Stirling Civic Alliance: A New Partnership Framework between Stirling Council and the Third Sector

Report prepared by Stirlingshire Voluntary Enterprise

Foreword

As Chief Executive of Stirlingshire Voluntary Enterprise, I am pleased to present Stirling Civic Alliance: a proposed new framework for the relationship between Stirling Council and the third sector in Stirling.

This work was commissioned by Stirling Council and has been shaped through co-design with third sector organisations, wider sector engagement and discussion with Council officers. I am grateful to everyone who has contributed their time, experience and challenge. The strength of this report lies in the fact that it has been informed by people and organisations who understand what partnership looks like in practice.

The third sector in Stirling is broad, skilled and deeply rooted in local communities. It includes charities, social enterprises, community groups, volunteers and informal community activity. Together, they support wellbeing, reduce isolation, respond to poverty, bring in external investment, involve volunteers and help people and communities before they reach crisis point. Much of this contribution is not always visible in formal systems, but it is central to the social and economic wellbeing of Stirling.

The work has shown that partnership is not only about structures, meetings or written agreements. It is about trust, respect, communication and a shared willingness to work differently. Third sector organisations have spoken clearly about the value of good relationships with Council officers, but also about the frustration caused when routes into the Council are unclear, communication is inconsistent or processes are more complex than they need to be.

Stirling Civic Alliance is intended to provide a practical basis for addressing these issues. It is not a new organisation, a hierarchy, an accreditation scheme or a funding gateway. It is a shared framework for how the Council and third sector can work together more consistently, openly and effectively.

This report does not suggest that all answers are already known. It sets out a framework for building a stronger relationship over time, based on shared principles, practical action and a willingness to learn. If implemented well, Stirling Civic Alliance can help create the conditions for better decisions, stronger communities and

improved outcomes for people across Stirling. The third sector in Stirling are ready to deliver on the vision, principles and commitments that will lead to transformational change for our communities. We look forward to working with Stirling Council to make this vision a reality.

Natalie Masterson
Chief Executive
Stirlingshire Voluntary Enterprise

Executive summary

In 2025, Stirling Council commissioned Stirlingshire Voluntary Enterprise (SVE) to develop a new framework for the relationship between the Council and the third sector in Stirling. The commission recognised that, although there are many examples of good joint working, the relationship can feel inconsistent and too reliant on individual contacts rather than clear, shared ways of working.

Stirling Civic Alliance is the proposed framework arising from that work. It has been developed through co-design with third sector organisations, wider engagement with the sector, and consultation and discussion with Stirling Council officers. It sets out how the Council and third sector can work together in a clearer, more consistent and more accountable way, with a shared focus on better outcomes for people and communities.

This report presents Stirling Civic Alliance as the proposed framework for the relationship between Stirling Council and the third sector in Stirling. It sets out why the work was commissioned, how the framework was developed, what was heard from third sector organisations and Council officers, and how the model can support stronger partnership working, community empowerment and improved local outcomes.

Background and strategic context

The relationship between local government and the third sector is increasingly important. Stirling Council and local third sector organisations are operating in a challenging context, shaped by financial pressure, demographic change, inequalities, rurality, growing demand for services and the need to place more emphasis on prevention, early intervention, community empowerment and local responses.

Public service reform and prevention

The Christie Commission (2011) continues to provide an important foundation for public service reform in Scotland. It called for services to empower people and communities, work more closely in partnership, prioritise prevention and reduce duplication across sectors. This is relevant to Stirling Civic Alliance because it

supports a move away from fragmented and reactive approaches towards more joined-up, preventative and community-shaped ways of working.

Community empowerment and local democracy

The Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 gives communities stronger routes to influence public decisions. It strengthened community planning duties and introduced participation requests, allowing community bodies to ask to be involved in processes aimed at improving outcomes. It also created asset transfer rights, allowing eligible community bodies to request ownership, lease, management or use of public land and buildings where this would support community benefit.

The Local Governance Review and Democracy Matters programme reinforces the need to share power and resources more effectively between national government, local government and communities. The 2026 route map to reform sets out proposals for more community decision-making, stronger local democracy and better ways for people and communities to shape decisions that affect their lives.

Community wealth building and local resilience

Community Wealth Building is now part of Scotland's statutory and policy landscape. The Community Wealth Building (Scotland) Act 2026 requires Scottish Ministers to publish a national statement and requires local authorities and relevant public bodies to prepare and implement community wealth building action plans. For Stirling, this approach is relevant to how procurement, employment, land, assets, ownership and finance can be used to keep more wealth locally, support social enterprises and community ownership, and strengthen local economic resilience.

Fairer funding and partnership with the third sector

The Scottish Government's Fairer Funding commitments recognise that the third sector needs clearer, more consistent and more stable funding arrangements. The commitments include improving grant-making, increasing multi-year agreements, making reporting and monitoring proportionate, giving prompt notification of funding and reviewing grant conditions. These points directly reflect issues raised by Stirling's third sector during this work.

The Scottish Government has also announced its intention to develop a Third Sector Partnership Agreement, co-designed with the sector. The proposed agreement is expected to focus on fairer funding, shared goals to improve outcomes for people and communities, and stronger opportunities for the third sector to contribute to policy and service design. Stirling Civic Alliance reflects this national direction of travel by setting out a local approach to a clearer and more balanced relationship between the Council and the third sector.

UK Civil Society Covenant

At UK level, the Civil Society Covenant provides a further reference point. It is intended to reset the relationship between government and civil society, recognising civil society as a trusted and independent partner. Its principles of partnership and collaboration, participation and inclusion, and transparency and data align with the aims of Stirling Civic Alliance, particularly around earlier involvement, respect for independence, shared evidence and genuine partnership.

Local strategic alignment

Locally, the timing of this work is important. The current Stirling Plan runs to 2027, creating an opportunity to consider how the principles and practice of Stirling Civic Alliance could inform the next phase of Community Planning. Although this report has been commissioned by Stirling Council, the issues it addresses are not for the Council alone. Stronger partnership with the third sector is central to Community Planning, prevention, place-based working, health and social care integration, community empowerment and the development of future local outcome priorities.

The Alliance therefore has potential to operate at two levels. First, it can improve the practical relationship between Stirling Council and the third sector. Second, it can provide a foundation for stronger third sector involvement across the Community Planning Partnership, ensuring that third sector organisations are involved earlier and more meaningfully in the design, delivery and review of local priorities. This will be particularly important as the next Community Planning cycle is developed beyond 2027.

The Alliance also provides an opportunity to learn from practical system-change work nearby. Clackmannanshire's Family Wellbeing Partnership, Family Support

Collaborative and Transformation Space show how values-based leadership, family voice, third sector coordination, community hubs and participatory funding can support earlier help, stronger relationships and more joined-up local systems. This is relevant to Stirling because the Alliance is intended to create the conditions for similar place-based learning and shared problem-solving, adapted to Stirling's own context.

The third sector in Stirling

The third sector in Stirling includes charities, social enterprises, voluntary organisations, community groups, faith-based organisations, sports and cultural groups, advocacy organisations and informal community-led activity. These organisations work across health and social care, children and families, community transport, employability, poverty, equalities, climate action, culture, sport, rural development, volunteering and community resilience. Some are long-established organisations with paid staff and formal governance arrangements. Others are small, volunteer-led groups rooted in a village, neighbourhood, community of interest or shared lived experience.

This diversity is one of the sector's strengths. Third sector organisations often hold relationships of trust with people and communities who may not otherwise engage with public services. They are able to identify issues early, respond flexibly, mobilise volunteers and bring forward ideas that are grounded in local knowledge. In rural Stirling, this local presence can be especially important, as geography, transport and access to services can make community-led activity central to wellbeing and inclusion.

The sector also makes a significant contribution to prevention and early intervention. Many organisations support people before they reach crisis point, help individuals and families navigate services, and provide practical assistance that reduces pressure elsewhere in the system. This includes formal commissioned services, grant-funded activity, peer support, community-led projects and informal volunteering. The value of this contribution is not only financial. It also lies in the sector's reach, relationships, experience and ability to work alongside people in ways

that feel accessible and trusted. A detailed profile of the local third sector in Stirling is provided at Appendix 1.

Stirlingshire Voluntary Enterprise and sector infrastructure

Stirlingshire Voluntary Enterprise (SVE) is the partnership and development agency for the third sector in Stirling, known as a Third Sector Interface (TSI). Currently every one of Scotland's local authority areas has a TSI. SVE is a membership body of 285 charities, voluntary organisations and social enterprises. Its role is to support, connect and represent the third sector, and to help ensure that charities, social enterprises, voluntary organisations and community groups can contribute effectively to local priorities. SVE receives core funding directly from the Scottish Government Third Sector Unit and is also supported by additional core funds from Stirling Council and the Clackmannanshire and Stirling Health and Social Care Partnership. SVE's infrastructure role does not replace direct relationships between Council services and individual organisations. Instead, it helps make those relationships more informed, more consistent and more proportionate, by supporting organisations to engage and by helping public partners understand sector capacity, pressures and contribution.

Strong third sector infrastructure is essential if Stirling Civic Alliance is to work in practice. Partnership requires coordination, trusted communication, good governance, volunteering support, funding advice, organisational development and effective representation in strategic discussions. Without this infrastructure, smaller and volunteer-led organisations are less able to participate, and public partners have fewer routes to be able to hear from the full breadth of the sector.

