

Washington Pride in Place Programme Board

June 2026

Chair of the Board – Ruth Walker

Sunderland All Together Consortium CIO

Ruth is an experienced Community and Youth Worker, having worked with young people across the city since the age of 18. She holds a degree in Youth Work from Sunderland University and later returned to higher education to complete a PGCE, followed by a Master's degree in Youth Studies. She currently manages a city-wide youth work charity and is committed to ensuring that young people are supported, invested in, and provided with the opportunities they need to develop confidence, resilience, and wellbeing.

A lifelong resident of the city, Ruth lives locally with her family and two dogs. She is deeply connected to the area and enjoys spending time exploring the city's coastline, parks, and surrounding countryside. Outside of work, her interests include walking, hiking, camping, gardening, and stargazing.

Why I'm delighted to be Chair of the Board and what value I will add...

Ruth is excited to serve as Chair of the Board, where she brings a strong commitment to inclusive leadership and youth representation. She is passionate about ensuring that young people are actively considered in decision-making processes, that their voices are heard, and that their aspirations for Washington help shape strategic priorities and long-term outcomes.

Sharon Hodgson MP

MP for Washington and Gateshead South

Why I'm delighted to be a Board member and what value I will add...

I am proud to represent the wonderful town of Washington in Parliament as part of my constituency. As the link between my constituents and Government, it is important that I hear the concerns of all those in the area to ensure that they are addressed. The funding that the Board has received will allow us to make real change, entirely based on the needs of the area and its residents. I look forward to working with my colleagues on the Board, as we work to bring communities together, improve living standards and give the residents of Washington more of a stake in their future.

Bobby-Jay Hudson

Member of Washington Youth Council

I have lived in Washington all my life and as a member of Washington Youth Council, I believe we have already begun making a difference to the local community. I feel honoured to be able to be on the Board to help shape the community that has made me who I am today.

I grew up in Washington and attended Barmston Village Primary School and then moved onto Washington Academy. I think Washington is a great place to live and will be even better with the support of the Board.

I am also the longest standing member of the Washington Youth Council and have supported many people throughout this role. I am also in the process of completing my Level 2 Qualification in Youth Work Practice.

Why I'm delighted to be a Board member and what value I will add...

I am a strong believer in opportunities for young people, so I am excited to share my views on this as part of the Board. I am looking forward to seeing how this investment will benefit people of all ages, and I feel proud to have the opportunity to voice issues that matter as a young person myself.

Shaun Hair

Youth Member of Parliament for Sunderland

I have lived in Washington all my life and feel incredibly proud to serve on the Board, representing the community that has shaped who I am. I love Washington and I am passionate about ensuring it continues to thrive as a place where everyone feels heard, valued and supported.

I grew up in Blackfell, attending Blackfell Primary School before moving on to Oxclose Community Academy. I also serve in Washington's local Royal Air Force Air Cadets squadron, 2214 Usworth, as a Flight Sergeant.

I am also the Youth Member of Parliament for Sunderland. In this position, I work closely with Members of Parliament, councillors and local organisations to represent the voices of young people across the city. I regularly engage with young people to understand the issues that matter most to them and ensure their views are reflected in local and national discussions and I have visited Parliament numerous times including speaking in the House of Commons.

Why I'm delighted to be a Board member and what value I will add...

I am particularly passionate about creating more opportunities for young people and ensuring their perspectives are included in the decisions that shape our communities. I believe meaningful change happens when we genuinely listen, and I am committed to making sure young people's opinions are heard clearly and taken seriously.

As a member of the Board, I am looking forward to contributing to positive change, supporting regeneration and helping to strengthen our local community. I will work hard to ensure that investment benefits residents of all ages, and that the voices of young people continue to play a vital role in shaping the future of Washington and that the Board's work delivers lasting, positive outcomes for residents across Washington.

Kim Hunter

Headway Wearside

I have lived in Washington since I was primary school age, with my first job being a catering assistant in the galleries, I attended Sunderland College as a Nursery nurse training and working in Nursery Schools in Washington.

