



Community Foundation

Vital Signs North East: Education



Education

How philanthropy can help support learning, educational attainment, vocational skills and academic excellence



About this Vital Signs report

Vital Signs is a Community Foundation resource presenting information about a range of issues affecting our area. It draws on statistics, published research, local expertise and knowledge gathered through funding across the region to 'take the pulse' of communities and inform a better philanthropic response to their needs. We see it as the start of a conversation and would love to hear your views about the ambitions of local communities and what more philanthropy and charitable funding could do to meet them.

This is our second Vital Signs North East 2024 report. It examines how philanthropy can support efforts to improve levels of educational attainment and vocational skills development in our region. And, as important, it looks at how charitable funding can also play a role in supporting informal community-based learning and "learning for learning's sake."

Vital Signs will explore ten themes during 2024:

Economy – How can philanthropy help build a strong regional economy where everyone benefits from increased prosperity?

Education – What opportunities can charitable funding create for people to learn, develop skills and achieve their potential?

Health – How can charitable funders improve the overall health of our region, and reduce differences in health outcomes between richer and poorer people?

Homes – Can philanthropists help ensure that there are decent, secure homes for everyone who needs them?

Environment – What support can philanthropy provide to help communities look after the environment and ensure the region rises to the challenge of climate change?

Access – How can philanthropists help people overcome the barriers they face in getting access to opportunities and services?

Community – What can charitable giving contribute to the task of ensuring our communities are strong, welcoming and able to cope with the challenges of uncertain times?

Culture – How can philanthropy help foster the North East's unique culture, from iconic theatres, museums and concert halls to diverse community arts, heritage and sports groups?

Justice – How can charitable funding support work to protect people from crime, prevent discrimination and give opportunities for offender rehabilitation?

Living standards – How should philanthropic funds support those faced with a decline in living standards due to economic pressures and rising costs?

In addition to reporting on each of these themes we will produce a brief printed summary of our findings.

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“If you think education is expensive, wait until you see how much ignorance costs in the 21st century.”

President Barack Obama, 2013

A note on terminology

In this report we use the following geographic terms:

“The North East” or “The North East region”: this refers to the North East English region which will soon cover the Tees Valley Combined Authority and new North East Mayoral Combined Authority

Tees Valley: this refers to the area covered by the Tees Valley Combined Authority comprising Darlington, Hartlepool, Middlesbrough, Redcar & Cleveland and Stockton-on-Tees

The North East sub-region: this refers to the area to be covered by the new North East Mayoral Combined Authority comprising Northumberland, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, North Tyneside, South Tyneside, Gateshead, Sunderland and County Durham.

Executive summary

This publication is one of a series of Vital Signs reports that the Community Foundation Tyne & Wear and Northumberland will publish in 2024 looking at the needs and aspirations of communities from Northumberland to Teesside and how philanthropy can help meet them.

Here we are concerned with education. This is a highly specialist area and, with national and regional elections fast approaching, one in which the future direction of policy and practice remains somewhat uncertain. Nowhere is it more appropriate to restate our view that Vital Signs reports should seek to “start a conversation rather than offer the final word!”

But it is worth briefly considering the general context in which future policy and practice will unfold, whoever ends up in charge. In broad terms there will be a balance to be struck between the demands of stimulating economic recovery, maintaining public services (with the NHS predominating) and addressing pressing domestic issues (e.g. the cost-of-living crisis) in an increasingly challenging international environment. As a recent report suggests there is “a genuine risk that education will not be given the focus or resource it needs” to cope with staffing shortages, improve services and address the gap in educational attainment that holds back students from disadvantaged areas particularly here in northern England.¹

The Community Foundation is clear that the role of philanthropy cannot be to plug funding gaps that statutory educational services may face because of competing priorities for state support. Instead, we have sought to identify

areas where giving and funding can enable civil societyⁱⁱ organisations to complement or enhance the educational priorities of policymakers and professionals within the state system from pre-school to higher education and beyond. But we have not limited the discussion to how philanthropy relates to these priorities, as important as these may be for our communities. Equally important, in our view, is the role that charitable funding can play in supporting those with exceptional academic ability from all backgrounds, and in funding less formal educational provision within the charitable sector such as services that support learning as an end in itself, or provide a means for local people to understand and perhaps even change the world they live in.



Want to know more?

You can download all our Vital Signs reports as they are produced via our website at www.communityfoundation.org.uk/vitalsigns

The Community Foundation believes charitable funding can have a significant impact in three key areas:

1

Supporting civil society organisations that add value to, or fill gaps in, mainstream education and training in areas such as:

- early years provision for disadvantaged families and communities;
- support, advocacy and learning for those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND);
- alternative educational opportunities and vocational training for those at risk of being not in education, training or employment (NEET) after school – in particular, those experiencing disadvantage and/or with special educational needs and disabilities;
- the provision of activities – such as those identified in the Gatsby Career Benchmarks – that enable young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to develop the competencies needed to access vocational and further and higher educational opportunities;
- supporting civil society groups to develop the organisational capacity to provide services under contract to benefit those often excluded from mainstream provision.

