



Nottingham
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Transformation Academy Evaluation

A 3 YEARS COLLABORATIVE JOURNEY

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FUNDED BY



Acknowledgement

The evaluation team wishes to thank everyone who participated in the research. This includes three anonymous participants, as well as the following people who wished to be credited:

Jane Howard, CEO, MVA

Clare Saunders, Funding & Programmes Director, MVA

John Norley, CEO, Age UK Kent Rivers

David Stokes, CEO, Halpern Charitable Foundation (Nucleus Arts)

Karen Scott, Founder/Director for Education & Development, FutureCodersSE CIC

Rupa Sen, Executive Manager, Medway Diversity Forum

Additionally, individuals from the following organisations participated in the research either as Transformation Academy members or external stakeholders:

Carers First Medway

Citizens Advice Swale

Faversham Umbrella

Graceway

Home-Start Medway

Kent Association for the Blind (KAB)

Kent Community Foundation

Medway Council

Medway Foodbank (Help in the Community)

MyHealthNet

North Kent Mind

Policy Centre for African Peoples

Square Pegs Arts

Swale Voluntary Alliance

wHoo Cares

Wisdom Hospice Charity

Foreword

During the height of the pandemic Medway Voluntary Action (MVA) contacted me about a funding idea they had. The pandemic had highlighted some key challenges for the voluntary sector in Medway. Some organisations, which had been really successful were struggling financially due to the pandemic stopping face-to-face work, and others were facing challenges of adapting to ever changing rules and regulations.

In the middle of this crisis MVA saw an opportunity. A group of leaders of some of the Voluntary and Community organisations, galvanised by the challenges of the pandemic, were meeting together, sharing learning and insights, developing new approaches and supporting each other in new and creative ways. While the pandemic had necessitated this new way of working, these leaders, and by MVA, felt that there was something powerful in this way of working, and they were keen, as initial threat of the pandemic subsided, to embed the good bits of this approach into a new way of working.

Out of this idea the Transformation Academy was born, not only as a means to strengthen local organisations, but also as a test-bed for new ideas and approaches.

We are delighted to present this report capturing the learning from the evaluation of the TA. This evaluation has been a collaborative effort, working alongside MVA and the TA members to develop a shared understanding of

The project not only sought to experiment with a new way of working for the members, but also a different approach to evaluation. We have seen this evaluation as a collaborative process, built on shared learning.



Daniel King

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Director of the VCSE Data and Insights Observatory

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1. Executive Summary

This report presents the evaluation of the Transformation Academy (TA), carried out by Nottingham Trent University's VCSE Observatory. The TA was a three-year, Lottery-funded initiative led by Medway Voluntary Action (MVA), which brought together around thirty leaders from small and medium voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) organisations across Medway and North Kent. It was established to strengthen a sector often characterised by fragmentation and fragility, and to build a more resilient and connected community of organisations. Designed as a structured community of practice, the Academy combined formal training, mentoring and practical tools with peer learning, relationship-building and leadership development. Its purpose was to enhance individual confidence and capability, support organisational transformation, and generate wider benefits for the VCSE sector as a whole.

The evaluation was collaborative in design, developed with MVA and Academy participants as a learning process rather than a detached, summative judgement. A distinctive feature was the involvement of an embedded PhD researcher, who attended sessions, spent time with participants and MVA staff, and conducted interviews to understand the dynamics of the Academy from within. This closeness brought richness and depth, while other members of the evaluation team provided critical distance, creating a balance that was vital for reflective analysis.

A mixed-methods approach was used, combining interviews, surveys, social network analysis and value creation stories to capture both tangible outcomes and less visible impacts. By working alongside participants, the evaluation not only documented achievements and challenges but also supported ongoing reflection and capacity-building, while sharing insights with wider audiences.

The evaluation found the TA delivered value at several levels:

- For individuals: participants reported greater confidence, enhanced leadership skills, a clearer sense of identity, and reduced isolation. The idea of “generous leadership” emerged as a shared theme.
- For organisations: members applied new practices in staff management, collaborative funding, coaching and emotional intelligence. Several secured new funding or improved governance.
- For the sector: the Academy helped knit together relationships, sparked collaborative projects, and contributed to wider discussions about VCSE resilience.

Although the most profound benefits were felt by core participants, the ripple effects spread more widely through mentoring, collaborations and MVA's convening role.

The word transformation suggests dramatic change, but in practice the TA fostered many small, incremental shifts — in identity, culture and practice — that participants viewed as highly significant. Equally, while the term academy implies formal training, the strongest

value came from informal learning: leaders taking time for their own development, building confidence, sharing experiences, and feeling less isolated. Many valued simply “being in a community,” knowing they could call on peers for advice and support.

Task and finish groups, though ambitious and uneven in delivery, gave participants a sense of purpose and action, reinforcing that the Academy was not just a “talking shop.” The evaluation highlights that intangible outcomes — trust, confidence, belonging, safe space — were as critical as tangible outputs. Through workshops, peer activities and collaborative projects, members experienced meaningful personal and professional growth, even when external outputs were modest.

The Academy also underlined the importance of facilitation and coordination. Having MVA act as convenor provided structure, legitimacy and vision, enabling the Academy to operate effectively. Stable, consistent funding was essential in making this possible. Yet sustainability remains a challenge: momentum built through the Academy risks being lost without ongoing investment.

Key Recommendations

For funders:

- Value relational outcomes — trust, confidence, and networks — alongside project metrics.
- Provide longer-term, flexible funding to sustain momentum and embed learning.
- Invest in leadership development for small and medium VCSE organisations.

For infrastructure bodies:

- Act as convenors by creating safe, neutral spaces for collaboration, supported by stable funding.
- Invest in skilled facilitation and coordination to sustain engagement.
- Consider adopting the TA model, blending formal learning with peer support and identity work.

For national stakeholders:

- Explore how locally rooted academies can be replicated to strengthen VCSE resilience.
- Shape policy and funding frameworks to value collaboration and leadership development.
- Support peer-to-peer learning between localities to share models and approaches.

2. Introduction

Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, Medway local area was home to a vibrant and diverse the voluntary, community, and social enterprise (VCSE) sector, comprising over 1,000 charities and community groups. Many of these organisations were small, often operating with just one or two paid staff members and a small team of dedicated volunteers. Despite their limited size, these groups played a vital role in supporting local communities, addressing social inequalities, and fostering civic engagement.

However, the pandemic brought unprecedented challenges. The operational landscape shifted dramatically, and many of these smaller organisations found themselves struggling to adapt. They lacked the financial resources, organisational capacity, and strategic skills necessary to navigate the post-Covid environment. While MVA, the local infrastructure organisation and the VCSE Leaders Network provided valuable guidance and information, it became increasingly clear that this support—though helpful—was not sufficient on its own. A Medway leader told us as a reflection of lessons learnt from the pandemic:

“When we come back from this, we can’t do things the same. We cannot go back to doing things the way we did. We have to do things differently and we have to do that to build in a level of resilience into organisations.”

The Transformation Academy (TA) is a three-year, Lottery-funded initiative led by the local infrastructure organisation MVA. It brings together up to thirty VCSE-sector leaders from northwest Kent, UK—primarily from service-delivery charities—to engage in structured learning aimed at driving organisational change. In January 2022, the TA was launched in direct response to the need for intensive, personalised, and sustained support to help VCSE organisations build resilience, develop leadership, and transform their ways of working.

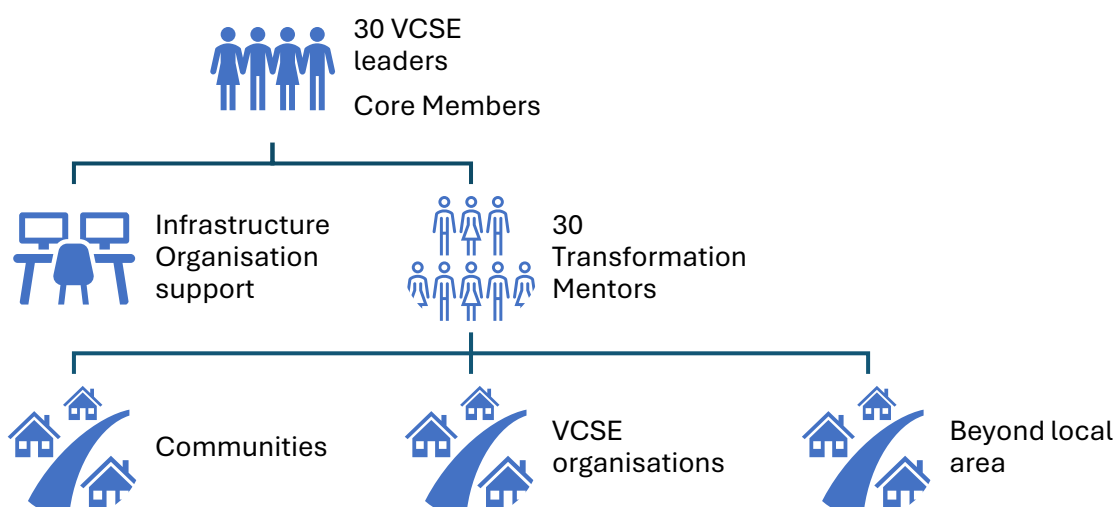
Designed to empower VCSE organisations, the TA offers tailored development programmes, practical tools, and strategic mentoring to support leaders in building capacity, resilience, and innovation within their organisations. The original aims of the Transformation Academy were designed to build leadership capacity within the VCSE sector as a strategic response to the challenges faced by small organisations in the post-Covid context.

Aim 1, *“To harness and develop the existing strengths of VCSE collaborative activity taking place at a local level”* reflects a commitment to strengthening inter-organisational relationships and leveraging collective expertise.

Aim 2, *“To provide space and mechanisms for VCSE leaders to undertake training, to develop learning and best practice to facilitate practical and cultural organisational transformation”* focuses on equipping leaders with the tools and knowledge required to lead change effectively within their organisations.

Aim 3, “All learning will communicate to the wider-sector and Academy members will train to become ‘Transformation Mentors’,” ensures that the benefits of the programme are disseminated across the sector, creating a ripple effect of capacity-building.

Collectively, these aims contribute to the development of a more resilient, skilled, and connected VCSE sector, which in turn enhances the sector’s ability to address local needs and improve outcomes for communities across the area. The original TA concept was to train 30 VCSE leaders for the benefit of communities, VCSE organisations and beyond the local area.



The VCSE National Data and Insights Observatory at Nottingham Trent University was commissioned to evaluate the MVA Transformation Academy (TA). This evaluation aimed to assess the initiative’s development, implementation, and impact. The evaluation focuses on understanding how TA contributes to organisational sustainability, capacity building, peer collaboration, income generation, and transformation-related skills development within the VCSE sector in Medway. A collaborative and developmental approach was adopted, involving MVA/TA members throughout the process to build internal evaluation capacity.

The evaluation was structured into four work packages. **Work Package 1** established an initial assessment and shared Theory of Change (ToC) through interviews, workshops, and stakeholder mapping to clarify TA’s goals and assumptions. **Work Package 2** developed diagnostic tools, including a Community of Practice (CoP) network analysis, to benchmark progress and inform strategic interventions. **Work Package 3** gathered impact evidence through interviews, surveys, and developed Value Creation Stories. Finally, **Work Package 4** synthesized findings into a summative Visioning Workshop, produced a lessons-learned

report, and led seminars and conference presentations. Dissemination activities connected MVA to national networks, promoting the TA model across the wider VCSE sector.

This evaluation examines TA's contribution both locally and more broadly, while assessing its distinctiveness in relation to other VCSE networks and its relevance for Local Infrastructure Organisations (LIOs). These questions are particularly significant given the persistent challenges confronting local VCSE infrastructure: sustainable funding, service effectiveness, and impact measurement (Rochester, 2012; Independent Commission on the Future of Local Infrastructure, 2015; Macmillan, 2016). As local authority budgets—historically a key funding source for LIOs—continue to decline, there is increasing interest in alternative models, including network-based approaches (Rochester, 2012). Within this context, the importance of strong, trust-based relationships is emphasised. As noted in the *Walking a Tightrope* report, “constructive relationships, built on mutual understanding of the role and challenges faced by each side, are seen by respondents as essential components for enabling the LIO to carry out its functions well” (Hamer et al., 2025, p. 27). The TA may offer to other LIOs a viable alternative for sustaining an effective model of network and leadership development.

This report proceeds by first outlining the evaluation methods and collaborative approach adopted by the VCSE Observatory team, providing context for how evidence was gathered and analysed. It then presents a detailed account of the Transformation Academy's development and activities across its three-year lifespan, highlighting key milestones and outputs. The subsequent sections explore the value created through the TA, drawing on qualitative insights from participants and evaluators, and examine the learning processes and organisational changes that emerged. Building on these findings, the report offers targeted recommendations for MVA, funders, infrastructure local organisations, and sector leaders, before concluding with reflections on the project's legacy and implications for future practice.

3. Methods

From insights of NTU evaluator: Dr Juliana Mainard-Sardon, Senior Research Fellow

The evaluation of the Transformation Academy was designed to be both collaborative and developmental, ensuring that the process reflected the lived experiences and priorities of those involved. Drawing on the expertise of the VCSE Observatory at Nottingham Trent University, the evaluation team worked closely with MVA and TA members to co-produce a methodology that was inclusive, participatory, and responsive to the evolving needs of the sector.

