



Nottingham
Business School
Nottingham Trent University

Data in Practice

Exploring how the VCSE sector
collects, uses, and shares data
and evidence

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With thanks to Dr Juliana Mainard-Sardon,
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Introduction

Over the past decade, VCSE organisations have increasingly recognised the value of the data they hold - not just as a record of activity, but as a strategic asset that can inform decision-making, improve service delivery, and demonstrate impact.

Renewed focus on VCSE data

The Civil Society Covenant¹ has renewed focus on strengthening data and evidence in the sector - from collection and analysis, to building skills and ensuring data can be shared responsibly under data protection rules.

Findings from our recent ESRC-funded project on VCSE Data Infrastructure suggest that, while awareness and use of data are growing, there is still significant scope to strengthen data maturity across the sector. Many continue to face challenges around capacity, formal strategies, and dedicated roles, which can make it difficult to move beyond ad hoc practices. Wider evidence, including a recent report by Data Orchard, echoes this: organisations are making steady progress in areas such as culture and impact measurement, but skills, resources, and the ability to engage fully with research remain key areas for development.²⁻⁵

In this wave, the VCSE Barometer builds on these insights by exploring how organisations collect, use, and share data and evidence, and the extent to which they have the skills and resources to do so effectively. The findings reveal a sector that values data and evidence, but where capacity shapes what is possible. Many organisations feel confident in their skills, yet lack the time, resources, and external support needed to embed data and evidence into everyday practice.

Barometer Developments

Over the past year, we've been creating data tools tailored to the needs of VCSE organisations.

Alongside our [Individual Insight Reports](#) and accessible [quarterly reports](#), we're pleased to launch our [new website](#) and [analytics dashboard](#).

Your feedback is really important to us. Let us know what you think and share any ideas on how we can make the Barometer even more useful for you.

 VCSEObservatory@ntu.ac.uk




Organisations' Skills and Capacity

VCSE organisations collect a wide range of information as part of their everyday work, through evaluations, monitoring, researching beneficiary needs when preparing funding bids and writing case studies. Our survey explored how confident they feel in using this information.

Three quarters of organisations reported confidence in their ability to use data and evidence (78%) and said they have staff with the skills to analyse and interpret it (74%). Eight in ten (81%) also felt confident in the quality of the data they use.

This confidence reflects progress, but our findings suggest that much of it is grounded in relatively simple, accessible forms of data, with many lacking the time, capacity or demand to make use of more specialist sources of data and evidence.



Capacity constraints

For most organisations (81%), capacity stands out as the single biggest barrier to making effective use of data and evidence. Almost half reported no dedicated time for data collection, analysis, or reporting (46%) or a having a named person responsible (46%), while two in three (69%) lack access to external support.

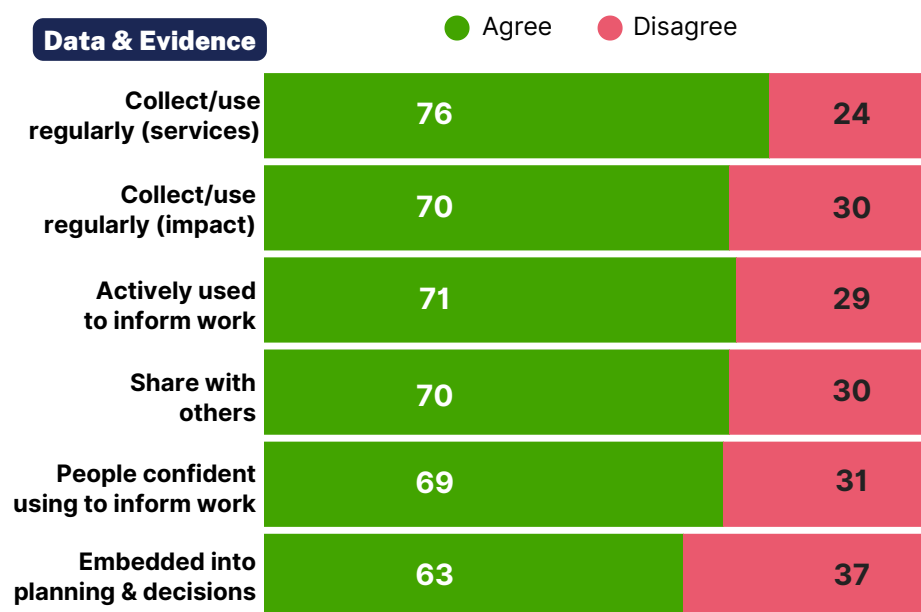
Funding requirements can add to the strain: data is often collected to satisfy funders and commissioners, but investment in the systems to use it well is uncommon. The result is a cycle where organisations work hard to provide evidence, yet lack the resources and capacity to build sustainable data practices.

