

Argyll & Bute TSI

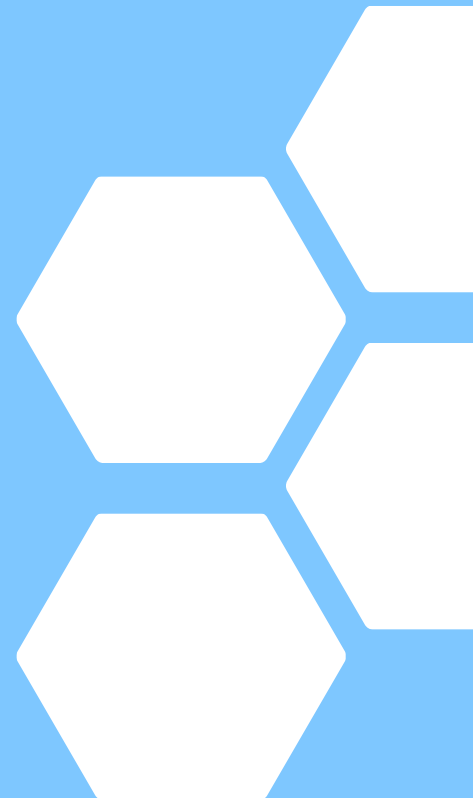
State of the Sector Analysis & Strategic Planning

Commissioned by: ABTSI

Prepared by:

Claire Whyte
Nicky Hesketh
Dr Susan Warren
SKS Scotland CIC
www.sksscotland.co.uk

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Executive summary

The research and engagement carried out for this report provide clear evidence for ABTSI's priorities over the next five years. Secondary research and ongoing primary engagement have been carried out in collaboration with ABTSI staff, members and local community organisations. The resulting report presents the third sector's needs, pressures and priorities across Argyll & Bute. It identifies shared challenges and themes that can inform both strategic development and sector-wide campaigning over the next five years.

Alongside its social and community impact, the third sector is a significant economic force within Argyll & Bute. Evidence gathered through this research indicates a sector comprising at least 257 social enterprises, collectively contributing an estimated £47.3 million annually to the local economy and supporting approximately 1,482 full-time equivalent (FTE) jobs. Many organisations manage community assets and generate good levels of earned income, reflecting a mature and entrepreneurial social enterprise economy. Together, this positions the third sector as an important employer, economic driver and custodian of vital community assets across Argyll & Bute.

Third sector organisations (TSOs) across Argyll & Bute are widely recognised as essential, resilient and deeply embedded in their communities. Many are delivering preventative and community-based services that statutory bodies no longer have the capacity to provide. However, the research consistently shows a sector that feels undervalued, overstretched and operating within an unequal system. This reflects a wider system challenge, where increasing reliance on the third sector is not yet matched by equivalent influence, resourcing or coordination. These findings are well-evidenced across national and local research and were reinforced through strong participation in the engagement process, showing the sector's willingness to find solutions.

The findings highlight the need for ABTSI to continue developing a stronger strategic leadership role. ABTSI is well placed to act as a strategic lead, advocate and source of information for the third sector, enabling collaboration, strengthening relationships and supporting more effective system working.

Six core strategic priorities have been identified which align with the policy and funding landscape and will guide the future development of ABTSI's services, member benefits and support offer. These priorities reflect both what the sector has said it needs and where ABTSI is best placed to add value within its remit, building on work already undertaken to define its strategic direction.

Six core strategic priorities

These priorities can also be understood through three overarching themes: system leadership, collaboration, and shared intelligence.

1. **Third Sector leadership & advocacy** – strengthening the third sector’s position as an equal strategic partner through coordinated advocacy on funding, referral pathways and policy issues.
2. **Shared data resource** – developing shared approaches to data, evaluation and impact reporting to better evidence the sector’s collective social and economic value.
3. **Networking & collaboration** – reducing isolation and creating opportunities for organisations to connect, collaborate and develop partnerships locally and around shared themes.
4. **Support with operations** – addressing volunteer shortages, trustee development, governance and administrative pressures through targeted capacity-building support.
5. **Communication & sector champion** – improving understanding of ABTSI’s role and services while promoting the third sector as essential community infrastructure rather than a charitable add-on.
6. **Sector mapping & intelligence** – building on existing online information to create a clearer picture of third sector activity, improving visibility, coordination and strategic planning.

The development of these priorities has been underpinned by strong member and stakeholder engagement, ensuring sector buy-in and creating momentum for implementation. The depth and breadth of engagement provide a clear mandate for action and form the basis for an ongoing, collective sector narrative and campaign focused on sustainability, prevention and equitable partnership.

The analysis also highlights distinct pressures in island communities, including infrastructure and energy constraints, land ownership barriers, limited access to digital support, housing shortages and challenges securing feasibility funding. These factors reinforce the need for flexible, place-based approaches across Argyll & Bute’s diverse geography.

To support delivery and accountability, the report also sets out a framework for ongoing evaluation across the strategy period. This framework integrates emerging evaluation work from the TSI Scotland Network with established quality and performance frameworks commonly used by procurement and statutory partners. Rather than a one-off exercise, evaluation is positioned as a practical, proportionate tool for learning, improvement and evidence-based decision-making, enabling ABTSI to demonstrate progress, adapt to change and continually strengthen its strategic impact.

Together, the evidence, priorities, engagement and evaluation framework provide a coherent foundation for ABTSI’s work over the next five years, supporting a more confident, coordinated and influential third sector in Argyll & Bute, while being clear about the limits of ABTSI’s remit and the need for shared ownership of solutions across the wider system.

Strategic narrative

This strategy responds to a clear challenge: the third sector in Argyll & Bute is essential, but not yet recognised, resourced or connected in ways that reflect its contribution.

The case for change

Demand on third sector organisations continues to grow, but resources, influence and infrastructure have not kept pace. Organisations are delivering key preventative and community services, often filling gaps left by statutory provision, without equivalent funding, partnership status or access to data. The sector's collective impact is not consistently evidenced, limiting its ability to influence decisions.

There is a need for:

- stronger coordination
- shared data and intelligence
- more effective partnership working

ABTSI's strategic role

ABTSI will strengthen its role as:

System leader - advocating for the sector as an equal partner and influencing policy and funding

Connector - enabling collaboration and reducing isolation

Intelligence hub - coordinating data to evidence sector value

This will enable a more coordinated and sustainable sector.

Strategic focus

The six priorities identified in this report can be understood through three strategic pillars:

Pillar 1: Stronger system leadership

- Advocacy, representation and influencing
- Strengthening the sector's role in decision-making

Pillar 2: A more connected and collaborative sector

- Networking, partnership working and shared services
- Reducing duplication, isolation and competition

Pillar 3: Shared data and collective impact

- Developing shared approaches to data, evaluation and mapping
- Demonstrating the sector's social and economic value

These pillars provide a clear framework for delivery, aligned with ABTSI's core functions.

What will change

By 2030:

- The sector is recognised as an equal partner
- Organisations are more connected and collaborative
- The sector can evidence its value collectively
- Decisions are informed by sector data
- ABTSI is a trusted strategic leader, connector and intelligence hub

Overview of evidence and sector insights

This report looks at the current health of the third sector in Argyll & Bute and what it needs to thrive over the next five years. It is based on a large amount of evidence, including national and local research, a sector-wide survey, focus groups across the area, and interviews with key stakeholders. More than 265 people from community groups, charities, social enterprises and partner organisations took part.

The big picture

The third sector in Argyll & Bute is essential to local communities. Third sector organisations support wellbeing, deliver preventative services, reduce isolation, and often provide help where statutory services no longer can. They are trusted, place-based and deeply connected to the people they serve.

However, the sector is under significant strain. Organisations consistently report feeling overstretched, undervalued and under-resourced. Demand for services is rising, but funding, staff and volunteer capacity are not keeping pace.

Key challenges facing the sector

Funding insecurity	Reliance on short-term grants, combined with rising costs, is putting increasing pressure on small, rural and island groups.
Volunteer & workforce pressure	Volunteers are ageing and fatigued, recruitment is difficult, and there are growing gaps in trustee and governance skills.
Unequal relationships with statutory bodies	Third sector organisations are often expected to “fill the gaps” left by public services, but without equal influence, funding or access to data.
Limited evidence of value	While organisations collect impact information, there is no shared system to show the full social and economic value of the sector as a whole.
Geography	Distance, travel costs and rural or island locations make collaboration, training and service delivery harder and more expensive.

What the sector is asking for

Across surveys and focus groups, organisations were clear about their priorities:

- More **sustainable and fair funding**
- Support to **recruit and retain volunteers and trustees**
- Stronger **infrastructure and shared services** (such as HR, payroll, and evaluation tools)
- Better **collaboration and networking**
- Clearer communication and **greater recognition** of the sector’s value
- A stronger, collective **voice** with decision-makers

These findings form the evidence base for the strategic priorities outlined in the preceding section.

