



BETTER TOGETHER FORUM POLICY CONFERENCE BRIEFING NOTE

Valuing and supporting a thriving VCSE: What does good grant making look like?

When: Tuesday 17th June (9:00 – 12:30)

Where: Neville Hall, Durham Leadership Centre, Spennymoor

Context:

This is the first Policy Conference for 2025, and the latest of series of bi-annual conferences, led by the VCSE in County Durham. The Policy Forums are planned to address policy themes which are important for our sector and for our communities.

The Policy Forums are an opportunity to convene colleagues, curate cross sector insight, and to amplify the important contributions the VCSE makes to the fabric of our communities in County Durham. Critically, the aim of these conferences is to influence and shape strategic developments and decision making across the County Durham Partnership.

Regular Policy Forums have been organised over the past five years and have covered a diverse range of issues and themes including health, wellbeing and partnership working. In October 2024, the theme focused on valuing social impacts of the VCS. It demonstrated examples of social value and how social value impact measurement has been adopted by the Durham Pound as an integral part of public sector procurement. The event looked at social value as it is understood through procurement, and its “fit” with our VCSE in terms of the day-to-day operational focus, and the people they reach through their work.

Ultimately, the event formed a catalyst for the VCSE to share messages with commissioners about building good relationships and how to demonstrate the impacts and the value of the work which the sector contributes to the social and economic wellbeing of the County.

This is an ongoing dialogue with cross sector colleagues and leads us to the theme of this first policy conference of 2025.

June Topic:

Valuing and supporting a thriving VCSE: What does good grant making look like?

This Policy Conference looks beyond the means for measuring and evidencing impacts and outcomes and explores how to model and apply investment and funding into the sector so that it can work most effectively and efficiently in terms of costs and resources for both commissioners and for VCSE organisations providing services in communities.

In October 2023, the [County Durham Together Partnership](#) established cross sector subgroup: **Voluntary and Community Sector Leadership Group**. The primary aim of this group is to deliver on the ambition of supporting a thriving voluntary and community sector in County Durham which is well resourced by maximising the alignment of VCSE funding.

Underlying this aim, the VCSE Leadership Group has been building their understanding and knowledge of the sector and how it works. They have been exploring ways to align a diverse and

multi layered range of funding streams (across all departments of the Council and via the ICB and other public sector partners) into a more coherent, stable and streamlined source of investment for the sector. This work is still in progress.

This implies a lot of work to ensure funding streams reflect the needs of the communities we all serve, and the operational needs and strengths of the VCSE. It also addresses issues which the sector has already engaged with, such as evidencing social value, ensuring continuity and ability to plan ahead and enabling capacity and the agility to work both responsively and effectively with change.

All sectors drew a lot of learning from the Covid pandemic when systems were forced into rapid change and response, making peace with uncertainty and targeting resources where they were most needed to ensure continuity of community-based support. Some of this strategic and system developmental work inevitably involves change and cultural adjustments, for organisations across all sectors including funders and public sector leads.

When it was established, the VCSE Leadership Group set out to explore how best to secure joint, longer term aligned funding for the VCSE and build shared delivery and cross sector support with the aim to see increased commissioned services delivered by the VCSE and more equitable investment.

The purpose of this Policy Conference is to explore how the VCSE Leadership Group is developing on their aims, and to reflect on the lessons we have all learned to date about effective and sustainable funding for the sector. We will have an opportunity to look at some of the research and consultation which has emerged post Covid and is helping shape the approaches of Community Foundations and the VCSE through their grant giving systems.

We'd also like to provide an opportunity for the VCSE and commissioners to talk about the best and the worst of current funding systems. This is so that we can shine a light on experience and the context we are all working in.

The outcomes and messages emerging from this event will help to inform a more formal Accord between the VCSE and public sector agencies. An Accord would be designed to achieve much clearer and more consistent relationships both across all public sector interests and with the VCSE, serving as community catalysts.

Better Together Forum Policy Conferences have a simple format: a keynote stimulus at the start and then focus on roundtable discussions. We'll hear directly from the County Durham Together VCSE Leadership Group and Point North will take us through some of the research and consultation delivered in partnership with IVAR (Institute for Voluntary Action Research) and how it has shaped their approach.

Through roundtable discussions, we'll aim to consider the following:

- What do good relationships between funders and the VCSE look like?
- What is core funding and unrestricted funding and what does the VCSE need to have in place to manage and deliver effectively, and to establish trust-based relationships with funders?
- What are the priorities and main concerns towards achieving better alignment and access for the sector to funding for their work?
- Examples of good and effective relationships and communication between funders and VCSE.

You'll need to register for the event; you can find a link to book your place for the June Policy Conference [here](#).