



**Annual Review
2024**



How we made a difference in 2023/24



Supporting our communities, we:

- Provided information, advice & guidance for 930 VCS organisations.
- Engaged 609 organisations and community groups in Share & Learn events.
- Attracted 606 delegates to our community development workshops.
- Assisted 86 community organisations through the Community Spaces Programme, including 17 seeking capital funding for projects.
- Assisted 40 Cree groups, supporting 330 Cree members.
- Engaged 64 organisations in our bespoke training and development activities.
- Launched the Rural Housing Enabling programme in Co. Durham.



Supporting volunteering, we:

- Recruited 834 new volunteers, increasing the total number of new volunteers recruited to date to 3,047.
- Held 31 volunteer promotion and recruitment events.
- Promoted 267 live volunteering opportunities via the online portal.
- Now have 264 organisations regularly using the online volunteering portal.
- Supported 518 active members of the Volunteer Co-ordinators Forum.
- Held 4 Volunteer Co-ordinator Forum meetings with higher participation.
- Established an Employer Supported Volunteering network in Co. Durham.
- Sustained contact and support for spontaneous and emergency volunteering activity including Community Resilience Planning.
- Supported 152 members of the Community Growing & Food Network.



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

- Assisted with development of a Connector commissioning model.
- Built strong linkages between the Voluntary, Community & Social Enterprise sector and the 49 strong Social Prescribing Link Workers Network.
- Represented the VCSE on the Regional Funders Network and in multi-sector Task Groups.
- Chaired the 50 member Better Together Network including two policy forums, and the Advice in County Durham Partnership. Contributed to the County Durham Partnership Board from a VCSE perspective.
- Delivered small grants schemes for diabetes prevention & social prescribing.
- Established the first Poverty Truth Commission for County Durham.

Credits:

Cover photographs (clockwise from top left): 1. DCA staff enjoying National Fitness Day; 2. Lands Village Hall; 3. Community Growing & Food Network members at Wharton Park; 4. Children's activities at Burnhope Community Centre (funded by The Ballinger Charitable Trust & The National Lottery Community Fund); 5. Engaging with diverse communities in Health & Wellbeing Research workshop; 6. Children's activities at Randolph Community Centre (funded by The Ballinger Charitable Trust & The National Lottery Community Fund); 7. DCA Staff Awayday at Ushaw College; 8. DCA Rural Housing Enabling research; 9. Abby Thompson presenting the Volunteering Kitemark to Michele Armstrong of the Auckland Project; 10. Little Treasures children's kayaking activities (funded by The Ballinger Charitable Trust & The National Lottery Community Fund); 11. Jan Worters MBE thanking Jenny Flynn MBE for her long service as a DCA Trustee; 12. Share & Learn workshop (Photos: Durham Community Action, except 4, 6, 9 & 10 which are courtesy of the respective named groups).

Photos this page: (Top) Framwellgate Moor Youth & Community Centre receiving their Hallmark quality standard certificate from DCA's Isla Ballard (pictured second left) ; (Middle) Quotation from Lewis Carroll by Veg Out in Barney, part of the Community Growing & Food Network; (Bottom) Community Research Network consultation (Photos: Durham Community Action, except Framwellgate Moor YCC which is courtesy of Peter Sykes).

Durham Community Action 2024 Annual Review: written, edited, and designed by Russell Hayward. © Durham Community Action 2024.

Challenges and opportunities



Welcome to Durham Community Action's Annual Review, reflecting on another busy and fulfilling year, as we managed our existing work, and developed our range of services. Our activities were focused around the core themes of Community Asset building, Volunteering Support, and ensuring that the views and interests of the Voluntary, Community & Social Enterprise Sector (VCSE) continued to be heard and represented by local and national policymakers. In this review we outline our objectives and achievements during the year to 31 March 2024.

Despite inflationary and service demand pressures, the strong contribution made by Durham Community Action (DCA), and colleagues across the VCSE has never been more needed. Together we provide practical and emotional support, helping to underpin community resilience, 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 in 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 the recruitment and retention of staff.

