

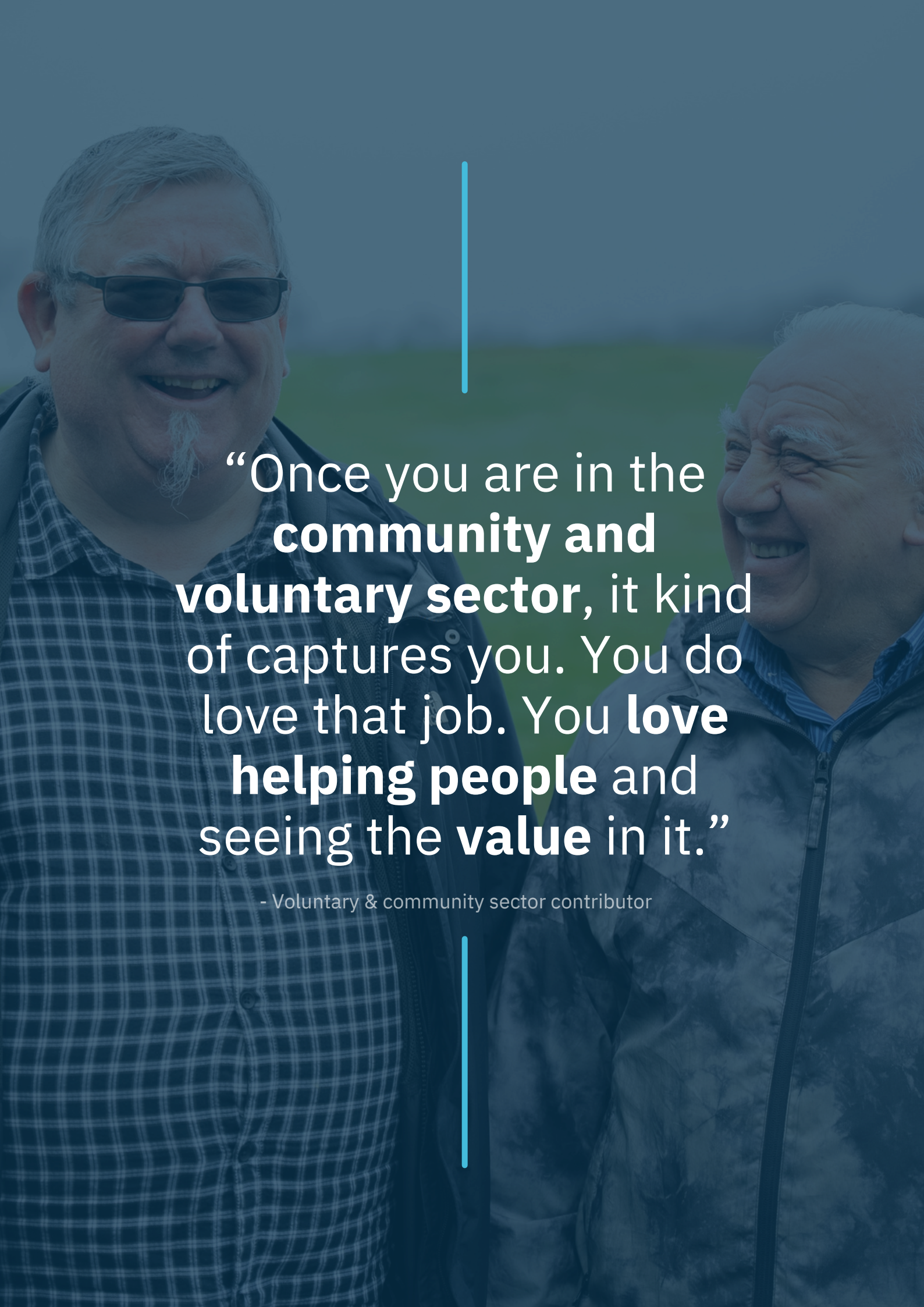
Making a difference

Reflections from the challenges facing the Voluntary and Community Sector workforce

July 2024



The logo for NICVA, featuring a blue curved line above the text "nicva" in a bold, lowercase, sans-serif font.

A photograph of two men standing outdoors, smiling. The man on the left is wearing sunglasses and a plaid shirt. The man on the right is wearing a jacket. The background is a blurred green field. The image has a blue overlay.

“Once you are in the **community and voluntary sector**, it kind of captures you. You do love that job. You **love helping people** and seeing the **value** in it.”

- Voluntary & community sector contributor

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Executive summary

Voluntary and community organisations play a pivotal role in providing crucial support to local communities, delivering essential public services and supporting some of the most vulnerable people in Northern Ireland.

However, as society has emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic and navigates the ongoing cost of living crisis, voluntary and community organisations find themselves grappling with their own challenges.

The Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) commissioned Stats & Stories to develop the **'Making a Difference'** research to investigate the challenges encountered by the voluntary and community workforce, the implications of these challenges and to reflect on potential solutions aimed at mitigating these difficulties.

The research was conducted in two phases and used a mixed method approach combining quantitative and qualitative research methods.

Phase 1 Online Survey: During November – December 2023, a total of 245 valid surveys were completed by staff working within the voluntary and community sector. Phase 2 Focus Groups: Three focus groups were held in Belfast, Newry and Derry during November 2023 with 39 participants taking part.



Key Results

Perceptions of Working in the Voluntary and Community Sector

Perceptions of working in the voluntary and community sector are generally positive. Participants highlighted the fulfilling nature of their work and the ability to make a positive difference on the people they support. They also appreciated working with passionate colleagues who share similar values.

However, there was recognition that this view may not be universally shared with some perceiving the sector as "fluffy" and "unprofessional." This perception was compounded by disparities in pay, terms and conditions compared to the public or private sector.

Joining the Voluntary and Community Workforce

Survey results reveal that 49.0% of organisations faced difficulties recruiting staff in the past year. Prolonged vacancies stressed existing staff, could cause service delivery issues and increased the risk of

burnout. The research found a number of key barriers to recruitment:

- **Salary Levels:** A total of 75.8% of participants identified salary levels as a barrier to recruitment asserting that voluntary and community sector salaries were uncompetitive.
- **Insufficient Numbers of Applicants:** Many organisations struggled with too few job applicants (70.8%), leading to challenges across all levels of staffing. Re-advertising and using recruitment agencies were found to be time-consuming and costly solutions. To attract more applicants, especially outside Belfast, remote work options were explored for flexibility.
- **Short Term Funding:** Over half of participants (55.8%) saw short-term contracts as a barrier to recruiting staff. The combination of low wages and instability caused by short term funding was described as a cyclical problem for the sector overall.

Participants also highlighted the need to establish and promote clear pathways to employment within the voluntary and community sector as a way to increase

the workforce, particularly for school leavers and graduates. Greater efforts to provide in-work learning opportunities with mentoring support within the voluntary and community sector were also needed to improve recruitment.

Retaining the Voluntary and Community Sector Workforce

Results show that 42.0% of voluntary and community organisations faced difficulties retaining staff in the past 12 months. The challenges in recruiting staff closely align with those in staff retention. The primary concerns were salary levels failing to match the rising cost of living (59.2%), other sectors perceived as offering better terms and conditions (52.4%) and short-term contracts (52.4%).

Nearly half of participants reported that high levels of burnout (47.8%) made it a challenge to retain staff. Focus group participants reported that staff were at risk from burnout from a number of contributing factors:

- excessive workloads caused by high demand for services with often not enough staff or resources;
- job insecurity caused by short term contracts;

- difficulty for staff to take accumulated hours off due to operational demands and organisations are unable to compensate for time owed;
- frustration about the lack of understanding by government departments on the work of the voluntary and community sector.

Concerns about career progression within the sector were raised within the context of retaining staff. Succession planning was identified as a significant challenge due to the ageing demographics of the sector, the difficulty in attracting new talent and the inability to retain skilled employees for key roles.

