

ONE COMMUNITY, MANY VOICES

VCAS SPRING CONFERENCE 2025

Voluntary & Community Action Sunderland

“Really enjoyed the conference, I actually had somewhere to be but cancelled it as found it so informative and inspiring. Hope it becomes a regular thing. Bringing people together is a good thing.”



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1.0 About the conference.

Sunderland's Voluntary Sector Spring Conference organised and hosted by Voluntary & Community Action Sunderland (VCAS), brought together a vibrant and diverse gathering of people and organisations from across the city and beyond. With the theme *One Community: Many Voices*, the day provided a space for open, honest, and thoughtful conversation about the state of the voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector, its strengths, its struggles, and its future.

Delegates included local VCSE organisations of all shapes and sizes, academic partners and infrastructure bodies. Together, they explored the importance of inclusivity, collaboration, trust, and visibility within the sector. Discussions reflected a rich variety of lived experiences and professional expertise, underpinned by a shared commitment to community-led change.

Workshops were designed to be interactive and inclusive, giving all attendees the opportunity to contribute their voice to eight key questions. These ranged from identifying which organisations are most at risk of being left behind, to what is needed to ensure the sector thrives. Time and again, participants highlighted the same core themes: the need for more equitable funding, better resourced local infrastructure, inclusive representation, meaningful partnerships, and time and capacity to think, plan, and build relationships.

Delegates also expressed the urgent need for trust, both within the sector and between the VCSE and wider systems such as health, education and local government. Across the board, there was recognition that collaboration must be properly supported, and that the value of community-based action must be more clearly understood by funders and policymakers.

This report brings together the key themes and insights the roundtable activity. It captures the voices of those on the ground, working every day to support communities in Sunderland and beyond. The message is clear: our sector is strongest when every voice is heard.

Section 4 of the report shares the feedback from the conference. Overall, the conference was a resounding success with 100% of participants saying they would return for another similar event, 72% felt the overall conference experience was excellent.

In Section 5, there is a networking hub, you can use the hub to continue your conversations or begin new ones.

Please do use this report as part of your evidence base for funding bids and applications, they showcase the types of challenges faced by the sector as well as what the sectors needs are.

Finally, VCAS would like to thank everyone who attended for their participation and contribution to the conference.

2.0 Conference Timetable

Times	Session	Speaker
9.30	Registration	
9.45	Opening Welcome and Framing the Day.	Janette Hilton Steve Donkin
10.05	How communities are experiencing political and social isolation and the new role of UCL in developing regional partnerships	Professor John Tomaney
10.35	How to collaborate with the VCSE sector to support social and economic inclusion in hard to reach communities. The role of the University of Sunderland	Dr Robin Finlay
11.00	Coffee break and networking	
11.20	Roundtable activity	
11.50	Working in the VCSE sector representing hard to reach communities and allowing their voice to shape service provision.	Shaun Newton
12.10	How do we listen to the BME community in Sunderland? How can it be improved to ensure that their voices are represented to policy makers?	Michael Chantkowski
12.30	Lunch and market place networking	
1.05	Roundtable Activity	
1.35	Representation the voices young people through Sunderland's All Together Consortium, how we influence change for those we represent.	Ruth Walker
1.55	Comfort Break	
2.10	INE and inclusive innovation on economic growth and demonstrate the ways in which universities can be pioneers in this area	Professor Louise Kempton
2.35	Panel Question Time	
3.05	The role of the regional representative – Issues	Martin Brookes
3.25	Conclusion/Networking	Janette Hilton Steve Donkin

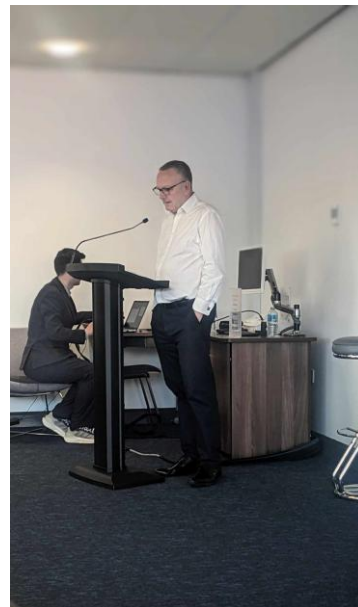
3.0 Summary of presentations and discussions

Opening Welcome/Framing of the Day

Janette and Steve opened the conference by warmly welcoming delegates. They explained that the main purpose of the conference was to create a space for community organisations to come together and share their views with others on what the challenges were for the sector and what it would take to overcome them. There was a recognition of the importance of collaborating and forming partnerships to address these challenges.

Janette and Steve reflected there hadn't been such an opportunity for a while, so both were delighted with the turn out and invited everyone to share their views at the conference in the recognition that we were one community with many voices.

How communities are experiencing political and social isolation and the new role of UCL in developing regional partnerships.



Professor John Tomaney's keynote address provided a compelling and thoughtful reflection on the role of social connection in shaping public health outcomes, and the vital importance of history, place, and local knowledge in building stronger, healthier communities.

Professor Tomaney began his talk with a tribute to Dr George C. McGonigle, a pioneering public health officer in Stockton-on-Tees in the early 20th century. McGonigle's groundbreaking work linked poverty and poor nutrition to ill health, findings that were revolutionary at the time. His legacy helped influence wartime food policy and public health reforms, underlining the principle that health outcomes are shaped not just by biology, but by social and economic conditions.

Dr George C. McGonigle



This focus on the social determinants of health runs through Professor Tomaney's research at University College London (UCL), where he works to connect academic knowledge with real community needs. He reminded delegates that while the creation of the NHS brought improvements, the biggest leap in life expectancy occurred earlier between the World Wars due to practical interventions like clean water and better housing. Public health heroes like McGonigle and Eustace Hill helped lead these changes, guided by local insight and a deep commitment to community.

