



The ECFI Visit to the Two Ridings Community Foundation, Leeds Community Foundation, and the 2024 UKCF Conference: Field Report and Reflection

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Introduction

Attending an event with hundreds of community foundation practitioners is a powerful experience for most in the field. UKCF's 2024 Conference brought together community foundation (CF) practitioners from the UK community foundations with more than 40 international participants. In addition to attending the conference, the European CF practitioners also visited the Leeds Community Foundation and the Two Ridings Community.

The visit comprised two parts. On October 7, two groups visited the Two Ridings CF in York and Harrogate and Leeds CF in Leeds, respectively. The field visit to Two Ridings CF involved engaging with the CF staff and two grantees – one addressing homelessness in York and the other on people with disabilities in Harrogate. The visit to Leeds focused on the Philanthropy Climate Commitment. On October 8-10, the group attended the UKCF Conference 2025, which took place under the theme *Foundations for the Future: Investing in Communities*.

The ECFI Team curated the visit as a learning experience, bringing participants in contact with the UK community foundation ecosystem. The international group consisted of CF practitioners from several European countries, including Albania, Austria, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Finland, Germany, Georgia, Italy, Latvia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Spain, and Ukraine.

The ECFI field visit to York, Leeds, and Harrogate and the conference enabled European CF practitioners to connect and get to know their UK peers, the strategic and operational challenges that UK communities, CFs, and UKCF are facing, and experience some of the impact of the Two Ridings CF and Leeds CF in their respective regions.

This report will engage with the experiences of European CF practitioners and reflect on how such visits impact the field of European CFs. The first part of the report is dedicated to the visit to York and Harrogate (given that I attended this part of the study visit), and the second part is dedicated to the UKCF Conference. In the third part, I will focus on the participants' reflections, and in the fourth part, I will present a few suggestions for future visits. The report aims to support, on the one hand, participants in further reflecting on their experiences in the UK and, on the other hand, to offer insights to CF colleagues who could not attend.

Visit to Two Ridings Community Foundation in York and Harrogate

Two Ridings Community Foundation (TRCF) covers East and North Yorkshire, delivering over 19 million GBP since 2000. The Foundation holds the following mission: “With people at the heart of everything we do, we inspire investment, develop relationships, and make grants to transform lives and strengthen communities.”¹

Two Ridings Community Foundation focuses on four strategic directions, including: “people at the heart of everything we do,” “transforming communities through everything we do,” “inspiring investment into Yorkshire,” and “using our knowledge to champion positive change.”² With regard to finances, TRCF invests in the local community approximately 2.1 million GBP in 2023.³

TRCF welcomed the group of European CF practitioners on October 7, 2024, in York to share their CF experience, mode of operation, strategic perspectives, ways of learning about and engaging the local community, and, not least, strategic communication of the Foundation’s impact. Several members of the TRCF team welcomed the international group and shared their perspectives on the Foundation’s work. The international group was met with positive energy, insightful discussions, eagerness to engage with an international audience, and a powerful feeling of care for the local community.

TRCF shared several aspects about the Foundation's work and experiences. Some of these aspects include the strategic directions of the Foundation, how the Foundation is organized, some examples of grantmaking funds focusing on certain localities, how TRCF builds partnerships in the local community, and how it works with the local administration, grantmaking, and communication.

A key feature of TRCF’s work is putting the community and people from the local community at the heart of everything it does. That was visible in how the Community Foundation works, engages with grantees, donors, and partners, and runs communication work. The strategic directions of the Foundation center on people and social change, empowering multiple types of local actors to work together for social change. Furthermore, TRCF’s focus on impact in its communication practices was perceived as impressive.

The focus on people translates into how TRCF is organised and in its working methods. The Foundation is at the core of an ecosystem that works for the sustainable

¹ <https://www.tworidingscf.org.uk/about/>

² Celia McKeon, TRCF Chief Executive, presentation on October 7, 2024, York.