2

Contributing to raising levels of academic attainment and vocational skills, closing the educational attainment and vocational skills gap and supporting individuals at risk of exclusion by:

- funding partnership work between state schools, civil society organisations and educational charities (including independent schools) that adds value to state-funded provision;
- providing disadvantaged high attaining pupils with additional support so they are able to realise their full potential e.g. mentoring, equipment, tuition or homework clubs;
- supporting young people from disadvantaged backgrounds in higher education experiencing financial and other hardship;
- providing accessible routes through which young people at risk of exclusion, and adults who lack the qualifications they need, may re-engage with education and training.

3

Promoting greater equity, diversity and inclusion in education and training, and supporting learning as a force for positive change in communities by:

- supporting work that celebrates and promotes learning that improves access to academic and vocational skills progression and draws attention to persistent inequalities;
- supporting evidence-based campaigning activity to ensure pupils with SEND secure appropriate access to mainstream educational and vocational training provision;
- funding learning through community organisations that enables people to develop their potential and become more active members of their communities.

Education and learning in the North East, and how philanthropy can help close the attainment gap

The Centre for Social Justiceⁱⁱⁱ identifies educational failure as a “route into poverty.” And in this report, we rightly consider how philanthropists are helping people from disadvantaged communities gain qualifications and vocational skills needed to access employment. But this is not our sole concern. If the region is to create the jobs on which greater economic inclusion depends, then we will need to encourage the brightest young people from all social backgrounds to become innovators and entrepreneurs. Community philanthropists may be particularly well-placed to identify and nurture their talents at an early stage. And we must look beyond the economic arguments and consider how learning contributes to the strength and cohesion of our society. Civil society organisations create spaces where people can learn more about themselves, their communities and the wider political, social and environmental issues that affect them. Often it is philanthropic funding that enables them to do so.

Early education provision can help narrow a gap in educational attainment, wellbeing and social and emotional skills between disadvantaged children and their better-off peers that is already well-established by the time a child enters formal education. Free provision is currently available to disadvantaged children at age 2, but this may be too late for some whilst take-up is an issue for others. And more important, perhaps, is the limited nature of the financial support provided which is often less than the costs of provision. This has reduced both the accessibility and quality of services

available, particularly to the children from disadvantaged backgrounds or with additional needs that most need it. A major issue is that providers do not have sufficient funding to offer the pay, training and working conditions that might make them appeal to the right staff given competition for labour.^{iv} This may explain why a significant proportion of voluntary sector providers have left the market, with just 11% of providers and 14% of places now within the sector. It may also underpin the limited impact of subsidised provision on attainment.

School budgets are under pressure, following a sustained fall in funding and are yet to recover from the austerity regime imposed after 2010. This also impacted on the additional funding provided to level the playing field for disadvantaged children and those with special educational needs. In addition the teaching profession is struggling to compete for graduates, particularly to work in more challenging schools, with shortages in key areas like computing, design and technology and physics. Unsurprisingly, the attainment gap often grows as a child progresses – or fails to progress – in formal education. Five-year-old children from disadvantaged backgrounds start school 4 months behind their affluent peers. Pre-pandemic this gap widened to 18 months at age 16, and progress on closing it was faltering. The disproportionate impact of pandemic disruption on children with higher support needs certainly had a further negative effect on attainment, although this may prove short-term. More worrying is the increase in absenteeism since the pandemic, particularly marked amongst children eligible for free school meals and those with SEND, and its contribution to an increase in the number of children and young people experiencing mental health issues.

Post-16 and higher education can open up opportunities to close the attainment gap, and a second chance for those hampered in life by a lack of qualifications and vocational skills. Here again cuts have been made, although some attempt has been made to target funds to address educational disadvantage. Apprenticeships are potentially a good route into work, but there is evidence that they are increasingly being accessed by existing employees. New apprenticeship starts for 16–18-year-olds – particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds – appear to have fallen. The new T-levels (equivalent to 3 A levels) provide another route into work or vocational higher education courses with a work placement included. These have a clear focus on key areas of employment including digital, construction, accounting, design and engineering, and education and early years. It is early days for these, and much depends on buy-in from students, employers and higher education providers. And there is some concern that they may compound the problem of disadvantaged young people by displacing less demanding and shorter-term courses within post-16 education provision.

For those who leave school with few qualifications the option of vocational skills training offers a way of avoiding being trapped in unemployment or in low paid, precarious work. Whilst adult education budgets are under pressure, there is some support to individuals in this position to gain level 3 qualifications through the Lifetime Skills Guarantee. However the House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts' recent report on workforce skills makes for gloomy reading, noting that:

"...the number of adults participating in government-funded further education and skills training has dropped dramatically, from 3.2 million in 2010/11 to 1.6 million in 2020/21. The fall in participation has been particularly marked in disadvantaged areas, with skills training in the 20% most disadvantaged areas of England falling by 39% between 2015/16 and 2020/21."

The report drew particular attention to issues with the design, delivery, evaluation, complexity and funding of government-supported provision and highlighted a decline in employer support for workforce training.^v

What of those people from disadvantaged backgrounds who *do* manage to do well in the education system and want to progress to university? With the expansion of higher education (HE) since the 1960s, there has been marked progress in increasing participation of state school students and access to HE from socio-economic groups traditionally underrepresented. However, research from the Sutton Trust suggests significant limitations in what has been achieved. Entry to HE by people from the most underrepresented neighbourhoods remains limited, as does access to the most prestigious universities for people from excluded communities.