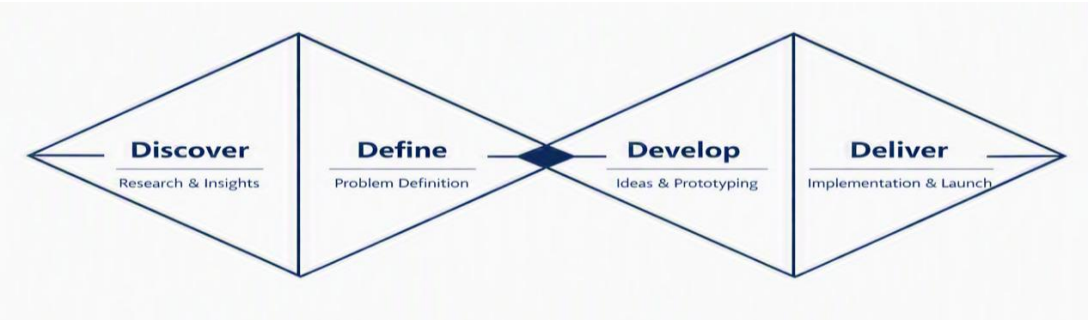
Like many third sector organisations and public bodies, SVE is operating within a challenging financial environment in which increasing demands are being placed on infrastructure organisations while real-terms funding pressures continue. In response, SVE is focused on delivering best value, strengthening resilience and ensuring that the TSI remains equipped to support communities and partners in the years ahead.

As part of this future planning, the Boards of SVE and neighbouring Third Sector Interface Clackmannanshire Third Sector Interface have recommended a proposed

merger to their respective memberships, with members expected to consider the proposal in early 2027. If approved, the merged organisation would bring greater scale, capacity and resilience to support partnership working across Stirling and Clackmannanshire, including the development and implementation of Stirling Civic Alliance.

Method: How the framework was developed

The framework was developed using the Scottish Approach to Service Design. This meant starting with the experience of those affected by the relationship, testing ideas as they developed and focusing on practical changes that could improve how Stirling Council and the third sector work together. The approach was deliberately participative, recognising that a relationship framework cannot be designed by one partner alone.



Credit: The Design Council 2005

Discover

SVE identified a core co-design group of third sector organisations representing different geographies, organisational sizes, themes, governance models and experiences of partnership working. This included urban, rural and community-of-interest perspectives, and organisations working across areas including culture, community development, equalities, social enterprise, sport, inclusion and community-led change. A literature review was also undertaken to consider effective partnership, public service reform and transformation models.

Define

The co-design group explored the current reality of the relationship between Stirling Council and the third sector, including barriers, enablers, shared values and

aspirations for the future. A full-day co-design workshop was used to build common ground, identify principles and test the type of relationship that partners wanted to create. Fictional organisation examples, or avatars, were used to explore how different types of organisations might experience a partnership framework.

Develop

Emerging ideas were shaped into the proposed vision, principles and Spheres of Partnership. These were tested through wider sector engagement, including a well-attended SVE Breakfast Club consultation event, further discussion with the co-design group, rural engagement, one-to-one conversations with organisations and consultation with Stirling Council officers. Feedback was used to refine the model, including the emphasis on movement between spheres, avoiding hierarchy, improving communication and keeping the Alliance practical and adaptable.

Deliver

Subject to Council consideration and approval, the next stage will be implementation, review and ongoing learning. This will include confirming governance arrangements, developing practical guidance, engaging Council officers, agreeing communication standards and ensuring the Alliance continues to learn from experience rather than becoming a static document.

The codesign group

A central element of the development of Stirling Civic Alliance was the establishment of a dedicated co-design group comprising representatives from a diverse range of third sector organisations operating across Stirling. Members were selected to reflect the breadth of the local third sector, ensuring representation from urban and rural communities, equalities organisations, community development bodies, social enterprises, organisations supporting minority ethnic communities, groups working with people experiencing disadvantage, and organisations delivering health, wellbeing and community-based services. The group also included representation from Stirling Council to support collaborative working and strengthen links between the third and public sectors.

The purpose of the co-design group was to provide ongoing challenge, insight and expertise throughout the development of the Stirling Civic Alliance model. Members played an active role in shaping proposals from the start, testing emerging ideas and identifying potential opportunities and risks. Their varied organisational backgrounds enabled discussions to reflect a wide range of perspectives from across the sector, helping to ensure that the developing model considered the needs and priorities of both strategic organisations and smaller community-led groups.

While no single group can fully represent the diversity of Stirling's third sector, the composition of the co-design group was intentionally designed to act as a representative sample of the wider sector.

Organisation	**Representative**
Artlink Central	Kevin Harrison
Inspiring Communities	Janette Mitchell
Kilmadock CDT	Neil Fergusson
Stirling Community Enterprise	Ally Scott
Stirling Pride	Scott McMurray
CSREC	Eman Hani
Radical Weavers	Mairi Breslin
Forth Valley Welcome	Laura Johnston
Bannockburn Community Rugby Football Club	Maciej Kornobis
Stirling Council	Kate Hudson
Stirling Council	Sam Neary

Third Sector Engagement

Engagement Summary

The engagement process was informed by the principles of the Scottish Approach to Service Design, placing people and communities at the centre of the design process. Rather than consulting on a pre-determined model, stakeholders were involved throughout development to help shape proposals, test assumptions and identify priorities.

The engagement included 103 individuals, and 53 organisations and was carried out between November 2025 and August 2026. This included:

- SVE Breakfast Club, November 2025
- SVE Breakfast Club, April 2026
- 2x rural engagement sessions, April 2026
- 3x Stirling Council sessions involving Council officers, August 2026

Engagement activity was jointly led by SVE Staff and members of the co-design group ensuring that partnership was in operation throughout the process.

The process of engagement reflected several key principles:

Inclusive Participation

Efforts were made to engage a broad cross-section of the third sector, ensuring representation from organisations of different sizes, geographical areas and thematic specialisms. This included urban and rural groups, equalities organisations, community-led bodies, social enterprises, and organisations working with people who may experience disadvantage or barriers to participation.

Collaborative Design

The co-design group played a central role throughout development. Rather than acting solely as consultees, members contributed directly to refining proposals, challenging assumptions and shaping recommendations. This iterative process allowed ideas to be tested and adapted as engagement progressed.

Evidence-Led Development

Feedback collected through workshops, consultation sessions and individual meetings was used to identify common themes, areas of consensus and issues requiring further consideration. This ensured the proposed model was informed by lived experience, operational knowledge and community insight.

Continuous Improvement

The consultation process was designed as a cycle of engagement, feedback and refinement. Learning from each stage informed subsequent discussions, enabling emerging proposals to evolve in response to stakeholder feedback.

We heard from a broad range of stakeholders including charities, social enterprises, community organisations, equalities groups, urban and rural groups, council staff and other strategic partners. An analysis of the organisations engaged demonstrates a diverse range of representation across geography, organisational focus and communities of interest.

Examining the profile of organisations engaged provides a useful indication of how representative the consultation was of Stirling's wider third sector. Appendix 2 provides a detailed overview of the engagement profile including participation by geography and thematic area, highlighting the diversity of organisations that contributed to the development of the Stirling Civic Alliance.

Main Engagement Themes

Trust, respect and power

Third sector organisations described good partnership not only in terms of structures, contracts or formal processes, but in terms of how it feels to work together. Words such as *trust*, *respect*, *openness*, *kindness* and *patience* were used repeatedly. This was not a call for informal relationships to replace proper governance. Rather, it reflected a clear message that good governance and good relationships need to sit alongside one another. Organisations want *clarity, fairness and accountability*, but they also want a relationship that recognises people's *time, pressures, knowledge and commitment* to Stirling's communities.

Organisations in the third sector, of all shapes and sizes, consistently mentioned power imbalances in the relationship between the third sector and the local authority. This is not a problem unique to Stirling but is reflected in the discussions that are ongoing with regards to fairer funding and a third sector partnership agreement nationally. The power imbalance is understandable and, in many cases unavoidable. It comes as a natural component of the legal status of the local authority, the funding it receives, the size of the workforce. Organisations in the third sector told us that there is a perceived, or real in some cases, fear that to speak out and challenge the local authority would damage their relationship and potentially funding. Participants asked how the third sector can raise issues without affecting the relationship, and whether mediation should be explored when things go wrong in the relationship.

Partnership can become difficult when concerns are not discussed openly, when challenge is interpreted as opposition, or when relationships are not repaired after disagreement. The following illustrative scenario is not based on one organisation. It brings together themes shared confidentially through the engagement process and is

included to illustrate how trust can be damaged when legitimate community advocacy is not followed by clear communication and relationship repair.

Illustrative scenario: when challenge affects trust

Bridgeview Youth Project is a medium-sized voluntary organisation that has operated since the early 1990s. It is well established in Bridgeview, an area facing multiple disadvantage close to the city centre. The organisation runs a weekly youth club and provides wider family wellbeing activity, including breastfeeding support and a parent and toddler group. Its income comes from a mix of local authority funding, charitable trusts and national funders.

Bridgeview rents its building from the local authority and has been based there for around 15 years. Five years ago, the building was included in a review of local authority properties, at a time when the Council was considering asset sales in response to budget pressures. Bridgeview residents, the organisation's board and local supporters campaigned to prevent the sale. The campaign attracted local press attention and support from elected members. The building was eventually retained for community use and Bridgeview secured a longer-term lease.

Although the immediate issue was resolved, the centre manager felt that the relationship with the Council changed afterwards. He believed the organisation was no longer seen as a trusted partner because it had publicly opposed the proposed sale. He also felt that this may have affected later opportunities, including local funding and involvement in community consultation activity. Whether or not this perception reflected formal decision-making, the impact on the relationship was significant. The organisation felt it had gained a reputation for being difficult, despite believing it had acted responsibly in standing up for its community, its services and the young people it supports.