The aftermath of Covid-19, poor health outcomes and financial pressures on communities, and on the VCSE's reach, workforce, volunteering, and their 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 partners in the public sector 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 continue to see increases in the numbers using food and fuel banks, and the growing number of new faces queuing for food and debt advice. These challenges are very evident and highly visible, and there seems little prospect of any improvement in the coming year.

Any one of the challenges which we are facing would be difficult to respond to with stretched workforces

Kate Burrows
Executive Director



across all sectors, however the range and depth of these challenges, coming in the wake of the pandemic and cost-of-living crisis, remains a very real concern.

During the year we were able to collaborate with colleagues in the VCSE, and in the public sector, to support communities with information, advice, and training, as we responded to the cost-of-living crisis, and its impact on vulnerable individuals & communities.

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.

Over the course of 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 in which they reach their beneficiaries. Through this support a lot of VCSE groups have been able to sustain, and to begin the process of reshaping income streams and activities.

Funding is an ongoing challenge across the VCSE, and we are fortunate and grateful to have the support of 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 all of our other funders. On behalf of everyone at DCA and in the VCSE sector, I would like to express thanks and appreciation to funders for their continued support.

The past year was challenging but hugely 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 enter our 90th year of operation, we relish the opportunity to continue making a real difference for our communities.

With best wishes

Kate



Supporting our communities

Keeping in touch with volunteer led community groups, finding out about their needs, fears, and concerns, and providing practical information, advice, and guidance continued to be our over-riding priority. We supported development and public access to community spaces and services, assisted local groups planning for community-led housing initiatives, and offered support to Cree groups offering informal mental health support.

Many individuals and organisations appreciated our focus on training and funding advice, much of it now delivered online, and offering greater flexibility to meet the changing needs of our users. We supported the wider Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector with information and good practice via our social media platforms, developed and expanded our innovative range of podcasts, and continued to improve our website with easier navigation, and expanded features such as audio and video case studies.

Greater use of new technology also freed up staff time to provide bespoke one to one group support through face-to-face meetings, a welcome return to normality in the aftermath of the pandemic.



West Auckland Memorial Hall, one of the groups to benefit from CBEEG funding (Photo: Durham Community Action).

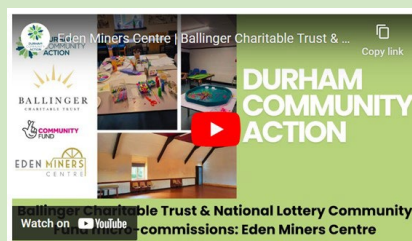
CBEEG and Energy Audits

Building on the initial Community Buildings Energy Efficiency Grant (CBEEG) programme, we worked with Durham County Council's Low Carbon Economy Team to design and deliver a new round of support for community buildings who want to progress 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.

We were delighted to be approached by The Ballinger Charitable Trust & The National Lottery Community Fund to assist with delivery of a grants programme to help small, volunteer-led organisations provide activities for children and young people. Local groups were invited to submit an expression of interest, telling us about their activities, and outlining their project ideas. There was a healthy response, and 20 groups were awarded combined funding of £20,062. DCA provided practical advice and support to help the groups to implement their projects.

Eden Miners Centre, Leadgate

The group were thrilled to receive funding from the Ballinger Charitable Trust and The National Lottery Community Fund to fund part of a wider scheme of summer kids' clubs. The funding was used to upskill their volunteers in terms of first aid, food safety, and DBS checks, as well as providing daily snacks and hot lunches for 20 local children one day a week for the 6 weeks of the summer holidays. The sessions proved invaluable, by helping with childcare so that parents could continue to work during the summer holidays, providing food for hungry children, helping children for whom English is an additional language to socialise, and supporting local volunteers to develop their skills.



Find out more by watching our video case study. Click on the icon above or visit our YouTube page: <https://youtu.be/fym9sYZbhk>

Health and wellbeing remained a core priority, and we again assisted community groups that provide informal mental health support through the Cree network. 40 groups received developmental workshops and support to access grant aid, helping them to offer a safe, communal space to women, men and young people who may be experiencing poor mental health, and at risk of social isolation, self-harm, or suicide.