Turning to the present, Professor Tomaney highlighted how life expectancy is now falling in some parts of the UK, especially in post-industrial regions like the Northeast. He drew attention to the geography of suicide, particularly among men, and introduced the concept of "deaths of despair," a term used to describe mortality linked to suicide, drugs, and alcohol. These, he argued, are symptoms of lost social connection and declining community infrastructure.

Professor Tomaney spoke about the importance of social infrastructure, places where people come together, such as community centres, clubs, and libraries which has been steadily eroded over time. Drawing from his own work in a former mining village in County Durham, he described how mapping old community assets helped illuminate how local people had once been connected, and how rebuilding those connections today could have real health benefits.

He stressed that building social connection should be recognised as a public health intervention, and that community and voluntary organisations are already doing this work every day, yet, they often lack recognition and resources. He called for the NHS and statutory partners to see investment in social infrastructure not as an optional extra, but as a core component of health and wellbeing.

Professor Tomaney also made the case for greater collaboration between universities and communities. He challenged institutions like his own, UCL one of the UK's largest and most prestigious universities - to do more to share knowledge and resources with places like Sunderland. He acknowledged that research often remains concentrated in

London and the South and emphasised the need to “repurpose knowledge for the benefit of communities.”

To this end, he outlined several UCL supported projects in the region, including a men’s mental health initiative with Space Northeast, and exhibitions celebrating working-class identity and resilience. These projects demonstrate the potential of partnership between academia and community organisations, where research supports real-world change.

He closed by returning to the core theme: social connection. Whether through history, public health, or community engagement, the key message was clear -stronger, more connected communities are healthier, happier, and more resilient. The challenge now is to learn from the past, act in the present, and ensure future efforts are rooted in local voices and needs.

Professor Tomaney’s keynote was a powerful reminder that while policy and funding matter, it is people and place that shape outcomes. Rebuilding social connection is not just desirable - it is essential

How to collaborate with the VCSE sector to support social and economic inclusion in hard-to-reach communities. The role of the University of Sunderland.

Robin from the Institute of Economic and Social Inclusion (IESI) began by setting out the role of the University, perceived very much as a place-based institution with a high priority on the needs of local communities informed by evidence-based analysis. The University he said, sees its role as working together in partnership to contribute to overcoming local challenges as well as measuring the impact of that contribution.

The IESI work with the voluntary and community sector across two workstreams including which are (i) Education and Employment pathways, (ii) Housing Community and Social Cohesion. When working with the sector there is a focus on ensuring that the project have social impact and there is community development. The University is keen to ensure there is an element of capacity building for community organisation as these organisations share their expertise and insights into community issues and lived experience

Robin highlighted the benefits of collaborations between the University and the VCSE sector, which include co-produced research, creating knowledge to directly benefit local communities, policy influence and monitoring and evaluation which helps to assess the impact of projects

Key challenges faced are time and capacity, financial barriers and the different research timelines with voluntary and community sector organisations often requiring immediate practical solutions and Universities focused on long-term research. These challenges can be overcome through research collaboration, joint funding bids and

flexible partnerships. Ideally it is hoped that collaborations will lead to a deepened trust and a mutually beneficial long-term relationship.



Robin ended his presentation by sharing some of the research projects that the University had been engaged with.



Roundtable Activity One

Question 1: Who or what organisations are most at risk of being ‘left behind’ in our communities?

During this roundtable activity, delegates explored which types of organisations are most vulnerable to being “left behind” in the current VCSE landscape. The discussion raised several key themes that highlight the challenges facing the sector

1. Everyone is at risk – but some more than others

There was a shared sense that *all* organisations face risk in today’s climate, particularly with growing uncertainty, competition for funding, and pressure to deliver more with less. However, some groups are especially vulnerable. These include those that lack the time, skills, or capacity to market themselves, build networks, or apply for funding. Volunteer-led groups and smaller organisations, particularly those without paid staff, were consistently identified as being at greater risk.

2. Funding and capacity gaps

Access to funding was a major concern. Many delegates felt there is a “monopoly effect” where the same organisations repeatedly secure funding, while others are excluded due to limited resources, skills, or insider knowledge. The ability to write strong bids, manage grant requirements, and deliver outcomes, demands time and specialist knowledge that many grassroots or small organisations simply don’t have. As a result, there’s a trickle-down effect where funding rarely reaches those on the edges.

3. Digital and geographic exclusion

Digitally excluded organisations - those without reliable access to technology, skills, or online platforms are at risk of becoming invisible. Geographic isolation also plays a role: organisations in the 'Coalfields' or peripheral areas often miss out on networks, support, and opportunities that are more easily accessed in the urban centres.

4. Inclusivity and representation

Delegates stressed the need to think about who is being left behind not just in terms of organisations, but also communities. Groups representing disabled people, neurodiverse individuals, young people (especially those aged 16–19), minority ethnic communities, and people with multiple or intersecting challenges are often underrepresented and unsupported. Specialist organisations working with these communities can lack visibility making them more likely to fall through the gaps.

5. Culture and cliques

Some participants reflected that the sector can feel "cliquey," with a lack of inclusivity for newer or 'quieter' organisations. Those not "in the know" or without established relationships can struggle to access networks, information, or influence.

Conclusion

To build a stronger, more resilient sector, we need to recognise and support the diversity of organisations and communities especially those that are less visible, less resourced, and less connected. Left behind shouldn't just be a label, it should be a call to action.

Question 2: What are the issues/challenges that have an impact on a more inclusive VCSE Sector?

Delegates explored a range of challenges that are currently limiting the inclusivity and sustainability of the voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector. Several common themes emerged, with a strong sense that although the sector is resilient, it is also under considerable strain.