In terms of other groups underrepresented in HE there has also been patchy progress. The increase in participation by Black young people is a major success story:^{vi} they were most likely to progress into HE in 2022 having been least likely in 2006. But the persistent low entry rate of White students compared to other ethnic groups is a concern, although the problem is less pronounced at the most prestigious universities. And there are other disparities too. The underrepresentation of men within HE has worsened, and there are significant spatial differences with levels of participation rising from 29% to 51% in 2006-2022 in London but only from 22% to 30% here in the North East.^{vii}

The growth in HE places competes with other calls on stretched public finances. There are two main ways governments can control expenditure within sustainable limits. One is to restrict university places, which drives up entry requirements and so works against the interests of disadvantaged students who often do better in HE than at school. Another is to make the most of historic expenditure by recovering student loans more quickly. But disadvantaged students already make considerable sacrifices to attend university. As Sir Peter Lampl, founder and chair of the Sutton Trust puts it:



"They have to borrow more than well-off students just to live on, resulting in them graduating with higher levels of debt which is both shameful and hugely unfair... Our previous research has found that many students are skipping meals as well as working sometimes full-time hours."^{viii}

Further changes in loan terms may mean that financial hardship persists longer after graduation, particularly for those in lower-earning occupations. This could exercise a deterrent effect for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds considering university.

A final dimension of learning that it is important to highlight is that which takes place outside of the formal education and training system. Such informal education is a key component of what community,

voluntary and social enterprise organisations do. Sometimes what is provided can be as simple as a chance to acquire basic English or literacy and numeracy skills or a volunteer job that helps someone learn work-related skills. At other times it can involve providing new ideas and experiences, and support with understanding and acting on important issues like inequalities, health or the environment. As such it can empower people to become more informed and active citizens, enhancing local representative democracy.

The following table gives an indication of where North East England is in relation to the various areas of education explored above. With few exceptions our region lags behind England and/or the UK on key measures of progress, and further still behind the South East region. This is not to say that significant progress is not being made, but it shows the scale of the challenge:

Key area	Indicator	North East	England	South East	Dates*
Overall educational attainment levels in the population	Highest level of qualification index score (higher is better)	2.767	2.831	2.881	2021
Early years attainment	Percentage of children in their reception year at the expected level across all early learning goals	64.6%	65.6%	68.5%	2023
GCSE attainment	% of GCSE grades at 7/A and above	17.6%	20.75%	24.4%	2023
Progression to HE and social disadvantage	HE Progression rate	42.5%	46.8%	46.3%	2023
	HE Progression rate (free school meals recipients)	21.9%	29.2%	21.2%	
	High tariff HE Progression rate ^{ix}	12.2%	13.4%	14.1%	
	High tariff Progression rate (free school meals recipients)	3.5%	5.3%	3.3%	
Progression to HE and identity ^x	HE progression rate /high tariff progression rate by gender				2023
	Girls	49.5% / 13.7%	53.6% / 15.3%	52.3% / 15.9%	
	Boys	35.8% / 10.8%	40.2% / 11.7%	40.5% / 12.5%	
	HE Progression rate/High tariff progression rate by ethnicity				
	Asian	68.1% / 21.4%	67.8% / 19%	71.3% / 21.3%	
	Black	69.8% / 18.5%	63.5% / 13.3%	68.4% / 15.3%	
	Chinese	84.6% / 44.2%	83.8% / 46%	81.4% / 44%	
	Mixed	54.7% / 17.4%	51.5% / 15.7%	54% / 17.5%	
	White	40.8% / 11.6%	41.8% / 12.3%	42.8% / 13.2%	
	HE Progression rate / high tariff progression rate for pupils with Special Educational Needs (SEN) ^{xi}	17.8% / 2.7%	20.1% / 3.6%	18.7% / 3.9%	
Skill levels	Qualified at RQF 4 and above (e.g. Degree, NVQ4)	36.7%	45.5%	48.1%	2022
	Qualified at RQF3 (e.g. A level, NVQ3)	23.7%	21.2%	21.7%	
	Qualified at RQF2 (e.g. GCSE grade 9, NVQ2)	23.8%	19%	18.6%	
	Qualified at RQF1 (e.g. GCSE grade 3, NVQ1)	3.9%	2.7%	2.8%	
	No qualifications	8%	7%	4.9%	