A particular strength of this approach was the embedding of a PhD candidate within the project and the active involvement of VCSE sector practitioners at every stage—from the initial assessment and design of diagnostic tools to the collection of impact evidence and the synthesis of findings. By integrating evaluation into the day-to-day activities of the TA, the process not only generated robust insights but also built internal capacity for ongoing learning and reflection among MVA, TA leaders and local VCSE members.

3.1 The VCSE Observatory and the evaluation team

The VCSE Observatory’s mission is to provide clear, reliable evidence about the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector. We collect, evaluate, analyse, and share data to help organisations, funders, and policymakers make informed decisions and strengthen communities. By working collaboratively, we turn complex information into accessible insights.

The VCSE Observatory led a major study on the impact of Covid-19 on the VCSE sector, in partnership with NCVO and Sheffield Hallam University. This was the largest UK-wide project of its kind, featuring a monthly barometer survey with around 500 responses and 300 in-depth interviews with VCSE organisations. The study also explored the role of local infrastructure during the pandemic. Since then, the Observatory has conducted several evaluations, including:

- A study for Diversifying Nottingham and Nottinghamshire Research, examining how under-represented groups and communities are represented in NHS research.
- An evaluation for a local infrastructure organisation (LIO) in St Albans.
- A project funded by Lloyds Bank Foundation focused on understanding the data needs and data impact of several UK LIOs.
- The Observatory team has also worked with the Esmeé Fairbairn Foundation, City Bridge Foundation, Paul Hamlyn Foundation, and the Henry Smith Charity to explore equity in funding practices.

The evaluation team members are:

- Prof Daniel King is the Director of VCSE Observatory. He specialises in rethinking organisational practices, with a particular focus on voluntary and community organisations. Notably, he leads the ESRC funded project ‘COVID-19 and VCSE organisational response’ and has also recently led an evaluation of DCMS’ 50+ volunteering program. These projects provide him with unique insights into the current state of the VCSE sector as well as contacts throughout the sector, including with government (DCMS), national infrastructure organisations such as NCVO, NAVCA, and ACEVO and other key stakeholders including BiTC.

-
- Dr Juliana Mainard-Sardon is a Senior Research Fellow for VCSE Observatory. She is a qualitative researcher and her research focuses on voluntary sector organisations. She uses digital storytelling to promote under-represented communities – in the UK and the Global South - to drive social change by giving voice to marginalised people. Juliana has also worked as a Funding Manager one of the UK’s largest BAME social enterprises. She had successfully managed projects funded by Sport England funds, Arts Council England, the National Lottery, European Regional Development Fund, and different Trusts & Foundations. Juliana was a youth worker and a community activist for 10 years in Argentina. She brings more than 25 years of experience on working in the VCSE sector.
 - Dr Amanda Hay is an Associate Professor at NTU with primary research interests in management learning where she has published widely. She also has extensive experience of working with managers to facilitate their learning, notably on the Doctor of Business Administration programme. Amanda is co-leader of the Organising as Practice Research Group which embraces a distinctive approach that helps organisational members see and understand their organisational activities with greater clarity, and in ways that enable new actions and questions. Mobilising this approach, Amanda has worked with several SMEs on European funded projects which have promoted learning and development.
 - Chelle Coulton is a doctoral candidate at NTU. She holds masters in Voluntary Sector Management from the Centre for Charity Effectiveness, Bayes Business School and Voluntary Sector Studies from University of East London, and a BA in Philosophy, Politics & Economics from the University of Oxford. She has worked in or with the VCSE sector for over 25 years, predominantly in senior leadership and consultancy roles in organisational capacity building, effectiveness & impact, and research, evaluation & learning, with a particular focus on community groups. Most recently, she was a co-founder-director of Compost London CIC, an east London-based social enterprise providing consultancy and local infrastructure services to VCSEs, and volunteers as a mentor for Charity Works – the UK non-profit sector’s graduate scheme.
 - Rich Pickford is the Head of NTU’s think tank Nottingham Civic Exchange which is charged with utilising the skills and expertise of NTU to make a difference in society. This work requires him to understand and synthesise NTU academic research and insights to develop it into meaningful change. Currently this focuses on three thematic areas: Insecurity, Work and Communities; Culture and Place; and Supporting the Development of

Practice. Working with partners, internal and external to NTU, he acts as a facilitator, connector and storyteller to develop programmes and projects that connect colleagues and partners and enrich their work.

- Prof Lynn Oxborrow is a Professor at NTU and the Programme Director for Help to Grow: Management. Lynn’s background encompasses extensive support for small and growing businesses (SMEs) through a succession of local, regional and national projects. Through her engagement with SMEs, including third sector and not-for-profit organisations, Lynn has delivered a range of business development programmes supporting leadership and growth.
- Dr Ben Evans is a mixed-methods Research Fellow at Nottingham Trent University’s VCSE Observatory, where he leads a range of state of the sector research projects. His work focuses on social and structural inequalities across individual, organisational, and societal levels, with a particular interest in the work experiences of people with invisible disabilities.

With a wealth of experience in co-producing evaluations, the Observatory works closely with sector organisations to ensure that research is meaningful, inclusive, and grounded in lived experience. This expertise is brought together in the evaluation of the Transformation Academy, applying collaborative and participatory approaches to understand its impact and support learning across Medway.

3.2 The evaluation ethos and process

Our evaluation and training program for the TA adopted a **developmental, relational, participatory, and VCSE-led methodology**. The aim was to support MVA and TA to better articulate their value and demonstrate their impact in ways that align with the program’s aims. This approach places MVA, TA leaders, and participants at the centre of our evaluation, ensuring that insights are grounded in the lived experiences, values, and practices of the organisations involved.

The **evaluation was structured into four work packages**, each designed to reflect and reinforce this inclusive and impact-focused approach:

- **Work Package 1** established a shared **initial assessment** and **Theory of Change (ToC)** through interviews, workshops, and stakeholder mapping to clarify TA’s goals and assumptions. This foundational step ensured that the evaluation was aligned with the values and priorities of those involved.
- **Work Package 2** developed **diagnostic tools**, including a **Community of Practice (CoP) network analysis** to benchmark progress and inform strategic interventions (please see Appendix 1). Diagnostic tools were co-designed with MVA to be

proportionate, inclusive, and tailored to the needs of TA members. Please see Appendix 2.

- **Work Package 3** gathered **impact evidence** through interviews, surveys, and the development of five **Value Creation Stories**, embedding an NTU researcher to observe, understand, and measure the value of TA in real time. Please see Appendix 3.
- **Work Package 4** synthesized findings into a **summative Visioning Workshop**, produced a **lessons-learned report**, and events. Dissemination activities connected MVA to national networks, promoting the TA model across the wider VCSE sector.

Our **evaluation implementation plan** was designed to be **inclusive, iterative, and impact-focused**. By embedding evaluation into everyday practice and fostering a culture of peer learning, we aimed to build long-term capacity across MVA/TA. Monitoring was framed not as a compliance task, but as a meaningful, proportionate tool for learning, adaptation, and demonstrating collective impact.

We engaged early with key stakeholders to **map existing provision**, identify synergies, and co-design delivery where appropriate. This helped avoid duplication, ensure relevance, and maximize the value of our support.

We brought our **collaborative ethos** to this project by:

- Co-designing training and tools with MVA to ensure they are proportionate, inclusive, and tailored to the needs of TA members.
- Sharing learning and resources with MVA to support wider capacity-building efforts.
- Embedding an NTU researcher to observe, understand, and measure the value of TA.
- Hosting joint events and conference presentations to foster cross-organisational dialogue, practitioners' insights and academic reflection.
- Maintaining regular communication with MVA and other key stakeholders to ensure alignment and responsiveness.

We were committed to working **collaboratively** with MVA, TA leaders, and local partners to ensure that our evaluation support complemented and enhanced existing training and capacity-building provision across Medway. Our approach was grounded in **co-production, mutual learning, and alignment with local priorities**.

3.3 Evaluation Process

The central aim of the TA evaluation project is to understand, document, and assess the development of the TA, with a particular focus on enhancing skills, knowledge, and confidence across a range of topics related to transformation. We approach this work as collaborative partners, working closely with MVA and TA members to gain deeper insights into their efforts to improve their ways of working.

To support this, we have proposed four Work Packages that span the life cycle of the TA and its legacy. This evaluation offers continuous assessment of key milestones for both MVA and TA, using benchmarking interventions, developmental evaluations, and a final summative report.

Central to our approach is an emphasis on *shared learning*, enabling TA and MVA members to build the capacity to train future trainers who can independently evaluate their own projects. This assessment is designed to equip MVA with key diagnostic and analytical tools to carry out future evaluations effectively.

3.3.1 Year 1 - 2023

In line with this collaborative model, we maintained continuous communication with the TA management team, attending meetings and delivering workshops since 1st December 2022. Prior to the launch of Work Package 1, we participated in two introductory meetings during April and May 2023 to present our team and outline the evaluation process. Activities for Work Package 2 commenced.

Work Package 1 – Familiarisation: The aim of this stage is to familiarise the research team with the ideas underpinning the creation of the Transformation Academy (TA).

In WP1, we carried out 11 in-depth interviews with TA members between 19th May and 8th June 2023, each lasting around an hour (please see Appendix 1 for summary). These conversations explored members' experiences with the TA, their understanding of what the TA represents, what it means to be a generous leader, the resources they bring, and their expectations for learning and collaboration. We also examined their views on challenges and opportunities within the TA, as well as the dynamics of relationships among members. The findings revealed a strong sense of shared values, mutual trust, and a collective desire to

make the TA work as a space for peer support. As one participant reflected:

“So looking at the interviews so far, the outcomes, I believe that we actually have a strong basis. Something where we cannot actually take for granted in terms of mutual trust, in terms of the common vision that what we want to achieve, the energy, the enthusiasm I think we shouldn't take these things for granted. It's a strong basis for building something bigger and stronger”
(2023)

These insights were shared at the Theory of Change (ToC) workshop on 30th June 2023, which served as a platform for participants to discuss what they hoped to transform in Year 1 and over the next ten years, and to identify the actions needed to achieve those goals. Following the workshop, our team developed two ToC diagrams—one focused on the TA as a whole and the other on individual TA members—based on the interview and workshop data. These were presented to the TA management team in August 2023 and later shared with TA members in October 2023. Feedback from members indicated a desire to revise the diagrams, leading to the planning of a follow-up session in March 2024 to revisit the TA's long-term vision.

We also held meetings with MVA/TA and participated in a TA meeting in December 2023 and did some observations. Although initial responses to the TA survey were low, we reissued it in December 2023 and received 11 submissions. These responses allow us to begin descriptive analysis on key aspects such as connectivity, communication, influence, learning provision, and crisis support. The WP1 was completed successfully.



Work Package 2 – We focused on diagnosing and benchmarking the Transformation Academy (TA) to inform future interventions. A key activity was the development of a Community of Practice (CoP) network analysis diagnostic, designed to help TA leaders reflect on their journey, share best practices, and generate new knowledge to support the TA’s growth.

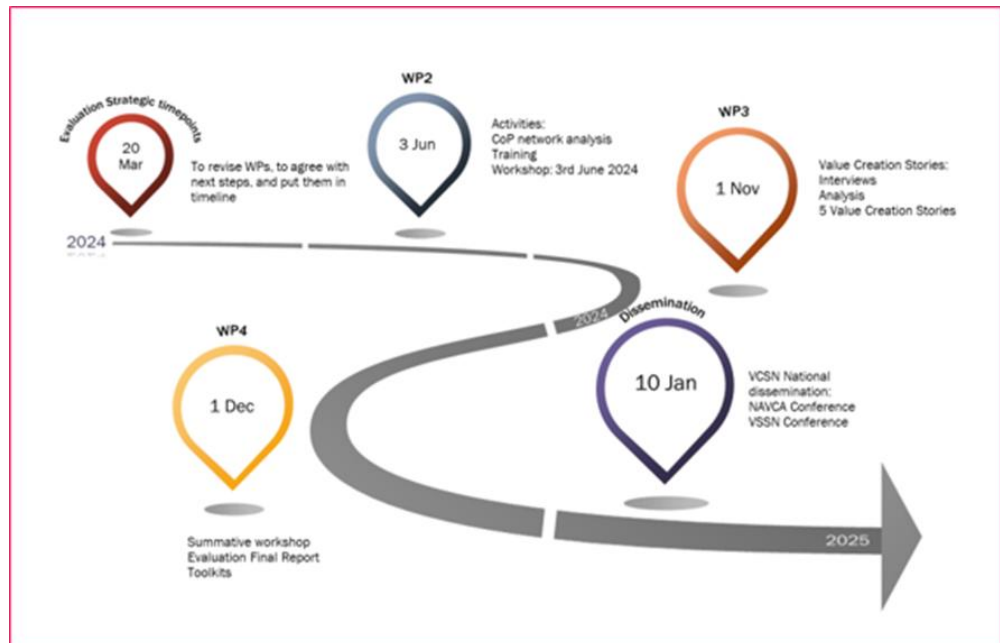
Between 2023 and early 2024, social network data was collected from members of the TA to establish a baseline understanding of the network. The goal was to identify which organisations were well connected, influential, key communicators, and valued learning partners, as well as to gather insights into how TA organisations perceived the partnership. Data collection was conducted via an online survey distributed by Medway CVS in June 2023, resulting in 16 organisational responses, one of which was incomplete. Duplicate responses were removed, and although the survey was sent to 27 members, 11 did not submit data. However, these organisations were still referenced in responses from other participants. Social Network Analysis typically requires a response rate of 85–90% for robust insights, but only 55% of the TA network provided data, meaning the perspectives of 12 organisations are not fully represented. The survey explored interactions across several dimensions, including communication, collaboration, learning relationships, crisis support, engagement, and perceptions of influence. The survey design was reviewed with the NTU team and a social network academic to ensure its relevance and analytical value. Please see attached confidential document.

