

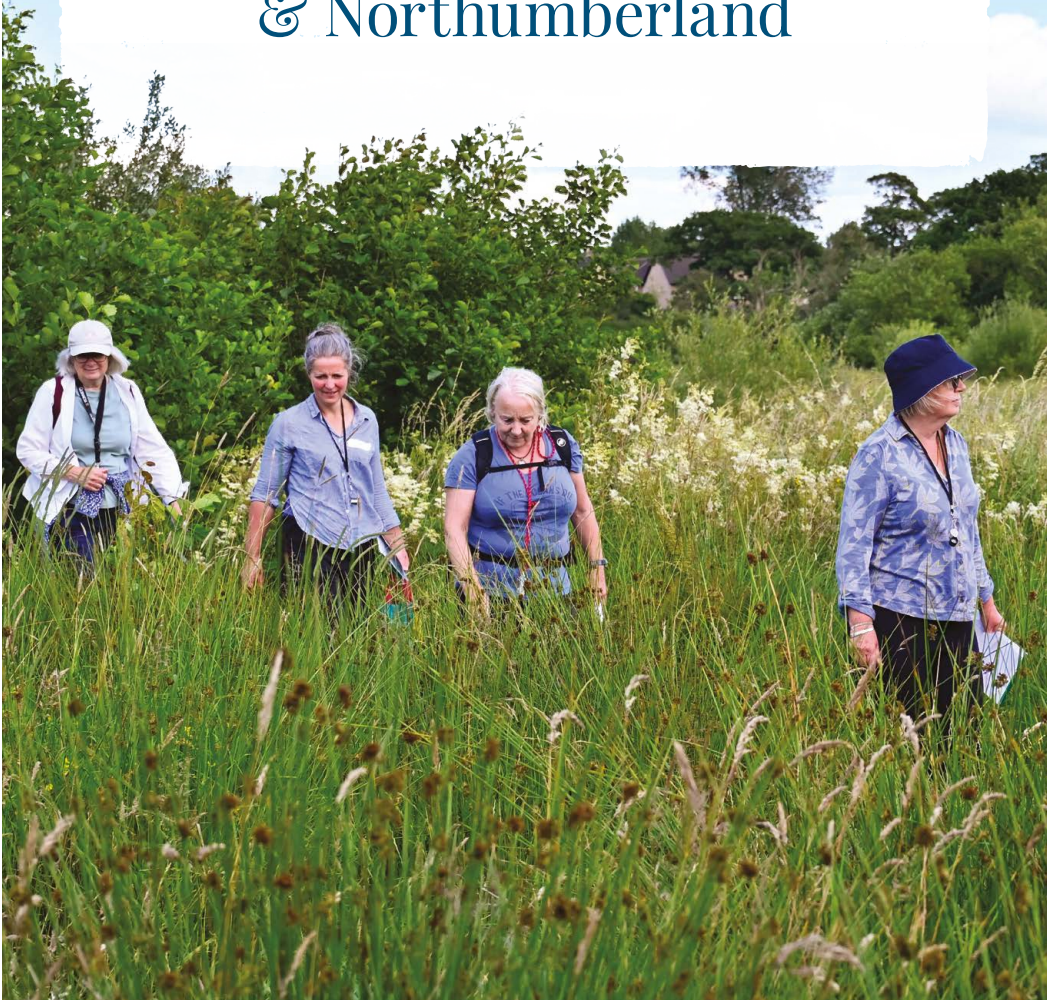


THE ROYAL
COUNTRYSIDE
FUND



COMMUNITY
FUND

Connecting and Supporting Countryside Communities in Cumbria & Northumberland



About The Royal Countryside Fund

We're The Royal Countryside Fund – a UK-wide charity working alongside farming families and rural communities to provide the support and funding they need to thrive.

Right now, hardworking rural communities and family farms face social, environmental and economic pressures that threaten the livelihoods they love. They shouldn't have to face these alone – and with us, they don't have to. That's why HM King Charles III founded The Royal Countryside Fund back in 2010 – to recognise the real challenges that come with rural life and do something about it.

By combining their ideas with our funding and guidance, we help rural communities run community-led projects that will stand the test of time. We also run locally based programmes to help farming families discover achievable ways to make their farms more financially and environmentally resilient. So far, we've supported over 5,700 farming

families, and invested more than £12.7 million in more than 550 rural community-led projects.

