A DIGITAL HUB FOR THE VCSE SECTOR IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Scoping Study | May 2025

Dormant Assets NI

Delivered by
THE NATIONAL LOTTERY COMMUNITY FUND

The Community Foundation Northern Ireland

Access the Full Digital Hub Scoping Study including Appendices

A DIGITAL HUB FOR THE VCSE SECTOR IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Contents

Chapter 1: Foreword

"I'm delighted to introduce this scoping study from the Community Foundation Northern Ireland, funded by Dormant Assets NI, which is delivered by the National Lottery Community Fund. Dormant Assets funding in Northern Ireland, through grant programmes and strategic investments, aims to build the capacity sustainability and resilience of the VCSE sector in Northern Ireland. This scoping study directly supports that aim by examining the digital capacity of the sector and how this is impacting its ability to sustainably deliver essential services to communities. It highlights how many VCSE organisations face significant barriers to digital transformation, including resource constraints, skills gaps and insufficient access to technology.

The study's recommendation to establish a Digital Hub is a practical response to these needs. By facilitating targeted training support and cross sectoral collaboration, a Digital Hub has the potential to build the digital skills necessary for VCSE organisations to thrive in a digital world. This aligns with Dormant Assets NI commitment to enabling organisations to adapt, collaborate and innovate, ensuring they are better equipped to serve their communities and remain resilient in the face of change."

Kate Beggs, Northern Ireland Director of The National Lottery Community Fund

1.1 Executive Summary

In today's rapidly evolving digital landscape, the Voluntary, Community, and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector in Northern Ireland (NI) faces significant challenges and opportunities. This scoping study explores the potential of establishing a bespoke digital hub to enhance digital capacity, foster collaboration, and drive sustainable growth within the sector.

In 2022, the Community Foundation Northern Ireland (CFNI) commissioned the Bytes Project to explore the VCSE sector's digital needs. The resulting "Wired UP!" report, was produced demonstrating areas of need. Following this, CFNI convened a Cross Sectoral Digital Innovation Lab to identify solutions. It identified key challenges which included poor digital skills (85.0%), lack of funding (82.3%), and limited access to devices (82.0%). Forthwith it acted to secure funding to develop a scoping study and business plan supported by a Steering Committee to guide the process for the potential of a bespoke digital hub for the sector. Blu Zebra was procured to facilitate and complete the study and plan.

The VCSE sector in Northern Ireland plays a crucial role in social and economic well-being. As of January 2025, there were 7,214 registered charities, with 73.9% having an income of less than £100,000. The sector employs approximately 53,620 people and relies on over 240,000 volunteers.

VCSE organisations play a vital role in community cohesion, social inclusion, and improving quality of life, relying heavily on volunteers and demonstrating adaptability, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, to drive social change and support vulnerable populations.

Digital inclusion ensures all communities, especially the disadvantaged, have access to and can effectively use digital to their advantage. Despite progress, the digital divide remains a significant challenge in Northern Ireland, with 14.2% of the population not using the internet. Key stakeholders such as the CFNI, NICVA, and various government bodies play an important role in addressing these challenges to ensure everyone can participate fully in the digital World.

The methodology for the scoping study combined both qualitative and quantitative techniques and involved a close working relationship with CFNI. A Project Steering Group, including members from the VCSE, private, and public sectors, guided the study. The methodology included one-to-one interviews (60+), benchmarking desk research, an online stakeholder survey (139 responses), a series of focus groups with key stakeholders.

The proposed digital hub aligns with current government and sectoral thinking on the importance of digital transformation for the VCSE sector. It integrates existing research, such as the CFNIs 'Wired UP!' report, and aligns with relevant strategies while identifying and addressing research gaps. This strategic approach ensures the digital hub addresses genuine needs without duplicating existing provisions.

As part of the benchmarking, the study compares digital inclusion strategies in the UK, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland, highlighting the VCSE sector's role in each region. In England, initiatives like the Good Things Foundation and Digital Skills Partnerships focus on local collaborations to enhance digital skills. Scotland's Connecting Scotland programme provides devices and training through community partnerships, issuing over 61,000 devices since May 2020. Wales emphasises digital inclusion across all sectors with programmes like Digital Communities Wales, training digital champions to support communities. Ireland's Digital for Good roadmap aims for comprehensive digital inclusion, supported by Connected Hubs, which includes over 400 hubs. Northern Ireland,

Delivered by
THE NATIONAL LOTTERY
COMMUNITY FUND

Dormant
Assets NI

The Community Foundation Northern Ireland

A DIGITAL HUB FOR THE VCSE SECTOR IN NORTHERN IRELAND

4

however, lacks a cohesive strategy, leading to fragmented efforts directed by a lack of a joined-up approach and highlighting the need for a dedicated digital support hub for the VCSE sector.

The digital hub is a crucial initiative to address the digital skills gap in Northern Ireland's VCSE sector. It will aim to enhance digital training activities, reach wider audiences, and support digital transformation within organisations. The hub will primarily be virtual, with a central hub location for management and admin functions and mini hubs for outreach training. It will include an information repository, a trusted suppliers directory, a knowledge-sharing forum, and a self-assessment audit tool.

Global best practice studies of digital hubs compare different resource, services, funding and sustainability. Three examples are shared in the study.

The smaller-sized hub (New Zealand) is run with lean resources, including one full-time staff member, three volunteers, and outsourced IT support. Operations are supported with excellent governance, and the staff member is experienced with high technical skills. It is financially supported through grant funding from both government and philanthropic sources. All services are offered online and include a repository of training resources at basic, intermediary, and advanced levels; a free online organisation self-assessment tool; and an online repository of digital applications and tools. The hub has only been in existence for four years. It aspires to continue growing and provide support to VCSE organisations to help address digital inclusion through transformation.

The medium-sized hub (London) supports a larger urban population, connecting more than 1,000 local government colleagues online and in person. It helps them share knowledge, build capacity, run projects, and influence change together. It has a staff compliment of 10 personnel. It is a membership organisation, and its operations are funded through annual subscriptions from 15 borough councils and grants from the government and other partners. The hub has been in operation for the last six years and has scope to develop and grow as it expands its projects.

The large-sized hub (Australia & New Zealand) is an example of how over 35 years an organisation has grown from a simple mission of supporting social justice. Over this period it has developed its software to deliver client and case management applications that help organisations become more efficient and effective. It is now used by over 3,500 government and community services to manage their client data and improve service delivery. It provides a vision for a different type of more sustainable hub which could develop and mature into a standalone organisation without the need for significant external funds.

The potential scale of the digital hub in NI is significant with a market of approximately 7,214 organisations based on figures from the Charity Commission for NI as of January 2025. Of these organisations 73.9% (5,337) have an income of less than £100, 000; 22.4% (1 615) have an income between £100, 000 - £1 million; 3.6% (262) have an income over £1 million; The sector comprises 53,000 employees over 49,000 trustees more than 240,000 volunteers.

The digital needs of these organisations vary with survey results indicating that 26% (1,876) are at a beginner level; 71% (5,122) are at an intermediate level; 3% (216) are at an advanced level; To accommodate these needs support must be provided through a combination of one-to-one online methods (a hybrid solution).

Cost considerations are crucial as private sector IT support which includes desktop virtual support costs between 20p-40p per person per day; For the 53,000 employees in the sector this could amount to between £2 .3 million - £4 .8 million annually assuming a 225 working day model; Larger

organisations tend to have budgets for this type of support whereas smaller organisations often struggle to afford it.

The smaller-size hub model (New Zealand) offers an interesting example. The lean early-stage digital hub primarily provides online guidance information and audit tool which recommend appropriate training tools for each organisation. The digital hub has one part-time officer and three active volunteer supports. It services a VCSE sector made up of 110,000 community organisations through its resources.

Several options were considered for the digital hub, each assessed against various criteria using a RAG system. The options included: one physical hub based in Belfast with a website and no outreach; a virtual digital hub without outreach; a virtual digital hub with outreach; multiple hubs in community centres and libraries without a central physical hub; a physical hub in Belfast with four mini hubs offering spaces for outreach training, a website, and outreach support for local groups; and the option of having no digital hub at all.

The criteria used to assess these options included the opportunity for exemplar digital transformation, opportunities for lifelong learning, cost, support for groups on a one-to-one basis, linkage to a Digital Competency Framework, academic links, car park availability, and accessibility for groups.

The feedback supports the concept that a digital hub should be primarily virtual, with a central base for management and administration. This central hub would be complemented by a range of mini locations across NI, which could serve as training hubs when needed. Initially, the coordination of these hubs would require one full-time project manager and one technical/graphic content manager.

These mini hubs would not be staffed but would be available for use by trainers. They should ideally be located in existing community buildings or virtual hubs with good training rooms, provided at minimal cost to ensure accessibility and openness. It is proposed that these mini hubs align with the City and Growth Deal areas to leverage digital transformation opportunities.

In addition to the central digital hub coordinating needs and support (both virtual and face-to-face), the digital hub offering should include strategic community development support. This support would help embed digital assistance within a broader community development competency framework, integrating with the work of existing organisations and requiring minimal additional accommodation.

The digital hub will support digital inclusion and reduce the digital divide, ensuring the VCSE sector remains a vital partner in social and economic development. Good governance and a dedicated team will ensure its success, with a focus on lifelong learning and building digital competencies. Funding options include an option through Dormant Assets NI (The National Lottery Community Fund), government funding and other philanthropic grants could be sourced to create momentum for future supported entirely by the VCSE sector.

The proposed Digital Hub for the VCSE sector in Northern Ireland offers a comprehensive and strategic approach to addressing digital transformation challenges.

1. **Supporting a Digital Strategy for Northern Ireland**

The hub provides an operational model that embodies many of the key features recommended for a regional Digital Strategy:

- Tackles digital exclusion through targeted support for underserved groups, affordable access to tools, and tailored training.
- Fosters cross-sector collaboration via a proposed multi-stakeholder board and strategic partnerships across public, private, and community sectors.
- Invests in infrastructure and includes mechanisms for annual monitoring, data collection, and impact reporting to track progress and inform future strategy.

2. Advancing a New Approach to Digital Infrastructure Funding

The proposal adopts a long-term funding vision supported by multiple streams:
- Seeks core funding for essential staffing, tools, training, and operational sustainability.
- Emphasises flexibility and innovation, encouraging organisations to evolve their digital practices.
- Incorporates a subscription-based self-funding model for long-term resilience.
- Encourages collaborative investment from government, philanthropic organisations, and the private sector.

3. Enhancing Digital Support for the VCSE Sector

The Hub is designed to serve as a sector-wide digital support platform:

- Provides technical assistance, including audits, cybersecurity advice, and help navigating digital procurement.
- Hosts a robust digital resource library with guides, tutorials, case studies, and peer learning tools.
- Establishes an interactive forum and regular virtual events for collaboration and knowledge sharing.

4. Building the VCSE Digital Workforce

The hub addresses the workforce development needs highlighted in the report:
- Delivers free and low-cost training across core digital competencies, including AI, data management, and cyber awareness.
- Introduces a digital skills audit tool to identify gaps and measure progress.
- Focuses on inclusion, ensuring 50% of training participants are from underserved communities.
- Creates a network of digital champions and mentors, promoting sustainability and shared learning.

The Digital Hub proposal not only aligns with but actively delivers on the *Wired UP!* recommendations. Through strategic governance, long-term funding, targeted support, and a collaborative delivery model, the Hub provides a scalable solution to the digital needs of the VCSE sector in Northern Ireland. It represents a vital step toward a more inclusive, connected, and resilient future for the sector.

1.2 The Community Foundation for Northern Ireland

The Community Foundation for Northern Ireland is an independent, grant making trust, inspiring generosity, and achieving impact across Northern Ireland. Currently, the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland works with 65 funds, bringing changes to hundreds of communities every day.

The foundation's vision is

> "a fair and equitable society for everyone"

The Community Foundation wants to see a place where generosity and fairness changes lives, communities flourish, and everyone feels they belong.

Its mission is

> "To work hand in hand with communities to build a better future"

Working collaboratively to influence policy, advocating for communities, and using impact and knowledge to inform practice and policy, will be the Key Drivers, making the changes it wants to see.

Figure 1: CFNI Strategy 2023-26

The foundation's objectives / strategic priorities for the next three years, 2023-2026, are:

- **Strengthen and supporting** community and promoting the community's voice
- **Advance diversity, equity and inclusion** for our sector
- **Improve well-being**
- Encourage and secure diverse funding streams, particularly independent **and transformational funding** into the VCSE Sector

The key drivers of its work are:

- Working collaboratively to influence policy
- Advocating for communities
- Using impact and knowledge for informing practice and policy

The Community Foundation for Northern Ireland, under its 2023-2026 Strategic Plan, has identified the following priority initiatives, of which digital inclusion is one.

Table 1: CFNI 2023-2026 Strategic Plan Priority Initiatives and what they mean

Priority Initiatives	What this means
Poverty	We will invest in projects, campaigns and organisations addressing short- and long-term poverty.
Climate Sustainability	We will create opportunities to educate and learn, decarbonise our operations, commit resources and manage our investments through a climate justice lens.
Community Transformation	We will build and develop opportunities in support of a stronger, more resilient, and inclusive community and voluntary sector.

Priority Initiatives	What this means
Digital inclusion	We will commit resources and advocate for a digital strategy for NI, a new approach to digital infrastructure and improve digital support and workforce development
Social Justice	We will broaden our Human Rights support and continue to advocate for and give greater voice to those most marginalised in our community.
Health	We will develop funding, policy and programmes that address enhanced mental, physical, economic, social, and environmental well-being

1.3 Introduction to the Scoping Study

In today's rapidly evolving digital landscape, the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector in Northern Ireland faces both unprecedented challenges and emerging opportunities. Recognising the need to enhance digital capacity, foster collaboration, and drive sustainable growth within the sector, this scoping study has been developed to explore the potential of establishing a bespoke digital hub for the VCSE Sector in Northern Ireland.

This study is underpinned by a thorough analysis of the current digital environment within the sector, stakeholder needs, market trends, and financial viability. It examines critical dimensions including technical feasibility, operational requirements, and economic sustainability to determine whether the proposed digital hub can deliver tangible benefits while addressing inherent risks and challenges.

Through rigorous research and stakeholder engagement, the scoping study seeks to provide a clear and evidence-based roadmap for the potential development and implementation of a VCSE Digital Hub.

The VCSE sector has been affected by COVID-19, much like the private sector. COVID-19 accelerated digital transformation in Northern Ireland's VCSE sector, however, challenges like the digital skills gap and technology costs persist. Many private sector businesses receive support from organisations like Catalyst, Digital Catapult, Invest NI, Government and others to develop the necessary skills, research, innovation, and strategies to adapt to this new and rapidly changing world. Without such support, the private sector would struggle to evolve, grow and ultimately some private sector businesses would not survive. However, the VCSE sector has not received the same level of support and resources, and the reality is that the VCSE sector critically requires digital support, resources, and training to effectively meet the needs of the communities it serves.

In the absence of a Digital Strategy for Northern Ireland or a VCSE sector specific digital strategy there are currently no clear overarching goals to address digital inclusion, identify priority areas for investment, or encourage collaboration between government, businesses, and civil society. As such there is a concern that the VCSE sector could further lag behind, impacting future investment, capacity and growth.

At a time now where technology drives most aspects of daily life, the community and voluntary sector in Northern Ireland faces significant challenges regarding digital inclusion.

Digital Inclusion for the VCSE sector is about more than just devices and software - it is about adopting a digital strategy that increases the capacity of the sector, allows the sector to plan, and

adopt a digital culture. It is also about increasing the capacity of the sector to address the digital divide experienced by the communities they serve.

It is critically important that government, businesses, and civil society work together to close the digital divide and ensure that everyone, regardless of their background, can fully participate in and benefit from our increasingly digital world.

To continue to address the digital divide this study examines how funding a hub to support VCSE organisations in adopting a digital culture and preparing for a digital future can address financial and technical resource constraints, provide training to upskill staff and volunteers, enhance cybersecurity to protect against online threats, create awareness and keep people safe from scams while promoting digital inclusion to ensure beneficiaries can access services.

1.4 Background to the Scoping Study

The Community Foundation Northern Ireland (CFNI) has consulted with a wide range of stakeholders across the VCSE, business and public sectors in the development of this study. This has involved direct engagements, research, and innovation labs, to ensure it understands the needs of the sector.

In November 2022, CFNI commissioned the Bytes project in partnership with Stats & Stories to explore the current digital needs of the VCSE sector in Northern Ireland and identify areas for potential development. The 'Wired UP!' Report [1]revealed that many VCSE organisations in Northern Ireland struggle with several barriers that prevent them from fully embracing digital technology and transformation. The three most common obstacles identified by participants in the study were:

- **Poor Digital Skills (85.0% of participants):** Many organisations lack the expertise and confidence to adopt digital technologies and strategies. This limits their ability to use technology to enhance services, communicate effectively with stakeholders, and reach more beneficiaries
- **Lack of Funding and Affordability (82.3% of participants):** The ongoing cost of internet data is a major concern for organisations working with limited budgets. These financial constraints make it difficult for them to maintain digital services, particularly in rural areas with limited digital infrastructure
- **Limited Access to Devices (82.0% of participants):** Many organisations have only mobile phones to work with, which restricts their capacity to handle digital tasks efficiently, such as managing data, delivering online services, or offering digital literacy training to their communities

A significant 87.0% of participants in the report agreed that investment is needed in devices, software, and support for staff to develop the necessary digital skills. Furthermore, only 36.8% of participants felt that their staff and volunteers had the digital skills needed to support those at risk of exclusion. By investing in training, VCSE organisations can empower their workforce to bridge the digital divide, offering better support to their beneficiaries, many of whom are already vulnerable to digital exclusion.