³ Two Ridings Community Foundation Impact Report 2022/2023, accessed at: <https://www.tworidingscf.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Two-Ridings-Community-Foundation-Impact-report-2023-1.pdf>

development of local communities in North and East Yorkshire. That is visible in how the Foundation is centrally positioned in connecting to local groups and organisations, donors and funders, and, increasingly, the local administration. The efforts of the Foundation to ensure that resources are meaningfully spent and support meaningful community action have been visible in the group's two visits. First, the group visited the Good Organisation, an initiative focusing on homelessness and supporting marginalised groups in York to benefit from tourism. The second visit was to Open Country, an organisation focusing on access to the countryside for people with disabilities in Harrogate.

The York tour with Miles

Taking the guided tour with Miles was a unique experience. Miles worked for a bank before becoming homeless, as a result of addiction and the subsequent breakdown of his marriage. The Good Organisation project aims to empower vulnerable groups by connecting them with the tourism sector and showed us an example of how change is possible. Miles offered us a wonderful tour on Wealth and Health in York – a key takeaway for some CF participants. The visit was a good occasion to reflect on how vulnerability co-exists with wealth in different historical moments, how vulnerable groups can be empowered to belong and contribute to the local community, and how proactive solutions based on community assets and functional sectors can address profound challenges and generate social change.

Exploring the Yorkshire countryside with courage – Open Country

The second initiative the group visited, Open Country, focuses on enabling disabled community members to access various experiences in the region. Key activities relate to exploring nature through sports, gatherings, and community activities. Open Country manages to engage many community members in their activities. The members of the CF delegation were impressed with the bold and courageous activities and the organisation's growth over the years.

UKCF Conference 2024: Foundations for the Future: Investing in Communities, Harrogate

The ECFI Group attended the 2024 UKCF Conference in Harrogate. Under the theme of Foundations for the Future: Investing in Communities, the conference covered several topics shaping the present and future of local communities – technology, climate, inequality, and philanthropy-related policies, among others. The conference had a diverse programme that allowed participants to select discussions referring to community challenges and CF-specific topics such as fund development, endowment building and management, needs assessment, and grantmaking.

For the international participants, UKCF conferences are key events as they bring together hundreds of CF practitioners and take place in English (making them accessible). Attending the UKCF conference is a powerful experience. The event's relevance for participants from countries where the number of CFs is limited is also important. The possibility of attending an event with hundreds of CF practitioners offers one an important professional experience, including belonging to a community of CF practitioners who work similar processes and confront similar challenges in relation to the broader community and within the CF.

Andrew Tuggey, Kaveed Ali, and Ben Robinson of UKCF welcomed the participants at the 2024 UKCF Conference and highlighted several key topics for the UK community foundations movement and the conference: the future strategy of UKCF; the UKCF accreditation system; more powerful partnerships with communities, funders, donors, and institutions; strengthening CF capacity to address underlining causes and achieve systemic transformation.

Celia McKeon of Two Ridings Community Foundation welcomed the participants to Harrogate and Yorkshire. She presented details about the areas covered by the Foundation. The region is diverse, with two main urban centers – Hull and York – and several rural communities. Despite the general assumption that the region is wealthy, several challenges affect local communities, including hidden poverty. TRCF makes efforts to work in smarter ways to mobilize resources together with local businesses, donors, and local administrations.

Ben Robinson presented the work done by UKCF and its members on the new UKCF Strategy. With considerable input from network members, the strategy process generated five themes for the future of UKCF: 'establishing a stronger influence and voice for community foundations,' 'supporting CFs to continue to transform place-based grant-making,' 'growing local philanthropy and giving,' 'becoming an insights and data-driven network,' and 'positioning CFs as a long-term funder in the UK.' These strategic themes will be approached through 'deeper cooperation,' 'building an equitable future through diversity and inclusion,' 'centering climate and environmental justice,' and promoting and celebrating philanthropy.

The conference weaved multiple topics related to the overarching title – Foundations for the Future. Throughout the conference, there was alignment that a growing number of challenges become relevant for local communities and, consequently, for the work of community foundations. Topics such as climate change, environmental justice, AI and technology, threats to democracy, local and social media, fake news, the future of work, etc., were discussed by CF practitioners and guests.

