



Strategic Plan 2026 – 2030



OUR VISION

Strong local communities where everyone can get involved and make a difference.

OUR MISSION

To bring people together, creating opportunities that make life better and communities stronger.

OUR VALUES

Inclusive

We value people's strengths, actively seek out overlooked voices, and promote fairness and equity in all we do.

Collaborative

We work openly with communities, charities, partners and public bodies to achieve the best outcomes.

Caring

We act with empathy, protecting wellbeing and safety, and making a positive difference.

Creative

We use fresh ideas and creative practice - from the arts to community action - to solve challenges and enrich lives

Quality

We strive for high standards and take pride in how our work is delivered.

Integrity

We do the right thing. We are independent, honest and transparent, and we always speak up for communities.

Looking ahead to 2030

By 2030, Communities 1st will have helped shape towns and communities where people can find support earlier, get involved more easily and stay connected as things change. Volunteering and creativity will be everyday routes into confidence and opportunity. Local organisations will feel more confident and better supported, and public bodies will be better connected to the communities they serve.

This strategy sets out how we will help shape those conditions deliberately and over the long term. It is how we strengthen confidence and resilience for people and communities.



A WORD FROM THE BOARD

Communities 1st exists to strengthen the conditions that allow people and communities to take part, find support and stay connected.

Places change. Structures evolve. Expectations shift. What remains constant is the need for trusted organisations that hold relationships steady, widen participation and keep support within reach.

This strategy sets a clear direction for 2026–2030. It reflects our responsibility to steward strong local infrastructure, deepen partnership working and ensure the organisation remains resilient, well governed and values-led.

As trustees, we will provide oversight and challenge while backing the ambition needed to strengthen communities and local support across our area.

We believe this strategy positions Communities 1st to act with clarity, purpose and long-term commitment.

Jason John, Chair

On behalf of the Board of Trustees

Sarah Yexley, Vice Chair

On behalf of the Board of Trustees

A few helpful definitions

This strategy is written for a wide audience. A small number of terms are used consistently:

- **VCFSE** – voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise organisations, including charities and community groups.
- **Place-based** – work shaped by local communities, relationships and context, rather than a single service.
- **Infrastructure** – the practical support and connections that help communities and organisations function well.
- **Participation and volunteering** – refers both to people contributing to their communities and to the confidence, skills and wellbeing people gain through taking part.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Community life should feel possible.

Easy to join in.

Easy to find help.

Easy to feel that you belong.

Communities 1st makes that happen.

We work close to everyday life, where people, organisations, volunteers, partners and public bodies meet.

That is where confidence is built.

That is where support becomes visible.

That is where participation starts to feel possible.

When people take part, confidence grows.

When local organisations are steady, communities are stronger.

When support is clear, problems are less likely to spiral.

This strategy gives Communities 1st a clear direction for 2026–2030. It sets out how we will focus our effort, make choices about growth and strengthen the conditions that help community life work better.

We will build from a strong core and grow where we can make a lasting difference.

By 2030, Communities 1st will be known for helping make community life feel more connected, easier to join in and easier to find support.

Stephen Craker

Chief Executive



OUR ROLE IN PLACE

Communities 1st works at the point where everyday life either opens up or narrows down

We focus on the practical conditions that allow people to participate, contribute and move forward. We notice where routes stall, where confidence dips and where fragmentation creeps in.

Our work strengthens the everyday fabric of place.

We build from a strong core and grow where there is clear need and opportunity.

When people take part, organisations thrive, creativity is visible and support is easier to reach, community life strengthens.

This is the level at which we operate.

Our approach connects four strands that create lasting momentum:

Infrastructure

strengthening confident, capable and well-connected organisations, spaces and assets

Participation

making contribution visible, accessible and valued

Creativity

embedding culture and shared identity into community life

Trusted routes into support

ensuring people encounter help early and with dignity

These strands are designed to reinforce one another. Together they reduce fragmentation and increase confidence across place.

Communities 1st holds long-term relationships, local insight and practical delivery within one coherent system. That continuity allows us to remain steady while environments shift.

We strengthen confidence and resilience for people and communities.

