

**Response by NICVA to the Draft  
Programme for Government 2024-2027  
'Our Plan: Doing What Matters Most'  
Public Consultation**

**November 2024**

## 1. Who We Are

- NICVA, the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action, is the membership and representative umbrella body for the voluntary and community sector (VCS) in Northern Ireland with over 1,400 members currently, who provide a wide range of services and activities for public benefit. These range from health and social care; housing, homelessness and emergency services; advice and information; supported employment and training provision; community development and peacebuilding; to environmental, heritage, arts, and sporting activities.
- We represent a diverse range of organisations and groups, large and small, UK wide, regional and local, all dedicated to making a positive impact on our communities, building a stronger, more resilient Northern Ireland.
- We believe that collaboration between government and the voluntary and community sector is essential to achieving positive outcomes for all, and we regularly engage with political representatives, Government Ministers and officials in support of this aim.

## 2. Context

- The charities, community, organisations and groups across Northern Ireland that make up our sector are at the front line of tackling key social, economic, and environmental issues across NI.
- Services delivered by the voluntary and community sector are the cornerstone of public sector delivery and an integral part of mainstream service pathways and well-established referral routes to many areas of public service provision.
- The sector also continues to respond to and plug increasing gaps across many of our mainstream public services, delivering support that may not be readily available or accessible within the public sector for a variety of factors not least budgetary or resourcing pressures.
- An independent survey of the public commissioned by NICVA found that **9 in 10 people had used a service provided by an NI community or voluntary organisation in the last year** and 1 in 8 felt that these services were ‘essential to their lives.’<sup>1</sup> More than 1 in 10 of those organisations providing these services, reach over 5000 people per year.
- This has never been more vital than in recent years, with COVID, the UK exit from the EU, the enduring cost of living crisis and public sector budget cuts all increasing the reliance

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nicva.org/resource/nicva-public-perception-survey-identifies-high-levels-of-public-usage-and-trust-in>

on the sector, which has not been adequately matched by financial or strategic policy support from government.

- The breadth of the services provided by the voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland is incredibly diverse and cuts across all areas of public service provision - **with the sector employing over 50,000 people and mobilising over 200,000 volunteers across over 7,000 charities** which deliver in all areas and underpin social and economic development in Northern Ireland.
- The voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland plays a vital role in supporting marginalised groups, fostering community cohesion, and addressing key societal issues. However, the sector is currently facing significant pressures that threaten its future sustainability and effectiveness.
- Chronic under-investment and the consequent short-term, single year and last-minute public budgeting as a result of the political instability here has been particularly detrimental to the many VCS organisations that receive public funding through grants and contracts to deliver services. This has resulted in continuous uncertainty for these groups and organisations, creating a workforce crisis across the sector.
- The long-term viability of the sector and the sustainability of many groups and organisations is at risk due to growing financial and operational pressures. This is set against rising need and demand for services, placing additional strain on already stretched resources.
- Our sector faces immense pressures yet continues to step up, providing a range of support and services to ensure that communities thrive and flourish.
- Sector organisations and groups have never been more needed. However, while the demand for their services has increased, the financial and strategic support from the government has not kept pace.
- Our unique value and expertise must be seen as a key asset that can help Government successfully deliver on their missions and improve outcomes in communities.
- The new Programme for Government needs to map out that journey and must be the guiding strategy for the necessary investment and improvement needed to recognise and support the sectors contribution.

### 3. Introduction

NICVA welcomes the publication of the draft Programme for Government 2024-2027.

Northern Ireland is facing many societal challenges and has been without a clear agenda for change and long-term planning for much too long. Recent years have been characterised by stagnation, limited prioritisation of critical policy issues and a general degradation of public sector services across the board. Long absences of a functioning government at Stormont have consolidated that lack of progress. These prolonged periods of stasis have also severely delayed much needed transformation of NI's public services and impacted directly on the stability and sustainability of the voluntary and community sector.

Throughout this, the voluntary and community sector has continued to deliver for the people of Northern Ireland, adapting, collaborating, and delivering against all odds. Our sector faces immense pressures amidst ever increasing demand and the absence of a strategic vision from Government has only served to compound these challenges.

To make any advancement on these challenges we need a clear strategic plan for Northern Ireland (NI), set out in a Programme for Government with clearly defined targets alongside appropriate needs-based funding formulas and multi-year budgets.

Transformation of public services will require cross departmental and cross sectoral co-operation and collaboration, which has been lacking in the past.

Given the challenges faced, the new Programme for Government needs to map out the journey and be the guiding strategy for the change, improvement and investment needed.

