

Report of National Funders' Insight Visit to Northern Ireland, 23–24 September 2025:

Overview

Twelve senior staff from eight national funders attended a Northern Ireland Insight Visit on 23rd and 24th September 2025. They represented: Allen Lane Foundation; Blue Light Card Foundation; Esmée Fairbairn Foundation; Paul Hamlyn Foundation; Rank Foundation; Rayne Foundation; Tudor Trust; and Saturday Hospital Fund. Several other interested funders were unable to attend and are being followed up by Forum members.

The visit was promoted by FFNI members and ACF as an opportunity for any national funder to lift the lid on funding in Northern Ireland, including: those already actively funding here, but who would benefit from gaining a fuller picture and connecting with others; and those not yet funding in NI, or funding in a very limited way, and who would like to understand how, why and where to start. It was designed to create opportunities for funders to:

- **Learn more** about Northern Ireland – its present and the context of its past
- **Understand better** how funders' contributions can and are making a difference in local communities
- **Be inspired** by visiting a range of visionary projects
- **Connect with** other funders and learn from their approaches to funding in NI.

Participant feedback indicated that attendees found the visit to meet these intentions – being highly valuable for understanding Northern Ireland's distinct funding environment and the complexity of its public and community sectors.

The event was incredibly helpful I have found the meeting very helpful in terms of helping to frame our funding in NI.

It was clear a lot of time, effort, and resource went into the event. Thank you for curating a thoughtful, fun, and valuable couple of days.

Day 1: Tuesday 23 September – Context and Connections

Day 1 was hosted at Clifton House, where guests were welcomed by Paula Reynolds, CEO of the Belfast Charitable Society. A short welcome video recorded by the First and Deputy First Ministers followed, which came about as a result of a meeting between representatives of the Forum and the First and Deputy First Ministers in June. The video was well received, with guests commenting that it conveyed strong recognition of the importance of cross-sectoral collaboration and of philanthropy in Northern Ireland.

The morning's two keynote speakers were Freya McClements, Northern Editor of the Irish Times, and Ann Watt, Director of Pivotal Public Policy Forum.

Freya provided an excellent and very well received overview of the political history of Northern Ireland – from its inception, through the Troubles to the Good Friday Agreement and the present day. There followed engaged discussion – picking up particularly on how the legacy of the Troubles and our divided society continues to live on in public life, including in responses to current issues, most particularly heightened racial tensions and protests over immigration.

This was followed by an overview of NI's political and public institutions and funding arrangements – how they function, the key differences with GB institutions and the key challenges we face with respect to public service delivery and reform. Again, guests engaged in discussion throughout this interactive presentation and fed back that this session deepened their understanding of the structural constraints faced by voluntary organisations and helped them appreciate the importance of flexible funding models in NI.



Fund in NI made the case clear.

The final presentation came from FFNI member Tim Jones (Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust), outlining ten reasons why funding in Northern Ireland can achieve significant impact. Orla Black (Community Foundation for NI) shared examples of partnership models that maximise funders' reach. Participants highlighted these contributions as inspiring and practically useful, noting how collaboration with local partners could amplify the effectiveness of national funders' work.

The political overview of NI now was fascinating and very helpful to locate ourselves.

I found it all incredibly valuable. The initial presentations by the journalist and Pivotal were especially useful to set the scene and context as I didn't have much knowledge before I came. This meant I could then get more out of the conversations with organisations.

The programme worked really well. The journalist brief set the scene, Pivotal clarified the institutions, and How & Why to

Afternoon Site Visits

The afternoon concluded with a visit to the Action for Community Transformation (ACT) Initiative, Shankill Road, hosted by William Mitchell. He discussed the work of ACT in peacebuilding and post-conflict transformation, before leading a guided walk to the Falls Road, taking in murals and the peace wall at Northumberland Avenue. On the Falls Road, we were hosted by Gerry McConville and Marie Maguire of Falls Community Council at the newly refurbished St Comgall's School. They spoke about their work, in the building and within the community, as well as wider opportunities and challenges within communities, including racism, immigration and street violence. They outlined how they and other local organisations are working to address these issues and build greater community cohesion. Participants described this as one of the most powerful elements of the trip, providing a tangible sense of the divided geography of Belfast and the resilience of grassroots leadership.

