



# Community Foundation

Vital Signs North East: Access



## Access

How philanthropy can help people overcome barriers in getting access to opportunities and services



# 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 tenth Vital Signs North East 2024 report. It draws together and updates findings from our Vital Signs Equity, Diversity and Inclusion reports published in 2021 and the access issues already identified in each of our 2024 suite of Vital Signs publications. It also covers three additional areas: digital and financial inclusion and access issues specific to rural communities. All are areas where we would want this report simply to initiate a conversation through a preliminary exploration of the issues, and in relation to which we will undertake to amplify the voices of those with lived experience. The starting point for this will be our On the Table events in Autumn 2024.

## **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 help reduce crime and anti-social behaviour and support the communities and individuals it affects?

**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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"Isolation is the sum total of wretchedness to a man."

**Thomas Carlyle, 1843**

## 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 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 Combined Authority comprising Northumberland, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, North Tyneside, South Tyneside, Gateshead, Sunderland and County Durham.

# Executive summary

**Problems relating to access have been identified throughout our Vital Signs reports and we have made the case for focusing philanthropic support on civil society organisations that seek to open up greater opportunities for those experiencing disadvantage.**

But this is not to discount philanthropy's role in relation to problems that impact on people from a wider range of social backgrounds, even if the disadvantage they experience is not always amplified by the "double-disadvantage" of poverty or deprivation. Improving quality of life for everyone in our communities will always remain a philanthropic priority.

**In this report we will explore this further by focusing on 4 areas:**

- access concerns/issues for communities of interest and identity building on our earlier Vital Signs reports on Women, Disabled People, Black and Minority Ethnic Communities (*sic*) and the Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual communities;
- access to services in rural areas;
- digital exclusion and
- financial exclusion.



## 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](http://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**, and in particular those led by people from the communities they serve, to widen access to opportunities and services e.g. support for accessibility audits; financial help for students from communities often excluded from Higher Education or vocational training; advocacy for people at risk of exclusion from services; support to address the needs of rural communities at risk.

2

**Funding activities and projects** that address issues of access and unmet needs e.g. services for groups that are underserved by mainstream services; outreach projects and community transport schemes (particularly in rural areas); support for business development in rural areas; digital literacy initiatives; alternative financial or digital services.

3

**Supporting research, consultancy and policy/campaigning activities** undertaken within Charity Commission guidelines to raise awareness and promote action on access issues. This could include for example research into how communities at risk of social exclusion can sometimes be “designed-out” of, or otherwise excluded from, mainstream provision; initiatives that help ensure public policies and services are “rural- proofed”; policy or consultancy work designed to increase the accessibility of individual civil society organisations or evidence-based policy/campaigning on issues relating to the availability of accessible housing in the region.

# Access in the North East, and how philanthropy can help

## Access and communities of identity

The Community Foundation believes that being held back or treated differently because of who you are or where you are from is not acceptable<sup>i</sup>. As an organisation we are committed to widening access to our services to ensure that we support donors from all North East communities and that our grant-making processes are as accessible as possible. This includes supporting initiatives like the **Asian Fund** that open up philanthropic giving to communities underrepresented in our donor base and developing funds focused on supporting people experiencing disadvantage as a result of one or more protected characteristics<sup>ii</sup> such as our **Women's Fund**.

We have made a start, but a key part of the Vital Signs conversation in this area is about identifying areas where we could be doing more. We will end the section with a look at issues of access to funding and the broader

question of ensuring civil society organisations are accessible to all.

Our previous reports in this series – alongside those published in 2020 with a particular focus on equity, diversity and inclusion – have identified how some communities of interest and identity face particularly formidable barriers to accessing opportunities and services. In this section we will offer a brief account of how the groups we have considered to date have struggled to achieve inclusion before looking in more detail at their experience and at what philanthropy can contribute to addressing their needs. In doing so we are aware that there are other protected characteristics that can lead to disadvantage that, whilst considered here in passing, require far greater consideration. We are particularly aware of the need to complete our set of earlier equity, diversity and inclusion reports with one focused specifically on age.



## Women

The North East was a centre of the suffragette movement and so the region can claim some credit for the achievement of equal political rights for women in 1928. However, it is sobering to consider that this milestone sits less than a century ago, and it was actually sometime later that government took action to establish true equality in relation to a wider range of matters such as property, reproductive and family rights, access to education, childcare and treatment within the workplace and criminal justice system. Pressure from national women-led civil society organisations such as the Women's Liberation Movement (1970), Rape Crisis (1973) and the Women's Aid Federation (1974) was key to securing these changes, as were the local efforts of women's organisations on issues such as domestic violence, childcare provision and the support of women in education and the workplace.

Despite the progress achieved, it remains shocking to consider how recently access to some basic rights and protections was extended to women including the right to contraception (1967); protection from discrimination on the basis of sex (1975); the right to be taxed separately from a husband (1990); protection from rape within marriage (1991) and the criminalisation of stalking (2012) and coercive control (2015). Many consider that it was not until the passing of the 2010 Equality Act that full legal equality between the sexes was achieved.

And despite such advances there was a growing sense that the battle for equality, or indeed the basic right to protection from harm, was not yet won. The issue of sexual violence was raised by high profile cases of Jeffrey Epstein (2008-2021) and Harvey Weinstein (2017-20) in the USA, and closer to home by the murders of Nicole Smallman, Bibaa Henry (2020) and Sarah Everard (2021). It prompted many thousands of women to share their experiences as part of the #Me Too movement, including revelations relating to misconduct within Parliament itself. In 2023 allegations emerged of systematic sexual abuse by the

prominent businessman Mohamed Al-Fayed, with concerns that it may have spanned decades despite investigations by the police and Crown Prosecution Service.

It is more than apparent that legal rights have yet to be fully translated into women's lived experience. Whilst in 2020 the European Institute for Gender Equality ranked the UK 6th out of 28 countries on its Gender Equality Index<sup>iii</sup> it noted that progress was slowing. Particular issues it drew attention to were:

- disadvantages in the labour market for women with children;
- the over-representation of women in welfare and humanities subjects as opposed to science, engineering, technology and maths and their decreased participation in lifelong learning;
- a drop in progress towards equality in the area of health;
- levels of violence against women.

Many of these findings are echoed in our local analysis which has highlighted the impact of pay inequalities between men and women that increase with age largely due to the impact of parenthood; the benefits of supporting more young people traditionally under-represented in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics notably women from disadvantaged communities; the role of civil society organisations in increasing participation in vocational education and lifelong learning; the need for specialist services to support women experiencing health inequalities especially when pregnant; and to increase levels of participation in exercise and perhaps most pressing of all the urgent need to address levels of violence against women and their unequal treatment within the criminal justice system. Key to addressing these issues is another concern highlighted by the Gender Equality Index: the need to ensure women's voices are heard by those in positions of power.

It is important to note that problems of disadvantage and discrimination associated with the full range of protected characteristics

(e.g. age, race and disability) are often amplified for women such that they experience a “double-disadvantage”. For example:

- many older people face financial problems due to inadequate pension arrangements. But for older women the risk is greater due to pay inequality and the disruption of employment by caring responsibilities that reduces pension income;<sup>iv</sup>
- the impact of imprisonment on the physical and mental health of women is greater than that for men, with many having been the victims of worse offences than those for which they are sentenced. But as we found in our Vital Signs Justice report, Black women are significantly more likely to receive custodial sentences than their White peers;
- domestic violence against women is rising and disabled women are at higher risk of it, but less than 2% of women’s refuge spaces are wheelchair accessible.

### **We therefore propose three priorities for philanthropy:**

- i. **funding women-led organisations and advice, advocacy and representation services** to ensure that women are able to have a voice in relation to social policy and exercise their hard-won rights. This might range from provision that ensures the needs of women and girls are met in relation to the development of recreational spaces<sup>v</sup> to support for women with children who have suffered discrimination in the workplace where issues of unequal pay, job insecurity and discrimination persist;<sup>vi</sup>
- ii. **supporting services to women** that use the reach of local civil society organisations to enable those experiencing social exclusion to gain access to interventions that address educational, health and other inequalities. These should include those that address issues of “double-disadvantage” as highlighted above;

- iii. **funding work that addresses the problem of violence against women in the North East** and in particular supporting civil society organisations to work with young people to promote healthier relationships and provide services to victims of sexual violence and domestic abuse.

### **Disabled people**

Around one in four people in the UK have a disability, and the proportion is increasing as our population ages. In the North East the legacy of heavy industry and persistent health inequalities account for a higher figure still: all Local Authorities have higher proportions of disability benefit claimants than the national average.<sup>vii</sup>

What is the story of disabled people in our region? As in other regions the Victorian era had seen a growth in segregated provision for disabled people from less affluent backgrounds focused on the self-contained world of the workhouse and the asylum. And the dawn of the modern era was not marked by an enlightened approach to disability. A key force in the UK was influenced ostensibly by Darwinian theory but in reality drew heavily on a rag-bag of social and racial prejudices. The Eugenacists argued that people with disabilities were a problematic symptom of national weakness, whose numbers must be contained through birth control, segregation and, in the case of some of its more extreme adherents, euthanasia. As repugnant as this may seem to most modern readers, it is notable that key figures such as Winston Churchill, William Beveridge, John Maynard Keynes and George Bernard Shaw as well as leading members of the North East medical establishment were all associated with the movement. It casts a long shadow up to the present day.

