

ENGRAVING SERVICES



**national network
for neighbourhood
improvement**

The national network for neighbourhood improvement

**3ni North East Study
Visit Report**

March 2026



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for neighbourhood
improvement**

About 3ni

The national network for neighbourhood improvement is a learning network for local government and the wider public sector that supports policy and practice towards community-led regeneration. It was incubated by Local Trust in 2024 and is hosted by Capacity.

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About this report

This is a write-up of 3ni's study visit to the North East in October 2025.



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Introduction

About 3ni – The national network for neighbourhood improvement

3ni is a new social value partnership, bringing together policy and practice to transform neighbourhoods across the country. By creating a space for collaboration and innovation, we're working with local government and the wider public sector to drive meaningful, lasting change where it's needed most.

At 3ni, we believe that real transformation starts from the ground up. Through our national network for neighbourhood Improvement, we're sharing and shaping the best and next practices that help rebuild disadvantaged communities. Our research, events, and activities are designed to support local government and public sector partners in learning what works – and, more importantly, putting it into action.

Our approach focuses on what makes places thrive: strong local connections, empowered communities, and the foundational social infrastructure that underpins long-term regeneration. With access to the latest evidence, data, and a suite of strategy and practice tools, we help partners understand and enable community-led change.

We build on the lessons of pioneering local authorities, past regeneration programmes, and groundbreaking initiatives like Big Local, which gave 150 communities the power and resources to invest in their own future. The programme showed that where social infrastructure – such as local networks, community groups, and accessible spaces – already existed, change happened faster and with greater success.

Now, at a time when local government and public services are under growing pressure, 3ni is here to bridge the gap between neighbourhoods that need support and the policies and practices that can make a difference. By sharing evidence and developing tools to lead on community-led, regeneration, we're working to create stronger, fairer, and more resilient places together.



The need for partnership working between local authorities and communities

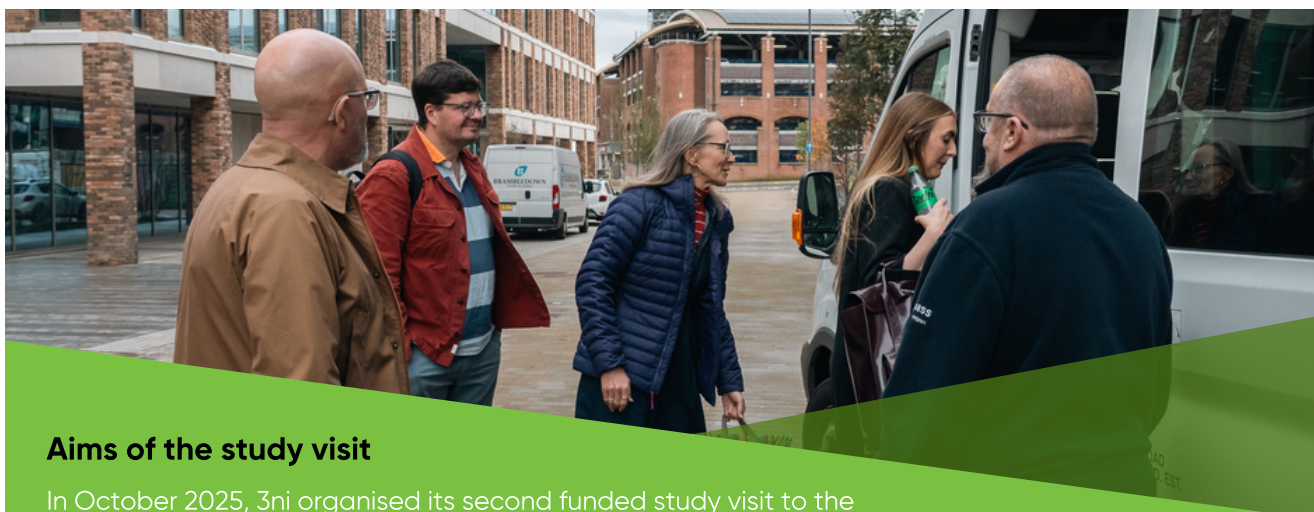
Sustainability is crucial for neighbourhood initiatives to be successful, as impactful change cannot be achieved without patient, long-term investment. This is why building confidence amongst community members and investing in volunteers and community leaders is important. Local people need the time to develop the skills and capacity to create a legacy from local community development initiatives.

