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Department for Culture, Media and Sport Contract Readiness Programme: Final Evaluation Report

July 2025

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The Contract Readiness Programme (CRP) – at a glance

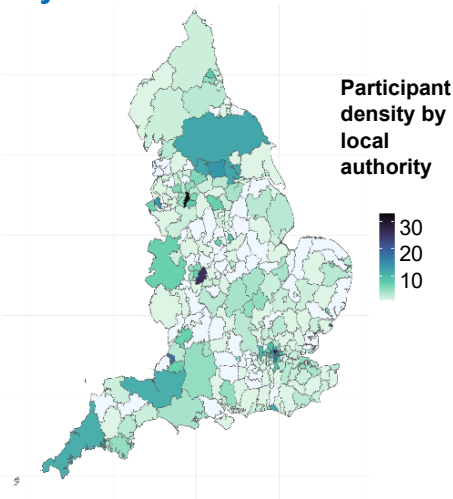


The VCSE Pathway

898 participants engaged.

14 webinars, 11 short courses, and 7 long courses delivered

129 participants moved through different CRP activities.

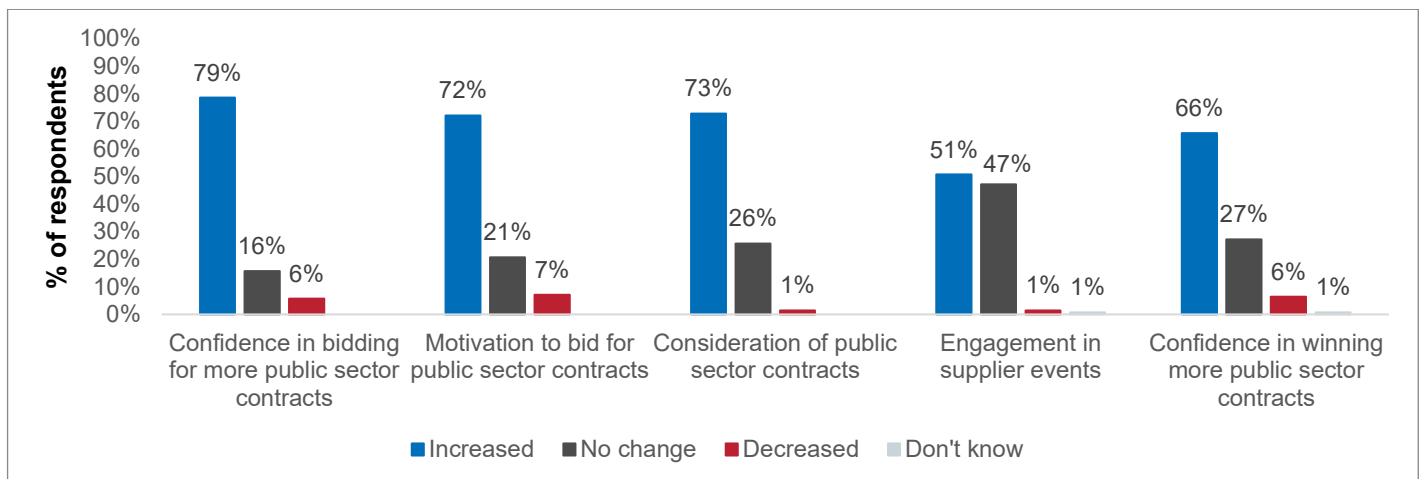


53 contracts won since VCSEs took part in the programme.

18 contract wins directly attributed to the CRP, at a total value of £2,066,495.

"It raised my aspiration, hearing the witness testimonies from other people who had leveraged contracts and social investments and were able to amplify their impact."
- VCSE survey respondent.

Survey respondents on the extent to which taking part in the CRP changed their organisation's...



VCSE participants liked:

- Focus on relationships with commissioners and partners.
- Hearing from inspirational, knowledgeable, and enthusiastic guest speakers.
- Emphasis on, and the explaining of, social value.
- Training on technical aspects of bidding for contracts.
- Peer-to-peer learning model.
- Opportunities for networking with commissioners and peer organisations.

"I think it was really, really useful to meet other people that were in the same position and facing the same barriers and some of that peer-to-peer learning was really useful."
- VCSE interviewee.

The commissioner pathway

10 baseline analyses of VCSE spend in central departments' supply chains places.

5 'Demystifying the VCSE Sector' webinars.

1 Meet the Buyer event

Commissioner pathway participants liked:

- Increasing awareness and knowledge of the VCSE sector.
- Informing action planning.

1.0 Key findings

About the programme

The Contract Readiness Programme (CRP) was designed and delivered in partnership between the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), Social Enterprise UK (SEUK), School for Social Entrepreneurs (SSE) and Voice4Change England (V4CE). It was launched in 2022 with the aim of enabling Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise organisations (VCSEs) to compete alongside other organisations and increase their participation in public service procurement in England. The CRP comprised of 2 complementary support pathways – one targeted at VCSEs, and the other targeted at central government commissioning teams.

The VCSE pathway

- ▶ Programme partners felt the co-design phase worked well to shape the support offered, and generally said good partnership-working aided programme delivery.
- ▶ Using delivery partners embedded in the VCSE sector enabled the programme to reach a diverse cohort of VCSEs.
- ▶ By the end of September 2024, 1,925 individual applications had been made to the CRP, showing substantial demand for the support. Over the same time period, 898 individuals participated in the different CRP activities.
- ▶ As intended, most participants took part in a webinar (774) and were generally from smaller, less mature, and less contract-ready organisations. A smaller number of individuals were engaged through the short course (163), which offered more in-depth support to slightly larger, more established and contract-ready organisations. The longest course format engaged 122 participants, from larger organisations with more pre-existing experience of contracting. Additionally, 129 participants took part in more than one CRP course, and interviewees valued the opportunity to progress through the programme
- ▶ Overall, participants' feedback about their experiences of the CRP webinar, short course and long course was very positive. Elements of the courses which worked well included the focus on relationships with commissioners and partners, hearing from guest speakers, and the emphasis on, and explaining of, social value. For the longer course formats, participants also highlighted the training on technical aspects of bidding for contracts and opportunities for networking and, for the long course, the peer-to-peer learning model.
- ▶ However, participants felt the content was not always pitched at the right level for attendees, and opportunities for networking could be improved.
- ▶ Participants identified areas of unmet need which were seen as ongoing barriers to participation in public sector procurement. These included needing more practical examples to build on, support to address organisation- or sector-specific challenges (such as 1-2-1 mentoring), advice about social value, and further support for smaller organisations not eligible for the longer course formats. They also acknowledged that demand-side barriers to engaging in procurement (e.g. a lack of suitable opportunities to bid for, challenges resourcing the lengthy bidding process) were ongoing.
- ▶ Within 6-months of participating in the CRP, participants reported improvements across the range of short-term outcomes anticipated in the ToC, including improved contract readiness in terms of awareness of public sector opportunities, and knowledge and skills in bidding for contracts.

- ▶ The evaluation found that by the end of 2024, 79% of 140 survey respondents reported increased confidence to bid, 73% said their organisation was considering public contracts more, 72% reported increased motivation to bid, 66% said the CRP increased their confidence in winning more public sector contracts, and 51% said the CRP led them to increase their engagement in supplier events.
- ▶ The final evaluation survey closed in December 2024 – 3 months before the end of CRP delivery in March 2025. It uncovered that, across 182 survey respondents (20% of all participants), there were 42 additional public sector bids and 18 ‘contract wins’ resulting from the CRP. The contract value secured by survey respondents, and which they attributed to the CRP, was £2,066,495.

The commissioner pathway

- ▶ The commissioner pathway design and timescale were adjusted to align with the VCSE Task Force – a cross-government Task Force led by VCSE Crown Representative Claire Dove, aiming to influence central government’s engagement with the VCSE sector. This led to delays to activities launching, but was instrumental in engaging the departments and disseminating information about the commissioner pathway activities.
- ▶ SEUK delivered 10 baseline analyses of VCSE spend in departments’ supply chains, 5 commissioner webinars, and a single commissioner-VCSE engagement event within the evaluation timeline (by December 2024).
- ▶ Overall, commissioner pathway participants had mixed views on the activities. Some found the activities engaging and useful in increasing awareness and knowledge of the VCSE sectors and informing their VCSE Task Force commitments such as developing a VCSE Action Plan. Others highlighted opportunities for improvement including providing departments with tools to monitor the spend on VCSEs in their supply chain internally.
- ▶ They also suggested that departments could have made more of the activities if they knew the support options available via the CRP and the delivery timelines from the beginning, and if commissioning teams were consistently engaged in the support offer (rather than, in some cases, only commercial teams).
- ▶ Feedback on the Public Services Hub suggested there is limited demand for and use of the resource, suggesting the Hub could be better promoted or pivoted in focus to increase engagement.
- ▶ Commissioner pathway participants reported that the commissioner webinars and baseline analyses contributed to increased awareness of VCSEs’ value and motivation to engage VCSEs across their teams. There was a general consensus that the achieved outcomes cannot be solely attributed to the CRP, as interviewees reported that other government initiatives, especially the VCSE Task Force, also contributed to achieving outcomes.
- ▶ Interviewees agreed that changes to procurement processes and systems (such as more tenders/specifications being informed by VCSEs, increased transparency around intent for VCSE procurement, and changes to simplify tendering processes) would take a lot more time.

Informed by the learning presented throughout this report, the CRP’s contribution to the existing evidence base and key recommendations for partnership-working, future programming, wider systems, and evaluation are discussed in [Section 8.0](#).

2.0 Introduction

2.1 About the Contract Readiness Programme

An independent study commissioned by Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) found that only 3-5% of the 250,000 Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise organisations (VCSEs) active in the UK engage in government contracting each year.¹

In recent years, there has been increased emphasis on promoting the voluntary sector's engagement in delivering public services. In the Civil Society Strategy (2018),² the Government acknowledged the prominent role of the VCSE sector in tackling key social challenges and recognised the added value that they can bring in delivering public contracts through their local and subject expertise. In 2020, the Cabinet Office's Transforming Public Procurement Green Paper highlighted an ambition to improve and simplify the public procurement process through a uniformed regulatory framework, and to provide opportunities for the VCSE sector in public service delivery through diversification of Government's supply chain.³ Furthermore, the Government launched the Civil Society Covenant in 2023 with the aim of resetting their relationship with civil society and recognising the sector as a trusted and independent partner.

The DCMS Civil Society and Youth Directorate launched the £900k Contract Readiness Programme (CRP) in 2022. It aimed to enable VCSEs to compete alongside other organisations and increase their participation in public service procurement in England.

DCMS commissioned Ecorys UK to undertake a process and theory-based impact evaluation of the CRP, to assess the extent to which it delivered on its intended aims. The evaluation was delivered from mid-2023 to March 2025.

2.1.1 Programme objectives

To achieve its aims, the CRP had 4 key objectives:

- ▶ Improve the skills, knowledge and support networks of VCSEs for successful bidding.
- ▶ Improve the awareness amongst VCSEs of opportunities regarding current and upcoming tenders.
- ▶ Raise Central Government commissioners' awareness and understanding of the sector's role and value to make it easier for the VCSE sector to position their offer to public service commissioners.
- ▶ Improve the evidence base on 'what works' to support greater VCSE participation in public service procurement.

2.1.2 Partnership structure

The CRP comprised of 2 complementary delivery pathways made up of the following planned activities:

- ▶ **VCSE Pathway** (delivered by School for Social Entrepreneurs (SSE) and Voice4Change England (V4CE)):
 - ▷ **Webinars:** up to 90-minute online 'Government Contracts Revealed' and 'Cracking the Code' webinars;

¹ Department for Culture, Media and Sport (2023) [DCMS action plan to engage the voluntary, community and social enterprise sectors in its supply chain](#).

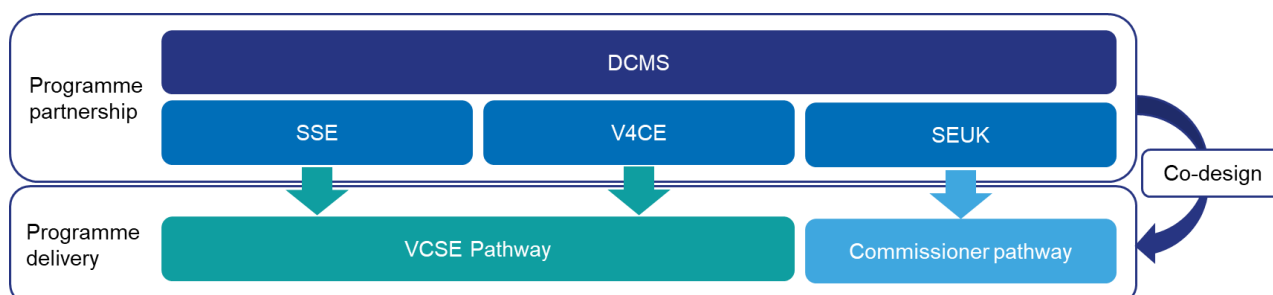
² Cabinet Office (2018) [Civil Society Strategy: Building a Future That Works for Everyone](#).

³ Cabinet Office (2020) [Green Paper: Transforming Public Procurement](#).

- ▷ **Short courses:** one-day ‘Government Contract Ready’ courses;
- ▷ **Long courses:** longer and more in-depth ‘Government Contract Wins’ courses made up of 4 sessions delivered over several months.
- ▶ **Commissioner Pathway** (delivered by Social Enterprise UK (SEUK)):
 - ▷ **Data baselining:** analysis of departmental VCSE spend to identify existing VCSE suppliers within central government departments’ supply chain;
 - ▷ **Webinars:** ‘Demystifying the Sector’ webinars;
 - ▷ **VCSE-Commissioner engagement events:** ‘Meet the Buyer’ events;
 - ▷ **VCSE champions scheme;** and
 - ▷ **Public Services Hub:** of online information about public sector procurement.

The delivery consortium was built on established relationships as all 3 delivery partners had worked together previously, with SSE being the lead partner responsible for communicating across the delivery partners and reporting into DCMS. V4CE had a specific role in reaching individuals representing black and minoritised ethnic community-led VCSEs, monitoring the diversity of participation in the programme, and sharing learning about the experiences of minority-led VCSE representatives. The programme partnership structure is outlined in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Partnership structure



A cross-partnership co-design phase was planned in at the inception phase of the programme to enable delivery partners and DCMS to share expertise and inform the design of the CRP, bring delivery partners into wider government agendas, and establish a mutual understanding of DCMS’ expectations for the programme. The implications of partnership-working and the co-design phase for each aspect of delivery are summarised in Partnership-working on the VCSE pathway and Partnership working on the commissioner pathway. Programme delivery started in April 2023 and originally planned to end in December 2024 but later extended to March 2025.

2.2 Report structure

This is the final report of the evaluation findings. The structure of this report is as follows:

- ▶ Methodology
- ▶ The VCSE pathway
- ▶ The commissioner pathway
- ▶ Conclusions and recommendations

Sources are referenced throughout the report using footnotes. Appendices are annexed at the end of the report.

3.0 Methodology

This chapter outlines the evaluation methodology and framework. An overview of the method is provided, linking the data collection tasks with the evaluation objectives, and the approach for qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis. The chapter finishes with reflections on the evaluation methodology including changes made and data considerations.

3.1 Evaluation

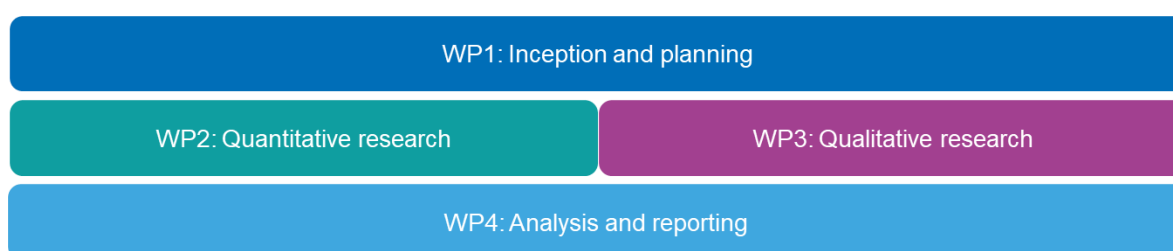
In 2023, DCMS commissioned Ecorys UK to undertake a process and theory-based impact evaluation of the CRP. The evaluation was delivered from mid-2023 to March 2025. The overarching aim of the evaluation was to assess the extent to which the CRP delivered on its intended aims and help build the evidence base around effective approaches to supporting greater VCSE participation in public sector procurement. The specific evaluation questions were:

1. How and to what extent did the CRP **reach** the target audience?
2. How was the CRP **developed, delivered and experienced**?
3. As a result of the CRP, what **measurable outcomes**, both intended and unintended, occurred?
4. What **longer-term outcomes/impacts** has the CRP contributed to?

3.2 Method overview

The evaluation was organised around 4 work packages (WP) as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2 Overview of evaluation methodology



The evaluation started with Theory of Change (ToC) development and review (the ToC is presented in Annex 1)⁴ which informed the evaluation framework, research tool development, and data collection. This was followed by quantitative data collection and secondary data analysis, and qualitative data collection and analysis. Links between the data collection and analysis tasks informing each evaluation objective are outlined in Table 1.

⁴ DCMS developed an initial ToC for the CRP, which Ecorys refined through a desk review of programme documentation and monitoring information (MI) and a ToC workshop with programme stakeholders.

Table 1 Data collection and analysis tasks informing each evaluation objective

Data source		Evaluation objective			
		1 – Reach of the CRP	2 – Development, delivery and experience of the CRP	3 – Outcomes	4 – Longer-term impacts
Programme monitoring information (MI) analysis		X	X	X	
Six-month follow-up survey with VCSEs			X	X	X
End-of-programme follow-up survey with VCSEs				X	X
Non-participant VCSE survey				X	X
Interviews and case studies with VCSEs		X	X	X	X
Interviews with commissioner pathway participants		X	X	X	X
Interviews with programme partnership stakeholders		X	X		
Comparison with existing literature					X

3.3 Quantitative research

The research team delivered three surveys with representatives from VCSE organisations over the course of the evaluation:

- **A survey of participants sent 6 months after first participating in a CRP activity (live from October 2023 – September 2024, referred to below as “6-month follow-up survey”):** questions explored respondent background and VCSE context; experiences of the different CRP activities; outcomes for VCSEs including contract readiness measures and bidding or winning contracts.⁵

⁵ Questions also explored the attribution of bids submitted/won to the CRP.

- **A final end-of-programme survey with participants (live for 6 weeks over November-December 2024):** focused on outcomes for VCSEs including repeat contract readiness measures, bidding for or winning contracts, and an opportunity to share final reflections on what worked well or less well in the CRP delivery.
- **A ‘non-participant’ survey of individuals who signed up for, but did not participate in, the CRP (live for 6 weeks over November-December 2024):** a short 5-minute survey focused on barriers to participation in and changes to participation in public procurement since signing up for the CRP.

A census approach was taken to inviting all VCSE participants, both to the 6-month follow-up survey, and to the survey at the end of the programme.

Table 2 shows the survey sample sizes. Throughout the report, survey data is presented as percentages where the base size (total number of respondents) is greater than or equals to 100, and as number values where the base size is smaller. The base size for each question is presented in the source information for tables and figures, and at the end of each sentence within-text.

Table 2 Survey sample sizes

VCSE survey	Number of responses ⁶	Response rate
6-month follow-up survey with participants	70	12.3%
End-of-programme survey with participants	150	17.0%
Non-participant survey	71	12.0%

The research team also analysed Monitoring Information (MI) data collected by the delivery partners to assess programme reach, engagement, and pre- and post- intervention contract readiness scores. This included data collected from participants before and after the courses, including VCSE characteristics, self-assessed contract readiness, and post-course feedback.

3.4 Qualitative research

The research team conducted 3 main waves of fieldwork with programme stakeholders. Table 3 shows the total number of interviews carried out at each wave of fieldwork.⁷

⁶ The base size reported in this report varies as a small number of survey respondents did not answer all questions, and when carrying out analysis (which required matching responses to the baseline MI data) not all respondents could be matched (69 of 70 6-month survey responses were matched, and 148 of 150 end-of-programme survey responses were matched).

⁷ The total number of interviewees consulted is higher, as some interviews included up to 2 individual interviewees.

Table 3 Interviews completed at each wave of fieldwork

Stakeholder		Interviews completed at each wave of fieldwork			
		Autumn 2023	Summer 2024	Autumn-winter 2024	Total
Programme partners (DCMS, SSE, V4CE and SEUK)		5	N/A	6	11
Commissioner pathway participants		2	N/A	3	5
VCSE pathway participants		11	15	4	30
<i>Webinar participants</i>		<i>3</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>N/A</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>Short course participants</i>		<i>4</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>N/A</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>Long course participants⁸</i>		<i>4</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>17</i>

Interviews with programme partners explored their involvement in the CRP, the wider policy context and aspirations for programme delivery, the design and development of the CRP, views on partnership-working and programme delivery, perceptions of outcomes achieved, and reflections on learning.

The research team carried out cross-sectional interviews with VCSE pathway participants in combination with a small number (n=5) of longitudinal case studies with long course participants. The cross-sectional and first wave of case study interviews explored VCSEs' background information and perceived contract readiness before taking part in the CRP, how participants got involved in the programme, experiences of the CRP offer, perceived outcomes from participation. Follow-up interviews with 5 VCSE long course participants provided an opportunity to understand VCSEs' journeys over time. The research team carried out follow-up interviews approximately 6 months after the first interview with the VCSE. Topics included any further support accessed through the CRP or other channels since initial participation, sustainability of short-term outcomes, and perceptions of longer-term outcomes. Where available, the case study interview data was triangulated with the relevant MI data and survey responses to provide a rich picture of the individual's journey through and beyond CRP participation.

Interviews with commissioner pathway participants explored participants' background experience of engaging with VCSEs, including successes and challenges, how they became involved in the CRP, experience of and views on the CRP offer, perceived outcomes from their involvement in the CRP, and priorities for future engagement with VCSEs.

All interviewees were asked to share suggestions for improvements to the CRP offer.

A light-touch literature review was also carried out in January 2025 to compare the outcomes achieved through the CRP to outcomes achieved by other, similar, programmes. The research team identified literature to be

⁸ One of the summer 2024 and all 4 of the autumn-winter 2024 interviews were wave 2 longitudinal case study interviews.

included in the review through an online search of ‘contract readiness’ evaluations/research and background knowledge of the existing evidence base.

3.5 Changes to the evaluation methodology

A collaborative approach was taken to the evaluation, to ensure that changes to programme delivery were reflected in the methodology, and to enhance the effectiveness of the evaluation. These included:

- ▶ A prize draw for a £1,000 and £250 VCSE donation incentive was added to the end-of-programme and non-participant surveys respectively. This positively influenced the response rate for these surveys.
- ▶ MI data included VCSE participants’ self-reported levels of contract readiness on a scale of low to high. The research team scoped the feasibility of linking VCSE participants’ self-reported baseline levels of contract readiness, to repeat measures reported in the 6-month and end-of-programme surveys administered by Ecorys. Feasibility testing of the repeat measures scores was not consistently possible due to gaps in the baseline data (particularly for long course participants and participants who were enrolled on a different course to the one they applied for). Validity testing also found the self-reported contract readiness scores to be a less valid measure of contract readiness,⁹ and alternative questions (which collected reflective answers using Likert scales) were used instead.
- ▶ The 6-month and end-of-programme surveys administered by Ecorys asked participants to self-report which activities they participated in. Self-reported participation was cross-referenced with participation logged in the MI data and the research team identified inconsistencies in how they were reported. Interview data suggested this may be due to respondent recall error (several months elapsed between participation and survey completion). Survey responses have therefore been linked with participation as reported in the MI data by the delivery partners.

3.6 Data considerations

As with any evaluation, there were several data limitations which should be considered:

- ▶ The final wave of data was collected at the end of the evaluation timescales (November – December 2024). The evidence therefore reflects progress and outcomes achieved by the end of 2024, whilst programme delivery continued to March 2025. It is to be expected that more time is needed to observe fully realised outcomes.
- ▶ Given the large cohort of the CRP and the relatively small sample sizes – particularly for sub-group analysis – the outcomes reported in this report are for survey respondents only and cannot be generalised to the wider population of CRP participants.
- ▶ The non-participant data collection has a relatively small sample size, primarily consisting of webinar participants from smaller organisations in the early stages of their development. This sample may not be representative of all non-participants, and this should be considered throughout the report.
- ▶ Different survey respondents were shown different questions depending on their self-reported participation in the programme. The base size for survey questions therefore varies across this report and is outlined in the data source information throughout.

⁹ Comparison of self-reported contract readiness scores submitted by VCSE interviewees illustrated that VCSE’s qualitative reports of outcomes achieved did not align with their recall of the scores submitted at baseline, or how their contract readiness had changed over time.

- ▶ A relatively small number of interviews were carried out with commissioner pathway participants. This reflects the weighting of programme delivery: fewer activities than originally planned were delivered on the commissioner pathway, with a small number of central government departments.
- ▶ MI data collected by the delivery partners and underpinning the MI data analysis was largely complete. However, some data gaps existed whereby participants' pre- or post- data was missing or incomplete. The base size for MI analysis therefore varies throughout this report and is included in the source information.

A conceptual image showing three small green seedlings with two leaves each, growing out of stacks of silver coins. The background is a soft-focus green with a bokeh effect. A large, dark blue diagonal shape covers the left side of the image. The text 'Part 1: The VCSE Pathway' is written in white on the blue shape.

Part 1: The VCSE Pathway

4.0 Implementation and reach

This chapter describes and reflects on the design, development and implementation of the CRP VCSE pathway, and the reach and engagement achieved. The chapter is informed by MI, qualitative interview and survey data.

Key findings

The CRP was designed and delivered in partnership between DCMS, SEUK, SSE and V4CE, underpinned by a meaningful co-design phase and generally positive partnership-working. Using delivery partners embedded in the VCSE sector enabled the programme to reach a diverse cohort of VCSEs.

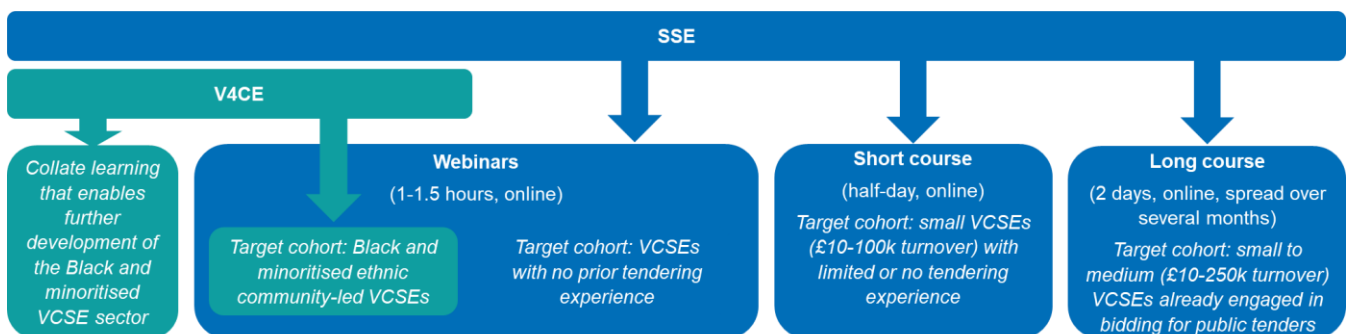
By the end of September 2024, 1,925 applications¹⁰ had been made to the CRP, showing substantial demand for the support. Over the same time period, 898 individuals participated in the different CRP activities. As intended, most participants took part in a webinar (774) and were generally from smaller, less mature, and less contract ready organisations. A smaller number of individuals were engaged through the short course (163), which offered more in-depth support to slightly larger, more established and contract-ready organisations. The longest course format engaged 122 participants from larger organisations with more pre-existing experience of contracting. Additionally, 129 participants took part in more than one CRP course, and interviewees valued the opportunity to progress through the offer.

4.1 VCSE pathway design and structure

The VCSE pathway was comprised of 3 main online training activities: webinars, designed for the least contract ready VCSEs; short courses, for established VCSEs with limited or no tendering experience; and more intensive long courses targeting small-to-medium sized VCSEs with some tendering experience. V4CE, supported by SSE, delivered sessions targeted to VCSEs with Black and minoritised ethnic community leaders. The content of the sessions mirrored the webinars delivered by SSE but included additional discussions around specific barriers minoritised ethnic community-led VCSEs faced to public sector procurement.

The delivery structure is outlined in Figure 3.

Figure 3 VCSE pathway structure



¹⁰ Not unique applicants.

Programme partners¹¹ believed the **co-design phase had positively shaped the support offered** through the CRP. Interviewees reported that the co-design phase allowed DCMS, SEUK, SSE and V4CE to share knowledge to inform the design of the pathway. For example, DCMS were flexible to include smaller organisations in the target audience for the CRP after delivery partners shared data and evidence highlighting the level of need and support from smaller organisations. Similarly, DCMS were able to share policy agendas with the delivery partners to ensure the advice provided to participating VCSEs aligned with wider policy developments, for example by highlighting the importance of including themes on cyber security and the Government Procurement Service Review in the course agenda.

“Cyber is a big issue at the moment and [there are some] policy documents that [VCSEs] would need to have in place if they’re going forward [with a tender], so those kinds of things I asked them [delivery partners] to look at.” - Programme partner

Programme partners reported that several changes were made to the VCSE pathway in the second year, building on learning identified through delivery and the interim evaluation findings:

- ▶ DCMS provided additional funding for more webinars and short courses to be delivered in the final year of the programme.
- ▶ Short course session times were reduced to address participant feedback about online fatigue and engagement.
- ▶ The time gap between long course sessions was reduced.
- ▶ Early interviews with VCSEs found that participants wanted more support in accessing local tendering opportunities, rather than only central government. In recognition of this feedback, SSE and V4CE have highlighted principles that work across central and local government levels and noted considering how to further build learning around local authority tendering in the sessions due to be delivered after the final evaluation interviews had concluded.