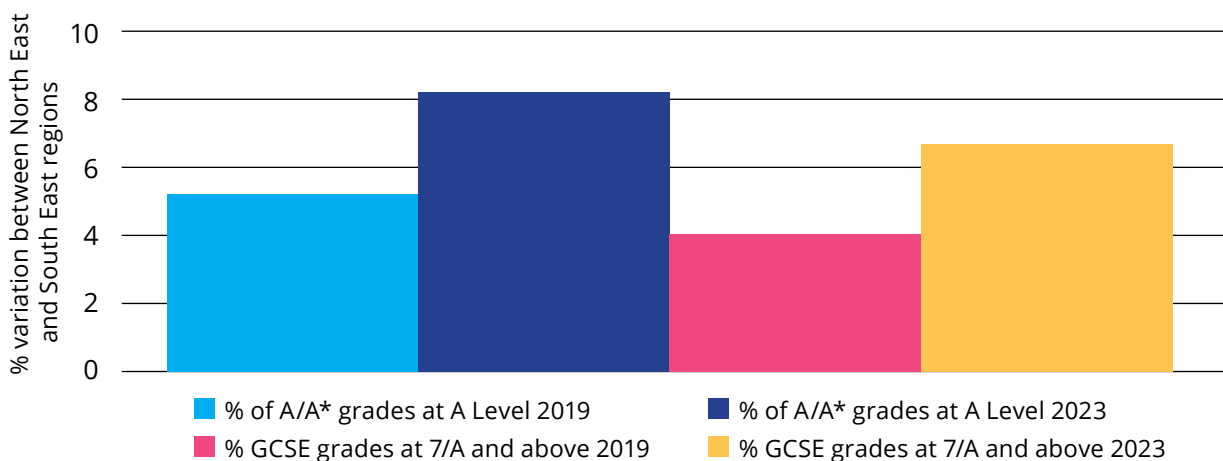
* Links to Source

The North East has 2,470 early years providers, offering 64,800 places. But only 140, around 6%, are voluntary sector providers – the lowest proportion in England. And yet voluntary organisations have a unique offer as trusted community bodies with the potential to reach families at risk of exclusion in disadvantaged areas. They can also enable parents to be involved in shaping more flexible provision through serving on management committees or volunteering. And they offer opportunities for progression to employment in the sector. Many have greater organisational longevity and established staffing than state or private providers. However, they face more challenges in an increasingly difficult financial environment and can make high demands of the people involved in running them. Local Government Association commissioned research suggests an accelerating decline in single-site voluntary providers, with a particularly marked impact on disadvantaged families. The impact of the pandemic on reserves, increased costs and a limited ability to recoup increased costs by raising fees seem to be driving it. **A possible role for community philanthropy could therefore be to provide financial and in-kind support to help sustain voluntary early years provision serving disadvantaged families and communities.**^{xii}

The educational attainment gap between the North East and the rest of England is significant, and growing at both GCSE and A level:^{xiii}

Relatively low levels of educational attainment in the North East inevitably place the performance of our schools under the spotlight. Whilst 93% of primary schools received an Ofsted rating of Good or Outstanding, for secondary schools this falls to 77%.^{xiv} It is beyond the scope of this report to explore arguments about the Ofsted inspection regime, or whether there is a north-south divide in the quality of school provision. But it does seem reasonable to consider the additional challenges faced by schools in our region, primarily but not exclusively arising from high levels of deprivation. The infrastructure body Schools North East argues there is a need to challenge the perception of a failing educational system here, and they cite the University of Bristol’s Fairer Schools Index (2019) which adjusts official school performance rankings by reference to pupil gender, age, ethnicity, special educational needs, free school meal eligibility, and whether English is not a first language. Focusing on pupil progress between their last year in primary school and GCSE, the index shows a dramatic improvement in the national ranking of North East schools – by on average 361

The growing gap between attainment in the North East and South East



places compared to official league tables.^{xv} This highlights the importance of considering the distance travelled by some young people during their education, as much as the qualifications they may or may not achieve. Schools – whilst they will certainly vary in quality – do not operate in a vacuum. The impact of deprivation, deficiencies in areas like rural transport and digital connectivity, physical and mental health inequalities, and the condition of the local economy and labour market all work against increased attainment as measured purely in terms of academic results.

And to this list we must now add the disruptive effects of Covid-19, which resulted in North East pupils missing a higher proportion of school sessions than in many other English regions. The House of Commons Education Committee reported in early 2022 that:

“The impact of school closures and the pandemic has resulted in a reversal of the progress made in narrowing the attainment gap, with children in the North disproportionately affected. It is also alarming that children and young people in the North, particularly the North-East and Yorkshire and the Humber, have suffered greater learning loss during the last two years compared to many in the South^{xvi}.”

A key factor is absenteeism – in 2023 around a fifth of pupils in the North East were persistent absentees. And many of those whose engagement with education was weak prior to the closure of schools during the height of the pandemic have not re-engaged: severe absenteeism in our region doubled between 2019 and 2023. The Education Committee has more recently expressed concern that without more urgent government intervention there may be a generation of young people at risk of increased disadvantage^{xvii}. Absenteeism is part of the wider issue of “invisible children” – those who leave the school system and “drop off the radar”. Other contributory factors are school exclusions and the “off-rolling” of some young people in order either to avoid the costs

of support or to boost school performance, a practice identified by Ofsted as a problem in our region prior to 2019.^{xviii} A recent rise in the prevalence of home schooling may partially relate to off-rolling, with parents being pressured into it as an alternative to fines for non-attendance or permanent exclusions.^{xix}

Philanthropy cannot fill gaps or address deficiencies in statutory provision which are best addressed through the type of large-scale government-funded programmes currently associated with the levelling-up agenda.

However philanthropic funding could have a role in helping to close the attainment gap and support “invisible children” by funding partnership work between state schools, civil society organisations and educational charities (including independent schools).

