

Voluntary Action Orkney

Annual Report

2024-2025

www.vaorkney.org.uk



Chair's Introduction

Gerry O'Brien

It gives me great pleasure to introduce this year's Annual Report for Voluntary Action Orkney (VAO).

Over the past year, VAO continued to play a vital role in supporting Orkney's third sector, enabling individuals and communities to thrive through resilience, creativity, and collaboration. We are proud to reflect on a period marked by meaningful progress and strategic investment in our local voluntary and community sector.



A particular highlight was our role in coordinating the Communities Mental Health and Wellbeing Fund. Now moving into its fourth round, the fund has provided a lifeline to many organisations, empowering them to deliver support that is community-led and person-centred. Through this initiative, pivotal projects that address loneliness, isolation, and mental ill-health have been sustained and strengthened across our islands, ensuring improved wellbeing is not just a policy aim, but a lived experience for more people.

In parallel, this year has marked a significant digital milestone for VAO. The launch of our new website not only refreshed our public presence but also significantly improved accessibility and user experience. It reflects our commitment to modern, transparent, and inclusive communication, and it serves as a portal for news, resources, and opportunities for the sector.

Looking ahead, we are especially excited by the momentum building around the development of a Third Sector Hub for Orkney. Following many months of exploration, partnership, and visioning, we are now actively progressing toward securing a new property to provide a dedicated, fit-for-purpose home for local third sector organisations. This development represents not only a physical space but a symbol of shared ambition, a place for collaboration, innovation, and support that will serve our communities for years to come.

All of this is only possible because of the dedication of the VAO team, our Board, our partners, and most importantly, the tireless efforts of the individuals and groups across Orkney's third sector who make a difference every day. As Chair, I am immensely grateful for your continued trust and partnership - together, we are building a stronger, fairer, and more connected Orkney.

VAO Board of Directors 2024/25

Gerry O'Brien	Chair
James Temple	Treasurer
Jan Swain	Director
Janice Annal	Director
Willie Neish	Director
Alison Sharkey	Director
Katherine McKerrell	Director
Francesca Couperwhite	Director

About us

The third sector includes all the charities, community groups, and volunteers who work to make life better in Orkney. Over 1000 local clubs, development trusts, social enterprises, faith groups, environmental and cultural organisations operate locally, by people who freely give their time to help others through volunteering. Together, they play a big part in supporting wellbeing, reducing inequality, and helping communities to thrive.

As Orkney's Third Sector Interface (TSI), we bring this sector together and ensure its voice is heard. We speak up for local organisations in important planning and decision-making – both in Orkney and nationally. We support community-led projects and help ensure local needs shape wider plans and policies, including Scotland's National Performance Framework and Volunteering Action Plan. We play an active role in our communities through partnerships such as the Orkney Community Planning Partnership and the Integration Joint Board. Our work aligns with national priorities and local outcomes, with a focus on tackling poverty, promoting wellbeing, and enabling inclusive, sustainable communities.

Guided by our values of honesty, integrity, respect and collaboration, we are committed to equality, Fair Work, and empowering Orkney's third sector to thrive.

Our Vision:

Orkney has sustainable, resilient, inclusive communities with a thriving third sector at their heart.

Our Mission:

Our mission is to give the Third Sector in Orkney a voice with trust, care and empathy. We will use what we hear to advocate for and enable change to improve our communities.

Our core functions:



Central Source of Knowledge:

Be a trusted hub of information on the third sector and local community needs.



Voice:

Amplify the voice of the third sector in local and national decision-making



Connect

Foster collaboration within the third sector and between sectors.



Building Capacity

Support third sector organisations to be effective, sustainable, and resilient.



[Visit our website to view our Strategic Plan](#)



Central Source of Knowledge

VAO continue to be a trusted hub of third sector intelligence in Orkney. We make it easier for local groups and volunteers to find helpful information. Whether it's funding updates, training opportunities, or best practice advice, we remain the go-to place for support.

Last year we responded to strategic data requests and continued to support evidence-based planning including from the Orkney Local Emergency Group, Orkney Islands Council, and Orkney NHS, and additionally, national services both public sector and third sector) wanting to operate locally. Requests for information include queries around mental health provision in the isles and the number of water-based organisations operating in Orkney to support Islands Council water safety initiatives across the islands.

Just over 16.96% of enquiries to our knowledgeable team were from organisations wanting to improve and work to best practice. Requests for policy templates, whether to become a SCIO or around upcoming changes to national legislation such as the Disclosure Act 2020, or the changes to charity law in Scotland (the 2005 Scottish Charities Act) which was updated, giving the Office for the Scottish Charity Regulator (OSCR) additional powers over the Scottish Charity Register.

VAOs website, newsletters and resources underwent a redesign in 2024-2025. Designed to support the work of the organisation, visitors to the new site learnt about the support and services that VAO offers and were able to access our news hub, events calendar, funding opportunities, and third sector vacancies. The homepage, featuring the most recent news items acted as a solid gateway to other areas of the website.



Website Users:

In 2024/25 there were 31,381 users (of which 31,156 were new users)



83.6% directly entered the site address



11.3% found the site via a search



2.8% followed a link from social media



1.8% followed a link from another site

There were 35,685 sessions consisting of 69,208 page views.

Volunteering Opportunities remained the most visited page on the new website, with 77% of active users engaging. The other main entry points were the Communities Mental Health and Wellbeing Fund, the Small Grants Scheme, (see the Fund Management section of Building Capacity) and jointly those searching for information on how to volunteer or to get in contact with one of our team.

The website is home to the Orkney Community Directory, our searchable database containing the details of groups, organisations and community services in Orkney. The Community Directory also remained high in terms of user visits (567 user sessions). Our main aim is to ensure that accurate and up to date information on those groups is maintained and published through the directory.



Voice



In 2024-2025 VAO collaborated with a wide range of strategic partners and forums to make sure that the views, needs, and strengths of community groups, charities, and volunteers were reflected in policies, plans, and services.

We helped to bridge gaps between statutory services and grassroots organisations and sought to influence policy with the aim of ensuring the third sector's voice is meaningfully represented, and is seen as an equal partner in local and national decision-making structures.

We continue to be an active partner in Orkney's Community Planning Partnership (OCPP), playing a key role in advancing collective action to address poverty, wellbeing, and community resilience and economic sustainability. VAO directly contributed to the Sustainable Development Delivery Group Action Plans, and played an active part in shaping the Community Wealth Building Delivery Plan to be released in 2025. In addition to this VAO helped shape the delivery of the OCPP sub group, the Cost of Living Taskforce was set up on the wake of the post-covid cost of living crisis.