The success of neighbourhood level initiatives fundamentally relies on building the capacity for community leadership. A lack of social infrastructure in areas with high community need means that stocks of social capital are depleted, with weakened connections between residents, organisations and public agencies, and lower levels of volunteering and wider civic activity. In doubly disadvantaged neighbourhoods especially, residents want to see their places thrive and to contribute to community-led initiatives to transform them, but they may lack the time, resources, experience, confidence and existing networks needed to do so.

Regeneration of the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods depends on effective collaboration between different tiers of local government. Efforts to build inclusive economies must centre on the priorities and harness the experience of the neighbourhoods making up a wider geography. Progress measurement should factor in the unique strengths and needs of individual neighbourhoods.

This is why local authorities should target investment into building social infrastructure, prioritising capacity building in areas that have historically missed out on local funding. Building community capacity empowers local expertise to be harnessed and directed toward shaping the design and delivery of services, while ensuring that resources are strategically allocated to meet community priorities.

Taking an asset-based approach, and creating space for community leadership, will allow for initiatives to be created that take advantage of the skills and potential that all communities already possess. However, this will require local authorities to work with partners to identify, harness and build on the unique strengths, assets and networks characterising a neighbourhood to achieve improvements to life outcomes, rather than focusing solely on deficits, and what is lacking or needed. With a genuine commitment to co-production, and emphasis on fostering community leadership, our neighbourhoods can thrive.



Aims of the study visit

In October 2025, 3ni organised its second funded study visit to the north east to examine how Sunderland is working to connect communities to regeneration and how communities are addressing persistent challenges in their neighbourhoods. The visit brought together practitioners from local authorities across England to learn from Sunderland's experience and to examine both the successes and ongoing challenges of neighbourhood-level working.

Participants spent time with senior council leaders, visited community organisations delivering on the ground, and heard directly from residents and frontline workers about what works, what doesn't, and what takes time to change.

Sunderland City Hall

Participants began their day at Sunderland's City Hall with a warm welcome from council leader, Michael Mordey. He started his welcome with this statement that summarises Sunderland Council's approach and beliefs: 'Sunderland is a place with a proud past and an ambitious future, and we're working hard, in partnership with our communities, to build a city that is vibrant, inclusive and full of opportunity.' This is evident in the council's ongoing transformational city-wide regeneration, with investments to address industrial decline and deprivation. Sunderland City Council is a prime example of how local government can adopt new ways of working to genuinely involve communities and ensure that they benefit from resources and funding flowing into the area.

Making Sunderland's regeneration journey work for residents

Sunderland is a city in transformation. With over £600 million of investment currently on the ground and plans for more to follow, the city centre is experiencing one of the most significant regeneration programmes in the country. Alongside new housing and physical infrastructure, a construction and skills academy has been opened to transform employment pathways alongside the thousands of jobs being created by new investments.

However, as Sunderland's leadership acknowledged from the outset of the visit, physical regeneration alone does not guarantee that communities will benefit from change. In many ways, this has been the fundamental challenge faced by Sunderland and shared by places undergoing similar transformation: how to connect residents experiencing disadvantage to the jobs, housing, and opportunities that regeneration creates.

This disconnect became starkly visible in the aftermath of the civil unrest that affected cities across England in 2024. When city leaders engaged with communities following the events in Sunderland, they heard a widespread sentiment of residents feeling left behind, unheard, and undervalued. In communities like Southwick, in sight of the new housing on Riverside Sunderland and the construction and skills academy, residents felt completely disconnected to the regeneration happening on their doorsteps.

The council's response has required recognition that the issues faced by the city's most disadvantaged communities are entrenched in the long-term and need to be addressed through similarly long-term responses. Sunderland's emerging strategy around communities represents an attempt to address this systematically. Rather than imposing a single model, the strategy operates on the principles of patient, long-term investment which is led by communities themselves. This has required a fundamental shift in mindset for both officers and elected members: moving from "doing to" communities towards an approach of listening, supporting, and enabling.

'That's the key thing we've got to get right: Local government can't put one size fits all in any community, it's got to be led by the community and it's got to be patient and long-term.'