Find out more by listening to our Cree podcast. Click on the icon above or go to our podcast page: <https://open.spotify.com/episode/4l8SXCLZfOpqzjLf0hzhE?si=VM>



Our long-standing support for community hubs continued as part of the National Lottery funded Community Spaces partnership. We supported 86 hubs during the year to build their capacity, providing one to one support around governance, legal issues (especially leases) and quality standards.

Capital funding for improvements is another key aspect of the partnership. We actively supported 17 community hubs to submit funding applications; so far 7 have each been offered funding ranging between £20,000 & £45,000 to improve buildings, with the remaining applications in development.

We are now developing a pipeline of community spaces that may be able to access capital funding through the partnership for energy efficiency improvements, or to tackle barriers to development with specialist technical support (e.g. legal fees and feasibility studies).

The programme is providing practical help for volunteers who carry responsibility for community buildings and village halls, helping to support them in their own development, and realising local ambitions. The programme is making a difference by building resilience in communities by helping to provide well run and well led community spaces.

Lands Village Hall

Located in High Lands between Bishop Auckland and Barnard Castle, the Village Hall dates back to the 1860s. The venue comprises a kitchen, main hall, toilets, and small car park to the front, with a small concrete area to the rear of the building. Lands Village Hall Association is a registered charity, and plays a vital role in the local community. After falling into disrepair, the building has been transformed by a new management committee since 2020. DCA has provided active support by undertaking a health check to assess the hall's condition and challenges, offering training on funding, policies and procedures, and access to networking events.

With DCA's help and support, the hall has accessed £70,000 grant funding in the past 4 years to refurbish the kitchen, install a generator, develop an emergency contingency plan, fit an Automated External Defibrillator device, create a village noticeboard, and build a new storage space. The Trustees recognise that this support has saved the village hall from terminal decline and set it on a new path to future success.

Community Buildings Networks

DCA organised 5 county wide events during the year for VCSE colleagues through the Community Buildings Network. Topics covered included community resilience and community buildings responses to emergency events, community energy and solar panels, funding for capital buildings, and digital inclusion. Delegates also heard from speakers on fire risk assessment and how Martyn's law (to ensure public premises and events are better prepared for terrorist attacks and ready to respond) might affect them.

Alongside the county wide events, we also supported the development of smaller networks e.g. in rural Teesdale where village halls (including Lands) have experienced challenges engaging with countywide networking. DCA has provided logistical support, organised meet the funder sessions, and helped to source suitable experts to speak on topics that network members wish to discuss e.g. volunteer recruitment. Although we help, the meeting agenda and its purpose is determined by network members themselves.

Lands Village Hall in Teesdale has benefited from DCA's help and support through the National Lottery funded Community Spaces partnership. The Hall is also an active member of the Teesdale Community Hall Network.



Photos:
Durham
Community Action



Supporting our communities

Information, advice and guidance continued to be an important part of our offer. 930 individuals and organisations sought our support on a range of topics during the past 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, delivering successful welcome spaces, managing staff and volunteers, trusteeship, and operational planning.



Tracy Emery (pictured left), DCA's Community Development Officer provided help and support to the Trustees of Buddy Cups (Photo: Durham Community Action).

Buddy Cups

Established 5 years ago as a peer support group for people experiencing or recovering from breast cancer, the group has grown in membership and offers emotional support, information, and resources to anyone facing similar challenges.

The founders recognised that they needed to formalise the group to ensure continued access to funding, and sought DCA's help to register as a charity, explore other funding opportunities, and continue the development and sustainability of the group. We provided advice on the options for registering as a charity including the various structures that would support the longer-term development plans for the group. Once the Trustees had decided to proceed with the registration process, we guided the group through the application process, and assisted with the documentation needed to complete the process.

Buddy Cups are now equipped with the tools and knowledge needed to continue their development, and will be able to explore new funding opportunities. We are also facilitating connections with Social Prescribing Link Workers to help the group to further expand their membership.

The Share and Learn Network for community organisations and groups continued to thrive online and we once again provided a fully subscribed programme of networking and training activities which attracted 609 attendees. Membership of the network increased to 617 organisations and groups.