Fortunately the Eugenicist agenda was tempered as the twentieth century progressed, not least because of the presence within communities of large numbers of men with disabilities relating to war service (2m after 1918 alone) and the subsequent development of new treatments, therapies and services that were gradually extended



to all disabled people. Important revelations from Nazi Germany seemed to permanently discredit the eugenicist project and spur a greater awareness of the need to protect the rights of potentially vulnerable minorities including the the disabled. Progress was made such that by the 1970s support for disabled people in the UK was relatively well-developed, shaped by pioneering disability rights and services legislation and the creation of social service departments in each Local Authority.

But despite all the progress achieved a medical model of disability – still emphasising the “deficits” of disabled people and often focused on segregated living and work spaces – continued to prevail amongst health and social work professionals. This began to change due in part to activism here in the North East. Newcastle-born civil servant Mary Greaves (herself severely disabled by Polio) was a prominent activist in areas like employment, housing, mobility and benefits, and led the influential Disablement Income Group. She was also instrumental in securing the passage of the landmark Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons Act (1970) which introduced rights to support, access, education and disabled people’s right to be represented on public bodies. As in the USA, lessons were being drawn from the civil rights movement as to how activism could mobilise communities and influence government to achieve positive change. Due to pressure from disability rights activists – perhaps most notably the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (1972) – the emphasis shifted towards a social model of disability. Rejecting the medical model’s focus on perceived individual limitations, this stressed the importance of adapting attitudes, places and activities so that disabled people could access them. The impact of discovering this model on individual disabled people could be profound, as the actress Liz Carr reports:

*“It showed me that it’s the attitudes, environments and systems around you that are usually more disabling than your condition. It can be your condition, too, but it was incredible to learn that there were things that could be changed when I’d spent my entire teenage years thinking: ‘Unless I can change, then I can’t have a decent quality of life.’”*

Informed by the social model of disability, activists, carers and their advocacy organisations successfully lobbied the UK government to pass legislation to challenge disability discrimination and segregation, give people greater control over their care, extend voting rights to patients in mental hospitals and establish the right to education services. And as important, spurred by revelations of widespread abuse within institutional care settings, the 1980s opened up an era in which integration and “care in the community” came to be regarded as the best option for the majority of people with physical or intellectual disabilities.

We lack the space here to fully explore the successes and failures of the community care project since the heady days of the 1980s. Significant progress has been made with the creation of services such as access to mainstream educational provision, independent living, day care and support for access to mainstream employment. There is now a significant emphasis on promoting independent living and choice in relation to care provision through devolved budgeting. But progress has perhaps been less than was hoped due to deficiencies in leadership, inadequate funding and institutional inertia.

For generations of disability activists the constant struggle to maintain progress towards equality for disabled people and the implementation of services that would underpin it has proved exhausting. There is perhaps no more apt metaphor for the current situation than the reports of a prominent former Olympian, disability activist and peer

-Tanni Grey-Thompson – being **forced to crawl off a train unaided** in August 2024. And both in service settings and the community the problem can go beyond mere indifference to the needs of disabled people. A de-humanising attitude towards disabled people – reminiscent of the worst excesses of the asylum system – lay behind the horrific abuse uncovered in residential services at Whorlton Hall in County Durham in 2019 and it underpins the 12,000 hate crimes recorded against disabled people each year. Even more worryingly, the Covid-19 pandemic has raised serious concerns about whether the well-being of disabled people is afforded equal priority to that of their non-disabled peers within the mainstream medical and social care system. The significantly worse health outcomes achieved by disabled people affected by Covid 19 may have reflected both the presence of co-morbidities and the impact of longstanding health inequalities. But there are concerns it also owes something to institutional prejudice within medical and social care agencies. As ever it is civil society organisations that have taken the lead in drawing the issue of the unfair treatment of disabled people to the attention of both the public and policymakers:

“The ongoing worries disabled people are experiencing are made worse by how coronavirus deaths are being reported, with “underlying conditions” frequently cited... the language used is leaving many disabled people with the sense that deaths of people with pre-existing conditions or impairments, many of whom will be considered disabled under the Equality Act definition, are deemed to be less of a concern than those of non-disabled people.”

**Scope (2020)**<sup>viii</sup>

“During the pandemic, stretched NHS resources and pressured decision-making meant that biases and discrimination became more visible and people with a learning disability suffered because of it.”

**Mencap (2024)**<sup>ix</sup>

There is no doubt that substantial barriers to access remain in relation to nearly all aspects of disabled people’s lives. Our reports highlight just some of them:

- Educational and vocational opportunities for disabled people are limited. Support for children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) is limited by a funding deficit that has not been fully closed by additional funding allocations,<sup>x</sup> with a higher-than-average proportion ending up not in education, training or employment after school. A lack of opportunities and support means that many disabled people are consigned to depending on benefits or find themselves unable to achieve the same level of earnings in work as non-disabled peers. This compounds the problem of poverty as disabled people are estimated to face extra living expenses of around 63% (after housing costs) for items like heating; aids, adaptation and equipment; medicines and therapies and transport (e.g. taxis).<sup>xi</sup>



- There is a lack of affordable and accessible housing when only 7% of English homes offer minimal accessibility features and around 400,000 wheelchair users are living in non-adapted properties.
- Health services are not adequately meeting the physical and mental health needs of people with disabilities. For example, disabled people are twice as likely to be obese as non-disabled people. ONS data<sup>xii</sup> shows that disabled people's ratings for happiness and life satisfaction are lower than for non-disabled people, and there is a higher rate of suicide affecting disabled people.<sup>xiii</sup> The problem is exacerbated by barriers to accessing recreational and sport opportunities which are social (e.g. marketing materials featuring only non-disabled people), physical (e.g. inadequate toilet facilities or no ramp access) and economic (the 'disabled tax' of additional heating, washing and more complex travel arrangements).

**We therefore propose three priorities for philanthropy:**

- funding organisations that are led by disabled people and advice, advocacy and representation services** to ensure that disabled people have a voice in relation to the issues that affect them and the support they need to secure access to opportunities and services;
- supporting anti-poverty work** that takes into account, and is responsive to, the additional challenges experienced by disabled people on benefits or low-paid work;
- supporting services for disabled people** that help to address unmet needs and overcome barriers to access in areas such as education, work, housing, physical and mental health and recreation.

**Black, Asian and minoritised ethnic communities**

Large scale immigration to the UK from its former colonies was encouraged in the post-war years to address labour shortages as the economy expanded. These were referred to as the Windrush generation, after one of the ships on which they arrived. But later came economic decline, which stoked social tensions in an increasingly multi-racial Britain. Legislative responses were forthcoming, with laws against discrimination passed in 1968, 1976 and 1986, by which time there were four MPs and many local councillors from Black, Asian and minoritised ethnic communities to promote the agenda. And at a local level efforts were made to bring communities together and reframe the "problem" of multi-cultural living as a cause for celebration, with the Notting Hill Carnival (1966-) and Newcastle Mela (1996-) notable examples.

But these efforts notwithstanding, far-right activism, direct discrimination and institutional racism in areas like employment, housing, public services and in particular the police and criminal justice system has necessitated decades of campaigning and public protest from within Black, Asian and minoritised ethnic communities. The case of Stephen Lawrence (1993) – the promising Black student murdered in a racially motivated attack in 1993 – continues to resonate to this day. Police failings in investigating his case prompted the **Macpherson report** of 1998 which pioneered a new way of understanding this type of failure by talking of institutional discrimination with regard to race defined as:

*"the collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture or ethnic origin..."*

due to

*"...processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantages minority ethnic people".*

This concept is now central to our understanding of institutional shortcomings. Its ramifications have extended beyond the issue of race, indicating for example:

- that a failure to address violence against women is in part due to a culture of toxic masculinity within the police (**Independent Office for Police Conduct, 2022**);
- that the Grenfell Tower fire (2017) could potentially have been averted if the concerns of its predominantly working-class and Black residents had been taken seriously by their Local Authority (**Grenfell Tower Inquiry, 2024**);
- that poor health outcomes for people with learning disabilities during the Covid 19 pandemic partly reflected institutional prejudice and discrimination (**Covid Inquiry, 2024**).

Yet decades on from the Macpherson report, it is clear that progress in addressing institutional racism over the past three decades has been both slow and patchy. In recent years the issue of racial discrimination has been informed by events in the USA where a spate of murders of Black people, from Trayvon Martin (2012) to George Floyd (2020), prompted the creation of a global Black Lives Matter social justice movement. In the UK this sense of injustice was echoed in anger at a long series of similar miscarriages of justice including the cases of **Mark Duggan** (2011) and **Dalian Atkinson** (2016); the deportation and **mistreatment of Windrush generation immigrants** (2017-) as well as the continued discrimination faced by people of colour in relation to issues such as health and employment. Recent examples include research-based evidence of **systemic racism in maternity care** (2022); **discrimination in the allocation of protective equipment to Black, Asian and minority ethnic health workers** during the Covid 19 pandemic (2020) and **significantly worse employment outcomes for ethnic minority graduates**.