Most participants rated their **organisation's digital culture** as excellent (11.7%) or good (46.0%). Over one third (34.3%) rated their organisation's digital culture as fair with 8.0% rating it as poor. No respondent rated their organisation's digital culture as very poor. Over one fifth of participants

---

[1] https://communityfoundationni.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Wired-Up-Digital-Report-1.pdf

Delivered by
THE NATIONAL LOTTERY
COMMUNITY FUND

The Community Foundation Northern Ireland

A DIGITAL HUB FOR THE VCSE SECTOR IN NORTHERN IRELAND   10

Dormant Assets NI

(22.0%) agreed or strongly agreed that their organisation was struggling to adopt a digital culture. Half of participants (50.0%) disagreed with this with 28.0% remaining neutral on this question.

The research identified three key characteristics present in organisations who are more advanced in adopting a digital culture:

1. Recognition that digital is a part of everyone's job.
2. Commitment from senior leaders to develop digital capacity; and
3. Understanding that addressing digital inclusion is now a normal part of service delivery.

Funding was seen as the largest challenge facing the VCSE sector **in the future**. This was expressed in two ways:

1. Difficulty in getting core funding to support digital (81.8%); and
2. Short-term funding making it difficult to plan ahead (81.8%).

The report noted the following recommendations:

Table 2: 'Wired UP!' Report Specific Recommendations

Recommendation	Specifically….
Recommendation 1: A Digital Strategy for Northern Ireland	The Northern Ireland Executive should develop a Digital Strategy for Northern Ireland to provide a coherent digital vision with a fully funded action plan. The Digital Strategy should: • Prioritise tackling digital exclusion and address key barriers to digital inclusion including affordability, access and lack of digital skills • Focus on supporting collaboration across all sectors including the creation of a strategic partnership between the VCSE sector and statutory agencies. Investment should be made to support VCSE organisations develop their digital infrastructure • Plan to collect and publish data on an annual basis to monitor trends and measure the progress of the Digital Strategy in achieving its outcomes
Recommendation 2: A New Approach to Funding Digital Infrastructure	Funders must play a greater role in supporting the digital needs of the VCSE sector, particularly regarding smaller organisations. Funders and organisations should work in partnership to develop a new approach to fund the digital processes and products essential for operational and service delivery. This should include: • Availability of core funding for digital infrastructure on a long-term basis to improve organisational efficiency and which offers flexibility to try new approaches • Recovery of the full costs associated with developing and maintaining digital infrastructure • Additional funding should be available to support organisations with their digital inclusion work. This should include collaboration between sectors
Recommendation 3: Improving Digital Support for the VCSE Sector	The creation of a digital support service would provide organisations with access to a range of supports and would particularly benefit smaller charities. This role may be filled by one organisation or a network of organisations and should provide:

Recommendation	Specifically….
	• Technical Assistance: Including troubleshooting and advice on cyber security. The service would also support organisations to undertake a digital audit, strategic planning for digital improvements and have the ability to negotiate with third party contractors to ensure best value • Resources: Collate and maintain online information with resources such as video tutorials, case studies and other guidance • Learning Opportunities: Offer training and learning opportunities for staff and volunteers with a range of digital skills including regular opportunities for staff and volunteers to share and learn from others in different organisations.
Recommendation 4: Workforce Development for the VCSE Sector	Training opportunities to develop digital skills should be ongoing and be available for free or low cost to organisations. Workforce development should focus on: • Enabling staff and volunteers to use digital technology that is relevant to their job role and will improve effectiveness • Developing a Digital Skills Audit for the VCSE sector which should be conducted at regular intervals to identify gaps, trends and provide an evidence base to inform organisations, funders and policy makers of ongoing need • Training resources and opportunities specifically developed to support staff and volunteers with poor digital skills, particularly older people or people with learning or physical disabilities • Creation of 'digital champions' across the sector to raise awareness of training opportunities, share good practice and encourage partnership working across the sector

Subsequent to this in February 2023, CFNI convened **A Cross Sectoral Digital Innovation Lab** to interrogate recommendations from previous evidence and convenings on the issue of digital innovation in parallel with the "Wired UP!" report. The purpose of the innovation lab was to identify solutions and partnership opportunities for future developments addressing digital skills and inclusion within the VCSE sector.

Solutions and partnership opportunities identified for development included:

• A clear call for cross sector partnership working
• Building a flexible digital fund for the sector, using impact and learning to influence policy
• Development of a "digital hub" for the VCSE sector, a central resource to support digital infrastructure and capacity building. Learnings from the digital fund would inform Hub priorities (Training, licensees, devices, supports, etc.)

The report noted this Digital Infrastructure Hub could, for example, support:

• The creation of a network of approved providers to deliver technical assistance for VCSE sector
• Scope the type and range of capacity training required by the VCSE sector
• Influencing of policy

- Examine the provision of devices
- Advise on social tariffs to overcome data poverty
- Further evidence to support tackling data poverty
- Broker social value opportunities
- Development of a digital charter for the VSCE sector

In response to the need identified through CFNI's work over the last two years, Blu Zebra Ltd was appointed in April 2024 to develop a scoping exercise and a business plan to support the delivery of a digital hub for the VCSE sector Northern Ireland. This approach was funded by the Dormant Assets NI fund (The National Lottery Community Fund).

CFNI established a Steering Committee including a wide range of stakeholders with experience and influence in the CVSE sector alongside knowledge of the digital industry.

The steering committee included representatives from:

- Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA)
- BCS- The Chartered Institute for IT
- British Telecom (BT)
- Catalyst
- Community Foundation Northen Ireland (CFNI)
- Department for Communities (DfC)
- Department of Finance (DoF)
- Hewlett Packard (HP)
- Innovation City Belfast
- Microsoft
- Strategic Investment Board (SIB)

Chapter 2: Background to VCSE Sector

The Voluntary, Community, and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector in Northern Ireland is vital to the region's social and economic landscape, but there are notable challenges in obtaining up-to-date and comprehensive data on its income, employment, and skill levels. This lack of reliable data impedes effective strategic planning and the development of policies that support the sector. The Charity Commission for Northern Ireland (2025) reports that there are 7,214 registered charities in the VCSE sector, with the majority (73.9%) having an income of less than £100,000. The three largest areas of activity are the advancement of education (15.7%), community development (11.6%), and religion (7.5%).

The NICVA Workforce and Volunteering Survey (2021) shows that the sector employs approximately 53,620 individuals, making up about 7% of Northern Ireland's total workforce. Additionally, there are over 49,000 trustees and 240,000 volunteers. The sector is highly diverse, with key sub-sectors including community development (26.5%), health and wellbeing (13.2%), and various others like arts, environment, education, and children's services. Over 75% of organisations employ paid staff, and the majority of them (51.5%) have full-time employees, though this represents a slight decrease from 2018. The gender composition of the workforce is skewed, with women making up 73% of paid staff. Additionally, 68.5% of organisations face challenges with staff retention, citing issues like lack of career progression, salary levels, and competition from other sectors.

Regarding digital engagement, Northern Ireland-based charities are falling behind in digital skills. The 2024 Charity Digital Skills Report points out that although many charities are strategically focusing on digital advancements, progress is limited by financial constraints, capacity issues, and the broader cost-of-living crisis. While AI integration is starting, there remains a critical need for more support, time, and funding to improve digital skills and infrastructure. Small charities, often led by marginalised groups, face particular challenges in enhancing their digital capabilities.

The UK Civil Society Almanac (2024) indicates that Northern Ireland has a higher density of smaller organisations compared to the UK as a whole, with many of these being micro-organisations (less than £10,000 in income). Additionally, the Continuous Household Survey (2023/24) highlights a significant uptake in volunteering, with nearly half of adults engaging in some form of volunteer work in the past year. Formal volunteering was particularly prevalent in activities like fundraising and office administration, while informal volunteering included helping others with shopping, transportation, and maintaining social connections.

Volunteering trends show that adults from the Protestant community were more likely to volunteer formally, and those in less deprived and rural areas were also more active. However, there are still barriers preventing full participation, and addressing these would help organisations engage a more diverse range of volunteers.

In conclusion, while Northern Ireland's VCSE sector continues to have a significant role in community well-being, it faces challenges such as limited digital capacity, recruitment and retention difficulties, and data gaps. However, the growth in volunteer engagement and the sector's increasing reliance on digital technologies show promise for its future development. More accurate, accessible data is crucial for supporting the sector's ongoing impact and growth.

Chapter 3: Digital Inclusion

For the Voluntary, Community, and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector, digital inclusion is particularly relevant as organisations when supported and skilled can contribute to the social and economic advancement of communities by providing access to education, employment opportunities, and essential service. It also enhances service delivery by allowing organisations to operate more efficiently and reach a broader audience. Online platforms facilitate remote support, virtual meetings, and digital resources, making services more accessible to those who might otherwise be excluded.

Digital inclusion fosters better community engagement. By ensuring that even the most marginalised individuals have access to digital tools, VCSE organisations can ensure that everyone has a voice and can participate in social and economic activities. This is crucial for addressing social and economic inequalities, as digital inclusion helps bridge the digital divide. The digital divide refers to the gap between individuals who have access to modern information and communication technologies (ICTs) and those who do not.

Digital inclusion is a critical concept that ensures all individuals and communities, especially the most disadvantaged, have access to and can effectively use information and communication technologies. This encompasses affordable, robust broadband internet service, internet-enabled devices that meet users' needs, access to digital literacy training, quality technical support, and applications and online content designed to enable and encourage self-sufficiency, participation, and collaboration.

The VCSE sector also plays a vital role in building digital skills among staff, volunteers, and service users. Improving digital literacy not only enhances the sector's capacity but also empowers individuals with essential skills for the digital age. This empowerment is important in reducing inequalities and ensuring that everyone can benefit from technological advancements in digital.

Embracing digital inclusion makes VCSE organisations more resilient and adaptable to changes. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of digital tools in continuing operations and supporting communities during challenging times. By adopting a digital culture, the VCSE sector can better navigate such disruptions and continue to serve and empower communities effectively.

Digital inclusion is essential for the VCSE sector to deliver services efficiently, engage communities, address inequalities, build digital skills, and remain resilient in the face of change. It ensures that all individuals and communities can participate fully in the digital world, thereby enhancing social and economic well-being.

While digital inclusion efforts are crucial, the digital divide remains a significant challenge in Northern Ireland. This divide encompasses various aspects, including access to broadband, digital skills, and the ability to use digital services effectively.

Northern Ireland has the highest proportion of internet non-users in the UK, with 14.2% of the population not using the internet[2]. There is a notable urban-rural divide, with rural areas experiencing poorer broadband coverage compared to urban centres. For example, Fermanagh and Omagh have some of the highest rates of poor broadband coverage. Many individuals lack the necessary digital

Ofcom analysis of operator data (July 2024).

Figure 2: Ofcom analysis of operator data (July 2024)- decent broadband connection

---

[2] https://www.assemblyresearchmatters.org/2021/11/16/an-overview-of-the-digital-divide-in-northern-ireland

skills to engage with technology effectively. This skill gap prevents them from accessing online services, educational resources, and employment opportunities. The digital divide is not just a technological issue but also a social and economic one. Many people without access to digital technologies often face greater inequalities in education, employment, and social inclusion.

Table 3: The percentage of broadband coverage in council areas in NI (July 2024)- Ofcom analysis of operator data including (July 2024)

Local Authority	Superfast (>=30Mbit/s)	Change since 2023	Full Fibre	Change since 2023
Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council	99%	+3pp	97%	+4pp
Ards and North Down Borough Council	99%	unchanged	95%	+1pp
Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council	98%	-1pp	93%	+1pp
Belfast City Council	C100%	unchanged	93%	unchanged
Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council	96%	+1pp	89%	+2pp
Derry City and Strabane District Council	98%	unchanged	93%	unchanged
Fermanagh and Omagh District Council	94%	unchanged	87%	+2pp
Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council	99%	+1pp	95%	+2pp
Mid and East Antrim Borough Council	98%	+2pp	95%	+4pp
Mid Ulster District Council	97%	unchanged	90%	+2pp
Newry, Mourne and Down District Council	98%	unchanged	93%	+1pp

The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified the digital divide, highlighting the critical need for digital connectivity. During the pandemic, access to the internet became essential for remote work, online education, and accessing health services. However, those without reliable internet access or digital skills were disproportionately affected, exacerbating existing inequalities.

Efforts to close the digital divide in Northern Ireland are focussed on improving broadband infrastructure, especially in rural areas, to ensure high-speed internet access for all. The issue is a challenge for some particularly along the border region. Providing training programmes to enhance digital literacy and skills, particularly for disadvantaged groups and supporting community-based initiatives that

Figure 3: Figure 2: Ofcom analysis of operator data (July 2024)- full fibre broadband coverage across the UK
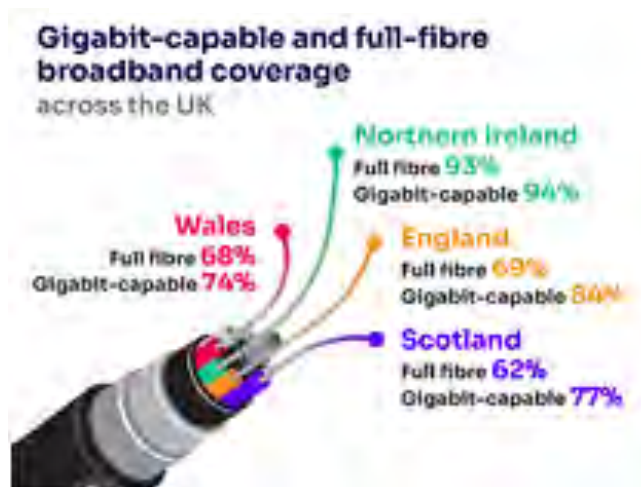
promote digital inclusion and provide access to digital devices and connectivity are being tackled in an un-coordinated manner through a range of support organisations.

Some of the other challenges which characterise the digital divide in NI included in the most recent Continuous Household Survey for the period April 2023 to March 2024[3] included the following:

- One quarter of people aged 16 and over in Northern Ireland had an advanced level of digital skills in 2023/24 (25% or 379,000 people).
- Over one in five people (23%) had no digital skills (344,000 people).
- A higher proportion of females reported having no digital skills (25%), and a lower proportion reported having an advanced level of digital skills (21%) when compared to males (21% and 30% respectively).
- Over half (55%) of those aged 65 and over had no digital skills, compared to less than 10% of those aged 16 to 49.
- Over two-fifths (43%) of those who were economically inactive had no digital skills, compared to only 10% of those that were economically active.
- The least deprived areas in NI had a higher proportion (37%) of respondents with an advanced level of digital skills when compared to the most deprived areas (15%).

Digital Skills in Northern Ireland – Published 29 Jan 2025 - NISRA

Other interesting data from the survey demonstrated the following across different cohorts.

The digital skill level in Northern Ireland differs across the various cohorts below.

Sex
- Similar proportions of males and females had an intermediate level of digital skills (23% and 24% respectively).
- A higher proportion of females reported having no digital skills (25%), and a lower proportion reported having advanced digital skills (21%) when compared to males (21% and 30% respectively).

Age
There were large differences in digital skill levels between those aged under 50 and those aged 50 and over.
- Just under four in ten (38%) of those aged 50 and over has no digital skills compared to 1 in 10 of those aged under 50.
- Delving into these groups further, the largest proportion of those aged 65 and over had no digital skills (55%) while for those under 50, the majority of respondents had an advanced level of digital skills (42% for those aged 16 to 24, 36% for those aged 25 to 34, and 32% for those aged 35 to 49).
- For those aged 50 to 64 the majority had a novice level of digital skills (33.6%).

Labour Market Status
There were notable differences in digital skill level between those who were economically active and those who were economically inactive.
- Over two-fifths (43%) of those who were economically inactive had no digital skills. There is, however, some variation in this level when compared across reasons for economic inactivity, with the largest proportion of those with no digital skills reported being retired (72%).

---

[3] https://datavis.nisra.gov.uk/economy-and-labour-market/digital-skills-in-northern-ireland-23-24.html

- 1 in 10 (10%) economically inactive people had an advanced level of digital skills, in contrast to one in three (34%) of the economically active.

Deprivation quintile
Differences in digital skill levels were evident between those who were in the least deprived areas and those in the most deprived areas.

- A higher proportion of those in the most deprived areas had no digital skills (30%) compared to those in the least deprived (15%).
- The largest difference (22pps) was recorded between those with an advanced level of digital skills. The most deprived areas in NI had lower levels of advanced digital skills (15%) than the least deprived areas (37%).

Digital Skills in Northern Ireland – Published 29 Jan 2025 - NISRA

The figures from the same NISRA report shows the use of online functions over the last twelve months, which are categorised by the five digital use sub-groups.

