



Government and Voluntary & Community Sector Joint Forum Meeting - 23 March 2026

Joint Chairs Update (Ray Caldwell Public Sector Group Chair & Karen Smith, VCS Panel Chair)



Introduction

On **Monday 23rd March 2026**, representatives from across government and the voluntary and community sector gathered at NICVA for the first meeting of 2026 of the Joint Forum between Government and the Voluntary and Community Sector. (See Annex 1 for list of attendees)

Chaired by Director of Voluntary and Community Division, Department for Communities, Ray Caldwell (VCD) this meeting looked at our shared responsibilities for implementing the Partnership Agreement between Government and the VCS. Key discussions included an update on Civic Threads a UK-wide project focused on partnership agreements between governments and the voluntary sector led by Dr James Greer from Pivotal, and how the Department for the Economy's Cooperatives project has aligned with the Partnership Agreement and included a discussion on how implementation of the Partnership Agreement might be strengthened from cross-UK collaborative learning.

Message from Ray Caldwell, JF Joint Chair.

“The Partnership Agreement sets out a strong foundation for effective collaboration between Government and the VCS. Today’s discussion, supported by cross-UK learning, will help us embed the Partnership Agreement, its values, ways of working and fair funding principles in the months ahead. We were pleased to hear how the Department for the Economy’s Cooperatives project reflects the values and principles of the Agreement, and we look forward to more examples of this alignment going forward.”

Message from Meeting Chair - Karen Smith JF Joint Chair

“Today’s meeting focus on the ‘Partnership Agreement in Action’ provided us all with a great opportunity to share important learning from current work being done via Civic Threads on UK-wide government and voluntary sector partnership agreements including a recent fact finding visit to Wales, and to also hear from DfE colleagues about how the NI Partnership Agreement has been used to inform their Co-operatives Project with VCS. I hope you enjoy hearing about our progress and please get in touch to keep these important conversations going.”

Meeting Highlights

Opening Remarks

The Joint Forum meeting opened with a welcome to members, including the newest representatives on the Public Sector and Voluntary Sector Groups. Progress against actions from the previous meeting was reviewed and agreed. Members were also introduced to the updated newsletter format for Joint Chairs' communications and were encouraged to share feedback.

Keeping the Partnership Agreement Live

Members reaffirmed the shared responsibility across government and the voluntary and community sector to promote the **Partnership Agreement between Government and the Voluntary and Community Sector**, including its values, fair funding principles, and collaborative ways of working.

Joint Forum representatives emphasised the need to keep the Agreement active, visible, and firmly embedded in day-to-day practice, noting that responsibility for this rests across both sectors.

Public Sector Updates

The Department of Finance is updating **Managing Public Money Northern Ireland (MPMNI)** to replace references to the former Concordat with new material reflecting the current Partnership Agreement. This update will ensure the Agreement is formally represented within public finance guidance.

Members were also informed that the **refreshed Infrastructure Support Policy Framework** has been agreed in principle by the Communities Minister, with publication expected shortly.

Committee Briefing Highlights

Forum members received a summary of key themes from the Communities Committee briefing held in November 2025 on the implementation of the Partnership Agreement at which Ray and Karen as Joint Chairs gave evidence. Highlights from this briefing included:

- **A Living Document** – The Partnership Agreement should be fully embedded in routine practice rather than viewed as aspirational.
- **Shared Responsibility** – Delivery and representation under the Agreement are jointly held by government and the voluntary and community sector.

- **Accountability** – Although the Agreement does not have statutory footing, the benefits of a statutory duty are being explored through the Joint Forum work plan. Accountability will be supported through evaluation mechanisms and annual reporting.
 - **Fair Funding Principles** – Clarification that the funding principles relate to how funding arrangements should be designed and delivered, rather than decisions on whether specific programmes should or should not receive funding or the quantum of funding.
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Update from the Joint Forum Communications Working Group

The Communications Working Group provided an update on the **Joint Forum Communications Plan**, which is now in place and has been shared with members. The Plan remains a live, evolving document, supported by continued commitment from working group members.

The Group highlighted the ongoing need for stories, awareness raising, and active promotion to ensure the Partnership Agreement remains visible and relevant. Members were encouraged to make use of existing communication materials, including the NICS-wide focus week on the Partnership Agreement earlier in the year.

Upcoming engagement opportunities were noted, including the **NICVA Summit** and the next Joint Forum meeting, both scheduled in June. Organisations across both sectors are encouraged to share ideas and continue promoting the Agreement to maintain momentum.

