

Project Summary

Leadership-in-Action (LIA) Summer 2024 - Point North Community Foundation, Durham, England

Author: Addy Shah

Laidlaw Scholar, Durham University

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Under the supervision of

Michelle Cooper

CEO, Point North Community Foundation

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Table of Contents

1.0 Acknowledgements..... 3
2.0 Preface 4
3.0 Project Summary..... 4
4.0 Sustaining Impact..... 5
5.0 Leadership Reflections..... 5

1.0 Acknowledgements

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2.0 Preface

It started with a conversation, unremarkable in its setting, but transformative in its unfolding. Over coffee at my college, Michelle Cooper, the CEO of Point North, spoke of communities just short walks away, people who lived with challenges far greater than I had imagined. As she described the work Point North does—partnering with fundholders and community groups across northeast England to create pathways to resilience—I realised how disconnected I had been. We often speak of global inequality in abstract terms, yet the reality was right outside our door. There was no grand epiphany, just a quiet moment of clarity: this was where I could do something, where my position as President of St. Mary’s College Volunteering Committee could make a lasting difference. I was not there to rescue anyone; I was there to learn, to contribute, and perhaps help create a structure that could grow beyond me. What started as a simple conversation became the foundation for something larger than I had expected.

3.0 Research & Impact

When I joined Point North, I had no preconceived agenda, no checklist of goals. Instead, I began with a question: “What does the team need, and how can I be most useful?” It was not a grand approach, but I have found that starting with an attitude to be of service to others in a room, regardless of the room I find myself in, often yields the richest opportunities. Michelle had mentioned I might need to wear multiple hats when I start, and she was right. In those early weeks, I was immersed in the seemingly mundane yet crucial tasks of communications, helping with attention to detail checks that underpin any successful rebranding. Through it, I came to understand the intricate web of relationships that sustain Point North, from the fund managers to the communities they support. The bonds I formed during this time were deep and unexpected. In conversations that strayed from work, I learned about my colleagues’ passions and their reasons for being part of this mission. These connections laid the foundation for the next phase of my project, when I transitioned into working directly with fundholders. Here, silent listening became my most valuable tool. Rather than offering solutions, I listened—to their aspirations, their frustrations, and their philosophy. In this role, leadership was not about making bold moves; it was about being present, about understanding people as they are, not as I expected them to be. These insights were then integrated into Point North’s communications strategy, ensuring that fundholder expectations were met in a sustainable manner throughout their journeys.

Later, I turned to the area closest to my academic training: investment research. Working alongside Chris, Point North’s CFO, I explored ways to improve cash flow forecasting and optimise investment strategies. I sought to gain a comprehensive understanding of the organisation’s liquidity needs, liabilities, risk tolerance, and resource constraints, all of which would ultimately inform my research on econometric models. This was where theory met reality. It was not enough to apply models from my studies; I had to think about how these insights could make a tangible difference to Point North’s ability to support communities in the long term. What I took away from this was more than technical knowledge—it was the understanding that the most effective solutions are often the quiet ones, the ones that unfold over time, not in a single moment of brilliance.

4.0 Sustaining Impact

From the start, I realised my time at Point North could not be just a six-week project destined to fade as soon as I returned to my studies. That would not have been enough. I wanted the work I was doing to have roots, to grow in ways that I could not predict. Fortunately, my role as President of St. Mary's College Volunteering Committee gave me the means to ensure that the impact would extend beyond my involvement. Together with Axel, a fellow Laidlaw Scholar, we intend to set about identifying the challenges faced by Point North's partner voluntary and community groups—places where small operational improvements could translate to a significant difference for their impact and sustainability. At the same time, Iris and Sam, both leaders in the Volunteering Committee, took on the task of researching perspectives on charitable giving among key stakeholders – those who carry the capacity to give back meaningfully to help resolve the hardships and evolving needs of grassroots charities. The findings from this research would offer Point North and similar organisations insights into how they might further refine their strategies, ultimately amplifying their impact. What we start this year is, I hope, just the beginning of a process that will continue to benefit the people in these communities for years to come.

In a personal capacity, I am committed to sustaining this impact through ongoing research in finance. Specifically, I am exploring advanced econometric methods to improve cashflow forecasting by uncovering the underlying relationships between grant outflows and macroeconomic variables. My focus is on adjusting these models for operational constraints, seasonality, and cyclicity to ensure their practical applicability. For investment and portfolio strategy, I am researching ways to streamline investment policy discussions at Point North. This includes building a dashboard that incorporates probabilistic thinking, facilitating long-term return optimisation while managing risk aversion, liquidity needs, liabilities, and available resources. By leveraging these financial tools, I aim to help Point North maintain sustainable operations and amplify its support for the community groups it serves.

5.0 Leadership Reflections

If my journey at Point North has taught me anything, it is that leadership is less about inconsiderately supplying solutions and more about fostering the correct conversations. Often, the most impactful insights arose when I took a step back, observed, and allowed others to invest in the process of ideating and discovering a way forward. The ethical leadership principles I learned from the team at Oxford revealed themselves in unexpected ways, reminding me that servant leadership is not marked by bold actions, but by patience, subtlety, and the discernment to act when necessary—and step aside when not. By giving space for my colleagues and external stakeholders to express their views, I was able to uncover insights aimed at facilitating partnerships at the heart of Point North's mission. Leadership, I learned, is not a static trait but a constant balancing act, where supporting and guiding must coexist. As I move forward, this understanding will continue to inform how I lead, ensuring that I remain adaptable, responsive, and mindful of the needs of those around me. This insight has consolidated my belief that sustainable change begins with strong internal alignment. Once that foundation is solid, it extends outward to foster broader, meaningful change within the wider community.