- 23% of people aged 16 and over did not use the internet in the last twelve months.
- Over half of people said they used the internet to find solutions to technical problems (54%) or to download or install software or apps (54%). In contrast, less than one in ten respondents (8%) reported writing code in a programming language in the last twelve months.
- The least common digital use sub-group was content creation which included writing code in a programming language; creating or making changes to files integrating text, pictures, tables or charts; and managing or analysing data using spreadsheet software. Around 40% of respondents aged 16 and over said they used these features in the last 12 months.

Figure 4: Usage of online functions, aged 16 and over, NI, April 2023 to March 2024
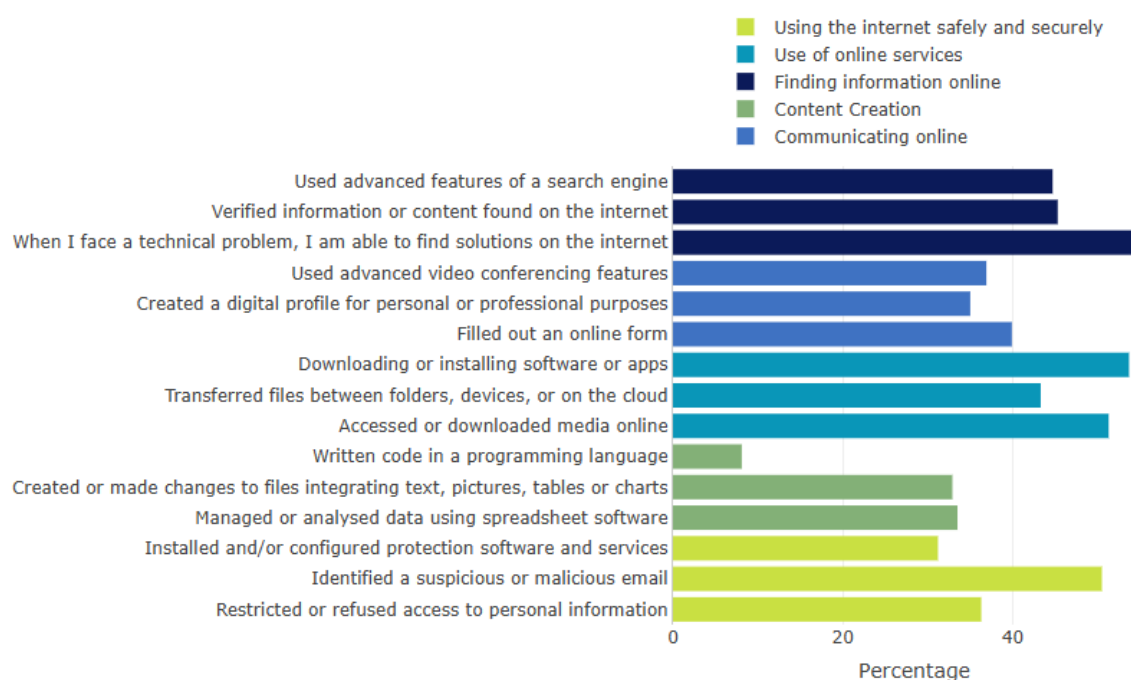
What the 'Wired UP!' said:

The current state of digital skills and inclusion within the VCSE sector in Northern Ireland is highlighted in the 'Wired UP!' report which provides a comprehensive overview of these dynamics.

The report demonstrated that many VCSE organisations have made strides in adopting digital technologies, but significant barriers remain. Approximately 42.9% of participants rated their digital skills as excellent or good, indicating a substantial portion of the sector is digitally proficient. 85% of organisations identified poor digital skills as a major barrier to digital inclusion. This skills gap limits their ability to fully leverage digital tools for service delivery, communication, and outreach.

Funding constraints are another critical issue, with 82.3% of organisations citing the cost of internet data and digital devices as a significant challenge. This financial barrier hampers their ability to invest in necessary technology and training, further exacerbating the digital divide.

NICVA plays a pivotal role in addressing these challenges. As a representative body for the VCSE sector, NICVA supports its members through tailored training, resources, and advocacy. In 2024, NICVA delivered 70 training sessions to 747 participants, covering essential areas such as governance, fundraising, and digital skills and hosted a conference for the sector which include a digital theme. This support is crucial in building the sector's capacity to navigate the digital landscape. It has seen significant demand for its cyber security training demonstrating a need. Another issues it has recently experienced is the difficulty in recruiting a digital services manager for the organisation. This is something also being experienced by Further Education Colleges and others who are competing with the private sector who are able to offer these highly skilled individuals much more attractive packages.

NICVA's efforts extend beyond training. It provides regular advice on funding, facilitates policy engagement, and represents the sector on various committees. These activities help ensure that the VCSE sector's needs and challenges are addressed at both local and national levels.

Digital Inclusion Conclusion

Digital inclusion ensures that all individuals and communities, especially the disadvantaged, have access to and can effectively use information and communication technologies. This includes affordable broadband internet and data, internet-enabled devices, digital literacy training, technical support, and tools designed for self-sufficiency and collaboration. For the VCSE sector in NI, digital inclusion is crucial. It enhances service delivery, allowing organisations to operate efficiently and reach a broader audience through online platforms for remote support, virtual meetings, and digital resources. Currently the VCSE sector in NI does not have the support, training and skills to support transformation, hence a Digital Hub would be a great enabler for organisations to reach their communities to share digital skills, connect and close the gap on digital inclusion.

The VCSE bridges the gap between Government and community. As Government transforms its public digital services it should engaged appropriately with the VCSE sector to help reach and enable its communities to engage effectively with its services.

Chapter 4: Methodology

The methodology for the scoping study combined both qualitative and quantitative techniques and a close working relationship with CFNI. A Project Steering Group was established by CFNI to assist in guiding the study. The project steering group agreed to a term of reference to ensure active participation and membership within a scope of responsibilities for the duration of the project.

The project steering group included members from the VCSE, private and public sectors:

- Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA)
- BCS- The Chartered Institute for IT
- British Telecom (BT)
- Catalyst
- Community Foundation Northen Ireland (CFNI)
- Department for Communities (DfC)
- Department of Finance (DoF)
- Hewlett Packard (HP)
- Innovation City Belfast
- Microsoft
- Strategic Investment Board (SIB)

All project steering group members were selected for their knowledge, contacts and expertise on digital inclusion and a desire to see how issues associated with digital inclusion could be addressed through working in a cross sectoral manner.

Meetings and workshops were facilitated by Blu Zebra with the project steering group to explore the VCSE context, digital infrastructure and training needs, networks, collaborations and partnerships in advance of the primary research. This enabled guiding principles to be established to help shape the final direction of consultation and research methodology.

The guiding principles included the following:

1. The Digital Hub could not be all things to all people

2. Its focus should be to support organisations in the VCSE sector in Northern Ireland hence empowering others through skills and efficiencies to reduce the digital divide & improve services

3. It should be set up and run to facilitate digital transformation and inclusion for the VCSE through policy influence, support, awareness, collaboration, knowledge sharing, skills and confidence and resilience building

4. It should evolve in both a physical and a virtual hub space/s over time based on need and connect across the Northern Ireland geography (urban and rural) through a hub/spoke model concept (budget dependant)

5. It should use inclusive language for all to understand – plain English

6. It should be a sustainable go to support space and place for the VCSE sector in NI.

The methodology for the scoping study included research and engagement:

- **One to one interviews** were conducted with **members of the project steering group**. This assisted in identifying additional stakeholders who could contribute to the study as well as the collation of relevant reports and research to help inform the study. These were shared with the consultancy team following the one-to-one meetings.

- An initial **benchmarking desk research exercise** was undertaken on the VCSE digital support services, training and resource needs currently in Northern Ireland, Ireland, England, Scotland and Wales. Some examples of best practice digital hubs were analysed and presented to the project steering group. Considerations around the provision, collaborations, partnerships and efficiencies were considered as part of the scoping study and throughout the project.

- A **stakeholder online survey** was designed in partnership with the project steering group and shared with the VCSE through social media, email databases, membership organisations, news bulletins, the NICVA summit, Advice NI Seminar and at the NICVA AGM, to highlight the study and offer opportunities for responses. In total, 139 detailed responses were received - including some from large membership organisations and networks, who responded as a collective on behalf of their membership.

- Ten **face to face focus groups** were held with members of a wide range of VCSE organisations including women, rural, disability, age, ethnic minority, LGBTQAI +, urban and older people.

- A series of **one-to-one interviews** (60+ organisations) were undertaken with a range of key stakeholders including funders, government departments, councils, social enterprises, charities, development trusts, urban and rural networks, The Good Things Foundation and private sector organisations, including key technology equipment suppliers and recycling device organisations.

- Weekly **project meetings** (48) took place with CFNI focussing on key project milestones and direction in line with the project outputs.

- A number of **steering groups meetings** (6) were held to present updates and to guide the development of the scoping study and business plan.

- The **report** was drafted and shared with the project steering group through a series of iterations to support the concept moving forward.

Delivered by
THE NATIONAL LOTTERY
COMMUNITY FUND

The
Community
Foundation
Northern Ireland

A DIGITAL HUB FOR THE VCSE SECTOR IN NORTHERN IRELAND   21

Dormant
Assets NI

Chapter 5: Strategic Context

The following is a summary of the strategic context with which the proposed digital hub aligns. This demonstrates a strong correlation between the need for the hub and current government and other thinking in relation to the importance of digital transformation for the VCSE.

It also demonstrates careful attention to avoiding duplication, evidenced by integration with existing research (CFNI's 'Wired UP!' report) and aligning with other relevant strategies, while addressing research gaps. This strategic approach ensures a digital hub proposition that demonstrates genuine needs rather than replicating existing provision. A detailed analysis of the Strategic Context is contained in Appendix 4.

Table 4: Strategic Context Summary

Document	Relevance to the VCSE Digital Hub Scoping Study
Draft Programme for Government 2024-2027[4]	Digital transformation will assist in the transformation of public services. The VCSE are a key partner in this transformation and require investment in digital readiness to work collaboratively alongside the public and private sectors.
DfC Voluntary and Community Sector Infrastructure Support Framework – Draft Framework Nov 2023[5]	Evidence and engagement responses for the draft framework indicated a clear demand and need for both digital and in person provision. It helps the VCSE get ready for working more effectively with government through upskilling digital skills which can support transformation.
PPN 01/21 - Social Value in Procurement[6]	The Social Value approach for IT contracts contains a number of initiatives which are related to digital inclusion including, but not limited to: Donation of IT devices, licences and software; Digital skills development and knowledge sharing; Business development and knowledge sharing. Further information is available on the Social Value Unit's website.
City and Growth Deals[7]	Improved infrastructure enables charities and community organisations to access reliable online services, participate in digital markets, and deliver services more efficiently.
People and Place Strategy DfC [8] **and its current review**	Many VCSE groups have been funded by NR for many years. The digital hub will prove to be of significant importance to supporting those groups working in the most disadvantaged areas of NI in delivering on a place-based approach to the support of local communities and in implementing a new integrated funding model/ approach that reduces bureaucracy and supports the multi-faceted nature of the sectors work in these areas in embedding an outcomes-based approach to challenging issues
10X Strategy[9] **DfE plus emerging initiatives around local economic development, sectoral action plans, social economy and apprenticeships** [10]	An opportunity exists to achieve greater alignment and achievement of joint ambitions around inclusive growth between DfE and the VCSE sector organisations including a focus on the social economy and the importance of digital transformation as a driver of same. The digital hub focuses on building the digital skills of staff and volunteers to help address these skills gaps and in meeting the overall goals of Skills for a 10 X Economy and the Minister's vision for the economy.

---

[4] https://www.northernireland.gov.uk/sites/default/files/consultations/newnigov/draft-programme-for-government-our-plan-doing-what-matters-most.pdf

[5] https://niopa.qub.ac.uk/bitstream/NIOPA/17234/1/dfc-voluntary-community-sector-infrastructure-support-framework-consultation.pdf

[6] https://www.finance-ni.gov.uk/publications/ppn-0121-social-value-procurement

[7] https://www.finance-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2024-10/NI%20City%20and%20Growth%20Deals%202024.pdf

[8] https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/articles/people-and-place-review

[9] https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/economy/10x-economy-ni-decade-innovation.pdf

[10] https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2025-01/Delivering%20the%20Economic%20Vision%20-%20Year%20one%20progress%20report.pdf

Document	Relevance to the VCSE Digital Hub Scoping Study
OECD Skills strategy for NI	The digital hub would build the digital skills among the VCSE to enhance productivity and earning capacity for lower income earners
New Decade New Approach – NI Assembly	A digital hub for the VCSE would complement these ambitions around employability and economic growth through enhanced digital skills for the VCSE, a sector which supports the most disadvantaged in society
T: BUC: Together Building a United Community - TEO	The digital hub will work with VCSE participants from all backgrounds placing good relations at the core of its delivery, making GR everyone's business through digital inclusion
Anti-poverty and social inclusion strategies - DfC	The Digital hub aims to build the digital sills of the sector to engage effectively in activities linked to these policy imperatives moving forward particularly for section 75 groups. This demonstrates comprehensive understanding of equality considerations.
Community development National Occupational Standards [11]	The digital hub can enhance the digital skills required to improve the effectiveness of the core competencies outlined in these standards.
The All-Ireland Standards for Community Work [12]	The digital hub can enhance the digital skills required to improve the effectiveness of the Standards.
A Digital Competency Framework for the Third Sector and Social Enterprises EU 3 Digital 2022[13]	This extensive EU research can help to inform the VCSE Digital Hub for NI.
Essential Digital Skills Framework- Department for Education UK Government [14]	This should be the basis of any skills development programme for the VCSE. It has been endorsed and updated by a wide range of public and VCSE organisations including the Good Things Foundation.
Concordat and the Joint Forum	A draft Partnership Agreement has been developed by the Joint Forum between Government and the VCS which will replace the 2011 Concordat. The Partnership Agreement will build on the foundations of the Concordat, containing a set of shared Values, Ways of Working and Fair Funding Principles which will underpin and guide relationships between Government and the Sector and offer an opportunity to build more collaborative relationships aligned to the draft PfG Outcomes.
Social Capital Loan Scheme – DfC	Could support organisations with some of the larger digital infrastructure needs
EU Digital Statistics of interest	Demonstrates the need for investment in digital skills and the need for the VCSE to lead by example
World Economic Forum – Future of Jobs report[15]	Digital skills alone are not sufficient to prepare people within the VCSE for the future of work over the next 10 to 20 years. A more all-round approach is required.
Digital Competency Framework - EU	This is a useful guide that could help in the design of a VCSE Digital competency framework for VCSE organisations in NI – linked to the wider community development competency framework. The Community of Practice is an interesting element to include as part of the development of the VCSE digital hub capacity building support.
Ulster University Economic Policy Centre- the Labour market and skills landscape	Demonstrates the need for digital skills within the VCSE.

---

[11] https://cldstandardscouncil.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/CDNOStandards2015.pdf

[12] https://www.cwi.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/All-Ireland-Standards-for-Community-Work.pdf

[13] https://eu3digital.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/EU3Digital-Framework-INTERACTIVE-Original-EN.pdf

[14] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/essential-digital-skills-framework/essential-digital-skills-framework#organisations-involved-in-the-consultation-and-update-of-this-framework

[15] WEF_Future_of_Jobs_2023.pdf

Chapter 6: Benchmarking

6.1 Assessing Government Influence on Digital Support for the VCSE Sector

This section of the study examines the significance of government digital strategies and their impact on the VCSE sector. By examining the approaches taken by England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland, it highlights the varying degrees of success and coherence in their strategies. Comparing National Strategies for Digital Inclusion via the VCSE Sector shows how Northern Ireland's lack of a cohesive strategy which hampers progress in digital inclusion. This section recognises the need for a dedicated digital support hub to enhance service delivery in a fast-transforming digital workplace. To illustrate this, three examples of digital support hubs of varying sizes are outlined, showcasing their effectiveness in advancing digital inclusion and supporting the VCSE sector.

6.2 Why Government Digital Strategy Matters

The importance of a comprehensive digital strategy for government cannot be overstated in a rapidly evolving digital landscape. These strategies enhance service delivery, promotes inclusivity, boosts economic growth, improves transparency, and strengthens resilience. To achieve these goals, it is essential to leverage support from various sectors, including the private sector, non-profit organisations, academia, and the public sector.

Government strategies should be supported by a Digital Charter which provides the commitment to key initiatives to reduce digital exclusion and ensure everyone can benefit from digital technology. This includes having agreed shared definition of basic online skills, supporting cross-sector partnerships, identifying and scaling best practices, making digital services more accessible, and simplifying user experiences.

The addition of a Digital Inclusion Strategy furthermore emphasises the need for high-speed internet access, digital skills training, inclusive service design, and regular monitoring and evaluation. The result of these strategies provides overarching outcomes for actions and direct funding and support to enable, develop and transform.

The United Kingdom (UK), Scotland, Wales and Ireland all have national digital strategies which encompass all sectors. These are central to setting the vision for transforming the focus of enhanced service delivery, promoting inclusion, boosting economic growth, improving transparency and strengthening resilience. The essential enablers include the private sector with its technological expertise innovation and investment. Academia contributing research and development of new technologies and the public sector ensuring policy alignment and a regulatory framework. The VCSE sector offers insight into community needs and helps bridge the digital divide.

