rock reports

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Photograph © Simon Veit-Wilson

the good life

Blyth Valley Food Co-op's Hilary Bell delivering a fresh consignment of carrots

Eat well and live longer, say the health gurus, but it's not that easy when you have no access to shops selling fresh food and nowhere to grow it. Northern Rock Foundation continues to support organisations that are prepared to get their hands dirty in the cause of healthy living.

Four years ago, in 2002, a lifestyle survey, commissioned by Northumberland Care Trust, highlighted the connection between what we eat and drink and our health. According to the survey, the number of local residents with diabetes, coronary heart disease, cancer and other illnesses or conditions influenced by diet was higher than the national average, and the number of opportunities to buy fresh food from local suppliers and retailers was lower. Although Blyth itself has shops selling fresh fruit and vegetables, the valley's villages have lost most of theirs.

The Primary Care Trust put its money where its mouth was and paid for a project that would test the demand for a local food co-operative. Food co-ops have been running in other countries for years, and are now beginning to take off in England. They are a direct response to the domination of food retailing by the big supermarkets and to the shortage of local sources of fresh produce. The pilot project was well received in Blyth Valley and in 2003, the Countryside Agency awarded Blyth Valley Food Co-op Ltd (BVFC) a grant to appoint its first food development worker.

With a degree in agriculture and years of experience as a postmaster and newsagent, Anthony Armstrong had found the ideal job. 'I'm a frustrated farmer,' he jokes. 'I am at the fruit and veg market at six o'clock, four mornings a week, sourcing produce for the village food co-ops.' At the last count there were 12, most of them operating from a local community centre. Volunteers take the orders from local residents and pass them on to BVFC. Two days later, quantities of fruit, vegetables and salad are delivered to the centre and volunteers bag it up. 'There is a popular misconception that food co-ops are only for people on low incomes,' says Armstrong. 'That's not true. This is a service for everyone who wants it. Where there are not enough volunteers, BFVC will deliver the food, already bagged.'

People cannot specify what they would like in their bag. BVFC chooses the best value and quality it can find, within a certain price limit. One week in June, the fruit bag included four apples, five satsumas, a honeydew melon, four bananas and two nectarines. The vegetable bag included potatoes, carrots and onions (as it always does), a cauliflower, spring cabbage and two leeks.

From the outset, BVFC recognised that the inability to buy fresh food was only part of the picture and it applied to Northern Rock Foundation for a grant with which to take on a second employee. Hilary Bell's job is to work with the food co-ops to recruit more volunteers (a continuing challenge) and to offer training in health and safety in packing, lifting and stock control, but also in food preparation.

'Our volunteers are vital,' says Armstrong 'and they do benefit. One person said to us that a couple of hours volunteering every week had been more effective than five years on Prozac!' A recent survey of health in Blyth Valley showed a slight improvement on the 2002 figures. 'Of course the problem still exists, but I think we are making a difference. A pound spent on food saves the National Health Service nine pounds on treatment.'

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the good life

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Simon McCabe was, until recently, chair of BVFC. His day job is as Food Links Project Officer for North East Land Links (NELL), an environmental and public health project, working to strengthen links between urban and rural areas in the region. One of its ambitions is to connect local food producers to 'community food initiatives' (CFIs) including food co-ops. McCabe's brief is to help people to set up CFIs in North Tyneside, to support them and to share best practice. A similar project in West Cumbria has been very successful, with local farmers supplying meat, fish, dried foods, fruit and vegetables to 22 CFIs. In the North East, it has been harder work.

'The two big challenges are sourcing the food and distributing it,' says McCabe. 'When I started, I tried to encourage people to work together, but nobody wanted to work with anyone else. They saw food co-ops as too much trouble.' He buys from local farmers and from the wholesale fruit and vegetable market in Team Valley. 'At the moment we just do fruit, vegetables, salad and eggs, but we're thinking about bulk-buying cereals too. Anything to get people away from the supermarkets,' he smiles.