This vignette illustrates why honest communication, constructive challenge and relationship repair matter. Third sector organisations may need to advocate strongly for the people and communities they serve. Public bodies may need to make difficult

decisions within financial, legal and political constraints. Where disagreement occurs, partnership is strengthened when there are clear routes to talk openly about what happened, explain decisions, address perceptions of unfairness and rebuild trust. Without this, unresolved concerns can shape how future opportunities are understood, even where no formal barrier exists.

For Stirling Civic Alliance, the learning is that challenge should be recognised as part of healthy partnership. The framework should help partners distinguish between disagreement and breakdown, create safe routes for raising concerns, and support honest conversations when relationships have been damaged. This is particularly important where funding, assets or access to decision-making are involved, as these are areas where power imbalances can feel most acute.

Shared responsibility and willingness to work differently

The engagement showed a strong willingness to work differently, alongside a clear recognition that improving partnership cannot sit with one partner alone. Organisations recognised that Stirling Council is also operating within complex systems and constraints, including financial pressure, statutory duties, political decision-making, regulatory requirements and competing demand. At the same time, there was a clear message that these constraints should not prevent more open communication, earlier involvement, proportionate processes and a greater willingness to test new approaches where existing ways of working are not delivering the outcomes communities need.

For the third sector, shared responsibility means engaging constructively, being clear about organisational capacity, collaborating where this strengthens impact, sharing learning and evidence where appropriate, and recognising the legal, financial and democratic responsibilities held by the Council. It also means continuing to bring challenge into the relationship where systems are not working well for communities. The feedback gathered through this work suggests that challenge should be understood as part of healthy partnership, not as a threat to relationships or funding.

For the Council, shared responsibility means creating the conditions in which the third sector can participate meaningfully. This includes clearer routes into services, transparent decision-making, realistic timescales, proportionate governance and

funding processes, and spaces where officers and organisations can work through complexity together. The engagement also highlighted that funding insecurity, unclear decision-making, difficulty navigating Council structures and inconsistent communication can all weaken trust and make partnership feel more fragile than it needs to be. The willingness to work differently therefore needs to be practical as well as cultural. It requires partners to move beyond consultation at the end of a process and towards earlier dialogue, joint problem-solving and shared learning about what works. Some of these challenges are illustrated in the case study below

Case study: On the Verge and pollinator sites on Council land

On the Verge has worked with Stirling Council and local communities over many years to create native wildflower and pollinator sites, including in school grounds and on community and council land. The work supports the Council's climate, nature and pollinator objectives, but the partnership experienced significant difficulty when an established route for agreeing sites was stopped before a clear replacement process was in place.

The experience highlighted several of the issues raised through this commission. On the Verge reported delays in communication, uncertainty about which part of the Council was responsible for decisions, and concern that internal processes across land, infrastructure, community development and legal services were not joined up. The organisation also felt that its repeated offers to help design a workable process were not taken up early enough, leading to missed seasonal windows for sowing and frustration for schools and community groups that were ready to participate.

A particular concern was that the council proposed agreement felt too legalistic for community and voluntary groups. From the third sector perspective, an agreement designed primarily to protect the Council risked discouraging the very community action needed to deliver the Council's own climate and nature commitments. The issue was not whether appropriate assurance was needed, but whether the process was proportionate, clear and suitable for voluntary groups with limited time and resources.

The position improved when officers and On the Verge were able to work through a practical example. Council land at Strathblane was used as a pilot to test the process. Strathblane Community Development Trust confirmed its support, site details were worked through, land and title issues were resolved, and the Council gave approval for the project to proceed while the paperwork was finalised. This showed that progress was possible when officers were responsive, issues were addressed directly and the focus returned to enabling community action rather than simply managing risk.

The case study shows both the risk and the opportunity for Stirling Civic Alliance. It demonstrates how delays, unclear ownership and disproportionate processes can damage trust and prevent delivery, even where the Council and third sector share the same objectives. It also shows that relationships can recover when there is honest communication, practical problem-solving, clear points of contact and a shared commitment to making collaboration work.

Earlier involvement and clearer routes to influence

A recurring theme was the need for earlier and more meaningful involvement. Organisations said that consultation can sometimes take place after the main direction of travel has already been set. This can leave the sector feeling that its role is to comment on decisions rather than help shape them. Where third sector organisations are involved earlier, they can help identify practical barriers,

unintended consequences and opportunities for delivery that may not be visible from within Council structures alone. Earlier involvement also helps reduce the risk that decisions are experienced as opaque or difficult to influence, particularly where organisations are trying to understand Council structures, funding routes or the point at which decisions are actually made.

Rural engagement reinforced this point strongly. Participants from rural community organisations said that consultation and partnership activity can sometimes be designed around urban assumptions, including central meeting locations, digital access, officer availability and organisational capacity. They emphasised that rural communities need to be involved before proposals are substantially developed, so that local knowledge, travel realities, connectivity issues and the capacity of small volunteer-led groups can shape decisions from the outset. Smaller, rural and volunteer-led organisations can experience barriers particularly sharply, as they may not have paid staff to follow up unanswered enquiries, interpret Council processes, travel to central meetings or attend repeated engagement sessions.

Recognising skills, assets and lived experience

The co-design work also highlighted the importance of recognising skills, assets and lived experience within the third sector. Participants reflected that community organisations can sometimes be perceived as less professional or less expert than public bodies, despite bringing substantial knowledge, technical skills, business experience and direct understanding of community need. The Alliance therefore needs to create spaces where different forms of expertise are valued and where challenge is understood as part of improving outcomes rather than as criticism.

Participants in the rural sessions also highlighted the importance of local knowledge and the multiple roles often held by people in smaller communities. Individuals may be involved in development trusts, community councils, schools, churches, village halls and voluntary groups at the same time. This can create strong networks of trust and practical intelligence about local priorities. The Alliance should recognise this as an asset, rather than treating overlapping roles or informal routes of influence as a complication.

Case study: CSREC and Stirling Council Resettlement Team

The Central Scotland Regional Equality Council (CSREC) works with individuals and families whose needs often cut across more than one service or policy area. Its work with Stirling Council's Resettlement Team was identified as a positive example of partnership working. The relationship was described as responsive, constructive and based on a shared willingness to resolve issues affecting people and communities.

In their interaction with the local community, CSREC identified a gap of knowledge on the changes to the Ukraine Extension Scheme. This has obviously created some confusion and concern amongst Ukrainian families who were asking their contacts within the Resettlement team for advice. After having conversations with colleagues at the Resettlement team, it was agreed that the best way forward would be to hold an information session open to both Ukrainian families and members of the Resettlement team. The session was run by CSREC staff who gave insight into the new scheme, what changes to expect, and who this applies to. An option for further 1-2-1 support was offered to those who required it through CSREC's Support & Advice Service. The feedback received from the Resettlement team was extremely positive, as it helped them understand better, thus enabling more confident conversations with their clients in future.

The case study also highlights why a wider relationship framework is needed. Even where there is a good relationship with one team, organisations may find it harder to navigate other parts of the Council, including housing or situations where people's immigration status changes and access to resources becomes more complex. Third sector organisations can feel that, when they raise these issues, they are seen as complaining rather than identifying service gaps that need shared attention.

This example shows the importance of a more consistent Council-wide approach to partnership. The relationship with the Resettlement Team provides a strong

foundation, but a more proactive shared vision, clearer routes into different Council services and ongoing dialogue about emerging needs would help partners respond earlier and more effectively. It also demonstrates the need for the Council and third sector to better understand one another's roles, pressures and constraints.

Consistency, communication and shared expectations

These themes are consistent with wider research on collaboration between the public and third sectors, including challenges around funding, procurement, meaningful collaboration and trust. They also reflect local experience, particularly where relationships depend on individual officers rather than consistent systems, clear routes for communication or shared expectations. Participants highlighted that inconsistent communication, limited space for innovation and learning from failure, reluctance to share data, and support that feels too standardised can all make partnership harder to sustain. The feedback does not suggest that one part of the system is solely responsible for these issues. Instead, it points to the need for a more consistent way of working that supports both Council officers and third sector partners to understand what is expected of them, while still allowing approaches to be tailored to the circumstances and capacity of different organisations.

Rural perspectives

The rural sessions echoed many of the themes raised across the wider consultation, including the importance of trust, clear communication, consistent routes into the Council and earlier involvement in planning and decision-making. However, participants also identified issues that affect rural organisations more acutely, including distance and travel, digital connectivity, thinner infrastructure and capacity, the need for proportionate processes, and the importance of drawing on deep local knowledge and existing community relationships.

Participants highlighted that rural organisations often operate with very limited paid capacity and may rely on a small number of volunteers to hold governance, funding, buildings, delivery and community leadership responsibilities together. They felt that one-size-fits-all approaches to consultation, compliance or reporting can be disproportionately burdensome for small, geographically isolated groups. They also

emphasised that digital participation is not always an adequate substitute for in-person engagement where broadband or mobile connectivity remains unreliable.

The sessions also identified existing strengths to build on. The Thomas Graham Community Library in Strathblane was highlighted as an example of how community organisations and the Council can work together to deliver ambitious outcomes that neither could achieve alone. Participants felt that this type of collaborative approach, built on trust, shared ownership and mutual respect, provides a useful model for the Alliance as it develops its future ways of working.

For Stirling Civic Alliance, the implication is that proportionate cannot mean a single fixed standard applied uniformly across the sector. What is proportionate for a well-resourced urban organisation may still be a significant barrier for a small rural group with limited capacity and infrastructure. Rural voice should therefore be embedded within the Alliance's governance, implementation and review arrangements, rather than treated as a one-off consultation exercise.