In March 2017, the UK Government unveiled its Digital Strategy, which is built on seven key pillars:

1. Developing world-class digital infrastructure for the UK
2. Ensuring everyone has access to necessary digital skills
3. Positioning the UK as the best place to start and grow a digital business
4. Transforming every British business into a digital business
5. Making the UK the safest place globally to live and work online
6. Maintaining the UK Government's leadership in online citizen services

7. Harnessing the power of data to boost the UK economy and enhance public trust in its use (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, 2017)

This strategy was developed as part of the post-Brexit industrial strategy, with a strong emphasis on business. The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport identified ten tech priorities to support recovery post-COVID-19, building on the Digital Strategy pillars to further develop the digital economy. However, the Good Things Foundation has noted that the strategy's implementation has been slow (Good Things Foundation, 2021).

Both Scotland and Wales have their own digital strategies (**Digital Scotland, 2021; Welsh Government, 2021)**. Scotland's strategy aligns with its National Performance Framework, focusing on national wellbeing across economic, social, and environmental dimensions. It highlights three priority themes:

1. people and place (ensuring no one is left behind)
2. the digital economy
3. digital government and services.

Wales' digital vision aims to "improve the lives of everyone through collaboration, innovation, and better public services." This vision is supported by six missions:

1. **Digital services**: Modernise and deliver services designed around user needs, ensuring they are simple, secure, and convenient.
2. **Digital inclusion:** Provide people with the motivation, access, skills, and confidence to engage with the digital world based on their needs.
3. **Digital skills:** Develop a workforce with the digital skills, capability, and confidence to excel in both the workplace and daily life.
4. **Digital economy:** Foster economic prosperity and resilience through digital innovation.
5. **Digital connectivity:** Ensure services are supported by fast and reliable infrastructure.
6. **Data and collaboration:** Enhance services through collaborative efforts, utilising and sharing data and knowledge (Welsh Government, 2021, pp. 7-8).

Ireland's Digital Strategy, known as the Digital Ireland Framework, outlines several key priorities to drive and enable digital transformation across the economy and society. It has 5 main priorities include:

1. **Connectivity:** Ensuring all Irish households and businesses are covered by a Gigabit network by 2028 and all populated areas by 5G by 2030.
2. **Digital Skills:** Providing digital skills for all, from school to lifelong learning, with a target of 80% of adults having at least basic digital skills by 2030.
3. **Digital Public Services:** Ensuring widespread access and use of inclusive digital public services, aiming for 90% of services to be consumed online by 2030.
4. **Digital Economy:** Helping small businesses benefit from digital opportunities, with targets of 90% of SMEs achieving basic digital intensity and 75% enterprise take-up in cloud, AI, and big data by 2030.
5. **Safety and Security:** Protecting citizens from harmful online content through regulations like the Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill (Digital Ireland Framework, 2022).

These priorities aim to maximise the well-being of Irish people and businesses, fostering a digitally inclusive and innovative society.

Northern Ireland however does not have an overarching Digital Strategy. The Executive Office has recently launched its Digital Skills Strategy which create alternative pathways into the digital sector, making it more accessible to a diverse range of individuals, emphasises the importance of inclusivity and encourages collaboration between government, industry, and educational institutions to support digital skills development.

In developing a Digital Skills Action Plan for NI, the Department has established a Technologies and Cluster workstream, with the following seven priority sectors identified:

1. Agri-Tech;
2. Life and Health Sciences;
3. Advanced Manufacturing, Materials and Engineering;
4. Fintech/Financial Services;
5. Software;
6. Screen Industries; and
7. Low Carbon (Including Green Hydrogen).

It is noted that these will evolve during its lifetime as the environment changes. The VCSE sector is not a part of this action plan.

Northern Ireland Government departments have focuses on digital transformation to improve public services and internal operations (Department of Finance); transform health and social care services through digital means to improve health outcomes and personalised care (Department of Health); work on enhancing digital skills and supporting the digital economy through various initiatives and strategies (Department for the Economy).

The Department of Communities provides digital inclusion programmes which aim to improve digital skills and access for disadvantaged groups, ensuring everyone can benefit from digital services, along with community support which provide digital skills training and support, helping communities to get online and use digital services effectively. The Department of Communities also provide funding and resources to community groups and voluntary organisations to support digital inclusion projects. Different departments may have varying priorities, leading to unequal distribution of resource allocations which can leave some areas of the VCSE sector underfunded and unsupported.

This lack of joined up approach therefore leaves gaps and barrier making a sector like the VCSE vulnerable. In the absence of a cohesive digital strategy and charter for NI, effort from departments may become fragmented leading to duplication of work. Different departments may have varying priorities, leading to unequal distribution of resource allocations which can leave some areas of the VCSE sector underfunded and unsupported. This lack of a unified approach is hindering the development of comprehensive digital skills programs, leaving many organisations without the necessary skills to fully embrace digital transformation. Funding has remained the same for the past decade not adjusting to the sectoral needs and demands. These financial constraints have restricted innovative approaches to upskilling the sector and responding to demand for increased training provision.

Inconsistent approaches and efforts result in uneven access to digital tools and infrastructure, particularly in rural or disadvantaged areas, exacerbating the digital divide. More critically in the fast-changing environment digital policies become misaligned causing confusing and making it difficult for VCSE organisation to comply with or meet the standards of best practice.

Further detail and comparisons between approaches and focuses in the VCSE around digital inclusion can be found in **Appendix 5**.

6.3 Global Best Practice VCSE Digital hubs of varying sizes

The following illustrates global best practice examples of functioning digital hubs for the VCSE and government sector at various sizes – small, medium and large and the types of activities within each.

6.3.1 Small Size Digital Support Hub

6.3.1.1 The New Zealand Navigator Trust

The New Zealand Navigator Trust operates with a focus on providing digital tools and resources to support community organisations in Aotearoa New Zealand. Their operations are centred around a digital hub that includes a growing portfolio of resources designed to enhance various aspects of organisational performance. These aspects include direction, governance, leadership, people, administration, finances, communication, evaluation, and relationships.

The Trust's resources are designed to be simple, relevant, useful, and trusted. They ensure that the resources are easy to use, practical, and effective in solving problems. The Trust also emphasises trust, with all resources curated by the community for the community.

The Trust's digital platforms offer convenience, affordability, and efficiency, allowing users to access valuable guidance and information anytime, from anywhere. They also engage in collaboration with community partners and sector capability builders to promote and support community organisations.

The Trust's mission is to equip a thriving charitable and community sector in New Zealand by providing flexible and accessible digital solutions. They continuously improve their offerings by incorporating user feedback and encouraging peer-to-peer learning and the sharing of successful tools and templates.

Key areas of focus:
- **NZ Navigator:** A free online self-assessment tool for community organisations to evaluate their performance and identify areas for improvement.
- **CommunityNet Aotearoa:** A hub of quality, free resources tailored for community groups, providing valuable guidance and information.
- **Digital Stuff We Love:** An initiative highlighting budget-friendly digital tools that are accessible and practical for not-for-profits.

6.3.2 Medium Size Digital Support Hub

6.3.2.1 London Innovation Community- LOTI- Demonstrates scale & resource

LOTI is London local government's innovation team. It helps borough councils and the GLA use innovation, data and technology to be high-performing organisations, improve services and tackle

London's biggest challenges together. It aims to find, fund and then scale the best ideas across London's local government.

Founded in July 2019 with just 15 boroughs, LOTI's record of delivery has led to its membership growing to include 27 boroughs, the Greater London Authority and London Councils. Today, it connects more than 1,000 local government colleagues online and in person, helping them to share knowledge, build capacity, run projects and influence change

Figure 5: LOTI Community Image

together. The LOTI community is supported by a team of 10 people, hosted at London Councils. It is a membership organisation, and its operations are funded through an annual subscription from borough councils and grants from the GLA, London Councils and other partners.

Key areas of focus:
- **Digital Inclusion Service:** Providing devices, data, and digital skills to Londoners who need to get online.
- **Rough Sleeping Insights Project:** Using data to support efforts to make rough sleeping rare, brief, and non-recurrent.
- **Home Care Cooperative:** Piloting an integrated, localised home-care service in Clapton.

6.3.3 Large Size Digital Support Hub

6.3.3.1 Infoxchange (Australia and New Zealand)

- Infoxchange is a not-for-profit social enterprise that has been delivering technology for social justice for 35 years.
- It is now a part of a larger not for profit
- It connects 150 staff members working to support more than 30,000 not-for-profits and over 2 million people in need each year across Australia and New Zealand
- It tackles the biggest social challenges through the smart and creative use of technology.
- Uses technology to improve the lives of people experiencing disadvantage and the organisations that support them.

Figure 6: Infoxchange products & services image

- It started as an online crisis accommodation register to help people experiencing homelessness find a bed for the night
- It developed service coordination and client and case management applications to help organisations become more efficient and effective- used by over 3,500 government and community services to manage their client data and improve service delivery
- Through "Ask Izzy" it developed a partnership with Google, REA Group and News Corp Australia a mobile website, which connects people in need with housing, a meal, money help, health and wellbeing services and more

Key areas of focus:

- **Client & Case Management:** Tools to help organisations manage client information and casework efficiently.
- **Digital Inclusion:** Initiatives like the Telstra Top Up program and Ask Izzy, which help people access essential services and stay connected.
- **IT Support:** Affordable and flexible IT support tailored to the needs of VCSE's.
- **Service Directory:** Access to over 450,000 health and welfare services through their comprehensive directory.

Figure 7:Infoxchange Community Programs image

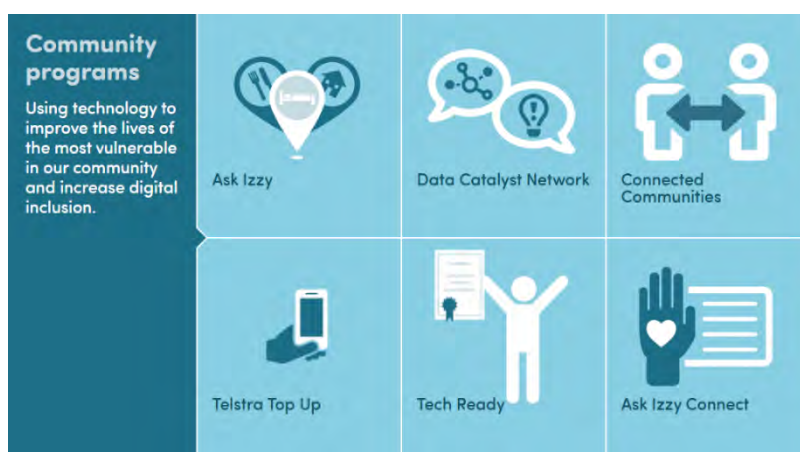- **Community Programs:** Programs aimed at breaking cycles of disadvantage and increasing digital inclusion

6.3.4 Conclusion

The three examples demonstrate digital hubs models of different supports, sizes and functions.

The **smaller sized hub** is run with lean resources which includes one full time resource, 3 volunteers and outsourced IT support. Operations are supported with excellent governance, operational and the staff member is experienced with high technical skills. It is financially supported through grant funding from both government and philanthropic sources. All services are offered online and include a repository of training resources at basic, intermediary and advanced levels; a free on-line organisation self-assessment tool; and an on-line repository of digital applications and tools. The hub has only been in existence for four years. The hub has aspirations to continue to grow and provide support to VCSE organisations to help address digital inclusion through transformation.

The **medium sized hub** supports a larger urban population connecting more than 1,000 local government colleagues online and in person, helping them to share knowledge, build capacity, run projects and influence change together. It has a staff contingent of 10 personnel. It is a membership organisation, and its operations are funded through an annual subscription from borough councils (15) and grants from the Government and other partners. The hub has been in operation for the last six years. LOTI has scope to develop and grow as it expands its projects.

The **large sized hub** is an example of how over 35 years an organisation has grown from a simple mission of supporting social justice. Over 35 years it has developed its software to deliver client and case management applications that help organisations become more efficient and effective. It is now used by over 3,500 government and community services to manage their client data and improve service delivery. It provides a vision for a different type of more sustainable hub which could develop and mature into a standalone organisation without the need for significant external funds.

Chapter 7: Assessment of Need

7.1 Introduction

The following is a summary of the need based on the following core needs assessment tools:

- A desk-based review of available research on digital hubs in the UK, Ireland and elsewhere
- A desk-based review of available research on digital inclusion
- A series of one-to-one interviews with stakeholders from the VCSE, private and public sectors
- A series of project steering group meetings
- An online survey with VCSE groups
- A series of focus groups with key sectoral interests within the VCSE with a focus on S75 groups

All quantitative and qualitative research and engagements were collated, triangulated and analysed, the evidence of which is summarised below. The full detail can be read in **Appendix 3 – Needs Analysis**

7.2 Needs Analysis

Summary of Needs Analysis

The following summary provides insights around key areas of resources, capabilities, support, adoption and transformation progress from the survey and one to one VCSE engagements.

Digital connectivity

Digital connectivity remains a significant challenge for many community groups and organisations in Northern Ireland, particularly in rural areas. Access to affordable and reliable internet is crucial for smaller community groups, staff, and volunteers who work from home. Widespread black spots and last-mile connectivity issues exacerbate the problem, limiting engagement and service delivery.
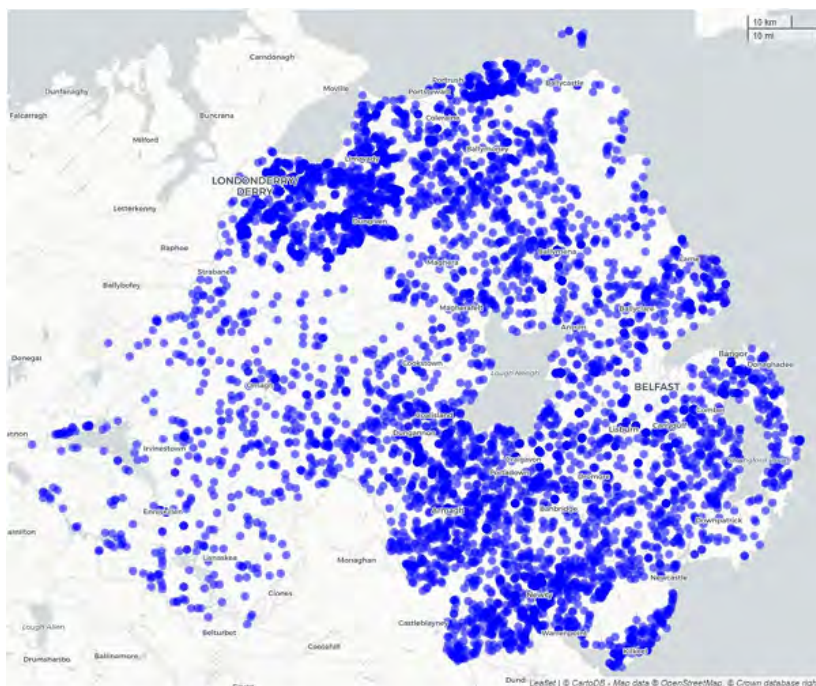
Figure 8: Eligibility for broadband connectivity under Project Stratum, NI-https://hyperfastni.com

In some areas, homes rely on multiple broadband providers due to inconsistent service, with poor connections being particularly prevalent in border regions, affecting both rural and urban areas. Older buildings often have limited broadband capacity and procurement contracts between government and service providers further restrict access in rural communities. The survey revealed that 36% of respondents are affected by affordability of broadband services; 18% by poor broadband services; 11% by limited broadband availability services. Comments from respondents highlight the

importance of digital connections included: *"how to connect to best suit the home/office or mobile working lifestyles"* and *"we are a small rural group of 220 homes but we have a "digital disconnect" with same thing that if fixed or improved might increase community engagement".*

Addressing digital knowledge gaps

Addressing digital knowledge gaps within the VCSE sector involved maximising the use of everyday software like the Microsoft suite, and leveraging AI tools for improved efficiency, while understanding cybersecurity are deemed essential skills for mitigating potential threats. Digital marketing and communication strategies are essential for enhancing visibility, while productivity tools and apps are lacking in most small and medium sized organisations. Effective planning skills are needed to manage projects and, multiple communication channels, and understanding how funders judge IT infrastructure is important for securing awards.

Cybersecurity and AI remain major challenges, with limited resources making organisations vulnerable. There is a lack of a cohesive digital knowledge network in Northern Ireland's VCSE sector, highlighting the need for a coordinated hub to support the sector. Improved data management and the transition from spreadsheets to databases are also critical knowledge gaps.

The survey also highlighted several key areas of digital need namely better communication strategies (45.53%), data management (43.9%), funding for tech infrastructure (39.02%), funding and resources (38.21%), cybersecurity knowledge (30.08%), and digital inclusion (29.27%. These areas are vital for the sector's growth and sustainability.

Barriers to Digital adoption

VCSE organisations faces several challenges including digital adoption in aging leadership with limited digital knowledge, high costs of licenses, and a lack of awareness about available discounts for suppliers for non-profits. Fear of change, potential scams, and hidden costs add to the barriers, while hybrid and tailored support and training for specific groups, such as visually impaired individuals, are essential but limited. Ongoing maintenance expenses also pose significant barriers. Overcoming these barriers require targeted education, awareness, and strategic support which can help organisations embrace change and foster a more digitally inclusive environment. VCSE leaders who don't embrace change and transformation to improve efficiency and service delivery can also be a barrier to transformation.

