DIGITAL
FUTURES
REPORT
LAUNCH

The Community Foundation Northern Ireland

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

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DIGITAL FUTURES REPORT LAUNCH

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DIGITAL FUTURES REPORT LAUNCH

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DIGITAL FUTURES REPORT LAUNCH

Therese Hogg
Managing Director

blu zebra
innovative business thinking!

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Introduction to the Scoping Study

The journey to this point:

- The Wired UP! Report -Exploring levels of digital skills & inclusion in the VCSE Sector in NI
  - 85% poor digital skills
  - 82.3% lack of funding
  - 82% limited access to devices

- A Cross Sectoral Digital Innovation Lab- solutions & partnership was set up to explore opportunities for the VCSE sector

- Develop a scoping exercise & a business plan for a Digital Hub for the VCSE Sector in NI

Wired Up?

Exploring the current levels of digital skills and inclusion in the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise Sector in Northern Irela

By Dr Donna Kernaghan and Stephen Dallas
September 2022

Commissioned by Community Foundation for North
Supported by Comic Relief.

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A DIGITAL HUB FOR THE VCSE SECTOR IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Methodology

- CFNI set up a Steering Group
- Consultation with Steering Group & 1-2-1's
- Benchmarking & research
- Digital stakeholder survey of VCSE sector (139)
- 1-2-1 stakeholder interviews (60+)
- Focus Groups (10)
- Events (3)
- Steering Group Meetings (6)
- Project Meetings (48)
- Scoping Study report drafts & final
- Business Plan

Guiding Principals

- The Digital Hub could not be all things to all people

- Its focus should be to support organisations in the VCSE sector in NI who can empower others through skills & efficiencies to reduce the digital divide & improve services

- It should be set up & run to facilitate digital transformation & inclusion for the VCSE Sector - influence policy, bridge gaps, create collaboration, knowledge sharing, increase skills, confidence & resilience

- It should evolve in both a physical & a virtual hub space/s over time based on need & connect across the Northern Ireland geography (urban & rural)

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

- It should be a sustainable "go to" support space & place for the VCSE sector in NI.

VCSE Sector Overview

Sector Size
7,486 registered charities
in Northern Ireland

Income
73.9% less than £100K
18% between £100K & £1 million
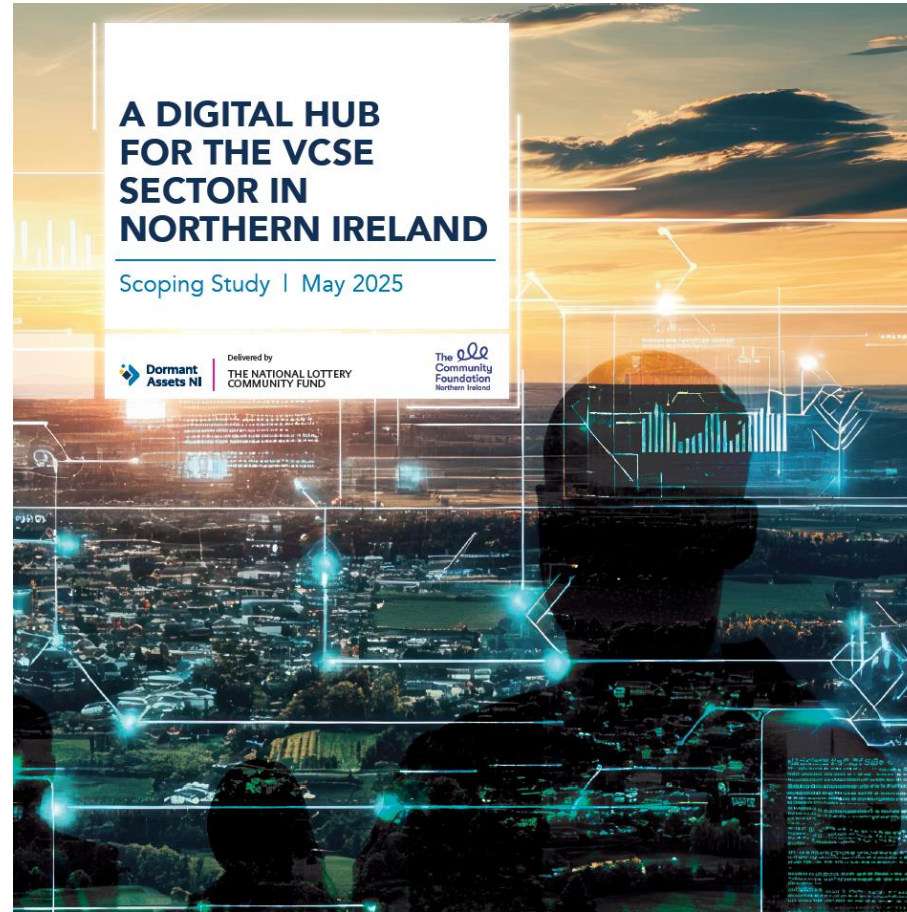3.3% over £1million

