

# **RESOURCING THE VOLUNTARY & COMMUNITY SECTOR**

## **Infrastructure Working Group**

### **Paper to the Task Force**

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3<sup>rd</sup> September 2003

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## Executive Summary

- Infrastructure can be defined as any organisation playing a supporting, co-ordinating or development role in relation to voluntary and community organisations at a regional, sub-regional or local level. Good infrastructure builds social capital, reinforcing networks and developing a resource that is not depleted but strengthened by use.
- The core functions of infrastructure bodies include: representation and participation; advice, information and sign-posting; campaigning and advocacy; consultation, influencing and changing public policy; supporting the community development process; encouraging collaboration between voluntary and community organisations; service delivery (in areas such as training, consumer rights consultation and mentoring support); raising awareness; and organising network events.
- Currently there are 160 groups self-classified as infrastructure organisations and ‘it is proving increasingly difficult to tell where a voluntary community group ends and a network/resource group begins’ (NICVA *State of the Sector III*, 2002: 60).
- Infrastructure groups were differentiated as either generic or sectoral organisations and mapped at three geographic levels (regional, sub-regional and local). This structural approach has inherent weaknesses both in relation to organisations self-defining as infrastructure bodies and the extent of their geographical remit.
- Several policy considerations emerge from modelling infrastructure bodies. There is organisational ‘messiness’ resulting from the organic growth of the sector. Evidence exists of overlap, duplication and overcrowding, juxtaposed with gaps in infrastructure provision and variable service quality. A ‘one size fits all’ approach to rationalise existing arrangements is inappropriate.
- This prompts a number of possible policy responses. Refine the way in which we classify and map infrastructure (through improving the structural model above or considering the infrastructure needs of individual sectors). Find ways to encourage co-operation between existing organisations, particularly where duplication is as a result of segregated provision, and plug support gaps. This will require public sector investment for infrastructure support linked to improvements in service quality and performance.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 A Task Force on Resourcing the Voluntary and Community Sector was established in February 2003 to consider issues around the future sustainability of the voluntary and community sector. Four working groups were set up to assist the Task Force in their role (government policy for support and funding of the voluntary and community sector; accountability and organisational systems of governance; infrastructure; and sustainability).

1.2 The terms of reference for the *Working Group on Infrastructure* were as follows:

- To consider a framework for voluntary and community sector infrastructure that will support the development of the sector in contributing to a vibrant civic society.

This included:

- Defining community infrastructure, roles and functions of the voluntary and community organisations within different strata of that infrastructure, and research and consultation about existing levels of infrastructure.
- Determining the necessary infrastructure to support a diverse voluntary and community sector involved in a wide range of activities including community development, participation in policy development, partnership working with government and the delivery of public services.

1.3 What follows is the output from the *Working Group on Infrastructure* (see annex 1 for membership) which attempts to draw together information from the following source materials: discussions from the 3 working group sessions above<sup>1</sup>; written feedback from participants<sup>2</sup>; presentations to the working group<sup>3</sup>; a scoping paper on infrastructure (prepared by Colin Knox, University of Ulster)<sup>4</sup>; primary research undertaken by NICVA (Gordon McCullough) on behalf of the Task Force entitled ‘Social Scaffolding: An Assessment of Voluntary and Community Infrastructure in Northern Ireland’; and secondary research drawing on policy documents dealing with infrastructure arrangements (both from Northern Ireland and other jurisdictions).

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<sup>1</sup> The minutes of the three Working Group meetings can be found on the Task Force website: [www.taskforcevcsni.gov.uk](http://www.taskforcevcsni.gov.uk).

<sup>2</sup> Working Group participants: Geraldine Donaghy, Niall Fitzduff, Alan Hanna and Anne O’Reilly have so far provided written inputs or materials for consideration.

<sup>3</sup> Presentations were made to the Working Group by Colm Bradley (Community Technical Aid); Gordon McCullough (NICVA); and Niall Fitzduff (Rural Community Network).

<sup>4</sup> Colin Knox’s scoping paper appears on the Task Force website: [www.taskforcevcsni.gov.uk](http://www.taskforcevcsni.gov.uk).

1.4 The aims of this draft paper are:

- To define what we mean by ‘infrastructure’ and attempt to clarify the boundaries of the work of the group, within the established terms of reference.
- To distil existing information and research on infrastructural arrangements, including principles which might guide our discussions on the creation or maintenance of ‘good infrastructure’ and what typically might comprise core functions for infrastructure bodies.
- Using information on which infrastructure bodies currently exist, to consider an illustrative model that might assist our thinking on the future functions, form and financing of such bodies. To consider the strengths and weaknesses of this approach, its limitations and alternatives which need to be considered.
- To examine the key policy considerations arising from the above, their consequences for future infrastructure arrangements and possible policy responses which the Task Force might usefully examine.

## 2. DEFINING INFRASTRUCTURE

- 2.1 Policy documents and previous research are replete with references to ‘infrastructure’, although other terms such as ‘networks’, ‘umbrella groups’ and ‘resource centres’ are used interchangeably and cause some confusion. Similarly, politicians, government officials and community leaders often refer to ‘weak community infrastructure’ as an expression of low social capital or weak community capacity in particular geographic areas.
- 2.2 The most obvious starting point for defining community infrastructure is contained in *Partners for Change* which suggests:

Infrastructure relates to the underlying structures that support voluntary action in Northern Ireland. It is characterised by umbrella bodies and networks that can assist grassroots organisations, who themselves have little access to resources, to develop and focus their activities<sup>5</sup>.

