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# BUILDING AN INCLUSIVE LABOUR MARKET

## CONFERENCE REPORT

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# Foreword

The voluntary and community sector (VCS) is a proven and indispensable force in addressing economic inactivity and building an inclusive labour market. By providing essential services and support to those further from the workplace, our sector not only fills critical gaps left by statutory services but also serves as a vital safety net for communities and individuals.



Local Labour Market Partnerships (LMPs) are established in each Local Government District in Northern Ireland to develop a range of employability provisions that address the specific labour market needs and challenges of local areas.

The impact and contributions of the sector are well-documented, particularly through projects supported by the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) to address barriers to employment. However, the expiry of UKSPF in March 2025 poses a severe threat to the continued operation of these essential services. Without a clear plan or transition fund in place, there is a real risk that the progress made in supporting those furthest from the labour market will be undone, and the skilled workforce delivering this support lost.

The “Building an Inclusive Labour Market” conference, which was delivered by NICVA and Labour Market Partnerships (LMP), provided a platform to highlight the extensive range and value of support provided by the sector. It made clear that a long-term strategy and strategic investment is essential to ensure that these vital services can continue to operate beyond the current funding timeline.

The VCS want to contribute to solutions, and the recommendations in this report provide a pathway to addressing economic inactivity in Northern Ireland.

There is an opportunity to reset the relationship between our sector and government, leveraging our collective experience and expertise. We stand ready to work together to achieve shared outcomes that will support government ambitions and reach those most in need of support.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The voluntary and community sector (VCS) play a key role in supporting people into employment.

This is critical in addressing the high levels of economic inactivity in Northern Ireland and requires investment in equipping people to overcome barriers and gain skills that will help them access the workforce.

Affecting the change required to see better outcomes for those furthest from the workplace requires a long-term and joined up approach that recognises the individual needs and the structural barriers that curtail access to employment.

Collaboration is essential if we are to achieve this across UK Government, the NI Executive, local government, the VCS as well as business and employers. This combined knowledge, expertise and investment can unlock an inclusive labour market and generate improved outcomes across some of the most marginalised groups in society.

To support the delivery of this, and emerging from the conference, we propose the following recommendations:

- **Clarity on UKSPF:**

Provide urgent clarity on the future of UKSPF, including an extension in the short-term and long-term commitment to invest.

- **Strategic approach to economic inactivity:**

Integrate economic inactivity strategies across government, with clear leadership from Department for Economy and Department for Communities.

- **Recognise structural barriers:**

Plan and invest in interventions addressing barriers for women, young people, carers, disabled, and minority ethnic groups.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- **Ringfenced funding:**

Ensure any transferred funding to the NI Executive is ring-fenced to address economic inactivity, and that programmes are delivered by the VCS.

- **Equal partnership:**

Treat the sector as an equal partner in designing, implementing, and overseeing new programmes.

- **Coordination and collaboration:**

Enhance coordination between VCS and public sector for consistent local service planning and delivery.

- **Employer awareness:**

Increase employer awareness of labour market partnerships and their business benefits.

- **Formal agreement on VCS role:**

Establish a formal agreement with the Executive on the VCS's role in service delivery, including improved staff conditions.

- **Funded childcare strategy:**

Implement a fully funded childcare strategy to support women into employment.

- **Carers Strategy:**

Implement a strategy to support carers in accessing employment.

# INTRODUCTION

Northern Ireland consistently ranks among the UK regions with the highest levels of economic inactivity, maintaining a gap of 4 - 8 percentage points above the UK average, currently standing at 27%. Closely linked to economic deprivation, the highest rates are amongst older age groups and individuals with lower levels of qualifications.

The primary factors contributing to economic inactivity include sickness and disability, caregiving responsibilities, full-time education, and early retirement. Unlike the unemployed, this group is not actively seeking or available for work.

On Wednesday, 12 June 2024, **Building an Inclusive Labour Market** was hosted by the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) and Labour Market Partnerships, bringing together the VCS with two Executive Ministers, senior officials, and other key stakeholders to discuss the lessons learned, challenges faced, and opportunities available for addressing economic inactivity.

