



# **JOINT GOVERNMENT AND VOLUNTARY & COMMUNITY SECTOR FORUM**

## **Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) Panel**

**Terms of Reference 2024 - 2027**

**(Agreed September 2024)**

## BACKGROUND & INTRODUCTION

- 1) The **Voluntary and Community Sector Panel ( VCS Panel)** is a key partner within the structures and operation of the Joint Forum between Government and the Voluntary and Community Sector in Northern Ireland commonly known as the **Joint Forum**.
- 2) The Joint Forum is made up of representatives from central and local government (**Public Sector Group**) and the voluntary and community sector (**VCS Panel**) in Northern Ireland. The Joint Forum is supported by NICVA and the Voluntary and Community Division in the Department for Communities (DfC) as joint secretariat. The Joint Forum was established in October 1998 with the purpose of promoting regular dialogue between the voluntary and community sector and Government departments and with the overarching aim of: *“develop[ing] and lead[ing] an effective working relationship between Government and the Voluntary and Community Sector in Northern Ireland”*
- 3) In September 2022, the membership of the Joint Forum was mandated by the former Communities Minister, Deirdre Hargey to:
  - Develop Proposals for a **new Partnership Agreement between government and the voluntary and community sector**, and define what commitments and actions need to be in place to give effect to that.
  - **Agree new formal cross-cutting principles of fair and effective funding** to support this.
- 4) This Partnership Agreement builds on and takes the place of the “Concordat between the Voluntary and Community Sector and Government”, which was agreed in 2011 via the Joint Forum and which has guided the relationship between the voluntary and community sector, Government Departments and public bodies for over a decade. The Partnership Agreement contains provisions to develop the relationship further, deliver impact and make progress, while building on the foundations of the original Concordat. The Partnership Agreement has been informed by a programme of engagement with both the voluntary and community and public sectors.
- 5) It is hoped that the Partnership Agreement will act as a framework for developing and supporting effective partnership working between government and the voluntary and community sector. It is anticipated that the Partnership Agreement will be agreed and

endorsed by the Northern Ireland Executive, following final developments by the membership of the Joint Forum.

- 6) It is anticipated that the Joint Forum and the VCS Panel will have a key role in supporting the implementation of the final Partnership Agreement as agreed and, in the design, coordination and/or delivery of an associated workplan regarding.
- 7) Considering these developments and this next stage in terms of the future role and direction for the Joint Forum, it was felt timely to review and develop an updated Terms of Reference for the VCS Panel that would be reflective of these and that will guide and support the VCS Panel and its membership in this role going forward.
- 8) Secretariat and development support for the VCS Panel will continue to be provided by NICVA.

## **ROLE & PURPOSE**

- 9) The role and purpose of the VCS Panel is:

*‘To represent the Voluntary and Community sector within the structures of the Joint Forum and to support the Forum in the delivery of mutually agreed key aims and objectives, including delivery of an associated Workplan.’*

- 10) The key responsibilities of the VCS Panel are to:

- a) Uphold the values of the Partnership Agreement.
- b) Play a key role in the operation of the Joint Forum, including relationship building, joint working and collaboration with its Public Sector membership and other key stakeholders.
- c) Support implementation of the Partnership Agreement between the sector and government and promote dialogue and engagement across the voluntary and community sector regarding.
- d) To contribute to the agreement and delivery of an associated workplan and key activities for the Joint Forum in support of this.

- e) Ensure the views and interests of the voluntary and community sector are articulated within the Partnership Agreement, the Joint Forum workplan and structures.
- f) Discuss VCS strategy and policy issues on a co-operative basis, identify key issues, agree a common approach where possible and articulate same through the Joint Forum.
- g) To actively contribute to subgroup and other key activities in support of the work of the Joint Forum and the implementation of the Partnership Agreement more broadly.

## **MEMBERSHIP**

- 11) The VCS Panel comprises representatives from across the voluntary and community sector. It is chaired by a VCS Panel member elected by panel representatives.
- a) The VCS Panel is made up of 20<sup>1</sup> representatives from across the voluntary and community sector. To provide continuity NICVA retains a regular place on the panels membership but will have no formal voting rights as a panel member. A further 19 representatives from across the Voluntary and Community sector are appointed to make up the Voluntary and Community Sector Panel.
  - b) NICVA is responsible for overseeing the appointment of VCS Panel members and voluntary and community sector organisations can put forward representatives via an open nomination process.
  - c) Only nominations from voluntary and community sector organisations and groups can be considered and nominees must clearly state the sectoral grouping/thematic interest (for eg; women's sector, young people, disability) they are seeking to represent.
  - d) The NICVA Executive is responsible for the selection of VCS Panel members and will implement a suitable selection process. This will involve a sub-committee of the Executive Committee selecting up to 19 people from available nominations (NICVA retains a standing place on the VCS Panel).

