

DRAFT Minutes of All-Party Group on Voluntary and Community Sector

Thursday 2nd May 2024

1pm – 2pm

Members' Dining Room, Parliament Buildings

MLAs present:	Chair Diane Forsythe MLA Vice Chair Sian Mulholland MLA Maolíosá McHugh MLA Brian Kingston MLA Andy Allen MLA
MLA Apologies:	Ciara Ferguson MLA Kellie Armstrong MLA Phillip Brett MLA Robbie Butler MLA Deborah Erskine MLA Harry Harvey MLA Cara Hunter MLA Nuala McAllister MLA Sinéad McLaughlin MLA
Speakers:	Andrew Irvine, East Belfast Mission on behalf of Belfast Works Consortium Paula Jennings, Stepping Stones on behalf of PROSPER Consortium Stephen Barr, Start 360 on behalf of Youth Start Consortium
Secretariat:	Celine McStravick (NICVA) Kathy Maguire (NICVA)

1	AGENDA ITEM 1: APOLOGIES, MINUTES AND MATTERS ARISING
1.1	Chair Diane Forsythe MLA welcomed everyone and outlined the agenda for the meeting.
1.2	The Chair reflected on the critical role and contribution of the sector and the continued cliff edge faced by the sector in terms of adequate funding. She said that the voice of the voluntary and community sector needs to be heard across the NI Assembly and within government and she hopes the APG can help amplify the sectors voice.
2	AGENDA ITEM 2: UPDATE FROM CELINE MCSTRAVICK, NICVA
2.1	Celine McStravick reflected on recent difficulties for the sector due to the lack of an Executive, continued uncertainty, and short-term arrangements in terms of government funding to the sector, loss of vital funding streams including the European Social Fund in recent years and cuts to local Government funding such as the DoH Core Grant Scheme.
2.2	Over 50,000 staff are employed in the sector, with over 200,000 volunteers, all working across all areas including health, education, justice, and infrastructure. Despite this its role and contribution is not always readily understood by Government and the sector is often the most vulnerable to cuts and reductions in funding.
2.3	The sector are often working to support the most vulnerable and to respond to a breadth of societal challenges. There are ever increasing pressures to deliver much needed services-and supports, whilst at the same time funding is decreasing, due to the continued squeeze on public sector budgets, further impacted by the loss of European Social Funding and recent significant cuts to a number of key government funded programmes/schemes. The sector continues to strive to meet need amidst these challenges, due to its collective values and its commitment to our communities.
2.4	However the sector cannot sustain these pressures indefinitely. Decreasing investment means that services are overstretched, and staff exhausted and there are difficulties with recruiting and retaining staff across all parts of the sector. Despite delivering essential services on behalf of Government, sector pay and working conditions fall short of what they should be.
2.5	Amidst these challenges a long-term strategy and investment is needed, and the sector wants to work in partnership with government in addressing these issues and in finding workable solutions.
2.6	She said her hope is that the APG will profile collective concerns/asks for the sector; including workforce issues, the need for a long-term strategy and investment, increasing understanding and recognition of the sectors role and contribution to many areas of public service delivery and the benefits of meaningful collaboration between government and the voluntary sector to achieving positive outcomes for all.