4.1.1 Need for the VCSE pathway

As outlined in 2.1.1, the VCSE pathway aimed to improve the skills, knowledge and support networks of VCSEs for successful bidding and awareness amongst VCSEs of opportunities regarding current and upcoming tenders. Indeed, the VCSE, commissioner, and programme partners interviewed perceived several barriers to VCSE participation in public sector tendering, which they hoped the CRP could reduce. These were often barriers that had been identified in previous research,¹² and included:

- ▶ **Being at a competitive disadvantage compared to larger, private sector companies** that had the advantage of offering cost benefits through economies of scale. Some VCSEs reported that due to the financial pressures on local authorities, and their need to demonstrate Value for Money, bidding had felt like a “*race to the bottom*” to find the provider that could deliver the service at the lowest cost; something that many VCSEs are not in the position to do due to, for example, operating at a smaller scale with few options for economies of scale.
- ▶ **Skills and capacity gaps in bidding for public sector contracts.** Interviewees, particularly from smaller organisations, noted that staff are typically assigned to delivering their existing offer, rather than having staff dedicated to searching for and writing bids, and they usually do not have the funds available to bring in external

¹¹ Throughout this report we refer to programme partners, meaning both DCMS and the delivery partners.

¹² See Section 6 in: Perspective Economics. (2022). [The role of Voluntary, Community, and Social Enterprise \(VCSE\) organisations in public procurement.](#)

bid-writing support. Commissioners interviewed echoed this view, acknowledging that VCSEs often do not have the capacity to attend pre-market engagement events, or have the time to dedicate to bid-writing.

- ▶ **Not having relationships with commissioners** and fear of not having the time or knowledge to develop fruitful relationships. Several VCSEs interviewed suspected commissioners were more likely to favour organisations they had worked with previously, because it may be less resource-intensive to re-use existing suppliers than carry out due-diligence checks on new suppliers.
- ▶ **Lacking recognised organisational track record in delivering contracted programmes**, despite having thematic expertise in a field.
- ▶ **Low contract readiness** was cited as a barrier by commissioners who said there was a limited supply of VCSEs that were in a position to bid for opportunities.

However, VCSE interviewees also perceived several **demand-side barriers beyond their control**. The CRP's efforts to address these issues are outlined in 7.1. These included:

- ▶ **A shortage of opportunities suitable for VCSEs to deliver**, due the scale of delivery being too large, the budget being too low, or a lack of demand/appetite for some of the services VCSEs offer. This barrier was more pronounced for VCSEs operating in sectors seen as 'niche' or underfunded, where few opportunities were commissioned.
- ▶ **Complexity of the bidding process**. For example, one interviewee described needing to attach 12 documents totalling 3,000 words each for a central government tender, which was challenging for them to meet. Another described Invitations to Tender (ITTs) as 'jargon heavy'.

"The most useful thing that could be done is to simplify the process so that small charities can access it. Because the biggest barrier is that it is so complicated that you really need a dedicated person to focus on that bid, who knows how to do it, and has the time to navigate all the complexities. And that means you are much more likely to get the really big players winning contracts." – VCSE interviewee

4.1.2 Partnership-working on the VCSE pathway

Overall, programme partners reported **positive partnership working on implementing the VCSE pathway**. DCMS praised the flexibility of delivery partners to adapt to feedback in making the changes outlined above. However, they also highlighted several learning points on partnership-working:

- ▶ Delivery partners expressed that the **unanticipated level of sign-off required by DCMS** on materials, particularly VCSE pathway communication and engagement materials, placed pressures on the timelines to launch the programme in the set-up phase. This illustrates a key learning around managing expectations for sign-off from an early stage of partnership working so this can be built into delivery timescales.
- ▶ At an early stage of the evaluation, programme partners raised **challenges around the collection and sharing of monitoring information**. DCMS stakeholders highlighted that delivery partners had responded positively when expectations around the sharing of monitoring information and communication across partners were re-established, leading to reports of improved data sharing and communication by the final wave of interviews.
- ▶ DCMS appreciated that delivery partners had reduced the wait time between VCSEs signing up to programmes and delivery starting, although this skewed the delivery timescale as **sessions were not evenly spaced out over the delivery timeframe**. Programme partners including DCMS and delivery partners noted this had negatively influenced the ability to 'test and learn' based on evaluation findings and session feedback.

Suggested improvements for future partnership working was for more collaborative discussion around changes to delivery plans, a written recording of changes made, and including more specific information about delivery timescales in the grant agreement.

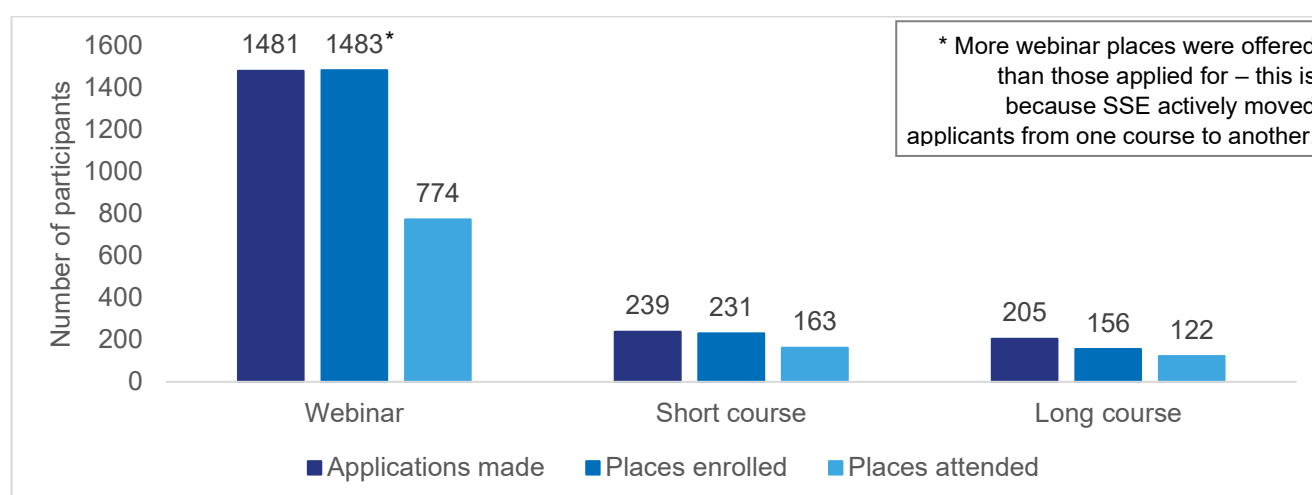
- ▶ Linked to the above, the delivery of CRP support targeted to black and minoritised ethnic community-led VCSEs fell later in the delivery timetable than initially planned. This meant **feedback from these sessions had not been shared internally** amongst the programme partners at the time of the evaluation.

4.2 VCSE reach and engagement

4.2.1 Reach

By the end of September 2024, **1,925 applications had been made to the CRP, showing substantial demand for the support**. Most (77%) of these applications (n=1,481) were made to the webinar, which was designed to reach the highest number of people through an accessible, online and universal offer. **Eligibility criteria for the short and long courses targeted organisations with a minimum size and more pre-existing awareness and knowledge** of public sector contracting relative to the wider cohort. Through self-selection to each course, as shown in Figure 4, the numbers of applications are unsurprisingly smaller for the short (12% of applications) and long courses (11%).

Figure 4 VCSE pathway reach and engagement¹³



Source: VCSE pathway MI data received October 2024. Base=1925.

The lack of eligibility criteria for the webinar meant that the characteristics of applicants were highly varied, but applications generally came from smaller and less mature organisations than the other course types:

- ▶ **Webinar applicants:** More than half of the 1481 applications (56%) were from micro-to-small (with turnover £0-£100k), 30% were from medium (£100k-£1m), 3% were from large (£1m-£10m) and, whilst not the target audience for the CRP, 2% were from major VCSEs (more than £10m). Whilst 63% had been running for over 2 years, 18% had been running for less than 2 years, and 17% were not yet running as an organisation.
- ▶ **Short course applicants:** Most of the 239 applications were from medium-sized organisations (62%, followed by large organisations (24%), and only 13% were small. They had most commonly been running for over 10

¹³ The number of places offered for webinars are higher than those who applied for webinars – this is because SSE actively moved applicants from one course to another (for example, from the short course to webinar).

years, followed by running for 5-10 years (25%). Whilst all organisations on the short course were established and running, 13% had been running for 2-4 years and a further 8% for less than 2 years.

- **Long course applicants:** The 205 applications for the long course tended to be from even larger organisations – 54% were medium, 43% were large and 1% were major. Three quarters (75%) of applications to the long course were from organisations that had been running for over 10 years, 18% for 5-10 years and 7% for 2-4 years.

Delivery partners' communication strategy involved **advertising the CRP VCSE support offer through their own networks**, including with other infrastructure organisations, encouraging VCSEs to apply via the SSE and V4CE websites. 68% of applicants heard of the CRP through the programme partners: 40% from SSE, 13% from SEUK, 10% from V4CE, and 6% from DCMS. Interviewees who had taken part in other SSE programmes expressed how the CRP, being delivered by SSE, had motivated them to apply, since they knew and trusted the quality of SSE's support. Indeed, 19% of all applicants had taken part in another SSE programme before applying for the CRP. Applicants most commonly reported hearing about the CRP through newsletters (49%) from either the delivery partners or wider VCSE infrastructure organisations, followed by social media (10%) and proactive web searching (10%) (base=1922).

V4CE had a specific role within the delivery partnership, to reach organisations with black and minoritised ethnic community leaders, and it was expected that a greater proportion of those organisations would be smaller in size. The MI data showed that 70% of all organisations that applied to V4CE's webinar, were indeed micro-to-small in size, compared to 52% of organisations that applied for the webinar delivered by SSE.

However, end-of-programme survey respondents and interviewees suggested that **some participants felt that the webinar should have been advertised more extensively**. One end-of-programme survey respondent, for example, reported that none of the 400 community groups they worked with had heard of the programme.

Overall, interviewees **found the registration process to be straightforward** for each of the courses. Only a very small number of participants found the registration process to be slightly complex. However, when interviewees had questions about signing up, they appreciated being able to speak to SSE who promptly responded to their queries. Survey respondents and interviewees also appreciated the opportunity to sign up for more than one of the courses at the same time.

Almost all of those (97%) who applied for the CRP (n=1,925) were offered a place: 1,483 places were enrolled across 14 webinars (>100%),⁹ 231 places (97%) across 11 short courses and 156 places (76%) across 7 long courses. SSE offered a small number of applicants places on different courses to the one they applied to, due to their course of choice being less appropriate to their organisation's circumstances, for example, being moved from a short or long course to the webinar.¹⁴ Figure 4 illustrates that the long course had the highest proportion of applicants who were not enrolled on their course of choice by the end of September 2024 (n=50), consistent with the stricter eligibility criteria for this type of course.

4.2.2 Engagement

As shown in Figure 4, by the end of September 2024, 1,059 CRP places had been attended by 898 unique individuals (129 individuals attended more than one activity). Across all activities, participant numbers exceeded the minimum targets agreed by the programme partnership.¹⁵ The **attendance rate for the CRP activities was**

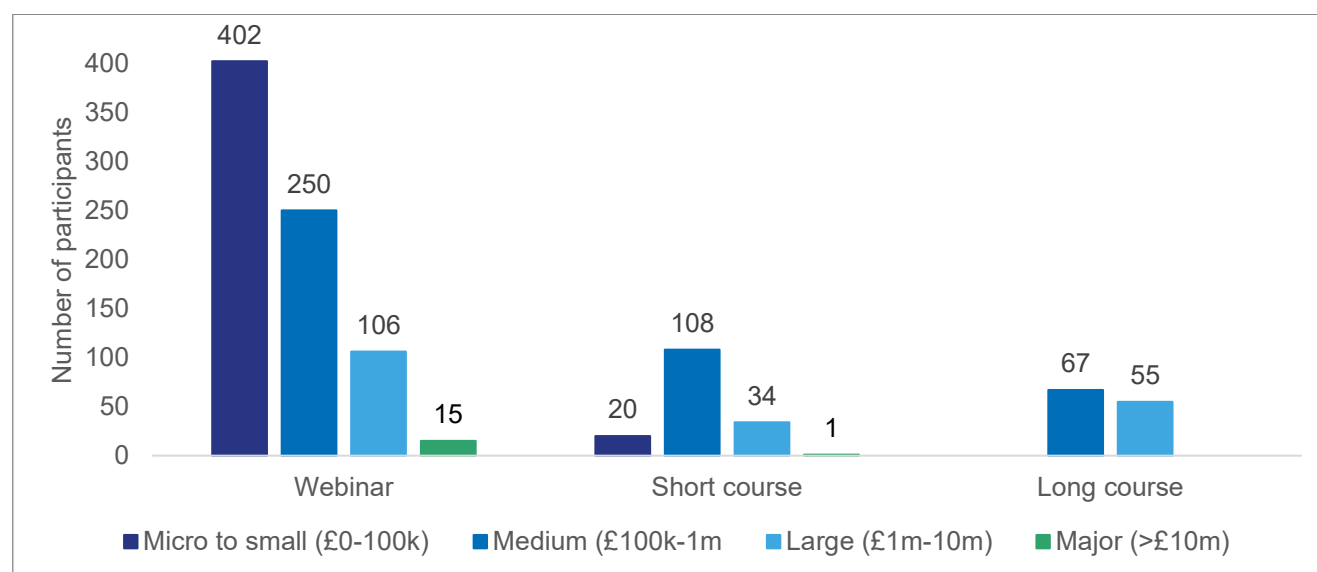
¹⁴ The number of places offered for webinars are higher than those who applied for webinars – this is because SSE actively moved applicants from one course to another

¹⁵ Minimum and upper target numbers of participants were set during the programme inception. For the webinar, the minimum target was 250 participants and an upper target of 500 participants – both of which were exceeded. The short course exceeded the minimum target of 120 (the upper target was 240), and the long course exceeded the minimum target of 80 (the upper target was 160).

higher for the more intensive activities at 94% for the long course¹⁶ and 71% for the short course. The webinar had the highest rate of non-attendance with 52% of the 1483 webinar places attended.

Echoing the characteristics of the organisations that applied for each course, Figure 5 shows the **webinar engaged participants from diverse organisation sizes but included a higher proportion of micro-to-small and medium-sized organisations** (52% of all webinar attendees), whereas the short and long courses engaged slightly larger organisations.

Figure 5 Organisation size for VCSE pathway participants



Source: VCSE pathway MI data received October 2024. Base=1925.

The **webinar also engaged less mature organisations than the other courses**: 16% of 774 participants were from organisations which were not yet up and running, and a further 17% were from organisations which had been running for less than 2 years. The short course engaged just 15 participants from organisations which had been running for less than 2 years. All other participants from the short and long courses were from more mature organisations which had been running for more than 2 years.

The MI data demonstrates that, as intended, the webinar engaged participants with the lowest contract readiness scores, followed by the short course, and long course participants gave themselves the highest baseline scores. For example, participants were asked by the delivery partners to self-assess their contract readiness scores before taking part in the CRP activities in several outcome areas (a full breakdown is provided in 9.0 Annex 1), including:

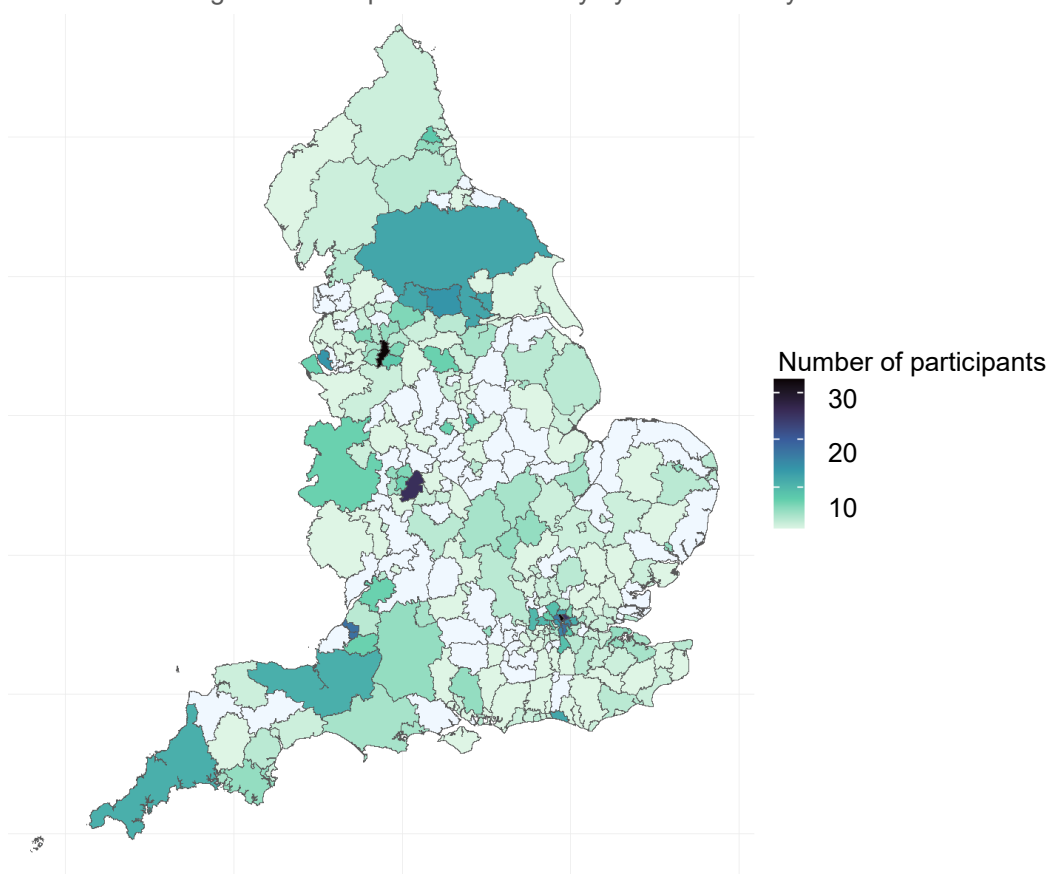
- **Awareness of current and upcoming public sector tenders:** webinar participants most commonly reported this as 'low' (40%) or 'none' (23%), short course participants most commonly reported their awareness levels 'low' (25 of 59) or 'medium' (16 of 59), whilst long course participants most commonly reported 'medium' levels of awareness (over half, 44 of 78) then 'low' (just under a quarter, 18 of 78).
- **Knowledge and skills around bidding for public sector contracts:** webinar participants most commonly reported this to be 'low' (42%) or 'none' (26%); short course participants most commonly reported 'low' levels (almost half, 28 of 59) or 'medium' (almost a third, 18 of 59); and long course participants most commonly reported this 'medium' (roughly 2 thirds, 50 of 78) followed by low (just under a quarter, 17 of 78).

¹⁶ The number of enrolments for the long course at the time of analysis was 156, however one of the enrolled long courses had not yet been delivered. The attendance rate is therefore based on the 7 long courses that had already taken place.

The CRP engaged VCSEs from a wide range of thematic sectors. Health and social care VCSEs made up the highest proportion (36%) across all 3 activities, which is unsurprising considering this is the most common sector for VCSEs to operate in, and with the largest income.¹⁷ In terms of other sectors, 11% were in the (un)employment support sector, 7% disability, 5% domestic and/or sexual abuse, and 3% homelessness. However, this does not reflect the broad range of sectors participants operated within as 39% reported their organisation's sector as 'other', describing their work in areas including but not limited to asylum and refugee support, youth services / youth justice, arts and culture, tackling loneliness, environmental justice and protection, and VCSE infrastructure support.

The programme was delivered England-wide. The **density of participation by local authority area** is depicted in Figure 6. It shows the highest numbers of participants came from Manchester, Birmingham and the London Boroughs of Islington and Hackney. Compared to the distribution of VCSEs in England, where the South of England has a higher concentration of VCSEs than the Midlands and even more than the North, this demonstrates that the CRP has reached well beyond the geographical vicinity of the delivery partners (based in the South).¹⁸

Figure 6 Participant VCSE density by local authority¹⁹



Source: VCSE pathway MI data received October 2024. Base=1,059.

The most common organisational structure of VCSEs participating in the CRP was registered charities (37%), followed by Community Interest Companies (CICs) limited by Guarantee (31%). Additionally, whilst information about organisational leadership was not collected through the MI data, the 6-month follow-up survey found the CRP engaged organisations with diverse leadership teams (see Table 4); the majority of survey respondents came

¹⁷ NCVO (2024). [UK Civil Society Almanac 2024: What do voluntary organisations do?](#)

¹⁸ Compared to the NCVO (2024). [Civil Society Almanac: Where are voluntary organisations based?](#)

¹⁹ Digital boundary data source: Office for National Statistics licensed under the Open Government Licence v.3.0. Contains OS data © Crown copyright and database right (2025).

from women-led VCSEs (56 of 70), almost a quarter were from VCSEs led by minoritised ethnic groups (16 of 70), 13 respondents were from VCSEs led by disabled people and 7 had LGBTQIA+ leadership teams.

Table 4 Composition of VCSE participants' organisational leadership teams

Do people from the following groups make up 51% or more of your organisation's leadership...	Minoritised ethnic groups?	Disabled people?	LGBTQIA+ people?	Women?
Yes	16	13	7	56
No	49	48	51	10
Don't know	4	6	9	3
Prefer not to say	1	3	3	1

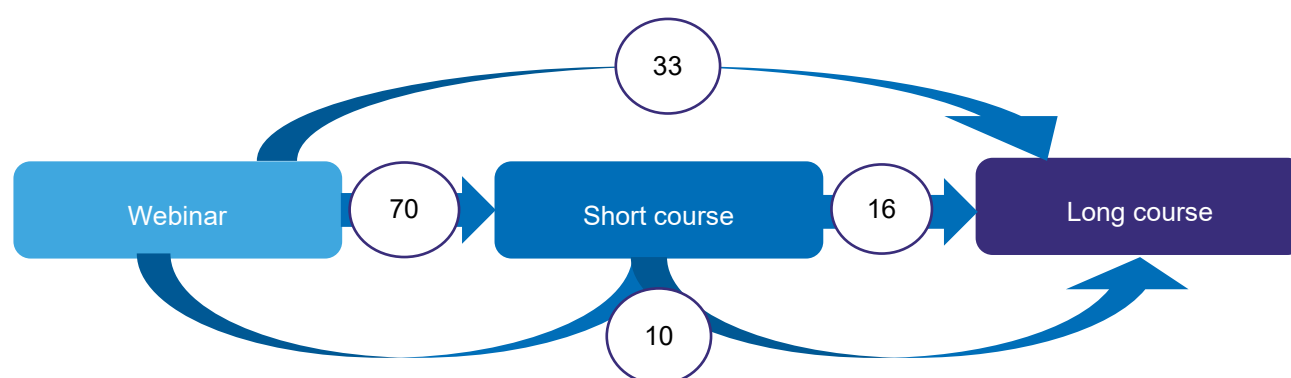
Source: VCSE 6-month follow-up survey. Base=70.

4.2.3 Movement between different CRP courses

The MI data provided evidence of 129 participants moving through different CRP activities, demonstrating how the **first activity may have acted as a gateway into other courses**.

Figure 7 shows that the most common journey was from the webinar to the short course (70 participants), followed by the webinar to the long course (33 participants). Sixteen short course participants also went on to participate in a long course, and 10 participants completed all 3 CRP activities.

Figure 7 Participant journeys through the VCSE pathway offer



Source: VCSE pathway MI data received October 2024. Base=1,059.

4.2.4 Rationale for taking part

Across the programme, interviewed participants' rationale for signing up to the CRP were:

- **Income stream diversification:** No matter their previous level of experience in public sector procurement, a key motivator for signing up to the CRP was income stream diversification. Many participants hoped that the CRP would help prepare them to bid for and win public sector contracts, therefore improving their organisation's financial health. Interviewees that had previously relied on grant funding described the ever-increasing difficulty of securing grants. Several participants felt that shifting their financial model by becoming increasingly 'contract

ready' would allow them to sustain their services in a sector where grant funding is becoming more difficult to obtain. For example, an infrastructure organisation that had historically depended on grant funding from county, district, and borough councils pointed to the growing financial pressures on local authorities they believed was leading to an increasing focus on value for money, with fewer grant-funding opportunities available.

- **Knowledge and skills development:** All participants were looking to improve their knowledge and skills around bidding for public sector contracts. Whilst some interviewees were looking to refresh their knowledge as they had not recently bid for public sector contracts, others had never bid for public sector contracts before and wanted to develop entry-level knowledge. Many participants wanted to know where to look for public sector contracts, central government contracting, understand why they had won some contracts and not others, if their knowledge of the sector was up to date and relevant, as well as seeking advice on bidding as a consortium, pricing and costing their services. Interviewees believed the CRP would bring all the information they needed into one place.
- **Learning from other organisations:** Several of the participants interviewed said they took part in the course to learn from other organisations of similar size and scope. They hoped the opportunity to learn from their peers would give them good insight into how to overcome the problems and challenges they face. Other participants felt that learning from those facilitating, and participating in the course, would provide good networking opportunities that could lead to forming consortia for future bidding.
- **Free capacity-building support:** Some participants also pointed to the lack of in-house expertise and limited financial ability to bring in the skills they needed to write bids as a reason for taking part in the CRP. They cited the CRP offer being free as an enabler to their uptake.

4.2.5 Barriers to engagement

A survey of individuals who signed up for, but did not attend, the CRP explored **reasons for non-attendance**:²⁰

- Over half of non-participants (39 of 71) said they were unable to attend because they **could no longer make the date or time**. The vast majority of these survey respondents had been enrolled in but did not attend the webinar (n=37), one was from the short course and the other from the long course. The open text responses in the survey provided more detail, suggesting that capacity constraints within their organisation was a key barrier to participation, echoing findings from wider research into the barriers VCSEs face in engaging in much-needed capacity-building support.²¹

"I am a volunteer as Trustee in three orgs. I am also a full time CEO, ultimately I am time poor...." – Non-participant survey respondent

- 9 survey respondents cited **technical issues** as a barrier to joining the activities they were enrolled in.
- 3 reported **accessibility issues**. Whilst no further detail was given by survey respondents, feedback in the MI data included suggestions to reduce sensory distractions in the webinar (such as informal conversation and background noise). This was echoed by interviewees from disability-led organisations who suggested the webinars were also too fast-paced.

²⁰ The vast majority of non-participant survey respondents were enrolled in the webinar (66 of 71), reflecting that the majority of non-participants overall were enrolled in the webinars. 3 non-participant survey respondents were enrolled in the short course, and 1 respondent was enrolled in the long course. A full breakdown of the non-participant survey sample is provided in Table 12.

²¹ Ecorys (2024). [Growth Fund Financial Resilience Research](#).

- ▶ 3 survey respondents said they forgot to attend, and several survey respondents provided additional comments highlighting that they **had not seen reminder emails** about the upcoming event, suggesting they may have gone to the organisation's spam folder or been missed.
- ▶ The least common reason given was that survey respondents were no longer interested in the support (2 of 71), suggesting that other factors proved to be a barrier to engagement.

Additionally, 4 of 15 survey respondents who took part in the long course reported not being able to attend all the sessions they were enrolled in because of other commitments (2 of 4) or health difficulties (2 of 4). Two participants reported the dates changing for some of the long course's sessions had caused them difficulty. These participants explained that it can be difficult for VCSEs to block out half a day for training as they already struggle with capacity, so it was impossible for them to attend to all the sessions once the dates changed. However, another participant reported that they had been able to arrange a replacement colleague to attend one of the sessions and that they appreciated SSE's flexible approach to changing this.

5.0 Experiences of the VCSE pathway

This section summarises the experiences of participants that took part in the VCSE pathway activities delivered within the evaluation timeframe. For each of the 3 courses offered through the pathways, the section explores what participants felt the successes and challenges of each element of the course were. The evidence presented in this section is based on interviews with participants of the VCSE pathway and programme partners; MI data collected by the delivery partners following each course session; and 6-month follow-up survey data; and end-of-programme follow-up survey data.

Key findings

Overall, participants' feedback about their experiences of the CRP webinar, short course and long course was very positive. Elements of the courses which worked well included the focus on relationships with commissioners and partners, hearing from guest speakers, emphasis on, and explaining of, social value. For the longer course formats, participants also highlighted the training on technical aspects of bidding for contracts and opportunities for networking and, for the long course, the peer-to-peer learning model.

However, participants felt the content was not always pitched at the right level for attendees, and opportunities for networking could be improved. Participants identified areas of unmet need which were seen as ongoing barriers to participation in public sector procurement. These included needing more practical examples to build on, support to address organisation- or sector-specific challenges (such as 1-2-1 mentoring), advice about social value, and further support for smaller organisations not eligible for the longer course formats. They also acknowledged that demand-side barriers to engaging in procurement were ongoing. Considerations for future programmes are outlined in [Section 8.3](#).

5.1 Webinars

Participants were generally satisfied with their experience of the webinars. They were **positive about the course's content, particularly its focus on building relationships with commissioners and partners, and social value**. However, some would have liked **more time spent on practical activities and examples**. Participants were also mostly positive about the webinar's guest speakers, its facilitation, and the opportunities provided for interaction (though some would have liked more time for networking). However, participants were **not in agreement on whether the webinars were pitched at the right level**. Some participants from **smaller organisations felt that too much was assumed about the knowledge participants already had** of public sector contracting, and some **from larger organisations felt that the webinars would be more useful for those with no prior bidding experience**. This section provides further detail on what worked well and less well about the programme's webinars.

5.1.1 Webinar content

Qualitative data collected through the MI, interview and end-of-programme survey demonstrates that many participants highly valued the content of the webinar. They felt the webinar provided a **good introductory review of the basics of public sector contracting or, for those with prior experience with public sector contracting, that it refreshed and updated their knowledge**. Several end-of-programme programme survey respondents, in

their open text responses, said that although they had not yet bid for any public sector contracts, they felt that the **knowledge gained from the course would be useful when they did.**

Data from all 3 sources suggested participants valued the information and advice given on:

- ▶ **The importance of building relationships with commissioners.** One interviewee explained previously they had not seen the value of market engagement events, but that after attending the webinar they realised that it was important to go to them to help shape commissioners' tender specifications and to make an initial contact with commissioners. MI data and end-of-programme survey data demonstrated that the advice made it clear to participants that they needed to build these relationships so that commissioners could develop an understanding of what they had to offer. However, course feedback collected by the delivery partners showed that some participants would have liked more detail on how to approach commissioners.

"I might have thought 'well that's a bit of a waste of time because they haven't even come out with their thing yet', but this made it clear that you've got to be in on that conversation and shaping what they're commissioning and knowing them. So, it was a bit of a wake-up call that that matters." – VCSE interviewee (webinar)

- ▶ **Social value.** Participants reported that the Social Value Act was explained in detail and clarified the purpose of the Act to them. Participants explained this was especially important as the social value section accounts for a substantial part of any bid and is easier for VCSEs to demonstrate than other competitors. Therefore, participants felt having improved understanding of social value and how to demonstrate it, could help them communicate their competitive edge in this area of a tender. Other interviewees explained that more information on social value was, and still is, desperately needed because there is a lot of confusion (for VCSEs, funders, and commissioners) as to what it entails.