This could include help for young people at risk of disengagement from education, support and funding to develop alternative provision, and additional extra-curricular educational opportunities that develop self-confidence, foster an interest in learning or help state-school pupils in key subject areas. Recent Community Foundation funding in this space included a £10,000 grant to Villiers Park Educational Trust for the additional support of disadvantaged students studying STEM subjects in eight schools in Newcastle and North Tyneside.



Attitudes towards education and training

How does growing up with disadvantage affect the attitude of young people towards education and training?

Research undertaken in County Durham has suggested that it limits access to the broad range of life experiences that help children from more affluent backgrounds to develop the self-confidence, and positive attitude to risk, required to take full advantage of academic and vocational opportunities.

Philanthropy can help bridge the gap by funding good quality youth work that gives disadvantaged young people access to alternative sources of support and a taste of the opportunities for self-development enjoyed by their better-off peers.

The **Gatsby Career Benchmarks** could help inform charitable funders' choices. In particular they highlight a range of potential activities including careers-focused STEM sessions; visiting, mentoring and enterprise schemes involving local employers; and familiarisation visits to workplaces or FE/HE centres.

The study also emphasises the importance of acknowledging the distance travelled by young people in education and training in overcoming disadvantage rather than simply focusing on qualifications achieved. **In our view this should be considered when measuring the impact of philanthropically funded activities both in schools and communities.**

It is important to note that this should not just be about supporting students who are struggling. The Sutton Trust recently examined the situation of disadvantaged high attainers at secondary school, and highlighted the gap that emerged between them and their better off peers by the time they took their GCSEs. This was due to the wide range of additional barriers they faced – particularly during the Covid pandemic – which included a lack of aspiration, limited access to IT equipment, tutoring and somewhere to work from at home, and caring responsibilities. Pupils in the North East were found to be at particular risk. **So there is a good case for charitable funding in our region being used to provide disadvantaged high attaining pupils with the additional support they need e.g. mentoring, equipment, tuition or homework clubs.**^{xx} Often this can be achieved by ensuring that they have full access to more generalist work funded charitably in schools,

such as extra-curricular activities designed to increase interest in STEM subjects. However there is also a case for targeted support such as the Guy Readman Rising Stars Programme at the Community Foundation. This provides funding of up to £20,000 per annum over two-years for programmes that target educational and vocational support on “bright but burdened” young people in secondary school and up to the age of 20.

Progression rates into Higher Education – as shown in our table – are relatively low compared with other regions of England as one might expect given the overall picture at GCSE and A level. There are notable variations between candidates of different socio-economic backgrounds, genders and ethnicities, and between those with special educational needs and their peers, reflecting both the additional challenges some young people face and at times the lack of support they may receive within the education system

to fulfil their potential. **Our case study on the Anne and David Parker Fund at the Community Foundation shows how philanthropically funded support can make a real difference to those students that need extra help to gain the maximum benefit from their hard-won university places.**

A major priority within the post-compulsory education offer across our region is to deliver skills we will need to reinvigorate the local economy. As our table shows we have some way to go to improve vocational skills and qualification levels within the workforce. But there has been some progress since we last published Vital Signs North East, albeit generally less than elsewhere in England. The table below shows the % change in qualification levels between 2017 and 2022.^{xxi}

The Tees Valley Combined Authority together with the existing combined authorities and the North East LEP (soon all to be subsumed into the new North East Mayoral Combined Authority covering the North East sub-region) have all been concerned with ensuring the delivery of a range of education qualifications, apprenticeships and specialised vocational courses working with private, public and voluntary sector employers and education and training partners. Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs) and related Local Skills Improvement Funding (LSIF) are designed to inform and enhance this offer by putting employers at the heart of the skills development process. Three LSIPs are in place in the North East which are described as covering Tees Valley, North of Tyne (Newcastle, Northumberland and North Tyneside) and “North East” (Durham, Gateshead, South

Tyneside and Sunderland) The first two are led by the North East Chamber of Commerce, and the other by the North East Automotive Alliance (NEAA). The funding available in 2023-2025 will be £3.6m for the North East and £2.5m for the other two LSIP areas. Delivery will be through FE and HE providers and a limited group of private sector providers with a strong focus on engineering and manufacturing, health and social care, green skills and construction and digital.

Many of the findings of the House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts’ recent report on the challenges of developing workforce skills, as referred to earlier in this report, will apply across our region. A recent North East Chamber of Commerce event in Stockton, for example, heard both of the need to engage more employers in planning and delivery in areas such as digital and the importance of mapping the plethora of local provision and funding streams.^{xxii} But securing the participation of local young people is perhaps the major challenge, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds who are already at risk of dropping off the radar due to absenteeism, exclusion and off-rolling. Data on levels of participation, and estimates of the number not in education, training or employment (NEET) present a mixed picture. In England 92% of young people are participating in education and training with 4.7% in apprenticeships. In the North East the figures are 90.5% and 6.7% respectively, whilst for the South East they are 91.1% and 4.1%.

