

# Voluntary and community sector Manifesto for 2010 Westminster elections

MARCH 2010



## Background

As we move towards another election in Northern Ireland, this time for Westminster, NICVA (the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action) and its members in the voluntary and community sector are seeking to influence the priorities of our political parties. There are specific policies we would like to see, but what we think would benefit Northern Ireland most of all is stable and functional devolution in which voters can have trust and confidence.

The voluntary and community sector is a large and diverse body of organisations in Northern Ireland. There are around 4,700 voluntary organisations here with a paid workforce which extends to almost 27,000 people or almost 4% of the Northern Ireland workforce. The voluntary and community sector employs more people than are respectively employed in construction, transport or the financial sector. There are over 87,000 active volunteers engaged in added value, unpaid work on behalf of their organisations. The income of the voluntary and community sector in 2004 was around £570 million. The sector's assets stand in the region of £737 million (housing associations' assets would be additional to this) (statistics from *State of the Sector V, Northern Ireland Voluntary and Community Sector Almanac 2009*).

Voluntary and community groups contribute to almost every aspect of life in Northern Ireland. It is generally accepted that three out of every five adults in Northern Ireland have an association with some form of voluntary or community organisation. As individuals, many people play a small or large part in the life and activities of those organisations.

Underpinning all of the issues in the manifesto is this commitment of people to voluntary action, whether this is in a governance role, providing a local voice or in the delivery of local services. Voluntary participation is a strong indicator of an inclusive and thriving civil society.

## Our vision

Our vision is of a society where all citizens are treated as equals, where sectarianism and discrimination are not tolerated, and where respect for human rights is regarded as the norm. We want to see a society that is developed sustainably and that is active and engaged with its democratic structures. We want to see a prosperous society where the benefits of prosperity are felt by all. The voluntary and community sector enshrines the principles of participation and inclusion which should also form the basis of good policy making and governance. We believe that the proposals made in this manifesto can contribute to the achievement of this vision.

The voluntary and community sector is a major force for change in Northern Ireland. What the sector has to offer is a profound experience of civic life – of a world where everyone is equally valued as an individual, where individuals come together for the common good, and where the everyday concerns of 'normal' politics are to the fore.

A vibrant civic culture is critical to a well-functioning, inclusive society. Civic associations have the capacity to achieve virtuous circles of growing trust, confidence and cohesion. Government increasingly depends on NGOs (non-governmental organisations) in complex societies where it can neither know nor do everything.

Research shows that NGOs enjoy greater trust on the part of citizens than governments or the private sector.

If supports are not put in place to enable excluded groups to participate in democracy, then inequalities are exacerbated. The voluntary and community sector fulfils this role through providing such supports. The not-for-profit ethos of the sector means that it actively seeks to build collective or community profit (capital) within economically and socially deprived communities when it is delivering services. The sector's ethos – treating everyone as an individual, involving users and constantly evaluating – can offset the dangers of one-size-fits-all bureaucracy and stagnation that many big state organisations suffer.

The voluntary and community sector also has a role to play in reconciling Northern Ireland's divided society. Strong civic networks can offset sectarian divisions and work at community level has the potential to encourage outward-looking and outward-reaching development rather than inward-looking competitive communities.

NICVA believes in a community development approach and in strong links between those who govern and those who are governed. Joining up what we know with the policies and resources that shape our lives is a challenge that voluntary and community organisations are fully engaged with. We want to make an ongoing contribution to making good decisions and focusing the agenda for governance on the issues that matter most.

### **We ask political parties to:**

- Put in place a robust **framework for relationships between government and the sector** – setting out the Executive's vision for the role and purpose of the sector, to strengthen and support the activities of citizens in Northern Ireland. We would like this to include recognition of the sector and the role it plays in a democratic context and as service provider, a vision of the good society to which it is contributing and a commitment to work with and support the sector in its various roles.
- **Standardise funding procedures for voluntary and community organisations** across government departments to reduce unnecessary bureaucracy and waste of public resources.
- Establish **pilots for community planning** which involve voluntary and community organisations as key partners so that organised citizens are actually structured into the way Northern Ireland is governed and can have a say in decision making and in contributing their experience to better decisions made by others.
- Produce a **successor strategy to A Shared Future** which sets out clearly how we will act to move Northern Ireland on from being a divided society plagued by low-level violence and mistrust. This must include action plans and appropriate resources. We believe this will ultimately result in savings in public spending if the right investment is made in ending duplication.

