



Neighbourhood Health in County Durham: Where are we Now?

Friday 18th September, 10.30-12pm, via Teams

Summary

Background

Following a Better Together Round Table event in February 2026 [Better-Together-Forum-Notes-10Feb26.pdf](#) , this online session intended to provide both an update and discussion space for Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) organisations in County Durham on the emerging Neighbourhood Health agenda and the role of the VCSE.

The session was attended by 12 representatives from VCSE organisations (with apologies from 3 organisations) as well as 4 members of staff from partner organisations and 3 members of DCA staff.

Presentations

Presentations were given by Dr Jen Steel, GP and Director of Integrated Community Services, who gave an overview of Neighbourhood Health and Susan Watson, Chief Executive of South Durham Health who gave an update from the perspective of a GP Federation.

(Please note – these are attached separately and will be uploaded to the DCA website ‘Better Together’ section shortly).

Given that Neighbourhood Health encompasses prevention and the wider determinants of health as well as the integration and coordination of health services, the presentations consistently highlighted the VCSE sector as a key partner in delivery. There was clear recognition that VCSE organisations need to be engaged from the earliest stages of planning and development and that they:

- Have trusted relationships with local communities.
- Reach people who may not engage with statutory services.
- Deliver preventative and community-based support.
- Bring valuable insight, lived experience and community intelligence.
- Are essential partners, not optional additions, in future service design and delivery.

Across County Durham, Integrated Neighbourhood Teams (INTs) and Multi-Neighbourhood Provider (MNP) arrangements are continuing to evolve. While there is no

national blueprint, local partners are working together to shape approaches that reflect community needs. A data-driven approach to planning is being taken, with neighbourhood priorities being shaped using data on deprivation, long-term conditions, hospital admissions and population health outcomes.

It was emphasised that much of this work is already happening across communities and neighbourhoods. The challenge is to better connect existing activity rather than create entirely new structures. Success will depend on partnership working, trust, community engagement and long-term cultural change across the system.

Main themes from discussion

Identified Challenges

Attendees from the VCSE sector welcomed the commitment to partnership working within Neighbourhood Health but identified several challenges:

- Increased expectations on VCSE organisations without corresponding funding.
- Concerns about sustainability and organisational capacity.
- Complexity of, and uncertainty around, commissioning processes.
- The need for better recognition of community insight and qualitative evidence provided by VCSE organisations.
- Ensuring smaller organisations are able to engage and influence developments.

There was also discussion about the importance of protecting and strengthening the existing VCSE provision and infrastructure that communities rely upon.

Community Engagement and Lived Experience

To make sure that data and insight reflect the knowledge held across the system by partners and communities, there was broad agreement that future neighbourhood health arrangements should:

- Be co-produced with communities.
- Be based on data and lived experience insight.
- Make better use of existing insight and data collected by VCSE organisations.

Funding and Sustainability of the VCSE

Funding, commissioning reform and sustainable financial support for the VCSE sector remain significant unresolved challenges. There were concerns that:

- Expectations on the sector continue to increase.
- Funding is not keeping pace with demand.
- Organisations are being asked to deliver more without additional resources.
- Some valued VCSE organisations may close due to lack of sustained investment.

Communication and Collaboration

Significant opportunities exist for stronger integration between health services and community organisations. There were discussions about strengthening communication and collaboration, including:

- The need to improve communication between partners.
- Benefits of developing clearer messages about neighbourhood health to be shared with organisations.
- The value of exploring spaces where information can be shared.
- Maintaining conversations between meetings rather than relying solely on formal forums.

Children and Young People

Neighbourhood Health implementation should operate across the life course. There is a need to consider inclusion of children, young people and families, including:

- Listening to young people's lived experiences.
- Involving children and families in service design.
- Building stronger links with Family Hubs and schools.

Next Steps

Attendees are asked to consider the following question:

Bearing in mind discussions at the session (including around the importance of the VCSE sector and the need to influence development of neighbourhood health, demonstrate our impact, and build partnerships) what do we need from:

- One another
- DCA
- Partners?

In the meantime, DCA will:

- Continue to engage with structures and partnerships emerging around neighbourhood health and provide information and connections in line with the Local Infrastructure Organisation role.
- Establish ways to keep the conversation moving forward locally amongst VCSE organisations.
- Explore ways to harness and share data and insight that exists within the VCSE sector.
- Advocate for and support clear and simple messages about NHS priorities, change and progress.