Whether it's through farming support or rural projects, we're all about bringing people together and making changes that last. Helping countryside communities thrive now and for generations to come.

To find out more, visit The Royal Countryside Fund's website at www.royalcountrysidefund.org.uk

Royal Founding Patron

HM King Charles III

Chair

Heather Hancock LVO DL

Chief Executive

Keith Halstead ARAgS



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Cover image: Participants take part in a plant identification workshop, run by Cumbria Biodiversity Data Centre in 2025.
Photo credit: Stuart Walker

Welcome

Cumbria and Northumberland are England's two least densely populated counties. Both have predominantly rural populations, proud farming traditions, and many villages and hamlets that are a long way from major cities or transport hubs.

This made these counties a clear choice for our first place-based funding scheme, which we launched in partnership with The National Lottery Community Fund in 2024. In 2025, we awarded funding to 16 diverse community-led groups from rural areas across the two counties.

Since then, we've had the great privilege of working alongside so many passionate and energetic community groups across Cumbria and Northumberland. What these organisations have achieved in that time is remarkable and inspiring.

The Royal Countryside Fund remains one of very few funders focused on rural communities like these across the UK. We're very grateful to The National Lottery Community Fund for all the support and expertise they have brought to this partnership.

This programme has been a brilliant opportunity to advance our mission to promote community-led solutions. By combining our funding



and support, with their local knowledge, we want to help rural communities to define, design and develop their own solutions to the challenges they face. Every community is different and local people know best of all what they need and what will work in their area.

We are also conveners and bringing people together is at the heart of what we do as a charity. When it comes to rural communities, we're here to build connections and create spaces for groups to share resources and ideas, and learn from each other.

Our hope is that every project and group that we have funded goes from strength-to-strength, generating new opportunities for their community, long into the future.

Keith Halstead

Chief Executive
The Royal Countryside Fund



Introduction

It is a pleasure to introduce this report, which demonstrates the strength, ingenuity and commitment found across the rural communities of Cumbria and Northumberland. The achievements of these sixteen organisations show what can happen when local knowledge and well-directed support come together with purpose.

I warmly commend The Royal Countryside Fund and The National Lottery Community Fund for investing not only in projects, but in the people and relationships that sustain communities for the long term. Above all, I thank the volunteers, staff and local leaders whose energy and dedication make our countryside such a resilient, special and inspiring place.

Alexander Scott

His Majesty's Lord-Lieutenant of Cumbria



“ We’re proud to have funded this unique collaboration that handed power over to isolated rural communities, allowing them to access exactly what they need.

Thanks to National Lottery players, the sixteen funded groups are leading lasting change. Communities are stronger, more sustainable, and better able to address the local issues they face every day. And by learning from each other, building skills and connections, the funded groups have been enabled to take that positive impact long into the future.

This project shows how trusting the people who know their communities best can be truly life-changing. ”

Gillian Halliwell

Senior Head of Regions – The North at The National Lottery Community Fund

Our Funding Programme

In 2024, we launched our first place-based funding scheme in partnership with The National Lottery Community Fund. This programme was focused on two specific predominantly rural counties, Cumbria & Northumberland, rather than run as a national open programme.

We offered funding of up to £30,000, over a maximum of eighteen months, to properly constituted, not-for-profit, community-led organisations based in rural areas with turnover under £500,000.

This programme is part of our ambition to support rural communities to increase their resilience and self-sufficiency in the face of economic, social and environmental challenges.

Our funding programme was built around four key aims, that are essential to the survival of rural communities. We wanted to:



Create prosperous and **financially stable rural communities**.



Improve **environmental sustainability** and climate resilience.



Build stronger, better connected and **resilient rural communities**.



Create the conditions for change via **funding, support and network activation**.

In 2025, we awarded £387,000 in funding to 16 projects, 13 in Cumbria and 3 in Northumberland. Funded projects ranged from community transport, food security and youth leadership programmes to environmental skills training, community emergency resilience and local enterprise development.

The programme was designed to help rural communities build local capacity, strengthen connections, develop new skills and create longer-term pathways towards greater self-sufficiency and resilience.

