





# How we made a difference in 2024/25

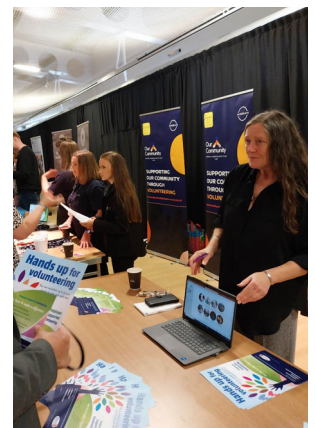
## Supporting our communities, we:

- Provided information, advice & guidance for 1169 VCS organisations.
- Engaged 617 organisations and community groups in Share & Learn events.
- Attracted 529 delegates to our community development workshops.
- Engaged 157 participants in the Community Hubs Development Programme, assisting 12 with Community Spaces Partnership capital grant case support.
- Supported 1172 attendees at our Share & Learn Network events.
- Provided bespoke training for 82 learners as part of our training offer.
- Assisted 23 Cree network members, hosting 39 separate Cree groups.
- Sustained and further developed our Rural Housing Enabling programme.
- Provided specialist bespoke consultancy support for 21 organisations.



## Supporting volunteering, we:

- Recruited 908 new volunteers, increasing the total number of volunteers recruited to date to 3,047.
- Held 23 volunteer promotion and recruitment events.
- Promoted 228 live volunteering opportunities via the online portal.
- Helped 312 groups to promote opportunities via the volunteering portal.
- Supported 518 active members of the Volunteer Co-ordinators Forum.
- Held 4 Volunteer Co-ordinator Forum meetings with higher participation.
- Developed the Employer Supported Volunteering network in Co. Durham.
- Sustained contact and support for spontaneous and emergency volunteering activity including Community Resilience Planning.
- Engaged with 152 members of the Community Growing & Food Network.



## As the voice of the Voluntary & Community Sector, we:

- Built strong linkages between the Voluntary, Community & Social Enterprise sector and the 70 strong Social Prescribing Link Workers Network.
- Supported 216 organisations / individual members of the Community Mental Health Transformation VCSE Neighbourhood Networks.
- Chaired the Advice in County Durham Partnership, and 50 member Better Together Network, and contributed to the County Durham Partnership and to the North East Combined Authority from a VCSE perspective.
- Delivered a small grants scheme to promote smoking cessation initiatives.
- Developed and sustained the Poverty Truth Commission for Co. Durham.
- Established the Rural Durham Community Research Network.



### Credits:

Cover photographs (clockwise from top left): Rural Housing event, Mickleton; Social Prescribing Link Workers network meeting; Volunteer Co-ordinators Forum; Poverty Truth Commission launch; Community Growing & Food Network visit to Crook Hall, Durham; Hallmark presentation to Spennymoor Youth & Community Centre; Boosting your Income through Trading training session; Middleton Housing Needs Survey promotion at Middleton-in-Teesdale Christmas Fair; Cornerstones Centre for the Community - The Ballinger Trust grant recipient (Photo: Cornerstones Centre for the Community); Employer Support Volunteering event; Better Together Forum policy conference; Charities & Trading training.

This page: (Top) DCA staff joining in celebrations to mark 30 years of The National Lottery Community Fund supporting good causes; (Middle) Employer Supported Volunteering event; (Bottom) Rural Durham Community Research Network consultation event in Teesdale.

All photos by Durham Community Action unless otherwise stated.

Durham Community Action 2025 Annual Review: written, edited, and designed by Russell Hayward. © Durham Community Action 2025.

# 'A busy and fulfilling year'



Welcome to Durham Community Action's Annual Review, reflecting on a busy and fulfilling year, as we managed existing work, and developed our services. Our activities focused around Community Asset building, Volunteering Support, and ensuring the views and interests of the Voluntary, Community & Social Enterprise Sector (VCSE) were heard and represented by policymakers. This review outlines our objectives and achievements in the year to 31 March 2025.

The past 12 months continued to present challenges for organisations within the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector both in terms of increased service demand, and uncertainty around contracting or grant funding. Nevertheless, it is clear that the strong contribution by sector colleagues in supporting our communities with the needs they face is never more needed. The VCSE provides practical and emotional support, underpinning community resilience, and enabling community led action.

In response to this landscape, we maintained our close collaborative work with colleagues in the VCSE, and across the public sector. We continued to keep in touch with the organisations and groups that play a key role in sustaining community-led support activity. The year was about supporting communities to develop, and grasping opportunities to build resilience.

Colleagues right across the VCSE face challenges adapting service provision to meet community needs within strained funding and rising delivery costs. Even where funding and investment is secured, colleagues report difficulties with staff recruitment and retention.

Poor health outcomes, and financial pressures on communities, and the VCSE's reach, staff, volunteering, and growth / development, did weaken capacity. The ongoing conflict in Ukraine, its direct impact on energy prices, and the resultant cost of living crisis, continued to present a challenge to an already fragile sector.

In the light of all this, there are increasingly complex challenges for both the VCSE and our public sector partners with respect to equitable provision of public services, including health, social care, and education. These challenges include the undermining impacts of poverty, poor and worsening mental health, and the escalating rate of the cost of living. We continued to see increases in the numbers using food and fuel banks, and a growing number seeking debt advice and other welfare or emotional support. These challenges are highly visible and exacerbate health inequalities across our communities, with seemingly little prospect of any improvement in the year ahead. Volunteer-led activity provides a safety net for those in need.

