

(DRAFT) Note of All-Party Group on Voluntary and Community Sector

Wednesday, 15 January 2025 12.00pm – 2.00pm

NICVA offices, Belfast

<b>MLAs present:</b>	Chair Diane Forsythe MLA Secretary Brian Kingston MLA
<b>Apologies</b>	Vice Chair Sian Mulholland MLA Ciara Ferguson MLA
<b>Guest Speaker:</b>	Minister for Communities, Gordon Lyons, MLA
<b>Secretariat:</b>	Celine McStravick (NICVA) Jonny Currie (NICVA) Kathy Maguire (NICVA)

1	<b>AGENDA ITEM 1: APOLOGIES, AND UPDATE SINCE LAST MEETING</b>
1.1	<b>Chair Diane Forsythe MLA</b> welcomed everyone, noted apologies (Sian Mulholland, MLA and Ciara Ferguson, MLA), and outlined the agenda for the meeting.
1.2	<b>Chair Diane Forsythe MLA</b> asked for agreement on the draft note of last meeting held on 16 September 2024, as an accurate record of proceedings/discussion. These notes were agreed.
1.3	By way of update since last meeting <b>Chair Diane Forsythe MLA</b> updated on a number of Ministerial meetings held via the APG last year, designed to support the sectors engagement with government including meetings with the Justice Minister and the Minister for Education. The delegation for these meetings included Diane Forsythe MLA as All Party Group Chair, NICVA Secretariat, and a small group of sector representatives, from sub sectors/organisations reflective of each Ministers portfolio. Diane advised that further Ministerial meetings were planned for 2025 and that NICVA as Secretariat would keep organisations updated on arrangements for these should they wish to be part of/join.
2	<b>AGENDA ITEM 2: Key Issues for Sector/ Topical Updates</b>
2.1	<b>Chair Diane Forsythe MLA</b> introduced this agenda item, citing it was an opportunity to highlight topical issues of cross sectoral interest and hear directly from sector representatives on key issues.
2.2	<p><b>Celine McStravick, CEO, NICVA</b> provided an update briefing on issues of key topical interest for sector currently including;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Impact of Increase in Employer National Insurance Contributions (NICs)</li> <li>• UK Shared Prosperity Fund funding position</li> <li>• NI Executive Budget Position for 2025/26 and Departmental Budget pressures</li> <li>• Development and delivery of the Programme for Government.</li> </ul> <p>Celine urged the need for much greater and meaningful collaboration with sector by government on current challenges faced and the role of sector in public service transformation more broadly.</p> <p><b>Action: Via Secretariat, APG Chair is to write to the UK Chancellor to request a meeting with Chancellor/her officials and a small delegation of VCS representatives to discuss the current funding position for sector due to impacts of proposed NICs increase and reduction of UKSPF funds or 2025/26.</b></p>
2.3	<p><i>Partnership Agreement between the NI Executive and the Voluntary and Community Sector in NI including Fair Funding Principles – Update</i></p> <p><b>Govt &amp; Voluntary Sector Joint Forum VCS Panel Chair Karen Smith, Disability Action,</b> provided an update progress against development of the ‘Partnership Agreement</p>

	<p>between the Voluntary and Community Sector and NI Executive (including the Fair Funding Principles and Ways of Working), currently being developed via the Govt and Voluntary Sector Joint Forum. Karen advised that the Joint Forum has recently commenced its new three-year term, with the appointment of thirteen new VCS representatives to the Forums VCS panel, increasing its membership to 20 VCS reps from across a diverse range of sub sectors. A priority for the Joint Forums joint Public Sector and VCS membership will be to agree a workplan for this next year aimed at driving forward and supporting progress against implementation of the Partnership Agreement, currently being progressed via NI Executive. Of critical interest to VCS panel, given the increasingly precarious funding environment is moving forward with Fair Funding principles and populating these with working examples that encourage progress etc,</p> <p>The Chair thanked speakers for their input and acknowledged that themes shared by the speakers are reflected in the focus of this year’s APG workplan which will aim to highlight the Value of the Sector.</p>
3	<p><b>AGENDA ITEM 3: Briefing from Minister for Communities and Q &amp; A</b></p>
3.1	<p><b>The Minister for Communities, Gordon Lyons, MLA</b> provided a briefing on key strategic priorities for his department and his vision as to the role and contribution of the voluntary and community sector more broadly.</p> <p><b>The Minister</b> acknowledged the vital role of the voluntary and community sector and its diverse contribution across communities, which reaches so many parts of society including addressing poverty, tackling homelessness, and promoting well-being.</p> <p><b>The Minister</b> said he was proud of his department’s leadership in supporting the voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland but acknowledged that the sectors work intersects with all parts of government and sectors role in helping shape policy, public service delivery and advocacy.</p> <p><b>The Minister</b> acknowledged the increased demands on sector as a result of economic, social, and environmental challenges faced.</p> <p><b>The Minister</b> acknowledged that operating conditions for the sector were particularly challenging – funding environment, workforce challenges etc and that sector feels undervalued by government.</p> <p><b>The Minister</b> said was crucial for government to work in effective partnership with sector and other funders to address these complex challenges and he was committed to strengthening partnership working moving forward. He highlighted the importance of and progress against the Partnership Agreement between the NI Executive and the Voluntary and Community Sector in NI including Fair Funding Principles – believes this can provide a solid foundation for greater collaboration between sector and all parts government and he and his department committed to its delivery, which he will champion across other parts of government as a way to do things better together etc.</p>