Tom Neill-Eagle from Plinth covered the topic of **Artificial Intelligence and CF Work**, presenting how AI-powered tools can support CFs in their everyday tasks. Along with

technology, **climate and environmental topics** were central at the UKCF conference. Discussions brought to the fore the difficulty of climate change for local communities, the broad implications, and the difficult modalities to address climate change and its consequences. The role of community action for climate change was emphasised, alongside the importance of funding resources. Examples of CFs engaging with climate change brought to the fore that community foundations can be actors that can drive climate change and adaptation work in local communities, contributing to the wellbeing of local communities and to achieving the SDGs related to climate, environment, and community sustainability.

A further focus in the UKCF conference relates to **progressive grantmaking**. Orla Black (Community Foundation for Northern Ireland), Ben Cairns (Institute for Voluntary Action Research), Marcia Asare (Walcot Foundation), and Jennie Richmond (Impact Works) focused in their discussion on progressive modalities of grantmaking and ways of engaging grantees in more strategic partnerships. The discussion also highlighted the challenges that local organisations have in ensuring the sustainability of their organisations while relying on a grants-based business model.

Jonathan Heawood (Public Interest News Foundation), James Magowan (European Community Foundation Initiative), Michelle Cooper (Point North), and Teresa O'Connell (Are We Europe) engaged in a powerful discussion about **The Importance of Local Media and Community Journalism** in the middle of difficult challenges such as falling standards in national media, rising far-right politics, polarisation, fake news, and social media. The discussion highlighted examples of community journalism from around the UK and other European countries. It revealed the vulnerability of local communities in front of biased media and disinformation and misinformation practices, directly impacting the quality of democracy in local communities and beyond.

Stefan Noble and Katie Leach (Oxford Consultants for Social Inclusion - OCSI), Hannah Clay (Sussex Community Foundation), and Margaret Firth (Wiltshire Community Foundation) engaged in a discussion about **Transforming Local Needs Analysis**, moderated by Rachel McGrath (Northamptonshire Community Foundation). The discussion revealed the importance of data for understanding community needs, designing impactful grantmaking funds, and providing evidence-based philanthropy advice to donors and funders. Also, the discussion presented in detail OCSI's tools for generating reports about local communities. The level of data available in the UK is impressive. It can enable CFs to play an important role in enabling communities to have an evidence-based understanding of local challenges.

UKCF and CAF worked together to advance a **national philanthropy strategy** in the UK, a discussion highlighting the importance of UKCF strengthening its advocacy capacity.

The Conference ended with a session entitled ‘Igniting our Imagination,’ which enabled participants to think of ***the future they hope for in their organisations and communities***. The exercise brought to the fore the importance of jointly imagining desirable futures and understanding current trends in order to prepare better CFs and local communities for plausible scenarios. Jo Williams of UKCF facilitated the exercise and recommended several books for further engagement.⁴

Other topics covered at the conference include how CFs can explore climate action, working with the NHS, donor engagement and Salesforce, the role of CFs in social justice, the art of storytelling, philanthropy advising, designing inclusive national programmes, integrating climate into everyday work, partnering with local authorities, re-imagining work for the future, AI-confident organisations, empowering youth involvement, endowments and impact, community-led solutions for lasting change, young people on the board, the power of hope, trust and community, and others.

UKCF could consider for the next conferences also other challenges that increasingly play out in local communities, limiting the impact of CFs and inviting changes in grantmaking and community leadership practices: security, radicalisation, hybrid warfare, peace and conflict, populism, extreme right/left, polarisation, and fake news, misinformation, and disinformation.

Reflection on the UKCF Conference and Two Ridings CF visit

The visit to the Two Ridings Community Foundation, Leeds Community Foundation, and the 2024 UKCF Conference brought inspiration and powerful insights to the participating European CFs.

