Better Together Policy Forum
6th October, Spennymoor Town Hall

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

Full Conference Report

Overview

This Policy Forum held at Spennymoor Town Hall on Tuesday 6th October explored what would enable the public sector and voluntary, community and social enterprise sector (VCSE) in County Durham to work together with greater trust, respect and parity of esteem. The discussion connected the quality of relationships with the practical conditions in which organisations operate.

The central message emerging is 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.

Main messages from the discussion

- Start with people and communities. Services, funding and evidence should reflect people's needs and journeys, with lived experience influencing both priorities and solutions.
- Make equality visible in decisions. VCSE organisations should contribute strategic insight and help shape commissioning, rather than being approached only for delivery or late consultation.
- Build trust into organisations. Relationships need multiple points of contact, shared expectations, continuity arrangements and leadership support.
- Collaboration activity needs to be properly resourced. Participation, relationship building and shared learning take time, particularly for small and volunteer led organisations.
- Funding, procurement, reporting and governance should all enable collaboration and recognise long term value.
- Treat any potential Accord as an ongoing process. Its value will depend on co-creation, use, review and reciprocal accountability.

How the discussion developed

The day was opened by Kate Burrows, Executive Director of Durham Community Action and Chair of Better Together VCS Forum. It was attended by 78 people from 44 different organisations. Facilitated externally by Andrew Laird from Mutual Ventures, the day was organised

around three conversations: values and beliefs; trust and relationships; and mechanisms that enable collaboration. The closing discussion considered what could happen immediately and what required further work. This note follows that structure and draws together related points across the conversations.

Context and purpose

The Better Together Forum policy conferences provide a cross-sector discussion intended to influence strategic developments across the County Durham Partnership. This conference built on earlier discussions about VCSE sustainability, investment, good grant making and the contribution of voluntary and community organisations to the county's social and economic wellbeing. The agenda aimed to establish a shared understanding of good collaboration, examine barriers honestly and identify practical changes. It also tested whether an Accord could help capture commitments and create accountability. Contributions from Neil Denton of the Relationship Project and Scott Darraugh of Social adVentures were included to introduce relational practice and learning from Greater Manchester.

Presentations

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

Conversation 1 - Values and beliefs

Communities and service users as the starting point

Participants repeatedly returned to a shared purpose of doing the best for service users. They wanted genuine conversations, local decision making and services shaped around people's circumstances. Concerns about fitting people into predetermined outputs and funding criteria reflected a perceived gap between that purpose and the way commissioning can operate.

Community knowledge was viewed as an essential contribution to decisions. Participants felt that formal data could miss local insight and lived experience. They wanted trusted community organisations involved in reaching people whose voices are less often heard, and service users involved in co-production. Comments about excessive signposting reinforced the importance of understanding a person's whole journey through support.

Parity of esteem in practice
Equality was discussed in terms of influence over priorities, money and service design. Participants questioned how power could be shared when one partner controls the funding. Some described the VCSE as an afterthought, approached for quick consultation without feedback or involvement in solutions.

Proposals included VCSE involvement in commissioning decisions, potentially through thematic representation; clearer routes to decision makers; and commissioners visiting services to understand delivery and community needs. Participants also recognised an exchange of assets beyond money: VCSE organisations bring ideas, innovation, trusted relationships and access to communities.

Mutual understanding and honesty
The discussion called for deep listening, empathy, accessible language and constructive disagreement. Participants wanted greater clarity about the expectations attached to different funding sources and the constraints facing commissioners. They also asked for honesty about what had not worked, including within the VCSE.

Competition between organisations, including larger and smaller VCSE bodies, could weaken collaboration. Protecting organisational income or relationships could conflict with community interests. One comment challenged any assumption that working for the community automatically created an entitlement to funding. Mutual respect therefore sat alongside responsibility to demonstrate value and be candid about delivery.

Funding and the meaning of value
Participants contrasted long-term strategies with short funding awards, including a reference to ten-year strategies supported by one year funding. They argued for recognising sustained impact and quality, rather than relying on short term indicators alone. Inflexible criteria were seen as encouraging organisations to pursue funding that did not fit their core purpose.

The proposed shift was towards tailoring grants to community needs, recognising local services and using reporting requirements proportionate to the funding. Participants also acknowledged that demonstrating value takes up capacity and that different organisations may understand or measure value differently.

