



Government and Voluntary & Community Sector Joint Forum Meeting – 18 June 2026

Joint Chairs Update

(Karen Smith, VCS Panel Chair & Raymond Caldwell Public Sector Group Chair)



(Pictured left to right Marty Hagan, ARC Fitness, Nii Mensah and Jonathan Mensah, African Caribbean Community Network, Lynn Connolly and Patricia O'Donnell, Foyle Food Network, Karen Smith, Disability Action, JF Joint Chair, Ray Caldwell, DfC, JF Joint Chair and Roisin McLaughlin, North West Community Network, JF VCS Panel Representative)

Introduction

The Joint Forum met on **Thursday 18 June 2026 at St Columb's Hall, Derry/Londonderry**, hosted by Joint Forum VCS member Roisin McLaughlin from the North West Community Network. (See Annex 1 for list of meeting attendees)

Holding the meeting in the North West provided a valuable opportunity to bring Joint Forum discussions into a community setting, connect with local voluntary and community organisations, and raise awareness of the Joint Forum and its work.

Chaired by **Joint Forum Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) Panel Chair Karen Smith, (Disability Action)**, this meeting was a valuable opportunity to meet collectively as a forum membership. Local community information stands and time for networking created space to showcase the range of community work taking place across the North West.

Message from Meeting Chair Karen Smith, Chair of the Voluntary and Community Sector Panel /Joint Forum Joint Chair

"It was wonderful for us all to meet in the inspiring venue of St Columb's Hall, Derry/Londonderry for our second in person Joint Forum meeting of this year. St Columb's Hall has a rich history of community activism and the arts. It was a fabulous setting for us all to meet together and be hosted by Joint Forum member Roisin McLaughlin from North West Community Network and to also have local community partners present to share details of their local focus and impact with all JF members.

This meeting of Joint Forum members from the voluntary sector, public sector and local government came at an important time for our current workplan overall, with updates from our communications working group as well as from Ruth Walker, our independent consultant who is actively supporting work on an evaluation framework, annual report (due to be issued to NI Executive and stakeholders in the Autumn) and examination of funding practices alongside the partnership agreement's fair funding principles.

Joint Forum members also heard from key contributors such as Mary McManus from Living Wage NI (which is funded by the Living Wage Foundation and the Department for Economy). Mary made a strong case for continued growth for all NI businesses and departments in adopting the real living wage and achieving living wage accreditation. It was heartening to hear that the voluntary and community sector is currently leading the way with 41% of accredited living wage employers coming from the sector.

Not surprisingly, the ongoing lack of an NI Executive Budget for local communities' services was a recurring theme throughout this JF meeting, and members were grateful to DoF colleagues who were present for providing important updates on the current situation.

*Joint Forum member and VCS colleague **Manus Maguire** from the **Cliftonville Community Regeneration Forum** noted the recent public disorder, condemning the intimidation and vandalism that occurred and acknowledging the dedication and support shown by local community organisations and services to affected individuals, families and communities. His remarks resonated strongly with all those present.*

Following the Joint Forum meeting, some members, including representation from the Department of Finance, remained at St Columb's Hall to participate in a Northern Ireland Office Local Growth Fund consultation engagement session. The session was also attended by a range of community organisations from across the North West and provided an opportunity for valuable discussion on local community needs and priorities in relation to the proposed approach to Local Growth Fund investment and delivery in Northern Ireland for 2026 -2029."

Message from Ray Caldwell, Public Sector Group Chair/Joint Forum Joint Chair.

"It was great to join colleagues from across the public sector and the voluntary and community sector in St Columb's Hall for this Joint Forum meeting. The venue, surroundings and meeting with local community groups offered a powerful reminder of the strength, resilience and innovation that exists within communities.

As we continue to work together in supporting the communication and implementation of the Partnership Agreement, these opportunities to engage beyond Belfast are invaluable in helping us better understand local priorities and challenges. The discussions throughout the day reinforced both the importance of partnership working and the significant contribution that the voluntary and community sector makes to improving outcomes for people and communities.

There was also a clear recognition of the challenging financial environment facing both public services and the voluntary and community sector. While budget pressures continue to create difficult decisions across government, members highlighted that ongoing funding uncertainty, short-term funding arrangements and delays in budget decisions are having a particularly significant impact on voluntary and community organisations. These challenges make longer-term planning difficult, place considerable strain on organisational sustainability, workforce retention and service delivery, and can undermine the sector's ability to respond effectively to growing community need. In that context, the work of the Joint Forum has never been more important in fostering constructive dialogue, strengthening partnership working and promoting approaches that support sustainable and effective services for our communities.