Updates from the Fair Funding, Statutory Duty and Evaluation Working Groups

The Forum noted that work of both the **Evaluation Working Group** and **Fair Funding Subgroup** had been paused pending the appointment of consultancy support. This support is now in place, and work will progress with renewed momentum.

Due to recent staffing changes, additional representatives are required:

- one Public Sector representative for the Statutory Duty Working Group
 - one Voluntary and Community Sector representative for the Evaluation Working Group
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Northern Ireland Budget Update

Current Budget Position

The Department of Finance confirmed that HM Treasury has approved a £400 million reserve claim to help address overspends in Health and Education. Remaining pressures will be managed within Departments' own resources.

Future Budget Planning

Members were informed that the **Open Book Review** with HM Treasury has concluded, with a report expected shortly. The Review aims to strengthen Treasury's understanding of the Executive's financial pressures and will inform discussions on budget sustainability and the wider fiscal framework.

The consultation on the draft Budget closed on 3 March, and responses—alongside the Review's findings—will shape the Executive's future budget decisions.

Sector Engagement and Transparency

The Forum emphasised ongoing commitment to openness and transparency with the voluntary and community sector throughout the challenging fiscal environment. Department for Community letters to currently funded VCS organisations and ALBs will be issued shortly, outlining a proposed holding position (subject to ministerial approval) to support planning and provide greater clarity.

The strong collaborative relationship between the Department and the sector was acknowledged, with continued commitment to advocating on the sector's behalf, particularly regarding the impact of funding reductions.

Local Growth Funding

The Department of Finance provided an update on the implementation of Local Growth funding in Northern Ireland which is set to succeed current UKSPF investment from 1 April 2026. Members were advised that continued collaboration is ongoing between the Department of Finance and the Northern Ireland Office on development of an Investment Plan for delivery of Capital from April 2026 onwards and Resource from April 2027 onwards, when, it is anticipated, responsibility for administration of the funding will be fully devolved. The Framework is expected to form the basis of a forthcoming NIO-led consultation. The aim is to complete co-design and approval so that the Framework is fully in place by September 2026. Members voiced concerns around the extremely challenging situation currently being faced by many voluntary and community organisations as a result of the 64 % cut to

current funding that VCS led economic inactivity projects will face following the introduction of the Local Growth Fund on April 1, and which the sector has advised is completely unworkable. This was acknowledged by all Joint Forum members. VCS members highlighted that the manner in which the funding scheme has been implemented in Northern Ireland directly challenges commitments made in both the UK Covenant and the Partnership Agreement more broadly.

Overview of Civic Threads and Study Visit to Wales.



Civic Threads, led by NICVA and funded by the NIO Connect Fund, is a cross-UK collaboration aimed at strengthening relationships between national voluntary and community sector (VCS) infrastructure bodies. The project seeks to deepen understanding of how civil society and government engage across the four nations.

Co-Chair Karen Smith welcomed Dr James Greer from the Pivotal Policy Forum, who delivered a presentation and facilitated discussion with members. As part of the Civic Threads programme, James has been commissioned by NICVA to develop an online toolkit, which will offer a simple guide to partnership arrangements in place across the UK – including arrangements in place or under development in Wales, Scotland, England and Northern Ireland. His session provided valuable insights into the Civic Threads project, the toolkit currently in development, and his wider findings

including analysis of key components of agreements such as the UK Civil Society Covenant.

Knowledge Exchange Visit to Cardiff

A knowledge exchange visit to Cardiff, led by NICVA and hosted by the Welsh Council for Voluntary Action (WCVA), took place in February. The delegation included 12 VCS leaders from Northern Ireland, six of whom were members of the Joint Forum VCS Panel.

During the visit, participants met with Members of the Senedd, Welsh VCS leaders and public sector officials. The programme provided useful insight into Welsh approaches to community empowerment, partnership working and sector–government collaboration.

Feedback from attendees highlighted:

- **the strong, constructive relationship between Welsh officials and the VCS, seen as a major asset in their collaborative working.**
- **the culture of shared problem-solving, with Ministers and officials demonstrating a deep understanding of the pressures and constraints facing the sector.**



Challenge Questions and Discussion.

