



RIGHT SUPPORT RIGHT TIME

Strategy 2026-2030

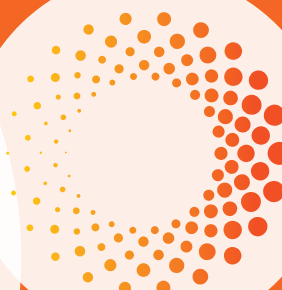


Strengthening charities and leaders.
Transforming lives and communities.



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Why this plan, why now?

Across the UK, small charities play a vital role in responding to need, strengthening communities and improving people's lives, often with limited resources, small teams and stretched leadership capacity.

Throughout this strategy, we use the term small charities to describe our primary focus, while recognising that charities, not-for-profit organisations and voluntary groups all contribute to improving lives and communities.

The context in which these organisations operate is becoming more complex and more pressured. Funding volatility, rising demand, workforce strain, leadership turnover, digital change, increasing regulatory expectations and shifting public policy priorities are now part of everyday reality.

At the same time, the support available to these organisations has become more fragmented. Local infrastructure is uneven, national provision is stretched, and while information and light-touch guidance may be available, deeper support that helps organisations apply advice, make decisions and embed change is much harder to access, particularly where it involves cost.

The rapid development of AI is accelerating this shift. Information, templates and advice are becoming more abundant and easier to access, but this does not remove the need for human support. For smaller charities and community organisations, the challenge is often not simply finding trusted information, but knowing what applies, what matters most, how to make good decisions, and how to embed change within teams, boards and organisations.

This is where we have a distinctive role. We bring together skilled volunteers and small charities in a relational way to strengthen organisations, develop leaders and deliver lasting impact. We mobilise high-quality expertise and apply it in context, through practical support that builds confidence, capability and connection. Our volunteers bring significant experience and credibility, working alongside charity leaders in ways that are trusted, high-quality and often transformational.

Demand for this kind of support continues to grow, faster than our current capacity to deliver it. As a relatively small organisation ourselves with a high-quality, resource-intensive model, we cannot meet all need by simply doing more of the same. This creates a clear imperative to focus our efforts where they can make the greatest difference: with smaller organisations that need our support most, and on the issues where practical expertise, relationships and human judgement can have the greatest impact.

Protecting the human, relational quality at the heart of our impact.

If we are to support significantly more organisations, we must evolve how our support is designed, accessed and delivered, while protecting the human, relational quality at the heart of our impact. Charity leaders value the support we provide, but increasingly want a broader range of options that respond to different needs and circumstances. The growth of our mentoring and peer support reflects this shift. In response we will strengthen our organisational capacity and develop new approaches that extend our reach without diluting quality. To do this well, we must also grow in ways that strengthen both capability and inclusion, broadening the experience, skills, backgrounds and perspectives represented across our staff team, volunteer network and Board of Trustees. This will keep us closely connected to the charities we serve and responsive to their changing development needs.

This strategy sets out how we will achieve greater impact at scale. It builds on our strengths while sharpening our focus, positioning us to play a more intentional role within the wider support ecosystem, and championing the value of skills-based volunteering in delivering meaningful, lasting change.



Our ambition and role



We have come to play a distinct role within the charity support ecosystem. By connecting charities with skilled volunteers who bring practical expertise, insight and judgement, we strengthen organisations and develop leaders at scale.

We focus our work where practical, relational support adds the greatest value. We know that charities are more resilient and achieve greater impact when their leaders have the confidence and skills to succeed. We work collaboratively with others to strengthen pathways, avoid duplication and help charities access the support they need more effectively.

At the heart of Cranfield Trust is a commitment to ensuring that small charities can access vital support, regardless of their ability to pay. The right support at the right time can help leaders and organisations survive, adapt and thrive, often even in the most challenging circumstances. For small charities, this means maintaining, and where possible expanding, free access to our support, so that cost is not a barrier to the specialist skills, expertise and support they need.

Our multiplier effect comes not only from the time and expertise contributed by our volunteers, but from an approach that looks beyond immediate organisational symptoms. Across our work, we invest in the people at the helm while strengthening the foundations of organisations, including strategy, governance, people, finance and succession. This helps charities adapt, sustain vital services and respond more effectively to community needs. By connecting leaders, shaping our support with them and systematically sharing what we learn, we can extend the impact beyond individual organisations and help the wider support system focus on what makes the greatest difference.