Employment
53,620 employees
7% of Northern Ireland workforce
75.9% paid & 24.1% volunteers

Innovative

Connected locally
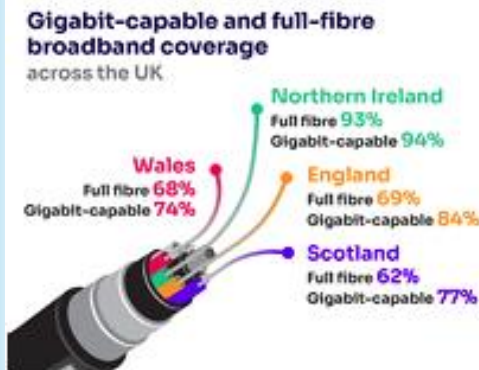
Collaboration & Support

Community Development

Geographical Reach

Community Service Driven

Community Focussed

Resilient

Digital Inclusion- What is it?

- Affordable, robust broadband internet service
- Internet-enabled devices that meet users' needs
- Access to digital literacy training, quality technical support & applications
- Online content designed to enable and encourage self-sufficiency, participation, and collaboration
- Content designed to enable and encourage self-sufficiency, participation, and collaboration

Gigabit-capable and full-fibre broadband coverage across the UK

Northern Ireland
Full fibre 93%
Gigabit-capable 94%

Wales
Full fibre 68%
Gigabit-capable 74%

England
Full fibre 69%
Gigabit-capable 84%

Scotland
Full fibre 62%
Gigabit-capable 77%

2,000
premises in Northern Ireland are without a decent broadband connection from a fixed or FWA service

Ofcom analysis of operator data (July 2024).
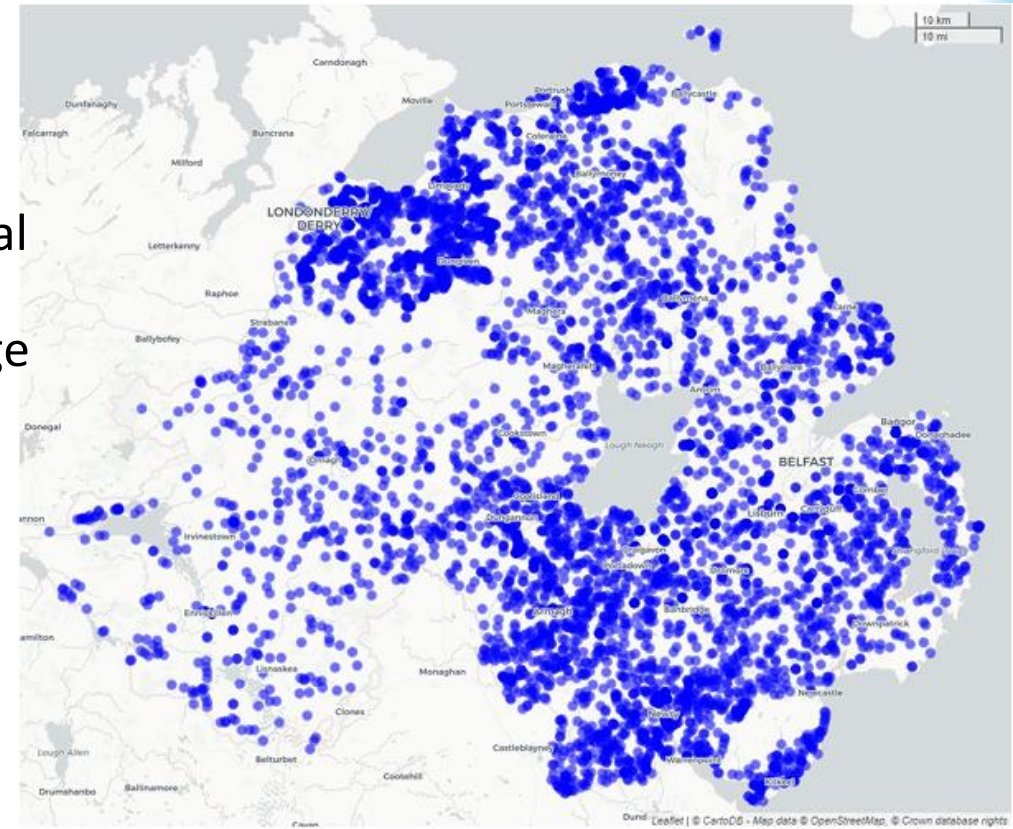
Digital Inclusion- How do we close gap!