Since 2001 attitudes to race in the UK have also been influenced by the issue of Islamist terrorism, particularly following the attack on the Twin Towers in New York (2001); the July 7th bombings in London (2005) and the 2017

attacks in London and Manchester. Aside from concern about domestic terrorists within minority communities, often inaccurate press coverage and right-wing activism in social media has fuelled wider anxieties about a perceived threat to the “British way of life” and “Western values” from the Muslim community. This was further stoked in the years leading up to the Brexit referendum (2016) with suggestions that membership of the EU would lead to an influx of Muslim immigrants from Turkey. In 2022, research suggested Muslims were the second “least liked” groups after Gypsy and Irish Travellers with a disturbingly high degree of Islamophobia amongst wealthier and better educated people.<sup>xiv</sup> This provides an interesting counterpoint to research that draws attention to the roots of racism and Islamophobia in the deprivation, low skills and absence of opportunities in poorer predominantly White communities. At the sharp end of such negativity, it is notable that religiously motivated hate crime is growing more quickly than other forms with offences relating to Muslims accounting for 38% of this figure.<sup>xv</sup>

The population of the North East has included people from Black Asian and minoritised groups for many centuries. In Roman times Syrian and North African soldiers shivered in camps along Hadrian’s Wall, and part of their legacy may be the Northumbrian pipes. Centuries later, in the 18th century, society portrait painters would discretely record the presence of Black servants (some enslaved, some not) in the great houses of Northumberland with their presence considered symbolic of wealth. By the early 19th century the prosperity of the North East rested in part on profits from, and employment within, the transatlantic slave trade. Fortunes were built through ownership of Caribbean plantations, whilst shackles forged in Winlaton were used on slaves producing sugar destined to be refined in Newcastle to Teesside. When the British trade was abolished in the 1830s, thirty-two owners from Northumberland, Gateshead, Durham, Darlington, Sunderland and Stockton received compensation in return for the freedom of 5,984 slaves. As a region we may, however, draw some little consolation from the fact that opposition to slavery also



has roots here. It was the Richardson family of Cullercoats and Newcastle for example that supported the great anti-slavery campaigner Frederick Douglass to visit the region to speak of its evils and that paid to secure his personal release from slavery.

During the 1890s, tradesmen and seamen from Yemen, Aden, Somalia, Africa, India and Malaya had established a thriving community in South Shields, complete with its own mosque (reputedly England's first), whilst Middlesbrough's first Asian medical practice dates from 1933. But as elsewhere in the UK, the North East experienced a significant influx of immigrants after 1945. Workers from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh in particular arrived to work in the region with settlements coalescing around areas of affordable housing in Newcastle and Middlesbrough as well as Stockton-on-Tees and Gateshead. Nevertheless the situation in the North East remains somewhat unique in that the Black, Asian and minoritised ethnic population remains relatively low overall (c7% at the time of the 2021 census), a fact that is also reflected in a lack of religious diversity. Over half the population are Christian, less than 3% Muslim. A relatively small population may also account for a less well-developed network of community-led organisations than exists in more diverse areas such as London or the North West. That said the proportion of residents from Black Asian and minoritised groups in some wards in Tyne & Wear and Teesside is comparable to the national picture, and we have highlighted some great civil society organisations rooted in these communities.

As elsewhere in England, the North East has witnessed a massive shift in attitudes towards issues of race and national identity in response to immigration: a 2021 poll suggests that 86% of us no longer equate being English with being White.<sup>xvi</sup> However it is nevertheless clear that tensions persist particularly around the issue, with around 1 in 3 people nationally sympathising with peaceful protests on the issue and a significant fall in the number of people nationally supporting migration on economic grounds. It is reassuring however that for less than one in ten people does this extend to support for the racially-motivated violence directed indiscriminately against

Black and Asian individuals, businesses and communities in Sunderland, Hartlepool and Middlesbrough in Summer 2024.<sup>xvii</sup> Indeed in the North East demonstrations of public support for the affected communities played some part in containing it.

There is however no cause for complacency as race-related offences account for the majority of hate crime, a situation that may worsen in the aftermath of the recent rioting. The role of community and voluntary organisations in promoting community cohesion may never be more important. And priority must also be afforded to meeting the needs of those victimised by recent events. The views of community members quoted in a recent report from the local charity Action Foundation make for chilling reading:

*"I didn't go outside for two weeks. I went out one day with my baby, a teenager screamed at me, 'Go back to your country.'"*

*"I was at work and felt I had to be careful about what I said, as I couldn't tell whether people around me are supporting the riots or not. I also felt less safe to stay at that job."*

*"Black people were targeted and asylum seekers. I was scared... I'm still questioning why it happened in the UK. We know the UK is a great country and safe with a lot of laws so I am asking, why here and could it happen again?"<sup>xviii</sup>*

The riots of 2024 will hopefully never be repeated. But our Vital Signs reports contain much on the everyday disadvantage experienced by people from Black, Asian and minoritised ethnic communities as a result of decades of prejudice and discrimination. Three particular areas stood out for us as obvious manifestations of wider injustices:

- **economic exclusion:** unemployment rates are twice as high than in the population as a whole and around 6% of small and medium size enterprises are run by people from Black, Asian and minoritised ethnic communities – about 1/3 of what one might expect given population size. Although often high achieving academically, Black students experience a widening pay gap with white peers after graduation.

- **unequal treatment within the criminal justice system:** Black young people are targeted by 20% of stop and searches (2021 data) which is 14% more than one might expect given population size, with 77% subject to no further action and only 10% being arrested.<sup>xix</sup> Defendants from minority ethnic communities having higher average custodial sentences imposed for indictable offences than white ones and spending a greater proportion of their sentences in custody. People from minority ethnic backgrounds constitute 27% of the prison population, compared to 18% of the population at large.<sup>xx</sup>
- **prejudice and discrimination, coupled with concerning levels of racially motivated hate crime:** this acts against efforts to address long-standing inequalities, promotes disharmony within communities and can have no place in a modern, vibrant North East. In light of recent events, persistent inequality and the upward trend in racially motivated hate crime we need to support efforts to ensure greater equity and support efforts to build inclusive communities.

**We propose three priorities for philanthropy:**

- supporting the development of community organisations within Black, Asian and minoritised ethnic communities** to ensure that the voice of communities is represented in the region and that appropriate services are developed to meet their needs. This should complement efforts to ensure that all voluntary services are fully accessible to them;
- supporting work that addresses institutional prejudice and discrimination** to include, but not be limited to, that which exists within the criminal justice system;
- to fund work that promotes greater community cohesion** by building stronger relationships between our diverse communities **and provides support to communities victimised by racially motivated hate crime.**

**Lesbian, gay and bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people<sup>xxi</sup>**

The persecution of LGBT communities was enshrined in English law for centuries. The focus of specific legislation was overwhelmingly men, although women could be prosecuted for public decency offences. The death penalty remained in force until the 1860s, and prominent victims of homophobic legislation ranged from the writer Oscar Wilde (1895) to the codebreaker Alan Turing (1952). The generally positive legislative approach followed in relation to women, ethnic minorities and people with disabilities from the mid- 20th century was not mirrored in relation to the LGBT community. The Sexual Offences Act of 1967 decriminalized homosexual acts between consenting men aged over 21 in private, but the age of consent was not reduced to 16 (establishing parity with heterosexual couples) until 2000. Government remained at best ambivalent on the issue of equal rights and in the 1990s it remained quite common for gay men and lesbians to be arrested for same-sex displays of affection in public.

The Stonewall Riots in the USA (1969) inspired organisations here such as the Gay Liberation Front and Campaign for Homosexual Equality to campaign against the criminalisation of their community. However much of the fight for equity and inclusion in the 1980s was led from within local government – notably the Greater London Council – in partnership with various national and local civil society organisations. This led the Conservative government of the day to introduce Section 28 of the Local Government Act in 1988 to prohibit the “promotion of homosexuality” by Local Authorities. Couched in what many considered then and now to be breathtakingly offensive terms, the move came as the situation of the LGBT community and public attitudes towards it reached a low point due to a failure to understand and contain the HIV/AIDS epidemic. But ironically the legislation also served to galvanise efforts to transform social attitudes towards the LGBT community.

The establishment of the **Stonewall** charity was a significant response, and in the 1990s and 2000s the organisation became a force for change in areas ranging from the right of

LGBT people to parity in relation to consent to the right to serve in the military (1994) and the repeal of Section 28 (2003). But a further factor was a significant shift in public opinion, particularly amongst younger, better educated and socially liberal city-dwellers who have reacted most positively to messages emanating from the LGBT community itself. The percentage of people believing same sex relationships are “not wrong at all” rose from 17% in 1983 to 67% in 2023. However, there is also some evidence that although the LGBT community was successful in achieving full marriage rights in 2014 this was at the expense of hardening attitudes particularly (but not exclusively) amongst those with strong conservative and religious views. Polling by Ipsos (2020) suggested that nearly half of the population oppose any further extension of LGBT rights, with the pollster commenting that *“these findings show how Britons believe LGBTQ+ communities are on the receiving end of discrimination, but this does not translate so strongly into advocacy around LGBTQ+ rights.”*<sup>xxii</sup>

Recently the issue of transgender rights has provided a focus for further contention. It reflects a dilemma, which is that of how to respond when the rights of communities experiencing prejudice and discrimination appear to conflict with each other. A challenge for community members – and perhaps more pressingly for legislators – is to deal with situations where perceived conflicts cannot easily be reconciled. This is playing out at present in the debate over a possible clash of interests between people with the protected characteristic of sex and those with the protected characteristic of gender reassignment under the Equality Act (2010). The Act allows for the provision of single-sex services, and this has benefited women in situations where access by men is inappropriate (e.g. where provision is tailored to the needs of women or there are personal safety concerns). But what if biological males who identify as women (and specifically those with the protected characteristic of gender reassignment) wish to have access to them? In general the approach to resolving this dilemma has been to avoid any suggestion that decisions should be made by reference to

general principles, but rather treated on a case-by-case basis. However given that opinion on this seems to be polarising on party lines since the election, it will remain to be seen whether this pragmatic line can be held. The at times somewhat toxic political debate on such issues seems to have prompted a hardening of public attitudes with the latest British Social Attitudes Survey showing an 18% fall since 2019 in the proportion of people reporting they are not prejudiced at all against this group (64%).

