



Better Together Policy Forum

Celebrating a Thriving Voluntary & Community Sector

Introduction

This showcase and networking event at Spennymoor Town Hall was held on Tuesday 2nd December and was the second Policy Conference for 2025. It offered the 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.

It was attended by 71 people representing 39 different organisations and opened by Kate Burrows, Executive Director of Durham Community Action, and Chair of Better Together VCS Forum.

Background

Better Together Policy conferences aim to influence and shape strategic developments and decision making across the County Durham Partnership. Regular Policy Forums take place and over the past five years, they have covered a diverse range of issues and themes including health, wellbeing and partnership working. In June 2025 we came together to consider 'What good grant making looks like' and to improve the efficacy and efficiency of costs and resources for both commissioners and VCSE organisations, looking beyond solely measuring and evidencing impacts and outcomes to exploring how to model and apply investment and funding into the sector.

In October 2024 the Forum focused on demonstrating the social value of the VCSE. We explored how social value impact measurement has been adopted by the [County Durham Pound](#) as an integral part of public sector procurement and its "fit" with our VCSE in terms of the day-to-day operational focus, and the people they reach through their work.

The learning from these sessions was taken forward by the County Durham Together VCSE Leadership Group and is helping shape and develop an 'Accord' to build a culture that fosters 'good grant making' and by working together to support the effective and efficient allocation of resources to a valued and thriving VCSE sector.

Presentations

Better Together Forum Policy Conferences usually have a simple format: a keynote presentation at the start followed by roundtable discussions. This time, the purpose was to shine a spotlight on the reality of community led activity and to showcase how a cross section of community organisations, one rural, one coastal and one delivering services across the whole county are overcoming the challenges they face and we wanted to do this alongside presenting newly gathered Third Sector Trends VCSE 2025 insight data.

A copy of the presentations can be found [here](#)

Professor Tony Chapman started the presentations by exploring the findings from the first in a series of five reports focusing 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 took us through the strength and depth of partnerships the third sector reports with partners in the VCSE, private and public sectors.

Key themes emerging from the survey included difficulties experienced in the sector when recruiting and retaining staff, volunteers and trustees with a particular reliance on volunteers to keep the organisation running within small/micro VCSE services. There appears to be a lack of targeted investment into organisational/staff development and a reduction in the overall level of partnership working organisations take part in, whether that is due to capacity is not clear.

As to funding, there was no change in the number of organisations drawing on reserves compared to 2022 and 84% of third sector organisations stated they were bidding for funding to do something new. An acknowledgement of charitable activity always requiring at least some grant funding to maintain services was shared as well as how applying for and managing contracts is becoming increasingly difficult thus explaining a reduction in contract reliance and a slight increase in grant reliance within the findings. Leaders in the sector were more worried than excited about managing with the resources they had to hand however, they were overall more positive and 'excited' about campaigning, bidding for 'new' work and working in collaboration with their VCSE partners future opportunities and in Durham we know we have some excellent partnership working in place.

After the unique insight from Professor Tony Chapman, we then heard from three Third Sector partners working across County Durham; each offering their own unique perspective:

Alison Patterson from **Blackhall Community Centre** shared the journey and challenges faced within this East Coast Community.

Take away points were that you need to shape your organisation's strategy to thrive and most importantly to know who you are, what you want to do and what you don't or can't do. To get this right it takes time and Blackhall Community Centre built a solid base in Blackhall by actively listening to their community. Providing ever-changing services, the centre is now a thriving hub in Blackhall because the team spent time getting as connected as they could to the people within it to build trust, and services that were useful and responded to what the community needed.

Grace Crawford from **UTASS** showcased the challenges both **UTASS** and **Teesdale Day Clubs** faced setting up the Time Together Project in a rural area.

Grace pointed to the specific rural issues relating to poverty and social isolation within the communities both UTASS and Teesdale Day Clubs serve. The geography in Teesdale provides very specific challenges to building connectivity, relationships and enabling people to access both statutory and social/community services, particularly if reliant on public transport. The need to manage capacity and get a new partnership and service right takes time and proper investment in the volunteer or staff workforce to build skills and a true understanding of the needs of the population.

Hannah Johnson from **Alzheimer's Society** outlined the challenges faced by an organisation delivering services across the county.

Hannah provided an overview of the work the Alzheimer's Society does across County Durham and outlined that it takes long term commitment, passion and energy to succeed and continue delivering those services. Being creative and open to accepting what works or doesn't when setting up new projects and finding opportunities to work together in both formal and informal partnerships locally and wider, being key to success. Ensuring larger organisations work in partnership with existing local and smaller charities to deliver new contracts ensures a service will be able to meet real need due to the relationships people have with those grassroots services.

Lindsay Henderson from Durham Community Action shared an overview of the partnership and networking spaces facilitated by DCA across County Durham that offer organisations the opportunity to connect, share and influence practice and decisions in the sector.

Round Table Discussions

Kate Burrows introduced the short round table discussions and asked attendees to respond to the following questions considering the content of the presentations:

- 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?

Summary

Attendees agreed with the reflection of the Third Sector Trends Survey findings in the main, with some people surprised that funding concerns did not emerge as more of an issue. Attendees noted a lack of core and longer-term funding opportunities, increased competition for funding as well as broad acknowledgement of experiencing difficulties recruiting and retaining volunteers and trustees to support the running of services.

When asked how to navigate the road ahead there were some excellent practical suggestions put forward that DCA can pick up through their wider work. They include the need for peer support, accessing organisational development opportunities, how to forward plan and diversifying income, improving the ability to use AI and building better comms to remind other organisations and the public that they exist. Understanding what is 'out there' and mapping the diversity of sector was felt to be important so every organisation can see how it fits or could fit into the current system and improve partnership working.

Attendees shared the type of support their organisations needed to thrive in the sector, those being better transport, keeping connected and building partnership and influencing opportunities with the support of DCA. Many felt they would benefit from governance and trustee support and that having an organisational health check/critical friend approach alongside support to understand how to measure impact and social value would raise their sustainability. Understanding and linking into the work of the NHS 10yr plan was identified and several attendees thought it was important to be willing to identify what isn't working and build honest relationships with funders, including having funders visit their service, to ensure their investment meets needs appropriately.

The Policy Forum established that there are strong foundations and networks operating in County Durham and an optimistic view of partnership working held by the sector. This type of collaboration could support an increase in capacity within already tight resources.

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, please visit <https://www.durhamcommunityaction.org.uk/better-together>