

# Policy Leadership, Advocacy & Collective Voice in a Fragmented System



NICVA Policy Survey  
April 2026

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# Executive Summary



The NICVA Policy Survey 2026 provides compelling evidence of the value, impact and necessity of NICVA's policy and advocacy role for the voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector in Northern Ireland.

The survey was disseminated to 720 individuals with direct experience of NICVA's policy work, achieving a 9% response rate. Responses represent organisations actively engaged in policy and advocacy, ensuring informed and relevant feedback. The survey reflects sector experience during a period of profound political complexity and financial uncertainty. While the restoration of the Northern Ireland Executive has brought greater political stability, funding and policy decisions affecting the VCSE sector continue to sit across multiple, fragmented decision-making systems.

Respondents overwhelmingly view NICVA as a trusted leader, effective advocate and critical enabler of collective voice, while also recognising the constraints of operating within fragmented policy and funding environments.

As one respondent put it:

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**“Without NICVA, it would be extremely difficult for smaller organisations like ours to track policy developments or have any real voice in decision-making.”**



# Introduction:

## Policy Leadership in a Fragmented Environment

The policy landscape facing the VCSE sector is increasingly complex. Decisions affecting communities are often shaped across Stormont departments, the Northern Ireland Office and UK Government departments, creating unclear accountability and delayed responses. This fragmentation can mean that even where the value of the sector is widely recognised, practical solutions are slow to materialise.

One organisation described the challenge clearly:

*“There is a real disconnect between the recognition of our work and the systems that fund and support it. Responsibility seems to sit everywhere — and nowhere.”*

Against this backdrop, NICVA’s policy role extends beyond representation. It includes interpreting complex developments, coordinating collective responses, and providing clarity and confidence for organisations operating under pressure.

### **Confidence in NICVA’s Policy Leadership and Representation**

The survey shows consistently high confidence in NICVA as a trusted leader and representative.

- Over **90%** agree NICVA represents their interests to government.
- **75%** give a clear “Yes” that NICVA provides trusted leadership in engagement with government and political stakeholders.

Respondents emphasised the importance of consistency and credibility:

*“NICVA brings authority and credibility that individual organisations simply cannot achieve alone.”*

*“Even when outcomes are uncertain, having NICVA lead engagement gives confidence that the sector’s voice is being heard at the highest levels.”*



## Enabling Sector Voice and Influence

NICVA is widely recognised as an enabler of collective voice, ensuring organisations can engage meaningfully in policy discussions.

Over **95%** agree NICVA provides opportunities to express views on key issues and contributes to policy development.

Respondents highlighted the importance of these spaces:

*“NICVA creates safe, constructive spaces where diverse organisations can speak honestly and influence shared positions.”*

*“Being able to feed frontline experience directly into policy discussions through NICVA is hugely valuable.”*

## Building Policy Knowledge, Confidence and Capability

One of the strongest findings is NICVA’s impact on policy knowledge and confidence.

Over **95%** agree NICVA has increased their understanding of key policy issues, and many report increased confidence to advocate independently.

This impact is reflected in respondent feedback:

*“NICVA’s briefings and updates make complex policy developments understandable and actionable.”*

*“We are much more confident engaging with MLAs and responding to consultations because of NICVA’s support.”*

This suggests NICVA is strengthening the long-term policy capability of the sector, not just representing it.

## Engagement with Decision Makers and Stakeholders

More than **90%** agree NICVA provides opportunities to engage with government departments, political representatives and other key stakeholders.



Respondents noted the value of this access:

*“NICVA opens doors that would otherwise be closed to us.”*

*“Without NICVA’s convening role, we simply wouldn’t be in the room.”*

## **Effectiveness of Advocacy and Influence**

Respondents express strong confidence in NICVA’s advocacy, particularly during periods of crisis.

Over **80%** rate NICVA’s advocacy as effective or very effective in representing the VCSE sector.

One respondent summed this up clearly:

*“NICVA’s advocacy has been tireless and visible — especially when the sector needed it most.”*



# Case Study



## The Local Growth Fund - Advocacy in a Fragmented Policy Landscape

**From late 2025 through to March 2026, NICVA led sustained, evidence-based advocacy on the Local Growth Fund through the #NICantWait campaign, engaging Ministers, MLAs, MPs, departments at Stormont and Westminster, and the Northern Ireland Office.**



The issue gained widespread political recognition, with cross-party acknowledgement of the value of community-led employability and inclusion services. Despite this, responsibility for resolving the funding gap remained fragmented. On 1 April 2026, Local Growth Fund cuts took effect, leaving organisations without revenue funding.

Survey responses reflect both appreciation for NICVA's advocacy and frustration of the process:

*“NICVA support in bringing together the VCS over the the Local Growth Fund has been hugely beneficial, their ability to raise the profile and speak to Government has been so important. I don't believe anymore could have been done, it is just the lack of action from the Government in Westminster to allow the change of funding breakdown.”*

*“NICVA did everything it possibly could — the failure was not in advocacy, but in the system.”*

*“The sector spoke with one voice, but fragmented accountability meant no one ultimately acted in time.”*

This experience reinforces the need for clearer accountability, earlier engagement and funding models aligned with people-centred services.



## Sector Feedback: Priorities for the Future

Across the survey, respondents consistently highlighted priority issues for future policy work, including sustainable funding, cross-departmental working and lived-experience leadership.

As one respondent articulated:

*“The sector’s expertise, reach and connection to communities position it as a critical contributor to improved outcomes — but only if policy systems genuinely work with us.”*

# Conclusion

The NICVA Policy Survey 2026 presents a strong endorsement of NICVA’s leadership, advocacy and convening role. Organisations value NICVA as a trusted partner, a credible voice and a connector in highly complex policy environments.

At the same time, the findings underline a crucial message:



**Recognition of our value must be matched by action - otherwise communities pay the price.”**

NICVA will continue to champion the collective voice of the VCSE sector. The challenge now is for policymakers and funders to ensure that strong advocacy is met with joined-up decision-making, timely action and sustainable support.





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