The main barriers identified were the cost of equipment and ongoing maintenance (71.54%), lack of skills (54.47%), lack of awareness on digital transformation (36.59%), resistance to change (11.38%), need for digital leadership and change management skills (34.15%), and challenges in long-term planning (21.95%). Commentary also included the importance of considering barrier like time. *"Finding the time to find suitable technologies, learn how to use them and adopt them. It's not necessarily about skills ability but finding the time to learn the skills".*

Organisational digital capabilities

Digital capabilities within the VCSE sector vary widely, with resources such as money, equipment, and time playing a key role. Many organisations lack an understanding of digital literacy, with smaller organisations often having less knowledge, skills, support, and infrastructure. Developing and funding advanced digital skills is crucial to enable, motivate, and inspire the VCSE sector to adopt a digital culture. Most organisations recognise that covering the basics well is essential to initiate digital transformation. The survey demonstrated that 26% of employers believed their staff had beginner capabilities, 71% intermediate and only 3% advanced capabilities.

Most needed digital resources

The VCSE sector face significant digital resource challenges, with key needs including funding for operational IT, licenses, equipment upgrades, and security. Capacity building for staff and volunteers is essential, as the sector lacks the skilled workforce available to larger organisations. While the value of Customer/Client Relations Management, data, and security is recognised, limited resources hinder the development of policies, strategies, and system implementation. Many organisations lack resources for IT upgrades, training, and project implementation, and often outsourced IT support. It was noted more scenarios around best practices in digital governance and greater knowledge-sharing opportunities are necessary to create efficiencies. The survey demonstrated that resources (30-50%) were needed to help address all areas across the board for transformation.

Digital literacy skills Needs

Many staff in VCSE organisations require basic training in software packages, and digital staff induction is often absent in smaller organisations. Secure data management and accessibility remain challenging without proper systems in place. Technical skills for office-based roles can streamline processes and save time, but understanding AI remains a mystery for many. While larger organisations benefit from dedicated IT support, they still require ongoing training and upskilling. Basic training on software like Microsoft Suite and graphic manipulation is essential, and transitioning from spreadsheets to databases can improve efficiency. The survey highlighted that a balanced mix of basic, intermediate, and advanced skills is necessary to address digital literacy gaps in the sector.

Types of training most needed

The VCSE sector faces a diverse range of training needs crucial for enhancing digital capabilities. The variation in language and externally supplied training course names across organisations makes it difficult to identify suitable training options. A central resource hub offering training dates and information would be beneficial. However, tight budgets make investing in staff and volunteer training challenging. Offering a continuum of courses for IT careers could help attract and retain young talent, while belonging to the Social Value Brokerage NI could help VCSE Organisations to connect with suppliers who require support in the delivering their social value requirements and other opportunities. (https://socialvalueni.org/contractors/find-a-broker/)

The survey results identified key training needs that included cybersecurity (41.14%), AI (47.41%), project management tools (37.93%), and digital skills audits in advance of training (37.07%). Understanding lifelong learning opportunities and certifications is crucial. Bespoke training for disability groups, cloud-based solutions, and creating a community of practice are also important. Project management, social media management, data management, and digital fundraising were highlighted as key areas for improving and transforming the VCSE sector.

Strategic planning for digital transformation

Different government departments offer fragmented funding and initiatives related to digitisation without specific overarching goals, leading to piecemeal efforts. Digital inclusion for the VCSE sector is not being addressed collaboratively or measured effectively, with post-COVID responses driven mainly by VCSE organisations through one off funding mechanisms.

Small and medium-sized organisations struggle to find time for strategic planning and keeping up with technological advancements. There is a need for digital audits to identify organisational needs and opportunities such as improving efficiency. Many organisations lack essential systems like Customer/Client Relations Management. Budgeting for digital is often deprioritised despite its

importance. There is a strong demand for support in creating digital strategies, action plans, and budgets, as well as for increasing awareness of digital transformation benefits.

The survey demonstrated that there was an overwhelming call for support around strategic planning, with between 70-85% of requests for the following types of provision:

- 84.55%- Increasing awareness of how digital transformation can assist us to do things differently
- 82.73%- Creating a Strategy and Action Plan for Digital
- 81.82%- How to develop a tech and digital strategy for our organisation
- 80.00%- An audit of our digital capabilities and weaknesses
- 80.00%- Budget/fundraising for our tech and digital transformation infrastructure
- 75.45%- How to create a digital and tech budget
- 72.73%- Supporting hybrid working practices powered by digital
- 72.73%- Support sourcing hardware and software
- 70.91%- Leading digital transformation/change management for our organisation

A central hub that facilitates planning and provides a coordinated approach for the sector could significantly enhance its ability to navigate and implement digital transformation effectively.

Ideas for the concept of a digital hub

Responses to the survey and one to one interviews highlighted that the proposed digital hub for the VCSE sector in Northern Ireland should be a community-led initiative offering a blend of in-person and online resources, tailored to the needs of local organisations. It should feature a comprehensive databank for apps, software, and planning tools and should provide a central space for knowledge sharing, training opportunities, and collaboration. This platform would reduce duplication of efforts and engage new trainers and volunteers, fostering greater inclusivity and knowledge exchange.

The hub should also serve as a Social Value Broker ((https://socialvalueni.org/contractors/find-a-broker/), facilitating connections with larger organisations and leveraging public sector contracts to deliver digital inclusion initiatives. It could offer access to digital skills, devices, software licenses, and other necessary resources. Flexibility is key, with outreach designed for rural groups and adaptable support based on the sector's evolving needs including those with additional support needs. A hybrid model, combining both physical and virtual presence, is essential to ensure digital inclusion while avoiding further divides.

The survey reflected a significant preference for various types of support hubs, with the following percentages:

- 87%- A Virtual Hub support element
- 77%- A physical hub with resources which can outreach to other locations (Hub & spokes)
- 65%- Multiple mini physical support hubs across NI
- 30%- One physical support hub located in NI

Overwhelming the sector supports the concept of co-creating the hub with the sector and keeping costs around a physical space down, but providing hybrid methods of support with virtual knowledge repositories, auditing tools and signposting to trusted suppliers.

Current digital support

Current digital support within the VCSE sector varies significantly. Larger organisations generally have IT support, either in-house or through contracted services, while smaller organisations face ad hoc and costly IT support challenges. Often, one knowledgeable person in the office handles IT issues, which can be time-consuming and unreliable. Many small organisations lack IT network support due to cost constraints, and website support is often expensive and charged by the hour.

It is challenging to find affordable highly skilled technical IT networking personnel who want to work in the VCSE sector (private sector work opportunities sometimes offer better packages). Remote troubleshooting is effective with trusted local providers, but outsourced support can sometimes be unreliable. Moving to cloud-based services has been beneficial for some, providing backups, security and essential tools, though it requires a significant upfront investment in time and learning and without support, the process of moving can be lengthy and disruptive to operations. The survey demonstrated that 41% of organisations don't have IT support. 10% do and 35% of respondents were not sure of what sort of IT support they receive. While IT support is received by 10%, this was for networking troubleshooting and fixes and development of IT or Digital skills. The largest barrier to accessing digital support was cost.

Transformation progress

Digital technology is reshaping the way VCSE organisations operate, though progress remains uneven. Factors such as age and motivation play a role, with some organisations still relying on traditional methods. The VCSE sector lags behind the private sector, which benefits from greater funding, including at times from government sources, as well as more extensive support.

Collaboration and knowledge-sharing within the VCSE sector are essential to prevent falling further behind. While COVID-19 accelerated digital transformation, many organisations, particularly in rural areas with limited connectivity and access to devices, have struggled to keep up.

Survey results show that:

- 46.61% of organisations are committed but lagging behind peers
- 28.81% are progressive and open to digital transformation
- 14.41% only change when necessary

A small percentage are resistant or unsure how to change. Many organisations are open to better ways of working but lack the knowledge and capacity to implement digital changes effectively.

7.3 Gap Analysis

The next table outlines the strategic gap issues identified through the primary research with the VCSE sector and other stakeholders that need to be addressed.

Table 5: Gap analysis issues identified by VCSE & other stakeholders

Strategic gaps to be addressed	Gap Analysis feedback from VCSE Organisations and other stakeholders
Connectivity	• Rural villages and areas across NI still affected by lack of connectivity, slow internet speeds and no/low capacity • Urban areas are generally well served by broadband, however some areas experience dated infrastructure for fibre optics and capacity can be a challenge at various time of the week/days depending on where you are based.

Strategic gaps to be addressed	Gap Analysis feedback from VCSE Organisations and other stakeholders
	• Border networks switching between NI/ROI is an issue for 4G users in getting a reliable service (areas vary based on terrain and mobile towers). • There is a lack of awareness of the support which providers can provide for inclusion around mobile data and connectivity (e.g. Good Things Foundation or other Social Tarriff schemes) • Contracts for social tariffs are too long/not flexible enough for many • "Last mile" in rural areas in an issue for many with cost making it unrealistic to connect • Not much choice of internet providers in rural areas, hence creating cost barriers and service quality challenges • The border areas are especially challenging for connectivity in NI. Fermanagh repeatedly was highlighted as having some of the worst connectivity issues • Some disability groups have challenges with internet service providers and communications because the principle account holder needs to communicate with the supplier when visually impaired or deaf this can be a challenge • Language options for newcomers' communities to NI are limited and understanding & receiving support is a challenge during troubleshooting • There is a general lack of knowledge, skills, training and suitable IT infrastructure to enable organisations to meet the needs of service users for connectivity in the sector • VCSE organisations don't have the expertise to advise their clients on contract options for broadband services because of geographical limits in NI and certain providers not serving certain areas
Digital barriers to adoption	• Knowing how and what to change in order to adapt at a basic level • Where to find solutions which suits the organisation, its skills levels & is affordable • How to stay safe online and catch up on cyber security • If English is your second language technical terms & understanding local NI accents can be a barrier • Online scams and misinformation, online with issues around trust and privacy can prevent engagement, adoption and contributions • Understanding costs of equipment, software and subscriptions • Trusting providers & their advice when their personal knowledge is basic • Accessibility for those with disabilities • Aging leadership and the motivation to adopt or be left behind
Organisational capabilities	• The sector size and capabilities vary in all organisations. More advanced skills are needed. Technical skills are an advantage for office trouble shooting, problem solving and process implementation. • Understand the risks of digitalisation and having leadership to enable change • Develop self-awareness of digital possibilities • Strategic planning, budgeting and evaluation
Most needed digital resources	• People who can engage, motivate and build confidence with stakeholders • Empower a digital champion within the organisation • Technical and management skills • Leadership for transformation • Network with peers and tech organisations • Digital inclusion for staff, volunteers and beneficiaries • Sharing and signposting of skills, knowledge and tools

Strategic gaps to be addressed	Gap Analysis feedback from VCSE Organisations and other stakeholders
	• Data driven solutions to inform decision making
Skills needs	• Develop 'users' research skills • Identification of tools which help organisational efficiency • Know when and where to seek help or outsource • Creating data standards and protocols • Leadership and management for digital transformation and projects • How to analyse data effectively • Marketing and social media skills
Types of training	• Understand the "how and what" to put training into action within the specific organisational context • Understand the limitations of digitalisation • Version control and document sharing • Database management • Social media, websites and email communications technology
Strategic planning	• Audits to determine what organisations need • Develop a long-term vision and strategy • Manage continuous change • Develop a holistic 'mindset': digital as core work • Understand trends and potentials of up-coming tech • Evaluate possibilities for digital service delivery
Suggestions to transform the sector	• Empower bottom-up ideas and initiatives • Collaborative training initiatives which are inclusive locally/regionally • Track and understand the impacts of decisions and investments • Build a knowledge community which is connected and collaborative • Don't forget rural organisations • Co-design solutions with the sector, provide the knowledge and evidence, show the data, the sector is adaptable • Embrace data, data driven solutions, make data the asset of the sector and monetise it for sustainability • Do the basic well and address the digital exclusion statistics

7.4 Summary of Needs Analysis, Barriers & Gaps

The following summary provides insights from stakeholder engagement, focus groups and survey on the digital needs for the VCSE Sector in Northern Ireland

Need analysis summary

- Digital connectivity remains a significant challenge, particularly in rural areas, affecting engagement and service delivery. Addressing digital knowledge gaps is crucial, with a focus on everyday software, AI tools, and cybersecurity.
- Digital adoption barriers include aging leadership, high costs, and a lack of awareness about wide ranging discounts for digital and support needs.
- Organisational digital capabilities vary widely, with smaller organisations often lacking resources and skills. The most needed digital resources include project management, funding for IT, capacity building, and data management.
- Training needs are diverse, with a focus on cybersecurity, AI, and project management. Strategic planning for digital transformation is hindered by fragmented funding and a lack of overarching goals.
- The concept of a digital hub should include community-led training, a combination of in-person and online resources, and a comprehensive databank. Current digital support varies, with larger organisations having more resources.
- Digital technology is transforming the sector, but progress varies, with many organisations lagging behind due to limited knowledge and capacity & resources to adapt.

Barriers to digital transformation summary

- The VCSE sector in Northern Ireland faces significant barriers to digital transformation. Connectivity issues persist, particularly in rural areas, with slow speeds, limited capacity, and unreliable service. Urban areas also experience challenges due to outdated infrastructure.
- Digital adoption is hindered by a lack of basic knowledge, affordable solutions, and cybersecurity awareness. Organisational capabilities vary, with many lacking advanced skills and strategic planning.
- Essential digital resources include motivated personnel, digital champions, and data-driven solutions. Skills needs encompass research, tool identification, data management, and marketing. Training should focus on practical application, an understanding of the limitations of digitalisation, and effective communication technologies.
- Strategic planning requires audits, long-term vision development, and continuous change management.
- To transform the sector, bottom-up initiatives, collaborative training, and a connected knowledge community are essential. Embracing data-driven solutions and ensuring digital inclusion will help bridge the digital divide and enhance the sector's sustainability.

7.5 What is happening around digital inclusion in the VCSE sector in Northern Ireland

Digital inclusion has become a critical focus for the VCSE sector in Northern Ireland. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of digital connectivity and skills, revealing significant barriers and gaps that need to be addressed to ensure equitable access to digital resources.

The VCSE sector, which plays a vital role in supporting communities, has faced numerous challenges in adopting digital technologies. Many organisations struggle with limited digital skills, inadequate

funding, and a lack of access to necessary digital tools. Despite these obstacles, there have been concerted efforts by various stakeholders to bridge the digital divide and enhance digital inclusion.

Key initiatives, such as the Digital Inclusion Fund supported by the Department for Communities (DfC) and the 'Wired UP!' (CFNI report) and its subsequent actions, have been instrumental in identifying and addressing the digital needs of the sector. NICVA has bolstered the VCSE sector's resilience through digital capacity building, partnerships, advocacy, and resource development to support digital transformation. Private sector suppliers offer discounted prices for licenses, data, equipment, hard/software but in many cases the VCSE sector is not aware of these benefits.

Furthermore, collaborations with educational institutions, private sector partners, and government departments have led to supported delivery on the ground. These efforts are crucial in ensuring that all members of the community, regardless of their background or circumstances, can benefit from the opportunities presented by digital technology.

This chapter outlines the various initiatives promoting digital inclusion within the VCSE sector in Northern Ireland and their dedicated commitments to reducing it. The research is not a exhaustive list. It is however a baseline of information gathered during the engagement and research for the hub concept which highlights some of the focus areas and initiatives which they contribute towards helping VCSE organisations both directly and indirectly.

The VCSE Digital Steering Group Organisations

The table below shows existing **steering group members** providing digital support to the VCSE sector in NI. It includes the types of support and the level of commitment currently to those various areas of support. (it is not an exhaustive list). Organisations with the green tick (✓) demonstrating a high level of commitment to different types of support. The orange tick (✓) indicating activities of a lower-level commitment to different types of support. Commitment may sometimes involve different interventions including promotion and projects which have an indirect benefit and helps reduce digital exclusion for the VCSE sector. The table also aims to highlight a greater need for consistency.

Table 6: Steering group members providing digital support to the VCSE sector in NI

Type	Areas of digital support					
Organisation	Funding Support	Connectivity	Devices	Education/Skills Development	Partnerships/ Collaborations/ Social Value	Policy/ Advocacy
NICVA	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
BCS- The Chartered Institute for IT	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
British Telecom (BT)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Catalyst	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
CFNI	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Department for Communities (DfC)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Type	Areas of digital support					
Organisation	Funding Support	Connectivity	Devices	Education/Skills Development	Partnerships/ Collaborations/ Social Value	Policy/ Advocacy
Department of Finance (DoF)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Hewlett Packard (HP)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Innovation City Belfast	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Microsoft	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

The Social Value Unit within the Strategic Investment Board is also a member of the Steering Group. The Social Value model for IT contracts contains a range of initiatives aligned to digital inclusion outcomes, including but not limited to: donation of devices, IT licences and software; digital skills and educational attainment including support towards ICT qualifications; and business development and knowledge sharing to VCSEs on areas related to IT.