- 2.3 The National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) provides a more generic definition of infrastructure<sup>6</sup> which the Working Group adapted (with minor amendments) as follows:

Infrastructure can be defined as any organisation playing a supporting, co-ordinating or development role in relation to voluntary and community organisations at a regional, sub-regional or local level.

This definition, NCVO suggests, might incorporate bodies beyond traditional infrastructure bodies and could include a range of formal and informal networks, some large voluntary sector organisations, and agencies external to the voluntary and community sector (e.g. local authorities and Business Links).

- 2.4 In addition, the Working Group suggested that by way of explication or a **description** of what is involved in infrastructure work, the paper from Joint Government/ Voluntary and Community Sector Forum<sup>7</sup> offered a useful supplement to the above definition as follows (adapted with minor amendments to the Joint Forum’s statement):

Community infrastructure allows new work and new organisations to develop, supports and resources those already there, and facilitates networking which encourages sharing. Good infrastructure builds social capital, reinforcing networks and developing a resource that is not depleted but strengthened by use. The sectoral infrastructure within the voluntary and community sector allows for an overall strategic view to be developed.

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<sup>5</sup> *Partners for Change: Government’s Strategy for Support of the Voluntary and Community Sector* (2003: 17). Belfast: Department for Social Development.

<sup>6</sup> *Review of Voluntary Sector Infrastructure* (2002: 3.1) National Council for Voluntary Organisations.

<sup>7</sup> *Joint Government/Voluntary and Community Sector Forum – Voluntary and Community Sector Panel: Issues Paper for the Task Force on Sustainability of the Voluntary and Community Sector* (2003: 3.1)

- 2.5 From this, the definition of infrastructure tends to focus on overarching or umbrella organisations with a sector or sub-sectoral wide remit or influence. This emphasis is also reflected in the *Treasury's Cross Cutting Review*.

They (network bodies) work to strengthen the organisational capacity of their constituent voluntary and community organisations, and to provide access to the information and networks, and consultative and representative mechanisms that enable the voluntary and community sector to engage as a strategic partner. There are also specific umbrella groups that can provide specialist advice and support within a given service area<sup>8</sup>.

- 2.6 It is too easy though to consider infrastructure in purely functional or organisational terms. Infrastructure immediately conjures up the image of hierarchies and maps comprising, for example, thematic and geographic differentiation of the sector. Whilst undoubtedly this is a key part of any work on infrastructure, it should not be seen in isolation. The *Treasury's Cross Cutting Review* notes 'infrastructure provides support for organisational capacity, a voice for voluntary and community organisations and access to representation and policy making'<sup>9</sup>. Hence, developing infrastructure is seen as one aspect of building capacity to ensure that voluntary and community organisations have the skills, knowledge, structures and resources to realise their full potential. Simply, infrastructure is inextricably linked to capacity building in its widest sense and hence important in considering the future of the sector.

- 2.7 In short, whether infrastructure is conceived of (for the purposes of the Working Group's task) as networks which offer support and advice for voluntary and community organisations on the ground, or more widely as infrastructural capacity alongside organisational, technical and community capacity (see figure 2.1<sup>10</sup>), it is a key consideration in the future funding and sustainability of the voluntary and community sector. This makes infrastructure worthy of consideration as part of the overall review. For the purposes of this paper however, there was 'general contentment with the terms of reference of the Infrastructure Working Group' and hence the narrower conception of infrastructure<sup>11</sup>.

