Digital Fellowship Research Project

Key findings, challenges, and opportunities to strengthen digital volunteering between tech businesses and the VCSE sector

by Katie Cecilia

Voluntary Action Leeds
Supporting Communities Together

THE INCLUSIVE DIGITAL ECONOMY NETWORK+

Contents

Contents

Contents

Executive Summary

This report outlines the findings of the **Digital Fellowship Project,** which aimed to strengthen digital volunteering partnerships between the tech industry and the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector. It explores the opportunities, challenges, and systemic barriers in cross-sector collaboration, offering practical recommendations to support more meaningful and sustainable partnerships.

The research employed a qualitative, participatory approach, including interviews, focus groups, and desk research, and engaged stakeholders from VCSEs, technology companies, and statutory bodies.

Based on this evidence, the report proposes four strategic interventions to support impactful and effective partnerships;

1. **Relationship Method**, a practical framework for building trust-based, long-term collaborations between tech and VCSE organisations.
2. **Social Value Quality Mark**, a standard to recognise and promote high-quality digital volunteering contributions
3. **Social Value Champions Network,** a peer network to support cross-sector learning, leadership, and visibility.
4. **Matchmaking and resource hub website,** an online platform to connect organisations, share resources, and support collaboration.

These recommendations aim to inform future policy, practice, and funding decisions, and provide a foundation for scaling digital volunteering in a way that is inclusive, sustainable, and driven by shared social outcomes.

The project was made possible by funding and support from INCLUDE+, a UKRI network dedicated to exploring and fostering social and digital environments where everyone can thrive.

Background and Purpose

Development of the fellowship

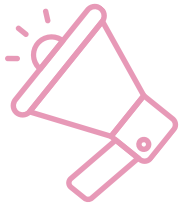
"Leeds Digital Volunteering Partnership (LDVP) is made up of representatives from 100% Digital Leeds, Leeds Community Foundation, Voluntary Action Leeds, Forum Central, and Leeds City Council. The partnership was formed in Summer 2023 after the success of the Leeds Digital Ball and Leeds Digital Inclusion Fund highlighted further opportunities for the tech sector to support the third sector other than financially.

LDVP fosters cross-sector partnerships that help the city's third sector organisations benefit from the digital skills and capacity of the tech sector, and enable tech businesses and their employees to gain new skills, experience, and a sense of community through work with not-for-profit organisations. Feedback from digital businesses and third sector organisations is that it is difficult to 'find each other' and form meaningful, mutually beneficial, lasting relationships.

Through a conversation with colleagues at the University of Leeds, as part of the Include+ programme, LDVP proposed to formalise this feedback and to address this challenge through a robust research piece. 100% Digital Leeds worked closely with Voluntary Action Leeds and LDVP colleagues to secure funding from the University for a Fellowship to focus on this.

This research has helped to focus attention on this issue and deepen understanding across sectors. It is a step towards developing the necessary infrastructure and resources to help the right interactions happen in the right way going forward. LDVP will continue to empower businesses and people that want to give their time where it meets the needs of communities."

-***Amy Hearn,*** *Digital Inclusion Manager, Member of the LDVP*



Context and aims

This project set out to explore how tech businesses and VCSE organisations collaborate through digital volunteering. We wanted to understand what's working well, identify the challenges these partnerships face, and discover what could strengthen these relationships moving forward.

To ensure our research aligned closely with the Fellowship's aims, we drew key language and priorities directly from the Include+ bid. This helped us shape a focused research question that reflects the core objectives of the project:

> "The fellowship will work closely with strategic partners across Leeds to develop and test the feasibility of a city scale approach to enabling tech sector businesses to share their technical skills with VCSE organisations and communities through volunteering."
>
> **- Include+ Fellowship Proposal Form**

From this, we developed the **overarching question**:

What mechanisms need to be in place to enable tech sector businesses to share their technical skills with VCSE organisations through volunteering in order to positively impact communities?

Context and aims

Sub questions – Private Sector Businesses:

1. What barriers have you experienced when offering employee volunteering and skills share?
2. What has worked well when offering volunteering to the VCSE sector?
3. What is the driving factor behind your interest and offer of employee volunteering?
4. What could be put in place to enable you to more easily offer volunteers to the VCSE?

Examples of the responses from Leeds based businesses include:

> "Unclear briefs and shifting staff availability create challenges. "Structured, stage-based projects with clearer briefs and dedicated coordination would improve delivery and engagement."

> "Strong networks and referrals help us create well-matched, high-impact projects. More structured referral processes and better capacity planning would help us manage volunteering more effectively."