"People just say, 'oh well, you've kind of got to do social value' and don't really understand what it is. But [SSE] were really clear and very helpful, specific and concrete, and that was particularly good...and actual examples of how you evidence it and things. It's just a bit of a dark art" – VCSE interviewee (webinar)

- ▶ **Partnership-building.** MI and end-of-programme survey data demonstrated that some participants valued the information provided on partnering with other VCSEs, consortium bidding, and getting on to framework agreements.

However, as reported at the mid-programme stage, many participants expressed that they would have liked **more practical examples.** End-of-programme survey, interview, and MI data shows that some participants would have appreciated more time spent on working through the process of bid writing. Other participants reported that it would have been useful if they had been provided with examples of good tenders and guidance on how to use procurement portals.

"Evidence of how somebody who successfully got a contract achieved it would've been useful because there's often lots of top tips on when you need to do this, and have this and this, but sometimes it's nice to get a case study or just somebody provide the feedback and say 'well, I won this big contract and the way I did it was by doing this, this, and this' to show stuff that actually worked." – VCSE interviewee (webinar)

Additionally, some participants reported they would have liked the PowerPoint presentation slides to have been shared prior to the webinars to make the webinar easier to follow.

5.1.2 Webinar facilitation and opportunities for interaction

The MI data and end-of-programme survey data collected demonstrates that **many webinar participants felt that the balance of the webinar activities was appropriate**. Participants appreciated the mix of time dedicated to the presentation of information, hearing from those with real life experience, and asking questions. Webinar participants highly valued the opportunity provided to ask questions and to receive direct feedback. They believed this helped demystify the process of bidding for public sector contracts. Interviewees and end-of-programme survey respondents also valued the opportunity to hear the questions asked by others in their cohort. For example, one interviewee said they were not confident to ask questions themselves and were unsure what to ask but found the question-and-answer discussion provided them with insights relevant to their organisation.

However, some participants provided feedback through the follow-up surveys, interviews, and in delivery partners' feedback forms that they **had hoped the webinars would be more interactive**. They suggested they would have liked the chat function to have been operational throughout the webinars and to have had more breakout rooms. This feedback should be balanced against the mixed views on the length of the webinar as more interaction may not, please everyone. Some participants provided feedback (collated in the MI data) that they appreciated the efficient, to-the-point nature of the webinar because they were able to fit it into their busy schedules, to give them an initial idea of whether public sector contracting was right for them. However, others fed back they would have preferred longer webinars, as it would have given them more time to learn about the topic, digest the information, undertake practical activities, and network with others.

5.1.3 Webinar relevance

Data from the end-of-programme survey and MI shows that webinar **participants did not agree on whether the webinar was pitched at the right level**. The evidence suggested that, owing to the universal access for VCSEs to participate, there were challenges in keeping the course relevant for the broad range of organisations in attendance.

- Some felt the webinar would be **more useful for organisations with no prior bidding experience**. However, respondents from smaller organisations with less experience of public tendering felt that it would be useful to have information more specific to them and that it felt like the webinar was aimed at those that already had experience. Indeed, one end-of-programme survey respondent said the Q&A section of the webinar was taken over by those with more experience.
- Several smaller organisations with less experience in public sector tendering reported that, though they felt it was useful to hear practical examples from smaller organisations that already had won contracts, there was an **assumption that everyone already knew what government contracts were**. Multiple participants expressed that case studies from smaller organisations that had experienced success with tendering would have been a useful addition to the webinars.

End-of-programme survey respondents suggested that more detail on the webinar's content should have been provided in advance, to help organisations decide whether the webinar was right for them.

Linked to this, several end-of-programme survey respondents reported that though they found the webinar useful, due to the small size of their organisation or other organisational priorities (such as, service delivery and bidding for grant funding), they would need further courses and opportunities to fully get to grips with the process of bidding, before going on to bid for contracts.

5.1.4 Webinar guest speakers

MI data collected by the delivery partners after the webinars showed that webinar participants **valued hearing from those with a range of real-life lived experiences**, who were experts in their field of both commissioning public sector services and delivering public sector contracts. They highlighted the following key successes:

- ▶ The **high quality of the webinar's panel** and the engaging nature of the speakers. Interviewees said they found the speakers inspirational.
- ▶ End-of-programme survey and MI data showed that for some participants, **hearing real examples** helped them to feel more confident to engage in the process of public sector bidding.
- ▶ Several interviewees particularly valued hearing from the commissioner from the local authority, as it was helpful to gain an understanding of their perspective.

5.1.5 Signposting to resources

Data from the MI, end-of-programme survey and interviews showed that webinar participants **highly valued the information and advice given on where to look for public sector contracts**. One interviewee also appreciated being signposted to the gov.uk website page that provided information on bidding for public sector contracts as a consortium.²²

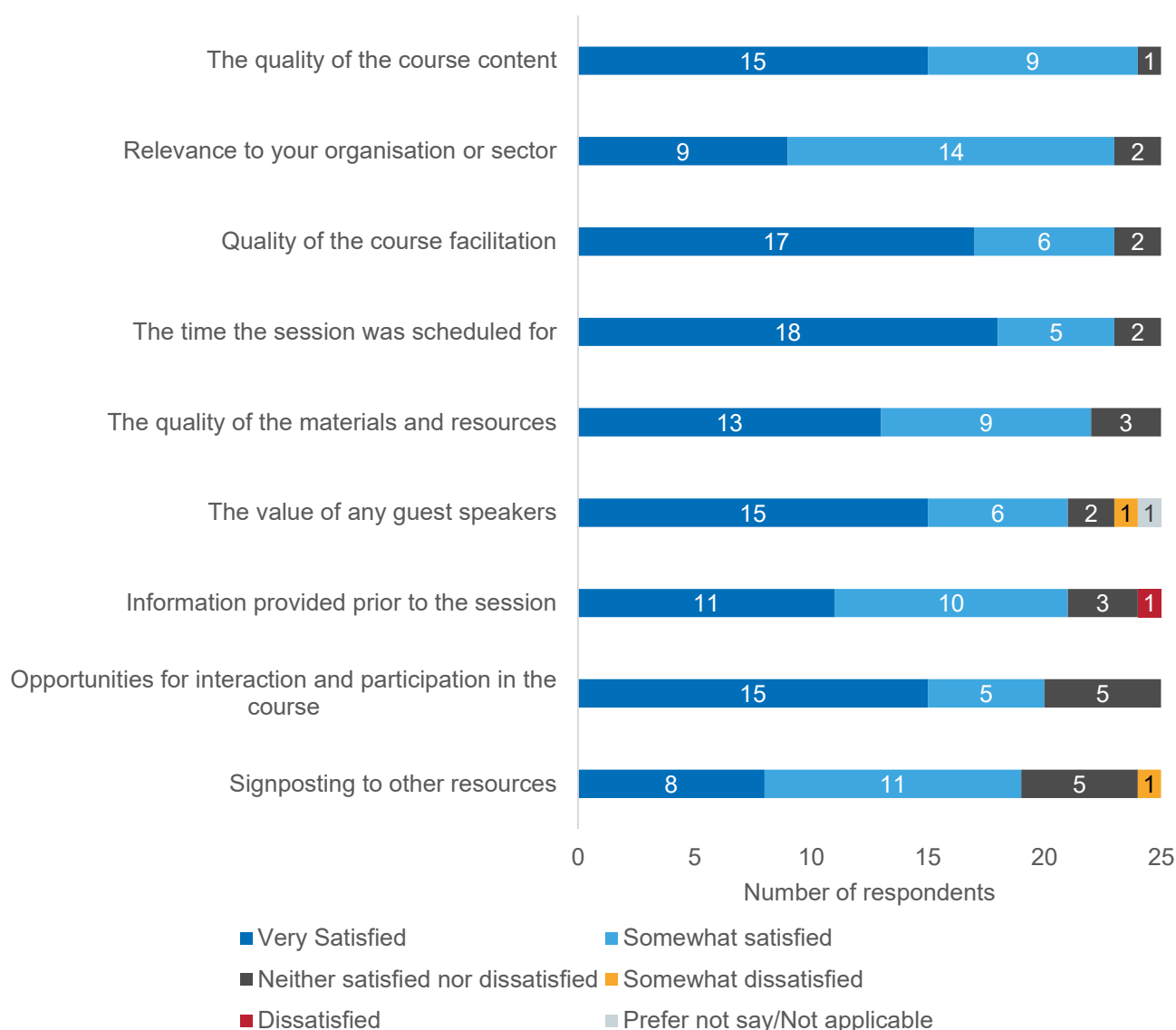
5.2 Short course

MI feedback form data collected after 11 short course sessions demonstrates that most of the 83 respondents, on a scale of 1 to 10, ranked the usefulness of the short course at either '8' (n=35), '9' (n=14), or '10' (n=10). Similarly, though there is variation on quite how useful participants found each element of the course, Figure 8 below demonstrates that most participants of the 6-month follow-up survey that took part in the short course were satisfied with each element.

The key successes of the short course for participants included **the training provided on the technical aspects of bidding for public sector contracts; Theories of Change (ToCs); social value; and on the value of building relationships with commissioners**. Participants also valued the **opportunities for networking with commissioners and their peers that the short course provides**, as well as the **thoughtful and energising guest speakers**. However, as was the case with the webinars, some participants would have **liked more time to have been spent on practical activities**, and others felt that not all of the elements of the course were **relevant nor practically applicable**. This section provides further detail on worked well and less well about the programme's short courses.

²² <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/how-to-bid-for-government-contracts-as-a-consortium>

Figure 8 Level of satisfaction for each element of the short course



Source: 6-month follow-up survey. Base=25.

5.2.1 Short course content

All but one (24 of 25) of the short course participants who responded to the 6-month follow-up survey were satisfied with the quality of the short course's content, with 15 reporting they were 'very satisfied' and 9 'somewhat satisfied'. No respondents reported that they were dissatisfied. Participants across the data sources highlighted several elements of the short courses' content they found particularly insightful:

- **Training on the technical aspects of bidding for public sector contracts.** Specifically, VCSEs valued the **information on bid writing** (such as on how to answer questions and write about how they measure their impact), information on the processes and terminology involved, planning and structuring bids, the forms that are required, and the supporting documents needed. Though, in line with the 9 respondents who were only 'somewhat satisfied' with the quality of the short courses' content, some interviewees reported they would have benefited from more practical activities. The MI data further clarified that some participants felt that whilst the information provided and the practical examples given by the guest speakers gave an overall sense of public sector contracts and how they worked, the reality of applying for contracts was much different. One end-of-

programme survey respondent, for example, reported that the complexity of forms for tendering was unsuitable for non-profit organisations because of their limited internal capacity and lack of technical bid-writing expertise. Others reported that they would need many more sessions to consolidate their knowledge and develop the technical skills they believed they needed to bid for public sector contracts. Others felt that it would have been useful to have been provided with more resources on how to bid for contracts, particularly at the local level²³. End-of-programme survey respondents and interviewees suggested that they would have benefited from more practical activities to improve their confidence (including, mock tendering, sharing successful examples, and having a step-by-step demonstration of bid submission).

- ▶ The **session on ToCs**, as this had left them with **an understanding of developing clear, concise, and well-structured ToCs**.
- ▶ **Information about Social Value**. Participants said the sessions gave them a better understanding of Social Value, and how they could demonstrate this. In some instances, VCSEs had no prior knowledge of Social Value at all.
- ▶ **Insight into how to determine whether specific tenders were right for them** (for example, considering whether the tender was in the right sector, if they had the right technical expertise, if they could deliver the contract for the budget available, and whether they would have the internal capacity to bid for it)
- ▶ The **session focused on building relationships with those involved in commissioning**. One tip given, for example, was to look for commissioning networks that focus on sectors relevant to participants' organisations area of work. Interviewees appreciated that the course went on to explain how to build these relationships, providing practical hints and tips rather than just theory:

“I’ve written down ‘go to local meetings on the topic’ and ‘offer to host a meeting here’. I’ve written down like specific things I could do, so that’s really good” – VCSE Interviewee (short course)

Some interviewees, however, would have liked **more practical detail on how commissioners make decisions**. Interviewees from smaller organisations sought more transparency - for example, to give them reassurance that commissioners were considering smaller VCSEs alongside larger organisations:

“We need more detail about how commissioners make decisions. Because, you know, in that room can be a brand-new charity sector organisation and a massive charity that’s been operation for years. I want to feel sure that I’m being given the same opportunity as a massive charity would, so I wanted to hear that reassurance from [the commissioner guest speaker], that commissioners would look at everyone equally.” – VCSE interviewee (short course)

5.2.2 The quality of the short course’s materials and resources

Across all data sources, participants were generally satisfied with the quality of the short course materials although there was limited information on why they thought this was the case. Most of the respondents to the 6-month follow-up survey that took part in the short course, were either ‘very satisfied’ (13 of 25) or ‘somewhat satisfied’ (9 of 25) with the short course’s materials and resources. No respondents reported that they were dissatisfied.

²³ The CRP programme was originally focused on central government tendering. However, data from each of the sources demonstrated that course participants were mostly bidding for local government contracts and wanted advice on how to do so.

5.2.3 Short course scheduling

As outlined in Figure 8, most 6-month follow-up survey respondents that took part in the short course (23 of 25), were **satisfied with the time the short course was scheduled** for. No respondents were dissatisfied. In terms of improvements, MI, end-of-programme survey data, and interviewee data highlighted that some participants felt the course was rushed. Specifically, these participants felt there was not enough time allocated for the bid writing session nor the networking session at the end.

5.2.4 Short course relevance

Most 6-month follow-up survey respondents that took part in the short course, were either 'very satisfied' (9 of 25) or 'somewhat satisfied' (14 of 25) with how relevant the course was to their organisation. None were dissatisfied. Whilst overall, participants of the short course did feel that most of the course was relevant to them, MI, end-of-programme survey, and interview data shows that **participants felt some components of the course were less relevant**. For example, interviewees and end-of-programme often reported that whilst one of the case studies was interesting, it was too specific and did not focus enough on how to write bids or bidding for government contracts in general. Some interviewees reported that the short course could have been made more relevant to the range of different attendees if there had been some time dedicated to different sectors or organisational structures (such as social enterprises), rather than covering VCSE organisations in general, and talking at a high level across a range of sectors. Curating the breakout rooms was another suggestion to improve relevance, discussed further below.

5.2.5 Short course facilitation and opportunities for interaction

Participants' **feedback on the facilitation of the short course and opportunities for interaction was generally very positive**. As shown in Figure 8, short course participants were satisfied (23 of 25, 17 of whom were 'very satisfied') with the short course's facilitation, and interviewees found the course facilitator to be knowledgeable and friendly. Additionally, most of the 6-month follow-up survey respondents were satisfied (20 of 25, 5 of whom were 'very satisfied') or 'somewhat satisfied' (5 of 25) with the opportunities the short course provided for interaction and participation. No respondents reported that they were dissatisfied.

The MI and end-of-programme survey data showed that participants who took part in the short course valued the **opportunity provided to network and discuss challenges with peers in the VCSE sector and commissioners**. Participants found they were able to learn from the peers, boosting their knowledge of tendering practices (such as information about the frameworks that commissioners use to make decisions). Some participants reported that making these initial connections with commissioners left them feeling confident to reach out to commissioners in the future, outside of the course. A small number of participants reported they had already begun to work with other organisations that they had made links with through the course. Others reported that the course had given them insight into the importance of building partnerships with other VCSEs when bidding for public sector contracts.

Some interviewees and respondents to the end-of-programme survey reported that the **short course's breakout rooms facilitated networking, however they felt this could be optimised further**. Some interviewees believed the breakout rooms were not useful as they were not paired with participants from organisations of a similar type, sector, or size. Interviewees suggested that organising breakout rooms with similar organisations could improve the value of the networking opportunities whilst also providing an opportunity for more specific learning to be discussed and shared to make it more relevant to each attendee.

5.2.6 Short course guest speakers

Most of the respondents to the 6-month follow-up survey that took part in short course, were either 'very satisfied' (15 of 25) or 'somewhat satisfied' (6 of 25) with the short course's guest speakers. Only 1 respondent was 'somewhat dissatisfied'. The data from the 6-month follow-up survey is echoed by the end-of-programme survey, MI, and Interview data. Participants who took part in the short course valued being provided with the perspective of a commissioner and reported that this had given them insight into what **commissioners were looking for in bids**, especially as it gave participants **knowledge on the frameworks commissioners use when making decisions**. Participants also valued the **variety of guest speakers** and the learning from their experiences that they were able to offer.

However, data from the three sources also highlighted that some participants found that though they found the speakers inspirational, **they didn't really help with knowledge on how to complete tenders**. These participants would have liked to have seen more time spent on practical examples and activities.

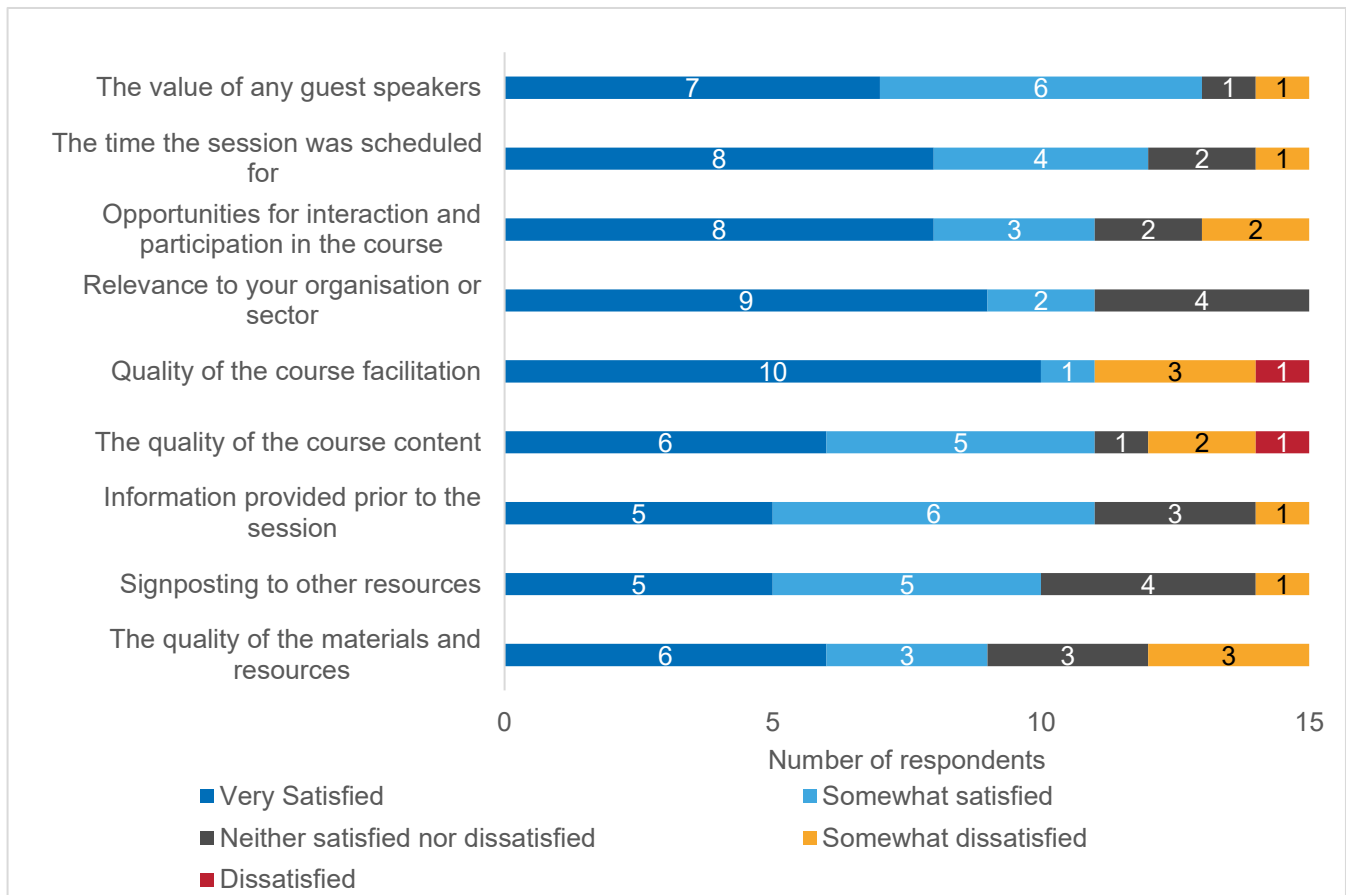
5.2.7 Information provided before and after the short course

Across all data sources (and as shown in Figure 8), the evidence indicated that participants were satisfied with the information provided prior to, and after, the session. Interview and feedback form data suggest that participants valued the information the course provided on where to look for public sector tenders. This was done in part by sharing tender search engines with participants, such as the Government Contracts Finder.

5.3 Long course

Overall, long course participants were positive about their experiences of the course. Similar to the key successes of the short course, long course participants reported that they **valued the training provided on the technical aspects of bidding for public sector contracts; Theories of Change; social value; and on the value of building relationships with commissioners**. Likewise, long course participants also valued the **opportunities for networking with commissioners and their peers**. Specifically, participants reported that **the peer-to-peer learning and delivery model was beneficial, as they were able to learn from the experience of other attendees, boosting their knowledge of tendering practices**. However, as was the case with the challenges of the webinar and short course, some participants would have liked **more time to have been spent on practical activities**, and others felt that not all of the elements of the course were relevant nor practically applicable. This section provides further detail on worked well and less well about the programme's long course, drawing on the findings presented in Figure 9.

Figure 9 Level of satisfaction for each element of the long course



Source: 6-month follow-up survey. Base=15.

5.3.1 Long course content

Most respondents to the 6-month follow-up survey that took part in the long course, were either 'very satisfied' (5 of 15) or 'somewhat satisfied' (6 of 15) with the quality of the long course's content. Only 1 respondent was 'somewhat dissatisfied' and 2 were 'dissatisfied'. The MI, EOP survey, and interview data suggest that many of the long course participants valued the wide variety of information provided and the training on technical aspects of bidding for public sector contracts. Specifically, participants valued the information provided on:

- ▶ **where to find public sector tenders** including through tendering portals, as many participants were previously unsure where to look.
- ▶ **bid writing, bid scoring, and form completion.** Many participants reported that although they had prior experience in bidding for public sector contracts, the long course had 'refreshed their knowledge' considerably.
- ▶ **Social Value.** Participants reported that it gave them a better understanding of the Social Value framework and the Social Value Act. They reported that it gave them guidance on how to communicate the added social value that VCSEs can bring to delivery.
- ▶ **ToCs,** because this left them with an understanding of developing clear, concise, and well-structured ToCs. Participants believed this helped them demonstrate what their organisation would be able to deliver and achieve to commissioners.

- ▶ **the importance of networking with commissioners and Local Authorities.** The advice made it clear to participants that they needed to build these relationships so that commissioners could develop an understanding of what they had to offer..
- ▶ **building relationships with peers.** This was particularly for interviewees who felt that they would be in a better position to bid for and deliver public sector contracts if they were able to do so as a consortium.
- ▶ **the importance of having a clear message about their offer** was useful. This was particularly useful for some participants and their organisations because they worked in multiple sectors (such as housing and childcare). Therefore, having insight on a how to tailor their messaging to specific tenders made them feel more marketable to different clients and commissioners.

“I suppose the bit that we took away, that we’ve made most use of, is the clarity of messaging [...] making sure that you are honouring your message and sell [your service] effectively.” – VCSE Interviewee (long course)

However, data from all 3 sources also demonstrated that some participants would have liked **more specific information and practical guidance**. Some interviewees explained that they would struggle to apply some of the information to their organisation as it was too general.

“I also found it quite difficult to translate that into what that means that we have to practically do.”- VCSE Interviewee (long course)

Most frequently, participants reported that they would have liked **examples of completed tenders and grant applications**. Some interviewees and survey respondents also reported that they would have liked to learn more about how to effectively cost for a contract.

“How to cost for a contract. I think for me that was one of the main drivers for me wanting to go on the course, what’s deemed ‘good value’ or ‘expensive’ or ‘unrealistic’, in terms of a public contract. I don’t think that’s been resolved in my head.”- VCSE Interviewee (long course)

5.3.2 Long course materials and resources

Most long course respondents to the 6-month follow-up survey were satisfied (9 of 15, 6 of these very satisfied) with the long course’s materials and resources. Interviewees commonly expressed that the practical tools and tips, such as the pro forma and the question-and-answer bank, helped them to be more organised and efficient.

5.3.3 Long course scheduling

Most respondents (12 of 15) to the 6-month follow-up survey were satisfied with the time the long courses were scheduled for. This was broadly echoed by interviewees, respondents to the final follow-up survey, and in feedback collected by the delivery partners.

However, 1 respondent was ‘somewhat dissatisfied’. Furthermore, in interviews, some participants said that the sessions being spread too far apart hampered the continuity between sessions and that it meant they had to spend time recapping on what they had learnt previously. One interviewee explained that with there being, at times, 2-3 months between sessions, it was hard to *“land the learning and embed the learning”* (VCSE interviewee (long course)).

5.3.4 Long course facilitation and opportunities for interaction

Most long course respondents (11 of 15) to the 6-month follow-up survey were satisfied with the quality of course facilitation. Across all other data sources, participants reported that the course was **facilitated well, with a good mix of people with varying expertise and experience**.

However, the course feedback forms showed that **some participants felt the course was not well structured**. These participants felt that though most of the information provided was useful and relevant, there was a lot of repetition throughout each session. Other participants reported that they found the long introductions around the group at the start of each session were unnecessary. Most respondents to the 6-month follow-up survey were satisfied (11 of 15) with the opportunities that the long course provided for interaction and participation. Only 2 respondents were 'somewhat dissatisfied'. The MI, end-of-programme survey, and interview data shows that participants who took part in the long course valued the opportunity provided to network and discuss challenges with peers in the VCSE sector and commissioners. Participants valued the peer-to-peer learning and delivery model and found that they were able to learn from the experience of colleagues, boosting their knowledge of tendering practices. Some interviewees highlighted that through the networking opportunities provided by the course, they had linked with other local organisation to bid for contracts.

"I think it was really, really useful to meet other people that were in the same position and facings with the same barriers and some of that kind of like peer-to-peer learning was really useful."- VCSE interviewee (long course)

Some participants reported that having made these initial connections with commissioners, they felt confident to reach out to commissioners more readily. However, some end-of-programme survey respondents and interviewees **suggested that the networking could be more effectively stewarded**. Participants suggested that this could be done through more planning when it came to organising the breakout rooms, as sometimes individuals were placed in breakout rooms with respondents from organisations that were in a totally different sector and of a size different to them, so they were not able to help each other. Some interviewees also suggested that there should be more opportunity to network with commissioners, especially local commissioners as the area local to them is where they needed to make inroads. Other interviewees suggested that less time should be spent on introductions and catch-ups at each session, and more time spent sharing relevant experiences and networking with commissioners.

5.3.5 Relevance of the long course

As shown in Figure 9, most respondents (11 of 15) to the 6-month follow-up survey were satisfied with the relevance of the long course.

Whilst **overall participants of the long course did feel that the course was relevant to them**, MI, end-of-programme survey, and interview data shows that participants felt that some components of the course were too general to be of practical use. This echoes the concerns that short course participants had. Several end-of-programme survey respondents, for example, reported that as bid writing was spoken of in general terms, it was not useful for participants wanting more specific information to help boost their knowledge of public sector contracting. Some interviewees felt that course content should have been tailored to specific needs. For example, some wanted more information on costing and budgeting, but it was not covered to the extent that they wanted. Interviewees also suggested that the speakers and facilitators should have provided more opportunity for participants to ask questions on specific issues.

5.3.6 Long course guest speakers

Respondents (13 of 15) to the 6-month follow-up survey were satisfied with the quality of the course's guest speakers. Across the other data sources, many participants reported that the guest speakers were **of high value, and they appreciated the range of backgrounds and experiences of the guest speakers**. They reported that the speakers were engaging, and provided them with plenty of support, encouragement, and confidence. Some appreciated the opportunity to talk through the practical aspects of the bidding with the speakers. One respondent to the end-of-programme survey reported that the course had:

"It raised my aspiration [...], hearing the witness testimonies from other people who had leveraged contracts and social investments and were able to amplify their impact."- End-of-programme survey respondent.

However, some surveyed and interviewed participants felt that whilst the guest speaker sessions were inspiring, **they found it difficult to "unpick" how those individuals did what they did**. Respondents frequently suggested that more practical examples and sessions would be useful.

5.3.7 Information provided before and after the long course

As illustrated in Figure 9, most long course respondents to the 6-month were satisfied with the information provided before (11 of 15) and after (10 of 15) the of the session. However, some interviewees mentioned that because there were often lengthy gaps between sessions, the information disseminated by email was sometimes lost in the mix. A proposed solution to this was that participants should be provided with a document listing all the resources at the end of the course.

5.4 Journey through the different CRP activities

As illustrated in

Figure 7, 129 participants moved through different CRP activities. Several interviewees moved from the webinar to the short course. **Participants felt that there was a logical progression from one course to the next**. For example, interviewees that took part in a webinar first believed this had enhanced and facilitated their ability to take more in-depth information from the short course:

"There were some real 'wake-up' things about that short webinar, so then I was getting deeper things from the other one [short course]. I think it was good to do them in order actually... I was more ready for that, and I got different things from it."
– VCSE Interviewee (short course)

End-of-programme survey respondents and interviewees who had progressed from the short to the long course also highlighted the stepping-stone approach. They said the long course had given them more time to consider and build upon their learning of each element of the contracting process covered in a lighter way, on the short course.

5.5 Views on the CRP online format

MI, end-of-programme survey, and interview data also demonstrated that **participants did not agree on the effectiveness of the courses being held online**. Some found that because the short and long courses were online, networking was not as effective. Additionally, whilst the webinar was not designed to facilitate networking, participants reported they would have liked a list of attendees to be shared to facilitate opportunities to network after the event.