Rather than focusing solely on delivering short-term activities, the programme sought to create the conditions for lasting change. Funding was awarded to help organisations recruit coordinators, develop leadership, establish partnerships, test new approaches and strengthen their organisational resilience alongside delivering direct support to their communities.

The aim was to give communities the tools they need and create change that would last.



Mapping our support



Awarded groups in Cumbria:



£29,600

Sustainable Integrated Transport for Ullswater (SITU)

Helped the Ullswater community improve local rural transport options, address congestion, and reduce carbon emissions.

£30,000

Carlisle FM

CRFM's mobile studio empowered rural communities through local broadcasting, workshops, and engagement, boosting visibility, income, environmental awareness, and regional sponsorship opportunities.



£28,875

Alston Moor Partnership

Funded a Volunteer Co-ordinator to connect groups, recruit volunteers, identify needs, support training, secure funding, and plan sustainable future volunteer engagement.



£29,960

VistaVeg

Established a new market garden in Dentdale & Sedbergh and provided bespoke training for new-entrant growers.



£30,000

Watchtree Nature Reserve

Funded a role to enhance Watchtree's land for nature, people, and sustainability through habitat management, volunteer coordination, income generation, education, and community engagement.



£29,988

West Lakeland Farmer Led Nature Recovery

Trained four local young people to become environmental land management advisors to farmers.



£30,000

Another Way

Developed and improved their Power of 10 app, providing young people and communities with a platform that promotes climate education, action, and collaboration.

£30,000

Grizedale Arts

Supported the circular economy by connecting food produce with customers more efficiently through equipment for apple and apple juice production and distribution.

£22,430

Grange Over Sands Community Foodshare

Expanded their food recycling scheme in South Cumbria to address food poverty and strengthen community bonds.



£23,250

Cumbria Biodiversity Data Centre

Developed a package of training opportunities for community groups to develop expertise needed to provide ecological services to their local community.



£5,000

Skelton Toppin Memorial Hall

Established a resilience centre supporting community needs and emergencies, enhancing facilities, energy resilience, income generation, and partnerships.

£13,615

Orton Fells Farm Cluster CIC

Increased engagement between the farming and rural community through school visits and volunteering opportunities.

£6,000

Bothel Village Hall

Developed an emergency hub for their community to mitigate against unexpected weather events.

Awarded groups in Northumberland:



£29,700

Rural Design Centre

Co-designed and piloted a community-led rural enterprise service that better serves the local business community in Bellingham, Northumberland.

£19,365

Lesbury Community Shop

Created an annual event program including themed retail events, hosted community days, and charity support days.

£30,000

The Nurture Project CIC

Developed its "Bridging people through nature" project which enhanced community cohesion through connecting with nature.

Funding outcomes: measuring our success

As part of this programme, we funded an incredibly diverse range of projects. Every project operates differently and each was set-up by local people to meet specific needs in their area.

As such, each project submitted its own end of funding report, setting out everything that was achieved over the funding period, as well as any challenges or learnings.

Some headline outcomes have been:

70	households are now buying locally-grown produce through VistaVeg	53	volunteers contributed 18,500+ hours at Carlisle FM
700	people in Cumbria are now users of the Another Way 'Power of 10' app	1	local Business Forum and Trade & Tourism Association has been revived by the Rural Design Centre
459	ecological training places have been secured by Cumbria Biodiversity Data Centre	200	community buildings have benefited from Skelton Toppin Memorial Hall's 'Emergency Hub' model
5,956	passengers travelled on SITU's Hopper Bus during the 2025 season and 80+ people attended Cumbria's Community Transport Conference	125	households have been supported through food insecurity and 90 tonnes of surplus food has been saved from landfill by Grange Over Sands Community Foodshare

In our end-of-project survey, **93%** of the groups reported that they are more viable and sustainable because of engaging with the RCF programme.

“ The RCF funding has enabled the organisation to strengthen its organisational capacity, improve sustainability and expand its impact within rural communities... As a result, we have improved our ability to recruit, support and retain volunteers, introduced more structured training and development opportunities, and strengthened governance and operational systems... These improvements have positioned us for long-term growth by creating a more resilient organisation, enhancing service delivery and increasing capacity to support rural communities. ”

Participating group, responding to the end of programme survey

The programme has made strong progress towards its intended outcomes of supporting thriving, resilient and sustainable rural communities, demonstrating that relatively modest, flexible investment can generate significant and lasting change when communities are trusted to shape solutions that reflect local priorities.

