in April 2024. VCAEC have also stated that Chair of Trustees has volunteered a considerable amount of hours for VCAEC by chairing the East Cambridgeshire Community Safety Partnership, however VCAEC has not included these hours in their SLA performance updates, although claim that if these hours were included, then VCAEC would have exceeded their targets.

### Member and user satisfaction

VCAEC's 2025 membership survey identified that the key issues facing local community groups include the recruitment and retention of volunteers; fundraising and financial stability; and finding volunteers of a younger age group. Safeguarding was identified as the most requested training course. There were 16 responses to the survey, with all 16 saying the membership offers good value for money.

The most recent survey of the car scheme, which takes place every three years and last took place in 2023, suggested that services remained in high demand and are valued by end users. The car scheme survey identified that almost all users thought the service was either 'vital' or 'important', that users appreciate the reliable and friendly service, and that users saw it as a cheaper alternative to other modes of transport. The car scheme is aimed at East Cambridgeshire residents that are elderly, frail, disabled, isolated or experiencing financial hardship.

### Other Feedback

It was reported to a multiagency meeting on the topic of local community transport in January 2026, that members of the public were quoted speaking positively of the

VCAEC car scheme. A common theme that emerged was that the scheme was a cheaper alternative to taxis, meaning residents without access to cars or public transport had a more affordable way of accessing services. It was also fed back that it was a reliable, user friendly, and personalised service where they felt well taken care of. For example, they appreciated the driver would wait for them while they had a hospital appointment and then drive them home, so they didn't have to worry about waiting for or organising their return trip. Some suggestions for improvement of the service were made, including having more vehicles that were suitable for wheelchair users and mobility aids, and having more drivers available. ECDC notes that these suggestions are based on availability of volunteers and their vehicles, which can be outside of VCAEC's control.

### **Similar or identical services to those listed within the SLA that are delivered by other organisations**

Other transport schemes operate in the district, such as Three Rivers and Dial-A-Ride, however some of these services are location-specific, as opposed to VCAEC's districtwide scheme. VCAEC have informed ECDC that they often receive referrals from the Three Rivers car scheme and are contacted several times a day by EMED who run the non-emergency transport for Addenbrookes as they are unable to cope with demand.

Support Cambridgeshire offer countywide support, training and advice to voluntary sector organisations, as well as providing a volunteering portal. Their services are available for East Cambridgeshire groups to access however are predominantly online, as opposed to the variety methods of engagement provided by VCAEC. VCAEC has informed the Council that during the 2024-26 SLA term, they have worked with Support Cambridgeshire to identify opportunities to support one another and make referrals to each another where appropriate.

### **Tender exercise seeking future voluntary sector support services**

On 29 September 2025, the Council sought quotations for the delivery of infrastructure support to voluntary and community sector organisations within East Cambridgeshire and to provide a 'one stop shop' which delivers quality services through volunteers, to local people; and advice and information to voluntary and community groups and volunteers.

The tender specification was developed with consideration of issues impacting the sector and the community and was informed using information taken from several sources, including, but not limited to, the findings of the VCAEC membership survey; Support Cambridgeshire's 'State of the Sector' survey; informal and informal feedback obtained by other agencies and officers at meetings, including the multiagency Parish and Community Forum; and feedback from VCAEC's performance monitoring data including the biannual reports that VCAEC provides to ECDC. The activity requirements set out in the specification were kept broad on purpose to test the market, rather than ECDC specifying the nature of activities. In previous years, the

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targets have been very specific, however it was felt that a less defined, more flexible approach allowed the specialist bidding organisations to propose and define specific activities in response to the ever-changing climate of the sector and evolving community needs.

As there is a national and local shortage of volunteers, impacting volunteer recruitment and retention, a requirement of the tender specification was for the winning bidder to carry out activities to increase the number of volunteers in East Cambridgeshire, and to provide volunteering opportunities within their own organisation for East Cambridgeshire residents.

In response to the cost-of-living crisis, there was a requirement for the winning bidder to identify and promote existing resources and support available for East Cambridgeshire organisations to access, including funding advice and infrastructure support to support the organisations that are assisting some of the most vulnerable members of our community. Similarly, the tender requires the provider to support voluntary and community sector organisations to develop skills, knowledge, structures, and resources to reach their full potential.

It is essential for the voice of the voluntary sector to be represented in the district and is helpful for the Council and other partner organisations to take this into account when decision making. Therefore, the tender requires the provider to champion and connect the sector by representing its voice at meetings and events, and by fostering relationships and networking opportunities.

