



You said, we did.

Impact Report 2024/25

**Together we don't
just talk about change,
we make it happen.**

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Community-led solutions are the answer to some of the biggest challenges in society

As Somerset's infrastructure charity, we help strengthen the Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise (VCFSE) sector through practical support, connecting people and organisations, and championing local voices. Everything we do is shaped by what matters most to you: supporting our local communities.



Our work

Our work is shaped by the findings from 'Reflect, Recover, Renew', a project we undertook following the pandemic where we worked with the sector to develop a 'road-map' for success. Everything we do at Spark Somerset reflects the priorities we identified together: *Collaborative, Funded, Community-led, Recognised, Coordinated*.

We were successful in attracting additional funding this year, which meant we could invest in a range of new pilot projects, responding to the needs identified.

You said, we did...

'You said, we did' has been a real theme for us over the last 12 months, and we're delighted to share the impact of this work with you.



A community-led VCFSE which:

- ✳ Understands community needs
- ✳ Plans for the future
- ✳ Works in partnership with volunteers
- ✳ Has equality, diversity and inclusion at its heart



An appropriately funded VCFSE with:

- ✳ Sustainable organisations
- ✳ Common priorities shaped by community need
- ✳ Totality of costs recognised



A collaborative VCFSE with:

- ✳ Reciprocity and joint project delivery
- ✳ Clear pathways for service users



A coordinated VCFSE with:

- ✳ Enhanced opportunities to network and connect within and across sectors
- ✳ Meaningful and supportive professional relationships
- ✳ Streamlined core organisational procedures and training
- ✳ Improved coordination with statutory and public services



A recognised VCFSE which:

- ✳ Raises awareness of the sector
- ✳ Recognises the uniqueness of Somerset

Building capacity, now and in the future

We continue to be a trusted source of free support and advice for charities, community groups and social enterprises. We work alongside them as they go on their journey from set-up through to development, supporting them to thrive.



You said:



"We need help accessing and finding grants. Identifying, researching, and cascading accessible information about potential grants and funders is crucial."

We did:

This year, we've been proud to support

582 groups

on their journey to grow and thrive.

Neighbourhoods

Sustainability **Safeguarding**

Communities **Networking**

Governance

Advocacy

Collaborations

Training **Partnerships**

Volunteer management **Inclusivity** **Funding**

Impact

Trustees

Research

Peer to peer support

Capacity building

Building capacity, now and in the future

Thanks to Shared Prosperity Funding, we were able to enhance our core support offering - providing tailored guidance to 287 organisations through in-depth 'health checks' and long-term planning conversations. This has helped them to explore their strategic priorities and long-term sustainability.

We worked with two Funding & Enterprise consultants who have been supporting groups with immediate and longer-term funding needs. Together, the organisations we've supported have secured over £1.5 million in funding, helping to bring vital new services and resources into Somerset communities.



Securing over
£1.5 million
in funding



"Again, we turned to Spark Somerset to ask for their help and Jenny Hannis gave us brilliant advice. You're the experts in the infrastructure side of things."

John Chettoe, Wells Community Network



Click to read
the story



"We are reaping the rewards of your funding advice and our diligent work. At the moment I've got a 100% success rate... we will keep on coming to events and asking for more advice as we go along."

Jenny Archard, Neroche Woodlanders



Click to read
the story



Supporting our people

Our people are our greatest assets - the vital support services we provide simply couldn't continue without the brilliant, passionate and experienced people that we work with. Supporting our people throughout the year has been - and will continue to be - a key priority for us.

You said:

"We need solid core training for all VCFSEs plus bespoke training for different organisations."



We did:

We delivered 73 training and networking sessions to 1,323 people. From one-off webinars through to in-depth courses, all were designed to build skills, confidence, and connections.

Subjects included, Fundraising Skills, Marketing, Safeguarding, Suicide Awareness and Youth Work, Volunteer Recruitment and Retention, Power BI, First Aid, HR for Beginners, and more.

73
Training and networking sessions

1,323
People participated

Supporting our people

We ran a series of Skills Bootcamps and Leadership and Management courses to help develop the next generation of voluntary sector leaders. An added benefit of these courses has been the peer support relationships that have developed – and are still going strong - after the course has ended.



Click to read the story

"This session really helped to focus my mind on how to set up a strategy and work with stakeholders. Thank you."

Attendee, Writing your Fundraising Strategy for Diversifying Funds



"The Leaders course was invaluable. Having the course sector specific allowed us to relate the content and understand each person's situation."