**Kate Burrows**  
Executive Director



During the year we collaborated with colleagues in the VCSE, and in the public sector, to support communities with information, advice, and training. We provided leadership and advocated for volunteer led delivery, and amplified the demonstrable contribution that the voluntary sector makes to our local economy.

Supporting networks and partnerships within the VCSE continued to be of crucial importance to us. As an infrastructure support provider, we play a key role in representing and championing the sector. Multi-sector partnerships in County Durham continue to be effective conduits for information exchange, problem solving, consultation, and co-production in shaping new approaches to services.

During the year, we worked closely with a diverse range of funders, including commissioners, and charitable grant giving trusts. Working collaboratively, funders have been hugely supportive to the sector, enabling greater flexibility, and supporting the sector as organisations have adapted the ways that they reach their beneficiaries. With this support, a lot of VCSE groups have been able to sustain, and begin the process of reshaping their income streams and activities.

Funding is an ongoing challenge across the VCSE, and we are fortunate and grateful to have the support of the Climate Action Fund, Defra, Durham County Council, the Durham Police & Crime Commissioner's Office, the National Lottery Community Fund, North East & North Cumbria Integrated Care Board, Point North, and our other funders. On behalf of DCA and the VCSE sector, I would like to express thanks and appreciation to funders for their continued support.

The past year was challenging but very rewarding, and I am grateful for the support of our fantastic team of Staff and Trustees, who are without doubt DCA's most valuable asset. As we mark our 90<sup>th</sup> year of operation in 2025, the challenges on all sectors will continue to be exceptional. However, alongside public sector colleagues, we continue to adapt, innovate, and respond to the new and emerging needs as we go.

With best wishes

*Kate*



## Supporting our communities

Keeping in touch with volunteer led community groups, finding out about their needs and concerns, and providing practical advice, guidance, information, news and updates were a key focus of our work during the year. We supported the development and public access to community spaces and services, assisted Cree groups offering informal mental health support, and provided networking and training.

Many individuals and organisations appreciated our focus on training, capacity building, and funding advice, with flexible delivery both online and face to face, to meet the changing needs of our users. The VCSE benefited from information and good practice shared via our social media platforms. In addition, we continued to develop our range of innovative podcasts, and made further improvements to our website, including easier navigation, and expanded features such as audio and video case studies.

### Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG)

IAG continued to be an important part of our offer, with 1169 requests for assistance received, covering a range of topics, during the year. Around half of all enquiries relate to governance and funding, however other issues often underpin these initial enquiries, including energy efficiency, cost of living pressures, setting up new community groups, developing project ideas, managing staff & volunteers, trusteeship, and operational planning.

Our Community Development Officers also delivered bespoke projects tailored to meet the needs of individual VCSE organisations. The diverse range of topics included Charity Commission registration, and various bespoke training packages.

### Stanhope Community Association

The Association contacted us for advice around governance. As part of our IAG offer, we carried out a full healthcheck which looked at governance arrangements, and identified other issues including outdated policies and procedures, communication issues, and community engagement.

Our team worked with the Association to review their legal structure, provided training on roles and responsibilities, helped with communication tasks, provided advice on dealing with conflicts of interest, and offered support for a funding bid. We also introduced them to the Hallmark Quality Standard to help update Policies & Procedures. Despite setbacks, good progress has been made. DCA's help and assistance has proved invaluable.

### Butterknowle Village Hall

The recent sharp rise in energy prices significantly impacted the ongoing viability of the Hall, which serves as a vital hub in a small rural community. As a result, the Trustees asked DCA for help to lower energy costs & reduce their environmental impact.

Although an initial funding bid for solar panels had been unsuccessful, the Trustees remained undeterred, fundraising £900 from events at the Hall, which also helped to solidify its role as a valued community space. DCA was able to offer £25,000 from Community Spaces funding, and we also helped them to obtain competitive quotes for the solar panels / battery installation. The Hall now generates its own electricity, leading to a 50% reduction in electricity costs; this has improved financial viability, and the reduced fossil fuel usage has enhanced the carbon footprint.

We also worked with the Trustees to complete a governance checklist, and provided advice to help them operate within the correct legal structure; this should prove beneficial for future funding bids.



Butterknowle Village Hall received funding for energy efficiency improvements through the Community Spaces programme (Photograph: Durham Community Action).

### Community Hubs Development Programme

DCA has supported 157 community organisations with consultancy and case work. We also offered training for volunteer Trustees to put governance and business planning into place, particularly focusing on energy efficiency measures. Funding advice has proved beneficial, and we have assisted 12 organisations to apply for grants through the National Lottery funded Community Spaces Partnership.

### Find out more

During Village Halls Week we celebrated, encouraged and supported the volunteers who keep community buildings open. Find out more from our podcast. Scan this QR code on your phone, or click [here](#) to download the Podcast.





We maintained a strong focus on energy and climate action throughout the year, with multiple strands of work including CAIRN and CBEEG dedicated to energy efficiency, community energy and supporting the transition to net zero. We also implemented many of the ideas within DCA, which achieved recognition in our successful Investors in the Environment assessment.