Outputs

- 11 in-depth interviews and analysis
- Presentation of findings at the ToC workshop on 30th June 2023.
- Development of two Theory of Change diagrams—one focused on the TA and one on TA members—based on interview and workshop data.
- Presentation of ToC diagrams to the TA management team in August 2023 and to TA members in October 2023.
- Engagement with MVA/TA, including meetings and participation in a TA meeting in December 2023.
- TA survey reissued in December 2023
- 1 Social Network Map

3.3.2 Year 2 -2024

Work Package 2 – We decided strategic points for the evaluation in a meeting on 20 March 2024. The map below was a guidance document for interventions during 2024.



Additionally, we have gathered data for a 2nd iteration of the social network mapping (primarily via a session facilitated at the December meeting). We participated in the last TA meeting and witnessed strong relations build by all TA members. We had an activity about stakeholders' mapping and we listened to members' journeys in growing trust and relations with each other. This was clear perceived as they couldn't choose for one 'star' member as they thought that many members are now key collaborators.



Results were uploaded into Kumu. This provided a visual tool to help us understand how relationships and connections amongst Academy members have developed over the course of the project. Please see attached confidential document.

Work Package 3 – Our immersed researcher Chelle Coulton started to gather impact evidence through interviews, observations, analysis of TA surveys, TA documentation and commencing to measure the value of TA. Chelle undertook 41 interviews and created 14 value creation ‘maps’ capturing the experiences of individual academy members, plus a summative map distilling these individual experiences into a map of the collective/shared/overall value created through the Academy. The NTU team did one Value Creation Map workshop in a TA meeting (October 2024). Prof Daniel King, Dr Amanda Hay and Dr Juliana Mainard-Sardon had monthly update meetings with Chelle Coulton.

Work Package 4 - Project-end data collected by NTU coordinated and advised was provide to MVA in drawing up an online survey to capture distance travelled, and incorporated open questions from MVA’s annual one-to-one reviews with TA members.

In September, members of the NTU team attended the Voluntary Sector & Volunteering Research Conference (held at Bayes Business School, London) and presented two papers about the Transformation Academy – one considering the efficacy of the evaluation approach being deployed,

and one highlighting the early findings from the evaluation. Our PhD student Chelle Coulton received the Duncan Scott new researchers award for her study in Value Creation Stories based on her work at TA.

NTU attended meetings of a small group of Academy members considering the future of the Academy and reboot of the VCS Leaders Network from which it evolved, and provided advice, suggestions and insights in support of this process, including feedback from the interviews conducted in Spring 2024 on members' aspirations for the Academy going forwards. The team organised a Visioning Workshop for MVA and TA leaders to think about the future of TA and the alumni program. Part of the NTU team attended last TA meeting and provided support for it. We received positive feedback about our interventions:

“It's always good to actually have an uninterrupted hour to actually just explore things regarding, because you just you don't intellectualise or analyse things to that extent in the hurly burly of the day job, so I always find it quite a refreshing exercise to do, so thanks for your time as well.” (TA leader)

Outputs

- 1 Social Network Map - a second timepoint.
- 41 in-depth interviews and analysis (including staff, external stakeholders, and 3 rounds with Academy members)
- 14 Value Creation Maps for each TA member and 1 summative Value Creation Map
- 1 Value Creation Maps workshop
- 1 Visioning workshop with MVA and TA leaders
- Attended the Voluntary Sector & Volunteering Research Conference and presented 2 papers.
- Chelle Coulton received the Duncan Scott new researchers award for her study in Value Creation Stories based on her work at TA.
- 12 supervision meetings with Chelle Coulton

3.3.3 Year 3 -2025

Work Package 2 – Significant progress has been achieved in the development and implementation of the diagnostic tools during this

period. Dr Juliana Mainard-Sardon met with Clare Saunders to finalise the tools, and, Juliana together with Dr Ben Evans, produced a comprehensive Diagnostic Tools Practitioner Booklet to support practitioners in their application. In June 2025, the team delivered training for the MVA team, providing them with the necessary skills to use the tools effectively. Following this, feedback was received from MVA via email. Importantly, no further changes were requested for the guidance, indicating that the materials met the team's needs and expectations. The NTU team remains committed to supporting practitioners and is happy to answer any questions that may arise as the tools are put into practice. For full guidance on the use and application of the diagnostic tools was sent to the MVA Team.

The social network analysis of the TA revealed a notable strengthening of relationships among participating organisations between October 2023 and December 2024. Despite some fluctuation in participation, Rich Pickford highlights that the data showed increased trust, learning, and collaborative activity across the network. More organisations were identified as crisis contacts and learning partners in the second round, suggesting deeper trust and awareness. Engagement scores rose, and shared activities—such as resource sharing and collective decision-making—also increased, with a significant shift in organisations aligning on shared missions and values. However, communication levels slightly declined, possibly indicating more focused networking. Overall, the findings suggest that TA members became more interconnected and collaborative over time, though variability in participation and organisational capacity limits direct comparisons. A summary of the analysis will be incorporated in attached confidential document.

Work Package 3 – TA members were closely involved in the development of their Value Creation Stories. These were based on the information shared with Chelle Coulton during one-to-one interviews. The full versions make extensive use of quotes from these, and were shared with the individual members to ensure they accurately reflect their experiences. All data was checked with participants and Dr Juliana Mainard-Sardon has selected and edited final 5 Value Creation Stories for the final report, please see Appendix 2. A booklet containing the final Value Creation Stories is included in a separate file and is ready to be shared.

Prof Daniel King, Dr Amanda Hay and Dr Juliana Mainard-Sardon had monthly update meetings with Chelle Coulton.

In addition to end of project interviews conducted with TA members and secretariat staff, Chelle conducted interviews with a small number of key external stakeholders during the first part of 2025.

Work Package 4 – In February 2025, Juliana and Chelle initiated contact with a member of the NAVCA leadership team to propose a workshop tailored for NAVCA members. Following this, the NTU team collaborated closely with MVA to prepare the seminar content. This process proved to be highly rewarding, both internally for the team and externally for the intended audience. On 3rd March 2025 we had final meeting to agree report structure and timeline with Clare.

On 2nd April 2025, Juliana and Chelle, in conjunction with Jane Howard and Clare Saunders, delivered a seminar for NAVCA's members. Although attendance was lower than anticipated, the feedback received from NAVCA members and leaders was positive and encouraging. The collaborative process of preparing and presenting the seminar was particularly valuable, fostering strong partnerships and enhancing the team's collective learning experience.

On 30th July, Chelle attended the Medway Solidarity Coalition exploratory event, where MVA convened representatives from the sector alongside key public sector stakeholders to develop a bid for the Lottery's new Solidarity Fund. During the event, Chelle also had the opportunity to meet with several members of the TA team.

In June 2025, Chelle presented a paper at the International Critical Management Studies Conference entitled "*Rethinking Local Infrastructure: The Regenerative Power of Place-Based VCSE Communities of Practice?*", drawing on findings from the TA evaluation. Building on this, the team prepared for further dissemination of findings at the Voluntary Sector & Volunteering Research Conference 2025 in September. At this event, Clare and Chelle contributed to a panel discussion exploring local VCSE infrastructure, and Chelle delivered a second paper focusing on the value of TA. Her paper was selected as one of the finalists for an award. Feedback received from both conferences was highly valuable and has contributed to a deeper understanding of the impact of the TA project.



On 13th August 2025, Juliana attended a final meeting with National Lottery to share some of our initial findings. The NTU Team and MVA developed a proposal for a workshop at the NAVCA’s conference for 2026.

Outputs

- Diagnostic Tool Practitioner Booklet created
- Diagnostic Tool delivered
- Social Network Analysis completed
- 5 Value Creation Stories created
- NAVCA’s member workshop delivered
- Final Evaluation report meeting delivered.
- Final monitoring meeting with National Lottery attended.
- Presented research findings at two major conferences
- A workshop’s proposal developed for the 2026 NAVCA conference.
- 9 supervision meetings with Chelle Coulton

3.4 Reflexive summary

“I’ve just really enjoyed it. I’ve learnt a lot, I’ve met a lot of nice people, and I think going forwards, being able to develop that and knowing that there’s support out there if I need it, I can go back to whoever I need to ask for that support. As a charity, I think I’ve been able to feedback a lot of valuable

learning from it, and personally, as I said before, it's just helped me- I've gained a lot of understanding, I've gained the confidence in being able to do things I didn't have a clue about before, and yeah, I've just really enjoyed it. I enjoyed going along and listening to, I suppose, everyone else's experiences of what the charity sector is and what they do primarily to change, but then what we've done together or we're planning to do together for change. I think that's been very valuable."

(TA member, End Project Interview)

Over the past three years, it has been a privilege to observe the growth of this project and the development of leadership skills among TA members, who have increasingly found support in one another. Throughout the evaluation, we have learned alongside participants how to collaborate most effectively, co-create this evaluation, and foster a supportive environment. Notably, the partnership evolved from an initial stage of uncertainty to a place of mutual recognition, where the value of VCSE Observatory as an evaluation partner in delivering a project such as TA became clear. The evidence gathered suggests that our involvement has been instrumental in shaping the direction and future vision of TA, enabling members to reflect on their learning and to better appreciate the value of their engagement.

The development of Value Creation Stories has provided meaningful qualitative evidence of the project's impact via our immersed researcher. These narratives have captured learning at both personal and organisational levels. Individually, participants reported enhanced leadership skills, increased confidence, and the benefits of peer support. At the organisational level, this learning has translated into tangible changes, such as the introduction of emotional intelligence training and the initiation of collaborative projects and joint funding bids. These stories not only illustrate the depth of personal growth but also highlight the project's role in fostering cross-organisational innovation and capacity building through the Transformation Academy.

The breadth of data collected has enabled the formation of lasting relationships with MVA and TA members. Feedback from other Local Infrastructure Organisations has recognised the insights from this project as vital for their own contexts, particularly in rethinking the role and support needs of Local Infrastructure Organisations. There is a clear recognition that members benefit from a supportive space for leadership development, and this project offers a successful model for delivering such support.

Looking ahead, the project is well positioned for expansion and replication in Kent and beyond. Further funding would enable the development of this initiative in new areas.

It would be valuable for the Funder to support dissemination of the final report, both through their website and by collaborating on an event. Additionally, there is a need for support in developing a sustainable business model—both to ensure that initiatives like TA can continue beyond the limitations of a three-year grant, and to enable MVA to share their expertise more widely and generate income from supporting similar delivery elsewhere.

4. Transformation Academy Value

From the perspective of an immersed evaluator: Chelle Coulton, PhD Candidate

4.1 Overview: the nature of value

The following describes the value created by the Transformation Academy from the perspective of a researcher engaged with the project from October 2023, and immersed from March 2024. Two overarching observations can be made about the nature of value created through the Academy: there is a discernible ‘ripple’ effect with those most engaged benefitting most; and the most significant benefit is often less ‘tangible’ – i.e.: readily quantifiable – and often, but not always, derived from the Academy’s less formal activities and aspects.

4.1.1 Value creation as a ripple

Value has been most significant at the individual level: a ‘ripple’ effect radiates outwards, with the Academy’s core individual members both engaging and benefitting most extensively and immediately. Similarly, at an organisational level, MVA has perhaps benefited most significantly, including through opportunities to extend its area of benefit to become a Kent-wide presence, strengthen its existing relationships and standing with public sector actors, and work more extensively both with Academy member organisations and second-tier bodies elsewhere in the county. Members’ organisations have benefited to the extent that their leaders have acquired or developed skills and knowledge through TA engagement and then applied these in their workplaces (whether deliberately or, perhaps more often, unconsciously), and in some cases through closer collaborative partnerships forged between members. Where they have been identified as such, members’ organisations are also held in higher esteem by a limited but key group of external stakeholders who regard individual members, their organisations, MVA, and the sector in general, with greater confidence as more equal and trusted partners, a viable option for commissions, and even leading the way in engaging in and developing solutions to key issues.

4.1.2 Tangible vs intangible value

The project's value thus far has been multifaceted and considerable, but largely resistant to quantification and often taking unexpected forms. Metrics are often misleading (e.g.: the 3 questions tracked by MVA throughout the process) and although more readily identifiable (and in some cases quantifiable), the value created through more tangible aspects is often less significant than that of intangibles. The following describes many instances of tangibles being underwhelming or still to materialise, and yet the Academy is highly prized by its members. These members are shrewd and time-poor senior leaders: they can neither be fooled into believing in value where there is none, nor afford to commit time to activities with scant return on investment. The Academy therefore presents a challenge to those who would seek to measure the value of social learning in order to assess and more fully understand the project's worth.