Volunteers

Volunteers are valued for their skills and dedication and the capacity they added to the sector. However, participants highlighted that managing volunteers has financial implications for organisations. The need for more support and resources to provide structure and training for volunteers was highlighted with the importance of avoiding overburdening volunteers and recognising the associated costs in funding applications.

Solutions

Many of the challenges faced by the voluntary and community workforce identified in this *'Making a Difference'* research stem from structural issues in funding. However, participants demonstrated a strong commitment to actively address workforce challenges in the voluntary and community sector. Proposed solutions include:

Promotion of the Voluntary and Community Sector

Participants identified the crucial need for greater awareness and promotion of the sector, focusing on three main areas:

- **Valuing the Sector:** This included improved communication and promotion of work of the voluntary and community sector through emphasising social value, raising awareness of the impact of the sector and working to increase understanding by funders and government departments.
- **Benefits of Working in the Sector:** Greater promotion of the benefits of working in the sector as an

employee is needed to support recruitment. Promoting the sector's benefits as an employer should include developing clear educational pathways, in-work learning programs and mentoring to attract a diverse workforce.

- **Collective Voice:** A united front on issues such as funding and terms and conditions was seen as a way to foster a greater sense of solidarity and would increase the influence of the sector as a whole.

New Approaches

Innovative approaches are vital to support the workforce, encourage collaboration and ensure financial sustainability:

- **Outsourcing and Pooling Resources:** Opportunities for outsourcing and pooling resources, particularly in finance, digital services and HR support should be explored to reduce costs and improve collective impact.
- **Partnership Working:** There was

wide recognition that collaborating with others both in and outside of the voluntary and community sector was beneficial and should be better facilitated.

- **Diversifying Income Generation:** Participants recognised the need to grow their unrestricted funds and called for more support to explore new income-generation avenues, including fundraising campaigns, social enterprise projects and building relationships with regular donors.

Recognising and Rewarding Staff

Participants perceived that a key driver to recruiting and retaining staff was a focus on wellbeing. Organisations had already implemented a range of innovative and creative approaches to recognising and rewarding staff in non-monetary ways and emphasised the advantage of flexibility, including a four-day work week and hybrid working path.

The Role for NICVA

Participants acknowledged NICVA's key role in supporting the voluntary and community sector and suggested areas

for additional support:

- **Engagement with the Sector:** Positive feedback was given for NICVA's efforts to engage beyond Belfast, with suggestions for hosting regular discussion forums to facilitate cross-sector dialogue.
- **Representation:** NICVA was seen as well placed to articulate and deliver clear messages to strongly represent the voluntary and community sector's interests, with participants emphasising the importance of more assertive advocacy and campaigning.
- **Information Sharing:** NICVA should review how it shares information with its members and the wider voluntary and community sector with a view to improving this. Further suggestions about information included creating practical guides, like 'top tips,' especially on recruitment and retention.
- **Standardisation:** While recognising sector differences, participants proposed NICVA could support greater standardisation across the sector. This included standardising job titles on the Community NI platform and influencing funders to adopt consistent reporting.

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- **Strategic Planning:** NICVA was seen as key in guiding the strategic direction of the voluntary and community sector. The need to develop short, medium and long term plans was seen as an important way to provide a common focus and instil hope for positive change which in turn was seen as essential for retaining staff.

In conclusion, the *'Making a Difference'* research highlights the passion and commitment of the voluntary and community workforce.

Participants recognised the need for structural changes in funding and have identified positive actions to raise awareness, support staff and advocate for systemic change.

New approaches, collective voices and the role of NICVA were identified as crucial elements in building a resilient and impactful workforce in the voluntary and community sector.



Background

Introduction

Voluntary and community organisations play a pivotal role in providing crucial support to local communities, delivering essential public services and supporting some of the most vulnerable people in Northern Ireland.

However, as society has emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic and navigates the ongoing cost of living crisis, voluntary and community organisations find themselves grappling with their own challenges.

Organisations have seen an increased demand in community needs amidst suffering the negative impact of escalating costs of fuel and energy, inflation increases and budgetary constraints.

Budget cuts across all government departments have resulted in staff redundancies and a reduction in service provision. The absence of long-term sustainable funding has taken a toll on the workforce, leading to job insecurity, low morale and difficulties in staff recruitment and retention. Political

instability and the lack of a functioning Northern Ireland Executive for two years post COVID-19 has further hindered the implementation of viable solutions to support the voluntary and community workforce.

The Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) commissioned Stats & Stories to develop the **'Making a Difference'** research to investigate the challenges encountered by the voluntary and community workforce, the implications of these challenges and to reflect on potential solutions aimed at mitigating these difficulties.

The next section briefly outlines the context the Northern Ireland voluntary and community sector currently operates in followed by the methodology and results.

Northern Ireland Context

Civil society is drawn from grassroots community groups, voluntary organisations, faith-based groups, sporting organisations and charities.

These ‘not for profit’ organisations work to support people in a diverse range of sectors such as community development, health, family support and education, training and employment throughout Northern Ireland.

In terms of employment, the voluntary and community sector is estimated to make up 6.7%^[1] of the total workforce in Northern Ireland compared to 57.4% of employees working in the private sector and 36.0% of employees working in the public sector.

Figures from the Annual Survey for Hours and Earnings (ASHE) survey indicated the voluntary and community workforce are on average the lowest paid sector with medium annual earnings for full time employees at £29,189 compared to the Northern Ireland average of £32,879 as displayed in Table 1^[2].

Please note the category "Non-profit body or mutual association" used in Table 1 includes entities that are not primarily driven by profit motives and encompasses a range of organisations such as charities, non-profit institutions, mutual associations and similar entities.

Table 1: Annual Average Pay for Full Time Employees in Northern Ireland by Sector in 2023

Sector Type	Annual Average Pay £
All employees	32,879
Public sector	36,651
Private sector	30,000
Non-profit body or mutual association	29,189

In the absence of a sector-specific pay and conditions framework, many voluntary and community organisations in Northern Ireland have adopted the National Joint Council (NJC) scales. This adoption provides a consistent salary structure across various roles, with annual updates communicated by NICVA.

However, prolonged wage freezes in the community sector have resulted in a growing gap between these scales and actual wages, even as the NJC scales continue to rise.

Recent analysis by the Neighbourhood Renewal Forum[3], representing 36 Neighbourhood Renewal Partnerships, indicates that without changes in 2024, salaries for community sector staff funded by the Department for Communities could be 29% lower than the NJC scale.

This widening gap and the resulting inability to offer fair compensation for voluntary and community employees compared to other sectors was found to have a range of consequences:

- A perception that voluntary and community organisations are not valued and are not seen by statutory agencies as genuine partners;
- Instances where managers earn less than the staff they manage due to differing funding sources;

- Management committees needing to subsidise staff salaries from reserves.

Comparatively lower pay has also been found to be a contributing factor that has made it difficult to recruit and retain staff in the voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland[4]. However, the challenges faced by the voluntary and community sector workforce in Northern Ireland are multifaceted as outlined below.

Increased Demand for Services

Unprecedented demand for services and support provided by voluntary and community groups rose during the COVID-19 pandemic beginning in 2020 and has remained high as society struggles with the current cost of living crisis.

Research from the Trussell Trust network[5] in Northern Ireland highlights the increased need for essentials provided by a charity. The Trussell Trust distributed 81,084 emergency food parcels between 1 April 2022 to 31st March 2023. This represented a 29% increase from 2021/22 and 2% increase on the number of parcels distributed in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic (2020-21).

[3] Neighbourhood Renewal Forum (2024) Sustainability of Neighbourhood Renewal funded community organisations, Position Paper for the Committee for Communities on 11 April 2024. [Watch here](#)

[4] Law Family Commission on Civil Society (2023) [Unleashing the power of civil society in Northern Ireland](#)

[5] IPSOS and the Trussell Trust (2023) [Hunger in Northern Ireland](#)

Both the COVID-19 pandemic and cost of living crisis has adversely impacted on people's mental and physical health and their financial stability, particularly for vulnerable groups, resulting in the need to seek more help.