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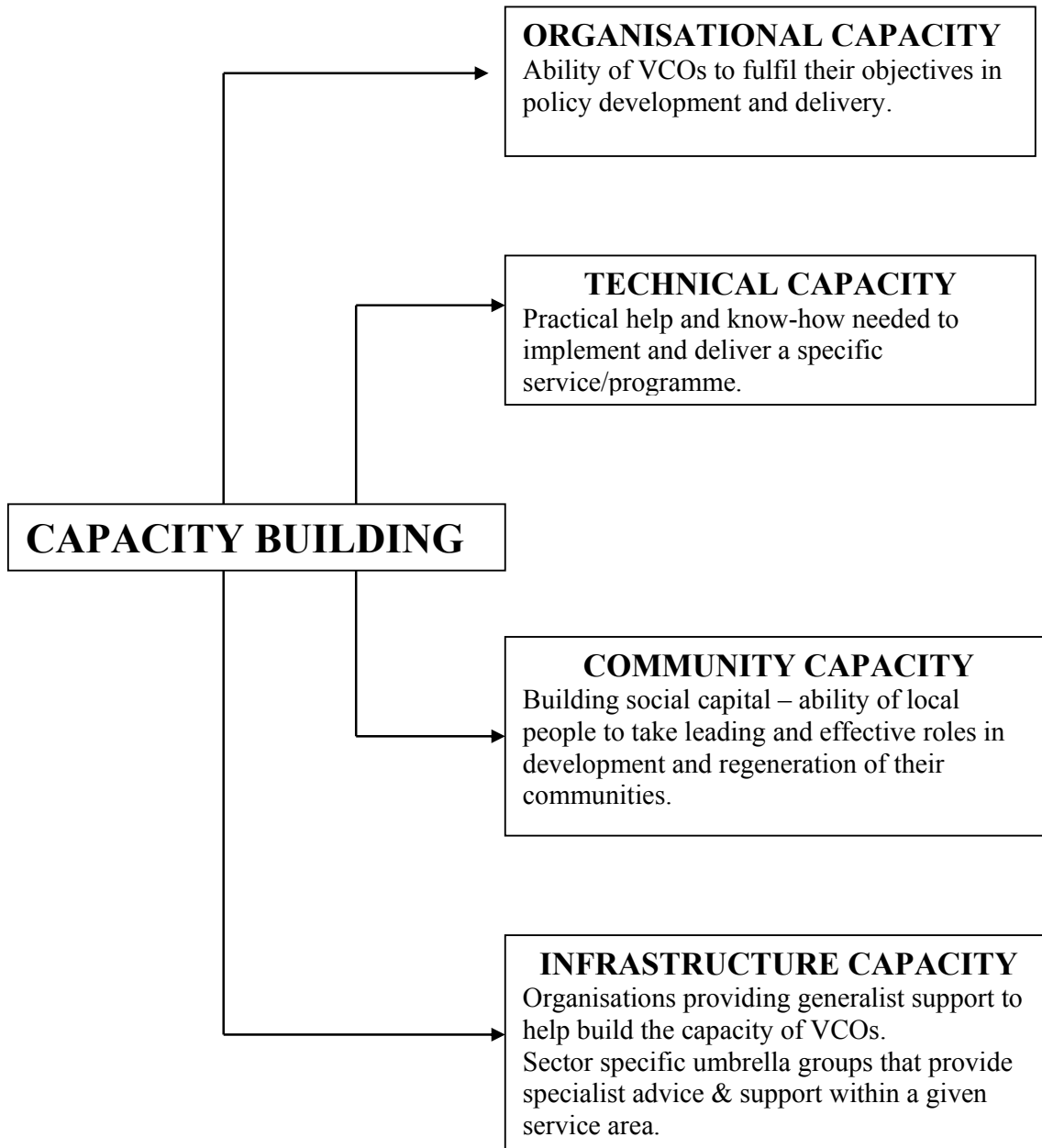
<sup>8</sup> The Role of the Voluntary and Community Sector in Service Delivery: Technical Annex – Capacity (2002: 9). London: H.M.Treasury.

<sup>9</sup> The Role of the Voluntary and Community Sector in Service Delivery (2002: 20). London: H.M.Treasury & Technical Annex, Capacity:3.

<sup>10</sup> Adapted from The Role of the Voluntary and Community Sector in Service Delivery (2002: 20). H.M. Treasury London: Technical Annex, Capacity Building.

<sup>11</sup> See Minutes of Infrastructure Working Group: 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2003 at NICVA – point 3.

**Figure 2. 1: INFRASTRUCTURE AS CAPACITY BUILDING**



### 3. PRINCIPLES AND FUNCTIONS

- 3.1 The Working Group took the view that it would be useful to establish principles which represented ‘good infrastructure’<sup>12</sup> and to outline core functions<sup>13</sup> which infrastructure bodies would typically undertake. Again, the work of NCVO was instructive in both cases.
- 3.2 Although the NCVO principles represented a very useful starting point for the Working Group’s discussions on what represented good infrastructure, they needed to be much more context-specific for the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland. Hence, the following principles were adapted and agreed:
- The sector’s infrastructure should be independent, owned by, and accountable to, the sector rather than government.
  - An ideal infrastructure is unlikely to emerge from an imposed structure.
  - The sector needs an operating environment which enables organisations to work together to provide a comprehensive web of support for the full gamut of voluntary and community sector activity.
  - The sector’s infrastructure should address the broad development needs of the sector as a whole and not just the needs of those with an existing or potential interest in the delivery of services.
  - The sector’s infrastructure should be funded on a sustainable basis and in a way that enables it to deliver a core of consistent, high quality functions.
  - Infrastructure organisations should embrace the equality agenda to promote equality of opportunity and good relations in their support and service delivery roles (now mandatory for public authorities under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998).
  - The sector’s infrastructure should play a complementary role with Government in addressing social exclusion and developing policies and services that are targeted at tackling social need. They can do this through partnership arrangements or other ways of joint working. A complementary role should not be seen as a means of displacing public services to the voluntary and community sector.
  - Infrastructure organisations will engage in advocacy and campaigning on behalf of their constituent groups and individuals and will seek to challenge and influence government policies.
  - Infrastructure bodies should promote the principles of good governance within the voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland, in particular transparency, accountability, best value, legality and improved management systems (e.g. budgeting, accounting, performance measurement, committee procedures and reporting).

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<sup>12</sup> Review of Voluntary Sector Infrastructure (2002: 4.8 – 4.14). National Council for Voluntary Organisations.

<sup>13</sup> Review of Voluntary Sector Infrastructure (2002: 5.3). National Council for Voluntary Organisations.

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- 3.3 The following were agreed by the Working Group as the core functions which infrastructure bodies would typically undertake (the list is not seen as definitive or exhaustive) and is not set out in any order of importance.
- Representation and participation on behalf of their membership or sector.
  - Advice, information (e.g. face-to-face, mentoring, support for submitting funding applications) and signposting.
  - Campaigning and advocacy on issues such as social justice and equality.
  - Public policy - consultation, influencing and changing public policy.
  - Support for the community development process to enable people to contribute to issues which affect their lives and the communities in which they live through empowerment, inclusion, equity, partnership and collective action.
  - Encourage collaboration between voluntary and community sector organisations.
  - Service delivery in areas such as training, consumer rights, consultation and mentoring support.
  - Raising awareness and political education (e.g. Bill of Rights, equality agenda, targeting social need).
  - Organising network events.
- 3.4 Importantly, it was accepted that a number of voluntary and community sector delivery organisations might also undertake some of these functions. The key difference is that infrastructure bodies will be primarily engaged in these activities. This is an important distinction when considering future infrastructure arrangements.