> "We want to plan pro bono work in advance and use a digital priorities checklist to better align tech skills with VCSE needs through cross-sector collaboration."

Context and aims

Sub questions - VCSE:

1. What barriers have you experienced when bringing in volunteers from the private sector?
2. What has been beneficial when bringing in volunteers from the private sector?
3. How can employee volunteering benefit your organisation?
4. What are the skills that would be most useful / have the greatest impact on your organisation?
5. What could be put in place to enable you to easily bring in volunteers from the private sector?

Examples of the responses from Leeds based VCSE's include:

> "Specialist skills and project support save money and bring valuable expertise. "Better sector understanding, clearer timelines, and support with project scoping."

> "Corporate volunteering often comes through CSR programmes, but it doesn't always match what we actually need. I'd love to see more offers focused on things like improving our digital presence or running workshops – things that really add value."

> "Working with businesses is incredibly valuable and brings real benefits to our charity and service users. But when sessions are cancelled at short notice, it can leave us struggling to adapt and support people on our own."

Methodology and scope

Project Duration: 6 month span project (**February 2025 - August 2025**)

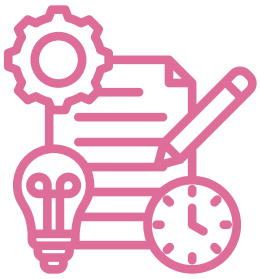
Methodology: **Mixed Methods** approach that included; **Individual Interviews** (charities and tech), **Focus groups** (Volunteer Managers Network), **Desk research**, and having conversations at the Leeds Digital Matchmaking event. This was appropriate to capture diverse perspectives and build a well-rounded view of digital volunteering across sectors.

Sectors Involved: **Tech companies, VCSE organisations** and **Statutory Bodies.**

Participating Organisations:

- **VCSEs:** Voluntary Action Leeds, Forum Central, Leeds Community Foundation, Burmantofts Community Friends, St Gemmas Hospice, Community Action Milton Keynes, Community CVS, VAL online, WCAVA , Sefton CVS, Holbeck Together, Healthwatch Leeds, Inspire North.
- **Tech:** CGI, Axiologik, Lenvi, Answer Digital, Hippo Digital, SCC and NetCompany.
- **Statutory bodies:** 100% Digital Leeds, Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council and Leeds City Council.

These partners came from across West Yorkshire and beyond, enriching our understanding of regional dynamics and platform usage.



Journey mapping & Process

Collaboration with NetCompany

We worked closely with Netcompany to understand how **VCSEs**, **Tech Companies**, and **Statutory bodies** engage with digital volunteering. The goal was to map out their typical processes, challenges, and needs.

Together, we created clear and easy-to-follow journey maps that show the typical steps and challenges each sector faces. These were developed and refined in weekly sessions.

Key steps:

- **Used notes from sector conversations** to get key insights that represented each sector's perspective.
- **Created an overarching journey map** that captured the full digital volunteering process across all sectors
- **Developed sector-specific journeys,** identifying differences in approach for charity-led, business-led, and public sector-led volunteering models.
- **Added real-world examples** to highlight practical insights, common barriers, and successful approaches.
- **Validated the maps** by testing them with stakeholders in each sector to ensure they were accurate, relevant, and usable.

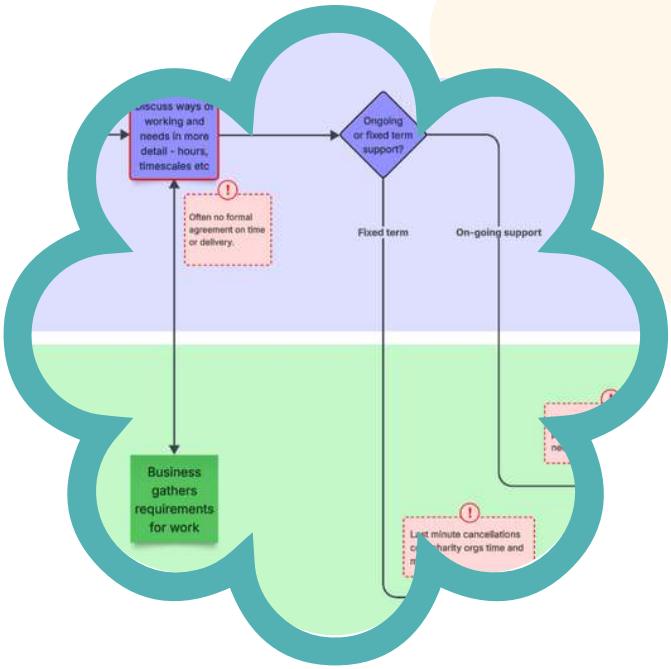
These journey maps now serve as a shared tool for understanding digital volunteering from different perspectives and can inform future service design, policy, and collaboration efforts.