Themes from council officer engagement

Overall, officers were supportive of the ambition and intention behind Stirling Civic Alliance. They recognised the potential to build on existing examples of effective collaboration between Council services, third sector organisations and communities, including work linked to community safety, Women's Aid, Stirling Street Pastors, Safebase and Thomas Graham Community Library in Strathblane. Officers were clear, however, that the Alliance must lead to practical improvements in how people and organisations work together, rather than creating additional layers, structures or bureaucracy.

The strongest messages from the officer sessions were the need to keep the purpose and benefits of the Alliance clear; focus on practical improvements and real-world outcomes; build on existing strengths and relationships; improve communication, information sharing and transparency; develop a better shared understanding of roles, responsibilities and specialist knowledge; recognise that organisations have different levels of capacity; ensure smaller organisations can participate meaningfully; provide clarity around governance and accountability; avoid

unnecessary duplication; and allow time for trust, relationships and the Alliance itself to develop.

A particularly important distinction raised by officers was that capacity should not be confused with ability. Third sector organisations may have the knowledge, expertise and willingness to contribute, but not always the time, infrastructure or resource to engage fully. One officer summarised this clearly: *"The third sector may lack capacity, but certainly not ability."*

Officers also emphasised that stronger partnership working requires better two-way communication between operational services and strategic decision-makers. Existing forums and partnership structures were identified as potential routes for ensuring that frontline experience informs strategy, while strategic discussions are translated more clearly into operational activity. There was also interest in more consistent approaches to sharing outcomes information and organisational data, where appropriate, to build a fuller picture of community need, demand and impact across Stirling.

Case study: Inspiring Communities and external investment in local outcomes

Inspiring Communities provides an example of how third sector organisations can contribute to local priorities by attracting grant income from sources beyond local public funding. Through its strategic and delivery work, the organisation has secured support including National Lottery Strengthening Organisations funding, Access Foundation funding for digital inclusion, and National Lottery and UK-funded activity linked to early years and whole family support.

This investment is not only important to Inspiring Communities as an organisation. It also brings additional resource, learning and delivery capacity into Stirling. The REACH Strategic Review has supported work on participation, community voice, partnership working and place-based systems change. The digital inclusion programme has tested practical approaches based on trusted local relationships, flexible learning, one-to-one support, online safety and digital confidence-building. The early years and whole family support model has developed relationship-based, preventative and community-rooted support through trusted local spaces.

The case study illustrates that the third sector can add value to local outcomes in ways that go beyond direct service delivery. Organisations can bring in external funding, test models of support, gather evidence, host activity, provide accessible community space and share learning across partnerships. This can strengthen work already underway through wider local priorities, including digital inclusion, whole family support, community engagement and participation.

It also shows why a stronger relationship framework is important. When third sector organisations are involved early in partnership discussions, their funded activity and local learning can be better aligned with Community Planning priorities and Council objectives. This helps avoid duplication, makes better use of external investment and supports a more joined-up approach to improving outcomes for people and communities.

Governance, accountability and expectations were also recurring themes in engagement with Council colleagues. Officers discussed the need to be clear about how the Alliance will relate to existing structures, including Community Planning, Health and Social Care Partnership arrangements and the Integration Joint Board, while avoiding duplication. They also recognised that the Council holds statutory, regulatory and organisational responsibilities that can create both opportunities and constraints within partnership relationships. This reinforces the need for clear roles, proportionate quality assurance, honest conversations about risk, and development support where organisations are being asked to take on greater responsibility.

The overall message from officers was that the Alliance should be ambitious in intention but realistic in implementation. It should strengthen what already exists, create better connections, and provide a clear and flexible framework for working together without becoming overly complex or bureaucratic.

How the main engagement themes shaped the Alliance

The feedback we received through the various engagement we have carried out has shaped Stirling Civic Alliance. As will become evident from our overview of The Alliance below, engagement has informed the vision and principles, the four Spheres of Partnership, the emphasis on movement rather than hierarchy, and the need for

practical arrangements covering communication, coordination, knowledge exchange, shared learning and proportionate accountability as set out below. Our engagement has also reinforced the importance of keeping the Alliance live and adaptable, so that it can respond to learning over time rather than becoming a static document. The approach has also drawn on emerging work on Human Learning Systems, which recognises that social outcomes are created in complex systems and cannot always be improved through linear plans, fixed targets or compliance-based relationships alone. This is relevant to the Alliance because many of the issues affecting people and communities in Stirling cut across services, organisations and funding streams. A stronger partnership therefore needs to support learning, adaptation and shared problem-solving, as well as clear accountability.

Introducing Stirling Civic Alliance

Stirling Civic Alliance is a shared charter and practical framework for partnership working between Stirling Council and the third sector. Its purpose is to make the relationship clearer, more consistent and more accountable, while recognising that different organisations will engage in different ways at different times.

The Alliance should also create space for Stirling to test collaborative approaches similar to those being developed elsewhere in Scotland that wholly reset the involvement of people and communities in decision making.

Vision and principles

The vision for Stirling Civic Alliance is:

Strong, collaborative partnership between Stirling Council and the third sector. A bold, interconnected and accountable network of support and opportunities for local people across our communities, valuing everyone's strengths and making the most of shared resources. A place where everybody thrives.

The partnership is founded on five principles that guide how partners work together:

Trust - partners act transparently, keep commitments, communicate clearly and share information proportionately.

Respect - partners value all contributions and perspectives, regardless of organisation size, status, geography or formal role.

Inclusion - diverse voices are actively heard and barriers to participation are recognised and removed wherever possible

.

Courage and disruption - partners are willing to challenge assumptions, take considered risks, learn together and create space for transformational change.

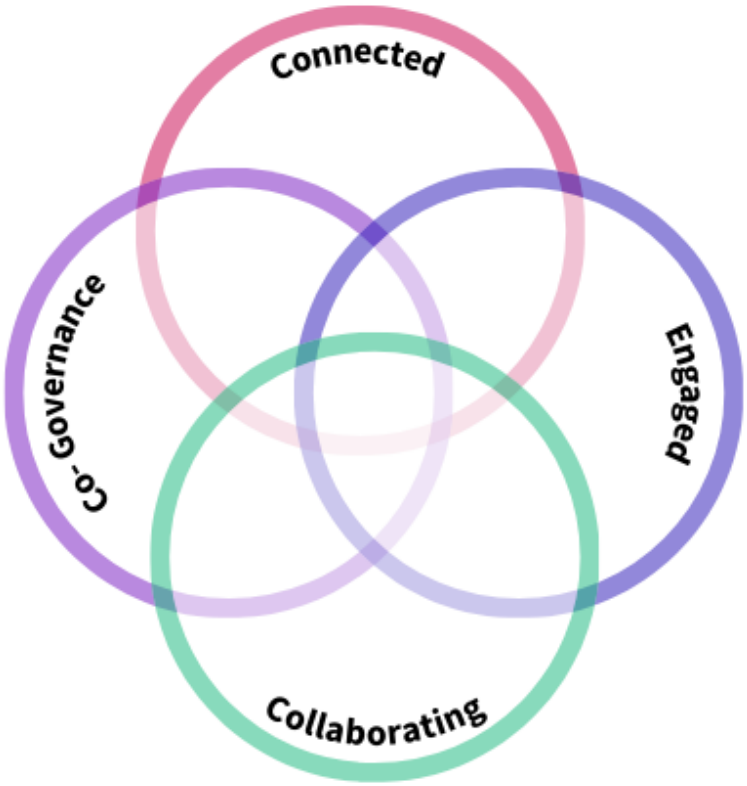
Outcomes driven - partners focus on real impact and improvement for people and communities across Stirling.

Spheres of Partnership

The Spheres of Partnership provide a practical way to put the vision and principles into action. They recognise that organisations contribute to Stirling in different ways, with different levels of capacity, experience, responsibility and appetite for formal partnership. A small volunteer-led group, a community council, a local charity, a social enterprise and a strategic delivery partner may all make valuable contributions, but they will not all need the same type of relationship with the Council.

The model is therefore not a hierarchy and does not suggest that one form of contribution is more valuable than another. It is intended to create clearer routes for connection, engagement, collaboration and co-governance. Movement between spheres is expected as circumstances change, and some organisations may sit across more than one sphere depending on the activity, issue or partnership involved. The spaces between the spheres are also important, as this is often where new ideas, joint projects and innovation emerge.

The intersecting spheres of the Civic Alliance



Stirling Council, Community Planning partners and SVE will enable the spheres by creating opportunities for organisations to connect with one another and with wider community planning, empowerment and renewal activity. This should include practical routes for organisations to find the right contact, understand what opportunities are available, take part in discussions at a level that is proportionate to their capacity, and raise issues when partnership arrangements are not working as intended. It should also include clearer routes for third sector involvement in Community Planning Partnership structures, so that the sector is not only consulted on priorities but able to help shape, deliver and review them.

Third sector organisations will be invited to sign up to Stirling Civic Alliance and identify the sphere, or spheres, most relevant to their current role and capacity. This should not be treated as a fixed status. It should be a way of starting a conversation about how an organisation wants to engage, what support or information it may need, and what contribution it can make to local outcomes.

Sphere 1: Connected - for informal volunteer groups, newly formed initiatives and organisations that want a light-touch relationship with the Alliance. This sphere is about visibility, inclusion and simple connection. Groups in this sphere may want to receive information, be listed in a directory, understand what support exists, attend occasional networking or training, or be kept informed about local opportunities. Expectations should be minimal and proportionate, recognising that many groups are run by volunteers and may have limited formal capacity.