Sadly, hate crime towards the LGBT community remains an issue with nearly 23,000 incidents of hate crime relating to sexual orientation and 5,000 recorded as relating to transgender in 2024.<sup>xxiii</sup> The National LGBT survey (2018)<sup>xxiv</sup> found most respondents still reluctant to display affection in public and that nearly 40% had experienced a physical or verbal assault. It noted also that *“more than nine in ten of the most serious incidents went unreported, often because respondents thought ‘it happens all the time’”*. It is perhaps unsurprising that many respondents talked about the importance of mental health services in the wider context of experiencing serious incidents such as verbal harassment and bullying.

Our Vital Signs reports highlighted issues relating to the LGBT community in the following areas:

- **Economic exclusion:** 20% of lesbian, gay, bisexual (LGB) and transgender job seekers reporting being discriminated against by recruiters in the past year. A recent survey of LGBTQ+ business owners<sup>xxv</sup> found that disclosure issues and discrimination remained challenges. Over a third of those surveyed reported being victims of discrimination.
- **Health:** Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people being more likely to experience depression, self-harm, alcohol and drug abuse and suicidal thoughts.<sup>xxvi</sup>
- **Housing:** a major driver of youth homelessness is breakdown in family relationships (46% of cases) and this includes conflict over issues like sexual orientation or gender identity.



**We propose three priorities for philanthropy:**

- i. **support for work that addresses prejudice and discrimination against the LGBT community** and in particular that which addresses hate crime and economic exclusion.
- ii. **support and advocacy services for LGBT people** with a particular focus on user-led initiatives and mental and physical health.
- iii. **support for LGBT youth and their families** with a particular focus on preventing family breakdown and addressing the needs of young people at risk of homelessness.

**Some other considerations**

In addition to the priorities above we need also to consider issues of access relating to the role of charitable funders and the services of the third sector more generally. High profile recent cases involving major national and international charities suggest that institutional cultures work against equity in our sector as elsewhere. In 2020, for example, a Voice4Change/ACEVO report "Home Truths" found evidence of widespread racism within

the sector and highlighted the need for critical self-reflection. As one respondent put it:

*"I think that [desire to downplay racism] comes more from the white society in self-denial ...especially charities, because they feel themselves as a good guy. It's almost to say it's a reflection of them. They don't want to look in the mirror and say, you know, I'm actually part of the problem."* xxvii

For civil society organisations this requires a proactive commitment to ensuring that people from all sections of the community have opportunities to influence and benefit from their work. For charitable funders it requires greater commitment to ensure that how we work, and what we fund, does not reinforce the barriers to access faced by marginalised groups. It also requires both a commitment to invest in work to widen access to mainstream charitable provision and foster the development of civil society organisations led by women; disabled people; Black, Asian and minoritised community members; members of the LGBT community and other groups at risk of social exclusion.





## Access and communities of place: supporting rural communities

How much of the North East is rural? This is in reality a somewhat harder question to answer than one might assume. The official designation is rather “broad brush” at the local authority level. Two are officially classified as “predominantly rural” – County Durham and Northumberland – with Redcar and Cleveland classed as “urban with significant rural”. But this doesn’t quite mean what one might assume because the metric used (the **Rural-Urban Classification 2011**) is based on population distribution not land-use, and so

a large area comprising mainly of countryside might be defined using the government’s classification as “urban” if most of the population live in an urban settlement within it. An area like Gateshead, which has significant areas of countryside, is nonetheless classed as “urban with major conurbation.”<sup>xviii</sup>

Fortunately, we can dig a bit deeper into the data to flesh out this broad picture. Data on the size of farms offers an alternative metric for the extent of the rural North East, allowing us to assess how much of each Local Authority’s surface area is dedicated to agriculture:

Area	Land farmed in hectares	Local authority area in hectares	% farmed
Northumberland	381,672	501,990	76%
County Durham	146,007	222,586	66%
Darlington	13,834	19,749	70%
Redcar and Cleveland	11,266	24,507	46%
Stockton-on-Tees	9,020	20,494	44%
Hartlepool	5,448	9,371	58%
Gateshead	3,988	14,234	28%
Sunderland	3,829	13,742	28%
Newcastle upon Tyne	1,865	11,345	16%
South Tyneside	991	6,442	15%
North Tyneside	978	8,230	12%
Middlesbrough	851	5,388	16%

Sources: **Land farmed in hectares / Local authority area in hectares**

Data about population and population density are also useful, giving an indication of areas likely to contain a large number of people living in relatively isolated rural communities. Perhaps unsurprisingly the least densely populated areas – Northumberland and County Durham – correspond to those with by far the largest amount of farmed land. However overall it is Northumberland that really stands out due to its combination of the highest total population, lowest population density and highest area of land devoted to farming.<sup>xxix</sup> Finally data from

the Indices of Multiple Deprivation 2019 (IMD) relating to geographical barriers – essentially the distance people must travel to access post offices, schools, supermarkets and GP surgeries – confirms that those areas where more people live relatively far from centres of population where services tend to be based are predominantly rural. Again Northumberland is by far and away the stand-out authority here, with nearly 30% of neighbourhoods in the most deprived centile nationally:

Area	Population (2021)	Persons per hectare (2021)	IMD Geographical barriers: proportion of neighbourhoods in most deprived 10% nationally
Northumberland	320,567	0.6	28.9%
County Durham	522,068	2.4	9.6%
Darlington	107,799	5.5	6.1%
Redcar and Cleveland	136,531	5.6	5.7%
Hartlepool	92,338	9.9	3.4%
Stockton-on-Tees	196,595	9.6	10%
Gateshead	196,151	13.8	1.6%
Sunderland	274,171	20	1.6%
South Tyneside	147,776	22.9	2%
North Tyneside	208,967	25.4	2.3%
Newcastle upon Tyne	300,125	26.5	3.4%
Middlesbrough	143,924	26.7	4.7%

Source: [lginform.local.gov.uk](https://www.lginform.local.gov.uk)

What are the needs of the North East's rural communities? A good starting point is the **Rural Lives** research project managed by Professor Mark Shucksmith of Newcastle University and funded by the Standard Life Foundation. Its final report "*Rural Lives: understanding financial hardship and vulnerability in rural areas*" drew on research in the North Tyne Valley as well as two areas of rural Scotland.<sup>xxx</sup> The report analyses the impact on communities of major structural changes in the rural economy. It notes that although the gradual loss of jobs in agriculture and forestry in the UK has been greater than the more intense losses in coal mining, this seismic change has gone largely unremarked. The statistics we have found show substantial losses over the past 40 years alone. According to Defra, between 1985 and 2021 the number of agricultural workers in Northumberland fell from 7,144 to 5,031 (-30%) and in County Durham from 5,756 to 3,636 (-37%) and this may well be an underestimate since it covers only larger holdings.<sup>xxxi</sup>

Rural Lives suggests that although alternative opportunities have emerged for employment/self-employment in areas like tourism and hospitality, for many this continues a pattern of insecure, low-paid and seasonal employment with limited opportunities for progression. And the loss of well-paid and secure public sector employment since 2010 has hit some rural areas particularly hard. On the positive side rural communities and local economies have benefited from an influx of wealthier residents, including those able to find well-paid local employment particularly in the public sector, commuters, home-workers, business and social entrepreneurs and retirees. But some of these incomers have also contributed to growing inequality: house prices and rents have risen, there is additional pressure on key services and social networks and norms have been disrupted.

The problems of those on low incomes from work or benefits in rural areas are compounded by the higher costs involved in travelling to shops and services, additional heating and housing costs and greater digital and financial exclusion (see below). This adds further impetus to the growth of problem debt amongst rural households. Yet

despite evidence of a significant problem with financial hardship and vulnerability within rural communities, Rural Lives suggest there has been a failure to adequately identify and address rural needs amongst social policy makers.

We believe the Rural Lives report demonstrates the need to support civil society initiatives addressing barriers facing rural dwellers in three priority areas:

### **1: Getting support for those experiencing poverty, financial hardship and deprivation**

The Rural Lives report noted that nearly half of rural residents in Britain had experienced poverty during 1991-2008 and that in 2018 a similar proportion were identified as financially vulnerable. They rightly noted that much rural poverty is hidden, but even so multiple deprivation across the rural North East is clearly identifiable in the Defra map reproduced on page 23 below.

The Rural Lives team suggested that civil society has an important role to play in reaching and supporting those affected by poverty and social exclusion, and addressing financial hardship and vulnerability:

*"Our research shows that the support and advice offered by VCSEs [Voluntary and Community Organisations and Social Enterprises] is valued highly by, and invaluable to, those in rural areas experiencing financial hardship or vulnerability. Indeed, we heard that VCSEs are most people's first port of call in hard times because of their kind, compassionate and empathetic approach, regarded indeed by some as their only potential source of support. The advice of Citizens Advice Bureaux (CABx) is of crucial importance to people needing to claim state benefits, or to appeal adverse decisions or sanctions" (p13)*

They highlight the essential role that a myriad of community organisations play in addressing multiple deprivation in rural areas – in relation to issues like mental and physical health; housing and homelessness; ageing and social isolation; social care; fuel poverty; debt and domestic violence – and also their importance

as route into statutory welfare provision. And they signal the importance of ensuring that communities have a voice to help ensure the “rural-proofing” of social policy initiatives, an area where civil society organisations make an important contribution.

