

# **Washington Neighbourhood Board – July 2025**

## **Chair of the Board**

### **Ellen Thinnesen OBE**

#### **Chief Executive, Education Partnership North East**

Ellen was appointed Chief Executive and Principal at Sunderland College in 2016, where her ambitious vision led the college through two highly successful mergers, which have produced one of the largest multi-campus college groups in the country.

Ellen became the Chief Executive of Education Partnership North East in 2019.

Ellen was awarded an OBE in 2021 for her outstanding contribution to education and in particular the partnership's focus on supporting the region's most disadvantaged and vulnerable students, including those with special educational needs and disabilities.

She began her career as a qualified nurse, working in hospitals in the Yorkshire and Humber and central London before progressing to a career in Further and Higher Education.

Ellen is an inspiring leader, who has transformed post-16 education across the North East region.

Ellen has held numerous board positions across the education and not-for-profit sectors within the North East and beyond. As a National Leader for Further Education, she works closely with the Further Education Commissioner and the Department for Education, contributing to national discussions to influence education policy and reform. Deeply passionate about social justice, Ellen is committed to making a positive and lasting difference through her work.

## **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 this Washington Neighbourhood 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.

## **Councillor Beth Jones**

### **Sunderland City Council**

I have lived in Washington all my life, growing up in Barmston and then living in Columbia since 1999. I attended Barmston Nursery, JFK Primary School and then Washington Comp.

In 2023 I was elected as a Ward Councillor for Washington Central Ward and in 2024 became the Council Cabinet Member for Communities, Culture and Tourism.

I have worked in the NHS as a mental health nurse for 25 years and for the last 4 years have worked as a commissioner for the Integrated Care Board.

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

I am delighted to be part of this journey so that we can develop plans and a vision for the town I am proud to call home. I am passionate about transformation and will add value by ensuring that our residents are at the heart of everything we do.

## **Councillor Linda Williams**

### **Sunderland City Council**

I've lived in Washington all my life and love the space, greenery and people. I left school at 16 and started working in Midland Bank, now HSBC. I left in 1983 and brought my 3 children up. I ran a toddler group a pre-school play group and became a school governor to keep me busy. Later on, I worked part time for Bridge Women's Education project delivering to sessions to adults. I've also worked part time in retail fashion shops. During my last year at secondary school my mother became disabled after an operation, and I supported her to live alone successfully until she passed away in 2006.

I've been a governor since 1987 and currently Chair Lambton Primary and Oxclose Community Academy schools. I was involved in the early days of the Sure Start programme from 1998 and that's continued on and off since then. We had a joint 6th form arrangement with City of Sunderland College and I chaired that committee too until the arrangement was ended. During that time we delivered the Washington building. I recently joined the Sunderland Altogether Consortium who have brought in funding to deliver youth work across the City and sit on the board of Oxclose and District Young Peoples Project who deliver youth work across Washington.

I have been a councillor for 19 years now and enjoy meeting people, listening to them, helping where I can and if I can't being honest about why and what their options are. I've held many posts, Area Chair, cabinet posts in Vibrant City and Children's and currently chair Children Education and Skills Scrutiny. I enjoy being part of the policy delivery for council services and then monitoring the outcomes via scrutiny. I currently chair Sunderland Care and Support and sit on the Empire Theatre Trust board.

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

I would like to add the feedback I get from residents into discussions. As a 'for ever' resident I've seen many changes, some good some not so good and want to make Washington the best it can be. As a Board we need to take the right strategic decisions to support our communities to thrive. I would like to see a good post 16 offer for our young people, both academic and vocational to meet their needs.

## **Rachel Snaith**

### **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 Washington Neighbourhood 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.

## **Scott Watson**

### **NHS North East & North Cumbria Integrated Care Board (NENC ICB)**

With over two decades of senior leadership in the NHS, I bring a wealth of experience in strategic planning, system transformation, and collaborative service design. My career has been defined by a commitment to improving public services through innovation, data-driven decision-making, and inclusive engagement.

Currently serving as the Integrated Care Board's delivery director for South Tyneside and Sunderland, I lead on strategic planning and service commissioning across a population of nearly 500,000. I've spearheaded system-wide transformation initiatives, and I'm currently taking a lead role in the development of the City's 'integrated neighbourhood health' programme.

My background in health informatics and performance frameworks has enabled me to design systems that are both accountable and adaptive—qualities essential for any regeneration effort. I've worked across acute, community, and mental health services, and have led multi-agency strategies that align health, care, and local authority priorities. Whether it's developing a city's first mental health strategy or negotiating £400m+ contracts, I bring a systems-thinking approach grounded in real-world delivery.

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

I'm genuinely excited to contribute to the regeneration of Washington because I believe in the power of place-based transformation. Regeneration isn't just about buildings—it's about people, services, and creating environments where communities can thrive. My career has been dedicated to exactly that: aligning strategy with local needs and turning complex challenges into opportunities for sustainable growth.

As a Board member, I bring:

- **Strategic Insight:** Proven ability to translate vision into action through robust planning and governance.
- **Collaborative Leadership:** A track record of building trusted partnerships across sectors and communities.
- **Innovation and Delivery:** Experience in leading award-winning, scalable solutions that improve lives.

- **Community Focus:** A personal commitment to volunteering and grassroots engagement, ensuring that regeneration is inclusive and locally owned.

I look forward to helping shape a future that reflects the aspirations of our residents—where health, opportunity, and community pride go hand in hand.

## **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.

## **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 Washington Neighbourhood 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.

## **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...**

I am delighted to be part of the Washington Neighbourhood Board. 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.

## **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.

## **Ruth Walker**

### **Sunderland Youth Consortium**

I'm Ruth. I'm a lifelong resident of our city where I live with my family and two dogs. I love walking in and around our city, we have amazing coast, parks and countryside that I like to spend time in. I love hiking, camping, gardening and star gazing.

I am a Community and Youth Worker, having worked in the city in this area since the age of 18. I completed my Youth Work degree at Sunderland University, later returning to complete a PGCE and then masters in Youth Studies. I currently manage a city-wide youth work charity, committed to giving young people the best possible start and ensuring they are well supported, invested in and able to grow in confidence and happiness.

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

Being part of the Washington Neighbourhood Board means that young people will have a champion and advocate who will ensure they are considered in every decision made, they will be listened to – and their aspirations for Washington will be heard and acted upon.

**Austin McNamara**

**Sunderland Voluntary Sector Alliance (SVSA)**

Austin is currently Interim CEO of SVSA. He is a highly experienced Interim Leader, specialising in supporting purpose-driven organisations through periods of transition.

After a successful career in teaching, culminating in 12 years as a secondary head, he joined the newly created Learning & Skills Council before moving to Connexions Northumberland as CEO. Since then, he has built on his experience of leadership to forge a career as a Professional Interim, working mostly in the public sector – including one year as Associate Director for Education in Sunderland. More recently, he moved with enthusiasm into the VCSE sector as Interim CEO of two North East charities, The Key and Newcastle Carers, before joining SVSA.

In his private life, Austin is a devoted husband and a proud parent and grandparent. He has a passion of most types of music, and he enjoys walking, foreign travel, spicy food and reading crime fiction.

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

I am delighted to be given the opportunity to play a part in the revitalisation of Washington, and I look forward to exploring opportunities for Voluntary Sector organisations to make a key contribution to improving the quality of life of its residents.