## 4. THE PRESENT SITUATION: WHAT CURRENTLY EXISTS

4.1 Clearly it is important when considering the infrastructure which supports the voluntary and community sector to establish, as a baseline, what currently exists. However, attempts to define what currently exists have proved to be problematic. At the general level, defining what constitutes the voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland is ‘still a difficult one and in a number of areas the boundaries have blurred somewhat’. In the absence of a definitive classification as to what a voluntary, community or charitable organisation is or, more widely, what constitutes a network organisation, NICVA’s recent survey of the sector asked respondents to self classify<sup>14</sup>.

4.2 NICVA estimates that the voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland comprises between 4,500 – 5,000 organisations with a gross income in the financial year 2000/01 of £657.1 million. It classifies the sector using 3 dimensions (adopted from the Charity Commission) as follows:

- The field of operation (what they do).
- Beneficiaries, client groups (who they serve).
- The function of the organisation or method of operation (how they operate).

Based on a sample of 851 groups, NICVA found that 41.6% of groups classified themselves as voluntary organisations, 31.1% as community organisations and 27.3% as charities.

4.3 Moving from this general overview of the sector to the specifics of infrastructural arrangements is no less clear. Initial work by McCartney suggested that by 2000 there were more than 100 networking organisations in Northern Ireland, strongest amongst which were community development, women’s and rural networks, respectively<sup>15</sup>. However, the overall picture is far from clear.

4.4 NICVA argues ‘there is very little data available that documents the size, scope and nature of the networks and resource bodies already in existence. This is even more the case when it comes to discussing the activities of network organisations’<sup>16</sup>. The ambiguity which surrounds practitioners’ understanding of such networks is borne out in evidence from *State of the Sector III*. Over half the groups (52.8%) responding (n = 472) stated that they considered themselves to be either a network, resource body or umbrella/membership organisation. The authors conclude that:

The infrastructure of the sector in Northern Ireland has developed to the extent that it is proving increasingly difficult to tell where a voluntary/community group ends and a network/resource group begins<sup>17</sup>.

<sup>14</sup> NICVA, *State of the Sector III*, 2002: 13.

<sup>15</sup> McCartney, F. (2001) NIVT ‘Reflection on Community Development’ unpublished.

<sup>16</sup> NICVA, *State of the Sector III*, 2002: 53.

<sup>17</sup> NICVA, *State of the Sector III*, 2002: 60.

4.5 NICVA researchers classified these infrastructural bodies using the themes of geography, issue and umbrella/membership and arrived at a taxonomy of 5 types of groups:

- Geographic-based network.
- Geographic resource body.
- Issue-based network.
- Issue-based resource body.
- Umbrella/membership organisation.

Umbrella/membership organisations accounted for the largest single type of network/resource body (almost 30%) and the remainder split fairly evenly across the other 4 four types<sup>18</sup>.

4.6 The principal function of resource/support bodies, according to the NICVA taxonomy, is allocation of resources and provision of services. Umbrella/membership organisations are involved in the promotion of a defined membership. Networks incorporate elements of both these, but their main focus is group networking at the macro level of the voluntary and community sector. NICVA researchers offer this classification ‘as a potentially useful analytical framework to further explore the more qualitative aspects of the work of network organisations’. They readily accept, however, that there is little to differentiate networks, resource bodies and umbrella/membership groups at the level of organisation structure, main focus of activity, and beneficiary. Any differences are more at the ‘nebulous level of process and self-definition’<sup>19</sup>.

4.7 In follow-up work, researchers argued that the self-report figure which indicated that over half the groups surveyed were infrastructural organisations ‘was obviously not a true reflection of the number of actual networks existing within the sector’<sup>20</sup>. Other questions posed in the NICVA survey allowed further scrutiny and validation of these claims and hence provided the opportunity for greater differentiation amongst the groups. This reduced the number of networks from 472 to 160 groups or 18.8% of the responding groups. Of these, 25 were classified as geographic networks, 25 as geographic resource bodies, 15 as issue-based networks, 18 as issue based resource bodies and 77 as umbrella/ membership bodies<sup>21</sup>.

4.8 The main group purposes of the top six network organisations in rank order were education and training; economic, community development, employment; advice, advocacy, information; cross border, cross community; general charitable purposes; and rural development<sup>22</sup>.

<sup>18</sup> NICVA, State of the Sector III, 2002: 54.

<sup>19</sup> NICVA, State of the Sector III, 2002: 17.

<sup>20</sup> McCarron, JJ (2003) ‘Squaring the Circle: defining networks in the voluntary and community sector’: 7. Belfast: Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action.

<sup>21</sup> McCarron, JJ (2003) ‘Squaring the Circle: defining networks in the voluntary and community sector’: 19. Belfast: Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action.

<sup>22</sup> McCarron, JJ (2003) ‘Squaring the Circle: defining networks in the voluntary and community sector’: 19. Belfast: Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action.