Even in these times of unprecedented budgetary constraint, Government can still greatly improve people's lives by focusing on clear priorities within its plan for government and working with key partners, including the voluntary and community sector to ensure best use of resources and to deliver most impact.

In this context NICVA recommends that the Programme for Government provide a framework to embed partnership and collaboration between the sector and government and to secure sustainable funding and investment that recognises and supports the true value and contribution of the sector, its services, and its people.

#### **4. Details of Our Response**

To support voluntary and community sector organisations to respond to the public consultation on the 'Draft Programme for Government 2024-2027', NICVA in partnership with Rural Community Network, Volunteer Now, CO3 and Development Trusts NI hosted three online engagements

sessions for voluntary and community sector representatives to discuss the content of the draft plan and to collate sector views/feedback.

Over 90 + representatives were in attendance over the three sessions, with representation from across a broad range of voluntary and community sector groups and networks including children and young people, older people, minority ethnic, disability, health, women's, housing, advice, supported employment, education, community development, cultural and sporting organisations.

As an outcome of these sessions, we produced a summary of key messaging.

**This summary is included in Annex 1 of this document, and we would ask that this summary be considered as the main portion of our response to this consultation.**

Please note that the comments as detailed are reflective of the feedback gathered via these sessions, and as such are not suggested to be definitive nor reflective of the full views and interests of the voluntary and community sector.

We acknowledge there will be other key points that many voluntary and community sector organisations will wish to highlight in their responses to the public consultation supported by their own expert insight, experience, and knowledge.

In addition, we have included some General Comments below, which highlight some key messaging from these sessions, and which also reflect insights, knowledge and perspectives gathered via NICVAs own work in supporting and representing the sector across Northern Ireland.

## **5. Key Comments**

### **5.1 The Role of the Voluntary & Community sector**

We echo the wider sectors disappointment and concern at the lack of any clear, cohesive commitments within the draft Programme for Government to recognise the central role and contribution of the voluntary and community sector.

This is despite the significant role the sector currently plays in all aspects of public life and the role that the draft programme clearly assumes it can continue to play in the delivery of many of the key priorities as detailed.

Across our sector engagements, VCS representatives felt the draft programme does not sufficiently acknowledge the sector's contributions nor provide any clear commitments to support its role and suggested that the draft programme's structure feels disjointed, with inconsistent references to the sector across its nine priorities. There was a call for a more integrated approach that clearly articulates the voluntary and community sector's role throughout the document.

As illustrated, our sector makes a vital contribution to the well-being of our population and communities and to making NI work for all. NICVA believes that any plan for the people of NI must explicitly acknowledge and reflect the unique role and contribution of the voluntary and community sector and ensure that this is appropriately reflected within priorities for Government, as will be set out in any final Programme for Government.

If NI is going to truly thrive, we need to better value the voluntary and community sector and Government must demonstrate a clearer appreciation and understanding of our sectors impact and the critical role it plays. The sectors unique value and expertise must be seen as an asset that can help Government successfully deliver on the final Programme for Governments key priorities and missions and help 'turn the curve' to improve outcomes across communities.

As essential partners to Government both through direct public service delivery, and through providing services which respond to and plug the gaps in mainstream services, the voluntary sector requires adequate recognition and support. The new Programme for Government needs to map out that journey and must be the guiding strategy for the investment and improvement needed in building the relationship. Any final Programme for Government must articulate a much clearer position as to how it values the voluntary and community sector and there is a clear need for more explicit commitments and a cohesive strategy to fully integrate the sector's role in achieving the government's priorities.

We believe the [Partnership Agreement between the Northern Ireland Executive and the Voluntary and Community Sector in Northern Ireland](#) developed via the [Joint Forum between Government and the Voluntary and Community Sector](#) as a successor to the previous [Concordat](#) and the mutually agreed shared values and ways of working that underpin this can provide an important focus and framework for this change and development moving forward.

We would therefore welcome and recommend explicit reference and commitments within the final Programme for Government to support the Partnership Agreements successful progress and implementation.

## **5.2 Reform and Transformation of Public Services**

We welcome the inclusion of a priority within the draft plan to reform and transform public services in Northern Ireland and in particular welcome the reference to the role of the voluntary and community sector in this section of the document.

We agree that improvement in multi-agency collaboration is required to transform public services and that the role of the community and voluntary sector needs to be better valued and utilised to support the reform and transformation needed. However, as our sector engagement highlighted, a more detailed and specific focus on how the NI Executive and Government more broadly, will involve and work together with the sector, including specific priorities and actions regarding, is needed within any final plan.