NICVA's research on the cost of living crisis found that the current demand for services placed an unsustainable pressure on the voluntary and community workforce, resulting in low staff morale, burnout and difficulties in retaining staff and volunteers[6].

Reduction in Funding

As demand for services provided by the voluntary and community sector has increased, major sources of funding for the sector have ended or been reduced. The conclusion of the Department of Health's Core Grant Funding Scheme, the termination of the European Social Fund (ESF) and departmental budget cuts for services provided by voluntary and community organisations during 2023 have compounded financial challenges.

The insecurity of the current funding structure of the voluntary and community sector has been long acknowledged as

being detrimental to both the workforce and those who benefit from services. A more robust and effective funding approach is urgently needed for the voluntary and community sector.

Recommendations for improvement, drawn from multiple sources, include the provision of core funding to cover essential operational costs, such as energy, digital infrastructure and administration, a full cost recovery funding model with emphasis on multi-year budgets[7],[8],[9].

Political Instability

The absence of a functioning Executive or Assembly in Northern Ireland for five out of the past seven years has exacerbated the situation. This type of 'stop-go' governance has hindered public service planning, investment and economic growth[10].

Data from a survey completed by NICVA members at the end of 2023 found that organisations were impacted by the lack of a functioning government through uncertainty, funding cuts and the lack of policy development[11]. The most common impact felt by voluntary and

[6] NICVA (2023) [The Cost-of-Living Crisis Tough Times, Smart Solutions](#)

[7] Reimagine Children's Collective (2023) [Reimagining Children's Social Care Services in Northern Ireland](#)

[8] Kernaghan, D. and Dallas, S. (2022) ['Wired Up?' Exploring the current levels of digital skills and inclusion in the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise Sector in Northern Ireland](#)

[9] Department of Communities (2023) [Voluntary and Community Sector Infrastructure Support Framework, Draft Framework: Proposals for Consultation November 2023](#)

[10] Pivotal (2024) [The Return of Stormont: Time for Real Change](#)

[11] NICVA (2024) [Pulse Survey Report](#)

community organisations were:

- 66.0% of organisations experienced uncertainty over current service provision;
- 65.9% of organisations experienced reducing or end of funding / commission of services;
- 65.6% of organisations reported that grants to their organisation have reduced or stopped.

Moreover, research developed by Queen's University, Belfast[12] found that the absence of a functioning Northern Ireland Assembly has reduced engagement between voluntary and community groups and Northern Ireland Executive ministers, MLAs and their staff.

This lack of opportunity to influence policy has further strained the sector's ability to effectively address its challenges and implement solutions.

Staff in the voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland currently face significant challenges.

The widening gap in compensation, increasing demand for services and unsustainable funding has led to a range of negative consequences including difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff, low morale throughout the sector and strained relationships with statutory bodies.

The following sections detail the methods used to examine these issues, the results and concludes with solutions which could bring about positive change.

Methodology

The ***'Making a Difference'*** research was conducted in two phases and used a mixed method approach combining quantitative and qualitative research methods:

Phase 1 Online Survey

During November – December 2023, a total of 245 valid surveys were completed by staff working within the voluntary and community sector.

The survey was taken as part of a wider Pulse survey with NICVA members and with participants of three direct engagement events.

The survey was anonymous and covered the issues relating to pay scales, recruitment and retention. Analysis of the quantitative data was conducted using the statistical software package SPSS with qualitative comments thematically coded.

Phase 2 Focus Groups

Three focus groups were held in Belfast, Newry and Derry during November 2023.

A total of 39 participants took part to discuss the perception of the sector, workforce challenges and their impact and to explore solutions that would support the voluntary and community workforce.

All focus groups were recorded, with participants' consent, for the purposes of conducting thematic analysis.

In addition, three case studies were developed to illustrate practical examples of themes arising from the focus group discussions.

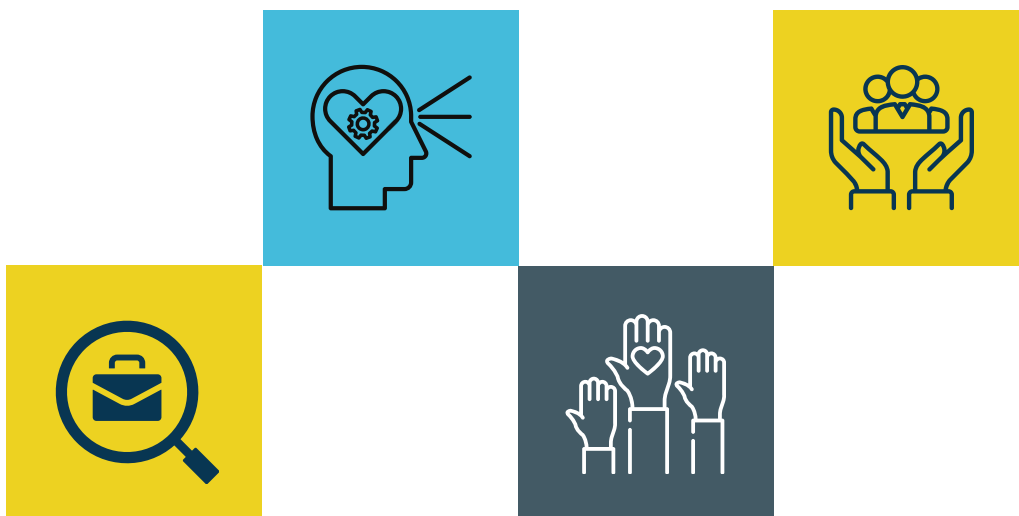
Results

Drawing on both the quantitative survey results and qualitative data captured during the focus groups, the results presented in the following sections investigate the issues facing the voluntary and community sector in terms of recruitment and retention of both staff and volunteers, followed by solutions developed to address these challenges.

The section begins by providing a demographic overview of the survey sample with the results presented in

four sections:

- Section 1: Perceptions of Working in the Voluntary and Community Sector
- Section 2: Joining the Voluntary and Community Sector Workforce
- Section 3: Retaining the Voluntary and Community Workforce
- Section 4: Volunteers



