



# Government and Voluntary & Community Sector Joint Forum Meeting - 23 October 2025

## Joint Chairs Update

*(Karen Smith, VCS Panel Chair & Ray Caldwell PSG Chair)*



# Introduction

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On **Thursday 23 October**, representatives from across government and the voluntary and community sector gathered at NICVA for the third meeting of the year of the Government and Voluntary Sector Joint Forum. (See *Annex 1* for list of attendees)

Chaired by **Joint Forum Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) Panel Chair Karen Smith, (Disability Action)**, this meeting was a valuable opportunity to deepen our shared commitment to partnership, transparency, and progress as a Forum membership.

At this meeting members extended a warm welcome to **Ray Caldwell (Director, Voluntary and Community Division, Department for Communities)** in his first meeting as the new Public Sector Group Chair and Joint Forum Joint Chair.

## Message from Ray Caldwell, JF Joint Chair

*“I was really pleased to attend my first Joint Forum meeting as Co-Chair. It was great to see the energy in the room and to hear about the valuable work being carried out by our voluntary and community sector partners. The presentation by Martin and Ruth on behalf of the YouthStart consortium on building trust and collaboration through developing a consortium was inspirational!”*

*I also welcomed the strong appetite from representatives across Government and the VCS to work together around a shared commitment to the Partnership Agreement. I’m excited to build on this momentum and look forward to chairing our next Joint Forum meeting in February.”*

We also formally thanked two VCS Panel members who had recently stepped down: Andrew Irvine (East Belfast Mission) and Fergal McFerran (Children’s Law Centre), in recognition of their valued contributions to the Forum.

## Message from Meeting Chair - Karen Smith JF Joint Chair

*“It was great to chair this meeting and see the energy and commitment from both our VCS and public sector representatives. The Joint Forum is an important space for meaningful collaboration between our sectors, and gives us the shared opportunity to challenge, reflect, and plan together - this meeting was a great example of that in action. A big thank you to everyone who contributed to the discussions on the day.*

*Our shared goal as a Forum, is to turn the commitments in the Partnership Agreement between government and the voluntary and community sector into practical actions that make a real and lasting difference to how we work together - and for our communities. As Joint Chairs, Ray and I are fully committed to this aim and to work together throughout this current term.”*

# Meeting Highlights

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**Key Agenda Items for discussion at this meeting included:**

## 1. Updates from Joint Forum Working Groups

The Joint Forum's primary role during this term (2024–2027) is to support the implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of the [Partnership Agreement](#) between Northern Ireland Government and the Voluntary and Community Sector, including its Fair Funding Principles and Ways of Working.

This forum meeting included updates from the Co-Chairs of the Evaluation Working Group, Communications Working Group, and Statutory Duty Working Group, which were recently established to drive forward practical implementation and awareness of the Partnership Agreement.

Cross-sectoral membership and Terms of Reference for each group have now been agreed. With work programmes underway, each group will report on progress at the next Joint Forum meeting in February 2026. ***You can read more about the working groups later in this update.***

## 2. Fair Funding Principles & Ways of Working

Members explored practical steps to advance the implementation of the Partnership Agreement's Fair Funding Principles, with a focus on promoting transparency, equity, and sustainability in funding relationships. The Forum reaffirmed its commitment to making Fair Funding a central priority during this term, recognising its importance in shaping effective and accountable partnerships.

As a key element of the Joint Forum's work programme for this year, members will identify examples of funding practices and relationships through case study analysis, and will develop a robust evaluation framework, and clear and structured format of reporting on progress.

## 3. Northern Ireland Budget Update

A regular item on the Joint Forum's agenda is the Northern Ireland Budget update. At this meeting, the Department of Finance provided an overview of key budgetary developments, including an update and insights on the UK Government's Local Growth Fund, expected to replace UK Shared Prosperity Funding from the end March 2026 and also the development of Multi-Year Departmental Budgets to support longer-term financial planning and stability.

The Department for Communities also provided an update on a number of funding programmes including the VCS Infrastructure Support policy framework.

Discussion took place on the deeply challenging fiscal environment and the significant challenges being faced across the voluntary and community sector with regard to continued funding uncertainty. It was acknowledged that the Joint Forum has a critical role to play in highlighting these challenges at a strategic level.

#### 4. Partnership Agreement in Practice



With a focus on supporting the Partnership Agreement into practice, a deep dive into one of the shared core values contained within the Partnership Agreement – **Collaboration** – was led by invited guests – Dr Martin McMullan, Youth Action and Ruth Cooper, Kings Trust, as representatives of the [YouthStart consortium](#).

**A presentation and discussion offered valuable learning and insights from a VCS perspective into how collaborative approaches are delivering real impact for those they support.** This included examples of shared delivery models and co-designed services and how lessons and learning could be aligned to the Partnership Agreement.

Group discussion followed and explored our shared understanding of:

- What creates an enabling environment for genuine partnership working across the sectors.
- What conditions enhance collaboration.
- What barriers remain—and how we might address them together.

For more insights read: [The Ten 'C' to Collaboration Checklist](#) Partnership Working Resource, developed by Youth Action reflecting the consortiums experience.

# Joint Forum Working Groups

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The Joint Forum has developed a rolling three-year work plan to support the implementation of the **Partnership Agreement** between Government and the Voluntary and Community Sector.