4.2 Value created through the Transformation Academy's official activities

4.2.1 Formal trainings

Whilst formal, course-based learning has been a reasonably significant element of the Academy (6 training days/half-days were offered free to members over the 33 months in which the Academy was operating), for the main part, this has not been the primary source from which members derived value, with most reporting content was familiar, thus a refresher more than revelatory. There were two or three notable exceptions: those undertaking coaching training (delivered in smaller groups, by TA's facilitator) and subsequent practice all reported deriving substantial benefit from the experience (including confidence, identification and appreciation of the value of their own professional skills and expertise, sense of fulfilment through supporting another VCSE leader, sense of personal progress: "Oh, I remember that! [...] I've got the answer to that now"). Furthermore, many found creative ways to adapt and apply the 'GROW' model, including self-coaching, coaching board members, integrating the technique into day-to-day staff management, and overhauling their organisation's annual appraisals to encompass the approach. Several participants reported changing their pitches &/or marketing collateral as a result of the storytelling workshop. Whilst receiving mixed reviews, the emotional intelligence training had a profound and timely, if unexpected, effect on one participant's staff- and self-management which, alongside informal conversations with other Academy members, enabled the necessary cultural and structural changes (including positive outcomes to some delicate HR situations) as the organisation adjusted to rapid growth.

Members reported value in undertaking formal trainings as a familiar group, enabling greater sharing of and engagement with others' perspectives, and informal networking/conversations about content, delivery, other work topics, and beyond, than happens within courses attended normally alongside strangers. The group determined the topics by consensus or vote, which meant individuals sometimes found themselves on trainings they would not have otherwise attended and deriving unexpected benefit. That the courses were not only free to, but also organised for, members was attractive to VCSE leaders who habitually prioritise their staff's CPD over their own, partly due to resource constraints.

4.2.2 Task & Finish groups

Whilst Task & Finish (T&F) groups were convened around the Academy's stated priorities, most have yet to come to fruition. This seems to be due to a combination of factors, including mismatch between the short-term nature of the T&F groups (and the project as a whole) and the ambitious, long-term problems they sought to address; lack of resource to engage with the wider sector to fully understand the problem and codesign workable solutions, drive things forward, and adequately market outputs; lack of member engagement in some instances, particularly from non-leads once snags are encountered; and a reticence to deploy expert colleagues from their organisations. A small number of outputs have been delivered, notably the recruitment toolkit and brochure for which there is no real evidence of uptake.

Arguably, the real value of T&F groups to date has been as spaces in which to practise collaborative working – indeed, there seems to be a correlation between T&F-group involvement and centrality within the wider group – and their symbolic significance as the forum in which the radical, pan-VCSE solutions were developed. Members emphasised the action-oriented nature of the Academy as marking it out from other networks: “not just a talking shop”. The concerted focus on a small number of key issues within the T&F groups and their progress reports to the full meetings has also enabled members to gain deeper understanding of the challenges and use these insights to respond more effectively at an organisational level. For example, upon recognising the volunteering downturn as sector wide, one member described changing their volunteer recruitment method to personal approaches for specific roles, yielding four new, committed volunteers, rather than general advertisements which had proved unsuccessful.

T&F groups also continue to have potential value, pending their respective projects' completion. Correspondingly, much store is set by their potential to deliver sector-wide solutions to shared problems, despite slow progress being a source of frustration for some. There is significant risk that the T&F groups will peter out before

ever bearing fruit, or that their intended outputs will prove impossible in practice, or will not have the impact envisaged. In these latter cases, the risk is not so much one of product failure so much as failure to learn valuable lessons from the ventures (what doesn't work and why), and to adapt and respond accordingly.

4.2.3 Main meetings

These were the lynchpin of the Academy: the forum in which connections were made and momentum maintained. Whilst the agenda was relatively fixed once the first year's priorities were set after the initial exploratory meetings, some evolution continued – deliberately through introducing increased informal networking time and a 'collaborative opportunities' standing item, and perhaps less consciously in relation to the use of speakers and increasing emphasis on updates. Following feedback, informal networking time was extended from an initial 10-minute break, to a longer (15-30-minute) break plus time before and after the formal business, to better allow members to form and deepen relationships and check in with one another. These meetings saw the initial brokering of several collaborations, particularly around UK Shared Prosperity Funding (into which not all bids were successful), promoted by a standing item for collaborative opportunities (introduced November 2023). Although guest speakers were invited quite commonly – particularly in the early-mid phase – to inform and encourage exploratory discussions of key issues, these were not identified by members as the main source of value. Latterly the purpose of inviting guests shifted to one of dialogue and an opportunity for the Academy to bring its agenda to – more than take its cue from – external stakeholders (particularly evident in relation to its impact & evaluation standardisation work). Meetings became increasingly focussed on updates from the Transformation Alliance, evaluation partner, and T&F groups including one considering legacy/next steps, rather than exploring new topics, with opportunities for members to share challenges and tips from their day-to-day practice relegated to informal networking times, AOB (e.g.: using ClickUp to manage workflow), or as an aside from the main business (e.g.: members reflecting on coaching practice). Consequently, members didn't always feel that they derived as much value as they might from the business agenda.

And yet, as its focal point, members derived considerable value from attending meetings: “we see more value in being in the room with those people than the content”, and from being part of the Transformation Academy, generally. Confidence was a recurring theme amongst participants: those new to their posts &/or the sector observably grew in confidence as they became increasingly engaged and vocal within meetings; others reported growing in self-confidence despite being seasoned VCSE CEOs. Members commonly described undertaking informal benchmarking and feeling reassured to find that they were on a par with or compared favourably to

others, that they were facing the same challenges (“It’s not just us”), and that they were “doing it right”. Members valued being amongst others who understood them – what they do and why – and the deisolating effect of connecting regularly. Sometimes members provided insights on one another’s situations due to their external perspectives (e.g.: progress achieved) and/or having faced something similar (e.g.: restructuring). The group was regarded as a safe space in which it was okay to ask “stupid questions”, not always have to know the answers, and not have to play a role or live up to expectations – often in contrast to members’ day-to-day work contexts – and where it was understood that learning could originate with any member and flow in any direction. During one conversation I witnessed in early 2025, members concurred that it had “felt like home”. Effectively, the group acted as a ‘holding environment’ in which members could undertake identity work as they learned more about themselves, tried out different ways of ‘being’, and became more adroit at leading their organisations. Strikingly, this was despite the fact that not everyone knew everyone else well (e.g.: interview participants sometimes struggled to recall others’ names). Notwithstanding, the frequent meetings with (broadly) the same group enabled relationships to deepen between individuals, for them to check in with one another, and become more knowledgeable about peers’ organisations, often leading to improved referral/signposting pathways and access to each other’s networks. At the same time, Academy members valued the injection of fresh perspectives by less frequent or one-off attendees, and were exercised by whether and how others could be brought into the group to enable more VCSE leaders to benefit and prevent the Academy becoming exclusive &/or stagnant.

Simply being part of the Academy was highly prized by participants, and a strong sense of identity was evident. Members aligned themselves to the concept of ‘generous leadership’, and the sense of uniqueness/pioneering which they attributed to the Academy. Celebration was also important, with participation certificates frequently awarded, and annual review meetings attracting greater attendance and tending to focus on what had been achieved by the Academy, more than how it might be improved. Use of university/college venues for meetings and an academic evaluation partner were symbolically significant for some, setting the Academy apart as a space for a different kind of thinking from that demanded by their day-to-day tasks.

4.3 Value creation beyond official activities

The Transformation Academy primarily manifested in its formal activities. However, as relationships between individuals developed, a number of members reported

connecting outside of the Academy's formal structure for informal peer support and/or to collaborate on joint ventures. The value in the latter lay not only in the actual service delivery, but also in jointly designing services and bidding for funding. Members reported identifying and exploiting synergies which would not obviously have otherwise come about, opening up new possibilities for efficiencies, a wider range of services better meeting community needs, and/or reaching groups they had hitherto struggled to access. Even where funding bids were unsuccessful, members reported that undertaking due diligence and coordinating bid-writing were easier due to greater trust between partners than they had previously enjoyed or experienced with non-TA partners. Unsuccessful bids were mothballed in readiness for future funding opportunities and, buoyed by the positive process, members reported keenness to collaborate in designing other projects which may then successfully win funding.

Informal peer support took a number of forms: some members met 1-2-1 for lunch or coffee to talk over how things were going and share immediate challenges; sometimes members would proactively share information they deemed relevant to another's work or of interest to the whole group, normally by email; and sometimes members would contact one another with a specific problem or to seek specialist knowledge or expertise (e.g.: advice on charity shop feasibility and set-up). Strikingly, whilst members universally reported deriving value from knowing they could 'phone a friend', they reported rarely or never actually so doing, which suggests the network acted as a safety net: as with a trapeze artist, the knowledge that it was in place and would support them if necessary was enough to provide members with the confidence to perform their roles. Members became increasingly fond of one another, and considerable care was in evidence (e.g.: offering lifts, administering first aid, asking after family). Several described something akin to friendship, stopping short of using the term 'friend' only because they knew each other in a professional rather than personal capacity.

4.4 'Transformation' and 'Academy'

The name 'Transformation Academy' suggests the project's value lies in whatever learning and transformation may be taking place. The value derived from the Transformation Academy has been diverse, and although the value created extends beyond learning, all can be traced back to the (social) learning occurring amongst the group. Value created can also be thought of as difference made – i.e.: change.

4.4.1 'Transformation'

Whilst 'transformation' conjures to mind something big, sweeping, sudden (or rapid), and timebound, change of this nature does not appear to have taken place. Neither

are these necessarily intrinsic to the concept: transformation can be incremental, dynamic, and occur over longer timeframes (Mintzberg 1994). Rather, what makes change transformational is the deep level at which it occurs (Buchanan and Badham 2008). Understanding transformation in these terms better captures the transformation taking place through the Academy: change is occurring, but rather than one ‘big bang’, the change is taking place in smaller ways, on multiple fronts, and at multiple levels: “It’s little things we share, little nuggets, or little cherries, that grow into a great big cherry tree.” Wenger-Trayner et al. (2023, p. 215) characterise transformative value as pertaining to “people’s identities or the systems and culture of the community’s context”. This closely reflects the identity work in which members have engaged within the Academy and their aspirations for pan- and inter-sectoral change.

4.4.2 ‘Academy’

Whilst learning has undoubtedly taken place, the formal agenda has, in general, been less valuable than the informal learning (‘hidden curriculum’). Nonetheless, the formal business has provided an important hook or reason for the group to convene. Much of the formal learning has remained as of potential value, rather than being adapted, applied, and subsequently integrated into (improved) practices better helping members realise individual, organisational and shared goals. However, hidden curriculum learning has been significant: learning about one another, how to work together in this context and to shared goals, and the personal learning that takes place in identity work. Another striking feature of the learning is its social nature and role of the group in enabling and enriching individuals’ learning. Whether providing a multiplicity of perspectives, or acting as a safe space or holding environment, the group has been critical to the learning – and thus the value created – through the Transformation Academy.

4.5 Future value: Legacy

Inevitably, this evaluation focuses on the value created during the three-year lifespan of the funded project. However, a more complete picture would also consider future value likely to be generated as a consequence of the Transformation Academy. Legacy is important not least to funders who wish to see enduring results from their investment, to the members who unanimously expressed a desire for the Academy to continue in some form, and – although they may not yet recognise it – to Medway’s wider VCSE sector due to the work in progress towards pan-sector innovations. Additionally, the potential for the model to be adopted elsewhere may have implications for local infrastructure organisations beyond Medway, and the health and functioning of the VCSE sector in general.

It has become increasingly apparent that the Transformation Academy is one manifestation of a longer-standing community of practice which both pre-existed (e.g.: as VCSEF Leaders Network Steering Group and Friday Zoomers which each fulfilled some but not all of the same functions) and will continue in alternative forms beyond the initial three-years of Lottery funding. Going forwards, the thread is set to split into a number of interconnected strands: “returning home” in the form of a rebooted VCSEF Leaders Network, whose revamped steering group will likely include many of the core Academy members; a new one-year cohort funded by an additional fourth year of Lottery funding; and potentially as an alumni group of the original cohort – although the latter may be limited to training to facilitate the next cohort. Expected shifts in local authority boundaries and the emergence of other Kent-based leaders networks during Medway’s VCSEF Leaders Network’s dormancy lend further complexity.

Despite the Transformation Academy’s short-term nature some things will endure beyond its lifespan: the ‘identity work’ undertaken by its members has made them better leaders, more equipped and confident to do their jobs. Much as a penny dropping, these changes, although often subtle, are significant and – once learned – not readily forgotten or eroded with time. Almost as enduring are the relationships which have been forged: without losing sight of these relationships’ professional nature, many of the core members have come to regard one another with the same fondness and familiarity with which they might friends. For some, informal peer support on an individual level, and collaborative projects at an organisational level, with fellow Academy members have become second nature. Whilst these require ongoing mutual effort and will, many of these relationships are likely to endure irrespective of formal opportunities to meet.

5. Transformation Academy Learning

From the perspective of a learning expert: Dr Amanda Hay, Associate Professor of Management Learning.

Overall, the Transformation Academy (TA) represents an incredibly positive story where many of the espoused aims stated in 2021 have to greater or lesser extent been realised. There is a genuine depth and breadth of outcomes reported by the TA members. This is evidenced through the discussion of the value types which span superficial/immediate to deeper levels of sustained value, which while chiefly impacting individual members, also promise wider impacts for their organisations and the VCSE sector.

At the individual level, perhaps most strikingly members have developed increased levels of confidence to act arising from an understanding of the shared nature of the struggles of VCSE leadership, displacing previously held perceptions of struggle as a sign of personal weakness. In turn, this confidence enables the development of an emerging 'expertise in not knowing' (Raab, 1997) where struggles are rethought as a starting point for further inquiry. At the organisational level, such openness to inquiry then creates space for doing things differently and often more effectively as actions are more careful and inclusive. At the sector level, while recognising that value is inevitably likely to be less visible since wider changes both take more time to materialise and are more challenging to pinpoint, glimpses of promising value are clearly evident, such as collaborative partnerships which promise to strengthen the outcomes for service users, for example, Medway Diversity Forum and Carers First securing £19, 970 of UK Shared Prosperity Funding and Nucleus and NKM development of £50k funding bid, which although ultimately unsuccessful, has strengthened inter-organisational relations and has the potential to be resubmitted for future bids.

