

# Better Together VCS Forum Notes – 23 October 2025

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Agenda Item	Key Issues
<b>Welcome &amp; Introduction</b>	<p>Apologies were received from 10 organisations and 10 people attended, which included representation from PCP, OASES &amp; NE First. Kate welcomed everyone to the meeting at the DCA offices in Willington and introductions were made.</p> <p>Kate gave an introduction to the meeting which is the second in a new format of roundtable discussions on matters that are important to the VCSE sector in County Durham. Kate reminded everyone of the upcoming policy forum which will be held on the 2<sup>nd</sup> December (details below) and mentioned that Tony Chapman (Durham University) will be a key note speaker.</p> <p>Lindsay introduced the speakers, explaining that the purpose of the day is to alleviate fears around the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and to enhance excitement around concept, and practical application, adding that DCA are considering where they may need to look at to support the sector around the subject.</p> <p>A copy of the presentations given below can be found here.</p>
<b>Understanding Artificial Intelligence (AI) for social good</b>	<p><a href="#">Dr Andy Dow</a>, is a lecturer and researcher in the field of HCI (Human-Computer Interaction) at Northumbria University. In his presentation, Andy explored the opportunities, challenges, and ethical considerations of using Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the VCSE sector. The presentation covered what AI is, how to identify AI generated content, and the importance of prompt engineering for effective use, suggesting the use of a prompt template to make instructions clearer and more effective, leading to better results.</p> <p>Much of the discussion focussed around the presentation slide on ethical concerns such as data privacy and bias (based on the information that the AI tool can access rather than on real world information), and the environmental impact of data storage and use. Andy also touched on the pace of AI development and the challenges for the sector in terms of gaps in policy and the ability to keep up with training, along with the expense of solutions.</p> <p>Andy welcomed contacted from Forum Members through his email <a href="mailto:andrew.dow@northumbria.ac.uk">andrew.dow@northumbria.ac.uk</a></p>
<b>Using AI in a grant application setting</b>	<p>Jess O'Neill from <a href="#">Plinth</a> gave her presentation. Plinth is an organisation which works with community groups, charities, and local authorities to help them run services more efficiently and provide tools for simplified case management, bookings, volunteer coordination, grants, etc.</p> <p>The presentation covered how AI can help VCSE organisations save time and improve grant writing by supporting idea generation, planning, fund matching, and feedback. Jess also shared funders' cautious optimism in using AI but mentioned their ethical concerns and the need for clearer guidance. She highlighted the National Lottery as a positive example where a funder has used AI and emphasised that organisations should think through how they use it, whether it is the best tool to use, and what they share online. Plinth are also working Point North and in particular are helping them to develop online tools to assist organisations</p>

	<p>to provide better applications and to help them to vocalise and describe what they are intending to deliver in a clear and well-articulated way.</p> <p>Two points of note for future reference are a regional project that Plinth are doing with VONNE, which will be published in due course and the <a href="#">Plinth Foundation</a>, that the organisation has set up, designed to assist small charities reduce their administrative burdens by providing free AI tools and support and a small grant. Jess shared her email which is <a href="mailto:jess@plinth.org.uk">jess@plinth.org.uk</a></p>
<b>AI Debt Advisor Project</b>	<p>Edward Pickering from Citizen's Advice County Durham gave a presentation about the new project that CAB are developing in conjunction with the Money and Pensions Service which is one element of a wider national programme of different projects.</p> <p>The project is in two parts:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. using AI to make the job of the CAB advisors easier through providing administrative AI tools using Co-pilot. The cost of a licence for Co-pilot is around £30 per month per head but Edward explained that it is anticipated that the cost of running the online service, once established will be offset against the time saved, making debt advisors jobs easier and cutting the admin by making it more cost effective.</li> <li>2. the development of an online AI consultation tool for service users which will be an Automated Debt Advice Module (ADAM). This is in production with pilot around Christmas and will be specifically for the County Durham area. Using a closed AI system (not accessing information outside of the organisation) it is designed to give 24/7 access to advice with the safety net of referrals to humans where particular triggers are hit, e.g. when client issues are wider than simple debt advice.</li> </ol> <p>There were a lot of questions about the ADAM project particularly in relation to user confidence and the development of the closed AI system. Anyone who is interested can contact Edward directly <a href="mailto:Edward.pickering@citizensadvicecd.org.uk">Edward.pickering@citizensadvicecd.org.uk</a></p>
<b>Roundtable Discussion</b>	<p>Most of the questions and discussion took place during the presentations but the group discussed some thoughts about how to integrate the use of AI into voluntary sector operation.</p> <p>Some key points were highlighted:</p> <p>Development of a practical AI toolkit would help each organisation choose the right tools for their needs based on the relevance to their organisation, the usability and affordability. This toolkit would provide clear guidance on what works best for different types of organisations and would consider the size of the organisation, the budget and its purpose (e.g. advocacy, fundraising or service delivery). As the ability of VCS organisations to keep up with the technology in terms of training was also highlighted, time available to learn and use the tools should also be taken into consideration in the development of the toolkit.</p> <p>Development of a framework which would include training, policies (particularly in relation to ethical and compliant use), and confidence-building to help organisations feel capable of using the systems (particularly those who are resistant or nervous of the use of AI). The framework would include a collaborative forum to help share learning and best practice and to discuss the challenges and opportunities.</p>

	Support of the framework through a dedicated AI oversight role or facility to support the sector to provide advice and technical help which would feed into wider forums and help the sector embed AI in ways that align with its values and mission.
<b>Date of Next Meeting</b>	<p>The next meeting of the Better Together Forum will be the Policy Forum which will be <b>2<sup>nd</sup> December 2025 at 1.30 – 4.30 p.m.</b> and will be held at Spennymoor Town Hall, High Street, Spennymoor, DL16 6DG.</p> <p>The next ordinary Forum meeting will be held on 10<sup>th</sup> February 2026 (time TBC). The venue for this meeting will need to be confirmed and Forum members are requested let Vicky know if they are able to host the meeting.</p>