The event shone a light on the essential work carried out by the sector across Northern Ireland, the impact countless programmes have had on the beneficiaries and explored the strategies and collaborations necessary to sustain and enhance support for those furthest from the labour market.

This included reflections on barriers to employment, such as the accessibility and affordability of childcare, and the poverty trap which has been heightened due to the increase in cost of living.

Addressing these complex issues require equally complex and tailored solutions, and many of the answers lie within the VCS. Working in partnership with government, we firmly believe we can unlock structural barriers that prevent over a quarter of the population from accessing the workplace.

And there is cause for optimism: while economic inactivity has long been a significant challenge for Northern Ireland, recent trends show promising signs of improvement.

The primary government policy to address this issue was introduced by the Conservative Government through UKSPF. To date, £57 million has been allocated to 59 organisations within the VCS, helping to deliver crucial support to over 11,000 people, including women, young people, and those with long-term health issues and disabilities.

With this funding set to end in March 2025, it is imperative that both the UK Government and the NI Executive take immediate action to ensure the sector can continue its vital work in reducing economic inactivity.

This report provides an overview of the key contributions from the conference and offers recommendations on how government, the sector, employers, and other stakeholders can collaborate to make further progress on this critical issue.



# Key Contributions

From Government Ministers to those who had benefitted first hand from Labour Market Partnerships, the conference heard a wide range of perspectives on the impact and need for schemes that provide essential employment support to people with a wide range of challenges.

The important contributions reflected the complex challenges as well as the inspiring potential that tackling economic inactivity can unlock.

For many people deemed economically inactive, the path to employment can be far from simple. With structural barriers that can seem so far away from the day to day lives of many of the most vulnerable in our society, it is essential that the NI Executive understands the full breadth of factors that contribute to the context in which they live.

Childcare costs, lack of skills and qualifications, mental health and other caring duties are just some of the reasons that contribute to locking people out of the workplace, and speakers at the conference provided a clear picture of what that looks like from the perspective of the service user as well as for the organisations delivering these important services.

This section provides a snapshot of the range of contributions from the day.

For a full list of conference speakers and contributors see the Annexe.

# Minister for Communities, Gordon Lyons MLA



***“I value the services and supports delivered by the voluntary and community sector and the partnership working with my department which allows greater expertise, reach and responsiveness to the needs of our customers.”***

*“Department for Communities initiatives such as Labour Market Partnerships, Workable NI and Access to Work NI help to channel this collaboration, direct our activity and target specific outcomes for those individuals facing additional barriers to employment.”*

*“Whilst we would like to do more to meet our high ambitions for our labour market, the reality of constrained finances means we need to find new and innovative ways to achieve more for our customers with less.”*

*“I am challenging my department to find better ways to achieve outcomes against these pressures and it is reassuring to see that the sector is also looking inwards and challenging itself to do the same.”*



# Minister for the Economy, Conor Murphy MLA



***“As part of the reform of Invest NI, local areas will be empowered to lead economic development in their area.*”**

*“I see the voluntary and community sector having a strong voice at this table, working in partnership with Invest NI and local enterprise agencies to identify economic priorities in their area.*

*“Labour Market Partnerships represent an excellent model for this type of approach, and I expect this to be built upon in the sub-regional economic plans which my department will publish later this year.”*



# Lord Mayor of Belfast, Councillor Micky Murray



***“Belfast Labour Market Partnership (LMP) and LMPs across the other 10 local councils are ideal mechanisms by which relevant stakeholders are convened to address local labour market challenges and opportunities.*”**



*“LMPs cannot deliver their strategic Action Plans without a vibrant employability and skills eco-system including delivery from those operating in the voluntary and community sector. LMPs need their expertise at reaching into communities to help and support the most vulnerable in our society.*”

*“Through our Community Plans, we all are working towards improving the lives of those within our communities and supporting economic growth across the region.”*

## What works: how the sector is making a positive impact to addressing economic inactivity

A range of voluntary and community sector organisations from across Northern Ireland provided insight into the critical support delivered by the sector.

The following case studies outline a sample of how these challenges are being addressed by some organisations including those currently funded through UKSPF.

The uncertainty of the future of this fund was repeatedly raised as a key concern for the sector in the planning and delivery of these projects.

## Youth Start



### Role

A consortium of seven youth organisations working with **2,200** young people across Northern Ireland.



