

[Home](#) ▾ [Business and industry](#) ▾ [Charities and social enterprises](#)  
▾ [DfE voluntary, community and social enterprises action plan](#)



[Department  
for Education](#)

Policy paper

# DfE voluntary, community and social enterprises action plan: 2025 to 2026

Published 25 March 2026

**Applies to England**

[Contents](#)

[Foreword](#)

[Introduction](#)

[VCSEs in DfE](#)

[Summary](#)

[How to tender](#)

[Helpful resources](#)

## Foreword

**Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprises Crown**

## **Representative statement**

In my role as the Crown Representative for the VCSE sector, I act as an intermediary between government and the charity and social enterprise sectors to champion the Public Services (Social Value) Act and improvements in commissioning and procurement practices. As part of this, I am very keen to work with all government departments to share best practice and to promote the benefits of working with VCSE organisations.

Having worked closely with the Department for Education (DfE), I am looking forward to supporting the DfE in making renewed progress with VCSEs and seeing it increase the amount of business on which it partners with VCSEs. This action plan builds on previous achievements and will help DfE to deliver on its ambitious plans for VCSE engagement.

I very much look forward to continuing working with my departmental colleagues to support them in achieving these targets.

**Claire Dove CBE, VCSE Crown Representative, Cabinet Office**

## **Department for Education Chief Commercial Officer statement**

DfE recognises the contribution that VCSEs make to the delivery of public services, bringing expert local knowledge that can be drawn on to create added social value to public procurement.

As DfE Chief Commercial Officer, I am committed to fostering an inclusive and collaborative environment where VCSEs play an active role in supporting us deliver our strategic priorities.

I am proud to publish our first VCSE action plan, which is a testament to our commitment to creating meaningful opportunities for VCSEs, ensuring they can thrive and contribute to the wellbeing of our communities.

This plan outlines practical steps to remove barriers, improve sector engagement and make our procurement and subcontracting opportunities easier to navigate for VCSEs. We will regularly review our progress against the plan and seek to build on lessons learnt from our work with small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) during this process as well as utilising good practice from across government to

increase opportunities for this sector to work with us to deliver our services.

**Jennifer Williams, Chief Commercial Officer, Department for Education**

## Introduction

This is the first iteration of a VCSE action plan for DfE. The aim and objective of this plan is to create a foundation of best practice to be adopted and improved in the future.

DfE is the lead department for the government's mission to break down the barriers to opportunity, working to deliver better life chances for all and breaking the link between background and success. We will work with our delivery partners to create opportunities for children and learners to achieve and thrive today, so they have the freedom to succeed and flourish tomorrow, strengthening our society, powering our economy and enabling equality.

Central government is committed to ensuring contracts are awarded not only on the basis of value for money but also the supplier's social impact. This commitment has been further strengthened in the [national procurement policy statement](#), which came into effect on 24 February 2025, and the [SME and VCSE procurement spend targets \(policy note 001\)](#). This provides VCSE organisations with much-deserved recognition for their positive contribution to society and the additional social benefits that can be achieved in the delivery of contracts by VCSEs. DfE is committed to improving its understanding of VCSEs, their operating models and the challenges they face with the aim of reducing barriers and increasing VCSE market appetite to participate in procurements.

VCSEs play a vital role in the delivery of public services, and many have strong links to the communities they serve. Their knowledge and connection to local areas ideally places them to help create compassionate, responsive and efficient public services.

DfE has appointed a VCSE senior sponsor and established a working group with representation from across teams within DfE. The purpose of this group is to raise the awareness of SMEs and VCSEs in our organisation and to support the implementation of the actions documented in this action plan and the [SME action plan](#).

The government supports charities and social enterprises by bringing social value

into public procurement, ensuring contracts are awarded on the basis of not only prices, but also quality and the supplier's social impact. The [Public Services \(Social Value\) Act](#), the [social value model \(PPN 002\)](#) and the ability to [reserve below-threshold procurements for VCSEs and SMEs \(PPN 005\)](#) all illustrate the government's commitment to providing VCSE organisations with much-deserved recognition while ensuring the additional social benefits that can be achieved in the delivery of contracts is taken into account.

The new [Procurement Act 2023](#) introduces further legislation to support the VCSE sector by reforming public procurement law to improve the way procurement is conducted. Increasing procurement spend with these organisations is a national priority to drive economic growth, as detailed in the [national procurement policy statement](#), specifically in the section about driving economic growth. This government wants to maximise every opportunity for this sector by opening up competition in public contracts and removing the barriers to participation they face, as set out in section 12(4) of the Act.