The community health teams have been key partners, providing information, local contacts and back-up services. 'We don't set up groups everywhere we are asked,' McCabe explains. 'We check out the area first and if there is a local fruit and veg guy, then we wouldn't do it, because it would be unfair competition, but if there is no shop - nothing - we would.'

At the last count, there were 37 CFIs in the North East, the most successful of which are in the East Durham coalfield area. McCabe puts this down to the willingness of the local volunteers and the support of Easington PCT. Some communities, he says, are 'really insular' and some PCTs could learn a lot from Easington's helpful attitude.

McCabe's contract with NELL comes to an end this autumn, but he will be carrying on as director of a new social enterprise, The Food Chain Company North East, supplying CFIs. The Food Chain and Blyth Valley Food Co-operative are currently considering a merger.

The Comfrey Project

There are two allotments in Newcastle and one in Gateshead that are about more than growing food. They are also places of healing and reflection. In 1995, Mandy Jetter was at home, with a small baby, listening to the radio. She heard a programme about an allotment project, in London, set up by the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture. She had previously worked as an 'enabler' on horticultural projects with learning disabled people and the radio programme struck a chord. This was before the policy of 'dispersing' asylum seekers around the country had been introduced and there were very few asylum seekers in the North East. Nevertheless, Jetter contacted the North East Refugee Service with her idea. The response was positive and, by autumn 2000, she was in a position to pursue it.

'Dispersal had begun to make an impact on the North East and I started talking to people. We got Health Action Zone money and a grant from the Allen Lane Foundation, through another charity, then we set ourselves up formally in July 2002.' Northern Rock Foundation is now helping to fund the organisation's core costs, including Jetter's salary.

It was she who chose the charity's name. 'Comfrey is a healing plant,' she says. 'Traditionally it's known as knitbone and bruisewort. It's also a plant that feeds other plants.' The Comfrey Project has one allotment in the West End of Newcastle, one in the East End and one in Gateshead. They each operate three days a week and the project's users, who are all asylum seekers or refugees, come and go as they please. They may stay all day, or just for an hour or two. The social interaction is as important as the gardening, Jetter believes, but there is no question that being out of doors and seeing new life emerge from the ground is therapeutic for many of the gardeners. One of the Comfrey Project's early users, a woman who had had to leave her family behind when she came to England, referred to the seedlings in the greenhouse as her children. Another has said: 'This beautiful place made me happy and invited me to a place of peace and tranquillity.'

Gardening to relax with the Comfrey Project

Photographs © Simon Veit-Wilson

People are referred by GPs, by community mental health teams, social workers, counsellors, English language teachers and existing users - a husband, a wife or a friend. 'One of the biggest challenges is what to do in the winter,' says Jetter. 'We meet in the shed on the allotment and have soup and bread and conversation. We cook what we grow or share it out. We also go to museums and galleries and do various arts and crafts activities.'

So why is gardening so beneficial for this particular group of users? 'People get different things from it,' Jetter concludes. 'One of the real benefits is the sense of normality it gives people. For all that your life may be in complete turmoil, there is something very grounded and very predictable about it. Having your hands in the soil, picking weeds helps you to focus on something else for a while. Our seasons are so short compared to where most people come from, they are amazed at how long things take to grow. Working on the allotment, you just have to learn to deal with our terrible weather!'

SImon McCabe stocking up at North East Wholesale Fruit & Vegetable Market, Team Valley Trading Estate

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you told us

Rock Reports talks to Rob Williamson about the results of the Foundation's extensive consultation exercise.

In June, the trustees and staff got together to look at the results of a year-long consultation on what the priorities of the Foundation should be for the next five years. New guidelines will be published in September and the first grants from the new programmes will be made early in 2007. Rob Williamson, the Foundation's assistant director - policy and communications, supported by communications assistant Joan Woolley and directors' PA Ruth Mansfield, was responsible for coordinating the exercise, in which nearly 1,000 people took part.

There were ten meetings of members of the voluntary and community sector in the North East and Cumbria, involving between 30 and 80 people, and ten smaller meetings for people with a detailed knowledge of particular fields. There were individual discussions with other funders, and the Foundation looked back at every grant it had made since 2003 and at the recipients' written reports on what the grant had achieved, or was achieving.

