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# **“It’s time to recognise the value of the workforce”:**

## reflective support for frontline staff & volunteers

October 2025

# Introduction

When frontline workers experience burn-out, it directly and negatively impacts the vital work the VCFSE<sup>1</sup> sector does to support Sheffield's people and communities.

One way to prevent worker burn-out is to provide them with appropriate wellbeing support. However, this is not widely accessible in the sector. This project aimed to better understand and demonstrate ways to address this gap.

Since June 2024, more than 70 frontline staff and volunteers working in Sheffield's VCFSE sector have been taking part in regular wellbeing support.

Staff and volunteers, along with their organisations, have shared their experiences with us. This report sets out what we have learnt. The project was funded by NHS Health Education England and coordinated by Voluntary Action Sheffield (VAS).

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<sup>1</sup> VCFSE stands for Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise

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# Background

## Increasing crisis and complexity

Like many parts of the country, Sheffield is facing a crisis of need. Since the onset of austerity, some communities have seen rising levels of poverty, compounded by the pandemic and sharp increases in the cost of living. This has led to worsening health and wellbeing, particularly in communities that already face the greatest barriers and poorest outcomes. As a result, demand for support continues to rise.

The health and care system has been unable to meet this rising demand. In addition, some communities and groups remain out of reach, leaving many people without access to appointments or support in the settings that would work best for them.

As a result, grassroots community organisations and their frontline workers are dealing with escalating crises and increasingly complex needs. The work is emotionally demanding, with many carrying the burden of failing services over a prolonged period.

This project was developed in response to VCFSE frontline workers being exhausted and depleted, with limited access to wellbeing support and increasing levels of burn-out. It also forms part of a broader emerging workstream at VAS that looks more closely at the important role worker wellbeing plays in sustaining the sector and supporting the communities it serves.

## Burn-out

Burn-out is what people experience at work when they are physically, mentally, and emotionally exhausted, and it has become an urgent problem for organisations in the VCFSE sector.

This reflects a national pattern for UK adults, as reported by Mental Health UK and YouGov in 2025<sup>2</sup>. One in five workers needs time off work due to mental health struggles caused by stress.

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<sup>2</sup> The Burnout Report 2025, Mental Health UK <https://mentalhealth-uk.org/burnout/>

### **What is burn-out?**

This is The World Health Organization's (WHO) definition<sup>3</sup>:

*Burn-out is a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It is characterized by three dimensions:*

- *feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion;*
- *increased mental distance from one's job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job; and*
- *reduced professional efficacy.*

*Burn-out refers specifically to phenomena in the occupational context and should not be applied to describe experiences in other areas of life.*

Burn-out can look differently for groups of people, for example, those who are neurodivergent or physically disabled. While this project did not explore these variations, feedback from VCFSE organisations highlights an important gap for future research and work in this area.

### **What is Reflective Support?**

There is no single or simple solution that organisations can introduce to solve the problem of workers experiencing burn-out. However, learning from organisations that are successfully supporting their workers' wellbeing, shows their approaches are tailored and made up of many different parts. Reflective Support, the focus of this programme, is one tool they all share in common.

This programme enabled frontline workers to access Reflective Support, examples of which include one-to-one support, group work, a creative or physical activity, or clinical or reflective supervision.

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<sup>3</sup> The World Health Organisation, 2019 <https://www.who.int/news/item/28-05-2019-burn-out-an-occupational-phenomenon-international-classification-of-diseases>

## The key characteristics of Reflective Support

In this project we have defined Reflective Support as an approach to wellbeing support that meets all four of these points:

- A regular, ongoing, and protected time commitment for the worker
- Facilitated by an experienced provider who has the skills to keep workers safe
- An opportunity for the worker to reflect on the emotional part of their role
- Contributing to the worker's professional development

## What we did

VAS designed and publicised a small grant scheme which offered VCFSE organisations in Sheffield the opportunity to fund Reflective Support for up to five of their frontline workers for one year. Grants were calculated at £800 per worker, to cover 12 one-hour sessions at £60 each + £80 to cover time for evaluation.

Of the 54 organisations that applied, there was sufficient funding to support 24 of them. VAS drew names out of a hat to decide who got a grant.

Of the total funding, 70% was explicitly awarded to Global Majority organisations. This was done in recognition of the historical and ongoing inequity in resource sharing that impacts communities of colour across Sheffield.

