



BETTER TOGETHER FORUM POLICY CONFERENCE BRIEFING NOTE

Celebrating a Thriving Voluntary & Community Sector

When: Tuesday 2nd December 2025 1:30pm - 4:00pm (registration from 1pm)

Where: Spennymoor Town Hall, High Street, Spennymoor, County Durham, DL16 6DG

Context:

This is the second Policy Conference for 2025, and the latest of series of bi-annual conferences, led by the VCSE in County Durham. The Policy Forums are planned to address policy themes which are important for our sector and for our communities.

The Policy Forums are an opportunity to convene colleagues, curate cross sector insight, and to amplify the important contributions the VCSE makes to the fabric of our communities in County Durham. Critically, the aim of these conferences is to influence and shape strategic developments and decision making across the County Durham Partnership.

Regular Policy Forums have been organised over the past five years and have covered a diverse range of issues and themes including health, wellbeing and partnership working. In October 2024, the theme focused on valuing social impacts of the VCS. It demonstrated examples of social value and how social value impact measurement has been adopted by the Durham Pound as an integral part of public sector procurement. The event looked at social value as it is understood through procurement, and its “fit” with our VCSE in terms of the day-to-day operational focus, and the people they reach through their work. In June 2025 we came together to consider ‘What good grant making looks like’. The event looked beyond the means for measuring and evidencing impacts and outcomes and explored how to model and apply investment and funding into the sector so that it can work most effectively and efficiently in terms of costs and resources for both commissioners and for VCSE organisations providing services in communities.

Ultimately, these two events formed a catalyst for the VCSE to share messages with commissioners about building good relationships and how to demonstrate the impacts and the value of the work which the sector contributes to the social and economic wellbeing of the County.

The outcomes and messages emerging from these events informed recommendations through the County Durham Together Partnership for a more formal ‘County Durham Accord’ between the VCSE and public sector agencies and have also supported the development of the Public Health Thriving Together grant programme managed through Point North.

Recommendations for improved grant giving processes and the development of an Accord designed to achieve much clearer and more consistent relationships both across all public sector interests and with the VCSE (serving as community catalysts) are all part of the ongoing dialogue.

The opportunity to highlight the ever-present evidence of the value of the voluntary & community sector within our communities alongside sharing newly gathered Third Sector Trends VCSE 2025 insight data leads us to this second conference of 2025.

December Topic:

Celebrating a Thriving Voluntary & Community Sector: a showcase and networking event illustrating how local organisations overcome the challenges they face as they serve their communities.

This Policy Conference will shine a spotlight on the reality of community led activity and showcase how local voluntary & community organisations are overcoming the challenges they face. We will present a snapshot of local activity illustrating what's possible and consider what more could be done.

Better Together Forum Policy Conferences have a simple format: a keynote stimulus at the start and then focus on roundtable discussions but this time, once we have explored a brief summary of the latest Third Sector Trends research with Professor Tony Chapman we are giving the floor to a cross section of community organisations, one rural, one coastal and one delivering services across the whole county.

With **Professor Tony Chapman**, we will explore the findings from the first in a series of five reports focused on the partnerships and relationships of the third sector: [Third Sector Trends in England and Wales October 2025](#). As a large-scale, long-running project, Third Sector Trends is in the unique position to look at partnership in its social context and can track changes in practices. Professor Chapman will take us through the strength and depth of partnerships the third sector reports with partners in the VCSE, private and public sectors; hopefully sharing a picture that will help identify and navigate the risks, challenges, and opportunities that lie ahead for the VCS in Durham.

We'll hear directly from three of our Third Sector partners working across County Durham; each offering their own unique perspective:

- **Alison Patterson** from **Blackhall Community Centre** will share the journey and challenges faced within this East Coast Community.
- **Grace Crawford** from **UTASS** will showcase the challenges both **UTASS** and **Teesdale Day Clubs** faced setting up the Time Together Project in a rural area and
- **Hannah Johnson** from **Alzheimer's Society** will bring to life the challenges faced by an organisation delivering services across the county.

There will be time for a brief roundtable discussion where we'll aim to consider the following:

- How do the trends identified in this year's Third Sector survey reflect your experiences?
- What can your organisation do to navigate the road ahead?
- What support do you need?

We'll also be giving time to informal networking and would love to fill the edges of the conference room with those marketing banners we all own!! There won't be any tables for multiple goodies but if you want to bring information leaflets to share, please do so.

You'll need to register for the event; you can find a link to book your place for the December Policy Conference [here](#).