**Devolution and democracy in Northern Ireland: dealing with the deficit**

NICVA (Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action) is the umbrella body for the voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland. It provides over 1,000 members with information, advice, training and support services on a wide range of issues, together with representation for the sector. NICVA works to achieve progressive social change, based on equality and equity, working through a community development approach, to empower local communities to pursue their own needs and agendas.

NICVA welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation from the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee on devolution and democracy in Northern Ireland. It is widely acknowledged that the absence of a functioning devolved government in Northern Ireland is having major impacts on communities, organisations, public services and businesses here. This is especially true at a time when negotiations are going on in relation to Brexit with major constitutional implications and there is no voice for Northern Ireland. The current interim measures that are in place to release cash for a budget are simply not enough and a functioning Assembly with the ability to take long term and strategic decisions is essential.

The current democratic deficit is causing a deeply concerning drift in terms of politics and political relationships here with political party positions apparently hardening and becoming more polarized, greatly impacting the likelihood of reaching a sustainable agreement. This ongoing drift makes it difficult for society to envisage the Northern Ireland political system as a homogenous entity going forward and more likely to increase public questioning of the ability of an Assembly to deliver for Northern Ireland in the future. We are concerned that this drift will cause increased political apathy here amongst civic society and the public in general. The longer that locally elected democratic structures appear unable to deliver for the public in Northern Ireland on key issues of concern such as health and education, the greater the likelihood that the public here will become disillusioned with devolved government and lose faith in the viability of a Northern Ireland Assembly. The atmosphere of distrust in politicians here can be evidenced in the public perception survey undertaken by NICVA in 2017 which found that only 16% of respondents considered MLAs and MPs to be the most informed to speak about issues facing society. This was significantly lower than the figure for the voluntary and community sector where 45% of people considered the sector to be most informed to speak on these issues.[[1]](#footnote-1)

There are also concerns about what impact the political impasse is having on the ongoing peace process in Northern Ireland as political parties seem increasingly divergent in their stances. The peace process and political stability is also being put under additional pressure by the decision by the UK to leave the EU and the resultant uncertainty around how this will impact on society and the economy in Northern Ireland, and on future North-South (NI/ROI) and East-West (NI/GB, ROI/UK) relations, border controls, citizens’ and citizenship rights which are inextricably linked with the rights and arrangements agreed in the Good Friday Peace Agreement. The resultant drift from the impasse has the potential to result in a step backwards for politics and political progress here.

The democratic deficit poses a threat to public services here as no budget has been passed and there are no Ministers in place to make important decisions about how these services should best be funded in future. We need only look to the budgetary outlook for Northern Ireland 2018-20 to see that the continuation of spending in the way we currently are is unsustainable and the money available will decrease in real terms over the next two years.[[2]](#footnote-2) To remedy this requires Ministers in place taking strategic decisions about our economy, health, education and the many areas across government which are in need of leadership and transformation. We can already see the extreme pressures being felt within our health system in terms of waiting lists, shortage in staffing, cuts to domiciliary care, lack of beds and A&E breaches. The much-needed health transformation agenda under the Bengoa reforms are unable to be taken forward without Ministerial leadership[[3]](#footnote-3). Similarly, within the education system, schools are facing huge pressures due to underfunding which at current levels will result in 400 schools in Northern Ireland being in budget deficit here.[[4]](#footnote-4) This will have negative impacts on school transport, maintenance and support for special needs education impacting children and young people in our society.

NICVA emphasises the need to embrace creative solutions to the current democratic deficit. All options for restoring accountability and democracy in Northern Ireland should be explored and better collaboration within government and across sectors are required. The best scenario for Northern Ireland would be to get a devolved assembly up and running on the basis of a sustainable and lasting agreement where communities, organisations, businesses and public services can engage effectively with local politicians and be provided with the certainty needed to be able to take decisions and plan for the future. Currently they are at a standstill, unable to move forward or progress. Until a sustainable agreement is reached there is a need for some form of functioning government here with Ministers in place able to take strategic decisions. In the absence of Ministers or an Executive, there should at least be a mechanism for scrutiny and debate at policy level. Although it shouldn’t be ruled out, there is a risk that Direct Rule has the potential to lead to further detachment of the Northern Ireland public from the political system here and we would be concerned that pursuing this option would make successful re-establishment of institutions here less likely.