Each organisation chose the type of Reflective Support they felt was most appropriate for their team. At the request of some organisations, VAS compiled a list of potential providers, though they were not required to select from it. Organisations were asked to inform VAS of their chosen provider so that a Memorandum of Understanding could be signed with each, clarifying their role and our expectations within the project. This step was a necessary step to ensure the safety and confidentiality of all participants in the programme.

We learnt quickly that organisations need time to plan what type of Reflective Support is appropriate for them, as well as to plan how to put it in place practically. As a result, and with the support of the funder, we did not require organisations to spend their grants within a specific timeframe.

# Findings

The findings below are a result of a Learning Event that VAS hosted to consult with representatives from all the organisations taking part in the programme in January 2025. Additional findings come from a survey of participants who had started their provision by the end of 2024, as well as from ongoing conversations with organisations taking part in the project.

## Frontline VCFSE sector workers need Reflective Support

Many VCFSE staff and volunteers are in roles that put them in challenging situations for which they may not have had adequate training. Even if they have, there are few support systems in place to help them unpack and make sense of things.

*"You were performing key therapeutic services with no training and no background and very little guidance and support around boundary management."* Director, reflecting on their previous personal experience working in the VCFSE sector

*"Majority of staff have come through from being volunteers, so not had a level of training required for the roles they are doing. So, not understanding their own needs, burning out and long-term sick. No support for them in place."* Counselling coordinator

## There are many types of Reflective Support

We have seen that different types of Reflective Support providers and provision appeal to different individuals and organisations.

The most popular approach chosen by people on this programme was regular one-to-one sessions with a Reflective Support professional. Typically, this happens once a month, for a 1-hour session each time, either over the phone, online or in person. Those taking part describe this in different ways, including working with a coach, mentor, supervisor or therapist, or as pastoral support.

Group work was also popular, firstly to consult with workers to plan any provision and secondly to reflect on their professional practice as a team. For example, the focus of sessions in three organisations included:

- *What does well-being mean?*
- *Co-creating the ongoing provision*
- *Creating a 'team self-care plan'*

Organisations that put group work in place often followed it up with one-to-ones for team members.

A related theme was the potential value of investing in senior staff to provide Reflective Support internally. In this programme, grants were used to buy in Reflective Support from external experts. Upskilling would have to focus on understanding how the relationship between the line manager and worker differs from that between the Reflective Support provider and worker. However, the potential of this approach is that it would be a more sustainable use of money as, over time, the knowledge, experience and skills of being a provider could be shared and extended to additional workers.

## **Reflective Support benefits individuals and their organisations**

Some of the benefits of taking part in one-to-one Reflective Support are:

*"Can debrief, and reflect, and think about my practice; equipping me with tools meaning it's not just me that feels better, but my relationships with everybody in the organisation; having better boundaries; better self-awareness; greater ability to self-regulate."* "Director, quoting feedback they've had from a worker taking part in one-to-one Reflective Support

The benefits reported of taking part in Reflective Support group work include:

- *"This sustains them in their work. They feel they can step away from the pressure of the office environment and caseload."* Director, describing impact of current group-based Reflective Support for their team
- *"Really liked the calm."* Operations director, quoting a participant's feedback from a group session
- *"Team members feeling valued, connected, cared for, and that they belong...team became more cohesive."* Counselling coordinator, reflecting on Reflective Support their team had previously

## **Frontline workers have varying knowledge and experience of Reflective Support**

We found that prior knowledge and experience of Reflective Support varies widely across VCFSE organisations:

- Many workers, particularly in Global Majority organisations, have never encountered or ever been offered Reflective Support during their long careers in the VCFSE sector

- Workers may first become aware of Reflective Support through having been able to access it when working previously in another sector, for example, the NHS
- Some organisations are familiar with Reflective Support because they offer this sort of support to their service users
- There are a few VCFSE workplaces which have had Reflective Support in place for a while. The extent of this varies and ranges from the opportunity to access a supervisor if wanted, to embedding Reflective Support as a way of working across the entire organisation.

## **Having knowledge of Reflective Support makes it easier to put it in place**

VCFSE organisations explained that having an understanding of what Reflective Support is, how it works, and what its potential benefits and harms are, is required to implement it in a meaningful way.