We invest in the people at the helm while strengthening the foundations of organisations



By connecting charities with skilled volunteers who bring practical expertise, insight and judgement, we can strengthen organisations and develop leaders at a scale that would not otherwise be possible. We recognise that confident leadership and applied capability are central to resilience and long-term impact.

Learning across our work is equally important: we use the collective insight from individual engagements to continually shape and improve our support, ensuring it responds to the changing needs of small charities and contributes to a stronger support system.

As AI reshapes consulting, knowledge work and access to information, our role will increasingly be to help small charities turn knowledge into confident action. We will embrace technology and AI to strengthen our work, improve efficiency and help us use insight more effectively. Our distinctive value remains human: experienced volunteers applying judgement, understanding context, working through relationships, and helping leaders and teams make confident decisions, manage change in an AI-enabled world.

We will expand our reach, offering a broader mix of support including one-to-many, group-based and shorter, targeted training alongside our core services. We will invest in leaders and volunteers as multipliers of impact, while strengthening the systems and infrastructure that enable quality, consistency and trust. In doing so, we will reach more organisations and use our shared learning to shape a support ecosystem that responds more effectively to the needs of smaller community organisations. We will do so while protecting the human, relational qualities that define Cranfield Trust and make our support effective.

Our vision

Strong, effective charities transforming people's lives and communities.

Our mission

We bring together skilled volunteers and small charities to strengthen organisations, develop leaders and deliver impact that lasts.

Our values

We care and connect

We build trusted, human relationships that support charity leaders with empathy, constructive challenge and practical help.

We deliver impact that lasts

We offer high-quality, appropriate support that creates real, lasting impact for charities and communities.

We learn and lead

We use insight, evidence and expertise to improve practice, strengthen charities and share learning and knowledge across the sector.

We meet the moment

We respond with pace and agility to emerging challenges, providing the right support at the right time.

The value we contribute

We make practical expertise and human judgement available at scale for small charities and their leaders, through appropriate and relational support they could not otherwise afford or easily access, helping them make better decisions, strengthen their organisations and increase their impact.



Strategic outcomes

By 2030 we aim to achieve five headline outcomes

Small charity leaders are confident, capable and resilient, with the judgement, support and connections needed to lead effectively through complexity and change.

Small charities access the support they need at the right time, becoming stronger and more resilient and better able to respond to changing demand.

Learning from charities, leaders and volunteers improves how support for small charities is understood, designed and delivered across the sector.

We create sustained impact and expand access to support through enduring relationships, peer learning, clearer pathways, technology and new approaches to delivery, while maintaining the human, relational quality that underpins our impact.

Cranfield Trust is a resilient, well-resourced and sustainable organisation, with the people, systems and partnerships needed to maximise our long-term impact.

In doing so, we will reach more organisations and use the learning generated across our work to shape a support ecosystem that responds more effectively to the needs of smaller community organisations. As we evolve, we will protect the human, relational qualities that define Cranfield Trust and make our support effective.



Strategic priorities

Priority 1

Leaders as multipliers of impact

We will develop and support a generation of capable small charity leaders to navigate complexity, uncertainty and change with confidence and judgement.

We will:

- Prioritise leaders and those with leadership potential, offering a suite of support to equip them with the skills, knowledge and connections they need to lead effective, sustainable organisations, enabled through high-quality pro bono support.
- Develop a leadership framework and diagnostic, to underpin our work and support leaders to build their skills, behaviours, mindsets and judgement.
- Introduce practical, accessible training, shaped by volunteer expertise, to equip charity leaders with the core skills and knowledge they need to run effective organisations.
- Expand mentoring, peer support and leadership development opportunities, particularly for CEOs and emerging leaders, supported by skilled volunteers.
- Develop a leadership community, connecting those who have benefited from our support to share learning, reflect, build relationships and contribute to future thinking and direction..



What success looks like:

Leaders we support demonstrate increased confidence, judgement and capability in practice, making more effective decisions and navigating complexity with greater resilience.

Leadership support contributes to measurable improvements in organisational confidence, capability and resilience.

Leaders remain actively engaged beyond initial support, contributing to peer learning, insight and the wider Cranfield Trust community.

Leaders act as multipliers of impact, strengthening their organisations and contributing to the effectiveness of others through shared learning and experience





Priority 2

Support where it matters most

We will focus our support where it matters most and make it easier for small charities to access the right help at the right time, with clearer pathways into and through our support.

