

Reflections and insights

from 120 community conversations

May 2025



www.communityfoundation.org.uk/onthetable



Community
Foundation
North East

Generously supported by:



Introduction

On the Table is a simple but powerful idea inspired by Community Foundation North East's counterparts in the US and Canada.

It calls people together over food to make connections and talk about issues that are important to them. These conversations can then inspire action, inform the work of funders and influence anyone with an interest in supporting positive change for communities. We wanted to pioneer On the Table in the UK to give people an opportunity to discuss our Vital Signs reports, which identify challenges and opportunities for our region and how philanthropy and charitable funding can best address them. It was also an important way to ensure community voices could inform Community Foundation North East's new strategy.

So, in Autumn 2024 we issued an invitation to anyone wishing to host an On the Table to get a toolkit alongside a modest contribution for food, room hire and any access support. In return, we simply asked them to complete a brief survey to feedback their On the Table discussions.

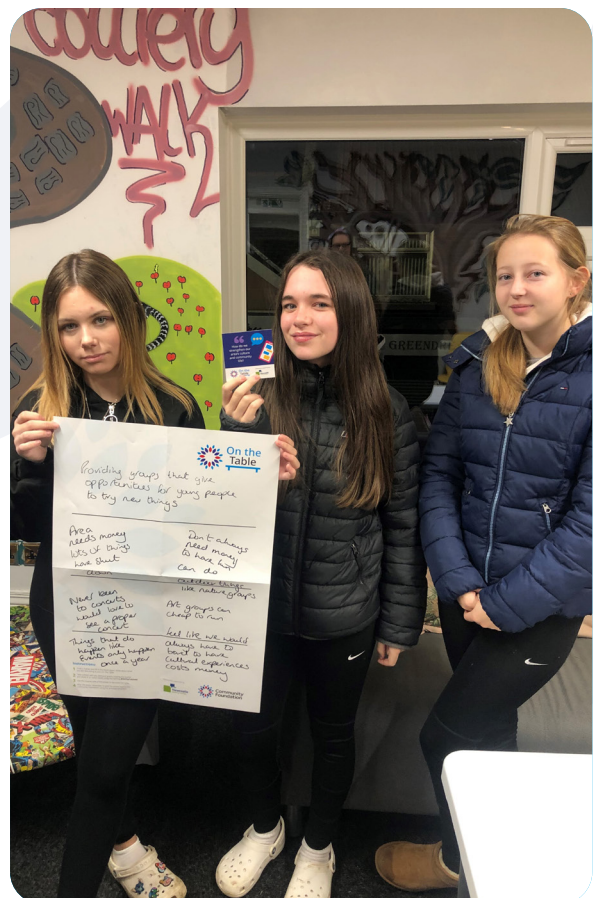
Our analysis of feedback from On the Table has identified over 50 broad priorities for philanthropic support.



The response was phenomenal. 62 organisations hosted events, with 120 separate On the Table conversations involving nearly 1,000 people from Northumberland to Stockton-on-Tees. Hosts were overwhelmingly positive about how events had gone, citing the value of engaging people in open discussions on issues that they felt passionately about. Conversations involved staff and volunteers from local charities and community groups, people who use services, carers, donors and funders, public and private sector employees, and families, friends and neighbours of hosts. A huge range of perspectives were offered. On the Table discussions included large charities and small community groups; big corporations and small businesses. Diverse voices including older people attending arts classes, people requiring support with complex social care needs and community leaders from Black, Asian and minoritised ethnic backgrounds. Several discussions were issue-based, including On the Tables focusing on the women's sector, social housing provision, and employment of ex-offenders.

Our analysis of feedback from On the Table has identified over 50 broad priorities for philanthropic support. We have summarised them in this report under five over-arching themes. They in turn have fed into Community Foundation North East's new strategy, ensuring your reflections and insights are at the heart of our response to local needs and priorities in the coming years as we inspire philanthropy, invest in communities and influence change. Our enormous thanks go to all our hosts and their On the Table guests, and to our partners at Newcastle Building Society whose generous support allowed this initiative to be so successful.

Rob Williamson OBE, DL
Chief Executive



On the Table Hosts said:



"It was a great opportunity to have honest conversations with like-minded people who work at 'the coalface'."

"It was an interesting experience, and I was happy to do it. Some of our participants would not traditionally engage with formal consultations..."

"Hosting the session was a genuinely eye-opening experience. It showed the power of bringing together people with lived experience."

"It was a very useful exercise and provided a focus on wider discussion for our organisation that we do not usually have the time to engage in and benefit from."

"A big thanks for the opportunity we benefited greatly from the fact that the Community Foundation had sponsored the meeting."

Topics most often On the Table

- Combating poverty
- Helping people into work
- Widening access to opportunities, services and decision-making including through support with transport
- Filling gaps in services
- Taking action on inequalities affecting women and girls
- Tackling digital exclusion and online safety
- Ensuring communities and civil society organisations have a say in decision-making
- Greater collaboration between community organisations and their partners
- Longer-term, larger grants for core funding of charities and community organisations



120
conversations



1000
guests



9
local authority
areas covered

Poverty and inequality

Poverty and inequality in our region places households under stress, holds children back and leaves neighbourhoods behind. Addressing poverty involves not only meeting basic needs for food, shelter and services but also tackling the inequalities that can amplify its impact on disadvantaged communities and individuals.