Patrick Melia, CEO of Sunderland City Council



Finding the right balance

Council officers were frank that this balance – between standard ways of working and a community-led model – has been difficult to manage. For example, there was an acknowledgement that major regeneration projects were initially focused on securing funding and getting developments ‘out of the ground’, rather than ensuring deep community involvement.

Governance structures have seen a similar balancing act. The council has trialed new arrangements to encourage area-based partnership working and bring budgets closer to neighbourhoods, while bringing new digital hubs into community venues and channeling public health funding into community organisations. However, there is a consistent need to reflect on whether these structures reflect community needs and feel accessible to residents, rather than appear as solutions parachuted in by elected leaders.

Sustainability and long-term commitment

Building this sense of ownership requires patience, consistent engagement, and genuine trust to be built in order to support communities to become self-sustaining. Council leaders were clear that business-as-usual approaches, such as standard performance management and governance requirements, are counterproductive in the attempt to build this long-term transformation.

Similarly, a recurring question throughout the session at City Hall concerned protecting neighbourhood initiatives from political change and funding cycles. The council has made public commitments to prioritise neighbourhood funding in its budget and has moved to make previously temporary funding streams permanent. For example, funding for the SARA project, initially established on short-term grants, has been made permanent by the council, with plans to roll out similar approaches across six localities.

At the same time, council leaders acknowledged the threat of party politics and shifting priorities. With challenging elections and boundary changes ahead, the sustainability of neighbourhood investment depends partly on building strong local coalitions of committed actors and demonstrating results that transcend party politics. So despite the vast energy and resources the council has channeled into engaging with their communities, their key takeaway was the sustained effort and ongoing commitment to learning that is required to build new ways of working which go against the grain and empower communities.

The study visit provided an opportunity to see examples of this approach in action: with Back on the Map representing nearly 25 years of sustained community-led development; the SARA partnership’s multi-agency response to entrenched issues in Southwick; Bunnyhill Family Hub bringing communities directly into the design of services; and Changing Futures’ relational approach to supporting people with complex needs.

Back on the Map

Back on the Map in Hendon represents one of the most sustained examples of community-led regeneration in the North East, with roots stretching back nearly 25 years to the New Deal for Communities (NDC) programme. However, the organisation's current form as a thriving asset-backed community business emerged from a deliberate break with its NDC past. Back on the Map was the second stop on our study visit, to hear about how Hendon has been transformed from the bottom-up.

Joanne Cooper grew up in Hendon and now leads the organisation as Chief Executive. She explained that when the NDC programme ended in 2011, there was a sense that it had fallen short of what was expected and crucially, "the community didn't have a voice in the decisions." The 10-year, £54 million programme had employed 28 delivery staff but was focused primarily on project and grant management, with very little direct engagement or decision-making by the community. This disconnect existed despite extensive consultation mechanisms, with forums and sub-groups creating the appearance of participation without delivering genuine community ownership and most funding contracted to external organisations.

When Back on the Map was reconstituted as a charity in 2011, it had three staff and 62 houses that were more liability than asset: with a third empty, sixteen uninhabitable, and all requiring a lengthy asset transfer from the city council. They began by creating a board of residents and canvassing door-to-door to connect with locals and hear directly about what they thought their community needed. Over time, they developed a structure for their vision for the area:

A Stronger Community	A Local Voice	A Better Place
• Reduce social isolation • Improve residents' physical health • Reduce intergenerational unemployment	• Support residents to identify local needs • Coproduce community services • Create volunteer opportunities • Give residents an influencing role	• Create quality homes and sustainable tenancies in the area • Support local wealth building • Reinvest rental income in the community

Fifteen years later their presence in Hendon is unmistakable: with a thriving community hub, a youth hub, a sustainable stock of housing for rent, a range of properties leased out to community businesses, and a wide array of community activities on offer for local residents.

Joanne attributes much of their success to the organisation's golden thread of valuing local voices. Today, 64% of staff live locally, most volunteers are local residents, and the organisation describes itself as embedded in the daily life of the community. When Hendon's former library building faced closure, Back on the Map worked with residents to take it over on a 25-year lease, creating the community hub that now serves as their base.