We will:

- Clarify and broaden the criteria for organisations we support, focusing on small charities that improve people's lives and communities, grounding our offer in the issues that matter most to them, so our support remains relevant, practical and accessible.
- Enable charities to better understand their own needs, using accessible self-assessment and diagnostic tools to guide them to the right support at the right time, while capturing richer insight at greater scale.
- Develop a more joined-up support offer, with our high-impact consultancy work at its heart, while expanding mentoring, peer learning, training, one-to-many support, On Call and online resources, as clear routes to the right help at the right time, matching the needs of charities with the skills, capacity and preferred ways of working of our volunteers.
- Clarify, standardise and package our core offers of support, making routes, value and expected outcomes clearer for charities, funders and partners.
- Continue to strengthen how we measure change in organisational confidence, capability and resilience, evolving our frameworks to understand which organisations benefit most from different types of support.

What success looks like:

More charities access appropriate support, including those who would not otherwise have engaged, with increased reach to organisations serving diverse communities and communities experiencing disadvantage, leading more timely and impactful intervention.

Our support is clearly focused on the issues that matter most to small charities and we are trusted as specialists in these key areas.

Charities move through support in a clear and intentional way, with evidence of progression in confidence, capability and resilience.

A wider range of support options are actively used and valued by charities, increasing reach without reducing quality.

Engagement with Cranfield Trust leads to sustained relationships and repeat engagement.

Our support is demonstrably targeted where it makes the greatest difference, with clear evidence of improved outcomes for the organisations we support.

Priority 3

Insight in action

We will use accumulated insight from our work with charities to strengthen practice and influence understanding of what works, ensuring those who use our support shape our services and that learning informs sector thinking and decisions.

We will:

- Build a consistent, cumulative insight base from across our work, using evidence, learning and accumulated knowledge to become a crucial source of expertise for small charities and their leaders.
- Translate this learning into clear, practical tools and insight that charities, funders and partners can use to improve decisions and support.
- Elevate the voice of our volunteer network as credible experts, enabling them to contribute grounded, experience-led insight to sector conversations.

Contribute to and shape sector dialogue in a timely and targeted way, using our evidence and experience to influence how support for small charities is understood, designed and delivered.



What success looks like:

Cranfield Trust is actively sought out as a timely and credible voice on what small charities need, informing funding, policy and sector practice.

Our insight is clearly evidenced, regularly synthesised, and widely used to shape decisions and approaches to support.

We are a visible, high-profile and trusted voice seen as bringing small charity experience into sector conversations and priorities.

There is clear evidence that our learning and insight translate into how support for small charities and their leaders is designed, funded and delivered both within the Trust and beyond.





Priority 4

High impact volunteers

We will strengthen and evolve our diverse community of skilled volunteers, with clearer pathways for progression, to deliver high-quality support to charities and contribute to shared learning and sector insight.

We will:

- Develop a clear and structured volunteer journey, from entry through to more experienced, flexible and specialist roles, enabling progression, deeper contribution and retention of expertise.
- Invest in high-quality induction, training, standardised approaches and ongoing development, equipping volunteers to deliver consistently effective, practical support.
- Broaden and diversify our volunteer community, establishing a clear baseline and regularly monitoring progress over time. We will expand the range of skills, backgrounds, lived experience and perspectives within our network, and evolve how we recruit, engage, develop and deploy volunteers so our support better reflects the priorities of the charities we serve.
- Create clear pathways into skilled volunteering, including routes for individuals, partners, employer-supported volunteers, making it easier to contribute skills at different stages and levels of experience.
- Enable knowledge exchange, specialism and collective learning, supporting volunteers to share insight, build communities of practice and develop depth of expertise which they can contribute to sector-wide thinking.
- Contribute to building a stronger culture of pro bono support across sectors, including within the charity sector itself.

What success looks like:

Volunteers consistently deliver high-quality, effective support, with clear evidence of impact for the charities they work with.

Volunteers report strong confidence, clarity and progression, and are increasingly engaged in a range of roles beyond single assignments.

We retain and deepen expertise over time, with experienced volunteers contributing to quality, learning and leadership across the network.

Our volunteer community is diverse, well-matched to need, and able to respond effectively to the range and complexity of demand from charities.

We have a clearer understanding of the diversity of our volunteer community, are transparent about gaps and under-representation, and use this insight to continually improve how we recruit, support, retain and deploy volunteers.

Volunteering actively contributes to our insight, learning and sector influence, strengthening our role beyond service delivery.

Trust volunteers find their roles fulfilling and feel they are able to use their skills to make a difference.

Priority 5

Foundations for growth and impact

We will strengthen Cranfield Trust's organisational capacity and resilience, enabling us to invest in growth, innovation and long-term impact.