We are now at a critical point where the NI Executive must urgently address the complex range of issues surrounding public services, many of which are set out in the draft programme. The transformation needed to address these will be challenging, will take considerable time and effort, and can only happen if governments' relationship with the voluntary and community sector is truly recognised and invested in.

In the midst of the challenges faced there is a real opportunity for government to meaningfully collaborate with the voluntary and community sector regarding. This includes ensuring the sector's representation in decision-making processes to bring in diverse expertise and perspectives.

We note the 2024 NI Audit Office Report into Budgeting and Accountability<sup>2</sup>, and the associated recommendations, particularly in relation to multiyear budgets, collaboration, and expenditure relating to measurable outcomes within a Programme for Government.

As we have highlighted the voluntary and community sector is a vital part of the public service infrastructure in NI, with a reach and expertise that the public sector doesn't have into communities. The community and voluntary sector's expertise and insights are critical to the service transformation and reform needed.

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<sup>2</sup> NI Audit Office, 'Budgeting and Accountability' (2024) (Available at: NI Audit Office Report - Budgeting and Accountability.pdf., accessed on 22/8/24)

In our sectors experience government is not always best placed to understand the complexities of service delivery; it is often the voluntary and community sector who hold this insight and expertise, and who ultimately can demonstrate and deliver most efficient and impactful ways of working.

As a sector we understand the importance of innovation and the benefit of pooling expertise, resources and solutions to ensure that we meet the needs of those we serve. With over 50,000 people employed in this sector there is no shortage of innovative ideas and grassroots knowledge of what works.

Any final plan must also better take into account and reflect reform and transformation structures and processes already underway across different parts of Government, and in which the voluntary and community sector has been involved, for example this includes the Independent Review of Children's Social Care Services and implementation of the new Integrated Care System for health and social care in NI.

Effective public sector transformation will also require sustainable investment in the voluntary and community sector going forward, that recognises the true value of the sector and invests in its services and its people – both employees and volunteers.

NICVA continues to highlight that our sector is under significant and unsustainable financial pressures as a result of continued short-term public-sector budgeting, underinvestment and disparity of pay and conditions.

To truly embed partnership between the sector and government, the Programme for Government must recognise this and set out a commitment to sustained investment in the voluntary and community sector, including fair and equitable funding (multi-year funding, full cost recovery, proportionate scrutiny and monitoring) and enhancing the sector's ability to respond to emerging challenges, including investment in effective early intervention and prevention.

We believe the '**Fair Funding Principles and Ways of Working**' developed via the [Joint Forum between Government and the Voluntary and Community Sector](#) , supported by NICVA can play a key role here.

We would therefore welcome and recommend explicit reference and commitments within the Programme for Government to support the **Fair Funding Principles and Ways of Working**' successful progress and implementation.

### **5.3 Addressing Poverty as a Priority**

The voluntary and community sector responds to the impact of poverty in our communities daily and as a sector we have been united in our continued efforts to urge Government to implement adequate policy and measures that target those most in need.

Many of the challenges faced by Northern Ireland are either exacerbated by, or have their root causes in, poverty. Poverty has been recognised as a key driver of demand for public services. Furthermore, poverty is inextricably linked with many of the priorities set out in the draft Programme for Government.

We therefore **echo concern from across the voluntary and community sector, that the delivery of an Anti-Poverty Strategy**, including measures to address child poverty, **has not been considered as a priority within the draft Programme** despite there being a legal obligation for the NI Executive to implement this.

The PfG aims to give the people of NI ‘the best possible opportunity to succeed in life and feel at home in our society’. The sectors collective expertise suggests that this objective cannot be delivered without a robust focus on measures to eradicate poverty.

An increasingly overstretched voluntary and community sector cannot be expected to continue to mitigate the impacts of poverty in our communities, Government must work alongside our sector and other key stakeholders to address its root causes and not just the symptoms. It is wholly unacceptable that voluntary and community sector led initiatives such as food banks, community meals programmes and breakfast clubs continue to be overwhelmed by demand and are so heavily relied upon by so many in need across our communities.

We therefore **call on the NI Executive Office make eradicating poverty a key priority in the final Programme for Government, in order to ensure a fairer and more just society for all.**

NICVA is part of a [group of civil society organisations who participated in a process to develop an Anti-Poverty Strategy](#)<sup>3</sup> for Northern Ireland and endorses the collective submission made by this group to the PfG consultation as follows:

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<sup>3</sup> [RECOMMENDATIONS ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN ANTI-POVERTY STRATEGY FOR NORTHERN IRELAND](#)

**The final Programme for Government should include an additional priority of ‘Eradicating Poverty’.** We recommend that this priority includes a commitment to adopting and implementing an Anti-Poverty Strategy, based on objective need.