- When supported & skilled VCSE Organisations can contribute to the social & economic advancement of communities by providing access to education, employment opportunities, and essential service.

- Making sure the most disadvantaged have access & can use information & communication technologies.
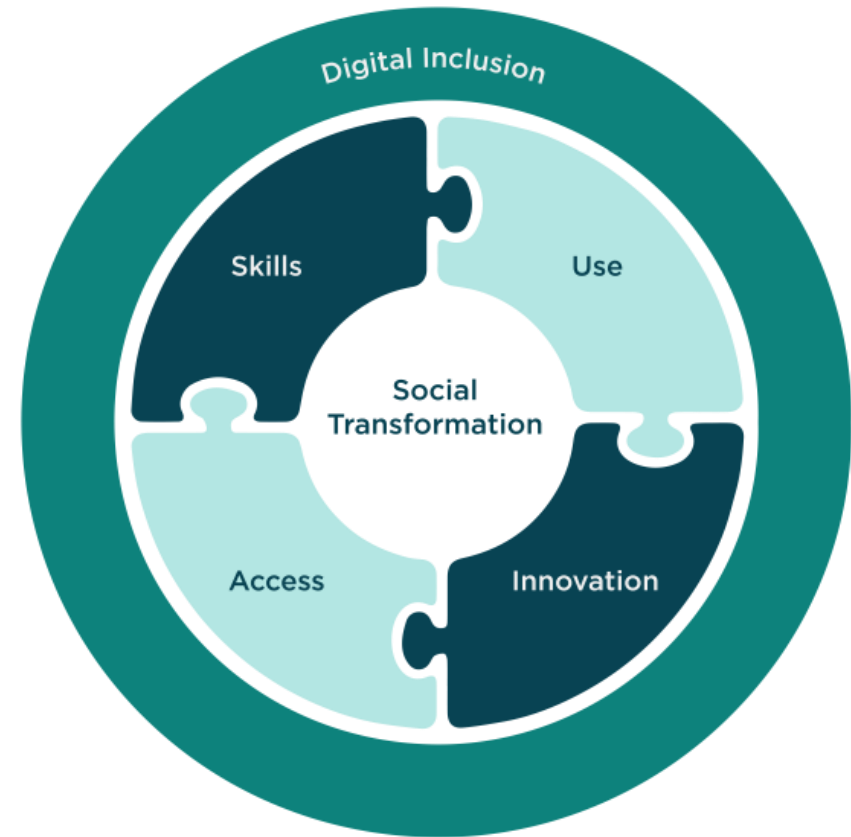
Strategic Context

The hub scoping study is detailed & demonstrates a strong correlation between the need for the **hub & current government strategies**

PfG; DfC Voluntary & Community Sector Infrastructure Support Framework; PPN 01/21 - Social Value in Procurement; 10X Strategy; Digital Skills Action Plan 2024-2034)

It also demonstrates careful attention to **avoiding duplication**, evidenced by integration with existing research (CFNI's 'Wired UP!' report) & **aligning with other strategies**, while **addressing research gaps**.

The study's strategic approach **ensures a digital hub proposition** that demonstrates **genuine needs** rather than replicating existing provision.