**Lauren Haddon,
Arc Inspire**



"A very good session, well delivered, well-pitched, informative and engaging. The HR trainer was knowledgeable and able to answer questions and relate content to the specific needs of the VCFSE sector. I appreciated the common-sense approach and signposting to further resources."

Beccy Swaine, Somerset Art Works



You said:

"We need to recognise talented people willing to share knowledge. Maybe have a directory of those people."

We did:

We launched our new SkillShare initiative, which connects smaller groups with generous individuals from larger organisations willing to share their knowledge and time - building stronger networks and mutual support.

"Being able to speak to experts in fields in which we have no experience and then being signposted to places where we can gain more knowledge is essential for a small organisation that is looking to grow. The information that we have received has been invaluable."

**Emma Lefevre,
Wells Community Network**

"I've only been to a few meetings, but I've gained a lot. I work alone from home, so these meetings lift my spirits and help me feel like I'm actually working with other people, not going it alone."

Colin Gummer, Volunteer, Bridgwater Area Cycling Campaign

You said:

"I think we need opportunities to build and form partnerships and collaborations."

We did:

We established three new peer-to-peer support networks for Trustees, Communications Staff and Fundraisers attended by over 85 people – in addition to the established Volunteering Coordinator Forums we have been running for many years.

Sparkling change through social action

We're passionate about the value of social action and volunteering to support vital services and activities, improve wellbeing, and build stronger, more resilient communities. Volunteers are the beating heart of so many services in Somerset, but we know that recruiting and retaining them remains a real challenge. To help address this, we deliver a range of services, projects and initiatives which aim to improve the quantity and diversity of volunteering in Somerset.



Image Credit: Robert Young



You said:

“Volunteers in Somerset are essential, aren’t they, in all sorts of areas...it’s a real struggle to find active volunteers.”

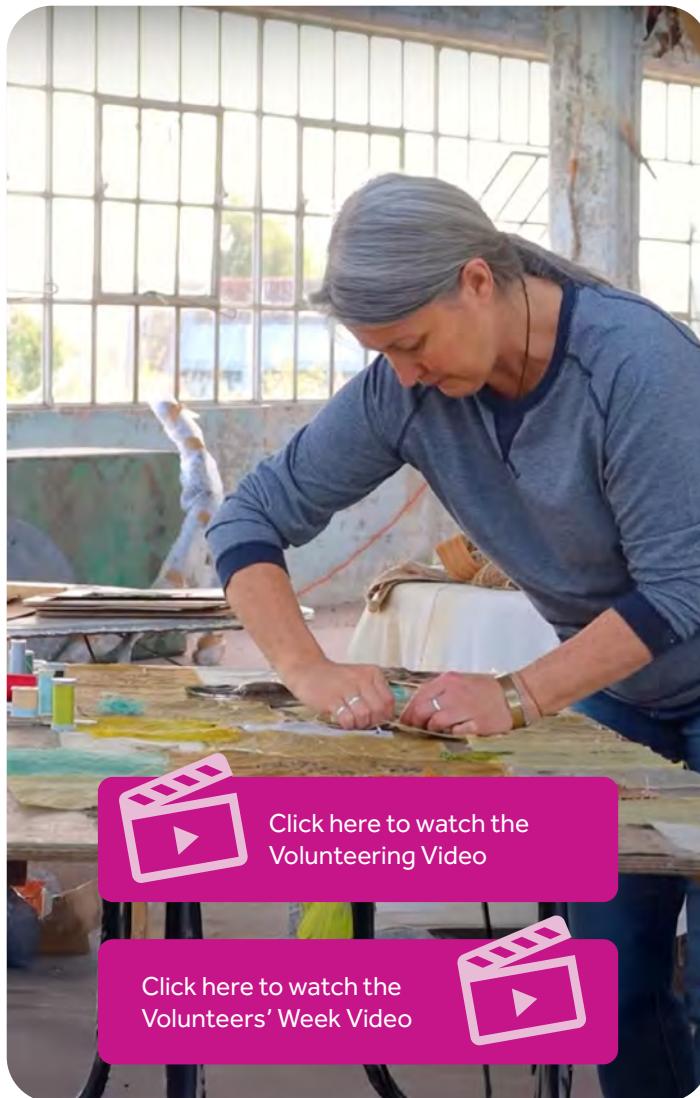


We held four in-person forums for over 100 Volunteer Coordinators to share ideas, resources, and best practice. Our volunteering platform, Spark a Change, welcomed over 85,000 visits this year - more than double the previous year - helping more people connect with meaningful opportunities.