Many On the Table conversations covered preventing and relieving poverty, which was seen by guests as a root cause of many of the problems experienced in North East communities. There was also a strong emphasis on addressing inequalities arising from protected characteristics such as age, disability and ethnicity but with the needs of women and girls perhaps the most prominent concern. There was also a call to address the disadvantages faced by people in rural communities who felt their needs were too often overlooked.

A common view expressed at On the Table discussions was that meeting needs through existing provision should be a priority rather than needless innovation. Guests were also concerned that civil society – and so philanthropy – might increasingly have to fill gaps in NHS and Local Authority services for more vulnerable individuals and communities, not just add value over and above what the state provides.

There was a call to address the disadvantages faced by people in rural communities.





Access to opportunity

Our region is well placed to achieve greater economic prosperity. However, ensuring people can benefit from the opportunities coming our way involves raising educational attainment and skills (including digital), removing barriers to learning, training and jobs, and supporting home-grown talent and local enterprise. And any progress towards inclusive prosperity for the North East will require access to extra support for those at risk of exclusion from services and opportunities.

Many On the Table conversations covered the need to support people who face barriers to accessing the jobs market. Priorities identified ranged from creating additional education opportunities for young people, support for women-led small businesses and providing more vocational training for adults, particularly to widen access to jobs associated with the transition to net zero.

Many On the Table guests referred to physical and attitudinal barriers to accessing services and other opportunities. This echoed priorities identified in Vital Signs around support for people in deprived communities and individuals experiencing disadvantage based on things like sex, age, ethnicity and disability. Actions

recommended included: greater investment in women's services and work to tackle misogyny and sexual violence with boys and men; developing more culturally appropriate voluntary sector services; work on digital exclusion; and a raft of measures addressing issues affecting disabled people in areas like housing, access to services, health and leisure, employment and participation in local democracy.

Another major theme was transport. This impacted on many rural dwellers, from older and disabled people wishing to access services to younger adults struggling to afford travel to work, and children isolated from after-school provision. Tackling digital exclusion and online safety were also flagged up, as was the need to support access to financial services with financial literacy training.

While highlighting the role of the community and voluntary sector in supporting access to work, services and opportunities, several On the Table sessions flagged up the need for the sector to do more to improve access to its own services, not least through more effective promotion of its local offer.



Healthy and safe communities

Our region has worse physical and mental health than others. And we have worrying levels of domestic abuse, hate crime and anti-social behaviour. Civil society plays a significant part in helping people and places at greatest risk through local action, healthy living activities, advice and advocacy, counselling, crisis intervention, support for victims and work to reduce re-offending.

Improving the region's mental and physical health was a major theme of On the Table. A particular focus was addressing inequalities and gaps in services. That included targeted services for women, young people, people from Black, Asian and minoritised communities, the unemployed, disabled people and those with long-term conditions and their carers, people in poverty and socially isolated older people, particularly in rural communities. There was a strong focus on early intervention to encourage young people to adopt healthier lifestyles but the need for support throughout peoples' lives, particularly as they aged, was recognised.

Community safety was seen not just as a quality-of-life issue, but as vital to bringing employment and inward investment to the region. Addressing high levels of sexual and domestic violence

affecting women and girls in the region emerged as the major theme. Other key priorities included diverting people (particularly the young) from crime, anti-social behaviour and radicalisation, support for victims and online safety. The role of community organisations in bringing different people, communities and cultures together to build greater social cohesion within communities was mentioned. There was also reference to the need to support ex-offenders.

Improving the region's mental and physical health was a major theme of On the Table.



Culture and community life

Arts, heritage, sport and community activities showcase our region, provide enjoyment and inspire change. Opportunities to engage in culture for fun – as well as to develop skills and opportunities – are part of what makes our region a great place to live and work.

Popular themes at On the Table discussions included the value of providing inclusive and affordable arts activities that could help address a range of inequalities and reflect the region's growing diversity. There were also calls for greater vocational support for those looking for careers in the arts, more opportunities for art that enabled people to explore their creativity, experience and identity and, to a lesser extent, a demand for funding to support artistic excellence. The discussion of amateur sport tended to stress its contribution to addressing social problems, for example to address low levels of physical activity or divert young people from crime and anti-social behaviour. Perhaps the importance of sport for its own sake was considered a given here in the North East!

Community organisations play a vital role in communities. Often led by the people they serve, they combine the talents and commitment of trustees, paid workers and volunteers to help build a sense of community. They support

engagement in local democracy and provide vital services in our towns, villages and neighbourhoods. Yet despite its vital role, the regional sector is poorly resourced and under-developed.