- 4.9 In a bid to develop the knowledge base further, the Task Force commissioned NICVA to complete a mapping exercise which graphically illustrates network organisations (issue based networks, resource bodies, and umbrella/membership organisations) by geographical spread (at local, sub-regional and regional levels) and thematic mix (main group purpose, key beneficiaries and method of operation). The rationale for the research argues that ‘infrastructure has developed organically and while some parts of the sector are well served, the overall coverage is variable in quality and extent’<sup>23</sup>.
- 4.10 Although a separate but parallel research project, NICVA’s (Gordon McCullough) mapping work was clearly of interest to the Working Group and we sought collaboration in trying to develop an illustrative infrastructure model which we now consider.

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<sup>23</sup> Research Proposal to the Task Force (2003) ‘Social Scaffolding: an assessment of voluntary and community infrastructure in Northern Ireland’. NICVA.

## 5. AN ILLUSTRATIVE MODEL

5.1 A useful reference point when considering the future of infrastructural arrangements in Northern Ireland is NCVO's work currently under discussion in Great Britain. Therein it proposes 3 broad levels of infrastructure support:

- *National generic infrastructure*: At the national level there needs to be an organisation, or combination of organisations, capable of providing:
  - An interface between the sector and government at a national level on broad strategic issues;
  - Consistent, high quality information, advice and good practice material across the sector;
  - Support, development and capacity building for local and regional infrastructure.
- *Local and regional generic infrastructure*: In every local authority area and region, voluntary and community organisations should have access to a certain core level of support which meets their needs. These services should be provided either by an existing organisation, a new body or coming together of several groups.
- *Sub-sectoral infrastructure*: These bodies can operate at the national, regional or local level and provide a broad range of services to a particular sub-sector of the voluntary sector. As the sector takes on a bigger role in service delivery, sub-sectors will have an increasingly important role<sup>24</sup>.

5.2 This framework is not readily transferable to Northern Ireland, not least because of our very different scale and operating environment. It is not particularly appropriate to talk about local, regional and national in the context of Northern Ireland. One suggestion was to consider the scale of analysis as local, sub-regional and regional. This might suggest infrastructure provision at the levels of local authorities; sub-regional e.g. education & library board or health and social services board areas; and regional or Northern Ireland wide provision.

5.3 Clearly the NCVO model cannot be directly adopted in Northern Ireland, but even an adapted version of this mixed geographic and sectoral framework requires much more thought, particularly in terms of the consequent funding requirements. The Working Group therefore considered a framework based on 'functions, form and finance' which might be useful in modelling future infrastructure arrangements as follows:

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<sup>24</sup> Review of Voluntary Sector Infrastructure (2002: 7). National Council for Voluntary Organisations.

## Generic Infrastructure Model

<b>Generic Infrastructure</b>			
Geographic Form	Core Functions	Financed by	Infrastructure bodies
Regional			
Sub regional			
Local			

## Sectoral Infrastructure Model

<b>Sectoral Infrastructure</b>			
Geographic Form	Core Functions	Financed by	Infrastructure bodies
Regional			
Sub regional			
Local			

- Infrastructure would, at the top level, be delineated as either generic or sectoral (thematic or issue based bodies).
  - Thereafter, core functions would be agreed at the three geographic levels of regional, sub regional and local (with consensus on the unit of analysis e.g. local authority area, education and library board area etc.).
  - Suggestions as to how each strata would be financed should also be included, along with the mix of funding income e.g. membership fees, public sector, charitable trusts, business etc.
  - Finally, the table would be populated with existing network bodies in each category. This would illustrate both areas of over-provision or duplication and gaps in the infrastructural networks.
  - Key recommendations would follow on the need for collaboration, integration, rationalisation or expanded infrastructure arrangements.
- 5.4 Working Group participants discussed the appropriateness of this framework and agreed to populate the matrix by way of illustration using organisations with which they were familiar in their own areas. This allowed a discussion to take place on the robustness of this framework as a means of categorising infrastructure bodies.
- 5.5 The amorphous nature of the voluntary and community sector, the complexity of defining what constitutes network bodies and the lack of organisational uniformity in their functional roles at different geographical levels, made this exercise more difficult than the above tables might suggest. The aim was to bring clarity to an otherwise muddled pattern of provision and provide a useful framework for funders to target their resources.

## 6. FEEDBACK ON THE MODEL

- 6.1 NICVA's *State of the Sector III* data were used to populate the model suggested by the Working Group. The first attempt at structuring the data resulted in some 44 organisations self-classified as generic infrastructure bodies and 66 sectoral groups. These were delineated graphically at 3 geographic levels: regional, sub-regional and local areas, and mapped to illustrate the coverage of infrastructure bodies at ward level throughout Northern Ireland. This provided a very useful visual depiction of infrastructural arrangements across the Province and a means of critically appraising the value of such an approach (see annex 2 to this report).
- 6.2 There were several strengths associated with the illustrative model. Infrastructure organisations were included in the mapping on the basis of self-definition which avoided researchers classifying bodies using their own criteria, hence it was based on a 'bottom-up' approach. The mapping exercise draws on the best available data (*State of the Sector III*) from the voluntary and community sector. Operationalising the model prompted suggestions for improvement in the way the data were gathered to enhance future iterations of the mapping exercise. The classification system afforded the Working Group an opportunity to review all of the organisations contained within the generic and sectoral categories, comment on their accuracy and make suggestions for additions or amendments<sup>25</sup>. The final list (annex 2) includes 71 generic and 122 sectoral groups. In short, through the operationalisation of *State of the Sector III* derived data, Working Group members were able to assess the robustness of the model as a way of considering infrastructure arrangements.
- 6.3 In working through the model several weaknesses were identified with this approach. Some Working Group members felt the notion of 'infrastructure' adopted in the model was too narrowly conceived, preferring to see it as one aspect of a much broader approach to capacity building (see figure 2.1). The different geographic levels also proved problematic. NICVA defined 'regional' as Northern Ireland wide, 'sub-regional' as bodies operating in more than one district council area, and 'local' as bodies operating in one council area only. Even the generic and sectoral split raised issues about the possibility of bodies being listed in either category or both. Although this was not necessarily seen as a flaw in the model (categories were not seen as mutually exclusive), it did raise the more general question as to whether this structural/geographical approach was the most effective. As one Working Group member submitted 'the essential point within this debate needs to focus on what organisations are doing rather than where they do it'<sup>26</sup>.

