



North Somerset Council



Creating a Single Gateway to Community Health & Wellbeing Services

North Somerset's model is precisely what Integrated Care Systems have been asked to build: a community-rooted, data-enabled gateway that connects residents to preventative support before they reach statutory services. It's local innovation in service of national ambition.

The Challenge

North Somerset Council like many local authorities are facing significant financial pressures coupled with increasing demand on services alongside limited visibility of community-based support. They advertised community services on their main website, but residents and professionals found it difficult to navigate to the right help — and the directory itself struggled to keep pace with the voluntary sector it was meant to represent.

In addition frontline staff within the council found it difficult to find reliable, current information about community services to refer, signpost clients to specialist support they might need.

Specific challenges included:

- Service data that was rapidly becoming out of date and unreliable
- Low engagement from VCSE organisations with the existing directory
- No clear pathway for residents, social workers or healthcare professionals seeking community-based support
- No facility for residents, social care teams to refer into community services
- Limited internal capacity to manage and maintain the directory
- No data or insight to help commissioners understand demand, gaps or outcomes, health and wellbeing outcomes
- Low visibility, awareness of services in diverse communities

National Policy Context

North Somerset Council's response directly mirrors the ambitions set out in the NHS Long Term Plan, the Government's 10-Year Health Plan, and the national Neighbourhood Health Framework (March 2026) — shifting resource upstream, activating community assets, and reducing pressure on statutory services before crisis hits.

The Government's Neighbourhood Health Framework sets out a clear ambition: Neighbourhood Health Centres that bring together GP services with community, local authority and civil society sector services — making care easier to access, easier to deliver, and reducing pressure on the wider system. It explicitly positions neighbourhood health as a joint endeavour between the NHS

and local authorities, requiring genuine partnership across health, social care and the voluntary sector.

The **Local Government Association** has been equally clear about the local authority’s role. In its guidance on neighbourhoods — from policy intent to lived reality — the LGA argues that neighbourhood health works best when powered by relationships, trust and lived experience, not just structures. It calls for VCSE organisations to be involved early and consistently, supported by local infrastructure organisations that can coordinate engagement and ensure diverse community voices shape priorities and delivery.

North Somerset’s model delivers precisely this. It places a trusted local infrastructure organisation (VANS) at the centre of delivery, connects residents to preventative community support before statutory services are needed, and provides commissioners with the data and insight to understand population need and gaps. At a time when Integrated Care Boards are actively seeking VCSE partnerships that can demonstrate population-level impact, North Somerset has built exactly the kind of locally-rooted, data-informed infrastructure that national policy has long called for but rarely seen delivered at scale.

This positions North Somerset not just as a local success story, but as a blueprint for what effective place-based neighbourhood health can look like across England — and a practical demonstration that the shift from policy intent to lived reality is achievable.

Route to Simply Connect

North Somerset Council heard about Simply Connect through Voluntary Action North Somerset (VANS), who had been working with the platform for a number of years to manage VCSE data and deliver local authority contracts.

When VANS were asked to update the existing council directory, they recognised that a more ambitious approach was needed — one that invested in local infrastructure, not just technology. Simply Connect met with the Head of Adult Social Care, Digital Transformation Lead and Service Development Manager to map challenges, needs and vision.

From that conversation, six strategic themes emerged:

<p>Whole Population Approach</p> <p>A digital gateway enabling residents to access preventative support earlier, manage physical health, build social connections, and get help before reaching statutory services.</p>	<p>Accessibility & Inclusion</p> <p>An easy-to-use platform embedded within the community, featuring trusted, quality-assured services and reaching people who find it hardest to access support.</p>
<p>Visibility of Community Assets</p> <p>Making local VCSE strengths visible, supporting frontline professionals to refer with confidence, and enabling commissioners to identify gaps and duplication.</p>	<p>Data & Insight</p> <p>Real-time commissioner dashboards surfacing user demographics, need, referral patterns, service demand and outcomes — enabling evidence-based decision-making.</p>
<p>Value for money</p> <p>Transparent pricing reduced duplication across services, and monitoring of outcomes and demand — providing clear evidence of Return on Investment and use of public funding.</p>	<p>Commission for Sustainability</p> <p>To create long-term, sustainable support for residents across North Somerset by embedding collaboration between statutory and voluntary sector partners into a single, scalable system.</p>

Beyond the Directory: Simply Connect as a Full System Platform

Simply Connect is not simply a referral tool or service directory. It is a comprehensive community health and wellbeing platform, designed to support the full journey from first contact to long-term outcomes — for residents, for social prescribers, and for commissioners seeking system-level insight.