Case Study: Third Sector representation in local strategic partnerships

Orkney Money Matters and the MoU for dignified anti-poverty support.

Orkney Money Matters is a strategic partnership formed in 2023. Within the context of community planning, VAO facilitated local anti-poverty frameworks to ensure that every household in Orkney has the resources to meet their basic needs with dignity. With oversight through the OCPP Cost of Living Task Force it brings together key partners.

In 2024-2025, VAO played a key role by delivering projects such as Cash First (THAW Orkney) and Pathways to Advice and Cash Scotland (Citizens Advice Bureau), while developing the tools needed for long-term sustainability.

Key partners include:

- Orkney Islands Council
- NHS Orkney
- NHS Primary Care
- THAW Orkney
- Citizens Advice Bureau
- Orkney Housing Association Ltd.
- Voluntary Action Orkney
- Orkney Food Bank
- The Blide Trust
- The Orkney Community Planning Partnership/Cost of Living Task Force

VAO led the development of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to define the partnership's shared objectives, roles, and guiding principles as it worked to deliver coordinated support aimed at reducing poverty, enhancing dignity, and streamlining access to financial help.

Through the work of VAO the Memorandum reflected a place-based approach, informed by local strategies such as the Orkney Child Poverty Strategy and the Food Dignity Report. It also committed partners to joint training, shared tools and use of the Scottish Approach to Service Design.

VAO representatives sit on the Local Action Group (LAG), which assessed applications to the Crown Estate Fund, and the Community Led Local Development Funds, helping to ensure £340,397 supported 31 local community initiatives financially.

VAO also strengthened youth representation through its support for the Youth Local Action Group (YLAG). This group of young Orkney residents assessed and awarded community grants, participated in strategic networks such as the Rural Youth Action Network (RYAN), and contributed to wider national youth engagement through the European Rural Youth Parliament (ERYP). See Building Capacity for the full case study.

To further strengthen sector representation, we continued to chair the Third Sector Working Group (TSWG), which acts as a collective voice and peer support forum for local third sector organisations.



Case Study: Third Sector Working Group - amplifying the sector's voice

The TSWG was created to strengthen the voice of the third sector in local planning and provide a space for organisations to share information and work collaboratively. The group is a valuable peer support network, enabling representatives from third sector organisations to connect, discuss shared challenges, and explore opportunities for working together.

This year, VAO began work to enhance the group's visibility and establish clearer links between its discussions and strategic decision-making processes.

Efforts have focused on encouraging consistent participation and regular meetings supported the flow of key information across the sector and created space for collective thinking. Relevant policy and funding updates, and key issues raised by the group such as funding pressures, referrals, and staffing changes were channelled through VAO's representation on strategic bodies such as the Community Planning Partnership and the Integration Joint Board, ensuring health and social care decisions consider community-led approaches.

Additionally, throughout 2024-2025 we continued to support collaborative responses through the Recovery and Renew groups, contributed to safeguarding via the Public Protection Committee, and promoted the role of the sector in shaping priorities within the Children and Young People's Partnership and the Strategic CLD (Community Learning and Development) Partnership.



Case Study: CLD Strategic Partnership - co designing local learning and development

Community Learning and Development (CLD) in Orkney is delivered through a strong and collaborative partnership, guided by the CLD Partners Plan 2024-2027. This statutory plan outlines how a wide range of stakeholders - including Orkney Islands Council, education providers, and third sector organisations, work together to ensure that CLD services are strategically planned and meet identified local needs. As Orkney's Third Sector Interface, VAO plays a key role in this partnership, championing the voice of the third sector, supporting community engagement, and contributing to shared priorities such as reducing inequalities, building skills, and strengthening

community resilience. VAO ensure that the voice of the sector is heard, and that the significant contributions of the sector in this field are clearly and accurately included in the Plan. To this end we took part in the most recent Education Scotland Inspection as part of this partnership, and VAO currently chairs the training sub-group of the Partnership.

Some key initiatives include the TRICE meetings, which bring together key stakeholders on some of the islands such as Sanday, Westray and Hoy. With some communities these are regular meetings and others they are one off meetings, bringing together agencies and local organisations, improving communication, sharing information and knowledge and looking at local gaps in provision or services as well as further influencing development and delivery of the priorities of the Partnership Plan.

Nationally, we strengthened our role within the Third Sector Interface (TSI) Scotland Network, raising Orkney's voice on matters such as fair work, rural needs, and inclusive policy design. By participating in strategic TSI forums and joint responses to Scottish Government consultations, we helped shape policy development that reflects the lived experience of our communities.



Case Study: Representing the Sector in Nationally-Led Local Services

Improving the Cancer Journey – Ensuring Orkney's Needs Shape Delivery

Working across the three island groups (Orkney, Shetland and the Western Isles) and led by MacMillan Cancer Support, the service is dedicated to supporting anyone affected by cancer with their non-clinical needs, whether it's financial, practical, emotional, physical or spiritual support.

VAO played an integral part in the development and launch of the Improving the Cancer Journey (ICJ) project throughout the year as a member of the Orkney project steering group.

Since launching in early 2025 hosted by NHS Orkney's Health Promotion Service, ICJ Orkney has received 40 referrals and has connected individuals with support from over 20 different services across Orkney, many of them being local third sector organisations. VAO has provided a voice for the sector and local knowledge which has informed the Service, including through representation on the steering group of the Islands Wellbeing Project and the Community Development team.



Connect

Bringing people and organisations together is a big part of what we do. We create chances to share ideas, learn from each other, and work on joint projects. By building stronger links, we help the third sector in Orkney work better together. We focus on relational support models as mechanisms that drive change through joined-up, people-centred support.



Case Study: Youth Workers Forum – a platform for collaboration and change

VAO chairs and administers the Youth Workers Forum, a peer-led, issue-responsive space with subgroups and practical collaborations. Anyone can bring their own item to add to the agenda.

The content is shaped entirely by members' own work plans. If there is a joint piece of work to undertake, a subgroup or partnership is formed to take it forward in a more structured way independent of the forum.

One such partnership comprises Community Learning and Development at Orkney Islands Council and VAO, who work together to organise the annual Orkney Youth Awards. (See Building Capacity for details)

During 2024-2025 the Youth Workers forum looked at:

- The impact of the cost of school supplies at Stromness Academy. This led to a collaboration with Youth Local Action Group (YLAG) to fund and supply basic school supplies.
- Developing a comments, complaints and compliments policy including strategies for social media.
- Tackling negative public perception of young people and promoting success stories.