## **2: Encouraging rural enterprise**

The report highlights the importance of diversifying rural economies, providing alternatives to land-based and tourism/hospitality related employment. It argues that fostering rural enterprise has the potential to develop routes into more productive, better paid and more flexible employment whilst also adding value to these established local industries. In part this is about developing the potential of existing residents and businesses there are clearly opportunities associated with the shift to more flexible working. Could we see some of those who have left rural communities to pursue opportunities in London and other large cities being tempted back to the region?

The NICRE State of Rural Enterprise 2023 survey of 765 rural businesses in the North East offered an insight into what firms perceived as being key potential growth areas. These were:

- Health and well-being products and services (47% of respondents);
- Environmental and green services and products (46%);
- Expanding opportunities for tourists and visitors (45%)
- Data skills/use of data (38%)
- Increasing exports (18%)

The mood within a substantial minority of rural businesses in the North East is upbeat about the future – 42% felt they were in a position to take advantage of opportunities in these areas. But barriers were also identified even within this group. A major issue in the North East – affecting 46% of respondents – was the ability to recruit and train staff, particularly for rural firms in the construction; wholesale, retail and transport; hospitality and production sectors.

And this issue of skills also seems to put a break on opportunities for self-employment, with Rural Lives suggesting that those who might most benefit from self-employment often lack the confidence and knowledge to pursue it as an option. They suggest that there is a particular lack of support for micro-businesses, highlighting a lack of support for women who need additional support to develop businesses that sit within the foundational economy in areas like cleaning and beauty services.

This suggests to us a link with priorities emerging from earlier Vital Signs reports around fostering an interest in entrepreneurialism, STEM and emerging areas of employment related to the Net Zero agenda amongst young people; enabling individuals at risk of exclusion from the labour market to access vocational training relevant to local job opportunities; and support for businesses (including social enterprises) within the foundational economy.

## **3: Accessing benefits and services**

The IMD data on geographical barriers quantifies the scale of the barrier many rural dwellers, particularly in Northumberland, face when trying to access basic services. It is the major reason that rural households spend 49% more on transport than those in urban areas.<sup>xxxii</sup> The Rural Lives report identifies a number of related benefit and service access issues impacting on rural households including:

- low benefit take-up: accessing benefit offices and related advice services can involve long journeys for rural dwellers, presenting an obvious barrier to those who struggle physically and/or financially with bus or car travel. There are also fewer social tenancies, where benefits advice is often wrapped into services or shared informally between tenants, than in urban areas. The report authors also believe that a culture of self-reliance in rural communities restricts benefit uptake, with the potential stigmatisation of claimants an additional factor;



- problems interacting with the benefits system: some of these arise from the difficulties the benefits bureaucracy experiences in supporting people in whose employment status and earnings level is subject to frequent change due to the nature of rural employment, some from difficulties explored above relating to digital exclusion and others from centralisation of services and associated difficulties claimants (particularly those with vulnerabilities/ mobility problems) experience when required to travel long distances for assessments or face-to-face support;
- childcare issues: many households have low, unpredictable incomes from multiple employment some distance from home. Their need for locally accessible, flexible and affordable childcare often goes unmet, and this presents particular barriers to women seeking employment;
- a lack of affordable personal care services: the difficulty of providing affordable care whilst also covering staff travel costs is greater in rural areas, and when costs are not covered this impacts on the attractiveness of care jobs to potential employees. This adds to issues facing care services more generally in rural areas, such as increased demand from a widely dispersed group of people with age-related needs.

We would also note that issues of “double-disadvantage” need to be considered relating to other protected characteristics where problems occur that may be exacerbated by rurality e.g. issues with access to domestic violence services for women or the additional service access challenges facing disabled people.

In addition to these examples there are issues relating to both the accessibility of financial services in rural areas and the further barriers rural dwellers face in accessing digital alternatives to physical provision. These are explored in the following two sections of this report.

The Rural Lives report highlights the importance of civil society in filling the gaps created by the inaccessibility of many public and commercial services to people in the North East’s rural communities: *“A range of specialist VCSEs supported specific groups in relation to poor mental or physical health, housing and homelessness, ageing and social isolation, social care, fuel poverty, debt, and domestic violence, among many other challenges. Many such organisations proactively worked together to complement one another, to signpost people to the most relevant services, and to provide integrated and responsive advice, albeit sometimes with time-limited project funding.”* (page 13)

The report makes special mention of the work of Community Action Northumberland on fuel poverty in the county and the advice and advocacy provision for those on benefits or in financial difficulty by the CAB service and other community organisations across the rural North East. To this we would perhaps add a reminder of the crucial role of village halls and other community buildings in providing a focus for self-help and service provision particularly to support vulnerable groups and of community transport schemes in providing an accessible alternative to cars, taxis and inadequate public transport services for those needing to travel to receive services.

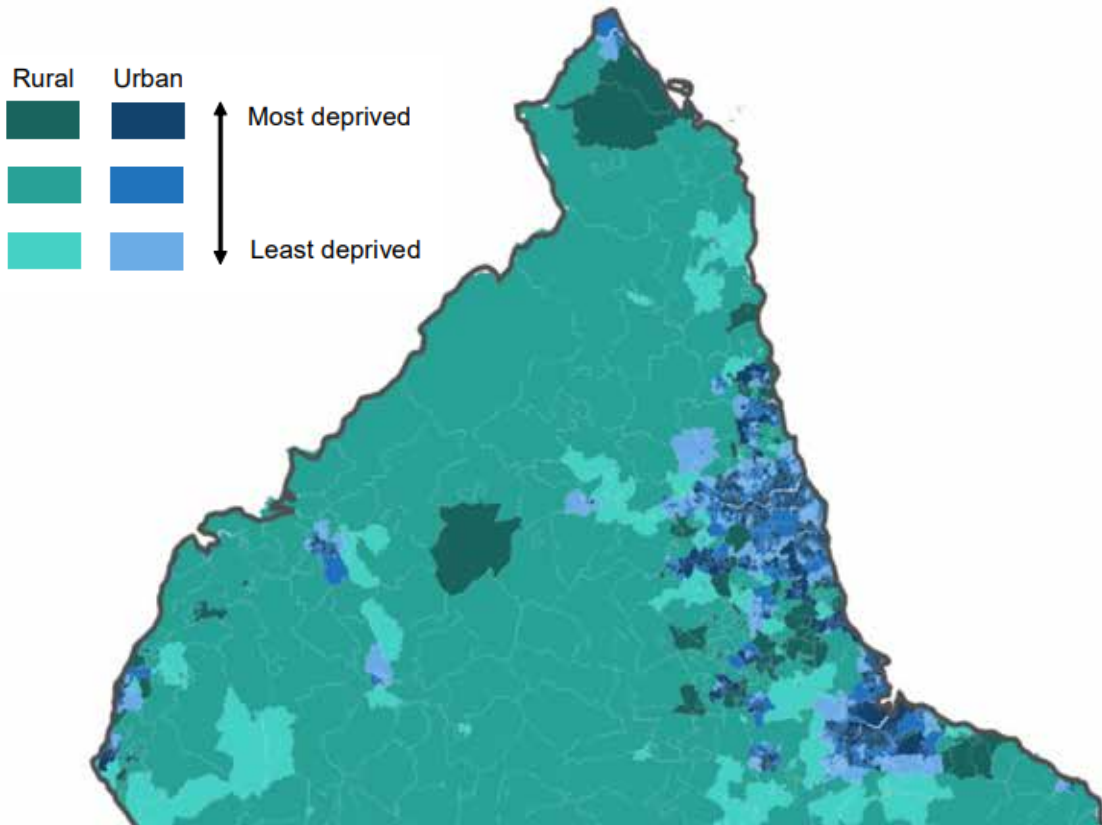
It is interesting to note that Rural Lives identifies a range of challenges that community organisations face in rural areas, all of which mirror those identified in our Vital Signs research, notably: increased demand; a lack of funding; problems with becoming engaged in contracting for services and a lack of reliable, core funding.

The nature of the rural community and voluntary sector, and the challenges it faces, are likely to be examined further as part of our next Third Sector Trends study. However data made available in advance for this report by the study’s author, Professor Tony Chapman, illustrates how, with the exception of Northumberland, charities in each Local Authority in North East England are largely based in major urban areas.

Area	N=	Defra area categories	
		Deep rural or town and country	Major urban
Hartlepool	235	17 (7%)	218 (93%)
Middlesbrough	308	4 (1%)	304 (99%)
Redcar and Cleveland	179	66 (37%)	113 (63%)
Stockton-on-Tees	397	27 (7%)	370 (93%)
Darlington	236	52 (22%)	184 (78%)
County Durham	1520	748 (49%)	772 (51%)
Northumberland	1271	890 (70%)	381 (30%)
Newcastle upon Tyne	972	25 (3%)	947 (97%)
North Tyneside	570	57 (10%)	513 (90%)
South Tyneside	279	2 (1%)	277 (99%)
Sunderland	660	7 (1%)	653 (99%)
Gateshead	638	65 (10%)	573 (90%)
North East	7265	1960 (27%)	5305 (73%)



## Map of deprivation in rural and urban areas of North East England



Notes: The map uses data from the 2019 Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) and the 2011 Rural-Urban classification system based on resident population rather than land use. The IMD includes measures relating to income; employment; education, skills and training; health and disability; crime; housing and services and living environment.

The map is covered by the licensing agreement set out [here](#) The complete map of which it is an extract can be seen in the **Statistical Digest for Rural England volume 4** (September 2024) page 17.