93% of participating rural community organisations surveyed reported **increased confidence in their ability to plan for the future.**

Here is what they said about the project:

“ We have been able to put our organisation on a more professional footing which makes it easier to engage with other organisations whose help and support we need. ”

“ We firmly believe that in what we do one size does not fit all; it is community-led and community-specific in terms of needs and how to meet them. We greatly appreciated RCF’s understanding of this. ”

In an end of project survey we asked organisations about where they feel their organisation stands now and they said:

63% now have new income streams or funding in place

63% say they are better equipped to respond to challenges ahead

69% now have stronger partnerships that will continue without the RCF

81% say they are now more connected to their local community than before

88% say they have built internal skills and capacity that will outlast this funding

75% feel they are in a stronger position to support others in their area

The strongest outcomes were achieved where organisations were supported not only to deliver activities but also to strengthen leadership, develop partnerships and build their long-term capacity.

This investment in people and organisations has enabled communities to become more resilient,

better connected and increasingly able to respond to future challenges independently.

We have collated some further highlights from each project and grouped them by theme in this report.

Projects that helped to provide economic benefits to the locality

Our aim

Fund projects that stimulate local economic activity. We want the countryside to be more economically prosperous, incentivising people to stay and do business.

CRFM helped volunteers build confidence through mock broadcasts and practice sessions with the organisation. The station supported 53 volunteers, who collectively contributed more than 18,500 hours to broadcasting and community engagement. One volunteer secured a highly sought after BBC apprenticeship, thanks to the experience, mentoring and training she received through CRFM.

The Rural Design Centre

worked closely with 34 rural businesses in Northumberland and re-formed the North Tyne Business Forum, which had been dormant for the last 8 years. This structured, design-led programme of business interviews, network facilitation and governance support helped to re-establish collective representation for Bellingham's fragmented business community.

The Nurture Project established a community produce stall that generated £888 during its first eight months of trading, becoming the library's third-largest source of unrestricted income while simultaneously redistributing surplus food and encouraging community participation.

Sustainable and Integrated Transport for Ullswater (SITU)

carried an average of 52 passengers each day along the Ullswater Valley, providing transport for 5,956 passengers over the 2025 season – a 62% increase on 2024. This service kept money in the valley by enabling visits that would not otherwise have happened, and unlocked a new way for local businesses to invest directly in shared infrastructure.



Projects that built a stronger sense of community and connectedness

Our aim

Fund projects that are working to foster community spirit in rural areas, and provide opportunities for networking and mentoring. As a result, local residents feel a sense of ownership over and are more connected to their rural locality as a result of the funded activities.

Watchtree Nature Reserve benefited from RCF funding to recruit a new Habitat and Estates Team Leader, ensuring continuity of the reserve's habitat management, volunteer programme and 20-year ecological planning. As a result, the Reserve now has a community of 20-25 volunteers and has launched 5 new partnerships, increasing the impact of its work combatting rural isolation. One local wheelchair user who had previously been unable to join practical conservation work was supported to lead an accessible wildflower nursery project after staff adapted the activity to reflect his interests and needs.



Community hubs continued to play an important role within many villages. Investments in facilities such as **Bothel Village Hall**, **Grizedale Arts** and **Lesbury Community Shop** strengthened organisations that act as focal points for wider community activity. Rather than delivering isolated services, these organisations created spaces where residents could meet, volunteer, access support and build relationships with other local groups.

Another Way has engaged with over 8,000 young people, run over 100 events in Cumbria and organised a Youth Climate Festival at Furness Academy, which was attended by 104 students from 20 schools. This work has helped grow its network of young people, deliver climate-action skills training, and build youth-led environmental projects across rurally dispersed Cumbrian schools and communities.

Projects that benefited the local environment

Our aim

Fund projects that work with rural communities to develop solutions to achieve emergency preparedness and environmental sustainability in the face of climate change.