Journey Mapping & Process

Charity sector

- Charities commonly use online platforms such as BeCollective and Reach Volunteering to recruit volunteers. These volunteers come from diverse backgrounds, including individuals and corporate groups.

- Charities typically post volunteer opportunities on these platforms, and interested individuals or organisations initiate contact. Due to limited resources, charities often adopt a **flexible and informal approach** to engagement, relying primarily on phone and email communication. As a result, formal agreements or commitments are rarely established.



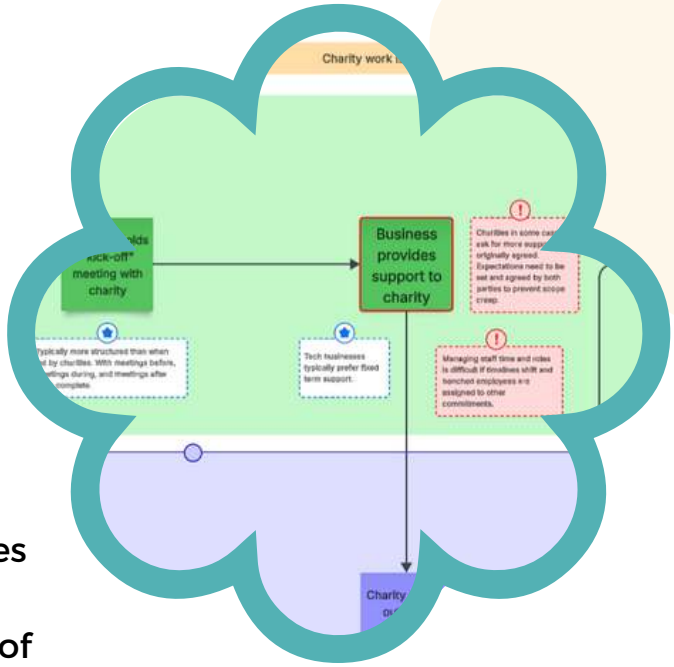
***See appendix A for the full map.**

- This lack of formalisation can lead to **last-minute cancellations** or **non-fulfilment**, particularly from corporate groups. Such cancellations are not only disruptive but can also have **significant hidden costs.** Although volunteering is perceived as a free resource, the time and effort invested in coordination, especially when plans fall through, can place a considerable burden on already stretched charitable organisations.

Journey Mapping & Process

Tech sector

- Businesses typically engage in volunteering through **employee outreach, existing partnerships, or statutory links,** rather than using centralised volunteering platforms. The typical engagement process involves a **kick-off meeting,** followed by **regular check-ins**, and concludes with a **final feedback session.**



***See appendix B for the full map.**

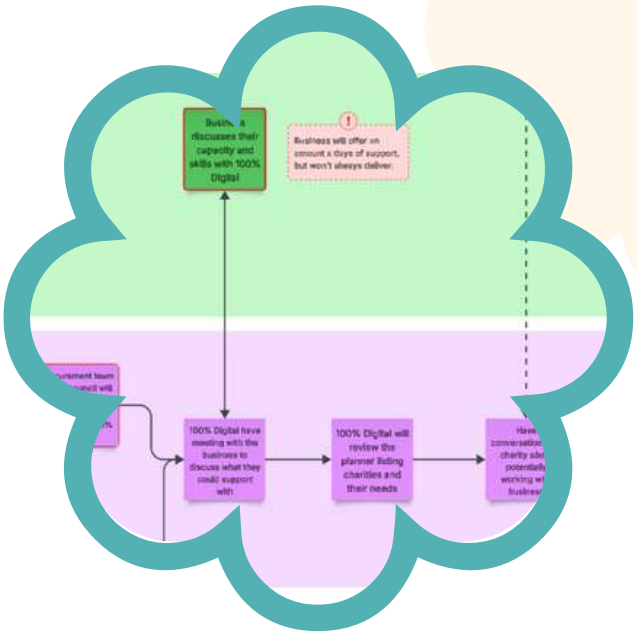
- Corporate volunteering generally takes place outside employees' core responsibilities, often during periods of lower workload or "**bench time**." However, the **unpredictable nature of business operations** makes it difficult for companies to commit to long-term volunteering initiatives.

- Several challenges arise from these arrangements. Charities may request more support than was initially agreed upon, while **unclear communication around needs and expectations** can lead to misalignment. These issues, combined with limited employee availability, can reduce the overall effectiveness and sustainability of corporate volunteering efforts.

