



Better Together Policy Forum

Ageing Well in County Durham: How do we maximise the benefits of collaboration to promote ageing well and improve lives?

Introduction

This event at Bowburn Community Centre on Friday 19th April 2024 was held for partners to consider the key issues surrounding Ageing Well in County Durham. Representatives from 28 different organisations explored the key issues and what we are doing about them. The key aim of the event was to explore how we are supporting our ageing population and what we might do better together.

VCSE organisations make a valuable contribution to the 'ageing well agenda'. Age UK County Durham play a significant role responding to the needs of those 50plus and (alongside many other sector colleagues) are building programmes of work to enable better outcomes. VCSE colleagues are passionate about meeting the needs of their beneficiaries and benefit from a level of independence that enables them to respond rapidly to the needs of those using their services.

Kate Burrows, Executive Director Durham Community Action, and Chair of Better Together VCS Forum, opened the meeting by introducing the topic of the day to explore how we are supporting our ageing population and what we might do better together in order to promote ageing well.

Presentation 1 - Robyn Holmes CEO of Age UK Durham

Through a pre-recorded video, and supported in person by Denise Whellans, Chair of Age UK Durham, Robyn presented statistics on what ageing well in County Durham currently looks like.

Information from Durham Insight was shared, telling us that County Durham has a population of approximately 533,000 of which the largest age group is the 50-59-year olds. 112,600 are aged between 50-64. (census) 21% of the total population of County Durham.

In her presentation Robyn commented that Ageing well is a whole life approach and in order to change the infographics for County Durham and maximise delivery in a meaningful partnership approach, we need to work together more smartly.

The aim of Age UK Durham is to tackle the inequality that the statistics present. The key areas of focus are narrowing inequalities; tackling loneliness and isolation; delivering a digital programme to tackle digital exclusion; challenging ageism and supporting access to information particularly in relation to key areas such as financial literacy and personal care.

A transcript of the presentation and copy of the video are available on the Durham Community Action website. The statistics that Robyn referred to can also be found on the Durham Insight webpage [here](#).

Presentation 2 - Amanda Healey, Director of Public Health, Durham County Council

This presentation touched on the Ageing Well Health Needs Assessment was completed in 2022 to identify the health and wellbeing needs of people age 50+ living in County Durham. It covered a wide range of priority areas using the [World Health Organisation Age-Friendly Cities framework](#) and the findings of the HNA led to a range of recommendations which have been shared with partners across the system. The recommendations have also been embedded within the Ageing Well Partnership Plan.

Amanda spoke about health protection, explaining that a key part of this is about fair access to health services. Her presentation included a slide on the establishment of a voluntary and community sector leadership group and touched upon the model developed to promote the role and involvement of the VCSE sector and communities in the [Greater Manchester devolution](#).

A suggestion was made that Health protection could be a future discussion for the policy forum or Better Together Meetings.

The presentation can be found on [the Durham Community Action website](#). A link to the video on the County Durham Together vision can be found [here](#).

Roundtable Discussion

The Forum took part in a roundtable exercise to consider the following key questions guided by a series of sub questions:

- How do we maximise the benefits of collaboration to promote ageing well and improve lives;
- Do policy and investment decisions consider the true value of VCSE service delivery and
- How can we work better together to build inclusive evaluation of service delivery that informs decision making.

How do we maximise the benefits of collaboration to promote ageing well and improve lives

What are the key drivers to better collaboration?

- **Cross-Sector involvement:** Promoting collaboration across all sectors will facilitate holistic approach to ageing well, providing a more diverse expertise and resources.
- **Ensuring effective communication:** Clear, consistent communication within and between organisations, and with service users. This includes better internal communication within large organisations and tiered communication systems to avoid duplication and scatter-gun commissioning.
- **Learning and sharing knowledge:** Facilitating opportunities for organisations to learn from each other, share best practices, and promote each other's services helps in building a collaborative environment.
- **Using the voice of lived experience:** Integrating the perspectives of those with lived experience (including the older people themselves) will ensure that services are relevant and meet the needs of an ageing population. This is key in capturing the qualitative data which is so important.

What is happening already that we are not capturing the potential of?