1. Funding pressures and competition

Perhaps the most dominant issue was funding. Delegates described the ongoing struggle for survival, with repeated cuts and an expectation that the VCSE sector should "do more for less." Many noted that larger organisations often dominate funding streams in the City and don't always share resources or opportunities with smaller or grassroots groups. This "funnelling up" of funding exacerbates inequality and undermines inclusion. There's also frustration with

opaque decision-making from some funders and a lack of alignment with real, on-the-ground needs.

2. Short-termism and instability

Short-term funding leads to short-term staffing, which creates a loss of knowledge, relationships, and momentum. Staff often have to move on when funding ends, making it difficult to sustain services, build trust with communities, or plan ahead. This creates a stop-start cycle that weakens organisational effectiveness and inclusivity.

3. Governance and structure confusion

Many organisations feel unsure about the most suitable legal and governance structures. Questions like “Should we be a CIO, CIC, or something else?” are common, and navigating these decisions can be a challenge. Good governance is crucial for resilience and inclusion, but smaller groups can lack the time, skills, or confidence to get it right.

4. Culture of competition, not collaboration

Despite the ethos of community and cooperation, delegates described a culture of fear and competition, organisations are hesitant to share ideas or work together due to scarce resources and limited trust. This leads to duplication, fragmentation, and missed opportunities for collective impact.

5. Visibility and inclusion challenges

Marketing, social media, and awareness-raising are vital but often overlooked due to limited resources. Location, digital exclusion, and social isolation also remain barriers. Many groups, especially smaller or less visible ones struggle to be heard or recognised. There’s still more to do to ensure underrepresented communities and quieter voices are truly included.

Conclusion

To build a more inclusive sector, we must move beyond survival mode. That means fairer funding, longer-term investment, better support for governance and collaboration, and a renewed understanding of the sector’s unique value, not just economically, but socially and emotionally too.

Question 3: How can we make other agencies aware of these issues and challenges?

Delegates explored practical ways to raise awareness of the challenges facing the VCSE sector. The discussion was rich and reflective, highlighting both current barriers and future opportunities. Several key themes emerged:

1. Stronger, independent infrastructure

There was widespread agreement that the sector needs a well-funded, independent infrastructure that is easily accessible and responsive to the needs of all VCSE organisations, especially the smaller and less visible ones. Infrastructure bodies like Voluntary and Community Action Sunderland (VCAS) play a vital role in support, coordination, and representation, but need to be properly resourced to continue doing so.

2. Leadership and collaboration

Delegates called for better leadership at all levels, more confident, skilled leaders who can advocate, inspire, and influence. This leadership should also foster partnership working both within the sector and with external bodies, including funders, statutory services, and private sector partners. Safe, respectful spaces for discussion, learning, and shared decision-making were highlighted as essential for building trust and encouraging collaborative action.

3. Evidence and data to make the case

To influence others and attract investment, the sector needs robust data and clear evidence of impact. Delegates acknowledged that having the right stories, stats, and case studies helps make the case for funding and shows the real value of VCSE work. There appears to be a growing appetite for collaborative research and shared learning, but more support is needed to build confidence and capacity in this area.

4. Communication and visibility

A recurring theme was the importance of effective communication. Social media, marketing, and direct engagement with communities and stakeholders all play a role. Some groups found that “having a riot” or responding to a crisis brought attention, but there was a desire to be heard without having to be in crisis. Delegates spoke about the need for a “big push” on communication, amplifying voices, telling stories, and using platforms to share insights and challenges more widely.

5. Boots on the ground

Finally, human connection matters. Events, showing the work in action, and simply being present in communities were seen as powerful ways to raise awareness. It’s not just about writing reports, it’s about relationships, visibility, and ongoing conversations.

Conclusion

Making others aware of our challenges isn’t a one-off campaign, it’s about building the right conditions for visibility, understanding, and support. That means better

infrastructure, more collaboration, stronger leadership, and consistent communication that puts people and purpose at the centre.

Question 4: How can we work together as cross-sector agencies to be more inclusive?

In this session, delegates reflected on how to strengthen collaboration within the VCSE sector. There was a strong and shared belief that working together more effectively can benefit not just organisations, but the communities they serve. Several practical ideas and themes emerged from the discussion:

1. Build genuine, meaningful partnerships

Participants stressed that collaboration should be more than just a buzzword, it needs to be authentic, purposeful, and focused on shared outcomes for people and communities. Working in partnership means investing time to build trust, aligning values, and finding common ground. Fair representation was highlighted as key to helping build that trust, especially across diverse and smaller organisations.

2. Learn, coordinate and grow together

There was a clear call for more opportunities to come together, to talk, learn, and coordinate. Regular networking events, joint training sessions, and shared spaces (physical or virtual) could foster stronger relationships and promote peer learning. Delegates also suggested training specifically focused on the benefits of inclusivity and collaborative working, to help embed these values across the sector.

3. Cross-promotion and shared communication

Better communication between organisations, through social media, newsletters, joint campaigns, and simple word-of-mouth, can help everyone become more visible and connected. Cross-promotion of each other's services and events not only boosts awareness but builds a sense of solidarity across the sector.

4. Creative and unexpected collaboration

Delegates were enthusiastic about thinking outside the box, joining forces with organisations or activities that might seem unrelated on the surface. Examples included combining music, football, or boat building with community support work. These types of collaborations can enrich experiences, widen reach, and attract new audiences.

5. A culture of “doing it for ourselves”

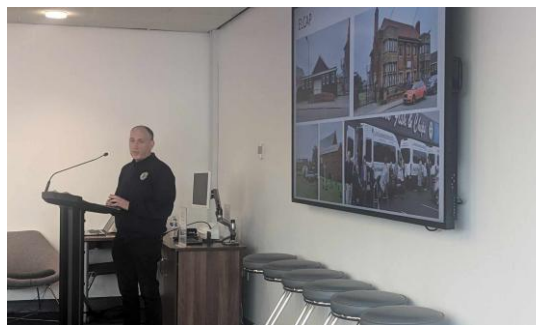
There was a strong message that the sector shouldn't wait for permission or external validation to collaborate. Delegates felt empowered by the idea that we can take the lead, create our own spaces for connection, and build a culture of

mutual support. When organisations interact more and share resources, everyone benefits, from staff to service users to funders.