## Climate Action in Rural North East

CAIRN is a pioneering new project that aims to reduce energy costs and combat climate change. The project, which is funded by The National Lottery Community Fund, is being delivered in partnership with NICRE (National Innovation Centre for Rural Enterprise), Community Action Northumberland, and the Rural Design Centre.



It is offering support to help rural communities across County Durham and Northumberland take control of their energy usage and create a greener future. The project has been designed to tackle the unique challenges facing isolated rural areas, by delivering a range of innovative activities including community energy projects, carbon assessments, free energy advice for households covering renewable options, the installation of solar photovoltaic batteries on community buildings, and training and skills development. The project aims to engage specifically with young people.



Delegates at the Energy, Sustainability & Community Buildings event held at Jubilee Fields Community Centre in Shildon (Photo: Durham Community Action).

## Investors in the Environment (IiE)

We were delighted to achieve the IiE bronze certification, following a thorough review of DCA's impact in relation to environmental policy, resource management and monitoring, progress against targets, action planning, and social/ environmental projects. IiE recognised our commitment in understanding, measuring and managing our environmental impact, and noted that the benefits are also felt by the stakeholders that we work with.



## CBEEG and Energy Audits

Following on from the initial Community Buildings Energy Efficiency Grant (CBEEG) programme, we worked with Durham County Council's Low Carbon Economy Team to design and deliver support for community buildings making the transition to net zero through enhanced energy efficiency measures. Using our connections and reach, we identified multiple community buildings requiring an energy audit, and provided wrap around support to help groups to apply for funding through the CBEEG scheme, or through alternative initiatives.

## Energy, Sustainability & Community Buildings

This event brought together more than 50 people who collectively support 37 community buildings across County Durham. Hosted by Jubilee Fields Community Association, the event also provided an opportunity to showcase the centre's own development in recent years, including a new solar panels system (partly funded with a CBEEG grant).

The event introduced Durham Energy Association Ltd (DEAL) a new, not for profit, community energy initiative for County Durham. Part of the CAIRN project, the initiative will guide community organisations through the purchase and maintenance of solar panels. Whilst it will not be suitable for every situation, it should benefit groups who need technical knowledge to get solar panels installed, and those lacking the time to select installers & manage the solar panel installation. Development work is now underway, and it is hoped that this will help to secure funding for feasibility studies and panel installations.



## Supporting our communities

Working with colleagues and partners, we helped to reshape the 'Enterprising Durham Framework' to maximise support for rural social enterprises and harness appropriate funding streams. As part of our input, we delivered two social enterprise strands within the framework, helping to foster a culture of enterprise within County Durham's VCSE sector.

### Enterprising Places / Third Sector Animation

Enterprising Places offered insight and intelligence by helping to develop relationships between business support practitioners and 25 active community buildings. The project identified clusters of rural community organisations that can support the delivery of business support activities e.g. in Blackhall, Coundon, Ferryhill, Shildon, and Wheatley Hill.

The Third Sector Animation project provided one to one enterprise support for 40 organisations, and 4 workshops that helped 44 attendees with ideas to 'Boost Your Income Through Trade'. Each session helped to showcase the host centre's achievements and inspired others to generate ideas for income generation to support their own organisations' long-term sustainability.

### Small grant schemes

With funding from the Ballinger Trust, we shared £10,000 across 16 community groups for projects supporting people aged 50 and over. Meanwhile, the Stop Smoking project supported by Durham County Council provided small grants to 10 VCSE organisations to enable them to provide activities that encourage individuals to stop smoking, whilst also helping to reduce social isolation, improve mental wellbeing and physical health, and provide referrals to appropriate services.



Wear Jammin Studio received funding from The Ballinger Trust to host a series of workshops for people to develop their own podcasts (Photo: Wear Jammin Studio CIC)

### Training

Workshops and training continued to form a key part of our offer. During the year, we offered a range of Community Development training sessions and workshops, including Meet the Funder, Community Buildings, Themed Meetings & the Good Food Network, which together attracted 1172 participants. Collaborating with colleagues in the VCSE, we also continued to provide information and training, particularly promoting safeguarding and risk awareness for staff and volunteers in the sector.

The Share and Learn Network for community organisations and groups continued to thrive online and we provided a fully subscribed programme of well-attended networking and training activities. Membership held steady at 617, reflecting the value that members place on the support provided.



'Boost Your Income Through Trading' workshop at Wheatley Hill Community Centre (Photo: Durham Community Action).

### The Cree Network

During the year we continued to support the Cree Network of community groups that provide informal mental health support. 23 organisations hosting 39 groups in the network participated in a range of developmental workshops, and received help to access grant aid. This support has enabled them to offer a safe, communal space providing activities and training opportunities to over 600 women, men and young people who may experience poor mental health, and be at risk of social isolation, self-harm, or suicide.



Green Arts workshop, one of many activities organised within the Cree Network (Photo: Durham Community Action)



## Rural Housing Enabling programme

We are part of the national Defra funded Rural Housing Enabling (RHE) programme managed by ACRE, which aims to boost the supply of new rural affordable housing. The programme is supporting landowners and communities to identify sites and housing needs, whilst working with parish councils, housing associations, and local authorities to bring forward high-quality homes that meet local needs.

