

UKSPF Volunteering and Social Action Project, Final Evaluation

Executive Summary

March 2026





Executive Summary

This evaluation has been developed at a point of transition, as the UK Shared Prosperity Fund programme draws to a close and the North East Combined Authority (North East CA) sets out its strategic priorities within a new Corporate Plan.

Our findings show that supported volunteering across the North East can be an effective means to assist local people in **moving from inactivity and isolation toward involvement and integration** within community and economic life. Building on learning from Phase 1 of the programme, Phase 2 shows a more intentional focus on targeted inclusion, with partners continuing to provide effective infrastructure support that enabled local organisations to become more confident hosts for new volunteers recruited from priority groups.

We also find it significant that the programme demonstrates clear alignment with the North East CA's *New Deal for North East Workers*, which provides the wider policy framework for employability and economic participation. In this context, the report should be read not only as a reflection on programme delivery, but as a contribution to the North East CA's wider evidence base, in relation to the role and capability of the voluntary sector in the development of inclusive pathways into participation and work.

Key Highlights

The programme exceeded key delivery targets, expanding volunteering opportunities and strengthening infrastructure across Newcastle, North Tyneside and Northumberland, with strong engagement from both volunteers and volunteer-involving organisations.

- A sharpened inclusion focus in Phase 2 led to more intentional engagement with underrepresented groups and a more intentional focus on 'cold spots', responding directly to recommendations from the Phase 1 evaluation.
- Training demand remained high, reflecting sustained appetite for skills development, reinforcing the usefulness of online learning, and revealing the VCSE sector to play a part in Adult Skills.
- Social action projects continued to engage young people and community groups in meaningful ways, creating an appetite for future volunteering.
- Partnership coordination matured, with infrastructure organisations contributing to the wider partnership according to their unique competencies.
- Monitoring systems improved in consistency and structure, enhancing output tracking and reporting alignment, though detailed demographic participation data remains a challenge.
- The programme has demonstrated growing strategic relevance to regional labour market ambitions, particularly in relation to residents facing complex barriers to employment.

Key Findings

- Supported volunteering demonstrates potential as a preparatory stage within the economic ecosystem, creating movement from inactivity and isolation toward involvement and integration.
- Targeted inclusion evolved significantly between Phase 1 and Phase 2, with partners responding to earlier learning and working more deliberately with priority groups.
- The voluntary and community sector operates as a distributed relational infrastructure, uniquely positioned to engage residents who are distant from formal employment systems.
- Improvements to monitoring strengthened delivery oversight, yet progression beyond volunteering is constrained by structural data-sharing limitations.
- The programme has moved beyond proof of concept; the central challenge is now structural

integration of volunteering within regional employment and inclusive economic strategy.

Key Recommendations

- Involve in the voluntary and community sector as enabling infrastructure within an inclusive economy ecosystem, reflected in commissioning design and partnership architecture.
- Sustain investment in VCSE infrastructure support and capacity building to reduce sector precarity and protect the relational capital underpinning effective engagement.
- Formalise clearer progression pathways linking supported volunteering with employment, skills, health, and child-poverty reducing workstreams.
- Strengthen two-way communication between regional strategic boards and the wider voluntary sector to improve feedback and accountability.
- Enhance shared monitoring frameworks and downstream data-sharing mechanisms to evidence participation and progression more robustly.

Key Policy Implications

- Volunteering should be explicitly recognised as a mechanism for targeted activation of economically inactive residents within regional employment strategies.
- Investment in VCSE infrastructure is foundational to inclusive growth, not peripheral to it.
- Structural integration between volunteering, skills provision and health-related employment support will strengthen long-term outcomes.
- Commissioning models must account for the highly distributed and localised nature of the voluntary sector which ought to be seen as a strength, not a limitation.
- Effective inclusion requires both open access and intentional targeting, supported by clear progression design and sustained funding stability.

This evaluation concludes that the question is no longer whether supported volunteering can work, but how fully it can be integrated within the region's wider economic architecture. The evidence demonstrates clear activation effects for some residents facing barriers, particularly in enabling movement from inactivity and isolation toward involvement and integration. However, continued refinement and repetition of programmes will be required to better understand which cohorts are most effectively supported, under what conditions, and how volunteering can most consistently contribute not only to community participation but to sustained progression into, or back into, the workforce. If sustained infrastructure investment, clearer progression pathways and ongoing strategic alignment are secured, supported volunteering has the potential to become a durable and increasingly targeted component of the North East's inclusive economy.