

Partnership Agreement

between Government and the
Voluntary and Community
Sector in Northern Ireland

developed by



Northern Ireland
Executive

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<https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/partnership-agreement-between-government-and-voluntary-and-community-sector-northern-ireland>

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The Agreement

1. Parties to the Partnership Agreement

This Partnership Agreement is made between the Northern Ireland Executive, its Ministers, the Departments they lead and the public and arm's length bodies which they are responsible for, on the one part and representatives of the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) in Northern Ireland, on the other.

2. Purpose of the Partnership Agreement

This Partnership Agreement builds on and takes the place of the **Concordat between the Voluntary & Community Sector and the Northern Ireland Government**.

Agreed in 2011, the Concordat has guided the relationship between the VCS and Government Departments and public bodies. Building on the foundation provided by the Concordat, the Partnership Agreement contains new provisions to strengthen and develop the relationship, reflective of contemporary challenges and issues faced, whilst also looking to the future. The Partnership Agreement will set the foundation for a productive relationship between Government and the VCS.

3. Development of the Partnership Agreement

The Partnership Agreement has been developed by the Joint Forum, in which representatives nominated by the VCS and representatives of the public sector work

together to ensure that there is an effective working relationship between Government and the Voluntary and Community sectors in Northern Ireland.

All partners agreed that there is a need to revisit the Concordat to provide renewed impetus for this important relationship in the current context.

4. Shared Commitment of the Partnership Agreement

In reaching this Partnership Agreement, the shared commitment of Government, at all levels, and the Voluntary and Community Sector is to work together as social partners to **build a participative, peaceful, inclusive, just and equitable society in Northern Ireland**.

This commitment is rooted in recognition of both sectors' distinct yet complementary roles in contributing to the social, economic, environmental, and cultural life of Northern Ireland and the belief that by collaborating and working together we can increase our impacts and improve outcomes for individuals and communities across Northern Ireland.

In this partnership, the Voluntary and Community Sector and the Public Sector representatives commit to working together to realise, progressively, this shared and **joint commitment**.

5. Recognition of the Distinctive Role of the Voluntary and Community Sector

In this partnership, Government recognises the nature, diversity, and value of the contribution which the Voluntary and Community Sector makes to the social, economic, environmental and cultural life of Northern Ireland and to the health and well-being of its people and communities. It acknowledges the role of the VCS as a key partner in the delivery of public services and the benefits of greater collaboration and partnership working.

It recognises, respects and supports the independence of the sector and its right to lobby, advocate, challenge and inform public policy. It recognises and values highly the importance of volunteering and public participation where individuals contribute actively to the development of their communities and to meeting the needs of others.

6. Recognition of the Distinctive Role of Government

In this partnership, the Voluntary and Community sector acknowledges the distinct and strategic role played by Government in the development of public policy and delivery of Programme for Government objectives. It recognises and respects Government's responsibility to provide the legislative framework for society and the parameters within which it acts in doing this. It acknowledges the legal and financial framework within which Government works and its responsibility for public accountability for resources.

The Voluntary and Community Sector also welcome Government's recognition of the significant role played by the sector and its contribution to society.

7. Nature of the Partnership

This Partnership Agreement relies on relationships of mutual trust and respect and aims to enable the energy and talent both within Government and the VCS to work together towards the development of a better society.

This Partnership Agreement will make a valuable contribution through supporting progress towards more responsive and effective people centred public services: strengthening communities and harnessing expertise in the design and delivery of better public policy and services. It aims to open up opportunities for more meaningful participation by the Voluntary and Community Sector in developing and supporting delivery of public policy.

While this Partnership Agreement does not currently have any statutory basis, the Voluntary and Community Sector has made a strong case for new legislation to underpin the commitments it lays out and Government has committed to developing options for statutory protection of the relationship described in the Partnership Agreement. The Joint Forum will be supported to explore and scope the options on the way forward.

8. Aims of this Partnership Agreement

An effective partnership between the Government and VCS should seek to support and achieve:

1. A strong, diverse, and independent voluntary and community sector.
2. Effective collaboration in the design and development of public policies, programmes, and public services.
3. Responsive and high-quality public programmes and services.
4. Clear arrangements for managing changes to publicly funded programmes and services.
5. An equal, just, and fair society.
6. Climate justice and sustainability.

9. Shared Values and Ways of Working that Underpin the Partnership Agreement

This Partnership Agreement is underpinned by core values and ways of working developed by the Joint Forum to guide the working relationship between the Voluntary and Community Sector and the Public Sector in Northern Ireland.

These Shared Values and Ways of Working are:

1. Accountability

A shared commitment to act with high standards of integrity and professionalism

This includes being open, honest, and transparent in the interests of a shared and common agenda and demonstrating mutual respect, and accountability for our actions and in our decision making.

Ways of working that will deliver for this value:

1. Timely, open and honest communication with stakeholders about progress, challenges, and decision-making.
2. Accountability across both sectors for actions and decisions, promoting a culture of responsibility.
3. Adherence to established guidelines on ethical behaviour and decision-making.
4. Commissioning, grant & procurement processes are transparent and consistent.
5. Clear arrangements for managing change to policy, programmes, and services.