The RHE programme is building support, encouraging community engagement, and supporting, advising and steering communities through the many stages in the process, from initial interest to final completion. Our Rural Housing Enabler is able to act as an honest broker between the different parties, providing informed and impartial advice, and assisting communities and landowners to identify sites for affordable housing developments. Housing Need Surveys are a key part of the process, as they help to provide an evidence base of local housing need.

### Middleton-in-Teesdale Housing Needs Survey

A full housing needs survey was undertaken on behalf of the Parish Council between October 2024 & February 2025. The survey identified overwhelming support for a proposal to build rural affordable housing. Respondents expressed strong support for family homes, homes for the young or aged, and some bungalows for those with mobility issues. There was also a clear desire for new houses to be made available with affordable rents, and protected for occupation by local people, as secondary evidence suggests that many local households would struggle to be able to afford market rents.



Delegates attending the Rural Housing Conference at Mickleton Village Hall (Photo: Durham Community Action).



### Find out more

Listen to our podcast about rural housing in County Durham. Scan this QR code on your phone, or click [here](#) to download the Podcast.

## How we made a difference

Although the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic and ongoing cost of living crisis presented significant challenges, we can point to a number of positive outcomes from our work during the year:

- As a broker and information point for the VCSE, we were able to ensure the sector had rapid access to relevant, timely guidance and advice. We supported and advised community services about how they could manage the issues and problems faced by volunteer led groups, such as sustaining their volunteer base, and dealing with fuel costs and increasing demands on services.
- Advice, guidance, and interventions helped to sustain community-based services delivered by volunteers, and community buildings managed by local people, helping them to establish, grow and develop the resources they need (staff, volunteers, and funding) to continue supporting their beneficiaries.
- Peer to peer networks for volunteer Trustees were expanded and supported, ensuring greater shared learning, problem solving and confidence building to plan and to sustain their offer.
- Knowledge, understanding and access to a changed funding climate were improved within the Voluntary, Community & Social Enterprise Sector.
- Volunteers and front-line staff were able to work together across sectors, to develop good practice and help them to provide stronger support for their clients and user groups.
- Lessons learned and intelligence were shared and disseminated, ensuring a clear view of social infrastructure issues arising through cost-of-living pressures and through longer term adjustments to different ways of working and the tools required e.g., digital services and reach for the most vulnerable and isolated people.



## Supporting volunteering

Volunteering is a key part of Durham Community Action's work, and we are proud to manage both the NAVCA accredited County Durham Volunteer Centre, and the online County Durham Volunteering platform for recruiting volunteers and promoting opportunities. During the year, 908 people, many new to volunteering, were supported via the Centre for Volunteering, with advice, information, and guidance, 23 volunteering promotion and networking events were supported during the year, including Volunteer Fairs, and two Durham Pound events.

We provided support and training for volunteers, and for volunteer led groups, advice, funding, and access to resources, and helped to ensure that volunteer involving organisations have the skills they need to support volunteers and their beneficiaries safely, and in full compliance with their legal obligations.

Working with partners, we co-ordinated support for organisations and their volunteers with advice and training, particularly regarding safeguarding. In addition, we invested significant time into developing the Employee Supported Volunteering Network (ESV) with encouraging results.



Durham Community Action manages the County Durham Volunteer Centre. The Centre was one of the first three to be awarded the Volunteer Centre Quality Accreditation by NAVCA in 2023, in recognition of the quality of service offered.

### County Durham Volunteering Platform

This is a dedicated web-based portal which we describe as 'the home of volunteering' in County Durham. Users are able to browse opportunities, and organisations, learn more about volunteering, and find out more about events and meetings in County Durham for volunteers.

During the year we further developed the platform, with 228 live volunteering opportunities advertised at the year end. 312 organisations are now actively using the site for volunteer recruitment; including 49 who are new to the site. In total, 908 new volunteers were recruited during the year through the portal, and via other means of contact. 120 new volunteering opportunities were advertised.

### Employer Supported Volunteering (ESV)

This offers the means by which companies can encourage or enable their employees to volunteer their time and skills to benefit the community. This may include providing time away from work for volunteering, organising team volunteer events, or skill matching employees to meet the needs of community organisations. ESV fosters a culture of social responsibility within companies, and provides valuable help to VCSE organisations.

During the year we placed a significant focus on ESV, which resulted in companies providing staff volunteering opportunities in a more impactful way. Changes in public sector procurement laws mean that businesses seeking contracts are now evaluated on their social value, placing a higher emphasis on the quality of volunteering.

We have established a robust ESV network which includes several large organisations that operate ESV programmes. Regular meetings provide an opportunity to discuss challenges, and share best practice; for example, a recent session focused on the roles and responsibilities of Trustees, with the aim of bringing additional skills and experience into Trustee roles in County Durham. An annual event highlights some of the offers available, and explains how the VCSE sector can access and utilise the skills & time of ESV scheme volunteers.



Employer Supported Volunteering Network Event  
(Photo: Durham Community Action).



### Find out more

Visit our website for more details about Employer Supported Volunteering. Scan this QR code on your phone, or click [here](#) for details.