Key Educators which support the VCSE sector in NI
The table below shows existing **key educators** providing digital support to the VCSE sector in NI. It includes the types of support and the level of commitment currently to those various areas of support. (it is not an exhaustive list). Organisations with the green tick (✓) demonstrating a high level of commitment to different types of support. The orange tick (✓) indicating activities of a lower-level commitment to different types of support. Commitment may sometimes involve different interventions including promotion and projects which have an indirect benefit and helps reduce digital exclusion for the VCSE sector. The table also aims to highlight a greater need for consistency.

Table 7: Key Educators providing digital support to the VCSE sector in NI

Type	Areas of digital support					
Organisation	Funding Support	Connectivity	Devices	Education/Skills Development	Partnerships/ Collaborations	Policy/ Advocacy
Queens University	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Ulster University	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
SRC	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
SERC	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
NRC	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Belfast Met	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
NWRC	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Open University	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Google for Non-Profits	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Key Funding Organisations for VCSE Sector in NI

The table below shows existing **funding organisations** providing digital support to the VCSE sector in NI. It includes the types of support and the level of commitment currently to those various areas of support. (it is not an exhaustive list). Organisations with the green tick (✓) demonstrating a high level of commitment to different types of support. The orange tick (✓) indicating activities of a lower-level commitment to different types of support. Commitment may sometimes involve different interventions including promotion and projects which have an indirect benefit and helps reduce digital exclusion for the VCSE sector. The table also aims to highlight a greater need for consistency.

Table 8: Funding Organisations providing digital support to the VCSE sector in NI

Type Organisation	Areas of digital support					
	Funding Support	Connectivity	Devices	Education/Skills Development	Partnerships/ Social Value	Policy/ Advocacy
DfC	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
DofE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Department of Finance (DoF)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
DEARA	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
CFNI	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
NICVA	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
PEACEPLUS	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Education Authority	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
11 NI Councils (Labour Market Partnerships)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Housing Executive	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Key Community and Not-for-Profit Organisations supporting the VCSE Sector in NI

The table below shows existing **Community and Not-for-Profit Organisations** providing digital support to the VCSE sector in NI. It includes the types of support and the level of commitment currently to those various areas of support. (it is not an exhaustive list). Organisations with the green tick (✓) demonstrating a high level of commitment to different types of support. The orange tick (✓) indicating activities of a lower-level commitment to different types of support. Commitment may sometimes involve different interventions including promotion and projects which have an indirect benefit and helps reduce digital exclusion for the VCSE sector. The table also aims to highlight a greater need for consistency.

Table 9: Community and Not-for-Profit Organisations providing digital support to the VCSE sector in NI

Type Organisation	Areas of digital support					
	Funding Support	Connectivity	Devices	Education/Skills Development	Partnerships/ Collaborations	Policy/ Advocacy
Business in the	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Type	Areas of digital support					
Organisation	Funding Support	Connectivity	Devices	Education/Skills Development	Partnerships/ Collaborations	Policy/ Advocacy
Community NI						
Libraries NI	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Craft NI	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
AbilityNet	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
The Good Things Foundation	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
The Princes Trust	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
U3A	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Social Enterprise NI	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Rural Community Network	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Bytes	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Catalyst	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
DTNI	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Advice NI	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Age NI	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Bryson Charitable Group	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Private Sector Organisations supporting the VCSE Sector in NI

The table below shows existing **Private Sector Organisations** providing digital support to the VCSE sector in NI. It includes the types of support and the level of commitment currently to those various areas of support. (it is not an exhaustive list). Organisations with the green tick (✓) demonstrating a high level of commitment to different types of support. The orange tick (✓) indicating activities of a lower-level commitment to different types of support. Commitment may sometimes involve different interventions including promotion and projects which have an indirect benefit and helps reduce digital exclusion for the VCSE sector. The table also aims to highlight a greater need for consistency.

Table 10: Private Sector Organisations providing digital support to the VCSE sector in NI

Type	Areas of digital support					
Organisation	Funding Support	Connectivity	Devices	Education/Skills Development	Social Value	Policy/ Advocacy
PWC	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
EY	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Apple	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Taylor Francis	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
BT	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Type	Areas of digital support					
Organisation	Funding Support	Connectivity	Devices	Education/Skills Development	Social Value	Policy/ Advocacy
VYTA	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Raylo	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
O2	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Vodafone	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
3 Networks	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Fibrus	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
HP	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Dell	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Microsoft	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Kainos	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
First Derivatives	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Danske Bank	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Henderson Group	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Conclusion of whats happening in digital inclusion in NI

There is an opportunity to build on those organisations of interest and their resources and skills to support the digital transformation within the VCSE sector. However, there needs to be co-ordinated support offered to signpost and navigate the different type and levels of support needed within the VCSE sector. A digital hub can advise them and serve as a central managed signposting facility for the sector.

7.6 Potential Benefits of a Digital Hub

The following is a summary of the potential benefits of a digital hub for the VCSE in NI. A digital hub is a centralised platform offering digital tools, resources, collaboration, and technical support. These benefits could include improved digital literacy, skills training, and enhanced connectivity. It can also help organisations network better and offer infrastructure support. A digital hub designed for the VCSE sector in Northern Ireland can offer a wide range of benefits, including:

Increased Efficiency and Cost Savings:
- Enables smaller organisations to share expensive digital resources, reducing individual costs.
- Streamlines operations through integrated digital solutions, improving overall service delivery.
- Improve sustainability of organisations by reducing costs
- Outreach activities (such as learning programmes) in particular should become more streamlined and effective

Enhanced Digital Capability:
- Provides access to modern digital tools, platforms, and infrastructure.
- Offers training programmes and workshops to build essential digital skills among staff and volunteers.
- Provision of state-of-the-art learning elements
- Access to wider range of specialist knowledge

Improved Collaboration and Networking:

- Acts as a central meeting point for organisations to share best practices, resources, and expertise.
- Fosters partnerships with tech experts, academic institutions, and other community organisations.
- Allows for improved partnership working and co-design of new digital solutions to challenging digitisation issues

Access to Innovation and Emerging Technologies:
- Creation of a one-stop-shop for all kinds of digital issues – more co-ordinated support
- Greater access to digital information in plain English, resulting in improved understanding of opportunities offered by digital for VCSE
- Provides a testing ground for new technologies like AI, data analytics, and automation.
- Helps organisations stay competitive and innovative in a rapidly changing digital landscape.

Enhanced Service Delivery and Outreach:
- Supports the development of digital platforms that can expand the reach of community services.
- Enables more efficient communication and engagement with beneficiaries, funders, and partners.

Bridging the Digital Divide:
- Offers targeted support to VCSE organisations that may lack the resources to invest in digital transformation.
- Contributes to reducing the gap between large, well-resourced VCSE organisations and smaller, community-led groups.

Sustainability and Long-Term Growth:
- Lays the foundation for ongoing digital transformation, making the sector more resilient.
- Encourages strategic digital planning that aligns with broader economic and technological trends.

Potential economic benefits
- Pooling of resources will lead to economic efficiencies, reducing sector's dependence on public funding
- Creation of physical hub will have range of direct and indirect economic benefits including:
  o Job creation
  o Secondary spend

By providing these benefits, a digital hub could empower the VCSE to overcome current digital challenges, enhance their operational effectiveness, and better serve their communities in an increasingly digital world.

Collaboration between government and the voluntary and community sector is another key benefit of establishing a digital hub in Northern Ireland. Such collaboration can drive the transformation of public services in several ways.

Integrated Service Delivery:
A digital hub can serve as a platform for government agencies and the VCSE to work together on developing and implementing digital solutions linked to stubborn social issues. This partnership

Delivered by
THE NATIONAL LOTTERY
COMMUNITY FUND

The Community Foundation Northern Ireland

A DIGITAL HUB FOR THE VCSE SECTOR IN NORTHERN IRELAND 43

Dormant Assets NI

can streamline communication and resource-sharing, leading to more efficient and user-centred public services.

Co-Creation of Digital Tools:
By pooling expertise, the public sector and VCSE can co-create digital tools and platforms tailored to local needs. This approach helps ensure that digital innovations are both practical and inclusive, addressing the unique challenges faced by communities including section 75 groups.

Enhanced Data Sharing and Analytics:
The hub can facilitate secure data-sharing between government bodies and community organisations. This collaboration enables more informed decision-making, allowing for targeted interventions that improve service delivery and policy outcomes.

Pilot Projects and Innovation:
A digital hub offers a collaborative space to pilot new technologies and digital initiatives. Such projects can serve as test cases for wider rollouts across public services, ensuring that innovations are refined in partnerships with those who understand community needs best.

Building Trust and Community Engagement:
Working in partnership with the VCSE can enhance transparency and trust between the government and citizens. Collaborative digital initiatives can support public services to be more responsive and reflective of the communities they serve.

Social Value in procurement
The hub could register as a Social Value Broker ((https://socialvalueni.org/contractors/find-a-broker/) to help support suppliers to deliver social value requirements on public sector contracts.

In summary, a digital hub not only boosts the digital capacity of the voluntary and community sector but also acts as a catalyst for transforming public services. By fostering collaboration, innovation, and data-driven decision-making, it helps create a more integrated and responsive public service ecosystem working in partnership with the VCSE in Northern Ireland.

7.7 Potential components of a VCSE Digital Hub

The main requirements of a VCSE digital hub based on the needs analysis and the wider environmental scanning are as follows.

What should the hub be:
- A trusted service
- A service delivered in plain language
- A dependable information repository
- A digital organisational self-assessment tool
- A resource which signposts to free/low-cost tools and apps
- A hybrid of online support which can also be reached by phone
- A service offered to all of Northern Ireland
- A VCSE sectoral training course offering
- A directory of trusted digital suppliers
- An interactive knowledge sharing forum
- A network for learning and sharing- lifelong learning approach

A pathway for the delivery of a transformational digital hub for the VCSE sector
- Needs to start small and then evolve as awareness increases
- Needs to be co-created with VCSE organisations
- Needs to address sectoral digital needs as well as recognising the differing needs of various sizes, purposes and locations of organisations
- Needs good and appropriate governance
- Needs a dedicated, digitally focussed operational and technical team to facilitate and run it
- Needs to be housed in a digital environment to support its goals and keep it up with the latest thinking
- Needs partners and collaborators from a hardware, software and strategy / leadership perspective
- Needs to register as a broker to help support suppliers to deliver social value requirements on public sector contracts
- Needs a VCSE capacity building/policy influencing broker

A defined budget for the delivery of a digital hub for the VCSE sector Northern Ireland
- Needs a budget for:
  - Key workers for at least 3 years-5 years
  - For an online repository
  - For access to digital free/low-cost tools
  - For a self-assessment organisational audit tool
  - For equipment and training
  - For measuring impact
- Needs sustainable long-term subscription based self-funding model

The creation of a cross sectoral digital consortium that will support the delivery of a digital hub to provide bespoke support to transform the sector
- Needs to be cross sectoral – public, private and VCSE with a strong dedicated active multi sectoral board (e.g. CFNI- Financial Stewardship; NIVCA- VCSE Connectivity; Catalyst- Innovative Digital Spaces & Resources)
- Needs to be led by an expert digital resource in a surrounding business environment driven by current transformation activities & thinking (e.g. Catalyst; Queens-Momentum One Zero; Ulster University; FE Colleges; NI Cyber Security Centre etc)
- Needs to be supported by a community-based network resource that understands the needs of the VCSE (e.g. NICVA, RCN, other Local Urban and Rural Hubs & anchor organisations
- Needs government support through Government Department collaboration (e.g. DfC/ DfE/ DfI/ TEO)
- Needs coordinated philanthropic funding model (CFNI & others stewardship)
- Needs to recognise differences in rural and urban needs/purpose of the VCSE organisation (section 75) and opportunities and those of different sized VCSE groups including social enterprises and development trusts

Technical Infrastructure
- Needs to collaborate with suppliers on public sector IT Contracts both in terms of advice and supply of equipment and software licences through social value opportunities.
- Signposting, resource sharing and collaboration with other NI/UK/Ireland based digital hubs

Workforce development
- Training and support programme which meets the needs of frontline staff, boards and volunteers to increase their digital capacity

- Organisational digital audits and digital mentoring
  - Targeted number of digital self- assessment audits per annum for different sized VCSE organisations – Micro, small, medium and large/theme based VCSE organisations
- Awareness training on cyber security and AI
- Understanding the transformational power of AI to local service delivery
- Training in collaboration using digital technologies between government and the VCSE
- Data collection, analytics and management
- Coordination of specific training needs delivered by private, public and voluntary sector organisations - co-ordinated through regional and local networks (e.g. NICVA, RCN)
- Mentor network and digital champions – link to social value contract deliverers

Chapter 8: Digital Hub Options

8.1 Introduction

This section of the report considers the following:

- Options of what a digital hub could include, including potential scale
- Identify how best this could be achieved from a physical, virtual or hybrid way

8.2 Options for a VCSE Digital Hub

8.2.1 Potential Scale

The feedback from the consultation, engagement and desk-based research demonstrates a hub that has a potential market of **c.7,214 organisations**. This is based on Charity Commission for NI figures for January 2025[16]. In 2025, of these, 73.9% (5,337), had an income of less than £100,000, 22.4% (1,615) had an income between £100,000- £1 Million and 3.6% (262) had an income over £1 million.[17] A further breakdown from data in 2021 outlined below demonstrates the difference in size of organisations in terms of turnover which has likely implications for the number of staff and volunteers.

Table 11: Charity Commission- Annual income of VCSE groups 2021

Annual Income of VCSE groups 2021	Percentage %	Likely staff – S, M, L	Likely volunteers – S, M, L	Likely Trustees – S, M, L
Less than £10,000	8.6%	S	S	S
£10,000- £20,000	5.3%	S	S	S
£20,001-£50,000	12.6%	S	S	S
£50,001-£100,000	11.3%	S/M	S/M	S/M
£100,001-£250,000	17.2%	S/M	S/M	S/M
£250,001-£500,000	13.9%	M	M	M
£500,001 - £1 million	14.6%	L	L	L
£1 million-£5million	12.6%	L	L	L
£5 million+	4.0%	L	L	L

The sector, according to NICVA, has **53,000 employees**, **49,000 + trustees** and a further **240,000 + volunteers**[18]. Taking the e-survey results as a benchmark / proxy of the digital needs of the 7,214 charitable organisations in NI, this would mean that of the 7,214 organisations.

Type	% in survey noting level of size	Approximate Number of VCSE/ Charities in each category
Beginner	26%	1,876
Intermediate	71%	5,122
Advanced	3%	216
Total	**100%**	**7,214**

Table 12: Comparison between survey reponse organisations and whole sector

---

[16] Note, that charities can also include universities, some schools etc.
[17] Charity Commission NI
[18] NICVA State of the Sector 2021

Given the size of the potential ask, the likely support needs of these organisations would need to be accommodated through a mix of both one to one and online supports.

Research through this scoping study has demonstrated that Private sector IT support which enables desktop virtual support costs approximately from 20p to 40p per person per day. Based on 53,000 employees within the sector, this type of support could cost the sector between £2.3 million to £4.8million (assuming a 225 working day model). The survey and focus groups demonstrated that accessing a budget for this type of online support is not easy for the VCSE and only those larger organisations seem to have the budget to access this type of support.

The New Zealand model represents an interesting lean early-stage model that offers primarily online digital guidance, information and an audit tool which recommends training tools appropriate to each organisation. Most of its work in online with very little front facing work although this is being considered as part of its growth plan. Currently just one part time officer and three active volunteers operate the service. New Zealand has a population of just over 5 million people, and its digital hub supports 110,000 community organisations.

8.2.2 Options considered

The following options were considered as part of the engagement process. All options were considered against a number of criteria and assessed on a RAG system.

Options Considered

- One physical hub based in Belfast with website - No outreach
- A virtual digital hub without any outreach
- A virtual digital hub with outreach
- Multiple hubs in community centres and libraries – no central physical hub
- A physical hub in Belfast with outreach hubs offering spaces for training, a web site and outreach for one to support for local groups.
- No digital hub

Criteria used to assess

- Opportunity for exemplar digital transformation opportunities
- Opportunities for lifelong learning
- Cost
- Support for groups on a one-to-one basis
- Linked to a Digital Competency Framework
- Academic links
- Car park
- Availability and accessibility for groups

Table 13: Options appraisal for Digital Hub

Criteria used / Options considered	Opportunity for exemplar digital transformation opportunities	Opportunities for lifelong learning in digital	Cost	Support for groups on a one-to-one basis	Linked to a Digital Competency Framework	Academic links	Car park	Availability and accessibility for groups	No of areas in green
One physical hub based in Belfast with website - No outreach	orange	orange	orange	red	green	orange	green	orange	2
A virtual digital hub without any outreach	orange	orange	green	red	green	orange	green	orange	3
A virtual digital hub with outreach	orange	orange	green	green	green	orange	green	orange	4
Multiple hubs in community centres and libraries – no central physical hub	orange	orange	orange	orange	green	red	orange	orange	1
A physical hub in Belfast with outreach hubs (in partner spaces) offering spaces for outreach training, a web site and outreach for one to support for local groups.	green	green	orange	green	green	green	green	green	7
No digital hub	red	red	green	red	red	red	red	red	1

Conclusion of options appraisal: The preferred option is a physical hub in Belfast with outreach offering spaces for training, a web site and outreach for one to support for local groups. Further investigations on costs will however be required. This will be explored further in the business plan element.

