Inspirational Women of the North East (IWNE) is a project aiming to redress the historic and present-day under-representation of women’s achievements and contributions to public life in North-East England. It challenges the cultural and social stereotyping of women (particularly the undue emphasis on celebrities judged primarily for their looks and body image) and offers alternate iconic images of women from various socio-economic backgrounds, ethnicities, ages, religions as the starting point for public debates and discussions. What kinds of role models are presented to young people in our region? How can the stories we celebrate offer different role models, particularly (but not exclusively) to girls and young women?

Preparing the photography exhibition of Inspirational Women brought together stakeholders beyond the University, specifically through the engagement of a co-ordinator who is a local skills trainer, social media expert and curator, plus academic staff and students from a variety of disciplines (fine art, history, geography). It used social media, print media, TV and a website to engage local people with nominating their favourite ‘inspirational woman’. It was an example of civic engagement in action, with a good level of press coverage via Tyne Tees television, the Newcastle Journal, and online discussions. Around 300 people became group members on Facebook and a Twitter feed provided informative channels for discussion and feedback. This exhibition has now toured around the nation, including to Northumberland College, where it continues to raise aspirations.

The exhibition features several women who are making significant changes in community activism; their presence has brought them onto campus with the message that this is their University too. Likewise, women who are small business owners – a crucial part of the bottom-up economic and social regeneration of the region, were featured in the exhibition and attracted press coverage on television and in local newspapers as a result – providing a positive feedback loop that raised their profile in the region. An accompanying booklet, containing stories about the 26 women featured in the exhibition, plus online resources at www.IWNE.org, provide lasting sources of information and platforms for ongoing public debates around women’s contribution to regional life.

“It has made such a difference to me”

One of the women featured

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http://www.iwne.org