*"[I have] found it hard as the person responsible for putting something in place as we've never had anything like this before. In this organisation, or in the sector. Ever. Never had a service available to support workers."*

Finance and contracts manager

Also, it is by all workers sharing an understanding of the role of Reflective Support in their organisation that they will feel empowered to prioritise their own participation in it.

In the words of leaders from two different organisations where workers were not familiar with the idea of Reflective Support, but who later reported the positive impact of it:

*"Where am I going to start from? How can I engage them?"*

Finance and contracts manager

*"[The most challenging thing is] people in organisation not understanding the value of reflective support. Other things take priority."*

Counselling coordinator

As workers have gained knowledge and experience of Reflective Support, they recognise its importance to their organisation.

*"We are budgeting this [Reflective Support] to continue, even when the grant funding ends."* Director and lead wellbeing worker

## It takes work to be ready to put Reflective Support in place

The practical barriers organisations described they faced are listed here:

- Some **trustees** don't recognise the value of investing in worker wellbeing, which matters because trustees make decisions about what is and is not funded.
- Direct and ongoing **funding** for worker wellbeing does not exist, so there is work to do to arrange this.
  - Grants (like this programme) end suddenly, and there is no continuity
  - Organisations patch together funds from any leftover money
  - Several organisations suggested including a line for staff wellbeing when writing budgets to bid for funding for future service delivery
- It takes work to figure out **what type of provision** is appropriate: while there are many options out there, the impact of each isn't widely known.
- The organisation has to identify **the right provider** by interviewing a few.
- Senior staff need to **protect workers' time** so their participation will be beneficial: *"to get staff to engage in it, the organisation has had to make resources available for the two hours that staff were missing. Funding needs to cover sessional workers to do the work being missed...otherwise all well-being gone. [So staff don't end up feeling] 'I'd rather not have done that and just get on with my work'."* Counselling coordinator
- Someone has to arrange a **suitable location**: *"And the location has to be right...so you can put work aside and drop into the content of the session."* Director
- It takes **resource** to do all of the above work.

Organisations in which all workers are volunteers face an additional set of challenges having less core resource to do the work to plan and implement Reflective Support.

**See also the resource at the end of this document:**

→ [Practical steps for putting in place meaningful Reflective Support](#)

At the outset this programme didn't account for the additional capacity required by organisations to be able to meaningfully put some Reflective Support in place – Organisations reflected that group work activities are administratively more time-consuming to arrange than one-to-ones. However, the flexibility afforded to participants as to when and how they spend their grants has been found to be helpful:

*"The flex in this grant scheme felt valuable, for organisations to support the staff the way they wanted to."* Counselling coordinator

*"Grateful to have space to question what [Reflective Support] means."* Operations director

*"[Taking part in this programme] has given us ideas. See what works and what doesn't. And how to continue with this."*

Finance and contracts manager

## **Prioritising self-care is culturally challenging in the VCFSE sector**

We have also learnt that personal and organisational cultures make it hard for workers to feel able to take time and resource, during work time, for self-care.

*"I would love for us all to have that raising understanding of self-care."* Finance and contracts manager

*"From the culture we come from we just do it. Go along with it. We never say we're struggling or seek help, unless you physically fall apart. We just carry on just doing the work. And this is something that seemed to be being reflected in the work culture of the organisation. [So our provision] is about giving tools and opportunities for staff to develop and learn about personal boundaries, healthy relationships. Such desire to help people means we create a level of dependence and this has been regular recurrent theme... Learn to manage that. And what messages staff have unconsciously taken on growing up within the culture. A lot of unpacking and helping staff feel more empowered and capable."* Counselling coordinator

*"Do you have your manager's and organisation's support, so you can really commit to doing this? Which means you will do less this week. It is clear in our organisation we will support that."* Director

## Reflective Support is one part of wider organisational wellbeing

As organisations come to see the value of Reflective Support, they talk about its impact on an organisational scale.

*"As an organisation in a period of strategising about the long-term direction of the organisation, we have found this support is complementing that."* Co-director

*"This is getting into our gears as an organisation; we've sat down together to think 'what is this'. And this has been beneficial."*

Director and lead wellbeing worker

At an organisational scale, the conversation about Reflective Support broadens to workforce wellbeing. Participating organisations see Reflective Support as one of many tools for use in the workplace to improve worker wellbeing.