WHAT WE ARE TRYING TO CHANGE

This strategy focuses on strengthening the conditions that enable people and communities to participate, contribute and progress across the places where we work.

Through long-term, place-based delivery, we have learned that confidence, connection and opportunity matter as much as access to services. Barriers to participation do not appear overnight. They build over time - shaping expectations, trust and belief in what is possible.

By 2030, we want to see four clear shifts.

People can see and trust a way forward

In the towns where Communities 1st is embedded, people facing barriers to participation or progression can clearly see, access and move along routes that improve their life chances. Support, participation, health, learning and work are easier to understand and better connected. Dead ends and repeated referrals are reduced. Taking a first step feels possible and worthwhile, even when progress is slow or the journey is complex.

Participation is normal across generations

Children and young people grow up seeing adults around them taking part, learning, volunteering and progressing. Participation is normal. Volunteering is visible. Progress is possible. The message shifts from "nothing changes here" to "this is a place where people move forward."

Wellbeing replaces survival as the norm

People find support earlier and with dignity. Short-term coping is increasingly replaced by trusted relationships and community-based opportunities that make planning ahead possible. This is about changing the conditions around people, so survival is not the default setting.

The voluntary sector shapes local decisions

Local charities and community groups operate with clarity, stability and collective voice. They are able to adapt, collaborate and shape decisions that affect their communities. Infrastructure is not fragile or reactive; it is steady and forward-looking. The voluntary sector helps shape how neighbourhoods work - not just respond to decisions made elsewhere.

How this shapes our strategy

These outcomes guide how we interpret our priorities, invest resources and respond under pressure. Progress will not be instant and it will not be even. But the direction is deliberate.

Communities 1st is working towards places where more people can see a way forward, where participation is normal, where organisations are strong and where community life feels stable and possible.

OUR STRATEGIC PRIORITIES (2026–2030)

These four priorities guide where we focus our effort. They shape what we grow, what we protect and what we choose not to do.

A

VCFSE
Capability,
Confidence
and Influence

B

Participation,
Skills
and
Opportunity

C

Creativity,
Culture
and
Connection

D

Wellbeing
and
Community
Belonging

Each priority stands on its own. Together, they form one connected approach. Progress in one strengthens the others. None works in isolation.

How we will work across the priorities

How we work matters as much as what we deliver.

Across all four priorities, we will hold to five simple disciplines.

- **We start with people** - Lived experience, dignity and fairness come first.
- **We stay rooted in place** - Our work reflects how communities function day to day, not how services are organised on paper.
- **We pay attention to how things connect** - Where routes break down, we notice. Where gaps appear, we respond.
- **We build for the long term** - Quick fixes are not enough. We strengthen what lasts.
- **We act responsibly and deliberately** - choosing scale and growth that strengthen, not dilute, our purpose.

These disciplines keep us grounded. They guide how we use time, money and influence. They ensure that growth does not dilute purpose and that ambition remains practical.

The priorities that follow set out what this looks like in practice.



Priority A

VCFSE Capability, Confidence and Influence

By 2030, local organisations are stronger, more visible and better able to shape place.

Aim: Local charities and community groups operate with confidence. They collaborate, influence and act with clarity. They are recognised as part of how places are shaped.

Why this matters

Strong neighbourhoods are not delivered to communities. They are shaped with them.

Local charities and community groups hold trust, lived experience and long-standing relationships. When they are confident and connected, decisions are better and outcomes are stronger.

A fragile sector limits what a place can achieve. A confident sector expands what is possible.

Our role

Communities 1st is the backbone of that confidence.

We connect organisations.

We create space for shared learning.

We open doors into influence.

We bring collective insight into the room.

We do not control others' work. We strengthen the ground on which it stands.

The sector is not an afterthought.

What we will focus on

- **Confidence in practice** - Clear advice. Strong governance. Safe and sustainable organisations.
- **Connection across place** - Organisations working together, not in silos.
- **Influence in action** - Voluntary organisations shaping neighbourhood priorities, commissioning and long-term plans.