Training and workshops

During the year, we offered a range of themed Community Development Workshops which attracted 606 learners, and organised bespoke training sessions to meet specific organisational needs, that attracted a further 64 learners. Collaborating with colleagues in the VCSE, we continued to provide information and training, particularly promoting safeguarding and risk awareness for staff and volunteers in the sector. Focused support is also developed to coincide with national campaigns e.g. during Adult Safeguarding Awareness Week in November 2023, we provided a series of dedicated online activities and events.



Delegates attending DCA's information and networking events. (Above) Charities and Trading. (Below) Capital Funding. (Photos: 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 designed to support landowners and communities to identify sites and housing needs whilst working with housing associations, parish councils, and local authorities to bring forward high-quality homes that meet local housing needs. Early work has been focused on building connections with potential stakeholders, and raising awareness with local communities about the opportunities that may be available.



Left: Susan Tron MBE (DCA's Rural Housing Enabler) at a Meet & Greet event held in Lanehead Village Hall in upper Weardale (Photo: Durham Community Action)



Right: Meet & Greet events have been held in local communities across County Durham to introduce the RHE programme (Photo: Durham Community Action)

During the year, we engaged with Enterprising Durham Partnership to influence its design, and ensure that current support structures are not undermined. The 'Enterprising Durham Framework' supporting start-ups in County Durham has been shaped to include charitable and social enterprises. The aim is to maximise support for rural social enterprises and harness appropriate funding streams.

Through the 'Third Sector Animation' initiative, delivered in partnership with NE Business and Innovation Centre (NEBIC) and Create North we provided one to one assistance and light touch support around selecting suitable legal structures for enterprises, and on premises and funding. We have also linked organisations into specialist enterprise support if needed through the partnership.

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 Voluntary, Community & Social Enterprise (VCSE) Sector, we ensured that 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 sustained 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 VCSE Sector.
- Volunteers and front-line staff were able to work together across sectors, to develop good practice and 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 one of the key pillars of our work, and we are proud to manage the NAVCA accredited County Durham Volunteer Centre. We provide support and training for volunteers, and for volunteer led groups, advice, funding and access to resources, and aim 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.

During the year we collaborated with volunteering organisations and individual volunteers supporting health and wellbeing initiatives, offered advice and access to resources and training, and promoted local community action. We also worked with partners to co-ordinate support for organisations and their volunteers with advice and training, particularly regarding safeguarding. In addition, we partnered with major local employers to establish a new Employee Supported Volunteering Network (ESV).

Once again, we informed and consulted with the Voluntary, Community & Social Enterprise (VCSE) Safeguarding Network, and provided representation on both the Children and Adult Safeguarding Boards in County Durham. Contributions from the Network are fed through to Safeguarding Board meetings and training events, helping to inform & shape resources.



VOLUNTEER CENTRE

County Durham Volunteer Centre

Durham Community Action is proud to manage 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, or organisations, learn more about volunteering, and find out more about events and meetings in County Durham for volunteers. During the year we further developed and sustained the platform, with 267 new volunteering opportunities advertised. 264 organisations are now actively using the site for volunteer recruitment; including 13 who are new to the site. In total, 834 new volunteers were recruited during the year through the portal, and via other means of contact. 681 people, all new to volunteering, received advice, information, and guidance via the Centre for Volunteering,

County Durham Volunteering Kitemark

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

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 VCSE groups, and shows an organisation that manages a volunteering programme that provides volunteers with a high-quality, positive volunteering experience. Several organisations were working towards, or successfully assessed and awarded their Kitemark during the year, including The Auckland Project, Sunderland Football Club's Foundation of Light, a second award for Bishop FM, and Wellbeing for Life which secured its third award.



County Durham Volunteering Kitemark certificate presentation. Pictured are (left): Charlotte Linton, DCA's Volunteering Specialist and (right) Tom Knox of The Foundation of Light. (Photo: Foundation of Light)



Delegates attending the Employer Supported Volunteering workshop (Photo: Durham Community Action).

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 can foster a culture of social responsibility within companies, and provide valuable support to VCSE organisations.

