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# AND SO WE GATHERED:

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Hearing the voice of community organisations in the Durham Coalfield



NATIONAL UNION OF MINeworkERS

NORTH EAST AREA



# AND SO WE GATHERED:

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## Hearing the voice of community organisations in former coalfield areas

The aim of this report is to provide community organisations with information that can be used to support applications for funding and continuing collaboration to enhance community voice on issues that affect us.

The report is a summary of a study on resilience and community networks by Insights North East, University College London, Redhills: the Durham Miners' Hall, and the Durham Miners' Association. The full research report can be accessed here:

<https://insightsnortheast.co.uk/reports-and-resources/building-a-resilient-community-network-in-the-former-durham-coalfield/>

The findings are based on twenty interviews Insights North East conducted with community leaders and our 2023 Annual Little Big Meeting workshop. This brought over 750 community organisations together to share and learn about the challenges we face working in County Durham and explored some of the solutions that might help us work together to increase our impact in the future.

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**ALISON CURRY:  
AND SO THEY  
GATHERED**

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## And so They Gathered

and so they gathered  
within walls of the past

sharing, bait, words and belief  
to build something to last

to stand upon struggle  
to stand upon graft  
shoulder to shoulder

move together as one

the intention is tangible  
the passion the thirst  
for a future that recalls  
united community, during the worst

looking both forward and backward  
to build something to last

to stand upon strength  
to stand upon hope  
hands clasped across common ground

move together as one

Choosing new dance partners  
Learning new steps

Giving old buildings  
New meanings

revolving  
evolving

To the whisper of heartbeats  
To the beat of the drum

The Little Big Meeting  
feels like something's begun

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*Alison Curry is the Director of Dispel Art, a County Durham-based community organisation founded to create environments that allow people space to thrive, create, and connect—because creativity is everywhere, but opportunity is not.*





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# CHALLENGES FACING THE REGION

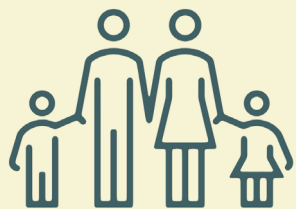
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'It's just layer upon layer of crisis. We don't work in traditionally diverse places, but in terms of social and economic deprivation and working in places that are left behind, it's diverse in terms of the issues.'

- Jess, No More Nowt

Statistics tell a story of an area with high rates of poverty and deep-seated health challenges. The data can be found [here](#). The County Durham Community Foundation has also published information on health and inequality that can be found [here](#).

To the right is a brief summary.



# 23.6%

of children (aged 0-19) live **in child poverty** in County Durham compared to the national average of 19.3%.



Gross weekly pay for those in work is less than average,

# £613

per week compared to £683.



County Durham is the

# 48th

**most deprived** area out of the 151 council areas in England.



# 78.3 yrs

**Life expectancy** in County Durham is significantly lower than the national average (81.8 vs 81.4 years respectively).



# 79.8 yrs

Nomis tells us that in 2022/23 **significantly less people are in employment** in County Durham than the national average,

# 70.8%

compared to 75.8%.



County Durham contains

# 16

**'left behind' neighbourhoods**

as identified by the Local Trust. This is double any other local authority in the country.



In 2021, the North East had **significantly lower GDP per head** than the national average:



North East:

# £24,575



UK:

# £33,745

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# ISSUES FACING THE SECTOR

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County Durham's economic and health problems create high levels of need that public services are not keeping up with. But our communities are also home to innovative and effective community organisations, delivering services and meeting pressing social needs. Very often, community organisations have stepped in to meet needs when the state or the market has withdrawn.



## The problematic funding landscape

Income from both local and central government, as well as income from grants and government contracts, have declined in recent years. The national funding landscape for community organisations is inequitable. Excluding major national or international charities, sector income is about £48 billion. But this is spread unevenly. Community organisations with income between £1 million and £25 million command over 70% of sector income even though they constitute just 5% of the organisations. Micro and small organisations, by contrast, have only a 3% share of income even though they form over 70% of the sector ([Community Foundation, 2023](#)).

## Short term issues of keeping going are clouding out time for longer term planning and fundraising

'It is still remarkably difficult to put a dent in the inequalities faced by individuals, families, and places. It is hard to effect large scale change. Many community organisations are engaged in an endless struggle to survive financially. This can foster a tendency to keep doing what has kept you afloat so far, knowing you can only go on like this for so long'.