“I haven’t sustained any relationships through that [CRP], I think. Programmes where you don’t physically meet people rarely result in long term relationships.” – VCSE Interviewee (long course)

However, participants did acknowledge that they understood the benefits of the course being online, as it would **allow people from across the country to join, and removed barriers associated with accessibility issues.**

5.6 What other support is needed?

Participants of each of the 3 activities reported that there were gaps in the support offered by the programme. Often, these gaps were reported by participants across all VCSE pathway activities:

- ▶ Data from the end-of-programme survey, MI, and interviewees suggested that for each of the programme’s 3 courses, participants would have **benefited from more practical activities** to improve their confidence (including mock tendering, sharing successful examples, and having a step-by-step demonstration of bid submission).
- ▶ Some respondents to course feedback forms explained that **financial support is needed to allow for organisations to employ personnel dedicated to completing contracts and tenders**. These participants explained that whilst training to support organisations to reach contract readiness may be useful, it has limited impact if the organisations don’t have the internal capacity or resources to then complete bids.
- ▶ Several long course and short course interviewees suggested that the support offered by the long course was not quite at the level that VCSE organisations needed. Multiple interviewees proposed **that 1-2-1 mentoring for participants would have been helpful for them to interpret their specific challenges**, such as reviewing bid feedback so that they would be able to understand the gaps in their bids. Other participants suggested that this mentoring support could have been used to take participants through the technical aspects of bidding. Though this would likely only be a short-term fix if organisations still find themselves with limited capacity to write bids.
- ▶ Linked to this, several end-of-programme survey respondents reported that though they found the webinar useful, due to the small size of their organisation or other organisational priorities (such as service delivery and bidding for grant funding), they would need **further courses and opportunities to fully get to grips with the process of bidding**, before going on to bid for contracts.
- ▶ Long and short course interviewees reported that the short course could have been made more relevant to the range of different attendees if there had been **some time dedicated to different sectors or organisational structures (such as, social enterprises)**, rather than covering VCSE organisations in general, and talking at a high level across a range of sectors. Curating the breakout rooms was another suggestion to improve relevance, discussed in sections [5.3.4](#) and [5.2.5](#).
- ▶ Interviewees that took part in both the long course and the short course explained that **more information on Social Value was, and still is, desperately needed** because they perceived ongoing confusion about what it entails among colleagues at their organisation, funders and commissioners, as well as within the wider VCSE community.

6.0 VCSE outcomes

VCSE participants were asked to share their views on what difference the CRP made to them in follow-up surveys administered by the research team at 2 timepoints: approximately 6-months after first participating in the CRP,²⁴ and at the end of the evaluation timescale in November-December 2024. In this section, we first outline outcomes reported by VCSEs 6 months after first taking part in the CRP. The next section assesses the extent to which the CRP has achieved medium-to-longer term outcomes around VCSE successes in public sector contracting, before exploring the question of attribution.

The data is presented at the programme level, and by subgroups of participants based on which activities they had taken part in:²⁵

- ▶ Webinar participants: survey respondents who took part in a webinar only.
- ▶ Short course: survey respondents who took part in a short course only, or a short course and a webinar.
- ▶ Long course: survey respondents who took part in a long course only, or a long course and short course and/or webinar.

Key findings

Within 6-months of participating in the CRP, participants reported improvements across the range of short-term outcomes anticipated in the ToC, including improved contract readiness in awareness of public sector opportunities, and knowledge and skills in bidding for contracts.

The evaluation found that by the end of 2024, participants reported increased confidence and motivation to bid, that their organisation was considering public contracts more, attending more supplier engagement events, and confidence in winning more bids.

The final evaluation survey delivered in December 2024, several months before the end of CRP delivery in March 2025. It found that, across 182 survey respondents (20% of CRP participants), 42 additional public sector bids and 18 'contract wins' resulted from the CRP. The contract value unlocked by survey respondents, and that they attributed to the CRP, was £2,066,495.²⁶

6.1 Short-term outcomes

The CRP aimed to increase VCSE's contract readiness. In the short-term, it was expected that all VCSEs would improve their:

- ▶ basic awareness of opportunities,

²⁴ Surveys were administered in the 6th month post-participation but unique links to access the survey remained open for responses indefinitely. Responses to the 6-month survey were therefore collected approximately 5-7 months after first participation. Figure 25 shows the point at which 6-month outcomes were reported relative to participation in each activity.

²⁵ These subgroups are mutually exclusive and have been grouped based on participation data from the MI analysis.

²⁶ The number of bids submitted, contracts won, and values of contracts won cannot be established for participants who did not respond to the surveys.

- ▶ knowledge of tendering processes for public contracts, and the resources and guidance to help them.

For the short and long courses, more advanced short-term outcomes were anticipated, around:

- ▶ putting awareness of opportunities into action by using tender portals and registering for frameworks,
- ▶ better understanding of commissioner requirements, social value and supply chains,
- ▶ improved bid-writing skills, and
- ▶ more networking.

This section presents an assessment of the extent to which the CRP achieved these short-term outcomes. It is based on evidence from interviews with VCSE participants and results from the follow-up surveys. The survey data was collected in the 6-month follow-up survey (n=69) and additional responses submitted to the end-of-programme survey 5-7 months after first participation have been included in the analysis (n=22).²⁷ Additionally, responses to the end-of-programme survey which were received >7 months after respondents first participated in the CRP were also analysed.²⁸

6.1.1 Finding public sector tender opportunities

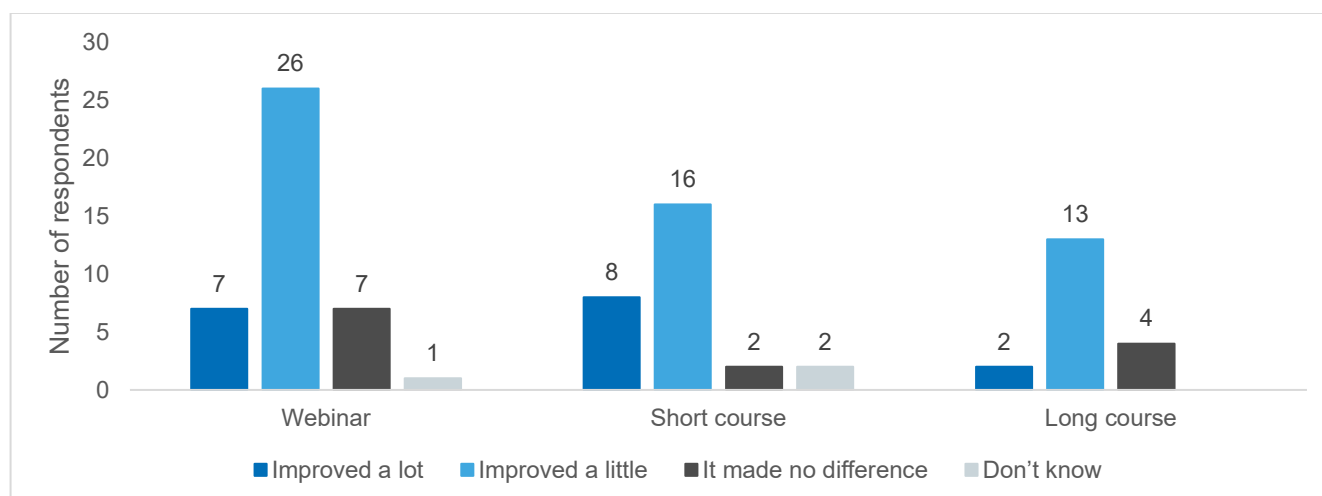
After 6-months of taking part in the CRP, survey respondents reported **improvements in their awareness of current and upcoming public sector contracts**. 72 of 88 survey respondents said their awareness had improved 'a little' or 'a lot', most of whom said it had 'improved a little' (55 of 88), and 13 respondents reported 'no change'. As illustrated in Figure 10, this trend was broadly similar across the different sub-groups, however webinar and long course participants were more likely to report 'no change' to their awareness whilst short course participants were most likely to report positive improvements. A long course interviewee suggested that whilst they were already aware of current and upcoming local public sector contracts, the long course led them to identify a need to be more future-focused and proactively search for upcoming national tenders. However, they had not yet put this into action.

"We're still quite operationally focused and although we're as busy as ever, we're not doing as much on the kind of horizon-scanning and looking to the future and trying to, you know, second guess what contracts and commissions might be coming up and looking even further afield to see, you know, are there things that are passing us by in the NHS through NHS England? And other things that we are not seeing because we're so focused on the kind of stuff that's happening [...] locally?" – VCSE interviewee (long course)

²⁷ The total base size for the analysis is n=91, however, due to the routing of the survey and unforced responses, the base size varies across each question and is presented in the data source. A full breakdown of the sample is presented in [13.0 Annex 5](#).

²⁸ The sample size was often too small to meaningfully compare outcomes reported at each timepoint, however where sample sizes allowed (Base=30 minimum) and a larger difference in outcomes was reported at the different timepoints, this is outlined within the body of this report. Full data tables are presented in [14.0 Annex 5](#).

Figure 10 To what extent did taking part in the CRP make a difference to your awareness of current and upcoming public sector tenders?

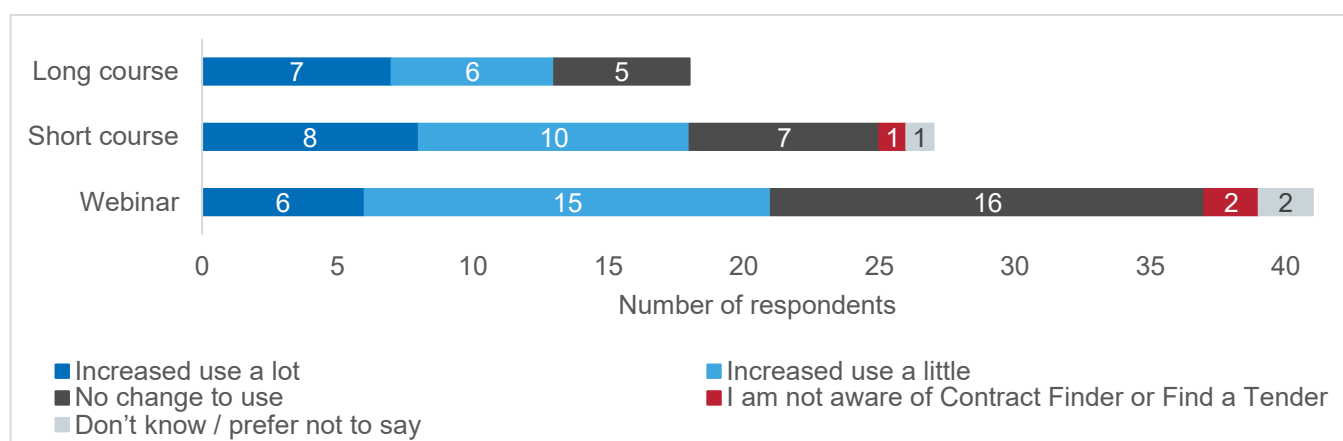


Source: VCSE 6-month follow-up and end-of-programme surveys. Base=88.

6.1.2 Using tender portals

Overall, almost two thirds (52 of 86) of survey respondents reported increased use of the main public sector tender portals Contracts Finder or Find a Tender within the short-term (6 months) after taking part in the programme.^{29,30} However, these outcomes differed between the different participant subgroups, as illustrated in Figure 11.

Figure 11 To what extent do you believe that taking part in the CRP increased your use of Contracts Finder and Find a Tender?³¹



Source: VCSE 6-month follow-up and end-of-programme surveys. Base=86.

The greatest improvements in the use of tender portals were reported by long course participants (almost 3 quarters, 13 of 18), followed by short course participants (two thirds, 18 of 27) – again perhaps unsurprising considering these groups were closer to public sector tendering when signing up to the CRP. Long and short course interviewees described signing up to newsletters and regularly checking Contracts Finder. One interviewee shared that prior to the CRP, they were only aware of portals for commercial opportunities which required a fee,

²⁹ [Contracts Finder](#) is a portal for searching for information about public sector contracts worth over £12,000 (including VAT) with the government and its agencies. [Find a Tender](#) is a portal for searching and applying for high value contracts over £139,688 (including VAT) in the UK's public and utilities sectors.

³⁰ Where outcomes were reported more than 6 months after taking part in the CRP, survey responses showed little change to the outcomes reported at the 6-month follow-up point.

³¹ The answer options for long course participants were presented as 'it made no difference', 'improved a little' and 'improved a lot'.

and were pleased to learn of the free-to-register portals for public sector procurement. A short course participant had also used Contracts Finder to identify some public bodies and organisations that may commission work relevant to them in the future, which made them feel more aware of potential commissioners.

While less commonly reported than short or long course participants, webinar participants responding to the survey did report going on to use tender portals (see Figure 11). Two webinar survey respondents were still unaware of the main public sector tender portals Contracts Finder or Find a Tender, which is perhaps unsurprising considering the webinar was a light-touch introduction to the basics of public sector tendering. When asked about more general awareness of where to find public sector opportunities, three quarters (26 of 34) of webinar participants reported improvements in their general awareness of where to find public sector opportunities with most (20 of 34) reporting this had increased a little. Interestingly, almost all (36 of 38) participants who reported outcomes later than 7 months after participating in the webinar said their awareness had increased (11 of whom said it had increased 'a lot'), suggesting that awareness may continue to increase over time, however sample sizes are too small to draw robust conclusions.

Interviewees also highlighted several challenges with using tender portals, including:

- ▶ A lack of opportunities relevant to their organisations. They suggested it would be a more efficient use of their time to be able to filter for opportunities suitable to the size of their organisation and area of work.
- ▶ The complexity of registering for portals, as each portal has a different registration process. They suggested a single, national portal for tenders which required a single registration.

6.1.3 Registering on frameworks

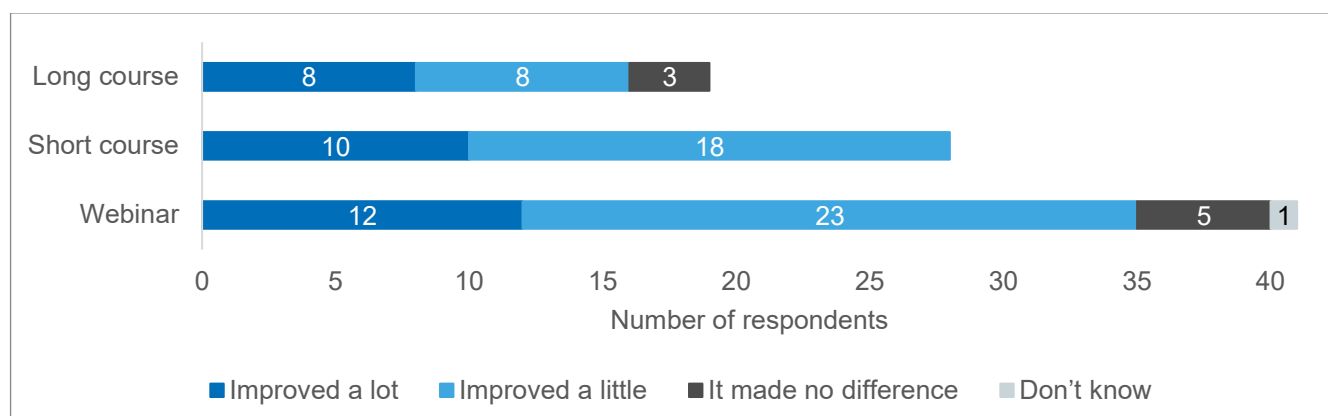
10 (of 37) short and long course survey respondents reported registering on frameworks within 6-months of taking part in the CRP. Of those, an equal number of respondents said they would have registered on the framework anyway, had they not taken part in the CRP (5 of 10), to those who attributed their registration on the framework to their participation in the CRP (5 of 10).

Programme partners highlighted **ongoing challenges with navigating the complexity of frameworks**, and there was limited qualitative evidence of VCSEs going on to register for frameworks. That said, one interviewee was optimistic about a regional framework that was due to be released after the interview. The regional framework was open to select VCSEs, which the interviewee felt made it a more viable option to register for than other frameworks, either alone or as a consortium with other VCSE partners.

6.1.4 Knowledge of the tendering process

The follow-up surveys found that, after 6 months, most survey respondents (79 of 88) believed the CRP had **improved their general knowledge and skills around bidding for public sector contracts**. Figure 12 shows that all short course participants reported improved general knowledge and skills around bidding, whilst a small proportion of webinar and long course participants reported no change to their knowledge and skills.

Figure 12 To what extent did taking part in the CRP make a difference to your knowledge and skills around bidding for public sector contracts?



Source: VCSE 6-month follow-up and end-of-programme surveys. Base=88.

Interviewees from organisations who were still some distance from bidding for public sector contracts often still valued having better insights into the procurement process. An interviewee who had taken part in a webinar said this made them feel more confident in speaking about how public procurement works. However, one interviewee suggested the short course content went ‘over their head’ as they had no prior knowledge or skills in contracting. They suggested they needed earlier stage support. This was an uncommon view, and suggested this organisation may have benefitted more from the webinar because of their starting point.

Whilst interviewees felt the courses improved their understanding of the commissioning and tendering processes – including, what steps the process involves and what to look out for – they noted that the processes are still not standardised. For example, the process varies across different local authorities and central government departments; there may or may not be pre-market engagement events, or opportunities to feed into the bid development process.

6.1.5 Awareness of resources and guidance

Webinar participants were asked whether taking part in the webinar had increased their awareness of the resources and guidance available around public contracting. Most participants said their **awareness of resources and guidance had improved** (27 of 34) either a little (20 of 34) or a lot (7 of 34). Interviewees suggested that they appreciated the materials and links provided during the webinar and shared by the delivery partners. However, several webinar participants described not having gone on to access the resources, citing it not being the ‘right time’ to further engage with public sector contracting, or not having the capacity to do further research. That said, when looking at the outcomes reported beyond 6-months after taking part in the webinar, a slightly greater proportion of survey respondents said their awareness of resources and guidance had improved (34 of 38) either a little (20 of 38) or a lot (14 of 38). Echoing webinar participants’ awareness of where to find opportunities, this may suggest that awareness of resources and guidance increases over time, however this finding should be treated with caution since survey samples are small.

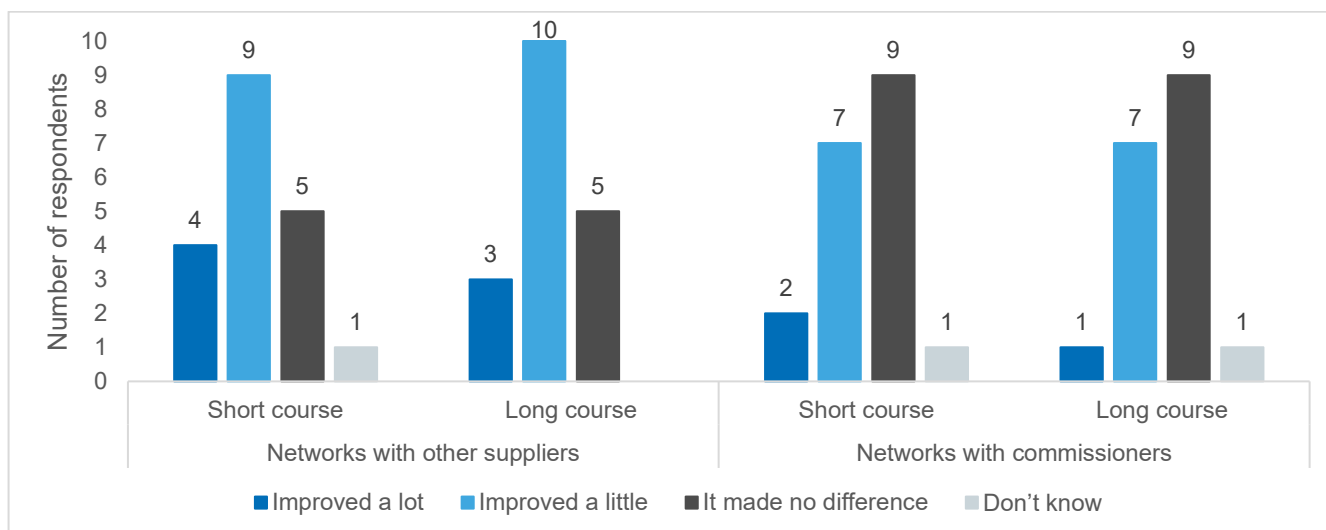
Echoing webinar participants, short and long course participants also valued the resources shared with them by SSE. These included document templates such as contracts and subcontracts which could be tailored, and links to online resources including the Procurement Act 2023 Knowledge Drop for Contracting Authorities.

“That for me was 100% the most valuable part. The practical resources” – VCSE interviewee (short course)

6.1.6 Networking and consortia-building

Over two thirds (26 of 37) of survey respondents said the CRP **had improved their networks with other suppliers** (7 of whom said it improved their networks ‘a lot’). Just over a quarter (10 of 37) reported the CRP made no difference to their networks with other suppliers (see Figure 13).

Figure 13 To what extent did taking part in the CRP make a difference to your networks with...?



Source: VCSE 6-month follow-up and end-of-programme surveys. Base=37.

Several short and long course participants described how connecting with others on the courses had led to improved networking within the first 6 months of the course. However, follow-up interviews with long course case study organisations suggested that not all relationships were sustained, with some interviewees highlighting the online format of the course inhibiting the development of longer-term relationships (see section 5.5).

Other interviewees' relationships with other suppliers were in their infancy shortly after taking part in the CRP and took longer to blossom. The case study below shows how the CRP was a catalyst for in-person networking, which led to improved networks in the longer term.

Longitudinal case study: building networks to form consortiums

Through the CRP, a member of staff from a VCSE providing health and wellbeing support for women connected with the founder of a another VCSE also operating in the health and social care space. Although the 2 organisations operated in neighbouring local authorities, they had not crossed paths until they met on the long course. The course facilitator encouraged them to share contact details and reached out to each other after the course finished. When they were interviewed 6-months after taking part in the long course, one organisation had introduced the other to a regional network of VCSEs working in the health arena, which included organisations already delivering for the NHS, and those aspiring to. When they were visited by the research team a second time, 6 months later (and roughly a year after taking part in the CRP), both organisations were fully fledged members of the network and, after having attended a pre-market engagement event, were in conversation with other VCSEs within the network about forming a consortium to bid for an upcoming tender.

Whilst webinar participants were not given the opportunity to network during the session (and therefore not asked about it in the survey), an interviewee acknowledged that a recommendation made during the webinar had encouraged them to network with other VCSEs after the course:

“Taking away concrete actions gives you the self-confidence to go for it and not give up halfway through the process and actually sort people and contacts and the networking aspects out” – VCSE interviewee (webinar)

Around two thirds (23 of 33) of short and long course survey respondents reported that the CRP had **increased their understanding of supply chains and consortia building**, however a third (10 of 33) said it had made no difference. There was little difference across short and long course respondents, however a small number of short course participants said their understanding had ‘increased a lot’ (5 of 18) whereas all (15) long course participants who reported a positive change, said their understanding had increased ‘a little’.

One interviewee explained that the CRP course had improved their understanding of their competitiveness and, after doing some further research, recognised they may need to partner to be more competitive. Another interviewee described taking steps to build consortia, because of the networks they had developed through the CRP, whilst several others who had gone on to submit bids since the CRP had done so with a consortium (see Bidding for contracts) and suggested they would not have considered bidding in partnership before the CRP.

Networking with commissioners was a key theme in the interviews and participants highlighted how the CRP had placed emphasis on this. Interviewees gave examples of their **efforts to build relationships with commissioners**, particularly at the local level, including requesting commissioner feedback on unsuccessful bids, giving talks to local business people and local authority staff, and one interviewee had connected with commissioners through Meet the Buyer event delivered by SEUK (see Commissioner-VCSE engagement events).

However, interviewees also expressed **several barriers to further networking with commissioners**, relating to commissioner staff turnover, the time needed to build positive relationships, and internal capacity for networking. For example, a smaller organisation said they did not have the resources for a member of staff to go out and build relationships with commissioners, whereas a larger organisation had agreed to invest in a member of staff going out to network with their local commissioners.

“I would say it [building relationships with commissioners] is an investment. The organisation is investing in me to spend time coming out. I'm going to go and give the talk to a room full of businesspeople and councillors, some of them are people who have a say in how services are commissioned.” – VCSE interviewee

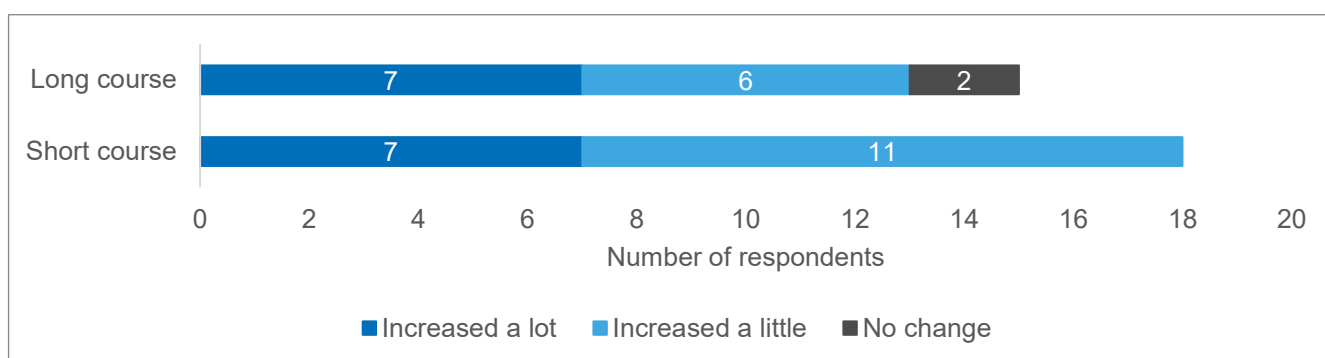
Figure 13 shows that almost half (18 of 37) of short and long course survey respondents said the CRP had made no difference to their networks with commissioners. These barriers may go some way to explaining the relatively less positive change in networks with commissioners within 6-months of taking part in the CRP, compared to other outcome areas.

8 (of 18) long course participants reported the CRP had led them to **improve their networks with support and infrastructure organisations** ‘a little’ and a further 2 said it improved their networks ‘a lot’, 6 months after taking part in the CRP. However, 7 of 18 said the CRP made no difference to their networks with support and infrastructure organisations, and 1 person said they don’t know. We know from the MI information that over two thirds of the participating organisations found out about the CRP through the delivery partners or wider support and infrastructure organisations, therefore they may already have had good networks in place before the CRP support.

6.1.7 Understanding commissioner requirements

As outlined in 5.0, hearing directly from commissioners was a key benefit of the CRP. VCSE interviewees said this had **equipped them with a deeper understanding of what commissioners were looking for, how to interpret commissioner requirements in tenders** (including social value – see 6.1.8). For example, one VCSE explained they had started using key terms and ‘buzzwords’ in their proposals to make them stand out to commissioners. As outlined in Figure 14, survey respondents echoed this view – the majority of short and long course respondents (31 of 33) reported increased knowledge of what commissioners are looking for, with around half of those reporting this increased ‘a lot’.

Figure 14 To what extent did taking part in the CRP make a difference to your knowledge of what commissioners are looking for?³²



Source: VCSE 6-month follow-up and end-of-programme surveys. Base=33.

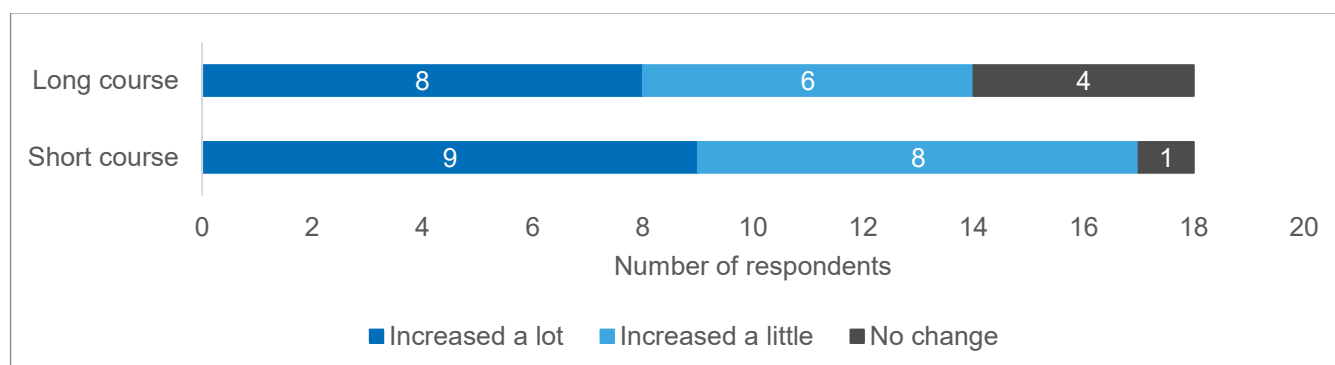
All short course participants reported an increase in knowledge, whilst only 2 long course participants reported ‘no change’. This may again be due to long course participants having more pre-existing knowledge of commissioner requirements; however, the sample size is too small to draw broader conclusions. Long course interviewees found the dedicated bid-writing and procurement sessions helpful to improve their knowledge of commissioner requirements.

6.1.8 Understanding of social value

Follow-up survey responses show that **increased knowledge of the Social Value Act and social value model** was a key short-term outcome from CRP participation. As outlined in Figure 15, four fifths of respondents (31 of 36) reported a positive change.

³² The answer options for long course participants were presented as ‘it made no difference’, ‘improved a little’ and ‘improved a lot’.

Figure 15 To what extent did taking part in the CRP make a difference to your knowledge of the Social Value Act and social value model?³³



Source: VCSE 6-month follow-up and end-of-programme surveys. Base=36.

This was echoed by VCSE participants and delivery partners interviewed, who highlighted that improved knowledge of social value was one of the key outcomes. VCSE interviewees expressed that following the CRP, they felt better able to communicate the added value they bring to the delivery of public services.

“As a charity it’s kind of really obvious that we’re doing great stuff, and you then focus on the little details. And [SSE] said it’s really important to communicate what you’re doing in terms of social value and things that aren’t the core stuff. And don’t just assume that just because we’re a charity doing some nice things, it’s obvious that we’re doing social value. So, I don’t know whether I then wrote it [social value section of a bid] right, but I had that in mind.” – VCSE interviewee (webinar)

Whilst still positive, long course participants were slightly more likely to report ‘no change’ to their knowledge of social value (4 of 18) than short course participants. Long course interviewees expressed how they already had some knowledge of social value, but felt the CRP motivated them to challenge themselves on further demonstrating social value. For example, one participant described how they had gone on to develop monitoring and evaluation tools to ensure they fully captured their social value. Interviewees also valued the tools and resources SSE shared which were designed to help measure social value.

6.1.9 Bid-writing skills

Interviewees from all course types reported that the courses **taught them how to write bids more efficiently** by utilising previous bids, considering feedback from commissioners, and creating organisational tools, such as response templates. Feedback from long course participants in particular suggested this was a key outcome; a strong theme was that participation in the long course led many interviewees to rethink their bid-writing processes, in terms of:

- **Resourcing bid development:** Several long course participants changed their approach to developing bids. This often included bringing more people into the tender development process. For example, in one case, where bid-writing had previously been down to just one staff member, the CRP led that individual to request inputs from other staff within their organisation, including those responsible for project delivery. They believed this improved the quality of their bid because of the wider inputs and quality assurance of the bid.