I would like to thank our hosts, Roisin and her colleagues in North West Community Network, and all those who contributed to an engaging and productive meeting."

Meeting Highlights

1. Progress Across Joint Forum Working Groups

A stocktake of the Joint Forum Working Groups highlighted continued progress across key priority areas, including communications, statutory duty, and evaluation. Members reflected on next steps and the importance of maintaining momentum across all strands of work.

Strengthening Communication and Engagement

Members received an update from the Joint Forum Communications Working Group on its ongoing efforts to increase awareness and understanding of the Partnership Agreement between Government and the Voluntary and Community Sector. The group continues to explore and agree ways to promote the Agreement's purpose, shared values, fair funding principles and the role of the Joint Forum more widely across both sectors.

Communications Working Group members Avery Bowser (Action for Children) and Anne Armstrong (Department for Communities) outlined progress in developing a range of communications resources to support implementation of the Agreement. These include a short animation, enhanced web-based information and the introduction of Campaign Monitor, a communications tool designed to share regular updates and highlight progress with regard to the implementation of the Agreement.

Members were encouraged to use and share these materials within their own organisations and networks to help broaden awareness and understanding of the Agreement. Avery and Anne also emphasised the importance of members continuing to share stories, examples of good practice and implementation successes to ensure the Partnership Agreement can remain visible.

2. Specialist Support and Fair Funding Focus

Members welcomed an **update from Ruth Walker**, the independent consultant supporting the Joint Forum's work on evaluation, reporting and the implementation of the Fair Funding Principles.

Key areas of Ruth's work include:

- Establishing a baseline analysis of how the Partnership Agreement is being understood and applied across both sectors.
- Developing an evaluation framework to measure progress and an annual reporting approach to demonstrate impact and accountability.
- Reviewing how some examples of current funding approaches align with the Fair Funding Principles, for purposes of benchmarking and learning.

Initial findings from Ruth's discussions with Joint Forum members suggest that while positive progress is being made, implementation is taking place within a deeply challenging financial environment. Members noted that achieving meaningful change will require continued commitment and action from both government and the voluntary and community sector.

Ruth also facilitated a focused discussion with members on how they can further champion the Partnership Agreement, its Values, Ways of Working and Fair Funding Principles within their own departments, organisations and networks. Members explored practical ways to raise awareness, share good practice and strengthen implementation. The discussion also considered how Joint Forum meetings can be structured to ensure members leave with clear priorities, practical tools and information, a renewed sense of purpose, and a shared accountability for promoting and implementing the Agreement between meetings. Further findings and recommendations emerging from Ruth's work will be reported to members at the October Joint Forum meeting.

3. Northern Ireland Budget Update

The Department of Finance (DoF) provided an **update on the current budget position**, including the ongoing challenges arising from the absence of an agreed Northern Ireland Budget and the significant financial pressures facing both government departments and the voluntary and community sector. Members emphasised the importance of continued transparency and engagement with the sector, particularly given the implications for service delivery and organisational sustainability.

DoF also updated members on the **implementation of Local Growth funding in Northern Ireland** and the ongoing public consultation on the Local Growth Investment Plan 2026–2029. VCS representatives stressed the importance of ensuring that both the consultation process and future decisions on the Fund take full account of the impact that funding cuts under the introduction of Local Growth funding have had on VCS-led services. Members highlighted the challenges experienced across services and the need for future investment decisions to help mitigate these impacts.

The discussion reflected the deeply challenging fiscal environment and the continuing funding uncertainty facing the voluntary and community sector. Members acknowledged the important role of the Joint Forum in highlighting these issues at a strategic level and advocating for funding approaches that support sustainable service delivery and effective partnership working between government and the voluntary and community sector.

4. Real Living Wage NI Presentation

Members heard from **Mary McManus of Living Wage NI**, who highlighted the growing momentum behind the real Living Wage movement in Northern Ireland and the important role the voluntary and community sector is playing in leading this work. Mary outlined how the real Living Wage, which is independently calculated to reflect the true cost of living, helps tackle in-work poverty by ensuring workers receive a wage that better meets everyday living costs. She noted that almost one in six jobs in Northern Ireland are paid below the real Living Wage, making fair pay an important issue for employers, funders and policymakers alike.