This simpler and more flexible commercial system will benefit suppliers of all sizes, including charities and social enterprises, which will be able to keep track of upcoming opportunities, tender notices and at least 18 months' worth of planned procurements on a new centralised platform.

This action plan complements the [plan to engage SMEs in the DfE supply chain](#) and is expected to be read in conjunction with it.

DfE is responsible for children's services and education, including early years, schools, higher and further education policy, apprenticeships and wider skills in England, and equalities. The main markets that DfE funds are:

- early years – child minders, nurseries and school-based provision
- wraparound childcare – after school provision, school holiday clubs
- compulsory education – primary and secondary
- 16 to 18 education and training – apprenticeships, classroom-based training
- special educational needs and alternative provision – support with mainstream education, specialist education
- children's services – residential care, fostering, supported accommodation, adoption and family support
- post-compulsory further and higher education and training – university degrees, apprenticeships, classroom-based courses, short-term courses, modular learning, online courses and community learning

DfE has a diverse range of secondary markets, including:

- qualifications
- curriculum development
- professional development
- student foreign exchange
- careers services
- construction equipment and materials
- social workers

One of the most important things contracting authorities can do is to provide the market with information about current and future public contract opportunities by publishing a forward-looking procurement pipeline. The Procurement Act 2023 achieves this by requiring the publication of pipeline notices in certain circumstances. This is of particular benefit to VCSEs, as it provides them with time to plan for future work, ensuring a competitive and diverse market.

Pipeline notices (UK1) for any intended requirement over £2 million are published on Find a Tender service (FTS). You can view the DfE pipeline of potential activities by searching for Department for Education UK1 pipeline notices on [Find a Tender](#).

Our pipeline notices are a forward look for 18 months and are reviewed and updated every 6 months, or as necessary. The forward look is not yet available on FTS, but the individual notices can be viewed as explained.

The Commercial Directorate's delivery teams support DfE to secure best value from its commercial arrangements by providing sound commercial judgement to help deliver quality services and value for money.

DfE's Schools Commercial team helps schools achieve value for money by providing the expertise, information and advice they need to run successful procurements.

## **VCSEs in DfE**

# Overview

The Cabinet Office [policy procurement note \(PPN 001\)](#) defined VCSEs as any organisation (incorporated or not) working with a social purpose. This ranges from small community-based groups or schemes through to larger registered charities and social enterprises, public service mutuals and co-operatives that operate locally, regionally and nationally. This term is often interchangeable with the terms ‘third sector’ or ‘civil society’ organisation.

## Barriers to participation

VCSEs appear to share many of the same barriers to participation as SMEs, and the issues that follow are those most often raised:

- due to the varying sizes of VCSEs, many face resource issues when bidding for and potentially delivering contracts
- lack of experience and knowledge of government agreements and terminology can result in decisions to not engage or attempt to bid
- some VCSEs may not know where opportunities are advertised or have the capacity to regularly review such places
- response times for bidding and providing evidence of delivery and past performance can also prove problematic if VCSEs are not provided with enough time to both operate their business and undertake the necessary work for bidding

We accept that there is more to do to develop a robust understanding of the barriers specifically facing VCSEs in DfE markets. In light of this, we are focused on addressing the following barriers to entry into public sector contracts:

- understanding of the sector
- supply chain issues
- awareness of opportunities
- contracts marked as suitable for VCSEs
- document design

We aim to do this by:

- increasing DfE understanding of the sector, educating commercial practitioners and policy customers to understand the definition of a VCSE, the markets they operate in and the benefits they can bring to DfE
- improving knowledge within the VCSE sector, improving awareness of DfE markets and opportunities, and how to access them

## Our spend with VCSEs

The Department for Culture, Media and Sport commissioned an [independent study](#) that suggested there are up to 250,000 active VCSEs in the UK and estimated that only 9,200 to 12,500 of them engage in government contracting each year – that is, 3% to 5% of active VCSEs.

DfE worked with Social Enterprise UK (SEUK) to obtain baselining information about the current VCSE market within DfE. The information used for the baselining information was for the 2023 to 2024 financial year. Analysis of the data is as follows.

### 2023 to 2024 financial year: contract data

Number of VCSEs that have had contracts or grants with DfE	1,360
<hr/>	
Total VCSEs with active contracts during 2023 to 2024	148
<hr/>	

### 2023 to 2024 financial year: spend data

Total procurement spend	£3,015 billion
<hr/>	
Direct spend via contracts with VCSEs	£544 million
<hr/>	
Total direct spend with VCSEs	18%
<hr/>	

This data illustrates that VCSEs have been successful in being awarded contracts. DfE intends to build on that success and apply the learning to replicate the success throughout the sectors.