Sphere 2: Engaged - for constituted groups and organisations delivering regular activities. Organisations in this sphere may want to take part more actively in discussions, access small grants, use community venues, receive capacity-building support, or develop governance and volunteer management arrangements. The relationship is more active than Sphere 1, but expectations should still be matched to scale and capacity. The focus should be on helping organisations build confidence, resilience and connection without creating unnecessary administrative burden.

Sphere 3: Collaborating - for established charities, social enterprises and community organisations working around shared outcomes. Organisations in this sphere may contribute to joint planning, policy and service development, locality

work, thematic partnerships and Community Planning structures. They may also be involved in commissioning, procurement or funded delivery where this is appropriate. The focus is on working together earlier and more openly, so that services, projects and strategies are informed by community insight and practical delivery experience. This sphere is particularly relevant to the Community Planning Partnership, where third sector participation should help shape priorities, identify barriers, support prevention and strengthen delivery across partner organisations.

Sphere 4: Co-Governance - for anchor organisations, strategic delivery partners and community-led partnerships that are ready to share responsibility for long-term outcomes, services or community infrastructure. This is the most ambitious sphere of the Alliance. It is where partners move beyond consultation and conventional project delivery into shared leadership, shared problem-solving and shared accountability for change. Organisations in this sphere may be involved in long-term investment, strategic development, co-delivery, shared governance, innovation activity, asset-based approaches or community-led transformation. Sphere 4 is not defined by organisational size alone. It is defined by the nature of the role being played, the level of trust between partners and the willingness to work across organisational and sectoral boundaries in pursuit of better outcomes for people and communities. This sphere carries higher expectations around governance, evidence, accountability and shared responsibility. It also requires public partners to create the conditions for genuine influence, early involvement and transparent decision-making where third sector partners are being asked to take on greater responsibility. Within the Community Planning Partnership, this could include third sector leadership or co-leadership of relevant groups, shared review of progress against outcomes, and involvement in decisions about future priorities and resources. Examples such as Artlink Central's involvement in Scene Stirling or Edinburgh’s Regenerative Futures Fund show how co-governance can shift partnership from consultation into practical, participatory and long-term community investment.

Though the spheres are numbered, the model should be seen as dynamic and interactive rather than linear. While it is hoped that the model will support groups to

'move through' the spheres over time, it is not necessarily expected that this journey should be progressive. A group may begin in sphere 1 as an informal, volunteer run community group. However, an opportunity may arise through community asset transfer or community energy programmes, for example, that enables them to move into collaboration (sphere 3) without necessarily having first moved through sphere 2. With appropriate support from both SVE and Stirling Council, it is possible, and indeed desirable for this to happen. This does not mean however that we would not expect that the same level of governance and due diligence to take place. Rather that for the model to work well, it should be possible for any group with the correct support to be able to benefit from opportunities such as collaboration. Likewise, it is possible for small groups with an informal structure and governance, to take on and enable some of the transformative work that we envisage in the Co-Governance sphere.

An exciting example of a group that are working well in the co-governance space is McLaren Community Futures (MCF).

Case Study: Moving through the spheres – McLaren Community Futures

Established in December 2024, MCF is an informal grouping that has enabled small community-led local development trusts and rural community groups to come together under a shared umbrella. Representing 10 community organisations covering 600 square miles, and 70% of the Stirling Council district, they provide an important voice for dispersed rural communities. Key areas of focus include local infrastrucure, the environment, resilience, transport and the local economy. By working together to bring a collective voice to key issues, they are able to work more effectively and with greater impact locally than through their membership working individually.

This model goes beyond the traditional community group to a reimagining of the role of communities in developing and delivering public service, influence and change in the local area. On the face of things, given the recency of being established and their informal governance, MCF might appear a more natural fit in Sphere 1. However, their approach and impact to date places them firmly in the co-governance sphere.

MCF demonstrates the wider purpose of Sphere 4: a space where transformational change can happen across organisational and sectoral boundaries, and where partners are willing to put outcomes for people and communities ahead of institutional boundaries or traditional roles.

Shared commitments

For the Alliance to make a difference, the principles need to be reflected in everyday behaviours, decisions and systems. The recommended commitments below set out what partners can expect from one another. They are intended to provide a practical basis for partnership. They should help Council officers and third sector organisations understand what good partnership looks like in practice and provide a shared reference point when relationships are working well or when issues need to be addressed.

The commitments recognise that partnership is a two-way relationship. Stirling Council has particular responsibilities because of its statutory duties, decision-making powers, assets and resources. The third sector also has responsibilities to engage constructively, represent communities carefully, be clear about capacity and maintain good governance. Shared commitments are therefore important because trust is built through consistent behaviour on both sides.

Stirling Council commitments

Stirling Council will:

- recognise the third sector as a valued partner and draw on its expertise, insight and community connections.
- involve the third sector as early as possible in relevant strategy, policy and service design.
- communicate openly and responsively, including greater clarity about who to contact, how decisions are made and what response times partners can expect.
- create opportunities for a broad and diverse range of organisations and communities to influence decisions.

- work towards fair, transparent and sustainable funding, commissioning and procurement arrangements, recognising that a mixed funding environment is necessary and positive.
- create the conditions for constructive challenge, shared learning and innovation.
- work with partners to understand, measure and improve outcomes for people and communities across Stirling.
- champion Stirling Civic Alliance commitments across Stirling Council and seek regular assurance, through officer reporting and third sector feedback, that they are being embedded in training, leadership, behaviours and day-to-day practice.

In practice, these commitments mean that Council services should involve the third sector early where decisions affect communities, avoid unnecessary jargon and process complexity, provide clear routes for communication and escalation, and explain decisions wherever possible. They also mean recognising that proportionate processes are essential if smaller organisations and volunteer-led groups are to participate meaningfully.

Third sector commitments

Third Sector partners will:

- bring independent voice, community insight and lived experience into strategic discussions and decision-making, including supportive challenge where systems, services or decisions are not working well for people and communities.
- work through representative structures and networks where appropriate to provide informed and constructive sector perspectives.
- work constructively across organisations and sectors to shape solutions to shared challenges, maximise impact and avoid unnecessary duplication.
- contribute expertise, learning and good practice to strengthen collective capacity and improve outcomes.

- demonstrate strong governance, accountability and responsible use of resources, proportionate to organisational scale and role.
- gather and share evidence, data and insight where appropriate to support learning, planning and evaluation.
- support the principles of fair work, volunteering good practice and inclusive participation.
- champion Stirling Civic Alliance commitments within third sector organisations, reflecting them in leadership, governance, behaviours and day-to-day practice.

In practice, these commitments mean that third sector organisations should engage openly about what they can and cannot do, raise concerns early and constructively, contribute evidence and learning where possible, and work with one another to strengthen the collective voice of the sector. They also mean recognising that the Council operates within legal, financial and political constraints, while continuing to provide challenge where systems or decisions are not working well for communities.

Shared commitments should be reviewed as the Alliance develops. This will allow partners to test whether the commitments are helping in practice, whether they are understood by Council staff and third sector organisations, and whether further guidance or examples are needed. This review should be focused on learning and improvement, rather than blame, and should include space to recognise positive partnership practice as well as address problems.

Governance and accountability

Stirling Civic Alliance will require clear but proportionate governance if it is to remain active, credible and useful. Governance should provide oversight, support learning and improvement, and create a route for resolving issues, without adding unnecessary bureaucracy for either the Council or the third sector.

The Alliance should have a clear route for review and reporting. This may include a senior officer lead within Stirling Council, elected member sponsorship, a third sector champion role and a joint space where Council officers, SVE and third sector representatives can review progress, share learning and address barriers. As

implementation develops, this governance route should connect to the Community Planning Partnership, so that learning from the Alliance can inform the next Stirling Plan and wider local outcome priorities.

Governance arrangements should focus on shared accountability rather than compliance alone. This means asking whether the Alliance is improving communication, supporting earlier involvement, reducing barriers, strengthening participation and helping partners work together more effectively around local outcomes.

Third sector partners reflected that the Alliance should include a clear and trusted mechanism for raising concerns constructively and safely, particularly where funding, commissioning or service relationships may make challenge feel sensitive. This should support early resolution, protect open dialogue and help partners address issues before they damage trust or future collaboration.

Officer engagement highlighted that governance should clarify accountability without creating another layer of bureaucracy. This includes being clear about decision-making, escalation, quality assurance and how the Alliance connects to existing partnership arrangements. It also means recognising the Council's statutory and regulatory responsibilities while creating the conditions for relationship-based working and shared problem-solving.

Implementation and indicative budget

Implementation should focus on the practical steps needed to move Stirling Civic Alliance from a shared framework into day-to-day practice. These steps should flow from the principles, the Spheres of Partnership and the shared commitments. The emphasis should be on creating the conditions for clearer communication, proportionate processes, participation, shared learning and stronger routes for co-governance.

The action plan at Appendix 3 therefore identifies areas to explore over the first 18 months, including practical coordination, participation support, proportionate processes, collaboration funding, community benefit, policy participation, asset transfer and longer-term community investment. These actions are intended to be

tested and refined with Council officers, SVE, Community Planning partners and the third sector, with a view to informing both Council practice and future Community Planning arrangements. The plan is aligned to the five principles of Stirling Civic Alliance and sets out proposed actions, lead partners, phasing and an indicative budget of £200,000 from the Thriving Communities Budget. This budget was reported to the Community Wellbeing Committee alongside the update paper presented in February 2026.

Progress against the commitments should be measured through delivery of the implementation action plan and through regular feedback from Council officers, SVE and third sector partners on the quality of the working relationship, including communication, trust, responsiveness and the ability to address issues constructively. This could be supported by developing a refreshed annual survey of third sector partners, providing a consistent way to track experience, identify areas for improvement and understand whether the Alliance is strengthening partnership practice over time.

