



Communities 1st

Working with you to make a bigger difference



Impact Report

April 2025 - March 2026



Chair's Foreword

This year has been an important one for Communities 1st. It has been a year of growth, change and consolidation, but also one of real substance.

Across the year, Communities 1st has continued to support local people, volunteers and organisations in practical and meaningful ways. From strengthening local charities and community groups, to supporting health and wellbeing, volunteering, learning and community services, the organisation has continued to respond to local need with care, ambition and purpose.

This has also been a significant year in the development of the wider organisation. The integration of Trestle Theatre Company has brought something distinctive, exciting, and valuable to Communities 1st. Trestle's long-standing creative reputation, including its international reach, sits well alongside our commitment to inclusion, participation and personal growth. It strengthens our ability to create opportunities for people to connect, build confidence, and take part in community life in different ways.



On behalf of the Board, I would like to thank our staff, volunteers, members, partners, and funders for all they have contributed during the year. This report reflects an organisation that continues to grow in impact, confidence, and reach.

Jason John

Chair of Communities 1st

Welcome to our Impact Report

Communities 1st brings people together through volunteering, accessible services, and practical support that helps individuals and organisations thrive. Whether it's helping someone find their first volunteer role, supporting a local group to grow, or connecting people to activities that improve health and wellbeing, we're here to make life better in the communities we serve.



Our Mission

To partner with local communities, turning knowledge and energy into action and progress.

Our Vision

Strong local communities where everyone has the opportunity to thrive and make a meaningful difference

Our Values



Inclusivity



Collaboration



Quality



Caring



Creative



Integrity

Our Goals

To develop a more resilient, effective and representative local voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise sector

To ensure volunteering is more recognised, visible, and valued in the community, providing improved community wellbeing and personal development

To achieve improved health and wellbeing, where individuals facing barriers or experiencing inequalities, are supported and resilient

To be a sustainable, inclusive and responsible organisation driven by our values

Chief Executive's summary of the year

Looking back on 2025–26, this has been a year of breadth, integration and growing confidence for Communities 1st. Across the year, we continued to deliver practical support that people and organisations could feel in everyday life. We supported local voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise organisations with development advice, funding support and networking. We expanded volunteering opportunities, strengthened employer-supported volunteering, and helped people move closer to work through training, confidence-building, and practical experience. We also continued to provide wide-ranging health and wellbeing support through our hubs, Welcome Spaces, befriending, refugee support, community supermarkets, and community transport.

A key part of the year has been joining things up better. Too often, people's needs are treated separately, even though real life does not work like that. Our work through ConnectU, alongside a wide range of other programmes and partnerships, has reflected a more connected approach around employment, wellbeing, housing, mental health, and food support. That matters because people are more likely to make progress when support feels coherent, local, and within reach. The visit from Volunteer Now also gave us useful external learning, helping sharpen our thinking around school engagement and youth volunteering.

This has also been a significant year for the shape of the wider organisation. The integration of Trestle Theatre Company has brought creativity more firmly into the heart of Communities 1st.

This matters because creativity helps people build confidence, find their voice, take part, and connect with others. It adds another route into community life and personal growth, and strengthens what we can offer across different ages and communities.





Alongside this, we continued to strengthen the wider voice of the sector. We worked with members to shape further “what we stand for” statements and our VCFSE Sector Charter on Local Government Reform, helping to strengthen the collective voice of the sector. We also deepened our work with businesses, and developed our contribution around health research and dementia-friendly communities.

Through the Herts and West Essex Research Engagement Network, we worked with underrepresented communities, supported co-produced local studies, recruited and trained Community Research Champions, and helped create more inclusive routes into health research across Hertfordshire and West Essex.

Taken together, this has been a year in which Communities 1st has kept delivering practical support while building a stronger platform for the future.

My thanks go to our staff, volunteers, trustees, members, partners, and funders for everything they have contributed across the year.



Stephen Craker
Chief Executive Officer

A more resilient, effective and representative local VCFSE sector



We provided **291** VCFSE organisations with 1:1 development support and funding advice, helping to strengthen their leadership, improving their governance and financial sustainability



140+ delegates from **70** voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise organisations, as well as our public and statutory sector partners, attended our annual conference, creating new networking, partnership and learning opportunities



79 member representatives attended **eight** member networking breakfasts, giving them the opportunity to connect with other groups, share initiatives and projects, and discuss local priorities and trends



Hosted **two** "Meet the Funder" events attended by **20** member organisations helping them to better understand eligibility, and expectations around funding applications. This led to stronger and more targeted funding applications to increase their chances of securing appropriate funding

Highlights

Published a VCFSE Sector Charter on Local Government Reforms, shaped by member input across Hertsmere, St Albans and Welwyn Hatfield, setting out sector priorities and guiding members' consultation responses.