The platform can currently offer:

- **A quality-assured service directory and community gateway** — enabling residents to find and self-refer to local services, and professionals to make warm, tracked referrals with confidence.
- **Social prescribing case management** — supporting link workers and frontline staff to manage caseloads, record interactions, and coordinate support across organisations.
- **Health and wellbeing tracking tools** — capturing validated outcome measures that allow commissioners and practitioners to understand the real impact of social prescribing and community support on individual wellbeing over time.
- **Client feedback tools** — giving residents a voice, surfacing lived experience to improve services, and providing the kind of community intelligence that commissioners and neighbourhood health teams need.
- **Real-time commissioner dashboards** — surfacing demand patterns, service gaps, population demographics and outcomes data to support evidence-based commissioning decisions.
- **Volunteer brokerage** — matching residents and organisations to volunteering opportunities, enabling councils and VCSE partners to mobilise community capacity at scale. Already in active use by VANS across North Somerset.
- **Befriending management tools** — supporting the coordination and oversight of befriending programmes, helping to address social isolation with the structure and governance that funders and commissioners require.

What this means for North Somerset — The current deployment in North Somerset represents the first phase of a broader ambition. As the platform matures and community relationships deepen, opportunities will arise for North Somerset Council to offer the social prescribing elements to link workers, develop health and wellbeing tracking and feedback tools — by working in partnership with NHS partners and wider system stakeholders across the Integrated Care System.

This positions North Somerset's investment not just as a directory upgrade, but as the foundation of a shared local infrastructure for community health — one that can grow and connect with the wider system, connect with NHS data flows, and provide the evidence base that commissioners, ICBs and national policy increasingly require.

The Approach: A Community-Led Infrastructure Model

What distinguishes North Somerset Council's approach from a conventional technology procurement is what they chose to invest in: not just a platform, but the human infrastructure to sustain it.

The local authority recognised early that for the service to be sustainable and genuinely effective, it needed to be embedded within the local community — not managed from a council office. VANS, as the local community infrastructure organisation, was the natural partner: already trusted by, and connected to, the VCSE sector across the area.

This decision — to commission infrastructure, not just software — is the model’s defining feature, and its most replicable lesson.

Delivery Model

North Somerset Council commissions VANS to manage and grow the platform, supported by Simply Connect. Responsibilities are clearly defined and mutually reinforcing:

Partner	Role	Key Contribution
North Somerset Council	Commissioner & strategic lead	Funds infrastructure; sets population health vision; accesses commissioner dashboards, lead on wider system integration and manage statutory services, care home provision
VA North Somerset (VANS)	Community infrastructure & delivery partner	Quality assures organisations; engages VCSE; convenes stakeholders; gathers feedback; drives improvement
Simply Connect	Platform & technical partner	Provides platform, QA framework, good practice advice, engagement support and support service for partners and all residents and VCSEF users

Measurable Early Impact

Launched in January 2026, the platform has already demonstrated significant traction — reflecting both the quality of the underlying model and the strength of VANS’ community relationships.

19,000 Views	5,000 Active Users	362 VCSE Orgs Engaged	462 Services Listed	120 seconds Average engagement time
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These early figures point to a platform that is being found, trusted and used — the foundations of sustainable long-term impact.

Benefits

Residents	North Somerset Council	VCSE Organisations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Faster, easier access to local support • Ability to self-refer, or refer friends and family • Earlier, preventative help — local and accessible 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduced pressure on frontline services • Improved visibility of local provision • Data and insight into population needs • A platform committed to continuous improvement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased visibility of services • Accessible support from VANS and Simply Connect • Stronger collaboration across the voluntary sector

Key Learning: A Model for Others to Follow

North Somerset Council's experience offers five transferable lessons for local authorities seeking to build effective, sustainable community health infrastructure:

- Sustainable partnerships are the foundation — technology alone is not enough. The success of this model rests on the relationships between NSC, VCSE and Simply Connect.
- Fund the human layer. Local delivery embedded within communities is critical. Digital infrastructure without community infrastructure will not achieve engagement or outcomes.
- Commission for sustainability, not just delivery. Local authorities that commit to funded partnership working with the VCSE sector will consistently deliver more innovative and durable solutions than those that procure on cost alone.
- VCSE engagement must be actively supported — not assumed. Organisations need help to meet standards, engage with platforms and promote their services.
- Trusted data requires trusted relationships. Data quality is a product of partnership quality. The ongoing relationship between VANS and local VCSE organisations is what keeps the directory accurate and alive.

Local authorities that are committed to funded partnership working with the VCSE sector will deliver the most innovative and sustainable solutions. North Somerset Council has demonstrated what that looks like in practice.

In Their Own Words

We are really pleased to have launched Simply Connect, working alongside Voluntary Action North Somerset. Simply Connect is key to supporting residents access services that will keep them well and active in their communities. We are looking forward to working with Simply Connect to explore the further system benefits that support more integrated working with our partners, making it easier to connect people directly with the services they need

Hayley Verrico Director Adults Support & Safeguarding, North Somerset Council

This project has really helped VANS and the NSC Adult Social Care Team strengthen our close working relationship and opportunities for wider cross-system collaboration. This approach means we can achieve our shared goal- better health and wellbeing for local people. The fact that Simply Connect originated from the VCSEF sector, they understand our needs and connect us to the wider national community delivering this model nationally, eg in Croydon where partners have been happy to share learning.

Sue Stone, Project Manager VA North Somerset (VANS)