Many readers of **Rock Reports** contributed their experience and ideas to the process. 'The big consultation events were a good way of taking the temperature of the sector,' thinks Williamson. 'The range of organisations represented was very broad and we got a clear sense of people's needs and expectations. We wanted a wide-ranging discussion to help us understand the bigger picture and that's exactly what we got.' An alternative would have been to invite smaller groups of people from the same field (for example, those working with older people, or in rural areas) to have a more detailed discussion about the issues affecting them, but the mixture of organisations was welcomed by almost everyone.

The new programmes will be available in September on www.nr-foundation.org.uk and in print, on request.

There were at least six Foundation staff at every meeting and for those not involved in assessing or monitoring grants, it was a rare opportunity to meet the sector face to face. The trustees, who ultimately make the decisions about where the Foundation's money goes, also found this extremely useful.

The meetings of experts had a different function. 'The idea,' Williamson explains, 'was to focus down on subjects in which we are already quite involved, but also to talk about how we might be more effective in areas where we haven't yet done much.' So, for example, there were sessions on young people, older people, health, the environment, jobs, money and culture (all themes of current Foundation programmes) and others on housing and homelessness and on enterprise education (or 'how to be an entrepreneur'). 'We wanted to bring together people working on the ground with researchers, public sector commissioners of services and people from the policy world to challenge our thinking and to tell us what was needed. It was really important, too, that we involved people from outside our region in these discussions.'

While experienced Foundation staff and trustees might have been able to anticipate the issues that arose, in relation to individual priority areas, what they had not expected was the emphatic message emerging from both sets of meetings, about the opportunities the Foundation has beyond grant-making.

'There is no question that we will remain a grant-maker and that most of our funds will be distributed through our funding programmes,' confirms Williamson. 'But, the consultation exercise really shone a light on our role, as an independent, non-aligned body, in bringing people together to talk, to debate policy, to broker agreements and to do more for our region than we are doing at the moment.'

Consultation Photograph © Simon Veit-Wilson

Photos & montage by Dave Grey © Kimmerston Design

scientist scoops writer's award

The Northern Rock Foundation Writer's Award for 2006 has gone to a Glasgow-born scientist turned novelist. At 44, Andrew Crumey is the youngest winner of the award so far. He completed a doctorate in theoretical physics at Imperial College, London, in 1986 and then balanced working as a researcher in the college physics department with running West London Nightline, a telephone helpline for students in distress. He was also a care worker for Westminster Mencap.

Crumey moved to Newcastle in 1992, married, had two children and got a job at a school in Gosforth, teaching maths and physics. This is when his career as a writer began to take off. His first book, **Music in a Foreign Language**, won the Saltire First Book Award. His third, **D'Alembert's Principle**, won the Northern Arts Writers Award and his fourth won prizes from both the Arts Council of England and the Scottish Arts Council in 2000. That was the year he became literary editor of Scotland on Sunday, a part-time job that the Writer's Award has enabled him to give up.

This is still the largest prize for literature in the UK and the only one with a regional focus. It is open to any writer living in the North East or Cumbria, who has published at least two books with a recognised publisher. It provides the winner with £20,000 a year, for three years, buying them time to concentrate on writing. Crumey is now hard at work on **Sputnik Caledonia**, the work in progress that captured the imagination of the judges - Maggie Gee, Don Paterson and DJ Taylor. The judging panel was chaired by Fiona Ellis.

Photograph © Allan Mushen

'The award has changed my life, giving me a moral as well as financial boost. It means freedom to work, encouragement to explore and stimulus to create. I feel immensely privileged to have been given the sort of chance every writer dreams of, and I'm determined to make the most of what I see as a great honour and a unique opportunity.'