Notably, increased levels of confidence to explore unknowingness allied to a repositioning of struggle and vulnerability as strength are consistent with growing expert voices in the Management Learning academic community (Bloomfield et al, 2024; Corlett et al, 2019; Deslandes, 2020; Hay, 2014; 2022; 2023). These voices champion exactly the type of learning that is evidenced through the TA. Critically, in keeping with its name, this learning reflects changes in the self, assumptions and behaviours making it transformational at the individual level (Mezirow, 1991). Accordingly, the TA therefore facilitates crucial leadership identity work (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003), that is, it helps leaders to revise and strengthen understandings of themselves.

Yet, of course, certain questions remain relating to the reach of these outcomes. Notably, for example, key initiatives such as volunteer passports and the Corporate Social Responsibility/Environmental, Social and Governance drive, designed to deliver sector benefits remain incomplete and continued effort is critical. Challenges also remain in respect of the longevity of value, underlining the need to see the TA, as an ongoing effort. Indeed, it is noteworthy that members themselves have recognised this need and have been pivotal in driving the continuation of the TA. However, this push has notably been focused on the development on a second TA cohort which leaves uncertainty surrounding the vital continuation of the existing TA as an ongoing Community of Practice. Crucially, too it is important to remain alert to the emergence of unintended consequences of learning which may place limits on future learning. For example, all attempts to organise learning inevitably mobilise organisational dynamics and power relations (Vince, 2004) such as the emergence of core and peripheral groups, and it is important to attend to these going forwards as these will shape future learning possibilities. Put differently, all learning is political, even in the VCSE sector with its laudable desire to do things differently and therefore reflection on how

organising impacts learning efforts is as crucial to consider as how learning impacts organising efforts.

5.1 Enabling and Constraining Influences on the Transformation Academy's Success

In this section, we explore the factors that were associated with driving the success of the Transformation Academy alongside those factors which constrained or limited its aspirations. In many cases, these factors represent opposites of each other and highlight the existence of contradictions of learning. These are summarized in the table below.

Enablers	Constrainers
<i>Relationships</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supportive and connected local infrastructure organisation to drive, promote and recruit to initiative. • Pre-existing relationships promote group familiarity. TA as one 'chapter' in ongoing Community of Practice. • Emergent supportive local authority/state actors plus ongoing local infrastructure contract. • Trust in MVA and TA from local VCSE sector. • Successful relationship with funder e.g. flexibility. • Support from university partner and PhD studentship: provides perceptions of credibility, rigour and independence. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emerging political tensions as learning efforts also inevitably mobilize organising tensions. • Existing and deepening relations can also exclude. • Initial unsupportive local authority/state actors. • Lack of trust from other sectors e.g. private sector. • Conditions of funding relationship e.g. tangible progress. • Different orientations and working approaches of academics and practitioners e.g. reflection v action orientations.
<i>Resources</i>	

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 3 Year funding from National Lottery (covers meeting and training costs, secretariat, some T&F work).• Hygiene Factors: easy parking & access; setting/space; refreshments provided; heat/light, breakfast/lunch options nearby.• Utilizing resources to maximum effect e.g. forward planning of meetings to ensure efficient time utilization; utilizing free space of local FE/HE institutions to reduce meeting costs and also academically symbolic.• Efficient administration: making it easy for busy people to engage e.g. researching training options, booking trainers, covering course fees; timely reminders; setting agendas	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Time-limited funding inhibits long-term goal achievement.• Lack of resource/capacity within organisations impedes engagement (those with no paid staff &/or most stretched are less likely to find time to attend).• Free spaces are often sub-optimal, or not neutral, or subject to being pulled (e.g. university cuts meant they could no longer offer free rooms).• Making it too easy for busy people to engage can mean they don't have to think about TA or progress things between meetings.
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VCSE Sector Conditions	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • COVID 19 catalyst: to working differently, building momentum, war-time spirit-forced embracing of unknown. • Agility of sector • Collaboration orientation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • COVID 19 fatigue and overstretch: threatens momentum. • Financial constraints • Cost of living crisis acutely felt and limits ongoing participation. • Lower status of sector • Competitive orientation
Transformation Academy Membership Characteristics	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diversity of organisational membership to include varying sizes of organization (small to large), areas of concern (e.g. health, disability, LGBTQIA+) enables broadening of perspectives. • Group membership stability enables continuity of action and relationship. • Group membership churn to broaden perspectives. • Strong shared identification with Medway as a place and an approach “the Med-Way”. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diversity of organisational membership presents challenges finding common ground e.g. organisational application, small organisations under represented and tensions between organisation and sector focus. • Lack of diversity of individual members e.g. age, political stance, constrains group input. • Group membership stability also prompts groupthink and stagnation. • Limited benefit of membership to occasional members. • Not all members are Medway-centric- resulting in emergent tensions of place commitment Medway v Kent. • Isolated [peninsula] place limits wider engagement.
Transformation Academy Membership Orientations	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shared passion and energy of members to improve local communities. • Generous leadership and generous organisations willingness to give back. • Goodwill, respective, 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Varying levels of engagement from members • Time poor • Lack of confidence to act

<p>supportive and welcoming.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acceptance that members will give according to their capacity. • Desire for doing things differently (relative to private and public sectors and past VCSE working). • Espoused ownership of TA: Learning Independence • External orientation • Openness to sharing information and to collaborating (through this project). <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perceived equality of membership <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning Optimism • Flexible learning orientation. • Urgency for action. • Action orientation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Those that can give more, yield greater influence in shaping group. • Desire for doing things the same (e.g. becoming more business-like, working as they had always done) • Ownership relinquished in practice: Learning Dependence • Internal orientation • Lack of expertise, resource and mechanism for sharing information. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inequality of membership: emerging core and peripheral groups. • Learning Naivety. • Rigid learning orientation • Impatience for action's effect. • Limited reflection orientation.
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Group Development and Processes

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initial smaller group (n=12) • Early participation key to ownership and involvement. • New potential members invited to observe without obligation.
 • Group identification and belonging.
 • In-person meetings facilitate trust and coherence.
 • MVA as skilled group facilitator: maintain group focus, momentum, continuity and equity. Develop safe space. • NTU as independent evaluator: identify taken for granted learning. • Extended time for informal networking during meetings (esp. crucial for smaller organisations' input). • Felt uniqueness of group: to drive momentum. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group growth and succession focus limits focus on current group. • Slow start – as group felt their way towards TA's function, shared priorities, and action plans.
 • Group identification means sometimes existing members too comfortable e.g. limits challenge and newer members uncomfortable. • In-person meetings resource intensive compared to virtual meetings and constitutes barrier to participation for some. • Group over-dependent on facilitator limiting their inputs and reflexivity and hence social learning. • Group over-dependent on evaluation team limiting social learning. • Informal networking: lack of structure, guidance, timings (start and end of meetings) and social anxiety limited participation for some. • Simultaneous need for replicability of the group to show wider value. |
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<i>Purpose & Evidence</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shared higher purpose to improve local lives. • Over time, clearer narrative of TA's purpose. • Informal piloting during COVID provided initial evidence base. • Over time, evidence of TA value e.g. Value Creation Stories. • Future development of impact tool (T4 lottery report) • NTU Evaluation Report as evidence base. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initial lack of clarity of specific aims and purpose of TA • Challenges in recognizing and articulating value of TA. • Lack of tangible evidence of value of TA.

As the above table illustrates, there were a wide range of factors which both drove and limited the success of the Transformation Academy. Reflecting the dynamic nature of learning, these factors were not always static, that is, more optimistically, some factors which initially acted as constrainers, over time, (e.g. a lack of evidence of the TA's value) could become enablers and more pessimistically, factors which started as enablers (e.g. group stability) could later also become constrainers. This underlines the importance of recognizing both enabling and constraining factors and working with the inevitable tensions that arise.

In getting the initiative off the ground initially, relationships, resources and sector conditions were pivotal. Yet these same factors, also at times, inevitably, produced tensions which constrained the ambitions of the Academy.

Relationships with several stakeholders were critical to the inception and early development of the TA. The relationship between **MVA, as the LIO and the local VCSE sector** stands out as critical to the genesis of the TA initially, for example MVA's role in driving, promoting and recruiting to the initiative, as well as to its maintenance over time. Yet, as we detail below, the strength of this relationship also imposed limits to the success of the TA since there is a danger of an unintentional, over-dependency on the LIO

which can constrain member contributions. It is also important to note the importance of **pre-existing relationships** between TA members prior to its inception. The TA emerged from the area's established leader's network which was further reinforced during the COVID 19 pandemic with the establishment of a 'Friday Zoomers' group. The TA can then be seen as a chapter or particular manifestation of an ongoing Community of Practice. Such relationships provided the foundations for the TA and facilitated identification with the group yet over time this could also prove unintentionally exclusionary, making the TA less appealing to newcomers. **A sense of belief "from the voluntary sector, the acceptance of us and trust"** as well as from the **local authority** were seen as enabling factors, while a perceived lack of trust from those working outside of the sector potentially threatened the fledgling initiative. The unanticipated **relationship with an academic partner** Nottingham Trent University and eventual allied PhD studentship provided perceived credibility to the initiative as well as theoretical rigour and an independent evaluation perspective yet at the same time, differences between practitioner and academic working approaches and perspectives also presented some challenges, not least different orientations in working timescales. The appointment of a PhD student with extensive experience in the VCSE sector has been crucial to the development of the academic partnership.

The availability and careful use of **resources** also underpinned the success of the TA. Most notably, securing **funding for three years** from the National Lottery was critical. Yet over time, the tensions of time-limited funding which challenge the achievement of long-term goals were acutely visible, as expressed by a TA member during an interview "You are winding this up [just] as we are trying to climb this mountain." So too, funding is of course not limitless, which meant that bigger projects arising from the work of the TA such as ambitions to adapt an online platform to progress the volunteer passport scheme, stalled.

Several **VCSE Sector conditions** were seen as crucial to driving the TA initiative. Of great significance was the **COVID 19 pandemic's impact** on the VCSE sector which revealed the sector's troubling vulnerability and fuelled a commitment to its future resilience "we can't ever be in this position again" [TA Member]. At the same time, the demands of COVID 19 which often over stretched the sector produced fatigue, threatening the momentum of the emerging project. The pandemic notably drove a shift towards a collaborative orientation between VCSE organisations with one member commenting that they were "forced to collaborate through circumstance". This positions members as "comrades in adversity" (Vince, 2004: 64) yet at the same time, an unstated competitive orientation which positions members as "adversaries with commonality" (Vince, 2004: 64) remained latent and fuels the organisational-sector foci tension described below. In

addition, further external shocks in the form of the **cost-of-living crisis** were acutely felt by TA member organisations which threatened their engagement and continuation in the TA.

Turning to look at the composition and working of the TA itself, our analysis detected a broad array of factors which informed and constrained its effectiveness. Strikingly, the **diversity of organisations** which comprised the TA was important in bringing different perspectives to the table allowing the group to see differently and envisage alternative ways of thinking and acting. Yet this same diversity also posed challenges in finding common ground, such as working out solutions which would work across the sector, and inevitably sometimes fuelled tensions between organisational and sector foci. It was also notable that despite the diversity of organisational representatives constituting the TA, at the same time, there was a lack of diversity of individual members, for example, most were of similar ages and shared political persuasions, which potentially limited diversity of perspectives feeding into the group. Efforts to ensure **stability of group membership** were critical to provide a sense of continuity of progress and to develop group belonging, however, this also sometimes prompted ‘groupthink’ which prevented members from forming or expressing outlying views and asking more critical questions. Simultaneously, members noted the value of some **level of group churn** to bring fresh perspectives, yet questions are also raised as to the value for the occasional group members who provided this churn. A **shared identification with the local area of Medway** allied to the developed place specific approach – **the Med-Way-** formed an important glue of the group yet the isolated location of Medway (and areas therein) also posed challenges in stimulating wider engagement with the group. In addition, not all members were Medway centric which resulted in emergent tensions of place commitment, i.e. Medway v Kent.