Strategic Objectives

- 1) **Increase the confidence and capability of local VCFSE organisations so they can operate safely, sustainably and with clarity.**
- 2) **Ensure the collective voice of the VCFSE sector shapes local decisions and neighbourhood development.**



Priority B

Participation, Skills and Opportunity

By 2030, participation feels normal, visible and valued in everyday community life.

Aim: More people take part. More people build confidence. More people feel connected and purposeful. Participation is visible, valued and within reach.

Why this matters

Participation changes what people believe is possible. Volunteering, creativity and community activity build confidence and belonging. For some, they open doors into skills and work. For others, they simply make life richer and more connected. Both matter.

Places are stronger when participation is normal - not exceptional.

Our role

Communities 1st treats participation as core local infrastructure.

We make it easier to see.

Easier to join.

Easier to stick with.

Where people want to take the next step, we connect participation to learning, skills and employment. Where they do not, participation remains meaningful and worthwhile.

We focus on participation that builds confidence and connection.

What we will concentrate on

- **Access** - Clear routes into volunteering and community activity.
- **Confidence** - Participation that builds wellbeing and belonging.
- **Progression** - Visible pathways into learning, skills and employment where wanted.
- **Inclusion** - Reducing barriers so participation reflects the full diversity of our communities.

Strategic Objectives

3) Increase meaningful participation that supports confidence, wellbeing and contribution.

4) Strengthen progression routes from participation into learning, work and sustained community involvement.



Priority C

Creativity, Culture and Connection

By 2030, creativity is part of how community life works and where connection grows.

Aim: People come together through culture. They express themselves. They feel connected to where they live. Creativity shapes how our neighbourhoods feel and function.

Why this matters

Creativity reaches people other approaches do not. It builds confidence. It strengthens wellbeing. It creates shared experiences and identity. Places without visible culture feel fragmented. Places with it feel alive.

Our role

Communities 1st puts creativity at the centre of community life.

We lead through our own creative programmes.

We support others to use creative approaches to build connection and participation. We make creative spaces open, welcoming and visible.

Creativity is not an add-on. It is a practical tool for connection, confidence and resilience.

What we will concentrate on

- **Access** - Widening participation in creative and cultural activity.
- **Connection** - Weaving creativity into wellbeing, learning and community life.
- **Sustainability** - Supporting long-term creative practice and enterprise

Strategic Objectives

- 5) **Expand access to creative and cultural activity that supports connection and wellbeing.**
- 6) **Embed creativity as a sustained and valued part of everyday community life.**



Priority D:

Wellbeing and Community Belonging

By 2030, people can find support earlier and feel more connected in local life.

Aim: People are better connected and able to find support early - without confusion or delay. Wellbeing is promoted. Belonging is visible. No one feels they are facing change alone.

Why this matters

Places cope better when people feel connected and supported before problems deepen.

Our role

Communities 1st delivers accessible, community-based support.

We create welcoming spaces where taking a first step feels safe.

We provide practical help that protects wellbeing and builds connection.

We connect people onwards when more specialist support is needed.

What we will concentrate on

- **Clarity** - Making local support easy to see and understand.
- **Connection** - Strengthening spaces and relationships that reduce isolation.
- **Early action** - Helping people take steps before problems escalate.
- **Partnership** - Working with others so support feels joined-up, not fragmented.

Strategic Objectives

- 7) **Improve access to timely, community-based support that helps prevent escalation.**
- 8) **Strengthen community connections and local capacity to adapt to ongoing change.**

HOW WE DELIVER

Our impact is not created by isolated projects. It is created by how the whole works together.

Strategy only matters if it works in practice.

Communities 1st delivers through long-term relationships, local presence and community-facing spaces that make support visible and easy to reach. We do not operate in silos. We connect organisational support, participation, creativity and community wellbeing so they reinforce one another in everyday life.

What makes delivery possible

Five strengths make this work.

- Voice** - We bring community insight into decision-making. Lived experience shapes priorities, not just consultation exercises.
- Connection** - We connect organisations, sectors and communities in practical ways that reduce duplication and increase coordination.
- Early action** - We focus on earlier access and community-based support, so problems are addressed before they escalate.
- Learning** - We use evidence and shared insight to refine what we do. We change course when needed.
- Innovation and adaptation** - We test new approaches, respond to change and improve how things work, while staying grounded in place and relationships.