Writer's Award winner, Andrew Crumey

Grants approved in the first half of 2006

Grants by programme

Grant programme	Amount approved (£)	No. of awards	% of amount approved
Aspiration	1,248,531	17	14%
Basics	1,261,984	21	14%
Better Sector	1,238,876	25	14%
Capital	1,122,000	6	12%
Exploration	753,676	8	8%
Money and Jobs	1,545,031	17	17%
Prevention	1,921,262	41	21%
Grand Total	**9,091,360**	**135**	**100%**

Grants by region

Region	Amount approved (£)	No. of awards	% of amount approved
Cumbria	1,493,628	19	16%
Durham	688,784	17	9%
North East	1,937,253	22	21%
Northumberland	913,690	15	10%
Tees Valley	1,577,554	24	17%
Tyne and Wear	2,480,451	38	27%
Grand Total	**9,091,360**	**135**	**100%**

Andy, June and Lisa from The Lawnmowers rehearsing a forum theatre piece for the company's employment research project

Photograph © Simon Veit-Wilson

the way to work

Now and again, governments come up with policies that change the lives of millions of people for the better. Valuing People: a New Strategy for Learning Disability for the 21st Century is one of those. Published in 2001, Valuing People stands out not only for its content, but also for the process that produced it.

According to Gerry Ling, director of The Lawnmowers Independent Theatre Company: 'There has never been so much consultation. The process was accessible, interesting and informative and that meant that, when the policy was published, it was workable. It was one you could trust and like.'

Valuing People is a five-year initiative to improve the quality of life of learning disabled people and their families, in areas such as education, health, housing and employment. Underpinning the strategy is a commitment to enabling 'people with learning disabilities to have as much choice and control as possible over their lives and the services and support they receive'.

No more than ten percent of learning disabled people in the UK are in paid employment. Three things get in the way: the benefits system, prejudice on the part of employers, and people's lack of experience in applying for jobs. As a result, a lot of the work they do is voluntary, or part time and poorly paid.

'The regulations on benefits are very complicated,' Ling agrees. 'You can earn up to £20 a week, as a volunteer or a trainee, without it affecting your benefits and you can try out a paid job for up to a year. Even so, most people assume that their pay will be less than their benefit.' The **Valuing People** website provides answers to this kind of question, but it still takes a lot of confidence, and the backing of families and support workers, to find and keep a job.

In 2005, The Lawnmowers received a grant from Northern Rock Foundation to investigate different models of employment for learning disabled people. Two of the company's disabled members are paid, but the rest are volunteers.

'Our approach to the Foundation arose out of our discontent with some of the activity that followed in the wake of **Valuing People**,' Ling explains. 'A lot of consultants suddenly developed an interest in learning disability. There was talk of setting up social firms and micro-enterprises but we felt that, in most cases, learning disabled people would still end up with the worst jobs and having no say in the running of things. The Government's agenda is to get people off benefits, which is fair enough, but there has to be more to it than that. We want people to have lives that are engaging and interesting, too.'

The first year of The Lawnmowers' three-year research project has just come to an end. Using their theatre skills, they have been talking with learning disabled people about their attitudes to, and experience of, different kinds of workplace and ways of working. Many people spend years on courses (for example, in gardening or catering) but rarely find a job at the end of it. **Valuing People** suggests that, in order to hold down a paid job, an employee with a learning disability may need additional support and The Lawnmowers have been looking round for examples. 'We went to a café in Edinburgh, called The Engine Shed,' says Ling. 'Their trainees stay for up to two years and 90% of them get a paid job. Why is it that most local authority initiatives of this kind have such a low success rate, and this one is doing so well? They are doing something right there.' They have also been to see companies in Brighton and London and are studying the different approaches taken in Italy, Spain, Brazil and the USA. 'It is important to find out what doesn't work, too,' agrees Ling.

The second year of the project will involve developing and 'road-testing' different employment models. The Lawnmowers are interested in whether direct payments might be used by learning disabled people to buy in the support they need. 'We want to end up with a model that can work for our own company, which is learning disabled led,' Ling explains 'We want to draw on all the best practice we can find and if we don't come up with a model that works - with everyone working so hard on it - then I don't want another policy telling me that we can.'

Towards the end of next year, The Lawnmowers will organise a conference to share their work in progress. By the end of 2007, there will be a video and printed materials on the different models the project has tested, and guidance on employment issues.

