

# Sunderland VCSE Volunteering Summit 2026

## Summary Report

14 May 2026 | Hope Vineyard, Hendon Road, Sunderland

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## Introduction

The Sunderland VCSE Volunteering Summit 2026 took place on 14 May at Hope Vineyard in Hendon Road. Close to seventy people came together from across the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector, from the university, and from statutory partners, drawn by a shared interest in what volunteering in Sunderland looks like now and what it could become.

The day was structured around four keynote presentations and three workshops. The conversations were honest. The proposals were practical. And by the close of the afternoon there was a clear, shared sense that the sector is ready to move.

This summary draws out the themes, challenges and proposals that emerged most consistently across the day. It does not try to reproduce every session in detail: the full conference and workshop report does that. What this document captures is the direction of travel.

## A Sector Under Pressure

The summit opened against a difficult backdrop, and participants did not shy away from naming it.

Volunteer numbers and hours across the region have not recovered to pre-pandemic levels. The North East runs a smaller voluntary sector than comparable parts of the country, while

serving communities where deprivation is among the highest in England. Organisations are being asked to do more, with less, at exactly the moment when that ask is hardest to meet.

Traditional volunteering models are under strain. The idea of a stable base of long-term, regular volunteers who can be relied upon indefinitely is increasingly at odds with how people actually live. Shift work, caring responsibilities, financial pressure and the way the benefits system is designed all shape who can volunteer and on what terms. The sector knows this. It is working out how to respond.

Running alongside the capacity pressures is a difficulty in demonstrating impact. Most organisations can describe what they do. Fewer can evidence what difference it makes. Funders are increasingly interested in outcomes rather than outputs, and the gap between what the sector achieves and what it can prove it achieves is both a strategic problem and a practical one the sector has the tools to start closing.

*The sector holds far more evidence of its value than it currently captures, communicates or uses.*

## Volunteering Is Not a Low-Cost Option

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One of the clearest messages of the day was this: effective volunteering costs something, and everyone involved needs to be honest about that.

Volunteer programmes require coordinators, systems, training and infrastructure. Disclosure and barring checks, safeguarding training, insurance, induction processes, risk assessments, expenses policies, the administration needed to hold it all together. None of this is free. The persistent undervaluing of it is one of the structural problems the sector faces.

Participants were direct about what good volunteer management actually demands, and equally direct about the gap between that and what many organisations currently have the resource to provide. The ask of funders and commissioners is clear: sustained, multi-year investment in volunteering infrastructure, not repeated cycles of short-term project funding that force organisations to rebuild capacity from scratch each time a grant ends.

This is also a point about honesty within the sector itself. Organisations need to be realistic about what they can offer volunteers before they invite people in, and equally realistic about what they need before they scale up what they do.

## Putting Volunteers First

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A principle returned to throughout the day: volunteers are partners, not supplementary resource.

They arrive with skills, lived experience, motivations and something to give. Organisations that treat them as an add-on, useful when available, overlooked otherwise, will not recruit well, will not retain people, and will not build the diverse volunteer base that communities in Sunderland need.

Good volunteer management starts by asking volunteers what they want to achieve, not only what the organisation requires of them. It means creating genuine belonging: through regular contact, supervision, social connection, and the small gestures of recognition that carry

disproportionate weight. A sincere thank you after a hard shift matters. Knowing where to turn when the work is emotionally demanding matters.

*Psychological safety came through clearly as a priority. Volunteers need to know that asking for help is normal, not a sign of weakness.*

Flexibility matters too. Micro-volunteering, taster sessions, short-term and skills-based roles all lower the threshold for participation and create pathways toward deeper involvement. Rigid structures that demand long-term commitment from the outset will always exclude people who have a great deal to offer.

Financial barriers are real and often invisible. Travel costs fall on volunteers personally. Most do not claim the expenses they are entitled to. As financial pressures increase across the population, volunteering is quietly becoming harder to access for the people it might benefit most. Organisations and funders both need to take this seriously.

And when volunteers are ready to move on, recognising what they have contributed, through references, formal acknowledgement of their experience, and active support for their next steps, matters as much as how they were welcomed at the start.