A key function of the forum is sharing of up-to-date information and news. This is a standing item at meetings and it is a chance for attendees to develop ideas and offer support for new initiatives.

The forum brings together local agencies that support young people to work on joint issues, improving partnership working between local and national Youth Services.



Case Study: Orkney Local Employability Partnership (OLEP) - Pathways to Progress

VAO is an active member of the Orkney Local Employability Partnership (OLEP) which aims to ensure "everyone can access positive progression routes, including sustained volunteering and fair and sustainable work". We support this by raising awareness of the benefits of volunteering including how volunteering can help people develop skills for gaining employment.

Nikki's Story

To improve her confidence and to support her community, Nikki took on a series of volunteering roles with different groups and organisations. After volunteering on reception at Orkney Blide Trust she put herself forward to become a member of The Jedi Council who are a group of local people with experiences of job seeking and local employability support services, who work closely with the OLEP. Nikki said:

“Being involved in The Jedi Council has provided me with some really valuable employability skills, such as team-working, communication and problem-solving skills.”

These roles led Nikki to also volunteering with Restart Orkney. Nikki said:

“[Volunteering] has really improved my self-esteem and given me a sense of purpose and value. The organisation putting trust in me as a volunteer has really helped me to believe in myself.”

Volunteering helped Nikki to gain experience and build her confidence. The skills she has developed will be taken forward into the future and she has begun studying for a degree which she would not have applied for before becoming a volunteer.



Case Study: Youth Philanthropy Initiative – youth connecting with our community



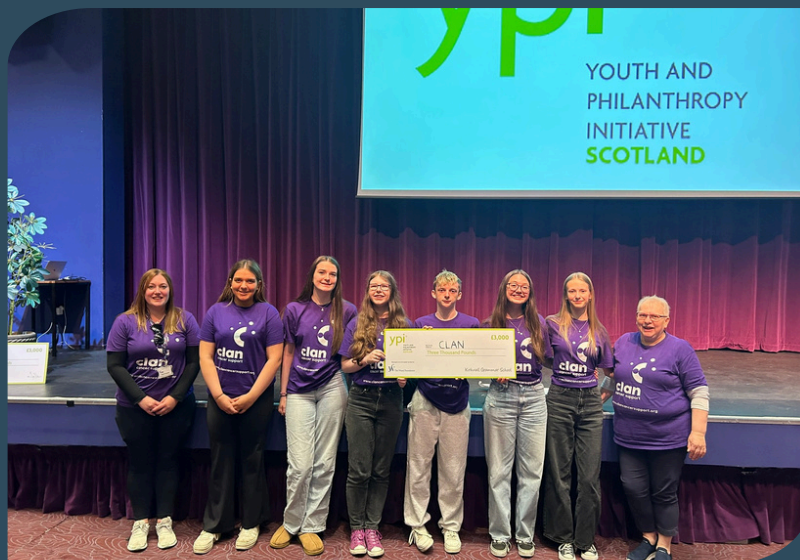
VAO provide regional support for The Wood Foundation to help deliver the Youth and Philanthropy Initiative (YPI) programme in Orkney which this year ran at both Kirkwall Grammar School (KGS) and Stromness Academy. By fostering early awareness of social challenges and community action, YPI nurtures a generation of active citizens and potential future volunteers, trustees, or charity leaders. This long-term engagement contributes to VAO's

vision of a thriving, resilient voluntary sector, with young people playing a meaningful role in shaping stronger, more connected communities across Orkney.

VAO assist with the launch and facilitate the final showcase. Behind the scenes, we also conduct planning and reflection sessions with the schools, and compile the various reports required for completion of the programme.

A total of 19 charities took part in both events this year and we organised a charities fair to give pupils the chance to meet and learn from charity representatives.

This year S3 pupils worked in teams to research social issues affecting their communities. They identified and connected with a local charity, created a presentation, and competed for a £3,000 grant for their chosen organisation.



At KGS, 160 participated. They also had 6 finalist presentations, and the successful group awarded the £3000 to SiMBA.

Through YPI young people gain insight into local needs, and engaging with local charities building empathy, confidence, teamwork, and presentation skills in a real-world context. They gain in-depth knowledge about their chosen charity while also learning about the social issues and organisations highlighted by classmates and other finalists.

This increases the number of people who know how and where to access support. After YPI, some young people have even volunteered with their chosen charity and become more involved in their local community. Aside from the lucky winner receiving a funding boost, participating charities benefit from exposure and new youth connections, better enabling them to respond to local needs.



Case Study: Connect Project - from Disconnection to Direction

The Connect Project started in 2008 to support young adults aged 15 to 21 who were having difficulty in making a smooth transition into formal education, training, or employment after leaving secondary school. It offers personalised programmes of learning, practical support, and meaningful engagement opportunities, tailored to help the young people build the confidence, skills, and self-awareness needed to identify and manage their next steps.



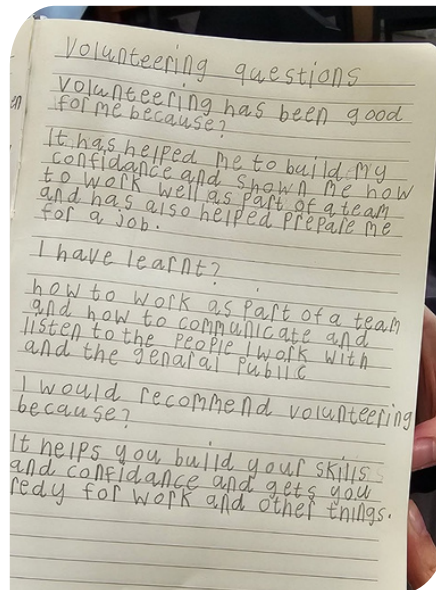
**27 young
people
supported**

During 2024-2025, 27 young people received tailored, wraparound support from the project most of whom joined after a period of disengagement from education, employment, or the wider community, often accompanied by low confidence and uncertainty about their future. Some expressed feelings of isolation and disconnection, both socially and emotionally.

The programme allowed participants to explore practical strategies, develop resilience, and consider a range of options for their next steps.

This year they:

- Participated in the 'Remembering Together' creative project.
- Explored their heritage by visiting historic sites and finding fossils.
- Volunteered at an intergenerational games group, community garden and charity shops.
- Embraced a range of craft and art experiences from pottery to printing and candle making.



Many of our young people chose to volunteer and make a tangible difference in the lives of others. The impact of this work was felt not only by the young people themselves, but also within the wider community.

