

Better Together VCS Forum Notes – 11 June 2026

Agenda Item	Key Issues
Welcome & Introduction	Kate opened the meeting, welcoming everyone to the DCA offices in Willington. Attendance was good with several new faces and introductions made. 18 attended with apologies received by 5 organisations.
Introduction to Today's Topic: Local Networks	Reference made to the long-awaited transition from Area Action Partnerships (AAPs) to Local Networks (LNs) and how this session will help the VCSE consider how to engage both as a sector and as individual organisations.
Setting the Scene – Local Networks Michael Wilkes Local Network Manager – North DCC	Michael Wilkes, Local Network Manager – North provided the introductory presentation for the topic. The presentation highlighted the transition timeline of AAP to LN from the initial review started in 2022 review supported by an external consultant (ERS) to the recent member led review in March 2026. Main changes in March were to governance arrangements and geography reducing LNs to 12 areas, resulting in staffing changes. All 12 areas now map closer to Parish council boundaries (only outlier is Etherley). LN roles, areas and contacts can be found within the presentation. All elected members are required to participate in their Network and due to boundary changes elected members will be part of one Network only (not the case with previous AAPs). Governance arrangements can be seen in presentation slides – the Stakeholder Board and Community Forums are the places VCSE have the opportunity to have a direct seat. Local Area Network Plans will be created for each area and drive the work with a focus on evidence, data and insight from sources such as Durham Insights but balanced with local resident and stakeholder feedback. As with AAPs some funding will be attached to the work of local networks alongside the administration of elected member Councillor Budgets. It is hoped the available funding is seen as part of local solutions identified within the Local Plans with a strong focus on community ownership and resilience. LN Coordinators are expected to be 'out there' in the community gathering intelligence and feedback with at least 1 event taking place in each ward per year. Annual reports will be produced to reflect progress. A new function on Let's Talk will enable direct feedback from residents and the local community on issues important to them if they can't attend drop ins – this will be monitored and used to influence activity. Allocated funding of £90,000 per year (reduced from £100k) can be carried over more than one year to enable the opportunity for multi-year funding for appropriate projects. The LN team are currently developing an easier/streamlined application process. In addition, Councillor Budgets of £19,400 per 98 members should also be used to align to each area plan.
Roundtable Discussion	Discussion focused on what these changes mean and the opportunities and challenges this new geography and governance brings for the VCSE along with any actions needed to support the VCSE's influence, presence and role in the new system. Opportunities – Overall the new approach was received positively as it seems lobbying for multi-year funding focusing on quality and meeting evidenced need has been listened to and is now possible with the new system. Simplifying a new application process

	was welcomed as is DCA's potential input into shaping this for the sector. It was noted by MW that new elected members appear open to learning so is there a potential opportunity to influence their new round of EM Training to improve knowledge of VCSE needs and safeguarding etc. Each Stakeholder panel can co-opt up to 6 members. MW noted a new Durham wide Homelessness fund (£100k pyr) being administered alongside the LNs. Challenges – capacity to engage in all panels means VCSE influence and voice potentially restricted. Budget reduced for each LN and there are 2.5 staff members for each area. Concern expressed re: larger organisations delivering locally not being seen as 'local or worthy for this funding'. Can this be a way to identify and promote collaboration & partnership working. Actions – Local Network Team to consider how DCA can support to convene VCSE representatives attending LN Panels to ensure understanding of the needs of the sector as a whole as well as individual service needs are reflected through the decision-making Boards in this governance structure. DCA can support the shaping of the application process, so it fits the sector's needs and highlights / signposts any safeguarding issues for support.
Partner Updates	Updates were brief – Noted Let's Talk consultations including Dementia, Financial Resilience/Poverty strategy. Healthwatch 30th annual report/event 9th July @ Bishop Auckland football club. Durham Wildlife Trust Marketing and Wellbeing engagement vacancies, County Durham Furniture Help Scheme set up repair café in Chilton and Wheels to Work have leased their 400th bike.
Date of Next Meeting	BTF - Policy Conference on Tuesday 6th October 2026 – Time and venue tbc