Journey Mapping & Process

Statutory bodies

- Statutory bodies play a key role in connecting charities and businesses, primarily through **procurement** and **digital inclusion teams.** These connections are often established via **procurement contracts** or **through direct engagement with 100% Digital Leeds**. Once a connection is made, 100% Digital meets with businesses to explore potential support opportunities and identify suitable charity partners.



***See appendix C for the full map.**

- Following this, a call is arranged between the business and the charity to discuss respective needs, capacity, and alignment. From there, the business and charity co-lead the partnership, while 100% Digital provides ongoing support, acting as a facilitator rather than a central coordinator.

- Despite this structured approach, challenges remain. These include **communication gaps, unclear expectations, and limited long-term commitment from some businesses.** In certain cases, the **lack of practical planning** on the business side reduces the effectiveness and impact of their support, limiting the overall success of the partnership.

Findings & Insights

Cross-sector Strengths

Several positive themes emerged that support successful partnerships between tech companies and VCSE organisations:

- **Shared Commitment to Impact**: Both sectors are motivated by a desire to create meaningful, lasting change. Increasingly, corporate social responsibility (CSR) goals are aligning with community priorities such as financial wellbeing and digital inclusion.

- **Embedding Social Value in Strategy:** Tech companies are starting to integrate social impact into their core business strategies. For example, Lenvi has prioritised financial wellbeing as a strategic focus, while many firms view volunteering as a tool for staff development and retention.

- **Flexible, Skills-Based Volunteering:** Models that make use of "bench time" (periods when staff are between projects) allow for pro bono work that is both flexible and sustainable. Skills-based volunteering and micro-volunteering are becoming more common and accessible.

- **Values Alignment:** Partnerships are most effective when organisations share common values, goals, and ways of working.

- **Learning Through Feedback:** Actively incorporating feedback from past projects helps improve future collaboration and strengthens long-term relationships across sectors.

Findings & Insights

Cross-sector Challenges

Several challenges emerged that make collaboration between businesses, charities, and statutory bodies more difficult:

- **Communication and Knowledge Gaps**: Differences in language, work culture, and capacity across sectors can make it hard to clearly communicate needs, expectations, and what each side can offer.

- **Power Imbalances:** Businesses may approach volunteering with their own goals in mind, such as team building or meeting CSR targets without fully recognising the time, effort, and resources required from charities or public sector partners.

- **Limited Flexibility:** Many employees have unpredictable schedules or only a small number of volunteering days, which makes it hard to offer consistent support or maintain momentum on longer-term projects.

- **Different Motivations:** Businesses often focus on corporate objectives, while charities and statutory bodies are driven by social impact. These differing priorities can affect how volunteering is planned, delivered, and evaluated, sometimes reducing the effectiveness of partnerships.

Cross Sector Key Themes

Challenges	VCSEs	Corporates/Tech
Knowledge of sectors offer and need	Not always knowing what support to ask for (e.g. lack of technical terms, type of skills or skill set to review current processes)	Not always knowing what skills would be valuable to the charity sector.
Capacity Issues	Lack of staff/time for relationship-building	CSR roles often additional to workload (no specific role for this work)
Unclear Expectations	Need for clearer engagement frameworks	Want more structured opportunities
Platform Gaps	Existing tools not suited to digital projects as they focus on individual volunteering	Lack of centralised volunteering systems
Desire for Impact	Seek long-term, meaningful support that benefits a variety of charity operations.	Aim to align with strategic CSR/ Social Value goals
Volunteering Diversity	Need skills-based flexible offers, not limited to "team days".	Want flexible options (projects that align with bench opportunities)
Relationship Management	Need consistent follow-through (e.g. clear deadlines, agreements and outputs)	Prefer clear project boundaries, advance notice and communication.

Recommendations

Relationship Method

A **consistent** and **collaborative** relationship method is an approach focused on bringing people together across all sectors to support digital volunteering city-wide. This method is key to successful partnerships and builds on existing efforts while aligning with trusted networks and practices already in place.

Brokerage and Facilitation – Helping relationships progress from initial contact to meaningful collaboration, with statutory bodies supporting partnerships to create real impact.

Networking & Visibility – Expanding current networking events by promoting cross-sector opportunities.

- Currently limited by the Leeds Digital Volunteering Partnership's capacity this is an unfunded addition to existing roles.
- With additional resources, VAL could take on a stronger city-wide coordinating role and facilitate more online and in-person engagement.

Human-Centered Approach – Prioritising personal connections alongside tech and business systems, building on existing goodwill and infrastructure. This grounds partnerships in shared values and real community needs.