“[We need] time, resources to allocate time, less pressure on chasing income and funding and more time to do the work and gain insights to outcomes and impacts”

Medium Registered Charity

How Organisations Collect and Use Data & Evidence

Organisations' Use of Data & Evidence (%)



Notes: N = 463. Chart shows the proportion of respondents that agree (somewhat / strongly) and disagree (somewhat / strongly) with statements about their organisation's current use of data and evidence.

Source: VCSE National Data & Insights Observatory, VCSE Barometer, Wave 11

Collecting and using data effectively is essential – both at a sector level, to understand the size, value, and health of civil society, and at an organisational level, to secure funding, demonstrate impact, and improve services.

Collection and use is widespread, but more so in larger organisations

Findings from Wave 11 show that most organisations regularly collect and use data and evidence about their services (76%) and impact (70%). Nearly three quarters agree that data and evidence are actively used to inform their work (71%) and that people feel confident doing so (69%). Around two in three (63%) also say it is embedded in planning and decision-making.

However, size makes a difference. Medium and large organisations were, on average, twice as likely as small organisations to report collecting and using data on services and impact, and to share this information with others.

What Data and Evidence do Organisations Collect and Use?

Most organisations said they collect data and evidence themselves rather than sourcing it externally. This was particularly the case for operational information (80%), service user data (79%), volunteer data (72%), and monitoring or evaluation evidence (71%).

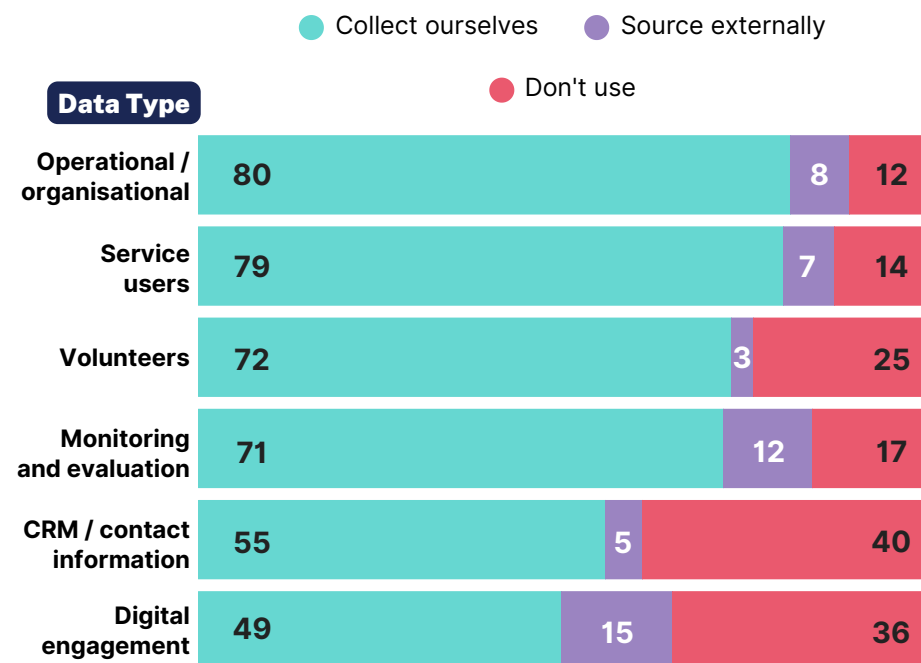
In contrast, two in five organisations do not use CRM or contact data (40%), while more than a third said they do not use digital engagement data (36%) or community needs assessment data (35%).

Lower data use among small organisations

These gaps are far more pronounced among small organisations. More than half reported not using CRM data (56%), compared with significantly fewer medium (27%) and large organisations (11%).

Similar patterns were seen for digital engagement data (50% of small vs 25% of medium and 13% of large) and for monitoring and evaluation data (28% of small vs 7% of medium and 2% of large). Though widely collected, service user data was not used by nearly a quarter of small organisations (23%), compared with only 4% of medium and 6% of large organisations.