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In Stockton-on-Tees, A Way Out runs drop-in sessions for teenagers, combining recreational activities with positive health messages

Photographs © Simon Veit-Wilson

behind the headlines

The misuse of drugs and alcohol by models and pop stars, the drink-fuelled, weekend fights in city centres, the shooting of drug dealers, and other stories linked to 'drink and drugs' are part of the staple diet of a hungry media. Behind the headlines, voluntary sector organisations are working to prevent substance misuse and to support users, their families and carers. Rock Reports talks to three charities currently funded by Northern Rock Foundation.

Someone had to do something. That was the view of Janet Murphy and the small group of bereaved relatives who set up Escape Family Support, in Blyth, in 1994. When her daughter Jenny died, as a result of drugs, Murphy was shocked to discover that there was no specialist counselling, information or advice available. The original aim of the charity was to support the families of substance users but, she explains, 'we soon realised we couldn't achieve anything without working with the substance users too.'

Today, Escape provides one-to-one and group counselling, a drop-in service, respite and advocacy services for families, and activities (mostly in sports and the arts) designed to give users something positive to think about it. There are 24 staff and more than 20 volunteers delivering services across Northumberland, and also in Gateshead. The charity has won numerous awards, including a Queen's Award for voluntary service and a Home Office Tackling Drugs Changing Lives Award 2006.

Escape's growth over the past five years is directly linked to the Government's commitment to tackling the misuse of drugs and, more recently, alcohol. A ten-year drugs strategy was published in 1998 and specialist treatment and support services followed, including Drug Action Teams, Sorted! (which offers advice and support to young people under 18), and the National Treatment Agency for Substance Abuse. The Primary Care Trusts and the Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships have also become key players in the process of prevention and cure. Escape's role has changed as a result.

> **'I think the problem has always been there, but once people know there's a service, they come to us.'**

'Everything we've done has been in response to need,' explains Murphy. 'We don't do much work with under 16s now, because there are specialist services for that age group, where there was nothing before.' But drugs are as available as ever and there's always something new: crack cocaine and methamphetamine are the latest arrivals.

There is nothing new about alcohol misuse, but the demand for services is increasing and Escape is currently running a project funded by the Lloyds TSB Foundation and the Greggs Trust, among others.

'We are not promoting it, because we'd be overwhelmed,' says Murphy. 'We've worked with 450 people in the past year alone. I think the problem has always been there, but once people know there's a service, they come to us.'

Addaction in Cumbria

Addaction is a national charity, with staff and projects all over the country, including Cumbria, Newcastle, Middlesbrough, Hartlepool and Redcar and Cleveland. Earlier this year, Northern Rock Foundation made a grant to Addaction Cumbria to appoint a new member of staff to work with families affected by alcohol, and particularly with children. A similar post involving families affected by drugs is being supported by Zurich Financial Services.

Karen Grandal Park, Addaction's Cumbria Services Area Manager, is frank about the scale of the problem. 'There is a lot of money targeted at drugs, but much less at alcohol,' she says. 'There is a National Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy but there's been no money following it.' Cumbria includes communities with some of the highest levels of alcohol misuse in the country. According to Cumbria Drug and Alcohol Action Team, 46% of young people in Cumbria drink alcohol every week, compared with a national figure of 27% and this can start a habit that continues into adulthood.

'It is not uncommon for different generations, in the same family, to be misusing alcohol and if they are all living in the same space, it can be hard to break the cycle,' says Grandal Park. In his first six weeks in post, Cumbria's new family support worker received 20 referrals.

'We have to prioritise the ones with the most needs,' Grandal Park explained. 'For example, we have a grandmother, mother, teenage boy and young child living together. The grandmother and mother are drinking heavily, the teenager is not attending school and the younger child is at risk of being taken into care. One of the key things for us is to try to ensure that all of the agencies - the school, social services, the GP - are working together, and making sure they are doing what they said they were going to do. Historically, everyone has gone off and done their own thing.'