Conclusion

Stronger collaboration doesn't just happen, it needs space, intention, and a shared belief in the power of collective effort. By building meaningful relationships, creating inclusive opportunities to connect, and championing each other's work, the VCSE sector can grow more united, more resilient, and more impactful.

Working in the VCSE Sector representing hard to reach communities and allowing their voice to shape service provision.



Shaun from Easington Lane Community Access Point (ELCAP) explained that they are a Community Anchor, independent multi-purpose community-led organisations, providing holistic solutions to local problems and challenges, bringing out the best in people and agencies. They are there for the long-term and are a driving force in community renewal. How? By promoting community participation, providing advocacy, resources and supporting partnership working as well as being a service provider and deliverer.

Shaun went on to describe Hetton ward as a former mining community that is very proud of its 200-year history at the forefront of the Industrial Revolution. Most of the local residents have strong connections and deep roots in the area. Local families have struggled with the closure of the collieries. Shaun explained the many reasons why the local community is disconnected from what is going on in the City, including poor transport infrastructure and the lack of recognition of place-based approaches which have left the community feeling ignored.

Shaun proposed the need to consider longer term funding for the sector and more collaboration within the sector. He also suggested that funders should also collaborate more.

Shaun's final message was focused on impact and the need for the sector to work hard to demonstrate the impact and value of what is being delivered but also not shy away from showing the true cost to deliver it and how the sector needed to be at the forefront of meaningful community engagement that would bring about local solutions to local issues.

How do we listen to the BME Community in Sunderland. How can it be improved to ensure that their voices are represented to policy makers?

Michal began by explaining what International Community of Sunderland, ICOS is and what they do as well as introducing himself and his involvement with ICOS. Michal has been involved with ICOS right from the start and has a background in community engagement and research. Here are the key takeaways from the presentation;

ICOS is a 15-year-old peer run service supporting migrants. The service is also led and delivered by migrants. ICOS deliver advice and advocacy across a range of areas including housing, education, employability, community development and access to benefits and support. ICOS’s community projects are focused on bringing people together to do things in their communities. Each year ICOS support 600 people with one-to-one support and over 2500 people through their events and various sessions.

ICOS participate in various research projects, including those on women's access to healthcare and the impact of living costs. They also lead the Back in Control project, which supports individuals affected by modern slavery and exploitation.

ICOS are also active in implementation and sharing, organising regular listening exercises and sharing the learning with various public bodies to help support their decision making.

Michal raised the key issues and problems for the sector continue to be resourcing, lack of focus and time. As there has been a changing landscape and associated needs, Michal wonders if the people and structures that exist are still representative. ICOS’s future plans include widening their steering group and embedding the asylum experience within ICOS.



Roundtable Activity Two

Question 5: What are the most common issues and challenges facing partnership working in the VCSE sector?

This session uncovered a complex set of challenges that can make partnership working difficult for voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) organisations, particularly smaller or volunteer-led groups. While there was recognition that collaboration is vital, delegates highlighted several barriers that can get in the way of genuine, effective partnerships.

1. Time, capacity and resourcing

The most frequently raised issue was time. Many organisations are already stretched, often relying on unpaid or part-time staff with no backfill available. Taking part in partnerships can feel like “a luxury” rather than a core function, especially when it draws attention away from day-to-day priorities and service delivery. Delegates emphasised that partnership working takes energy, effort and time to build relationships, all of which need to be properly resourced.

2. Imbalance of power and input

Power dynamics were a major concern. Larger, more established organisations often take the lead, leaving smaller groups feeling like a token partner or a small piece of a much larger pie. Imbalances in time, experience, funding, and influence can create tension and erode trust. Some smaller organisations feel excluded, or that their contribution is undervalued. This can lead to feelings of “what’s in it for me?” and even long-standing grudges based on negative past experiences.

3. Risk, fear and uncertainty

For some, partnership working is seen as a risky, especially when the value isn’t clear or past collaborations haven’t worked out. There can be fear that resources or funding will be diverted elsewhere, or that agreeing to a formal partnership could stretch an organisation beyond its limits. Unclear roles, clashing organisational cultures, and lack of a shared purpose can further muddy the waters.

4. Communication and connection

Delegates pointed out that successful partnerships rely on clear, respectful communication, but this doesn’t always happen. A lack of local networking opportunities and sector events means organisations may not even know who’s out there or how to connect. Without the space to build trust and understanding, collaboration remains surface-level.

Conclusion

While partnership working presents an opportunity, it needs to be supported properly if it’s going to work well. That means fairer funding, honest communication, recognition of unequal power dynamics, and time and space to build relationships. For collaboration to be more than a buzzword, we must all invest in the conditions that allow it to thrive.

In this roundtable discussion, delegates focused on how to strengthen connections between the voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector and regional or national organisations. The conversation highlighted both structural challenges and practical solutions to building stronger, more equitable partnerships.

1. Prove our impact and tell our story

Delegates agreed that to build partnerships, the VCSE sector needs to clearly demonstrate its value. That means collecting better data, evaluating outcomes effectively, and showcasing what works. Producing tangible outputs like reports, case studies, and social media content can help raise visibility and attract attention from regional and national stakeholders. There's also value in using local press, online platforms, and creative communications to share the sector's stories.

2. Invest in local infrastructure and leadership

A well-resourced infrastructure is essential for fostering regional and national partnerships. Organisations like VCAS and other local leadership bodies need to be supported to facilitate collaboration and act as connectors. Delegates suggested this leadership could be shared between existing regional and national bodies to create inclusive spaces for engagement.