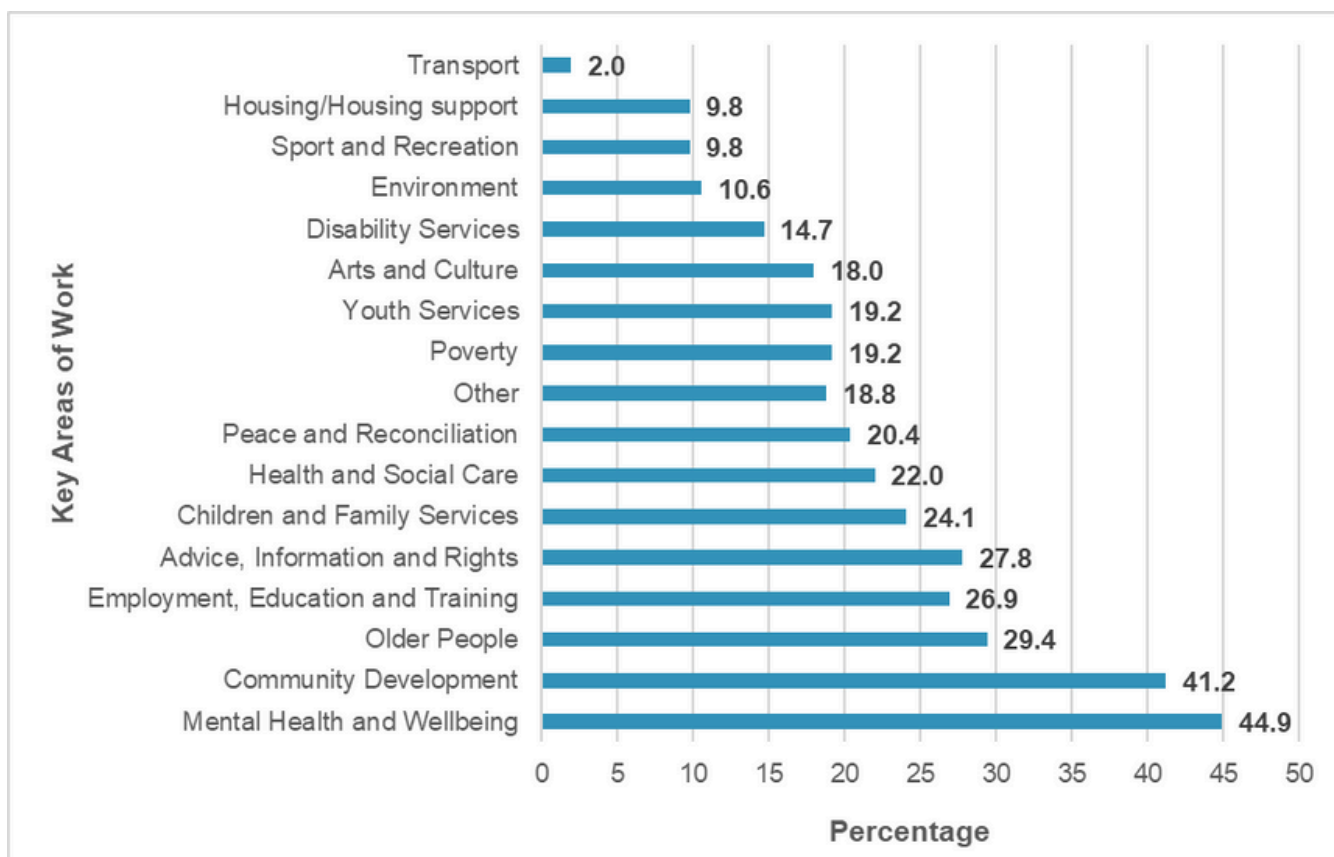
Demographic Overview

This demographic overview relates to the 245 respondents who completed the workforce survey. Responses were drawn from organisations across every council area in Northern Ireland with over one third of organisations working on a regional basis (35.1%).

Key Services: Results show that voluntary and community groups perform

services in a wide and diverse range of areas. The most common key areas of work included mental health and wellbeing (44.9%) and community development (41.2%) as shown in Figure 1. Organisations which selected 'other' included those working in the faith sector, animal welfare, support for ethnic minorities or heritage projects.

Figure 1: Key Areas of Work Carried Out by Voluntary and Community Sector Organisations



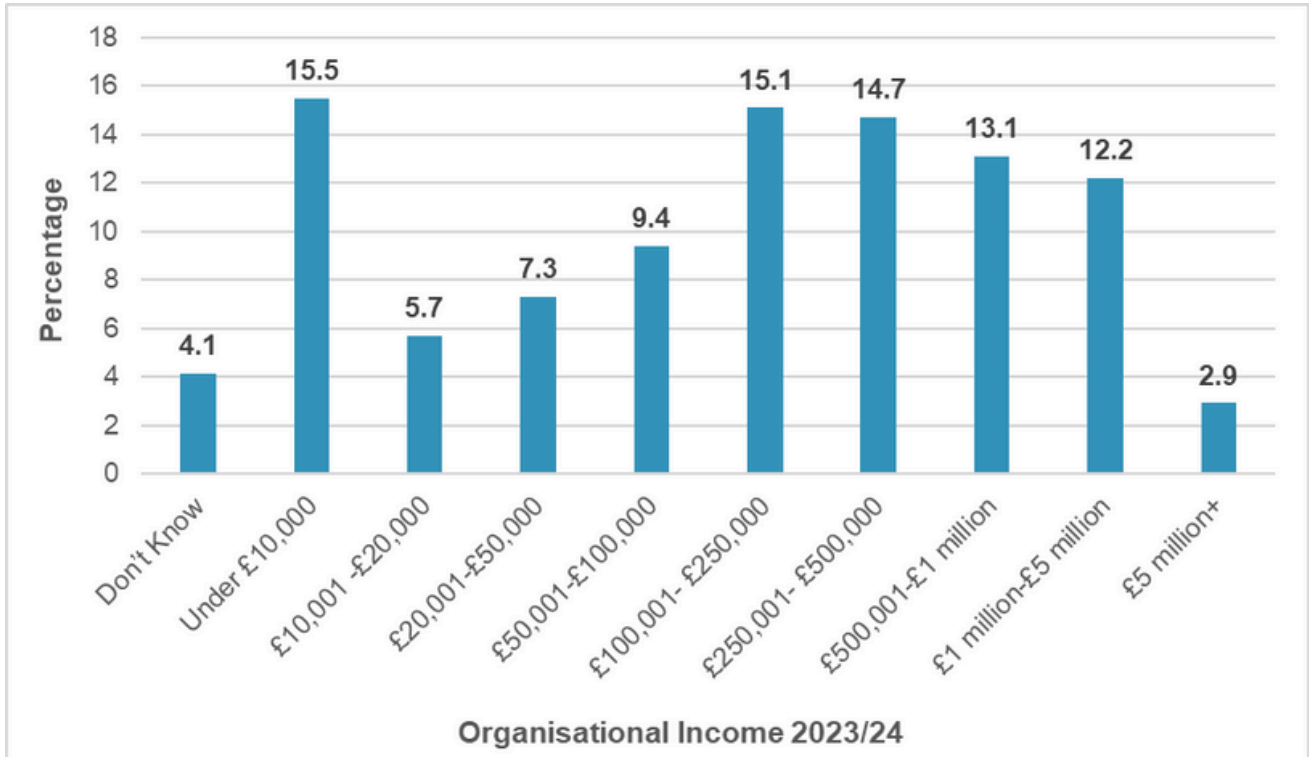
(N = 245)

Income: Organisations in the sample reported a broad range of income for 2023/24. Over forty percent of organisations reported their income between £100,000 and up to £1 million (42.9%), with a further 37.9% reporting their organisational income under £100,000. A fewer number of organisations (15.1%) had an income in excess of £1 million pounds as displayed in Figure 2.

Workforce: The organisations in this sample employed a combination of 5,465 full-time staff and 3,770 part-time staff which highlights the diverse nature of the workforce within the voluntary and community sector.

Significantly, there was a high level of volunteer engagement within these organisations with 11,468 volunteers contributing their time and skills without monetary compensation.

Figure 2: Organisational Income 2023/24



(N = 245)

“It is knowing that you are making a difference. You can see the impact at a grassroots level and see the difference it makes.”

“Once you are in the community and voluntary sector, it kind of captures you. You do love that job. You love helping people and seeing the value in it.”

Similarly, when asked what was positive about their own job, participants reported having a sense of fulfilment through their ability to make a positive impact on those they worked with.

Working with colleagues who were passionate and shared similar values was highlighted as a positive feature of working in the voluntary and community sector. Additionally, the flexibility of their job and the opportunities to engage in different aspects of the work were also noted positively by participants.

While participants were able to identify many positive aspects of working in the voluntary and community sector, it was acknowledged that this may not be a universal view.

Participants reported others were often unclear about what the workforce did and that there could be the perception that the voluntary and community sector were ‘fluffy’ and ‘unprofessional’. This perception was compounded by the

disparity in pay and terms and conditions in comparison to the public or private sector:

“We have to get away from this idea that we are not professional. We need to professionalise the sector and be valued.”

“I know my peers who work in other sectors don’t respect or value the work of the community or voluntary sector. That is largely due to the pay structures, the terms and conditions, the pension contributions, the short-term contracts. All of it.”