He said he recognised the importance of mechanisms such as the Joint Forum and platforms such as the APG that help focus on /can drive strategic engagement between sector and government.

**The Minister** outlined a number of key areas where he and his Department working to support his vision of a thriving and empowered voluntary and community sector including:

- Funding Uplift of 5% to sector for 24/25 – demonstration of his departments commitment to being a fair funder etc
- Review of People and Place Strategy
- Refresh of arrangements for delivery of independent advice services
- Review of strategic infrastructure support for VCS and the VCS Infrastructure Support Policy Framework

**The Minister** said in working together, is need to acknowledge and be open to change to ensure are flexible and agile in meeting need and given challenging fiscal environment.

**The Minister** reiterated his commitment to championing and supporting the sector, including across other parts of government and thanked Chair, Secretariat, and membership of APG for the opportunity to reaffirm this.

**The Minister** then took a range of questions and comments from voluntary and community sector representatives, on a range of topical issues. This included:

- The impact of the planned increase in Employer National Insurance Contributions (NICs) on sector and role of NI Executive/Government.
- The perceived lack of progress with regard to publication and implementation of the Anti-Poverty Strategy by his department and the continued role of civil society within further development of the strategy and its current omission within draft Programme for Government.
- The funding and sustainability challenges faced by the arts sector and also delivery of grass roots sports in communities.
- The need for much greater collaboration and leadership across the NI Executive and Government departments in response to the ongoing budget position.
- The impacts on sector of reduction in UKSPF funds for 25/26 on VCS delivery, a call for a greater lobby and options for funding by and from local Government departments to address this shortfall.
- The impact of loss of the Jobstart scheme on opportunities for young people.
- Continued lack of progress and meaningful commitments by Government to racial equality and inclusion.
- The need for much greater connection /attention to role of philanthropy in supporting key interests of sector and those they serve.

	<p>In response the Minister reiterated a number of commitments and key actions including; Engagement with the civil society Anti-Poverty Strategy Design Group previously involved in the Strategies development by DfC, to discuss progress against the strategies publication etc. A commitment to continued championing of the impact of and funding for grass roots sports delivery across communities. A commitment to tackling racism and the importance of NI Executive ownership of Race Relations and Racial Equality Strategy and learning from elsewhere. To continue to press UK Government on impacts of NICS for sector and need to mitigate, in hope of a workable solution. To continue to press for clarity from UK Government as to next stage funds post UKSPF and the impacts on sector and beneficiaries of this funding deficit. The Minister detailed his support for a proposed voluntary sector delegation to meet with the UK Chancellor on twin issues of UKSPF funding and impact of national insurance contributions. The Minister also voiced a commitment to continued engagement with the APG.</p>
<b>4</b>	<b>AGENDA ITEM 4: APG WORKPLAN FOR 2025</b>
<b>4.1</b>	<p><b>Chair Diane Forsythe MLA</b> shared details of the proposed APG Work plan for 2025, advising that future meetings around themes of Fair Funding including commissioning/funding models, Workforce Challenges for Sector and Public Sector Transformation (including health and social care reform) were in plan. The hope is that APG could also provide a platform for NI Executive Ministers to come and engage with sector on key policy issues and detail their departments priorities and vision in terms of role of sector.</p>
<b>5</b>	<b>AGENDA ITEM 5: AOB, NEXT MEETING AND CLOSE</b>
<b>5. 1</b>	<p><b>Chair Diane Forsythe MLA</b> thanked all attendees and speakers for their invaluable insights and contributions to the meeting.</p>
<b>5.2</b>	<p><b>Chair Diane Forsythe MLA</b> advised that the next APG meeting was proposed for March and shared a draft schedule of further meeting dates for 2025. Final dates/arrangements will be issued.</p> <p><b>Action: Date and arrangements for next meeting to be confirmed by Secretariat</b></p>