Types of Data & Evidence Collected by Organisations (%)



Notes: The response option 'source externally' refers to those selecting either 'source externally' or 'both collect ourselves and source externally'.

Data type: Organisational / operational N = 457. Service users N = 460. Volunteers N = 460. Monitoring and evaluation N = 458. CRM / contact information N = 455. Digital engagement N = 457.

Source: VCSE National Data & Insights Observatory, VCSE Barometer, Wave 11



Organisations' Use of Publicly Available Data

Organisations reported moderate use of secondary and publicly available data sources, most often drawing on national statistics (51%), local authority data (47%), and Charity Commission data (42%). Fewer than one in ten made use of more specialist sources, such as 360Giving (8%) or the UK Data Service (5%).

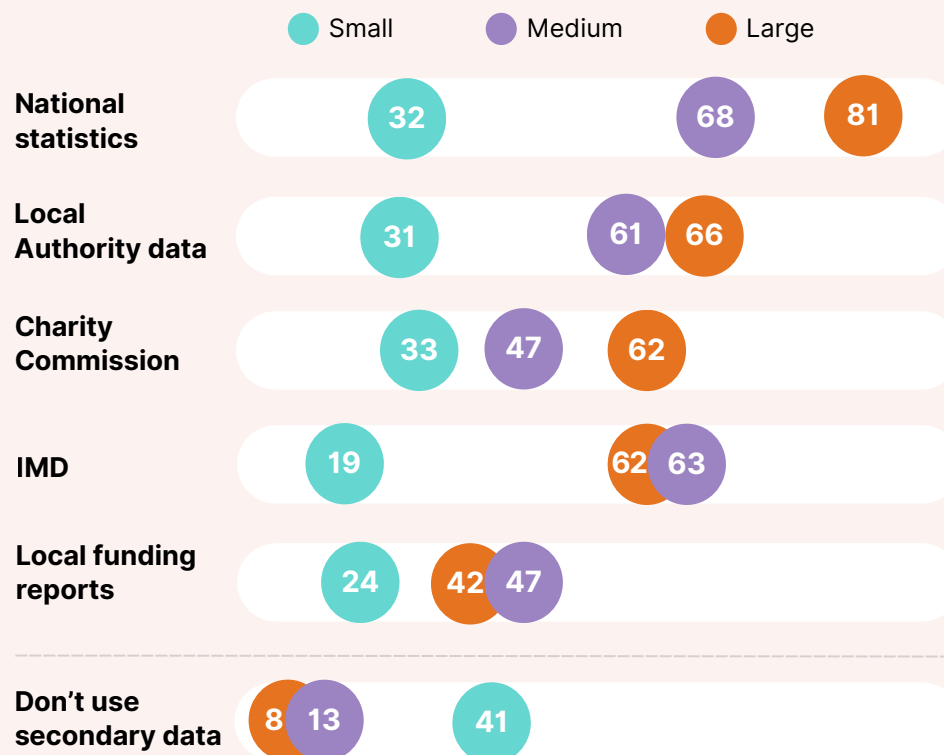
These findings reflect wider commentary that the sector often struggles to engage with more complex or specialist datasets, instead relying on a narrower set of readily accessible sources.² This pattern is even more pronounced among small organisations, which are far less likely to use secondary data sources.

Small organisations less likely to use secondary data

Two in five (41%) small organisations do not use secondary data, compared to one in eight medium (13%) and one in thirteen large (8%) organisations.



Most used publicly available data sources by organisation size (%)