The third sector in Argyll & Bute is resilient, committed, and vital to community wellbeing but is operating close to capacity. With stronger leadership, greater collaboration, and improved recognition, ABTSI can help the sector become more sustainable, influential, and resilient over the next five years.

1. Introduction

Nationally, TSIs are funded by Scottish Government to deliver four core, agreed functions:

- Building capacity of the third sector
- Source of knowledge and intelligence on the third sector
- Connecting partners and facilitating collaboration
- Voice of the sector in community planning, health & social care integration and public service reform

This role is facilitative and strategic, not service-delivery or commissioning. ABTSI's own published role aligns with this: **capacity building, coordination, strategic voice, information sharing and partnership leadership.**

The third sector plays a vital role in the social, economic and civic life of Argyll & Bute. From supporting community wellbeing and delivering preventative services, to responding to cost-of-living pressures and sustaining local assets, third sector organisations (TSOs) are deeply embedded in the places and communities they serve. Often, they are delivering services that statutory bodies no longer have the capacity to provide.

The sector is operating in an increasingly challenging environment. Short-term and **insecure funding, rising costs, volunteer fatigue, workforce pressures and complex commissioning arrangements** are placing significant strain on organisations of all sizes. These pressures are intensified by Argyll & Bute's rural and island geography, where distance, scale and infrastructure constraints shape how services are delivered and how organisations collaborate. Despite their essential contribution, many TSOs report feeling **undervalued, overstretched and excluded from strategic decision-making.**

ABTSI commissioned this State of the Sector report to develop a robust, evidence-based understanding of the current health, needs and aspirations of the third sector across Argyll & Bute. The purpose of the report is:

- to provide a clear picture of the pressures and opportunities facing TSOs
- to identify shared priorities and themes across different geographies and types of organisations
- to inform ABTSI's strategic direction and role over the next five years

Overall project methodology

Steps	Details
Reporting / inception	Due to the collaborative nature of the commission, reporting was regular throughout the project. This included email updates and meetings with the Chief Executive and key colleagues, allowing the work to remain flexible and responsive. An Advisory Group was established to support the consultation and engagement process and to sense-check emerging findings and concepts.
Secondary research	This research ensured familiarity with existing local evidence, including survey data, focus groups and stakeholder interviews, alongside relevant national research (including OSCR and SCVO data) and academic studies.
Engagement programme to build local supply streams	A programme was designed to engage with local organisations and ABTSI staff to assist in the delivering elements of the project, helping build local supply capacity while retaining expenditure and knowledge within Argyll & Bute. Activity included social media promotion, direct outreach and PR.
Local supply stream planning	An in-depth planning process (Appendix 1a) supported co-design, cross-sector collaboration and community wealth building objectives. Following initial promotion, local community organisations participated in delivery, with partnership payments recognising time and contribution (Appendix 1b).
Early stakeholder interviews	Early conversations with the Advisory Group and ABTSI Third Sector Support Advisors informed the development of surveys and focus groups, helping shape the engagement approach and ensure meaningful discussion and outcomes.
Sector-wide survey	A sector-wide survey, <i>Developing a Sustainable Future for Argyll & Bute's Third Sector</i> , gathered quantitative and qualitative insights into sector challenges, needs and expectations. A total of 181 responses were received from volunteers, trustees, employees and members across the sector. Full analysis is provided in Appendix 3.
In-person focus groups	Four focus groups were held in Helensburgh, Tarbert, Dunoon and Oban, involving a wide range of third sector organisations. Participants discussed sector strengths and pressures openly. The programme followed Art of Hosting principles. Further detail is provided in Sections 4.5 and 4.6.
Follow-up thematic online focus groups	Two online sessions focused on Health and island communities, exploring sector-specific challenges, solutions and priority support needs from ABTSI.
Collation & analysis	A process of informal collation was carried out during both the in-person and the online focus groups to identify emerging themes and insights. This provided flexibility and enabled the programme to focus on areas of particular interest or potential queries, allowing for a more natural and intuitive process and analysis.
Reports	The data gathered from the above steps has been analysed to provide a ' <i>state of the sector report</i> ' recording the understanding of sector needs, and includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • draft strategic priorities developed to refine ABTSI's vision and mission to align with Scottish Government policies and strategies • short, medium and long-term priorities and recommendations for the sector and ABTSI • an overview framework for ongoing evaluation throughout the strategy period

The report draws together secondary research with primary engagement carried out across the area, including a sector-wide survey, in-person and online focus groups, and early stakeholder interviews. The co-produced approach ensured that the findings reflected the diversity of the sector and capture voices from rural, island and town-based communities. Over 265 individuals engaged in the process, representing volunteers, trustees, staff, social enterprises and community organisations. It is worth noting that volunteer/trustee voices were particularly engaged and prominent throughout the process. See section 3 and 4 of this report for further details.

What emerges is a picture of a sector that is **resilient, innovative and deeply committed to place**, but also one that is operating close to capacity and within an unequal system. The findings point to a clear need for stronger coordination, improved collective intelligence, more sustainable funding models and a rebalancing of relationships between the third sector and statutory partners. They also highlight an opportunity for ABTSI take a stronger strategic leadership role – acting as a connector, advocate, data hub and sector champion.

This report sets out that evidence and analysis. It is intended not only as a snapshot of current conditions, but as a foundation for action: supporting ABTSI, its members and partners to work collaboratively towards a more confident, coordinated and sustainable third sector in Argyll & Bute.

2. Secondary research

A full summary of the secondary research analysis is in appendix 2. It draws together a wide range of existing local, regional and national evidence to establish a robust baseline understanding of the health, sustainability and operating context of the third sector in Argyll & Bute.

Documents reviewed

- ABTSI Scottish Government Business Plan
- Four Area Plans prepared by TSSAs
- TSI Scotland Network Improvement Project
- Social Enterprise Census (Oct 2023)
- Preventative Services Mapping
- Volunteering & Cost of Living Survey (March 2023)
- Towards a 2024–2029 Strategy (Position Statement)
- PESTLE Analysis (July 2025)
- Positive Destinations Programme (April 2025)
- Shared Services Scotland: Start Up Proposal (Nov 2025)
- Social media report

The secondary research presents a picture of a sector that is vital to local communities and asset-rich. But it is also constrained by capacity, financially fragile and under mounting pressure to provide more. Third sector organisations contribution is not matched by sustainable funding, long-term planning structures or system-wide recognition.

Key themes emerging from the evidence include:

Financial fragility & sustainability risks	Organisations face rising costs, declining or short-term funding, reliance on public sector income and limited capacity for business planning. This is particularly acute for small, rural and island groups.
Volunteer & workforce pressures	An ageing volunteer base, recruitment challenges, trustee skills shortages and increasing compliance and governance expectations are stretching organisational resilience.
Geographic & rural constraints	Dispersed populations, high travel costs and limited economies of scale affect participation, partnership working and service delivery models. “Standard” engagement and commissioning approaches don’t always work effectively.
Weak evidence of collective impact	Data is fragmented and inconsistent, limiting the sector’s ability to demonstrate outcomes, articulate its preventative value or influence local and national decision-making.
Growing demand & system pressure	The third sector is absorbing unmet need as statutory services shrink or change, often without increased resources, influence, or shared data infrastructure.
Opportunities for shared infrastructure & collaboration	Evidence highlights demand for shared digital platforms, evaluation tools, training, volunteer support and professional “back-office” services. ABTSI is well placed to act as a convenor, facilitator and infrastructure provider.
Alignment with national priorities	Local issues strongly mirror national themes around data improvement, collaboration, equalities, human-rights-based practice, and continuous improvement. This underscores the need to leverage rather than duplicate national work.

Economic contribution, community assets and Community Wealth Building

Alongside these challenges, secondary research also highlights the significant economic and asset-based role of the third sector within Argyll & Bute. Evidence from the Social Enterprise Census and related documents show a mature social enterprise economy comprising 257 organisations, mainly rural-based, collectively contributing an estimated £47.3 million annually to the local economy and holding substantial community-owned assets. Community centres, land and property, tourism and heritage are areas where the third sector is particularly economically active, as well as leading local regeneration.

These findings position the sector not only as a provider of social value but as an important contributor to local economic resilience and place-based development. Community ownership, local economic focus and reinvestment of surplus align closely with Community Wealth Building (CWB) principles. The research also reflects the role played by ABTSI and the Community Planning Partnership's CWB Steering Group in supporting the development of the Argyll & Bute Community Wealth Building Charter, agreed by the Council in November 2026, including commissioning early-stage research to inform this work.

