



Voluntary Health Scotland

Strategic Plan 2025 – 2030



**Collaboration for
Health Creation**

Foreword

Health inequalities gap. Three words. A small, polite phrase. Probably meaningless to most people. Even among those who feel the impact every day of their lives.

Yet this gap is life changing. Living on one side of this gap you have a good prospect of a healthy, long life. But, live on the other side and you inherit the likelihood that your life will be shorter, and more challenging because of poor health. A lottery of life chances but where you do not get to choose your lucky numbers.

The health inequalities gap is not new. It has existed for decades, passed down from one generation to the next. Over the years, the excuses for Scotland's poor health record have been many and varied. Poverty, the loss of large-scale traditional employment, poor diet, lack of exercise, even the Scottish climate. There have been glimmers here and there of progress. But those small successes are too few and seldom sustained. The gap is widening, and too many families, older and younger people and babies are still living and growing up in communities impacted by poor health, both physical and mental. Scotland is rightly proud of our history, our heritage, and the incredible impact our citizens have had on the world.

The health inequalities gap is not a source of national pride.

And, for too long, the potential of the third sector in preventing health inequalities has been ignored. Recent policy announcements, including the Population Health Framework, give hope that the dial is shifting to community based preventative services – but that change yet needs to be delivered.

As we publish our new Strategy 2025-2030, Voluntary Health Scotland will ensure that the voices of our growing membership are heard at the right tables. We will influence the changes needed and take our members' incredible skills, experience, and passion to the heart of the debate. So that every citizen, wherever they live in Scotland, has their best chance for a healthy life.

Christine Carlin

Chair, Voluntary Health Scotland



Our purpose

- ▶ **To create a healthier, fairer Scotland renewed by a thriving third sector.**

Who we are

We are a movement for health creation working to reduce health inequalities to enable the people of Scotland to live well. We believe that health is more than the absence of illness, and together with our members and partners we champion this belief. We collaborate to provide the national voice for third sector health organisations in Scotland.

Our Aims

- ▶ **Amplify the voice and influence of third sector health organisations**
- ▶ **Promote strong and equal partnership between the third sector and public sector as part of the health sector**
- ▶ **Contribute to and promote the evidence base for health policy and practice**
- ▶ **Improve legislation, policy and systems to deliver better solutions for Scotland's health challenges**

Our Values

- ▶ **We strive for equity**

By centring equity in all that we do, we strive to ensure fair access to health, dignity, and wellbeing for every individual and community we serve.

- ▶ **Collaboration for change**

We recognise that lasting change in health is only possible when we work together across sectors. By sharing knowledge, resources, and responsibility, we create stronger, more sustainable solutions that advance health and wellbeing for all.

- ▶ **Our members are at the heart of everything we do**

Their passion, voices, and commitment drive our collective vision forwards and ensure that we remain connected to the communities we serve.

- ▶ **We are bold and tenacious**

We are visible and proactive; speaking up, showing up, and driving change even when challenges feel bigger than us.

Health inequalities in Scotland

Widening health inequalities remains one of the greatest challenges facing our country. Scotland has the lowest life expectancy, and one of the lowest healthy life expectancies, in Western Europe.

There are a range of public health challenges in Scotland that have proven to be particularly challenging to address. Our country's drug-related mortality rate is

perhaps one of the starkest indicators of health inequality. The percentage of people in Scotland experiencing mental health issues is increasing rapidly, and those living in more deprived communities are more likely to report a mental health condition. Vaccine hesitancy, driven by misinformation and fear of side effects, is a growing concern. Uptake of certain vaccines is significantly less in deprived communities and among certain ethnic groups.

Health Inequalities in Numbers

13 years

difference in healthy life expectancy for men living in Scotland's least and most deprived communities.

22%

of Scotland's children living in relative poverty, a key determinant of health.

11.3%

of Scotland's people reporting a mental health condition, up from 4.4% in 2011.

80%

of activity affecting health happens outside the public sector health and care system.

Our public health challenges are further compounded by the projected increase in demand for health services in the years to come. Scotland's population is ageing and more people are living with long-term conditions. On the other side of this equation, workforce pressures are

increasing as a result of demographic population changes and immigration restrictions. The Scottish Government Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care stated in 2025 that a shift to prevention in the delivery of health services is 'no longer a choice'.