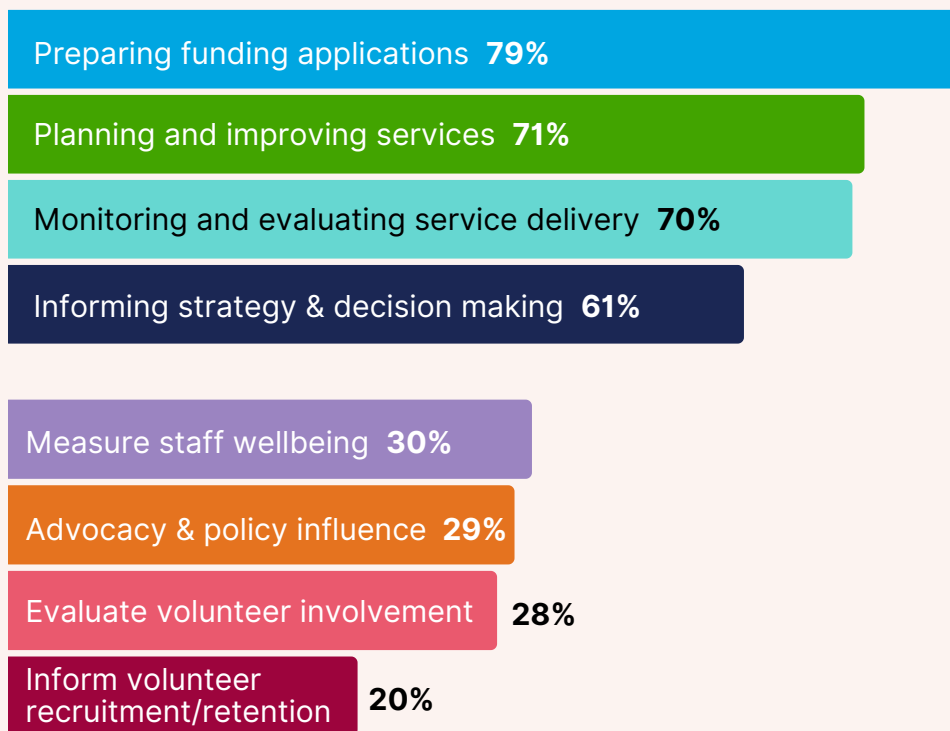


Notes: N = 453. Chart shows the six response options selected by the largest share of organisations, by organisation size, broken down by organisation size. IMD refers to the Indices of Multiple Deprivation.

Source: VCSE National Data & Insights Observatory, VCSE Barometer, Wave 11

What Data and Evidence Are Used For

Top and bottom four purposes for using data and evidence



Notes: N = 450. Chart shows the four most and least common purposes for using data and evidence.

Source: VCSE National Data & Insights Observatory, VCSE Barometer, Wave 11

Our findings suggest that data and evidence primarily serve a dual role: as a practical tool for monitoring and improving services, and as a requirement for demonstrating impact to funders.

Most organisations use data and evidence to support funding applications (79%), service planning and improvement (71%), and ongoing monitoring and evaluation of service delivery (70%).

Data less often used to support workforce insights

In contrast, far fewer use it to measure the wellbeing of staff (30%) or volunteers (31%), or to inform the recruitment and retention of volunteers (20%).

These patterns are broadly consistent across organisation sizes, but small organisations reported, on average, two fewer purposes for using data and evidence. This indicates that medium and large organisations engage in a wider range of data-related activities.



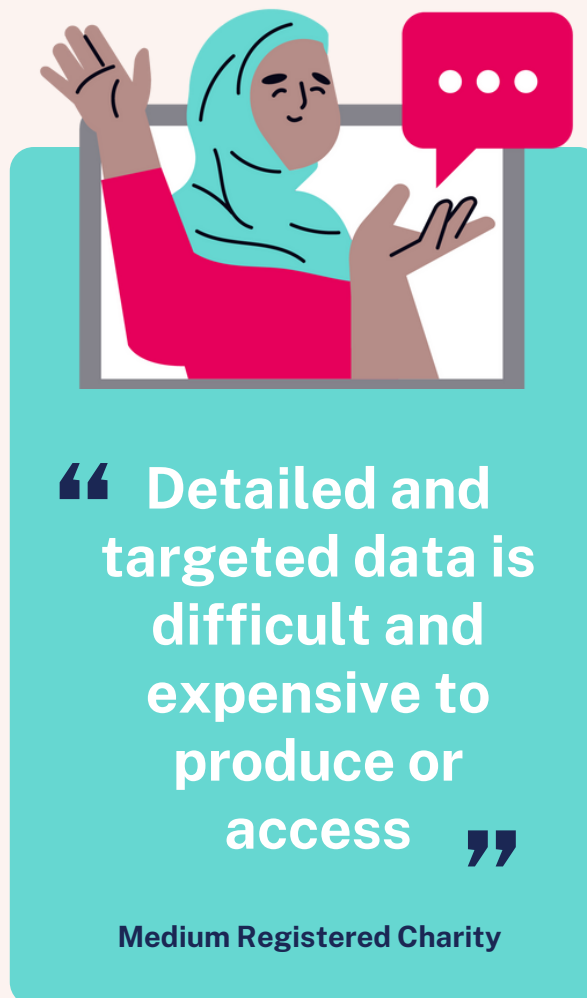
Where Organisations Find and Access Data and Evidence

Wider research shows that data sources can be hard to access and navigate, making it difficult for organisations to find information that feels relevant and usable. Reflecting this, our findings indicate that organisations turn most to familiar, trusted sources when seeking data and evidence.