Principles emerging from the conversation
Taken together, the proposals suggest five principles for further development:

- Put community needs and lived experience first;
- Share influence from the start;
- Communicate honestly and respectfully;
- Value local knowledge and long-term outcomes;
- Make collaboration inclusive of small organisations.

These are a synthesis of the discussion, rather than an agreed final statement of principles.

Conversation 2 - Trust and relationships
What builds trust
Participants associated trust with openness, knowledge of one another, shared objectives and reliable communication. Meeting funders and service users, understanding restrictions and explaining decisions helped partners interpret each other's actions. Shared learning and a willingness to offer expertise or resources were also valued.
The discussion distinguished personal goodwill from organisational culture. Boards, trustees and

leaders need to support the relationship, while staff need permission to work collaboratively. Participants wanted partners to understand both the formal requirements and the less explicit expectations that shape how organisations behave.

What undermines trust

Several concerns related to consistency between words and actions. Examples included late invoice payments, changed meetings and deadlines, last minute changes to requirements, short funding windows and consultation after decisions appeared to have been settled. Such experiences were seen as limiting influence and leaving VCSE organisations carrying uncertainty or financial risk.

Funding competition and repeated demands for new projects could discourage sharing and continuity. Participants also described tension between quality and quantity, and between intensive work with an individual and numerical performance expectations. Performance management was recognised as useful but could feel controlling where it did not reflect delivery realities or allow flexibility.

Other concerns included a lack of transparency, poorly managed expectations, limited tolerance of mistakes and assumptions about the other sector. The perceived contrast between a continuously available VCSE and a public sector working conventional hours was raised as a barrier to examine, rather than treated as an established description. Online meetings were considered useful for information sharing but less effective for developing empathy and relationships.

Moving from personal to institutional trust

The question of what would survive if key people left organisations exposed a recurring vulnerability. Participants described relationships resting on a single contact and observed that one person could also damage trust. Changes in staff, leadership, administration and local structures could interrupt understanding built over time.

Suggested responses included relationships between several people in each organisation, clear roles and expectations, shared records and continuity arrangements. Recruitment and induction should reinforce relationship building as a core skill and expectation. Joint learning and team development could help carry that culture across organisational boundaries.

Behaviours proposed for partners

- Be open about pressures, interests, capacity and what can realistically be delivered. Explain constraints early and manage expectations.
- Share problems and support recovery when delivery becomes difficult. Make room for learning from failure across ordinary contracts, as well as innovation projects.
- Disagree respectfully, reduce blame and be able to say no or challenge disproportionate processes without fear.
- Give up some control, share knowledge and place community benefit ahead of organisational self-preservation where these conflict.
- Invest time in relationships, include people with decision making authority and maintain contact beyond the end of a project.
- Participation itself needs support. The notes proposed paying or reimbursing grassroots organisations for their time and recognising relationship building within resources, rather than expecting small teams to absorb it alongside delivery.

Conversation 3: Mechanisms that enable collaboration

Barriers in systems and structures

Participants identified procurement, internal permissions, governance hierarchies and lengthy decision pathways as barriers even where individuals wanted to collaborate. Some felt that people

attending partnership discussions lacked authority to act. Statutory responsibilities, safeguarding, regulation and accountability were acknowledged, alongside a question about whether rules were sometimes used as an explanation without fully exploring alternatives.

The county's scale, number of stakeholders and range of boards and partnerships made opportunities difficult to navigate. Too many meetings could consume scarce capacity. Changes from Area Action Partnerships to Local Networks were associated in some comments with disrupted relationships or distance from decisions. Participants wanted community feedback to reach decision makers without being diluted and wanted clearer feedback in return.

Funding and commissioning

Proposals included longer term and more sustainable support, capacity building, sufficient time to form collaborations before bidding, and greater recognition of collaborative applications. Funders were encouraged to visit organisations and understand delivery capability rather than relying principally on bid writing strength.

A standard contract offer was suggested, alongside a more supportive commissioning relationship in which funder and provider jointly want delivery to succeed. VCSE organisations were also asked to be honest about capacity and which organisation was best placed to deliver. Participants wanted local delivery valued, subject to quality, and suggested recognising partnerships with local organisations when larger providers enter the area. These were proposals for exploration, rather than agreed procurement changes.

Proportionate reporting and shared learning

A common reporting approach, developed with the VCSE, was a repeated practical suggestion. Participants described different funders asking for different information, with organisations and service users bearing the burden. They wanted requirements proportionate to award value and scope to include stories, qualitative evidence and longer-term outcomes alongside quantitative measures.