Most of our young people reported feeling more confident and empowered. They were able to explore their ideas, define their goals, and take steps toward their future aspirations. For some they showed dedication simply by maintaining a routine and participating regularly in Connect groups. For others progress towards independence was more significant. They secured their own housing and employment or successfully entered and sustained further education courses.



Case Study: Young People's Befriending Project

The Young People's Befriending Project delivers consistent, high-quality, relationship-based support for children and young people across Orkney. The Project maintains strong engagement with volunteers and families, offering a personalised approach to building confidence, resilience, and social connection for young people.





11 young people supported

During 2024-2025 the Project supported 11 active one-to-one befriending matches, with regular meetings and tailored activities based on the interests and needs of each young person. In addition, group support sessions were delivered for young people on the waiting list, with 8 participants benefiting from this engagement during the period.



- **11 trained volunteers**
- **2 new volunteers recruited**

11 trained volunteers were active in matches, bringing compassion, consistency, and creativity to their roles. Volunteers were supported through regular check-ins and review sessions. Their strengths and interests were intentionally integrated into match planning to ensure meaningful connections and positive outcomes for young people.

2 new volunteers were registered and preparing to begin training in early 2025. Recruitment efforts remained active, with planned advertising to increase uptake and sustain the volunteer pipeline.

Success stories included young people overcoming barriers such as social anxiety and transport fears, and gaining the confidence to engage in further education and community activities.

As well as working with the young people and the volunteer befrienders, we maintained strong links with referral agencies and support services, ensuring holistic support around each young person and effective signposting where necessary.

The project was fully funded by The National Lottery Community Fund during this period.



Case Study: Community Link Practitioner Service - Personalised Support in Action

Funded by the Primary Care Improvement Fund in alignment with the Primary Care Improvement Plan, the Community Link Practitioners work alongside 6 GP practices in Orkney. They provide help with non-clinical needs, connecting patients with other services both locally and nationally in order to address issues such as housing, loneliness and isolation, finances, and other areas of concern identified by each individual.



Community Link Practitioner team with Improving the Cancer Journey and RSPB/Species on the Edge.

With their local and national knowledge, Community Link Practitioners identify sources of support for each individual, referring them on to other services where required.

The Service connected 178 clients to 183 non-clinical services.



178 clients



183 clients
referred to non-
clinical services

By addressing these needs in the short-term (where there is adequate service provision), it increases the individual's confidence and self-esteem in the longer term. Their feelings of isolation and helplessness are lessened, and they learn about the support available which provides a basis for any future issues that may arise.

Participating GP practices acknowledge that having a Community Link Practitioner as part of the team enhances the support available to their patients and ensures appointments are given for those with medical/clinical needs. Babs Womack, Practice Manager at the Heilendi Practice said:



The CLP has been beneficial to the practice as they have supported many patients who would otherwise be frequently attending the surgery for support. This would take significant GP time and it has been found that the CLP can give more of the time and signposting required for these patients.



Case Study: Remembering Together Project, co-creating space for collective memories

Remembering Together is the Scottish Government's Community Covid Memorial Project which, in Orkney, is managed by VAO with support from Orkney Islands Councils Arts Development Officer. The project has worked with 5 communities in Orkney to co-create memorials with local artists that reflect the needs and wants of each community. In each place, despite differing approaches, communities created spaces for contemplation, quiet remembrance and reflection.

In Flotta, artist Ros Bryant worked with the local community to create a carved stone map of the island, celebrating local people, places and culture. It sits in the playpark along with a beautiful curved seating area and table and in the Spring is surrounded by flowers planted on the mound that houses the carving.



In Sanday, artist Jake Ghaleb, created a book of memories and portraits which acts as a timeline of experiences during the Covid lockdown. Intimate, gentle and personal stories of the unique experience of this small community intertwine and act as a memory box for the community. The portraits are also displayed on the island as a permanent exhibition hosted by the Community Association.

In Shapinsay, artists Louise Barrington and Megumi Barrington, worked with the Shapinsay Development Trust, Men's Shed and Shapinsay Church to create Shapinsay's Reflective Space, on land owned by the Church and long planned for such a space. Including the building of a reflective platform, planting and places to sit and think, the Remembering Together project was able to support and enhance this long planned space for the community.



In Kirkwall, Louise and Megumi worked with Papdale and Glaitness Primary Schools and VAO's Connect Project, resulting in a reflective film. The project came to completion in May 2025 however the artists spent this year planning, developing and then delivering the creative elements of the project, before taking time to edit the final film which they called Starlings.

In North Ronaldsay, the year was spent in developing and seeking planning approvals for a circular stone bench which will be built in 2025. The bench will enable people to stop, reflect and remember, as well as being used for viewing the stars as part of North Ronaldsay's dark skies project.

This project has enabled communities to come together, collaborate and create long lasting responses to the Covid pandemic, to provide reflective spaces for their communities and will enable residents and visitors a moment of reflection long in to the future. Many individuals have learned new skills such as stone carving, film making and printmaking, and the resulting artworks allow

Orkney to be part of a network of national memorials across Scotland.



Case Study: Island Wellbeing Project - Wellbeing where it matters most

The Island Wellbeing Project is a collaboration between VAO, Island Development Trusts, Orkney Health and Care (OHAC), and Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE).

Funded by Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, The Tudor Trust, The Integration Joint Board, and the Island Development Trusts the work aims to coordinate health and wellbeing support across the ferry-linked isles of Hoy, Westray, Sanday, Stronsay, Shapinsay and Rousay, Egilsay, & Wyre and has improved service delivery and accessibility across all ferry-linked isles.

The Island Wellbeing Project has fostered strong partnerships between Community groups, voluntary organisations, statutory and public services, and private and cultural organisations.

Each island has a dedicated Wellbeing Coordinator, employed by their local Development Trust. They provide signposting support services and develop community-led initiatives.

During 2024-2025, Wellbeing Coordinators played a vital role in the creation or continuation of 45 community wellbeing groups and initiatives. which saw 6,582 attendances through the year.

The Wellbeing Coordinators directed 291 residents over 808 sessions to groups, organisations and services for support with their physical health, mental health, financial issues and loneliness and isolation.



Group activities:

- 45 groups
- 6,582 attendances



Signposting:

- 292 residents
- 808 sessions

In Shapinsay the Wellbeing Coordinator helped to organise a festival to celebrate environmental stewardship, cultural connections and preventive health care.

In Stronsay the Wellbeing Coordinator helped to set up a Men's Shed. This provided attendees with a safe space to work at their own pace on meaningful projects which had a positive impact on their mental health and reduced social isolation.