Cumbria Biodiversity Data Centre delivered 26 skills courses and provided 459 training places, equipping volunteers, land managers and professionals with the knowledge needed to undertake habitat surveys and environmental monitoring across the county. Feedback demonstrated consistently high levels of participant satisfaction, while individual case studies showed participants progressing into further education, employment and environmental leadership roles.



Orton Fells Farm Cluster used their funding to support tree planting, run visits from local schools, and fund facilitation of the group. This work helped build a greater understanding from local primary school children and the wider community regarding the rural economy and farming practices. The group's coordinator was also able to secure £85,000 worth of environmental connectivity funding to increase future sustainability.

Skelton Toppin Memorial Hall became Cumbria's first designated Community Emergency Hub, developing practical emergency planning resources that are now being shared with approximately 200 community buildings across the county. This work makes Cumbria's countryside more resilient to climate shocks and extreme weather.

West Lakeland CIC recruited and trained 4 people from local farming communities to become environmental land management advisors. So far they have completed a total of 32 farm visits and their new skills will allow them to go on to deliver significant environmental benefit across farms in the Lake District.

Environmental benefits also emerged through projects whose primary objectives lay elsewhere. **VistaVeg** supported local food production with lower food miles, while **Grizedale Arts** developed local food processing and distribution through community workshops and a village vending machine. **Grange Over Sands Community Foodshare** diverted more than 90 tonnes of surplus food from landfill, demonstrating how environmental outcomes can arise naturally from projects addressing social need.

Projects that created an innovative and replicable approach addressing an unmet need within the rural area

Our aim

Strengthen collective action across rural communities nationwide by offering funding, tailored support, and opportunities for networking—ultimately laying the groundwork for meaningful, community-led transformation in rural areas.

Alston Moor Partnership demonstrated the value that a dedicated co-ordinator can bring to rural areas. This co-ordinator rebuilt communication and collaboration between more than 40 local organisations and secured a £4,500 funding gain for a local group. The project demonstrated the benefits of resource-sharing and coordination that could benefit many other local communities.

Grange Over Sands Community

Foodshare has created a clear model for surplus food redistribution and community support in south Cumbria, benefiting 125 local low-income households. The success of the project has already begun to spread and the organisation is now supporting a satellite group in a nearby town with templates, tools and mentoring.



Lesbury Community Shop developed expertise and built a model for how community shops in rural areas can function as self-sustaining event hubs. Additionally, increased sales during themed community events, helped sustain the coordinator role that underpins the shop's wider contribution to village life.

Vista Veg recruited and trained 8 new-entrant growers, who now have the skills to found new market gardens and replicate Vista Veg's locally-grown veg box business. At the same time the organisation has extended its local veg box scheme to 70 new households and opened a new market garden in Cumbria, providing a model for how other sites can operate to deliver locally-grown fresh produce.

Evaluating our place-based approach

The programme adopted a deliberately place-based approach. Rather than viewing each award as an isolated intervention, The Royal Countryside Fund worked closely with funded organisations throughout delivery, providing opportunities for networking, shared learning and collaboration.

We wanted to create a cohort of like-minded groups and build connections between geographically disparate organisations that would survive the end of the funding period.

Site visits, learning events and regular dialogue enabled organisations to exchange ideas, solve common challenges and identify opportunities to work together. This convening role became an important source of added value, helping individual projects contribute to wider community development across the region.

During this programme we held two convening events at the Rheged centre in Cumbria (with a third to follow when the programme concludes). This brokered connections between organisations that would otherwise never meet.

For example, it introduced Bothel Village Hall to Skelton Toppin Memorial Hall

— two beneficiaries solving the same problem in different ways — leading to a site visit and shared learning. It also allowed Grange Over Sands Community Foodshare to benefit from the expertise of Vista Veg, when they came to set-up their own community garden.

It also encouraged cross-working that a transactional funder, dealing with each beneficiary in isolation, would be unable to create. Groups told us “this rarely happens with other funders”.