- Graham, *East Durham Trust*

'We now have the highest rates of poverty in the country. Child poverty rates are getting worse and worse. So, we are not tackling it. There's not enough honesty about that. People are too busy trying to bring in the money'.

- Sara, *Tyne and Wear Citizens*







## Lacking an evidence base to communicate effectively what we do

'Do we win or do we not? is the only measure. Do the bus fares go down, do the wages go up? We're not interested in anything else. We could produce data on the number of people we've trained, but it's meaningless unless we win.'

- Sara, *Tyne and Wear Citizens*

The North East has the largest number of third sector voluntary organisations per 1,000 people in England and we know that these rarely serve a single purpose. Instead, they work to serve many beneficiaries in multiple ways to achieve a wide range of impacts – and often do so across geographical boundaries. Identifying who does what and with what benefit to whom is very hard given this tapestry of activity. This often has consequences for funding applications and reports, with funders wanting to see 'cause and effect'.

## Volunteer working and burnout

'We are all getting frazzled. We're getting inundated every day with Internet issues that take up a whole day, so I don't get to my funding applications, which means we won't get money, which means we might not be able to keep going. One day like today wipes me out, frustratingly it wipes me out, whereas if you're in the police, or in the public sector, the IT guy is working on it.'

- Alison, *Blackhall Community Centre*

We know that overall in the sector, organisations often have very few or no employees. Without volunteers, 85% of the sector could not keep going. And given that the third sector relies on governing trustees, its leadership would collapse without people giving their time for free.

Community organisations serve some of the most vulnerable people in extremely precarious financial circumstances. They often face instability in recruitment and retention of staff due to volatility of funding, and insufficient core funding to ensure stable functioning of systems and processes. Burn out is a common problem. A lack of infrastructural support across the sector contributes to this.

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**WHAT CAN BE DONE  
AND HOW CAN  
REDHILLS HELP?**

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The model overleaf details how Redhills intends to help community organisations respond to the issues raised in this report.

Redhills has the space for people to come together, but we want to take this one step further, creating an active and impactful collective network that will help organisations in a range of ways.



Through this network, Redhills can also help influence a change in funding by, for example, encouraging and supporting organisations to have a central role in the proposed Community Wealth Funds <https://communitywealthfund.org.uk/> and strengthening the relationship with funders and grantees. There is also a focus on wellbeing and young people, who can be the future ambassadors for their towns and villages.

'Individual voices expressing their needs is one thing, but when everyone comes together and says "our community needs this", it is very difficult to say no'.

- Sara, *Tyne and Wear Citizens*

'A neutral space where genuine debate and exploration can occur, where multiple voices can feel strong enough to be heard and listened to, that would be great.'

- Graham, *East Durham Trust*

'Children experience our communities here and now and should have a say what happens in it. If children and young people were more aware of their rights, they would be empowered to get their needs and aspirations met'.

- Robert, *Investing in Children*

# Our journey towards change

## Short term (now)

Redhills - 'the heart and lungs' - a space to come together, learn and share good practice



1. Supporting the sector and problem solving, hosting action learning groups on:
  - Youth democracy and voice
  - Assets, property and space
  - Sector wellbeing
2. Partnership projects supported by NHLF and ACE.



Influencing policy makers and government officials for a change in funding



Redhills' annual Little Big Meeting events, where policy makers and government officials will be invited, for example NHLF, to hear about their new funding programme.



Building trust: strengthening the relationship between funders and grantees



Signposting organisations to different funding directories as well as organisations that look for opportunities for you and act as a critical friend reading over grant applications.



## Medium term (1+ year)

1. Creating an impactful collective network that will help organisations in a range of ways.
2. Continue our knowledge exchange projects with a focus on wellbeing.

Continue to convene a conversation about a fair and equitable community-research compact with Higher Education Institutions.

A key focus on helping organisations build an evidence base to measure social impact.

Redhills will host a series of 'meet the funders' events which will allow for a two-way exchange, to hear from funders but also enabling community organisations to provide feedback to funders.



## Long term (2+ years)

Bottom-up movement making:

Led by a community champion and grant funded, the community network will be a mass voice to create agency for change from communities themselves.

A move away from competitive funding and towards longer-term and more learning-oriented engagement.

Well-formed relationships based on trust and confidence are established with grant makers, recognising that community organisations are experts in their field and have a deep understanding of the social dynamics in the areas in which they work.



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