Evaluation was seen as an opportunity for reflective learning, rather than only a check against indicators. Suggested mechanisms included group reflection, mentoring, coaching and sharing effective partnerships across the system. Participants also wanted space to review changing needs during contracts without arbitrary changes to expectations.

Infrastructure and inclusive participation

Other proposals included: data sharing agreements; clearer objectives and delegated authority; mapping existing forums, partnerships and gaps; and a marketplace of skills to connect partners. Place based approaches and existing County Durham structures were identified as foundations to use.

Participation is needed to reach beyond the organisations most often present. Suggestions included funding engagement, allowing contributions outside meetings and offering evening opportunities for volunteer-led groups. Community involvement and relationship building should be planned into the work from the beginning.

Practical priorities emerging

The strongest proposals were to:

- Resource collaboration properly;
- Improve consistency of funding and commissioning.
- Simplify and co-design reporting.
- Create shared learning and data arrangements.

Piloting changes through real projects was suggested to test whether new arrangements improve practice, including in contexts such as safeguarding where requirements need careful handling.

The potential role of an Accord

Appetite and intended value

Participants saw potential for an Accord to clarify expectations, make relationships more consistent and give partners a shared basis for asking for what they need. A collective agreement could help organisations challenge poor behaviour or disproportionate demands with greater confidence. It could also make commitments less dependent on an individual champion.

However, support was qualified. Participants asked whether an Accord would change behaviour or become words on a page, whether the work involved would produce sufficient long term benefit and whether the organisations whose involvement mattered most would sign up. Interest in Greater Manchester sat alongside questions about the experience of the earlier Compact and what a new approach would do differently.

Conditions for a useful Accord

- Co-create it with communities, public sector partners and the breadth of the VCSE, including smaller groups, with community needs influencing the process from the start.
- Secure senior and institutional commitment, including from people who can authorise changes and sustain them through their organisations.
- Identify leadership, coordination and resources, including support for participation and time to build relationships.
- Connect values to practical expectations on commissioning, reporting, communication, involvement and behaviour.
- Make accountability reciprocal with a way to challenge breaches of agreed practice and clarity about consequences.
- Keep it active through review, learning and adaptation, and test its ambitions through practical work.
- These conditions describe the direction of discussion. The notes do not establish an agreed governance model, enforcement mechanism, budget or implementation timetable.
- Participants asked whether the Accord should be county based or regional and how it should respond to changes across the North East. The follow-up discussion called for horizon scanning and a clearer understanding of wider policy and public sector change. That work needs to inform scope without losing the focus on County Durham's communities.

From conversation to action

The final discussion separated ideas for immediate action from issues requiring further work. The following consolidates those suggestions. They are potential next steps raised in the workshop, with ownership, resourcing and timescales still to be settled.

Actions identified for an early start

- Identify interest and leadership - Find out who wants to participate, who would champion change and who could coordinate it. Establish what resources are needed. Participants specifically sought engagement with senior figures across the council, NHS, Integrated Care Board and policing structures, while also asking how to include partners who were absent.
- Map the existing landscape - Identify forums, partnerships, local networks and routes to decisions, using the exercise to reveal gaps in participation and connections. This could help avoid creating additional meetings without a clear purpose.
- Begin reflection and learning now - Participants proposed personal reflection, sharing insights

within organisations and discussing what had gone wrong, what could be done differently and where relationships already work well. Learning from other areas and drawing together practical examples could strengthen the case for change.

Issues requiring further development

- Representation and inclusion - Who can legitimately speak for a sector, how are smaller organisations heard and how do representatives feed back? The discussion called both for the right decision makers in the room and for routes that reach beyond the usual participants.
- Shared values and aims - Develop an agreed set of values and clarify what the VCSE wants to change in processes and reporting. Use these to start discussions across sectors rather than treating the wording of an Accord as the first task.
- Evidence and learning - Research other Accords, examine relevant examples and assemble case studies demonstrating the value of relational approaches. Consider how best practice and learning would remain accessible, including possible online arrangements.
- Coordination and resources - Resolve who drives the work, how it is funded and how it relates to existing commissions, thematic groups, partnership boards and local networks. Test senior support and readiness for change across organisations.
- Timescales and wider change - Manage expectations, show progress and recognise that the agreement and relationships will need to evolve. Consider regional developments and longer term strategies alongside immediate local opportunities.

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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