“ One of the comments from everybody has just been the face-to-face nature of this funding, how important it is to link up. Networking is just so powerful. We’re all trying to do the same thing really, so doing it together we’ll have a lot greater impact. ”

Watchtree Nature Reserve,
RCF funding recipient, Cumbria





“ The collaborative elements of the programme added significant value to our organisation. Connecting with various community organisations provided opportunities to discuss common challenges, and identify areas where we could support each other. As a result, we gained new ideas around partnership working and community engagement, which have helped inform our future planning and strengthened our confidence in delivering long-term impact. ”

Participating group, responding to the end of programme survey

Our key learnings

Invest in the people who make a difference

Some of the most successful projects came from funding the connective and coordinating capacity of a place — a coordinator, a facilitator, a first paid role — rather than discrete activities. There are very few funders willing to cover running costs, like staffing, but investing in these roles can have an outsized impact on the organisation.

Projects such as Alston Moor Community Partnership and Watchtree Nature Reserve demonstrated that dedicated coordination often delivered returns that far exceeded the original investment. In many cases, the value of the funded role lay not simply in delivering activities but in creating the time needed to build relationships, identify opportunities and bring people together around shared ambitions.

Relationships are as important as activities

Another consistent finding was that relationships often became the mechanism through which wider outcomes were achieved. Across projects supporting food insecurity, volunteering, youth engagement and community participation, beneficiaries repeatedly described the importance of feeling welcomed, listened to and included before engaging in wider activities. In many cases, confidence, volunteering, employment or leadership opportunities emerged only after people had first experienced a sense of belonging within their community.

This was particularly evident in projects such as Grange Over Sands, CRFM, Another Way and The Nurture Project. Their success was not simply a result of the activities delivered, but of the safe, supportive environments they created.

Rural communities value a face-to-face funder

Creating a cohort of local groups and bringing them together to make new connections was hugely valuable. Many of the groups ended up sharing resources and learnings, and visited each other's projects as a result of taking part in this programme.





“ It was excellent to have a personal relationship with the RCF team and for them to visit and get to know our ‘place’ and the challenges we face. ”

Vista Veg, RCF funding recipient, Cumbria

“ It’s really nice to work in a way that feels like a partnership rather than a transaction. We take more from that. It feels like the process is more valuable. ”

Skelton Toppin Memorial Hall, RCF funding recipient, Cumbria

Capturing impact remains a challenge for many community organisations

Several organisations clearly delivered significant outcomes but found it difficult to evidence these using standard reporting processes. Volunteer-led organisations often lacked the time, confidence or expertise to collect data, undertake evaluation or articulate the wider impact of their work.

As a result, some projects appeared weaker on paper than they were in practice. Visiting projects in person and speaking directly to organisers and the people who directly benefit from each project was hugely valuable, as it allowed us to fill-in some of these gaps.

What we learned

Investing in people delivers the greatest long-term impact

Relationships underpin successful community development

Place-based funding achieves stronger outcomes

Community organisations need support to evidence impact

How this will shape future funding

We will continue to fund projects that deliver coordination, leadership and skills development

We will build even more networking and peer learning opportunities into our funding programmes

We will continue adapting our delivery to local contexts and remain committed to regularly meeting with projects in-person

We will develop simpler, more flexible monitoring and evaluation approaches

Reflections

Addressing the needs of Northumberland

To understand why we had fewer applications from Northumberland we commissioned local experts to deliver a programme called Supporting Rural Community Organisations in Northumberland. This 'Rural Catalyst' team was led by the National Innovation Centre for Rural Enterprise, with support from Community Action Northumberland and the Rural Design Centre. The aim was to better understand the barriers to funding-readiness faced by rural groups, at the same time as offering on-the-ground support.

The findings from this programme will help inform our future place-based support for rural communities in the north of England and beyond. We want to build on our community-led approach to funding, to ensure that the specific needs of rural organisations are met and that their voices are heard.

It also shines a light on the specific needs of rural communities, as well as their untapped potential. Through our work, we want to encourage other funders to engage more deeply with rural organisations, and provide a blueprint for them to follow.

Expanding our support

Our ambition is to extend the success of our initial place-based programme. We want to build on the learnings from this project and the findings from our Rural Catalyst report to create a funding model that is tailored to the specific needs of these rural communities, but that is also replicable for us and for other funders to support the countryside across the whole of the UK.



Scan to read our
Rural Catalyst report.

Contact us

Find out more about our work and how you can get involved on our website:
www.royalcountrysidefund.org.uk

And contact us directly by emailing:
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