1. The Programme for Government **should detail that this priority is the responsibility of all government departments**, and that action on poverty should be a collective effort.
2. The **‘Eradicating Poverty’ priority should reflect that Northern Ireland departments will work closely alongside civil society in delivering on this priority.** The expertise and relationships held by civil society will enhance the development and delivery of an Anti-Poverty Strategy. The work of the Co-Design Group should be used to inform the development of the draft strategy.
3. The Programme for Government should **specify that the Anti-Poverty Strategy will contain specific, measurable, time-bound targets, identifying the responsible department for delivery.** The Programme should also note **that the Anti-Poverty Strategy should be accompanied by an action plan**, detailing specific actions to be taken, the responsible department and relevant partners.

This is necessary in providing a road map to NI Government in navigating and addressing the growing impacts of poverty across our communities.

#### **5.4 Further Omissions and Gaps**

We appreciate the challenging circumstances for Government in determining immediate priorities for inclusion in the draft Programme, particularly in the context of the current fiscal environment.

Whilst we do not disagree with any of the priorities detailed within the draft Programme for Government, we echo wider sector concerns that there are some clear omissions within the draft programme which have the potential to impact on some of those most marginalised across our communities, including Section 75 groupings.

As was highlighted during our sector engagement, the draft plan does not appear to sufficiently recognise the essential contribution of many organisations across the sector who cannot see the needs or interests of those they serve adequately reflected in the draft plan.

As is detailed in our Summary of Key Messages (Annex 1), not least this includes detail on how government will respond to the realities of our increasingly ageing population, how it will address the needs of those with a disability, tackle issues of racism and support integration across our communities, promote and embed early intervention and prevention approaches, through to the provision of arts, sports and youth services.

The real concern is that these elements could falter without appropriate focus in any final programme particularly in the context of attracting necessary budget and NI Executive commitment.

An effective Programme for Government must take action to tackle persistent inequality and to advance equality of opportunity and promote equity for everyone in NI, supporting those who are most disadvantaged and who face the greatest barriers to realising their rights and potential.

Whilst there are multiple references throughout the draft plan to tackling inequality, it is clear that there are some critical structural issues and gaps in content that must be addressed if this Programme for Government is to be most representative.

The PfG says it aims to give the people of NI ‘the best possible opportunity to succeed in life and feel at home in our society’. The inclusion of more attainable targets and goals, that reflect the fullest needs and interests of our communities, is essential to achieve this and to deliver meaningful change in Northern Ireland.

Clearly there is an urgency to determine how Government can best address short-term need, in the context of the current budgetary picture, whilst retaining ambition for the long-term well-being and prosperity of all. We trust the NI Executive will listen to and consider the expert insight and feedback from across the sector in response to this public consultation and beyond and respond appropriately in determining final priorities for inclusion.

### **5.5 Relationship between the Programme for Government and Budget**

The Programme for Government provides an important opportunity to set the direction of travel for progressive change. We therefore need to see vision and ambition from the NI Executive in how the NI Budget is to be linked to the delivery of a Programme for Government.

NICVA recognises the challenging financial situation that the NI Executive is operating within during the preparation of the draft Programme for Government, however now more than ever we must rethink how we fund public services, in order to really understand the connection between funding and supporting the wellbeing of people across Northern Ireland. NICVA and its members are keen to work with government in support of this.

#### *Linkage between the Programme for Government and budget allocations*

We would highlight the current inconsistency around the detail of how the Programme for Government will be implemented in practice and how it will be funded. Across all our engagement sessions the incongruity and disconnect between the current budget picture presented by NI government departments and the ambition of the Programme for Government was raised. Whilst representatives acknowledged the challenging financial circumstances in which the draft plan is being presented, it was felt this was indicative of how separate the current public sector budget and Programme for Government appear as processes

Whilst understanding of the financial picture for NI, we are disappointed to be considering priorities for a Programme for Government whilst facing another one-year budget. A longer-term budget to suit this longer-term plan is a necessity, more strategic and efficient.

We also wish to note the 2024 NI Audit Office Report into Budgeting and Accountability<sup>4</sup>, and the associated recommendations, particularly in relation to multi-year budgets and expenditure relating to measurable outcomes within a Programme for Government. The NI Executive should agree a process for multi-year budgets to support longer term financial planning and allocation

As the summary of the government's objectives, the PfG should underpin decisions about how funding is allocated, both in the setting of budgets and during in-year monitoring rounds.

