



BETTER TOGETHER FORUM POLICY CONFERENCE BRIEFING NOTE

Trust and Relationships across a system How do we create and sustain the environment for collaboration?

When: Tuesday 6th October 9:30 – 15:30 (9:00 registration)

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

Context:

This is the first Policy Conference for 2026, and the latest in a 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 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 June 2025, the theme focused on valuing and supporting a thriving VCSE. It explored the underlying aim of the [County Durham Together Partnership](#) sector subgroup: VCSE Sustainability & Investment - Leadership Group to deliver on the ambition of supporting a thriving voluntary and community sector in County Durham which is well resourced by maximising the alignment of VCSE funding.

It illustrated the characteristics and benefits of 'good grant making' and looked beyond the means for measuring and evidencing impacts and outcomes and explored how to model & apply effective and efficient investment to the sector for the benefit of both commissioners and organisations providing services in communities.

Ultimately, the event 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.

We had hoped that the outcomes and messages emerging from this event would help to inform a more formal Accord between the VCSE and public sector agencies. An Accord would be designed to achieve much clearer and more consistent relationships both across all public sector interests and with the VCSE, serving as community catalysts.

In December 2025, our policy conference explored the findings of the 'Third Sector Trends Survey and showcased the impact of three VCS in County Durham one rural, place based and Countywide VCS organisations. Roundtable discussions focused on what our organisations need to do to navigate the challenges we may face on the road ahead, the reflection from this session was that

there are strong foundations and networks operating in County Durham on which to build more effective collaboration to support the capacity issues we all see within a framework of very tight resources.

Nationally, recognition that building trusting relationships across sectors is at the centre of discussions about how 'civil society' and the public sector work together to support resilient communities. In County Durham we have collectively shaped an Approach to Wellbeing and the work of the County Durham Together Partnership (as part of the County Durham Partnership) demonstrates the desire to listen more and learn together. However, the conditions we are all operating within are in constant flux and in a pattern of constant change many can feel that their perspective has not been heard.

The Better Together Forum aims to convene spaces which gather reflection and connect across the system for conversation.

This ongoing dialogue with cross sector colleagues leads us to the theme of this first policy conference of 2026.

October Topic:

From [Civil Society Covenant](#) to [Regional Action](#), how do we create and sustain the environment for collaboration: Does County Durham Need an 'Accord'?

This Policy Conference aims to look beyond the transactional relationships we all engage in across the 'system' within and between both the Voluntary & Community Sector and the Public Sector.

This purpose of this Policy Conference is to provide the space for honest reflection in order to explore the conditions required for better trusted and valued relationships between sectors and to explore how building on the firm traditions of partnership working in County Durham, we can truly incubate spaces where parity of esteem are fully reflected in our practice and the balance of power is honestly shared across the system.

Better Together Forum Policy Conferences have a simple format: a keynote stimulus at the start and then focus on roundtable discussions.

This time, supported by [Mutual Ventures](#) who will help facilitate our discussions, we will have the opportunity to explore:

- Values and beliefs
- Trust and Relationships
- Mechanisms that enable collaboration

We'll hear from Neil Denton Co-Lead, [Relationship Project](#) about the importance of relational practice at the heart of 'systems' and Scott Darraugh CEO/Founder of [Social adVentures](#) who has been part of shaping and developing Manchester's 'Accord'.

We want to provide the space to shine a light on the experience and the context we are all working in and explore if an Accord between VCS and Public Sectors in County Durham will actually help us create the conditions of respect, trust and parity of esteem across all aspects of collaboration.

The key aim here is to further ignite the culture change required to truly value all sum parts of the whole together!

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