Whilst raising my family I worked in local community centres at Blackfell and Albany as a creche worker but also held the role of trustee, it was here I learnt skills that would be useful in my career.

Due to ill health/disability I couldn't do the job I trained for and joined a local disability parent group and helped to grow the charity across Sunderland, this was my stepping stone into the world of disability, the needs that disabled people have and how I could "tell it like it is" at regional and local health forums and meetings.

I became the voluntary sector rep at the Strategic Health meetings, and more recently as one of the Voluntary sector reps for Washington at the area meetings.

My working adult life has seen me manage small disability charities such as Wearable and now Headway Wearside, a charity supporting those with brain injury and their carers.



For many years I have fought to have disability on the agenda to ensure accessibility for everyone to enable them to access local services working alongside the NHS, Transport and Local Authority leisure services to name a few.

I have attended several “an afternoon” at parliament to highlight the need for rehabilitation services to be implemented into mainstream health services.

Why I’m delighted to be a Board member and what value I will add...

I am still living in Washington in the same family house that I have brought my children up in, and I can honestly say I like living here, I’m local to shops [and yes there could be improvements], I’m local to leisure activities [and yes they could be fully inclusive] I’m local to sports provision and libraries [that I would love more of] but I am delighted to be a member of the Board to engage with local people, find out what they need and what they don’t need.

My strengths include helping to make policies and strategic plans into practice, into a reality that we can all understand and ensure that people who don’t normally have a say CAN have their say in their own neighbourhood.

Dr Raj Bethapudi

Galleries Medical Practice, Washington

Dr Bethapudi qualified as a doctor in 2003 and has been a GP since 2009. He is a postgraduate GP trainer and appraiser with particular interest in cardiovascular disease prevention, early cancer diagnosis and medical education.

After being elected as an executive GP for Sunderland CCG in 2016, Dr Bethapudi has subsequently been involved in various roles including ICB Sunderland place based clinical lead, RCGP NE faculty board vice chair, director of Sunderland GP Alliance and partner at Galleries Medical Practice.

Outside medicine, being a married dad of two boys, playing cricket, practicing yoga and meditation keeps him well occupied.

Why I’m delighted to be a Board member and what value I will add...

Dr Bethapudi is passionate about driving technological innovation in practices and working towards reducing health inequalities to help shape a future that reflects the aspirations of residents.



Simon Marshall

Together for Children, Sunderland

Simon has over 30 years of experience working in education across the North East region. He spent twelve years as a headteacher specialising in leading schools in challenging circumstances.

Simon's success was based on establishing school improvement strategies to improve outcomes for children by creating a culture of well-being and resilience and developing leadership at all levels.

In 2017 Simon was appointed as Director of Education for Sunderland and has helped lead the Children's Service improvement journey from inadequate to outstanding.

In 2024 Simon was appointed as the Director of Children's Services and Chief Executive of Together for Children.

Why I'm delighted to be a Board member and what value I will add...

Being a Board member will provide an incredible opportunity to meet influential, enthusiastic, and well-connected individuals who are committed to working with communities to develop a strategic vision which will empower local people, so that they can decide on local priorities and what's best for the long-term future of the places where they live.

I am looking forward to the opportunity to network and interact with the key leaders from health, education, industry, commerce, voluntary sector and government and I bring a wide range of experience of working with children, young people and families to build stronger, resilient and successful communities.

Marc Edwards

Gentoo Group

Marc is the Executive Director of Property at Gentoo Group and leads all property related services for their 28,500 homes. Marc's responsibilities include Property Maintenance, Property Safety, Property Investment, Sustainability and Asset Management.



Marc is passionate about delivering great services for customers, improving the quality and energy efficiency of customers homes. Marc is also a fellow of the Chartered Association of Building Engineers.

Why I'm delighted to be a Board member and what value I will add...

I am delighted to be a member of the Board. Gentoo is the main landlord in the area and we have 12,000 customers who live within Washington. I believe this Board has a fantastic opportunity to listen to the residents of Washington and help shape its future.

I'm passionate about the role of housing associations in building strong communities and thriving places and as a Chartered Building Engineer, I will bring a wealth of experience around homes, partnerships, and investment which I hope will complement the skillset of the Board.