In this current year, **four working groups**—bringing together representatives from across both sectors—have been established to drive progress on the priorities identified for year one.

These are as follows:

- **Communications Working Group**  
Developing a Communications Plan to raise awareness of the Partnership Agreement and Fair Funding Principles, and the Joint Forum’s role and work more broadly, across both sectors.
- **Evaluation Working Group**  
Creating an Evaluation Framework to measure impact and evaluate implementation of the Partnership Agreement and developing a report format for the Joint Forum to report to the NI Executive and the wider public and voluntary and community sectors on its progress.
- **Fair Funding Subgroup**  
Examining fair funding approaches and analysing practice examples to understand how Fair Funding Principles can be effectively applied by both funders and funded organisations to deliver tangible impact.
- **Statutory Duty Working Group**  
Exploring the rationale for a statutory duty to underpin the Partnership Agreement and its commitments.

We look forward to sharing more updates as this work progresses.

## Looking Ahead

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The next Joint Forum meeting will take place on **Thursday 5 February 2026** and we look forward to sharing information from this meeting in our next update.

In the interim, we encourage you to connect with your departmental or sectoral representative on the Joint Forum to learn more about our work plan and the key issues under discussion.

Strengthening our reach and connections across both sectors is central to the Joint Forum's shared goals, and your input will help ensure that a broad range of views and experiences are reflected in our ongoing work.

You can view the list of current Joint Forum representatives here: [Joint Government and Voluntary Sector Forum \(Joint Forum\)](#)

## For More Information

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**Interested in learning more about the Joint Forum and its workplan?** Visit NICVA's [Joint Forum Overview and Updates](#) to find out more about the Forum's membership and activities and how you can contribute or get involved.

For general queries on the Joint Forum and its membership please **contact the Joint Forum Secretariat** via:

### **Public Sector Secretariat**

Aideen Logue, Department for Communities

Email: [Aideen.Logue@communities-ni.gov.uk](mailto:Aideen.Logue@communities-ni.gov.uk) or [jointforumsecretariat@communities-ni.gov.uk](mailto:jointforumsecretariat@communities-ni.gov.uk)

### **Voluntary and Community Sector Secretariat**

Kathy Maguire, NICVA

Email: [kathy.maguire@nicva.org](mailto:kathy.maguire@nicva.org)

## Annex 1 Attendee List– Joint Forum Meeting Thursday 23 October 2025

<b>In Attendance - Public Sector Group</b>	
Ray Caldwell	Public Sector Group Chair/Joint Chair Joint Forum, Department for Communities (DfC)
William Peel	Department of Finance (DoF)
Marc Bailie	Department of Health (DoH)
Tracey Mimna	The Executive Office (TEO)
Claire Hazelden	Executive Programme on Paramilitarism and Organised Crime (EPPOC)
Elaine Colgan	Department for the Economy (DfE)
Anassa Coan	Department for the Economy (DfE) – Student Placement
Gavin Hamilton	Department for Infrastructure (DfI)
Deirdre McCloskey	Department for Agriculture, Environment & Rural Affairs (DAERA)
Nichola Creagh	Department for Communities (DfC)
Simon Sloan	Department for Communities (DfC)
Ruth Jamison	Department for Communities (DfC)
Donna-Marie Hancock	Department for Communities (DfC)
Antoinette Kennedy	Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA)
<b>In Attendance – VCS Panel Members</b>	
Karen Smith (Chairing)	Joint Chair Joint Forum, Chair VCS Panel, Disability Action
Charlie Fisher	Development Trusts NI (DTNI)
Avery Bowser	Action for Children
Paul Boylan	Cooperation Ireland
Stephen Dallas	Bytes Project

Roisin McLaughlin	Northwest Community Network
Anne Mc Vicker	Women's Resource & Development Agency
Irene Sherry	Ashton Centre
Kathy Martin	CDHN
Manus Maguire	Cliftonville Community Regeneration Forum
Judith Poucher	Clanrye Group
<b>Guest Attendees/ Speakers</b>	
Dr Martin McMullan	Youth Action (on behalf of the YouthStart consortium)
Ruth Cooper	Kings Trust (on behalf of the YouthStart consortium)
<b>Joint Secretariat</b>	
Kathy Maguire (Notetaker)	NICVA
Aideen Logue	Department for Communities (DfC)
Lorraine Gallagher	Department for Communities (DfC)
<b>Apologies</b>	
Colm McDaid	Supporting Communities
Gareth Eannetta	NIACRO
Samantha Gallagher	Rural Community Network
Frances Campbell	Community Transport Association UK
Melissa Frame	Start 360
Janet Schofield	CAN
Jonny Currie	NICVA
Glenda Davies	Department of Education (DE)
Jason Foy	Department of Agricultural, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA)
Karen Weir	Department of Finance (DoF)

Laura McDonald	Department of Finance (DoF)
Joanne Doherty	Executive Programme on Paramilitarism and Organised Crime (EPPOC)
Keith Forster	SOLACE NI
Alison Allen	Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA)
Maria Watson	Department of Justice (DoJ)
April Dalzell	Department for Communities (DfC)
Chris Gardner	The Executive Office (TEO)
Julie McCormack	The Executive Office (TEO)
Kiera Lloyd	Department for Infrastructure (DfI)