This method of relationship-building is the foundation for sustainable partnerships and underpins the other recommendations presented in this report.

Recommendations

Social Value Quality Mark

Drawing from the principles of Leeds City Council's 2016 Social Value Charter and existing city-wide guidance, this research recommends establishing a **Social Value Quality Mark.**

This initiative provides a **training** and **accreditation** process based on locally developed principles for social value volunteering. It offers a clear framework for organisations to meet Leeds-specific standards, supporting community benefit, cross-sector collaboration, and demonstrating business commitment to CSR that aligns with local needs.

A **toolkit** supports the process, offering practical advice such as:

- How to approach skills-based volunteering
- Do's and don'ts of effective partnership working
- Tips for achieving mutual benefit and lasting impact
- Strategies for developing and maintaining strong cross-sector relationships

Implementation:

- Initially targeting businesses, VCSEs, and statutory bodies already engaged through the Leeds Digital Volunteering Partnership (LDVP) and Leeds Digital Matchmaking events.
- Encouraging company participation by integrating the framework into Leeds City Council's procurement contracts, reinforcing a formal commitment to social value and community support.
- Using case studies from participating organisations to highlight successful outcomes and inspire wider adoption.

These resources and the accreditation process create a foundation for trusted, sustainable partnerships that deliver ongoing benefits to Leeds communities.

Recommendations

Social Value Champions

A city-wide, cross-sector initiative to recognise individual commitment to social value, bringing together VCSEs, tech companies, statutory bodies, and businesses to create a diverse and inclusive network of Social Value Champions. Each champion will also hold the **Social Value Quality Mark** and actively promote its values within their organisation and sector.

- **Cross-Sector Representation:** Inclusive recognition across sectors, fostering a connected community passionate about social value and community impact.
- **Social Value Badge:** A visible symbol to identify and connect individuals committed to social value, community engagement, and positive change.
- **Training for Champions:** Delivered by VAL, covering social value fundamentals, cross-sector working, values alignment, flexible collaboration, and creating win-win outcomes.

Implementation:

- Utilising the Leeds Digital Matchmaking events to launch this initiative, drawing from an engaged pool of attendees.
- Builds on the foundation of existing Social Value Group structures within tech organisations, such as those at Answer Digital and Axiologik.
- Offer city-wide recognition to employees across sectors, promoting trust, best practice, and a collaborative culture.
- Focus on developing trust, sharing best practices, and encouraging ongoing cross-sector collaboration.

Recommendations

Matchmaking and Resource hub web page

A website that works **to aid matchmaking** between sectors that also **provides resources to educate on cross-sector collaboration and partnerships.**