We did:

1,430

New volunteers registered on Spark a Change this year



“The team at Spark Somerset are inspirational and run some refreshing events - a great time to reflect on our volunteering offering and the journey involved. Thank you team Spark!”

**Tina Huntington, RSPCA
West Hatch Animal Centre**

“I have always found Spark Somerset to be very approachable and the support they provide is varied and useful. When the Volunteer Coordinators of Somerset meet as a group under Spark’s eye, it is rare to come away without a nugget of gold.”

Andrew Pattie, Balsam Centre

You said:

"We need better awareness and marketing of the benefits that volunteering has on people. It's altruistic, but volunteers also get something for themselves in giving their time."



To help break down barriers to volunteering, we launched a county-wide campaign to showcase a range of stories and the positive impact of getting involved. This resulted in twice as many new volunteers registering on Spark a Change, an increase of 714 on the previous year.

Click here to watch our
Volunteering Campaign Video

**We did:**

85,000

Visitors to Spark a Change

376

**New volunteer
opportunities registered**



"We have been really pleased with the support of this campaign in raising ARK's profile and volunteering opportunities. It has been very influential in a recent surge in people looking to support us with volunteering."

Nigel Bell, ARK at Egwood

"Volunteering has given me so much — new perspectives, greater understanding of others, and a real sense of connection. It opened my eyes to so many things that I hadn't thought about in terms of where I live, the wildlife, the habitats, and what other people are experiencing."

Jo, Volunteer

"I loved Fit for Work; I really enjoyed it. It was really fun, and I got to meet new people. I learnt to help other people and helped people get involved with activities. I learnt how to communicate and work as a team, and this has helped me with my volunteering when I am leading."

Betty, Volunteer, SASP Fit for Work & Nova Sports



Click to read the story

But there are lots of ways to give back to your community – and ‘traditional’ volunteering isn’t the only way.

You said:

“We need to look at working with additional specific communities of interest or place-based groups to start building skills/trust needed for more collaborative working.”



We did:

Hoping to reach out to people who don’t usually volunteer, we ran community organising pilots in Highbridge and the Westfield and Birchfield areas of Yeovil, working alongside more than 1,000 community members, supporting 61 organisations, and enabling 53 events.

Our team worked with local residents to support them to develop new projects themselves including the ‘Great Highbridge Drop-in’, a free family event, a new ‘Tea and Poetry’ group and the development of the Birchfield Action Group, a monthly space for developing new projects and events.

Working alongside
1,012
residents

Enabling
53
events

“Poetry has been a huge success for us. We have had engagement from learners who are normally reluctant to try new things. More importantly, it has given our Learners the chance to speak in public, be listened to and praised for their words.”

Joe Knights, Able2Achieve

Click to read the story



Working with the Somerset Community Foundation, the project also provided £6,000 of seed funding for local grassroots activities. Decisions about how the funding was spent in their community were made by local residents via a participatory grant-making panel.

£6,000

Seed funding for local grassroots activities



"Community Organisers are a vital connection to the community. The insights we're gaining are invaluable. It's not just a means to an end but an outcome itself - building knowledge, leadership, relationships, and agency among participants. I'm eager to see the community's ideas and watch new initiatives take shape."

Kirsty Campbell, Somerset Community Foundation



SPARK iT 
your **digital** discovery

Discovering digital

Increasingly, digital solutions are providing transformative opportunities for charities and community groups – enabling us to help more people, more effectively and more efficiently. Technology also helps us to reach more people - and brings our sector closer together through collaboration and shared learning. Technology can also help us connect and work together better as a sector.

You said:

"Improve collaborative working and sharing of resources and ideas."

We did:

We created the VCFSE ShareSpace, an online hub where colleagues can share ideas and resources, ask questions, and connect with their peers.



"The chat channels are really useful and people are always happy to offer suggestions and advice. It is yet another valuable resource for charity workers courtesy of Spark Somerset and I think it will continue to evolve into a much-used resource."

Jo Morrison, YMCA, Taunton

Demonstrating our collective impact as a sector can be a real challenge.

You said:

"If it were understood just how much we contribute, perhaps resources and genuine collaborative approaches would follow."



We did:

Working with a range of VCFSE organisations, we have taken the first steps to addressing this, developing an Insights Hub: an online space where we are creating common impact measures and a system for VCFSE organisations, large and small, to record the impact of their work. Still in development, the platform includes a knowledge library and a mapping and data bank where we can all report on shared impact measures.



