

Better Together VCS Forum Notes – 5 December 2024

Agenda Item	Key Issues
Welcome & introductions	Kate Burrows welcomed everyone to the meeting at the PCP officers in Newton Aycliffe and thanked them for their hospitality. 12 people attended and introductions were made. Apologies were received from 11 organisations.
Poverty Truth Commission	<p>Cathryn Gathercole, the Poverty Truth Project Co-ordinator at DCA gave a presentation to update everyone on the establishment of the new PT commission. The project is a two-year development involving people with broad spectrum experience of poverty recruited to be part of the commission. The areas of Bishop Auckland, Ferryhill, Shildon and Newton Aycliffe are the focus of this commission with the potential of further commission in another area of the county in the future.</p> <p>The project reports to the County Durham Together Board and is funded by DCC Public Health and Point North and is an implementation of County Durham Together principles and the County Durham approach to wellbeing. An evaluation will take place, with outcomes focussing on what is important to the people who are part of the group, rather than simply, what can we learn from their experience or what topics are identified from the learning.</p> <p>An official commission launch will take place in mid-March with a save the date invitation coming out shortly. At the end of the commission there will be a sharing event of the outcomes and current work is looking at the format of how those outcomes will be presented which may include creative storytelling</p> <p>The presentation is shared on the DCA website and Cathryn included two very informative videos about the Poverty Truth Commission which can be found here and the relational approach here.</p>
Regional VCSE Leadership and Advocacy	<p>Although there is voluntary sector representation on the Cabinet of NECA, regional ISOs are working to ensure that that voice is heard as an active partner and that the voluntary sector can be central to what is happening in the region. For that purpose Kate facilitated a conversation to seek the views of the forum on some of those significant developments:</p> <p>NECA</p> <p>There was considerable discussion about how grassroots organisations can be involved in the NECA workstreams as presented by Kate at the BTF meeting in June.</p> <p>Key points raised in this part of the conversation included:</p>

- It is important to encourage NECA to look outwards, listen to what is already working and not focus on inward approaches.
- How does the voluntary sector tell the story and promote their innovative approaches? Who is doing well and what are they doing?
- Should the voluntary sector have to demonstrate how it is different – should this not already be recognised?
- How are the portfolios that are being led by other authorities take into consideration the Durham story?
- What is the value of the sector as a contributor to the economy and how can it be recognised as such?
- What is the value of the sector as a whole and what would be the impact if the sector was not there?
- Is there recognition that in some instances the removal of services by the voluntary sector would be dangerous in areas where they provide critical support, e.g. around mental health?
- How can the private sector and local and statutory sectors give more to the voluntary sector, beyond finance but in terms of a contribution of time and skills?
- Where does the money come from to enable the continued delivery of services by the voluntary sector and central investment is required in order to be sustainable?

Kate agreed that she would speak to Martin Brookes about the points that have been raised in the discussion and encouraged the Forum to send her their thoughts to amplify the purpose and value of the sector.

Kate referred to the Social Value impact measurement work discussed at the [BTF meeting in June](#) and the ongoing modelling using the Social Value Engine (measuring against the sustainable development goals). Kate asked for colleagues to bring forward projects they might want to be part of the SV report card modelling alongside Advice in County Durham and possibly the Cree Network. Hannah volunteered Durham Alzheimer's Society to be part of this and Robyn indicated the Durham Age UK may also participate.

Budget and Spending Review

The impact of employer NI contribution increase and increase to the minimum wage will have a significant affect on the charity sector. Kate asked if charities have calculated how much this will affect them.

A regional calculation of the impact of the employer National Insurance contributions changes on VCSE organisations across the region has been estimated to be an increase of around £19.5M. The report produced by VONNE and endorsed by Pro Bono Economics can be found [here](#).

Kate highlighted that if charitable organisations are currently supported by Grant Funders, they should have a conversation with their grant officer about any potential for uplift to offer some relief against these additional costs. She also reminded smaller charities that the increase in threshold for employers allowance (from £5,000 - £10,500) and could offer some relief to those eligible if they are aware of these changes.

	<p>Civil Society Covenant</p> <p>This was briefly touched upon with an observation that like the former voluntary sector compact, it will only be effective if it is followed through and has real value. DCA are engaged in the consultations through a regional collaboration by Local Infrastructure Organisations across the North East and through membership of ACRE, NAVCA and NCVO at a National level. Kate encouraged colleagues to engage in the consultation and get in touch with any comments or reflections they might want to feed into DCAs responses to the consultation.</p>
<p>Other Business</p>	<p>Winter Wellness Webinars</p> <p>The webinars arranged by Public Health for the 5th and 6th December were highlighted.</p>
<p>Date of Next Meeting</p>	<p>The date of the next Better Together Forum will be Tuesday 11th February. Dates for 2025 have now been diaries and forum members were requested to consider whether they could offer space to host future meetings.</p>