Participants particularly highlighted the poor treatment of the workforce in the last year. Concerns were raised about being offered only three month contracts at a time and the loss of critical funding such as the Core Grant Scheme.

Participants expressed frustration over the perceived lack of respect and understanding from funders with many concluding that the work of the sector is often misunderstood and undervalued.

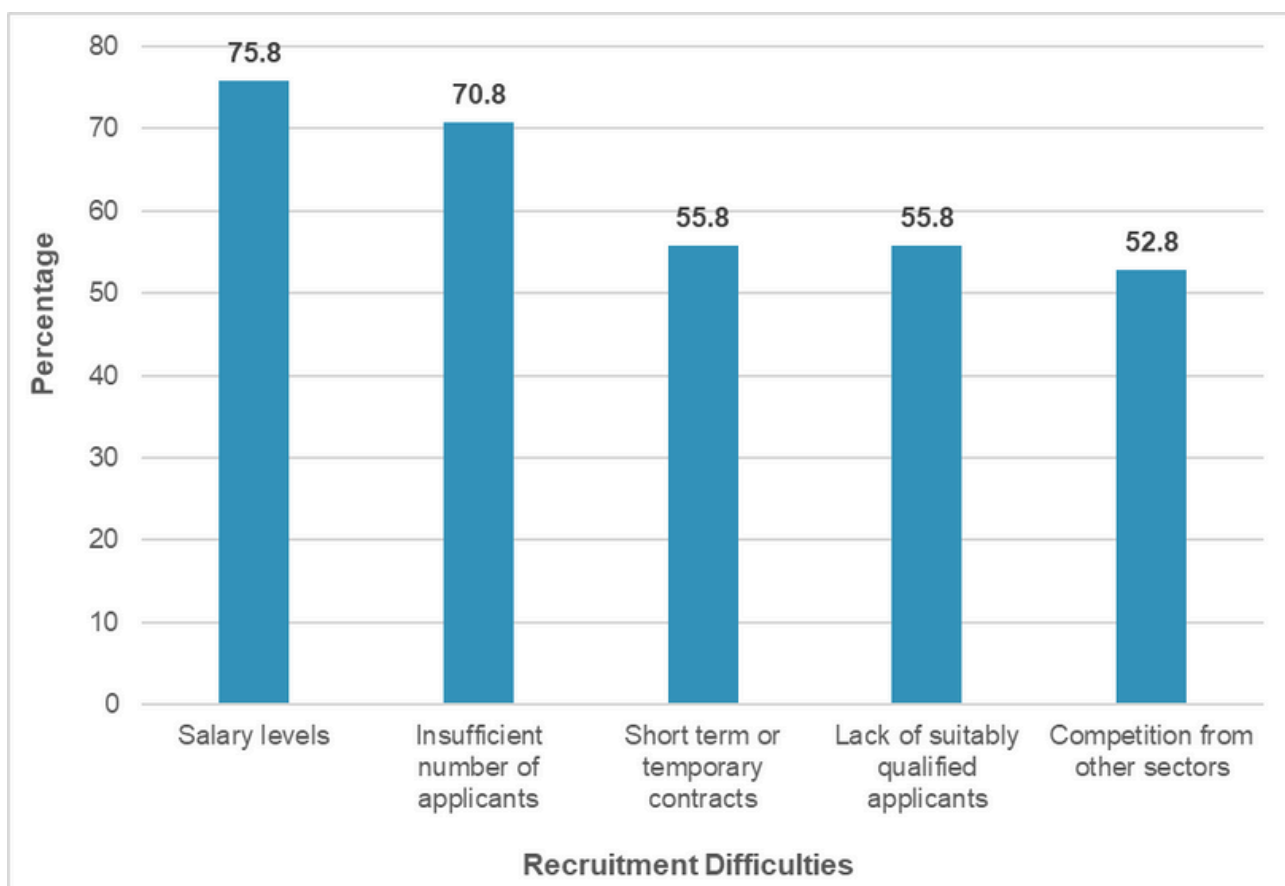
This was widely recognised as a barrier to attracting people beginning their careers or to recruiting people to work in the sector as discussed in the following section.

Section 2: Joining the Voluntary and Community Sector Workforce

Results from the survey show that nearly half of organisations reported having difficulties recruiting staff in the past 12 months (49.0%). A further 32.7% did not recruit with 18.4% reporting that they did not have difficulties with recruitment in the past 12 months.

Of those organisations that did report having difficulties recruiting staff (n = 120), a range of issues were identified as barriers to recruitment with the most common issue identified as salary levels (75.8%) as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Top Five Barriers to Recruitment for Voluntary and Community Organisations



(N = 120)

Participants in the focus groups felt that salaries typically offered in the voluntary and community sector were uncompetitive compared to other sectors which made recruitment challenging.

Nearly half of survey respondents reported that their organisation did not use pay scales (49.0%). For those that did use pay scales (n = 108), the majority had adopted the National Joint Council (NJC) scale (73.1%). Others used the pay scale developed by the Joint Negotiating Committee (JNC) for Youth and Community Workers or another internally developed scale.

It is important to note that participants in the focus groups highlighted that while their organisation may use a pay scale such as the NJC, their wages had not increased on an annual basis and so their pay did not actually reflect the current rates on these pay scales.

As shown in Table 1, annual average salaries for full employment for those in the voluntary and community sector were comparatively lower than public or public sectors. This had a number of implications for growing the workforce as outlined below:

Insufficient Number of Applicants:

Findings show that organisations often had insufficient numbers of applicants applying for jobs (70.8%). Participants

reported that this was across jobs at every level of their organisation.

Re-advertising job vacancies was seen as time intensive with no guarantee of filling posts. More expensive alternatives such as using a recruitment agency to find workers had been used by some.

Organisations, particularly those operating outside Belfast, sought to increase numbers of applicants by offering remote working to provide staff with greater flexibility and reduce time spent travelling.

Case Study 1 illustrates the difficulties involved in recruiting qualified personnel within the voluntary and community sector including issues related to competition, salary disparities and candidate fit.

Case Study 1: Recruitment Challenges in the Voluntary and Community Sector

During this past 10 months we have recruited for 3 project workers, with a salary of £26,500, 8.5% pension, 29 days holidays, 12 bank holidays, 6-8 mental wealth days.

For the first 2 jobs we advertised we had approximately 50 people requested application packs, we only had 5 returned, 2 for one post and 3 for the other. We invited all 5 for pre interview, only 3 showed. We offered the posts to 2 people, then one pulled out a week before they were due to start. They got offered another job with £7,000 more, 15% pension, 30 days holidays. The other person started with us and is still with us.

We readvertised the 2nd post, had 3 people apply, only 1 fitted the bill.

Our 3rd post has been advertised twice this year, the first time we had no applications. The second time we had 10 people request applications but none returned. We extended the closing date and followed up with those that requested applications, no new applications were received but 3 who had originally requested applications returned them, though only 1 fitted the bill and we employed her.

Participants noted that prolonged vacancies increased pressure on the existing staff team to continue to deliver services at the same level. This dynamic was identified by participants as a significant contributor to staff stress which heightened the risk of burnout.

“We are struggling. We have went out twice in the last two months, only got two people the first time, and then the second time one person didn’t show up. We are firefighting constantly, fighting your email inbox. We are carrying a vacancy so I am now doing another person’s job as I don’t want to stretch my staff anymore.”

Ultimately, vacant posts and the inability to recruit staff impacted on service delivery. Examples were given of organisations reducing their service delivery hours, long waiting lists and the loss of early intervention and prevention opportunities within communities.

Short Term Funding: A total of 55.8% of survey respondents who found it difficult to recruit identified that short term or temporary contracts were a barrier to recruitment. Instability caused to staff by short term funding was identified through thematic analysis of the qualitative data gathered during the focus groups.

“Permanent contracts don’t exist. People come to work in the VCSE on a temporary basis.”