### Access to the digital world

Colonisation of the digital sphere has proceeded at a remarkable pace, opening up opportunities for massive improvements in our access to people, goods and services and information for work and leisure. Since 1998 the number of households with internet access has increased from 9% to 96%. A major survey in 2020 showed how digital services had become an everyday part of most people's lives. The table below summarises the 5 major areas of use at that time. It is likely that the

extent of access to the digital world has grown further over the past four years, with use of online voice and video communications driven by an increased focus on remote working. But the figures also showed how levels of access varied between social groups. Our table below shows how women, older people and those with disability tend to have lower levels of access, with a few notable exceptions such as women's greater use of social media/instant messaging and voice and video calls:

Area of service	% all adults age 16+ accessing in past 3 months	Women (Men)	Adults aged 55+ (less than 55)	Equality Act Disabled (Not EA Disabled)
Email	85%	85% (86%)	76% (89%)	78% (87%)
Finding information on goods and services	81%	80% (83%)	72% (88%)	79% (82%)
Internet banking	76%	76% (76%)	59% (88%)	65% (79%)
Social media/ instant messaging	71%	73% (69%)	47% (87%)	71% (74%)
Voice and video calls	49%	51% (46%)	28% (63%)	49% (52%)
Accessing online content (news, media, health information, TV and video and music)	62%	60% (65%)	40% (77%)	65% (52%)

It is notable that lower levels of access by older adults and disabled people extended to areas where they might derive particular benefits such as shopping, use of the “Internet of things” (e.g. health monitoring devices or energy or lighting controls) and accessing financial, transport and accommodation services.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

The completion of the latest Census provides some interesting data on ethnicity and “digital propensity”, in this case measured by the ability to complete the Census return online. The data covers separately the majority of households in the North East that were considered likely to complete online, and a minority where paper copies were issued in the expectation of low online take-up. In both cases Asian, Black and Mixed households showed markedly higher digital propensity than White ones.

The figures highlighted an area that has been further explored of late: the “digital divide” between those who can use the internet to fully engage in modern society and those who are unable to do so. It has three main causes:

- i. **Lack of connectivity:** 7% of households in the UK do not have adequate connections to the Internet, with rural areas generally experiencing poorer coverage than urban ones. Whilst 99% of urban properties in England have access to superfast broadband, only 89% of rural ones do. Similarly 4G extends to 99%+ of urban properties, but 90% of rural ones. In the North East our Table of Indicators (see end of report) suggests that as a whole we do not have major issues as regards coverage or the quality of services. But it is notable that there are large rural/urban variations. According to the House of Commons, average broadband download speeds are 86 Mbps in Hexham compared to 186 Mbps in neighbouring Newcastle upon Tyne North. Similar gaps exist between Bishop Auckland (93.5Mbps) and Darlington (209 Mbps).
- ii. **A lack of digital skills and access issues:** 16% of adults face barriers in relation to the skills, confidence or physical ability to access the online world. The North East has a relatively high percentage of people with very low digital capability, and a higher-than-average percentage of people remaining offline (see Table of Indicators). There may well be a particular issue given the large proportion of older people and disabled people here. Age UK research suggests 69%



of people aged over 65 have not had the opportunity to develop the ability to use the internet as much as they would like and 9% cannot do so for health reasons. According to Scope disabled people are three times more likely to have not acquired basic digital skills and 50% more likely to face barriers to accessing digital and online services. The problem is underpinned by poor design: 97.4% of homepages having accessibility issues and 26% of older users struggle to activate the accessibility features on their devices.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

iii. **Affordability:** The costs of up-to-date smartphones, tablets, PCs and related software represent a significant, ongoing expense. The cheaper options of using dated or second-hand equipment or accessing the internet via mobile phone only involve compromises in relation to both functionality and security. Around 10% of UK households are struggling to afford broadband. Internet access ranges from 82% in the **socioeconomic band DE** to 98% in AB households, and issues of affordability are prevalent in households dependent on means-tested benefits or old age pensions and those containing a disabled person. In 2023 36% of people reported reducing their online activity to save money during the cost-of-living crisis. This is a particular issue for the North East which has high numbers of people on low income from work or benefits and in poverty.

Digital exclusion is underpinned by broader inequalities in society – based on factors like income, education, age and disability status or rurality – many of which it compounds by restricting educational and employment opportunities; limiting access to a raft of goods and services; reducing disposable income by reducing the availability of cheaper goods/services; and deepening social isolation. Achieving greater digital inclusion emerges as a key part of any equalities agenda.

The previous government was taking action to increase access to broadband; develop more accessible social tariffs; widen library internet provision and improve digital skills. However the approach to date has tended to be *ad hoc* rather than strategic.<sup>xxxv</sup> The House of Lords Communications and Digital

Committee have argued that this strategy needs to concentrate on wider issues of poverty and extending the reach of digital inclusion opportunities provision by engaging civil society organisations, alongside broader measures like encouraging competition in the digital arena to reduce costs.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

A 2021 report from the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) on digital exclusion in the North East suggested that the lack of a strategy at the national level was reflected in the lack of a “joined-up” approach regionally and locally. This deficiency was acknowledged by the North East Local Enterprise Partnership which accepted that whilst a range of partners including civil society were fully engaged: *“There are numerous initiatives aimed at developing digital skills and providing access to digital equipment and infrastructure. However, the current approach to tackling digital exclusion is fragmented, with initiatives at national, regional and local level, targeting different groups or challenges.”*<sup>xxxvii</sup> Whether this concern is shared in the south of the region is harder to assess. The Tees Valley digital strategy published in 2022 refers only briefly on its penultimate page to the role of civil society in delivering inclusion initiatives alongside the public and private sectors.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

The IPPR report identified improving access to connectivity and devices, developing digital skills, ensuring online safety and implementing inclusive design as priorities for addressing digital exclusion. It suggested solving the problem would require collaboration across the public, private and voluntary, community and social enterprise sectors and identified three major areas where civil society involvement was vital, namely:

- informing the development of, and delivering, digital inclusion initiatives in collaboration with public and private sector partners, making full use of their links with communities and understanding of local need, and providing a route for the distribution of unused or surplus devices;
- providing a space where people likely to be excluded from classroom-based approaches can engage with the digital skills agenda, particularly through community and peer-delivered initiatives;

- identifying and signposting people who might benefit from digital inclusion initiatives within the public and private sector.<sup>xxxix</sup>

In this context it is interesting to note the involvement of **Community Action Northumberland** in a three-year rural digital inclusion project in partnership with the **National Innovation Centre for Rural Enterprise** (NICRE) linked to Northumberland County Council's 20-year contract with network provider Commsworld to transform connectivity in the county. This will address digital exclusion by linking locally-recruited digital champions with village halls and community spaces where they and free devices can be located to provide support for local people, community groups and businesses to make the most of the new service. One outcome for the project will be the development of a blueprint for rural digital inclusion.

During the pandemic **Voluntary Organisations Network North East (VONNE)** undertook research with eight civil society organisations working on digital inclusion to identify ways that the sector could be better supported in this area. Our reading of the research suggests the key needs are

for greater collaboration within the sector, the development of its potential to advocate for digitally excluded communities, longer-term funding and commissioning to enable continuity of support for learners, and the development of sustainable strategies in relation to issues like accessibility and safeguarding.

The North East may yet develop as a centre for innovation in relation to digital inclusion, particularly linked to centres of expertise such as the **Internet of Caring Things** that are reimagining the "challenge" of an ageing population as an opportunity to open ageing and healthy longevity markets.

**Philanthropic funding cannot provide a substitute for the investment that such developments will require from other partners involved in the planning and delivery of digital inclusion programmes. But in our view it can add value by:**

- **supporting work with those most at risk of digital exclusion** e.g. funding community buildings in disadvantaged neighbourhoods to provide access points for digital services or supporting initiatives within social care services that help disabled and older people get online.



- **providing independent funding for collaborative projects and advocacy initiatives developed by third sector organisations working to address digital exclusion.** This will ensure the sector has the unrestricted resources needed to develop an holistic approach to addressing the different aspects of digital exclusion within localities (e.g. access to equipment, skills, safe access to services) and help ensure that work on digital exclusion is informed by its in-depth knowledge of local needs.
- **developing the capacity of community organisations working in this space, for example in relation to contracting for services, digital security and safeguarding.** This will help civil society organisations to be in a position to take advantage of local opportunities arising from the government's digital inclusion agenda and ensure that beneficiaries are protected from online harm.

**In addition the Community Foundation is well placed to broker further collaboration between professionals working in the digital sector and community organisations as part of its sector support work. This may be essential given the pace of technological developments in the future.**

### Access to financial services

In the final of a series of ten reports on financial inclusion in Britain, researchers from the Universities of Lincoln, York and Birmingham highlighted the three key components needed for financial inclusion as being:

- a secure level of income that doesn't just meet basic requirements but gives access to the opportunities and choices necessary to participate in society;
- Access to appropriate and well-regulated financial services like bank accounts, affordable credit and insurance and
- Access to free and appropriate advice and education, particularly for those with debt problems.

They noted that whilst the previous government had taken a considerable amount of action in relation to these issues, their

approach had been marked by the lack of a clear strategic focus.<sup>xi</sup> Labour has promised to implement a national financial inclusion strategy, and so time will tell if they are able to build significantly on existing initiatives.

In previous Vital Signs reports we have highlighted the opportunities that exist for inclusive economic growth within the UK in general, and the North East in particular, and how this offers us the prospect of greater prosperity and resilience. Greater financial inclusion is one of the preconditions for such a development: more accessible, appropriate financial services and support will make it easier for households to balance their budgets and build savings. This will reduce financial distress, improving quality of life and reducing the additional burden it places on health, housing, social care and other services.