Example of Insights Hub webpage



Although digital solutions have been a real focus in our work this year, we know that getting online isn't always easy.

You said:

"Many people and families lack access to tech equipment, which ultimately, many services rely on, like benefits and housing. Access needs to improve."

We did:

Working in partnership with community spaces and local volunteers, the Spark iT project hosted 25 digital cafés. Supported by 30 volunteer champions, over 800 skills sessions and 157 refurbished devices were provided to those who need them most.

809

Digital skills sessions

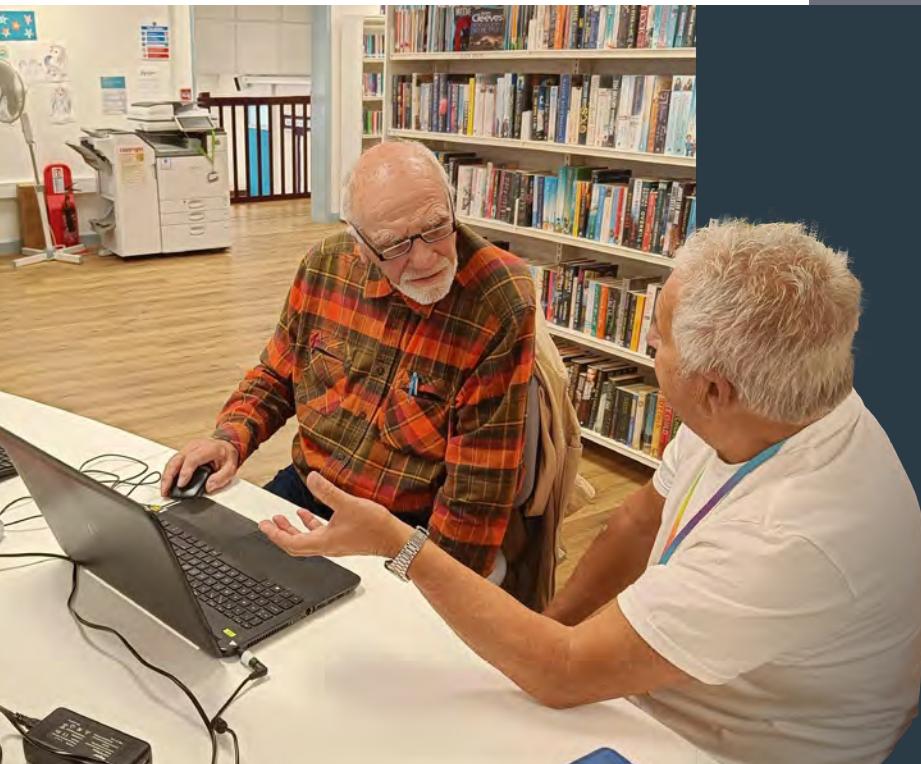
Supporting

4,672

clients

"I hope to re-engage with technology to have a more fulfilling life and hopefully learn skills, study, become more independent and improve my chances of returning to work. Thank you so much for this opportunity - it's a real lifeline."

Sara, client



"John had a Stroke in December 2024 and lost his wife in January 2025. He has had a lot of change. He used to love writing books but due to his stroke, he became unable to write well anymore. A recycled device means that now he can type or dictate his writing, greatly improving his quality of life and mental wellbeing."

The Stroke Association

Stronger together

This year we have worked hard to strengthen the voice of the Somerset VCFSE sector, providing opportunities for collaboration with public sector partners.



You said:

"We need to establish our place as a key partner for the new local authority, ICB and newly merged NHS trust."

**We did:**

With over 50 member organisations, the VCFSE Collaborative - hosted by Spark Somerset - is a vital bridge between the voluntary sector and public bodies, championing shared values and joint working. It has an independent Chair, supported by a Steering Group of key leaders. Building on the [Memorandum of Understanding \(MoU\)](#), signed by system leaders, the Collaborative holds events, forums and shares regular updates with

members from the Council and ICB. Thanks to the Collaborative, we have helped shape outcomes in a number of areas including VCFSE representation on the Board of Governors for Somerset NHS Foundation Trust, formal VCFSE contribution to the Somerset Council Peer Review, and enhanced relationships between the sector and commissioners.

50

**VCFSE voices in the
Somerset VCFSE
Collaborative**



Hosted by
Spark Somerset

"Just wanted to say how fab the Collaborative Bulletin is - it's amazing to see all the hard work coming together."