³³ The answer options for long course participants were presented as ‘it made no difference’, ‘improved a little’ and ‘improved a lot’.

“We now put more resource into getting ready for tenders and contracts, and we now have a process that has a little bit more oversight from more people within the team.” – VCSE interviewee (long course)

- **Building resource banks:** Several long course participants described collating internal resources and feedback from previous bids, which they felt better equipped them to respond to new opportunities, quickly, and incorporating learning from previous bids. These included content libraries of previous responses, collating common questions and answers from tender documents, and drafting template text which could be adapted to different word limits.

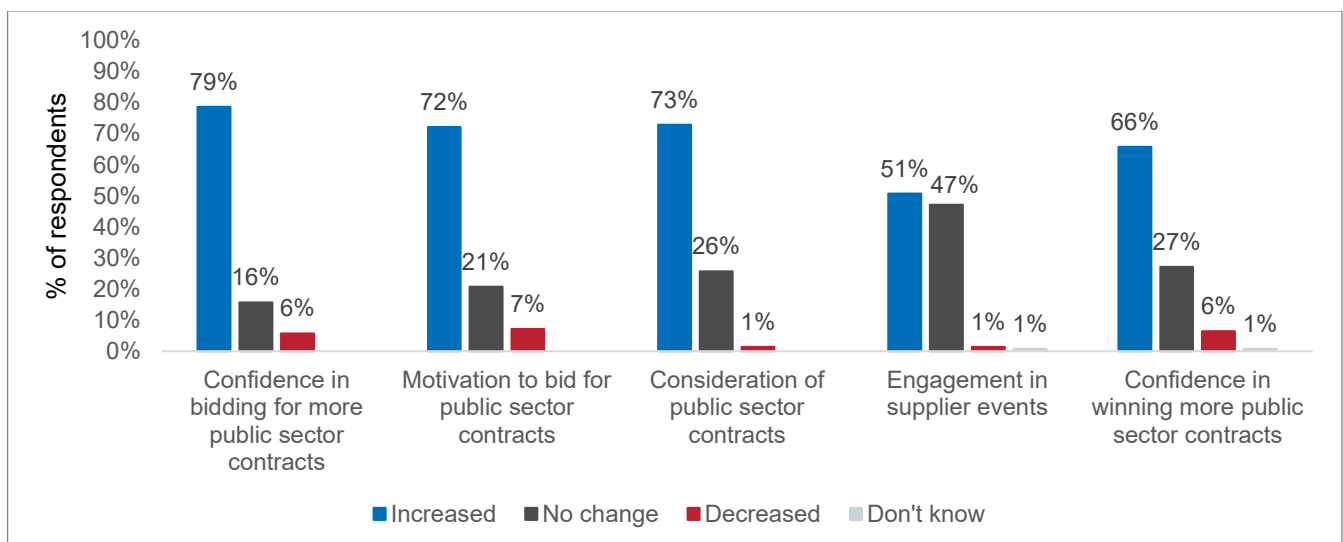
“[We are in a] strong position when the next tender lands, to have the information we need to hand rather than just reading through previous tenders and extracting things.” – VCSE interviewee (long course)

The 6-month follow-up survey echoed these findings. 16 of 18 survey respondents reported the long course had improved their bid-writing skills and experience with 5 of those reporting it had improved ‘a lot’. An interviewee gave a practical example of how the long course led them to include different roles in their bids, including a ‘research and data officer’ role, since the course taught them the importance of, and how to demonstrate, procurement compliance. Just 2 respondents reported the CRP made no difference to their bid-writing. This may be explained by the qualitative data, where an interviewee described how they already had strong bid-writing skills, but believed the long course had still improved their confidence in their bid-writing abilities and gave reassurance that the content they would usually include in bids met the expected standards.

6.2 Medium term outcomes

It was anticipated that the CRP may support VCSEs to take tangible steps towards bidding for and winning more public sector contracts over the medium-term, including confidence in and motivation to bid for and winning contracts, consideration of public contracting opportunities, and engagement in supplier events. Figure 16 shows that overall, CRP participants reported a positive change across all of these areas. Although still positive, respondents reported slightly less change in their engagement in supplier events. Each of these outcomes is further discussed below.

Figure 16 To what extent has taking part in the CRP changed your organisation’s...



Source: VCSE end-of-programme survey. Base=140.

This remainder of this section draws on data collected in November-December 2024 through the end-of-programme survey of participants and the wealth of interview data collected throughout the evaluation to demonstrate how VCSEs perceived the programme influenced the journey towards participating in public sector contracting.

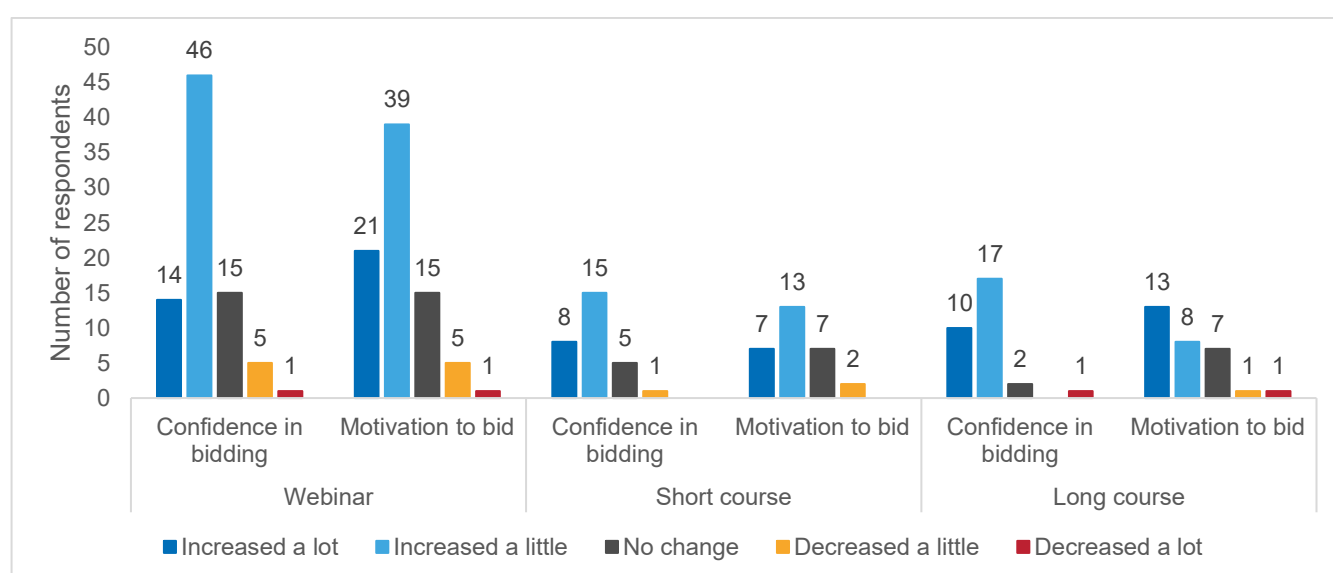
6.2.1 Confidence and motivation to bid

When asked about what difference the CRP made to VCSE participants' **confidence and motivation to bid for public sector contracts**, most survey respondents reported positive outcomes. 79% of the 140 end-of-programme survey respondents reported their confidence in bidding for more contracts had increased either 'a little' (56%) or 'a lot' (23%). 16% said the CRP had made no difference to their confidence to bid, and just 4% said their confidence in bidding had decreased. However, Figure 17 shows that webinar participants who responded to the survey were more likely to report reduced confidence in bidding,³⁴ than short or long course participants.

"I think I'm definitely more confident in tendering after taking part, I probably think now, you know what, we really do have a chance of winning the contract. I'm not saying that we will, because I know what we're up against, but I'm confident that [the CRP] will give us the best chance of getting that [bid] right." - VCSE interviewee (short course)

This positive trend is reflected in survey respondent's self-reported motivation to bid for public sector contracts. 72% of the 140 survey respondents reported their motivation to bid had increased either 'a little' (43%) or 'a lot' (29%). 21% reported no change to their motivation to bid, and just 7% said their motivation to bid had decreased. There was little variation in the proportion of those who reported decreased motivation across the course types. However, Figure 17 shows that long course survey respondents were most likely to report increased motivation to bid (27 of 30), although sample sizes are small and cannot be generalised.³⁵

Figure 17 To what extent has taking part in the CRP changed your organisation's confidence and motivation to bid for public sector contracts?



³⁴ When combining decreased 'a little' and 'a lot'.

³⁵ When combining increased 'a little' and 'a lot', and combining decreased 'a little' and 'a lot'.

Source: VCSE end-of-programme survey. Base=140.

Interviewees echoed these findings, and attributed improvements to their confidence to the increased awareness of commissioner requirements, knowledge of how they can best ‘sell their offer’ in their bids, and the new tools and resources they had in place that made them more ‘bid-ready’. Long course participants spoke of increased motivation to bid, but also of increased confidence to be assertive when bidding, including pushing back against commissioner expectations and providing alternate options based on their expertise.

‘It all gave us the confidence to stick our elbows out and push ourselves to the front of the queue. I don’t think we would have been quite as assertive before that [long course].’ – VCSE interviewee (long course)

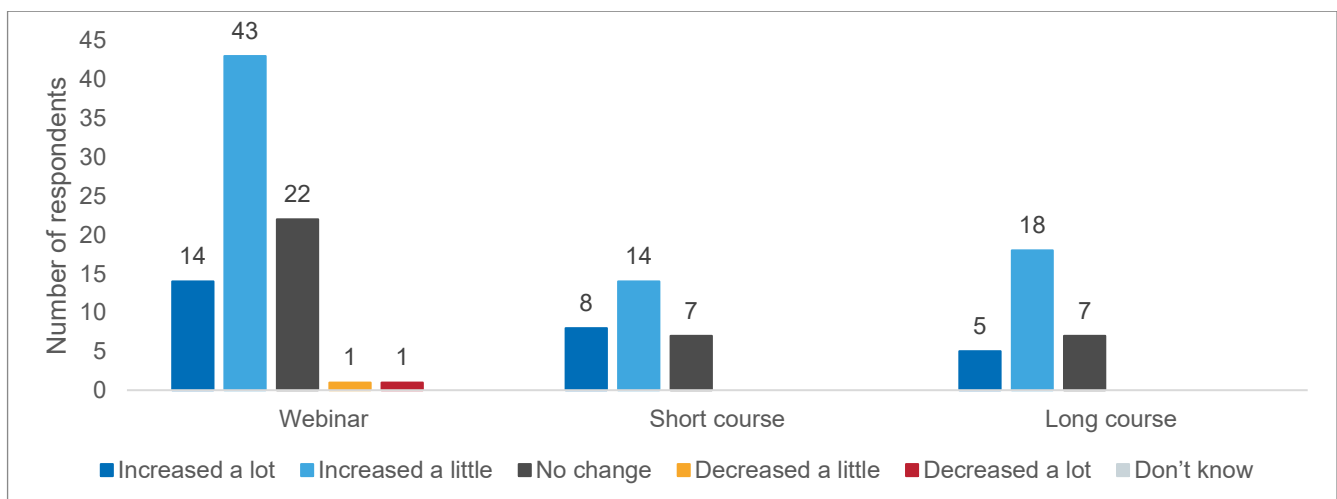
However, Figure 17 illustrates that a small number of participants reported decreased confidence and motivation to bid. Qualitative data suggested reduced confidence may be due to VCSEs realising they were further away from bidding for contracts than they had realised, until being walked through the steps required (see 6.48.1.3). Interviewees explained that reduced motivation was due to a lack of suitable opportunities being tendered by central government (further discussed in 6.3.1.1) and that tender portals and bid processes continued to be too complex (see 4.1.1 and 6.1.2).

Whilst not the main focus of the CRP, which aims to increase central government procurement of VCSEs, VCSE interviewees highlighted that their confidence could be further improved by having increased awareness of local authority tendering processes, as many saw this as the main target for future bidding efforts.

6.2.2 Consideration of public sector contracts

Further to VCSE interviewees reporting changes to their process for developing bids (see Bid-writing skills), participants also went on to consider public sector opportunities. Figure 18 shows that 73% of 140 respondents reported their organisation’s consideration of public contract opportunities had increased either ‘a little’ (54%) or ‘a lot’ (19%). This was broadly similar across all participant groups, however 2 (of 81) webinar participants said their consideration of public contracts had decreased, and webinar participants were slightly more likely to report ‘no change’ (22 of 81) than short or long course participants, and slightly less commonly reported an increase (57 of 81) than other course participants.

Figure 18 To what extent has taking part in the CRP changed your organisation’s consideration of public contract opportunities?



Source: VCSE end-of-programme survey. Base=140.

Interviewees described investing more time in strategically considering opportunities. Interviewees explained how, before the CRP, they had sometimes bid for opportunities even if they did not have enough time or resources to develop a bid to the quality they would like. For several interviewees, learning from the CRP led to enhanced assessments of their likelihood of winning, and being able to effectively deliver, opportunities. Ultimately, for some, this led to writing fewer, higher quality bids.

“So now we if a tender comes out, we are more likely to say no if we don't think we've got the time to do it, rather than put it in anyway. Which is better for us. And if we are saying 'yes', we're more likely to then have a meeting and discuss how much time have we got to dedicate to which parts of it, and who's doing what. And it's just we're a bit more prepared for it... It gives us far more resources to put into the ones that we do want to go for.” – VCSE interviewee (long course)

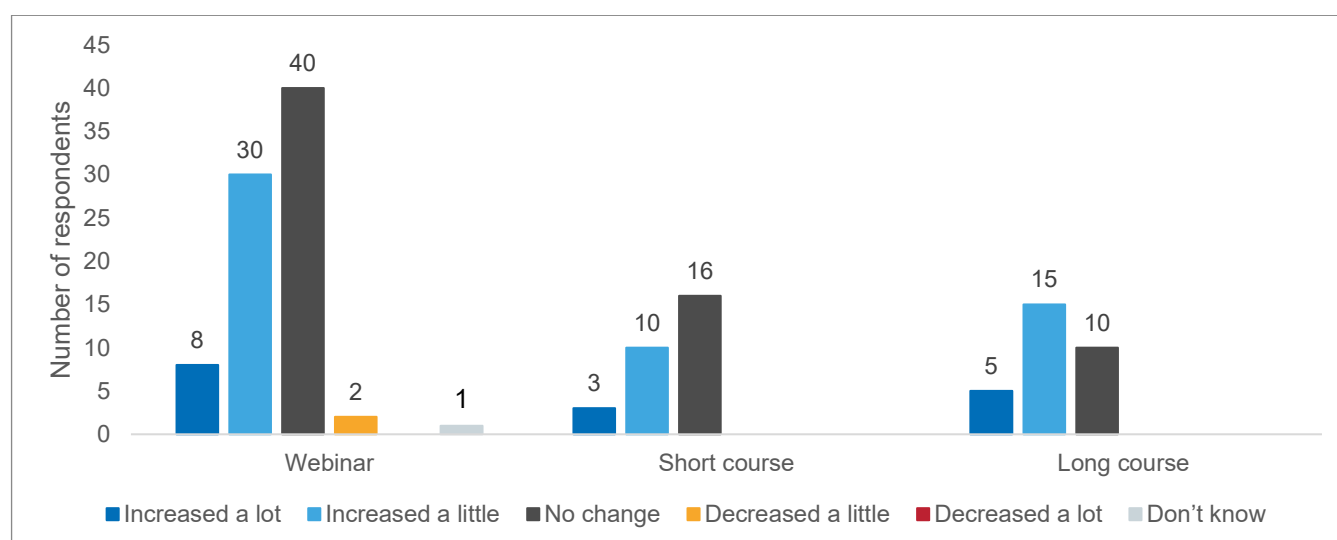
Several interviewees described how the long course prompted them to create new or restructured roles, to provide extra resource to business development and support the decision-making processes around which tenders to bid for. New roles included Directors of Operations and Delivery, Business Development roles, and Trustees with a specific focus on winning new business.

“[We were] very much informed by the advice from the course to have additional senior capacity to support some of these [procurement] processes.” – VCSE interviewee (long course)

6.2.3 Engagement in supplier events

It was anticipated that, in the medium term, VCSEs may go on to engage more in supplier events after attending the CRP. This outcome area was less positive overall than other outcomes reported at the same timepoint. Almost equal numbers of the 140 survey respondents reported 'no change' to their engagement in supplier events (47%) to those who reported an increase (51%). However, Figure 19 shows that webinar and short course survey respondents were more likely to report 'no change', and for 2 webinar participants, a decrease in engagement, than an increase. The picture is more positive for long course survey respondents who were twice as likely to report increased engagement (20 of 30) than 'no change' (10 of 30).

Figure 19 To what extent has taking part in the CRP changed your organisation's engagement in supplier events?



Source: VCSE end-of-programme survey. Base=140.

Interviewees who had taken part in the long course described going on to participate in pre-market supplier events with local and regional authorities. However, interviewees reflected that they felt pre-market engagement events were more suitable for larger organisations, particularly where the supplier events were by invitation only:

“We’ve been invited into some pre-contract discussions [...] If we were still a small organisation, I’m not convinced we would have ended up there.” – VCSE interviewee (long course)

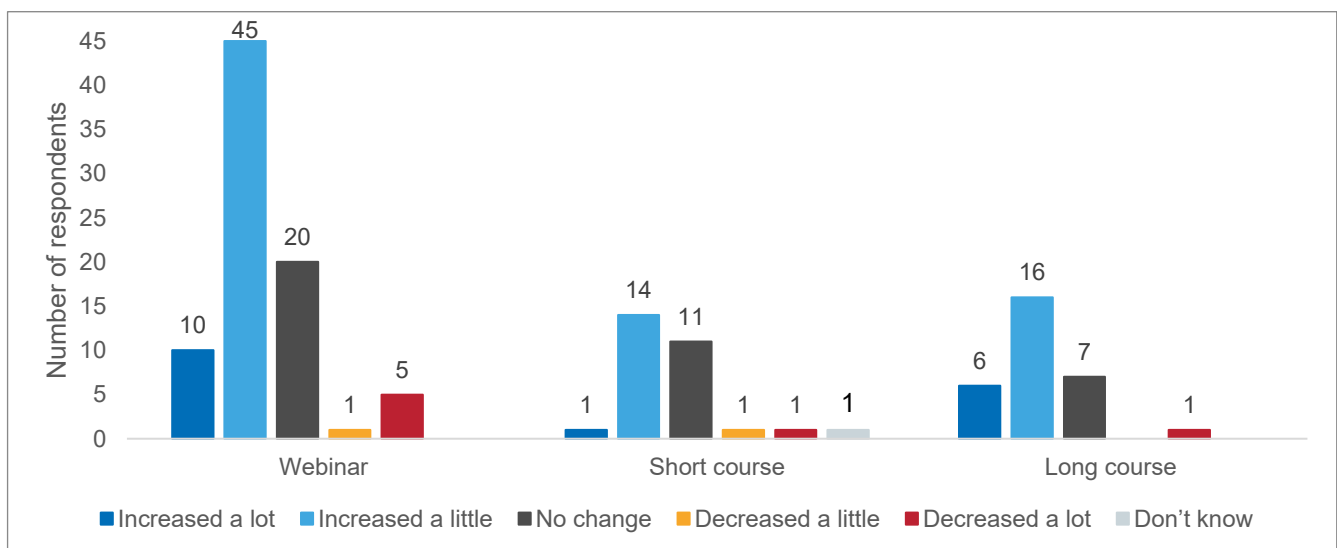
This may go some way to explain why webinar and short course participants who responded to the survey less commonly reported attending more supplier events, than long course participants who tended to be from larger organisations, and closer to bidding for contracts. Indeed, whilst short course and webinar participants interviewed rarely discussed attending supplier events, one webinar participant had gone on to attend market engagement event, but was still uncertain about the relevance of the event to their smaller organisation:

“I have been to some market engagement events which I might’ve thought ‘I’m not sure that’s worth my hour and a half’, but I’ve been to them” – VCSE interviewee (webinar)

6.2.4 Confidence in winning more bids

Overall, 66% of the 140 end-of-programme survey respondents reported increased confidence in winning more public sector contracts. 27% reported no change to their confidence in winning more contracts, and only 6% reported a decrease in their confidence in winning more. Figure 20 shows that long course participants were more likely to report increased confidence in bidding (22 of 30), followed by webinar participants (55 of 81). Interestingly, despite reporting more confidence and motivation to bid, short course participants most commonly reported only a slight increase in confidence in winning (14 of 29) but were more likely than other groups to report ‘no change’ (11 of 29).

Figure 20 To what extent has taking part in the CRP changed your organisation’s confidence in winning more public sector contracts?



Source: VCSE end-of-programme survey. Base=140.

6.3 Bidding for and winning public sector contracts

This section presents summative programme outcomes based on all evidence of bidding for and winning public sector contracts collected over the course of the evaluation.³⁶ The final outcomes presented reflect the state of play at December 2024, 3 months before the end-of-programme delivery. Qualitative findings from the interviews and case studies provide additional explanation and understanding for the interpretation of the outcomes reported by participants who responded to the surveys.

The importance of attribution

In this section, we include both the total number of bids submitted, contracts won, and value of successful contracts. However, we know that in the real world, VCSEs can and do go on to win contracts – without having taken part in the CRP.

In fact, the research team surveyed individuals who signed up for, but did not take part in the CRP activities. Of the 71 non-participants who responded to the survey, 8 went on to submit a total of 17 bids. 3 of these were successful, to a total contract value of £45,000.

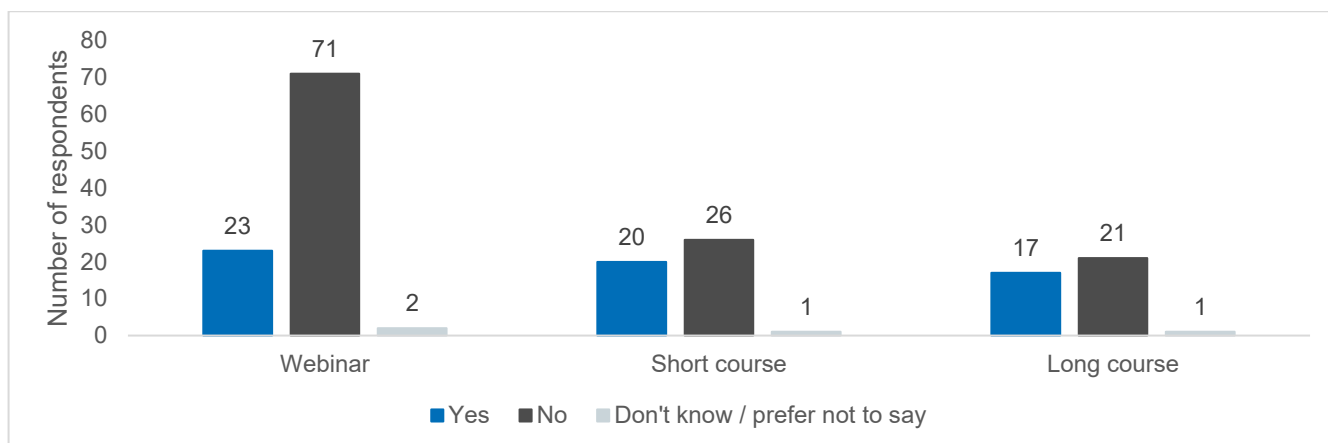
Survey respondents who took part in the CRP were asked to reflect on which of the bids they submitted and/or won, they would have done so anyway despite taking part in the CRP, to understand which of the successes could be credited to their participation in the programme. We describe these outcomes as 'attributable'.

6.3.1 Bidding for contracts

By December 2024, **33% of 182 of survey respondents had gone on to bid for public sector contracts** after taking part in the CRP. Figure 21 shows that long course survey respondents were most likely to go on to bid for contracts within the evaluation timeframe with 17 (of 39) reporting they had submitted bids, followed by short course respondents (20 of 47) and then webinar respondents (23 of 96).

³⁶ Primarily through the end-of-programme survey, but also drawing on outcomes reported in the 6-month follow-up survey where respondents did not go on to submit an end-of-programme survey response.

Figure 21 Have you bid for any public sector contracts since taking part in the CRP?



Source: End-of-programme survey responses (n=140), combined with 6-month survey response where an end-of-programme survey response was not later submitted (n=42). Base=182.

The 60 survey respondents who went on to bid for contracts after the CRP **submitted a total of 158 bids** to public sector commissioners, **42 of which they attributed to the CRP**.³⁷ Some interviewees who had submitted bids after participating in the programme activities mentioned they were already in the final stages of bid development whilst taking part in the CRP. However, interviewees more often highlighted key learning from the CRP as being critical to them going on to submit bids. This included their increased awareness of where to find bids and improved bid-writing skills, particularly from being able to interpret the requirements of a tender more easily and effectively.

Interviewees shared examples of **submitting bids both independently and as part of a consortium, as a lead partner and a subcontractor**. Of all the 158 bids submitted, 68% were submitted to local authorities (including combined authorities), followed by 14% to the NHS or Integrated Care Board, 13% to UK central government departments who are the main focus of the CRP, 2% to UK devolved nations government departments and 1% to European or international governments and 2% to 'other'.³⁸

Around **a third (21 of 60) of survey respondents who submitted bids after taking part in the CRP said their proposals received higher scores** than their previous bids, 14 of whom reported 'slightly higher' scores and 7 reported 'much higher' scores. All of these respondents said their participation in the CRP made a positive difference to their higher scores. Just under a quarter (14 of 60) reported 'no change' to their scores, and just one respondent reported 'slightly lower' scores since taking part in the CRP. However, the most commonly selected answer option was 'don't know' (25 of 60) suggesting some participants were either still waiting for feedback on their bids, or were otherwise not aware of the change in scores over time.

6.3.1.1 Barriers to bidding

Interviewees highlighted several **barriers to submitting more bids**, including:

- **The wider financial context VCSEs are operating in.** One interviewee reported that their organisation was operating at a loss since the cost-of-living had increased unpredictably, where they had previously been operating at a profit. This meant they were taking a more risk-averse approach to proposals and avoiding investing time and resources in bidding for opportunities with a lower chance of success.

³⁷ Based on the total submitted bids minus the answer to the survey question "If you had not taken part in the Contract Readiness Programme activities, how many of your [total submitted bids as per previous question] winning bids, would you have won?"

³⁸ 2% were submitted to 'other' bodies, however write-in responses suggested these may be arms-length not-for-profit organisations such as national institutes and education establishments, rather than public bodies.

- **A lack of opportunities from central government.** Several participants noted a lack of opportunities that were relevant for their organisation, including expected pipeline opportunities not coming to fruition. One organisation had previously considered bidding for central government contracts, however, they decided to stop using national tender portals as they had stopped seeing suitable opportunities. Instead, they decided to focus on local opportunities.
- **Fewer opportunities at a local level.** Additionally, interviewees believed the number of opportunities coming from local government had also declined over recent years. They perceived this to be associated with local authorities' budget constraints.
- **Insufficient budgets.** Where suitable opportunities had come through, interviewees were disappointed with the budget envelope, which they believed was not sufficient for delivering the requested services.

That said, the section below presents participants' successes in winning contracts.

6.3.2 Winning public sector contracts

By December 2024, several months before the end of CRP delivery in March 2025, survey respondents reported that 53 of the 158 bids submitted had been successful.³⁹

Sub-group	How many bids were submitted?	How many bids were successful?	How many successful bids were attributed to the CRP?	What was the total value of the contracts won?	How much was attributable to the CRP?	Average attributable contract 'win' value
Webinar	79	24	9	£813,500	£391,495	£43,499.44
Short course	39	7	4	£167,000	£131,000	£32,750.00
Long course	40	22	5	£13,014,000	£1,544,000	£308,800.00
Total	158	53	18	£13,994,500	£2,066,495	£114,805.28

Source: End-of-programme and 6-month follow-up survey responses. Base=182.

A breakdown by organisation size demonstrates that 4 micro-to-small VCSEs, 9 medium VCSEs and 5 large VCSEs attributed contract 'wins' to the CRP. Table 5 shows that of these 53 'wins', **participants attributed 18 successful bids to the CRP, to a total contract value of £2,066,495.**

- 12 webinar participants went on to win 24 bids, of which 9 were attributable to the CRP, to the value of £391,495.
- 4 short course participants went on to win 7 bids, of which 4 were attributable to the CRP, to the value of £131,000.
- 12 long course participants went on to win 22 bids, of which they attributed 5 to the CRP, to the value of £1,544,000.

³⁹ The total contract value of all successful bids was £13,994,500, of which survey respondents believed £11,928,005 would have been won anyway, had they not taken part in the CRP.

Table 5 Number of bids submitted, won and attributed to the CRP by survey respondents, and the respective total contract values

Sub-group	How many bids were submitted?	How many bids were successful?	How many successful bids were attributed to the CRP?	What was the total value of the contracts won?	How much was attributable to the CRP?	Average attributable contract 'win' value
Webinar	79	24	9	£813,500	£391,495	£43,499.44
Short course	39	7	4	£167,000	£131,000	£32,750.00
Long course	40	22	5	£13,014,000	£1,544,000 ⁴⁰	£308,800.00
Total	158	53	18	£13,994,500	£2,066,495	£114,805.28

Source: End-of-programme and 6-month follow-up survey responses. Base=182.

A breakdown by organisation size demonstrates that 4 micro-to-small VCSEs, 9 medium VCSEs and 5 large VCSEs attributed contract 'wins' to the CRP:

Table 6 A breakdown of attributable contract win values by VCSE size

VCSE size (income reported at application stage)	Total attributable contract value	Number of survey respondents who attributed contract 'wins' to the CRP
Micro-to-small (under £10k to £100k)	£197,996	4
Medium (£100k to £1m)	£824,499	9
Large (£1m to 10m)	£1,044,000	5
Total	£2,066,495	18

Source: End-of-programme and 6-month follow-up survey responses, matched with VCSE pathway MI data received October 2024. Base=182.

Interviewees shared several examples of going on to win contracts and highlighted key contributing factors which they said came about as a result of the CRP. These included better understanding and interpretation of tender requirements (including knowing what commissioners are looking for) and improved strategic decision-making on which contracts to bid for, coupled with better resourcing of bid-writing, which they believed positively influenced their 'wins'.