“It is insecure for a young person who is thinking of having a career. Say you have a young family, you have a mortgage, there are so many people who can’t take up a job in the community and voluntary sector because what if I don’t have a job when I have this mortgage and a young family? So it is insecure. There is no permanent jobs or jobs were you can go up the career path.”

The combination of low wages and instability caused by short term funding was described as a cyclical problem for the sector overall. In addition to finding it increasingly difficult to attract and recruit potential candidates to the sector, organisations were limited by unfilled vacancies in terms of planning, strategic development and the ability to build capacity within their team.

Strong consensus from participants indicated that structural changes to investment in the sector with sustainable funding is essential to address these recruitment challenges.

Pathways to Employment

In addition to further sustainable investment, participants in the focus groups emphasised substantial effort is required to establish and actively promote pathways to employment within

the voluntary and community sector, with a particular emphasis on school leavers and graduates. Pathways to employment in the sector were described as ambiguous and something individuals stumbled into instead of being actively promoted:

“Pathways are unclear and they are ad hoc.”

“If you are at school, no-one comes down to you and suggests community development as a career.”

“We need that support to show this is a really, really positive sector to work in. It is not that you accidentally fall into it and realise you love it but that it is good.”

While it was recognised that volunteering to pursue a specific interest or cause could introduce some people to the sector, it was widely agreed that the lack of established pathways to employment was a barrier to sustaining and increasing the workforce.

Case Study 2 demonstrates the need to identify new and innovative approaches to attracting workers to the sector including the need to develop apprenticeship programmes as a potential solution to provide individuals with relevant qualifications and practical experience.

Case Study 2: Employment Pathways to Voluntary and Community Sector

Traditionally, volunteering experiences often lead to people getting involved in the community and voluntary sector, often sparking an interest in gaining employment in the sector.

However, the decline in volunteering in recent years due to factors like the COVID-19 pandemic, rising living costs and changing lifestyle habits mean people are connecting with the sector less. In the 1980's and 1990's the ACE scheme provided a valuable pathway to employment and training opportunities but we are in a very different economic climate now.

Finding new pathways requires innovation. Our organisation's response includes a Leadership programme offering accredited training and support helping a wide range of people to develop their knowledge, skills and capacity. We also have a strong track record of giving placements to students and recently we brought in a Trainee Manager who could learn on the job.

What could work now is apprenticeships. Our sector needs an apprenticeship programme. Students could gain qualifications and be placed with an employer to develop their skills and experience while working. This is the type of model that should be piloted and evaluated for three to five years across the region. This is an important opportunity we need to actively explore.

We also need to explore the scaffolding around the sector in parallel to establishing employment pathways. We know that volunteers are down and we know that we are largely not seen as an attractive place to work as a sector. So we can do things like apprenticeships but we also need to be good employers. This means good terms and conditions for our staff including reasonable pay, paid sick leave and a decent pension.

The scaffolding around the sector on which we need to build pathways has to change, but it can only change if the ambition comes from within.

Within the focus groups, a number of organisations reflected on their experiences of participating in the JobStart Scheme which offered six-month job opportunities to those aged 16 to 24 at risk of long-term unemployment or the Rank Foundation ‘Start Here’ Scheme which provided funding for a new 3-year entry level position and suggested this model of in-work learning opportunities with mentoring support could be further built on within the voluntary and community sector.

“I can identify a few people who would be interested in this type of work. They can’t afford to give up their job to either volunteer or go to university but if they had a paid placement in that chosen profession, it’s an opportunity.”

“Learning on the job is what is going to have to happen. I think we need to identify this and support emerging leaders.”

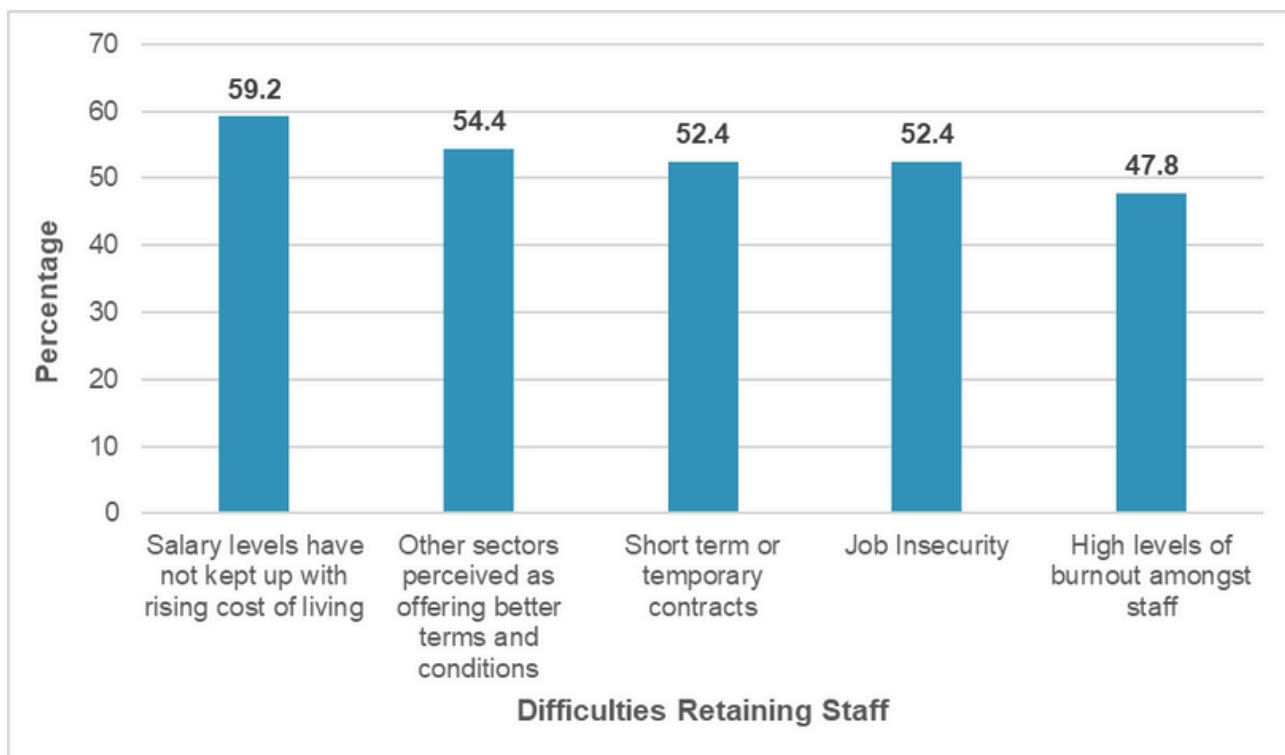
Participants also raised the need to increase awareness of the sector as an employer through closer collaboration with schools, FE colleges and universities with increased access to accredited training and qualifications to degree level in related areas such as community development.

Section 3: Retaining the Voluntary and Community Workforce

Survey results indicate that 42.0% of organisations had difficulties retaining staff in the past 12 months. Many of the factors which participants have identified as recruitment challenges are mirrored in the difficulties experienced in retaining staff within the voluntary and community sector.

As shown in Figure 5, the most common challenges organisations face in retaining staff (n = 103) was that salary levels have not kept up with the rising cost of living (59.2%) and other sectors were perceived as offering better terms and conditions (52.4%).

Figure 5: Top Five Difficulties Retaining Staff in the Voluntary and Community Sector



(N = 103)

Terms and Conditions: Funding restraints resulted in many voluntary and community organisations unable to provide staff with the terms and conditions available in other sectors.

Many organisations were unable to provide annual wage increases or any benefits such as sick pay, maternity and paternity pay or pension contributions beyond the minimum legal requirements. Within the current cost of living crisis this was viewed by participants as a major source of frustration and anxiety and a leading factor in being unable to retain staff within the sector.

“How can we offer better pensions for instance? That is what people need for the future to be looked after but we can’t offer more than what we are given by the funders.”