Published a further two "what we stand for" policy statements around young people and older people, shaped with input from our members, adding to the robust framework for collective advocacy and informed representation of the sector's views.



Advice and support helped local VCFSE organisations secure **£130,000+**



We dispursed **£311,000+** to local VCFSE organisations



Four monthly membership newsletters (funding, training, volunteering and policy) kept **12,000+** people informed



Through the Hertsmere Sports Club Forum, we welcomed **10** new members



Communities 1st

Centre for
Voluntary Service

Supporting local charities and community groups for the districts of St Albans, Hertsmere and Welwyn Hatfield

Volunteering is more recognised, visible and valued



713 Volunteers registered on our Let's Give online volunteering platform where organisations can search for potential volunteers by skill-set



120+ local businesses engaged with, greatly boosting their social responsibility initiatives and volunteer engagement



128 new volunteering opportunities promoted on behalf of our member organisations



13 individuals attended training sessions for volunteer coordinators and managers



30+ individuals attended Introduction to Volunteering training providing them with practical information about volunteering

Highlights

Hosted a delegation from Volunteer Now, based in Northern Ireland. This project set out to establish a practical East–West learning exchange. Since the visit, our Volunteer Centre and the wider Partnerships Team have developed a more defined school engagement approach, including further support for local youth volunteering.

Successfully recruited volunteer mentors who are supporting other volunteers to gain confidence and skills. They provided support to the employment support service, the Communities Thirst coffee cart, and at Your Community Hub.

We brought together volunteers from a range of industries to conduct mock interviews and share employment skills tips with 150 secondary school students as part of our Inspire interview skills event. Students were given feedback to prepare them for the future



450+ hours of employer-related volunteering facilitated by staff



328 volunteer applications managed via our Volunteer Centre



10,900+ individuals received our volunteering newsletters



Helping you make a bigger difference
Broxbourne • East Herts • Hertsmere
St Albans • Welwyn Hatfield

Adult skills and community learning

Communities 1st
Able2Enable
Supporting journeys into
volunteering and employment



117 individuals given extra support to access volunteering opportunities through our Able2Enable programme



253 individuals attended **43** community learning courses, learning practical skills and knowledge for everyday life and work

17 people took part in our Advancing Careers Through Driver Training project, building driving skills to support their career goals. With added employment support, **five** have secured paid employment



17 active volunteers advanced their volunteering journey with us at the Communities Thirst coffee cart, gaining confidence, life and social skills, customer service skills, and hands-on barista training. **Three** volunteers have gone onto paid work

Highlights

Launched ConnectU, a partnership initiative between Communities 1st, Emmaus, Hertfordshire Mind Network, St Albans Foodbank and Citizens Advice St Albans delivering joined-up support across employment, training, wellbeing, housing, mental health, and food poverty, helping people overcome barriers and improve life outcomes.

Since February, 12 weekly Barista Skills and English Conversation sessions supported six participants per session to build confidence for customer service roles, including barista training, work experience, and progression towards Level 2 Food Hygiene certification.

We received overwhelmingly positive feedback about our "A New You" course from Step2Skills and participants. We will be extending our skills training with new courses focused on IT skills for work, CV and interview skills, as well as "A New You", enabling more people to benefit.



3,400+ individuals received our monthly training newsletter improving access to training, skills, and development opportunities



162+ hours spent by trained volunteers supporting employment support projects



40+ individuals supported through the ConnectU programme since October 2025



Learn something new, one step at a time

Improved health and wellbeing



2,000+ health and wellbeing enquiries resolved, helping people in the community by offering advice, referrals and local signposting



1,500+ individuals accessed our Better Days Hubs for support with wellbeing, skills, volunteering, and more



14,000+ visitors supported at Welcome Spaces with energy advice, safety alarms, benefits help, and signposting



10,000+ journeys made by our community car services taking passengers to social events, shopping, and appointments



600+ referrals to Community Supermarkets with **350+** active users accessing high-quality, cost effective food and essential household goods



72 dancers of all ages enjoyed our Para Dance sessions, helping them to improve their physical and mental wellbeing

Highlights

We added the Radlett Institute Village Hall to our portfolio of community spaces, offering an attractive and accessible site for a wide range of activities

We funded 20 partners to deliver Welcome Spaces, supporting local people and communities by providing energy advice and money saving tips. The value of this support has been recognised by funders and will continue until 2028

We reviewed and refreshed our Para Dance UK Inclusive Dance Training course, achieving CPD recognition from EMD UK, the National Governing Body for Group Exercise



Our volunteers supported 320+ people with practical support tasks



2,300+ befriending calls made to beneficiaries to ease social isolation



183 refugees and asylum seekers supported to integrate into their local community



90,000+ visits to our community centres



Communities 1st Wellbeing Support

Connecting you with help and wellbeing services

Working with partners to tackle health inequalities



Five health studies promoted through outreach, social media and community engagement



40+ groups engaged to promote the Herts and West Essex Research Engagement Network



9 Community Research Champions recruited



First voluntary organisation commissioned by Hertfordshire County Council to deliver Stop Smoking Services within Lung Cancer Screening Programme.