Longitudinal case study: how learning from the long course supported contract winning

Despite having delivered a public service previously, the leader of a VCSE providing support to individuals with long-term health conditions signed up for the CRP because they struggled to engage with bidding for public sector opportunities. With only themselves and a handful of other senior colleagues - who already had full workloads to deliver - involved in bid development, they felt there was not sufficient capacity or

⁴⁰ The highest value of contracts an organisation had won (attributed to the CRP) was for £350,000.

resources to write high quality proposals. They hoped the long course would reassure them that they were bidding for the right opportunities, including the right things in their tenders, and advise them on how to make their bidding processes more efficient. During an interview after they had finished the long course, the VCSE said they valued the clear guidance SSE provided about how to communicate their ‘unique selling points’ (USPs) and suggestions about how to resource bid-development. The VCSE leader explained that taking part in the long course had not only improved their ability to communicate their ‘USPs’ but also influenced their decision to restructure, bringing in additional senior capacity to support with business development.

When the research team caught up with the VCSE leader roughly a year after they took part in the long course, they said the CRP had helped them win an NHS contract, which in turn, had boosted their confidence in their ability to bid for, win, and deliver more contracts in the future.

Some interviewees suggested that the CRP was one of several wider factors contributing to being more successful in winning contracts. Indeed, interviewees and survey respondents suggested other things which helped, including:

- ▶ **Accessing business support for VCSEs** – one interviewee accessed support provided by a local infrastructure organisation, focused on budgeting and pricing, something which they believed was a gap in the CRP support offer. Another interviewee received funding for business support from Lloyds Bank Foundation, which although focused on marketing and organisational development, they felt would make their organisation more attractive to commissioners and better able to identify prosperous contracting opportunities.
- ▶ **Attending further capacity-building training programmes** - delivered by SSE (for example, the Procurement Readiness Programme) and other organisations such as Alia’s Grow Your Business programme, RBC Brewin Dolphin’s Procurement Readiness Programme, and Hatch’s Impact Growth Programme.
- ▶ **Growing in size and capacity** – had meant more capacity to bid for contracts, and take on social investment which subsequently supported further growth and provided more opportunities for bidding for larger contracts.
- ▶ **Carrying out research** – about local contracting and bid-development.
- ▶ **Getting practice in tender-writing** – several interviewees cited ‘learning by doing’ beyond the CRP to gain knowledge and skills which helped with bidding for and winning contracts.

6.4 Wider outcomes

Whilst the core focus of the CRP was to increase VCSE participation in public sector procurement, VCSE interviewees shared several wider outcomes, unintended from the ToC. These included:

- ▶ **Bidding for grants, social investment, and commercial contracts.** Interviewees felt the bid-writing skills they learned through the CRP helped them better communicate their offer and unique selling points. Several interviewees expressed how these skills were transferrable and enabled them to secure more grant funding and social investment.
- ▶ **Assessing the current stage of their organisation.** Qualitative feedback suggested that for early-stage and micro/small VCSEs, the webinar helped them to self-assess the current stage of their organisation. For some, this included a recognition that they were quite far away from being able to bid for contracts, which interviewees valued as an outcome, echoing the views of delivery partners. For them, other actions were needed before bidding for contracts, including registering their organisation, developing business plans, and seeking early-stage business support (including mentoring).

- ▶ **Reviewing internal policies and procedures.** Short and long course interviewees described how learning from the CRP supported their wider internal strategic work including reviewing policies and processes, particularly around procurement compliance, supporting continuous improvement of their governance. For example, one interviewee invested in their IT and cyber security and were undergoing the Cyber Essentials accreditation.
- ▶ **Developing funding strategies.** Interviewees suggested that the CRP had contributed to the renewal and development of fundraising and funding strategies, including focusing on funding diversification. A talk given by a guest speaker was cited as particularly inspirational to motivate interviewees to focus on this.
- ▶ **Passing on knowledge.** Additionally, VCSE participants who were themselves VCSE infrastructure organisations described passing on what they had learned to their wider communities of VCSEs.

A conceptual image showing a small green seedling with two leaves growing out of a stack of silver coins. The coins are stacked on a bed of dark brown soil. In the background, there are more stacks of coins and another seedling. The entire scene is overlaid with a large, diagonal blue gradient that covers the left side and bottom of the image. A soft, out-of-focus green background is visible behind the coins and plants.

Part 2: The commissioner pathway

7.0 The commissioner pathway

This section outlines the design, development and implementation of the CRP commissioner pathway, as well as outcomes achieved. The chapter is informed by the qualitative interviews with commissioner pathway participants and programme stakeholders, and MI data collected by the commissioner pathway delivery lead. Successes, challenges, and considerations for future similar programmes are highlighted throughout.

Key findings

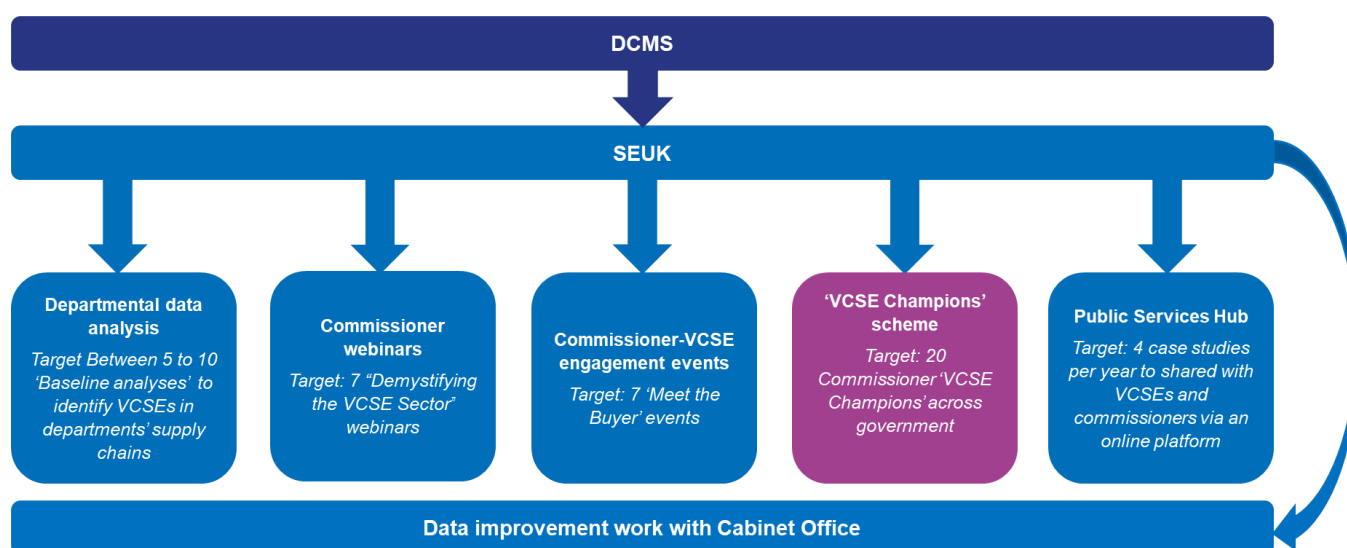
The commissioner pathway design and timescale were adjusted to align with the VCSE Task Force, which led to delays to activities launching, but was instrumental in engaging the departments and disseminating information about the commissioner pathway activities.

SEUK delivered 10 baseline analyses of VCSE spend in departments' supply chains, 5 commissioner webinars, and a single commissioner-VCSE engagement event within the evaluation timeline (by December 2024). Overall, commissioner pathway participants had mixed views on the activities. Whilst some found the activities engaging and useful in increasing awareness and knowledge of the VCSE sectors and informing Action Planning, others highlighted opportunities for improvement. This included improving the engagement with the departments' commissioning teams rather than just their commercial teams, and providing departments with tools to monitor the spend on VCSEs in their supply chain internally. They also suggested that departments could have made more of the activities if they knew the support options available via the CRP and the delivery timelines from the beginning. Feedback on the Public Services Hub suggested there is limited demand for and use of the resource, suggesting the Hub could be better promoted or pivoted in focus.

There was a general consensus that the achieved outcomes cannot be solely attributed to the CRP, as interviewees reported that other government initiatives, especially the VCSE Task Force, also contributed to achieving outcomes. However, interviewees reported that the commissioner webinars and baseline analyses contributed to increased awareness of VCSEs' value and motivation to engage VCSEs across their teams. At the same time, they also agreed that observing the system-level outcomes (more tenders/specifications informed by VCSEs, and increased transparency around intent for VCSE procurement) would take a lot more time.

7.1 Commissioner pathway design and delivery

The commissioner pathway targeted central government commissioners and sought to increase their understanding of and engagement with the VCSE sector. This strand of the CRP was managed and delivered by **Social Enterprise UK (SEUK)**. SEUK worked closely with DCMS and other delivery partners, which supported the communications and co-design of the programme.

Figure 22 Commissioner pathway initial design and targets⁴¹

7.1.1 Aims of the commissioner pathway

As outlined in 2.1.1, the commissioner pathway aimed to raise central government commissioners' awareness and understanding of the sector's role and value to make it easier for the VCSE sector to position their offer to public service commissioners. Indeed, the interviewed commissioners agreed that commissioners have limited knowledge of VCSEs' needs and specialisms; and that they struggle to identify and attract VCSEs suitable to deliver their contracts. This also reflects the views of VCSE representatives who identified a lack of suitable opportunities, the complexity of the public procurement process, and commissioners' use of jargon as some of the key demand-side barriers (see Need for the VCSE pathway'). The expectation was that the commissioner pathway activities would address these barriers and increase commissioner's awareness of the VCSE sector's needs and its role in delivering services relevant to the departments' policy areas. In the long term, the programme aimed to bring system-level changes in departments' approaches to VCSE procurement by creating more transparency and opportunities informed by, and suitable for, VCSEs.

7.1.2 Partnership working on the commissioner pathway

During the interviews, both the **SEUK and DCMS representatives described their working relationship as positive** and appreciated each other's flexibility in adapting the commissioner pathway activities to changing circumstances (for example, changing needs of government departments, aligning CRP activities with other governmental initiatives, and adapting to the impact of the 2024 UK General Election). However, one programme partner highlighted that the progress and developments in the commissioner pathway could have been communicated more clearly to the rest of the programme partners to ensure joint working and alignment between the pathways, particularly around communications about activities that crossed over both VCSE and commissioner audiences (such as the Meet the Buyer events).

Because SEUK had not previously worked with DCMS, interviewees highlighted the **importance of building trust at the start of the programme**. Echoing feedback in 4.1.2 this involved adjusting their working style and expectations, especially around the timeframes for decision-making and getting 'sign-off' from DCMS senior staff, particularly their communications team. However, programme partners shared that over the course of the

⁴¹ The blue activities indicate activities which were planned and delivered whilst the magenta activities were not delivered.

programme the time required for reviewing materials had reduced, whilst they also adapted their working plan to account for the decision-making timelines.

“The responsiveness of the consortium to adapting and trialling some things is really helpful.” - Programme partner

As outlined in Partnership structure, DCMS led a series of co-design workshops with VCSE sector representatives and government departments. The co-design workshops shaped the design of both CRP pathways. As shown in Figure 22 above, the initial design of the commissioner pathway comprised 5 key activities with set delivery targets. These activities were to be further underpinned by and fed into wider data improvement work with the Cabinet Office. During the set-up phase, DCMS led further discussions with other government departments to explore their needs and promote the commissioner pathway to get ‘buy-in’ from senior staff. Programme partners reported that, as a result, **several changes were made** to the commissioner pathway structure:

- ▶ To further align commissioner pathway activities with existing initiatives, **SEUK established a close working relationship with the VCSE Cross Government Task Force**⁴² (‘VCSE Task Force’ or ‘Task Force’) led by the VCSE Crown Representative. The relationship was mutually beneficial; SEUK could utilise the existing Task Force network of commercial leads across government departments to reach their intended audience, whilst the Task Force members could engage with the CRP support. Programme partners believed that baseline analysis could help Task Force members with delivering their Task Force commitments, especially the development of VCSE Action Plans (see 7.3.1), covering how the baseline analyses informed the departments’ VCSE Action Plans).
- ▶ **Delivery of the VCSE Champion scheme was suspended** (see Figure 22) to avoid potential duplication or confusion with existing initiatives, including the Small to Medium-sized Enterprise (SME) Champions Scheme⁴³ and VCSE Task Force.
- ▶ **The targets for activities shifted** from delivering ‘Meet the Buyer’ events towards more baseline analyses and commissioner webinars. Programme partners suggested this was due to higher demand from the government departments for baseline analyses and commissioner webinars.

Although the discussions with government departments and adjusting delivery timescales to the VCSE Task Force delivery contributed to **initial delays** in launching the commissioner pathway activities, the programme partners agreed it was necessary to ensure the CRP activities aligned with other governmental initiatives in this policy area. This allowed programme partners to explore how the CRP could complement other initiatives in achieving shared goals. A DCMS stakeholder valued SEUK’s patience in this process, and its flexibility in adjusting the planned activities and timelines in response to the government’s processes and changing needs.

In the second year of the commissioner pathway, the **2024 UK General Election impacted the delivery timescales** of the programme. Programme partners said that they were not able to deliver the planned activities for the first half of the year, subsequently condensing delivery into the second half of the year. On the upside, one of the programme partners expressed that the compressed delivery period led to improved efficiency in data collection and engagement.

“We were able to build in a lot more urgency this time [...] that helped a lot to get things moving and happening, which means that everything is booked in or done despite very tight timelines.” - Programme partner

⁴² Cross-government initiative to engage departments’ commercial teams in developing VCSE Action Plans aimed to increase commercial engagement with the VCSE sector.

⁴³ Cross-government initiative to increase the diversity of government supply chains by creating more commercial opportunities for SMEs.

Overall, the following commissioner pathway activities had been delivered during the evaluation timescales (by December 2024):

- ▶ **Departmental data analyses:** SEUK delivered 10 baseline analyses of commercial spend data to identify VCSEs within departments' supply chains (contracts) for 11 departments.⁴⁴
- ▶ **Commissioner webinars:** SEUK delivered 5 'Demystifying the VCSE sector' webinars to 6 departments.
- ▶ **Commissioner-VCSE engagement events:** One 'Meet the Buyer' event had been delivered by one department, supported by SEUK hosting the event.

At the time of writing this report, SEUK had several activities planned for the remainder of the contract delivery period to March 2025. This included 6 'Demystifying the VCSE sector' webinars, 2 baseline analyses and a 'Meet the Buyer' event.

Additionally, one of the programme partners explained they are in ongoing discussions with the Cabinet Office around data improvement work. They noted a priority for further data improvement work is to ensure VCSEs are embedded in the new procurement data system being developed by the Cabinet Office. This could, for example, mean VCSEs could be 'flagged' allowing easier identification within departments' supply chain.

7.2 Reaching and engaging central government departments

As reported at the 'mid-programme' stage, there was consensus amongst the interviewed stakeholders that the **VCSE Task Force had been critical to engaging central government departments** in the CRP. The VCSE Task Force meetings were used to engage the departments and disseminate information about the commissioner pathway activities. However, one of the commissioners noted this created a challenge as personnel not involved in the VCSE Task Force **had little knowledge or awareness of the CRP activities**. They suggested that a '*menu of support options*' available via the CRP would have been a helpful tool to engage wider department staff and inform them about the available support.

The commissioner pathway **engagement approach was aligned with the Task Force timescales** to enable Task Force members to participate in the CRP activities. Through the VCSE Task Force, SEUK reached 13 government departments across 2 cohorts, including 6 departments in the first and 7 departments in the second (see Table 7). However, one of the Cohort 2 departments had not participated in any CRP activities within the evaluation period and is expected to take part in the commissioner webinar and baseline analysis in 2025. Commercial Directors were the key point of contact at each participating department and were expected to stimulate engagement further from other personnel within their departments.

⁴⁴ A joint baseline analysis was delivered to the Department for Business and Trade (DBT) and Department for Energy Security and Net Zero (DESNZ).

This was because the commissioning data provided was from the previous Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy (BEIS) which existed until February 2023 when it was split to DBT and DESNZ as part of a cabinet reshuffle.

Table 7 Government departments participating in the CRP commissioner pathway divided into cohorts

	Government departments
Cohort 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ The Crown Commercial Services (CCS) ▶ Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCM) ▶ Department of Justice (MoJ) ▶ Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) ▶ Department for Business and Trade (DBT) and Department for Energy Security and Net Zero (DESNZ)⁴⁵
Cohort 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Department for Transport (DfT) ▶ Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra) ▶ Home Office ▶ Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) ▶ His Majesty Revenue & Customs (HMRC) ▶ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) ▶ Department for Education (DfE)

Source: SEUK Commissioner Pathway MI data.

According to programme stakeholders, the initial engagement with Cohort 1 was slow. They found it challenging to engage departments and follow up on actions because departments' participation in CRP was voluntary. However, they reported that the engagement sharply increased in September 2023. One of the partners assigned this to the impact of the **Procurement Bill** that was being developed by the Cabinet Office at the time. The new bill would, according to the programme partner, "*mandate commissioners to track VCSE spend better*", which motivated departments to commit to the commissioner pathway activities.

Programme partners reported that the engagement of government departments further improved with Cohort 2 because of **clearer communication** about the activities, including clearly structured briefings for departments about upcoming data requests from SEUK, and **testimonies** from Cohort 1 participants about the benefits of the CRP.

Programme partners also highlighted **varying levels of departmental commitment** to CRP and VCSE Task Force activities. They shared they had received feedback that the Cabinet Office were better placed to set direction around VCSE engagement in public procurement, as they are responsible for setting commercial policies across the government. According to programme partners, this view may have contributed to mixed commitment amongst departments' staff on the CRP and VCSE Task Force and potentially affected the level of 'buy-in' from some of the departments. One commissioner participant suggested that ministerial endorsement of the VCSE Action Plans would increase the commitment across government departments.

⁴⁵ Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy (BEIS) existed until February 2023 when it was split to form the Department for Business and Trade (DBT) and Department for Energy Security and Net Zero (DESNZ) as part of a cabinet reshuffle. SEUK engaged with the integrated commercial function of these 2 departments.

“The SME Action Plan for many years has been a ministerial commitment, and the VCSE Action Plan, I don’t think, has that requirement. It’s more of a voluntary commitment [...] If that could be changed so it is more of a ministerial commitment, I think that it would give it greater importance, greater gravitas across all departments.” – Commissioner pathway participant

Wider department staff, including **commercial and procurement teams, engaged with the programme mainly via ‘Demystifying the VCSE sector’ webinars**. Department representatives noted during the interviews that the webinars were well-attended, and staff were highly engaged. However, in some cases, they indicated that the webinars were attended by commercial team members and commissioners did not attend, missing out on the opportunity to engage those directly involved in designing and managing contracts.

“I think a lot of the time, these things are aimed at commercial (teams), whereas I think presenting them as information to commissioners [...] would also have been useful.” – Commissioner pathway participant

They highlighted that commissioners would benefit from further learning about the barriers faced by VCSEs, as some of these barriers lie with commissioning processes (reflecting VCSE perceptions of demand-side barriers – see 4.1.1). For example, commissioner pathway participants noted that commissioners were best-placed to remove barriers created by focusing on developing low-cost tenders and rushing tendering timescales due to the pressure to get services in place quickly.

7.3 Experiences of the commissioner pathway

This section summarises the experiences of the Cohort 1 participants who took part in the commissioner pathway activities delivered within the evaluation timeframe. The evidence presented in this section is based on interviews with 6 participants from 3 departments who had participated in CRP activities in Cohort 1. Overall, the consulted commissioner participants agreed that the commissioner webinars provided useful learning for their teams. However, they had mixed views on the usefulness of the baseline analysis. They suggested that departments could make more out of the activities if they were aware of the support options available via CRP and the delivery timelines from the beginning.

7.3.1 Departmental data analyses

Commissioner participants had **mixed views on the baseline analyses of departments’ commercial spend on VCSEs**. As outlined in the mid-programme stage, some departments found the baseline exercise helpful for understanding their VCSE engagement. However, others raised concerns about the long-term effectiveness and replicability of the baselining approach.

Generally, the commissioner participants believed the VCSE baseline analyses had informed their understanding of the current level of VCSE engagement in their procurement portfolio. Some interviewees appreciated that the outcomes of the analysis revealed the number of commissioned VCSEs in their supply chain. Interviewees from 2 departments reported they had used these figures to further inform their Action Plans.

“It’s been helpful in the sense that for the first time, we’re able to quantify the level of VCSE engagement.” – Commissioner pathway participant

However, there were some concerns about the baseline analysis approach, including:

- **Replicability of the analysis:** As there was no standard definition of a VCSE adopted by the government, SEUK used their own definition for the baseline analysis. Some commissioner pathway participants discussed that using such a definition introduced risks to the accuracy and objectivity of the analysis.

- ▶ **Using and interpreting the baseline figures within a wider context:** Participants further shared that, in some cases, they struggled to understand the data in a wider context. They suggested it would be helpful to have access to data from other departments, or have set targets to be able to compare their figures and understand what is considered a 'good' level of VCSE participation for their sector.
- ▶ **Tracking changes over time:** Interviewees shared frustration that they did not have the necessary tools to monitor the VCSE engagement internally.
- ▶ Although some departments had already commissioned SEUK to update the analysis for the upcoming years, participants from other departments recommended developing a 'blueprint process' and tools within the existing government procurement systems, enabling the same analysis to be conducted in-house or by other suppliers. At the same time, the commissioner participants shared concerns about having the capacity and resources needed for conducting the analysis on a regular basis.

"We don't have the time and resource or the ability to replicate [the analysis] because it's not an agreed definition of a VCSE. It's SEUK's definition, so it's not tracked in our finance systems." - Commissioner pathway participant

7.3.2 Commissioner webinars

The consulted commissioners found the content to be **highly engaging, well-presented, and well-structured**, echoing feedback provided to SEUK directly through the in-session poll during one of the 'Demystifying the VCSE sector' webinars. Interviewees said the following elements of the webinar worked particularly well:

- ▶ The **overview of central government's VCSE supply chain**, which provided useful insights around VCSE participation in public procurement across the government as a whole.
- ▶ **Explaining the distinctions between VCSEs and SMEs** was important, as this was confusing for some. However, another interviewee believed that, for their department, it was important to consider SMEs and VCSEs together, as that was the approach recommended within their wider policy.
- ▶ **Co-presenting of the webinars with VCSE representatives** provided the commercial teams with valuable insights into the VCSEs' experiences.

Some commercial leads described how the information from the webinars was further disseminated to team members who could not attend. This included one of the departments recording the webinar to share it with their commissioners and use it as an ongoing resource, whilst another department followed the webinar with a series of internal presentations sharing plans to improve their engagement with the VCSE sector. Additionally, one of the commissioner participants said that departments with bigger commercial and commissioning teams would appreciate it if the webinar could be delivered more than once for each department, allowing more staff to attend. Although they recorded the session, they explained that attending the webinar 'live' was preferable as staff could ask questions and network with the presenters.

To further improve the quality of the webinars, commissioner pathway participants recommended incorporating **more practical 'tips, tricks and tools'** which attendees could take away and implement. One of the interviewed commercial leads explained this could include tools to assess the due diligence of VCSE suppliers because it might differ from the process for private sector organisations. Another commissioner pathway participant said they would have appreciated more tailored advice for departments that are mandated to procure through frameworks.

7.3.3 Commissioner-VCSE engagement events

Commercial leads who had been offered the opportunity to work with SEUK to deliver ‘Meet the Buyer’ events had **different views on taking up the offer**. One of them was unsure of the value SEUK could bring and believed they could organise an event in-house. However, participants from another department were keen to work with SEUK to organise an event due to their ability to reach and invite VCSEs – a group which the department had few networks or links with. They also valued the additional capacity that SEUK could bring to facilitate the event as they felt they would not have the internal resources to host it themselves in-house.

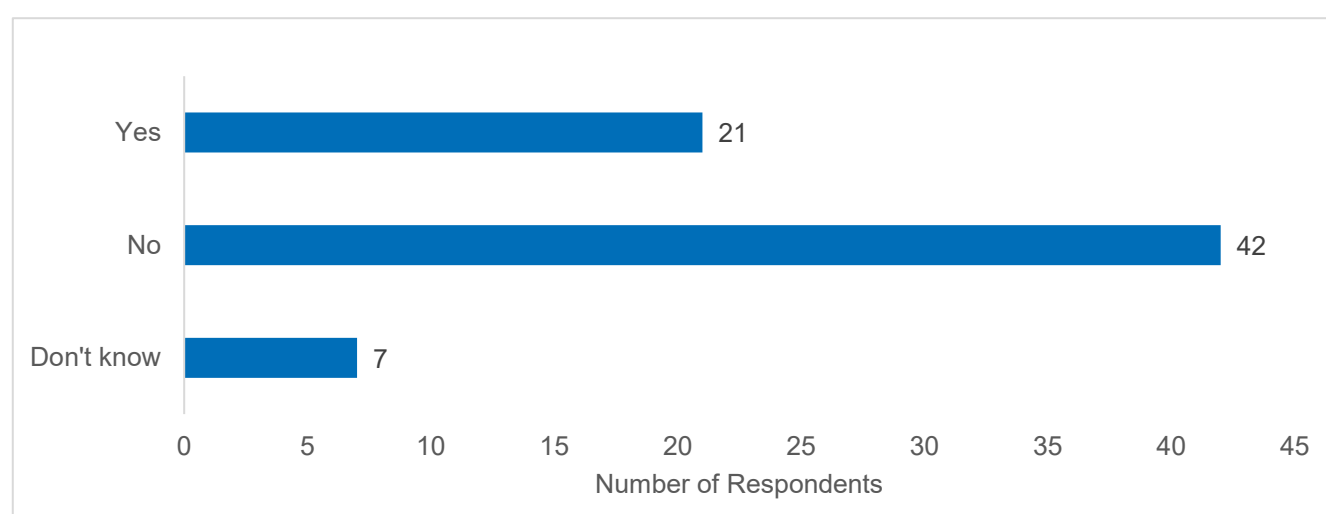
By the end of the evaluation timeframe, just one Meet the Buyer event had been delivered. Department representatives involved in the event were very positive about the session. They believed it created an ‘internal buzz’ about working with VCSEs, and raised further awareness of VCSE suppliers amongst their team.

One suggested improvement was to **have ‘Meet the Buyer’ events jointly delivered by several departments with more VCSEs joining**. This would allow departments to combine resources to manage the events, and expand the audience reach to the VCSEs that work with other departments. The programme partners reported that they considered delivering a joined commissioner-VCSE engagement event in 2025. However, they emphasised that this would rely on each department identifying and engaging their current VCSE suppliers – something that departments still face challenges in doing, without having a clear way of identifying which organisations they have procured are indeed VCSEs.

7.4 Public Services Hub

The Public Services Hub⁴⁶ (‘the Hub’) is a web page collating resources for both commissioners and VCSEs. According to the initial design (see Figure 22), the aim was to identify a range of VCSEs already contracted by participating departments and share their ‘stories’ of involvement in public procurement on the Hub as case studies. The programme partners reported that SEUK regularly published case studies on the website and that the link to the platform was shared on a government website. However, the evidence from the 6-month follow-up survey and the interviews with different VCSE participant groups shows **there was a lack of awareness of the Public Services Hub** and little evidence of demand.

Figure 23 Have you accessed the Public Services Hub?



Source: VCSE 6-month follow-up survey. Base=70.

⁴⁶ Social Enterprise UK (n.d.) [The Public Services Hub](#).

As shown in Figure 23, almost two thirds of VCSE participants who responded to the 6-month follow-up survey had not used the Public Services Hub (42 of 70); however, just under a third (21 of 70) had used the resource. Survey respondents who did not use the Hub reported that the most common reasons for not using it were that they were not aware of it (21 of 42) or had not had the time to access it (6 of 42). This was echoed by VCSE interviewees, who further outlined a lack of capacity to ‘keep up’ with all the available resources and a wish for the CRP resources to be streamlined.

“There are so many things it’s hard to keep up with everything, especially when you only work three days a week.” - VCSE participant

VCSE interviewees were also often unaware of the Hub. A strong theme amongst the VCSE participants interviewed was that the SSE Portal provided a useful curation of resources related to public sector contracting, and they were unsure what added value the Public Services Hub would bring to them. That said, most VCSE survey respondents who had gone on to use the Hub were satisfied with the quality and usefulness of the resource (14 of 21).

All interviewed commissioner pathway participants, except one, reported that they had not accessed the Hub. One interviewed commissioner who accessed the site had found the content useful but suggested that the content could be more applicable to wider government departments as they found it to be DCMS-focused. They also suggested that including all government departmental VCSE Action Plans in one place could be a useful addition to the site. One of the programme partners echoed that the Hub had not been well-utilised by commissioners and that they were unsure of the value it brought. They also suggested that it would have been better for the information to be included directly on the DCMS website and that the published case studies should have focused on the successes of the CRP to promote the programme (rather than focusing on the experiences of VCSEs who had not benefitted from the CRP).

7.5 Commissioner pathway outcomes

This section summarises the qualitative evidence of commissioner pathway outcomes, drawing on the interviews with commissioner pathway participants and programme partners. As mentioned in [Section 3.6](#) Data considerations, the qualitative evidence from commissioner pathway participants is limited by the small number of consulted departments due to the programme delays and the evaluation timescales. The interviewees reported the commissioner webinars and baseline analysis contributed to increased awareness and motivation across their teams. However, they also said that to see the system-level long-term outcomes would take a lot more time.

The interviewees agreed that **the achieved outcomes cannot be solely attributed to the CRP** but are inherently linked to other government initiatives, especially the VCSE Task Force. Interviewees commonly identified the VCSE Task Force as a key ‘contributor’, alongside the commissioner pathway, to achieving the reported outcomes. The VCSE Task Force was crucial for delivering the commissioner pathway, helping departments develop and implement their Action Plans and providing a structured approach to engaging with VCSEs. This means that the achieved outcomes cannot be separated. Some commissioner participants also emphasised the contribution of their work with Social Value UK, which delivered a series of webinars on assessing and monitoring social value. One of the programme partners said that the government Social Value Training Programme and Social Value Champions Scheme could have also contributed to the achieved outcomes.

7.5.1 Individual outcomes for commissioner pathway participants

On the individual level, commissioner pathway participants commonly reported **a better awareness of the value of VCSEs and their current VCSE suppliers** because of the baseline analysis and ‘Demystifying the VCSE sector’ webinars. Whilst programme partners believed this improved awareness would enable departments to

develop more transparent approaches to their intent for VCSE procurement, there was little evidence of this provided to date, suggesting more time may be needed for this system-level outcome to be realised.