We will:

- Build a diversified income model to support sustainable growth and investment, investing in fundraising capacity to unlock untapped opportunities and develop new approaches; clarifying and strengthening our offer so we can confidently and consistently develop partnerships; and generating earned income from larger organisations.
- Invest in strengthening our systems, capabilities and infrastructure, including redesigning our website and enhancing digital and AI-enabled tools to improve access to support, enable appropriate self-service, strengthen triage, streamline data gathering and improve how charities and volunteers engage with us.
- Adopt technology and AI ambitiously and responsibly, using it to strengthen access, learning, insight and efficiency, while developing clear principles that protect trust, quality, inclusion and human judgement.
- Build a high-performing organisation that puts people at the heart of how we deliver for charities, creating an inclusive, flexible and connected remote-first workplace where everyone can thrive, feel valued and be proud to work. We will retain, attract and develop a talented and diverse team, strengthen our employment offer over time, and support staff to work effectively across the UK while remaining connected to each other, our mission and the communities we serve.
- Maintain strong financial stewardship, ensuring resources are used effectively to maximise impact and support long-term sustainability. We will manage expenditure carefully, make informed investment decisions aligned to our strategy, and maintain clear financial oversight and accountability from our Board.
- Ensure strong, inclusive and effective governance, adopting recognised standards of good practice, including the Charity Governance Code. We will continue to review and strengthen our governance, invest in Board development and succession planning, and seek to ensure our trustee body reflects a broad range of skills, diversity and lived experience relevant to the communities and charities we serve.

- Evolve our brand and visual identity to support growth, ensuring how we present ourselves reflects our values and future direction, strengthens recognition and reach, helping small charities, volunteers, funders and partners understand our role and contribution more clearly.

What success looks like:

Cranfield Trust has a resilient and diversified income base, providing stable and flexible funding to sustain and grow impact.

Our systems, processes and infrastructure enable efficient, high-quality delivery at greater scale, without compromising the relational nature of our support.

Our website and digital tools provide a clear, accessible and effective route into support, increasing reach, are user-led by design and enable appropriate self-service.

We attract, retain and develop a skilled and diverse team, with a strong, inclusive and values-driven culture that supports performance.

Resources are deployed strategically and effectively, with strong financial stewardship supporting long-term sustainability and impact.

Cranfield Trust has robust, inclusive and effective governance, with a skilled and diverse Board that provides strong oversight, challenge and support for the strategy.





Our theory of change

We have developed our theory of change alongside our strategy to explain the difference we want to make and how we believe our work will help achieve it. Ultimately, our aim is to help charities achieve greater impact for the people and communities they serve.

It looks beyond the support we deliver to the changes we want to see for charity leaders, organisations and the wider system around them. Together with our new approach to monitoring and evaluation, it reflects our commitment to understanding and demonstrating our impact.

We will use it to guide our decisions, measure what changes, learn what works, and adapt and develop our support. It is not a fixed model: we will review it as we learn and as the needs of small charities and the wider sector evolve.

The impact we seek

Our vision is of strong, effective charities transforming people's lives and communities. Our mission is to bring together skilled volunteers and small charities to strengthen organisations, develop leaders and deliver impact that lasts. Our impact statement connects these with the lasting difference we want our work to make:

Small charities and their leaders have the confidence, capability and resilience to deliver lasting impact for the people and communities they serve.

We achieve this by connecting charities with practical expertise, trusted relationships and tailored support, and we help leaders build the confidence, capability and resilience needed to navigate complexity and change.

In turn, this strengthens organisations, enabling them to become more sustainable, effective and better able to achieve their mission.

At the same time, we generate and share learning from our work to improve how support for small charities is understood, designed and delivered across the wider sector.

Underlying assumptions

We have based our Theory of Change on some key assumptions. These are:

- We believe that small charities are better able to achieve their mission when they can access the right support at the right time.
- We believe that strengthening the confidence, capability, resilience and connections of charity leaders is one of the most effective ways to strengthen organisations and improve outcomes for the communities they serve.
- We believe that practical expertise, mentoring, coaching, trusted relationships and peer support help leaders make better decisions, strengthen governance, improve strategy and build organisational resilience.
- We believe that volunteers, specialist advisers and professional networks are valuable assets whose knowledge and experience can be mobilised to support small charities.
- We believe that learning generated through our work can help funders, infrastructure organisations and partners better understand the needs of small charities and improve how support is designed and delivered.
- We recognise that long-term impact depends on continued volunteer engagement, effective partnerships, sustainable funding, appropriate systems and technology, and a supportive external environment.