Reflecting **on orientations of the TA membership**, several attitudes and values were pertinent to driving the group’s success. Notably, a **shared passion and energy to improve** the lives of those living in Medway allied to what the group termed ‘**generous leadership**’ which was described by one member as “people (are) giving up time for the greater good of things that may not directly even affect them” and a desire to do things differently to how things had been done previously in the VCSE sector and in the private and public sectors where some members had previously worked, gave the group impetus. Yet in reality practical concerns often constrained such positive attitudes. Notably, for example, time constraints meant that commitments could not always be honoured resulting in fluctuating attendance at meetings, and so too, an initial lack of self-confidence, e.g. to act as coaches, held members back. We also discerned the emergence of critical features of the group’s culture which facilitated the group’s activities. For example, members highlighted that “**ownership** is very important” and that

they "like(d) being involved in the direction of the group" as this enabled the pursuit of collective priorities rather than individual concerns. This was allied to an emerging shared **external orientation** towards the inter-organisational network which allowed members to lift their heads up to see the broader sector landscape. However, this orientation existed in tension with their internal orientations towards their own organisations. TA members also expressed the importance of the **openness and perceived equality** of the group "the culture that's emerged for the Transformation Academy is that everyone is equal", yet over time, maintaining the desired equality of membership was challenged owing to the emergence of organizational dynamics which are routinely observed in all groups as they evolve. Here, fluctuating attendance and engagement resulted in the emergence of core and peripheral groups which shaped ongoing learning. For example, in line with the group's culture, there was an acceptance that members would give according to their capacity but inevitably those that gave more yielded greater influence over the shaping of the group. We also noted the importance of positive orientations towards learning, what could be described as '**learning optimism**' with the TA being labelled by one member as "an oasis of shared positivity" denoting a can-do attitude and a **sense of urgency for action**. This was allied to members' **flexible responses to learning** outcomes such as persistence in the event of failure and capitalizing on emergent opportunities such as the appointment of new staff members in member organisations enabling new collaborative projects. While such optimism is laudable, at the same time, this produced what could be described as '**learning naivety**' where members avoided confronting the deeper challenges that all learning efforts inevitably encounter such as raising questions of a lack of learning progress, thus often limiting more critical forms of learning. Relatedly, a sense of a rigid approach to learning was often seen whereby members tended to rely on familiar responses which limited the depth of learning. This reflects an understanding that learning is always "both desired and avoided at the same time" (Vince, 2004: 69).

In respect of **group development processes**, several factors emerged as critical to the Academy's functioning. The development of the group was facilitated by starting with a smaller and **realistic group size of 12** which enabled members to feel that they belonged. Belonging to the group from the start was identified as critical to a felt sense of ownership and ongoing commitment. In contrast, those who were not present from the start often reported that they felt that they had missed something significant which limited their sense of belonging to and ownership of the group. Meetings took place **in person** which fostered trust between members and developed group coherence but at the same time were more resource intensive than virtual meetings. For some, in person meetings were reported as a significant barrier to participation in the TA. Crucially, **MVA**

facilitated the group's meetings which was identified by members as pivotal in ensuring the group's focus, momentum and perceived equality of membership, which was especially important in ensuring multi-directional learning between the more and less experienced. Vitality, facilitation also ensured that a culture of respect was generated and that the TA constituted a **safe space** for members to explore ideas without personal judgement. However, simultaneously MVA's facilitation and cultivated safety also meant that members could sometimes become overly dependent on MVA and became too comfortable in their space which threatened members' independence and questioning, both central to extending the reach and depth of learning. For example, members demonstrated a reluctance to raise uncomfortable truths as this might potentially unsettle the harmonious group relations. This kind of dependence was also glimpsed in relations with the academic partner who was perceived to be responsible for the group's evaluation thus limiting the group's deeper consideration of their own progress.

Over time, **informal networking opportunities** emerged as salient to the deepening of group belonging and furthering shared concerns, especially from the perspective of members who represented smaller VCSE organisations. Consequently, informal networking times were extended within the TA's meeting agendas. Yet, paradoxically, a lack of structure and guidance of how to operate in the informal space as well as timing constraints (e.g. ease of being able to opt out at start or end of meetings allocated for networking time) allied to social anxieties also limited the value of informal networking for some. Finally, a perception of the **uniqueness** of the TA initiative was ostensibly critical to the development of the group's identity, "meeting other people and talking about moving things forward. That in itself is actually quite radical when you look at other areas, it's really unique. I often quote the Transformation Academy", yet at the same time the group were minimally aware of pressures to show broader applicability to facilitate the group's wider impact beyond Medway, thus threatening the perceived novelty of the group. In light of this tension, over time, the group re-identified themselves as advanced collaborators.

The clarity of the group's identity also related to questions of the **group's purpose**. While, initially the group coalesced around broad shared aims of improving the lives of communities in the Medway area, building VCSE Sector resilience and developing different ways of sector working to tackle systemic social issues, a lack of specificity beyond these broad aims threatened the progress of the group, especially in the early stages of the TA "I don't think we've come up with a good way of describing it (TA)". For example, clarity of aims and purpose were especially important in helping members to understand what they were investing their time in as well as presenting the group to key stakeholders such as organisational trustees and potential new members. Over time, the

purpose of the group became somewhat clearer as members coalesced around shared priorities and consequent pan-VCSE sector initiatives. Relatedly, difficulties in recognising and articulating value as well as a lack of tangible **evidence of the group's value** constrained early development of the group with one member commenting that “from my perspective my trustees don't know what I'm doing, that is a real problem. They don't see the benefit yet”, but over time the collection of evidence for example, in the form of value creation stories and reports such as this can bolster the future development of the initiative.

5.2 Raising the tensions of learning

Our analysis therefore highlights that attempts to organise learning, here the TA, produce contradictions of learning such as learning optimism and learning naivety, group inclusion and exclusion, and learning independence and dependence. As Hay, King & Smith (2024) observe, these kinds of contradictions do not indicate weakness or fault, but rather are unavoidable, and while they are unresolvable, it is important to recognize and work with these emergent tensions to strengthen future learning outcomes. For example, while cultivating psychological safety is vital to encouraging learning, it is also important to remain alert to the simultaneous ways in which members can become overly safe and avoid asking more searching questions of the group, such as why leaders failed to delegate tasks to appropriate organisational members, limiting possibilities for organisational learning or why certain group projects ostensibly disappeared from the group's agenda, threatening the realisation of wide reaching sector benefits. Recognizing both enabling *and* constraining forces and working with the generated tensions can therefore allow for deeper and wider forms of learning.

6. Recommendations

This section presents a series of recommendations emerging from the evaluation of the Transformation Academy (TA). These insights are directed toward MVA, TA members, and a range of other stakeholders, including funders, commissioners, infrastructure organisations, and academic partners. They reflect both strategic and practical considerations for sustaining and enhancing communities of practice (CoPs), with attention to inclusivity, learning dynamics, and organisational relationships. The recommendations aim to support the long-term development of the TA and its local area, while also offering guidance to the wider VCSE sector. By encouraging reflective practice, fostering collaboration, and addressing structural challenges identified through this evaluation, they provide a foundation for strengthening similar initiatives in other geographical areas.

Funders & commissioners

- To view learning as long term and ongoing process. Recognise challenges for organisations working to short term time scale on long term projects.
- To encourage/incentivise establishing & use of such CoPs to build sector capacity.
- Greater latitude for experimentation, including understanding the value of failure/unsuccessful initiatives.
- Recognition that CoPs do have costs, notwithstanding generous leadership.
- To recognise the different forms of learning's value, most of which are intangible and difficult to quantify. To embrace alternative qualitative forms of evidence e.g. value creation stories.
- To see value in incremental changes which over time can cumulatively deliver deeper change.

Other stakeholders (e.g.: local authority, health)

The TA provides broader representation of the VCSE sector than individual organisations, but it remains a small segment, largely made up of larger entities. Future cohorts should actively encourage participation from medium and smaller organisations to better reflect the sector's diversity. Key stakeholders could support this by signposting potential new members.

Local infrastructure organisations

- Setting up such CoPs need not be the preserve of a local LIO, particularly as area coverage becomes increasingly patchy. There may be a role for head offices of federal charities to support local branches in setting up place-based CoPs.
- Negotiating venues, refreshments, etc at low/no cost is a useful task LIOs are well-placed to undertake. Rather than members hosting the CoP between them, the use of neutral venues was important in promoting even power distribution and enabling all members to physically distance themselves from their day-to-day work in order to achieve the psychological distance required to reflect. Use of in-house venues is appropriate for task & finish groups, informal catch-ups, etc, and allows members the opportunity to see one another in-situ and gain a fuller understanding of one another's organisations.
- Consider evolving the LIO model to place Communities of Practice (CoPs) at its core, potentially through a multi-CoP structure aligned to specific themes.
- There's a valuable opportunity to rethink how reach and inclusivity are balanced within the TA. Exploring a lighter-touch 'nursery' Community of Practice (CoP) for micro-organisations could offer a psychologically safe entry point, enabling them to engage

meaningfully without the pressure of traditional 1:1 capacity-building. As these groups grow, they could naturally transition into the more established CoP, preserving trust while expanding participation. This approach could help unlock wider engagement without compromising the integrity of the existing network.

- Recognise the importance of in-person meetings for building social capital, especially in a post-lockdown world where so much of our inter-organisational communication is done online. Recommend retaining this feature as much as possible, at least for the member meetings.

MVA

- To recognise their crucial role in setting up communities of practice but to also be mindful of creating over dependence on the infrastructure organisation.
- In setting up communities of practice to be mindful of individual diversity as a selection criterion as well as organisational diversity.
- Managing conflicts of interest:
 - MVA's CEO's membership of TA was legitimate/appropriate, however, this affected power dynamics amongst the members
 - Facilitator was also project lead, so there was a tension between allowing the group to coproduce and having hard outcomes to report back to funder.
 - One way to manage CoI would be to bring in an external facilitator. Alternatively, they could make a reciprocal arrangement with an LIO in a neighbouring area.
- To establish greater clarity from the outset regarding the intended duration of the group. A shared understanding of the group's timeline could help sustain momentum and motivation. While the decision for a hard closure was ultimately made, involving the group more collectively in that process might have supported a smoother transition and preserved engagement.
- Minutes - Whilst verbatim minutes may have inhibited free & open discussion, confidential summaries of actions, key discussion points, and decisions would have helped keep everyone up to speed, served as useful reminders, bolstered a sense of continuity, and would be a helpful source for future reference to save going over the same ground at a future point.
- To support greater engagement, future initiatives should ensure that both the group's profile and its outputs are more prominently featured on MVA's website. Improved visibility can help raise awareness and encourage wider participation.
- Encourage greater transparency in recruitment communications: Providing clear and timely updates on membership applications will support a shared understanding across the group.

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- Developing clearer offer for alumni – not just the opportunity to facilitate subsequent cohorts.
 - There's an opportunity to bring more clarity and alignment across the new cohort, alumni, VCSEF leaders network, and its steering group. A more streamlined approach could really strengthen collaboration and impact.
 - MVA to invest in properly developing marketable offer based on experience of running CoPs.

Original cohort/members

- To recognise the ways in which organising impacts learning as much as learning impacts organising in all sectors, even in VCSE with its distinctly noble aspirations. Notably, to be alert to organisational dynamics which shape learning possibilities e.g. learning dependence and psychological safety.
- To recognise both enablers and constrainers of learning and to work with the tensions that emerge. So too, to recognise their dynamic relationship, that is, how factors which can initially enable can also constrain and vice versa.
- To embrace more critical forms of learning- e.g. asking deeper and challenging questions, reflecting as well as acting.
- To recognise intangible value as central part of communities of practice and avoid focusing exclusively on tangible outcomes
- To recognise learning as an ongoing process for all and to maintain current as well as future communities of practice.

Members/cohorts of similar groups (future or elsewhere)

- To purposefully create space for informal learning e.g. space within meetings to allow unforeseen learning possibilities to emerge.
- To create a safe and inclusive space for all members.
- To develop broad vision for group at the outset to communicate potential value to other stakeholders, while at the same time not being overly concerned about the exact content of this allowing it to evolve over time.
- Leaning into conflict, holding one another to account, questioning more. These were rare, but when they did occur, they served the group well in generating better ideas and enabling progress.
- Reflecting on the meeting planning approach can help ensure that participants and facilitators make the most of available resources, including opportunities between meetings. Encouraging more frequent idea exchange and reporting back on the application of learning in everyday practice would enrich the experience and

outcomes. When these moments occurred, they proved to be especially valuable and could be fostered more intentionally in future settings.

- Future initiatives would benefit from more strategic use of available expertise. Inviting individuals who have successfully addressed similar challenges—such as developers and users of existing volunteering apps—could provide valuable insights and accelerate progress. Additionally, ensuring that the most relevant specialists from member organisations are engaged in task and finish groups, either directly or via proxies, would strengthen the quality and relevance of contributions.
- Showcasing throughout – slots for members to share about themselves, their organisations, their challenges, their breakthroughs.
- Natural development (over time) would be to coordinate on bigger issues – shifting focus beyond initiatives to support the sector to solutions which directly benefit end users: i.e.: how do we best organise to tackle x social problem? Prospectively consortium bids, prospectively coordinating across sectors.

Academic Partners/Evaluators

- To be mindful of potential over dependence on evaluation team and encourage joint responsibility for ongoing evaluative efforts.
- To select researchers with close and distant knowledge of the field.
- Use of technologies to aid reflective practice between meetings – slack/teams channels for sharing ideas & information amongst group, capturing value, sharing stories, getting feedback, etc.
- A more integrated approach to data collection between the LIO and the evaluation partner would help ensure that the right expertise informs the design and delivery of evaluation activities, while also reducing the time demands placed on participants.
- Incorporating short, reflective value creation capture exercises into the members' meetings from the outset would have encouraged greater reflective practice as is more typical of a CoP, and potentially reduced both demands on participants' time for interviews and the amount of analysis and interpretation required from the evaluators – better done by the participants. Example: better integration between the work of the group and the evaluation.

7. Conclusions

The Transformation Academy set out to explore whether a different way of working could strengthen the voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector in Medway and North Kent. What emerged was not a single, dramatic shift, but a series of incremental yet deeply meaningful changes that accumulated across

individuals, organisations and networks. For participants, the Transformation Academy created a trusted space to build confidence, reflect on leadership, and trial new practices. For their organisations, it introduced tools, approaches and collaborations that influenced governance, fundraising and staff management. For the sector more widely, it demonstrated how peer support and collective identity can foster resilience in a challenging environment.