*"Big internal conversation about well-being, particularly staff's. Went through collective process to generate our policy on how we do wellbeing. Has lots of parts to it. Lots of things that make you feel well and respected and valued in your work: having a sense of community; where do I debrief; how connected to decision making.*

*It's a long-term game. We know people will only stay in their roles if their needs are met. Along with good pay and manageable workload and recognition. Part of the bigger picture."* Director

In these ways, the organisations that took part highlighted how better workforce wellbeing positively impacts the sustainability of organisations.

### Workers' perspective

Through a survey of the workers taking part in this programme, they told us about the things that make the most difference to their wellbeing at work:

- *Positive, trusting and supportive **relationships** with co-workers*
- *Effective and supportive **leadership***
- *Working for a **proactive and caring organisation**, one that plans for their wellbeing*

### **Other things organisations provide to support worker wellbeing**

Throughout this project, VAS gained insight into the various ways in which VCFSE organisations in Sheffield already support their workers' wellbeing. Taken together, all these measures can be thought of as a support system, with Reflective Support being just one component. We identified the following elements that make up these support systems:

At an organisational level:

- A wellbeing policy
- Worker wellbeing mentioned in organisational strategy
- Someone named as 'wellbeing lead'
- Worker wellbeing outcome measures
- Trustees who understand the value of investing in worker wellbeing
- Budgeting for worker wellbeing
- Relevant training (for example: difficult conversations, boundaries, trauma-informed approaches)
- Using a Reflective Practice model in your work
- A physical wellbeing space that workers can access when at work
- Flexible working

For individual workers:

- Regular internal supervision, for example 1-1s with a more senior worker
- Regular external supervision with a professional (Reflective Support)
- Annual appraisals
- Access to regular wellbeing sessions with a focus on worker wellbeing
- Organised peer support amongst co-workers
- Access to a peer support network beyond your organisation
- Wellness Action Plan
- Wellbeing personal budget
- Wellbeing time-out

### **The VCFSE workforce has been taken for granted for too long**

Leaders of VCFSE organisations know that their workers are their greatest asset. However, the way the sector is funded prioritises service delivery. This means they have no or limited resources to spend directly on supporting their workers.

The following call to action comes from a long-standing VCFSE leader, directed at decision makers who fund the services the sector works so hard to deliver:

*"It's time to recognise the value of the workforce."* Chief executive

# Recommendations

## For city decision makers

- Recognise and champion the critical role that workforce wellbeing plays in enabling the VCFSE sector to support our city's people and communities

## For funders and commissioners

- Account for workforce wellbeing in planning process and investment approach

## For trustee boards

- Recognise that better workforce wellbeing positively impacts service delivery and is a key part of effective risk management

## For VCFSE organisations

- Include an amount for worker wellbeing within your budget when bidding for funding for future service delivery
- Start, or continue, the conversation with your workers about wellbeing
- Continue providing or enabling the things workers say have the most impact on their wellbeing at work:
  - Positive, trusting and supportive relationships with co-workers
  - Effective and supportive leadership
  - A proactive and caring organisational approach to worker wellbeing
- Invest in training for senior staff to become Reflective Support providers

## For Voluntary Action Sheffield (VAS)

- Respond to feedback from participants in this project
- Continue to support upskilling frontline workers as part of VCFSE capacity building
- Continue to advocate for work in the city that reimagines a VCFSE working culture in which self-care is a priority

# Appendices

## Practical steps for putting in place meaningful Reflective Support

This summary is based on the experiences of the organisations taking part in this programme.

- Acquire funding for Reflective Support, eg:
  - Include a line for staff wellbeing when writing budgets to bid for funding for future service delivery
  - Work with trustees so they too recognise the value to the organisation of investing in worker wellbeing
  - Allocate any leftover money from projects to this
- Consult with workers to find a suitable provider and type of provision
  - Explore their wellbeing needs, and the role of Reflective Support
  - Decide on a format and focus for the Reflective Support
  - Meet a few providers to identify who feels right. It is in the interest of providers to get this right, too. They are usually able to work with you to explore this before you both commit to working together.
- Support the delivery of the provision in terms of protecting workers' time and finding suitable locations
- Evaluate the provision, planning this with the provider from the beginning

## A list of qualified Reflective Support providers

Voluntary Action Sheffield (VAS) has put [this online list](#) together of potential Reflective Support providers.