Risks and conditions for success

The Alliance has significant potential, but there is a risk that expectations are raised without sufficient follow-through. The main risks are that the framework becomes symbolic, that partners do not have the capacity to engage, that communication and decision-making remain inconsistent, or that the model is seen as an additional process rather than a way to improve outcomes.

There is clear will to make a change. However, this cultural change, across organisational and sectoral boundaries will require people to recognise and reduce power dynamics and commit to a new way of working. Likewise, an ongoing risk identified by the third sector is all involved being too risk averse in our approach to transformation. The conditions for success include clear senior management ownership within Stirling Council, visible support from elected members, continued third sector leadership through SVE and sector networks, sufficient coordination capacity, honest communication about constraints, and a shared willingness to test, learn and adapt over time.

Council officer feedback adds a further condition for success: implementation must be translated into practical tools and behaviours that staff and partners can use in day-to-day work. This includes clearer contact routes, shared examples, guidance on proportionality, better use of existing forums, and mechanisms for bringing frontline experience into strategic decision-making.

Recommendations and next steps

This report recommends that Stirling Council recognises Stirling Civic Alliance as the framework for strengthening the relationship between the Council and the third sector in Stirling. In doing so, the Council recognises the evidence gathered through this commission and the clear appetite across the third sector and Council officers for a more consistent, transparent and outcomes-focused way of working. The recommendation is not simply to endorse a document, but to support a change in how partnership is understood, enabled and practised across Stirling.

Following Council approval, the Stirling Civic Alliance Steering Group will be established to:

- launch Stirling Civic Alliance by sharing the agreed principles, Spheres of Partnership and Stirling Council and third sector commitments;
- finalise the implementation action plan and confirm key actions, responsibilities and the indicative budget;
- establish a review cycle based on learning, evidence and improvement; and
- integrate Stirling Civic Alliance into existing partnership structures and the development of the next Stirling Plan beyond 2027.

Implementation should be approached as a process of system and culture change, rather than a short-term launch activity. It will require visible values-based leadership, honest communication about constraints, and a willingness from all partners to look beyond job titles, organisational boundaries and institutional defensiveness where these get in the way of shared outcomes. The measure of success should be whether the Alliance helps people work together more effectively around the things that matter to communities: earlier support,

stronger relationships, more meaningful participation, fairer access to opportunity and better local outcomes.

Acknowledgements

SVE and Stirling Council would like to thank all organisations and individuals who contributed to the development of Stirling Civic Alliance through co-design sessions, consultation events, one-to-one discussions and wider engagement. Particular thanks are due to the members of the core co-design group, whose time, experience and constructive challenge helped shape the framework.

- Kevin Harrison, Artlink Central
- Janette Mitchell, Inspiring Communities
- Neil Fergusson, Kilmadock Community Development Trust
- Ally Scott, Stirling Community Enterprise
- Scott McMurray, Stirling Pride
- Mairi Breslin, Radical Weavers
- Laura Johnston, Forth Valley Welcome
- Maciej Kornobis, Bannockburn Rugby Football Club
- Eman Hani, Central Scotland Regional Equality Council (CSREC)

Thanks are also extended to the Stirling Council officers who contributed to the development and testing of the emerging framework and to SVE staff who supported facilitation, engagement and drafting throughout the process.

Appendix 1: Profile of the Third Sector in Stirling

SCVO PowerBI data identifies 794 third sector organisations in Stirling, with a combined income of £141,796,817 and 2,465 paid staff. This demonstrates the third sector as a significant part of Stirling's social and economic infrastructure, as well as a key delivery and community partner. The figures should also be understood as a minimum picture of the sector, as they do not fully capture informal groups, unincorporated activity, volunteer time, community organising or the wider social value created through local relationships and unpaid contribution.

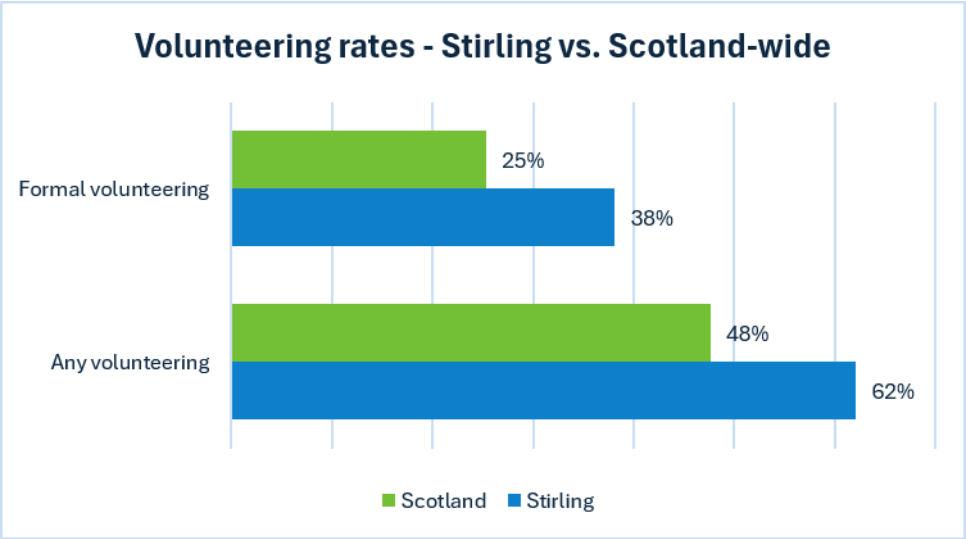
The SCVO data excludes formal education providers such as universities, colleges and private schools, non-departmental public bodies, arms-length external organisations and CICs limited by shares. It is therefore useful as a baseline, but it should be read alongside local knowledge held by SVE, Council services and community partners.

Local Authority	No. of orgs	Paid Staff	Income 2025	Expenditure 2025
Stirling	794	2465	£141,796,817	£144,067,739

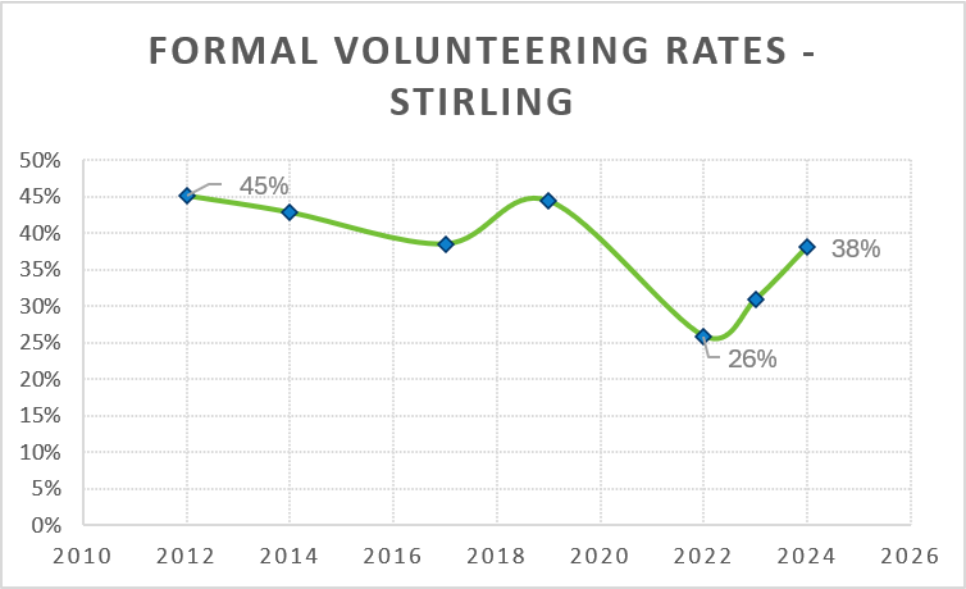
SCVO: State of the Sector – Size and Shape. Last Updated May 2026

Volunteering in Stirling

The third sector would not exist without volunteers. The Scottish Household Survey 2024 local authority data shows that volunteering remains a significant strength within Stirling. In 2024, 62.1% of adults in Stirling reported taking part in some form of volunteering in the previous 12 months, compared with 47.6% across Scotland. This places Stirling well above the national average and reinforces the importance of volunteering as part of the area's civic life, community resilience and third sector infrastructure.



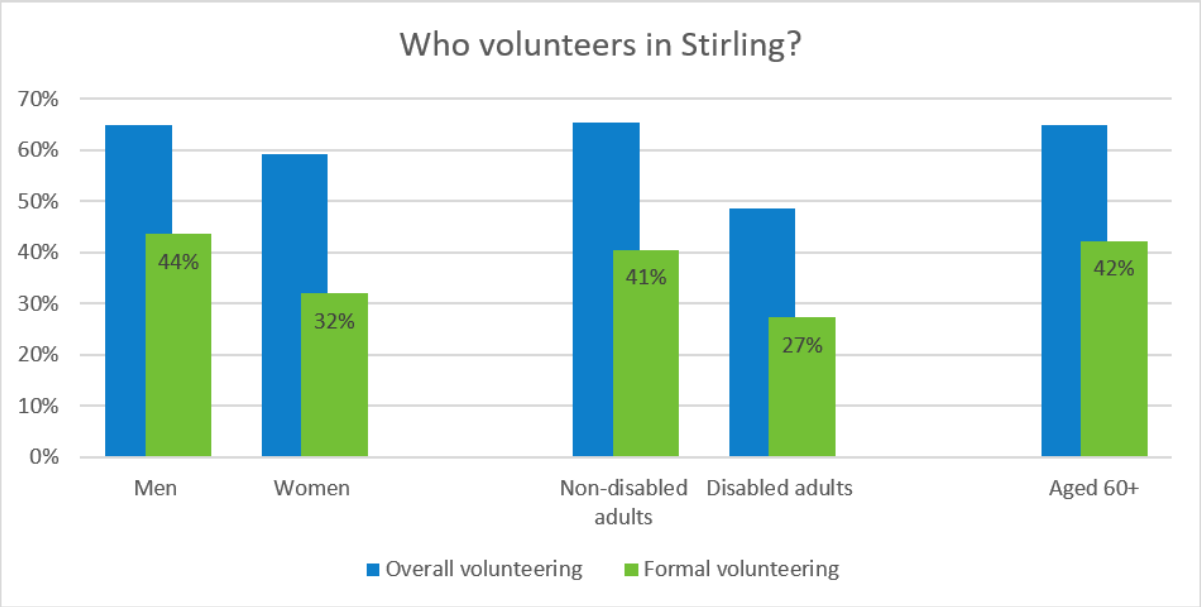
Formal volunteering, which means unpaid help given through an organisation, group or club, has also recovered strongly. In 2024, 38.1% of adults in Stirling formally volunteered, compared with 25.3% across Scotland. This is a substantial recovery from 25.9% in 2022 and suggests that Stirling's volunteer-involving organisations have rebuilt capacity and participation following the disruption of the Covid-19 period.