When asked:

- 100% of group activity participants said their wellbeing improved
- 38% of group activity participants said their physical health improved
- 21% of group activity participants said their social isolation was reduced
- 18% of group activity participants said they gained a new skill
- 10% said their mental health improved

The Island Wellbeing Project has become a trusted, community-led model for improving health, wellbeing, and social connection across Orkney's ferry-linked isles.

A Children and Adult Social Work Team member said:



It's great to know that there are coordinators who know everything about their islands - from who to talk to, to what events are scheduled, and which groups and activities are currently running.



Through its unique dual approach - individual support and community capacity building, the project has shown both immediate benefits and lasting value which will support the projects transition to a stable, sustainable community-managed network in 2025 and beyond.



Information sharing and outreach

In 2024/25 we continued to strengthen sector-wide communications through digital tools, newsletters, and social media outreach.



Social Media:

A total of 1818 people follow VAO on Facebook and our page was visited 8190 times in 2024/25. Over the year our content reached 17,530 people indicating an increase in those receiving information from us, and indicating our strengthening reach to our communities.

Newsletters:

Debuting as part of the website launch, a new logo and branding was designed by local designer Iain Ashman for VAO. February's newsletter was the first publication to be sent using the newly designed format. Both the VAO Newsletter and the VAO Training and Funding Update now align closely with the website, helping drive engagement and strengthen consistent communication. In 2024/25, 11 newsletters and 12 Training and Funding Updates were distributed to contact lists of 974 and 610 recipients respectively.



Building Capacity

We support local organisations and volunteers to grow stronger and more confident. That includes offering training, advice, and help running services and applying for funding. Our goal is to help you do the best job you can for your community.

Organisational Development

We provide advice, support, information and signposting to existing charitable organisations and emerging groups who wish to formalise their charitable activities and social enterprises. Our aim is to ensure that Orkney based charities and social enterprises have a strong infrastructure and base to deliver their services lawfully and safely, and the resilience and capacity to deliver high quality activities.

We respond to enquiries and requests for support and provide information and training. Some can be resolved with a simple phone call or email reply. Other activities undertaken with groups can be lengthy and complex, for example working with a group to establish the most appropriate legal structure for their activity and supporting them to create the appropriate governing documents and apply to register as a charity, which can take a number of months to work through.

- 110 funding advice enquiries
- 36 governance and operational good practice enquiries
- 31 legal status enquiries for a new groups
- 13 training enquiries (e.g. delivery of trustee training and general training)
- 12 Policies and procedures review enquiries
- 8 Social Enterprise start up advice, support and signposting enquiries
- 7 general support enquiries
- 4 business planning enquiries
- 4 finance enquiries
- 3 Organisational Health Check enquiries
- 2 project planning enquiries
- 1 human resources enquiry
- 1 PVG (Protecting Vulnerable Groups) enquiry



Support Services

Organisational Health Checks:

Our organisation health checks provide an overarching review of an organisation's governance and a 360-degree review of the organisation will result in a range of recommendations of priorities for development and improvement. Over the year we worked with 3 organisations resulting in a variety of actions including training and constitution revision, changes to the way organisations undertake their meetings and restructuring of their legal status.

Finance:

We offer advice on financial record-keeping which comply with statutory guidance and build strong working relationships with our clients, based on trust. We provide finance services to charities and not for profit groups throughout Orkney. In 2024/25, we carried out 43 Independent Examinations (IEs), 36 for OSCR registered charities and 7 for not-for-profit groups. We provided bookkeeping for 6 organisations. We also helped 80 groups run their monthly payroll smoothly and on time.

Our finance and payroll services give organisations the confidence that their statutory obligations are being fulfilled and reduces the stress associated with these obligations so they can focus on what they do best.



Training and Funding

VAO's training and development offer in 2024- 2025 focused on strengthening sector resilience through responsive, accessible, and locally informed learning. This year we worked with 13 organisations to provide bespoke training for their trustees on their roles and responsibilities and provided training opportunities through our Spring Training Week and Trustees Week.



Case Study: Multiply funded financial training- Strengthening financial confidence across the isles

VAO delivered targeted financial literacy and governance training across Orkney through the Multiply programme, funded by Orkney Islands Council. The programme supported 74 individuals from 28 local organisations through 23 sessions focused on key financial topics including OSCR returns, budgeting, gift aid, and board-level finance governance.

Training was delivered both in-person and digitally, with bespoke sessions tailored to the needs of rural and island-based groups. Feedback showed that 85% of participants reported greater financial confidence, and 72% planned to apply their learning to funding applications and internal processes. Many participating organisations also introduced updated finance policies and improved the accuracy of their reporting.

The success of this work was rooted in VAO's local credibility, flexible delivery model, and strong peer-learning approach. A contract extension through to 2027 will allow VAO to expand 1-to-1 support, compliance clinics, and bespoke workshops for trustees and Development Trusts.



With 110 enquiries, funding was the top subject for groups and organisations looking for support. We provided:

- suggestions of potential funding sources for specific projects
- help with completing application forms
- training around the responsibilities of organisations when fundraising
- the range and options for where income might be sourced from
-

In an environment where funding is ever more difficult to come by, this support helps groups to improve their chances of securing funding for their activities and improve their longer-term resilience.



VAO Fund Management



Case Study: The VAO Small Grants Scheme

With donations from Repsol Resources UK Ltd and Liam McArthur MSP, in 2024/25 VAO offered grants of up to £500 to charities, community groups and voluntary organisations in Orkney.

Project applications were assessed by a panel of VAO Directors who awarded grants to groups and organisations whose project or activity demonstrated the most local impact across Orkney. In total £6605 was distributed to 14 projects. Through funding these projects VAO met a wide range of community needs, including the provision of access ramps, gardening activities, suicide prevention, awareness raising activities (events, marketing and materials), musical instruments, a boat trailer, and training bibs for sports groups.



Case Study: Community Mental Health Fund – Strengthening Wellbeing through grassroots funding

VAO manage the Communities Mental Health and Wellbeing Fund on behalf of the Scottish Government. This, the fourth year of funding, saw delivery of the projects which were awarded funding at the end of the financial year 2023/24, and the assessment process for activities which will take place from March 2025.

The fund supports grass root, locally led community projects that aim to improve individuals and community wellbeing, and it can be accessed by small unconstituted community groups as well as more established and larger charities and social enterprises.