The specification included the following activities:

- Carry out activities to increase the number volunteers and volunteering opportunities in East Cambridgeshire.
- Provide volunteering opportunities within your organisation for East Cambridgeshire residents.
- Support East Cambridgeshire-based voluntary and community sector organisations by helping them develop the necessary skills, knowledge, structures, and resources to reach their full potential; through the provision of, but not limited to, information, advice, guidance, and assistance with funding and income generation.
- Champion and connect the East Cambridgeshire voluntary and community sector by representing its voice at meetings and events, and by fostering relationships and networking opportunities.
- Identify and promote existing resources and support available for East Cambridgeshire organisations to access e.g. funding portals, volunteering platforms, local grant schemes.
- Use a hybrid approach, incorporating both in-person and other engagement methods, to deliver the required activities within the district.

The tender required that the winning bidder is a member of National Association for Voluntary and Community Action (NAVCA) for the duration of the SLA term. Being a member of NAVCA signals that the bidder is aligned with the wider Voluntary,

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Community, and Social Enterprise (VCSE) infrastructure sector, and is part of an established, reputable national network. Being a member of NAVCA, reassures the Council that the bidder receives up-to-date information on policy, best practice, and national developments and frameworks. This means that the bidder can bring that national intelligence into local strategy, thus strengthening its ability to coordinate and represent the local VCSE sector. Membership links the organisation to hundreds of peer organisations across England which can demonstrate or provide a commitment to learning, collaboration or sector improvement, not isolation. NAVCA helps its members maintain strong governance and leadership through training, resourcing and peer learning, which provides ECDC with reassurance that the bidder has access to resources to enable it to carry out the requirements of the agreement. There are only two known Councils for Voluntary Services (CVSs) covering East Cambridgeshire who are NAVCA members; these are VCAEC, and Support Cambridgeshire, therefore these two organisations were invited to bid for the grant.

### Evaluation of tender responses

In response to the tender, one bid was received, from VCAEC, who intend to subcontract some aspects of the work to Support Cambridgeshire.

In their bid response, VCAEC explained how VCAEC would carry out activities to increase the number of volunteers and volunteering opportunities in East Cambridgeshire. This included how each of the services being sought by the Council would be delivered using a hybrid approach. VCAEC stated that with Support Cambridgeshire, a series of face-to-face activities would be developed specifically designed to increase the number of volunteers and volunteering opportunities. This includes utilising both the VCAEC website and Support Cambridgeshire website to increase options for local residents; offering a mix of face to face, one to one assistance and online opportunities to residents; and Support Cambridgeshire running widely promoted online volunteering fairs.

The number of East Cambridgeshire residents registered on the Support Cambridgeshire Volunteer Portal will be increased by five percent per annum, and the number of local organisations registered on the portal by ten per annum. In addition, VCAEC, via Support Cambridgeshire, will provide one to one support to two individuals with their volunteering requirements per annum. VCAEC and Support Cambridgeshire will also deliver a minimum of five in person volunteer promotion activities per annum across the district.

VCAEC explained how they will provide volunteering opportunities within their organisation for East Cambridgeshire residents. This includes within its office, and via its car and gardening schemes. VCAEC have stated that they will aim to maintain and increase volunteer levels across all these programmes subject to need, capacity and funding.

In response to the bid asking how VCAEC will support East Cambridgeshire-based voluntary and community sector organisations, VCAEC stated that they will work with East Cambridgeshire groups and stakeholders to add in district specific opportunities.

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The opportunities offered include training, support and funding assistance, with examples of these listed below:

- VCAEC have committed to offering fifteen training sessions (either in person, online or hybrid) based on feedback from the centre as well as on emerging issues. Additionally, VCAEC will deliver three bespoke courses per annum, based in person at local venues. Finally, VCAEC will offer always available courses through the Support Cambridgeshire website.
- VCAEC explained they will offer comprehensive remote support and advice regarding setting up and running a voluntary sector organisation. This includes running a locally based funding day and three other local in person support events per annum.
- VCAEC have stated that they will provide in person and remote funding assistance. Additionally Support Cambridgeshire will offer their funding portal, fairs, news bulletin and critical friend service.