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<sup>25</sup> Following a presentation to the Working Group on 5<sup>th</sup> August 2003 by Gordon McCullough (NICVA) a list of 76 generic bodies and 101 sectoral bodies was circulated for consideration, amendments and revisions.

<sup>26</sup> Written submission by Geraldine Donaghy (Confederation of Community Groups – Newry & Mourne).

- 6.4 The model also attracted criticism of self-classification by infrastructure bodies. This was highlighted in *Squaring the Circle* which noted that groups ‘were responding to current funding difficulties and insecurities by fulfilling many of the roles usually associated with network/resource groups’,<sup>27</sup> and hence describing themselves as infrastructure bodies. A general observation from Working Group participants was that populating the generic bodies at the 3 geographic levels seemed achievable, but there were particular difficulties when considering sectoral bodies at the local level. This prompted further comment by one Working Group participant who noted: ‘The impulse quite properly exists to neaten (*sic*) things up. It does not matter so much that there is a plethora of bodies, what is important is that we are clear who is doing what, on whose behalf, and that the support is resourced and effective’<sup>28</sup>.

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<sup>27</sup> McCarron, JJ (2003) ‘Squaring the Circle: defining networks in the voluntary and community sector:6. Belfast: Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action.

<sup>28</sup> Written submission by Ruth Moore (Fermanagh District Council).

## 7. POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

7.1 What are the key policy considerations emerging from our Working Group which need to be taken forward by the Task Force? Thus far we have considered: issues of infrastructure definition, principles for good infrastructure, core functions of infrastructure bodies, what infrastructure currently exists, and worked through an illustrative model of those organisations which self-classify as generic and sectoral infrastructure bodies. How should these inform, at a high level, future policy considerations in this area?

7.2 The first observation from the work of the Infrastructure Group is the complexity of this issue. Attempts at approaching this task in the traditional way of examining ‘functions, form and finance’ foundered when it came to considering ‘form’. It must be acknowledged that the voluntary and community sector is amorphous in nature, there is a level of organisational ‘messiness’ through the organic growth of the sector, some of which is as a response to need. But we must also accept that there is element of overlap and duplication.

7.3 One Working Group member presented this more cogently:

The sector needs to critique itself and accept that it has grown out of all proportion and embark on a root and branch downsizing which will effectively level out as the optimum size of the sector (it is preferable we do it before it is imposed). An audit needs to take place on who or what makes up this phenomenon known as the voluntary and community sector. It has become a very crowded market-place with very many vested interests and entrenched positions. Its breadth and diversity is mind boggling and many of us working within it are confused and perhaps bemused at the range of activities now operating under the mantle of the voluntary and community sector<sup>29</sup>.

7.4 An important output from the Working Group has been reaching agreement on the definition of infrastructure, key principles of good infrastructure and the core services to be provided by infrastructure bodies. A key policy consideration will be how best to deliver these core functions. From this, two issues emerge. In our attempts via the illustrative model ‘to neaten (*sic*) things up’, it became obvious that a ‘one size fits all’ approach may be impossible to achieve. Moreover, duplication and overlap lead to the inefficient use of resources. Simply ‘eyeballing’ the list of sectoral infrastructure groups in Belfast from the NICVA data, for example, would suggest *prima facie* evidence of duplication.

7.5 This leads us to consider, in particular, local infrastructure groups (generic and sectoral). It becomes obvious as we move from the level of region (Northern Ireland) to local (district council), that the closer one gets to local

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<sup>29</sup> Presentation by Geraldine Donaghy (Confederation of Community Groups – Newry & Mourne) to the Task Force: Portaferry, 25<sup>th</sup> March 2003.

organisations the less able they are to deliver the range of core functions agreed by the Working Group. We made the distinction in considering what constitutes core functions of infrastructure bodies between those organisations ‘primarily engaged’ and those undertaking ‘some’ of these functions. Hence, a further policy consideration must be how to more tightly define or classify infrastructure bodies. Intuitively it seems implausible to have (from the NICVA list of organisations) over 190 organisations self-classifying as primarily engaged in infrastructure support for a population of 1.7m people.

