

# **Evolving our Ecosystem**

**A Review of Sutton's Charities,  
Community, and Faith Organisations:  
Their Needs, Potential, and Challenges**

## **Summary Report**

**This summary report highlights some of the key content in the longer report “Evolving our Ecosystem: A Review of Sutton’s Charities, Community, and Faith organisations: Their Needs, Potential, and Challenges” published in April 2025.**

**The full report is available to download from  
<https://bit.ly/EvolvingOurEcosystem>**

# Introduction

Sutton's charity, community, and faith sector has long been at the heart of local life—providing essential services, support, and spaces for connection. From small volunteer-led initiatives to well-established organisations with large staff teams, these groups play a vital role in shaping a thriving, resilient ecosystem of interconnected and complementary providers.

However, the past few years have been marked by significant challenges. Financial pressures, increasing demand, and volunteer shortages are straining the ecosystem's ability to function effectively. While the commitment and passion remain strong, many organisations feel they are being stretched to breaking point or have concerns about the future sustainability of their efforts.

Commissioned by **Community Action Sutton and Volunteer Centre Sutton**, the new report exploring the shape, size, challenges and opportunities of Sutton's charity, community and faith ecosystem is based on input from **over 100 local organisations** and substantial research into local and national data. It paints a picture of a **sector in transition**—one that is grappling with serious pressures but remains determined to evolve and adapt.

We are proud to have committed funds from Community Action Sutton and Volunteer Centre Sutton to the production of this report – the full version of which offers over 40 pages of detailed insight and analysis. Our hope is that the content is useful to everyone working for Sutton's communities as a resource for planning, fundraising, and developing new connections and partnerships. **Together, we are stronger.**

**Simon Breeze, CEO**  
**Community Action Sutton**

**Anita Maullin, CEO**  
**Volunteer Centre Sutton**

# Rising Pressure: A System Under Strain

Sutton's charity, community, and faith organisations are dedicated to supporting local residents, often acting as a lifeline for those most in need. But behind the scenes, many organisations are operating under significant pressure, facing financial instability, increasing demand, and workforce challenges that threaten their ability to continue.

**“The community depends on us, but we are barely holding on. Every month is a battle to keep going.”**

For many, keeping the doors open is becoming an increasing challenge. **41% of the charities we heard from reported spending more than they earned last year**, highlighting the stark reality of financial fragility. Funders often focus on short-term project grants, but charities, community and faith organisations need **stable, long-term support** that includes reasonable recognition of essential costs like rent, staffing, and utilities. Without this, even the most impactful organisations face shrinkage or closure.

**“We're constantly told to ‘innovate’ our way out of financial difficulties, but what we really need is sustainable funding that covers the real cost of our work.”**

Some charities are now unsure whether they will be able to continue their services in the near future. This uncertainty affects not just staff and volunteers, but also the thousands of people who rely on these services daily.

**“An organisation like mine, whose services are much needed and has reasonable reserves, may not last the next five years.”**

Without urgent action to address these pressures, **the sustainability of Sutton's charities, community and faith groups is at risk**. Organisations cannot continue absorbing increasing demands and rising costs without proper investment and structural change. Their dedication is unwavering, but **dedication alone is not enough to keep them going**.

# Valuing People: Staff and Volunteers at the Heart

Sutton's charity, community, and faith ecosystem provides thousands of local jobs and volunteering opportunities, strengthening both community resilience and the local economy.

**43% of organisations we heard from are entirely volunteer-run**, and over 90% of others depend on volunteers for key activities. Yet recruitment is becoming increasingly difficult. Changing work patterns, economic pressures, and shifting availability mean fewer people can commit to volunteering, creating a growing gap in service provision.

**“We have an amazing team of volunteers who make such a difference to our community, but we are struggling to find new people to replace those moving on.”**

Organisations recognise the need for **better investment in workforce development**, including fairer pay structures, and stronger volunteer support systems. Training opportunities, improved work-life balance, and peer networks could help retain skilled staff and keep volunteers engaged.