It can take years, even decades, to see the true impact of policy interventions on health inequalities. Minimum Unit Pricing was introduced in 2018 to reduce alcohol-related harm, a major public health issue in Scotland that is particularly prevalent in more deprived communities. Five years on, a **2023 study by Public Health Scotland** found a 13.4% reduction in alcohol-specific deaths and a decline in alcohol-related hospital admissions and deaths.

There have been some positive developments in 2025 progressing the policy shift to prevention and the focus on public health. The **Population Health Framework**, the **Health and Social Care Service Renewal Framework**, and the **Public Service Reform Strategy** have all committed to prioritising prevention in the provision of public services. We need to acknowledge the vital role of the third sector as a partner in the shift to community-based preventative services.

“At the core of the Population Health Framework is a commitment to improving life expectancy for everyone in Scotland and closing the avoidable and unjust gap between our most and least deprived communities. This shift in focus, from treating illness to preventing it, requires targeted action to address the root causes of poor health and to invest where the need is greatest.”

**Neil Gray, Cabinet Secretary
for Health and Social Care**

However, there are significant systemic challenges that need to be addressed. Audit Scotland have highlighted **considerable issues with the provision of General Practice in Scotland**, and complexity in decision-making and service implementation around **adult mental health**. The latter review found that accessing mental health services can be ‘slow and complicated’, particularly for people from ethnic minorities or those experiencing poverty.

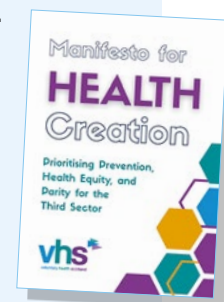
Our Manifesto for Health Creation

Our manifesto, published in October 2025, was developed following extensive consultation with our members and will inform our policy priorities well beyond the 2026 Scottish Parliament election.

Our key asks are:

1. Create a prevention-centred health system
2. Prioritise health equity and the right to health
3. Establish third sector parity
4. Improve health measures and datasets

Scotland’s policy makers face considerable and mounting challenges when it comes to the nation’s health. Recent policy developments have provided cause for optimism given the shift in focus towards prevention and health creation. However, systemic change and long-term solutions are urgently required to bring meaningful impact.



Our Strategic Objectives

Objective 1:

We will grow and diversify our membership, to provide more effective representation for organisations that support people experiencing health inequalities and disadvantage across Scotland.

OUTCOME 1: Our membership will grow to over 1,000 organisations by 2030 and be more representative of diverse communities across Scotland, enabling VHS to enhance the voices of health inequalities.

Key Activities:

- ▶ Grow our membership through communities and organisations where health inequalities are mainly experienced the most, through targeted engagement.
- ▶ Utilise our existing networks for membership growth and seek to develop new networks where there is a need.
- ▶ Provide a free membership service to third sector organisations removing the primary financial barrier to engagement.
- ▶ Seek wider income streams to enable the growth of our networks, membership and reach.

Objective 2:

We will amplify the voices, stories and impact of our members and their communities to influence for change.

OUTCOME 2: Improved parity for third sector organisations and recognition of the vital role the sector plays alongside public sector services in addressing health inequalities.

Key Activities:

- ▶ Convene events to provide a platform that stimulates creativity and diversity of thought. Bring together unusual friends and new voices at the forefront of innovation, practice and academia across the UK and internationally.
- ▶ Develop impact reporting to highlight the importance of the work third sector organisations deliver to address health inequalities.
- ▶ Coordinate thematic community visits bringing together members, healthcare professionals and policy makers.
- ▶ Review the VHS brand and messaging to effectively reach and represent our target audiences.
- ▶ Identify the need for strong evidence and carry out social research projects to showcase impact and drive policy influence.

Objective 3:

We will play a leading role in advocating for a prevention-first approach, championing the benefits of health creation and living well in our communities.

OUTCOME 3: Preventative third sector services are sustainable, and a culture of health creation is fostered by policy makers and commissioners.

Key Activities:

- ▶ Contribute to and promote the development of the evidence base for preventative and early intervention services with our members.
- ▶ Advocate for the asks in our Manifesto 2026 through the duration of the next Parliamentary term to seek cross-party support.
- ▶ Provide leadership and influence in championing the benefits of mainstreaming social prescribing across Scotland.
- ▶ Continue to develop and grow Community Link Working as a core component of primary care services alongside the Scottish Community Link Worker Network in partnership with Scottish Government.