The fund has become an important local funding source which allows a wide range of groups and charities to:

- deliver activities in their local halls,
- bring communities together
- ensure that individuals are less isolated and have access to social activities

A total of 18 funded projects ran throughout 2024/25, providing a wide range of social, craft, leisure and gentle sport activities to communities across Orkney, alongside projects providing counselling and mental health support.

£74,900 was disbursed to 22 organisations for activities to take place from February 2025 following 2 application deadlines which attracted 55 applications in total.

As well as managing this fund, we provided capacity building support for any group who required it,

to develop their project idea and complete their application and help become a constituted group if needed.

Originally set up to counter the social isolation and distress caused throughout the pandemic and then the cost-of-living crisis that followed, this fund makes a significant difference to individuals and our communities alike.



Volunteering

In 2024-2025 the number of individuals expressing interest in volunteering is continuing to rise again following the drop-off that was seen post-pandemic.

This year, 53 individuals expressed interest in volunteering after seeing a specific opportunity



- 173 new enquiries
- 68 new volunteers registered
- 42 new volunteers placed

on the VAO website. We share relevant information including application forms on behalf of local groups and organisations to connect them with the prospective volunteers. This is especially useful when they do not have a local organisational presence for individuals to liaise with and helps to increase their capacity as we can carry out processes on their behalf.

13 people met with us for 1-1 support. Through these conversations we helped them to identify suitable volunteering opportunities to match their needs and interests.

A further 7 individuals were directed to us by another local service. With our support and working in partnership with other services individuals who have experienced barriers such as disability or poor mental health, have been given the opportunity to become actively involved in their communities and increase their sense of wellbeing and self-esteem.



Case Study: Volunteering opportunities for all

VAO provides groups and organisations with support to recruit and management volunteers. This includes encouraging volunteering good practice. This year we received:

- 28 requests for support with volunteer recruitment which resulted in 46 new volunteering opportunities being published on our website. The opportunities covered a range of activities including youth work, conservation, committee positions, festivals and events, befriending and care, technical support, fundraising and retail.
- 12 organisations requested advice and guidance around volunteer management and good practice which included support with volunteering policy and queries relating to PVG processes.
- 3 national organisations approached us asking for help in expanding their services into Orkney where we helped to identify and connect them with relevant contacts and shared information through our communication channels.

We helped Sporting Memories establish a presence in Orkney and to launch a series of projects. Donna Mackey their Partnership Manager said:

“VAO have been a fantastic support to our project and have provided us with vital links to the local community... [and have] ...helped us to recruit and train excellent volunteers from across the area. We will continue working with VAO as we look to embed our Sporting Memories clubs in the Orkney community.”



Case Study: Orkney Island Games 2025 - Building Capacity at scale

Orkney 2025 are the group that organise the 20th International Island Games. During 2024-2025 the management team approached us for assistance with managing and coordinating their volunteer recruitment, training and communications. We also provided advice and practical guidance around good practice in volunteer management and welfare. We did this through regular meetings with the Games Director and Director of Volunteering. We helped them by:



- writing the volunteer documents (policy, agreement and handbook)
- facilitating volunteer welcome Zoom calls
- providing Saltire Awards information to be included in training sessions
- creating and managing a volunteer survey which collated required information

Over 1200 individuals registered to be Games Volunteers. Our guidance provided useful insight into managing large numbers of volunteers and ensuring inclusivity, positive engagement and good welfare. It ensured that volunteers' needs would be considered when allocating roles, and that reasonable adjustments were made for those with disabilities.

Our support also increased the capacity of the Orkney 2025 team at the time when it was needed. We managed a volunteer survey which collated information such as uniform size, food intolerances, relevant medical details and emergency contacts. This also ensured the welfare of the volunteers was given appropriate consideration. Games Director, Kirsty Talbot, said:

“It was great having volunteer experts on board to help us develop the programme and know what we should (and shouldn't) be doing within a volunteer remit.”

By ensuring they had a positive experience as part of the games, we hoped it would inspire and encourage those new to volunteering to continue to support their community and volunteer with other local groups and organisations.



Youth Development and Volunteering

VAO has a strong focus on youth development and feel we play a part in building our sector's future capacity. Through our partnerships with Kirkwall Grammar School and Stromness Academy, VAO is positioned to provide structured, inclusive opportunities for young people to lead, learn, and contribute. We see repeatedly how volunteering strengthens communities and youth confidence.

VAO is committed to empowering young people as active contributors to Orkney's communities. We prioritise youth development by creating inclusive opportunities for skill-building, leadership, and volunteering — from one-to-one support through the Connect Project (see Connect) to youth-led decision-making through YLAG. Our work is grounded in the belief that investing in young people strengthens both the third sector and the future of Orkney.



Get Ready To Volunteer - Opening the Door to Volunteering

Get Ready To Volunteer aims to help people gain the knowledge, confidence and contacts to get into volunteering. Over this year we have run 3 courses, 2 in partnership with Orkney Islands Council's, Community Learning Development and Employability Team through the Local Employability Partnership (LEP) and another at Kirkwall Grammar School (KGS).

Many on the participants on the LEP course had been referred by a local support agency. They faced barriers such as low self-esteem, past trauma, long-term unemployment, or mental health challenges.

Similarly, the 'Get Ready to Volunteer' course at KGS is run in the Curriculum Support department where pupils struggle to follow a full timetable because of emotional, physical and learning challenges.



Throughout the course, participants:

- learnt about the different ways in volunteering can benefits them and the community.
- explored different ways they can volunteer. looked into what volunteering opportunities were available in Orkney.
- met representatives and volunteers from local charities and organisations (LEP course).
- had the chance to take part in an optional group volunteering activity.



Case Study: The Saltire Programme and Orkney Youth Awards

The Saltire Awards, endorsed by the Scottish Government, recognise the contributions and showcase long-term commitment of young volunteers in Orkney aged 12–25.

VAO actively promotes the scheme and celebrates achievements each March at the Orkney Youth Awards. Together with Orkney Islands Council's, Community Learning and Development team we organise the event as a partnership subgroup of the Youth Workers Forum (see Voice) .

The 2025 Orkney Youth Awards attracted a full audience was at capacity with 234 attendees. A total of 116 awards were presented, including 79 Saltire Awards, which recognised 2,680 hours of volunteering. These can be broken down as:



- 4 Summit Awards (the highest level of Saltire achievement)
- 2 × 200-hour
- 14 × 100-hour
- 8 × 50-hour
- 14 × 25-hour
- 13 × 10-hour
- 24 Challenge Awards (for one-off volunteering activities)

The Orkney Youth Awards further recognises the impact young people can make through volunteering. The event itself creates roles for young people which are public-facing and community focused. These include MCing, performing music, sound engineering and providing catering. This practical involvement also supports their personal development, enhancing their employability and future opportunities.