Highlights

We continued to work with NHS and local authority partners so community voices and lived experience helped shape health and care development. This included council and NHS co-production meetings, Healthier Me Herts, the Adult Physical Disability Strategy, and the refreshed St Albans Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy.

We strengthened our contribution to prevention and early intervention by being commissioned to deliver Stop Smoking Services within Community Lung Cancer Screening Programmes, better linking community support with formal health pathways. We responded to the need for digital support via drop-in sessions across Hertsmere, St Albans and Welwyn Hatfield, helping residents build confidence using devices and online services such as the NHS App and switching providers to reduce household costs. In addition, we were able to provide asylum seekers and migrant communities with mobile phones, laptops and SIM cards, enabling connectivity and access to volunteering and employment opportunities.

Through the Herts and West Essex Research Engagement Network, we helped create more inclusive routes into health research. We worked with underrepresented communities, supported co-produced studies, promoted research opportunities, recruited and trained Community Research Champions, strengthened links with the Regional Research Delivery Network, and created a peer-to-peer forum for Research Active GP surgeries across Hertfordshire and West Essex.

We also supported age- and dementia-friendly work across Hertsmere, St Albans and Welwyn Hatfield. This included contributing to the age-friendly engagement toolkit, coordinating awareness sessions and a public listening event through Dementia Friendly Hertsmere, and using our Access to Healthcare event to build further collaboration around health research.



Communities 1st
Our Health Matters

Advancing health equity for all communities

Trestle Theatre Company



101 inclusive School of Drama sessions were enjoyed by **42** regular participants who got to explore the world of drama, grow in confidence, and learn performance skills



67 fully inclusive Act Up, Dance Now, Sing Out sessions were attended by 70 regular participants who got to explore fun theatre exercises, dance and movement, and the joy of creating music as a group



48 young people took part in holiday workshops, getting a taster of what Trestle has to offer, as well as working together to put on a small performance

Highlights

The Mask Team crafted and shipped over **300** mask sets to **25** countries, including the brand-new Mini Masks for children aged 5 to 11. Developed through our Create, Speak, Thrive programme, these masks are already proving popular in primary schools, helping young learners gain confidence, imagination, and communication skills

The unforgettable 24-Hours of Drama event was a creative marathon which saw School of Drama students develop, rehearse, and perform four original plays back to back

The Act Up, Dance Now, Sing Out groups united for The Great Winter Show Off, a lively showcase of music, movement, and storytelling that filled Trestle Arts Base with energy and warmth



What our beneficiaries, volunteers and members said about us this year



"A great service. The drivers are very friendly and you are able to meet people on the bus and chat. I really look forward to it. It has opened up my world. Thank you" - **Shopper Bus user**

"The AGM was a great opportunity to network with other charities and organisations. I enjoyed listening to the speakers and having some one-to-one coaching time with Communities 1st. All in all, a very productive day." - **Conference delegate**

"I just wanted to thank you and everyone at Trestle for making my son feel so included - the way that he feels so much a part of the class is a real credit to you and the ethos of Trestle. You are so amazingly inclusive and that is actually still such a rare thing to find". - **Mum of a School of Drama participant**

"I like it (Para Dance) because I feel a sense of freedom inside me. When I dance, it lifts my body up. It helps my body – my hip and my heart." - **Para Dance dancer, aged 15**

"I enjoy volunteering and I look forward to my sessions. It gets me out of bed, out of the house, and into the community! It has helped give me a structure to my life and a routine which I like. The Communities 1st people are all super supportive!" - **Coffee cart volunteer**

"As I live alone coming to the Creative Cafes helps me so much. Spending time with other people and joining in with various projects really is so good for me. It's great to spend the time talking and exchanging ideas. Also, information is passed on regarding other groups and support that is available in the area." - **Creative Cafe attendee**

"Volunteering gave me so much experience and boosted my confidence. This company rejected me before Christmas but after volunteering they accepted me so it really does work!" - **Employment Support beneficiary**



Looking Ahead, we will:

In the year ahead, Communities 1st will focus our time where we can add the greatest value: helping people access support earlier, strengthening the local organisations and relationships that hold communities together, and creating practical opportunities for people to take part, build confidence and move forward.

Support local organisations

Help groups and charities stay resilient, relevant and better connected through practical advice, development support and stronger networks.