Val Bishop, CEO, Thrive



You said:

"I think we need opportunities to build and form partnerships and collaborations."

We did:

We hosted a partnership event at Haynes Motor Museum in 2024, attended by more than 100 leaders from across the VCFSE, health and the local authority, to strengthen relationships, commit to working together and discuss how to bring the MoU to life.

In October we hosted 'Live Well in Somerset' - a celebration of Social Prescribing in the county with inspiring talks, interactive workshops, and networking attended by 130 people.



Click here to watch the Live Well in Somerset Video



Live Well in Somerset

A celebration of Social Prescribing

Keynote Speaker

Dr Michael Dixon:
GP, Chair of the College of Medicine
and former National Clinical Lead
for Social Prescription





"A wonderful opportunity to continue to champion the VCFSE sector in this space and provide an opportunity to build relationships and foster trust between the sectors."

**Mel Smith-Wild,
British Red Cross**



"I really enjoyed the conference and had a brilliant insight into what needs to be done within Social Prescribing in Somerset, let alone the rest of the country! Thank you for allowing me to be part of something really inspiring and meaningful."

**Kathy Fellender-Clark,
Health Connections Mendip**



"Excellent to get so many commissioners in the room. The informal and semi-structured networking opportunities were key to the success of the day."

Sue Place, The Balsam Centre

Stronger together

Strongly aligned with the work of the Collaborative, we also supported and coordinated a range of thematic networks to support closer partnership working.

With 77 members, the Dementia Partnership supports the development of a Dementia Strategy for Somerset to improve the lives of those living with and caring for those with dementia.



"Spark Somerset have been instrumental in pulling together, and coordinating, our new Somerset Dementia Wellbeing Service. Cindy has done fantastic work in putting together an informal alliance of 60+ VCFSE dementia organisations to work proactively together to deliver, and improve, dementia services in partnership with our statutory providers and we could not have done this without her."

David Sealey, Assistant Commissioning Manager for Mental Health Services, NHS Somerset



"Let's keep championing how support for people living with Dementia is delivered. We will only settle for the very best in Somerset."

Kate Smith, Associate Director Strategic Programmes, NHS Somerset

Engaged with

49

members of the Children
and Young People's
Mental Health Network

23

Organisations engaged
with the Somerset
Youth Alliance

You said:

"We need to develop a strong case and strategy for the youth sector in Somerset. One that not only advocates the importance of youth work in the county, but also spotlights youth mental health as an essential priority."

We did:

A new initiative this year, the Children and Young People's Mental Health Network already has 49 members and meets regularly to enable close partnership working and better outcomes for young people.

The Somerset Youth Alliance is a network of 23 youth organisations which aims to grow the infrastructure and profile of youth work, supporting them with training, guidance and collaboration.



"Liz Loud's background and experience mean that "she gets it" - she knows what helps and hinders charities like ours....She identifies opportunities and focuses your resources to the benefit of PROMISEworks and other charities like us that are dedicated to improving the lives of children and young people across Somerset. Liz is also building stronger links across those organisations and, in doing so, helping to create a single voice for the sector."

**Kev O'Donnell, Trustee,
PROMISEworks**

"Spark has played a vital role in helping the ICB strengthen partnerships with the VCFSE sector across Somerset. Over the past year, Spark Somerset has been instrumental in shaping our thinking around more inclusive and sustainable commissioning models, including early work to explore a VCFSE network and alliance-based approaches. Their insight and ability to bring partners together has added real value to our strategic planning and helped ensure the voice of the sector is better reflected in how we design and procure services."

**Rose Firth, Head of Commissioning and Localities –
Women's and Children's Commissioning, NHS Somerset**



SOMERSET YOUTH ALLIANCE

“The Somerset Youth Alliance was involved with Hestercombe Local Community Network and Children and Young People Working Group from the start and was key to bringing together a group that were focused on a needs-led solution.”

Emmaline Kay, LCN Link Worker



In partnership with Turtle CYP, the Somerset Youth Alliance has supported a training programme for

32

newly qualified youth workers



Click to read the story



West Monkton Parish Council

“I just wanted to tell you how much I appreciate the course you have been facilitating for my volunteer.....She has developed so much since starting the course and now we are able to work in partnership to ensure that we can provide a super provision for our young people.”

West Monkton Parish Council

Listened to, recognised and valued

While our sector plays an essential role in Somerset life, it's not always fully recognised - and many feel their voices go unheard. We are working hard to improve visibility amongst the public, stakeholders and funders of the incredible contributions made by VCFSE organisations to our community.