Area	No qualifications	Level 2 or above	Level 3 or above	Level 4 or above
North East	-2	+8.9	+7.1	+4.4
South East	-.6	+8	+8.2	+6.6
England	-1.3	+9	+2.7	+6.5



A more worrying variation is in the figures for NEET young people which are 2.8% nationally, 2.5% in the South East and 4.7% in the North East (the highest of any English region).^{xxiii} Pupils from disadvantaged communities and those with low educational attainment are at significantly greater risk of finding themselves in this group.^{xxiv}

Local community organisations have a proven track record of supporting young people at risk of becoming NEET, and of reaching adults wishing to re-engage with education and training such as those wanting to improve their earning potential or those (predominantly women) previously occupied in caring roles. These adult learners may well include those who travelled a long way in their school education without quite seeing that progress reflected in grades they achieved. This is an area where philanthropy can play a role in providing “second-chances” both by funding direct services and providing financial and in-kind support to groups wishing to develop the capacity to provide services under contract to statutory agencies or private providers.

Given the state we are in as a region it seems obvious that the education and training of children and adults should be constructed around the needs of the local economy. But there is much more value to learning than this: many educators see learning as a process of understanding the world in a way that enables us to change both it and ourselves for the better. And research suggests that becoming better educated in the broadest sense does indeed have a positive impact on the individual, their family and their community through improved health, better consumer and personal choices, lower criminality and higher participation in charitable giving, volunteering and a greater interest in community activism and local democracy.^{xxv} Civil society organisations provide many opportunities for people – particularly those that did not thrive at school – to learn through participation in activities like arts and crafts, music, drama, sport, courses focused on practical skills like spoken English, DIY or cookery, self-help around issues such as domestic violence or mental health, the pursuit of hobbies or interests, and work that helps others or improves their



local communities. **Without the imperative to focus on vocational learning outcomes, philanthropy is uniquely well-placed to fund learning activities that enable people to develop their potential and become more active members of their communities.** The following quotes from Community Foundation-funded groups give a flavour of the outcomes that can be achieved:

"...the girls who attended the camp gained experience in life skills (cooking, cleaning, communication), working together and understanding each other's differences." Uniformed youth group

"The new group for older women's gardening has thrived... It is a nurturing space that empowers women, provides a lot of peer support ... and has allowed some participants to form friendships outside of the sessions and have the confidence to volunteer more. They are taking great pride in growing cut flowers to donate to Marie Curie and are enjoying learning about this at every step." Environmental charity

"The project has enabled participants to articulate the differences they want in their community and develop confidence to share this with adults in their life – they started to understand they had power to create change." Community arts organisation

All aboard?

How philanthropy can help level the educational playing field

Throughout this report we have covered the impact of factors like gender, ethnicity and socio-economic background on levels of attainment. The negative impact of disadvantage aside, the picture is not always as one might expect given the persistence of discrimination on the basis of gender or race. Girls generally do better than boys, and some minoritised ethnic groups better than the white majority. As the example of improvements in the proportion of Black people entering HE demonstrates, targeted action can lead to positive change. But there's still a long way to go while women remain underrepresented within the higher echelons of academia, the academic success of the Chinese community results in negative stereotyping and Black students experience a widening pay gap with white peers despite gaining higher qualifications. **In this context, philanthropy could play a useful role both in celebrating and learning from what is being achieved in terms of widening access to academic progression and drawing attention to persistent inequalities.**

One group in particular faces additional challenges that merit further attention: children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND). The education system has a duty under the Children and Families Act 2014 to support those with learning difficulties and disabilities aged 0-25 from pre-school to college and – if needed – to offer additional support via an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHC). In the North East, 13.9% of pupils receive SEN support and 4.6% have EHC plans. However, underfunding is a serious issue as demand increases. With a £1.3bn funding deficit nationally as of April 2022, it is generally recognised that the current system is unsustainable. Reforms are in the air, designed to create a more simplified and sustainable system of support, but at the time of writing it is unclear when they will be in place or how they will affect the quality of provision.

Absenteeism and exclusion rates are particularly high amongst pupils with SEND. A recent House of Commons report



acknowledged that this often reflected the needs of such pupils not being adequately met in specialist and mainstream education settings. A recent **Office for National Statistics video** and associated report offers an insight into the challenges young people with SEND face. It is a situation that places both them and their families under increased pressure, and at risk of an adversarial relationship with schools and local authorities that must consider calls for additional support within the context of the imperative to contain expenditure. Disadvantaged families who may lack the confidence, time and resources to either manage their situations, put their case effectively, or provide home-schooling are particularly vulnerable in this situation. **There may be scope for charitable funders to do more here to support young people with SEND and their families, for example by paying for practical support or advocacy services alongside learning activities that enhance statutory educational provision.**

A higher-than-average proportion of young people with SEND end up not in education, training or employment after school (NEET). Ofsted has talked of “a culture of low expectations” and “a continuing lack of ambition for pupils with SEND” (SEND: old issues, new issues, next steps, June 2021)

particularly in terms of supporting progression into work. This may affect progression into HE too, which our table above shows is accessed by a relatively small proportion of those with SEND. Equality legislation has required HE institutions to improve support to students with learning difficulties or learning and physical disabilities, but the National Association for Special Educational Needs (nasen) argues that there is often a lack of support for pupils wishing to apply to them. **Funding civil society organisations to provide a safety net of alternative educational opportunities and vocational training routes for people at risk of becoming NEET after they leave school is a good use of charitable support and will particularly benefit those with SEND. But getting ahead of the problem by supporting evidence-based campaigning activity to ensure pupils with SEND secure appropriate access to mainstream educational and training provision is also an appropriate focus for philanthropy.**

Sources: HM Government education statistics service; Office for National Statistics; UK Parliament Education Committee 2022-2023; Whole School SEND Consortium, nasen; The Bureau of Investigative Journalism; Ofsted/ CQC.