8.2.3 Preferred Option

The physical hub in Belfast with outreach hubs emerges as the preferred option based on the criteria and agreed by the steering group. It scores the highest across several critical areas, including digital transformation opportunities, support for one-to-one group engagement, lifelong learning, and links to a competency framework. Despite the higher initial investment, it offers the best long-term value in building the digital capacity and resilience of the VCSE sector in Northern Ireland.

Funding and long-term sustainability

To ensure the long-term sustainability of the Digital Hub, we have developed a comprehensive strategy that focuses on diversified income streams, self-sustaining models, and strategic partnerships.

Securing the right funding and establishing strong partnerships are critical components for the successful delivery and sustainability of the digital hub for the VCSE sector. A robust funding strategy will ensure that the hub is effectively resourced, scalable, and able to deliver long-term value to the sector. Additionally, leveraging social value contracting and fostering strategic collaborations with the private sector and tech companies can provide not only financial resources but also expertise and innovation. These partnerships will be essential in driving the success of the hub, particularly in terms of digital transformation and fostering resilience in the VCSE sector.

By tapping into funding opportunities from a variety of sources, including government, philanthropic organisations, and private sector investors, the hub can build a sustainable model that is capable of meeting the ongoing digital needs of the VCSE sector. Moreover, by using social value contracting principles, the hub will align with broader social goals such as job creation, skills development, and community engagement, ensuring that the digital transformation process delivers benefits beyond just technology adoption.

Dormant Assets (The National Lottery Community Fund)

Dormant Assets NI is an opportunity to move from strategic vision to full implementation. The Digital Hub represents a once-in-a-generation opportunity to embed digital resilience across the VCSE sector in Northern Ireland. Building on Dormant Assets NI's previous investment in the scoping study, further support could allow the operationalisation of this vision and create a lasting, scalable solution that empowers organisations to adapt, grow, and lead in a digital future.

This funding would enable:

- The recruitment of a core team to lead implementation, technical development, and sector engagement.

- The design and launch of key digital infrastructure (website, self-assessment tools, training portal, suppliers' directory).

- The delivery of a coordinated digital skills programme, targeting at least 60 organisations in Year 1 who provide support into underserved Section 75 groups.

- A phased, "test and learn" rollout model to refine tools and support services based on ongoing sector feedback and impact data.

Dormant Assets funding is pivotal to de-risking early-stage delivery and enabling the initiative to demonstrate value, build confidence, and attract longer-term support from additional partners.

How the Hub Aligns with Dormant Assets NI Outcomes

Dormant Assets NI Outcome	Digital Hub Contribution
Increased confidence to adapt to future challenges	Offers VCSE organisations access to tools, guidance, and training to navigate digital change with confidence.
Greater financial resilience	Promotes shared infrastructure and access to free/low-cost tools, lowering operational costs and increasing sustainability.
Increased skills and capacity	Provides structured digital training, mentoring, and a sector-wide digital champion network.
Improved strategic planning	Enables organisations to undertake self-assessments and access tailored guidance for digital transformation.
Enhanced cross-sector collaboration	Brings together VCSE, public, and private sectors through shared governance, innovation partnerships, and joint delivery.

Table 14:Dormant Assets NI Outcomes vs Digital Hub contribution

Social Value Contracting and partnership with private sector

The Digital Hub will seek to register as a Social Value Broker, facilitating connections between private sector companies and public sector contracts to help these companies meet their social value targets. By partnering with the hub, businesses will have the opportunity to directly contribute to the social and economic development of Northern Ireland's VCSE sector, ensuring that their investments are aligned with broader societal benefits. This approach will enable companies to fulfil their social value obligations in government contracts through tangible contributions, such as providing resources, services, and expertise to support the digital transformation of VCSE organisations.

The hub will coordinate with private sector partners, particularly within the tech industry, to help them meet their social value targets. Through these partnerships, the hub will secure investment and collaboration from businesses, allowing for the provision of discounted or donated technology, training, and digital infrastructure to VCSE organisations. In turn, the private sector will benefit from the ability to showcase their social impact, build stronger community relationships, and fulfil their obligations under public sector contracts.

Many companies while engaged during the consultation intimated at a huge willingness to be able to operate independently assisting in providing expertise for training, mentoring, supplying equipment and supporting the hub in working ways to suit their needs to meet both urban and rural challenges. This social value could all be managed based on need through the hub and help establish a network of companies with values aligned to help the VCSE Sector transform and improve capacity.

By acting as a Social Value Broker, the Digital Hub will ensure that the VCSE sector receives meaningful, sustainable support from private sector partners while enabling businesses to meet their corporate social responsibility goals, fostering a collaborative environment that benefits all parties involved.

Northern Ireland Assembly and Government

The Digital Hub is well-aligned with key government strategies, including the Programme for Government (PfG) 2024-2027, which emphasises the critical role of digital transformation in public

services. The PfG highlights a commitment to harnessing new technologies to improve service delivery, lower costs, and design services that meet user needs. The VCSE sector plays a key role in this transformation, and the Digital Hub offers a strategic solution to equip these organisations with the digital tools and skills needed to effectively collaborate with public and private sectors.
In the DfC Voluntary and Community Sector Infrastructure Support Framework, digital development is identified as a priority to reduce the digital divide and enhance volunteer matching, advice, and guidance. This framework recognises the need for continued investment in digital resources for the VCSE sector. The Digital Hub directly addresses these needs by providing VCSE organisations with the digital infrastructure and support required to engage more effectively with government and improve service delivery.

The City and Growth Deals further bolster the case for government funding, as these initiatives aim to improve digital connectivity and infrastructure across Northern Ireland. The Digital Hub complements these goals by ensuring that the VCSE sector can leverage modern technologies and tools to thrive in a digital-first economy. By supporting the VCSE sector in adapting to digital changes, the hub contributes to the broader economic growth objectives outlined in these deals, particularly through initiatives like the Digital Transformation Flexible Fund (DTFF), which could support VCSE organisations in accessing digital tools and resources.

Government strategies such as the People and Place Strategy, which targets communities facing high levels of deprivation, DFE's 10X Strategy and DFE's Economic vision for NI including the importance of regional balance with their focus on inclusive growth and sustainable development, also align with the Digital Hub's objectives. The Digital Hub will help equip VCSE organisations in these areas with the digital capacity to implement place-based approaches and inclusive economic development. It will also support the social economy by enhancing digital skills and addressing skills gaps, which are central to the Digital Skills Action Plan 2024-2034.

Moreover, the OECD Skills Strategy and New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) place a strong emphasis on addressing inequalities in the workforce, enhancing employability, and promoting lifelong learning. By building digital skills among VCSE staff and volunteers, the Digital Hub directly supports these policy imperatives, helping the sector contribute to economic growth and social inclusion.

In summary, the Digital Hub aligns with government strategies focused on digital transformation, economic inclusion, skills development, and social value. Dormant Assets NI and Government funding would enable the hub to strengthen the VCSE sector's digital readiness, thereby supporting broader policy goals and ensuring that Northern Ireland's voluntary and community organisations are equipped to thrive in the digital age.

8.3 Description of a Digital Hub offering for the VCSE Sector

8.3.1 Introduction

The proposed Digital Hub for the VCSE sector in Northern Ireland offers a comprehensive and strategic approach to addressing digital transformation challenges.

1. **Supporting a Digital Strategy for Northern Ireland**

The hub provides an operational model that embodies many of the key features recommended for a regional Digital Strategy:
- Tackles digital exclusion through targeted support for underserved groups, affordable access to tools, and tailored training.
- Fosters cross-sector collaboration via a proposed multi-stakeholder board and strategic partnerships across public, private, and community sectors.
- Invests in infrastructure and includes mechanisms for annual monitoring, data collection, and impact reporting to track progress and inform future strategy.

2. **Advancing a New Approach to Digital Infrastructure Funding**

The proposal adopts a long-term funding vision supported by multiple streams:
- Seeks core funding for essential staffing, tools, training, and operational sustainability.
- Emphasises flexibility and innovation, encouraging organisations to evolve their digital practices.
- Incorporates a subscription-based self-funding model for long-term resilience.
- Encourages collaborative investment from government, philanthropic organisations, and the private sector.

3. **Enhancing Digital Support for the VCSE Sector**

The Hub is designed to serve as a sector-wide digital support platform:

- Provides technical assistance, including audits, cybersecurity advice, and help navigating digital procurement.
- Hosts a robust digital resource library with guides, tutorials, case studies, and peer learning tools.
- Establishes an interactive forum and regular virtual events for collaboration and knowledge sharing.

4. **Building the VCSE Digital Workforce**

The hub addresses the workforce development needs highlighted in the report:
- Delivers free and low-cost training across core digital competencies, including AI, data management, and cyber awareness.
- Introduces a digital skills audit tool to identify gaps and measure progress.
- Focuses on inclusion, ensuring 50% of training participants are from underserved communities.
- Creates a network of digital champions and mentors, promoting sustainability and shared learning.

The Digital Hub proposal not only aligns with but actively delivers on the *Wired UP!* recommendations. Through strategic governance, long-term funding, targeted support, and a collaborative delivery model, the Hub provides a scalable solution to the digital needs of the VCSE

sector in Northern Ireland. It represents a vital step toward a more inclusive, connected, and resilient future for the sector.

Based on the evidence from the consultation and engagement process, the following are the key elements that could be included in a digital hub.

Addressing Critical Skills Gaps: The Digital Hub will be a strategic initiative aimed at bridging the digital skills gap within Northern Ireland's VCSE sector, ensuring the sector has the capacity to embrace digital transformation and build long-term resilience. It will help address immediate skills deficits while building sustainable digital capacity to support community engagement and service delivery.

Enhancing Operations and Efficiency: The hub will explore how digital tools can improve the effectiveness of existing operations, broaden outreach, and enhance project delivery. By unlocking the potential of digital technology, it will help organisations reach a wider audience, streamline processes, and deliver better services.

Practical, Sector-Specific Training: Recognising the particular needs of VCSE organisations, the Digital Hub will provide sector-appropriate, practical training in digital transformation. This ensures that organisations gain the relevant skills to enhance their operational efficiency, improve outreach, and better serve their communities. This can be delivered through sector specific training options.

Digital Self-Assessment and Resource Linkage: The hub will feature a digital self-assessment audit tool, enabling organisations to evaluate their digital maturity. This will be linked to a variety of resources and training opportunities tailored to their needs, facilitating easy access to ongoing support.

Collaborative Learning and Problem-Solving: A key function of the hub will be to provide a collective, trusted forum for learning, collaboration, and problem-solving. This will allow VCSE organisations to share best practices, address common challenges, and support each other in their digital transformation journeys.

Support for Underserved Demographics: The hub will ensure that traditionally underserved groups within the VCSE sector, particularly those covered by Section 75, have access to the support and digital resources they need to thrive. This will be a crucial step in promoting inclusion and equity within the sector.

Digital Inclusion and Reducing the Digital Divide: The hub's primary objective is to address digital inclusion and reduce the digital divide, ensuring that organisations within the VCSE sector are equipped with the tools, skills, and knowledge to remain competitive and effective in a rapidly digitalising world.

Bridging the Gap Between Government, Private Sector, and VCSE: As the bridge between government policies, private sector initiatives, and the communities they serve, the VCSE sector requires strategic investment in digital capabilities. The Digital Hub will help position the VCSE sector as a fit-for-purpose partner in both government and private sector digital transformation initiatives.

Supporting Social Mobility and Economic Inclusion: The Digital Hub will empower disadvantaged communities to access opportunities within Northern Ireland's growing economic sectors. By providing essential digital skills and resources, the hub will help transform aspirations into tangible opportunities, contributing to social mobility and economic inclusion.

Ongoing Sustainable Support: The Digital Hub will not be a one-off initiative; it will be a sustainable, long-term resource that continues to support the VCSE sector's digital transformation. By maintaining this support, the hub will ensure that the VCSE sector remains adaptable and ready to engage in future opportunities.

By equipping the VCSE sector with the skills and resources it needs, the Digital Hub will ensure it remains a vital and effective partner in the region's social and economic success.

The digital hub for the VCSE sector will be designed to support organisations on their digital transformation journey. It includes the following key features:

8.3.2 The website

The website will fulfil the following core functions.

- **An Information Repository:** A comprehensive library of resources and guidance on the basics of digital transformation. This helps organisations understand and implement digital strategies effectively. It also signposts relevant training opportunities to build their digital skills.

- **Trusted Suppliers Directory:** A curated list of verified suppliers offering various digital services. This directory helps organisations find reliable partners for their digital needs, building trust in technology through vetted and unbiased recommendations.

- **Knowledge Sharing Forum:** An interactive platform where users can engage, share experiences, and exchange knowledge. This forum fosters a supportive community, encourages collaboration, and provides unbiased support. It also helps organisations connect with potential partners and collaborators.

- **Self-Assessment Audit Tool:** A tool that allows organisations to evaluate their digital transformation needs. It provides insights and recommendations to help them plan their digital journey. This tool also highlights areas where training is needed, guiding organisations to appropriate resources.

- **AI Assistant:** A support tool to allow instant customer support, answer queries, and guide users through various tasks, enhancing user experience and efficiency. It can also offer personalised recommendations and automate routine processes.

8.3.3 Human Resources Support

To ensure the digital hub operates smoothly and meets the needs of the VCSE sector, a dedicated team of human resources will be required:

Project Management: A Project manager will oversee the growth and development of the digital hub, ensuring it evolves to meet the changing needs of the sector.

Partner Interface: The project manager can also interface with partners, fostering relationships and ensuring seamless collaboration.

Website Support: A technical/graphically skills resource will maintain and update the website, ensuring it remains technically robust and user-friendly.

> **Organisational Support:** The project manager will have some technical knowledge and be able to support VCSE organisations with their digital needs, providing guidance and signposting them to digital champions and partners where appropriate.
>
> **Training and Development:** Follow a self-assessment audit automation through the website will identify and promote relevant training opportunities, helping organisations build their digital capabilities. Furthermore, other digital planning advice can be offered through the Hub.

8.3.4 Good Governance and Operational Success

Good governance and a strong operational and technical team are crucial for the success of the digital hub:

> **Governance:** A governing board that can oversee the strategic direction and ensure the hub operates with transparency, accountability, and integrity is proposed. This board will include representatives from the VCSE sector networks, technology experts, and funders including philanthropic funders.
>
> **Operational Team:** The operational team will manage day-to-day activities, ensuring the hub runs smoothly and efficiently. This team will include project manager, technical/graphical content manager, and outsourced website develop support staff.
>
> **Technical Team/Outsourced website development team:** The technical team will focus on enhancing the digital infrastructure, ensuring the hub remains secure, scalable, and user-friendly. They will also implement new features and improvements based on user feedback and technological advancements.

8.3.5 Competency Framework

The digital hub should be built on the basis of a solid digital competency framework taking into account good guidance from

> **Design a Competency Framework:** The digital hub should be built on the basis of a solid digital competency framework taking into account good guidance from A Digital Competency Framework for the Third Sector and Social Enterprises EU 3 Digital 2022; Community development National Occupational Standards and The All-Ireland Standards for Community Work. Digital competences that are distributed across an organisation, rather than concentrated in a single individual, support sustainable and effective digitalisation. This means it is not necessary for each individual in an organisation to develop the whole range of digital competences
>
> **Create links with universities:** Embed the digital hub with universities and FE colleges who offer community development and youth work qualifications
>
> **Lifelong learning:** Develop a series of micro credentials linked to the digital competency framework that can add to already qualified community development and youth officers
>
> **Develop soft digital skills curriculum**: Develop ''Soft' skills around leadership and management competences (e.g. managing change) and apply them in the digital domain. Recognise that digital

requires changes in both working practices and in attitudes and ways of thinking - that is to say the development of a digital culture

Be true to the mission: Support organisations to avoid the potential negative impacts of digitalisation and the need to maintain the centrality of their social mission, whilst simultaneously adopting digital business practices that deliver efficiencies

Leadership training for digital enablement: Leadership that empowers, re-imagines, and develops shared vision has a central part to play in the process of digitalisation

Build new digital support networks: Support organisations to make effective use of their existing networks and create new connections.

By combining good governance with a dedicated operational and technical team, the digital hub will be well-positioned to drive its success, supporting the VCSE sector to thrive in a digital world.

8.4 Vision and Mission

The vision of the proposed digital hub is outlined below.

A well skilled VCSE sector in NI that has embraced the opportunities offered through digital transformation resulting in more effective and efficient VCSE organisations, supported through a sustainable VCSE transformative digital hub offering a wide range of digital infrastructure and training supports relevant to the needs of the sector

The mission of a proposed digital hub is outlined below.

The VCSE digital hub addresses the critical skills gap in Northern Ireland's VCSE infrastructure building the resilience of the sector, linked to a digital competency framework using a lifelong learning approach

8.5 Initial Strategic Objectives

The following are the initial strategic Objectives based on the needs assessment process.