- 7.6 This, however, should **not** imply that local community groups have a limited role in infrastructure services – far from it. Currently some sub-regional groups in receipt of government funding have a much smaller infrastructure support remit (in range and depth) than local community groups. Similarly, regional infrastructure organisations, to be effective, need local community group involvement<sup>30</sup>.
- 7.7 A further policy consideration must be around the issue of funding infrastructure. Although the Working Group did not have sufficient time to consider this, it is clear from the literature in Northern Ireland and other jurisdictions that funding is most likely to come from the public sector – the general public, for example, is not interested in donating money for infrastructure support. This offers the prospect of investing in building capacity within these organisations, encouraging collaboration/co-operation between bodies and ultimately differentiating between those bodies ‘primarily engaged’ in infrastructure activities and others. Although it could also be argued that it might jeopardise the independence of infrastructure bodies and stifle their role in campaigning and advocacy on issues of social justice and equality as they become incorporated by stealth, through funding dependency, on the public sector. The Department for Social Development, one likely funding source, is responsible for major public services such as housing, social security and urban regeneration, areas in which the voluntary and community sector frequently lobby and campaign.
- 7.8 Finally, an important policy consideration must be the quality and standard of services provided by infrastructure bodies. The Working Group has agreed a number of principles which represent ‘good infrastructure’. These could evolve into objective benchmarks for infrastructure bodies and lead to minimum performance standards for the services which they provide. Whilst this might meet with resistance from some organisations currently engaged in these services, public sector funding support increasingly demands such accountability and performance measurement. These however must be sensibly derived and applied so that infrastructure bodies are not constrained by a rigid regulatory framework.

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<sup>30</sup> This point has been argued by Geraldine Donaghy (Confederation of Community Groups – Newry & Mourne).

## 8. POSSIBLE POLICY RESPONSES

- 8.1 Several possible policy responses flow from the above considerations. These are offered to the Task Force as options for further debate in their consultation process due to begin in the autumn.
- 8.2 Some clarification is needed on the identification of groups primarily involved in the provision of infrastructure services or those with the capacity to become more involved. The illustrative model outlined in this submission is a starting point but needs further development and refinement. Self-classification is proving to be a very blunt instrument in delineating infrastructure bodies. The model has also raised some doubts as to whether there is a need for infrastructure support at all 3 geographic levels across generic and sectoral bodies, given the size of Northern Ireland, with obvious doubts expressed about the need for a large number of local bodies. ‘Local’ in the case of Northern Ireland might well be seen as beyond the boundaries of one district council – with the exception of Belfast City Council.
- 8.3 As a direct follow-on from this, gaps in infrastructure service provision and obvious areas of duplication need to be identified. In the case of the former, there must be public sector investment to plug infrastructure support gaps and, in the latter, ways found (e.g. financial incentives) to encourage collaboration and co-operation between existing organisations. The Working Group endorsed the emerging proposals coming out of the research by Community Technical Aid<sup>31</sup> which promoted the idea of ‘networking centres’ both as a vehicle for moving organisations from ‘co-operation’ towards active ‘co-ordination’ and their potential in adding to sustainability (see annex 3).
- 8.4 In general, the mapping exercise embarked on by the Working Group and its policy consequences are sensitive issues, not least because they can encourage what one participant described as ‘a beauty contest’ between organisations which feel the need to compete as the preferred provider of infrastructure functions. The problem of duplication and overlap is also exacerbated by the territorial segregation that characterises Northern Ireland. Many local groups self-defining as infrastructure bodies are single identity. There is a Government imperative to move towards a shared and pluralist society<sup>32</sup>. Any policy responses on the future of infrastructure arrangements must reflect this overall goal and encourage collaborative working.
- 8.5 An alternative policy response could be to consider the infrastructure needs of key sectoral (or thematic) groups in Northern Ireland<sup>33</sup>. One possible starting point here would be to determine the needs of those sectors covered by section

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<sup>31</sup> Colm Bradley presented a paper to the Working Group (5<sup>th</sup> August 2003) on ‘Networking Buildings for Sustainability’ as the first stage in a two-part research project funded by the Task Force.

<sup>32</sup> Office of the First and Deputy First Minister (2003) ‘A Shared Future: Improving Community Relations’.

<sup>33</sup> This approach is favoured by the Chair of the Working Group (Anne O’Reilly) who has argued for ‘the need to better understand and research thematic infrastructure in respect of women, age, disability, travellers, race etc’. She expressed some concerns about an approach which tended to focus on infrastructure bodies (in email correspondence with the author).

75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998<sup>34</sup> and work outwards to incorporate other sectors not within the purview of the legislation (e.g. unemployed, victims support groups). In other words, what are the infrastructure support needs of voluntary and community groups representing the interests of women, disabled, ethnic minorities etc. This policy response is informed much more by a service user orientation in determining infrastructure support requirements. Having considered the infrastructure needs of sectoral bodies, organisations outside these parameters would be served by generic infrastructure bodies. The Chair of the Working Group argued ‘when we consider and better understand infrastructure needs of sectoral/thematic bodies, this could lend itself to the development of partnership/collaboration arrangements with existing generic infrastructure bodies/centres, particularly at sub regional and local levels’<sup>35</sup>.