For the 2023 to 2024 financial year, separate from the spend data outlined, DfE awarded grants worth £659 million to VCSEs.

# DfE VCSE action plan

We are focusing in the action plan on 3 objectives:

- awareness: through research and engagement, we aim to get a better understanding of VCSEs and the barriers to procurement participation they face
- data: we plan to improve data accessibility and the accuracy of current and future data about VCSEs that is held in DfE supply chains
- accessibility: we want to provide VCSEs with the confidence to tender for DfE contracts by ensuring the bidding process is user-friendly

We have begun working towards achieving the actions set out in the plan. We have:

- established a working group consisting of VCSE champions
- appointed a senior sponsor within the Commercial function
- worked collaboratively with SEUK to offer a webinar on demystifying the VCSE sector, which was open to all commercial staff to attend and available on the DfE intranet
- started internal communication about the purpose of the action plan, which will be strengthened as the plan is implemented
- engaged with the VCSE taskforce and used best practice from departments that have previously produced VCSE action plans

## Summary

Ownership of this plan sits with the DfE Commercial Policy and Assurance Team. We will ensure effective implementation across DfE by working closely with our SME and VCSE champions, who are members of the working group and cross-functional teams, with regular monitoring of progress. They will promote the VCSE agenda to increase awareness and accountability, and support improvements to procurement processes.

The lead champion will work closely with the Cabinet Office and other government departments through the cross-government VCSE commissioning taskforce, to

share best practice and lessons learnt, and to review progress. We will proactively seek and act on feedback from the VCSE sector to continuously improve our understanding of VCSEs and how we can better support the sector going forward.

This action plan is a one-year plan, which will be reviewed and updated as appropriate based on the commitments outlined.

## How to tender

- [DfE eTendering portal](#): Where opportunities at DfE can be found and tender documents submitted.
- [Procurement at DfE](#): Guidance on tendering for DfE contracts.

## Helpful resources

- [VCSE business hub](#): A dedicated space to help VCSEs that want to work with the government, providing links to other departmental action plans and centralised guidance on bidding for government work.
- [VCSEs: a guide to working with government](#): Guidance commissioned by VCSE Crown Representative Claire Dove for VCSEs looking to work with central and local government.
- [Find a Tender](#): Register to keep updated on new and upcoming contracts worth over £10,000 with the government and its agencies.
- [Public procurement review service](#): If you have a concern you'd like to raise about the procurement process, or a problem with payment on a public contract, inform the service and it will be investigated.
- [Prompt payment policy](#): Guidance on the measures introduced by the government to tackle late and unfair payment practices in the public sector.
- [Public services hub](#): This platform, hosted by SEUK, provides resources and opportunities to help advance the role of VCSEs in public-sector commissioning.
- [How to bid](#): This guidance is aimed at SMEs, but much of the detail also applies to VCSEs.

# Contact

For queries or feedback about the DfE VCSE action plan, email [PolicyAssurance.COMMERCIALQUERIES@education.gov.uk](mailto:PolicyAssurance.COMMERCIALQUERIES@education.gov.uk)

[↑ Back to top](#)

---

## Help us improve GOV.UK

To help us improve GOV.UK, we'd like to know more about your visit today. [Please fill in this survey \(opens in a new tab\)](#).



### Services and information

---

[Benefits](#)

[Births, death, marriages and care](#)

[Business and self-employed](#)

[Childcare and parenting](#)

[Citizenship and living in the UK](#)

[Crime, justice and the law](#)

[Disabled people](#)

### Government activity

---

[Departments](#)

[News](#)

[Guidance and regulation](#)

[Research and statistics](#)

[Policy papers and consultations](#)

[Transparency](#)

[Driving and transport](#)

[How government works](#)

[Education and learning](#)

[Get involved](#)

[Employing people](#)

[Environment and countryside](#)

[Housing and local services](#)

[Money and tax](#)

[Passports, travel and living abroad](#)

[Visas and immigration](#)

[Working, jobs and pensions](#)

---

[Help](#) [Privacy](#) [Cookies](#) [Accessibility statement](#) [Contact](#)

[Terms and conditions](#) [Rhestr o Wasanaethau Cymraeg](#)

[Government Digital Service](#)

**OGI**

All content is available under the [Open Government Licence v3.0](#), except where otherwise stated



[© Crown copyright](#)