Greater collaboration between community organisations locally and regionally was the single most referred to priority at On the Table discussions. There were calls for greater leadership and joint working around funding, service delivery, promotion and the representation of organisations and communities they serve. This was seen as key to achieving a range of key goals including: better community engagement with mayoral combined authorities and other local decision-makers; more effective community-building; a strategic approach to funding and service development; and a greater focus on supporting neglected rural communities. A close second were calls for larger, longer-term grants to cover the core costs of community and voluntary agencies. Other priorities for the sector included support to build community organisations' capacity, especially around governance (e.g. trustee recruitment and development) and marketing/raising public awareness of its contribution.



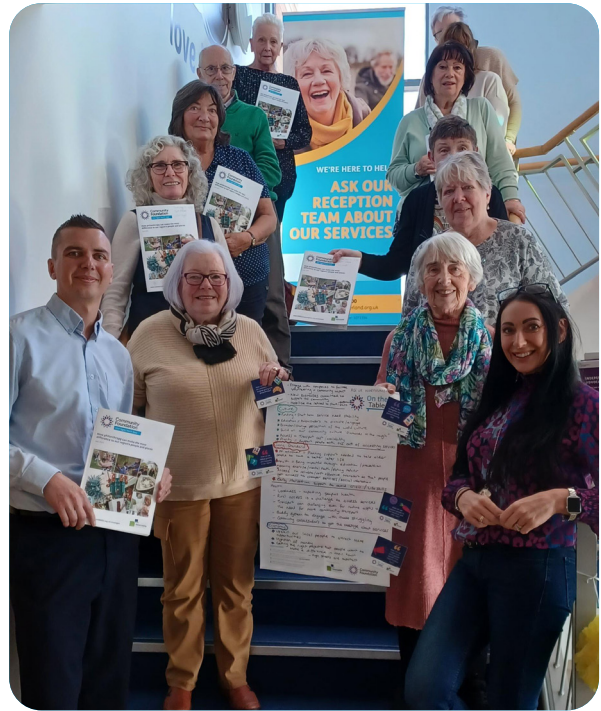
Our environment

The North East is vulnerable to climate change, including extreme weather. We also face a decline in biodiversity. Alongside managing everyday challenges like controlling pollution and reducing waste, we also need to care for the local environment as part of our offer to inward investors and tourists. Much of this is about doing what we can to build resilience to the local impact of global environmental change.

The North East is vulnerable to climate change, including extreme weather.

There is considerable interest in environmental issues. The Environment Vital Signs report was by far the most often downloaded during the period that On the Table meetings were being held. It is perhaps important to note that local action on climate change, however important, was far from the only focus of the discussions. A range of environmental priorities were discussed including: the need to halt the decline in biodiversity; the need for local environmental

improvements to improve quality of life; the need for environmentally sustainable economic development and broader access to employment in the green economy; community resilience to natural events and the role of energy-efficiency in supporting the sustainability of community buildings.





On the Table hosts and partners

Age UK Northumberland	Northumberland Domestic Abuse Service
Anxious Minds	North East Chamber of Commerce
Berwick Community Trust	North East Forum on Ageing
Blue Cabin	North East Local Cultural Education Partnerships (flipchart only)
Brainbox	North East Museums (formerly Tyne & Wear Archives & Museums)
Carers Cultural Adventures	Oasis Community Housing
CBI North East and Cumbria	One Million Women and Girls
Choices4Growth	Phoenix Detached Youth Project
Churches Together South Tyneside - Happy at Home Project	Planet Action Street Arts
Community Campus 87	PROPS North East
Cramlington Voluntary Youth Project	Prudhoe Community Partnership
Dance City	Represent Women
Difference	Scotswood Natural Community Garden
Emmaus North East	Search Services For Older People
Equal Arts	Skills4Work Gateshead Ltd
Escape Intervention Services Ltd	Soroptimist International Whitley Bay Tynemouth and District
Hartlepool Community Trust	Sported
Historic England	Stanley Area Action Partnership, Durham County Council
Healing Opportunities Provision Sunderland	The Cultural Spring
Impact Family Services	The KAYAKS
Learning from Social Lettings group	The Recruitment Junction
Left Foot Forward Walking Group	Thursday Lunch Club
Linskill and North Tyneside Community Development Trust	Tyneside Women's Health
Millin Charity/ Represent Women	VONNE
MIND Active	Voluntary and Community Action Sunderland
My Big Career	West End Women and Girls Centre
NAAFI Break South Tyneside	West End Refugee Service
NE Youth	Women Health In South Tyneside
Newcastle Building Society	Women's Workshop in Amble
Newcastle Carers	YMCA North Tyneside
Newcastle University	
Northumberland Community Development Company	



A number of individuals also hosted an On the Table in a personal or professional capacity.

Acknowledgements

This report was researched and written by Mark Pierce, Associate Director of Knowledge and Research at Community Foundation North East until April 2025.

On the Table is generously supported by Newcastle Building Society.

Let's talk

We hope that On the Table and Vital Signs will inspire more of you to get involved with and give to causes that address our region's challenges and opportunities. If you would like to discuss this report further, or what you could do to help, please contact us on 0191 222 0945 or [**general@communityfoundation.org.uk**](mailto:general@communityfoundation.org.uk)

A more detailed report on the findings from our On the Table discussions is available on request.

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