A central lesson is that transformation often arises through relationships and culture rather than through discrete projects or outputs. Trust, confidence, belonging and identity proved to be as valuable as tangible products or measurable outcomes. Leaders spoke of the relief of not feeling alone, of sharing experiences with peers, and of knowing they were part of a supportive community. These outcomes, although less visible externally, form critical foundations for resilience and sustainability.

The Transformation Academy also highlighted the importance of facilitation and convening. Having Medway Voluntary Action (MVA) at the centre provided not only coordination and organisation but also vision and legitimacy. MVA's role illustrates the potential of local infrastructure bodies to convene transformation, creating spaces in which leaders can connect, learn and innovate. This, however, is resource-intensive work that requires explicit recognition and sustained investment.

Sustainability emerged as both an achievement and a challenge. The Transformation Academy showed that consistent funding and facilitation can generate momentum and trust, but it also revealed the fragility of these gains if support is withdrawn. Without long-term commitment, the relationships and practices developed risk dissipation. Funders and policymakers therefore need to look beyond short-term project cycles and invest in the continuity of leadership development and collaboration.

The evaluation itself was also experimental in approach. By embedding researchers within the Transformation Academy, it captured insights that would have been inaccessible from a distance. It also enabled participants to reflect on their own learning, making the evaluation part of the Transformation Academy's developmental process rather than an external assessment. This collaborative model demonstrates how evaluation can build local capacity, generate actionable insights and contribute to sector-wide learning.

The Transformation Academy thus offers a valuable model for new ways of working, centred on structured opportunities for collective reflection, peer learning and leadership development. Investment in these elements should be considered a core component of sectoral resilience, not a peripheral concern. Yet, sustaining and extending this model will require ongoing support. While the Transformation Academy provides a replicable framework, its success depends on sensitive adaptation to context and a recognition that resilience is built through long-term commitment to relationships, leadership and collaboration.

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9. Appendices

9.1 Appendix 1 – WP1: Familiarisation interviews summary

What went well	What was a challenge	Future ideas
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Embedded values: trust, collaboration, belonging • Desire to make it work, energy and enthusiasm • Common language • Generous leadership • Radical – not competitive, innovative • Peer Leadership Support • Membership w/ diverse expertise, skills and experience • Creation of 3 working groups • TA membership growing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time commitment • Membership sizes/range of organisations involved • Diversity • Planning vs doing stages? • Communicating the TA vision and having a collective understanding of the TA – building confidence • Some people are less involved than others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing learning tools • Sharing resources • Connections between organisations to create a better experience for service users • Creating more visibility of the sector • Bidding together • Improving the local area
<p><i>“I think, how the collaboration and partnership working is going to work really well for the voluntary sector, because we are agile, we are trusting, and we are accommodating. And we are passionate about the people we look after”</i></p>	<p><i>“It is a time commitment and people do struggle, they go back to their charities, and they have to justify to their trustees why they're out of the office for half a day, not doing what they're paid to do but doing something almost ethereal”</i></p>	<p><i>“I think it's more about connecting everybody up in Medway and everybody being on the same path of, this is what we want to achieve, we want Medway to be a great place for everybody”</i></p>

9.2 Appendix 2 – WP3: Value Creation Stories

Story 1: Taking a different approach to management

Transformation Academy-led impact for Leaders

Emotional Intelligence Training

- Reassessed priorities, adapted leadership to individuals, and delegated with confidence.

Managerial Shift

- Moved from control to empowerment, improved communication, and encouraged team collaboration.

Our first story is about a CEO of a large charity who joined the Transformation Academy (TA) to develop their network locally. Our participant told us: *“being a CEO is a very lonely place to be”*. With many years of experience in the VCSE sector, the participant began by quietly observing, but quickly discovered the TA was a powerful catalyst for their professional growth—particularly in how they lead and manage their team.

The Academy’s culture of openness and peer learning gave this leader the confidence to reflect deeply on their leadership style.

“I think the social part of it, the kind of solidarity, the getting to know everybody and knowing that we were all working on similar issues in our organisations then working towards the solutions in the Academy, I think that, for me, felt really important and kept me coming back, knowing that there were several people in the room that I knew I was going to learn a lot more from” (Interview, Project End)

Through **emotional intelligence training** and exposure to diverse management approaches, they began to re-evaluate their leadership priorities and how they engaged with their staff.

“we had to plot on sheets of paper your priorities, and not just work, but family and what things were important to you [...in terms of] your values, [...] and I think that that was a big thing for me [...] actually I found myself putting that [work] further up the values and I think that’s because of the people, and so I think that’s helped me invest more in making my SMT’s life better, it sounds bizarre but actually valuing them more individually for all that they do and so perhaps that’s let me then step back a little bit” (Interview, Project End)

They shifted from a uniform management approach to one that is more personalized and responsive to individual needs. This change strengthened relationships **and improved team dynamics**.

“I think it’s helped me to be more confident to treat people differently, so I think as a manager [...] it’s helped me to relax the way I engage with people, and more on a one-to-one [...] because what

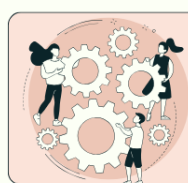
actually will work with you is knowing a little bit more about me, and that helps cement the relationship” (Interview, Project End)

One notable transformation was this participant’s decision to delegate **more strategically**. After learning from peers and applying emotional intelligence principles, this leader works more collaboratively with their team. This not only empowered their team but also freed up this leader’s time for strategic leadership.

“it’s quite nice to listen to what others’ experiences are and how they share [...] so I’m learning a lot from colleagues who are at different positions in their organisations, different points in how their organisation is delivering. There’s some comfort, although it sounds very bad, but there’s some comfort to know that it’s not just us, maybe, that has funding issues, staff retention issues, volunteer issues. And I think what I’m getting out of it is that sense of we are working together on these bigger issues in Medway, that we’re pitching all our ideas and thoughts together [...] I think people’s openness, [...] the Chatham House rules, everybody’s willing to share [...] I feel like everybody’s as up for it as I am, which I think helps. I don’t get the sense that anybody’s there under duress” (Interview, Mid-Project)

This leader’s journey illustrates how the Academy fosters reflective, adaptive management style. By learning from others and applying new insights, this participant become a more confident, emotionally intelligent leader—better equipped to support their team and navigate complex challenges. This CEO felt increasingly confident to ask questions of other members about issues or topics where they perceived others to have greater expertise or experience – that it was okay to not present as being all-knowing, and expedient to tap others’ readily available and willingly shared knowledge. A combination of factors seems to have led to this: building trust in the Academy as a safe space; recognising that others bring and will readily share a wealth of expertise in different areas, but that no one member is expert in everything; realising that drawing on this expertise and observing other similarly senior leaders asking others for information or advice was beneficial for whole learning journey.

This story demonstrates the tangible value of investing in leadership development through collaborative learning environments. By creating



OUTCOMES

Stronger team relationships, more time for strategic focus and greater confidence and adaptability as a leader

supportive relationships with other TA members and finding similarities with their organisations gradually this CEO was replacing a sense of isolation with one of solidarity across organisations and greater connection with colleagues within their team.

Story 2: Reimagining Leadership and Innovation Through the Transformation Academy

Transformation Academy-led impact for Leaders

New income generation ideas

- Exposure to peers' experiences through TA; expanding internal roles (e.g., Programmes Director) can unlock new income streams and build staff capacity; shift to Trust & Foundation fundraising led to more sustainable, unrestricted funding.

Importance of Leadership Reflection

- Major changes require internal alignment and thoughtful planning.

In our second story, a CEO of a large charity, embarked on a transformative journey through the Transformation Academy (TA). Faced with declining contract values and underperforming fundraising efforts, they recognised the urgent need to rethink how their organization generated income. As they told us *“the value of the contracts has been going down rather than up”* and they were looking for different income generation sources. By participating and listening to other Academy members, they realised that grant income from trusts and foundations was an area of fundraising they had not significantly developed, compared with other local VCSEs.

“I think that’s been very useful, even [...] picking up things around funding and so what other people are doing on funding. Not now, but early on, the trend was about trusts and foundations, and I think we weren’t there [...] I learned that from listening to my colleagues on the Transformation Academy when they were talking about examples or good news stories: “I got funding in!”” (Interview, Project End)

A pivotal shift came through **strategic role reconfiguration**. Inspired by insights from TA peers, they expanded the responsibilities of the Programmes Director to include grant fundraising. This not only unlocked new streams of unrestricted income but also empowered the Programmes Director with fresh challenges and skill development. The change fostered a more agile and responsive fundraising approach, directly informed by frontline service knowledge.

“We’re now much more focused on fundraising from trusts & foundations. Even though it’s not [the Programmes Director’s] day job, [...] they can fire off the applications really quickly because [they have] the knowledge in [their] head, [they know] what it is, [they] can speak very emotively about the impact and the value of what we do, and just turned it around, because somebody was dedicating the time and [another colleague] does the pipeline, so [they’re] managing deadlines and what needs to go where [...] they have] more of a vested interest in, “If I want to develop the counselling service I

have to put the bids in and then if I get the bids, I can”- so there’s a great period of growth for [participant’s organisation]’s services, which hopefully is enough to keep [participant’s colleague] engaged” (Interview, Project End)

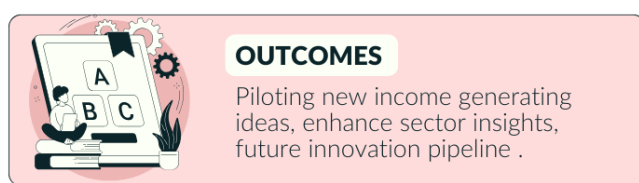
In addition to putting resources into growing their organisation’s grants income, this leader has also begun to offer non-primary-purpose services through the Transformation Alliance, as a pilot to experiment with alternative, self-sustaining, income-generating models, more akin to social enterprise. Although this is through the Alliance, they identify that they would not have considered diversifying in this way were it not for the TA, which provided the platform to learn about the Alliance opportunity first hand from the project initiator. As an active member of the TA, they are **learning new ways for income generation**, exploring new areas for funding and, via this network, visualizing new activities. They spotted a business opportunity in one of the TA meetings with potential for scaling.

“[TA member] was giving [their] presentation about what the Alliance was all about, and it was maybe three more meetings into that, that it suddenly – light-bulb moment: “Well, actually, maybe I could, but-”, and so it was twofold, it was from that generous leadership, but also from a: this is actually an income-generating aspect that can help [Participant’s organisation] to bring some extra money in, and it is a pilot as I know, but were it to work it’s already got me thinking about, “Well, what’s the infrastructure I need to make that work internally?”, and talking to our [...] team as, “How could we actually roll this out even further to Kent, nationally [...]?”” (Interview, Mid-project)

Simultaneously, the organisation began to **build sector insight and internal capacity**. Through a pilot initiative with the Alliance, staff engaged with smaller VCSEs, gaining valuable understanding of the broader sector landscape. This hands-on experience served as a proof of concept for a new service model and helped the team prepare for potential future scaling.

“it’s ticking those boxes for income generation, it’s getting to know the sector a bit more, like [my colleague] would say that [they know] more about smaller organisations than [...] before from people contacting [them]” (Interview, Project End)

Looking ahead, this participant is exploring **future-oriented innovations**. These include expanding their training program, offering coaching services to other VCSE leaders, and even launching an online shop with a social enterprise twist. These ideas reflect a growing entrepreneurial mindset, rooted in sustainability and mission alignment.



Crucially, these developments were catalysed by the **peer learning environment** of the TA. Listening to colleagues' successes and challenges sparked new ideas and validated bold decisions. The TA also offered a space for **leadership reflection**, where this participant recognised the importance of pacing, team buy-in, and structured planning when pursuing new ventures. Through the TA, this leader not only reimagined income generation but also reshaped their organisation's culture—toward one that is adaptive, collaborative, and future-ready.

Story 3: Leader's personal development journey

Transformation Academy-led impact for Leaders

Peer support amplifies learning

- The Transformation Academy's informal conversations reinforced and contextualised formal training, making it more actionable.

Organisational growth requires leadership evolution

- Rapid expansion requires not just scaling operations, but also shifting leadership mindset and structure. As well as leaders understanding and managing emotions that enable more effective communication, boundary-setting, and team development.

In our third story, our participant is a CEO of a federated organisation in across Medway, embarked on a transformative journey through the Transformation Academy (TA). They are an experienced VCSE leader and founding member of the Transformation Academy. In helping set up the Academy, they intended for it to provide a space for VCSE leaders to learn together through a mixture of informal exchanges and in more formalised ways, including discussions of agenda items during member meetings and more traditional trainer-run, skills-based, day courses. As a longstanding leader of a larger organisation, this TA member was committed to the initiative as valuable for the sector as a whole, but had not anticipated deriving much value for themselves or their organisation.

"I went into it thinking, "I will be pouring quite a lot of myself into it", and I think I have, but at the same time, yeah, it was a pleasant surprise to take quite a lot away from it as well." (Interview, Project End)

Over time, this leader built strong, candid relationships with the other Academy members, which meant the **Academy became a 'comfortable', safe space** within which members could speak openly with one another and explore day-to-day challenges without fear of negative consequences.

“The comfort is about giving people permission to ask what they might perceive as awkward, silly, daft questions or whatever. [...] the comfort opens doors to conversations that might not have happened otherwise, and there's a sense of togetherness” (Interview, Mid-Project)

When the Transformation Academy (TA) group was invited to choose their next training focus, emotional intelligence emerged as a shared priority. The course, held in February 2024, became a turning point—**not just for individual development, but for organisational transformation**. Although this CEO initially found the training style off-putting, encouragement from peers kept them engaged. As others shared how the material resonated with their own experiences, the content began to take root.