## Volunteer Co-ordinators Forum

We organised and hosted 4 sessions of the Forum, alternating meetings in person and on-line, which helped to attract increased participation from the membership. 142 volunteer co-ordinators attended meetings across the year, supported by several guest speakers. Topics discussed included Isolation, Loneliness and Volunteering, Measuring Impact, Employer Supported Volunteering, and Volunteer Engagement. Participants are also encouraged to engage in networking activities; these provide a useful opportunity to exchange best practice and discuss any challenges that have arisen.



Volunteer co-ordinators sharing information and best practice at a Forum meeting (Photo: Durham Community Action).

## County Durham Volunteer Kitemark

The Kitemark is a free quality standard awarded to organisations that demonstrate a commitment to their volunteers, and a dedication to providing a high-quality volunteering experience for their volunteers and service users. Organisations that can show how their volunteering programmes overcome barriers to volunteering, and recognise the value of recruiting and retaining volunteers receive a certificate.

Our staff offer advice on areas of good practice and suggestions for development, and work with each organisation to implement their ideas. The Kitemark is recognised by volunteers, funders, commissioners of services and other VCS organisations and shows an organisation that manages a volunteering programme where volunteers receive a high-quality, positive volunteering experience.

Ferryhill LADDER Centre, The Foundation of Light, and The Auckland Project were successfully assessed and awarded the Kitemark during the year, taking the total number of Kitemark recipients to 35. A further 15 organisations received support and advice around the Volunteer Kitemark during the year.

## County Durham Volunteer Passport

The County Durham Volunteer Passport aims to create a network of flexible volunteers who are fully recruited, consistently trained and supported, and ready to respond quickly and appropriately to the needs of the local community. For volunteers, it offers the flexibility to switch between organisations and experience different volunteer roles, without repeatedly having to go through the full recruitment and training process. Meanwhile, organisations benefit from a single recruitment and training route that saves time and resources, and provides access to a wider and more diverse pool of volunteers. It also helps to build capacity in smaller organisations.

## Durham Together

The Volunteer Passport forms part of DCA's training offer, as a partner in 'Durham Together' initiative, a Lottery funded employability project which is being jointly delivered by Cornforth Partnership, Coalfields Regeneration Trust (CRT), DCA, Wheels 2 Work County Durham, and WEA North East and Cumbria. The project offers community-based support services, community learning, and bespoke training, to help individuals increase their confidence, improve their health and wellbeing and progress into further learning or sustainable employment.

DCA's training offer includes the Volunteer Kitemark, Volunteer Passport, 1 to 1 volunteer support, accredited and vocational training, and bespoke community development workshops. Groups benefiting from our support included The Bread and Butter Thing in West Cornforth, CRT volunteers in the Horden area, and volunteers at the Ferryhill LADDER Centre.



Volunteers at Ferryhill LADDER Centre. Top: celebrating their Volunteer Passport success; (Bottom): Joanne Jones & Kath Merrington receive the Kitemark certificate from DCA's Abby Weatherill. Photos: DCA/Ferryhill LADDER Centre



## Supporting volunteering

### Events and activities

These form an important part of our volunteering calendar and provide an opportunity to promote the positive benefits of volunteering to a captive audience. We attended 23 volunteering promotion / recruitment events tailoring our key messages to the audience e.g. volunteering as an opportunity for a career change, and the benefits that volunteering can have on mental health and reducing loneliness. We attended events countywide, including County Hall, Durham Pound Seminar, Durham University, New College, Seaham High School, and Teesdale Community Network.

We also sustained contact and support for spontaneous and emergency volunteering activity, and assisted Town and Parish Councils and communities with support for development of Community Resilience Planning. Partnering with the British Red Cross we provided local information / intelligence to support national development and support initiatives.

We continued to inform and consult with the VCSE Safeguarding Network and provided representation on the Children and Adult Safeguarding Partnerships in County Durham. Contributions from the Network are fed through to Safeguarding Partnership meetings and training events, helping to inform and shape resources.



Community Growing and Food Network visit to Pioneering Care Partnership community garden, Newton Aycliffe  
(Photo: Durham Community Action)

### Community Growing and Food Network

We facilitate this network which brings together like-minded organisations and volunteers with projects, or an interest related to growing and food. Online sessions are held bi-monthly, with a different theme for each session, providing participants with an opportunity to meet other community groups, share experiences and updates, and discuss items of interest. Face to face events promote local growing and food sharing ideas that volunteers can take back to their own projects.

### Training and support

Training and good practice support for organisations that are run by, and support volunteers are an important part of our offer. 61 training sessions were delivered attracting 615 delegates from 292 organisations and groups, with 85 organisations attending more than one training session. Topics included cyber security, volunteer recruitment & management, safeguarding, disclosure and barring

Bespoke sessions e.g. Volunteer Development were tailored to meet the specific needs of individual organisations. Training feedback was positive, with excellent ratings, and participants noting that the courses achieved objectives, were delivered at the right pace, easy to understand, and well organised.

As part of the UKSPF Community Infrastructure Partnership, we collaborated with Digital Durham and the Rural Design Centre to support 27 community hubs to develop volunteering projects through the Impactful Volunteering & Social Action Programme. Of these, 20 were successful in securing project funding through the programme.

