

About Voluntary Action Swindon - a history



Voluntary Action Swindon (VAS) is the Council for Voluntary Service (CVS) in Swindon. A CVS is a charity which supports other charities and coordinates voluntary activity in the local area, as opposed to a frontline charity which supports individuals directly. A CVS is also a forum through which local voluntary and community organisations and statutory sector organisations can communicate with each other and work together.

VAS offers a wide variety of services and support to the local voluntary and community sector. This includes advice on fundraising and governance, printing services, DBS checks and room/equipment hire. VAS runs or helps to administer several of the major networks and projects in Swindon's voluntary and community sector, including Swindon Sports Forum, Swindon200, Sanford House, Involve Swindon, and the SAIL Project.

VAS is based on John Street in the town centre. Our building also houses Volunteer Centre Swindon, Threshold Housing Link, and Disability Experts CIC.

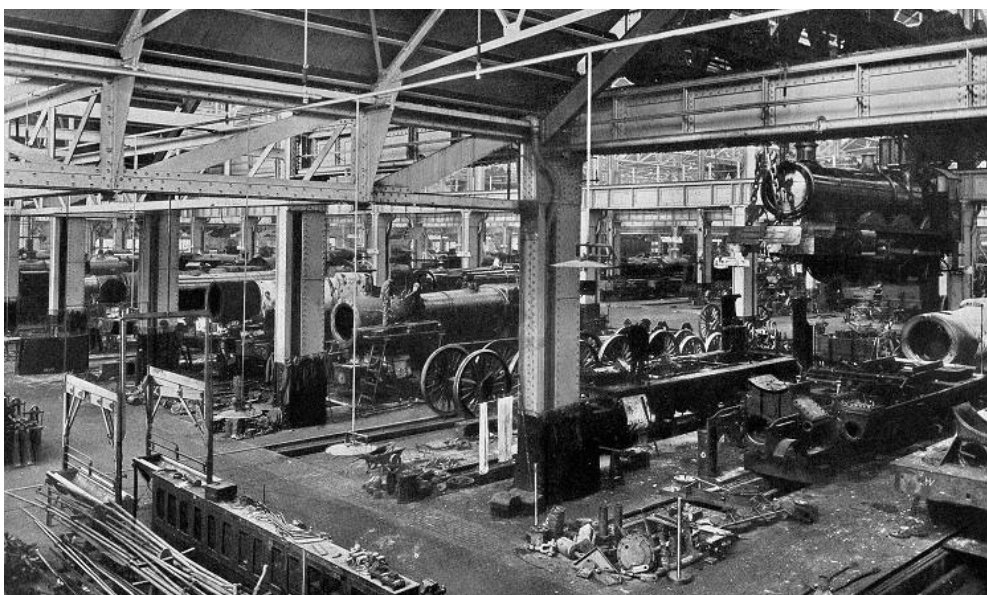
The Story of VAS

VAS was formed in 1932 as the Swindon Council of Social Service. The organisation's purpose and core activities have changed over time, from unemployment relief during the 1930s depression to evacuation schemes during the Second World War. In the post-war period, VAS began to deal with a much more complicated array of social needs, gradually transitioning to a support agency and focal point for the hundreds of charitable organisations and self-help groups working in Swindon. What has remained consistent is that throughout its life, VAS has provided much needed assistance to people unable to help themselves.

Formation

The conditions for VAS's formation are found in the mass unemployment afflicting Swindon in the 1920s. Swindon avoided the worst of the slump due to Great Western Railway's predominance as the town's main employer, but the railway brought its own problems. GWR imposed what local historian Richard Tomkins has described as a "rigid paternalistic regime" on the town, stifling personal initiative, prohibiting the growth of unions, and refusing any suggestion that it should help the unemployed.

Mass unemployment of the kind seen in Swindon in the 1920s was a new phenomenon. When the majority of the population had worked in the fields, those unable to work through sickness or old age were cared for by local charities and the Poor Law. Industrialisation resulted in a more visible kind of poverty in urban areas, which the Poor Law was incapable of remedying.



Swindon GWR Works in the 1920s

The failures of both GWR and successive governments to properly cater for those without jobs prompted the people of Swindon to set up various schemes and funds to provide assistance. The first attempt to organise and coordinate these disparate efforts led to the formation of VAS in 1932 – known then as the Swindon Council of Social Service.

The First Ten Years

In the early 1930s, everything in Swindon hinged on GWR – if it fell, Swindon would be pulled down with it. Improved railway efficiency meant a reduction in the workforce, and 1932 was the worst year for cuts, resulting in peak unemployment across the town at the same time as unemployment benefits were being cut.