Philanthropy and education: case studies

How Support and Grow North East Ltd supported young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and their families in North Tyneside.

Support and Grow North East is a registered charity based in Shiremoor, North Tyneside that exists to tackle poverty and social disadvantage. In July 2023 the group received an award of £2,500 from the Daisy Marr Fund at the Community Foundation to provide food, support and activities over the Summer holidays to children and young people from North Tyneside and Northumberland with special educational needs and disabilities.

The group already worked with SEND parents, and ran an online support group, so the activities were planned and delivered with the involvement of some of those who would be attending.

In their application to the Community Foundation the group highlighted the disadvantage experienced by the young people with SEND and their families as a result of the limited support available to them. A lack of adequate childcare or support meant they

were more likely to be trapped in poverty, and more likely to experience social isolation and physical and mental ill-health.

As well as providing food, enriching activities and social interaction, the events were intended to encourage SEND parents to engage with other services offered by the group and to build supportive networks with others in the same position.

Cooking and activity sessions were provided twice weekly to 123 children and young people in a local Community Centre who might otherwise have been confined to staying at home. Through cooking and craft activities participants were able to gain confidence, learn new skills and make new friends.

Parents and carers attending had the opportunity to take part in activities alongside the young people, creating memories and strengthening family bonds. Networking amongst the parents provided opportunities to exchange ideas and information, and some have stayed in touch after the activities ended.

“From our work with those in poverty, we were aware of the large number of parents caring for children with neurodiversity, learning disabilities and other disabilities. They told a story of a lack of support and opportunities for the children, and isolation and poor mental health of parents.

We looked at the provision in our area and saw very little for children with disabilities, particularly for those in poverty, where cost is an issue. The activities we put on were planned to enable participation by all the children. We used crafting methods and equipment that was adapted to support this. It was important to the children and parents that all the children could do all of the activity. We also encouraged the parents to join in, if they wanted to, or opt out and have a break if they preferred while supervising from the side. No pressure...

The children surprised themselves as to what they are capable of. Parents also recognised that children could be given more freedom to try new things if given the right support and adaptations.

Following the success of this project, its impact and its high demand, it is our intention to seek further funding for ongoing SEND services.”

Louise Jones, CEO and Founder of Support and Grow North East

Sunderland Women's Centre helps women asylum seekers and refugees learn English.

Sunderland Women's Centre is a registered charity that supports women of all ages and backgrounds in the City of Sunderland. Its aim is to instil a sense of purpose and achievement - and improve prospects of employment and quality of life - by removing barriers to learning and supporting women from under-represented groups.

A grant of £3,000 from the Curtin PARP Fund at the Community Foundation enabled the group to provide three 20-hour Basic English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses to 30 women, 80% of whom were asylum seekers or refugees. In all 95% of those attending successfully completed their courses.

Feedback from participants showed that the courses were enjoyable, and many signed up for further courses not least to be more involved with women from different backgrounds to themselves. For some this involved progression onto pathways involving accredited courses and qualifications.

Feedback from the project very much chimed in with research findings from the Bell Foundation that characterises ESOL courses as "critical enablers" for asylum seekers and

refugees. They boost confidence, help with everyday tasks, support the development of new social networks and enable personal and vocational goals to be pursued. This project provides a good example of how philanthropic funding can help community organisations unleash the power of learning to open up new opportunities for those that might otherwise miss out.

"The difference the grant made to learners who attended was that it gave them the skills and knowledge which they could use in everyday life helping them to be a part of the community they live in and making even the smallest of tasks that little bit easier.

For some this was as simple as being able to ask for a pint of milk in a shop or getting on a bus and paying bus fare.

It also increased their confidence and helped them to integrate into the community as they were able to gain a better understanding of the English language and felt more comfortable having conversations with others."

**Willa Allan, Project Manager,
Sunderland Women's Centre**



Philanthropy in action:

how Anne and David Parker set up a fund at the Community Foundation to help women students study STEM subjects at Newcastle University

Only 2% of the students that manage to gain a place at our top universities are from disadvantaged backgrounds. And the evidence suggests that women wishing to study STEM subjects within this group will have had to overcome substantial additional barriers to achieve their ambition. It is therefore particularly concerning when the potential benefits of such a hard-won experience are denied to them as a result of continued hardship.

In Autumn 2020 Anne and David Parker established an endowment fund at the Community Foundation. Its purpose was to support female students from Tyne & Wear and Northumberland studying STEM degree topics at Newcastle University that were experiencing financial constraints or other hardships. Typically students are nominated by the University to receive annual bursaries of £3,000, and to date £24,000 has been awarded to 4 students.

We spoke to Anne and David about their philanthropic giving.

Tell us a little about yourselves, and how you came to set up a fund at the Community Foundation...