We did this on request from several organisations who were thinking about putting Reflective Support in place for their workers but not sure who to contact.

## Existing networks

These are the existing relevant networks that VAS either hosts or is aware of, which might offer support for organisations to share and learn from their experiences in supporting their workers' wellbeing.

### Frontline workers network

- Facilitated by VAS's Workforce Development Lead
- A monthly, in-person meet up
- A mailing list
- Find out more: [s.sharif@vas.org.uk](mailto:s.sharif@vas.org.uk) or 07838 215 610

The frontline workers network is an opportunity for frontline workers to access a safe space and meet other frontline workers, offering peer support, the sharing of ideas as well as learning and collaborating.

### VAS network

- Hosted by VAS's Workforce Development Lead
- Every Thursday 10-11am, on Zoom, drop in for as long as you want
- To find out more: [s.sharif@vas.org.uk](mailto:s.sharif@vas.org.uk) or 07838 215 610

The VAS network is for workers from the VCFSE sector, cross-sector, and health, council and private business, to make connections and facilitate discussions between decision makers and service providers.

### Sheffield VCS Leaders Forum

- Meet monthly in-person
- A mailing list and WhatsApp group
- To find out more: <https://www.vas.org.uk/voice-influence/campaigns/> or [ceo@vas.org.uk](mailto:ceo@vas.org.uk)

The Forum has grown to around 60 leaders from community organisations. It aims to create a unified and consolidated voluntary and community sector in Sheffield, fighting for an equal society and challenging cultural norms.

The Sheffield Voluntary and Community Sector Leaders Forum wants all groups to be visible and equal and contribute to our City's life.

## **Volunteer Coordinators Forum**

- Hosted by VAS
- Zoom, monthly, Tuesday or Wednesday in 3<sup>rd</sup> full week of the month
- A mailing list
- To find out more: <https://sheffieldvolunteercentre.org.uk/Networking> or [vc@vas.org.uk](mailto:vc@vas.org.uk)

The Volunteer Centre facilitates the development of good practice in volunteering through learning from the many organisations we work with. Our Volunteer Coordinators Forums are a great place to keep updated, network and get peer support.

## **Synergy Sheffield Mental Health Alliance**

- Hosted by Rethink
- Quarterly meetings, in person
- Email group and monthly newsletter (last Thursday of the month)
- To find out more: <https://www.rethink.org/aboutus/what-we-do/synergy-mental-health-alliance/> or Holly.Moncaster@rethink.org

The Synergy group is an alliance of VCSE organisations, Experts by Experience, NHS and Local Authority Services who are working together across Sheffield to support individuals with a range of mental health needs.

## **Mental Health Partnership Network**

- Hosted by Sheffield Mind
- Themed working groups
- A mailing list
- To find out more: [Rebecca.Lawson@sheffieldmind.co.uk](mailto:Rebecca.Lawson@sheffieldmind.co.uk)

The Mental Health Partnership Network (MHPN) supports mental health organisations in Sheffield's voluntary sector. The network provides a space for senior leaders to work together to challenge and influence local decisions, as well as providing a space for shared learning and peer support.

## Existing online wellbeing resources

### South Yorkshire ICS Mental Health Hub

- Phone line for confidential emotional and psychological support:  
0330 380 0658
- Self-help information:  
<https://sybhealthandwellbeinghub.yourcareeap.co.uk/>
- Free to access

For healthcare workers, including those in the VCFSE sector, within the South Yorkshire Region. Regardless of role, support is on hand 24/7, 365 days a year.

### South Yorkshire ICS Workforce Wellbeing

- Free to access resources: <https://syics.co.uk/workforce-wellbeing>

Easy-to-access and comprehensive health and wellbeing offer that supports mental health, physical wellbeing and emotional resilience, a wide range of resources to staff, free-of-charge, 24/7 and 365 days a year, including workers in the VCFSE sector.

### Sheffield Mental Health Guide

- Information on Sheffield's mental health services, activities and resources that are available to you, or someone you are supporting:  
<https://www.sheffieldmentalhealth.co.uk/>

This website has been co-created with the community and people who have lived experience of mental health. Managed by Flourish.