

Note of All-Party Group on Voluntary and Community Sector

Tuesday 25 March 2025, 1.00 pm – 2.00 pm

Senate Room Parliament Buildings, Stormont

<b>MLA members present:</b>	Chair Diane Forsythe, MLA Vice Chair Sian Mullholland, MLA Secretary Brian Kingston, MLA Ciara Ferguson, MLA Nicola Broghan, MLA
<b>Apologies</b>	Chair of Communities Committee, Colm Gildernew, MLA
<b>Guest Speakers:</b>	Minister for Communities, Gordon Lyons, MLA Dr Lindsay Cordery-Bruce, CEO, Welsh Council for Voluntary Action (WCVA)
<b>Secretariat:</b>	Celine McStravick (NICVA) Jonny Currie (NICVA) Kathy Maguire (NICVA)

1	<b>AGENDA ITEM 1: WELCOME AND UPDATE SINCE LAST MEETING</b>
1.1	<b>Chair Diane Forsythe MLA</b> welcomed everyone 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 Tuesday 25 March 2025, as an accurate record of proceedings. Chair noted that all Actions from this meeting had been completed. These notes were agreed.
1.3	Apologies were noted from Chair of Communities Committee, Colm Gildernew, MLA who had been due to attend today's meeting for purposes of a briefing, but who unfortunately was unable to attend due to a bereavement. It was noted that this briefing would be rescheduled for a further date.
1.4	<b>Chair Diane Forsythe MLA</b> welcomed new APG MLA member Nicola Broghan, MLA to the meeting
2	<b>AGENDA ITEM 2: Address From Minister for Communities, Gordon Lyons, MLA</b>
2.1	<b>Chair Diane Forsythe MLA</b> introduced this agenda item, thanking Minister Lyons for his attendance.
2.2	<p><b>Minister Gordon Lyons MLA</b> briefed members on a £1500 payment being made to organisations funded through his department's Voluntary and Community and Community Empowerment Divisions, which he was announcing today.</p> <p>Approximately 285 Voluntary and Community organisations are eligible to benefit from these payments, with the aim of supporting continued delivery of key services across some of our most vulnerable communities. The Department for Communities will contact eligible organisations in the coming days to advise and make necessary arrangements. Payment will be received towards the end of March 2025.</p> <p>In making the announcement the Minister said he was acutely aware of the challenges that persist within the voluntary and community sector, with organisations continuing to face significant pressures as operating costs continue to increase, at a time when demand for services and support remains high. He said the groups eligible to benefit from this funding are at the forefront in the delivery of key services across many of our most at-risk communities.</p> <p>The Minister acknowledged the funding was limited and would in no way meet all these challenges but hoped would go some way to help vital VCS organisations continue to meet need and support delivery. The Minister said he remain committed to ensuring voluntary and community partners are supported to continue providing vital services across Northern Ireland.</p> <p><b>Full details of the announcement <a href="#">HERE</a> . The Minister then took questions from the floor.</b></p>

3	<b>AGENDA ITEM 3: Briefing from NICVA</b>
3.1	<p><b>Celine McStravick, CEO, NICVA</b> provided an update briefing on issues of key topical interest for sector currently and detailed how NICVA is responding to some of the key challenges sector facing, particularly with regard to the current budgetary environment, key policy developments and impacts for the sector and those it serves.</p> <p>Celine provided a brief, and discussion took place on key issues including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Final Programme for Government.</li> <li>• Pending Increase in Employer National Insurance Contributions (NICs), sector impacts and continued lobby to UK and NI Govts as to impacts.</li> <li>• UK Shared Prosperity Fund - anticipated cuts for delivery over this next transition year 25/26 and arrangements for a replacement scheme post March 26. Role of NICVAs Economic Inactivity Coalition re: continued lobby across Governments.</li> <li>• NI Executive Budget Position for 2025/26 and Departmental Budget pressures, highlighting ‘squeezed Departmental Budgets and impact on public sector contracts/grants &amp; policy development for eg; DoH Core Grant Schem</li> <li>• UK Government Spring Budget Statement – anticipated further cuts to welfare spending, including disability benefits, future of UKSPF funds</li> <li>• Public Sector Transformation agenda and role of VCS</li> <li>• The Role of Philanthropy and Funding for Sector</li> <li>• NICVA recent visit to Washington and current position of civil society role and engagement globally.</li> </ul> <p>3.2 Discussion took place across MLA members and VCS representatives in attendance regarding.</p> <p>3.3 <b>Chair Diane Forsythe MLA</b> led a discussion on how the All-Party Group and its MLA members can continue to amplify the sectors concerns and key asks across government. A number of next steps were agreed including inviting the Finance Minister to brief the APG at a next meeting. In addition it was agreed that the Funders Forum for NI would be invited to join a future meeting. APG Vice Chair Sian Mullholland, also updated on her upcoming Private Members Bill re: The Lotteries for Communities..</p> <p><b>Action: Via Secretariat, APG Chair is to invite the Minister of Finance to attend a future APG meeting for purposes of briefing. This is part of a wider schedule of Ministerial Meeting Invitations to brief APG, being led by APG Chair /Secretariat</b></p> <p><b>Action: Via Secretariat, APG Chair is to invite a representative from the Funders Forum for NI to join a future meeting for purposes of briefing.</b></p> <p><b>Action: APG Vice Chair, Sian Mullholland, MLA to provide a briefing at next APG meeting on The Lotteries for Communities Bill (Private Members Bill).</b></p>

4	<b>AGENDA ITEM 4: The Experience of VCS in Wales, Dr Lindsay Cordery- Bruce, CEO, WCVA</b>
4.1	<p><b>Jonny Currie, NICVA</b> introduced <b>Dr Lindsay Cordery-Bruce CEO of Welsh Council for Voluntary Action (WCVA)</b> who joined the meeting online to share the Welsh experience of advocating for sustainable funding for the VCS, including core funding to sector. Lindsay highlighted that many of the challenges experienced in Wales appear similar to the Northern Ireland context. Lindsay provided updates on some key developments including the updated Funding Code of Practice for Wales and alternative funding sources being explored for sector via investment in green energy. It was agreed it would be extremely useful for the APG to maintain links with WCVA and other VCS colleagues from across the UK to share insight and learning and to explore opportunities for collaboration on shared issues in a UK context.</p>
4.2	<p>A range of questions were posed to Lindsay as speaker, and discussion took place across the speaker and MLA members and VCS representatives in attendance regarding. <b>Jonny</b> extended thanks to Lindsay on behalf of APG for her insightful input.</p> <p><b>Action: Secretariat to coordinate schedule of inputs from UK colleagues/sister councils for VCS to APG over coming meetings.</b></p>
5	<b>AGENDA ITEM 5: AOB, NEXT MEETING AND CLOSE</b>
5.1	<p><b>Chair Diane Forsythe MLA</b> thanked all attendees and speakers for their invaluable insights and contributions to the meeting.</p>
5.2	<p><b>Chair Diane Forsythe MLA</b> advised that the next APG meeting was proposed for <b>Tuesday 27 May 1pm- 2pm Senate Room, Parliament Buildings, Stormont.</b></p>