3	AGENDA ITEM 3: PRESENTATION FROM SECTOR ORGANISATIONS ON THE IMPACT OF UNCERTAINTY OF UK SHARED PROSPERITY FUNDING, DRAFT MOTION & DISCUSSION
3.1	Celine McStravick introduced this agenda item for discussion highlighting that the VCS plays a key role in addressing economic inactivity and in helping create a more inclusive labour market. Despite this these services face financial uncertainty beyond March 2025 due to the lack of clarity from UK Government on UKSPF funds post March 2025. At a local level this provision falls between two stools (DfC and DfE) in terms of Departmental responsibility and decision making, compounding the challenges faced. Celine stressed that urgent clarity/ decision making is needed, before the Summer period, when UK Govt attention is likely diverted to UK General Election.
3.2	Andrew Irvine, representing the Belfast Works consortium, Paula Jennings, representing the consortium PROSPER and Stephen Barr representing the Youth Start Consortium, shared insights into the sector's response to tackling economic inactivity and highlighted the uncertainty surrounding continued funding, in particular the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UK SPF), currently due to come to an end in March 2025.
3.3	Andrew Irvine, East Belfast Mission, representing the Belfast Works consortium said that the Consortium is a £9 million project delivering over two years which aims to tackle economic inactivity for those age 16 -65 yrs. He said it was important to recognise the unique role that the VCS plays in regard to employability support. These services are working with those who are furthest /most marginalised from the labour market and who mainstream public sector services are not reaching.
3.4	He said that are many reasons why some working age people may struggle to access or opt out of the workforce – eg; as a result of caring responsibilities, health issues, generational impacts, institutionalism etc. He said that very often people have no hope about their situation and in their ability to develop new skills or gain employment.
3.5	He said that most often, they are working to ensure peoples basic needs are met such as housing, heat/food, or healthcare needs before they can begin to explore training needs or employability support. He said that those individuals Belfast Works is supporting cannot be reached from a government office, but through local community-based provision, which has an outreach focus, is flexible in approach and can provide the intensive, wrap around support that is needed. The VCS has a reach into communities and expertise in terms of staffing that the public sector doesn't, hence why it is so critically needed if we are committed to genuinely tackling economic activt .
3.6	In terms of the deadline for decision making on UK SPF, Andrew said we need to talk about December 2024 instead of March 2025. Beyond this period, if there is no clarity on the funding position, organisations will have to move forward with redundancy arrangements, in order to comply with their statutory responsibilities and also prepare those they support for the wind down of support arrangements etc. Once lost, staff and services will not be easily replaced,
3.7	Paula Jennings, Stepping Stones NI, representing the disability consortium PROSPER described its role as a group of VCS organisations providing dedicated employment related support to people with disabilities. Paula highlighted that Northern Ireland has the lowest rate of employment among disabled people in the UK and referred to the recently published Pivotal report on Economic Inactivity.

3.8	She said that people should have opportunities to gain meaningful employment regardless of having a disability. She said the consortium provides support for people with all levels of disability, including physical disability and/or learning disabilities.
3.9	She said the Consortium currently works across 9 council areas to help disabled people overcome barriers to employment. They assist and support those with a disability to prepare for, access and sustain suitable employment. Each individuals situation is unique, and this requires a tailored approach, expertise and understanding, not readily available within mainstream public sector services. These services have established excellent relationships with a broad range of employers (both local, regional and UK wide) to support people into 'good' jobs that they can thrive in and sustain.
3.10	She suggested that in the absence of future UKSPF investment, all those VCS organisations currently in receipt of Funding, including disability organisations, need as a minimum one year of funding certainty in the form of a Transition Fund, until a new co-design process can begin with government as to what future funding and resources to this sector should look like. Otherwise, services, without the continuation of funding and investment, will be forced to end, meaning no tailored pre- or post-employment support will be available for those with a disability.
3.11	She said the sector and those they support cannot return to the uncertainty of funding for organisations and services which was experienced in 2023, at the end of ESF. She said the sector is a key part of the solution in meaningfully addressing economic inactivity and to supporting those with disabilities across Northern Ireland to access meaningful and sustainable employment opportunities, but urgent clarity is needed on funding if these services are to be in any way sustained.
3.12	Stephen Barr, Start 360, representing the Youth Start Consortium said the Consortium is a youth work led employability initiative to support young people aged 16-30 yrs. who are economically inactive to enter the labour market. It helps them to prepare for, enter and sustain employment.
3.13	He said the Consortium works across all 11 Council areas to tackle economic inactivity amongst young people, who are furthest for the labour market. He said that across the youth work organisations that make up the Consortium there is a breadth of expertise, and experience in working with young people who face particular challenges, including young people who are care experienced, young people involved in the criminal justice system, young people who have experienced homelessness. Many of these young people will have had a disrupted education, with no or limited qualifications.
3.14	Young people accessing the programme require tailored and wrap around support to overcome disadvantage, educational underachievement, mental ill health, involvement in justice system and other issues.
3.15	Stephen highlighted that the Consortiums work delivers strongly across key NI policy priority areas and cross departmental strategies, including the NI Programme for Government, delivering across its 9 strategic outcome areas.
3.16	He expressed the Consortiums significant concerns about the cliff edge of funding beyond March 2025, saying there is no clarity on the continuation or replacement of funding. This presents immediate short- and long-term challenges to viability of these