You said:

"Sometimes when I'm talking to colleagues who are coming from a statutory perspective, they use the word collaborate, well, actually, they actually mean as a partnership, or a contract, where they're the commissioner, and you're doing what they want you to do."



We did:

This year, we undertook comprehensive research into the State of the Sector, working with over 300 organisations to build a fuller picture of the challenges and strengths across Somerset. We commissioned Quay Research to develop a suite of reports, including a summary, a main report and lessons from the national picture.

One of the many fascinating insights from the report was that many colleagues feel we often don't get the recognition we deserve. This prompted us to write an Opinion Piece which we have used to amplify the sector's voice. It was downloaded 868 times and shared widely during presentations to senior leaders across the ICB, Somerset NHS Foundation and Somerset Council.

[Click here to read more about the State of the Sector](#)



[Click here to read our downloadable Opinion Piece](#)



QUAY RESEARCH



Collaboration between the VCFSE and Public Sector in Somerset: challenge or opportunity?

commissioned by Spark Somerset
Quay Research, October 2024

"Spark Somerset are a critical partner for Somerset Council. Whether it is developing thinking around our collective vision for Somerset or leading the development of the sector through their collaborations, life in Somerset is better because of Spark. I was really pleased to be able to work with Spark on an opinion piece that considered the relationship between voluntary and community partners and the public sector. Some of the issues identified and named in that piece have changed our thinking around how we engage with and commission the sector."

Duncan Sharkey, Chief Executive, Somerset Council

Prof Michael
Fisher, Ryan Aslett
Oliver Clabburn

Listened to, recognised and valued

We've seen encouraging growth in awareness of our work, and of the wider sector's value. Compared to the same period last year, our newsletter subscribers are up by 24% to 2,828, our new, more accessible website has seen a 15% increase in the number of users to 22,596, and our social media following is up 23% at 4,453.

We talk to colleagues in our sector every day about their challenges, opportunities and aspirations for the future and this is one of the messages we hear loud and clear: "nothing about us without us". More and more, people are recognising the vital role that communities themselves play in tackling society's most pressing issues. A key area of development for us this year has been about listening and learning and supporting the sector to improve their community engagement skills.



15%

Increase in website users

24%

Increase in newsletter subscribers



"The monthly newsletter is incredibly useful. There's always at least one useful 'take-away' along with links to relevant events, and funding sources. It's in a format that is easy to follow and read and is just the right length."

Maria Bailey, Grief Specialists

You said:

"Groups can do as much as possible but if there is no feedback from the community, how do you know that it's needed?"



Our team worked with NHS Somerset and Somerset Council to improve community participation in research. Spark Somerset's role has been to advocate for VCFSE involvement in research and champion lived experience and community voices.

We did:

Although this work is in its early stages, there is a growing recognition of the importance of "community experts" and the VCFSE, especially when working with under-served communities. We funded seven community-based leaders, training them to be 'Research Connectors', who then shared their knowledge, skills and learning with other colleagues across the sector.



We held our first Research Conference in May – 72 delegates from 45 organisations heard from a range of speakers, academic and social researchers, community groups, health and the local authority.

72

Delegates attended our Research Conference



£15,000

Invested in the sector for
community research

“It was really great to hear from different types of researchers. There is a lot of energy in the county for more pooling of research expertise and learnings.”

Conference delegate



“The process of conducting the research taught me a lot and I was able to encourage my group to respond confidently. Like me, they were all thrilled to be asked their opinion as they often feel unheard. I felt like the mouthpiece for these people and the wider voluntary sector.”

Margaret Tatham, Watchet and Quantocks Dementia Action Alliance and Research Connector

Thank you.

It's been a busy year for Spark Somerset, but we couldn't have done it without you - our funders, partners, stakeholders, volunteers and Spark team. A huge thank you to every individual and organisation that has worked alongside us this year; it has been an absolute pleasure. Although there will always be challenging times to navigate, we look forward to continuing to work and collaborate with you to ensure we have the vibrant, dynamic and sustainable VCFSE sector we need to support people in Somerset.



Katherine Nolan
Chief Executive,
Spark Somerset



Grahame Paine
Chair of Trustees,
Spark Somerset



We'd love to hear from you!

Please visit our website, follow us on social media, send us an email or sign up to receive our regular newsletters.



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SPARK
SOMERSET
Inspiring communities