Relying on known networks to access data

The most common access points are peer or membership networks (58%) and newsletters or bulletins (48%). Almost half also turn to local infrastructure organisations (46%), slightly more than those using national infrastructure bodies (40%).

By contrast, consultants or evaluators are the least used source (13%), likely reflecting the high costs involved - something two in five organisations (38%) identified as a barrier.



Two in five large organisations (39%) and a similar share of medium organisations (38%) said that difficulty accessing relevant data limited their ability to use it effectively, compared with one in four small organisations (25%). Yet larger organisations were also more likely to draw on a wider range of sources.

In particular, large organisations made far greater use of specialist sources. Over a third (36%) accessed data through consultants or evaluators, compared with 16% of medium and just 5% of small organisations.

More than half also used academic partners (55%) and online research repositories (53%), while fewer than one in seven small organisations did so (12% and 15%). These differences likely reflect the greater resources and wider networks available to larger organisations.

Most Useful Formats of Data and Evidence

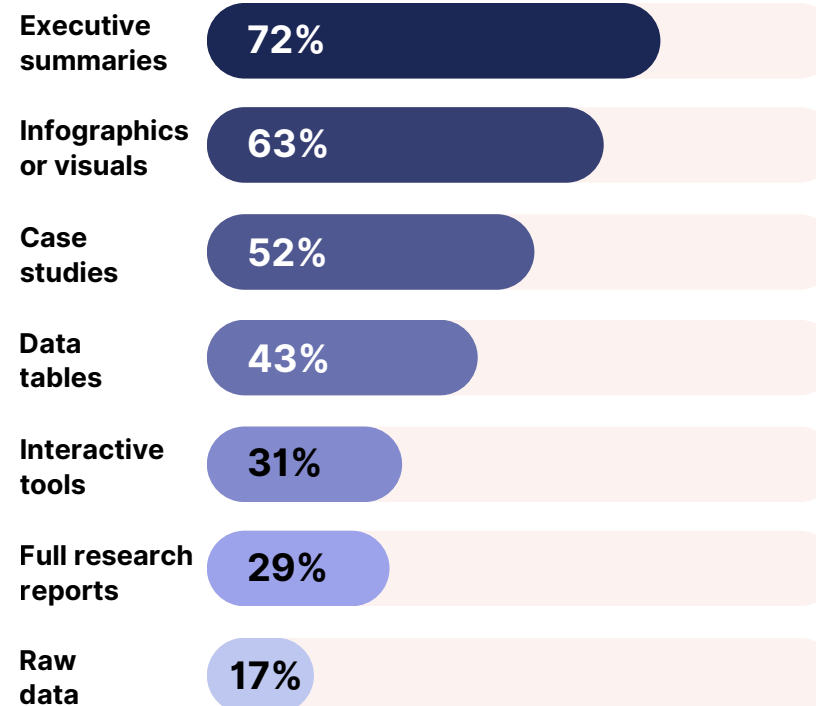
Preferences for data formats reflect a clear need for speed and accessibility. Executive summaries are valued by almost three quarters of organisations (72%), while infographics and visualisations are favoured by nearly two thirds (63%). Case studies are also popular (52%), especially among smaller organisations, who may use them to capture impact stories.

“It is finding a way to evaluate our impact with the limited resources we have and in a user friendly way”

Medium Registered Charity

In contrast, formats which demand additional time and effort to interpret, including full research reports (29%) or raw data (17%), are valued by fewer organisations. However, large organisations tended to value these formats more – this was particularly the case for interactive data tools, preferred by two in three (65%) large organisations, compared to fewer medium (38%) and small (16%) organisations.