From grant dependency to sustainability

The transition from grant dependency to asset-backed sustainability is among the organisation's most significant achievements. In their early years after reconstituting, they recognised their property portfolio as the key to sustaining their wider vision for Hendon: both due to the issues caused by anti-social tenancies in the area and the potential to fund community services in perpetuity with consistent rental revenue.

After securing asset transfer of their original housing stock, Back on the Map began generating recurring revenue for reinvestment. With a mix of savings, rental income, and social borrowing, they created a £1.2 million house purchase fund. Timing favoured the initiative, and with a dip in the local property market, they were able to purchase 22 additional houses in the local area. Additionally, their connection to the local community was a benefit to their acquisition, with many locals willing to sell approaching Back on the Map directly, preferring to sell to a community business with the knowledge that the homes would benefit the area in the long-run.

With a new-found surplus of income and a source of consistent revenue, Back on the Map has been able to grow their offer to local residents: from childcare out of their youth hub to art classes for residents with undiagnosed mental health issues. Moreover, they have been able to remain responsive to local issues as the area has changed.

Responding to new challenges

The Covid-19 pandemic and its pressures prompted new responses from Back on the Map. After running door-to-door surveys, they identified three vital concerns of local residents: health inequalities, a lack of opportunities for young people, and the deteriorating high street. In particular, drug dealing and crime in the area had increased during Covid, with a negative feedback loop of shop closures accelerating this decline and perceptions of safety. When lockdowns were lifted, the local economy struggled to recover.

The unique context pushed the board to expand their business model, at the time focused on capital investment in housing, towards a focus on wider economic development. Recognising the issues and opportunities on their high street, Back on the Map acquired multiple derelict and vacant shops on the high street and refurbished them to turnkey standard. The most ambitious recent project involved a derelict block of five shops that had been empty for 15 years – an area of particular concern to residents due to anti-social behaviour. Taking this on required eight months just to engage the landlord, followed by the assembly of a complex financial package: reserves from capital investment funds, help from a Community Ownership Fund grant, and a seven-year social loan.

They then focused on filling the units with local businesses which could stay financially viable and continue to feed the virtuous cycle of income generation for Back on the Map. This is the heart of their approach, as exemplified by their youth hub. In the downstairs, dedicated youth services are offered to local residents, while the upstairs has commercial office lettings which generate income. This 'mixed economy' has allowed Back on the Map to sustainably scale up their community regeneration approach without a reliance on government funding.



Balancing relationships

Back on the Map's role as a successful community business has required a balancing of relationships, both with tenants and the council, and their landlord responsibilities with their community development mission. The organisation has three non-negotiables for tenants: pay rent, look after the home, and be a good neighbour. However, given the history of issues with private tenancies in the area, being a charity provides the necessary flexibility to work directly with residents struggling to make ends meet. The charity has worked with tenants in the past to connect them with needed services, from employment support to debt advice, while accepting temporarily reduced rent.

Separately, their success has influenced their relationship with Sunderland City Council. On a positive note, their reputation as a trusted and competent actor in the area has granted them a significant degree of autonomy: for example, in the use of grant or loan money, or taking on responsibility for managing a local park. The flip side to this is a perception that "Hendon's alright because they've got Back on the Map", meaning that the area has at times been seen as less of a priority for city-wide initiatives. Their response has been a continued engagement with the council and regular advocacy for the area.

This perception alone – that Hendon is safe in the hands of Back on the Map – is a testament to the trust they have built up through transparency, engagement and consistent delivery. The confidence for communities to claim space and authority takes time to build but ultimately enables long-term transformation that externally-led and top-down initiatives would struggle to achieve.

SARA (Southwick Altogether Raising Aspirations)

The SARA project – Southwick Altogether Raising Aspirations – emerged from a crisis. Southwick has always been one of the most deprived areas of the city, with a range of issues including poverty, health issues, crime, and anti-social behaviour. These issues culminated in an increasingly dangerous bonfire night tradition: with cars being driven onto the bonfires, followed by cars with explosives, and in 2019, an attack on the fire services who came out to respond. Problems were met with a sense of fear and resignation by local residents, many of whom had lost faith in the ability of local government to respond.

Faced with the potential for loss of life as a result of the disorder, SARA was launched as a 12-week multi-agency response between Sunderland City Council, Northumbria Police, Gentoo (the area's main social housing provider), and a range of public health and VCSE organisations. It initially focused on education, enforcement, and engagement with local residents, to understand locals' perspectives of issues in the area and work towards solutions.