### How we made a difference

Although the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic and the ongoing cost of living crisis continued to present challenges, we can point to some positive outcomes during the year:

- As a result of our work, volunteer involving organisations are more effectively networking, sharing good practice, and offering mutual support for tackling and finding solutions to problems.
- Improved pathways for volunteers to access opportunities, develop their experience, and make contributions that are both valued & add value to civil society.
- There is now a robust and efficient system of communication and collaboration between front line staff in the NHS and the VCSE sector with respect to recruitment, support, and placements for volunteers.
- Volunteer led groups and organisations have support and ready access to advice and help when they need it. They are better informed and have the resources on hand that help them to ensure that their volunteers are well trained and supported.



As an infrastructure service provider, we play an important role by representing and championing the VCSE Sector voice, through reviews of partnership working across the sector and strategic multi sector partnerships. We also consult, survey, analyse, and disseminate intelligence gathered from the VCSE.

We worked with partners to ensure a sustainable social & community infrastructure remained in place, with access to the resources needed to help it thrive and rebuild. By engaging with regional Grant Funding Foundations & Trusts, we were able to inform and shape funders approaches. This included implementing a connector model, to support more effectively targeted funding into the VCSE sector, and consulting with VCSE and commissioning colleagues through Better Together Policy VCS Forum meetings

Health and Wellbeing cross sector networking continued to increase in complexity and importance, with changes in primary care, access to mental health services and the firming up of the 'wiring' of the Integrated Care System (ICS). Our focus was on evolving changes in community based mental health support, access to and building strong social prescribing linkages with the VCSE (through delivery of a Social Prescribing Link Workers Network), and ensuring VCSE representation into Integrated Care Board (ICB).strategic governance models.

We continued development of a shared approach to system and workforce development. This is needed to ensure that front line staff and volunteers have access to the training they need, and the tools to provide support e.g., access to referral pathways and link workers, funding for initiatives, and for addressing needs highlighted by people in crises that are triggered through health, financial or housing related issues. During the year, we also consulted with VCSE service providers and organisations to build stronger local connections with Primary Care Networks to support Social Prescribing models and new systems for access to health care.

## Better Together Network

The network brings together senior representatives of 44 VCSE organisations, many with a countywide remit, in order to share best practice and look for new opportunities to collaborate. DCA chairs the forum. During the year we chaired 2 Forum meetings, and a Policy Conference entitled: Valuing Social Impacts of the VCSE in County Durham: how do we make best use of the social value impact measurement opportunities available?

## Rural Durham Community Research Network

We were pleased to secure funding from the UK Research and Innovation's (UKRI) Community Research Networks programme in partnership with The Young Foundation, to launch the Rural Durham Community Research Network (RDCRN).

This brings together local communities, VCSE organisations, and community groups, across Derwent Valley, Teesdale, and Weardale. The network, which is funded for 5 years, aims to support communities to share their knowledge, addressing local needs through evidence being heard, recognised, and valued. The initiative aims to build capacity and capability in rural communities to lead their own research, share their findings, and influence policy and practice for rural places. It aims to explore barriers to accessing health and social care, a lack of opportunities for young people, and access to critical public services.

DCA has partnered with Durham County Council, Durham University, Insights North East, Newcastle University, Point North, and the Rural Design Centre to support the network. Initial work was focused on 3 Knowledge for Change workshops, and planning for community-led research training sessions that were held just after the year end. The project has a dedicated website to record progress at [communityresearchdurham.org](https://communityresearchdurham.org).



Participants sharing ideas at an RDCRN Knowledge for Change workshop (Photo: Durham Community Action).



## Find out more

Listen to our podcast about Rural Durham Community Research Network. Scan this QR code on your phone, or click [here](#) to download the Podcast.



## A voice for the VCSE sector

### Poverty Truth Commission (PTC)

County Durham's first PTC is based around Bishop Auckland, Ferryhill, Newton Aycliffe & Shildon. It aims to amplify the voices of local people experiencing poverty, creating direct connections with decision makers in positions of power, and hopefully leading to practical solutions to some of those challenges.

The official launch in March 2025, provided an opportunity for local people (Community Commissioners) to share their stories of struggles with poverty with a wider audience, including decision makers. For many it was their first experience of public speaking, and it required a huge amount of courage to speak to a diverse audience of over 100 people. It proved to be an emotional and hard-hitting experience, but hugely rewarding, challenging individual views of poverty, nurturing collective engagement, and invoking a need for change. One individual said that *'It was the first time I felt listened to in 20 years'*, a view shared by all.

Work is well underway to build relationships with decisionmakers, identify issues, and develop ideas to tackle those issues. DCA will continue to provide help and support, whilst working with a new group of Community Commissioners to develop a second PTC, covering the Stanley area of north Durham.



Community Commissioners sharing their first-hand experiences of poverty at the PTC launch (Photo: Durham Community Action).



### Find out more

Listen to our podcast about the County Durham Poverty Truth Commission. Scan this QR code on your phone, or click [here](#) to download the Podcast.



Social Prescribing Link Workers undertake regular training to ensure they are up to date with the latest developments. (Photo: Durham Community Action).

### Social Prescribing Link Workers (SPLW)

SPLWs connect people to community-based support, including activities and services meeting practical, social, and emotional needs that affect health & wellbeing e.g., housing, finance and welfare advice. We developed closer relationships with 70 SPLWs, providing them with information and networking opportunities, and liaising with Primary Care Networks (PCNs) to ensure better connections to volunteer led social infrastructure, informing longer term development opportunities.