Preferred formats of data and evidence (%)

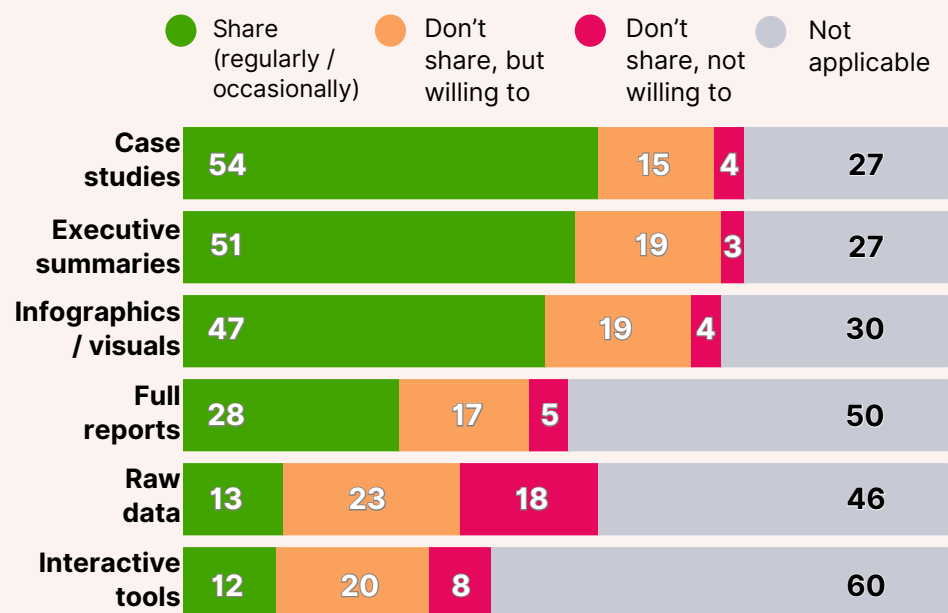


Notes: N = 435.

Source: VCSE National Data & Insights Observatory, VCSE Barometer, Wave 11

Types of Data and Evidence Shared by Organisations

Types of data & evidence shared (%)



Notes: Statements N = 409 - 433.

Source: VCSE National Data & Insights Observatory, VCSE Barometer, Wave 11

Organisations were most likely to share the formats they also found most useful, such as case studies (54%), executive summaries (51%), and infographics or visuals (47%).

In contrast, formats that are more resource-intensive were shared less often, though many organisations expressed willingness to share them in future.

Higher rates of 'not applicable' responses suggest that some organisations simply do not produce these types of outputs. For example, interactive tools were shared by fewer than one in eight organisations (12%), but three in five (60%) said this format was not applicable.

Smaller organisations were particularly unlikely to share more complex outputs such as full research reports, raw data, or interactive tools. Two in three small organisations marked these as not applicable, compared with around one in three medium and one in five large organisations.

A contributing factor may be that almost two in five (38%) small organisations have never been asked to share, compared with just one in seven (15%) medium and large organisations.

Who Organisations Share Data and Evidence With

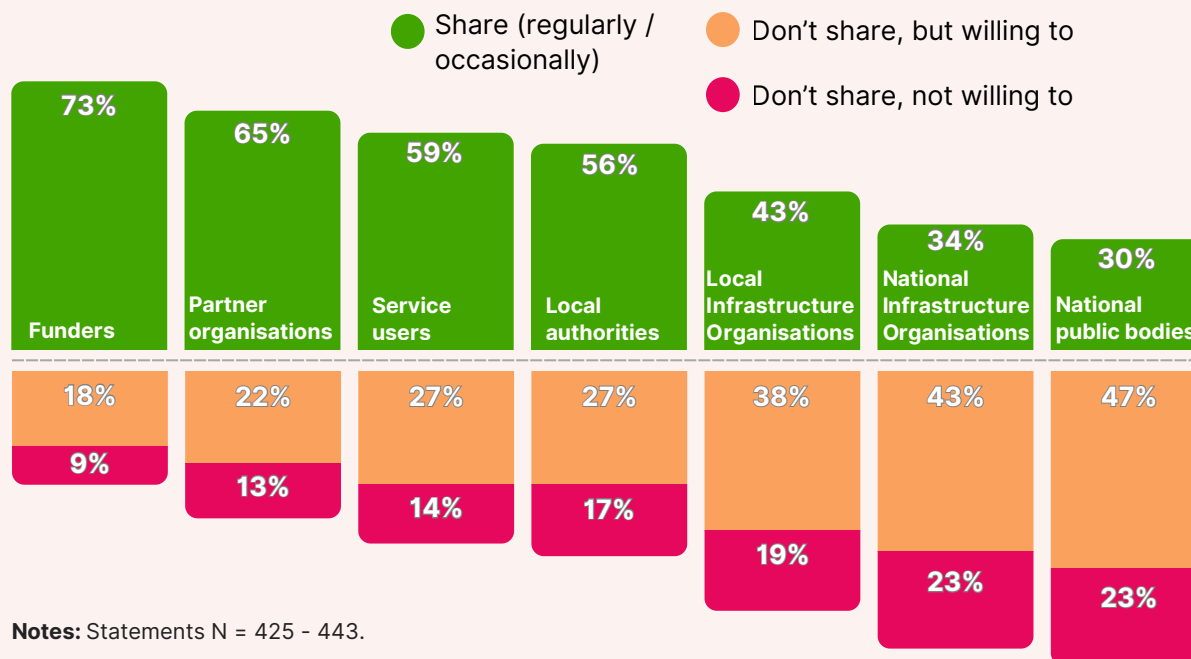
Data sharing is most common where organisations already have established relationships or obligations. This includes funders and commissioners (73%), partner organisations (65%), service users (59%), and local authorities (56%).