Improving communication within the family is as important as getting the various service providers together, which is why the support worker is focusing on a small number of families at a time. 'To be honest, sometimes it does feel like we are trying to bail out a tanker with a teaspoon,' admits Grandal Park 'and it's important not to take on too much. It has to be about quality, not quantity.'

A Way Out

Jessie Joe Jacobs grew up in Stockton-on-Tees and went on to research the town's drug intervention and prevention services, as part of a Masters course at Durham University. She knew that there was a gap that needed filling and four years ago, in June, she and two friends set up A Way Out to help young people at risk from drugs and alcohol. A Way Out was particularly concerned by the number of young women in Stockton (but often from elsewhere) who were working as prostitutes to pay for their drugs or someone else's. While providing support for girls and young women was a priority, Jacobs and her team recognised that they needed to be working with children and young people of both sexes, in schools, youth clubs and in the community, to reduce the chances of them getting involved in drink or drugs in the first place.

'Heroin and crack cocaine are a very big problem in this area,' explains women's worker Avril Gregory. 'If you don't catch them at school age and give them the right tools, then by the time they get into their early teens they are ripe targets. It is about ignorance, lack of confidence and peer pressure - a case of "I'm young and I know it all."'

A Way Out's activity now has two distinct strands: a drop-in centre with services for women, aged 18 and over and a prevention programme for children and young people, delivered mostly through schools and youth clubs. The women's drop-in is at 93 Skinner Street and is open every weekday. Women may be referred by social services or another agency, or they may refer themselves.

'We offer meals, laundry and a shower; they can get their hair done and take part in arts activities,' says Gregory, 'and we run life skills and confidence-building sessions too. We very rarely get people who've just started misusing drugs. We get the really vulnerable and hard to reach people, who don't feel they have anywhere else to go.' The aim is to gain the women's trust, through kindness and friendship. The greater your self esteem, the more likely you are to accept help. 'If someone is hurting then it's a community response that's needed,' stresses Gregory, echoing the charity's Christian principles.

Janet Murphy, founder of Escape Family Support

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The Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy for England
www.strategy.gov.uk/downloads/su/alcohol/pdf

Tackling Drugs to Build A Better Britain
www.dh.gov.uk/PublicationsAndStatistics

A Way Out also makes home visits, keeps in touch with women who have to spend time in prison, and sends birthday cards. It may sound like a small gesture, but for someone with no family or friends it can mean a lot.

Gregory is encouraged by the way people can turn their lives around. 'We had one woman in her thirties, who had really given up. She used to whisper when she came in, but after she'd been with us a while, she ended up enrolling herself at Stockton College. Now that's a success story.'

Northern Rock Foundation is currently helping to fund A Way Out's young people's programme. This involves six sessions at a youth club, school or drop-in centre. 'The idea is to work with young people who are vulnerable to drugs and alcohol misuse, which also means they are at risk of sexual exploitation and anti-social behaviour,' explains Jessie Joe Jacobs who, as well as running the charity, leads on the schools work. Positive health messages are incorporated into enjoyable, recreational activities.

The VIP project does as its name suggests, treating ten year olds as privileged individuals. It is not an experience that many of them have had. At each of the six sessions, the children are greeted by 'hosts' (as distinct from teachers or youth workers) and are offered the opportunity to take part in a range of activities, many of which their peers have previously suggested - DJ-ing, street dance and games. There are also health-related workshops where they can ask straight questions and get straight answers and find that perhaps they don't 'know it all'.

Getting them to come back six weeks in a row is an achievement in itself. 'They come because they want to be there,' says Jacobs. 'They are being given an opportunity to do things they have been asking to do, and they are treated well.'

For teenagers, there are regular drop-in sessions in Parkfield, Hardwick and Port Clarence. These are more relaxed, with pool tables and decks provided, but the principle of combining creative activities with health education is the same. North Tees Primary Care Trust is a significant supporter. Sometimes, there is a change of scene: one group was taken away for a weekend, to work on a barge and came back buzzing with the energy that comes from having done something different. They had also had a drug-free weekend.