- Publish and implement an **Anti-poverty Action Plan** for Northern Ireland. We now have a strategy, endorsed by the Executive without any fanfare or strong political messages of support. We now need detailed action plans, translating into Programme for Government Public Service Agreements, with budgets attached to show how the targets, such as child poverty, will be reached and setting realistic targets in other areas.
- **Develop, resource and implement an integrated childcare strategy by 2011**, as the absence of this is hampering other initiatives in areas such as training and employment, and **increase the provision of Sure Start in Northern Ireland** to levels equivalent to Great Britain. (In 2007/08, expenditure per child was £80, which compares unfavourably with the rest of the UK where it was nearly £600 per child in England, £380 in Scotland, and between £270 and £350 per child in Wales, according to Treasury figures).
- Set ambitious targets for sustainability and carbon reduction, involving communities in energy reduction strategies. Introduce a **Green New Deal for Northern Ireland** to address local unemployment, climate change, security and diversity of energy supply, maximizing renewable local energy sources, fuel poverty and rising energy costs.
- **Support volunteering** by implementing the proposed Volunteering Strategy and introducing free AccessNI checks for all volunteers, including those in the public sector.
- Support **community ownership and management of public assets**. Northern Ireland can learn from and build on the work of the Quirk Review commissioned by the Office of the Third Sector in England. This identified the clear benefits of local groups owning or managing community assets – such as village halls, community centres, building preservation trusts and community enterprises – building on the links between active community involvement and economic development identified in the Lyons Review. It found that community ownership can bring people from different backgrounds together, foster a sense of belonging and play a role in enhancing the local environment, alleviating poverty and raising people’s aspirations. Fundamentally, it’s about giving local people a bigger stake in the future of their area. Parties should commit to producing guidance to public authorities in Northern Ireland on the transfer and management of assets in communities.
- **Ensure 100% of good cause lottery funds always goes to voluntary and community organisations** and does not substitute for statutory funding. NICVA and other bodies have concluded that the principle of additionality has been steadily eroded over the years since the establishment of the New Opportunities Fund (NOF, now merged with Community Fund to form the Big Lottery Fund). Combining exchequer and lottery funding excludes organisations which have ethical problems with lottery funding, even through mainstream government funding.

- **Address barriers to procurement for voluntary and community organisations,** following the recent Finance and Personnel Committee Inquiry. In other parts of the UK major investment has been put into informing public procurement officials about contracting with the voluntary and community sector – the same should happen in Northern Ireland.

Guidance for contracting authorities, such as the documents produced by the Office of Government Commerce *Social Issues in Purchasing* and *Think Smart – think voluntary sector*, should be produced here.

- **Support at Westminster for the introduction of a Robin Hood or Tobin Tax** (originally suggested by Nobel Laureate economist James Tobin). This is a tiny tax on bankers that would raise billions to tackle poverty and climate change, at home and abroad. By taking an average of 0.05% from speculative banking transactions, hundreds of billions of pounds would be raised every year - easily enough to stop cuts in crucial public services in the UK, and to help fight global poverty and climate change. The plan is for the US\$400bn that could be generated by a global Robin Hood Tax to be split equally, with US\$200bn spent domestically and US\$200bn spent around the world. Of the money spent globally, US\$100bn would go towards international development and US\$100bn would support developing countries as they adapt to climate change.

The US\$200bn to be spent domestically would make serious inroads into tackling the structural factors that mean more than 13 million people in the UK live in poverty. Gordon Brown, Angela Merkel (the German Chancellor) and Nicolas Sarkozy (the French President) have all spoken out in support of a tax on financial transactions. Business leaders also in support include Lord Turner (Financial Services Authority), George Soros and Warren Buffet. The hundreds of economists who have backed the idea include Nobel Prize winner Joseph Stiglitz.

- **Make tax work for charitable giving** – reform and simplify Gift Aid and allow charities to claim back excess VAT in the same way as other sectors.

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