As Scotland's CWB framework continues to develop, pending detailed national guidance, the evidence indicates that community assets, social enterprise activity and local economic participation are recurring strategic priorities rather than peripheral themes. This suggests a growing role for ABTSI in supporting collaboration between communities, anchor institutions and statutory partners to maximise local economic benefit.

The secondary research reinforces the need for ABTSI to continue its shift from a traditional support role towards strategic leadership, advocacy, coordination and the development of shared intelligence.

This aligns with ABTSI's Scottish Government-funded role (see appendix 2) as a sector infrastructure and strategic partner. As such, the challenges identified are system-level issues requiring shared responsibility across statutory and third sector partners, rather than problems that ABTSI alone can address.

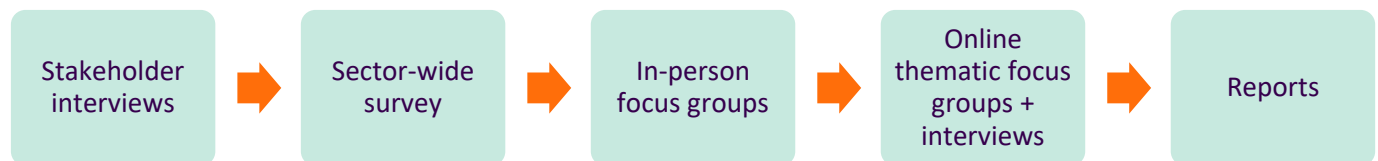
3. Engagement design

The community engagement was co-produced with ABTSI staff and local third sector organisations, ensuring the approach was shaped and delivered with direct input from the third sector. The aim was to engage with a broad geographical and thematic range of organisations.

The overarching theme, “*Community Voices – Speaking up for Argyll and the Isles*”, was developed to maximise interest, connect locally and clearly communicate the purpose of the project. A core principle of the engagement was to value everyone’s time and skills, whether contributing a single survey response or using their networks as a TSO to recruit focus group participants.

The key objective was to involve local third sector organisations in both the design and delivery of engagement activities. From important factors such as best times/places to meet, to who to invite. While this was largely achieved, the capacity of local organisations limited their ability to deliver activities on the ground. However, they played a vital role as communicators, using their networks effectively to promote both the engagement opportunities and the overall project. This collaborative approach resulted in strong participation, with over **265 individuals engaged across Argyll & Bute**, and ensured the findings reflect genuine sector experience and priorities. In addition to this an Advisory Group made up of key stakeholders advised and guided this work.

Key activities



Co-produced approach. Who was involved?

SKS Scotland CIC	Argyll & Bute TSI	Third Sector Orgs
2 consultants Facilitation Delivery	CEO support & direction. TSSA support & facilitation. Business Manager support and comms design. Database Manager support with comms lists.	Advisory group - 7 members. TSO x 5 - survey distribution and promotion. TSO x 4 – focus group promotion & organisation. TSO x 2 – online focus group, promotion & organisation.

TSO support. How did we show their time and expertise was valued?

Survey Support	Focus Group Support	In-person Focus Groups
£250 or training - prize draw for orgs completing the survey. £150 to TSOs who sent the survey to their database and promoted it on social media.	£250 for "supporting hosts" who helped with comms and facilitation. Local venues used and paid for their space.	£40 towards time and expenses for all attendees.

Survey collateral and promotion

Survey – online and paper

Community Voices
Speaking up for Argyll and the Isles

Developing a sustainable future for Argyll & Bute's 3rd Sector

Have your say!

This survey is part of a project to create a **Third Sector Strategy for Argyll and Bute**. The strategy is about supporting the whole sector, charities, community groups and social enterprises, with [Argyll & Bute TSI](#) playing a supporting role.

Local voices matters
By sharing your experiences, challenges, and ambitions, you'll help shape priorities that reflect the real needs of our communities and strengthen the sector's future. Together, we can ensure support and resources are focused where they are most needed.

As a thank you, organisations completing the survey can choose to enter our award for completing the survey: either £250 or half a day's tailored training (details at the end). ☺

Shaping support for your future
We want to better understand the challenges the third and social enterprise sector is facing in Argyll and Bute. This will help us to develop a sector wide strategy. Using this new strategy we will be able to make sure we're delivering the services you need and shape the TSI to help your future and sustainability, guided by shared values and aspirations.

We understand the sector is facing challenges, we want to make sure we're delivering the services you need and shaping the TSI to help your future and sustainability, guided by shared values and aspirations.

Please give a few minutes of your time to complete this survey.
Survey deadline: 3rd November 2025

Who are we?
The Argyll & Bute Third Sector Interface (ABTSI) supports local charities, community groups, and social enterprises across the mainland and Isles. We provide advice, training, funding support, networking, and ensure the third sector has a voice in local and national decision-making.

The survey is being delivered by ABTSI with support from [SKS Scotland CIC](#). Our work is funded by the Scottish Government to provide key support functions for the third sector. We aim to improve on these to support you as effectively as possible.

No identifiable information will be shared with anyone outside the research team. If you require any help with this survey, please email cas@argyllandbute.co.uk.

Thank you!

Please note that we are using the term '3rd sector organisations' throughout this survey to encompass community groups, charity organisations and social enterprises.

If you are reading this survey on paper and would like to fill it in online, please scan the QR code - go to www.surveymonkey.com/argyllbute

Short survey handout

Community Voices
Speaking up for Argyll and the Isles

Help shape the future of Argyll & Bute's Third Sector

A **Third Sector Strategy for Argyll and Bute** is being developed to strengthen support for local charities, community groups, and social enterprises. By sharing your experiences and ideas, you'll help shape priorities that reflect the real needs of our communities.

Complete the full survey by 3 November for a chance to win £250 or half a day of training for your nominated organisation.
To take part in the full survey, scan the QR code, go to www.surveymonkey.com/argyllbute or ask for a paper survey.

Not keen on ANOTHER survey?
How about just answering the two questions below?

In an ideal world what would be your ambitions for the whole sector in Argyll & Bute in the future?

How could the Argyll & Bute Third Sector interface best support the sector's future growth and resilience?

Delivered by Argyll & Bute TSI with support from SKS Scotland CIC.

Social media & email

Speaking up for Argyll and the Isles

Listening Learning and Leading together

Focus Group collateral, promotion and planning

The sector-wide survey results were used to gather quantitative and qualitative insights into challenges, needs, and expectations and help to inform the programming and content of the focus groups. Key to the focus groups was involving the TSI staff team, Advisory Group and TSOs, creating an environment of inclusivity and enthusiasm, for the delivery of the focus groups. Building on the Art of Hosting approach, the focus groups captured information in a variety of ways, using small group conversations and group-wide input.

Focus Group email to TSO Database

Dear [Group Name]

[Group Name] is supporting Argyll & Bute TSI with their work to develop a 5-year strategy for the third sector in Argyll & Bute, we'd love your voice to be part of it.

Last year, many local people contributed to the **Community Voices: Speaking up for Argyll and the Isles** survey. The next step is a series of **local focus groups**, giving people the chance to talk in more depth about what's working well, what's challenging, and what needs to change over the next five years.

These sessions are a real opportunity to:

- celebrate the strengths of the third sector locally
- highlight the challenges organisations and communities are facing
- influence priorities and decisions that will shape future support and investment
- view and discuss useful information collected in the survey

We're helping to recruit people from across the area who are keen to share their experience and insights. It would be fantastic if someone from your organisation could attend the session for our area and help ensure local voices are properly heard.

Focus group details: (please delete those not relevant to your area)

Date: Wed 28 Jan
Time: 1 - 2.30pm
Location: The Bridge, Héleensburg Parish Church

ABTSI recognises the time and cost involved in attending and will provide a **£40 payment per attendee**, paid directly to their third sector organisation.

If you're able to take part, or would like more information before deciding, please let me know. We really hope you can join us and help shape a strong, inclusive future for the third sector in Argyll & Bute.

Best wishes,
[Your name]
[Role / Organisation]

Focus Group question prompt sheet

Community Voices
Speaking up for Argyll and the Isles

Discussion Topics

Discussion 1: The Sector Now: Strengths, Challenges, and Change
How can the 3rd sector's core capacity in A&B be strengthened (eg across governance, finance, workforce development, digital tools and impact measurement)?
What would the best way to develop a coordinated approach to shared services (e.g. HR, bookkeeping, digital support and evaluation systems)?
How can we strengthen the voice of the third sector so it helps shape local and regional planning?

Discussion 2: The Role of the TSI: What's Needed, What Works
How can the TSI help improve funding stability (eg advocate for longer-term contracts, multi-year funding and simplified application processes)?
What is the best way to expand and promote the TSI's training, networking and partnership-building work?
What is the best way for the TSI to increase its outreach into rural and island communities, ensuring equal access to support?