VCAEC explained how they will champion and connect the East Cambridgeshire voluntary and community sector by representing its voice at meetings and events and fostering relationships and networking opportunities. They stated that they will represent the sector at twelve meetings per annum and will digitally distribute the information they gather to the wider voluntary sector. VCAEC also explained that Support Cambridgeshire, who represent the sector more widely at county level, offer a wide range of networking events that build relationships between the business and voluntary sector, as well as statutory partners, ensuring there is a cross-sector input to issues. By working with Support Cambridgeshire, VCAEC can utilise both organisations' communications networks to ensure more organisations are aware of opportunities. As well as this, Support Cambridgeshire have committed to producing a minimum of two sector spotlight features in their communication channels on East Cambridgeshire organisations which will highlight work in the district. Both organisations will aim to promote their work to and engage with the local business community at key events e.g. business networking forums, as well as working with the Chamber of Commerce to ensure better business links between business and the voluntary sector. VCAEC are aiming for this work to also encourage businesses to develop corporate social responsibility activities e.g. skills-based volunteering, as well as potentially lead to future funding opportunities. Through the agreement, Support Cambridgeshire will work more closely with VCAEC to promote their online services, portals, and training courses in East Cambridgeshire via VCAEC and their own social media and newsletters; they will physically assist by attending events to promote their volunteering portal, training courses, and funding portal in East Cambridgeshire; and will provide information from the various countywide meetings they attend which can be passed to East Cambridgeshire residents through VCAEC.

The bid response required bidders to identify and promote existing resources and support available for East Cambridgeshire organisations to access, such as funding and volunteering platforms, and local grant schemes. VCAEC stated that their communications through social media and events will encourage residents to utilise the support VCAEC offer, as well as aiming to distribute newsletters by agreement to local authority networks e.g. parish councils and local business organisations. VCAEC also explained East Cambridgeshire organisations will have access to: Support Cambridgeshire funding portals, which VCAEC will report the annual take up of;

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Support Cambridgeshire website which has extensive best and safe practice resources and training sessions; and new resources and support on useful and emerging topics (e.g. evaluation, impact and storytelling, AI and technology opportunities, and charities statement of recommended practice).

VCAEC have bid for £39,530.00, which was the maximum amount available. If awarded, the grant will be funded from existing Communities and Partnerships budgets.

**Options Appraisal**

This options appraisal sets out the advantages and disadvantages of options available to the Council.

<b>Option 1: Award a grant to VCAEC and enter into a two-year SLA</b>	
<p><b>Advantages:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provides VCAEC with security of funding which enables continuity of service and ensures that there are voluntary support services in place to support communities including the most vulnerable.</li> <li>• A two-year grant provides VCAEC the stability to explore other income streams.</li> <li>• Minimal disruption to services, especially services provided by volunteers that are already impacted by the national and local volunteer draught.</li> <li>• Fixed cost of £39,530.</li> <li>• No impacts on VCAEC’s member groups, volunteers, and end users reliant on VCAEC services.</li> <li>• Although other organisations may offer similar services such as car schemes, it is beneficial to residents in East Cambridgeshire to have access to more than one organisation where they can access the support that they require.</li> <li>• Funding supports VCAEC to recruit and support volunteers, which is very important as there is currently a national and local shortage of volunteers.</li> <li>• VCAEC’s work contributes to the aims of Council strategies.</li> <li>• Some Support Cambridgeshire services are already available to East Cambridgeshire voluntary organisations and residents, however historically the uptake has been low. Support Cambridgeshire have not proactively promoted their services in East Cambridgeshire due to there being another</li> </ul>	<p><b>Disadvantages:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Historically, VCAEC has not achieved all SLA targets, as highlighted in previous reviews.</li> <li>• Some duplication of services as other organisations are delivering similar services.</li> <li>• May reduce any potential future opportunities to align funding with other organisations in the short term.</li> </ul>

<p>NAVCA organisation (VCAEC) operating in this area, however as VCAEC will be subcontracting some of the ECDC funded services to Support Cambridgeshire, Support Cambridgeshire will proactively promote their services in East Cambridgeshire, therefore maximising the potential uptake from East Cambridgeshire organisations and residents. Examples of these services include: their website; funding portal; volunteer portal; and online courses. Support Cambridgeshire will also be providing new East Cambridgeshire specific services such as online volunteering fairs; funding fairs; and networking events.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Targets have been set by the bidding organisation and therefore more likely to be met.</li> </ul>	
<p><b>Option 2: Do not award a grant to VCAEC</b></p>	
<p><b>Advantages:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cost saving.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Disadvantages:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Risks a loss or reduction in service provision which could likely negatively impact voluntary and community groups, volunteers, and vulnerable residents.</li> <li>• Reputational damage to ECDC.</li> <li>• VCAEC may not be able to continue and may close.</li> </ul>