Consideration should also be given to formalizing the role of social partners and the role of a citizens’ assembly or civic forum mechanism. These options should be fully explored to afford Northern Ireland a public voice on different platforms and not limited to political voices. An existing example of a social partners mechanism which could be built upon is the Concordia Group which is a collaboration between Confederation of British Industry, Irish Congress of Trade Unions, the Ulster Farmers’ Union and NICVA and has been in existence for over 20 years in Northern Ireland focussing on identifying and articulating issues of common interest and concern across Northern Ireland society as a whole. If Direct Rule were to be considered as an option, NICVA would advocate for mechanisms to allow scrutiny of emerging policies and decisions by all local NI parties. This scrutiny could be enhanced by input from Citizen’s Assemblies and/or Social Partners forums reflecting wider social interests here. Greater attention should also be given to areas in Northern Ireland where democracy is still operating. An example of the this would be throughout the local councils in Northern Ireland. Consideration should be given to how policies and legislation can be progressed at council level, looking along the lines of the programme for government outcomes and whether these can be delivered at more local level.

There are concerns about the way in which talks to re-establish an Assembly have been progressing over the past year. Under the current format of the talks designed to reach an agreement between the two main parties, there is a risk that any outcomes which result from this result in an unsustainable agreement if the talks do not also involve other political parties in Northern Ireland. The lack of transparency around the talks also has the potential to create an atmosphere of distrust and wariness amongst other political parties and the public. Other formats and strategies for Stormont talks should be explored to increase the likelihood of reaching a sustainable resolution.

The decision by the UK to leave the EU adds greater pressure to the need to get a functioning government up and running in Northern Ireland. NICVA has engaged extensively with the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector and others on the issue of Brexit and has identified five overarching issues of concern for Northern Ireland society as a whole; impacts on peace and political stability, impacts on economic well-being (related to trade, EU subsidies and programmes), impacts on social and economic rights, impacts on health and impacts on the environment.[[5]](#footnote-5) There is no united voice representing the views and concerns of Northern Ireland in the Brexit talks which leaves us in a very disadvantaged position limited ability to provide insight and scrutiny to negotiations and the debate around the EU Withdrawal Bill. Brexit will have significant impacts in Northern Ireland especially in relation to the border and has the potential to create a more polarised society here as the two largest parties have diverging views on the issue. It is putting many long-term decisions on hold and creating even greater uncertainty for people in Northern Ireland. There are widespread concerns that any return to border enforcement or monitoring on the island of Ireland could have a potentially de-stabilising effect, with these concerns not being adequately addressed or represented locally or nationally in the current situation. With the decision to leave the EU, Northern Ireland will lose out on another democratic platform through which to have a voice, resulting in still greater under-representation of the Northern Ireland electorate.

The voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland is set to be amongst the worst affected sectors in Northern Ireland because of the democratic deficit. Lack of certainty and late decisions around funding have become a given for most voluntary and community organisations who frequently lurch from year to year with no ability to plan long term, having to place staff on notice of potential redundancy again and again. Cuts to funding of the voluntary and community sector driven by short-term, year-on-year budgetary management by officials, rather than by long-term outcomes-based strategic budgetary decisions made by politicians, seem only likely to continue or increase as the democratic deficit continues and there is less money available in the Northern Ireland budget. The voluntary and community sector is hugely valued by the community in Northern Ireland with 90% of the population here having used a charitable or voluntary service in the past 12 months[[6]](#footnote-6), any downturn in funding for this sector will greatly impact communities here and impact those people that rely on these services as pressure increases on statutory public services. The voluntary and community sector makes significant use of government funding to deliver its services and activities, but in the current climate many organisations are wary of starting new projects, or hiring new staff and are therefore becoming less able to respond to social problems that require new strategies, leading to potential stagnation in this sector. There is also concern that if Direct Rule were to be implemented here, it would be more difficult for this sector to engage effectively with and help inform policy, political decision-making and public debate.

Overall it is clear that the democratic deficit in Northern Ireland is having far-reaching and long-term implications for civic society, businesses and political stability here. This is made worse against the backdrop of Brexit negotiations at which Northern Ireland does not have a voice. NICVA is clear that the best outcome for Northern Ireland is to have an Executive up and running on the basis of a sustainable and long-term agreement but every option for re-establishment of the Executive and strengthening the potential for scrutiny and debate at various levels should be considered and explored.

1. http://www.nicva.org/resource/nicva-public-perception-survey-identifies-high-levels-of-public-usage-and-trust-in [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://www.finance-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/dfp/Briefing%20on%20Northern%20Ireland%20Budgetary%20Outlook%202018-20\_3.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://www.irishnews.com/news/2018/01/01/news/a-year-in-health-2017-crisis-hit-health-service-plagued-by-staff-shortages-and-spiralling-waiting-lists-as-civil-servants-t-1222195/ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-42317279 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. http://www.nicva.org/brexit [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. http://www.nicva.org/resource/nicva-public-perception-survey-identifies-high-levels-of-public-usage-and-trust-in [↑](#footnote-ref-6)