After lunch the group considered the following three challenge questions:

- 1. Which elements of the Civic Threads learning feel most relevant or valuable to the Joint Forums current work plan and to the wider implementation of the Partnership Agreement and why?**

Early reflections from Civic Threads suggest a number of themes that align closely with the Joint Forum's priorities and the wider implementation of the Partnership Agreement. Key areas of relevance include:

- **Learning from other jurisdictions:** There is strong interest in understanding how structures such as the Welsh *Future Generations Act*, the *Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice*, and cooperative models operate in practice. These approaches may offer useful insights for strengthening partnership culture and long-term planning in Northern Ireland.
- **Enablers for a thriving VCS:** The discussion highlighted the importance of exploring what helps the voluntary and community sector flourish—ranging

from access to finance and multi-year funding to stronger recognition of the sector's diversity, value, and contribution.

- **Shared tools and language:** The Civic Threads Toolkit, currently being designed within the Civic Threads project for VCS organisations, was recognised as having potential value across both sectors by promoting common terminology, mutual understanding, and shared frameworks for partnership working.
- **Evidence-based approach:** Participants noted the importance of understanding what works in other regions and establishing a clear baseline for comparison with Northern Ireland. This includes considering how statutory mechanisms interact with cultural change.
- **Ongoing evolution:** The themes explored through Civic Threads were seen as part of a continuous, long-term process to strengthen relationships, improve funding practices, and embed partnership-focused ways of working.

2. In what ways might the approaches used in Wales and other UK nations help strengthen implementation of the Partnership Agreement, and partnership structures and culture more broadly in Northern Ireland?

The discussion identified several elements from Wales and elsewhere in the UK that could help enhance the implementation of the Partnership Agreement in Northern Ireland:

- **Future generations and long-term thinking:** Roles such as the *Minister for Future Generations* illustrate how long-term planning can be embedded into government structures, offering potential lessons for NI.
- **Support for smaller organisations:** Capacity building and proactive inclusion of smaller organisations were highlighted as essential for improving participation and influence across the sector.
- **Honest learning culture:** Participants emphasised the need for a clear-eyed assessment of what works and what does not, and for moving beyond repeated challenges to new solutions.
- **Addressing systemic barriers:** Issues such as staff turnover and silo working within government were identified as areas where external learnings could help inform change efforts.
- **Joint monitoring and shared accountability:** Approaches used elsewhere to jointly monitor commitments could support enhanced transparency and co-ownership within the NI context.
- **Keeping a watching brief:** The Joint Forum may benefit from maintaining active awareness of policy developments in other jurisdictions—particularly as the Welsh Third Sector Scheme is itself undergoing review.

Are there particular areas highlighted in today's civic threads presentation or discussion that colleagues feel warrant a deeper Joint Forum exploration or additional information?

Several themes emerged that may merit deeper Joint Forum consideration:

- **Shared understanding and consistent messaging:** Ensuring both sectors have a deep and aligned understanding of each other's roles and pressures is essential, along with improving information flow within and between organisations.
 - **Fair funding in practice:** There is interest in translating fair funding principles into practical, achievable steps and exploring real-world case studies.
 - **Procurement and commissioning:** Well-run procurement processes—including service level agreements—are as important as grant funding in shaping effective partnership working.
 - **Social value and social capital:** Further exploration of how these concepts can inform policy, funding, and partnership practices may add value across sectors.
 - **Local government relationships:** The Welsh model of engagement between local government and the VCS may offer useful insights for the NI context.
 - **Alignment with Joint Forum priorities:** Several aspects of Civic Threads—such as fair funding analysis and clarifying terminology—closely align with existing Joint Forum work and may help strengthen future activity.
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Specialist Support – Joint Forum Working Groups

Members were introduced to Ruth Walker, the independent consultant appointed to support the Joint Forum Evaluation Working Group and the Joint Forum Fair Funding Subgroup deliver against the Joint Forum workplan. Ruth outlined that her initial priority will be to undertake a baseline analysis of the current position of the Partnership Agreement — including how well it is understood, and how it has been applied and implemented across both Government and the VCS. She thanked members in advance for their contributions and expressed her enthusiasm for working collaboratively with members in the months ahead.

Co-operatives: Department for the Economy



The Joint Forum received an update from the Department for the Economy's Social Economy Branch on recent work to support the development of co-operatives and the ways in which Partnership Agreement principles have been embedded within that programme. The presentation highlighted the strong alignment between co-operative models and the aims of the Partnership Agreement between Government and the VCS, particularly their shared focus on improving social, economic, environmental and cultural outcomes across Northern Ireland. Members were also informed about efforts to strengthen engagement between central government and this part of the sector, alongside details of a co-operative education and awareness project that has been co-designed and delivered with sector partners. Looking ahead, DfE plan to host online information sessions for policy officials to increase understanding of co-operatives and provide opportunities to hear directly from delivery partners about how co-operative approaches can support public policy objectives.