3. Create the conditions for collaboration

Delegates emphasised the importance of creating time and space to build genuine relationships through informal meetings, networking, and thematic partnership groups. These efforts should be grounded in mutual trust, shared goals, and equal voices. Collaboration must feel safe and not be undermined by overly competitive funding environments or restrictive contracts. Flexible funding that supports relationship-building was seen as vital.

4. Break down barriers and build bridges

To work effectively across local, regional, and national levels, there needs to be a willingness to tackle common barriers such as lack of trust, over-competition for funding, and disconnected priorities. Encouraging organisations to signpost to each other and engage in joint problem-solving can build stronger networks and foster a culture of cooperation. Health, for example, was raised as a barrier to employment a theme that could unite organisations across sectors in shared action.

5. Grassroots voice and thematic working

Delegates called for more thematic groups focused on shared issues such as health, employment, or youth inclusion that bring together grassroots

organisations and funders to work collectively. Strengthening the ability of smaller organisations to demonstrate their impact with evidence would help ensure they have a seat at the table.

Conclusion

Building strong partnerships with regional and national organisations requires trust, evidence, and investment in the local infrastructure that holds everything together. With the right support, the VCSE sector can step into these partnerships as equal, valued contributors bringing knowledge, creativity, and real

Question 7: What is the impact [social, economic, and political] of not having inclusive 'voices' represented?

In this discussion, delegates explored the serious consequences of failing to include a wide range of voices within the voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector. The conversation was plain and honest, highlighting how the absence of inclusive representation has real-world impacts on communities, trust, and effectiveness.

1. People are left behind

When voices are excluded especially those from marginalised, underrepresented, or less visible communities people miss out on the support they need. Services become less responsive, and the sector struggles to reach those it aims to help. Delegates agreed: if we don't include everyone, we simply won't achieve what we set out to do.

2. Trust and connection are eroded

Exclusion leads to disconnection. Communities that feel unheard can lose trust in the organisations meant to support them. Over time, this creates disenfranchisement and apathy not just towards the sector, but towards the systems and services around them. Without inclusive engagement, there's a loss of shared purpose and a weakening of the social fabric.

3. A less effective and more divided sector

Delegates warned of a future where a lack of inclusivity leads to a smaller, more monopolised sector dominated by a few organisations. Such a sector would risk creating a system that lacks diversity of thought, experience, and innovation. When we don't understand or reflect people's real needs, we end up with solutions that don't work and a sector that's built on shaky foundations.

4. A sense of exclusion and not belonging

Inclusion isn't just about ticking boxes; it's about creating spaces where everyone feels they belong. Without this, individuals and communities can feel alienated, adding to wider social tensions and reducing opportunities for

collaboration and cohesion. A lack of inclusive voices diminishes the sector's ability to be truly community-led.

5. Equity must be prioritised

Delegates were clear: equitable funding and decision-making are vital. Funding should not be political or directed only toward the loudest or most connected organisations. Instead, it should be fair, transparent, and open to those who may have previously been overlooked.

Conclusion

Failing to represent inclusive voices doesn't just affect individuals, it weakens the entire sector. To build something sustainable, responsive, and meaningful, inclusion must be at the heart of everything we do. When everyone is heard, we all move forward.

Question 8: How can we build capacity for the VCSE sector to engage at a strategic level more effectively?

In this final discussion, delegates explored what is truly needed to help the voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector not only survive but thrive. Their responses highlighted both practical requirements and structural changes that could strengthen the sector from the ground up.

1. More funding and equitable investment

Unsurprisingly, funding came up again and again. But the emphasis was on *equitable* funding, ensuring that resources reach all parts of the sector, not just the most visible or well-connected. Delegates stressed that organisations need funding not just for service delivery, but also to take part in strategic conversations, build partnerships, and reflect on what's working. Without the time and resources to think and plan, the sector can't grow effectively.

2. A stronger, better-resourced infrastructure

To function well, the sector needs robust infrastructure: trusted bodies that engage with all groups regardless of size, supporting coordination, learning, and representation. Infrastructure organisations need investment in their workforce and systems, so they can help smaller and grassroots groups connect, collaborate, and influence change. When infrastructure works well, everyone benefits.

3. Time and space for engagement

Delegates felt that time was as valuable as money, time to engage with commissioners like the NHS and local authorities, time to gather feedback and data, and time to build meaningful relationships with communities and partners. The current climate doesn't always allow for this, and many felt pushed into a reactive rather than strategic space.

4. Better data and communication loops

To influence decision-making and show impact, the sector needs support to collect and share data, stories, and insights. But it's a two-way street, there also needs to be better feedback from commissioners and funders to ensure organisations know how their input is being used and valued.

5. New models and creative solutions

Delegates were open to exploring new ways of working, such as tendering as part of consortia based on ability and need, or developing “swap shops” for sharing skills, space, or resources. They also saw value in corporate partnerships or pro bono support from experts in areas like legal advice, marketing, or strategy.

Conclusion

To make the VCSE sector work for everyone, we need fairer funding, smarter infrastructure, time to think and engage, and fresh approaches to collaboration. With the right support, the sector can continue to be a powerful force for positive change, rooted in community, driven by purpose, and ready for the future.

Representation the voices of young people through Sunderland's All Together Consortium. How we help influence change for those we represent.



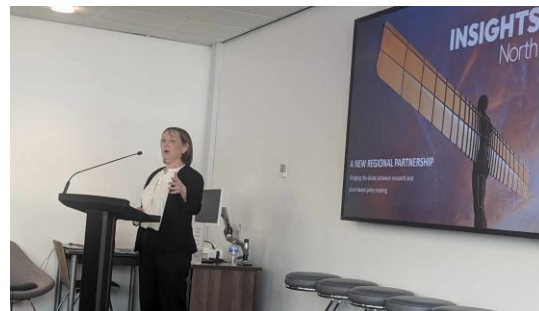
Sunderland All Together Consortium is made up of several youth work organisations, all of whom share one common goal; to transform the lives of young people across the city of Sunderland and to create a strong sustainable future for youth work services. Each consortium member's experience and geographical reach means the Consortium can provide a broader city-wide service for children, young people and families in Sunderland.