Visiting the Shankill/Falls Road and peace walls was powerful.



Dinner took place at The People's Kitchen, where a meal had been prepared by The Kind Economy, a network of refugees and asylum seekers. Paul McCusker (People's Kitchen) and a representative from The Kind Economy shared their stories of community service and integration. Many participants remarked that this dinner was a visit highlight, to gain insight into compassion and inclusion in action, and illustrating the value of partnerships between local charities and newer communities.

Dinner with People's Kitchen showed real community impact.

We really enjoyed the dinner and the opportunity to hear more about People's Kitchen (who were fantastic hosts).

The evening concluded informally, with some continuing discussions in a local pub.

Day 2: Wednesday 24 September – Thematic Cluster Conversations

Guests joined two of four themed cluster conversations, based on their interests identified in advance. Each conversation brought together funders and local organisations for open, interactive dialogue. Themes and participating organisations included:

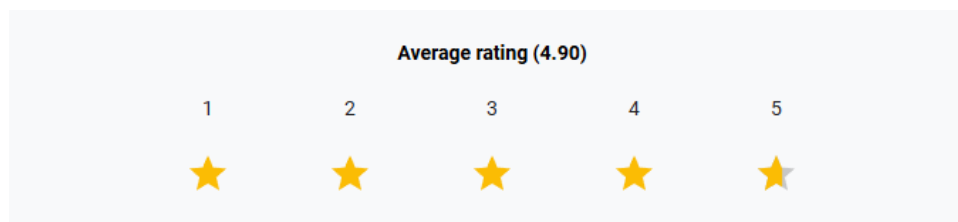
- Racial Justice: (JoinHer/ASCONI, PPR, Migrant Centre NI, Forward South)
- Youth Leadership and Young People's Rights: (NI Youth Forum, MACS, VOYPIC, Children's Law Centre)
- Place-based Approaches: (Ashton Community Trust, Belfast Charitable Society, NI Rural Women's Network, Evolve NI)
- Social Enterprise and Regeneration: (Market Development Association, Bolster Newry, Courthouse Bangor, STEP Dungannon)

Guests and participating organisations reported enjoying highly productive sessions, allowing candid discussion about needs, challenges, and opportunities. Several commented on the openness of community representatives and the insight gained into local leadership, innovation, and resilience. Funders especially valued the diversity of organisations involved, which provided a holistic picture of community life across urban and rural Northern Ireland. Some participants expressed a desire for more time in these sessions.

Visiting and meeting organisations in person was super insightful, the discussions from these visits were really informative and helpful as we consider how to best fund in NI.

Reflections and Next Steps

Guests' feedback was extremely positive – assigning altogether a 4.9 out of 5 rating of the overall visit experience. 100% of respondents reported that the visit met their needs and expectations and that they would recommend the visit to colleagues in their or other funding organisations in the future.



Overall, the visit met its objectives: to deepen funders' understanding of Northern Ireland's context, foster stronger relationships between local and national funders, and highlight opportunities for collaborative impact. Participants valued the balance of strategic briefings and community-level experiences, which together gave a rounded and authentic understanding of the funding landscape and appreciated the professionalism, warmth, and hospitality of FFNI and others. They reported leaving with:

- increased confidence in funding within Northern Ireland;
- greater appreciation of the voluntary and community sector's strengths; and
- enthusiasm for exploring new partnerships.

The visit was really well put together from start to finish. Each part added something valuable — from the briefings and presentations to the site visits and discussions. I enjoyed every element and came away with a much clearer understanding of the challenges Northern Ireland faces and the important work being done to address them.

Thank you, what a lovely opportunity to meet/network with others, brilliant insights, connections made and expertly organised (generous hospitality too).

Just a big thank you to everyone for organising the trip, it has sparked many conversations with our team and I'm excited to see where it leads us.

There will be an opportunity for guests to reconvene early in 2026 to continue to reflect on the impact of the visit on their funding practice, and to follow up on our invitation to them to join FFNI.

Acknowledgements

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The total cost of the visit was £3,000 – including speakers' fees, catering, transport and a contribution towards the FFNI Co-ordinator's time.

Reported prepared by: Funders' Forum for Northern Ireland, October 2025