Sharing is more frequent with Local Infrastructure Organisations (43%) than with national infrastructure bodies (34%). National public bodies are seldom shared with (30%), though two in five organisations said they would be willing to do so.

Sharing higher in medium and large organisations

Despite this, smaller organisations are less willing to share with others. More than a quarter (27%) reported not sharing any data or evidence, compared with just 6% of medium and 4% of large organisations.

Who organisations share data and evidence with



Notes: Statements N = 425 - 443.

Source: VCSE National Data & Insights Observatory, VCSE Barometer, Wave 11

Over a third were unwilling to share with national public bodies or national infrastructure organisations, and at least a quarter were unwilling to share with LIOs or local authorities.

In contrast, fewer than one in ten medium and large organisations were unwilling to share with most groups - likely reflecting their size and reach, but also the stronger reporting requirements placed on them.

Sharing Data and Evidence: Concerns and Safeguards

Although our findings indicated a willingness both in what organisations share and with whom, and only a few (12%) do not see any benefits in sharing, a number of concerns act as barriers.

Challenges of complying with GDPR

While few (15%) organisations cited ethics and privacy as a barrier to effective use, compliance with GDPR when sharing was the top concern for two thirds (67%). Despite these concerns, most organisations take active steps to manage risks and protect participants.

The extra responsibilities linked to data protection compliance may also explain why nearly half (49%) said they lack the capacity to prepare data for sharing.



Safeguarding service users

Nearly three quarters (74%) of organisations anonymise data before sharing, while half (51%) seek informed consent from participants. Just over two in five (42%) review requests case by case, highlighting a preference for control and discretion.

Organisations also have concerns with how their data will be framed, with almost half (46%) worried about misinterpretation of their data and evidence and a third (34%) lacking trust in how others might use it. Following this theme, around one in four (24%) viewed data as a key asset and preferred stakeholders to approach them directly.

Applying terms of use

One in three (31%) organisations adopted more formalised approaches to protect their data and their participants, including through a data sharing agreement and by applying terms of use and forward-sharing.

This likelihood of these conditions being applied increased with organisation size, with three in five large organisations using data sharing agreements to mitigate risk.

Points for Reflection

Capacity is the main barrier

Wave 11 shows that most organisations feel confident in their skills and data quality, but four in five say limited capacity stops them making full use of it. Many lack time, resources, or access to external support. This echoes wider evidence that without investment in core capacity, confidence alone does not translate into practice. Smaller organisations in particular risk being left behind unless support is proportionate and accessible.

Funder demands shape practice

Data is most often collected to meet funding requirements or show impact. Service and impact data are strong, but workforce wellbeing and advocacy are far less developed. This reinforces concerns that external accountability pressures can narrow how data is used, sidelining areas that could support long-term sustainability. Funders have a role in enabling fuller data practices, not just requesting evidence.