But as Louise Butler from Sunderland City Council recognised, the short timeframe couldn't create lasting change. Partners also realised that previous multi-agency efforts had failed because "nobody knocks on our door, because it's still seen as services, and nobody's a grass."

Since the initial 12-week inception period, Sunderland City Council committed a Neighbourhood Partnership Project Lead Officer to drive the SARA project and sourced a base for SARA in the community. SARA received a year of funding from the Office of the Police Crime Commissioner and was able to secure a further four-year funding grant from the National Lottery. SARA's approach has sought to be fundamentally different. As stated above, the project is located in an existing community building already used for a café, exercise classes, and other activities, removing any perceived stigma of engaging with statutory services.

Next, the funding received allowed for the recruitment in a local community engagement worker – Vicki – rather than assuming existing staff could bridge the gap into the community. Finally, it involved the creation of a standalone brand with no organisational logos.

This approach has made a clear difference from the perspective of the police stationed in the building. Police Constable Jules, a 25-year officer, mentioned they had "never known policing like it." Not only is there a dedicated team focusing exclusively on Southwick, but trust has developed quickly between officers and local residents, the result of seeing the same faces over and over again in a familiar community space.

Residents have been far more likely to report crimes and their issues, and with the multi-agency presence in the building, partners can deal with issues in a joined-up way.

Multi-agency problem solving

SARA operates through daily morning meetings bringing together police, Gentoo housing, council ASB officers, and environmental enforcement. They review overnight incidents and determine quick collective responses. Louise gave an example: a young person on the police radar for anti-social behaviour issues. Police are linked through the social housing provider to speak to the parents, while council and VCSE partners work to connect them with youth activities like boxing.

On wider instances of crime, agencies use an innovative data platform which integrates data from different statutory providers onto one map, overlaid with CCTV locations and historical data. The shift towards integrated systems has saved time spent by each agency in tracking and planning their responses, allowing a greater focus on engagement over administrative work.

The partnership maintains links to wider services – adult social care, children's services, youth justice, schools – through "conduits" or single points of contact. Additionally, the community engagement worker set up a partnership board between the voluntary and community sector in the area, allowing statutory services to extend their reach. Having direct contacts who can quickly identify whether services are working with a family "shaves off a whole load of frustrations" and enables rapid, holistic responses. For example, a Sergeant described their record of addressing a domestic violence case in one day through coordinated partner action.

The multi-agency approach is crucial in a context where resident issues involve considerable complexity. Constable Jules outlined another case where a residents' refusal to pay for takeaway food and police calls about anti-social behaviour were linked to someone not taking their medication due to address changes. This ability to investigate and coordinate across multiple services addresses interconnected issues that siloed services would struggle to deal with.

Governance and community infrastructure

SARA's success integrating into the community required an intentional departure from normal ways of working. Their strategic board gave explicit permission to think differently. Rather than a normal model of relying on detailed business cases to fund projects, the board sets broad priorities and allows agencies to collaborate within these to operate flexibly. Traditional data would struggle to tell the story of SARA's success – for example, with an increased number of crime reports reflecting a newfound confidence and trust between residents and the police, rather than an uptick in crimes in the area.

Separately, the partnership has supported community activities and infrastructure which target needs outside of traditional service provision. SARA supports local organisations with funding applications and encourages collaboration in their community hub – with a range of afterschool clubs hosted in the venue providing food and homework space. Additionally, they have encouraged the community to take ownership over local issues – such as transforming a derelict local outdoor space by planting flowers and opening volunteering opportunities.

Notably, this approach has allowed them to access new opportunities. The National Lottery doesn't fund statutory services, but they do fund community engagement work.

Impact and ongoing questions

SARA has created visible change across the neighbourhood: bonfire night is now safe, older residents report feeling the safest they have in decades, and trust has improved between citizens and services. Nonetheless, Louise was candid that most residents are still “just surviving – not really living life”. While good practice has emerged, sustaining the change will require a long-term commitment.