---

<sup>1</sup> It was agreed by the NICVA Executive in September 2024 to increase the total number of VCS Panel places from 15 to 20, to help ensure sector representation is as balanced as possible.

- e) Established criteria will ensure the panel achieves a cross-section of representation from across the sector with due care being taken to balance the selection in terms of gender, geography, sectoral or thematic groupings and size of organisation (based on income) etc.
- f) Panel Members will be appointed to represent a sectoral grouping and/or thematic interest, rather than their individual organisation or group.
- g) To ensure broad representation, ordinarily only one VCS panel place can be retained per organisation and/or sectoral group.
- h) Whilst ensuring panel membership is regularly refreshed, NICVA's Executive Committee will also strive to ensure continuity of the VCS Panel by seeking to retain at least 50% of any existing panel membership to achieve a balance between experienced and new members.
- i) Each panel member will be appointed for a period of three years and will be entitled to seek re-nomination for a further three-year period. No person shall be appointed for a period of more than six consecutive years.
- j) The Chair of the VCS Panel, who will also act as Joint Chair of the Joint Forum will be elected by current VCS Panel members.
- k) A Vice Chair of the VCS Panel will also be elected to deputise and provide additional support to the Chair as required.
- l) All VCS Panel Members, with the exception of NICVA, will be eligible to put themselves forward for the positions of VCS Panel Chair and/or Vice Chair and their election will normally take place via a confidential ballot, with those receiving the most panel nominations securing roles.
- m) Panel members unable to maintain the required commitment to participating in the VCS Panel/Joint Forum and fulfilling their roles as outlined in this Terms of Reference are required to inform the VCS Panel Chair and/or NICVA Secretariat as soon as is possible.

- n) A panel member can resign or step down at any time. If a resignation takes place NICVA's Executive Committee will appoint a replacement from a Reserve List, agreed from its existing pool of VCS nominations

## **ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF PANEL MEMBERS**

- 12) The responsibilities of individual VCS Panel members include:
  - a) Demonstrating the Shared Values of the Partnership Agreement.
  - b) Actively engaging in and contributing to the work of the VCS panel and the Joint Forum, informing discussion and decision-making through expert insight and sectoral awareness.
  - c) Acting as the conduit between their sectoral/thematic group and the VCS Panel/Joint Forum by canvassing views/opinion, disseminating information and representing the broader interests/views of their grouping; including taking personal responsibility for representing the views of their area of expertise or sub-sector.
  - d) Taking responsibility for supporting the delivery of the Joint Forum workplan, including participation in associated subgroups or other key activities.
  - e) Consistent attendance and participation at all related meetings, activities and/or events.

## **GOVERNANCE AND DECISION MAKING**

- 13) Overall responsibility for the operation of the VCS Panel, including its recruitment and selection lies with NICVA.
- 14) As detailed NICVA will retain a standing place within membership of the VCS Panel to provide consistency of representation and co-ordination between its work and that of the VCS Panel and the Joint Forum more broadly.
- 15) NICVA will not be eligible to nominate for and/or undertake the role of the VCS Panel Chair/Joint Chair.

- 16) The NICVA Executive will receive regular updates on the work of the VCS Panel and Joint Forum. This includes briefing on any key issues requiring attention, further direction or action by the NICVA Executive. The Secretariat will provide these updates in agreement/partnership with the VCS Panel Chair.
- 17) The VCS Panel Chair will meet annually with the Chair of the NICVA Executive to discuss progress and key issues of interest and to facilitate alignment with the work and interests of the VCS Panel, the Joint Forum and that of NICVA more broadly.
- 18) All VCS Panel members are required to demonstrate commitment and be willing to contribute to collaborative working. To enhance collaborative working decisions will be made by consensus as far as possible. In the absence of consensus on decision making, matters will be deferred to the NICVA Executive for direction.