The Stirling volunteering population is made up of different forms of contribution: 23.1% of adults undertook both formal and informal volunteering, 15.0% undertook formal volunteering only, and 24.1% undertook informal volunteering only. Volunteering in Stirling is not limited to formal organisations. It also includes

neighbourly help, practical support, befriending, transport, childcare, advocacy, environmental action and other forms of unpaid community support.

The data highlights the contribution volunteers make to reducing loneliness and social isolation, helping people access services, supporting children and young people, keeping people active, and sustaining local organisations and activities. It also points to inequalities in participation, particularly for disabled residents and people living in more deprived communities. Disabled adults in Stirling reported lower overall volunteering participation than non-disabled adults, and formal volunteering rates were highest in the least deprived communities.

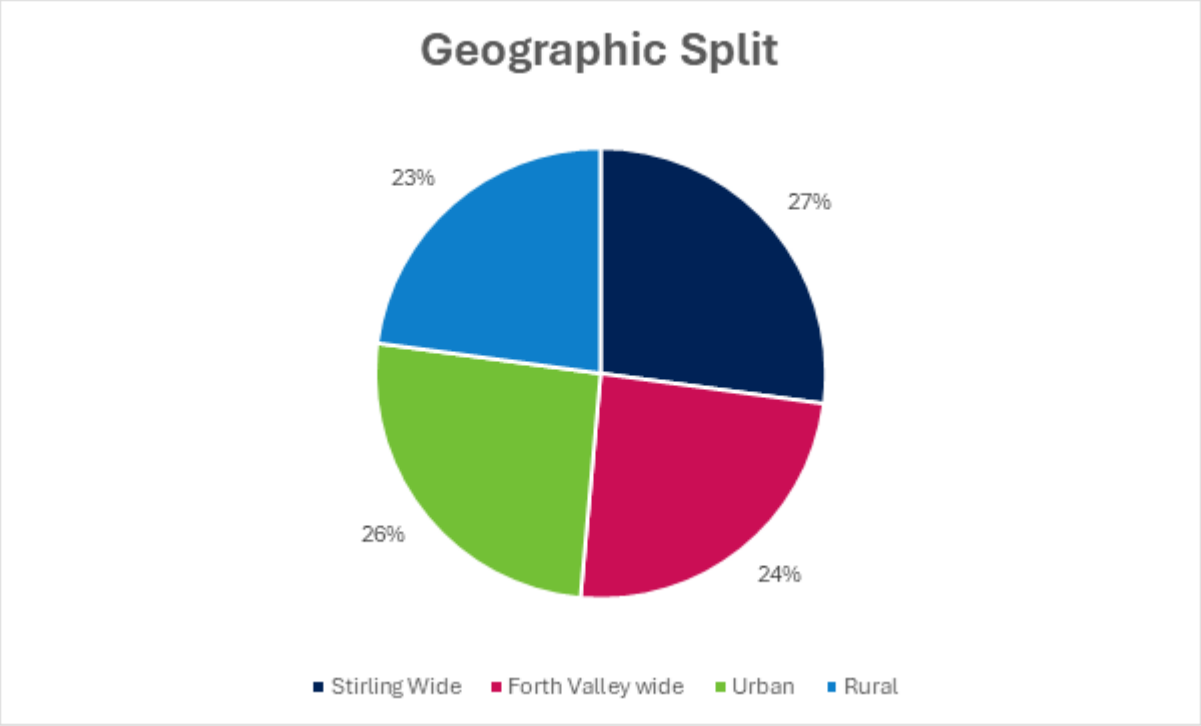


These findings matter for Stirling Civic Alliance because volunteering is both a practical contribution and a powerful form of civic participation. Volunteers support services and activities, but they also build social connection, identify emerging need, help people navigate systems and bring local knowledge into decision-making. Effective partnership with the third sector therefore needs to create the conditions for volunteering to thrive, including inclusive practice, clear routes into volunteering, proportionate processes and support for volunteer-involving organisations. Stirling was the first local area in Scotland to develop an action plan aligned with the National Strategy for Volunteering. The action plan, Stirling's Alive with Volunteering, will be refreshed in 2027 with input from Stirling Civic Alliance informing the next stage.

For the Alliance, the message is clear: volunteering should be recognised as one of Stirling's key community assets. The priority is not only to celebrate high levels of participation, but to widen access, reduce barriers, support volunteer-led groups and make sure volunteers and volunteer-involving organisations have a meaningful voice in local partnership discussions.

Appendix 2: Profile of engagement activity for the Civic Alliance November 2025 – August 2026

The geographical distribution of organisations engaged through the consultation process was as follows:



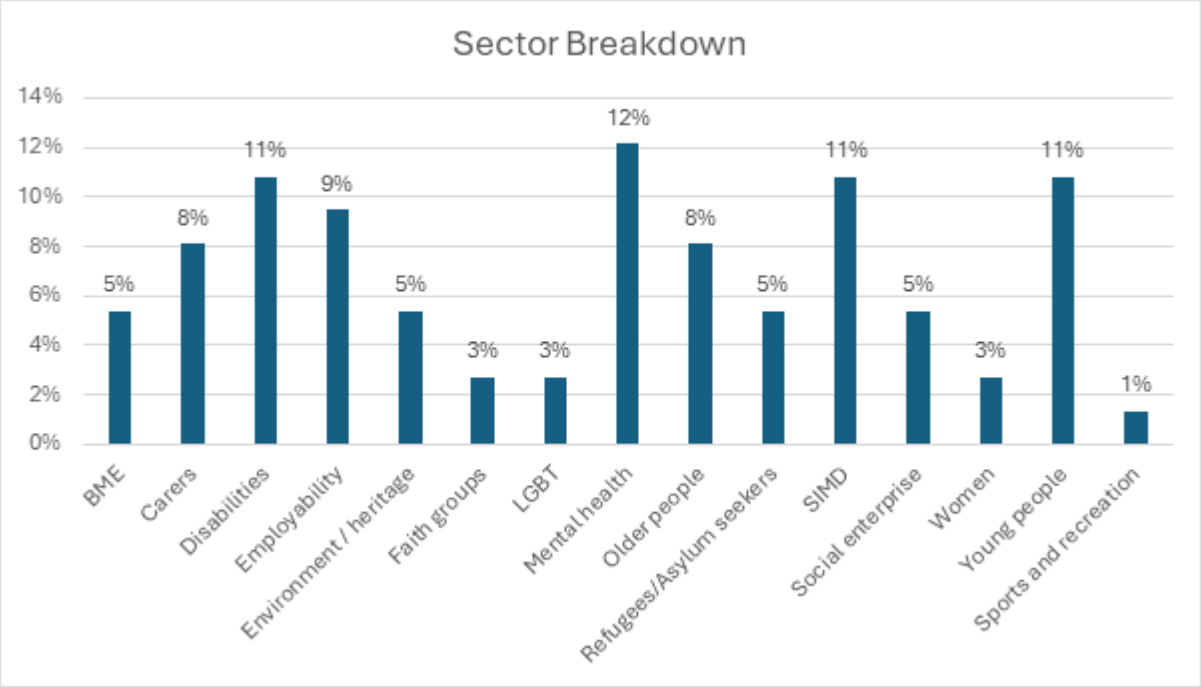
The geographical profile of organisations engaged through the consultation process demonstrates a notably balanced spread across Stirling's third sector. Organisations operating across Stirling accounted for 27% of engagement, while 26% were urban organisations, 24% operated across Forth Valley and 23% were based within rural communities. This relatively even distribution suggests that the engagement process successfully reached organisations working at different geographical scales, from small community-based groups embedded within individual geographic communities to larger charities and social enterprises operating across Stirling and the wider Forth Valley area.

This balance is important in the context of Stirling's unique geography. As one of Scotland's largest local authority areas by landmass, Stirling contains both urban populations and a significant number of dispersed rural communities, each facing different opportunities and challenges. The strong representation from rural

organisations helps ensure that issues such as transport, digital connectivity, access to services and rural sustainability are reflected within the findings, while the engagement of Stirling-wide and Forth Valley-wide organisations provides insight into strategic issues, partnership working and service delivery across larger geographies.

Although there is no comprehensive dataset categorising the entire Stirling third sector by geographical reach, the distribution achieved through this consultation is broadly consistent with the known composition of the sector. This reflects Stirling's third sector as comprising of a mixture of locally rooted community groups, voluntary organisations, charities and social enterprises, and the engagement therefore provides confidence that both grassroots community voices and larger strategic organisations have been represented in shaping the development of the Stirling Civic Alliance.