For future Programmes for Government, we would hope to see more effort to bring them in line with each other with allocations based on PfG Commitments.

## **6. Closing Comment**

As our summary of key messages (ANNEX1) highlights there are clearly some critical structural issues and significant gaps in content that must be addressed if the final Programme for Government is to be representative for everyone and ambitious in its intent, alongside the need

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<sup>4</sup> NI Audit Office, 'Budgeting and Accountability '(2024) (Available at: NI Audit Office Report - Budgeting and Accountability.pdf., accessed on 22/8/24)

for inclusion of more attainable targets/goals that reflect the fullest needs and interests of our communities. To be effective, the Programme for Government needs relevant indicators and better use of data to inform service provision. The Programme for Government references the Wellbeing Framework: Doing What Matters Most as a key process for understanding the impact of PfG actions, however as our sector engagement highlighted some of these current indicators are not fit for purpose and do not align with existing strategies.

### **Role of the Voluntary and Community sector**

The voluntary and community sector is an employer, a key partner, and a vital social and economic actor central to delivering on the ambition outlined by Government in the draft programme and beyond, and there is a clear need for more explicit commitments and a cohesive strategy to fully integrate the sector's role in achieving the government's priorities.

Any final Programme for Government must be clearer on how the sector will be involved in shaping and delivering the programmes priorities and outline how an effective relationship between the sector and government will be maintained. This should include clarifying the role of the sector in the reform and transformation of public services, including in the Public Service Transformation Board, on which we recommend there is suitable sectoral representation.

The agreement and publication of a final Programme for Government provides a significant opportunity for the NI Executive to fully recognise the diverse contributions of the voluntary and community sector and to detail its commitment to fostering a strong, collaborative relationship with the sector in support of the implementation of the programme and ultimately to create a more equitable and just society.

NICVA confirms our willingness to share our expertise and to support government in ongoing engagement with the sector regarding the Programme for Governments development and public sector transformation and reform more broadly.

**For more information on any aspect of our response please contact:**

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## ANNEX 1

### **Summary of Key Messages and Feedback from VCS Engagement Sessions on the draft Programme for Government 2024-2027 ‘Our Plan: Doing What Matters Most’. (October 2024)**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

NICVA, Rural Community Network, Volunteer Now, CO3 and Development Trusts NI jointly hosted three online engagement sessions for voluntary and community sector representatives, on [the draft Programme for Government 2024-2027 ‘Our Plan: Doing What Matters Most’](#).

The aim of the sessions was to provide an overview of the key priorities detailed within the draft plan and hear sector views and feedback. It was an opportunity to discuss what was in the draft programme as well as consider what may have been overlooked, required more attention or detail and what sector representatives felt should be prioritised and considered within this next Programme for Government (PfG).

Representatives from the Executive offices (TEO) Programme for Government engagement team attended each of the sessions to share information on the draft plan, take questions and hear views.

Over 90 + representatives were in attendance over the three sessions, with representation from across a broad range of voluntary and community sector groups and networks including children and young people, older people, minority ethnic, disability, health, women’s, housing, advice, supported employment, education, community development, cultural and sporting organisations.

As an outcome of the sessions, we have collated some key trends and comments that emerged as consistent discussion points across all three sessions.

Please note that the comments as detailed are reflective of the feedback gathered via these sessions, and as such are not suggested to be definitive nor reflective of the full views and interests of the voluntary and community sector.

We acknowledge there will be other key points that many voluntary and community sector organisations will wish to highlight in their responses to the public consultation supported by their own expert insight, experience, and knowledge.

We would however encourage all voluntary and community sector organisations to consider these points as summarised when making their own response to the public consultation.