### Challenges

Imminent loss of UKSPF threatens the continuation of support for vulnerable youth and the jobs of 107 project workers.



### Solutions

Need for secure funding and investment to ensure future planning and sustainability.



### Impact

**1,316** participants supported  
**580** qualifications gained  
**186** into employment

## NIACRO SkillSET



### Role

Provides vocational training for individuals with convictions, aiding rehabilitation and employment in construction, hospitality, and warehousing.



### Challenges

Personal, circumstantial, and systemic barriers hinder social inclusion.



### Solutions

Tailored one-on-one support, vocational training, and post-employment assistance.



### Impact

**703** people engaged  
**291** qualifications gained  
**122** secured employment.



## Cedar Foundation



### Role

Supports disabled individuals in achieving full inclusion in society and employment.



### Challenges

Addressing employment barriers for disabled individuals.



### Solutions

Holistic support, job readiness programs, and employer guidance.



### Impact

**780** people supported  
**73** paid jobs secured  
**93%** success rate

## Access Employment Limited



### Role

Social enterprise providing training, mentoring, and work experience for individuals with disabilities and health conditions.



### Challenges

Bridging the gap between qualifications and work experience.



### Solutions

Pre-employment support, intensive mentoring, and employer engagement.



### Impact

**240** trainees recruited  
**190** qualifications achieved  
**79** work tours facilitated.



# Belfast Works Connect



## Role

An employability project supported by UKSPF, targeting individuals facing barriers to employment.



## Challenges

High rates of benefits dependency, low education levels, and health-related issues.



## Solutions

Community access points, comprehensive support, and a need for a coordinated government approach.



## Impact

**83%** success rate

**1,950** recruited

**174** secured employment



# Workshops

Conference attendees participated in workshops in the afternoon portion of the conference to reflect on key messaging from the days contributions, and to explore what is needed in terms of next steps and the vision of building a more inclusive labour market for all:

A summary of workshop feedback is detailed below:

## Reflecting on today's contributions and your own experience, what are the key strengths of the VCS in helping build a more inclusive Labour Market?

- Intensive and flexible support
- Grass roots – connection with local areas
- Youth work and giving people second chances
- Community knowledge and relationships with communities and employers
- Quick to adapt
- Highly motivated, staff treat it almost as a vocation

## Considering these, if we had a blank page, how would we design the employability and skills eco-system to build on these strengths, and to support the role and contribution of the VCS in delivering best outcomes for participants?

- Simplified finance structure, and a sustainable funding model, to include multi-year funding.
- Greater collaboration with government. VCS be included in policy discussions and planning across education, training and workforce planning - VCS must be highly valued from the beginning.
- Avoid a one size fits all approach.
- Engagement with schools and employers on what skills are needed and how to deliver them.
- Increase support for entrepreneurship rather than expecting employment.
- Ensure greater communication and collaboration between government departments.

- Centralised services – often duplication that costs money. Increase awareness of what’s available.
- More outcomes focused, but big targets not always useful in understanding needs.
- Don’t just focus on hitting numbers – be prepared to take harder cases to make a larger difference.
- Longer term programmes and funding – allows the building of relationships with service users.
- Offer multiple points of entry and an all-age approach.
- Focus on education.

### What barriers need to be addressed, what opportunities currently exist and what change or developments are needed to deliver this?

- A sustainable funding model, including multi-year funding model to prevent cliff edge, in terms of funding and support.
- Address internal bureaucracy and silos across government departments in terms of planning. This is creating a barrier, and duplication of funding and services causes confusions.
- Awareness that school/college isn’t always the answer, as well as age barriers to training.
- Isn’t always viable to create bespoke programmes because the time needed isn’t billable.
- Encourage employers to be more flexible in models of working and methods of interviewing – shrink gap between perspective employers and employees.
- Address issue of competition for funding.
- Improve relationship with government.
- Focus on co-designing with employers.