Together, these strengths allow Communities 1st to combine ambition with credibility.

We are local, adapt where needed and deliver what matters.



HOW WE WILL KNOW IT IS WORKING

We will measure what matters - and we will be honest about what needs to change.

We are clear about the difference this strategy is meant to make.

Our approach

We combine data with lived experience.

We report openly on progress and use what we learn to improve. Accountability should drive better decisions - not bureaucracy.

What we will track

We will focus on a small number of core measures:

- *Reach and participation*: Who is taking part, and how
- *Outcomes and change*: Confidence, wellbeing, skills and organisational strength
- *Equity and access*: Who benefits, who does not, and what we change
- *Sustainability and resilience*: Organisational health, workforce wellbeing and responsible use of resources
- *Influence*: How community insight shapes wider decisions

Turning strategy into action

The long-term strategy will be translated into annual objectives and delivery plans. Trustees and senior leaders will review progress regularly. We will adjust course when needed and stay focused on long-term change.

What success looks like by 2030

By 2030:

- Communities 1st is recognised as a core part of local prevention and resilience.
- People find support earlier and stay connected for longer.
- Community insight is built into decisions from the start.
- Our place-based focus remains clear, even when working beyond our immediate geography.
- Trustees are confident that ambition is matched by strong leadership and stability.
- Staff and volunteers can see how their work contributes to lasting change.

A shared responsibility

This strategy belongs to all of us.

Trustees, staff, volunteers and partners each play a role in delivering it - ensuring Communities 1st continues to strengthen communities in ways that are grounded, effective and sustainable.

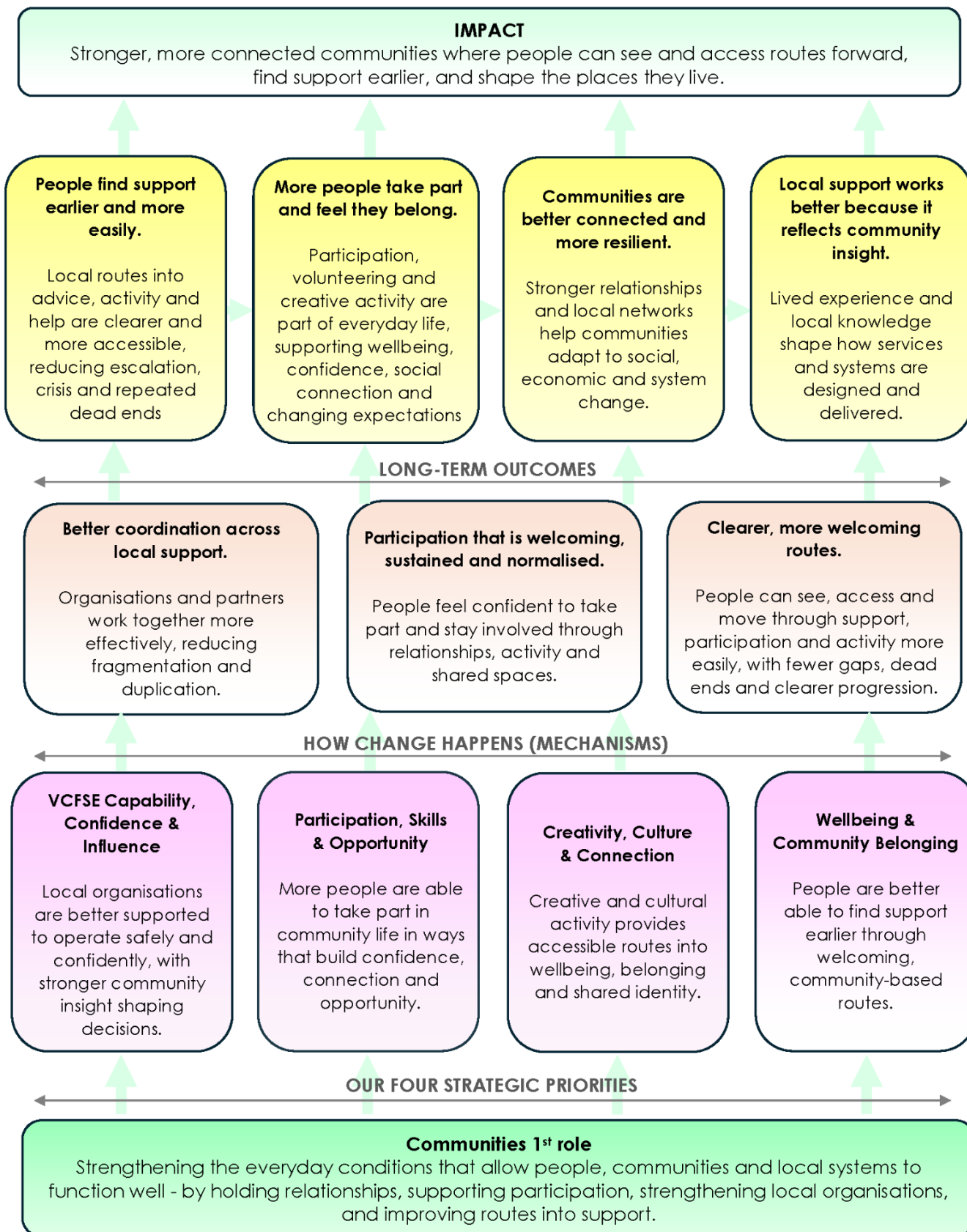
APPENDIX A: COMMUNITIES 1ST THEORY OF CHANGE (2026–2030)