## **KEY MESSAGES & FEEDBACK**

### **THE ROLE OF THE VOLUNTARY & COMMUNITY SECTOR**

- It was a consistent view across all sessions that the voluntary and community sector currently does not have sufficient profile or recognition within the draft programme. This is despite the significant role it currently plays in all aspects of public life and the role that the plan assumes it can continue to play in the delivery of the key priorities as detailed.
- Representatives expressed disappointment and concern at the lack of any clear commitments within the draft programme to recognise the central role and contribution of the voluntary and community sector.
- It was noted that the sector has a clear role to play and currently delivers across aspects of all nine listed priorities, as well as delivering other crucial elements within communities and society as a whole. The sector is there to identify and provide solutions to challenges faced and is a vital part of the public service infrastructure in NI, with a reach and expertise that the public sector does not have into communities. The PfG assumes the sector to be key delivery partners but makes limited mention of its role.
- It was noted that inclusion of the sector was inconsistent across the plans nine priorities and that its overall role and contribution needed to be more clearly articulated and more consistently referenced across the draft plan.
- *Reform and Transformation of Public Services* –representatives recommended that the plan have a more detailed and specific focus on how the NI Executive will involve and work together with the sector, with specific priorities and actions regarding. Representatives wished to communicate a clear message that the sector should be seen as a well-respected, strategic voice, with a need for strong partnership/collaboration between the sector and government. The importance of VCS involvement in the context of the Reform and Transformation Unit and the Public Sector Transformation Board was raised.
- It was noted that the PfG needs to better acknowledge the positive work that is already happening across or in partnership with the voluntary and community sector to support the ‘turning the curve’ agenda.

## THE STRUCTURE OF THE PROGRAMME FOR GOVERNMENT DOCUMENT

Across the sessions there were questions around the rationale for the structure of the draft plan. Representatives reflected that the structural framework for the PfG felt disjointed and the read across from the well-being framework to the four missions and back to the nine priorities was not clear.

Overall, it was felt that there was a disconnect between the nine priorities, the Wellbeing dashboard, the four missions and how these all interlink.

Some key questions raised, and suggestions made via the sessions included:

- **The lack of specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and timely (SMART) objectives** within the plan, makes it challenging to decipher tangible outcomes, and ultimately dilutes the strength of the PfG. It was suggested that many of the actions included within the plan were somewhat vague and greater clarity around actions was needed, with clear targets and timescales for delivery built into the plan. Representatives noted that a clear weakness of the draft programme was that at points it appears so high level that it is difficult to see how the NI Executive can be held accountable for what it has (and has not) achieved within the programme.  
  
Representatives recommended much clearer SMART objectives within each priority to make meaningful action much more achievable. To make any advancement it was suggested we need a clear strategic plan, with clearly defined targets and measures.
- **The Wellbeing Dashboard** was seen as a welcome addition, but there was confusion as to how this links directly to the priorities as detailed within the proposed PfG. Secondly, some apparent flaws in the selection of certain measures within the wellbeing dashboard were highlighted by representatives. Some of the measures/data points selected with regard to homelessness and children's well-being were cited as some live examples of this. It was suggested that some of the selected measures may give a false impression of elements and outcomes on the dashboard. It was suggested that engagement with the sector was critical in better informing the dashboard, data sources and measurement.
- **Missions** The 4 missions (People, Prosperity, Place, Peace) were welcomed and participants agreed with their importance. However, it was felt the structure of the document makes these look like a slight afterthought, and there is a lack of linkage between the missions and the nine priorities.

## SIGNIFICANT OMISSIONS, LIMITATIONS AND GAPS

There was consensus across all three sessions that the priorities as defined in the draft plan were valid, and each of significant importance.

However, across each of the sessions representatives queried how the plans' nine priorities had been determined and called for greater transparency regarding.

There was a view that some of the priorities included in the draft plan appeared largely to have been built around work or initiatives already 'in train' and therefore this meant that in parts, the plan appears limited in scope, range, and ambition.

A broad range of sub-sectors across the sector felt that the needs and interests of those they work with and on behalf of were not adequately reflected in the plan, in some instances appearing largely to have been overlooked.

Representatives stressed that the determination of priorities must clearly be on the basis of greatest need and impact and that in making a case for inclusion, it was not about any particular sub sector or group claiming greater priority or importance. However, across all sessions it was agreed that there were a number of clear omissions within the plan, which appear either to have not been considered or which have not been given adequate focus. Concern was expressed that these elements could falter without appropriate focus within a PfG, particularly in the context of attracting necessary budget and NI Executive commitment.

***Significant omissions and gaps highlighted by representatives during the sessions included the following:***

### **Poverty**

- The absence of a detailed focus on poverty within the draft PfG and a call for the inclusion of poverty as a new priority within the plan to address this was highlighted across all three sessions. This should include objectives relating to tackling poverty with corresponding and measurable outcomes and targets. There was also a recommendation that consideration be given to the inclusion of Eradicating Poverty within the plans overarching missions.
- Notwithstanding the reference to delivery of a Fuel Poverty Strategy, the omission of poverty within the focus of the draft plan was a significant concern across all

representatives given the increasing prevalence and impacts of poverty across communities and the key role played by the VCS in mitigating and responding to same.

