

27th April 2026

Third Sector Forum

East Renfrewshire

Discussion Write Up

VAER

What to expect from this report

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Note from the VAER Chief Officer Ruth Gallagher



Thank you to everyone who was able to join us for our April Third Sector Forum (TSF) the first for 2026-27. The focus of the session was to build on the discussions started in January's TSF and to begin shaping our thoughts, asks and opportunities in pulling together a 3rd Sector Sustainability Strategy.

At a time of increasing demand, economic uncertainty, and complex social challenges, it has never been more important to ensure that our third sector is not only effective today, but resilient and financially sustainable for the future.

Our approach will be to work alongside the TSF to build a thriving and confident third sector in East Renfrewshire, recognising that sustainability extends beyond environmental considerations—it encompasses strong governance, financial resilience, inclusive growth, and the ability of organisations to adapt, collaborate, and innovate in response to changing needs.

Through meaningful engagement, we aim to amplify the voices of local organisations, understand their priorities and challenges, and co-produce solutions that support long-term stability and impact. We will foster collaboration across partners, strengthen capacity, and promote opportunities for funding, shared learning, and strategic development.

Our ambition is clear: a connected and empowered third sector that is equipped to deliver vital services, support local communities, and play a central role in shaping a fairer, more resilient East Renfrewshire. By working together, we can ensure that the sector continues to thrive—financially, organisationally, and socially—for years to come.

Executive Summary

The April Third Sector Forum brought together organisations to explore what the sector requires for sustainability, associated challenges, opportunities, and collective actions. Discussions highlighted a strong appetite for deeper collaboration, shared learning, and more coordinated approaches to funding and service delivery.

While organisations are demonstrating resilience, adaptability, and a clear commitment to their communities, there are significant pressures around funding uncertainty, workforce sustainability, volunteer capacity, and infrastructure constraints. A recurring theme was the need for longer-term strategic thinking, particularly around funding, workforce development, and partnership working.

There is a clear opportunity to build on existing strengths, particularly strong local relationships and collaborative willingness, to create a more connected, efficient, and sustainable third sector ecosystem in East Ren.

Key Themes and Insights - What is needed for sustainability?

Collaboration & Networking

- Increased collaboration between organisations, including better awareness of each other's services to improve signposting.
- More cross-organisational networking opportunities (both in-person and hybrid)
- Stronger networks to share knowledge, ideas, and resources.
- Sharing of spaces, projects, volunteers, communication platforms, training and events
- Volunteer-to-volunteer networking across organisations to build community.

Training & Skills Development

- Greater access to free or shared training opportunities.
- Development of a shared or centralised online training platform.

Funding & Resources

- Increased overall funding to the sector.
- Shift toward longer-term, multi-year funding models.
- Better communication from funders regarding changes and timelines.
- More coordinated and collaborative funding approaches aligned to community need.
- Strategic planning to support joint funding bids.
- Streamlined, proportionate reporting requirements.

Transport

- Improved and more accessible transport options to support service delivery and participation.

Volunteers

- More flexible volunteer roles to widen participation.
- Improved recruitment and retention through better support and recognition.

Key Themes and Insights - What are the challenges?

Funding & Financial Pressures

- Short-term and restrictive funding models, often lacking sustainability or exit strategies.
- Rising operational costs linked to the cost-of-living crisis.
- Pay disparities and limited ability to increase wages within funding constraints.
- Complexity of funding applications and lack of visibility of opportunities.
- Reliance on donations in some cases.

Transport

- Geographic spread creating access challenges for staff, volunteers, and service users.
- High transport costs and insufficient coverage.
- Transport limitations impacting attendance and sustainability of activities.

Spaces & Facilities

- Limited access to affordable, suitable, and consistent spaces.
- Changing priorities affecting availability of council-owned venues.
- Accessibility challenges, particularly for groups supporting people with additional needs.

Staffing

- Workforce pressures, including workload, job security, and expectations.
- Difficulty attracting and retaining suitably skilled staff.

Volunteers

- Volunteer shortages, with particular localised challenges (e.g. Barrhead).
- Risk of burnout due to limited volunteer capacity.
- Challenges engaging socially isolated individuals in volunteering.