Instability: Similarly, the insecurity caused by short term funding was identified by 52.4% of survey respondents as a difficulty in retaining staff. The negative impact of short-term contracts on staff was corroborated in the focus groups and identified as a key driver of people leaving the voluntary and community sector:

“When people have left we have asked them why and it's that whole thing about the short term contracts. That is really the key thing for people.”

“People have actually seen us in June waiting to hear for another three more months and that does affect your work. It definitely causes low morale as they don't know and people have families, they have to pay for this, that and the other.”

“You see when you have young, innovated staff working in your organisation and it comes to this time of year, you see their feet beginning to move because they don’t know if they are going to be here in three months time.”

The type of ongoing job instability was identified by over half of the survey respondents (52.4%) as a key challenge faced by the voluntary and community sector in retaining staff.

As discussed in Section 2, the past year has been particularly difficult for the sector suffering from the accumulated impact of budget cuts. Anger was expressed by many at the treatment of the voluntary and community workforce by government departments around short-term contracts:

“The disgusting, disgraceful way the government from the Department for Communities treated the voluntary and community workers. We got a three month contract, we got another three month contract, then we got a six month contract and people are looking for at least a sustainable job for a year.”

Crucially, participants who were awarded longer term government contracts up to three years described having little confidence in contracts being honoured as they continued to be subject to annual review.

Staff Burnout: As shown in Figure 5, nearly half of participants reported that high levels of burnout (47.8%) made it a challenge to retain staff. Focus group participants reported that staff burnout could be caused by a number of factors. The most common factor identified was excessive workloads caused by high demand for services with often not enough staff or resources.

“People will only do so much and we are being stretched beyond capacity in our sector and we only have so much capacity.”

“In the advice sector we are crucified at the minute. With Christmas coming up and I have worked here for 15 years in the organisation and I have never seen as much poverty, people coming for toiletries, for food, for electricity, for everything.”

Case Study 3 underscores the complexity of retention challenges within the voluntary and community sector.

Case Study of Retention Challenges in the Voluntary and Community Sector

Our organisation takes a strategic approach to retaining our staff. We provide a strong induction and what works well for us as a way to manage staff retention is a strong CPD offer.

Around 35% of my staff at the moment are doing third level education or training courses. We offer flexible options around CPD and staff are doing courses like CBT counselling, psychology and others are doing Open University social care. This is a very good, solid retention strategy.

We believe that if you train staff they might go, but if you do train them then they might stay which increases their skills and value to the organisation.

It is also essential that the Board knows the value strengths, experience and skills staff have. We need to pay staff accordingly and also look at pensions, health plans and supporting their wellbeing. We do things like get staff some food and give them birthday days off and nominate one person to have a day off in the month.

Despite this we have lost three members of staff within the past 12 months. We know that there is competition from other sectors. In particular, where we work, colleagues in other organisations have lost staff across the Border as there is

opportunity to double your salary for a 20 minute commute.

But there are other factors here. Staff face personal challenges such as caring responsibilities, health issues and bereavement in their own lives which can make them reconsider working in the sector.

Many staff are at a tipping point. External factors like the impact of COVID and now the cost-of-living crisis has seen the demand for services grow and grow. The kind of impactful work that we do does drain on the person. It is more than a job and when you are front facing and people are coming through the door every day they see us as the face of support.

It is very hard to switch off. For example, one staff member felt compelled to pursue a lower paying job below her capacity in the private sector, not due to dissatisfaction with the organisation, but because of the reduced emotional demands of the job.

While we strive to provide a supportive work environment and ample development opportunities, the reality is that retaining staff in our sector is an ongoing challenge influenced by both external and personal factors.

One way participants highlighted the impact of excessive workloads was a common scenario where staff accumulate significant Time Off In Lieu (TOIL) by consistently working beyond their regular hours. This was challenging as often staff were unable to take these hours back at a time of their choosing due to operational demands and organisations were unable to pay a proportion of the time owed.

The current funding model and reporting demands was also identified as a source of stress for staff. Not only does the short term approach cause insecurity within the workforce but it also is considered a heavy burden for organisations in the following ways:

- Participants highlighted that the administrative burden of applying or reapplying for small amounts of money took considerable time, particularly for smaller organisations;
- Reporting to multiple funders was seen as a heavy burden on organisations as there was no consistency or standardisation;
- The lack of core funding available for roles such as administration, finance, HR or IT meant it was difficult for organisations to cover these types of back room posts which often meant staff carried additional responsibilities alongside their job.

Participants also felt that work in the voluntary and community sector was largely undervalued and unappreciated.

For many, the COVID-19 pandemic marked a positive shift in cross-sector partnership working. However, this was seen as short lived:

“Who were the most active during COVID? It was the people closest to the ground. It was the community and voluntary sector who kept the community going and the government recognised it for maybe a month or so until they got back on their feet again.”

“The message coming from very strongly from government departments and Arm’s Length Bodies was that COVID was a game changer and that we would never go back to the relationships we had before. We would be more collegiate and take a partnership approach but that is being clawed back.”

“There was a change in the culture towards the community and voluntary sector during COVID. People in meetings had more respect for the sector. But that has gone now, it has rolled back.”

A number of participants expressed frustration about the lack of understanding government departments had for the work of the sector and seen this as a further factor in causing low staff morale. Focus group participants

further expanded on a number of different issues facing the community and volunteer workforce which made it challenging for staff to continue to work in the sector including:

Progression: Participants had mixed views about whether the voluntary and community sector provided enough opportunities for individuals to progress and develop their skills. Some participants felt that there were good opportunities while others recognised that there was a natural limit to progressing in small organisations.

Within the context of low pay and poor terms and conditions in comparison to some other sectors, some participants felt that working in the sector was seen as a ‘stepping stone’ to gain valuable experience, skills and connections that contribute to future career opportunities, typically outside the voluntary and community sector.

“They get lots of skills. They are very employable and that is the challenge we live with. You want people to progress and move on but we are such a small organisation, within that hierarchy there probably isn’t anywhere else to go unless someone else leaves.”

“People use it as a stepping stone to get the experience and then go somewhere else to get double the salary elsewhere.”

As a consequence, organisations lost employees that they had invested time and resources in training which in the short term could lead to vacant posts, additional stress on remaining staff and disruption to service delivery. Inability to retain junior staff members was also recognised as having a detrimental impact on the development of leaders for the future.

The lack of internal candidates capable of advancing to senior roles was raised as a concern which poses a significant obstacle to effective succession planning:

“In relation to senior staff of voluntary and community sector organisations, many people are in roles which have evolved over ten or fifteen years, evolved through what the person has made the job become in order to run the organisation and in many cases, and we have gone through this recently, to try and put that job into a job description and advertise it and find someone to do it is next to near impossible.”

The general consensus was that succession planning was a challenge for the future due to the aging demographics of the sector, the lack of recruitment of new talent and the inability to retain existing skilled employees who can potentially move into key roles.

“I am thinking about the age of the people doing community development. I am probably one of the younger people doing community development and I am 55. We have some really important leaders in our community and they are 65, 66 and they are going to be leaving. In the next ten years we are all going to be gone and there is no one coming behind us. We really need to enthuse younger people to become involved and that is through mentoring. We really need young people coming behind us in terms of succession planning.”

Participants acknowledged that while it was difficult to prioritise strategic planning in the current environment, more focus is required on how to attract young people into the sector and how to effectively offer mentoring, training and coaching to support staff and prepare employees for leadership roles.

Section 4: Volunteers

Volunteers were viewed as a valuable resource for voluntary and community organisations. Volunteers brought diverse skills and expertise as Board members, dedication and played a significant role in expanding workforce capacity to support service delivery in a cost-effective way. Due to these benefits, participants drew attention to the need to recruit and retain volunteers.

Both the COVID-19 pandemic and the cost of living crisis were seen to have changed the demographics of those who volunteered. Participants perceived that there were less long-term volunteers from older people with young people looking to gain experience through volunteering.