Objective 4:

We will utilise digital systems, technology, media and data to improve engagement and effectiveness as we grow.

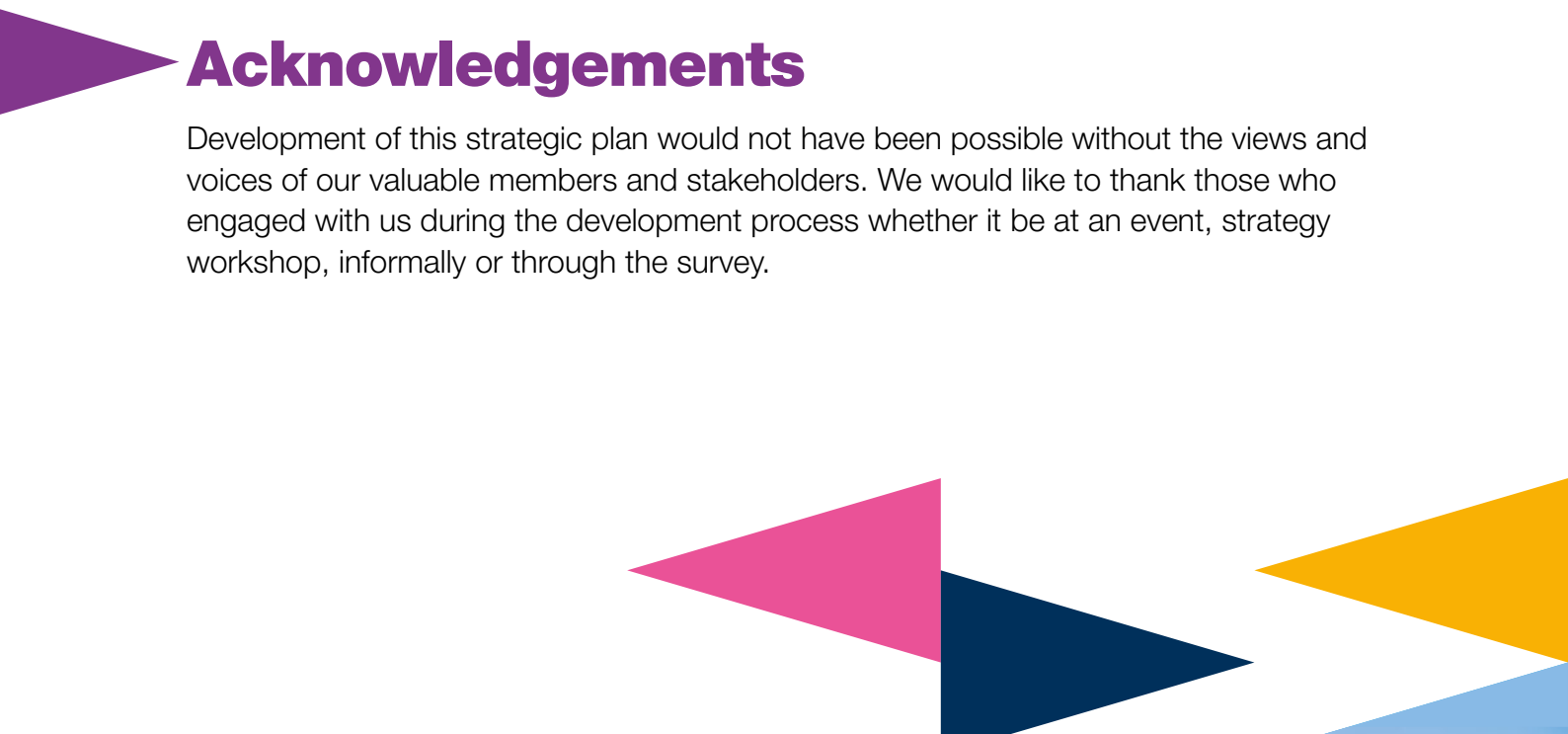
OUTCOME 4: It is easier, more effective and safer to engage and participate as a member and stakeholder of VHS.

Key Activities:

- ▶ Further develop and maintain robust systems for data collection, compliance and reporting to inform our work.
- ▶ Take a continuous improvement approach to our membership and customer journey, striving for excellence.
- ▶ Produce high quality digital media and visual material to tell impactful stories and to maximise member and stakeholder engagement.
- ▶ Recruit, nurture and develop a high performing staff team.

Acknowledgements

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