It was in these dire circumstances that the Rotary Club of Swindon asked the Mayor to convene a meeting with parties involved in social work in the town. The aim was to explore the possibility of establishing a local body with responsibility for coordinating the work. In the view of the Rotarians, “distress is likely to be severe during the coming winter... only by such co-ordination can the greatest amount of good be achieved.”

142 people attended the meeting, including Mr Tom Fessey, who with his family had set up an organisation to collect and distribute second-hand clothing to the needy of the town. Given the overwhelming support for the Rotarians’ proposal, the inaugural meeting of the Swindon Council of Social Service was held on 1st December 1932. The objectives of the new organisation were:

To promote the general good of the community in the Borough of Swindon by assisting the work of statutory authorities and voluntary organisations engaged in advancing education, developing physical improvement, furthering health, relieving poverty, distress or sickness, or in pursuing any objects which may be deemed by law to be charitable... To promote and organise co-operation in the achievement of the above purposes.



The seed scheme. Tom Fessey is on the far left.

Tom Fessey was appointed Honorary Secretary of the new organisation, initially for six months – he remained in post until his retirement 21 years later. Fessey was allocated a room at the Town Hall to deal with ‘information and enquiries.’ He found that what most people who approached him needed was not handouts (the Unemployment Assistance Board already offered grants), but advice and empathy. On one day in 1933, he dealt with more than 350 callers, ranging from a mother who had pawned her wedding ring to pay for her child’s medical treatment to the penniless man whose former employers owed him several weeks back pay. Often, the cases Fessey dealt with were matters of life and death.

Advice work aside, the first ten years of VAS’s existence were occupied with relieving distress and poverty caused by unemployment. This was done through seed schemes – providing the unemployed with seeds and gardening tools so they could grow their own food; pig settlements – providing the unemployed with pigs and a small amount of land, with a view to selling the animals for bacon and eventually becoming self-sufficient; the Cases Committee, which dispensed financial assistance to needy families; and the Legal Aid Committee, providing professional legal services at nominal rates.

Much of VAS’s funding during these early years came from Garrards Ltd., the other large employer in the town besides GWR. After Tom Fessey visited their factory in 1937 to persuade them of the importance of what VAS was doing, the employees organised a monthly deduction from their wage packets – a valuable source of income which continued until 1965.

World War 2

With the outbreak of World War 2, the problem of widespread unemployment came to an abrupt end. VAS immediately turned its attention to the 5,000 children billeted with Swindon families as the town became a reception area for the national Evacuation Scheme. Where second-hand clothing had been distributed to the unemployed, it was now handed out to evacuees, many of whom were poor or destitute.

Sanford House’s Congregational Schoolroom was fitted out with mattresses to provide temporary accommodation for the new arrivals. Swindon Citizens Advice Bureau (now Citizens Advice Swindon) was quickly established, operating initially as part of VAS, and taking over the majority of evacuee work. CAB’s remit was soon

expanded to meet the community's needs for information and advice which arose from the confusions of war, evacuation and foreign service.



Parts of Swindon were bombed during the Second World War

VAS's work during the war consisted of issuing Ration Books, tracing missing soldiers, dealing with Prisoner of War enquiries and the Red Cross Postal Message Scheme, and generally coordinating voluntary support work. Over 100 Luftwaffe bombs fell on Swindon during WW2, killing 48 people and rendering many more homeless. A Searcher's Service was formed in 1941, with Tom Fessey as Liaison Officer in charge of several hundred volunteers, to look for survivors and injured people.

Post-War Period

With the foundation of the NHS in 1948 and expansion of the Welfare State in the post-war years, the Poor Law was abolished and responsibility for poverty was transferred to local authorities. VAS began to play a supportive role to the reorganised local authority departments now concerned with social welfare, and to the town's numerous voluntary groups. VAS's revised constitution showed that it had begun to see itself as a forum through which representatives from the public and charity sectors could engage in dialogue to solve the problems facing the town.

Nevertheless, local people continued to approach VAS's office at 1 Faringdon Road for assistance, and VAS continued operating its seed scheme and giving out a limited number of grants. Unemployment was no longer the main problem facing the town. Responsibility for dealing with this had been taken over by the government in 1944, and by 1947, unemployment had fallen to a record low of 1.5%. CAB began dealing with more general enquiries, such as advice on starting up new businesses, legal matters, and taxation problems.