- The links between poverty and poor health, housing, education, employment, and the economy were highlighted. It was unanimously stated across all sessions that addressing poverty must be added as a key priority and mission within this next Programme for Government.
- The lack of any meaningful reference to addressing Child Poverty was noted, highlighting that this was significantly out of step with approaches in other parts of the UK.
- The need for specific reference and targets with regard to implementation of an Anti-Poverty Strategy was unanimously called for, with representatives noting that previous New Decade New Approach agreement (NDNA) commitments have still not been honoured and reminding of the legal obligation on the NI Executive to adopt an Anti-Poverty Strategy based on objective need. An Anti-poverty strategy must be as essential corner stone of the PfG.
- Further to this the limited reference within the plan, to the wider suite of social inclusion strategies i.e., Disability, Sexual Orientation and Gender strategies was noted and considered disappointing due to their cross-cutting importance and the previous extensive input and commitment by the VCS to their development.
- The links between addressing poverty and the existing nine key priorities within the draft plan were highlighted. It was felt many of the key priorities in the PfG could not be effectively delivered without a clear commitment to addressing poverty, including adequate reference in each of the priorities and indicators as appropriate.
- *Welfare mitigations* – A clear commitment to prioritising the extension and strengthening of current welfare mitigations was considered an essential part of addressing poverty and it was felt that the NI Executive had ‘missed a trick’ by not referencing the existing mitigations package within the plan, as a positive initiative to be built upon and strengthened. Further to this there was significant concern that without reference in the PfG the future funding picture for welfare mitigations appeared somewhat uncertain.

### **Older people and an Ageing Population**

- Representatives expressed disappointment and concern that older people and the needs of Northern Ireland's increasingly ageing population appeared overlooked in the draft programme, noting the draft plan had only two references to older people.

- Citing the demographic shift towards an increasingly ageing population and the significant societal and economical challenges this poses, not least to health and social care, it was urged that population ageing be seen as a key lens in framing the drive for public service transformation referenced in the draft plan, requiring a whole of government approach.
- The importance of recognising the needs of the ageing population in the plan was highlighted – including, Quality of life, Investment in health and social care, Protection of older people’s rights including workers’ rights and Recognition of the contribution of older people to the economy and society.

## Health

- Representatives reflected that a commitment to cut waiting times was welcomed, however it was felt that a singular focus on reducing waiting lists and on primary care services was too narrow and in no way adequately captured the underlying causes of poor health across our communities.
- It was agreed across the sessions that investment purely in cutting waiting times for primary care appointments would not solve the wider problems within our health and social care system and would not address many of the pressures acutely felt by communities.
- The need for a more explicit recognition, focus on, and investment in early intervention and prevention was strongly recommended, and an extension to the wording of this priority to include ‘Building Healthier Communities’ suggested.
- *Mental health* – The limited reference to mental health, and to the existing NI Mental Health strategy within the plan was a concern given the enduring mental health crisis across our communities, including access to services and supports and the well evidenced connection between people’s physical and mental and emotional health and wellbeing.
- The lack of recognition within the plan of the role of the voluntary and community sector regarding health, particularly in the context of social care, mental health, addiction support, early intervention, and prevention and in acting as a gateway to and addressing gaps in primary care services was highlighted. It was stressed that the voluntary and

community sector must be seen within the plan as a key partner in health and social care delivery, reform, and transformation.

- The lack of reference to implementation of the new Integrated Care System or the establishment of the five-cross sectoral, Area Implementation Partnership Boards (AIPBs), which includes VCS membership were cited as omissions in the context of health service reform and transformation.

### **Disability**

- The lack of explicit reference within the draft plan to disability and the omission of specific or detailed actions aimed at addressing the needs of or upholding/strengthening the rights of those with a disability was cited as a significant omission and concern.
- Representatives noted that the needs of those with a disability appear largely unrecognised and unsupported in the draft plan. It was noted by disability representatives, that in the absence of specific actions related to disability within the draft plan, it was a challenge to respond to the consultation meaningfully, given the level of omission and oversight.
- The disconnect between the PfG and the wider policy and strategic environment in regard to disability was noted.

### **Rural Needs**

- Representatives working with and on behalf of rural communities cited that the rural needs impact assessment linked to the document was disappointing and suggested a lack of understanding as to the fuller needs of rural communities for eg, in the context of housing, poverty, employment, access to healthcare. The challenge with this, representatives noted was that as government looks to implement policy arising from the PfG, the underpinning framework may not be fully informed and/or key issues may have been missed or misunderstood to the disadvantage of those living across rural communities.
- It was suggested that the needs of border communities are also missed within the draft plan.
- Representatives also felt it was not clear from the draft document how the government intends to meaningfully tackle regional imbalance within the PfG.