As a member of the County Durham Together Partnership, and the Board of the County Durham Partnership (CDP), we were well-placed to represent VCSE interests. Our involvement enables us to collaborate with public sector colleagues promoting a joined-up policy for commissioning and funding, engaging with communities of interest in the development of new funding programmes, and influencing key service provision by engagement with Heads of Services.

We ensured that the VCSE sector was fully engaged with co-production on responsive services to support mental health, access to advice providers and health care. Advice in County Durham and Better Together, as networks of VCSE and specialist providers, were each mobilised to share insights and experiences, in turn contributing to the development and delivery of objectives arising from the Poverty Action Group.

During the year, we chaired and supported the development of the Advice in County Durham (AiCD) multi-agency network as the 'go to' practitioner network for all advice agencies to come together and join up services. Network members continued to provide advice and one to one casework support across County Durham.



## REACH County Durham

This is a 3-year partnership project between DCA, Durham County Council and Durham University. The initiative aims to examine ways to tackle the unfair & avoidable differences in health experienced by communities across County Durham. These are known as the 'wider determinants of health', and play a crucial role in shaping health outcomes.

Income, education, housing, employment, and social support networks contribute to a person's ability to maintain good health, however inequalities in these areas can lead to disparities in health, which is why addressing them is so important in public health, research, community interventions and policy efforts. The Office for National Statistics has estimated that a child born in one part of County Durham may live 9.5 years less than a child born in another neighbourhood; the gap in life expectancy widens further when compared to many other parts of the UK. REACH County Durham aims to mitigate these challenges and improve health for all, by helping to develop policies that promote equal opportunities, fair wages, and social inclusion.

We represented VCSE interests in multi-sector Task Groups tackling mental health, economic and community regeneration, funding and investment, and volunteering. By collaborating with partners from the local authority and NHS / Public Health we co-ordinated communications, resources and reach into communities and responded to local needs. We supported good practice information exchanges for VCSE and health & social care providers regarding social isolation, and health and wellbeing services, particularly in rural areas.

We were represented on and supported a range of networks and partnerships including County Durham Partnership Board, County Durham Economic Partnership, the Environment & Climate Change Partnership, Health & Wellbeing Board, North East Combined Authority, & Safeguarding Children & Safeguarding Adults Partnerships,

We chaired or supported Advice in County Durham Partnership, Better Together Forum, Community Growing and Food Network, and the Volunteer Co-ordinators Forum during the year.



REACH County Durham launch workshop  
(Photo: Durham Community Action)



### Find out more

Visit the Reach County Durham website for further information. Scan this QR code on your phone, or click [here](#) for details.

## How we made a difference

The VCSE in County Durham has a strong representational base that is influencing the ways in which public services are shaped:

- VCSE led partnerships are collaborating to shape community services. This enables them to be responsive to the needs of communities that are struggling with inflationary pressures particularly regarding food and fuel poverty, mental health, and access to wellbeing support and advice services. It ensures that the voluntary sector is engaged and represented within key public sector led networks as they address issues of loneliness and isolation within our communities.
- Collaborative coalitions are influencing the design and delivery of public service contracts.
- Front line VCS organisations are better informed and trained about the issues that affect them and the people they work with.
- Funding and investment into the VCSE sector are more responsive, streamlined, and targeted, and enabling in terms of sustaining a community infrastructure post-pandemic.

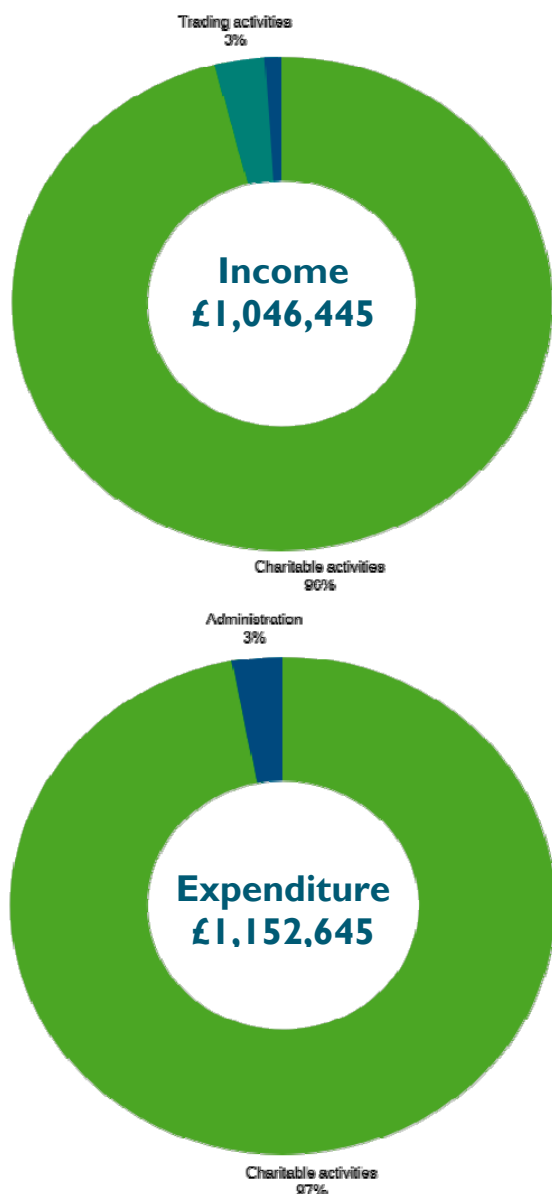
Through County Durham Together, the Better Together Forum and Advice in County Durham Partnerships, we continue to build collaborative responses to key themes facing our communities, including opportunities for delivering welfare support, the cost-of-living crisis, and supporting the Poverty Truth Commission.