During the year we partnered with several large local employers to establish a local ESV Network. Initial discussions led on to an information sharing event supported by Amazon, BAM Construction, Durham County Council, Durham University, Nissan, and PCP. The event highlighted some of the offers available, and explained how the VCS can access and utilise the skills and time of staff through ESV schemes. Employer-supported volunteering schemes help to build resilience and a sense of belonging, developing team skills, and also support individual physical and mental wellbeing.

We again supported the Volunteer Co-ordinators Network, hosting 4 Forum meetings for members. These were a mix of in person & on-line sessions which helped to increase participation. A broad range of topics were discussed; for example, one session focused on risk assessing volunteers with criminal convictions using the 'Time Well Spent Toolkit'. This enables people with convictions to access volunteering, reducing re-offending by providing opportunities to gain skills, meet new people, and get involved in positive activities. This in turn can lead to increased confidence, improved mental wellbeing, and increased social inclusion. 518 volunteer co-ordinators are active network members; connecting with us through meetings, regular information and training, and by using the County Durham Volunteering Platform.

Training is a key part of our offer. Topics covered included financial management, funding health & safety, mental health awareness, safeguarding, volunteers and the law, & volunteer recruitment / management. 218 organisations participated in training benefiting 604 learners. In addition, bespoke training sessions helped a further 54 learners.

In addition to delivering in-house training, we worked with NAVCA to deliver 5 cyber security workshops benefiting 62 learners, and delivered 2 workshops with the Disclosure & Barring Service for 20 learners. 2 training sessions delivered in partnership with the British Red Cross dealt with adapting and recovering from adversity, and supporting connections.



DCA's Lyndsey Hocking introducing a session of the Community Growing & Food Network (Photo: Durham Community Action).

Community Growing and Food Network

We continued to facilitate this network, bringing together like-minded organisations and volunteers with projects, or an interest related to growing and food. Network sessions are held online bi-monthly, with a different theme for each session. Each of the sessions offers an excellent opportunity to meet with other community groups, sharing experiences and updates, and discussing items of interest.

In addition to online sessions, face to face events are held to promote growing and food projects, in collaboration with Food Durham. A recent session covering Biodiversity and Climate Friendly Growing, included a guided tour of Wharton Park in Durham. Volunteers from the park's Community Garden showcased simple ideas to encourage wildlife, which attendees were then able to take back to their own projects. The visit was useful for sharing ideas and building contacts. Find out more in our podcast:



Click on the icon above or visit our podcast page: <https://shows.acast.com/dca-podcast/episodes/community-growing-and-food-network>



Supporting volunteering

Thanks to Know your Neighbourhood funding, we were able to further develop the County Durham Volunteer Passport initiative. Partnering with multiple organisations enabled us to form a shared agreement on values, goals, and standards regarding recruitment, good practice, and the deployment of volunteers. The aim was 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.

Such an approach has tangible benefits, as volunteers have the flexibility to switch between organisations and experience different volunteer roles, without repeatedly having to go through the full recruitment and training process. Passport scheme partners benefit from having 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 within smaller organisations.

BASH Volunteer Passport course

With funding from Bishop Auckland and Shildon Area Action Partnership (BASH), we delivered a Volunteer Accredited Learning course (Volunteer Passport) to learners within the area who were currently volunteering or looking to volunteer in the future. 10 learners enjoyed taking part in the weekly sessions, which included modules covering working as a volunteer, assertiveness and decision making, and group and teamwork communication skills.

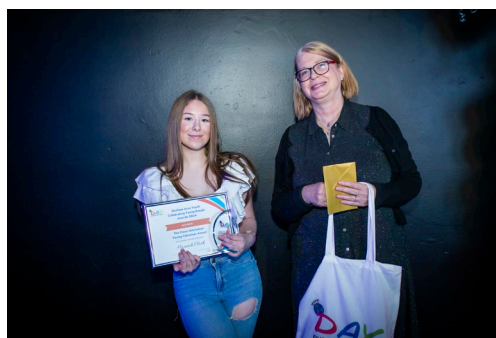


BASH Volunteer Passport course participants helping out with a local litter pick during Volunteers Week (Photos: Durham Community Action)



Durham Area Youth Awards

The annual awards recognise and celebrate the fantastic achievements of young people, staff, and volunteers. We were delighted to sponsor the Young Volunteer Award which recognises a young person who has made an active and significant contribution to Durham Area Youth via volunteering within the preceding 12 months. 19 young people were nominated, all of whom had demonstrated responsibility and accountability and taken pride in volunteering, making a real difference in their communities.



