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How County Durham Community Foundation (UK) embraced the SDGs



*Michelle Cooper, CEO, Co.
Durham CF*

Embracing the SDGs is a process that requires bringing the staff team and board on a journey. Along that journey there is a realisation that embedding the Goals in a community foundation helps everyone within it and outside of it - donors, partners, community groups, see the relevance of their work as part of a bigger picture and to appreciate interdependence. Michelle Cooper, Chief Executive of Durham Community Foundation describes how she recognised the opportunity that embracing the SDGs presented and how she went about it.

‘When I joined County Durham Community Foundation, the team had a sense that they were doing something good, and worthwhile. But as a ‘middleman’ organisation - with the donor providing the money, and the community group turning it into magic - there was a sense of detachment and a lack of confidence in our offer. A big piece of work was to help staff understand that their knowledge, attention to detail and discernment was leading to more impactful grant making, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) became a bridge for that.

What we do as a Foundation has a million positive consequences for our communities - too many for us to wrap our heads around. But the SDGs simplify and clarify this impact, to the point where our elevator pitch is starting to come together.

As such, SDGs play a key, and growing role, in donor relationships. We need to be able to communicate our value in order to invite new funds, and the SDGs offer a simple, colourful way to do this that appeals to dynamic and growing businesses.

The process then came together piece by piece. We didn’t know exactly how we were going to reach our aim but decided the best thing to do was to get started. In doing so, next steps have always presented themselves. From the start we could see that 17 SDGs were too broad for us, so we narrowed this to the nine that align with our grant making. It is worth noting of course, that our focus on nine, does not limit our donors. One of our donors has been inspired to use SDGs from our lead, but has a business that fits closely with the environmental SDGs, so there is real flexibility within this system.

I presented the framework of the SDGs to the board, who gave their buy-in, as they could see the merits of being able to communicate with donors and potential donors. I then took the SDGs to external meetings - showing prospective donors that we fund a broad range of projects and that a fund with us can cover virtually any passion of theirs - from supporting children (Quality Education) to opportunities for disabled people (Reduced Inequalities) to care for the elderly (No Poverty). Many employers are now increasingly concerned with the health and mental health of their teams, and Good Health and Wellbeing is the stand-out SDG for those conversations.

With a positive external response, it was time to introduce the SDGs to the team with the evidence to support their value. Our communications team, in particular, was engaged with using the SDGs and building them gradually into our messaging and various platforms. Members of the team were invited to take part in UKCF workshops and discussions around the SDGs and, little by little, everyone has become more familiar and comfortable with the purpose and the terminology.

It was also the right time for us to consider refreshing our brand (process ongoing), which also gave the opportunity to build the language of the SDGs and their importance into our mission statements and brand guidelines.

The next step was then to begin a simple mapping process of aligning grants to the SDGs they primarily work towards. This was completed in the summer of 2020, followed by staff training. To date we have the map for our Covid-19 grant making and for the Financial Year 2019-2020 and this is providing a clear structure for the reports that we are writing about these two areas.

We are now at the point where the SDGs are in our Annual Review, our literature, some of our videos, [on our website](#), in our press releases and in the presentations we make to potential donors. Perhaps the most important achievement is that the donor services and programmes teams now include SDGs in relationship building and decision-making and the comms team are continually finding new ways to embed them into our messages. As time has passed we have come to see four SDGs as our headlines (No Poverty, Good Health and Wellbeing, Reduced Inequalities and Sustainable Cities and Communities) and the remaining five (Zero Hunger, Quality Education, Affordable and Clean Energy, Decent Work and Economic Growth and Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) as sub narratives that build depth into our reporting and messaging. We recognise that we have a long way to go, but feel confident that we are now on the road.'



County Durham
Community Foundation

County Durham Community Foundation is one of 46 in the UK.

Website: <https://www.cdcf.org.uk/>

Michelle can be contacted on michelle@cdcf.org.uk