**The Financial Inclusion Commission** has identified a number of strategic priorities that need to be addressed to raise levels of financial inclusion notably improving access to:

- **a secure level of income that meets basic requirements and allows for full participation in society.** The challenges we face in the North East in relation to this strategic priority are considerable. Our **Vital Signs Living Standards report** highlights the prevalence of low income and poverty in the region. Our table of indicators below shows that as a result both deprivation and economic inequality are more common here than in England as a whole.
- **cash, face to face and digital financial services, affordable credit and regular savings.** Many people facing financial exclusion are dependent on cash, not least because its use represents the simplest means of controlling expenditure. Our table of indicators suggests access to cash is less of an issue here than for most of England, and we have roughly as many bank and building society branches per head of population as most English regions (excluding London). However these overall figures may hide some major disparities based on factors like economic viability and rurality. If we look, for example, at access to banks/building societies there

are major variations between and within local authority areas. Thus 34% of people in Middlesbrough have access to a personal account offer within 2km, compared to 50% in Darlington and 71% of urban dwellers but only 11% of rural dwellers in County Durham enjoy this level of access. This is one area where the new government has pledged rapid action, with a plan to give the FCA further powers to control branch closures, extend cashpoint provision and build on an existing initiative to establish 350 additional “banking hubs” on top of 56 already in place where people can access services from a range of providers. In the North East this has the potential to improve access to financial services in parts of Northumberland, County Durham and North Tyneside by the end of 2025, although questions have been raised about the commitment of some institutions to the project.<sup>xii</sup>

However the real issue for us is around issues of digital access (see above), affordable credit and savings. In our table of indicators we show how the region ranks last of all English regions within Lowell’s Financial Vulnerability Index and by a considerable margin at that. Within this it is reported that 9.2% of people in the region use often more expensive alternative financial products (e.g. payday loans) and 64% lack sufficient savings to cover an emergency.

- **financial education and support with problem debt.** Low levels of literacy and numeracy,<sup>xiii</sup> and a prevalence of low paid work and benefit dependency, provide fertile ground within our region for the growth of problem debt. A recent survey by **Wealthify** and the **Centre for Economics and Business Research** asked 2,250 adults a series of 10 questions to test their understanding of inflation, tax, pensions and savings. A typical question was “Imagine you





have a variable rate mortgage. Which of the following will lead to the amount you pay each month changing?

- a. The amount of money you earned that month
- b. Changes in the Bank of England's interest rate / base rate
- c. Fluctuations in the value of your property that month
- d. The amount you need to spend on other goods and services that month
- e. Need more information
- f. Don't know"

Against an expected score of 6.5 the North East scored lowest of all English regions (none of which met the required standard) with an average of just 4.3.<sup>xliii</sup> According to the Money & Pensions Service, 43% of North East adults do not feel competent in their money management skills.<sup>xliv</sup>

Given that many of us struggle to understand the basic facts of financial life it is perhaps unsurprising that in the Lowell Financial Vulnerability Index for 2023 Q4 (created by one of the UK's largest debt collection specialists **Lowell**, the US think-tank **Urban and Opinium**) the North East was found to have some of the highest numbers of Lowell's customers in arrears (23.1%) or default on a credit arrangement (19%).<sup>xlv</sup> This tends to reinforce the message from government statistics that show high levels of problem debt in the region.<sup>xlvi</sup>

So what can charitable funding for civil society organisations contribute to addressing these problems? Our recommendation is that it can add most value by:

- **supporting those at greatest risk of financial exclusion** e.g. building the capacity of community organisations to identify individuals that would benefit from support with managing their finances so they can be referred to specialist services when necessary;
- **funding services to improve the accessibility of financial services and products.** This could include a range of generalist and specialist activities from Credit Unions offering affordable financial products and credit to community transport

schemes that enable people in rural areas to access banks, building societies and cashpoints in nearby towns.

- **provision of education and advice services.** Providing people at risk of financial exclusion with informal opportunities to improve their money management skills is something that is already undertaken by many community and voluntary agencies. The Community Foundation supports such work in a range of settings from neighbourhood centres and supported housing programmes to youth groups.

The Money Advice Service estimates the percentage of local people in need of debt advice across our region at 17% – compared to a national average of just under 14% – with local levels ranging from 21% in Newcastle to 13% in Northumberland.<sup>xlvii</sup> Free national sources of support include phone and online advice from agencies like the National Debtline, StepChange, Moneyplus Advice, Money Wellness and the Debt Advice Foundation. Face-to-face services are available primarily from the **Citizens Advice** service, which nationally dealt with well over 40,000 people in debt a month during 2024, are well-placed to look at a person's whole financial situation and help them with what can often prove to be complex problems involving multiple creditors. They also have the data and lobbying experience required to influence policymakers in relation to issues like **support for consumers in debt to energy suppliers.** Other providers also play a part, notably the Christian charity **Community Money Advice** which operates five centres in the region and a range of locally-based community organisations.

Charitable grants constitute part of the funding that enables this work to take place. Examples of activities supported by the Community Foundation include the provision of specialist training for advice centre employees and volunteers and the purchase of equipment to support the provision of digital and telephone services. We can also provide awards to help with the general running costs of advice hubs and specific programmes of 1:1 support.



# Philanthropy and Access: case studies

## **P.R.O.P.S North East (PNE) delivers accessible multi-year, targeted support for people with substance misuse issues in Black, Asian and ethnic minority, and LGBT communities with help from the Joseph Brough Charitable Trust Fund and the John Bell Fund at the Community Foundation.**

PNE offers individual and family support to anyone in North East England affected by another person's drug or alcohol misuse, including carers and families. Its services include one-to-one counselling, group support, signposting, home and prison visits, respite, telephone support, training and an information library. PNE understands the complex lives of its clients and *"...prides itself on being carer-led and responsive to need by adapting the service delivery to fit the changing requirements of carers who are managing chaotic situations at home and within their family."*

PNE identified the need to ensure its beneficiaries better reflect the communities it serves, as the majority are white and heterosexual. PNE believed that Muslim, Black and ethnic minority and LGBT communities were not reaching out to access support due to the challenges around cultural sensitivity, language barriers and stigma.

"The Community Foundation Grant has enabled PROPS to devote more time and resource to identify barriers for engagement for people living in the BAME, Muslim and LGBTQI+ communities. By sharing experience and being a constant presence, we are building relationships and increasing our understanding of the cultural differences while providing valuable information to individuals, organisations and groups in these areas."

**Helen Thompson, Chief Executive Officer at PNE**

Funding of £45,000 over three years covers a new part-time role to build relationships and support Muslim, Black and ethnic minority and LGBT communities. The post-holder invests time and resources to get to know these communities, creating accessibility to support, awareness and education. Revised programmes are then delivered to the PNE staff team, ensuring that all benefit from learning and can deliver support that is culturally sensitive.

Now into the third and final year, PNE reports that supporting these communities has required a significant amount of time to break down barriers to access, building trust in services that can deliver a support package that serves their needs, retains their identities and respects their diverse cultures. One of the more important findings is that the stigma attached to drug and alcohol use means that families will not talk about addiction for fear of judgement from within their own community. The success of programmes therefore relies on developing volunteers within the communities themselves to educate about addiction, stigma, health and then provide a more structured programme.

To this end, PNE is meeting and talking with services from around the country who have developed successful support services, learning more about the culture and the different levels of support it should be providing to meet the needs of the families.

## **How the Ray Wind Farm Community Benefit Fund at the Community Foundation helped a parish council to bring superfast broadband to residents of rural Northumberland**

Northumberland is England's largest unitary authority by geographic coverage with a land area of 1,960 square miles. It is also the most sparsely populated with only 63 people per square kilometre. It remains largely rural,

with no settlements being home to more than 40,000 residents. Its geography presents significant barriers to the roll-out of digital services and infrastructure.

Rothely and Hollinghill Parish Council (RHPC) covers two parishes with a population of around 240 people. It is the first tier of local government, is community-led and makes decisions on behalf of local residents. Its overall responsibility is for their wellbeing. It requested funding to deliver fibre optic broadband to 22 business and residential properties which were not included in the BT fibre-optic roll out in Northumberland. The properties were not on the roadside, and so were deemed too remote and costly to link up.

“Superfast broadband is so vital, especially for rural areas with very long distances to access services and the need to be online to address social isolation, working from home, school work and so on. Without this grant the area would have been unable to connect to a good quality broadband service” Rothely and Hollinghill Parish Council

RHCP worked with a local County councillor to remedy the situation and was contacted by iNorthumberland (digital infrastructure organisation) to explore possible solutions. RHPC then liaised with the residents to register interest and apply for gigabit vouchers. It obtained a quote from BT to add their properties to the fibre-optic network.

However it soon became apparent that even with the gigabit vouchers further funding would be required. The overall cost of the project was £79,937, and RHPC secured £6,000 from other charitable funders to add to £67,500 from gigabit vouchers. A successful application to the Community Foundation resulted in a £6,000 grant from the Ray Wind Farm Community Benefit Fund that provided the final piece of the funding jigsaw that ensured the fibre network was built and all 22 properties gained access to superfast broadband.

# Philanthropy in action:

## The Women's Fund

The Women's Fund is an important and vital part of the portfolio of funds held at Community Foundation. Now in its 25th year, it was established in 1999 with an initial donation of £250k from Dame Margaret Barbour. It is a collective giving fund and continues to grow through regular and one-off donations by individuals, and through pooling income from other named funds. Its endowment fund has grown to £450,000, ensuring its work will continue for the foreseeable future. To date it has made 279 grants totalling £642,000.