Paul McEldon OBE

CEO, North East Business Innovation Centre (BIC)

CEO of BIC since 2001. BIC is a premises in Sunderland and Washington for SMEs which has helped nearly 2,000 Washington residents start their own businesses.

Chair of Washington Heritage Partnership since 2022.

Recognised in 2022 with an OBE for services to local businesses.

Why I'm delighted to be a Board member and what value I will add...

I am delighted to be a Board member as I have a passion to raise aspirations of the Washington population and can bring the voice of small business and start up to the table in a coherent long term plan for the benefit of the residents.

Professor Graham Thrower

The Institute for Economic and Social Inclusion, University of Sunderland

Professor Graham Thrower is Head of the Institute for Economic and Social Inclusion (IESI) at the University of Sunderland where he leads interdisciplinary work that informs joined-up insights and research into areas such as inclusive learning, inclusive living, inclusive work, and the relationship between these and the health outcomes of excluded communities.

Much of his research and practice has been to address areas of weak socio-economic performance, the challenge of so-called 'left behind places'. Graham has led work with communities, local and national government, and international organisations to develop just transition plans, inclusive economic development strategies, net zero pathways, and climate budgeting to enable communities and local governance organisations to have agency over their own lives, and to shape the type of socio-economic environment that will frame their future.

Why I'm delighted to be a Board member and what value I will add...

We have an opportunity here to work with the people, businesses and organisations of Washington over the long term, to build the agency and capacity within communities so that they can genuinely realise the future that they want for the area. We are there to enable and to guide, but I am particularly looking forward to us as a Board listening to what the local people want and need and working with them to make that a reality.

Emma Cottle

Sunderland College (part of Education Partnership North East)

I have lived in Washington since 2018, and with my children attending the local secondary school, and as such I feel deeply connected to the community. I love the area and spend much of my spare time exploring the many green spaces with our family dog – places that make Washington such a fantastic place to live.

I have spent over 20 years working across the North East in sectors including electrical infrastructure, finance, higher education and, most recently, further education. As a Chartered Marketer and commercially driven leader, I am committed to putting customers and students at the heart of every decision.

In my current role as Vice Principal of Marketing, Strategy and Communications, part of the Group Executive Team at Education Partnership North East, I lead key strategic functions including Student Recruitment, Admissions, Marketing, Communications, Insight & Reporting, and Change Management. Working within a purpose-driven, change-making organisation, I am passionate about widening opportunity and helping learners across our region to thrive.

Why I'm delighted to be a Board member and what value I will add...

I feel genuinely privileged to support the regeneration of Washington. This is my home, and I believe the Board can shape positive, long-term change for residents, businesses and future generations.

I bring:

- Strategic insight and long-term planning skills, grounded in two decades of experience shaping organisational strategy across complex sectors.
- Expertise in community-focused communication and engagement, helping ensure residents' voices are heard and that regeneration plans are clearly understood.
- A strong understanding of education, skills and opportunity, offering perspectives on how regeneration can align with the ambitions of young people and the local workforce.
- A passion for partnership working, with a track record of building collaborative relationships across public, private and education sectors.

Rachel Snaitth

Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner for Northumbria

Rachel is the Director of Commissioning and Policy at the OPCC, responsible for leading the work on four key areas: violence against women and girls, victims commissioning, anti-social behaviour, and the criminal justice system.

Rachel led on the development of the OPCC's Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy, bringing together a cross-office team to deliver projects such as enhanced support for stalking victims and the creation of the new Sexual Assault Referral Centre.

She supports the Chief of Staff by leading work on scrutiny, challenge, and strategic risk. Rachel leads an exceptional team, developing and delivering key projects aligned with the commitments in the Police and Crime Plan.

Rachel's professional background includes a focus on good governance, policy development and transforming strategic partnerships.

Why I'm delighted to be a Board member and what value I will add...

The Board is made up of passionate people wanting to make a positive difference for the communities of Washington and my energy and focus on effective



community involvement and engagement will help to make sure our plans are cohesive, reflect the needs of communities and deliver meaningful change where its most needed.