Discussion 3: The Future: Vision, Ambition and Collaboration
What would you like the Third Sector in Argyll & Bute to look like in **5 years time**?
How could collaboration across the area be strengthened?
Would an "All Argyll Fund" help? How would you like to see it structured?
What support would make the biggest difference to your sustainability?

Facilitation and Art of Hosting



4. Engagement analysis

Engagement summary:

Advisory Group & stakeholders		
Throughout project <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 7 members of Advisory Group, to sense check the project from the outset 20 potential focus group hosts / promoters 		
Survey	In-person Focus Groups	Online Focus Groups
Live 22 Sept to 17 Nov 2025 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 181 responses 	28 - 30 Jan 2026 4 local focus groups <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Helensburgh, 25 attendees Tarbert, 14 attendees Dunoon, 16 attendees Oban, 19 attendees 	Feb 2026 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Health & Wellness focus group, 7 attendees Islands and remote locations focus group, 4 attendees

4.1 Process

Our approach in delivering this project was to work closely with ABTSI, community organisations and relevant stakeholders, encouraging the co-design, cross sectoral collaboration and community wealth building. We built on the Art of Hosting approach which is being embedded effectively across the area.

Working with ABTSI to identify the best organisations to deliver locally, SKS co-produced this work with them and ABTSI staff. Remuneration to these groups and individuals were made from the project's budget ensuring expenditure and knowledge development is retained in Argyll & Bute.

4.2 Early stakeholder interviews

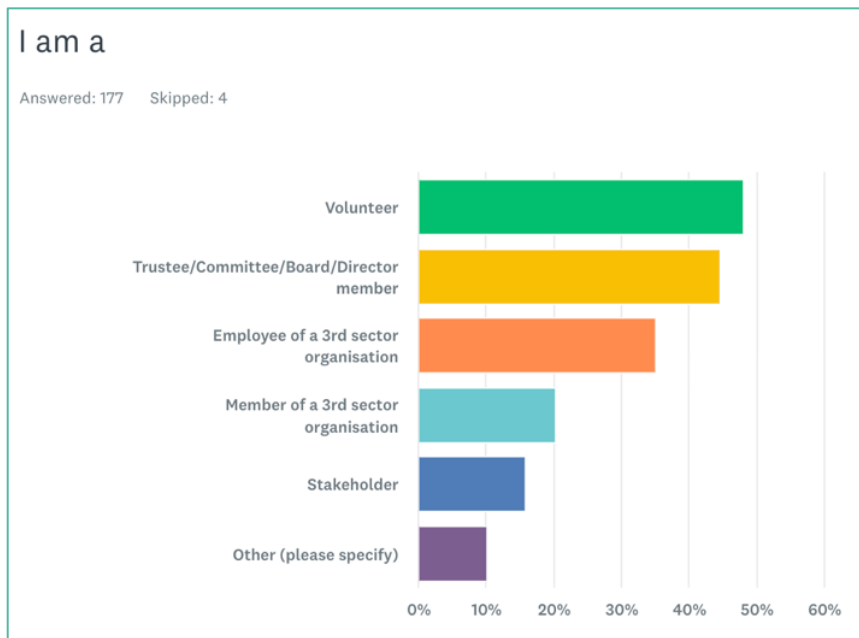
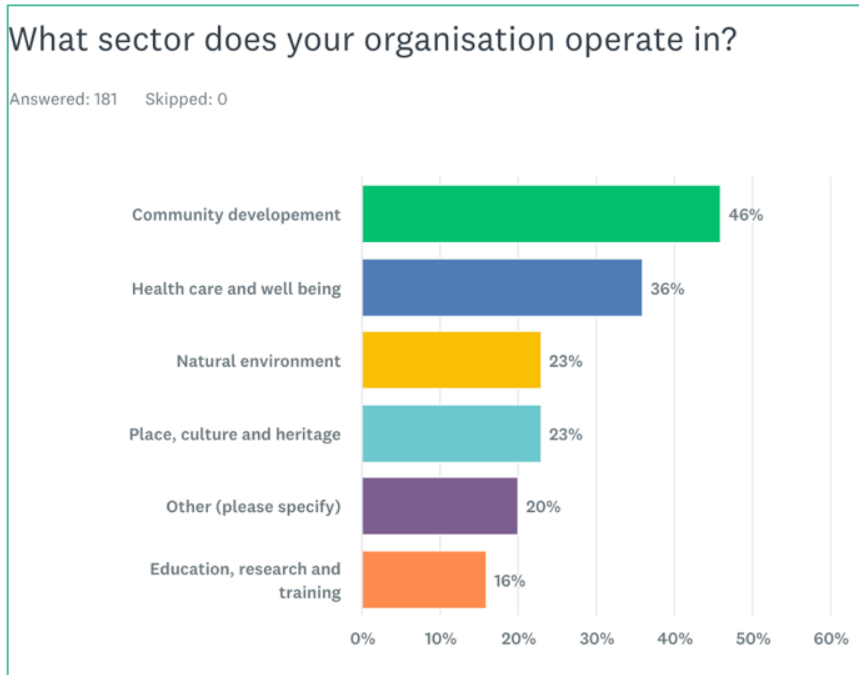
Stakeholder interviews were carried out at an early stage with members of the advisory group, the Third Sector Support Advisors and the TSI Chief Executive. This insight helped inform and design the survey and focus groups, drawing on the knowledge (both local and sector-wide) to ensure that they were carried out in a way that maximised the depth of information gathered.

4.3 Art of Hosting and Collation

The consultation process incorporated Art of Hosting methodologies, such as participatory methods for facilitating dialogue and, fostering, and leveraging collective intelligence to solve the complex challenges faced. A process of informal collation was then initiated, to identify emerging themes and insights. This enabled flexibility, and the information gathered from the group interaction allowed for a more natural and intuitive analysis. Each group explored sector-specific challenges and solutions, identifying key support needs from Argyll & Bute TSI.

4.4 Sector-wide survey results summary

The survey, "Developing a sustainable future for Argyll & Bute's Third Sector," had 181 responses. The average completion time was 14 minutes, showing meaningful engagement with the questions. The respondents represented a broad cross-section of the third sector including volunteers, trustees, employees and members:



The full survey report is in appendix 3.

Survey summary:

Sector strengths

- Good local knowledge & community trust
- Dedicated volunteers & staff commitment
- Ability to adapt quickly
- Collaboration & partnerships
- Person-centred support
- Innovative & opportunity-seeking

“Community Knowledge – We invest time in understanding local needs and work alongside our community to help people regain purpose and social connection.”

“We are an exemplary organisation, & are consistently told so by national organisations, HSCP, IJB, clients etc. We have worked diligently with considerable expertise & thoughtfulness to shape a model that is effective & enjoyable. However, we are finding it more & more difficult to fund our activities”

Sector challenges

- Funding insecurity
- Volunteer shortages & fatigue
- Capacity pressures
- Rising demand & complex needs
- Geographical barriers
- Challenging relationships with statutory partners
- Infrastructure challenges
- Governance & compliance burden

Sector priorities and aspirations

- Sustainable income
- Volunteer recruitment and retention
- Strengthening organisational set up
- Maintaining & expanding services, improving geographic reach
- Community assets
- Improve collaboration with the Council/HSCP and other partners
- Improve comms, visibility and awareness
- Support local economy

“To have the capacity for a wider geographic reach”
“We aim to reduce our waiting list by strengthening volunteer recruitment”
“Community Wealth Building via securing assets, build membership, strengthen governance”

Experience of ABTSI services

ABTSI viewed as:

- Proactive and responsive to opportunities
- Effective at sharing funding, training, and networking opportunities
- Valuable local support from TSI staff & hubs

Areas for improvement:

- Usability of the directory
- Expand training & trustee support resources

Membership services requested:

- Marketing and social media support
- Tools to store evaluation data and demonstrate impact
- Insurance and legal support
- Shared admin support services

This indicates demand for capacity-building and operational support services.