Hannah Clark, (left) receiving her award from DCA's Abby Thompson (right). Photo: Durham Area Youth.

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 Voluntary, Community & Social Enterprise Sector (VCSE) voice, through a range of strategic multi sector partnerships, and continuing reviews of partnership working across the sector. We also consult, survey, and analyse intelligence gathered from the VCSE sector and disseminate important information and best practice through multi sector partnerships. During the year we worked with partners to ensure a sustainable social & community infrastructure remained in place, with access to resources needed to help it thrive and rebuild.

Health and Wellbeing cross sector networking continued to increase in complexity and importance, with key 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 the delivery of a Social Prescribing Link Workers Network), and providing representation for the VCSE into strategic governance models for the new health management systems and commissioning.

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, and funding for addressing needs highlighted by people in crises that are triggered

Community Research Network

We worked with the Rural Design Centre and the National Innovation Centre for Rural Excellence (NICRE), to shape the infrastructure for a rural Community Research Network (CRN) in County Durham. The project explored how communities living and working in the Durham Dales could be more actively involved in setting research agendas, contributing their experiences, collecting relevant information, and influencing positive changes in policy and practice. We held engagement events and workshops with community organisations and other stakeholders and now hope to secure additional funding to launch a fully-fledged CRN for County Durham. Find out more in our podcast:



Click on the icon above, or visit our podcast page:
https://open.spotify.com/episode/5MspFOQUuiGw8VVe83v3xg?si=63z03_zqSCKHMXMLibYQ3Ak

Engaging with Diverse Communities in Health & Wellbeing Research

In March 2024 we partnered with the Institute for Medical Humanities, Discovery Research Platform, and VONNE to co-host a 1 day conference looking at how we can engage diverse communities in Health & Wellbeing Research. The workshop, supported by the Wellcome Foundation, brought together 34 representatives from academia and the VCSE. The day stimulated useful conversations and discussions, and the findings will be taken forward to develop plans and activities, and shape a regional code of practice, with practical tools to support VCSE research partnerships.



Delegates sharing ideas at the Engaging with Diverse Communities conference (Photo: Durham Community Action).

through health, financial or housing related issues. VCSE sector & service providers were consulted to build stronger local connections with Primary Care Networks (PCNs), supporting Social Prescribing models and new systems for access to health care.

During the year, we consulted with VCSE service providers and organisations to build stronger local connections with PCNs to support Social Prescribing models and new systems for access to health care.

We represented VCSE interests in County Durham Together & the County Durham Partnership (CDP), and collaborated with public sector colleagues to promote joined-up commissioning and funding policy, engaging with communities of interest to develop funding programmes, and to influence the provision of key services by engaging with Heads of Services. Consultation and survey work with VCSE sector service providers also helped us gather intelligence about needs and issues arising from support work in the community. Information and best practice were then disseminated through multi sector partnerships. 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 through the Poverty Action Group.



A voice for the VCSE sector

During the year, we chaired and supported the development of 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. Internally, the ongoing development of a clearer governance framework and strategic work plan for AiCD continued to support the strength and impact of the partnership.

Advice in County Durham and Better Together, as networks of VCSE & 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.

We cross link our work with the County Durham Partnership and academic colleagues to ensure alignment with the strategic goals of the County Durham Health & Wellbeing Board, County Durham Inclusive Economic Strategy, and the strategic vision of both the County Durham Care Partnership and the regional Integrated Care Board. Through AiCD, Better Together and County Durham Together, we continue to build collaborative responses to key themes facing our communities, including responses to the cost-of-living crisis, and opportunities for the delivery of the Household Support Fund.

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 which meets bi-monthly. During the year we also chaired 2 Policy Forums focused on finding common ground within the Integrated Care System, and working together to build an inclusive County Durham evidence base to inform decision making.