## **MEETINGS AND OPERATION**

### **Format and Frequency**

- 19) The format and agenda for VCS Panel meetings will be shaped/informed by the agreed workplan for the Joint Forum
- 20) The VCS Panel will meet formally at least four times each year with meetings normally scheduled to take place two weeks in advance of a full Joint Forum meeting.
- 21) VCS Panel members will be expected to participate in further subgroups, meetings, activities and events to progress the Joint Forum Work Plan.

### **Subgroups**

- 22) The Joint Forum may need to establish subgroups to take forward specific actions as detailed in its Work Plan. VCS Panel members will be expected to participate and contribute to these. This includes chairing, leading on or supporting key pieces of work as part of this workplan. Such groups should be task focused and time limited, and

additional support will be provided by the Secretariat to support Panel Members participation.

### **Administration and Operation of Meetings**

- 23) In addition to Joint Forum meetings, the VCS Panel will meet primarily via VCS Panel Meetings, subgroup meetings and other key meetings or events as appropriate. All key administrative functions in support of these and the work of the VCS Panel will be performed by the Secretariat.
- 24) It is the role of the Secretariat to oversee the effective operation of VCS Panel Meetings, and to support panel members participation in subgroups, and other agreed meetings or events. This will include finalising the agenda and format for VCS Panel meetings in discussion with the VCS Panel Chair and putting in place practical arrangements regarding.
- 25) Agenda items for VCS Panel Meetings should, as far as is possible, be substantive issues that relate to the remit or work programme of the VCS Panel and/or Joint Forum.
- 26) Issues specific to or between individual organisations and government will not normally be considered suitable as an agenda item for VCS Panel Meetings. However, where such an issue has a broader impact then it may be considered appropriate and may be considered.
- 27) Ordinarily the agenda for VCS Panel Meetings will be agreed and issued (with relevant papers) to members at least 5 working days before the VCS Panel meeting.
- 28) VCS Panel Meetings will follow the agenda. Secretariat will have briefed the Chair on issues including apologies and anticipated attendance.
- 29) Contributions from all VCS Panel members will be encouraged in meetings. While there is an informal environment to encourage debate, it is important that Panel members wishing to speak go through the Chair to ensure their point is heard and order is maintained in meetings.

- 30) The Secretariat will prepare the notes/minutes of any meetings. Panel members who have made contributions or presentations may be asked for comments on the draft minutes or for copies of presentations or supporting materials.
- 31) The Secretariat will normally issue draft minutes/notes as soon as is practical after a meeting has taken place.
- 32) Minutes of a meeting will be formally agreed at the next meeting.

## ATTENDANCE

- 33) VCS Panel Members will be expected to attend all Joint Forum, VCS Panel and related meetings. If members cannot attend, they are expected to provide adequate notice. **If a panel member fails to attend two consecutive Joint Forum and/or VCS Panel meetings, they will be contacted by the Chair of the VCS Panel and offered the opportunity to improve attendance or resign their role as a Panel Member.**
- 34) In exceptional circumstances **where non-attendance is unavoidable the panel member should advise the Secretariat, as soon as is practical** and can nominate a suitable delegate from their organisation to attend in his/her place. To ensure consistency of representation, **VCS members can only deputise attendance once in any calendar year for any Joint Forum or VCS Panel meeting.**

## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

- 35) Participation in the VCS panel is an open and transparent process and documentation in relation to the VCS Panel, and/or its meetings may be made available via the NICVA website and other key communication channels.
- 36) Conflicts of interest may arise, in the business/operation of the VCS Panel and/or the Joint Forum. It is the responsibility of individual Panel members to identify any potential conflict, including perceived conflicts, and to declare it to the Chair and/or Secretariat. Any conflict of interest will be recorded in meeting minutes. Any issues regarding that cannot be resolved will be deferred to the NICVA Executive for direction.

## **REVIEW OF TERMS OF REFERENCE**

- 37) The terms of reference for the VCS Panel will be subject to regular review by NICVA and its Executive in consultation with the Chair and membership of the VCS Panel. The terms of reference may be amended reflective of changes to the Joint Forums operation and/or its workplan.
  
- 38) NICVA will undertake a review of the Terms of Reference and arrangements for the VCS Panel (including its operation) at the end of each VCS Panel/Joint Forum term (currently 3 years).