It aligns with **Social Value opportunities** & represents a once-in-a-generation opportunity to embed digital resilience across the VCSE sector in Northern Ireland
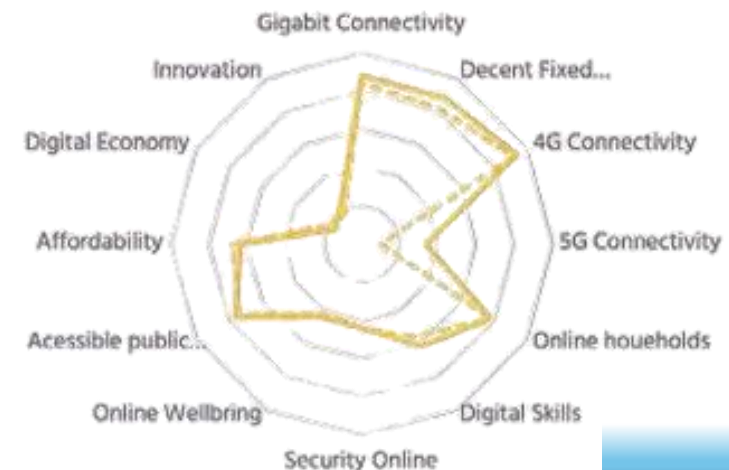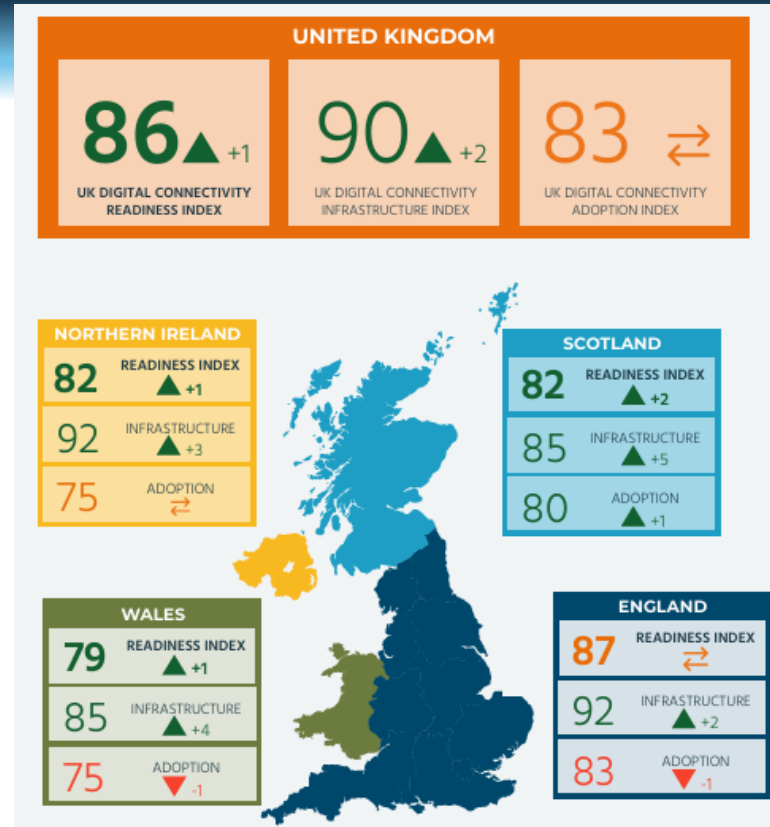
Funding opportunities such as **Dormant Assets** funding are pivotal to de-risking early-stage delivery and enabling the initiative to demonstrate value, build confidence, and attract longer-term support from additional partners.

Benchmarking

- Compared government strategies & digital support for the VCSE Sector in England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland and NI

- Strategies & Digital Charters are developed to reduce **digital exclusion** and ensure everyone can benefit from digital technology

- Our research highlighted NI's **lack of a cohesive digital strategy** which hampers progress in digital inclusion and support for the VCSE Sector in digital

- Our research recognised the **need for a dedicated digital support hub** to enhance service delivery for the VCSE Sector

- The VCSE sector is lagging behind in a fast-transforming digital World

Digital Connectivity Readiness Index

UNITED KINGDOM

86 ▲ +1	90 ▲ +2	83 ⇄
UK DIGITAL CONNECTIVITY READINESS INDEX	UK DIGITAL CONNECTIVITY INFRASTRUCTURE INDEX	UK DIGITAL CONNECTIVITY ADOPTION INDEX