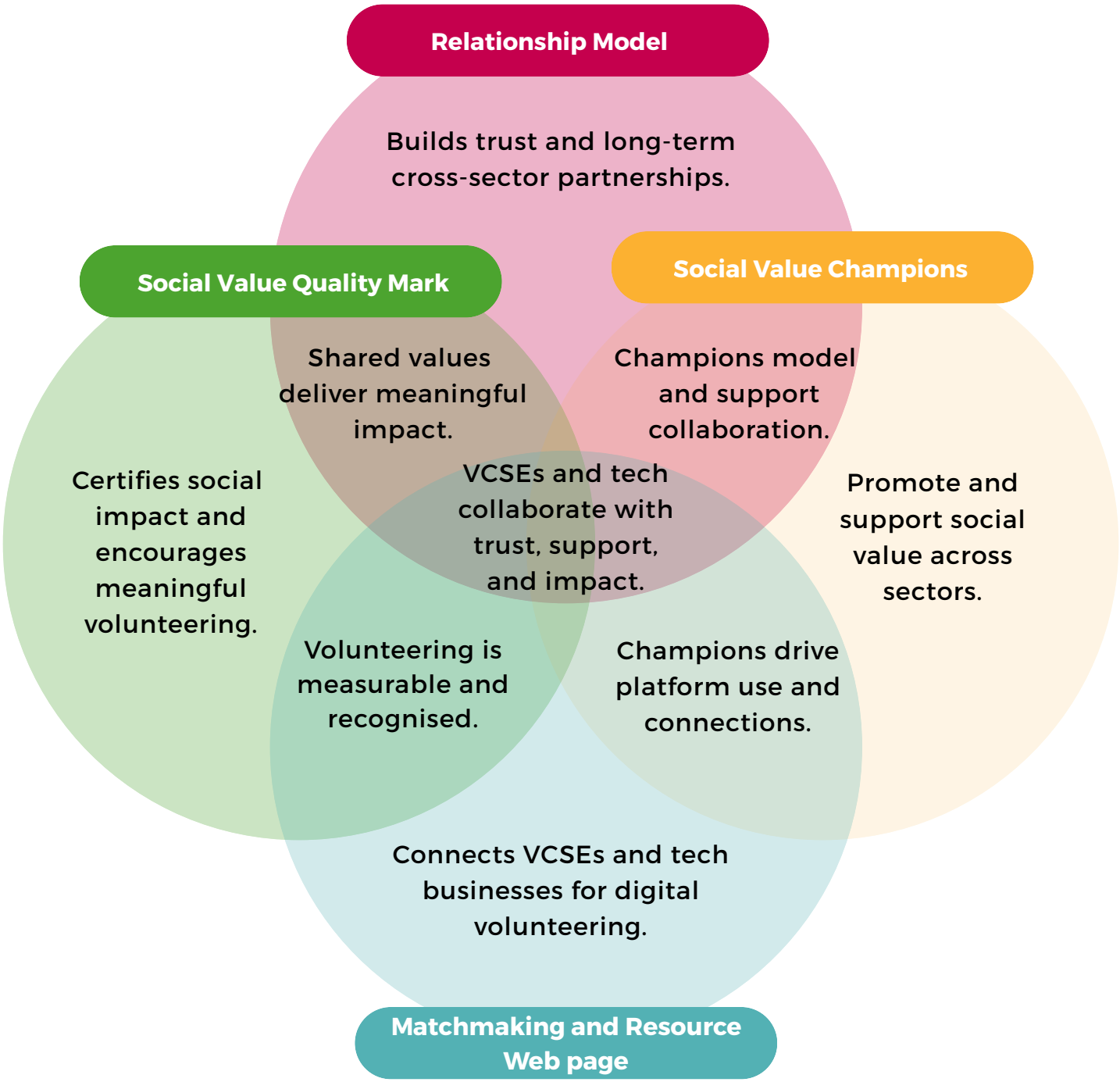
- **Organisation Profiles** with information on location, values, skills offered/needed, capacity, and availability, with support for smaller VCSEs to engage.
- **Skills-Based Matchmaking**, allowing organisations to post and respond to digital support requests, searchable by shared values, skills, and timeframes, addressing gaps in current platforms.
- **Resource Hub** with practical guidance on cross-sector collaboration, co-created by partners from different sectors. Users would review key materials and sign a pledge before engaging.

Implementation:

- Hosted by a trusted local organisation (e.g., VAL) but developed collaboratively with shared decision-making and co-authored content.
- Designed for sustainability and local ownership to ensure long-term impact and user relevance.
- Delivered in partnership with Leeds City Council, LDVP, and other key stakeholders to ensure it reflects real sector needs and is embedded in local networks.

VCSEs in this research highlighted the need for a **sustainable, locally embedded approach** that builds trust and reflects real needs—echoing the Keep It Local campaign in Leeds, which champions place-based partnerships over short-term national solutions.

Intergration of Recommendations



With thanks to our funders and supporters...