Ruth Walker began her presentation by quoting some key statistics which demonstrated how young people are not seen or heard in our society. She then explained why it was important to amplify youth voice because they lack power and representation, they are legal and economic dependents, they have unequal opportunities are often stigmatised and stereotyped, many have poor mental health and there is a lack of safe spaces for them.

Ruth shared how the Consortium's services empower and include young people, giving them autonomy and financial independence, ensuring that young people find acceptance and understanding and build strong mental well-being by ensuring there is an abundance of supportive spaces across Sunderland.

The projects delivered by the Consortium have led to several outcomes for young people, such as increased confidence, improved ability to make their own choices, reduced inequalities, and development of resilience. These projects provide young people with opportunities to understand themselves better and create space for personal growth.

INE and inclusive innovation on economic growth and demonstrate the ways in which universities can be pioneers in this area.



Louise's presentation was on improving inclusion outcomes from investments in innovation and infrastructure in post-industrial cities.

Louise introduced Insights North East (INE) a new regional partnership designed to bridge the divide between research and place-based policy making. They do this by facilitating policy makers access to research and knowledge base and through capability and capacity building. INE works with regional universities, local government, the voluntary and community sector and the NHS trust and integrated care board. INE works in three themed areas, inclusive growth, net zero and health and wellbeing with a cross-cutting focus on data.

Louise shared the study of two cities, Newcastle and Pittsburgh both post industrial cities where innovation and infrastructural investment had taken place, with community involvement and development taking place as an afterthought. She demonstrated using employment data that the investments have not really had a significant impact on employment and in fact over the period in Newcastle the employment gap between national employment and the city had increased over the period.

Definitions of inclusive innovation can be rather vague, but INE’s study had highlighted three feature that can support an area to be inclusive. (i) When the innovation infrastructure contributes to challenges that local people face. (ii) When local people and businesses receive some benefit through jobs and opportunities (iii) When local communities have a level of agency or influence in shaping the priorities and activities of innovation.

Louise observed that the Newcastle Helix development scores well on many orthodox innovation/science led growth metrics. It also performs reasonably well when looking at metrics focused on green growth, but as yet there are no specific measures defined within the development for purposeful inclusive innovation goals. There is strong interest to making progress in this area in the future.

The key stakeholders that formed part of the study identified a range of steps to progress an inclusive innovation agenda which were, establishing a shared purpose, values and measures of success, accelerating the animation and outreach and engagement activities, create community spaces and on site community enterprises, align activities with wider regional and city wide strategies, identify skills and training opportunities and design principles that encourage community use.



The role of the regional representative as an advocate for the wider VCSE Sector and the issues faced by the sector.

Martin introduced Voluntary Organisations Network North East (VONNE) who are the regional support body for the North East voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector and represent more than 1400 member organisations.

VONNE use their position to raise the profile of the VCSE community and ensure it is recognised and valued as an equal partner. VONNE are also recognised as a source of intelligence and are frequently invited to contribute to strategic government policy discussions and consultations, representing the sector both regionally and nationally.

Currently VONNE represents the VCSE sector as a cabinet member of the North East Combined Authority (NECA). This position enables VONNE to directly influence the policy, practice and programmes of the combined authority alongside other regional partners. Martin sees NECA as providing a key opportunity for the region, their strategic priorities link directly to many organisations within the VCSE as they focus on child poverty and the foundational economy.¹ The Mayor who heads up NECA is keen to impact on the local economy by reducing child poverty and supporting the

¹ [What is the foundational economy? – The Foundational Economy](#)

foundational economy. How this ambition is translated into activity is yet to be seen and this is where there is an opportunity for VONNE supported by its members to demonstrate the significant impact the VCSE make in addressing child poverty challenges and supporting the foundational economy.

A combination of storytelling and metrics is the best way of making an impact and getting stakeholders into listening mode.

The mantra is ‘No numbers without stories and no stories without numbers.’ People only understand impact through stories. VONNE can support VCSE to do this, but VCSE have the evidence, they have the stories and the numbers.

Martin’s message was to provide this type of data in any format to VONNE and they can use it to develop compelling stories of impact and demonstrate the huge social and economic impact the VCSE makes





SUNDERLAND'S VOLUNTARY SECTOR SPRING CONFERENCE

‘ONE COMMUNITY: MANY VOICES’

VCAS are pleased to announce the VCSE sector spring conference of 2025. The voluntary sector and the local communities we represent have faced a number of significant and ongoing challenges over a number of years. Lets hear what you have to say.

WEDNESDAY 26TH MARCH 9.30AM - 3.30PM

HOPE STREET XCHANGE
HIND STREET
SRI 3QD

Keynote speakers:

						
JOHN TOMANEY Professor of Urban and Regional Planning in the Bartlett School of Planning & Pro-Professor (Regional Communities) at The University of Sunderland.	ROBIN FINLAY Dr Finley is the Partnerships Manager and Research Associate at The Institute for Economic and Social Inclusion at The University of Sunderland	LOUISE KEMPTON Professor of Urban and Regional Policy at Newcastle University and Strategic Director for Insights North East	MARTIN BROOKES Martin is Chief Executive Officer VONNE The Regional Support body for the North East Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector.	SHAUN NEWTON Shaun is the Chief Executive Officer for Easington Lane Community Action Point [ELCAP]	MICHAL CHANTKOWSKI Michal works as a Development Manager for The International Committee of Sunderland Communities [ICCS]	RUTH WALKER Ruth is the Operational Manager for Sunderland's All Together Consortium

4.0 Conference Feedback

VCAS received 26 responses to their delegate survey asking for feedback. This is a 52% response rate. The charts below provide a summary of the feedback received.