Jamie volunteered at this year's event. He said:

“ The experience of getting hands on with sound engineering at the youth awards this year was very valuable and gave me a good look into what needs done on the desk. It has opened up more opportunities for me to undertake roles in sound engineering and stage management at events such as the Orkney folk festival! ”

By celebrating youth achievement through the Saltire Awards programme and the Orkney Youth Awards, we are contributing to a culture that values inclusive volunteering and actively shapes our community. One of the MC's for the event, Nymeria Drayak said:

“ Being able to help with an event that promotes youth voices, volunteering, and work was such a fulfilling experience. Seeing that there are so many other like minded young people gives me a bigger community... and [I] feel very blessed to have all those around me, supporting me though out my own volunteering. ”



Case Study: Youth Local Action Group – grantmaking and governance development

In 2024-2025, VAO supported the continuation of the Youth Local Action Group (YLAG), a youth-led decision-making body. We helped ensure the group had strong governance, a solid understanding of how organisations operate, and the training needed to make fair, transparent decisions on community funding.

Aurelia, a YLAG member, said:



“ Seeing the result of the projects we've funded in the community is amazing, it makes you feel like you've made a real difference. A huge highlight for me is how youth-led the YLAG is. Everything we say is listened to and actioned where possible... The YLAG also inspired me to get involved with more funding opportunities. I was part of the Corra Foundation independent human rights fund for Scotland in 2024. The YLAG is awesome and I'm really glad to be part of it. ”

The YLAG empowers young people to be the decision makers, through this years programme, YLAG was able to administer £29,106 in grants to support specific problems, issues or youth projects.

The YLAG members gained personal development from being involved in these funding programmes, both in the experience of reading and scoring applications, and in feeling more involved in the community. A variety of activities were organised for members of YLAG themselves, designed to help them grow both as individuals and as a group, while developing practical, transferable skills.

In September, members participated in a First Aid demonstration evening, where they had the chance to learn and practise essential First Aid techniques.



The YLAG was also involved in the wider Rural Youth Action Network (RYAN), which provided life-changing new opportunities for the young people and through this work, VAO ensured that young people were not only heard but also had meaningful power, influencing how resources are distributed and how future youth engagement is shaped.

A YLAG member, Iona said:

“ I have gotten more opportunities, e.g. attending the RYAN event and being a part of the ERYP (European Rural Youth Parliament) Advisory Board, both of which I wouldn't have known existed, let alone participated in, without YLAG. ”



Case Study: Loud 'n Live

In August, they helped to organise and run at Loud 'n Live, our annual music and auction fundraiser at Orkney Sailing Club. A total of 6 young bands took part, raising £2,278.25 for Women's Aid Orkney. The volunteers took on roles such as poster graphics designer, reviewer, event photographer, MC, raffle sales and venue dresser.

Through youth-led fundraising events like Loud 'n Live, young musicians made direct contributions to local causes, including third-sector organisations such as Women's Aid Orkney. These efforts demonstrated the positive social impact young people can have when empowered to take initiative.



Case Study: Christmas Carols

In the lead-up to Christmas, a group of 8 young volunteers visited St Rognvald's House, Gilbertson Day Centre, the Sunnybrae Centre, and St Colm's to sing carols for residents. These interactions helped reduce social isolation among older residents while by empowering young people to become active, confident members of their communities. They are not only developing personally but also making meaningful contributions to local life.

VAO is committed to empowering young people as active contributors to Orkney's communities. We prioritise youth development by creating inclusive opportunities for skill-building, leadership, and volunteering — from one-to-one support through the Connect Project (see Connect) to youth-led decision-making through YLAG. Our work is grounded in the belief that investing in young people strengthens both the third sector and the future of Orkney.

VAO's Governance



We are a company limited by guarantee and a registered charity governed by a Board of Directors. They meet quarterly and additionally as needed to ensure strong and effective oversight of our strategic direction, finances, operations, and compliance with legal and regulatory responsibilities. The governance structure also includes sub-groups to help maintain robust internal control and accountability. Our directors also support the Chief Executive in developing and monitoring

delivery of our Strategic Plan. Their scrutiny and insight ensure the needs of the third sector in Orkney are firmly at its core and our functions are delivered transparently and responsibly.

During 2024/25, the board focused on strengthening oversight, ensuring good governance practice and contributing to the development of the Third Sector Hub proposal and VAO's strategic priorities. This helped us to maintain a high standard of governance while continuing to evolve as an organisation with a clear and accountable governance framework underpinning our work.

Effective governance ensures that we can operate with stability, trust, and responsiveness. A well-functioning board enables us to manage risk, attract funding, and deliver long-term value to our members, the sector, local and national partners and the wider Orkney community.

We remain committed to continuous improvement in our governance practices and to maintaining a diverse and skilled Board reflective of the communities we serve.

Extract of accounts

Income and Expenditure account - Year ended 31 March 2025

	2025		2024	
Income	£	£	£	£
Grant income	709,989		833,222	
Other income	112,291		112,291	
		817,297		945,513
Expenditure				
Charitable activities	1,163,149		928,668	
Raising funds	40,118		34,188	
		1,203,267		962,856
Surplus/(Deficit) for year		(385,970)		(17,343)

Balance Sheet - as at 31 March 2025

	2025		2024	
Fixed assets	£	£	£	£
Intangible assets	13,412		7,337	
Tangible assets	3,396		6,586	
		16,808		13,923
Current assets				
Stock	500		500	
Debtors	54,273		299,832	
Cash at bank within 1 year	437,088		560,517	
	491,861		860,849	
Current liabilities				
Creditors falling within 1 year	(111,407)		(91,540)	
Net current assets		380,545		769,309
Total assets less current liabilities		397,262		783,232
Represented by:				
Restricted funds		138,126		515,009
Unrestricted funds		259,136		268,223
		397,262		783,232

The above figures have been extracted from the company's audited financial statements which have been approved by the Voluntary Action Orkney Board of Directors.

The accounts for the year ending 31 March 2025 show a deficit of almost £400,000, this reflects the fact that we spent grant funding that had been received and recorded in previous years. This money

was used as intended, to deliver several large-scale projects, such as the Community Mental Health & Wellbeing grant funding, Orkney Money Matters and the Island Wellbeing initiative.

We are now moving into a new phase as will be outlined in our new Strategic Plan for 2026-2028. We expect that most of the remaining restricted funds will be used and a clearer picture of our usual, ongoing income and spending will be seen during the 2025/26 financial year.