Find out more

Contacts

Andrina Dawson - Andrina.Dawson@Val.org.uk
Katie Cecilia

Stringer House
34 Lupton Street
Hunslet
Leeds
LS10 2QW

0113 297 7920

You can find out more about who we are or by scanning the QR code

SCAN ME

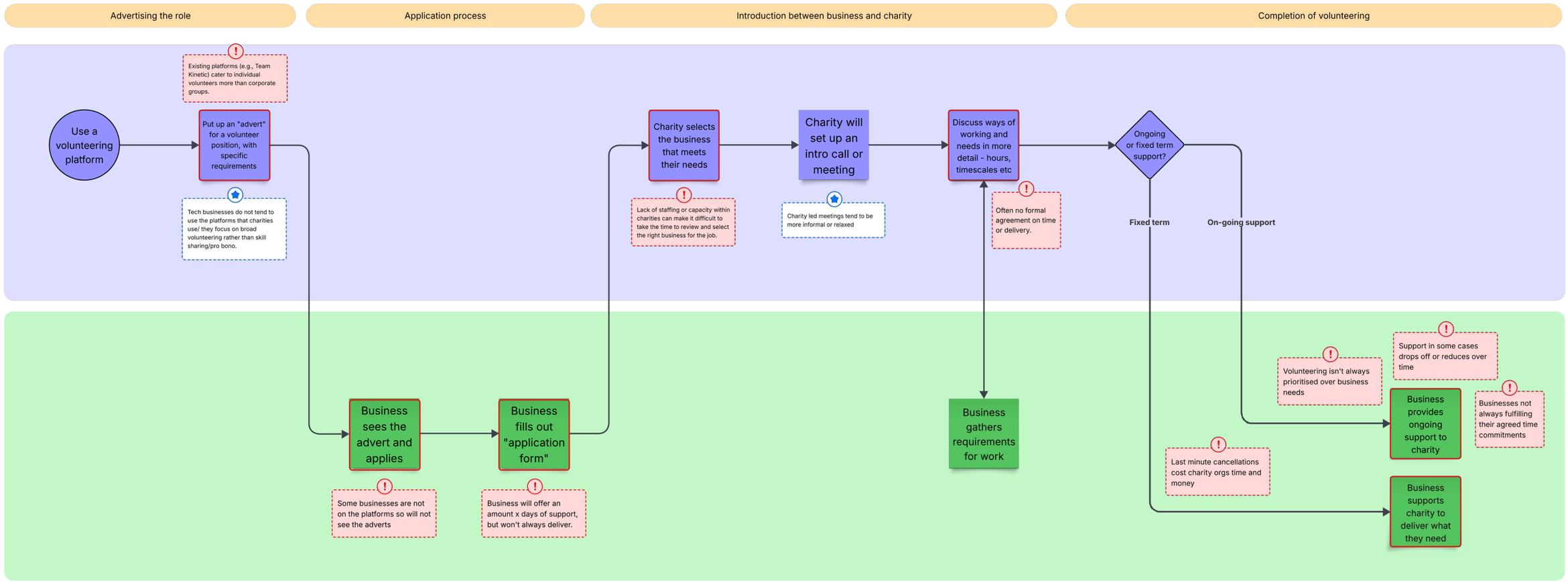
Voluntary Action Leeds
Supporting Communities Together

Charity led

Appendix A

Digital volunteering journey #1 - **Charity-led onboarding**

This map shows a typical onboarding journey when it is initiated and led by the charity themselves, highlighting key insights and pain areas throughout the process.



Key: ! Pain points ★ Insights

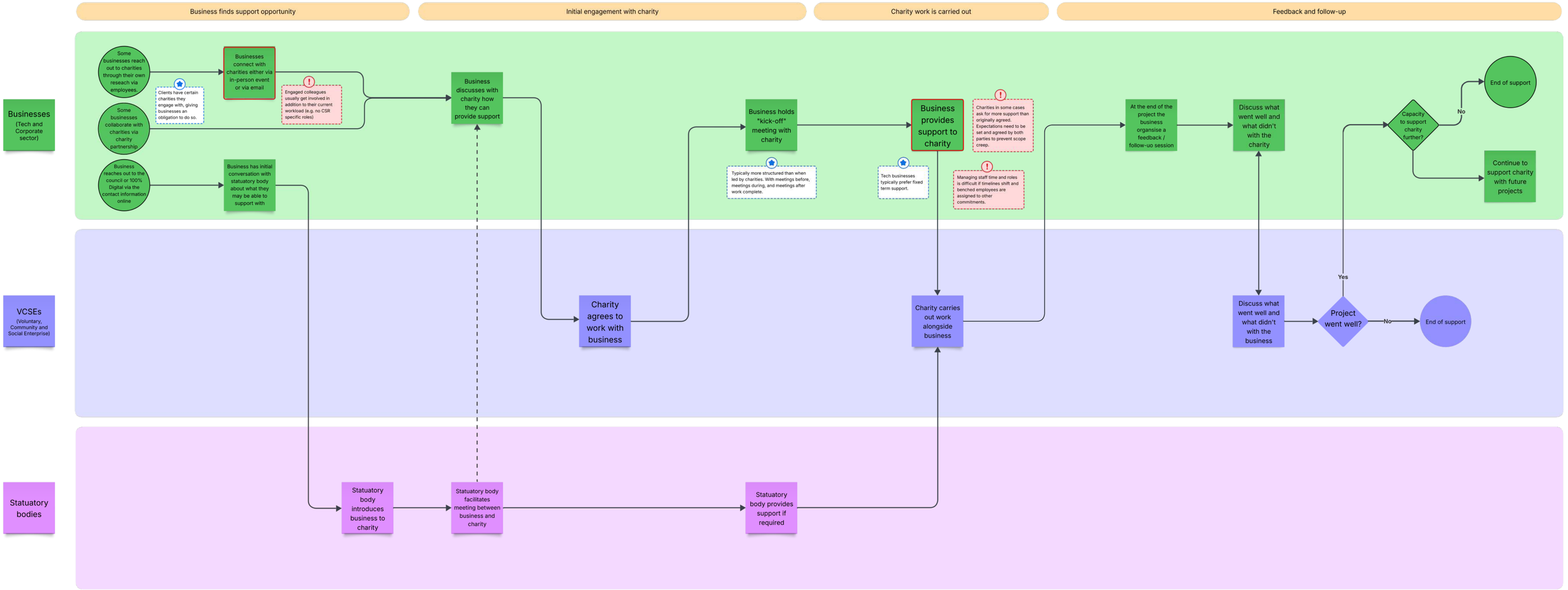
*Pain points in this map are from a charity perspective.