- Establish a Digital Hub board ensuring cross sectoral representation including the VCSE, private and public sectors
- Establish a VCSE transformative digital hub and outreach hub locations for use for cluster-based training
- Develop an interactive web site
- Mobilise a range of private sector companies and public sector trainers and mentors to whom the sector can be signposted for support and access to devices and licences
- Develop a wide range of digital infrastructure and training supports relevant to the needs of the sector that result in the skilling up in exemplary digital skills of at least 50% of all VCSE organisations in NI over a 3–5-year period

- Develop a digital competency framework for the VCSE and include in all University degrees for community and youth development work
- Develop a funding model and Secure resources to deliver the digital hub
- Register as a social value broker

In the first year of operation, the Digital Hub for the VCSE sector in Northern Ireland should focus on building a strong foundation while addressing immediate needs. The following goals outline what can be realistically achieved in Year 1:

Area	Goals	Actions
Governance and Board Appointment	Establish a Governance Framework for the Digital Hub by appointing a strategic board representing the VCSE, private, and public sectors, ensuring transparency, accountability, and alignment with sectoral needs and objectives.	• Identify and appoint a governance board consisting of 8-10 members from diverse backgrounds, including representatives from the VCSE sector, local government, private sector, and digital industry experts. The board should have expertise in digital transformation, community development, and funding. • Develop a clear governance structure that outlines the roles and responsibilities of the board, ensuring it provides oversight and strategic direction for the Hub, while also engaging with key stakeholders and securing funding.
Funding and Finances	Secure funding under the financial stewardship of CFNI for five years through identified channels including Dormant Assets NI (The National Lottery Community Fund)	• Align finances secured to the business plan investments for the first three years to safeguard the establishment of the VCSE Digital Hub, its human resources, virtual properties and necessary digital requirements to connect the Hub and its supports to the VCSE sector for service delivery
Human Resources	Appoint key staff members to champion the set up and operations of the Hub. Establish partnerships with digital champions and technical experts who can provide ongoing support and guidance to VCSE organisations.	• Establish clear job descriptions for core staff • Appoint a Project manager and Technical/Graphic Designer within the first 3 months. • Work with local universities/further education institutions and tech partners to recruit specialists.
Website Development	Design and development the Digital Hub website by the end of Year 1, including all core features (information repository, trusted supplier's directory, knowledge-sharing forum, self-assessment audit tool). Ensure the website is user-friendly and includes comprehensive content that	• Procure website & hosting development partner • Create a detailed specification for the website and its planned phased development • Include a feedback mechanism on the website to continually improve the user experience.

Area	Goals	Actions
	aligns with the needs of VCSE organisations.	
Digital Self-Assessment and Resource Linkage	Launch the Digital Self-Assessment Tool on the website, allowing organisations to assess their digital needs and access relevant resources and training opportunities. Ensure 100 organisations use the self-assessment tool and follow up with support. Support at least 30 organisations in adopting digital tools that improve their operational efficiency (e.g., project management tools, cloud services, CRM systems).	• Develop and integrate the tool into the website's backend • Set up automated notifications and signposting to resources after self-assessments • Create a user guide and video tutorials to help organisations navigate the tool • Provide tailored recommendations and support to organisations based on audit results • Create case studies to showcase how digital tools can improve outreach and service delivery.
Bridging Critical Digital Skills Gaps	Develop and launch a digital skills training program tailored to the needs of VCSE organisations, focusing on both basic and intermediate digital skills (e.g., Microsoft Suite, data management, cybersecurity). Train at least 200 individuals (staff and volunteers) from VCSE organisations in core digital competencies.	• Partner with local training providers to design sector-specific courses • Use the website as a platform to promote available training opportunities • Identify and engage digital champions within the sector to lead training efforts.
Collaborative Learning and Problem-Solving	Launch an interactive Knowledge Sharing Forum on the website where organisations can share experiences, challenges, and solutions. Host 2 virtual meetups so VCSE organisations can collaborate, problem-solve, and exchange best practices.	• Promote the forum through digital channels and the website • Encourage participation through incentives such as certificates or recognition for active contributors. • Develop a calendar for regular online meetups on digital topics.
Support for Underserved Demographics	Identify and engage at least 10 organisations serving underserved Section 75 groups (e.g., people with disabilities, ethnic minorities, and rural communities) and offer tailored digital resources. Ensure 50% of the organisations engaged in training represent these underserved demographics.	• Work with partner organisations to identify barriers to digital inclusion for underserved groups • Offer targeted resources, such as digital literacy workshops for specific groups • Provide access to subsidized or donated digital tools and devices.

Area	Goals	Actions
Bridging the Gap Between Government, Private Sector, and VCSE	Facilitate at least 2 strategic partnerships between the VCSE sector, government, and private companies to improve digital capacity. Secure at least £200,000 in funding from government, philanthropic organisations, or private sector partners for digital transformation initiatives.	• Register as a Social Value Broker • Act as a liaison between VCSE organisations and digital-focused government and private sector initiatives. • Create a business case for VCSE sector digital transformation that aligns with government priorities.

By the end of Year 1, the VCSE Digital Hub should be well-established, providing essential digital skills training, resources, and support for the sector while fostering collaboration, inclusion, and innovation. These goals will create a sustainable foundation for long-term success, improving the digital capabilities of VCSE organisations and ensuring they remain fit for purpose in an increasingly digital world.

Year 2 and Year 3 will build upon initial goals and evolve as the sector embraces the support and culture of transformation through the services provided by the Digital Hub resources. Initiatives including development of the competency framework and digital skills curriculum will be initiated.

Year 4 and Year 5 will increase the capacity to sustain growth and momentum.

Dormant Assets NI

Delivered by
THE NATIONAL LOTTERY
COMMUNITY FUND

The Community Foundation Northern Ireland

A DIGITAL HUB FOR THE VCSE SECTOR IN NORTHERN IRELAND   60

8.5.1 Accommodation Solutions

The overwhelming sentiment from the feedback is that a digital hub should be **primarily virtual in nature** with **a central innovative contact hub and outreach carried out in mini hubs locations.** The central hub should be within an existing co-located digital environment where every day digital transformation activities and thinking is being supported**.** The VCSE sector currently lacks this opportunity space, however **Catalyst presents this accommodation solution** with the additional strength of Belfast as a primary location and Derry/Londonderry as its North West Hub. **A range of mini locations located across NI** could act as training hubs for outreach as and when required through partnerships There could be alignment with the City and Growth Deal areas to take advantage of digital transformation opportunities emanating from these including their Digital Hubs. (e.g. Newry, Derry & Enniskillen)

Alongside the need for a digital central hub to coordinate needs and digital support (virtual or face to face), the digital hub offering should also include a **wraparound strategic community development support** that helps to embed the digital support within a wider community development competency framework. This can be part of the work of **existing organisations** and as such would require minimal additional accommodation needs.

The proposed model is outlined figure below.

Figure 9: Proposed Digital Hub Model
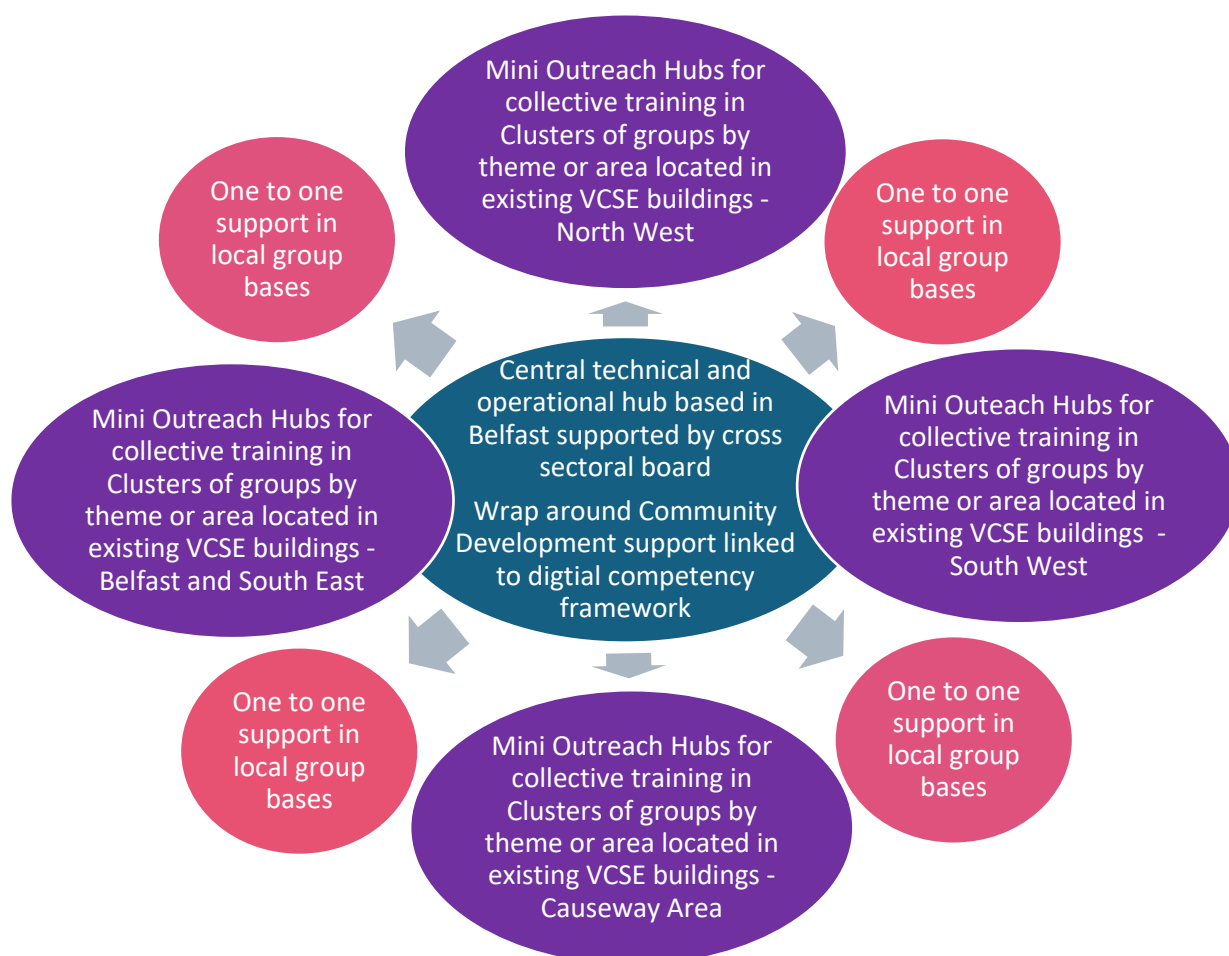
8.5.2 Staffing Options and Costs for office set up

Below is an outline of staffing and costs to set up the digital hub. These financials will be developed through a full business plan. The estimated costs cover the human resources which includes a senior project manager who will oversee the growth and development of the digital hub, ensuring it evolves to meet the changing needs of the sector.

A website support resource with both technical/graphically skills will maintain and update the website, ensuring it remains technically robust and user-friendly with all designed content elements and social media channels. Their initial role will be to work with an outsourced agency to develop the website in phases during the first number of years. A further resource will be recruited in year 5 to assist with website development and resource management.

The accommodation solution will be facilitated by Catalyst and includes set up, desk spaces and meeting room hire allowances. The website will be a phased development over an initial 5 year planned period and includes development, hosting and maintenance costs. Rent for training outreach facilities has been included for areas where organisations through social value and other collaborations cannot provide a space or outreach mini hub in the area. Outreach training will cover trainers and support where social value and other partnerships are not able to provide specialist skills or resources for outreach.

Hardware set up covers the necessary office technology enablers and their respective licenses.

Sundry expenses and inflation have been allowed for at 2.8%. The total of estimated costs is therefore £995,926 over five years. The table below outlines the estimated costs:

Digital Hub Staffing and Costs for office set up							
	Type	**Year 1**	**Year 2**	**Year 3**	**Year 4**	**Year 5**	**Total**
A1	**Project Manager**	£75,556	£75,556	£75,556	£75,556	£75,556	**£377,780**
A2	**Website Support- Tech/Designer**	£45,984	£45,984	£45,984	£45,984	£91,968	**£275,904**
B	**Website**	£50,000	£25,000	£25,000	£20,000	£20,000	**£140,000**
C	**Office rental**	£8,580	£8,580	£8,580	£8,580	£8,580	**£42,900**
D	**Rent training outreach facilities**	£1,536	£3,072	£3,072	£4,096	£4,096	**£15,872**
E	**Hardware set up**	£12,000	£5,000	£5,000	£6,000	£6,000	**£34,000**
F	**Outreach training budget**	£10,000	£12,000	£14,000	£16,000	£18,000	**£70,000**
G	**Sundry expenses**	£4,000	£3,500	£3,500	£3,500	£3,500	**£18,000**
	Inflation (assume 2.8%)		£5,003	£5,060	£5,032	£6,376	**£21,470**
	Total	£207,656	£183,695	£185,751	£184,748	£234,076	**£995,926**

Table 15: Digital Hub Staffing and Costs for office set up

Additional fund raising from government, philanthropic organisations, or private sector partners for digital transformation initiatives following the initial operational set up of the digital hub will help develop two key areas which include the competency framework and digital skills curriculum. These will be developed in year 2/3. A sustainable revenue model will be co-created with the VCSE sector based on subscription and detailed in the business plan.

Chapter 9: Scoping Study- Conclusion & Next Steps

The VCSE sector in Northern Ireland plays a crucial role in social and economic well-being. The scoping study has demonstrated how digital inclusion is affecting the VCSE sector across Northern Ireland. It lacks strategic direction, suffers from resource constraints, digital skills gaps, access to technology, funding and support. Addressing these gaps requires a solution in the form of a Digital Hub to facilitate training and support to embrace digital transformation and embed a culture of change. With key stakeholders collaborating and using their strengths, it can bridge the gap between government, private sector, and VCSE, playing an important role in addressing these challenges to ensure everyone can participate fully in the digital World.

The study has highlighted global best practices of Digital Hubs, compared resources, services, funding and sustainability. The benchmarking highlighted different national digital inclusion strategies, and the local Northern Ireland needs demonstrated a need for a VCSE Digital Hub.

The study supports the establishment of a Digital Hub through a business plan. The key stakeholders to establish the start-up moving from co-design to co-delivery perspective should be CFNI, NICVA, and Catalyst. The first goals should be to establish a governance framework for the Digital Hub by appointing a strategic board representing the VCSE, private, and public sectors, ensuring transparency, accountability, and alignment with sectoral needs and objectives.

Through the financial stewardship of CFNI and with NICVA enabling the connection and networks within the sector and beyond, the foundations can be established for the Digital Hub. Catalyst will enable the first two recruited resources to be located within their digital transformation environment. This will provide two co-located locations for the establishment of the Digital Hub, showing geographical coverage from the outset. Belfast will act as the main hub with Derry/Londonderry as a mini hub initially. Further mini hubs in the South East, South West and Causeway will be identified based on training needs with social value partners initially when required

Following the appointment of two key human resources (Project Manager and Technical/Graphic Content Manager), work should commence on the identification of a website development plan and agency to design and develop the information repository, trusted supplier's directory, knowledge-sharing forum, and a self-assessment organisation audit tool.

Priority development should focus the website on the self-assessment organisation audit tool. This will be key to enabling engagement and allowing organisations to assess their digital needs so that they can be supported with access to relevant resources and training opportunities.

Through the collective targets and outcomes from organisation audits, the Digital Hub will be able to identify, develop, and launch a digital skills training programme tailored to the needs of VCSE organisations, focusing on both basic and intermediate digital skills (e.g., Microsoft Suite, data management, cybersecurity).

Additional engagement will be stimulated through the launch of an interactive Knowledge Sharing Forum on the website where organisations can share experiences, challenges, and solutions. By hosting virtual meetups, the VCSE sector can begin to collaborate, problem-solve, and exchange best practices. Through the partnerships and collaborations, further identification and engagement with organisations serving underserved Section 75 groups (e.g., people with disabilities, ethnic minorities, and rural communities) will be able to offer tailored digital resources. These goals will be continuously assessed to ensure the Digital Hub retains a focus on Digital Inclusion and cross-

sectoral partnership development. It should facilitate at least two strategic partnerships between the VCSE sector, government, and private companies to improve digital capacity in its first year.

Additionally, it should work to secure at least £200,000 in funding from government, philanthropic organisations, or private sector partners for development of the digital competency framework and digital skills curriculum.

As a social value broker, the Digital Hub will deliver broader social value to the community by connecting stakeholder organisations, creating mutual benefits, and using technology to leverage processes, reduce costs, and ensure skills development, job creation, and a culture of transformation for local community organisations across Northern Ireland.

Guided by the VCSE sector and its organisations' needs, the Digital Hub will also provide outreach to mini hubs to train and enhance skills, signpost to devices, internet connectivity, and bridge the gaps for all size organisations across Northern Ireland.

Through its establishment and presence, the Digital Hub will act as a liaison between VCSE organisations and digital-focused government and private sector initiatives.

As the VCSE sector embraces the support, a sustainable model will be established to enable further development, transformation, and embed a culture of digital change to enhance the support and services which the VCSE sector provides to its communities.

Access the Full Digital Hub Scoping Study including Appendices

A DIGITAL HUB FOR THE VCSE SECTOR IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Community Foundation for Northern Ireland

Community House City Link Business Park
6a Albert Street, Belfast, BT12 4HQ

T : +44 (0) 28 9024 5927
Charity Number: NIC105105

communityfoundationni.org

blu zebra
innovative business thinking!