In 1954, persistent ill health forced Tom Fessey to step down from the position of Honorary Secretary, though he remained on the Executive Committee until his death four years later. His former assistant, Gladys Plumley, became the new Honorary Secretary upon his retirement.

Swindon's population swelled through the 1950s, with new housing estates built at Moredon, Penhill, Parks and Walcot. The growth in population was matched by an expansion of Swindon's voluntary sector, and an increasingly diverse range of groups

came under the VAS umbrella. Housing policy at the time was based on the idea of quickly building as many houses as possible, without regard for public facilities, shops or community centres. VAS was involved in the new estates from the outset, organising necessary assistance for transferring families and dealing with the social and environmental problems resulting from the housing policy.



The mural at Faringdon House, commemorating VAS's first 50 years

Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, voluntary activity generally began to encompass support for those with disabilities (both physical and mental) and those suffering mental ill health. Thousands of inpatients suffering mental ill health were discharged following the Mental Health Act, creating a new need for care and attention. With the Rotary Club and League of Hospital Friends, VAS opened the Upham Road Centre in 1960, to support those with learning difficulties.

Expansion Through the 1970s

The 1968 Seebohm Report revealed a nationwide lack of resources, inadequate knowledge about the nature of many social problems, and the overlapping of work between government and voluntary organisations. The Report suggested that services such as aftercare, counselling and practical help were often better left to the voluntary sector.

As such, towards the end of the year, the local authority recommended that VAS's work should be strengthened and enlarged, with increased financial support. Funding from the local authority increased dramatically between 1969 and 1971, allowing for the reorganisation and expansion of VAS. This included the creation of a new body called Communicare, established to provide the missing link between voluntary and government services. Communicare included members from industry, unions, churches, local government, and voluntary groups in the area, and its focus on volunteers led to the creation of the Volunteer Bureau in 1972.

From the 1980s to Today

By the 1980s, VAS (now known as Thamesdown Voluntary Service Centre) had taken on its familiar role, providing support to the hundreds of charitable and community organisations in the town. The new focus was partly due to its earlier function as a relief agency having been taken over by the local authority. It was also partly driven by the 1975 Wolfenden Report on the future of voluntary organisations, which provided, for the first time, firm guidelines for the work of Voluntary Service Councils.

The services VAS offered in the 1980s ranged from typing and information sharing to facilitating training and carrying out original research. VAS continued to have a vital role in launching new self-help groups and other non-profit organisations, such as the Thamesdown Housing Association (now known as Threshold), Thamesdown Law Centre (now Wiltshire Law Centre), the Thamesdown Community Trust (which later merged with the Wiltshire Community Trust and is now known as the Wiltshire Community Foundation), and Focus on Carers and Self-Help (now known as Swindon Carers Centre).



Thamesdown Voluntary Service Centre moves to John Street, VAS's current location

VAS has continued to receive funding from Swindon Borough Council, and has also secured money from other funders, such as the Big Lottery Fund, to run new projects. In recent years, VAS has hosted Swindon Local Involvement Network (now Healthwatch Swindon), the Gateway Project (helping to set up new charities), and the VOICE Project (encouraging charity and statutory sector organisations to work together). Currently, VAS manages Swindon Advice and Support Centre, administers Swindon Sports Forum and Swindon Equality Coalition, and runs a number of voluntary sector networks and forums including Swindon Fundraisers Network, Swindon Charity Accounting Network and Swindon Community Centres Network.

About Sanford House



Sanford House (also known as Swindon Advice & Support Centre) is the town centre's charity hub. The historic building has stood for more than 130 years and was the former location of Sanford St Boys' School. The building was the creation of architect Brightwen Binyon, who also designed the town hall in Regent Circus, Westcott School in Birch Street, and the 1892 additions to the Mechanics' Institute.

The building was temporarily commandeered by the War Office as a hospital during the First World War, but remained in use as a school until 1966, when Sanford St Boys' School was amalgamated with the girls' school on Drove Road.

On June 30th 2014, Sanford House began a new lease of life as a central hub for charitable services to provide information, advice and support to local residents under one roof and in an easily accessible location.



The transformation of the building began in 2013, supported by an investment of £350,000 from Swindon Borough Council and the Swindon Clinical Commissioning Group. Not only has the move improved residents' access to vital services, it has encouraged joined-up working between the organisations now resident at Sanford House. The Council has estimated that the shared arrangements will save around £25,000 a year in grant funding needed for properties.

Working with the Council and other voluntary organisations, VAS took a lead role on the design and development of the centre, and now has responsibility for managing the building.