- **Networking and Collaboration Platforms:** Utilising platforms like the AICD portal to include small voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations can enhance collaboration and resource sharing. Capturing the work of the smaller organisations whether they are specialised or providing more general services. Ensure we are Making Every Contact Count and using social media platforms to share broader information.
- **Promoting Services:** Better promotion of services and opportunities within the community ensures that more people can benefit from existing resources, including those which address the wider determinants and encourage people to think about ageing well from early years onwards.
- **Evaluation and Impact Measurement:** Capturing the true impact of collaborative work through comprehensive evaluation methods helping to understand and showcase the benefits of collaboration. We need to ensure that data captured is qualitative and not just quantitative.

- **Effective Signposting:** Maximising the work of community navigators and social prescribers who can signpost individuals to appropriate services and provide localised support. It is important however to recognise that social prescribing will not meet all of these needs (and that the voluntary sector are not deliverers of public sector services).

What would facilitate action/progress?

- **Facilitating comprehensive service accessibility:** Creating a detailed, easily accessible directory of services would help individuals and organisations understand what support is available, enhancing service delivery. Online access would be key allowing it to be updated as people move on or start new services. It would link into generalist organisations who don't specifically deal with older people but whose services address the wider determinants.
- **Stakeholder engagement:** Organising events and promoting face-to-face and online networking opportunities helps in building strong connections, facilitating 'time out' for better collaboration.
- **Inclusive services:** Ensuring services are inclusive and accessible to all, including addressing barriers such as transport and digital access (particularly in rural areas), is essential for equitable service provision. These services should start from early in life to maximise opportunities for people to age well and a better quality of life.
- **Funding and commissioning:** Developing long-term, impactful funding strategies that avoid short-term fixes and promote sustainable service provision. Encouraging shared resources and joint ownership models, like the Mental Health Alliance, can enhance service delivery.
- **Communication plans:** Implementing a robust communication plan that is accessible to all stakeholders ensures everyone is informed about available services, opportunities, and collaborative efforts.
- **VCSE Recognition** – recognising the expertise and professionalism of the VCSE and valuing volunteers.

How can we make sure policy and investment decisions consider the true value of VCSE service delivery?

What are we not capturing the potential of?

- **Knowledge and lived experience:** The valuable insights and lived experiences of older people and service users are underutilised. These perspectives are key to shaping relevant policies and services.
- **Small and informal organisations:** Many small organisations and informal groups, such as churches, contribute significantly to community well-being but are often overlooked in funding and recognition and are not on the immediate radar of commissioners.
- **Intergenerational and community groups:** The potential of intergenerational programmes and community groups to foster community cohesion and support ageing well is not fully realised.
- **Effective information sharing:** Current directories (e.g., AICD, Locate) are not comprehensive or up-to-date, limiting their effectiveness in facilitating referrals and collaboration.

Who/could facilitate this?

- **Durham County Council:** an opportunity to create and maintain an "approved directory of services," recognising the contributions of VCSE organisations and ensuring inclusive commissioning processes – an opportunity to revisit the Durham Book?
- **Policy makers and commissioners:** By integrating the voices of VCSE organisations and their service users into the policy-making process, ensuring that funding and policies reflect the true value of VCSE contributions.
- **VCSE Networks and umbrella organisations:** to amplify the collective voice of the VCSE sector, advocate for policy changes, and provide capacity-building support to smaller organisations.

What should we be tackling together?

- **Inclusive commissioning:** Developing commissioning processes that are inclusive from the outset, ensuring early involvement of VCSE organisations in the commissioning journey, and recognising the value of lived experience.
- **Sustainability and predictability of funding:** Avoiding short-term, annual funding cycles that limit the capacity of VCSE organisations to plan and deliver impactful services. Emphasising long-term funding models that provide stability and predictability and mitigate against issues such as remuneration.
- **Cultural change:** Promoting a shift in the culture and language of government and large organisations to value and respect the work of VCSE organisations and the people within them (both staff and volunteers).
- **Collaboration over competition:** Encouraging VCSE organisations to collaborate rather than compete for funding, thereby increasing the overall impact and efficiency of service delivery.