That said, one of the commissioner pathway participants described being **more aware of the barriers to VCSE participation in procurement** after participating in the webinar.⁴⁷ They explained that this influenced how they guided their team to write ITTs and encourage VCSE participation. Their advice to their team included suggesting they simplify language and provide a high level of detail in the specification, making it more accessible to smaller organisations without in-house bid-writing teams.

“[The webinar presenters] made reference to the things that they [VCSEs] would find helpful in terms of making sure that there’s a detailed specification and, all things that actually I can take away when I’m talking to my business area when they’re putting their specification together for a new requirement.” - Commissioner pathway participant

During the CRP delivery, programme partners said they had observed **increased commissioner confidence and motivation to engage VCSEs**, with one of them suggesting that it could be a result of a renewed policy focus on the topics of social value and VCSE participation in public procurement.

Case study: increased motivation to engage VCSEs

Following the commissioner webinar, one of the departments participating in the commissioner pathway established a VCSE working group comprised of representatives from a variety of teams across the department, including the commercial and commissioning teams. The purpose of this group was to raise awareness of the VCSE sector and the department’s existing VCSE suppliers to encourage procurement and commissioning teams to engage with VCSEs more. The group also aimed to support the implementation of the commitments documented in the department’s Action Plan. At the time of the interview, interviewees were also planning to invite VCSEs to attend the working group and share their experiences and concerns around public procurement. A commissioner pathway participant from this department described how the webinar motivated their colleagues to set up the VCSE group:

“We’ve got a group of enthusiastic people who are passionate about VCSEs in our working group. So, that’s new; and it’s a result of the programme - the webinar itself.” - Commissioner pathway participant

7.5.2 System level outcomes

At a **system level**, the commissioner pathway participants generally agreed that the learning from baseline analysis and webinars contributed to the **development of the VCSE Action Plan**, which all VCSE Task Force members committed to. Interviewees further stated that having the VCSE Action Plans, underpinned by the improved awareness of commissioning teams, further led to:

- having a more **transparent approach** around their intent for VCSE procurement (within the action plan itself);

⁴⁷ This short-term outcome is not captured in the Theory of Change (see [Error! Reference source not found.](#)).

- ▶ having a **clearer approach to increasing VCSE procurement** (within the action plan); and
- ▶ the development and **adaptation of procurement processes**, underpinned by better understanding of how VCSEs operate.

For example, one of the departments used the learnings from commissioner pathway activities they had completed (VCSE spend data baselining, webinar) and other Task Force activities, to set **clear commitments in their Action Plan**. This included modifying their financial due diligence processes to accommodate the unique financial structures of VCSEs, analysing its supply chain annually to identify the level of VCSE engagement, and updating its action plans annually to incorporate VCSEs' feedback.

However, one interviewee reported that **the clarity around the actions and targets committed to, varied by different departments**. They believed this might be due to the different levels of commitment and appetite for change amongst those responsible for setting the direction for procurement (including commercial directors and senior teams). In some cases, programme partners reported that the responsibility for delivering on the VCSE Action Plan had been pushed down the seniority ranks. They highlighted the importance of maintaining the senior or strategic level ownership of the Action Plan to ensure the departments' commitment.

A range of interviewees also highlighted that **some departments found it easier to integrate VCSEs in their supply chain** due to the nature of the services they procure (for example, in thematic areas where VCSEs operate such as cultural or justice services) or previous strong engagement with the VCSE sector, whilst others found it difficult to create opportunities that are better suited for VCSEs. Some commissioners reported that they need to balance creating opportunities for VCSEs with contract management efficiency. They highlighted that creating more, lower-value contracts suitable for VCSEs would help increase the diversity of government supply chains and increase VCSE's share of government spend. However, managing contracts is resource-intensive and departments are pushed to improve their efficiency in commissioning – one mechanism for this is to commission fewer, larger contracts.

Commissioner pathway participants and programme partners agreed that **seeing the long-term outcomes**, especially the increased number of VCSEs winning government contracts and a greater portion of Government spend on contracts with VCSEs, **would take a lot more time**. Furthermore, to accurately measure those outcomes, all departments would need to adopt consistent monitoring approaches.

A conceptual image showing three small green seedlings with two leaves each, growing out of stacks of silver coins. The background is a soft-focus green, suggesting foliage. A large, semi-transparent blue triangle is positioned on the left side of the image, pointing towards the bottom right. The text 'Conclusions from the CRP programme evaluation' is written in white, bold, sans-serif font within the blue triangle.

Conclusions from the CRP programme evaluation

8.0 Conclusions and recommendations

In this final section of the report, we conclude with the main findings drawing on all the evidence available to the end of 2024, 3 months before CRP delivery ended. First, the section presents an appraisal of programme design and delivery against (reflecting on the ToC depicted in [9.0 Annex](#)). Secondly, an assessment of the impact of the CRP is made. Then, key reflections and learning from previous programmes, and how the CRP has refined or broadened this understanding, are discussed. Lastly, recommendations based on programme learning are made to inform future policy and programme development.

8.1 Appraisal of CRP design and delivery

Evidence from programme partners indicates that, as intended, the CRP was developed based on existing evidence and expertise, with strong collaboration between delivery partners and DCMS, facilitated by the co-design phase.

There was a high level of demand for the CRP support with interest in all courses. The evidence indicates that the CRP reached the target VCSEs, facilitated by having delivery partners with good reach into the sector and having clear eligibility criteria (focused on recruiting micro-, small- and medium-sized VCSEs). The evaluation found evidence of the risk of some VCSEs having limited capacity to engage or put learning into practice, particularly for smaller organisations.

By December 2024, 3 months prior to the end of CRP delivery, the CRP has generally engaged the intended VCSEs in terms of size, organisational maturity, and self-reported contract readiness for each of the courses, in line with the eligibility criteria. Indeed, the CRP delivered the webinar to 774 participants, the short course to 163 participants, and the long course to 122 participants, exceeding the minimum targets agreed by the programme partnership.

Overall, the feedback about the VCSE pathway was very positive. Elements that worked particularly well included the focus on relationship-building with other VCSEs and commissioners, social value, and hearing from relevant guest speakers including VCSEs and commissioners. Where more technical training was provided on bidding for contracts and peer-to-peer learning in the long course, this was valued, and VCSEs taking part in other courses without such a focus felt this was something additional they would like. The main challenges with the VCSE pathway activities were pitching the content at the 'right level' when there is a diverse mix of VCSEs in attendance and providing meaningful networking opportunities for a mixed cohort in an online setting.

As expected, key contextual factors (such as the VCSE Task Force, VCSE Action Planning, and wider policy changes including the Procurement Bill coming into play) facilitated strong engagement with the commissioner pathway once delivery was underway. The approach of aligning with the VCSE Taskforce introduced an unexpected risk to the delivery of activities on the VCSE pathway. Activities and outputs were delayed, and fewer activities were delivered than first intended. Most progress was made with data-baselining and delivering commissioner webinars. Just one department delivered a Meet the Buyer VCSE-commissioner engagement event, and others had turned down the offer. The VCSE champions scheme was also revoked to avoid detracting from existing schemes, such as the SME champions scheme. However, the extent to which the commissioner pathway activities reached those most able to effect system-level change in commissioning practice is also inconclusive.

There were mixed views on the commissioner pathway activities (although the interview numbers were small, and delivery was at an early stage, so these findings should be treated with caution). Generally, interviewees valued the webinars, which they found engaging, and felt contributed to increased awareness and knowledge of VCSEs amongst attendees. There was also evidence of departments using the data baselining VCSE spend to inform action planning. However not being able to reproduce the data analysis to track VCSE spend was a key challenge.

Additionally, whilst the Public Services Hub was implemented, the evidence suggested engagement with the resource was limited and not perceived to effect positive outcomes.

8.1.1 VCSE outcomes

The evaluation provides evidence of improved VCSE outcomes across the range of short-term outcomes anticipated in the ToC. The most commonly reported outcomes included:

- ▶ The vast majority survey respondents reported improvements in their **awareness of current and upcoming public sector contracts** (72 of 88) and general **knowledge and skills around bidding for contracts** (79 of 88).
- ▶ Almost two thirds of survey respondents reported increased **use of the main public sector tender portals**.
- ▶ Most webinar participants (27 of 34) reported improved **awareness of resources and guidance** around public contracting.
- ▶ Over two thirds (26 of 37) of survey respondents said the short and long courses had improved their **networks with other suppliers** and around two thirds (23 of 33) of short and long course survey respondents reported the CRP had increased their **understanding of supply chains and consortia building**.
- ▶ The majority of respondents (31 of 33) reported the short and long courses increased **knowledge of what commissioners are looking for**, with around half of those reporting this increased 'a lot'.
- ▶ Most short and long course participants responding to the survey (31 of 36) reported increased **knowledge of social value**.
- ▶ 16 of 18 survey respondents reported the long course had improved their **bid-writing skills and experience** with 5 of those reporting it had improved 'a lot'.

Whilst positive outcomes were still reported, this was less common in the following areas:

- ▶ A third (10 of 37) of short and long course participants had gone on to **register on frameworks**, however half of them (5 of 37) said they would have registered on those frameworks anyway, irrespective of the CRP.
- ▶ Almost half (18 of 37) of short and long course survey respondents said the CRP had made no difference to their **networks with commissioners**.
- ▶ Around half (8 of 18) long course participants reported the CRP led them to improve their networks with support and infrastructure organisations 'a little' and a further 2 said it improved their networks 'a lot'. However, 7 of 18 said the CRP made no difference to their **networks with support and infrastructure organisations**.

The evaluation found that by the end of 2024, participants responding to the end of programme survey (n=140) reported that the CRP had made a positive difference across a range of outcome areas:

- ▶ 79% said the CRP increased their confidence to bid for more public sector contracts.
- ▶ 73% said the CRP led to increased consideration of public sector contracts in their organisation.
- ▶ 72% said the CRP increased their motivation to bid for more public sector contracts.
- ▶ 66% said the CRP gave them increased confidence in winning more public sector contracts.
- ▶ 51% said the CRP led them to increased engagement in supplier events.

- Around a third of survey respondents who had gone on to submit bids after the CRP (21 of 62), noticed their bids had received higher scores (which they felt the CRP had positively influenced).

The final evaluation survey recorded the number of bids submitted and won by CRP participants and was delivered in November to December 2024, 3 months before the end of CRP delivery. **It uncovered 42 additional public sector bids and 18 ‘contract wins’ resulting from the CRP, to a total contract value of £2,066,495.**

8.1.2 Commissioner and system-level outcomes

On commissioner outcomes, there was **emerging evidence of increased confidence and motivation to engage VCSEs**, however the extent to which this was echoed across departments and teams as a whole, beyond interviewees directly, is unknown. There **was little evidence of system-level, medium-to-longer term outcomes** and commissioner pathway participants also said that observing the system-level long-term outcomes would take a lot more time. This was echoed by VCSE interviewees who highlighted a lack of suitable opportunities to bid for, demonstrating that this risk (identified in the ToC) was borne out, and ongoing challenges in navigating tender portals. More work is therefore needed to reduce demand-side barriers to VCSE engagement in public sector procurement, and further consideration is needed of whether and how wider contextual challenges around what is commissioned (and when) could help or hinder achieving the longer-term impacts of the CRP.

8.1.3 Unexpected outcomes

Unexpected outcomes which are not captured in the ToC include VCSEs **winning contracts from bodies outside of central government, bidding for and winning grants** after the CRP, and **successfully applying for social investment**. VCSEs also reported better understanding their organisation’s current ‘contract readiness’ and going on to develop funding strategies or review internal policies and procedures. VCSE participants who were themselves from infrastructure organisations also described passing knowledge gained through the CRP on to their wider VCSE networks.

8.2 Contribution to the existing evidence base

Since 2012, the UK Government and other stakeholders have trialled and tested a range of programmes to support the sustainability of the VCSE sector, as well as unlock public service spend for maximum social value. These programmes have focused on supporting VCSEs to become ‘ready’ to take on contracts or investments, using different delivery models, such as offering grants for VCSEs to access individualised, wraparound business support (such as, the Social Incubator Fund, The Big Potential Breakthrough Programme, Investment and Contract Readiness Fund), or to develop specific aspects of their offer (for example, the Impact Readiness Fund provided grants to charities and social enterprises to develop their impact measurement approaches). While very different in scope, scale, level of intensity and spend to the CRP, evaluation of these prior programmes produced common learning applicable to the CRP. Below we summarise the key learning from other programmes, and how the CRP evaluation has refined or broadened this understanding.

Table 8 Key learning from other programmes and reflections from the CRP

Learning from other programmes	Reflections from the CRP evaluation
The recognition that contract readiness is on a 'spectrum' and the needs and capacity of VCSEs vary substantially; support should reflect this. ⁴⁸	Evidence presented throughout this evaluation report confirms the wide range of contract readiness amongst VCSEs, and demonstrates that the programme model – webinar, short course and long course – has generally worked well to cater to these different levels of contract readiness. However, the evaluation highlighted that VCSEs' capacity continues to be a constraint – in some cases for their ability to participate in the programme at all, and in others to be able to put their learning from the CRP into practice.
Readiness support offers for VCSEs should include a forum to bring together public sector commissioners and VCSE organisations. ⁴⁹	The CRP's model included commissioner guest speakers at each of the courses. The evaluation found strong evidence that VCSEs highly appreciated the opportunities to engage with commissioners, to better understand what they are looking for during tendering opportunities. Likewise, central government staff members engaged in the commissioner pathway welcomed the opportunity to hear from VCSEs during their webinars, particularly to understand VCSEs' perspectives on the barriers to (and enablers of) engaging with public sector contracting.
Ensuring representation of VCSEs (for example, across geographies, sizes, organisation types, leadership composition) needs to be a key focus throughout delivery. ⁵⁰	The evaluation has highlighted that a diverse range of VCSEs have engaged in CRP activities, with more representation from small-to-medium sized VCSEs and representation across a wide range of different thematic sectors and geographically across England. While data is limited on the leadership composition of participating VCSEs, the survey found the CRP engaged organisations with diverse leadership teams. Using national and/or specialist infrastructure organisations (for example, SSE, V4CE and SEUK) was a key enabler for reaching the diverse population of VCSEs that went on to engage in the CRP.
Further opportunities for accessing support, information and networks following engagement in primary activities, could be beneficial. ⁵¹	<p>The evaluation highlighted that where VCSE participants had access to networking opportunities, they generally appreciated them, although the findings also stress the importance of ensuring networking environments are organised to bring together similar VCSEs (such as by organisation size, sector, geography) to maximise enabling VCSEs to develop partnerships/consortia. The evidence also indicated that even following 1.5-hour webinar sessions, there could be value in enabling networking for those interested.</p> <p>In terms of further information following courses, the evaluation identified limited demand for, and engagement in, the Public Services Hub, by both VCSEs and commissioners. Post-course materials were seen to be more useful, but their use by VCSEs was largely dictated by their capacity/availability to engage with them.</p> <p>In terms of additional support, a strong theme in the CRP evaluation was interest in further 1-2-1 mentoring to help VCSEs with the practical barriers to public sector procurement they were facing. This highlights how, alongside 'lighter-touch' programmes such as the CRP, which cater to a diverse range of VCSEs, there still remains a demand for the types of 'wraparound' support offered in previous programmes such as the ICRF and Big Potential Breakthrough.</p>

⁴⁸ Hazenberg, R. (2020). [Big Potential Breakthrough Evaluation Final Report](#).⁴⁹ Consulting InPlace (2011). [National Programme for Third Sector Commissioning](#).⁵⁰ Hazenberg, R. (2020). [Big Potential Breakthrough Evaluation Final Report](#).⁵¹ Ronicle, J. and Fox, T. (2015). [Investment Readiness Fund evaluation](#).

8.3 Recommendations

The key recommendations based on the learning discussed in this reported are outlined below.

8.3.1 Recommendations for partnership working

- ▶ **Incorporating the co-design phase was a successful approach** to programme design and development and would be advisable to build into future, similar programmes. However, **changes made to the programme should be agreed in-writing** to ensure a record of adaptations can be monitored and reviewed.
- ▶ DCMS should provide **upfront information (for example in ITTs), regarding the expectations for sign-off** on communications materials to allow service providers to develop realistic delivery plans from the outset of programme design.

8.3.2 Recommendations for future, similar programmes

- ▶ The delivery consortium's strong links with the VCSE sector facilitated the wide reach of the CRP. Engaging with **delivery partners well-embedded in the VCSE sector alongside the target audience is therefore recommended** for future programmes seeking to engage a diverse cohort of VCSEs, with additional resource available for further external communications.
- ▶ VCSE capacity to engage in the CRP was a barrier to engagement and participation in the evaluation. This echoes wider research into barriers VCSEs face in engaging in much-needed capacity building support.⁵² Beyond the CRP, programmes which seek to support VCSEs more intensively could **consider how VCSEs can be supported to participate**, such as providing funding to backfill the time of VCSE leaders attending the training.
- ▶ Common feedback across the 3 VCSE pathway activities was that participants would have found the sessions more relevant to their organisation if more specific information related to their sector or set-up could be shared, or if opportunities for interaction were designed to enable similar VCSEs to connect and share. Future similar programmes should consider how this may be supported, for example by **targeting the invitee lists and content accordingly**.
- ▶ A small number of VCSEs believed they took part in activities that were not well-suited to their organisations' pre-existing contract readiness. In future, **providing more detailed information, might help VCSEs to make a decision about which course is most relevant for them**. Additionally, if feasible, the webinar could be segmented to offer sessions to those with no prior knowledge of contracting, and for those with some pre-existing knowledge or experience.
- ▶ Several interviewees highlighted that the commissioner pathway activities may have had further impact had they reached personnel in different roles beyond the procurement team, namely those with commissioning responsibilities. Therefore, **time should be invested in defining the target cohort for activities and promoting activities more widely with departmental staff**, for example sharing 'ready to use' adverts and communications templates as a low-burden mechanism for key contacts to easily invite wider staff members and promote the benefits of participation.

⁵² Ecorys (2024). [Growth Fund Financial Resilience Research](#).

- ▶ Commissioner pathway participants requested **more practical tips and tools** to help them implement learning from the CRP. This may include standardised forms and a checklist for assessing VCSE due diligence, as the process could vary from processes used for due diligence on private sector organisations.
- ▶ The use and demand for the Public Services Hub seems to be limited. When commissioning future contract readiness programmes, **the demand for such a service should be scoped in advance of being delivered**. An alternate purpose for the web resource could be a single place for all VCSE Action Plans to be collated and shared – something an interviewee suggested would be helpful for commissioners. Or alternatively, if the purpose of the Hub was to promote the CRP, this could be further clarified and focused on the benefits and offer of the CRP to encourage wider participation (particularly from government departments).
- ▶ Suggestions for additional support which is needed to achieve the desired outcomes of the CRP - to increase the proportion of public spend going to VCSEs - within and beyond the CRP includes:
 - ▷ **Further information about Social Value for VCSEs**, but also for funders and commissioners, to ensure there is a consistent understanding and appraisal of social value.
 - ▷ More **hands-on bid-writing support** including practice for writing bids, walk-throughs of submitting bids through procurement portals, and sharing examples of good tenders alongside feedback.
 - ▷ Offering **complementary networking spaces** alongside online delivery. This may include encouraging peer networks to develop amongst VCSEs with things in common (such as organisational size, maturity, sector, or challenges), and advising on how to set up in-person networking if desired.
 - ▷ **Transparent information about how commissioners make decisions**, including what they are looking for and what wider factors are taken into consideration when assessing bids beyond the words on the page.
- ▶ Whilst it is earlier in the process for the Cohort 2 government departments, emerging evidence suggested the phased approach to commissioner pathway delivery has enabled learning from Cohort 1 to inform ongoing delivery and support future engagement efforts. **Taking a phased approach to delivery** may therefore be advisable.

8.3.3 Recommendations for wider systems

- ▶ **Departments could consider taking a joined-up approach to sharing VCSE supplier networks** and engaging VCSE suppliers collectively, to broaden existing VCSE suppliers' contact with government and reduce burden in organising and delivering such an event.
- ▶ VCSEs expressed ongoing system-level barriers to going on bid for, and win, contracts. These included the complexity of the bidding process and the inability to easily navigate tender portals. They suggested **bid requirements should be simplified and made less burdensome** to remove barriers to VCSE bid submission, and **tender portals could be made more VCSE-friendly** by including additional filters to help participants easily sort for relevant opportunities. Tender portals should therefore be reviewed for user-friendliness by a range of VCSEs. A single, national portal was also suggested to streamline the advertisement of public sector tenders.
- ▶ The commissioner pathway chapter details how high-level, strategic buy-in was key to facilitating engagement in the CRP activities and commitment to the wider aims of the CRP. A wider recommendation, beyond the CRP, is to consider how best to **ensure that senior level stakeholders' engagement in the VCSE Task Force is sustained**, to ensure cross-government commitment to the objectives of increasing the proportion of government spend on VCSEs.

- ▶ To fully track the desired CRP outcomes, having an **internal way of monitoring government spend on VCSEs** is needed. Participants pointed to the equivalent mechanism for identifying SME suppliers, which should be considered for VCSEs. An objective definition must first be agreed across government departments.

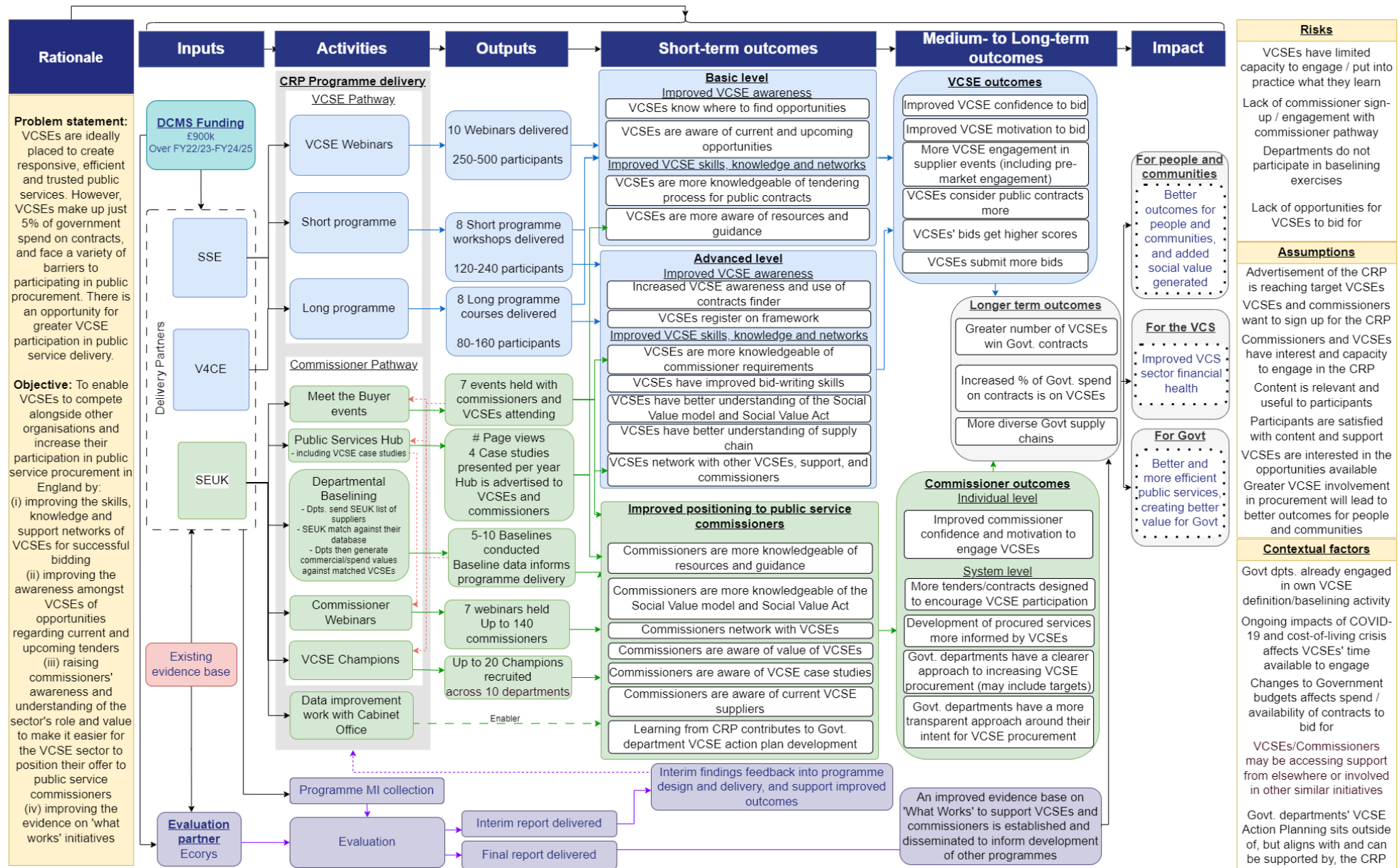
8.3.4 Recommendations for future evaluation

- ▶ Including an incentive for the second follow-up survey positively influenced the response rate. Future evaluations may **consider including incentives for VCSE personnel to respond to surveys** to optimise responses.
- ▶ In lieu of being able to track government spend on VCSEs (which could enable a counterfactual impact design to assess outcomes won by CRP participants or similar, non-participating VCSEs), **alternative approaches to track contract bidding and outcomes are needed since it is likely that more time is needed beyond CRP delivery for the intended outcomes to be fully realised**. In future, requesting to retain contact details of participating organisations and sending follow-up (incentivised) surveys may be an effective way to track VCSE procurement outcomes.

Appendices



9.0 Annex 1



9.1 Theory of Change narrative

9.1.1 Rationale

The VCSE sectors and the social value they create can support the government to deliver smarter, more thoughtful and more effective public services to meet the needs of people and communities. VCSEs have strong links to their local communities, with over 75% delivering services where they are based. Their place-based solutions can better reach those in need and create a greater impact in their communities than traditional public sector services, opening opportunities for social connection at a local level, improving wellbeing. VCSEs also generate economic impacts, making the economy more innovative, resilient, productive and contributing to growth.⁵³

VCSEs are therefore ideally placed to create responsive, efficient and trusted public services. However, VCSEs make up just 5% of government spend on contracts and face a variety of barriers to participating in public procurement.⁵⁴ This presents an opportunity for greater VCSE participation in public service delivery.

The CRP aims to enable VCSEs to compete alongside other organisations and increase their participation in public service procurement in England. To achieve this, there are four key objectives:

- ▶ Improving the skills, knowledge and support networks of VCSEs for successful bidding.
- ▶ Improving the awareness amongst VCSEs of opportunities regarding current and upcoming tenders.
- ▶ Raising Central Government commissioners' awareness and understanding of the sector's role and value to make it easier for the VCSE sector to position their offer to public service commissioners.
- ▶ Improving the evidence on 'what works' initiatives.

9.1.2 Inputs

The CRP is a £900k programme, funded over three years (2022-2025), by DCMS' Civil Society and Youth Directorate. The programme will be delivered by three delivery partners: School for Social Entrepreneurs (SSE) and Voice4Change England (VC4E) will deliver activity for VCSEs, and Social Enterprise UK (SEUK) will deliver activity for commissioners.

Ecorys were commissioned to evaluate the programme from July 2023 – March 2025.

It is anticipated that both delivery partners and Ecorys will draw on the existing evidence base to deliver their activities and outputs. For delivery partners, it is expected that the evidence base will inform the design and delivery of their activities. The evaluation design will be informed by learning from previous contract readiness programme evaluations, and the evaluation will build on existing evidence in reporting.

⁵³ Perspective Economics. (August 2022). [The role of Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise \(VCSE\) organisations in public procurement](#). DCMS.

⁵⁴ FINAL DCMS Grant Annex 1 – Project Description_VCSE Contract Readiness Programme _v5 citing: Tussell Trust. (2021). [UK Public Procurement through VCSEs 2016-2020](#), DCMS; Perspective Economics. (August 2022). [The role of Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise \(VCSE\) organisations in public procurement](#). DCMS.

9.1.3 Activities

Programme activities are split into complementary packages: the VCSE pathway, the commissioner pathway, and monitoring and evaluation activities.

The VCSE pathway is the primary aspect of the programme, made up of three activities: VCSE Webinars, the VCSE short programme, and the VCSE long programme. The commissioner pathway is made up of three main activities: commissioner webinars ('Demystifying the Sector'), VCSE champions programme, and Meet the Buyer events. These main activities are underpinned by three complementary activities: the Public Services Hub which is an online website that will feature VCSE case studies (accessible to both participating and non-participating VCSEs and commissioners); and departmental baselining which enables Central Government departments to benchmark their overall VCSE contract spend.

A separate activity, which is funded through CRP but does not sit directly within either pathway, is data improvement work with the Cabinet Office, which aims to ensure VCSEs are effectively flagged within supplier databases. Whilst the data improvement work is funded as part of the CRP, it is not intended to lead explicitly to the outcomes and impacts articulated in the programme's Theory of Change – instead it is viewed as an activity that will facilitate and enable some of the CRP's expected outcomes and impacts.

The delivery partners will also be responsible for collecting programme MI, to feed into ongoing monitoring of the CRP, as well as the evaluation.

9.1.4 Outputs

The activities are expected to produce the following outputs:

► VCSE Pathway:

- ▷ VCSE Webinars: 10 delivered to 250-500 participants
- ▷ Short programme: 8 workshops delivered to 120-240 participants
- ▷ Long programme: 8 Long programme courses delivered to 80-160 participants

► Commissioner Pathway

- ▷ Commissioner webinars: 7 webinars delivered to up to 140 commissioners
- ▷ VCSE Champions: Up to 20 champions recruited across 10 Government departments (across two cohorts – six in cohort 1: DCMS, DLUHC, CCS, MoJ, DHSC and BEIS; and four in cohort 2: DWP, DfE, DfT and Defra)
- ▷ Meet the Buyer events: 7 events held with commissioners and VCSEs attending
- ▷ Departmental baselining: 5-10 Central Government departmental baselines conducted. The findings will inform programme delivery (particularly the Meet the Buyer events, Public Services Hub, and VCSE Champions activities).
- ▷ Public Service Hub: The hub will be used by commissioners and VCSEs – reflected in the number of page views. Four case studies will be presented on the Hub per year. These case studies will aim to support the business case for contracting VCSEs, including the potential for cost-saving, innovation, social value, improved quality, and added value. These case studies will also be used as examples in the commissioner training webinars.

Specific outputs from the evaluation include an interim slide deck delivered in November 2023. It is anticipated that, through a learning workshop held in December 2023, interim findings will help inform the development of the programme activities for the second year of delivery. A final report will be delivered at the end of the programme, providing summative findings which will also be shared through a final presentation.