	<p>services and the wider sector in Northern Ireland. He said the sustainability of funding must be critically analysed from Autumn 2024 to provide certainty and to prevent widespread collapse of this sector.</p>
3.17	<p>He emphasised that these services exist because mainstream provision does not meet the needs of many across our communities or because individuals have or are being failed by the current system. These services are addressing persistent societal needs. He stressed that urgent clarity is needed on continuation of UKSPF funds, post March 2025 or a comparative successor, otherwise organisations will not be in a position to continue delivery.</p>
3.18	<p>Chair Diane Forsythe MLA thanked the speakers for their contributions. She said an Assembly motion on the role of the sector with regard to addressing Economic Inactivity and funding uncertainty including UK SPF funding was being proposed by the APG.</p>
3.19	<p>She said the motion had cross party support within the APG and the APG aims to have it brought to the Assembly shortly. She invited observers and other APG members to comment on the draft.</p>
3.20	<p>Discussion took place on the proposed Draft Motion, with some suggestions made with regard to wording.</p>
3.21	<p>Brian Kingston MLA suggested that the motion start by recognising the value of the voluntary and community sector, more broadly, then a focus on economic inactivity and the UK Shared Prosperity Fund.</p>
3.22	<p>The suggested reference to the Childcare within the draft Motion was noted. Chair Diane Forsythe MLA welcomed the commitment of funding for the Childcare Strategy in the draft Budget 2024-25. She said that she would like to see the return of multi-year budgets, for all sectors including the voluntary and community sector.</p> <p>Action: APG to table an Assembly motion recognising the critical role/contribution of VCS in addressing economic inactivity, and the need for urgent clarity and decision making by Government on future funding to sector post March 2025, including UK Shared Prosperity Funding and the need for long term strategic investment in the sector. The APG will look to secure a debate in the Chamber regarding. The current draft Motion is to be updated by Secretariat/Chair on the basis of today's discussion.</p>
AGENDA ITEM 4: DISCUSSION	
4.1	<p>Observers highlighted issues affecting the voluntary and community sector and of key interest. These included;</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Listening to and involving the voices of black and minority ethnic groups in the sector; 2. Recognising the needs of the aging community, and the needs of older people in employment (e.g. in work training, engaging with the workplace) 3. Th urgent need for agreement and implementation of the Anti-Poverty Strategy by NI Executive, alongside Welfare Reform Mitigations. A robust, well-resourced VCS is key to this delivery and to ending poverty.

<p>4.2</p> <p>4.3</p>	<p>4. Recognition of the role and value of sector by Government, their role in early intervention and prevention and the added value, it brings to many public services. This was highlighted throughout the pandemic, but the commitments made by Government at this time, not been realised.</p> <p>5. For the sector to be recognised by the government as key partners and for funding to be delivered to organisations in a way which allows them to be responsive to the needs they can see in the community, including Multi- Year funding.</p> <p>Chair Diane Forsythe MLA thanked observers for their comments. She said the new Programme for Government should contain a critical aim to join up the work of the sector and Executive Departments and their agencies.</p> <p>APG Vice Chair Sian Mulholland MLA thanked observers for their contributions and said the voluntary and community sector “picked up the tab” during Covid-19. She reflected on the challenging position sector faces, stated this is well recognised and understood by MLAs, across the Assembly. She spoke about her experience working in the sector and how it impacted her understanding of the sectors contribution.</p> <p>Action: APG to write to the First Minister and deputy First Minister as the Programme for Government is being established, asking them to recognise the voluntary and community sector and its role in the Programme for Government.</p> <p>Action: APG to write to Executive Ministers asking them to detail their plans to work with the voluntary and community sector in key areas off policy making and development.</p>
<p>5</p>	<p>AGENDA ITEM 5: DISCUSSION ON WORK PLAN</p>
<p>5.1</p> <p>5.2</p> <p>5.3</p>	<p>Chair Diane Forsythe MLA acknowledged that the work programme can be “live” to be able to respond to issues which may arise over the year.</p> <p>Chair Diane Forsythe MLA said that the APG is open to receive input of ideas for agenda items from observers/sector.</p> <p>Celine McStravick said that the APG had agreed to focus on the ‘Value of the Sector’ as the overall theme for the work plan for the year ahead.</p> <p>Action: APG to hold ‘Meet the Sector’ event in the Long Gallery in September/October.</p>
	<p>AGENDA ITEM 6: AOB AND TIME AND DATE OF NEXT MEETING</p>
<p>6.1</p> <p>6.2</p> <p>6.3</p>	<p>Chair Diane Forsythe MLA thanked everyone for attending and contributing to the APG.</p> <p>Chair Diane Forsythe MLA suggested that the APG meet again online in June to discuss progress on the Assembly motion, and to allow members to provide feedback and ideas for future motions.</p> <p>The Secretariat will circulate information when the motion is confirmed.</p>

	Action: Date and arrangements for next meeting to be confirmed by Secretariat
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