The approach has been modified and replicated elsewhere in Sunderland - HALO in Hetton, SAIL in the city centre - with the council committing to make funding permanent and roll out to six localities. The early success of their model contains a range of learnings for statutory providers. Primarily, it demonstrates what dedicated resources can enable, with ring-fenced budgets and staff time allowing a deeper engagement with communities. They also point to the importance of building trust and breaking down the barriers between residents and services, something they achieved through community engagement, co-location, and an open atmosphere to working directly with residents.

They are also a successful case study in the wider public sector shift towards integrated working: with a flexible, multi-agency structure allowing frontline service workers to get on with their jobs and collaborate effectively. Data sharing and co-locating services has allowed relationships to flourish across partners. And, notably for other local authorities, this flexibility was enabled by the intentional choices of executive leaders to let go of control.



Bunny Hill Family Hub

Our study visit stopped next at Bunny Hill Family Hub, one of five hubs across Sunderland offering pregnancy, young person and family services. The trip was excellent insight into how statutory services are working with each other, and communities, to create a better offer of help for families. The hub has a core emphasis on the first 1001 days – pregnancy to age two – while still supporting older children as part of a whole-family approach.

Universal services and geographic challenges

The tour illustrated universal early intervention in practice. Midwife appointments occur in the hub from 10 weeks through pregnancy and beyond, with antenatal classes, yoga for mothers, infant-feeding groups, stay-and-play sessions, and late pregnancy classes. As families attend these services, they can access a much wider range of help: visiting the GP, or speaking with housing and welfare advisors. The hub is a one-stop shop, completely free, with dedicated early-help teams assisting families with a range of needs. It is a recognition of the wide range of determinants that impact early years care, including the importance of supporting the financial and social needs of parents.

However, despite its city-wide offer, staff acknowledged the geographic and psychological barriers. Many families prefer to stay within their immediate neighbourhoods and are unwilling or unable to travel across the city – particularly where associated travel costs are involved. One response to this issue has been making services more mobile, for example, delivering services like baby massages in community locations closer to family homes. The inability or reluctance to travel, whether due to time and monetary constraints or perceptions of safety, is an ongoing challenge that is shaping the co-design of services as the hub engages with families.



Community engagement pathways

Building on the universal offer, the hubs place equal emphasis on ensuring families can actively shape the services they use. Rather than engagement sitting as an 'add-on', staff framed it as essential to making universal early-help genuinely responsive to families' needs.

To achieve this, the community engagement team has developed ten volunteering and participation pathways, including a Family Voice panel, family champions, signposting roles, infant-feeding support, and roles linked to wider services. These roles provide multiple ways for families to contribute.

The volunteer model emphasises flexibility around people's availability. Some roles require only 90 minutes on a monthly basis, while others involve more substantial commitment. Support includes dedicated coordinators, access to training platforms used by staff, and references for volunteers maintaining consistent involvement for six months. Five volunteers have secured employment across sectors, with two former volunteers gaining employment within the hubs themselves.

Family Voice is the centrepiece of the engagement model, with 50 active members attending one of four monthly meetings. These are a crucial forum for families to shape the care they and their children receive by speaking to service providers, discussing issues, and providing feedback to managers. The Family Voice group has influenced significant changes in the delivery of services, including:

- **A redesign of infant-feeding groups following feedback about uncomfortable chairs and a lack of refreshments; now attracting 12-15 members per session**
- **The delivery of a Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) information sharing event, attracting 63 families and helping parents discover support opportunities**
- **A review and redesign of the SEND in Sunderland directory to identify missing areas and make the layout and language more accessible**

With some families unable to commit to monthly meetings, the hub runs community engagement events like picnics, breakfasts, and neighbourhood-based sessions to widen their reach and provide less formal environments for sharing views. This is particularly important to reach parents who are less confident, or less consistently available.

The family hub session provided valuable information about the ways in which medical services are working to improve their offer to families and communities. Nonetheless, the staff were candid that there are still open-ended questions they need to address, such as:

- **What happens to families who do not engage with universal services?**
- **How can universal provision better connect to targeted support when families face crisis?**
- **What does co-production look like where Family Voice members disagree with one another?**

Changing Futures Northumbria

Our final session on the study visit was a morning presentation in Gateshead, from Changing Futures Northumbria (CFN), which gave a radically different lens on supporting people in the community who are experiencing what services label “complex needs”. Changing Futures was launched in 2020 by the Ministry of Housing, Communities, and Local Government (MHCLG) and the National Lottery Community Fund (NLCF), to understand how to improve outcomes for the estimated 363,000 people in England living in multiple disadvantage. The programme was launched as a learning and systems-change programme, rather than an operational delivery service.