A copy of the company's audited financial statements for the year ended 31 March 2025 is included in the AGM pack. After the AGM, you will be able to find them on our website.

Our Funders

- Children in Need
- Decelerator
- Esmee Fairbairn
- Grants Resources
- Information News – GRIN
- Micro Award
- Greenspace Scotland
- Liam MacArthur MSP
- Microsoft
- Mollie Lind Fund
- NHS Orkney
- Orkney Islands Council
- Repsol-Resources UK Ltd
- Robert Gordon University
- Scottish Government
- Social Investment Scotland
- The National Lottery
- Community Fund
- The Robertson Trust
- The Wood Foundation
- Tudor Trust

Chief Executive's Conclusion

Morven Brooks

This year, our focus at VAO was to strengthen the foundations of the third sector through collaboration, leadership, and practical support. We set out to amplify the voice of the sector, build capacity across organisations, and ensure local knowledge informed key decisions. Working with our board, staff, volunteers, and community partners, we made steady progress on each of our 4 strategic priorities



Central Source of Knowledge:



Voice



Connect



Capacity Building

From administering funding through the Communities Mental Health and Wellbeing Fund, to supporting the early development of the Third Sector Hub, to launching our new website - each initiative was designed with long-term sustainability in mind. We also continued to work hard behind the scenes to support organisations navigating governance, funding, and service delivery in an increasingly complex environment.

These efforts have helped to raise the profile of the third sector, strengthen our partnerships with public sector colleagues, and ensure that community voices are heard where it matters most.

As we look ahead, the conditions remain challenging, but the sector's role has never been more important. VAO will continue to act as a central source of knowledge, a strong voice for the sector, and a facilitator of meaningful collaboration.

I would like to thank the Board of Directors for their continued support, our dedicated staff team for their unwavering commitment, and the many organisations and individuals across Orkney who give so much of their time and energy to support their communities. Together, we are building a stronger third sector, one that is inclusive, forward-thinking, and here for the long term.

Organisations:

Access Orkney
Advocacy Orkney
Age Scotland Orkney
Amnesty International
Birsay Heritage Trust
Burray Community Association
Chest, Heart & Stroke Scotland
CLAN Cancer Support
Community Energy Scotland
Cromarty Hall Trust
Crossroads Orkney
Deerness Community Association
East Mainland Agricultural Society
Eday Community Enterprises
Eday Heritage Centre
Eday Partnership
Eday Renewable Energy Ltd
Employability Orkney
First Kirkwall Company
Boys' Brigade SCIO
Firth Community Association
Flotta Community Association
Flotta Community Council
Flotta Day Club
Flotta Heritage Trust
Friends of Happy Valley
Friends of the Hoy Kirk
George Mackay Brown Fellowship
Girlguiding Orkney
Greener Orkney
Grieveship Residents Association
Haey Hope Club
Hamnavoe Carers
Harray and Sandwick Community Council
Harray Community Association SCIO
Home-Start Orkney
Hope Cohousing Ltd
Hoy Youth Hub
Island of Hoy Development Trust
John Rae Society
Kirkwall East Church
Kirkwall Squash and Racketball Club
Marie Curie Fundraising Group - Orkney
MS Society Orkney
OIC Housing Services
Orkney Archaeology Society
Orkney Arts and Crafts
Orkney Arts Society
Orkney Athletic and Running Club
SCIO
Orkney Blide Trust
Orkney Charitable Trust
Orkney Citizens Advice Bureau
Orkney Creative Hub

Orkney Community
Transport Organisation (OCTO)
Orkney Dance and Fitness Ltd
Orkney Disability Forum
Orkney Drugs Dog
Orkney Family History Society
Orkney Field Club
Orkney Folk Festival
Orkney Foodbank
Orkney Friends of Palestine
Orkney Heart Support Group
Orkney Hearts Supporters Club
Orkney Heritage Society
Orkney Historic Boat Society
Orkney Housing Association Ltd
Orkney Islands Sea Angling Association
Orkney Japan Association
Orkney Library and Archive
Orkney Local Committee - Cancer Research
Orkney Men's Shed
Orkney Multiple Sclerosis Therapy Centre
Orkney Music and Culture
Orkney Natural History Society
Museum Trust
Orkney News Ltd
Orkney Pilgrimage
Orkney Rape and Sexual Assault Service
Orkney Renewable Energy Forum
Orkney Riding for the Disabled
Orkney Rowing Club
Orkney Sailing Club
Orkney Skate Trust
Orkney Street Pastors
Orkney Tourist Guides Association
Orkney Traditional Music Project
Orkney Trout Fishing Association
Orkney U3A
Orkney Versus Arthritis
Orkney Vintage Club
Orkney Wireless Museum
Orkney Yole Association
Orkney Youth Café
Orkney Zerowaste
Papay Community Co-operative Ltd
Papay Development Trust
Peedie Kirk United Reformed Church
Relationships Scotland Orkney
Rendall Community Association
Right There (Orkney)
Rousay, Egilsay and Wyre Development Trust
RSPB Scotland
Royal Voluntary Service

Samaritans of Orkney
Sanday Afternoon Club
Sanday Community Council
Sanday Community Craft Hub Ltd
Sanday Development Trust
Sanday Enterprises CIC
Sandwick Community Association
Shapinsay Community Association
Shapinsay Development Trust
Shapinsay Heritage Arts and Crafts
Shapinsay Lunch Club
Shapinsay Renewables Ltd
Skerries Toddler Group
Soulisquoy Printmakers
South Ronaldsay Golf Club
St Andrew's Community Association
Stromness Community Council
Stromness Royal British Legion Pipe Band
Stromness Shopping Week
Stronsay Moncur Memorial Church
Stronsay Renewable Energy Ltd
Swandro-Orkney Coastal Archaeology Trust
THAW Orkney
The Hoy Trust SCIO
The Peedie Retreat
The Pickaquoy Centre Trust
The Pier Arts Centre
The Workshop Loft and Gallery
Upside Down's Orkney
Victim Support Scotland
Vital Talk Orkney Counselling Service
West Side Cinema
Westray Community Association
Westray Development Trust
Westray Fairtrade Steering Group
Westray Golf Club
Westray Heritage Trust
Westray Parish Kirk
Westray Sailing Club
Women's Aid Orkney

Individuals:

Alison Sharkey
Alistair Carmichael MP
Elaine Grieve
Francesca Jane Couperwhite
George Hannah
Ian Carse
James Temple of Stowe (James Temple)
Keith Johnson
Linda Lennie
Sheila Garson