At its heart, the fund exists to help level the playing field for the women and girls of our region. It is not overly dramatic to say that many of the most pressing issues of our region disproportionately affect women and girls. From the hidden homelessness of women to the erosion of community early years provision that means poorer women are unable to return to work; the challenges women face are often under-reported, misunderstood and ignored.

The women's sector, like those it seeks to support, has faced multiple challenges in recent years. Covid and the cost-of-living crisis, as well as the erosion of local authority budgets and increased competition for funding, has seen organisations battle increased demand for services at the same time as rising costs.

And yet, a very real strength of the sector comes from the coming together of like-minded people who want to agitate for change, for the women and girls they represent, for their communities, for the sector and for society as a whole. Like lots of notable advances in women issues the strength comes from unity, but also anger and action. The sector does great things, often at a hyper local level, but also in terms of advocacy and lobbying at national policy level.

This fund supports organisations that hold their communities at heart. It is open to organisations led by women, for women and girls. Crucially, decisions are made by a panel of experts who work in the sector. As such, they can represent the voice of those communities on the frontline. It is this specific expertise that has underlined a shift in recent years to prioritising multi-year core costs grants.

"I have worked in and around the women's sector for over 20 years. I see first-hand the brilliant work these organisations do, as well as the challenges they face and the opportunities they can provide to women and girls in some of our most disadvantaged communities. The Women's Fund panel is special in that it values expertise and local knowledge and is able to pivot funding to respond to the need. This is exemplified in the move to unrestricted, multi-year core funding."

**Cullagh Warnock, Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise Consultant. Women's Fund panel member since 2015**

The current grant recipients (2022/23 and 2023/24) receive an annual grant of between £2,500 and £7000 each towards core costs. These relatively small pots of money contribute towards a massive array of programmes and projects that are targeted at specific communities. Some of those might come at times of crisis, such as domestic abuse support and debt management, whilst others are about enabling longer term change, such as Apna Ghar's pioneering carers project:

*"It has taken some time but, through education, support and confidence building Apna Ghar has helped many women who were uncomfortable to care for male clients to become Carers by explaining that the role is like nurses or doctors caring for male and female patients. This may seem a small thing, but it is seen as instrumental in creating a larger cultural mind shift through its ripple effect as women feel empowered within the community and also gaining employment, serving the community whilst maintaining their cultural identity!"*

All of the grants reference the importance of women's voices in the designing and delivery of their programmes.

The challenges for this sector remain stark. The need to grow the pot to enable more organisations to get on with the vital work of empowering their communities of women and girls is evident.





# Appendix 1:

## Table of Indicators

Access issue	Access indicator (UK)				
Access and communities of identity	% people thinking inequality between groups in society is a moderate/big problem: Disability 62%; Regions 60%; Social class 61%; Ethnicity 57%; Genders 51%; Religions 50%; Age 50%; Sexual identity 47%. (Source: <b>Fairness Foundation 2024</b> )				
Access issue	Access indicator	Range for urban areas	Range for rural areas	Date*	
Access and communities of place: the problems faced by rural dwellers	Average time in minutes taken to travel to 8 key services by foot/public transport  The 8 key services are: centres of employment; primary school; secondary school; further education provider; GP; hospital; food store and town centre	14 -21 minutes	22- 64 minutes	2021	
Access issue	Access indicator	North East	England	South East	Date*
Access to the digital world	% households receiving <10Mbps (over 30Mbps)	4% (85.4%)	3.6% (85.8%)	3.4% (86%)	2024
	Average download speed	159.6	152.1	154.8	2024
	% of population offline (with very low digital capability)	5% (28%)	4% (25%)	2% (23%)	2023
Access to financial services  Note: Lowell is one of the UK's largest firms managing defaulted consumer debt. Their index is based on the following metrics from Lowell's, Nomis and Opinium: Consumers who are in default; Consumers in late arrears; Average credit use; Consumers claiming social benefits; Consumers using alternative financial products; Consumers without emergency savings.	% of households experiencing deprivation in at least one dimension (education, employment, health and disability or housing)	54.6%	52.1%	48%	2021
	GINI coefficient for disparities in total wealth (100%=most unequal situation. 0%=Most equal)	63.9%	61.6%	57.8%	2020
	Percentage of people living 2km + from a cash access point (exc. cashback)	1.5%	3%	3.2%	2023
	Bank and building society branches per head (change in number of branches 2012-2022)	1.1 (-33%)	(1.1) -40%	1.1. (-39%)	2023
	Lowell's Financial Vulnerability Index 2024 rank of 9 English regions (score) – see note	9 (50.7)	N/A (44.9)	1 (38.8)	2024

# References

- i You can read more about the Community Foundation Tyne & Wear and Northumberland's approach to diversity, equity and inclusion **here**

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- ii Protected characteristics defined in the 2010 Equality Act are age, race, sex, sexual orientation, pregnancy and maternity, gender reassignment, religion or belief, marriage or civil partnership and disability.

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- iii See <https://eige.europa.eu/>

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- iv See <https://www.wbg.org.uk/article/the-growing-crisis-of-poverty-in-later-life/> double disadvantage black women

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- v A good example is the need to combat the “designing-out” of girls from public spaces highlighted by **Make Space for Girls**

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- vi The campaigning organisation **Pregnant then Screwed** for example draws attention to a range of issues from inadequate rates of maternity pay to a less than 1% take-up of opportunities to exercise employment rights in relation to pregnancy or motherhood related unfair dismissals.

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- vii House of Commons (2024) **UK disability statistics: prevalence and life experiences**

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- viii See <https://www.scope.org.uk/campaigns/disabled-people-and-coronavirus/the-disability-report>

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- ix See <https://www.mencap.org.uk/press-release/charity-reveals-shocking-treatment-treatment-people-learning-disability-during-covid>

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- x See <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/ceqq46x068xo>

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- xi See <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/globalassets/age-uk/documents/reports-and-publications/reports-and-briefings/money-matters/tackling-the-cost-of-living-crisis-july-23.pdf> and <https://www.scope.org.uk/campaigns/extra-costs/disability-price-tag>

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- xii <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/disability/bulletins/disabilitywellbeingandlonelinessuk/2019>

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- xiii <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/healthinequalities/bulletins/sociodemographicinequalitiesinsuicidesinenglandandwales/2011to2021>

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- xiv See <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/news/2022/university-of-birmingham-survey-reveals-islamophobia-is-the-posh-persons-prejudice>

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- xv For the sake of accuracy it should be pointed out that by far and away the greatest risk of victimisation falls on the Jewish community. They experience 121/10,000 crimes, compared to 10/10,000 for Muslims who comprise the second most victimised group.

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- xvi See <https://www.britishfuture.org/english-identity-open-football-unites/>

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- xvii See <https://yougov.co.uk/politics/articles/50257-the-public-reaction-to-the-2024-riots>

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- xviii See [https://actionfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/ActionFoundation-Race-Riot-Report\\_2024-11-06-FINAL.pdf](https://actionfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/ActionFoundation-Race-Riot-Report_2024-11-06-FINAL.pdf)

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- xix See <https://www.russellwebster.com/the-state-of-youth-justice-2024/#:~:text=Gateway%20to%20the%20justice%20system&text=Black%20children%20were%20involved%20in,represented%20compared%20with%20the%20population.>

- xx See <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/ethnicity-and-the-criminal-justice-system-2022/statistics-on-ethnicity-and-the-criminal-justice-system-2022-html#executive-summary> and Monteith KC, G (2022) **Racial Bias and the Bench** University of Manchester
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- xxi The term LGBT is used throughout here, except where information cited relates to a wider or narrower grouping
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- xxiii See <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/hate-crime-england-and-wales-year-ending-march-2024/hate-crime-england-and-wales-year-ending-march-2024#:~:text=Hate%20crimes%20are%20a%20subset,the%20year%20ending%20March%202024>
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- xxviii See <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/population-statistics-for-rural-england> and [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7f6a3640f0b62305b87020/RUCOA\\_leaflet\\_Jan2017.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7f6a3640f0b62305b87020/RUCOA_leaflet_Jan2017.pdf)
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- xxx Shucksmith, M et al (2021) **Rural Lives**
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- xxxiv See <https://business.scope.org.uk/accessibility-and-disability-facts-and-figures/> and <https://rsnonline.org.uk/new-research-from-age-uk-reveals-almost-6m-older-people-cant-access-the-internet-safely>
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- xxxv See <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cdp-2024-0041/#:~:text=While%20it%20acknowledged%20the%20range,to%20seek%20input%20and%20advice%E2%80%9D> and also Ofcom (2023) **Connected Nations England Report**
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- xxxvi See <https://ukparliament.shorthandstories.com/digital-exclusion-comms-digital-lords-report/#group-section-Digital-exclusion-whats-the-problem-jQ1CWiPeZk>
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- xxxvii NELEP (2021) **Digital Exclusion in the North East LEP Area: Executive Summary**
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xii See <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cly8yj42g5wo>

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xiii See <https://literacytrust.org.uk/communities/north-east/read-north-east-frequently-asked-questions/> and <https://www.nationalnumeracy.org.uk/what-numeracy/numeracy-index>

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xiiii You can take the test here: <https://www.wealthify.com/blog/what-is-the-uk-s-level-of-financial-knowledge>

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xiv See <https://maps.org.uk/en/work-with-us/location/financial-wellbeing-in-north-east-england#Financial-wellbeing-in-North-East-of-England>

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## Let's talk

We hope that this report will inspire more of you to give to causes that contribute to improving Access in 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](http://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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