European CF movements are at different levels of development, being embedded in different types of philanthropy and civil society sectors. The UK philanthropy ecosystem is among the most developed. Consequently, the participants had the opportunity to observe well-established organisations with large, employed teams and well-functioning governance models, good engagement with the local community, donors and initiatives, and an impressive level of funding. A few aspects that drew the particular attention of participating CF practitioners include:

- ***The pleasure to be part of a larger community of CF practitioners*** (‘My kind of people’ – participant words) where CF-related topics are discussed, CF practices are

⁴ The Good Ancestor: How to Think Long Term in a Short-Term World (Roman Krznaric), On Time and Water (Andri S. Magnason), The Optimist’s Telescope: Thinking Ahead in a Reckless Age (Bina Venkataraman), A New Reality: Human Solutions for a Sustainable Future (Jonas Salk, Jonathan Salk, David Dewane, and Elizabeth Balckbum), The Ministry for the Future (Kim Stanley Robinson), and Timefulness: How Thinking Like a Geologist can Help Save the World (Marcia Bjornerud).

presented and scrutinized, and a feeling of collective understanding, appreciation, and respect is shared.

- European CF practitioners noted ***the high level of institutionalisation, experience, and expertise of UK CFs***. In particular, the funding level available, the endowments, the number of employed staff, and the thoughtful approaches to CF-related processes are perceived as highly professional and a good source for learning and inspiration. Some of the processes noted by the European participants include how UK CFs approach their communities through small and rapid grants, as well as capacity building and general-purpose grants; the focus on small organisations and their development; the professional management of donors and funders; the impact-focused communication approaches; the ability to mobilize the community around certain topics of relevance; the positioning of some of UK CFs in relation to local communities and local actors which enable the CFs to understand local dynamics and build impactful grantmaking programmes. Several participants appreciated a core focus on community transformation rather than financial assets.
- Participants also observed ***the elaborate ways in which UKCF is working with its members***. Several European CF movements are in their early stages; therefore, being in contact with UKCF's work is inspiring and motivating.
- The ***focus on youth*** was also appreciated as essential. The discussions around youth work, engaging youth in programmes, and especially on the Board of CFs were the highlights for some European participants.
- The conference's topic sparked interest in ***the impact of globalisation and global challenges on the sustainability of local communities***. The insight that emerged throughout the conference – what we leave for future generations – triggered insightful thoughts and discussions among the European participants.
- 'Climate crisis is so big; CFs are so small' (European participant) – the conference discussions brought a heightened ***awareness around the challenges posed by climate change*** and the difficulty in addressing them. The importance of community commitments to climate change was also noted.
- The ***needs assessment*** discussion inspired several participants, generating insight that more can be done to better understand the needs of local communities and strengthen CF work and impact.
- Significant appreciation was expressed for ***the C.S. Mott Foundation's support for European CFs*** to access such learning experiences.

Reflection for further engagement

The participation of European CF practitioners at the ECFI visit has been a powerful and exciting experience, leaving most participants with important insights for their work in CFs and local communities. Considering the impact of the experience, the report concludes with a few thoughts for the future:

- UK CFs were interested in learning about European CFs and connecting more with international colleagues throughout the conference. More content related to European/international CF movements and CF practices may be considered for future conferences. This also relates to discussing national contexts of CF movements in other countries and challenging realities such as the ongoing war in Ukraine and the Middle East.
- A stronger connection between European and international participants could bring further benefits given the similar level of development of CF movements in respective countries. The visits to TRCF and Leeds CF would have also been useful to international participants.
- The number of European participants per country is limited at the moment. For the next editions of the UKCF Conference, it would be wonderful to consider including more participants from each country. A joint UKCF-ECFI conference could be envisaged if the UKCF proves open to and ECFI and European CFSOs can mobilize the needed funding.
- ECFI could also partner with other CF movements to build an international component of their conferences.
- At the conference, more structured networking with UK participants may prove useful. The pairing of UK CFs with European/international CF/CFSOs present at the conference could open a space for more in-depth discussions.

Stefan Cibian, October 2024

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