Breaking down the pixelated view

A central critique by CFN of public services is that past service design has generated high costs to the public purse, without people who are experiencing chronic and entrenched issues seeing better outcomes. This is due to a pixelated view in which public services see people as a “set of problems” rather than human beings. This view, CFN argues, fragments responsibility and prevents any service from holding a full understanding of the person. It also contributes to disengagement from the service and negatively impacts staff, who can experience burnout and isolation.

The morning session started with insight and learning from Gateshead’s council tax team, who reframed locals’ inability to pay council tax not as a debt issue, but as a signal of crisis. Instead of pursuing collection, staff began calling back and building relationships. This became the seed of a transferable framework – a relational practice that is applicable across local authority services.

The ‘liberated method’

The “liberated method” operates through three principles: stay legal, do no harm, and agree purpose. Within these boundaries, staff are supported but not tightly managed, trusted to do good work whatever that looked like. Staff work in pairs coupling someone from professional sectors with someone with lived experience, with shared power between the roles. Job descriptions were redesigned to prioritise the qualities and relational skills required for the work, rather than technical knowledge.

On this basis, CFN highlights three fundamental human needs to prioritise when working with people. These are somewhere to live (including belonging, and community), something to do (a purpose), and someone to love (connection). Instead of formalised consultation structures, caseworkers focused on developing strong relationships with people to secure these needs in the community – allowing co-production to naturally emerge and breaking down the barrier between ‘service user’ and ‘service provider’.



What the work looks like

Unlike most statutory services, CFN does not assess for eligibility. Staff meet people where they are, typically in settings like homelessness shelters, domestic abuse services, or alcohol care teams. The first focus is on stabilising immediate needs and safety, followed by a “high support and high challenge” approach. Staff pairs are clear about expectations, build relationships with those in need, and work alongside them to help them develop a sense of their own future direction. Gradually, as immediate needs subside, the approach seeks to empower people to regain agency and aspiration.

This approach is powerfully demonstrated by the case of “Brian”. Over 15 years, Brian had 3,382 health presentations costing an estimated £918,275: including 797 visits to A&E, 261 ambulance call-outs, and 155 patient episodes. In simple terms, “the more he was engaging in services the worse he was getting.”

Relational work with Brian began in 2023, and in 2024, his resource consumption fell to 0.3% of his levels in 2022. His presentations did not disappear, but became planned and purposeful rather than driven by crisis. His alcohol-related hospital admissions fell by 76%. His case challenges how services understand demand, and highlights a key learning that previous ‘demand’ was not meeting his needs. Meanwhile, a relational approach significantly reduced these interactions and helped Brian regain a semblance of control over his life.

Implications and unresolved tensions

For local authorities and service providers, the session identified a set of important principles:

- Start with existing services: reconfigure these rather than creating new ones
- Find staff who already want to work differently
- Look for overlap in “top tens” of highest-demand service users across agencies and focus intensive work there, where it will have the most impact

CFN leaders acknowledged that the difference in approach is not cost neutral, especially given the intensive nature of the work with two caseworkers assigned per case. However, it was also acknowledged that this could provide significant savings in reducing waste demand, and moreover, bring real solutions to high-demand service users.

There are questions that remain: how can an intensive, relational model be scaled? How do we prevent this from becoming a boutique project rather than mainstream work? What does the learning process look like, so that the practice can continually evolve?

While Changing Futures operates at the individual level, its insights about relationships, trust, and working with rather than doing to people apply equally to local authority and community-level initiatives. It challenges similar system dynamics: fragmentation, restrictive eligibility criteria, and services designed around cost management instead of meeting human need. It also recognises the centrality and importance of community, social connections and social infrastructure in supporting wellbeing outcomes.

Reflections

The study visit to Sunderland illuminated how one city is grappling with a challenge faced by places across England: ensuring communities experiencing disadvantage benefit from regeneration and public investment. Through visits to initiatives operating at different scales and with different models, participants saw the potential of long-term, community-led, place-based, and relational approaches to transformation.