Like Escape Family Support and Addaction, A Way Out recognises that it is one of many agencies and services working to prevent substance misuse and to reduce its impact on society. Jacobs sits on two partnership boards, which enables her to keep in touch with the latest developments and plans. 'We work in partnership, because nobody has all the answers,' says Avril Gregory. 'In this kind of work, networking is everything.'

taking the chair

The new chairman of Northern Rock Foundation is Alastair Balls, chief executive of the Centre for Life, in Newcastle. A straight-talking Scot, he was chief executive of Tyne and Wear Development Corporation and is currently chairman of the NewcastleGateshead Initiative. Balls is the Foundation's fourth chairman and the first never to have worked for the bank or the building society.

'I must admit my acceptance was instant and instinctive,' he says. 'There were three reasons why I was keen. First, because the issues of disadvantage need to be looked at holistically, and no one other than the Foundation is doing that. Second, because the funds we have are restricted to the North East and Cumbria, we do genuinely have an opportunity to make a difference. Third, I am a great admirer of Fiona Ellis and her team.'

Balls has had experience of the Foundation as a beneficiary. In 2001, the Centre for Life needed a million pounds to buy a nearby plot of land that was ripe for commercial development. The land had the potential to provide the Centre for Life with much needed additional income. The request did not meet any of the criteria of the grants programmes, and so the Foundation suggested a loan. The land is now occupied by a thriving hotel business and the Centre for Life is well on its way to paying back the loan.

The new chairman is impressed the way the Foundation thinks creatively. 'I don't believe in the view that says the Government can cure everything and in fact, I think government finds it hard to deal with problems in a sensitive way.' He points to the way that regional government offices and agencies find themselves trying to implement policies that were developed with a national picture on the drawing board, overlooking the fact that the North East (like other regions) has specific issues with which to deal.

Alastair Balls

Balls sees the Foundation's long-term commitment to the region as one of its great strengths. As chief executive of the Development Corporation, he was working to a ten-year timescale. 'In the cycle of development, ten years is not very long. A high premium was put on getting the job done. Of course we tried to cooperate and to work collaboratively [with partners, locally and regionally] but most of our energy was directed to just to getting things done.' He likens the Development Corporation to a retailer, at the sharp end of sales, and the Foundation to a wholesaler, with more time to negotiate deals.

'It's our job to help other people to do things,' he believes. 'The charity sector is an interesting beast. It has very large organisations at one end of the spectrum, that should really be called not-for-profit, rather than voluntary and, at the other end, small charities, with just a couple of people, with an enormous commitment to what they do, but few resources. It's part of our job to build capacity within the sector and that demands patience and understanding.'

He is interested in the potential for the Foundation to influence the root causes of disadvantage. 'We are often dealing with problems that have other causes - such as the education system - which we cannot change,' he observes. 'But the North East has a real, long-term problem here. It has to be globally competitive, yet its education standards are well below the national average. What can we do about that?' While he does not want the Foundation to be treading on other people's toes he does believe that, over the past eight years, 'it has acquired a reputation for professionalism and integrity that invites us to spread our wings a little bit.'

So what kind of a chairman will he be? 'As I have grown older, my ego has shrunk,' he says, with a smile. 'Not a lot, but I am interested in building a consensus with the trustees and the team. It's not my job to punch through, but to reach a common understanding. The one thing I have said is that, with our funds growing, because of the success of the company, and with experience behind us, we can afford to think a bit harder about the line we might want to take.'

Photograph © Newcastle Centre for Life

highly commended

In June, the Foundation was shortlisted in the Grantmaking category of The Charity Awards 2006.

The nomination was for its £4-million initiative to help victims of domestic violence in the North East and Cumbria. The Foundation is supporting two multi-agency partnerships to test different ways of working with the victims and perpetrators of domestic violence. It is also funding a team from Sunderland University to evaluate the scheme. The Grantmaking category was won by Nationwide Foundation. Northern Rock Foundation, Charity Bank and London Bombings Relief were all highly commended.

northern rock foundation

Northern Rock Foundation is a registered charity. Registered number: 1063906

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