### **Race, Racism, and supporting Minority Ethnic groups.**

- The references to race and/or tackling racism within the plan were noted as limited and vague and this was cited as a concern by representatives particularly in the context of the recent racist violence, incidents and demonstrations experienced across our communities.
- The lack of detailed/clear actions in reference to the needs and interests of NI growing minority ethnic communities throughout the plan was a concern, in the context of the plan’s overarching Peace mission. It was recommended that much greater specificity on the actions in view here was needed.

### **Bill of Rights and New Decade New Approach Commitments**

- The omission of any reference to progress against a Bill of Rights for NI within the draft plan and the limited reference to the wider New Decade New Approach Commitments, including delivery of an Anti-Poverty Strategy was referenced across all sessions.

### **Other Key Issues/Omissions**

Other concerns, in terms of priority or focus within the draft plan highlighted by representatives across the sessions included:

- Arts, heritage, and culture
- The role of Sport across communities
- Education, in particular commitments to integrated education.
- Tackling Loneliness
- Supporting Volunteering
- Economy and Good Jobs
- Promotion and protection of Human Rights

### **EQUITY AND INTERSECTIONALITY**

The need for the PfG to recognise and promote equity not just equality of access was raised across the sessions with the importance of recognising that can have equality of access to services for example, but that an equitable approach also takes account of the distinct barriers that people may face in even understanding or knowing about a service.

An understanding of intersectionality of needs across the programme is key.

### TARGETS, DELIVERY AND MONITORING

- Across the sessions the importance of clear outcomes, measures and targets within the draft plan was cited, so there can be a clear understanding of what the plan is seeking to achieve and ultimately in capturing what is and is not working well and its true impact.
- It was suggested that the actions as presented currently within the draft plan were difficult to navigate, given the size and layout of the document and in some instances were too vague/broad.
- It was suggested that inclusion of an appendix setting out deliverables and expected timeframes would be advantageous to the final document and make it easier to navigate in terms of identifying key actions.
- In many areas representatives felt that improved matrices needed to be developed to better reflect the priorities the plan is trying to address rather than just measuring what is readily available.

### RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE PFG AND BUDGET

- Representatives highlighted inconsistency around the detail of how the some of the actions within will be implemented in practice and how they will be funded.
- Across all sessions the incongruity and disconnect between the current budget picture presented by NI government departments and the ambition of the PfG was raised.
- Whilst representatives acknowledged the challenging financial circumstances in which the draft PfG is being presented - It was felt this was indicative of how separate the current public sector budget and PfG appear as processes.
- As government departments continue to commit to single year funding only, announce budget cuts and gaps in funding, it was felt by representatives that the NI Executive needed to be clearer about where the funding will come from to deliver the PfG effectively and what is to be prioritised.
- Again, representatives raised concerns as to some of the significant omissions within the plan and the concern looking forward, that these may not be able to attract or will not be prioritised for funding, given their absence.

- Representatives whilst acknowledging the reality of the current fiscal picture stressed that a longer-term budget to deliver a longer-term plan is a necessity and is more strategic and efficient.
- Within the document, representatives noted that ‘sustainable funding methods’ are highlighted. Representatives encouraged clarity and specifics around this. Asking does this mean full cost recovery, longer commissioning periods, co-design, etc.

## THE CONSULTATION PROCESS & DEADLINE

Across the sessions it was noted that the eight-week consultation period was particularly short, and as such it would be challenging for many VCS organisations to make considered and constructive responses to the consultation within the published time frame given that many organisations were already significantly overstretched and/or are time or resource poor.

There was concern that this may impact negatively on the level and depth of responses received from the sector to the draft plan.

## CLOSING SUMMARY

In summary, representatives across the three engagement sessions welcomed the draft Programme for Government, and the concept of more long-term strategic planning. Representatives were clear, however, that there are some critical structural issues and significant gaps in content that must be addressed if the Programme for Government is to be representative of everyone and ambitious in its intent. The PfG aims to give the people of NI ‘the best possible opportunity to succeed in life and feel at home in our society.’ More explicit recognition of the role and contribution of the VCS within the PfG and in the reform and transformation of public services more broadly, alongside the inclusion of more attainable targets/goals that reflect the fullest needs and interests of our communities, were regarded by participants as essential to achieve this and to deliver meaningful change for all in Northern Ireland.