NORTHERN IRELAND
- 82 READINESS INDEX ▲ +1
- 92 INFRASTRUCTURE ▲ +3
- 75 ADOPTION ⇄

SCOTLAND
- 82 READINESS INDEX ▲ +2
- 85 INFRASTRUCTURE ▲ +5
- 80 ADOPTION ▲ +1

WALES
- 79 READINESS INDEX ▲ +1
- 85 INFRASTRUCTURE ▲ +4
- 75 ADOPTION ▼ -1

ENGLAND
- 87 READINESS INDEX ⇄
- 92 INFRASTRUCTURE ▲ +2
- 83 ADOPTION ▼ -1

Digital Hub best practice example

Small Size Digital Support Hub- New Zealand Navigator Trust

The Trust's mission is to equip a thriving charitable and community sector in New Zealand by providing flexible and accessible digital solutions

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.

Digital Hub best practice example

Medium Size Digital Support Hub- London Innovation Community- LOTI- Demonstrates scale & resource

- It helps the great London area 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.

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

Digital Hub best practice example

Large Size Digital Support Hub- Infoxchange (Australia and New Zealand)

- It connects 150 staff members working to support more than 30,000 not-for-profits & over 2 million people in need each year across Australia & 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.

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.

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

Needs, Barrier & Gaps Summary

- **Digital connectivity** - significant challenge- rural areas, affecting engagement & service delivery.
  - 36% of respondents are affected by affordability of broadband services;
  - 18% by poor broadband services
  - 11% by limited broadband availability services

- **Digital knowledge gaps** – challenges with software Microsoft suit, AI tools, & cybersecurity.
  - 45% better communication strategies & data management
  - 39% funding for tech infrastructure
  - 30% cybersecurity knowledge

- **Digital adoption barriers** - aging leadership, high costs, & a lack of awareness for VCSE discounts & support needs.
  - 71.54% cost of equipment and ongoing maintenance
  - 54.47% lack of skills
  - 36.59% lack of awareness on digital transformation

- **Organisational digital capabilities** - vary widely, lack of resources and skills.
  - 26% of employers believed their staff had beginner capabilities
  - 71% intermediate
  - 3% advanced capabilities.

Needs, Barrier & Gaps Summary

- **Most needed digital resources -** funding for operational IT, licenses, equipment upgrades & security.
    - sector lacks the skilled workforce available to larger organisations
    - limited resources hinder the development of policies, strategies & system implementation
    - lack resources for IT upgrades, training, project implementation & IT support
    - greater knowledge-sharing opportunities

- **Digital literacy skills needs - basic training in software packages**
    - Microsoft Suite, spreadsheets, databases & graphic manipulation packages

- **Types of training most needed - huge & varied need depending on the size of the organisation & investment in staff**
    - Training course offering & language make it hard to identify courses
    - 47.41% AI ; 41% cybersecurity ; 37.93% project management tools
    - 37.07% digital skills audits in advance of training

Needs, Barrier & Gaps Summary

Strategic planning for digital transformation - fragmented funding initiatives across government departments do not enable digital inclusion to be tackled and measured effectively. Many organisations offer one off supports.

Lack of prioritisation around the importance of digital transformation benefits means the VCSE sector is lagging behind.

The survey demonstrated that there was an **overwhelming call for support around strategic planning** for:

- 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
- 80.00%- An **audit of our digital capabilities** and weaknesses
- 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

100% need for central hub that facilitates planning & can provide a coordinated approach for the sector to navigate & implement digital transformation effectively.

Barrier to transformation

The VCSE sector in Northern Ireland faces significant barriers to digital transformation:

1. **Connectivity** issues persist, particularly in some rural areas, with slow speeds, limited capacity, and unreliable service. Urban areas also experience challenges due to outdated infrastructure.

2. **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.

3. **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, & effective communication technologies.

4. **Strategic planning** requires audits, long-term vision development, and continuous change management.

To **transform the VCSE Sector**, bottom-up initiatives, collaborative training & and a connected knowledge community are essential. Embracing data-driven solutions & ensuring digital inclusion will help bridge the digital divide & enhance the sector's sustainability.

What is happening around digital inclusion in NI?

- The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of digital & the VCSE sector response

- NICVA provides ongoing work in digital capacity building, partnerships, advocacy, & resource development to support digital transformation.