Our Theory of Change

Communities 1st

Working with you to make a bigger difference



How we work: People first | Place-based | Systems Aware | Resilient | Sustainable

APPENDIX B: SYSTEM CONTEXT AND OPERATING ENVIRONMENT

This appendix provides context for the wider environment shaping Communities 1st's strategy.

Long-term system pressures

Local systems face sustained pressure driven by demographic change, economic insecurity, workforce constraints and widening health and social inequalities. These pressures are structural and unlikely to ease over the life of this strategy.

Demand is increasingly complex. People experience overlapping challenges relating to income, housing, health, isolation and access to services. These rarely sit neatly within organisational or sector boundaries and can be intensified during periods of structural reform, including Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) and changes within Integrated Care Boards (ICBs).

Prevention, neighbourhoods and place

Across health and local government, there is a continued shift towards prevention, earlier intervention and neighbourhood-level working.

The NHS direction of travel emphasises a "left shift" towards community-based support and partnership working. Locally, this is reflected in Health and Care Partnership and neighbourhood models, including within St Albans and Hertsmere.

While strategic intent is clear, implementation is uneven. Organisational change and system pressure can disrupt relationships and make preventative ambition harder to translate into accessible support.

The evolving role of civil society and infrastructure

VCFSE organisations are increasingly relied upon as trusted access points into support, mobilisers of participation and long-term holders of community relationships.

Local infrastructure bodies convene, coordinate and amplify collective voice, often without formal authority or long-term investment. This creates both risk and opportunity. Where infrastructure is clear about its role, it can reduce duplication, strengthen preventative capacity and ensure community insight informs decisions from the outset.

Implications for Communities 1st

This context reinforces the need for a strategy that strengthens long-term conditions, not only short-term delivery.

The 2026–2030 Strategy positions Communities 1st as a stable, place-based organisation that maintains continuity of relationships, participation and community voice as systems, structures and funding arrangements evolve.



Thank you

This work does not happen on its own.

It is built by people who show up, join in, share what they know, back what matters and keep going when things are not simple. Our volunteers, staff, trustees, partners, funders, local charities, community groups and supporters all play a part in making Communities 1st what it is.

Thank you for the trust, challenge, encouragement, time and effort you bring. This strategy is shaped by that. So have the organisations behind it.

How this strategy was shaped

This strategy has been shaped by what Communities 1st has learned through doing the work: supporting local organisations, working alongside communities, building partnerships, listening carefully and paying attention to where things are working well and where they are not. It reflects practical experience, honest reflection and the changing realities facing the places where we work.

Trustees, staff and volunteers have all helped test, challenge and strengthen the thinking behind it, so that it reflects both the reality of today and the direction needed for the years ahead.



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