

Better Together VCS Forum Notes – 28 April 2026

Agenda Item	Key Issues
Welcome & Introduction	Kate opened the meeting welcoming everyone to the DCA offices in Willington. A number of colleagues who had indicated their attendance were not able to make to the meeting alongside that a significant number of apologies were received and so the form of future meetings was discussed (e.g. hybrid/in person). It was agreed that there is value with in-person meetings, but a survey of members will be conducted to gauge a wider view for future meetings.
Introduction to Today's Topic: System Leadership in County Durham	<p>Lindsay gave an introduction to frame the discussion on system leadership, drawing on reflections from the recent policy conference workshop. There was broad agreement that the findings from the conference resonated with those present.</p> <p>It was noted that relationships across the sector are currently under pressure due to a combination of funding constraints, workforce challenges and limited organisational capacity. Within this context, there is a growing need to strengthen collaboration and partnership working across the VCSE sector and wider system.</p>
Setting the Scene – System Leadership & Moving Together (Becks Lippe, RISE)	<p>Becks Lippe, Durham Relationship Lead provided the introductory presentation for the topic. County Durham Sport has merged with Rise as the Active Partnership for the NECA area and the local delivery arm for Sport England, working with partners to increase physical activity.</p> <p>The presentation highlighted that physical inactivity remains a significant issue, with little change despite sustained investment over many years. Becks emphasised that inactivity should be understood as a complex system problem, requiring a shift away from traditional delivery models towards a whole system approach.</p> <p>This involves looking beyond individual interventions to understand the wider system around a person, including their community, local services, environment and broader influences. A key message was the importance of working with communities to understand the barriers they face, rather than imposing solutions. There was also a strong emphasis on the need to test new approaches, adapt, and learn over time, including being open about what is not working in order to learn what is.</p> <p>Learning from place-based pilot work, including in areas such as Shildon and Peterlee, showed that community-led approaches are more effective but require time and investment to build relationships and trust. It was noted that a deeper understanding of local systems leads to more meaningful and sustainable change, but this requires a long-term commitment rather than short-term fixes.</p> <p>Becks also reflected on some of the ongoing challenges, including the difficulty of articulating system change, the tendency to move too quickly to solutions, and maintaining engagement from partners where progress may not be immediately visible.</p> <p>Becks also promoted the system leadership development programme (Miova), highlighting that funding is available to support VCSE participation. It was noted that DCA could play a role in encouraging and supporting organisations to access similar development opportunities.</p>

Roundtable Discussion

Discussion focused on what system leadership means in practice for the VCSE sector in County Durham. There was a strong desire to work in partnership, although it was recognised that capacity constraints, particularly due to day-to-day operational pressures, limit the ability of organisations to engage fully.

Challenges around achieving strategic alignment were highlighted, particularly within a constantly changing landscape. It was also noted that collaboration is increasingly important as funders seek to avoid duplication. However, there was recognition that duplication is not always negative, and can provide choice for communities, sitting on a spectrum depending on context.

Participants highlighted the need for clearer processes around who is delivering what, to support more effective collaboration and reduce confusion. Identifying local need was described as challenging, particularly within short funding timescales and competing priorities. There was also discussion around the potential to expand projects by bringing in organisations with the appropriate skills and expertise.

There was agreement on the importance of strengthening connectivity across organisations in order to improve collaboration and enable a stronger “ripple effect” across the system. Creating space to explore commitment to partnership working in more detail, including opportunities for joint funding bids, was also seen as important.

A gap in data relating to hard-to-reach groups was highlighted as a key issue. Reference was made to [Durham Insight](#) and ongoing [rural community research](#) being undertaken by DCA, with recognition that further work is needed to improve the evidence base.

The need for a future workshop focused on gap analysis was identified. Discussion also touched on the perceived hierarchy of data, with some organisations seen as holding more “credible” data than others.

There was agreement on the need to improve how data and outcomes are shared across the system. Mapping organisational reach and identifying areas of overlap and commonality, linked to identified need, was suggested as a useful approach.

Further discussion considered what system leadership looks like in County Durham. It was recognised that while individual organisations can influence the system, this influence is strengthened when organisations work collectively, particularly where larger organisations can bring additional weight and reach.

It was noted that relationships and trust within the VCSE sector are generally strong. However, questions were raised about the extent to which VCSE advice is trusted and acted upon within the wider system, with reference to existing frameworks such as the Accord.

The influence of larger organisations within the system was also discussed, including how this can both support and shape system-wide working.

Learning from the Rise delivery pilots was highlighted as a useful example, alongside interest in approaches such as ripple effect mapping to better understand impact and system change (potentially a future workshop topic).

Partner Updates	Updates were brief but it was noted that an outreach programme by Citizens Advice County Durham is being delivered in May and sessions will be advertised.
Date of Next Meeting	Thursday 11 th June 2026 at 1:30 p.m. – DCA Offices, Willington.