2. Active Participation

A shared commitment to the active participation of all stakeholders in Northern Ireland, which acknowledges and seeks to address inequalities of power.

This is rooted in the shared belief that communities and people have the right, and should be empowered to, identify their own needs and interests and the outcomes required to meet these.

Ways of working that will deliver for this value:

1. Participatory approaches to formulating public policy underpinned by strategic commitment and investment.
2. Capacity building and resources to empower stakeholders to effectively participate in decision making and discussions.
3. Informed and deliberative approaches and processes valuing relevant expertise and lived experience.
4. Inclusive mechanisms that ensure diverse voices are considered in decision-making processes.
5. Participation methods are regularly monitored and reviewed to identify and address any power imbalances.

3. Social Justice

A shared commitment to human rights, equality, and anti-discrimination.

This involves promoting, advancing, and protecting human rights and equality in our society while recognising the intersectional impacts of inequality and discrimination experienced by individuals, groups, and communities.

Ways of working that will deliver for this value:

1. Uphold and promote international human rights standards.
2. Act with due regard to statutory Section 75 and Rural Need commitments.
3. Advocate for policies that support marginalised individuals and communities.
4. Pursue and prioritise work that will help to address inequalities.
5. Ensure work to tackle inequalities is informed by lived experiences.

4. Independence

A shared understanding of the need for an independent, resilient, and sustainable voluntary and community sector to meet shared societal outcomes.

This recognises and supports the sector's legal rights to give voice to civic society, to participate in, shape, comment and challenge public policy and decision making and to determine and manage its own affairs.

Ways of working that will deliver for this value:

1. Maintain organisational autonomy while seeking ways to collaborate and engage with government.
2. Articulate and communicate the sector's rights and responsibilities to engage in policy discussions.
3. Support the sector's capacity to challenge, innovate and add value to public policy and decision-making.
4. Sustain investment and resourcing of the work of the sector.

5. Collaboration

A shared commitment to promoting and sustaining opportunities for relationship building, collaboration and partnership working between our sectors, and to broadening shared experience and understanding, for the benefit of the communities and people we serve.

Ways of working that will deliver for this value:

1. A culture of collaboration and cooperation across the sectors.
2. Platforms for regular interaction and knowledge-sharing between the sectors are available.
3. Participatory and collaborative approaches to formulating public policy and programmes are championed and resourced.
4. Improved inter-sector engagement in planning and co-design of programmes and public services.

6. Sustainability

A shared commitment to climate justice and sustainable development, including promoting cultural, environmental, economic, and socially sustainable policies and practices.

Ways of working that will deliver for this value:

1. Promotion and investment in working practices that are environmentally and socially just and sustainable.
2. Sustainability considerations are integrated into decision-making processes. Advocate for climate justice and the importance of sustainable practices among stakeholders.

10. Fair Funding Principles

While many Voluntary and Community Sector organisations operate without public funding and for others it makes up just a small part of their overall income, there are also many voluntary and community organisations who are key partners in the delivery of public services and recipients of financial support from Government. Public funding should achieve value for money and deliver the best results for individuals and communities recognising the basis on which public funding is provided to voluntary and community organisations is fair and transparent.

The Joint Forum has developed a set of fair funding principles and ways of working to underpin the funding relationship and build good practice between government and the voluntary and community sector. These principles and ways of working are interconnected and applicable to both funders and funded bodies with the aim of enabling the best use of public funding and greater impact on our communities.



It is intended that the principles, in general, will have applicability to all funding arrangements but require different emphasis depending on the funding purpose and the category of funding arrangement being used. These principles should be read in conjunction with and do not override key accountability, financial and budget guidance, public sector budget periods or procurement policy and legislation that is in place.

The Northern Ireland Executive will adopt these principles of fair funding within the bounds of Managing Public Money and other relevant guidance to the funding practices of its departments, their public bodies and their Arm's Length Bodies and will recommend their adoption to all local authorities in Northern Ireland. Similarly, voluntary and community sector organisations operating with public funding will be encouraged to adopt these principles of Fair Funding within the bounds of their funding relationships with government departments and public bodies.

The Fair Funding principles and illustrative ways of working are included in Annex 1.

11. Role of the Joint Forum

The Joint Forum has developed this Partnership Agreement. It also has the roles of:-

- encouraging commitment to the values, principles and ways of working underlying the Partnership Agreement
- identifying issues which require to be addressed by the Joint Forum, being issues which affect the overall relationship between the Voluntary and Community

Sector and the Public Sector in Northern Ireland at a strategic level

- agreeing a programme of work to advance the joint commitment entered into by the Voluntary and Community Sector and the Public Sector by virtue of the Partnership Agreement
- identifying any necessary revisions of the Partnership Agreement on an ongoing basis and carrying out a review of the Partnership Agreement within 5 years of it coming into effect.