Chart 1: Overall conference experience

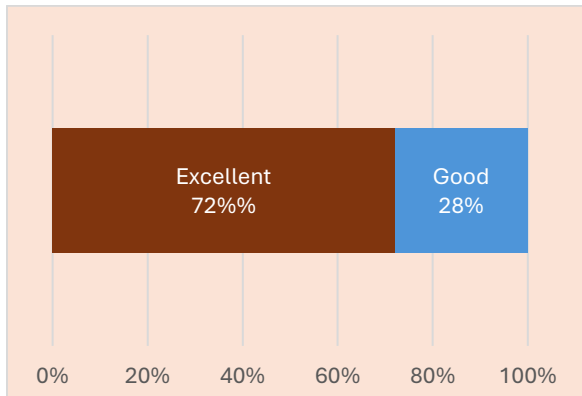


Chart 2: Conference organisation

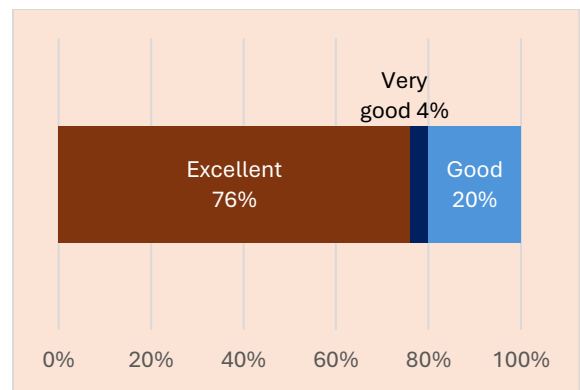


Chart 3: Suitability of venue.

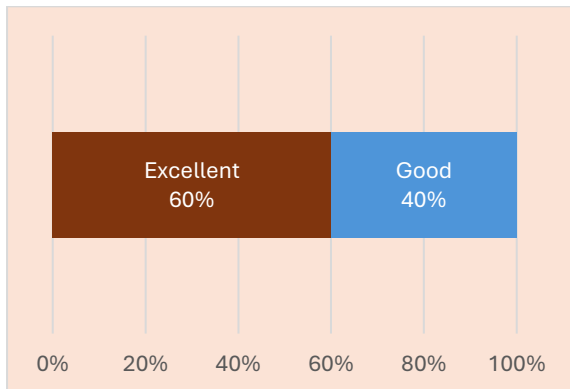


Chart 4: Relevance of topics

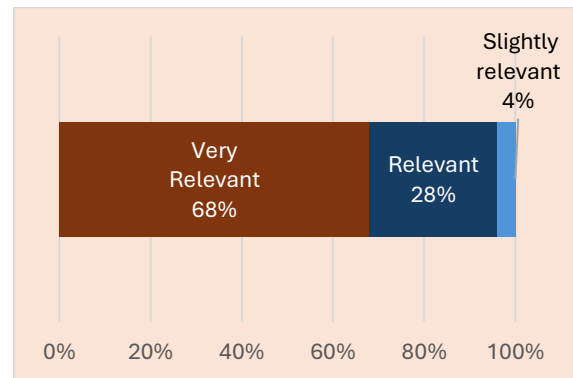


Chart 5: Speakers Presentations

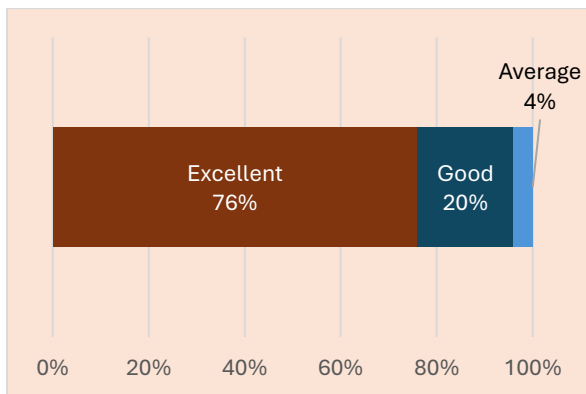


Chart 6: Workshop Sessions



100%

said they would attend another similar VCAS conference in the

Feedback comments

Below is a selection of feedback from conference delegates.

Overall experience

“great organisation, great speakers, great engagement from attendees”

“Very informative and collaborative”

“Interesting, high quality and professional”

“Well put together and a great range of speakers. Good to hear from speakers from other sectors.”

“Really well-balanced group of speakers”

Speakers' presentations and all-round engagement on the day.

“Interesting, Informative and Inspiring. A regular version would be amazing.”

“a really interesting mix of speakers”

“A varying array of knowledge from across the sector all very well chosen in their fields”

“The combination of University and grass roots organisations was very powerful. It allowed us to hear from people we wouldn't normally hear from, who have an interest in supporting the region and the sector.”

Value of workshops

“Good to hear others experiences”

“Super effective working with others actually involved in delivery.”

“They were great in meeting new people/organisations and providing that interactive element so that we were able to switch between listening and sharing.”

“Alot of questions in a short time meant no real discussion of all.”

“Good opportunity to speak to others on table”

“Helped learn from each others experiences”

Final comments

“Really enjoyed the conference, I actually had somewhere to be but cancelled it as found it so informative and inspiring.”

“Hope it becomes a regular thing. Bringing people together is a good thing.”

“well done, a greatly enjoyable day”

“Great day. Thanks VCAS”

“I'd like to thank the members of VCAS for inviting me to a very successful Spring conference. very enlightening.”

“It was evident that much careful thought had gone into the organisation of this event; and it was appreciated that staff picked up on the audibility problem and solved it by the afternoon session.”