Organisations needed resource to provide the appropriate structure and training to support volunteers in their role and ensure there is a mutually beneficial experience. This was identified as important in two ways.

Firstly, participants stressed the importance of avoiding overburdening volunteers, particularly given the challenges of short-staffed organisations discussed above.

Secondly, participants reported that

managing volunteers did have financial implications which should be recognised in funding applications:

“Volunteering is far from free. It is costly. For example, if you have staff responsible for them. It is just an add on to their workload. It is not something they get paid for, because we just don't have the funding to do that. If you were cost centring that, there would be a cost to it, volunteering expenses, feeding the volunteers whenever they are in, their transport, their PPE. We don't even have a Volunteer Grant anymore as they stopped that as well.”

The evidence presented in Part 3 shows the multifaceted nature of the challenges faced by the voluntary and community workforce. While participants spoke passionately about their areas of work and found many positive aspects to working in the sector, the challenges of low pay, uncompetitive employment terms and conditions, short term contracts and excessive workloads were highlighted as factors which made it extremely difficult to recruit staff and impacted staff morale.

It is clear that many of these challenges stem from structural issues of how the voluntary and community sector is

funded which requires a comprehensive and strategic approach to securing sustainable, long-term investment.

In Part 4, participants have identified a range of actions that could be taken to improve the situation. This includes

awareness raising of the voluntary and community sector as an employer, creating and promoting pathways to employment and developing training to equip and support staff.



Solutions

Although challenges identified in this research still remain, there was a resounding commitment from participants to positively engage in finding solutions to the workforce challenges as outlined below.

Promotion of the Voluntary and Community Sector

Participants emphasised the need for greater awareness and promotion of the voluntary and community sector. This was described in three main ways.

Valuing the Sector: Further work is needed to communicate and promote the work carried out by the sector. This includes being able to quantify the social value, developing case studies and demonstrating the impact of the work of the sector.

Specifically, participants felt that funders and government departments needed a better understanding of how to support the sector, including the impact of accumulated funding cuts and short-term contracts.

Benefits of Working in the Sector:

Greater promotion of the benefits of working in the sector as an employee was raised. Key to raising the profile of the voluntary and community sector and attracting young people was establishing clear pathways from educational institutions.

Participants proposed that the development of more in-work learning programmes to provide training was a practical approach to building skills, provide mentoring and encourage more individuals to apply for posts.

Collective Voice: As shown above, structural issues around funding impact staff and have been shown to be a challenge to recruitment and retention.

While acknowledging the diverse range of perspectives and approaches across the sector, participants felt that a stronger collective voice on these issues was needed. A united front on issues such as funding and terms and conditions was seen as a way to fostering a greater sense of solidarity

and community and would increase the influence of the sector as a whole:

“We would need to be stronger as a sector, we need to have louder voices and just demand more respect and better terms and conditions.”

Participants also felt it was beneficial to have more opportunities to discuss issues such as workforce challenges together to share their experiences and learn from others.

New Approaches

Fresh ways of working are needed to support the workforce, increase collaboration and work towards financial sustainability in order to provide greater stability. Ideas included:

Outsourcing and Pooling Resources:

Outsourcing, particularly in areas such as finance, digital services and HR support, was viewed as an opportunity to tap into external expertise in a way that was both cost-effective while also alleviating the burden on existing staff.

Additionally, participants highlighted that the concept of pooling resources through collaboration with other organisations should be further explored in order to reduce costs for individual organisations and improve collective impact.

Partnership Working: There was wide recognition that collaborating with others both in and outside of the voluntary and community sector was beneficial.

A noteworthy example given by a number of participants was working in partnership with university students through initiatives such as the Science Shop at Queen’s University Belfast. By further developing similar relationship with universities and private sector organisations, the voluntary and community sector can benefit from the knowledge, skills and experience of others in areas such as digital assistance and website development.

Diversifying Income Generation: There was a general recognition that organisations needed to grow their unrestricted funds through exploring new avenues for income generation.

Participants emphasised that more support for the sector is needed to develop initiatives like fundraising campaigns, venturing into social enterprise projects and fostering relationships with regular donors.

By diversifying income streams, organisations can secure unrestricted funds, ensuring greater financial resilience, more certainty for staff and flexibility to address emerging needs.

Recognising and Rewarding Staff

Participants perceived that a key driver to recruit and retain staff was a focus on wellbeing. Organisations had already implemented a range of innovative and creative approaches to recognising and rewarding staff in non-monetary ways.

This included:

- Christmas Shopping Day
- Duvet Days
- Holiday for Birthdays
- Paid lunch for team meetings/training
- Private Health Insurance
- Staff Wellbeing Policy outlining an organisation's commitment to promoting and maintaining the health and well-being of its employees
- Raffle for additional half day leave per month

The predominant advantage of working in the voluntary and community sector highlighted by participants was flexibility.

This encompassed both the freedom to adjust working hours, accommodating those with family and caring responsibilities and the option to work from different locations. Examples of flexibility for the workforce included:

Four Day Work Week: In the absence of being able to offer staff a pay increase, a

small number of organisations permitted staff to reduce their hours to four days per week on full pay. While this could be complex due to the needs of service delivery and funding requirements, participants felt this was another way to attract job seekers, support a better work-life balance and to contribute to better staff retention.

Hybrid Working: The general consensus among participants was that working practices had changed since the COVID pandemic and there were effective ways for staff to work remotely.

While hybrid working was viewed as beneficial for staff, citing increased flexibility, time and cost savings due to reduced travel, some concerns were raised about the potential impact of remote work on organisational culture.

In addition, the benefits of supporting hybrid working were found to be particularly advantageous for organisations situated outside of Belfast as this model of working attracted candidates on a regional basis which expanded the recruitment pool.

The Role for NICVA

Participants recognised that NICVA plays a vital role in supporting the voluntary and community sector with the challenges it faces and identified a number of areas where additional support would be beneficial:

Engagement with the Sector: Positive feedback was given about NICVA's recent efforts to engage beyond Belfast. Participants suggested NICVA should play a key role in hosting regular discussion forums either on a specific issue or by location in order to listen to a range of views and support greater cross-sector dialogue and interactions.

Representation: Participants saw NICVA as well placed to articulate clear messages to strongly represent the sector's interests, with participants emphasising the importance of more assertive advocacy and campaigning.

Information: It was suggested that NICVA should review how it shares information with its members and the wider voluntary and community sector with a view to improve this. Further suggestions about information included creating practical guides, like 'top tips,' especially on recruitment and retention.

Standardisation: While understanding the sector's differences and the limitations of a one size fits all approach, participants expressed the view that NICVA could support greater standardisation across the sector. Examples of this include standardising job titles on the Community NI platform, standard training for managing volunteers and influencing funders to adopt a consistent approach to reporting.

Strategic Planning: NICVA was seen as having a key role in guiding and developing the strategic direction of the sector. The need to develop short, medium and long term plans was seen as an important way to provide a common focus and instil hope for positive change which in turn was seen as essential for retaining staff.

Conclusion


The **'Making a Difference'** research showed that the voluntary and community workforce are passionate and committed to supporting the people they work with, often under difficult circumstances.

While recognising that structural changes are needed in how the voluntary and community sector is funded, participants have identified a range of positive actions that can be taken to raise awareness of

both the type of work the sector carries out and it as an employer, making it easier for young people to have a pathway to the sector and supporting staff in their jobs.

It was recognised that new approaches are needed and that a collective voice would be useful for stronger advocacy to influencing system change that benefits the workforce of the voluntary and community sector.





“We have to get away from this idea that we are not professional. We need to professionalise the sector and be **valued**.”

-Voluntary & community sector contributor



Report prepared by:



61 Duncairn Gardens, Belfast, BT15 2GB

www.nicva.org

info@nicva.org

028 9087 7777

Charity No: NIC100012