Appendix B

Business led

Digital volunteering journey #2 - **Tech Business-led onboarding**

This map shows a typical journey when support is initiated by a business seeking to work with a charity, this can be through a statuatory body or via an established relationship another business has with the charity.



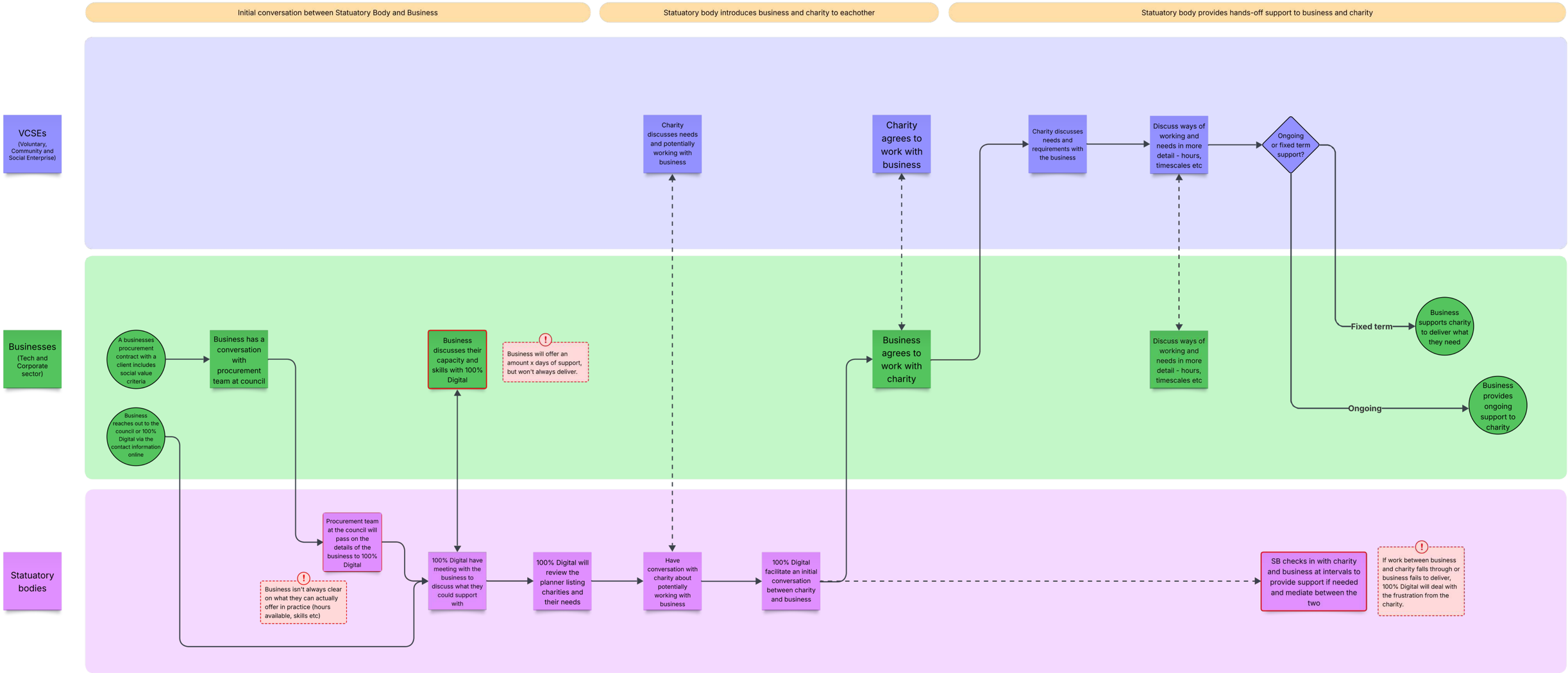
Key: Pain points Insights

*Pain points in this map are from a business perspective.

Appendix C

Digital volunteering journey #3 - **Statutory Body-led onboarding and support**

This map shows the typical journey for a statuatory body when facilitating a relationship between businesses and charities.



Key: Pain points Insights

*Pain points in this map are from a Statuatory Body perspective.