# Participant Comments

Conference attendees had the opportunity to provide comment and reflect on the contributions they had heard throughout the days programme:

*“New and innovative ways are available in abundance from the voluntary and community sector; sector stands ready to propose these ways of working.”*

*“It’s important to remember that this is all about tackling structural inequality and that it is human beings at the centre of it.”*

*“Good to hear two ministers with different views on the political future of NI united in the view to building and inclusive labour market. Hopefully ongoing deeds and policies back up the good words.”*

*“Terrific to hear directly from people using CVS services and trusting them to help them to achieve their goals and aspirations.”*

*“Great to hear Youth Consortium speaking and presenting their work with one voice rather than representing individual organisations. Collaboration demonstrated at its best from the sector.”*

*“Look at the great success stories of our employment programs on a low budget, so think how many more successful pathways can be provided on a more secure funding model.”*

# Recommendations

Addressing economic inactivity offers a significant opportunity to create a society that puts inclusion and wellbeing at its core, ensuring that prosperity is shared and the benefits felt by all communities.

The VCS has a long track record in innovating and responding to need, and there is an opportunity to rethink, reset and restructure the delivery of key services by the sector in partnership with government.

The expertise and experience within the sector is unrivalled in understanding the issues facing communities and individuals furthest from the workplace. The VCS is best placed to deliver the support, reaching into communities and building relationships based on trust, that simply can't be achieved by government.

The potential for generating cost savings through supporting more people into employment is also significant, and we would encourage government to weigh up the potential benefit when taking decisions on future spending. However, this collaboration can only succeed if the sector is recognised and invested in by government as a critical partner.

We are urging the NI Executive and UK Government to seize the opportunity that a more inclusive labour market can deliver, and propose the following principles and recommendations to work to achieve this:

- 1** Urgent clarity should be given on the future of UKSPF, with the intention of continuing existing investment or replacing it with the same or more, and a long-term strategy that reflects both the needs of the sector in delivering support and the needs of those that programmes are in place to support. This should include a 12-month extension to existing UKSPF to give certainty to the VCS.
- 2** If funding is transferred to the NI Executive for allocation, this should be ringfenced to ensure it is allocated to address economic inactivity and delivered by the VCS.

- 3** Economic inactivity needs a strategic approach and should be embedded across government, removing the siloed approach that is currently limiting progress. This includes reflecting this in strategies including anti-poverty, skills and economic growth. This should include an agreed lead to coordinate the approach, with clear leadership role for DfE and DfC, and working with other departments.
- 4** Planning and investment that recognises the distinct barriers faced by those furthest from the labour market and interventions is needed to recognise and respond to intersectionality of issues including women, young people, carers, disability and minority ethnic groups.
- 5** The sector should be treated as an equal partner in the design. The voluntary sector needs to be recognised as a key and equal partner by both UK Government and NI Executive including implementation, transition to, delivery and oversight of any new programmes that replace UKSPF.
- 6** Greater coordination and collaboration is needed across VCS and public sector in terms of local service planning and delivery. LMPs represent a good model but need more consistency across NI, with an agreed and constituent approach on the role of the VCS sector in supporting them.
- 7** Increased awareness needed amongst employers about the role of the VCS and how this can work for their business.
- 8** Formal agreement with the Executive on the role of the sector in delivery of key services, including improved terms and conditions for staff working in the sector.
- 9** Implementation of a fully funded childcare strategy to support more women to access employment.
- 10** Carers Strategy to be implemented to include support for carers to be able to access employment.

# Annexe

## Building Inclusive Labour Market - The Role of the Voluntary & Community Sector

Wednesday 12 June 2024, Stormont Hotel, Belfast

9.45am	<b>Registration and networking</b>
10am	<b>Welcome</b>
	Lord Mayor of Belfast, Councillor Micky Murray
10.05am	<b>Context and Overview</b>
	John Campbell, BBC NI
10.10am	<b>The Role of the Voluntary and Community sector in building an inclusive labour market</b>
	<b>Keynote Address</b> Minister of Economy, Conor Murphy, MLA
	<b>The Role of the Vol and Community sector in supporting pathways to employment</b>
	<b>Keynote Address</b> Minister for Communities Gordon Lyons, MLA