- 8.6 Funding for infrastructure support is likely to come from the public sector. The present arrangements for funding are unsatisfactory. From the funders’ perspective there is merit in clarifying which bodies are primarily engaged in infrastructure support. From the viewpoint of the voluntary and community sector, confusion reigns as to the level, nature and source of funding for infrastructure work. There is a need to rationalise the process of funding, locate responsibility for it within identified public sector bodies or government departments and develop a medium to long-term strategic funding plan for investing in infrastructure support to the voluntary and community sector. Any proposals for funding should be directly linked to the quality of services provided, and performance targets developed to raise the standards of infrastructure support. These policy responses should not be at the expense of public sector support to the sector generally. As one Working Group participant argued: it would be unfortunate ‘if the main funder changed their support from the specific needs of society to the needs of the sector’.
- 8.7 He went on to argue for: a clear definition of services that need to be provided to support the voluntary and community infrastructure (which are not available elsewhere); the provision of these services (funded by the public sector) through a competitive tendering process for infrastructure organisations; and the withdrawal of public funding for infrastructure provision from mixed providers (those engaged in direct services and infrastructure support) to encourage greater concentration on service provision or infrastructural services<sup>36</sup>. These general policy considerations and possible policy responses are summarised in table 8.1.

<sup>34</sup> The nine categories covered by the Section 75 legislation are: religious belief, political opinion, racial group, men and women generally, marital status, age, persons with a disability, persons with dependants, and sexual orientation.

<sup>35</sup> Anne O’Reilly in email correspondence with the author.

<sup>36</sup> Alan Hanna is the British Telecom representative on the Infrastructure Working Group and submitted a short paper (June 2003) for consideration by the group.

**Table 8.1****VOLUNTARY & COMMUNITY SECTOR INFRASTRUCTURE**

<b>Policy Considerations</b>	<b>Possible Policy Responses</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Working Group consensus on:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- definition of ‘infrastructure’;</li> <li>- principles for good infrastructure;</li> <li>- core functions of infrastructure bodies.</li> </ul> </li> <li>▪ Attempts to describe current infrastructure arrangements are problematic, not least because of self-classification by voluntary and community sector.</li> <li>▪ Complexity of infrastructure arrangements – organisational ‘messiness’ through organic growth of sector.</li> <li>▪ ‘One size fits all’ model inappropriate.</li> <li>▪ Overlap, duplication and overcrowding, juxtaposed with gaps in infrastructure provision and variable service quality.</li> <li>▪ Confusion reigns as to the level, nature and source of funding for infrastructure work.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Use agreed definition, principles and core functions of infrastructure to:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- refine and improve illustrative model and associated mapping exercise;</li> <li>- consider an alternative approach which examines the infrastructure needs of identified (S75) sectors (e.g. women, elderly, disabled, ethnic minorities);</li> <li>- consider an alternative approach in which infrastructure organisations competitively tender for the delivery of core functions funded by the public sector.</li> </ul> </li> <li>▪ Find ways (financial incentives) to encourage collaboration or co-operation between existing organisations, particularly where duplication is as a result of segregated provision. Plug infrastructure support gaps.</li> <li>▪ Consider alternative approaches to achieving co-operation through networking buildings approach (Community Technical Aid).</li> <li>▪ Hypothecated public sector funds needed to invest in infrastructure support. Funding linked to improvements in quality of service provision and performance targets for infrastructure support.</li> </ul>

- 8.8 In conclusion, it is perhaps worth emphasising why ‘infrastructure’ is important to the future work of the Task Force within their wider remit of ‘issues around the future sustainability of the voluntary and community sector’<sup>37</sup>. The Home Office’s Active Community Unit notes:

Voluntary and community organisations, whether large, medium or small need help, advice and assistance to fulfil their objectives. Infrastructure organisations meet this need, they help build capacity through the provision of advice and direct assistance on wide range of issues, and provide a channel for cross sector communication. However, coverage is patchy and quality is variable<sup>38</sup>.

- 8.9 This paper is offered as the first step in examining infrastructure arrangements in Northern Ireland and acknowledges that more needs to be done to fully ‘determine the necessary infrastructure to support a diverse voluntary and community sector involved in a wide range of activities including community development, participation in policy development, partnership working with government and the delivery of public services’<sup>39</sup>.

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<sup>37</sup> Terms of Reference for Task Force on Resourcing the Voluntary and Community Sector.

<sup>38</sup> Active Community Unit (2003) Consultation on Voluntary and Community Sector Infrastructure. Home Office: London.

<sup>39</sup> Terms of Reference of the Infrastructure Working Group to the Task Force (2003).

**ANNEX 1**  
**WORKING GROUP MEMBERSHIP**

The Working Group had the following membership:

Anne O'Reilly (Chair), (Help the Aged); Charles Bamford (DHSS&PS – Social Services Inspectorate); Paul Cavanagh, (Western Health and Social Services Board); Rowan Davison, (South & East Belfast Health and Social Services Trust); Gerard Deane, (North West Community Network); Geraldine Donaghy (Newry Confederation of Community Groups); Niall Fitzduff (Rural Community Network); Alan Hanna, (British Telecom); Avila Kilmurray (Community Foundation Northern Ireland); Anna Lo (Chinese Welfare Association); Maureen Pigott (MENCAP); Adrian McCracken (Greater Belfast Community Network); Mary McMahon (Travellers Movement Northern Ireland); Ruth Moore (Fermanagh District Council); Alison Wightman (Community Change).

The Group met on three occasions at the following venues:

- NICVA Premises, Belfast (3<sup>rd</sup> June 2003)
- Calgach Centre, Derry/Londonderry (1<sup>st</sup> July 2003)
- Rural Community Network, Cookstown (5<sup>th</sup> August 2003).

**ANNEX 2**  
**SOCIAL SCAFFOLDING**

### **ANNEX 3**

## **NETWORKING BUILDINGS FOR SUSTAINABILITY**