Future ambitions for the sector

- Properly funded & treated as an equal partner
- Secure, multi-year funding
- Better collaboration
- Greater visibility and public understanding
- Reduce reliance on volunteers


Future support from ABTSI

- Act as a connector & enabler
- Funding support
- Amplify the sector's collective voice
- Strengthening collaboration
- More face-to-face local support
- Improving communication infrastructure

All Argyll Fund proposal

Good support, with perceived benefits including:

- Simplify access to funding
- Reduce time spent on grant applications
- Create a fairer and more transparent process
- Support smaller or rural groups who traditionally struggle to access funding
- Encourage collaboration instead of competition



"The principle sounds good as a root to innovation and shared resources but would need local flexibility in terms of delivery models"

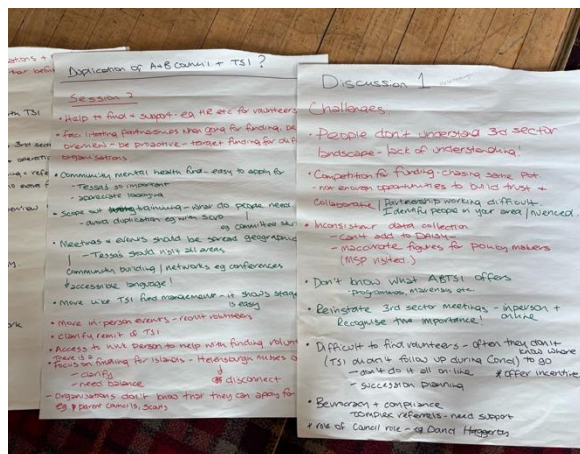
Summary of recommendations:

- Strengthen organisational capacity-building support
- Develop coordinated shared services
- Enhance sector representation and strategic voice
- Improve funding stability and sustainability
- Expand training, networking, and partnership opportunities
- Pilot and develop the All Argyll Fund
- Increase outreach to rural and island communities
- Invest in digital infrastructure and skills
- Support volunteer recruitment and retention

4.5 Focus Groups output summary

Four focus groups were held across Argyll & Bute – in Helensburgh (25 attendees), Tarbert (14), Dunoon (16) and Oban (19), alongside two online sessions focused on Health and the Hebridean Islands. Participants represented a wide range of third sector organisations and spoke candidly about both the sector’s strengths and the pressures it faces.

Discussions highlighted a sector that is essential, resilient and deeply embedded in local communities, yet also stretched, undervalued and operating within systems that are not always supportive.



The simplified SWOT below summarises the key themes emerging from these conversations.

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The third sector is essential to community wellbeing and, in some cases, delivers services comparable to emergency provision. - Strong local knowledge and trusted community relationships. - Resilient and committed organisations motivated by service to their communities. - Positive examples of funding platforms and fund management systems. - ABTSI training and lobbying are valued. - Place-based TSI support is appreciated, particularly given the geography of Argyll & Bute. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Perception that previous engagement has not led to action or change. - Lack of clarity around ABTSI’s remit and services; limited awareness among some groups. - Weak communication and limited signposting across the sector. - Fragmented data collection and difficulty evidencing impact collectively. - Capacity pressures: volunteer shortages, trustee skills gaps, and administrative burden. - Limited collaboration; organisations compete rather than cooperate. - Ongoing disconnect between third sector and statutory bodies.
OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Strengthen ABTSI’s role as a connector and advocate. - Develop shared data system, reporting tools and impact measurement frameworks. - Improve collaboration through face-to-face networking and partnership working. - Advocate for core and longer-term funding, including exploration of an All Argyll Fund. - Improve communication, clarify ABTSI’s role, and better promote sector achievements. - Build stronger bridges with statutory partners to address referral, funding and policy gaps. - Develop targeted support around governance, succession planning and business sustainability. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Continued funding pressures, short-term grants and competition for limited resources. - Increasing demand from statutory bodies without corresponding funding. - Growing administrative and compliance burdens on small organisations. - Volunteer and trustee recruitment challenges. - Lack of public understanding of the third sector’s role and contribution. - Geographic challenges that make collaboration and equitable funding distribution more complex.

Helensburgh



Dunoon



Tarbert



Oban



Helensburgh highlights:

"Thank you for a really good meeting today. A by-product was networking before and after! Proving it's good to meet face to face!" Alison Gildea, Grey Matters

"We found the session extremely interesting, and it was valuable to share and discuss ideas on how TSI can continue to strengthen the support it provides. The conversation was thoughtful, engaging, and a great reminder of the positive impact that collaborative working can have." Elaine McGregor, Helensburgh & Lomond Carers SCIO

4.6 Follow up thematic focus groups

Thematic online focus groups were held with

- a Public Health and Health & Social Care Partnerships cohort in February 2026
- TSO's from the Hebridean Islands, who couldn't attend the in-person focus groups due to logistics / accessibility

These were carried out using collaborative, participatory methods and encouraged attendees to discuss two main themes:

Discussion theme 1

Understand what's working well, where organisations struggle, and what's changing in the local landscape.



Discussion theme 2

**The Role of the TSI: What's Needed, What Works
The Future: Vision, Ambition and Collaboration**



Comments and feedback were recorded live using online sticky notes. The comments are summarised in the previous SWOT report and can be found in full in appendix 4 and 5.

Below are some examples of the comments collected from the online sessions (all comments in appendix 5).

All- Argyll Fund (eg wind fund / energy).

Some areas are betting at aligning funds / consulting eg money just given to households. Is there an opportunity to look at a fund across A&B that provides infrastructure etc.

Priorities for improvements-

Digital training. Online training is really the only way on an island.
HR changes has to be kept on top of.
Succession planning –lots of young people who are interested but may not have the skills. TSI could help here, encourage young people to get involved.

Opportunities for innovation / change

Bring back more cooperation between small orgs and statutory bodies.
Sharing services eg back office services, fill in gaps that aren't currently being supplied.
Pull our stories together, so that decision makers in A&B know what is going on and how big a part of the economy the third sector is.
TSI and Statutory sector needs to get round a table together and talk more.

5. State of the Sector report

This section summarises our understanding of the needs, pressures and priorities of TSOs across Argyll & Bute, drawing together the research above. The findings provide guidance for ABTSI's work over the next five years and identify clear themes to strengthen the sector's voice locally and nationally.

5.1. Essential but under strain

Across all engagement and research, one consistent message emerges: the third sector in Argyll & Bute is essential, resilient and deeply embedded in communities. But it is increasingly stretched, undervalued and operating within a fragile funding and policy environment.

This reflects both the national context outlined in Section 2, including public service reform, health and social care integration and the agreed strategic role of Third Sector Interfaces, and the local evidence presented in Section 3, which highlights financial fragility, workforce pressures, geographic constraints and weak collective impact data.

TSOs are delivering preventative services, responding to cost-of-living pressures, addressing social isolation, supporting families, and increasingly filling gaps created by public sector reform. However, this expanded role has not been matched by funding or partnership status.

There is a clear emotional and practical tension, **the sector knows its value, but the wider system does not consistently recognise or resource that value proportionately.**

5.2. Sector needs and pressures

Financial and funding

Evidence from the secondary research (appendix 2) and engagement findings (appendices 3 and 4) consistently highlight financial fragility across the sector. Many organisations remain heavily reliant on short-term grant funding, while rising costs continue to outpace funding growth. Competition for limited funding pots is increasing. There is pressure to deliver additional services, particularly those previously provided by statutory bodies, without corresponding resources. Although trading income across Argyll & Bute has grown in recent years, over half of organisations (51%) operate with an annual turnover below £50,000, limiting their capacity to diversify income or invest in long-term sustainability.

Need: Sustainable, multi-year and core funding for essential community services.

Volunteer and workforce

As set out in section 3, volunteer fatigue, an ageing volunteer base and difficulty recruiting trustees are consistent themes across the Volunteering & Cost of Living Survey, focus groups, Area Plans and Business Plan analysis. Demand for services keeps increasing and volunteer capacity can't keep pace. Organisations are also navigating increasing compliance, safeguarding and governance requirements, often without access to the skills needed. This combination places strain on already stretched organisations and threatens longer-term sustainability.

Need: Investment in people, volunteer recruitment, trustee development and overall workforce resilience.

Relationship with the statutory sector

Focus groups described a “chasm” between statutory services and the third sector. Participants highlighted one-directional referral pathways without attached funding, limited data sharing from statutory partners, policy not filtering through effectively, perceived inequalities in funding and influence, and complex commissioning processes that smaller organisations struggle to navigate. This disconnect is mirrored in the national context outlined in section 2. Participants stated that change needed to happen around fair funding (eg if service reach and impact is recorded in a more accurate way, funding would be better allocated), full cost recovery, data-sharing, referral pathways, partnerships in preventative ways of working (i.e. D&G model), co-production and commissioning reform.

Despite this, the Third Sector is playing an increasingly central role in preventative services and community wellbeing, often filling gaps left by statutory provision. This growing reliance, without corresponding power or resource, reinforces a structural imbalance.

Need: The third sector recognised and resourced as an equal strategic partner in public service reform.

Shared data resource

Individual TSOs collect impact data, but systems across the sector vary, different reporting platforms are used and nothing leads to a collective story to show the whole picture. Focus groups were keen to explore a coordinated approach, including a shared reporting portal, annual sector surveys, practical evaluation tools and two-way data-sharing with statutory partners. The view as if it was possible to collate sector data for various purposes, it could be a significant asset.

