Better Together Policy Forum

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

Introduction

This Policy Forum held at Spennymoor Town Hall on Tuesday 6th October was the first Policy Conference for 2026/27. The event brought together colleagues from the public sector and voluntary, community and social enterprise sector (VCSE) across County Durham. It offered the opportunity to explore would enable us to work together with greater trust, respect and parity of esteem and if an accord could help create the conditions required for true collaboration.

It was attended by 78 people from 44 different organisations and was opened by Kate Burrows, Executive Director of Durham Community Action, and Chair of Better Together VCS Forum.

Background

Regular Better Together Policy conferences take place, and they aim to influence and shape strategic developments and decision making across the County Durham Partnership. In June 2026 forum attendees considered newly gathered Third Sector Trends VCSE 2025 insight data and learned from partner organisations about the reality of rural, coastal and county wide community led activity and how any challenges can be overcome to help navigate the road ahead. This conference built on earlier discussions around VCSE sustainability, investment, good grant making and the contribution of voluntary and community organisations to the county's social and economic wellbeing.

In October 2024 we demonstrated the social value of the VCSE and how social value impact measurement is being adopted by the County Durham Pound as an integral part of public sector procurement. 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. We looked beyond solely measuring and evidencing impacts and outcomes to exploring how to model and apply investment and funding into the sector.

The learning from these sessions was taken forward by the County Durham Together VCSE Leadership Group and began shaping and developing an 'Accord' and this October 2026 conference continued these developments to understand if an Accord was both needed and what conditions were needed to embed trusted partnership and collaboration across County Durham.

Presentations

Better Together Forum Policy Conferences have a simple format: a keynote presentation at the start followed by roundtable discussions. This time we invited Andrew Laird, an external facilitator from Mutual Ventures to take us through the day starting with contributions from **Neil Denton** of the **Relationship Project** and **Scott Darraugh** of **Social adVentures** to introduce relational practice and learning from Greater Manchester's Accord. Andrew then guided us through conversations throughout the day to help establish a shared understanding of good collaboration, examine barriers honestly and identify the practical changes needed if County Durham were to commit to developing an Accord.

Putting Relationships First: Neil Denton of the **Relationship Project** started by introducing relational practice, reminding attendees of the importance of social capital and establishing authentic relationships. Relationships are not a "frilly extra" to our work, they ***are*** our work. We all have a part to play in building relational infrastructure and it is critical to ensuring services are fit for purpose and reach people who need it in the most efficient and effective ways. We were invited to become 'Bridge Builders' to widen, repair, strengthen or create new bridges in our own communities by being open to challenge, taking ownership, reaching out and making new connections, being brave and turning connections into collaboration by deepening our understanding of each other.

The Power of Partnerships: Scott Darraugh of **Social adVentures** outlined Greater Manchester's approach to creating their Accord. He outlined trust, alignment and accountability as being imperative in reaching a truly integrated approach. Having the Accord jointly owned by the VCSE Leadership Group and all the local and regional statutory decision makers cemented a commitment to partnering with and supporting the development of local VCSE organisations. Scott introduced the Continuum of Collaboration asking attendees to reflect and consider where they and their organisation stand on this continuum from being in competition for resources through to having a fully integrated and unified approach to service planning and funding. Examples were shared of GM's Alternative Provider Collaborative enabling better investment and outcomes in integrated health care delivery and the Inclusive Economic Partnership using infrastructure to unlock private sector resource and ensure equitable distribution of wealth and opportunities for all.

A copy of both presentations can be found here

Round Table Discussions

Andrew Laird introduced the three conversations the day was organised around and asked attendees to respond to the following questions:

- **Values and Beliefs:** What should characterise the relationship between the public sector and VCSE organisations in County Durham?
- **Trust and Relationships:** What creates trust between organisations and sectors, what undermines it, and how can we make trust more resilient?
- **Mechanisms that enable collaboration:** What needs to be put in place so that collaboration becomes the normal way of working rather than something that depends on individual relationships and goodwill?

The closing discussion considered whether there is a shared appetite for an Accord and creating greater accountability across the system along with what could happen immediately, what required further work and a small number of practical actions that could make a real difference, rather than restating good intentions. A summary of the conversations is below, and you can find the full conference report following the structure of the day **here**

Summary

The conversations throughout the day connected the quality of relationships with the practical conditions in which organisations operate, and the central message emerged that stronger collaboration requires both changes in behaviour and changes in systems. Openness and mutual respect matter, but their credibility depends on everyday practice, including realistic deadlines, reliable payment, proportionate reporting, and meaningful involvement before decisions are fixed. There was interest in developing an Accord. Participants wanted it to clarify expectations, support accountability and sustain relationships through organisational and personnel changes. However, they also questioned whether it would change behaviour, who would lead and resource it, and whether the right organisations would participate.

The discussion supported further development and testing of an Accord rather than an assumption that a final agreement was approved.

The conference concluded by distinguishing between actions that could begin immediately and areas requiring further development. Early priorities included identifying who wants to be involved, who can champion and coordinate the work, and what resources would be needed. Participants also highlighted the importance of mapping existing partnerships, forums and decision-making structures to identify gaps and avoid duplication, while encouraging organisations to start reflecting now on lessons learned, effective relationships and examples of good practice that could inform future change. Alongside these immediate actions, participants recognised the need to strengthen representation and inclusion by ensuring the right decision-makers are involved while creating mechanisms for smaller organisations and wider networks to have a voice. There was also a strong call to establish shared values and objectives, focusing first on agreeing what the VCSE sector wants to achieve and improve before developing any formal Accord.

Further work is needed to gather evidence and learning from other areas, develop case studies that demonstrate the value of relational approaches, and ensure knowledge is shared effectively. Questions about leadership, funding, governance and alignment with existing partnerships also need to be resolved. Participants stressed the importance of managing expectations, demonstrating early progress and recognising that both the Accord and the relationships underpinning it will need to evolve over time in response to local, regional and strategic developments.

Each participant agreed to reflect on the day and take the key messages from the conversations back to their organisation and networks to raise awareness of the possibility of an Accord, how it could benefit County Durham and how they could be involved.

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.

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