“there's been times throughout the last couple of years where it [the Transformation Academy]'s been hugely helpful for me as a leader in my organisation, there's been [...] some personal development in terms of some of the training courses that we've organised as an Academy [...] and I've very quickly been able to translate those into day-to-day practice. Particularly one that stands out was the emotional intelligence training” (Interview, Mid-Project)

Soon after emotional intelligence training, a colleague approached with a challenging situation. Drawing on a model from the course, they used a handout to guide a conversation that helped the colleague understand their emotional response, recognize their instinctive reaction, and choose a more constructive path. *“It felt like I had the tools the very next day,”* they reflected, *“and that was really powerful.”* They proposed incorporating emotional intelligence into the team’s CPD plan, recognising its value in improving both internal dynamics and customer service.

For the first time, they have become more mindful of **their own emotional and mental wellbeing**, and begun to communicate their wellbeing needs to their board members.

“So rather than just sitting on my own in a room and dealing with stuff in my head and not talking to anybody else about it [...], I think that it did enable me to have the confidence to speak to my board [...], in a way that said, “Look, I'm not saying I'm not coping, but what I'm saying is this is immensely intense and I think you need to know that I can't really focus on much else at the moment. So some of the business as usual isn't going to happen because this is taking all of my emotional capacity, physical capacity.”” (Interview, Mid-Project)

The board responded with empathy—and surprise that they hadn’t spoken up sooner. This marked a shift from a culture where the CEO did everything, to one where capacity and boundaries were respected.

The Transformation Academy played a pivotal role—not only through formal training but through **ongoing peer support**. Informal conversations with fellow members helped them see how the training was influencing not just individuals, but the culture of their rapidly growing organisation.

“I think sometimes other people saying how they view my organisation gives me a better understanding of the wider third-sector landscape [...] when you're in an organisation, all you see is the nuts and bolts that are around you, don't you? And it's when you go out of that into a different environment and then people say, “Oh, you've done this, this and this, that's fantastic!” (Interview, Mid-Project)

As the organisation expanded beyond Medway to become a major player in Kent, TA peers helped them realise that the scale of change required a new kind of leadership as it was a significantly different organisation. They began to understand that they couldn't lead the same way anymore.

“so I had a conversation with an external HR consultant. [...] And [they] said, you're going to kill yourself, you've got to change this.” (Interview, Project End)

Progress has been affirmed along the way by Transformation Academy peers.

“And it's good that the Transformation Academy was going, “Yeah, yeah, well done, brilliant. Good appointment – COO, you needed that.” (Interview, Project End)

Taking their peers' advice to heart, they hired a consultant to support a restructure and discussed the recommendations with fellow TA members. Their shared experiences affirmed the need to “*spread the load*”. Acting on this, they introduced a new leadership team, moving from a flat structure to one that



OUTCOMES

Improved team dynamics and service delivery, cultural shift in leadership expectations and strategic organisational changes.

could support sustainable growth. Participation in the Transformation Academy has not only enhanced this leader's personal growth and decision-making but has also created ripple effects across the organisation. It has opened opportunities to develop and promote less-senior staff, creating clearer career pathways and contributing to staff retention—a critical advantage in the VCSE sector where recruiting and keeping skilled staff is increasingly difficult. By fostering emotionally intelligent leadership and peer-informed decision making, the organisation is now better equipped to navigate complexity, support its people, and sustain its growth.

Story 4: Quick Pivot: How Peer Insight Shaped a Smarter Business Decision

Transformation Academy-led impact for Leaders

Expertise is Most Valuable When It's Accessible

- Rather than relying on time-consuming research, the CEO learned that tapping into peer expertise—especially from someone with direct experience—can yield faster, more tailored, and more actionable insights.

Not Every Idea Needs to Be Pursued

- The experience reinforced that ruling out an idea early can be just as valuable as pursuing one. This clarity freed up time and resources to focus on more aligned, mission-driven opportunities.

Our participant is CEO of a charity that run a multitude of projects including local art, community and culture festivals. They were already well-connected and knew many of the other TA members. Whilst some trust and rapport had been built over a longer timeframe, the TA accelerated the process. Specifically, this leader found the TA enabled them to **deepen existing relationships**: regular meetings entailed frequently spending extended time together, talking about the things that mattered to them, both professionally and personally.

“It's very good to meet with the other CEOs. [...] actually to have that dedicated space for the third sector is really, really helpful. [...] when you're running an organisation, it's very much you are where the buck stops, and it's nice to talk to other people in that situation and get to know them so I can – I already knew [TA member] – but I could call up [TA member] and go, “Hi [TA member]. I've got this crazy situation, what do you think?” [...] so that in itself is priceless” (Interview, Mid-Project)

These interactions built trust, camaraderie, and a clearer understanding of where expertise lay—making it easier to approach peers for advice on real-time challenges.

“there's now a cohort of people I can go to with problems that I feel comfortable more than I did before to go to them and ask them questions.” (Interview, Project End)

When one of the charity's premises unexpectedly became vacant—with two years remaining on the lease—they quickly considered turning it into a charity shop to generate income and make use of the space.

“Having those connections, so practical things, like do we look at doing a charity shop? Well there's an advice there, it's just having access for the organisation to wider expertise is really, really valuable.” (Interview, Project End)

Thanks to their involvement in the Transformation Academy (TA), **they didn't have to navigate this decision alone**. Drawing on this network, the CEO reached out to a fellow TA member with extensive experience of running charity shops. Their candid and timely conversation provided practical insights into the operational demands, financial viability, and spatial requirements of such a venture.

So I went to [TA member] and asked [them for] some advice on charity shops because [they are] the [monarch] of charity shops, and so that's such a useful thing to be able to go straight to someone who knows what they're doing, didn't have to go through various loops and then we had a really honest chat about it, what we could do there, and that came out of the Transformation Academy" (Interview, Project End)

This leader was able to obtain answers to their specific questions, gain clarity about the steps involved in setting up and running a charity shop successfully, and swiftly rule this out as a viable option: the size of the space made it unsuitable and unlikely to give a profitable return on investment. They described the ease of reaching this insight compared to through their usual approach of internet-based research.

"my way of doing that previously would have been to Google how you set up a charity shop and talk to the [Medway Council] Business Team and push and push, and it would have taken a long, long time. Instead, I did a little bit of that, called [TA member], "[TA member] have you got time for a chat?" and [they] said, "Right this is what you need to know, blah, blah, blah, it's done". And we go, "Well actually, looking at the size of it, it's not viable, so I need to think of another option", and [they] said, "If you need any help", and instantly we had that network of [they] could give me the whole model of how to run a charity shop, but also, I could ask [them] the honest questions of what are the problems and so on." (Interview, Project End)

This **peer-to-peer exchange**—enabled by the trust and accessibility fostered by the TA—allowed them to quickly and confidently rule out the idea. The space was too small to be profitable, and pursuing it further would have diverted valuable time and resources.

"We've ruled that one out, we've got a much better plan [...] we're going to do something together in there to get SEN kids getting work experience, it'll be amazing – an arty café" (Interview, Project End)

As a result, the organisation avoided a costly misstep, repurposed the space for a new collaborative project aligned with its mission, and strengthened its internal culture of agile, informed decision-



OUTCOMES

Leader avoided a costly and unsuitable business venture. Repurposed the space for a mission-aligned project

making. The Transformation Academy was instrumental—not just in providing a support network, but in actively shaping how this leader approached complex decisions with clarity and confidence.

Story 5: Collaborating for Impact: Organisational success

Transformation Academy-led impact for Organisations

Targeted Collaboration Enhances Impact

- Organisations previous challenges were overcome by partnering with an organisation that had direct access to the target group. This shows the importance of aligning strengths and resources.

Trust and Familiarity Foster Effective Partnerships

- The relationship built through the Transformation Academy enabled quick alignment, mutual respect, and efficient bid development.

Our last story is about two TA leaders who decided to collaborate in a funding bid and resultant project. One of the leaders works in a small minority led organisation (Community Organisation) and the other one provide support for carers (Carers Organisation). Both leaders have extensive experience working in the VCSE sector.

During one of the TA meetings, the secretariat mentioned the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF), which sparked an idea for collaboration in the mind of the Community Organisation's leader. They recognised that they were well-positioned to respond, having already developed a detailed project plan and a draft bid for an employability programme aimed at young people in the Health and Social Care sector. While they had successfully engaged employers, they had struggled to reach the right participants.

"[I] had previously tried to engage with young people to deliver an employability programme for the Health and Social Care sector. We were successful in engaging with employers, but the young people did not turn up. We realised that we needed to meet young people with experience as carers, so when the UKSPF opportunity came up, we turned to [Carers Organisation] (Community Organisation, Email, Project End)

This time, they turned to Carers Organisation, a trusted community partner with strong relationships with young people who have caring responsibilities. Carers Organisation had

over 700 young carers registered, including 150 young adult carers—precisely the demographic Community Organisation sought to engage.

“it was very clear in that our part would be that we would identify those young adult carers: we’ve already got 700 [young carers] registered with us [...], 150 [...] as young adult carers, so what we’ll do is target those 150. So that was straightforward, and then [TA member organisation] would actually provide their training and the links with the local employers and businesses” (Carers Organisation, Interview, Project End)

The collaboration was a natural fit. Community Organisation brought training expertise and employer networks, while Carers Organisation offered access to the target group and insight into their needs. Their bid-writing process was swift and efficient, building on Community Organisation’s existing materials and Carers Organisation’s demographic knowledge. The two organisations worked in sync, combining their strengths to submit a compelling and successful application.

“they were already very good at putting that together, so for them it was putting that bid in [...] based on what they had done before, it was quite straightforward and it met the criteria (Carers Organisation, Interview, Project End)

Recruitment began with a focus group session at a local McDonald’s, where 15 young people met with Community Organisation and its employability partner. Four expressed interest, two completed the programme, and both secured employment. One of them continues to receive support for further development and work experience.

These outcomes would not have been possible without the proactive effort by [... both participants’ organisations]. (Community Organisation, Email, Project End)

The project aligned closely with both organisations’ missions. For Carers Organisation, it complemented an existing mentoring project that was already engaging the same group of young adult carers. This overlap allowed them to **leverage existing relationships** and infrastructure to support the new programme.

“it just seemed like an ideal opportunity and it just seemed to fit as well, and for us at that time we were successful with our mentoring project which we started in the summer, which is a one-year project, it finishes in March, and it paid for a part-time worker that we’ve got, so [the mentoring project worker was] starting from scratch identifying all those 150 to find out what their needs are around going into employment, education and training [...] (Carers Organisation Interview, Project End)

This collaboration was not only a strategic success—it was also a direct outcome of the learning and **relationship-building fostered by the Transformation Academy (TA)**. Both organisations were represented in the TA, where members had built familiarity, trust, and confidence through regular engagement.

The TA provided a space for leaders to reflect on their roles, explore their leadership styles, and identify opportunities for collaboration beyond their immediate organisational boundaries. Through shared learning and open dialogue, members began to see each other not just as peers, but as potential partners.

“also it shows that we’ve got that now new working relationship going forward we can build on that and there’s other opportunities that will come out of that as well going forward” (Carers Organisation, Interview, Project End)

The Academy helped members grow in their ability to lead collaboratively, spot synergies, and act on them. It became a space where ideas could be tested, relationships could be nurtured, and confidence could be built.



OUTCOMES

Confident TA leaders identified collaboration opportunities, building trust and impactful inter-organisational partnerships.

This project stands as a testament to the TA’s impact—not only on individual members, but on the organisations they represent and the communities they serve. It demonstrates how leadership development, when grounded in trust and mutual respect, can lead to meaningful, lasting change.

About Us



The **VCSE Observatory** provides clear, reliable evidence about the **Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE)** sector. We monitor and analyse trends, visualise data, and **turn complex information into accessible insights** for researchers, policy-makers, funders, infrastructure organisations, and practitioners.



We've built strong links with **key stakeholders** including Bank of England, DCMS, NCVO, NAVCA, British Red Cross, Directory of Social Change, and DataKind UK. We're working with **ESCOE** and **Fraser of Allander Institute** to improve how the voluntary sector is measured in the UK National Accounts. We're funded by **ESRC** to explore **a new data infrastructure** that could turn VCSE information into research-ready data.



Since 2020, we've run the quarterly **VCSE Barometer survey**, offering real-time insights into **sector trends and challenges**. Supported by over 50 major social sector membership organisations and networks, findings are shared quarterly with national and local stakeholders. Results are available via our **VCSE Dashboard**, and each participating organisation receives an **Individualised Report**. We're also developing a **bilingual Welsh Barometer, Baromedr Cymru**, in partnership with Wales Council for Voluntary Action.



With **deep experience in co-producing evaluations and analysing VCSE trends**, we work closely with organisations such as the **NHS, Communities 1st, Lloyds Bank Foundation, Medway Voluntary Action (MVA)**, and funders including **Esmeé Fairbairn Foundation**, City Bridge Foundation, Paul Hamlyn Foundation, and Henry Smith Charity. We've also partnered with **SJOG** to develop the **Goodness Metric**, helping VCSE organisations measure Environmental, Social, and Governance outcomes.



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How to cite this report:

Mainard-Sardon, J. ; Hay, A.; Coulton, C. ; King, D.
(2025). *Transformation Academy evaluation - A 3 years collaborative journey*. VCSE National Data & Insights Observatory. Nottingham Trent University.

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