Trusted routes dominate

Organisations most often access data through membership networks, newsletters, and Local Infrastructure Organisations. Few use specialist sources such as academic repositories, with larger VCSEs much more likely to do so. This reflects the importance of trusted intermediaries, but also the need for researchers and policymakers to make data easier to find and use. Accessible formats and stronger local connections can help broaden reach.

Sharing is uneven

Sharing data is most common where relationships already exist, especially with funders and partners. Far fewer share with national bodies, reflecting concerns about trust, compliance, and capacity. Small organisations are also more likely to say sharing is “not applicable,” suggesting they lack the type of data others expect. To encourage wider sharing, safeguards, clear benefits, and proportionate processes are vital.



Unlocking Community Insights

VCSE organisations collect a wealth of information and insights through their everyday work with communities, but too often this knowledge is only used for reporting or compliance before lying dormant on servers. **Unlocking Community Insights**, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, explores how these everyday insights can be transformed into structured data that informs social science research and strengthens the sector's voice.

Working with partners such as the British Red Cross, DataKindUK, and the University of Strathclyde, we are developing tools and frameworks that make this process ethical, reciprocal, and non-extractive. This matters because it helps VCSEs turn everyday information into evidence that supports advocacy, reduces duplication, and ensures communities are represented in policy and research. It also rebalances the relationship with academia, moving away from extractive approaches toward ones led by the sector itself.

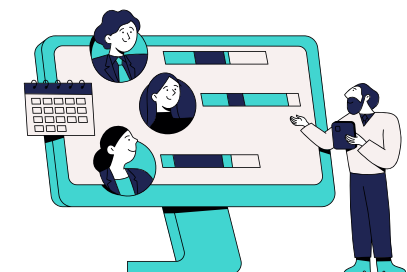
In practice, we are testing AI to analyse reports, standardising wellbeing data, and drawing insights from volunteer management systems. These tools are designed to reduce workload, save time, and help organisations make better decisions locally while contributing to a powerful shared national picture.

The VCSE sector routinely collects rich information about diverse communities through various research activities. Yet much of this information remains unstructured and difficult to access.



With ESRC funding, the VCSE Observatory is exploring how to unlock this information to make it usable for research.

Our goal is to test the feasibility of building a shared data infrastructure that can answer a wide range of questions across disciplines and over time.



Methods, References, and Resources

Methods

The findings in this report are based on an analysis of Wave 11 of the VCSE Barometer, a quarterly survey of VCSE organisations designed and administered by Nottingham Trent University's VCSE National Data and Insights Observatory. The VCSE Barometer offers a snapshot into real-time trends, changes, and challenges in the UK voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector. It is supported by over 50 major social sector membership organisations and networks, and findings are shared every quarter with national policy and decision-makers, local infrastructure organisations and the VCSE sector.

Wave 11 of the VCSE Barometer was conducted between 16 July - 13 August 2025 and comprises the views of 474 VCSE organisations. Data were prepared and analysed using Microsoft Excel and R Studio. Data tables are available upon request.

How to cite this report

VCSE National Data & Insights Observatory (2025). *Data in Practice: Exploring how the VCSE sector collects, uses, and shares data and evidence*. Nottingham Trent University.

References

1. Department for Culture, Media & Sport (2025). *Civil Society Covenant*.
2. Department for Culture, Media & Sport (2025). *Review of Local Civil Society and Community Data: Summary Report*.
3. Ainsworth, D. (2021). *Why we need leadership on data in the voluntary sector, and how you can get involved*. Data Collective.
4. Kenley, A. & Wilding, K. (2021). *Better Data, Bigger Impact*. Civil Society Commission.
5. Data Orchard (2024). *State of the Sector: Data Maturity in the Nonprofit Sector 2024*. Data Orchard.

Resources

Open Data Institute: Data literacy and capability

DataKind UK: Data skills, webinars, and digital policy

SuperHighways: Technology advice, practical support, and skill development for small charities

Catalyst: Technology support and digital inclusion

Data Orchard: Data maturity free self-assessment; advice and support on how to do more with data



Nottingham Trent University's Voluntary Community and Social Enterprise Sector (VCSE) National Data and Insights Observatory develops innovative methods to collect, uncover and unify existing and new data so that a clearer, more accurate picture of the nature and value of UK VCSE can be painted for policymakers, practitioners and stakeholders.

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 [VCSE Observatory](#)

 [Interactive Barometer Dashboard](#) (NEW!)

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