

# Better Together VCS Forum Notes – 12 August 2025

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Agenda Item	Key Issues
<b>Welcome &amp; introductions</b>	<p>Apologies were received from 17 organisations and 7 people attended, which included representation from Durham Wildlife Trust, Investing in Children and Waythrough. Kate welcomed everyone to the meeting at the DCA offices in Willington and introductions were made.</p> <p><b>Action:</b> Forum members are reminded to let the County Durham Partnership know whether they are going to attend (rather than a simple calendar acceptance) in order to get a more accurate picture of how many people will be attending the meeting.</p>
<b>Introduction</b>	<p>Kate gave an introduction to the session which focussed on how the Safeguarding Partnerships better engage with the VCS and Abby gave an overview of how she links into the partnerships, themed groups, think tanks and assurance groups and how DCA support the sector in relation to Safeguarding.</p> <p>Jemma Austin, Research and Insight project lead for DCA also attended the meeting. She spoke about a piece of work being undertaken with both Safeguarding Boards to develop a survey to explore the experiences of the VCSOs in dealing with safeguarding report, training and resources. The survey will explore how the sector are able to access these and the outcomes will help to shape good practice. When the survey is ready, it will be circulated between August and end of October with an opportunity for 1-2-1 discussions and also the opportunity to take part in a focus group in October.</p> <p><b>Action:</b> VCS colleagues who would be interested in taking part in the small focus group should contact Jemma directly and themes or ideas to bring to the focus group should be shared with DCA to include. Open ended questions are encouraged to provide meaningful feedback. A comms pack with more about the survey and links will be circulated in due course.</p>
<b>Roundtable Discussion</b>	<p>Heidi Gibson, Safeguarding Adults Partnership Business Manager was unable to attend the meeting and the discussions focused on the Safeguarding Children’s Partnership (SCP). Adrian Green the Independent Scrutineer of the County Durham CSP who posed a series of questions which will form a report to the Board with a series of recommendations informed by the answers. Adrian emphasised that the best model of Safeguarding should demonstrate complementary practice, supported by what actions partners take and what actions that Safeguarding Board, adding that there should be community confidence (not just curiosity) in reporting.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is the safeguarding partnership engaging effectively with the voluntary sector?</li> <li>• Where are the current gaps in communication, support, or representation?</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What could be improved in how the partnership works with voluntary organisations?</li> <li>• How do you feel about your organisation’s role and experience within the safeguarding system?</li> <li>• How confident do you feel in representing the voluntary sector in safeguarding discussions?</li> <li>• What assurance does DCA have that the sector understands and can identify safeguarding issues such as poverty, mental health, young carers, and DBS requirements?</li> </ul> <p>Key points in the discussion around the answers to these questions included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There is engagement through forums, board meetings, and working groups both through Abby and other voluntary sector partners, but this is challenging as the diversity and scale of the sector make representation difficult.</li> <li>• There are concerns about the language used by the partnerships in communications being a barrier which can affect volunteer confidence, particularly in smaller organisations where they may struggle to meet safeguarding expectations. e.g. village halls.</li> <li>• Some organisations (particularly smaller ones) may also struggle to recognise the subtle signs (“hooks”) that indicate a safeguarding concern, such as casual comments, behaviours and patterns that require trained awareness to interpret. It was noted that there is sometimes a blurring of boundaries between welfare and safeguarding which also adds to the challenge.</li> <li>• Resourcing of support for the voluntary and community sector is challenging to enable some smaller organisations to stay up to date with safeguarding training, monitoring, and practice, aligned with expectations set out in the safeguarding assurance matrix.</li> <li>• The question of whether DCA’s role in representing the sector in the Safeguarding arena should be formally funded was touched upon. Products such as Kitemark can help DCA to work with an organisation to understand their Safeguarding requirements and develop good practice.</li> <li>• The point was raised that if bespoke training is arranged for a voluntary organisation, DCA are made aware to record this.</li> <li>• Understanding of the sector of the safeguarding requirements of their organisation could be improved with measures to tackle the technical triangle, ensuring that information is not too broad or complex, and more clear, practical resources translating policy into everyday practice are available.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Date of Next Meeting</b></p>	<p>The next meeting of the Better Together Forum will be held at 10.00 a.m. on Thursday 23 October 2025 at the DCA offices in Wellington.</p>