The case for a shared data and collective impact approach builds directly on the intelligence gaps identified in Section 3 and aligns with the TSI’s agreed role as a source of knowledge and evidence, as outlined in Section 2.

Need: Evidencing the social and economic value of the Third Sector.

Capacity and infrastructure

TSOs reported governance and succession planning challenges and a heavy admin workload. Added to this they talked of limited digital skills and infrastructure, and the practical constraints of delivering services across rural and island communities. Opportunities for face-to-face networking can also be limited by geography and cost. There is demand for stronger infrastructure support, including shared services (such as HR, payroll and evaluation tools), business planning and sustainability support, expanded training provision and networking across regions.

Need: Strengthening infrastructure and capacity with shared support resources

Communication

Survey and focus group analysis shows that the general public don’t fully understand TSOs activities and often assume services are delivered by statutory bodies. It’s contribution to society is not always understood. TSOs would like to improve this and change the views from being a supplementary or charitable group to being recognised as essential community infrastructure that underpins wellbeing and public services.

Need: Change the narrative and positioning the Third Sector as core community infrastructure.

5.3. Geographic reality: rural and island context

Argyll & Bute's geography shapes the third sector within it. TSOs are often small and dispersed, operating across large distances with high travel costs and limited economies of scale. Challenges differ between islands, rural areas and towns. A single model will not meet these varied needs and must be recognised as necessitating a distinct, place-based focus.

Island-specific realities

Engagement with organisations from the Islands highlights additional pressures that are distinct from those experienced elsewhere in the region and are not simply a variation on rurality. Pressures include, for example, housing shortages, land barriers, energy/grid constraints, contractor access, limited technical support and feasibility funding gaps:

- Energy and infrastructure constraints, such as limited grid capacity for renewable projects, water supply issues, and concerns around electricity reliability.
- Island communities also face land ownership barriers, where delays or lack of cooperation from landowners can hinder local development.
- Digital challenges are amplified, with limited local access to technical support and a need for more accessible online training.
- Housing shortages make it difficult to retain staff and volunteers, and early-stage project development is restricted by difficulty securing feasibility or scoping funding.
- Levels of awareness and engagement with the TSI vary between islands, underlining the need for strengthened communication and more equitable access to support.

Need: Place-based with flexible approaches to address the challenges faced, particularly with regard to the islands. Support for infrastructure challenges, feasibility funding and digital access.

5.4. Community assets, local economy and community wealth building

The Third Sector as Local Economic Anchor

Engagement findings and survey responses highlight the increasingly important role of Third Sector Organisations in managing community assets, supporting local economic activity and contributing to community wealth building across Argyll & Bute. While often viewed as service providers, many TSOs also act as local economic anchors, running community spaces, employing local people and supporting local supply chains.

Survey responses identified a wide range of asset-based and economic activity taking place across the sector, including the management and development of:

- community halls
- heritage assets and archives
- woodland and environmental projects
- piers and local infrastructure
- biodiversity initiatives
- employability programmes
- digital inclusion activity
- participation in Local Place Planning processes

These activities demonstrate the sector's growing role not only in social wellbeing but also in local economic resilience and place development.

Community assets as essential infrastructure

Community assets are often run by volunteers or small organisations with limited capacity, yet they provide essential infrastructure for rural and island communities. They enable service delivery, social connection, cultural activity and local enterprise, often filling gaps where commercial or statutory provision is not viable.

However, organisations reported challenges related to asset maintenance costs, governance responsibilities, capital funding access and the skills required to manage increasingly complex projects.

Supporting local economies and regeneration

The survey also points to a strong appetite for the third sector to play a more active role in shaping local economies. Respondents described ambitions to:

- support local employment
- retain wealth within communities
- develop sustainable tourism and environmental initiatives
- strengthen participation in regeneration and planning decisions

This aligns with wider national policy priorities around Community Wealth Building and preventative, place-based public service reform.

Recognition and system alignment

Despite this contribution, economic and asset-based roles are not always fully recognised within funding structures or partnership arrangements. Support is often fragmented between community development, economic development and infrastructure funding streams, creating complexity for organisations operating across these areas.

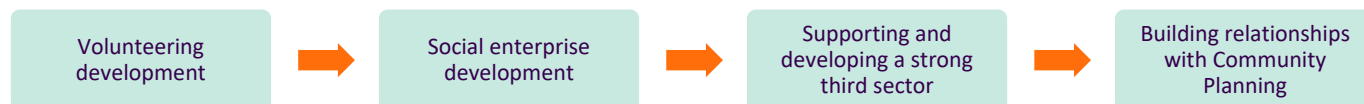
Strengthening the sector's role in community wealth building therefore represents both a challenge and an opportunity; enabling TSOs to move from being seen solely as service deliverers towards recognition as key partners in local economic development and long-term place sustainability.

Need: Support for community asset development and management, stronger links between the third sector and local economic development, and recognition of TSOs as contributors to Community Wealth Building and place-based regeneration.

6. Draft strategic priorities

While ABTSI's core support role remains essential, the sector is clearly asking for something more: stronger system leadership, clearer advocacy, improved collective intelligence and more visible coordination across Argyll & Bute.

The following draft priorities respond to these needs while remaining firmly grounded in ABTSI's mandated role as a Third Sector Interface (TSI), as defined by the Scottish Government. TSIs are required to deliver four core functions:



6.1. ABTSI priorities summary

These priorities reflect the three overarching pillars outlined in the Strategic Narrative and translate them into operational delivery.

Continue the journey from support provider to strategic leadership

ABTSI should continue to operate as a negotiator between the TSOs and statutory partners, addressing power imbalances, influencing funding practice and ensuring the sector is positioned as an equal delivery partner in public service reform.

*This work supports **community planning** relationships, with ABTSI acting as a representative and influencer.*

Facilitating networking and collaboration

There is a clear need to reduce silo-working and build trust across the sector. ABTSI is in a good place to connect suitable TSOs, particularly around funding, partnership development and shared services.

*This contributes to **third sector support** and **volunteering development**, with ABTSI as a convenor and connector.*

Producing data that demonstrates its value

The sector holds valuable data, but it is not collected centrally. ABTSI can support shared data systems, coordinated impact reporting and evaluation tools to better evidence the sector's social and economic value.

*This strengthens **third sector support** and informs **community planning** relationships, positioning ABTSI as a coordinator of shared intelligence and evidence.*

Challenging the funding landscape

Short-term funding is often unproductive for the sector. ABTSI's strategy should include advocacy for core and longer-term funding. Support is also needed to strengthen business planning and financial resilience.

*This aligns with **social enterprise development** and **third sector support**, combining direct organisational support with sector-wide advocacy.*

Sector champion

The sector needs improved visibility, to reshape how the third sector is understood by communities, partners and policy makers. This includes telling a strong story about impact, prevention and cost savings.

*This priority supports all four TSI functions, particularly **community planning relationships**, with ABTSI acting as a sector advocate and communicator on behalf of the wider third sector.*

6.2. ABTSI priorities over short, medium and long-term

Strategic intent:

Over the next five years, ABTSI will strengthen networking and collaboration across the third sector in Argyll & Bute to reduce isolation, address fragmentation and support more sustainable, resilient organisations. This work responds directly to evidence of silo-working, geographic challenges and competitive funding pressures, and positions ABTSI as a neutral connector and facilitator.

Progress will be evidenced through:

- Increased participation in networking and partnership activity across all areas
- Growth in collaborative outcomes such as joint bids, shared services and partnerships
- Positive feedback from organisations on accessibility, value and impact
- Clear evidence of reduced isolation, duplication and competition over time

Years 1 - 5	Aim	Action	Delivery	KPIs
Yr 1 (short-term): Building connection and visibility				
Communication	Improve communication around networking opportunities, partnership activity and outcomes. Ensure learning and progress are shared.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue sharing information on ABTSI's remit and services. • Strengthen signposting and general communications. • Share engagement outcomes and highlight subsequent actions. • Review and refine messaging and social media content. 	CE Comms TSSA's	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased in enquiries re ABTSI's services. • Reach and engagement statistics for email and social media communications
Visibility	Improve awareness of ABTSI's role and how it can support individuals and organisations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deliver regular in-person networking events across all areas. • Increase communication around meetings, including topics and outcomes. • Strengthen personalised engagement, particularly where organisations face capacity issues. 	CE Comms TSSA's	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase in direct engagement with organisations. • Positive feedback from the sector.