Inputs driving our work

To achieve our mission we are very fortunate to draw on:

- Skilled and committed volunteers with specialist expertise, experience and strong judgement.
- Experienced staff and trustees.
- Strong organisational values and reputation.
- Relationships with charities, volunteers, funders and partners.
- Partnerships across the voluntary, public and private sectors.
- Learning, evidence and data generated through our work.
- Knowledge and insight gained from supporting thousands of charities and their leaders.
- Funding, infrastructure, systems and technology.

Impact:

Small charities and their leaders have the confidence, capability and resilience to deliver lasting impact for the people and communities they serve.

Outcomes

Short-term outcomes

Leaders

Small charity leaders are confident, capable and resilient, with the judgement, support and connections needed to lead effectively through complexity and change

- Leaders feel less isolated.
- Leaders improve their skills in interpreting information and evidence.
- Leaders are better equipped to exercise judgement.
- **Leaders feel more confident in uncertain and changing contexts.** ★
- Leaders strengthen their management and leadership knowledge.
- Leaders have more capacity to think strategically.

Charities

Small charities access the support they need at the right time, leading to stronger, more resilient organisations able to respond effectively to changing demand

- Charities have a better understanding of the support available.
- **More charities access the right support at the right time.** ★
- Charities gain practical skills, tools and expertise.
- Charities improve their understanding of organisational development.
- **Charities increase confidence in planning and decision-making.** ★

Sector

Learning from charities, leaders and volunteers informs how support for small charities is understood, designed and delivered across the sector

- More stakeholders understand Cranfield Trust's work and contribution.
- Stakeholders have greater awareness of the challenges facing small charities.
- **Stakeholders increasingly recognise Cranfield Trust as a trusted voice and convenor.** ★
- Trust and relationships between organisations increase.

Priority outcomes

While all the outcomes in our Theory of Change contribute to our overall impact, we have prioritised a smaller number of short-term and medium-term outcomes for monitoring and learning.

We selected these because they reflect where we expect to make the greatest direct contribution and where we can gather meaningful evidence of change. Our monitoring and evaluation framework sets out how we will measure, learn from and report progress against these priority outcomes.



Priority outcomes for measurement

Medium-term outcomes

- Leaders make more informed decisions.
- Leaders are better able to navigate organisational challenges and change.
- Leaders strengthen their wellbeing, resilience and personal effectiveness.
- **Leaders develop stronger strategic leadership capability.**
- Leaders build stronger peer and professional networks.

- Charities improve governance and management practices.
- Charities strengthen strategic planning and organisational development.
- Charities improve financial sustainability and resilience.
- Charities make better use of data, systems and infrastructure.
- **Charities become more adaptable and responsive to change.**

- Infrastructure organisations and partners access practical insight about what works.
- Funders and partners gain greater insight, evidence and learning.
- Shared understanding develops around the needs of small charities.
- Support becomes better aligned to charity needs.
- Learning influences how support is designed and delivered.

Long-term outcomes

- Leaders are resilient and sustainable.
- Leadership transitions are better planned and managed.
- Leadership knowledge and skills are retained within the sector.
- Organisations are led more effectively and sustainably.

- Small charities are resilient and sustainable.
- Small charities are effective and well led.
- Small charities are better able to achieve their mission.

- The support ecosystem becomes more responsive to the needs of small charities.
- Investment in charity infrastructure is strengthened.
- Support pathways become more joined up and accessible.
- Small charities have improved access to effective support.



Achieving this vision together

We want to work with small charities, volunteers, funders and partners who share our belief in the power and potential of small charities.

Whether you can contribute your time and expertise, join our leadership network, collaborate with us, fund our work or make a donation, we would love to hear from you.

Together, we can ensure more small charities receive the right support at the right time and achieve lasting impact for the people and communities they serve.

If you share our vision and would like to invest in stronger charities and greater impact for people and communities across the UK, we would be delighted to hear from you. Please email development@cranfieldtrust.org.

Our thanks



Cranfield Trust is an independent, fundraising charity, and we are deeply grateful to everyone who makes our work possible.

We thank our volunteers, who generously share their time, skills and expertise, and our staff, whose care, commitment and professionalism connect charities with the support they need.

We are also especially grateful to the individual supporters, funders, partners and companies whose financial contributions and in-kind support enable us to run the Trust, deliver our services and create space for us to develop our strategic thinking.





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