The consultation process engaged organisations working across a wide range of thematic areas and beneficiary groups. Analysing participation by sector helps assess how representative the engagement was of Stirling's wider third sector and highlights which communities and areas of work were most strongly represented throughout the development of the Stirling Civic Alliance:



The largest proportion of organisations engaged through the consultation process were those operating within social care and wellbeing, accounting for 23% of participants. This includes organisations supporting mental health, people with disabilities or additional support needs, and carers. The next most represented thematic areas were organisations working with young people, employability services and communities experiencing socio-economic disadvantage (SIMD). It should be noted that many organisations work across multiple thematic areas and therefore contribute to more than one category within the analysis.

This profile is broadly consistent with national third sector trends identified through SCVO's State of the Sector research, which highlights social care, health and wellbeing, and services for children and young people as amongst the most common areas of third sector activity. The strong representation from these sectors provides confidence that the consultation captured the views of organisations working with some of the communities experiencing the greatest levels of need and inequality.

Lower levels of participation were recorded from faith groups, LGBTQ+ organisations and women's organisations. While these perspectives were represented within the consultation, they comprised a smaller proportion of participants than other sectors. Similarly, organisations focused on sport and recreation accounted for only 1% of participants. This contrasts with the wider third sector landscape, where sports clubs, recreational groups and faith-based organisations make up a significant proportion of community-led organisations. While the breadth of engagement achieved was strong overall, these findings suggest opportunities for future engagement activity to further strengthen participation from these sectors and ensure an even broader range of voices are represented.

In addition to the thematic profile illustrated above, 23% of organisations engaged with were Community Development Trusts and 20% were council participants.

The prominence of community organisations and Development Trusts reflects the strong place-based nature of Stirling's third sector, where many groups exist to support the overall wellbeing, resilience and development of their local communities rather than a specific beneficiary group or service area. Their substantial representation within the consultation demonstrates the extent to which local

community voices have informed the development of the Stirling Civic Alliance. Similarly, the participation rates from Stirling Council officers highlights the importance of partnership working between the third and public sectors and reflects a shared interest in strengthening collaborative approaches to community planning and service delivery across Stirling.

Dedicated rural engagement

Alongside the wider co-design and sector engagement, SVE ran two dedicated consultation sessions with rural third sector organisations and community groups. One session was held online on 31 March and one was held in person in Killearn on 29 April 2026. These sessions were held separately from the main co-design and Breakfast Club engagement in November 2025 because rural organisations often face a distinct set of pressures that can be lost within a wider, urban-weighted conversation if they are not deliberately sought out.

In total, the sessions brought together 17 individuals representing organisations from across rural Stirlingshire, including Thornhill Development Trust, Killearn Community Futures, Strathard Community Trust, Drymen Community Development Trust, East Loch Lomond Community Trust and Strathblane Community Development Trust. The organisations reflected the diversity of geography, population size and organisational capacity found outside Stirling's urban centre.

Council officer engagement

In addition to third sector engagement, we were keen to engage with council officers to gain their perspectives on the existing relationship with the third sector. Through this 13 Stirling Council officers participated across three dedicated consultation sessions. Officers represented a range of service areas including Community Development, Economic Development, Children and Families, Business Development, Education and Waste Services. Their involvement provided valuable insight into existing relationships between the Council and the third sector, helping to ensure that the development of the Stirling Civic Alliance considered both third sector and public sector perspectives.

Appendix 3: 18-month implementation action plan and indicative budget

This action plan sets out potential areas for development over the first 18 months of Stirling Civic Alliance. It is aligned to the five principles of the Alliance and should be treated as a practical working plan rather than a fixed delivery schedule. It will require further discussion with Stirling Council, SVE, Community Planning partners and the wider third sector before final budgets, responsibilities and timescales are confirmed.

Actions	**Resource implications**
Principle: Trust	
1. Alliance partnership coordination: establish the practical coordination arrangements needed to embed the Alliance, support implementation, maintain momentum and provide a constructive critical friendship function between partners.	Coordination capacity, senior Council ownership, third sector participation, administration and reporting support.
2. Community directory: build or update a directory of third sector organisations, groups, services, activities and areas of expertise, drawing where possible on existing sector data and systems such as MILO or Team Kinetic.	System development, data maintenance, communications input, technical support and Community Development input where required.
3. Internal change management and response standards: support culture change within Stirling Council by agreeing clear communication standards, routes into services, escalation routes and expected response times for partner communications.	Council officer time, senior leadership support, internal communications, staff guidance and monitoring arrangements.
4. Membership assets and visible identity: create a simple Alliance identity, such as a logo, badge	Design and communications support may be required.

or sign-up mark, to support visibility and recognition.	
Principle: Respect	
1. Learning and development fund: invest in leadership, skills and knowledge exchange opportunities for third sector organisations and Stirling Council staff, including practical learning on partnership, participation, procurement, governance and outcomes.	Learning budget, facilitation, administration, venues, accessibility costs and staff time from participating organisations.
2. Networking and learning exchanges: build on existing sector networking activity and develop additional learning opportunities where needed, including shadowing between Council officers and third sector organisations.	Administration support, facilitation, communications and Council officer participation.
3. Capacity support: clarify the support available to third sector organisations, including governance, evaluation, funding, compliance and organisational development.	Organisational development capacity, Community Development input and possible commissioned support.
4. Proportionate governance and compliance: develop a simple governance self-assessment or checklist linked to the principles and relevant opportunities, avoiding unnecessary burden.	Development time, Council input where linked to funding, assets or procurement, and possible external modules.
Principle: Inclusion	
1. Open and transparent funding opportunities: publish clear information on available funding, eligibility, decision-making, timescales, reporting expectations and feedback routes, so that	Council funding, finance and communications input, administration time and agreed public-facing guidance.

organisations can understand how opportunities are accessed and assessed.	
2. Small grants fund: develop a small grants approach that supports participation, collaboration and local outcomes, including support for organisations to take part in co-design activity aimed at transforming services to better meet community needs.	Funding allocation, administration, proportionate decision-making, accessibility costs and simple reporting arrangements.
3. Mix of grants, in-kind support and procurement: develop guidance that explains the different types of support available, including grants, in-kind help, access to assets, community benefit and procurement, and when each route is most appropriate.	Council finance, procurement, legal and asset input, third sector engagement and communications support.
4. Venue and community space access: review access to Council venues and other community spaces, including charging policy, discounts, priority booking, cost offsets or free access where activity contributes to agreed local outcomes.	Council discount or access support, venue-holding partner input and possible community space access fund.
5. Volunteer recognition and access: explore ways to recognise volunteers, including access to local events, cultural activity or civic opportunities.	Partner contributions may be needed, including event allocation rather than direct budget.
Principle: Courage and disruption	
1. Collaboration catalyst fund: provide small, flexible support for early-stage partnership ideas, joint projects and pilots that test new ways of working.	Fund allocation, light-touch administration and partner panel.

2. Equipment and community benefit: explore an equipment offer linked to the Community Benefit Portal, enabling suppliers or partners to respond to practical asks from community groups.	Council procurement and community benefit input, coordination and supplier engagement.
3. Transformation Space test: explore whether Stirling Civic Alliance could test a Transformation Space style approach for one or two complex issues, drawing on learning from Clackmannanshire.	Community Planning partner involvement, facilitation support and support for lived experience participation.
4. Partnership funds pilot: test a partnership approach to future funding opportunities where public sector and third sector partners have shared interests, with outcomes agreed early and proportionate processes built in.	Council and Community Planning partner input, coordination and shared funding development time.
Principle: Outcomes driven	
1. Procurement and commissioning readiness: support organisations to understand procurement, frameworks and commissioning opportunities where relevant, while also reviewing how procurement processes can be made clearer, more proportionate and accessible to third sector providers.	Council procurement input, training support, supplier engagement, legal input where required and third sector participation.
2. Participation in policy and Community Planning structures: review Community Planning Partnership and related structures, and co-design options to increase meaningful third sector involvement.	Community Planning partner involvement, Council strategic input and third sector leadership.
3. Three-year funding commitment: explore a commitment to three-year funding arrangements for third sector organisations delivering	Council funding policy, budget planning, legal and finance

substantial or strategically important services, where this supports stability, prevention and better outcomes.	input, and engagement with affected organisations.
4. Stirling long-term community investment model: consider whether Stirling could develop a pooled, long-term community investment model inspired by Edinburgh's Regenerative Futures Fund.	Charitable funder engagement, Council input, coordination and local anchor organisation involvement.
5. Shared data and impact systems: develop systems to record, understand and share the impact of work with communities across public and third sector organisations, supporting better planning, evaluation and learning.	Data, digital and evaluation support, information governance input, partner participation and reporting capacity.
6. Co-governance and asset transfer: explore third sector roles in Community Planning governance and develop clearer routes for asset transfer, including an asset interest portal and joint asset review.	Council asset, legal and Community Planning input, third sector engagement and support for shared governance arrangements.
7. Implementation guidance and launch engagement: develop practical implementation guidance, launch and sign-up materials, and a review cycle so that the Alliance is understood, used and improved over time.	Communications, design, officer engagement, event support, administration and review capacity.

The action plan should be developed alongside the proposed £200,000 enabling budget. Not every action will require a separate budget line. Some actions may be delivered through existing staff time, changes to process, better coordination or use of existing programmes. Where new investment is required, this should be prioritised against the actions most likely to strengthen participation, improve partnership practice and support better outcomes for people and communities.