The Joint Forum will also develop and keep up to date a 3-year rolling programme of work to advance the joint commitments of the Partnership Agreement. The current work programme is available at <https://www.nicva.org/groups/joint-government-and-voluntary-sector-forum-joint-forum>. The Joint Forum will consult the wider voluntary and community sector and the public sector in updating its work programme.

12. Endorsement of the Partnership Agreement

The Northern Ireland Executive, its departments and their public and arm's length bodies and the Voluntary and Community Sector will commit to the Partnership Agreement and work together, to achieve the joint commitment they have entered into under this Partnership Agreement. The values, principles and ways of working contained in the Partnership Agreement will be recommended for adoption by all local authorities.

The Department for Communities, acting on behalf of the Joint Forum, carried out a consultation process between November 2023 and February 2024 which included seeking the views of interested parties on the proposed values and ways of working.

In addition to this, the Joint Forum's Voluntary and Community Sector Panel carried out a series of engagement sessions for wider Voluntary and Community Sector representatives, throughout the period November 2023 to August 2024 to share and seek feedback on the proposed values and ways of working, including the Fair Funding principles, as they were under development.

Respondents to both the consultation and the VCS engagement process overwhelmingly agreed with the proposed values and ways of working and, as a result, these have been confirmed by the Joint Forum as the values and ways of working which will drive implementation of this Partnership Agreement.

The commitment of Ministers in the NI Executive and their Departments has been communicated to the Northern Ireland Assembly in a Statement from the Minister for Communities. This Partnership Agreement will be recommended to Local Authorities.

13. Reporting on the Partnership Agreement

The Joint Forum will report annually to Ministers and the Assembly and the wider Voluntary and Community Sector on the operation of the Partnership Agreement.

14. Date of Coming into Operation of the Partnership Agreement

This Partnership Agreement will come into operation on 5 June 2025.

Fair Funding Principles & Ways of Working

The funding principles and ways of working are intended to underpin the funding relationship and build good practice between government and the voluntary and community sector. These principles are applicable to both funders and funded bodies with the aim of enabling the best use of public funding and greater impact on our communities. These principles should be read in conjunction with and do not override key accountability, financial and budget guidance, public sector budget periods or procurement policy and legislation that is in place. These principles and ways of working are not intended to be prescriptive, and are reflective of contemporary challenges and issues faced, whilst also looking to the future.

1. Collaborative and Trusting Partnership Working

Develop collaborative and constructive funding relationships that enhance mutual understanding, and are underpinned by trust, mutual recognition and respect for each other's distinct roles, contributions, and constraints.

Ways of working for this principle:

1. Recognise and value each other's expertise and insights.
2. Embed open and trusted communication, informing each other of issues as they arise.
3. Embed accountability by demonstrating integrity, probity and governance.
4. Undertake regular engagement, to support continuous learning through a shared lens.
5. Adapt and apply good practice methods and approaches, drawing on evidence and experience.

2. Fairness

Funding considers all the necessary costs to deliver services, the timescales for delivery and impact for our communities, to achieve more cost-effective use of public funds and promote stability.

Ways of working for this principle:

1. Align funding periods to their purpose and time needed to deliver outcomes.
2. Promote longer funding arrangements where possible and where better value for money and impact can be demonstrated.
3. In line with the application of full cost recovery, recognise, identify, and take account of all relevant costs including direct and indirect costs.
4. Timely, fair, and realistic communication when changing or ending a funding relationship.
5. Employing organisations recognise and promote the Real Living Wage and the contribution it makes to achieving a fair and just society.

3. Proportionality

Considered approaches, proportionate and relevant to the value and complexity of the funding, supporting effective delivery and value for money.

4. Outcome Focused and Impactful

Focus on mutually agreed outcomes, to ensure the most effective and efficient use of public funds for maximum impact and value to society.

5. Responsive, Agile, and Flexible

Respond and adapt to changing priorities, circumstances, needs and evidence by being flexible and agile in our approach.

Ways of working for this principle:

1. Reduce bureaucracy to ensure efficient administration and minimise duplication of effort.
2. Supplement formal reporting with regular opportunities for engagement, to build shared knowledge, understanding and learning.
3. Require only essential information appropriate to the level of expenditure, the scale and complexity of service delivery, identified risks and intended outcomes.
4. Adopt proportional monitoring, reporting and evaluation.

Ways of working for this principle:

1. Engage and consult to determine need(s) and outcomes for funding and the appropriate funding mechanism.
2. Collaborate to achieve better outcomes and impact, including the pooling of resources and use of partnerships.
3. Determine value for money as a combination of cost; quality; and sustainability including, social, economic, and environmental benefits.
4. Agree measurable outputs and outcomes, with relevant information and evidence shared to inform understanding and decision making.
5. Maintain a focus on value and impact; not solely on activities.

Ways of working for this principle:

1. Regularly review objectives, delivery, outcomes, and impact to maximise effectiveness.
2. Apply timely and effective methods to identify, understand and respond to emerging issues.
3. Value innovation and test and learn approaches, identifying and taking agreed risks to maximise outcomes.
4. Joint planning for the end of funding at the earliest stage.

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