## Finance and funding

We gratefully acknowledge the support of our funders, partners and customers including:

ACRE  
Action for Station Town  
Alcote House Association  
All Disabilities Matter  
Aspire Learning  
Bloom Procurement Services  
British Red Cross Society  
Buddy Cups  
Bullion Hall  
Communities CAN (NE)  
Community Action Northumberland  
Cornforth Partnership  
County Durham Community Clothing Bank  
Defra  
Durham County Council  
Durham Police & Crime Commissioner's Office  
Durham University  
East Durham Theatre Group  
Havannah Association  
Innovate UK  
NAVCA  
NHS North East & North Cumbria ICB  
North East Business and Innovation Centre  
Outdoor and Sustainability Education Specialists  
Point North Community Foundation  
Rural Design Centre  
The Ballinger Charitable Trust  
The National Lottery Community Fund  
UTASS  
Voluntary Action Leeds  
VONNE  
West Rainton & Leamside Partnership



Income & Expenditure has been extracted from our financial statements for 2024/2025 and does not contain sufficient information to allow for a full understanding of our Financial Affairs. Copies of our full audited accounts may be viewed on the [Companies House website](#).



## Social Media



[www.durhamcommunityaction.org.uk](http://www.durhamcommunityaction.org.uk)  
[www.countydurhamvolunteering.org.uk](http://www.countydurhamvolunteering.org.uk)



<https://www.facebook.com/DurhamCommunityAction/>  
<https://www.facebook.com/countydurhamvolunteercentre>



<https://www.linkedin.com/company/durham-community-action-limited/?originalSubdomain=uk>



## Staff (year to 31/03/25)

Jemma Austin (from 27/02/25)  
Katie Baggott  
Isla Ballard  
Helen Brown  
Kate Burrows  
Fiona Christian  
Tracy Emery  
Susan Fern  
Rio Floreza (from 04/09/24)  
Susan Garrett  
Cathryn Gathercole  
Julie Gourley (from 01/05/24)  
Tara Hallimond  
Craig Hampton  
Lyndsey Hocking  
Nicole Kirby  
Charlotte Linton  
Allison Lishman  
Susan Tron MBE  
Abby Weatherill

## Trustees (year to 31/03/25)

Professor Sarah Banks  
Mrs Linda Bird (Vice-Chair)  
Mrs Patricia Buckley-Atkins (Treasurer)  
Mrs Karen Davison (from 21/11/24)  
Mrs Angela Hawkes  
Mr Ian Hunter Smart (from 21/11/24)  
Mrs Elaine Kilgannon MBE  
Mr Mike Litchfield  
Professor Fred Robinson  
Mr John Robinson  
Mrs Clarice Smith  
Mrs Jan Worters MBE (Chair)

## Our values

We work with and for communities and believe that County Durham is a better place for having thriving community organisations. We run Durham Community Action well, so that we can support community organisations by providing expertise and advice that is tailored to their needs and circumstances, supporting and nurturing new community initiatives, enabling good volunteering practice and opportunities, and representing and providing a voice for the VCSE sector in County Durham.

### What we value

Objectivity, honesty, and integrity

Doing the right thing

Setting high standards for the sector

Encouraging a can-do culture

Accountability and responsibility

Professional pride

Enabling leadership

Learning the lessons and sharing them

Listening and reflecting

Analysis and problem solving

### What we are doing

#### Providing expertise and advice

We support community organisations to do their work effectively, by providing advice, training, resources, and help to tackle challenges, and to realise their aspirations.

#### Supporting new initiatives

We work with networks and communities of interest to track opportunities and challenges for the sector, and to innovate and test new approaches that strengthen our social and community infrastructure.

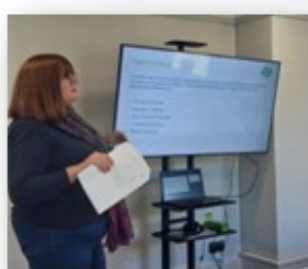
#### Enabling good volunteering

We provide brokerage and resources to develop volunteering opportunities and good practice in volunteer involving organisations. We champion volunteering across all sectors in County Durham, and support people who are new to volunteering to find the right opportunities for them.

#### Providing a voice

We apply our knowledge and expertise within the VCSE into sector led networks, and multi-agency partnerships in County Durham, the northeast and nationally. We achieve this, through effective leadership, and representing sector interests and the issues that affect communities in County Durham. Through championing the interests of our local VCSE, we can influence and help shape public sector policy, and the design and commissioning of local services.

# Annual Review 2025



**DURHAM  
COMMUNITY  
ACTION**

8 St Stephen's Court  
Low Willington  
Crook  
County Durham DL15 0BF

Charity number: 229119  
Company number: 309329