- Private sector suppliers offer discounted & benefits to the VCSE Sector

- Digital Inclusion Fund supported by the Department for Communities

- The is significant collaborations between educational institutions, private sector & government departments

- The Social Value Unit within the Strategic Investment Board- doing excellent work to advance this area

- Significant research on levels of commitment to Funding Support; Connectivity; Devices; Education/skills development; Partnership/Collaborations/Social Value; Policy/Advocacy

There are significant opportunities for different types & levels of support; there is a proactive need to build on these resources & skills already on offer; there is a need to co-ordinated opportunities through a central signposting digitally focussed support hub

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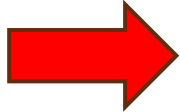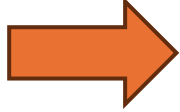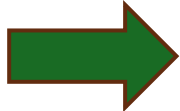
Potential components of a Digital Hub

- Trusted service
- Service delivered in plain language
- Dependable information repository
- Directory of trusted digital suppliers
- Digital organisational self-assessment tool
- Resource which signposts to free/low-cost tools & apps
- Hybrid of online support & in person support
- Service offered to all of the VCSE Sector in NI
- VCSE sectoral training course offering
- Interactive knowledge sharing forum
- A network for learning and sharing- lifelong learning approach

Options for a VCSE Digital Hub for NI

- Potential market 7,500 organisations

- 53,000 employees

- 49,000 + trustees

- 240,000+ estimate volunteers

- IT skills levels by organisation
  - 27% beginner, 71% intermediate, 3% advanced

- Variation in VCSE organisation annual income
  - 62.3% over £100K
  - 37.7 less £100K

Options considered

Options considered	RAG	Criteria used to assess	Preferred Option
• 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	→	• 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 & accessibility for groups	Preferred option is a physical hub in Belfast with outreach offering spaces for training, a web site & outreach for one to support for local organisations.

Description of a Digital Hub Offering

1. Supporting a Digital Strategy for Northern Ireland

- Tackles digital exclusion with targeted support and training
- Promotes cross-sector collaboration via a multi-stakeholder board
- Invests in infrastructure with annual monitoring & impact reporting.

2. Advancing Digital Infrastructure Funding

- Proposes long-term, multi-stream funding for sustainability
- Encourages innovation and flexible digital evolution
- Includes a self-funding subscription model & collaborative investment.

3. Enhancing VCSE Digital Support

- Offers technical help, audits, and cybersecurity guidance
- Hosts a digital resource library and peer learning tools
- Facilitates collaboration through forums and virtual events.

4. Building the VCSE Digital Workforce

- Provides accessible training in AI, data, and cybersecurity
- Uses a skills audit tool to track progress and gaps
- Prioritises inclusion and builds a network of digital champions.

Digital Hub Vision & Mission

Vision:

A digitally confident VCSE sector in Northern Ireland, empowered by a sustainable digital hub that delivers the tools, training, and support needed to thrive.

Mission:

To close the digital skills gap in Northern Ireland's VCSE sector by building resilience through lifelong learning and a sector-wide digital competency framework.

Digital Hub Objectives

Establish a Cross-Sector Digital Hub Board
Ensure representation from VCSE, private & public sectors.

Launch a VCSE Digital Hub & Outreach Network
Create central & satellite locations for cluster-based training

Develop an Interactive Website
Provide access to resources, training, and support.

Mobilise Sector-Wide Mentorship & Support
Engage private & public sector partners for training, devices & licences.

Deliver Sector-Wide Digital Upskilling
Provide infrastructure & training to reach VCSE organisations in 3–5 years.

Create a VCSE Digital Competency Framework
Integrate into university degrees for community & youth development.

Secure Sustainable Funding
Develop a funding model & secure resources for delivery.

Register as a Social Value Broker
Formalise the hub's role in delivering social impact.