**“Many of us are expected to do more for less, and it's taking a toll on the sector. We need to prioritise looking after the people delivering these services.”**

Wellbeing must also be a priority. **Without proper support, charities risk losing experienced staff and volunteers.** Ensuring sustainability isn't just about services—it's about valuing and supporting the people who deliver them.

**“Charities don't just run on goodwill. We need to invest in the people delivering vital services, otherwise we risk losing them.”**

As demand rises, organisations must find new ways to attract, retain, and support staff and volunteers. **System partners must also enable this** through better commissioning and contracting processes that recognise the full costs of delivery. A well-supported workforce is the foundation of a resilient charity, community, and faith ecosystem.

# Challenging Times: Rising Demand, Limited Capacity

As local needs grow, Sutton's charities, community groups, and faith organisations are being asked to do more than ever. Many now operate beyond their original remit, often filling gaps left by cuts to statutory services.

**“We’re taking on roles we were never meant to do. People are turning to us because they have nowhere else to go.”**

The pressure is widespread. Food banks report record demand, mental health services have long waiting lists, and advice services are overwhelmed by people seeking support with housing, debt, and employment. Yet many organisations struggle to expand to meet need due to funding and staffing constraints.

**“Demand has doubled, but our resources have stayed the same. We’re having to make difficult choices about who we can help.”**

Financial strain is a major challenge. 41% of organisations we heard from spent more than they earned last year, and rising operational costs mean many are running at a deficit. Short-term funding cycles add to the instability, making it difficult to plan for long-term growth. Many sector leaders stress the need for sustainable funding models and better collaboration with statutory services to share the burden effectively.

**“We can’t keep firefighting. We need proper investment in long-term solutions, not just sticking plasters.”**

While the charity, community, and faith ecosystem continues to meet rising demand with dedication and creativity, without systemic change, services will struggle to remain viable. A sustainable, well-supported sector is essential to Sutton's future.

# Collaboration: The Key to a Stronger Sector

Collaboration has been cited by many as a key strength of Sutton's charity, community, and faith ecosystem. Many organisations recognise that **working together is no longer optional but essential** to meeting growing demands with limited resources. However, collaboration can be difficult to achieve in practice.

**“Everyone is so busy just trying to keep going that finding time to collaborate feels impossible. But we know we can't do it alone.”**

Many organisations report that **they miss opportunities to share knowledge, resources, and expertise**. Some partnerships exist on paper but lack meaningful evidence of commitment. Others feel that **power imbalances** between large and small organisations can prevent truly equitable collaboration.

**“Partnerships sound great, but they only work if everyone has a seat at the table. Otherwise, smaller organisations get overlooked.”**

Better coordination is needed to ensure **joint working is effective and genuinely beneficial**. Many organisations also highlight the need for **more spaces to connect**, whether through sector forums, networking events, or dedicated partnership-building initiatives.

**“It would be great to understand the challenges across Sutton as it can sometimes feel very isolating.”**

Some of the most successful collaborative efforts in Sutton have emerged when organisations come together around **shared goals**, rather than being driven purely by funding opportunities.

As Sutton's charity, community and faith ecosystem, and the wider system it operates in look to the future, finding ways to **break down barriers and build trust across organisations** will be key. Sustainable, meaningful collaboration has the potential to create a stronger, more resilient Sutton—one that is better equipped to support local communities in the years ahead.

# Conclusion: A Call to Action

As Sutton's charity, community, and faith ecosystem - as well as the wider system it operates in - look to the future, the challenges facing us are real and pressing. But there is also great potential for transformation.

The **State of the Sector Report 2025** is an invitation to work together to find sustainable solutions. It calls on funders, policymakers, and charities themselves to think differently about how the sector is supported and valued.

**The full report, which we warmly encourage you to read, is available to download here:** [Insert Link]

If you are part of this ecosystem—whether as a leader, volunteer, funder, or supporter—we encourage you to read the full findings and be part of shaping the future of Sutton's charity and community sector. We look forward to future conversations about how we can work together to benefit our ecosystem and in doing so, our communities.

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