# Annexe

<p><b>10.30 to 11.35 am</b></p>	<p><b>Voices from the Sector (Part 1)</b></p>
	<p><b>Introduction</b> John Campbell, BBC NI <b>Setting the Scene</b> Celine McStravick, CEO NICVA</p>
	<p><b>Building the Confidence and Skills of Young People</b> Claire Meenehan YouthStart consortium</p>
	<p><b>Supporting Women: A conversation about issues and impact</b> Anne McVicker WRDA, Lynn Carville, Womens 'Tec, Sarah Collyer, Kilcooley Women's Centre &amp; Patricia Lewsley-Mooney, TWN</p>
	<p><b>Social Inclusion and working with Statutory Partners</b> Fiona Greene, NIACRO</p>
<p><b>11.35 - 11.45 am</b></p>	<p>Comfort break</p>
<p><b>11.45 am to 12.45 pm</b></p>	<p><b>Voices from the Sector (Part 2)</b></p>
	<p><b>Supporting people with disabilities and/or health conditions</b> Elaine Armstrong, Cedar Foundation Lorraine Black, AEL Heather Logan, Disability Action with Sharon Bailie &amp; Lindsay McNabb, McDonalds Facilitated by Norman Sterritt, Triangle</p>

# Annexe

	<p><b>Engaging and delivering in communities</b>          Padraigin NiMhaonaigh, Triax, Ciaran Boylan &amp; Rosemary McCusker, Belfast Works Connect &amp; Liam Devine, Clanrye Group</p>
<p><b>12.45– 1.00 pm</b></p>	<p><b>Reflections</b>          John Campbell, BBC NI</p>
<p><b>1 - 1.45PM</b></p>	<p>Lunch</p>
<p><b>1.45 - 2.45 pm</b></p>	<p><b>Workshops</b> - Building an Inclusive Labour Market – creating the best outcome together.</p>
<p><b>2.45– 3.15 pm</b></p>	<p><b>Panel Discussion: Identifying the challenges and making the most of the opportunities</b>          John Campbell, BBC NI          Panel members:          Geraldine McGahey OBE, Chief Commissioner, Equality Commission NI · Dr Lisa Wilson, Nevin Economic Research Institute, Independent expert for Minister for Economy · David Babington, CEO, Action Mental Health · Jonathan McMurray, Data &amp; AI Consultant, Microsoft · Moira Doherty, Deputy Secretary, Department for the Economy (DfE)</p>
<p><b>3.15 - 3.30 pm</b></p>	<p><b>Next steps and Closing Remarks</b>          John Campbell, BBC NI</p>

# Annexe

## UKSPF: Northern Ireland - Economic inactivity projects

Project	Locations
Belfast Works Connect	Belfast, Antrim & Newtownabbey, Lisburn & Castlereagh, Ards & North Down, Mid & East Antrim
Work It Out	Northern Ireland wide
Empower	Northern Ireland wide
Women Breaking Barriers (Scaling up Women's Education, Training and Employment Skills)	Northern Ireland wide
PROSPER (People, Resilience, Opportunities, Success, Participation, Employment and Results)	Antrim & Newtownabbey, Belfast, Armagh City, Banbridge & Craigavon, Causeway Coast & Glens, Lisburn & Castlereagh Mid & East Antrim, Mid Ulster, Newry, Mourne & Down, Ards & North Down
Maximise Employment	Northern Ireland wide
Building Futures	Belfast, Newry, Mourne & Down
YouthStart Consortium Project	Northern Ireland wide

# UKSPF: Northern Ireland - Economic inactivity projects

Project	Locations
Triax Success Northwest	Derry City & Strabane
Niacro SkillSET	Northern Ireland wide
Exploring Self-Employment and Enterprise Skills Together (Explore Enterprise)	Northern Ireland wide
Employ Me	Newry Mourne and down and Armagh, Banbridge, Craigavon District council areas
Rural Economic Accelerator Programme	Fermanagh & Omagh, Mid Ulster
Moving Forward Moving On	Belfast, Antrim & Newtownabbey
SkillSET	Northern Ireland wide
Migrant Access Programme (MAP)	Armagh, Banbridge & Craigavon, Lisburn & Castlereagh, Newry, Mourne & Down
GROW Partnership (Growth, Resilience, Opportunities and Work)	Antrim & Newtownabbey, Causeway Coast & Glens, Derry & Strabane, Fermanagh & Omagh, Mid & East Antrim, Mid Ulster
YouthStart	Belfast



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