Support	Strengthen understanding of sector needs and improve support provision.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scope priority training needs (governance, first aid, PVG, trustees). • Strengthen volunteer signposting and trustee recruitment support. • Map any duplication with national bodies (e.g. SCVO/DTAS). • Increase engagement with organisations experiencing capacity pressures or isolation. 	CE TSSA's	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Production of a mapping document. • Satisfaction with support: post-support feedback score (e.g., 1-5) and % reporting improved confidence/capacity. • Qualitative feedback on accessibility and value of networking.
Advocacy	Continue to develop the strong advocacy role ABTSI undertakes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to raise concerns regarding funding inequality and referral pressures. • Promote the third sector as an equal partner within Community Planning structures. 	CE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased references to the third sector as an equal partner within CP structures. • Number of strategic forums where ABTSI presents or raises issues. • Evidence of narrative shift in official documents. • Referral trends (cases without funding, escalations, resolutions). • Evidence of funding improvements where ABTSI contributed.

	Aim	Action	Delivery	KPIs
Yrs 2-3 (medium-term): Move from connection to collaboration by supporting partnerships that lead to tangible outcomes				
Sector-wide data	Enable a system of holding sector-wide data to provide more accurate material for policy makers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a reporting portal or shared evaluation framework. • Re-establish an annual sector survey or continual sector information feed. • Develop a case study and impact library showing social and economic value. 	CE TSSA's Database Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Production of a reporting portal, annual sector survey and data library. • Data quality: % submissions meeting minimum completeness criteria (e.g., outcomes + reach + location).
Mapping	Develop a live map of TSO activity across Argyll & Bute to reduce duplication and unmet need.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a mapping process which challenges duplication and competition where collaboration is feasible and beneficial. 	CE Database Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Production of a sector map. • Map freshness: % of entries updated within last 6/12 months • Map usage statistics (visits, searches etc).
Collaboration	Facilitate partnerships around shared challenges, funding opportunities, services and infrastructure needs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Broker partnerships around shared challenges and opportunities. • Deliver themed knowledge-exchange and peer-learning sessions. • Explore development of the All-Argyll Fund. • Support shared services, joint bids and collaborative delivery models. 	CE TSSA's	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of knowledge-exchange events and attendance. • All-Argyll Fund milestones (e.g., scoping, governance, pilot). • Evidence of collaborative outcomes. • Sector feedback on collaboration effectiveness.
Facilitate & advocate	Strengthen ABTSI's facilitating role between statutory bodies and TSO's.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure constructive dialogue between statutory bodies and TSOs. • Improve data-sharing and referral mechanisms. • Advocate for improvements in funding structures. 	CE TSSA's Database Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Holding regular events where TSO's and statutory bodies can discuss issues. • Improved information flow. • Improved funding structures.

Support TSO resilience	Strengthen long-term sustainability of TSOs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expand business planning and succession planning support. Support trustee / board recruitment. 	CE Business Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The development of support services within ABTSI. Number of organisations completing business/succession plans.
	Aim	Action	Delivery	KPIs
Yrs 4 – 5 (long-term): Embedding a collaborative sector culture				
Third sector champion	Ensure the third sector is recognised as a vital delivery and policy partner.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase influence within Community Planning and local priority setting. Strong representation, as the third sector champion. Good public understanding that the third sector is essential infrastructure. The sector's contribution is known, valued and appropriately supported. 	CE TSSA's Comms	<p>Improved sector feedback, benchmarked against this research:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evidence of sustained partnerships and collaborative delivery. Reduced silo-working, increased cooperation. Positive changes in sector confidence and collective impact.
Data and intelligence hub	Collate and communicate key data to influence regional and national decisions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maintain a verified evidence base demonstrating impact and cost savings. Present Argyll & Bute as a distinctive rural and island third sector model. 	CE TSSA's Comms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Number of instances where ABTSI evidence is used in funding/commissioning/policy discussions (tracked as "evidence used in decisions").
Support sustainable funding	Shift toward more sustainable, long-term funding approaches.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attract larger funders into the region. Promote funding models that recognise prevention, partnership and community wealth building. 	CE Business Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Number of strategic engagements with large funders. Number of funders newly active in the region.

7. Capacity building

Capacity building is at the heart of this vision for the third sector in Argyll & Bute. It encompasses strengthening the skills, resources, and resilience of local organisations, enabling them to deliver vital services, adapt to changing needs, and thrive in a challenging environment.

7.1 Building organisational strength

ABTSI's strategy prioritises capacity building through:

- **Training and Development:** Expanding access to governance, leadership, and operational training for staff, trustees, and volunteers.
- **Shared Services:** Developing platforms for HR, payroll, evaluation, and business planning, reducing administrative burdens and improving efficiency.
- **Succession Planning:** Supporting organisations to recruit and retain volunteers and trustees, ensuring continuity and resilience.

7.2 Transferring wealth and resources

A key element is the transfer of wealth, both financial and social, within the community:

- **Community Wealth Building:** Securing assets, building membership, and strengthening governance to ensure resources remain within Argyll & Bute.
- **Legacy Creation:** By investing in capacity and infrastructure, ABTSI helps organisations become more self-sufficient, leaving a lasting impact that extends beyond individual projects or funding cycles.
- **Collaboration and Partnership:** Facilitating knowledge exchange and partnership working, so expertise and resources are shared across the sector.

7.3 Lasting impact

By empowering organisations and communities, ABTSI will create a legacy of stronger, more resilient third sector bodies that can continue to make a difference for years to come. The transfer of wealth, whether through skills, assets, or collaborative opportunities, builds a foundation for sustainable growth and community empowerment across Argyll & Bute. Achieving this long-term impact also requires a strong and sustainable sector infrastructure. ABTSI itself needs to be resourced to support, coordinate and lead delivery of this strategy.

7.4 ABTSI sustainability and delivery model

The ambitions set out in this strategy reflect an evolving role for ABTSI as both sector infrastructure provider and strategic partner within public service reform. Delivering this role requires a sustainable organisational model with the capacity, skills and resources to support leadership, coordination and sector development.

ABTSI will therefore focus on:

- **Diversifying income** and funding models to strengthen long-term resilience
- **Developing shared services** and appropriate paid support aligned with sector needs
- **Strengthening strategic alignment** with partners to ensure infrastructure investment is recognised as fundamental to effective collaboration and public service reform
- **Investing in organisational capability**, including staff capacity, digital systems and knowledge infrastructure to support evidence-led decision making

8. Strategic risks and mitigations

The delivery of this strategy depends on a range of external and system-level factors. The following risks and mitigations have been identified to support implementation and ongoing evaluation.

Continued funding insecurity across the sector

Risk: Organisations remain in crisis mode, limiting ability to engage strategically

Mitigation: Ongoing advocacy for multi-year funding and support for financial resilience

Limited influence within statutory systems

Risk: Structural imbalance persists despite engagement

Mitigation: Strengthen representation in Community Planning and strategic forums

Capacity constraints within ABTSI

Risk: Increased expectations without corresponding resource

Mitigation: Diversify income, develop shared services and invest in organisational capacity

Data and collaboration challenges

Risk: Difficulty implementing shared systems and approaches

Mitigation: Develop proportionate, user-friendly tools and phased implementation

Geographic and infrastructure barriers

Risk: Inequitable access to support across rural and island areas

Mitigation: Maintain place-based approaches and flexible delivery models

9. Evaluation

This evaluation provides ABTSI with a clear, structured way to understand whether its strategy is working, how it is making a difference, and where it needs to adapt over time. Rather than being a one-off exercise, it is designed as an ongoing tool to support learning, accountability and strategic decision-making across the full strategy period.

8.1 Evaluation framework and priority focus

It is designed as a practical, ongoing tool to support learning, accountability and facilitate improvements. It has been cross referenced to the TSI Scotland Network Improvement Project 2024 / 25 and supports the Project's aims, activities, outcomes and national performance framework.

Top three strategic priorities for evaluation

While ABTSI's strategy includes a range of inter-connected priorities, it is recommended that three priorities are focused on to make them actionable and achievable with relatively limited resources. In addition, the evidence from the State of the Sector analysis indicates that these **three priorities are critical to enabling progress across all others**. These priorities will therefore be the primary focus of evaluation activity, particularly in the early years of the strategy.

The top three priorities are:

1. System leadership & advocacy
2. Networking and collaboration
3. Shared data and collective impact resource

While the three priorities above will be the main focus of evaluation, communications, operational support and sector mapping will also be tracked using proportionate, lighter-touch evaluation methods.

1. System leadership & advocacy

Evaluation will prioritise ABTSI's effectiveness in strengthening the third sector's position as an equal strategic partner within public service reform. This includes assessing ABTSI's influence on funding practices, commissioning, policy development and relationships with statutory partners.

Key evaluation questions include:

- Is ABTSI increasing the visibility, credibility and influence of the third sector?
- Are relationships with statutory partners improving in quality, consistency and impact?
- Is there evidence that third sector perspectives are shaping local decision-making?