Anne: We are both from the North East. I left school at 16 and joined Northumbria Water, eventually moving on to set up my own consultancy business specialising in leadership and development. I closed the business in 2021.

David's career was in manufacturing. He managed large teams of staff in a number of businesses here in the North East, and for a period had his own company before retiring in 2018.

David: As part of our career development both Anne and I studied for Higher Education qualifications. We did it the hard way through part-time study whilst working. But Anne had the support of her employer, and at the time there was grant support available, so both of us were able to afford to do it.

We know it can be very different for students nowadays, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds or with additional needs. The introduction of tuition fees, and the cost-of-living crisis, mean such students can often struggle with the costs of higher education.

Anne: We contacted the Community Foundation after I gained an inheritance from my mother which we decided should be used charitably to help female students affected by this issue. But although we had a good sense of what we wanted to achieve, we weren't really sure about the practicalities. So we asked our professional advisors about it, and they referred us on to the Community Foundation.

Your fund at the Community Foundation has a very specific purpose. Tell us a bit more about the thinking behind this...

Anne: We were aware from my work as a consultant, and our business networks, that the North East isn't producing enough graduates particularly in STEM subjects [i.e. science, technology, engineering and maths]. And women are underrepresented. We thought that supporting local women to study STEM subjects at university could help address that problem. Newcastle University is a leader in this field, but that must pose particular challenges for students that face financial or other hardships in addition to its high academic demands.

I have also been passionate about raising the aspirations and confidence of women in our region for a long time. The fund seemed to be a tangible way of contributing to that.

David: So we thought this was where we could fill a gap, by providing a bit of extra financial support to those female students studying STEM subjects at Newcastle University that most needed it. That could be to help with living costs or pay for the additional materials or activities that students from better-off backgrounds might enjoy.

The fund is new, but already we know it has made a significant difference to three female students' university experience. How does it feel to know that your giving has had such an impact?

David: We've had the opportunity to meet some of the young women we helped and their families. It is very heartening to get feedback and it gave us a sense of the practical and tangible difference the fund was making. We felt it validated the choice we made about the purpose of the fund. We learnt how tough it can be for such students, but also about how our giving through the Community Foundation has helped them in the way we hoped it would.

Anne: Of course an acid test in terms of impact will be whether some of the young women we help stay in the North East and opt for careers in STEM. But that will be their choice. In the end, it's more important that we enable them to pursue the career they want.

What would your advice be to anyone thinking about getting involved in charitable giving?

Anne: We found it useful to identify an issue we really cared about, and to have an idea about what we wanted to achieve. But don't let anything about the process of getting involved put you off. Your local Community Foundation can manage the complexities of setting up and managing a charitable fund.

David: We wouldn't have had a clue where to start with that. But the Community Foundation handled the practicalities and sorted out an arrangement with Newcastle University to ensure our giving supported those female students who would really benefit from it.

Anne: By the way, we don't really identify with the term "philanthropist". It is often used to describe people like Bill Gates or Warren Buffet. Our fund is big enough to make a difference - but it isn't billions!

Really, we're just ordinary people who had the interest, and sufficient income, to do something good that will outlive us. Our endowment fund at the Community Foundation will be helping future generations of local young women to achieve their potential far into the future.

It will be our way of giving back to the North East, which has been good to us over the years.

Note: The data on university access quoted here is from the **Sutton Trust**, the **Education Policy Journal** and the **London School of Economics**

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- ii The term 'civil society' describes the connections between people with common interests coming together voluntarily to do things out of care for others, creativity or to pursue a cause. Charities and other types of community groups are the backbone of UK civil society organisations. For further discussion see: <https://civilsocietycommission.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/What-is-civil-society.pdf>
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- iv **The Early Years Alliance**, which is the largest membership organisation representing the sector in England, offers a range of reports on the crisis facing the Early Years sector in areas like funding (including for children with special educational needs and disabilities), recruitment and retention.
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- v House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts (2022) **Developing workforce skills for a strong economy**
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- ix 'High tariff' universities comprise the third of institutions requiring the highest levels of academic achievement for entry
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- x The figures here should not obscure the fact that White students comprise 73% of total HE entrants, and just under 77% of total entrants to high tariff HE institutions
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- xi SEN refers to the requirement for additional support with communicating and interacting; cognition and learning; social, emotional and mental health difficulties and/or sensory or physical needs. Notable people with special educational needs include Albert Einstein, Richard Branson, Ian Dury and Jamie Oliver.
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- ^{xv} **School North East** – with a membership of 1,150 schools and educationalists in membership – is currently campaigning for a greater recognition of the challenges the region faces.
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While the group advises on data sources, analysis and findings, the Community Foundation has overall editorial responsibility. The content and findings of our Vital Signs reports reflect the Community Foundation’s conclusions not the individual views of editorial group members or of Newcastle Building Society.

Let’s talk

We hope that this report will inspire more of you to give to causes that contribute to improving levels of educational attainment and vocational skills, and support the positive benefits of learning within communities, across our region.

You can help inform our work on this and the other Vital Signs themes by completing the Vital Signs North East 2024 questionnaire. Just visit www.communityfoundation.org.uk/vitalsigns or scan the QR code below

If you would like to discuss this report further, or what you could do to help, please contact us:

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