Common themes across the visit

Several themes emerged across our visits with City Hall, Back on the Map, SARA, the Bunnyhill Family Hub, and Changing Futures, often revealing a shared logic despite operating in different forms.

Foremost was the **primacy of relationships and trust**. This extended from Patrick Melia acknowledging that statutory services are often not always seen as trusted voices, to SARA's rebuilding of police-community relationships in Southwick, Back on the Map's 15-year journey to re-establish confidence in Hendon, and Changing Futures' commitment to relational help.

Another cross-cutting lesson is the importance of time. The issues being addressed in Sunderland are in many cases the result of deindustrialisation, disinvestment, and compounding social issues over decades. They are entrenched in the long-term and require equally long-term responses, as recognised by Sunderland City Council – to build the trust, consistency, and sustainability needed to drive forward progress over time. Organisations like Back on the Map demonstrate the need to move beyond short project cycles, with its consistent approach over the past fifteen years now undeniably successful in transforming the area. At SARA's co-located hub, statutory services have been able to rebuild trust with a marginalised community but recognise that they will need to sustain this way of working for a long time to see real impact.

A third shared theme was the importance of starting with people and places rather than services. Each approach began with an attempt to understand what issues people were facing and how they could be engaged to solve them. CFN rooted their approach around relationship building and conversations to identify needs and aspirations, and saw remarkable progress as opposed to a traditional model of demand management and service provision. At the Bunnyhill Hub, families were directly engaged in reshaping the services meant for them. And after shifting from an NDC area to a community-led business, Back on the Map moved from a model of grant management towards co-creation with communities.

Fourth, was the recurring need for **permission to innovate**.

At SARA, Back on the Map, and CFN, transformation depended on leaders making a deliberate break from standard ways of operating and granting their staff the freedom to think differently. In a less constrained institutional environment, these models allowed frontline workers to use their expertise and allow communities and individuals – rather than structures – to shape services.

Finally, **asset-based thinking** connected the disparate groups. This ranged from the prioritisation of existing physical assets, including Back on the Map's stewardship of local housing and green spaces, to the cultivation of social networks like those in Southwick which outsiders had deemed problematic. In each case, strength rather than deficit was the starting point for planning.



Most fundamentally, the gap between city-centre regeneration and neighbourhood experience was very real, and one that needed bridging, and how this starts with building connections, relationships and social capital at the grassroots. Patrick Melia's observation that Southwick residents don't believe jobs and housing are for them framed the entire visit. Despite massive physical investment, psychological and social distance means regeneration can happen alongside persistent disadvantage without one alleviating the other.

What can we learn from this landscape?

Sunderland shows that commitment from leadership matters, with responses like multi-year funding for SARA and a commitment to neighbourhood working creating the space for people on the ground to innovate. This has allowed experimental work to develop, and the acceptance of uncertainty has allowed hyper-local models to demonstrate real results.

In Sunderland we see multiple models coexisting with different strengths. Back on the Map's asset-backed model offers autonomy but required a high risk tolerance and benefited from pre-existing resources. SARA's intensive partnership built trust and can deliver rapid responses to local issues, but depends on sustained multi-agency funding which may be difficult to scale to other areas. Family hubs provide universal access and have helped residents meaningfully shape services, but still face geographic barriers that restrict participation. In neighbouring Gateshead, Changing Futures has transformed outcomes for people experiencing multiple disadvantage, but requires staffing ratios difficult to scale. Crucially, the visit reflected that no single approach is sufficient to meet the full range of needs in a neighbourhood. The difference in approaches reflects different organisational environments, and often, a difference in community capacity. Hendon has benefited from a recent history of community development, while areas like Southwick are in the early stages of their journey. Thus, progress may be driven by an innovative community organisation like Back on the Map, but in other areas, local government may need to lay the groundwork – particularly where trust has been eroded and austerity has hollowed out local capacity.

Taken together, these examples suggest that a focus on key principles for community development rather than a single, scalable model is desirable. Each organisation visited by 3ni has a unique approach to solving the set of issues within their remit, and importantly, neighbourhood approaches will look different because they reflect the specific assets and challenges of their communities. The unifying factor in success across initiatives tended to be patient, long-term investments which were developed in genuine collaboration with communities.

The challenge is whether these initiatives can inform broader transformation rather than remaining exceptional examples.



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