Action area	Key actions	Timescale	Lead responsibility	Outputs / evidence
Strategic influence	Develop and agree a clear advocacy position based on State of the Sector findings	Short (Yr 1)	Chief Executive	Advocacy brief; agreed priority messages
Statutory engagement	Establish regular, structured engagement with Council, HSCP, IJB and CPP partners	Short-Medium (Yrs 1-2)	Chief Executive	Meeting schedules; agendas; minutes
Policy input	Coordinate third sector input into consultations, commissioning reviews and reform agendas	Medium (Yrs 2-3)	CE / Network & Policy Manager	Consultation responses; submissions
Sector voice	Strengthen third sector representation in strategic forums	Medium-Long (Yrs 2-5)	CE / Board	Representation records; feedback
Narrative change	Use evidence and case studies to reposition the third sector as essential infrastructure	Ongoing	CE / Comms	Briefings; presentations; public messaging

Staff: use as a delivery checklist

Senior management team: use to prioritise workload and resourcing

Board: use to track progress against strategy and evaluation indicators

Evaluation: actions directly generate evidence for Sections 8.2-8.4

2. Networking and collaboration

The evidence from this report shows a strong appetite across the sector for greater connection, collaboration and shared working. Geographic dispersion, capacity pressures and competitive funding environments have contributed to silo-working, limiting opportunities for partnership, peer learning and collective problem-solving. ABTSI is well placed to act as a neutral connector, bringing organisations together locally and thematically to reduce duplication, build trust and enable collaboration. This includes facilitating relationships around shared challenges, funding opportunities, service delivery models and infrastructure needs.

A renewed focus on networking and collaboration will prioritise:

- Accessible, place-based networking opportunities across Argyll & Bute, including rural and island communities
- Proactive partnership brokering to support joint funding bids, shared services and collaborative delivery models
- Knowledge exchange and peer learning that build confidence, skills and resilience across the sector

Over time, this approach will support a shift away from competition towards cooperation, enabling organisations to maximise limited resources, strengthen sustainability and increase collective impact. The evaluation framework will assess how effectively ABTSI is reducing silo-working and enabling meaningful collaboration across the sector. This includes formal partnerships, shared services, joint funding approaches and informal peer learning and networking.

Key evaluation questions include:

- Are more organisations working collaboratively rather than competitively?
- Are partnerships leading to tangible outcomes such as shared resources, funding or service delivery?
- Are networking opportunities accessible across Argyll & Bute's diverse geography?

Action area	Key actions	Timescale	Lead responsibility	Outputs / evidence
Networking access	Deliver regular face-to-face networking events across all geographic areas	Short (Yr 1)	Network & Policy Manager	Event records; attendance data
Partnership building	Proactively connect organisations around funding, services and shared challenges	Short-Medium (Yrs 1-3)	Network Team	Partnership logs; referrals
Shared approaches	Support development of shared services, joint bids and collaborative delivery models	Medium (Yrs 2-3)	Network Team	Joint funding applications; MOUs
Knowledge exchange	Facilitate peer learning and themed collaboration sessions	Medium (Yrs 2-3)	Network Team	Learning notes; feedback
Reducing silos	Actively challenge duplication and competition where collaboration is possible	Ongoing	SMT	Case examples; TSO feedback

3. Shared data and collective impact resource

Evaluation will focus on the development and use of shared data systems that enable the sector to evidence its social and economic value collectively. This priority underpins advocacy, funding reform and public understanding.

Key evaluation questions include:

- Is ABTSI enabling consistent, proportionate impact reporting across the sector?
- Is sector-wide data being used to inform strategy, influence partners and attract funding?
- Is there increasing confidence and capacity among TSOs to collect and use data effectively?

Supporting evaluation principles

To support these priorities, the evaluation framework will:

- **Establish clear outcomes and indicators** aligned with short-, medium- and long-term strategic goals
- **Use baseline data** drawn from existing surveys, focus groups and secondary research
- **Combine quantitative and qualitative evidence**, including participation data, case studies and stakeholder feedback
- **Embed continuous learning**, with regular review points to adapt activity and respond to emerging needs
- **Align with national frameworks**, including TSI Scotland Network improvement work and established quality frameworks used by procurement managers

By focusing evaluation activity on these three core priorities, ABTSI will be able to demonstrate progress where it matters most, while ensuring that wider capacity-building, operational and communication activity is clearly connected to strategic outcomes and long-term impact.

Action area	Key actions	Timescale	Lead responsibility	Outputs / evidence
Shared reporting	Develop and pilot a proportionate shared reporting / evaluation framework	Short–Medium (Yrs 1–2)	Database Manager	Reporting tools; guidance
Sector intelligence	Re-establish annual sector survey or rolling data collection	Medium (Yrs 2–3)	Strategy Team	Survey reports; datasets
Impact evidence	Build a library of case studies demonstrating social & economic value	Medium (Yrs 2–3)	Strategy / Comms	Case studies; impact briefs
Data confidence	Support TSOs to improve confidence and skills in data collection	Medium (Yrs 2–3)	Network Team	Training records; feedback
Influence through data	Use shared data to inform advocacy, funding reform and commissioning	Long (Yrs 3–5)	CE / Strategy Team	Evidence used in decisions

8.2 Indicators aligned to the three strategic priorities

Priority 1: System leadership & advocacy

Purpose:

To assess ABTSI's effectiveness in strengthening the third sector's influence, status and relationships within public service reform, funding and policy decision-making.

Key indicators:

- Number of policy consultations, advocacy campaigns or strategic submissions led or coordinated by ABTSI
- Frequency and consistency of engagement with statutory partners (e.g. council, HSCP, IJB)
- Evidence of third sector perspectives influencing policy, commissioning or funding decisions
- Third sector representation in strategic planning and decision-making forums
- Qualitative feedback from TSOs and statutory partners on ABTSI's leadership and influence

Priority 2: Networking & collaboration

Purpose:

To assess whether ABTSI is reducing silo-working and enabling meaningful collaboration that strengthens sector resilience and outcomes.

Key indicators:

- Number and geographic spread of networking events and partnership forums facilitated
- Participation rates across different types and sizes of organisations
- Number of new partnerships, shared services or joint funding applications supported
- Evidence of reduced competition and increased cooperation between organisations
- Feedback from TSOs on the value, accessibility and outcomes of collaboration

Priority 3: Shared data & collective impact resource

Purpose:

To assess the development and use of shared data systems that enable the sector to evidence its collective social and economic value.

Key indicators:

- Number of organisations contributing to shared data systems or reporting portals
- Consistency and quality of impact data collected across the sector
- Production of sector-wide reports, case studies or evidence briefs
- Use of shared data to influence funding, commissioning or policy decisions
- Increased confidence and capability among TSOs to collect and use data

8.3 Strategic priority indicator tracking template (aligned)

Priority area	Indicator	Baseline (2025)	Target (2027)	Current status (2026)	Evidence / notes	Responsible	Review date
System leadership & advocacy	Policy consultations / advocacy actions led	2	4	3	Consultation reports	Chief Executive	Dec 2026
System leadership & advocacy	Engagement with statutory partners	Quarterly	Monthly	Bi-monthly	Meeting logs	Chief Executive	Dec 2026
Networking & collaboration	Networking / partnership events facilitated	3	6	4	Attendance records	Network & Policy Manager	Dec 2026
Networking & collaboration	New partnerships or joint bids supported	2	8	5	Funding applications	Network Team	Dec 2026
Shared data resource	Organisations using shared reporting tools	0	20	12	Portal analytics	Database Manager	Dec 2026
Shared data resource	Sector-wide impact outputs produced	0	3	1	Published reports	Strategy Team	Dec 2026

Operational support, capacity building and communications activity should be recorded as contributing evidence under these priorities rather than as standalone evaluation areas.

8.4 Data collection methods (mapped to priorities)

1. System leadership & advocacy	2. Networking & collaboration	3. Shared data & collective impact resource
<p>Log of consultations, campaigns and submissions.</p> <p>Minutes and records of meetings with statutory partners.</p> <p>Document analysis of policy and commissioning references.</p> <p>Qualitative feedback from statutory partners and TSOs.</p>	<p>Event registration and attendance data.</p> <p>Records of partnerships, shared services and joint bids.</p> <p>Post-event surveys and reflective learning notes.</p> <p>Case studies demonstrating collaborative outcomes.</p>	<p>Usage statistics from shared data platforms.</p> <p>Annual sector surveys.</p> <p>Submitted case studies and impact reports.</p> <p>Evidence of data use in advocacy and funding decisions.</p>

Appendices

- Appendix 1a – Focus Group Planning
- Appendix 1b – Guidance for Working with Partners
- Appendix 2 - Secondary Research Summary
- Appendix 3 - Survey Report
- Appendix 4 - Focus Group SWOT Analysis
- Appendix 5 – Thematic Online Focus Groups