Join support up earlier

Make it easier for people to access joined-up help before problems deepen, across wellbeing, food, money, work and community life.

Grow volunteering and participation

Create more ways for people to take part, contribute, build confidence and shape the communities they live in.

Create practical routes forward

Support people into greater stability, skills, wellbeing and work through local, realistic and connected opportunities.

Use creativity and community spaces well

Bring together creativity, inclusion and community spaces as part of everyday local life, confidence-building and personal growth.

Speak up with the sector

Champion the role of local community organisations and help public systems work better with the people and places they serve.

Net Zero



Communities 1st remains committed to reducing our environmental impact and playing our part in the journey towards net zero.

During the year, we have continued to improve energy efficiency where we can, reduce unnecessary travel, encourage car sharing, recycle IT equipment responsibly, and explore further steps such as food waste recycling. Staff also continue to think about how everyday decisions affect our carbon footprint and where small changes can make a useful difference. We know that progress is often shaped by the buildings we work from, many of which are landlord-controlled, so our approach has to be practical as well as ambitious. Alongside this, we remain committed to helping the local VCFSE sector better understand and respond to climate-related challenges.

Pay gap

Communities 1st is committed to equality of opportunity for all. Although we employ fewer than 250 staff and are not required to publish gender pay gap information, we do so voluntarily as part of our commitment to transparency. As at 30 March 2026, our hourly pay data for employees in scope was as follows:

	Male Hourly Earnings (£)	Female Hourly Earnings (£)	Difference (£)	Difference (%)
Median	13.18	15.06	1.88	14.3%
Mean	14.56	15.42	0.85	5.9%

Women represented 70.3% of colleagues, with men representing 29.7%. Our analysis shows that women's hourly pay was higher than men's on both a median and mean basis, with a 14.3% median gap and a 5.9% mean gap in favour of women. The gender pay gap measures average earnings across all roles and is different from equal pay for the same work. We will continue to monitor pay and workforce composition to ensure our approach remains fair, transparent, and consistent with our values.

Memberships and Associated Bodies

Communities 1st is proud to be a member and partner of the following national bodies and local organisations to provide us and our members greater opportunities for national representation, networking, resources and influence for the voluntary and community sector.



Communities 1st Annual Accounts

Communities 1st continues to monitor its financial position carefully, alongside the impact of its work across communities and the local voluntary sector. During 2025/26, the charity maintained a stable overall position while continuing to deliver services, support local organisations, and manage a wider range of community-based activity.

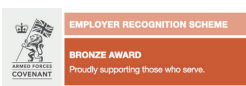
For the year ending 31 March 2026, Communities 1st received a total income of £1,789,861 and spent £1,716,151 delivering its charitable activities. The accounts show an overall increase in funds of £73,710. This was mainly due to restricted funds held for specific purposes, while the unrestricted position was close to break-even, with a small underlying deficit of £2,140.

	Unrestricted Funds	Restricted Funds	Total 25/26
Incoming Resources	£1,639,919	£149,942	£1,789,861
Resources Expended	£1,694,451	£21,700	£1,716,151
Net movement in funds	(£2,140)	£75,850	£73,710
Funds carried forward	£916,413	£273,545	£1,189,958

The Trustees have reviewed the charity's financial position, budgets, and projected cash flows through to March 2027. They are satisfied that Communities 1st remains able to meet its financial obligations as they fall due, with no material uncertainties about its ability to continue as a going concern.

Pledges and quality marks

We actively uphold a range of recognised pledges and quality marks that reflect our dedication to fair pay, equality, the wellbeing of staff and volunteers, digital security, and environmental responsibility. We are proud to hold the following:



Thank You

to our amazing volunteers who give their time, kindness and commitment to support our work and help others!

Communities 1st fact file

Board of Directors / Trustees

Jason John (Chair)
Sarah Yexley (Vice-Chair)
Ross Gemmell (Treasurer)
Roberta Beaton
Chris Cloke
Joy Dobbs
John Howson
Ann Rogers
Karl Wilding
Madeleine Clark
Julia Tilbury (resigned Sept 25)
Samantha Lane (joined July 25)
Andrew Chaloner (joined July 25)

Company Secretary and Chief Executive

Stephen Craker

Accountants

Bradshaw Johnson Chartered
Accountants and Statutory Auditors

Company and Charity Registration

Company Limited by Guarantee No: 11875362.
Registered Charity No: 1187164

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 @TrestleTheatre

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 @trestle-theatre

 @ParaDanceUK

 @paradanceuk

Registered Office

Ver House, Park Estate, Frogmore,
St Albans, AL2 2DR

Community Hubs

Leeming Road, Borehamwood, WD6 4EB
Civic Centre, St Albans, AL1 3JE
Trestle Arts Base, St Albans, AL4 0JQ