What do we need to do to make sure we take an inclusive approach to commissioning?

- **Early and ongoing engagement:** Engaging VCSE organisations early in the commissioning process and maintaining ongoing dialogue to ensure their insights and needs are considered through co-production.
- **Person-centered commissioning:** Focusing on the needs of individuals rather than predefined project outcomes, allowing for more flexible and responsive service delivery.
- **Transparency and accountability:** Ensuring transparency in the commissioning process and holding all stakeholders accountable for inclusive practices including tackling Ageism and encouraging organisations to proactively support older people through age friendly employment opportunities.
- **Recognition and respect:** Acknowledging and respecting the unique contributions of VCSE organisations, particularly the smaller and informal groups that are often overlooked.

What development opportunities/capacity building might be useful?

- **Training and Workshops:** Providing education and workshops on impact measurement, storytelling, and how to demonstrate the value of VCSE services effectively.
- **Capacity building for small organisations:** Supporting small organisations in developing the capacity to participate in commissioning processes, including understanding funding opportunities and building necessary administrative capabilities. Often these organisations are too busy 'doing the doing' to take time out to capture funding and commissioning bids.
- **Collaborative platforms:** Creating and maintaining platforms for VCSE organisations to share information, collaborate on projects, and collectively advocate for their needs.
- **Evaluation frameworks:** Developing evaluation frameworks that reflect the qualitative nature of VCSE work and capture both quantitative and qualitative impacts. "The VCSE will need to be included in the bigger conversation".

How can we work better together to build inclusive evaluation of service delivery that informs decision making?

What does good evaluation/impact/success measurement look like (from all perspectives)?

- **Utilise diverse methods:** Incorporate both quantitative and qualitative approaches, including case studies and stories, to capture the full impact.
- **Include multiple perspectives:** Reflect the views and experiences of service users, providers, and funders.
- **Measure wellbeing:** Focus on the qualitative impact on individuals, not just numerical targets.
- **Recognise different contexts:** Be sensitive to the varying experiences across different areas and demographics.
- **Be simple and relevant:** Ensure the evaluation process is straightforward and directly applicable to real-world scenarios.

What would be meaningful?

- **Tell the whole story:** Include qualitative data and personal stories to provide context to quantitative measures.
- **Address unmet needs:** Highlight areas where services are lacking or can be improved. Using the service users to develop a 360° review of how the system currently works.
- **Engage stakeholders:** Ensure the evaluation meets the needs of commissioners and funders while accurately reflecting the work done.
- **Provide actionable insights:** Offer clear, practical recommendations for improvement. "What works well, what can we do better in the future approach."

How can we work together on this?

- **Sharing successful strategies:** Regularly exchange information on what works well.
- **Streamlining services:** Avoid duplication to ensure resources are used efficiently.
- **Networking and forums:** Use these platforms for knowledge sharing and building connections.
- **Community hubs:** Facilitate word-of-mouth communication and feedback collection.
- **Leveraging digital tools:** Utilise digital capabilities for better communication and data collection.
- **Engaging both large and small organisations:** Ensure that smaller organisations have opportunities to contribute and benefit from shared goals.

What are we not capturing and who would/could facilitate this?

- **Individual stories and qualitative impact:** Go beyond numbers to understand personal experiences and outcomes, capturing the lived experience - we need the stories behind the improvement/impact.
- **Address the unmet needs and hidden issues:** "Need to find those people who are left behind."

Facilitated by:

- **Community navigators**
- **Higher education institutions:** Partnering Durham University for rigorous research.
- **VCSE organisations:** providing in-depth case studies and qualitative data.
- **Durham Insight:** for impacts of organisations to gather comprehensive information.

What development opportunities/capacity building might be useful?

- **Provide education and workshops:** Train service providers on effective evaluation methods and tools.
- **Develop a centralised system:** Implement a simple, standardised system for data collection and reporting.
- **Encourage respectful competition:** Foster a collaborative spirit while pursuing funding opportunities.
- **Maximise digital capabilities:** Use digital tools for more efficient data collection and dissemination.
- **Create networking opportunities:** Facilitate interactions between different organisations to share knowledge and best practices.
- **Engage younger voices:** Ensure younger people know how to gather and share lived experiences.