Digital Hub Co-Creation
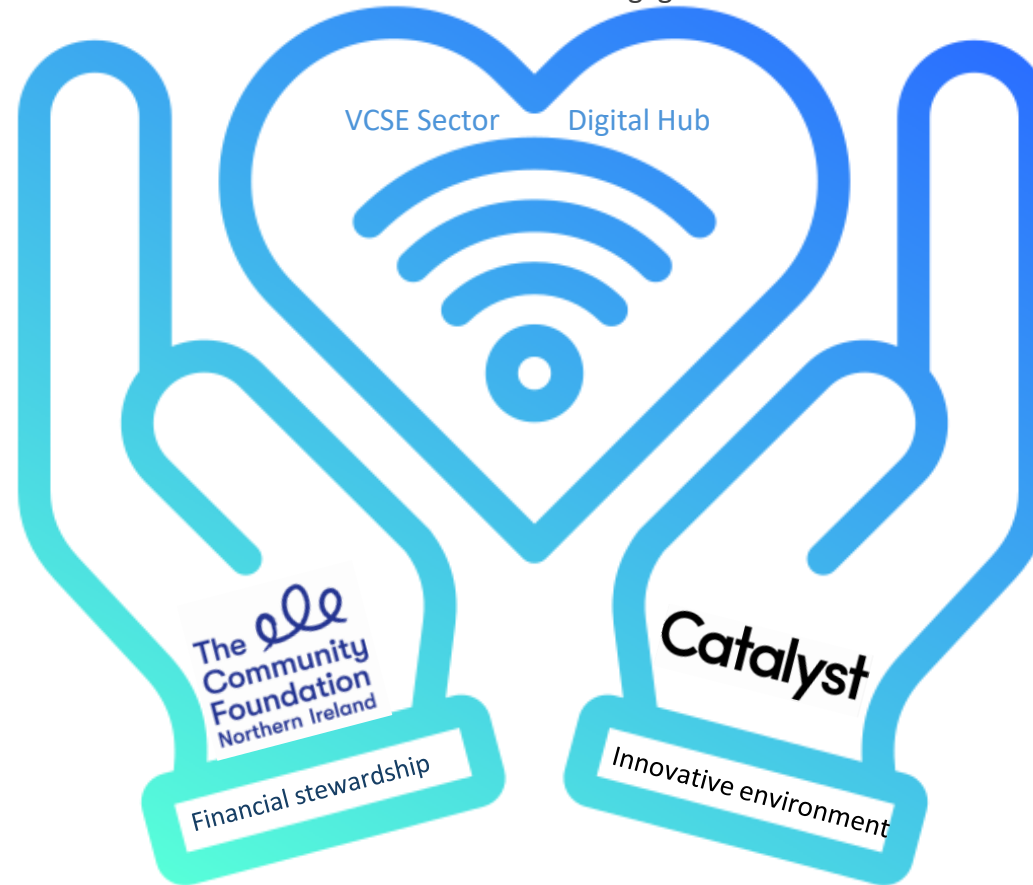
Cross sectional board

Secure Funding:
- Dormant Assets NI
- Government
- Philanthropic Organisations
- Private Sector Partners

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Department of **Finance** An Roinn **Airgeadais**

Department for **Communities** An Roinn **Pobal** Depairtment fur **Commonities** www.communities-ni.gov.uk

nicva
Sectoral networks & engagement

VCSE Sector   Digital Hub

The Community Foundation Northern Ireland

Financial stewardship

Catalyst

Innovative environment

Catalyst

Accommodation Solution:
- Main Hub in Belfast, mini hub in Derry/Londonderry, with future hubs based on need
- Website & audit tool to assess digital maturity & tailor support
- Knowledge-sharing forum to build community & share best practices
- Competency framework & digital skills curriculum

Good Governance

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A DIGITAL HUB FOR THE VCSE SECTOR IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Digital Hub Co-Creation

Staffing & Office Set Up

- Two key staff initially located in Catalyst

- Outsourced website development
  - information repository
  - trusted supplier's directory
  - knowledge-sharing forum
  - & priority development of a self-assessment organisation audit tool

- Enable relevant signposting resources & training opportunities & devices, connectivity, data, gaps for different size orgs

- Set collective targets & outcomes from organisation audits for outreach training

- Initiate outreach training for section 75 underserved groups/organisations using co-ordinated social value cross sectoral partners/collaborators

- Become a Social Value Broker

Digital Hub Co-Creation

- Set collective targets & outcomes from organisation audits for outreach training including focus on Section 75 underserved groups/organisations

- Secure funding from government, philanthropic organisations, or private sector partners

- Act as a liaison between VCSE organisations & 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.

Panel Discussion

Panellists:

- Adrian Johnston - Innovation Commissioner at Innovation City Belfast and Chair of CFNI

- Celine McStravick – CEO of NICVA

- Andrea Maclean – Social Value Advisor at SIB

- Paul Dickey – Head of Enterprise and Development, DoF

- Bruce Hogg – Director at Blu Zebra

Close

Thank you for attending