Delegates representing Health & Wellbeing countywide organisations at the Better Together policy conference held in October 2023 (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 continued to develop closer relationships with SPLWs and the Primary Care Networks (PCNs), to ensure better connections to the volunteer led social infrastructure to inform longer term opportunities for development. We supported 49 Social Prescribing Link Workers through information & networking events. Find out more about SPLWs in our podcast:



Click on the icon above, or visit our podcast page:

<https://open.spotify.com/episode/0kVvWP7zvqbHBG9jkbPrI?si=jDRH8G7S4mQf2V2BjGKxg>



Social Prescribing Link Workers undertake regular training to ensure they are up to date with the latest developments.

(Photo: Durham Community Action).

Social Prescription Small Grants Fund

Health & Wellbeing can be impacted by many factors. Family life, finances, physical health and other issues can all have an impact. Whilst people may visit their GP for help, a medical prescription may not be the best solution. SPLWs, often based in GP practices, work with patients to understand their needs, and then connect them to practical and emotional community support. Innovative solutions e.g. activity classes, creative and traditional skills, walking groups etc are often helpful, however many VCSE groups lack funding to keep up with the demand. During the year we managed a small grant scheme for the North East & North Cumbria Integrated Care Board (ICB). We offered 13 grants ranging from £1,950 to £4,000 to help VCSE organisations shape project ideas that develop and deliver social prescription activity. The funding was well received, and we are helping the delivery organisations to collect the evaluation data and to measure outcomes.



Representing the VCSE on the Regional Funders Network, we helped inform and shape funders approaches. We also continued with development of a Connector commissioning model, targeting funding into the VCSE sector more effectively, and representing the sector in task groups tackling mental health, funding and investment, economic & community regeneration, and volunteering.

Collaborating with local authority and NHS / Public Health partners, we co-ordinated communications, resources, and reach into communities, responding to local needs. We also supported good practice information exchanges for VCSE and health & social care providers regarding social isolation, health and wellbeing services, particularly in rural areas.



UK-wide PTC co-ordinators meeting to share best practice. Cathryn & Julie are pictured in the 2nd row, 1st & 2nd left (Photo: Durham Community Action).

Poverty Truth Commission

Work to develop County Durham's first Poverty Truth Commission (PTC) began during the year. The initiative aims to amplify the voices of local people experiencing poverty, and create direct connections with decision makers and those in positions of power. It is hoped that this will lead to practical changes and solutions to some of those challenges. We secured funds to employ 2 staff, and were pleased to welcome Cathryn Gathercole & Julie Gourley to the team earlier this year. A project plan is being developed, and initial engagement is well underway with organisations in the first PTC area around Bishop Auckland, Ferryhill, Newton Aycliffe & Shildon. A second PTC area in County Durham will be added at a later date.

Diabetes small grants

During the year we received grant funding to support delivery of initiatives linked to diabetes prevention, early identification and improved management, particularly focused on people living with mental health conditions and / or learning disabilities and their carers. We provided £1,900 grants to 5 VCSE partners to raise understanding of diabetes, risk factors and prevention amongst the target groups. Each organisation adopted a different approach, building on their current work, and making the most of existing relationships with target individuals and groups. We helped the groups to evidence outcomes, connect with partners delivering diabetes services, and promote the projects to key NHS partners including Social Prescribing Link Workers, Nurses and Health Trainers, NHS Learning Disability Teams and GP practices. The modest investment has increased awareness and understanding of diabetes amongst target groups. It highlights the tangible impact that small amounts of funding to the VCSE can have on the health outcomes of our communities.