9.1.5 Short-term outcomes

9.1.5.1 VCSE Pathway

Reflecting the varying intensity of engagement in the CRP for different VCSEs, the short-term outcomes expected from the VCSE pathway are split between ‘basic level’ outcomes (anticipated from the VCSE webinars), and ‘advanced level’ outcomes (from the short and long programmes).

Webinars are aimed at VCSEs with little or no experience in tendering. By providing an overview of public sector procurement processes, signposting to available support and resources, and explaining how to source public sector opportunities, webinars are intended to facilitate **improved VCSE awareness** (in terms of where to find both current and upcoming opportunities) as well as **develop knowledge** of the tendering process and what resources and guidance is available.

The short and long programmes target VCSEs with existing understanding of public procurement (short course) and experience of bidding for government contracts (long course). These programmes intend to lead to more ‘advanced outcomes’ for VCSEs by covering the same content as the webinars, but additionally covering business strategy and development, opportunity mapping, bid-writing and optimising communication strategies (particularly around social value). This is expected to lead to **increased VCSE awareness** (and use of, contracts finder and registering on framework(s)) as well as **being more knowledgeable** of commissioner requirements; improved bid-writing skills; better understanding of the Social Value model and Social Value Act (specifically following the central government framework for social value). The short and long programmes, along with the Meet the Buyer events, also offer the opportunity to speak directly to commissioners (more in-depth on the long course) to result in better VCSE understanding of commissioner requirements.

Several activities in the commissioner pathway also contribute to VCSE outcomes. The public services hub intends to contribute to VCSEs being more aware of resources and guidance as the site will be available to both (participating and non-participating) commissioners and VCSEs and includes resources for charities and social enterprises. The Meet the Buyer events will also enable VCSEs to network with other VCSEs, CRP delivery partners, and commissioners.

9.1.5.2 Commissioner Pathway

The departmental baselining activities intend to lead to commissioners **being more aware of their existing VCSE suppliers** by helping departments understand their spend with VCSEs and how they can do more. This will be supported by the data improvement work with the Cabinet Office which may support departments to be more aware of their existing VCSE supply chain by providing clear mechanisms for monitoring their VCSE spend. The learning from these activities is expected to **contribute to departmental action planning** (for example through the development of targets, and monitoring of departmental spend and engagement with VCSEs).

It is intended that commissioners become **more knowledgeable of resources and guidance** through the Public Services Hub, which includes resources and guidance for commissioners. The Hub will also host a series of case studies demonstrating the value and business case for contracting VCSEs which, through advertisement of the Hub to commissioners, it is intended that commissioners **become aware of the case studies** and, through reading them, have **increased awareness of the value of VCSEs**.

The Meet the Buyer events are expected to lead to **commissioners networking with VCSEs, having increased awareness of VCSEs' value and knowledge of existing VCSE suppliers**, through hosting events where both commissioners and VCSEs are invited to engage with each other. This will be enabled by the departmental baselining informing the matchmaking of commissioners and VCSEs invited to each event.

By engaging commissioners in training around the value of VCSEs in public procurement and the Social Value model/Act, the 'Demystifying the Sector' webinars and the VCSE Champions scheme intend to increase **commissioners' knowledge of the Social Value model and Act, increase commissioners' awareness of VCSEs value, and take learning back to inform their departmental development of VCSE action plans**.

9.1.6 Medium-to-long-term outcomes

Several of the medium-to-long-term outcomes could apply to the participating VCSEs and the participating commissioners/engaged government departments. However, there may also be wider outcomes (and impacts) seen at the system level, affecting non-participating VCSEs and non-participating commissions/government departments.

9.1.6.1 VCSE outcomes

Through VCSEs gaining an improved awareness of sourcing public procurement opportunities and improved skills, knowledge and networks, it is expected that **VCSEs will have improved confidence and motivation to bid, will consider public contract opportunities more, and submit more bids**. The extent to which the CRP expects to achieve these outcomes will be influenced by VCSEs' starting points and size. For example, a small VCSE that has never bid for public contracts may already be highly motivated but lack awareness and/or confidence. Whereas a large VCSE that may have previously bid and lost out on a public contract may be highly aware of opportunities and confident, but less motivated to bid due to negative prior experiences; for these VCSEs, increased motivation or internal consideration of bidding would be key outcomes. VCSE motivation to bid may also be driven by a more positive interpretation of Govt. opportunities and thus increased desire to bid for them. It is also intended that **VCSEs will engage in more supplier events** (e.g. pre-market engagement events), through increased awareness of them and increased commissioner motivation to engage with VCSEs (see below). It is expected that **VCSEs' bids will also achieve higher scores**, reflecting that VCSEs are more aware of and have better understanding of requirements and processes and are therefore better at meeting commissioner requirements, and that commissioner requirements are better aligned to VCSEs' capabilities/offer (see below).

9.1.6.2 Commissioner outcomes

Through commissioners becoming more aware of the value VCSEs bring and the Social Value model, the resources and guidance to support them, being better connected to VCSEs, and recognising the need to increase public spend on VCSEs (and formalising this in VCSE Action Plans outside of the CRP), it is expected that **participating commissioners will have improved confidence and motivation to engage VCSEs**. It is also anticipated this will result in **more tenders being designed to encourage VCSE participation; the development of procured services being more informed by VCSEs; and Government departments having a clearer and more transparent approach** to increasing VCSE procurement. This may include performance management against targets (or other actions outlined in their VCSE action plans). It is anticipated that these outcomes will also contribute to **VCSEs achieving higher scores on bids**, through commissioner requirements (as outlined in tenders) becoming better aligned to VCSE capabilities/offer.

9.1.7 Evaluation outcomes

It is expected that the final CRP evaluation report will **add to the evidence base on 'What Works' to support VCSEs and commissioners to increase VCSE participation in public sector procurement**. Future programmes could be informed by the dissemination of this evidence to develop more effective programmes, contributing to outcomes (relating to increased commissioner contract spend on VCSEs and VCSE participation) in the future. There is a specific desire to build the evidence base around how programmes such as the CRP meet the needs of black and minoritized communities, to inform future programming.

9.1.8 Longer term-outcomes leading to impacts

In combination, the VCSE, commissioner and evaluation medium-term outcomes outlined above are expected to lead to three key longer-term outcomes: **a greater number of VCSEs win Government contracts**; **an increased proportion of Government spend on contracts goes to VCSEs**; which in turn leads to **Government supply chains increasing in diversity**.

The focus of the CRP is on central government contracting, where DCMS has the strongest relationships and thus potential level of influence through the commissioner pathway activities. However, the programme could also strengthen VCSE participation in local government procurement. This is because many of the principles shared - and skills developed - through the VCSE pathway activities could apply across both central and local government, and much of the spend for VCSEs sits at the local government level.⁵⁵

9.1.9 Impacts

The broader impacts that the programme seeks to contribute to are expected for people and communities, for the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS), and for the Government. Through contracting more VCSEs and designing more programmes with input from the VCSEs that know the target communities best, it is intended that programme design and delivery will improve, resulting in **better outcomes for people and communities, at a high level**. It is also expected that contracting VCSEs results in increased social value being generated, positively impacting people and communities. The expected impact for the VCS is that the sector will have **improved financial health**, for example through having greater level or stability of income,⁵⁶ from Central Government contracts, supporting the diversification of VCSEs' income streams, and/or building their credibility.⁵⁷ The expected impact for Government is that **better and more efficient public services are procured and delivered**, creating better value for Government through efficiencies and greater social value being achieved through the spend.

9.1.10 Risks, assumptions and contextual factors

9.1.10.1 Risks

There are several key risks that may affect the CRP's activities, outputs, outcomes and impacts. Firstly, VCSEs may have limited capacity to engage in the programme (despite, in some cases, registering) or to put what they have learnt into practice. Second, there is a risk of a lack of commissioner sign-up or engagement with the CRP activities, which would limit the reach and effectiveness of the commissioner pathway in contributing to greater commissioner awareness and knowledge of the value of VCSEs in public sector procurement. In particular, a lack of engagement of Central Government departments in the baselining activities may present challenges for

⁵⁵ DCMS. 2022. [The role of Voluntary, Community, and Social Enterprise \(VCSE\) organisations in public procurement](#).

⁵⁶ Thomson, W. and Smith, J. (June 2022). [Scoping a new approach to social value through social investment: Close out report from Phase 3 of the Futurebuilders Learning Project](#). Social Investment Business.

⁵⁷ Ecorys. (March 2023). [Growth Fund Financial Resilience Research: Rapid Evidence Assessment](#). The National Lottery Community Fund.

informing – and rolling out - the commissioner pathway in the timeframes intended. Finally, a lack of, or limited, contract opportunities for VCSEs could affect the longer-term outcomes of VCSEs bidding for, and winning, more contracts. .

9.1.10.2 Assumptions

For the programme to progress as intended and outlined in the ToC, the following assumptions must hold:

- ▶ advertisement of the CRP must reach the target VCSEs (so that those that would most benefit from the CRP have the opportunity to engage in it);
- ▶ commissioners and VCSEs must have interest and capacity to engage in the programme (so that the target numbers are reached);
- ▶ the content must be useful and relevant to participants (in order for outcomes to be achieved);
- ▶ participants must be satisfied with the content and support (in order for engagement to be sustained and to want to put learning into practice);
- ▶ there must be demand and desire from VCSEs and commissioners to sign-up to the CRP;; and
- ▶ VCSEs must be interested in the public sector contract opportunities (at the contract budget envelope available) that are available for them to bid for.

Additionally, there is an assumption that programme outcomes relating to increased VCSE involvement in public procurement (a greater number of VCSEs win Government contracts; an increased proportion of Government spend is on VCSEs; and more diverse Government supply chains) do indeed lead to the anticipated impact of better outcomes being generated for people and communities. Whilst not within the scope of this evaluation, this is a critical policy issue, evidence need and question for DCMS.⁵⁸

9.1.11 Contextual factors

Wider contextual factors that may influence the CRP's outputs, outcomes or impacts include: Government departments already being engaged in defining and baselining their VCSE spend (which may influence how they engage with the CRP baselining activity, and how credible they perceive it to be); the ongoing impacts of COVID-19 and the cost-of-living crisis which is known to affect the amount of time VCSEs have available to engage in business development activities⁵⁹; changes to Government budgets which influences the availability of contracts being tendered; and what is or is not included in Government Departments' VCSE Action Plans developed in parallel to the CRP (which may be supported by the programme activities).

⁵⁸ DCMS. (2023). [DCMS areas of research interest](#).

⁵⁹ See: Charity Commission. (2021). [What new research tells us about the impact of COVID-19 on charities](#).

10.0 Annex 2

Figure 24 VCSE pathway participants self-reported baseline contract readiness scores

VCSE Pathway activity	Self-reported baseline contract readiness score						
	None	Low	Medium	High	Very high	Don't know	Total (base size) ⁶⁰
Knowledge and skills around bidding for public sector contracts (asked of all)							
Webinar	189	306	165	12	2	56	730
Short course	9	28	18	2	0	2	59
Long course	0	17	50	10	1	0	78
Awareness of current and upcoming public sector tenders (asked of all)							
Webinar	166	290	158	23	4	89	730
Short course	10	25	16	3	1	4	59
Long course	0	18	44	14	2	0	78
Networks with commissioners (asked of short and long course applicants)							
Short course	10	26	11	5	0	4	56
Long course	0	27	35	12	3	0	77
Networks with other suppliers (asked of short and long course applicants)							
Short course	10	16	22	5	0	3	56
Long course	0	24	39	14	1	0	78
Networks with support and infrastructure organisations (asked of long course applicants only)							

⁶⁰ Long course participants' baseline contract readiness scores were collected across 2 documents: application form and pre-course survey. Not all participants completed the pre-course survey, resulting in a base size lesser than the total number of attendees. Likewise when participants were moved from the course they enrolled in to a different course, they were not required to submit a second application form and therefore a small number of baseline contract readiness scores for short and long courses were missing.

Long course	0	38	47	21	3	3	112
Networks with private sector providers (asked of long course applicants only)							
Long course	0	80	25	5	1	1	112
Knowledge of the social value act and social value model (asked of long course applicants only)							
Long course	0	58	40	10	4	0	112
Knowledge of what commissioners are looking for (asked of long course applicants only)							
Long course	0	24	71	16	1	0	112
Bid-writing skills and experience (asked of long course applicants only)							
Long course	0	13	57	29	12	1	112

Source: VCSE pathway MI data received October 2024 including application form data and, for long course baseline readiness scores, pre-participation surveys administered by SSE. Base=1925.

11.0 Annex 3

11.1 Baseline VCSE participant characteristics

Table 9 Baseline characteristics of VCSE participants

Group	Webinar		Short course		Long course		All groups	
Category	Count	Percent (%)	Count	Percent (%)	Count	Percent (%)	Count	Percent (%)
Awareness of current and upcoming public sector tenders								
None	147	24.9%	19	14.7%	4	8.2%	170	22.1%
Low	236	40.0%	62	48.1%	13	26.5%	311	40.5%
Medium	111	18.8%	36	27.9%	25	51.0%	172	22.4%
High	15	2.5%	4	3.1%	4	8.2%	23	3.0%
Very High	1	0.2%	2	1.6%			3	0.4%
Don't know	80	13.6%	6	4.7%	3	6.1%	89	11.6%
Knowledge and skills around bidding for public sector contracts								
None	167	28.3%	23	17.8%	5	10.2%	195	25.4%
Low	245	41.5%	72	55.8%	14	28.6%	331	43.1%
Medium	121	20.5%	29	22.5%	24	49.0%	174	22.7%
High	5	0.8%	3	2.3%	4	8.2%	12	1.6%
Very high	1	0.2%					1	0.1%
Don't know	51	8.6%	2	1.6%	2	4.1%	55	7.2%
Sector								
Health & Social Care	214	36.1%	56	39.2%	39	33.9%	309	36.3%
Unemployment	61	10.3%	21	14.7%	11	9.6%	93	10.9%
Disability	33	5.6%	7	4.9%	13	11.3%	53	6.2%
Domestic and/or Sexual Abuse	20	3.4%	7	4.9%	12	10.4%	39	4.6%
Homelessness	13	2.2%	6	4.2%	3	2.6%	22	2.6%
Environment	1	0.2%					1	0.1%
Other	251	42.3%	46	32.2%	37	32.2%	334	39.2%
Size								
Micro to small (£0-100k)	333	56.3%	24	16.8%			357	42.0%
Medium (£100k-1m)	179	30.2%	91	63.6%	63	54.8%	333	39.2%
Large (£1m-10m)	67	11.3%	26	18.2%	52	45.2%	145	17.1%
Major (>£10m)	13	2.2%	2	1.4%			15	1.8%
Stage								
Getting set up, but not yet running	103	17.4%	7	4.9%	1	0.9%	111	13.0%
Set up and running (<2yr)	105	17.7%	16	11.2%	1	0.9%	122	14.3%
Running for over 2 years	373	62.9%	34	23.8%	26	22.6%	433	50.9%
Running for 2 to 4 years			8	5.6%	6	5.2%	14	1.6%
Running for 5-10 years	1	0.2%	30	21.0%	16	13.9%	47	5.5%
Running for over 10 years	2	0.3%	48	33.6%	65	56.5%	115	13.5%

Other	9	1.5%					9	1.1%
Total								
Total	593	69.6%	143	16.8%	115	13.5%	851	100.0%

Source: MI application data. Base=898.

11.2 Survey sample characteristics

Table 10 6-month follow-up survey sample baseline characteristics

Characteristic	Category	Count
		69
Group	Webinar	27
	Short course	24
	Long course	18
Sector	Health & Social Care	20
	Unemployment	12
	Disability	7
	Domestic and/or Sexual Abuse	2
	Other	26
Size	Micro to small (£0-100k)	18
	Medium (£100k-1m)	30
	Large (£1m-10m)	18
	Major (>£10m)	1
Stage	Getting set up, but not yet running	10
	Set up and running (<2yr)	5
	Running for over 2 years	31
	Running for 5-10 years	4
	Running for over 10 years	17

Source: 6-month follow-up survey sample matched with VCSE pathway MI data received October 2024 including application form data and, for long course baseline readiness scores, pre-participation surveys administered by SSE. Base=69.

Table 11 End-of-programme survey sample baseline characteristics

Characteristic	Category	Count	Percent (%)
N		148 ⁶¹	
Group	Webinar	80	57.1%
	Short course	30	21.4%
	Long course	30	21.4%
Sector	Health & Social Care	42	28.2%
	Unemployment	17	11.4%
	Disability	13	8.7%
	Domestic and/or Sexual Abuse	9	6.0%
	Homelessness	3	2.0%
	Other	65	43.6%
Size	Micro to small (£0-100k)	60	40.3%
	Medium (£100k-1m)	65	43.6%
	Large (£1m-10m)	24	16.1%
	Getting set up, but not yet running	9	6.0%
	Set up and running (<2yr)	29	19.5%
	Running for over 2 years	73	49.0%
	Running for 2 to 4 years	3	2.0%
	Running for 5-10 years	10	6.7%
	Running for over 10 years	23	15.4%
	Other	2	1.3%

Source: End-of-programme follow-up survey sample matched with VCSE pathway MI data received October 2024 including application form data and, for long course baseline readiness scores, pre-participation surveys administered by SSE. Base=148.

Table 12 Non-participant survey sample characteristics

Characteristic	Course enrolled in, but not attended	Count
Group	Webinar	66
	Short course	3
	Long course	1
	Unknown	1

Source: non-participant survey sample matched with VCSE pathway MI data received October 2024 including application form data. Base=71.

11.3 6-month outcomes analysis sample

Analysis of outcomes achieved approximately 6-months post-participation in the CRP included all responses to the 6-month follow-up survey (submitted between 5-7 months after survey respondents first took part in the CRP). Additional responses from the end-of-programme survey were included in the analysis of repeat measures outcomes questions, where the survey respondent submitted their response 5-7 months after first taking part in

⁶¹ The total count is less than the total end-of-programme sample size due to the characteristics information being drawn from the application data. The table therefore reports only on EOP survey respondents the research team were able to match to application data.

the CRP. These participants were not invited to the 6-month follow-up survey due to the 6th month being the same month as the administration of the end-of-programme survey.

Table 13 presents the breakdown of responses drawn from the 6-month survey and the end-of-programme survey in total and by sub-group.

Table 13 6-month outcomes analysis sample breakdown

Sub-group	Webinar	Short course	Long course	Total
6-month follow-up survey	27	24	18	69
End-of-programme survey	16	5	1	22
Total (base size)	43	29	19	91

12.0 Annex 4

Table 14 shows the number of bids submitted by VCSE pathway survey respondents (n=182 base size).

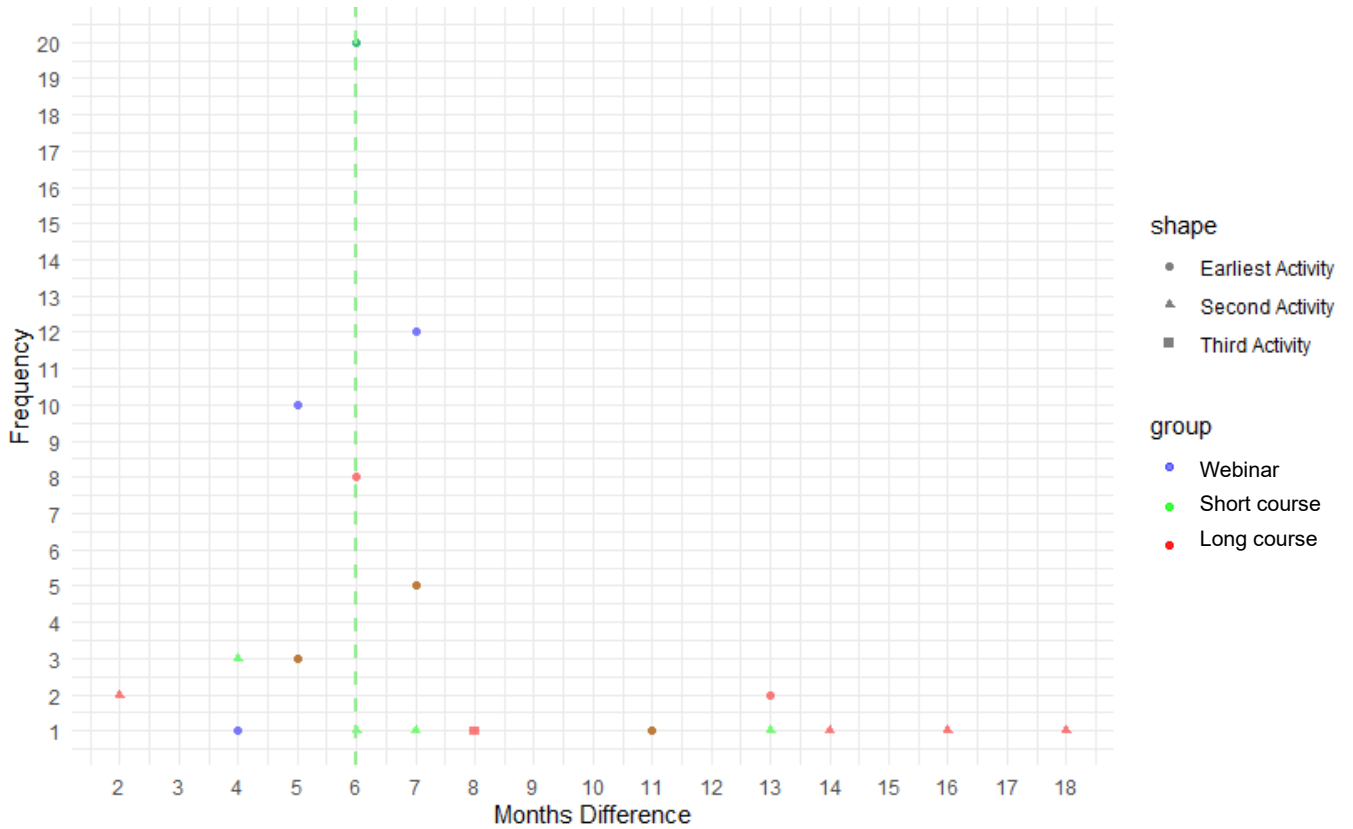
The equivalent questions were also asked of non-participating VCSEs (n=71 base size) and are presented in the bottom row. This demonstrates the number of bids submitted and won by those who did not take part in the CRP. It is not possible to directly compare the results for non-participants with participants due to the small sample size, and the skew of the non-participant survey sample compared to the participant survey sample and overall cohort of VCSE pathway participants (see [11.0 Annex](#) for a breakdown of the survey samples).

Table 14 Contract bidding and winning by participants and non-participants

Group	How many bids were submitted?	How many bids were successful?	What is the total value of the contracts won?	How much is NOT attributable to the CRP?	How many of those successful bids are attributable to the CRP?	Average 'won' value
Webinar	79	24	£813,500	£422,005 (avg. £28,133.67 per non-attributable win)	9	£43,499.44
Short course	39	7	£167,000	£36,000 (avg. £12,000 per non-attributable win)	4	£32,750.00
Long course	40	22	£13,014,000	£11,470,000 (avg. £674,705.88 per non-attributable win)	5	£308,800.00
Total (base size)	158	53	£13,994,500	£11,928,005	18	£114,805.28
Non-participants	17 (8 respondents)	3	£45,000	£45,001 (avg £15,000 per non-attributable win)	0	£15,000

Sources: End-of-programme survey responses (n=140), combined with 6-month survey response where an end-of-programme survey response was not later submitted (n=42). Base=182.

Non-participant survey. Base=71.



14.0 Annex 6

Table 15 Outcomes reported by survey participants at 6-months and outcomes reported by survey participants beyond 6-months

Timepoint outcomes reported	Group	Webinar	Short course	Long course	All
Awareness of current and upcoming public sector contracts					
6 months	No change / it made no difference	7	2	4	13
	Improved / increased a little	26	16	13	55
	Improved / increased a lot	7	8	2	17
	Don't know / prefer not to say	1	2	0	3
	Total	41	28	19	88
>6 months	No change / it made no difference	3	3	4	10
	Improved / increased a little	30	9	7	46
	Improved / increased a lot	11	5	6	22
	Don't know / prefer not to say	2	0	0	2
	Total	46	17	17	80
Knowledge and skills around bidding for public sector contracts					
6 months	No change / it made no difference	5	0	3	8
	Improved / increased a little	23	18	8	49
	Improved / increased a lot	12	10	8	30
	Don't know / prefer not to say	1	0	0	1
	Total	41	28	19	88
>6 months	No change / it made no difference	4	2	2	8
	Improved / increased a little	26	8	6	40
	Improved / increased a lot	14	7	9	30
	Don't know / prefer not to say	2	0	0	2
	Total	46	17	17	80
Networks with other suppliers					
6 months	No change / it made no difference	n/a	5	5	10
	Improved / increased a little	n/a	9	10	19
	Improved / increased a lot	n/a	4	3	7
	Don't know / prefer not to say	n/a	1	0	1
	Total	n/a	19	18	37
>6 months	No change / it made no difference	n/a	6	4	10
	Improved / increased a little	n/a	4	8	12
	Improved / increased a lot	n/a	2	3	5
	Don't know / prefer not to say	n/a	0	2	2
	Total	n/a	12	17	29
Networks with commissioners					
6 months	No change / it made no difference	n/a	9	9	18
	Improved / increased a little	n/a	7	7	14
	Improved / increased a lot	n/a	2	1	3
	Don't know / prefer not to say	n/a	1	1	2
	Total	n/a	19	18	37

>6 months	No change / it made no difference	n/a	6	8	14
	Improved / increased a little	n/a	5	5	10
	Improved / increased a lot	n/a	1	3	4
	Don't know / prefer not to say	n/a	0	1	1
	Total	n/a	12	17	29
Networks with support and infrastructure organisations					
6 months	No change / it made no difference	n/a	n/a	7	7
	Improved / increased a little	n/a	n/a	8	8
	Improved / increased a lot	n/a	n/a	2	2
	Don't know / prefer not to say	n/a	n/a	1	1
	Total	n/a	n/a	18	18
>6 months	No change / it made no difference	n/a	n/a	4	4
	Improved / increased a little	n/a	n/a	8	8
	Improved / increased a lot	n/a	n/a	1	1
	Don't know / prefer not to say	n/a	n/a	2	2
	Total	n/a	n/a	15	15
Knowledge of the Social Value Act and social value model					
6 months	No change / it made no difference	n/a	1	4	5
	Improved / increased a little	n/a	8	6	14
	Improved / increased a lot	n/a	9	8	17
	Don't know / prefer not to say	n/a	0	0	0
	Total	n/a	18	18	36
>6 months	No change / it made no difference	n/a	5	1	6
	Improved / increased a little	n/a	4	4	8
	Improved / increased a lot	n/a	1	10	11
	Don't know / prefer not to say	n/a	10	15	0
	Total	n/a	5	1	25
Bid writing-skills and experience					
6 months	No change / it made no difference	n/a	n/a	2	2
	Improved / increased a little	n/a	n/a	11	11
	Improved / increased a lot	n/a	n/a	5	5
	Don't know / prefer not to say	n/a	n/a	0	0
	Total	n/a	n/a	18	18
>6 months	No change / it made no difference	n/a	n/a	1	1
	Improved / increased a little	n/a	n/a	7	7
	Improved / increased a lot	n/a	n/a	5	5
	Don't know / prefer not to say	n/a	n/a	2	2
	Total	n/a	n/a	15	15
Awareness of resources and guidance around public contracting					
6 months	No change / it made no difference	5	n/a	n/a	5
	Improved / increased a little	20	n/a	n/a	20
	Improved / increased a lot	7	n/a	n/a	7
	Don't know / prefer not to say	2	n/a	n/a	2
	Total	34	n/a	n/a	34
>6 months	No change / it made no difference	2	n/a	n/a	2
	Improved / increased a little	20	n/a	n/a	20

	Improved / increased a lot	14	n/a	n/a	14
	Don't know / prefer not to say	2	n/a	n/a	2
	Total	38	n/a	n/a	38
Awareness of where to find public sector opportunities					
6 months	No change / it made no difference	7	n/a	n/a	7
	Improved / increased a little	20	n/a	n/a	20
	Improved / increased a lot	6	n/a	n/a	6
	Don't know / prefer not to say	1	n/a	n/a	1
	Total	34	n/a	n/a	34
>6 months	No change / it made no difference	1	n/a	n/a	1
	Improved / increased a little	25	n/a	n/a	25
	Improved / increased a lot	11	n/a	n/a	11
	Don't know / prefer not to say	1	n/a	n/a	1
	Total	38	n/a	n/a	38
Knowledge of what commissioners are looking for					
6 months	No change / it made no difference	n/a	0	2	2
	Improved / increased a little	n/a	11	6	17
	Improved / increased a lot	n/a	7	7	14
	Don't know / prefer not to say	n/a	0	0	0
	Total	n/a	18	15	33
>6 months	No change / it made no difference	n/a	2	1	3
	Improved / increased a little	n/a	5	7	12
	Improved / increased a lot	n/a	3	7	10
	Don't know / prefer not to say	n/a	0	0	0
	Total	n/a	10	15	25
Understanding of supply chain and consortia building					
6 months	No change / it made no difference	n/a	5	5	10
	Improved / increased a little	n/a	8	10	18
	Improved / increased a lot	n/a	5	0	5
	Don't know / prefer not to say	n/a	0	0	0
	Total	n/a	18	15	33
>6 months	No change / it made no difference	n/a	5	1	6
	Improved / increased a little	n/a	5	10	15
	Improved / increased a lot	n/a	0	2	2
	Don't know / prefer not to say	n/a	0	2	2
	Total	n/a	10	15	25
Experience of using Contracts Finder and Find a Tender					
6 months	I am not aware of Contracts Finder or Find a Tender	2	1	0	3
	No change / it made no difference	16	7	5	28
	Improved / increased a little	15	10	6	31
	Improved / increased a lot	6	8	7	21
	Don't know / prefer not to say	2	1	0	3
	Total	41	27	18	86
>6 months	I am not aware of Contracts Finder or Find a Tender	2	1	0	3
	No change / it made no difference	18	2	2	22

	Improved / increased a little	19	6	5	30
	Improved / increased a lot	6	6	7	19
	Don't know / prefer not to say	0		1	1
	Total	45	15	15	75
Registration on frameworks					
6 months	Yes	n/a	6	4	10
	No	n/a	11	12	23
	Don't know	n/a	2	2	4
	Total	n/a	19	18	37
>6 months	Yes	n/a	6	6	12
	No	n/a	6	10	16
	Don't know	n/a	0	1	1
	Total	n/a	12	17	29

Source: 6-month and end-of-programme VCSE follow-up surveys. Base size included in Table.