Looking Forward

Plans were outlined for a one-year celebration of the Partnership Agreement to take place in June 2026, running alongside NICVA's Summit event taking place on 10 June. This event will provide a platform to showcase progress to date and highlight the value of strong communication and partnership working across sectors.

Members were also advised that the next Joint Forum meeting, scheduled for 18 June, is expected to be held in a community setting, and suggestions for suitable venues were invited.

Members were also advised of a change in Joint Forum roles and membership, with Stephen Dallas, Bytes, stepping down from his role as VCS Panel Vice Chair and as Co-Chair of the Evaluation Working Group and member of the Funding Subgroup. Stephen will also step down as a Joint Forum VCS panel member, once a new panel member has been appointed, likely before the June Joint Forum meeting. On behalf of all members, Joint Forum Chairs expressed thanks to Stephen for his contribution to date and welcomed his ongoing valuable contribution as a VCS panel member until such times as a replacement is confirmed.

Stay Updated

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. We welcome your feedback.

You can view the list of current Joint Forum representatives here: [Joint Government and Voluntary Sector Forum \(Joint Forum\) | NICVA](#) or [Joint Forum | Department for Communities](#)

[Sign up to receive updates on the Partnership Agreement between Government and the VCS](#)

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 or jointforumsecretariat@communities-ni.gov.uk

Voluntary and Community Sector Secretariat

Kathy Maguire, NICVA

Email: kathy.maguire@nicva.org

Annex 1**Attendee List– Joint Forum Meeting Thursday 23 October 2025****In Attendance - Public Sector Group**

Ray Caldwell (Chairing)	Public Sector Group Chair/Joint Chair Joint Forum, Department for Communities (DfC)
Helen Toner	Department of Finance (DoF)
Laura McDonald	Department of Finance (DoF)
Karen Weir	Department of Finance (DoF)
Laura Sturgeon	Department of Finance (DoF)
Elaine Colgan	Department for the Economy (DfE)
Gavin Hamilton	Department for Infrastructure (DfI)
Jason Foy	Department for Agriculture, Environment & Rural Affairs (DAERA)
Valerie McCloskey	Department of Justice (DoJ)
Nichola Creagh	Department for Communities (DfC)
April Dalzell	Department for Communities (DfC)
Ruth Jamison	Department for Communities (DfC)
Anne Armstrong	Department for Communities (DfC)
Antoinette Kennedy	Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA)
Janelle Craig	Public Health Agency HSCNI
In Attendance – VCS Panel Members	
Karen Smith	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
Celine McStravick	NICVA

Manus Maguire	Cliftonville Community Regeneration Forum
Roisin McLaughlin	NWCN
Samantha Gallagher	Rural Community Network
Kathy Martin	CDHN
Melissa Frame	Start 360
Frances Campbell	Community Transport Association UK
Diane Ewart	TADA Rural Support Network
Janet Schofield	CAN

Guest Attendees/ Speakers	
Dr James Greer	Pivotal Policy Forum
Ruth Walker	Consultant
Martina Brennan	Department for the Economy (DfE)
Philip Abraham	Department for the Economy (DfE)
David Gibson	Department for the Economy (DfE)
Fiona Marshall	Department of Finance (DoF)
Joint Secretariat	
Kathy Maguire	NICVA
Aideen Logue	Department for Communities (DfC)
Rachael Carroll	Department for Communities (DfC) (notetaker)
Apologies	
Maria Watson	Department of Justice (DoJ)
Chris Gardner	The Executive Office (TEO)
Irene Sherry	Ashton Centre
Michael Briggs	EBCDA
Glenda Davies	Department for Education (DE)

Colm McDaid	Supporting Communities
Simon Sloan	Department for Communities (DfC)
Alison Allen	NILGA
Marc Bailie	Department of Health (DoH)
Andrew Steenson	HSCNI
Joanne Doherty	Executive Programme on Paramilitarism and Organised Crime (EPPOC)
Judith Poucher	Clanrye Group
Keith Forster	SOLACE NI
Kiera Lloyd	Department for Infrastructure (DfI)
Gareth Eannetta	NIACRO
Lorraine Gallagher	Department for Communities (DfC)