Some of the feedback on value of the presentations

"Prof John Tomaney was really effective with the subject matter and made us want to do projects. Ruth Walker was very inspiring, I really enjoyed hearing about ELCAP from Shaun Newton and he highlighted important issues, Louise Kempton was illuminating and Martin Brookes was important to hear so glad I stayed to the end."

"I can't pick... (sorry, no use for your stats!). took something from all. But one strong point was from Ruth Walker - regarding the level of trust needed to form a strong partnership,"

"John and Robin talking about engaging with the grassroots to carry out meaningful research - that is what we do"

"As I work in academia, I found all the VSCE sector presentations very valuable as they gave me insights into community and VSCE challenges."

"Shaun Newton - good to hear the challenges at the coal face in an isolated area Academics - a world that we are rarely exposed to but should be."

"Louise Kempton: Inspiring and experienced speaker. Striking image of new architecture that cost millions as against the nearby soup kitchen - which is most valuable for the community? and Martin Brookes: Highly relevant comments re-funding, showing understanding of needs of grassroots organisations, though it would be good to hear even more about the struggles of organisations that are so small and overworked that they haven't the time to do the work he advises - case studies, feedback quotes, statistics."

"All were valuable in different ways; the first presentation was particularly thought provoking."

"ELCAP and Youth Collaboration presentations were both great and had a trust local focus."

"Heavens - I valued them all as each was a different subject / viewpoint. I was there to learn and this was ideal."

"Professor John Tomaney was an engaging presenter, even without power point slides. Therefore, I was interested in listening. I did lose interest in some other University presentations. The local presenters Shaun and Ruth were excellent and relevant too."

"The presentation about Easington, really showcased how Sunderland and a lot of places are treated across the region by government, local and central. It highlighted the issues clearly on a level that was relatable and understandable."

"Professor John Tomaney even when he forgot his slide presentation, he still kept it very entertaining and very informative."

"I think the blend of information that covered local organisations and how other agencies are trying to work at a locality level was outstanding. Very relatable."

5.0 Networking Hub

Below are the list of delegates shaded in blue and those that did not attend but registered for the event. Recommendation moving forward is to develop a networking hub and provide feedback and future developments through the hub.

No	Name	Organisation
1.	Ayodeji Aleshinloye	Independent
2.	Stephen Armstrong	Groundwork North East and Cumbria*
3.	Faye Atherton	HOPS
4.	Lesley Barefoot	HOPS
5.	Martin Bell	The Wise Group
6.	Sharon Brennan	SHINE NHS Charity
7.	Gordon Chalk	The Red Cross*
8.	Michal Chantkowski	ICOS
9.	Carl Chapman	VCAS
10.	Amy Coates	VONNE
11.	Trish Cornish	Sunderland Mind
12.	Joise Covas	Maritime Heritage
13.	Alan Cummings	Living History North East And The Donnison School Heritage Centre
14.	Leanne Davis	Sunderland Counselling Services
15.	Angela Dinsdale	Sunderland Counselling Services*
16.	Gary Doig	Alzheimer's Society
17.	Steve Donkin	VCAS
18.	Cllr Michael Dixon	Sunderland Council
19.	Jessi Fairless	Wearside Woman In Need
20.	Colin Fishwick	SID Social Inclusion and Dyslexia Project
21.	Ger Fowler	Veterans In Crisis*
22.	Karima Heraoua	Independent
23.	Janette Hilton	VCAS
24.	Sarah Hollis	Wearside Women In Need
25.	Feruz Hussain	Youth Focus North East*
26.	Denise Irving	Citizens Advice Sunderland*
27.	Chris Ivey	VCAS
28.	Louise Kempton	Insights North East
29.	Susanne Kennedy	
30.	Charlie Lamb	Sunderland Youth Work*
31.	Leah Lamb	Involve North East
32.	Justine Massingham	Greggs Foundation*
33.	Justine Merton-Scott	Space4
34.	Shaun Newton	Easington Lane Action Point [ELCAP]
35.	Susan Nolan	HOPS
36.	Oreoluwa Odenusi	ICOS
37.	Karen Parkinson	Tansy Community Centre

38.	Mary Pattinson	VCAS
39.	Sanjee Ratnatunga	Ideas for Change Consulting
40.	Michael Renshaw	Sunderland Maritime Heritage
41.	Kenny Sanger	The Bunker Sunderland
42.	Alexandra Smith	
43.	Will Stuart	The Wise Group*
44.	Toby Sweet	Sunderland Counselling Services*
45.	John Tomaney	UCL
46.	Leigh Ann Thomson	Sunderland Mind*
47.	Ruth Walker	Sunderland All Together Consortium
48.	AJ White	Involve North East *
49.	Joanne Youngson	Sunderland AFC Heaven Branch
50.	Sofia Zhu	
51.	Ruth Hardy	Theatre Space Northeast
52.	Steve Newman	Friends of The Drop In [FODI]
53.	Martin Brookes	VONNE
54.	Amy Coates	VONNE
55.	Kris Heskett	Shelter
56.	Stephen O'Brien	Councillor
57.	Robin Finlay	University of Sunderland
58.	Dr Peter Adegbie	The Chapel of Light
59.	Pat Chambers	4Louise
60.	Zoe Chandler	Weights and Cakes*
61.	Kevin Clark	Groundwork North East and Cumbria
62.	Barbara Cookson	The Family Tree
63.	Clair Docherty	National Lottery Community Fund
64.	Kathryn Foley	SPORTED
65.	Amanda Lowery	NERAF
66.	Paul McLoughlin	Veterans in Crisis*
68.	Dawn Marshall	Becoming Visible
69.	Emma Neil	Communities Together*
70.	Joanne Redman	
71.	Abu Sharma	Social Enterprise Academy
72.	Claire Stewart	The Special Lioness
73.	Tugay Yalcin	Dialogue Society*
74.	Kimberley Kennedy	Together We Can - Northeast