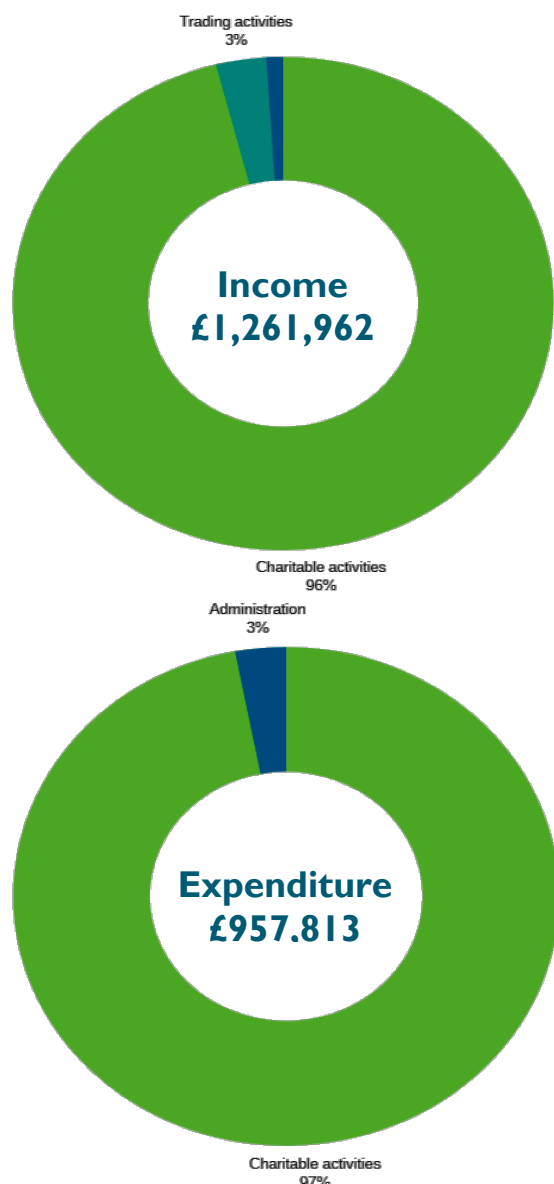
How we made a difference

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 more enabling in terms of sustaining a community infrastructure post-pandemic.



Finance and funding



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

ACRE
Barnard Castle Meet
Breathe Easy Darlington
British Red Cross Society
Buddy Cups
Bullion Hall
Chilton Town Council
Citizens Advice County Durham
Communities CAN (NE)
Community Action Northumberland
Community Spirit
Cornforth Partnership
County Durham Community Foundation (now Point North)
Cumbria CVS
Defra
Durham City of Sanctuary
Durham County Council
Durham Police & Crime Commissioner's Office
Durhams Haven
Eden Hill Peoples Centre
Ferryhill Town Council
Horden Community Welfare FC
Innovate UK
Missed a Beat
NAVCA
NHS North East & North Cumbria ICB
North Bitchburn Community Association
North East Churches Acting Together
St Catherine's Community Association
Tanfield Lea Community Association
The Ballinger Charitable Trust
The National Lottery Community Fund
UMI Commercial Limited
VONNE
Wingate Community Association

2023/2024 income includes charitable funds received in advance that are due to be spent on activities that will be delivered during 2024/2025. This information has been extracted from the financial statements for 2023/2024 and does not contain sufficient information to allow for a full understanding of our Financial Affairs. Copies of our full audited accounts are available from Companies House <https://find-and-update.company-information.service.gov.uk/company/00309329/filing-history>



Social Media



www.durhamcommunityaction.org.uk
www.countydurhamvolunteering.org.uk



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



<https://twitter.com/DurhamComAction>
<https://twitter.com/durhamvolunteer?lang=en>



Staff (serving in the year to 31/03/24)

Katie Baggott
Isla Ballard
Helen Brown
Kate Burrows
Fiona Christian
Tracy Emery
Susan Fern (from 18/09/23)
Hannah Foster (until 06/10/23)
Susan Garrett
Cathryn Gathercole (from 04/03/24)
Tara Hallimond
Craig Hampton
Lyndsey Hocking
Nicole Kirby
Charlotte Linton
Allison Lishman
Abby Thompson
Susan Tron MBE

Trustees (serving in the year to 31/03/24)

Professor Sarah Banks
Mrs Linda Bird (Vice-Chair)
Mrs Patricia Buckley-Atkins (Treasurer)
Mrs Jenny Flynn MBE (until 09/11/23)
Mrs Angela Hawkes
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 2024



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Crook
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Charity number: 229119
Company number: 309329