## Building a Connected Local Ecosystem

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The most ambitious conversation of the day was about the shape of volunteering in Sunderland as a whole. Participants were clear that the sector currently operates in ways that are too fragmented and too competitive to make the most of the assets and knowledge it holds collectively.

The shift people called for is cultural as much as structural. Less guarded. More generous with what the sector knows. More genuinely oriented toward shared benefit rather than organisational survival.

### A centralised volunteering hub

There was broad support for a single, accessible point of contact for volunteers and organisations across the city: a hub that can match people with opportunities, hold an up-to-date register of vacancies and resources, help organisations navigate recruitment and governance, and provide the kind of human-centred support that a database alone cannot. The emphasis on keeping it current and genuinely usable was consistent. A system that is out of date or difficult to navigate becomes a barrier rather than a resource.

### A volunteer passport

A portable record of a volunteer's training, safeguarding checks and experience, allowing people to move between organisations without repeating the same processes from scratch each time. Models for this already exist elsewhere in the region. The case for developing one in Sunderland was made strongly, and the benefits are straightforward: less duplication, faster recruitment, clearer recognition of what volunteers have built up over time.

### Shared training and progression pathways

Structured routes that allow community connectors to develop into volunteer coordinators, and volunteer coordinators to grow into broader community leaders. Train-the-trainer approaches that build internal capacity rather than creating indefinite dependence on external provision.

Clearer connections between volunteering and routes into employment and further education, with particular attention to young people currently outside all three pathways.

### **A quality assurance standard**

A recognised mark for volunteering organisations in Sunderland: a benchmark to work toward and a clearer signal to volunteers and communities of what good practice looks like.

### **A different approach to funding**

A shift away from competitive grant-making in areas where joint bids would serve communities better, and a stronger collective case made to funders for sustained investment in volunteering infrastructure rather than the short-term project cycles that currently dominate.

## **Making the Evidence Work**

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A recurring theme across the day was the gap between what the sector does and what it can demonstrate. The Data for Change project, a partnership between VCAS, the University of Sunderland and University College London, is a direct attempt to close it.

The project will work with 30 to 40 organisations across Sunderland to map how data is currently understood and used. A series of workshops will follow, building confidence and practical skills. The central output will be a free, co-designed tool that organisations can use to gather and apply data more effectively in their day-to-day work.

The message from the session was an important one: many organisations are already collecting meaningful evidence through sign-in sheets, case studies and session feedback. The challenge is often one of confidence and recognition rather than capacity. The sector holds more than it realises.

## **Lived Experience as a Genuine Asset**

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The University of Sunderland's Patient, Carer and Public Involvement programme offered a detailed and instructive example of what co-production looks like at scale. Between 200 and 300 people with lived experience of long-term health conditions are embedded as genuine partners in the education of healthcare professionals, contributing to curriculum design, student selection, clinical assessments and governance. By the end of this academic year the programme will have facilitated approximately 80,000 hours of contact.

Participants in the programme are employed on zero-hours contracts structured to protect their benefit entitlements, so they are not technically volunteers. But the principles that make it work are the same ones that run through good volunteering practice: genuine partnership, the recognition of lived experience as expertise, sustained relational investment. And the outcomes, confidence rebuilt, isolation reduced, progression into employment and education, mirror what the sector is working toward across the board.

## Where This Goes Next

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The summit closed with a shared recognition that the challenges are real, that the questions raised do not have easy answers, and that building a more connected and resilient volunteering ecosystem in Sunderland will require honesty, ambition and sustained collective effort.

Participants were encouraged to stay engaged, to hold infrastructure organisations to account, and to push when support is needed. That relationship, between the sector and the organisations that exist to serve it, only works when it is active and genuinely two-way. Any future changes to Sunderland's voluntary sector infrastructure must be shaped by the organisations working on the ground, not decided without them.

The proposals that emerged from the day, a centralised hub, a volunteer passport, shared training standards, clearer progression pathways, more collaborative approaches to funding, are not a finished plan. They are a shared starting point.

*The conversation, as Janette Hilton put it in closing, continues.*