Key messages from the VCS for Commissioners

- **Provide longer-Term Funding:** One-year funding cycles hinder staff retention and service impact. Longer-term contracts are crucial for stability and effectiveness.
- **Footfall is Not the Be-All and End-All:** Prioritise soft outcomes and the impact on individual lives, not just numbers.
- **Sharing and Collaboration:** Promote collaboration and sharing of successful strategies across organisations to avoid duplication and enhance efficiency.
- **Valuing Stories and Case Studies:** Use qualitative data and personal stories to illustrate real impact, as numbers alone don't tell the full story.

- **Support for Smaller Organisations:** Provide resources and support for smaller organisations to engage in the evaluation process effectively.
- **Appropriate and Impactful Monitoring:** Focus on key data without overwhelming organisations with excessive requirements.
- **Open and Transparent Working:** Foster open collaboration with non-public sector services to enhance trust and efficiency.
- **Reframing Initiatives:** View initiatives as ongoing services rather than short-term projects, recognising their long-term impact.
- **Encouraging Business Engagement:** Link businesses with the VCSE sector to promote volunteering and community involvement.
- **Meaningful Engagement and Policy Input:** Ensure diverse input for policy development to reflect a wide range of perspectives.
- **Focus on People:** Prioritise the happiness and fulfilment of service users, looking beyond funding and policy challenges.
- **Trust in VCSE:** Recognise the vital role of the VCSE sector in filling gaps left by other services, such as GPs and social workers.

Key messages from Commissioners for the VCS

- **Communication and Trust building:** Seeking detailed information/clarity and sharing upcoming priorities so both sides are clear on expectations and build trust.
- **Collaboration Over Competition:** among VCSE organisations.
- **Understanding Own Organisation's Role:** VCSE organisations should understand their role within the sector and identify their contributions effectively.
- **Personalised Case Studies:** Commissioners value personalised case studies highlighting the impact of VCSE services.
- **Documentation of Local Knowledge:** VCSE organisations are encouraged to document local knowledge digitally for accessibility. “we are only as good as good as the home of our knowledge”.
- **Role in Filling Gaps:** VCSE organisations fill gaps left by the Government. Continue to advocate for greater respect for volunteers.

Key Points of the day

A short plenary captured the points each table felt most salient:

- Commissioning services through the voluntary sector needs consistent and sustainable funding, as the short-term nature of many projects impact both the individual and the organisation.
- The impact measurement and evaluation of commissions should be qualitative, not quantitative. Capturing case studies is so important.
- Once an organisation receives funding for projects through commissioning, they often remain in the system so we must support an inclusive approach.
- It is everyone’s business to look after older people and for that we need more cross collaboration and recognise the importance of knowledge and its value.
- In terms of investment and policy development – lessons can be learned from Mental Health Wellbeing Alliance.

Next Steps

- Continue open discussions – it’s clear that there is a continued desire to work better together and build on opportunities to learn from one another. We must always be careful not to destabilise existing work that delivers well for our communities but exploring opportunities to develop an inclusive, accessible and innovative framework of support could ignite further collaboration.

- Shape and develop appropriate collaborative programmes of work (including training and funding packages) to support the implementation of initiatives and activities that gather insight (assuring local voices are heard) to influence strategic policy decisions and inform the design of interventions from an inclusive evidence base.
- Together, take opportunities to build on existing and emerging commissioned and grant funded activities across the County. Use this insight to shape responses to identifiable needs.
- Above all, shape suitable opportunities to take forward and build on the issues raised at the conference through the Better Together VCS Forum in order to continue to influence and inform future policy and service developments for our communities.

About the Forum

[The Better Together Forum](#) brings together senior representatives of larger or specialist VCS organisations with a countywide remit to share best practice and look for new opportunities to collaborate.

Contacts:

Kate Burrows (Chair) kate.burrows@durhamcommunityaction.org.uk

Secretariat provided by the Council's Partnerships Team countydurhampartnership@durham.gov.uk

For further information click [here](#) or see www.durhamcommunityaction.org.uk