Engagement & Awareness

- Difficulty capturing attention in a fast-paced digital environment.
- Challenges ensuring services reflect and incorporate local lived experience (including geographic context).

Key Themes and Insights - What's going well?

Funding & Sustainability

- Some access to supportive grants (e.g. covering employer costs), reducing pressure on core funding.
- Instances of consistent funding providing a degree of stability.

Volunteers

- Strong relationships between volunteers and organisations.
- Recognition approaches are effective in retaining volunteers.

Promotion & Growth

- Increased promotion of services identified as an opportunity to attract funding, sponsorship, and participation.

Adaptability

- Organisations are increasingly proactive in considering sustainability and long-term viability of projects.

Collaboration & Community

- Strong collaborative culture across the sector.
- The locality enables relationship-building and partnership working.

Key Themes and Insights - What are the actions?

Funding & Income Generation

- Diversify funding sources to reduce reliance on single streams.
- Advocate for multi-year funding models and improved funding stability.
- Explore income-generating opportunities (e.g. room hire).

Communication & Promotion

- Improve transparency and communication across the sector.
- Increase cross-promotion of activities to expand reach.

Systems & Tools

- Develop shared platforms (e.g. training systems, mailing lists).
- Improve directories and information-sharing tools (e.g. CH Directory).
- Explore creation of shared “route finder” tools for services.

Volunteers

- Improve accessibility and inclusivity of volunteer opportunities.
- Strengthen cross-promotion of volunteering roles between organisations.
- Increase support for organisations in designing volunteer roles.
- Encourage participant involvement in delivery to build ownership.
- Develop approaches to maintain continuity during volunteer breaks.

Transport

- Explore more sustainable and coordinated community transport solutions.
- Consider better use of existing transport assets.

Collaboration & Networking

- Continue and expand Third Sector Forum opportunities.
- Host networking events across different organisations.
- Develop stronger partnerships with public sector bodies.
- Ensure the third sector is represented in decision-making spaces.
- Share resources, learning, and successful delivery models.
- Expand collaborative training opportunities.

Staffing & Workforce

- Focus on staff retention and wellbeing.
- Address workforce pressures through supportive organisational practices.

Discussion Summary

Discussions reflected a sector that is **committed, collaborative, and community-focused**, but operating within a challenging environment. Sustainability is closely linked to improved collaboration, longer-term funding, and more efficient use of shared resources.

Key priorities emerging across discussions include:

- Strengthening partnerships and coordination across organisations.
- Moving toward more sustainable funding and planning models.
- Investing in workforce and volunteer capacity.
- Improving infrastructure, particularly around spaces, transport, and systems.
- Enhancing visibility, communication, and shared learning.

Collectively, there is a clear willingness to work together to address shared challenges and build a more resilient third sector**.**

Action Log / Next Steps

Action	Owner(s)	Notes
Improve volunteer recruitment & accessibility	All organisations	Develop inclusive and flexible roles
Collaboratively promote volunteering	All organisations	Cross-promote opportunities
Provide support for volunteer role design	VAER	Build organisational capacity
Continue Third Sector Forum events	VAER / partners	Maintain networking and collaboration opportunities
Host networking events across organisations	All organisations	Rotate locations
Expand shared training opportunities	All organisations / VAER	Share resources and platforms
Create shared systems (mailing lists, directories)	VAER / partners	Improve access to information
Share spaces and resources	All organisations	Maximise existing assets

Attendees



- Macmillan East Ren (Enjoy East Ren)
- Mearns Kirk Helping Hands
- Retail Trust
- RCA Trust
- The Black Door Shop
- East Renfrewshire Council
- Scottish Parliament
- Community Transport East Renfrewshire
- Cosgrove care
- Playlist for Life
- Retail Trust
- East Renfrewshire Carers' Centre
- Deafblind Scotland
- NAS East Renfrewshire branch
- Fairweather Drop In

Contact Us



Thank you for taking the time to read this report, we hope it is useful to you. We would love to hear from you as we continue to develop the Third Sector Forum into a space that is useful to you.

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If you would like to share thoughts, ask questions or meet for a chat, Luana (Partnership and Policy Manager with VAER), would love to hear from you:

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