Encouragingly, the voluntary and community sector continues to lead the way, with 41% of Northern Ireland's accredited Living Wage employers coming from the sector. Members heard how Living Wage accreditation can improve employee wellbeing, reduce financial stress and contribute to stronger families and communities. Mary also encouraged Joint Forum members to champion the real Living Wage within their own departments, organisations and networks, engage funders and boards in discussions about sustainable funding for fair pay, and support a joined-up approach to ensuring publicly funded services are delivered through good quality jobs that provide fairness, dignity and economic security for workers.

The session on the **Real Living Wage** prompted discussion on how government and the sector can work together to ensure publicly funded services support **fair pay and good jobs**, particularly in the context of wider funding constraints.

5. Middle East Conflict and Cost of Living Impacts

Members received a **presentation from The Executive Office (TEO) on the potential cost-of-living impacts arising from the conflict in the Middle East**. The presentation highlighted how global instability can affect Northern Ireland through rising energy, transport and agricultural costs, creating increased pressures for households, businesses, public services and voluntary and community organisations. While there are currently no immediate concerns regarding fuel supply, members heard that affordability remains a significant issue, particularly for lower-income households and communities already experiencing financial hardship.

The discussion focused on the potential for sustained cost pressures to increase demand for public and community services while also raising the costs of delivering those services. Members were invited to share insights on the challenges being experienced by communities and organisations, emerging risks over the coming months, and the implications for service sustainability. The session provided an opportunity for voluntary and community sector representatives to share real-time insights on the impact of rising costs on local communities and organisations. TEO advised that these contributions will help strengthen the cross-government evidence base, inform ongoing analysis of emerging pressures, and support the development of coordinated policy responses aimed at mitigating the effects of rising costs across Northern Ireland.

6. Joint Forum Session at NICVA Summit June 2026



(Pictured left – right David Gibson, Department for Economy, Ross Davies, WCVA, Karen Smith, Disability Action, JF Joint Chair, Anne Armstrong, Department for Communities, Avery Bowser, Action for Children)

The Forum reflected on the recent **NICVA Summit 2026**, including the Joint Forum engagement session, *“The Partnership Agreement: More than a Memo.”* Session facilitators updated on this session highlighting how key themes and insights from the session could help shape future Joint Forum priorities and strengthen implementation of the Partnership Agreement.

A more detailed summary of the learning and reflections from the engagement session is currently being developed, and a full report on the NICVA Summit will be available soon at www.nicva.org

In the meantime, further information on the session can be found in this Department for Communities article: [HERE](#)

7. This Is Our Health Update

Members received an update from the Public Health Agency on **This Is Our Health**, the regional conversation on health and wellbeing in Northern Ireland. The initiative aims to gather views from people across Northern Ireland on what helps them stay healthy and well, and what changes could improve health outcomes within their communities. To date, more than 7,000 people have taken part, reflecting strong public interest and engagement.

The Joint Forum discussion highlighted the important role that voluntary and community organisations can play in ensuring that a wide range of voices are heard, particularly those from communities that are often underrepresented in consultation processes. Members were encouraged to promote the survey through their networks and communities to help maximise participation.

Looking Ahead

The next Joint Forum meeting will take place on **Thursday 22 October 2026**.

In the interim, work continues across the Joint Forum membership to progress our workplan and support the promotion and implementation of the Partnership Agreement, including:

- Ongoing communications rollout
- Development of the evaluation framework
- Preparation of the Joint Forum Annual Report
- Continued engagement on fair funding
- Promotion of the Partnership Agreement's Values, Ways of Working and Fair Funding Principles across government and the voluntary and community sector

In the meantime, **we encourage readers to connect with your departmental or sectoral representative on the Forum** to learn more about our workplan and the key issues under discussion. You can view the list of current Joint Forum representatives here: [Joint Government and Voluntary Sector Forum \(Joint Forum\)](#)

As members we are keen to hear experiences, examples of practice or implementation with regard to the Partnership Agreement from across organisations and networks. Sharing these

insights will help strengthen awareness of the Agreement and support its implementation in practice.

Strengthening our reach and connections across both sectors is central to our shared goals as a Forum, and your input will help ensure that a wider range of views and experiences is reflected in our ongoing work.

[Sign up for updates on Partnership Agreement between Government and the Voluntary & Community Sector \(VCS\) in NI](#)

Interested in learning more about the Joint Forum, its membership, and 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 Forum and its membership please **contact the Joint Forum Secretariat** via:

Public Sector Secretariat

Aideen Logue, Department for Communities

Email: Jointforumsecretariat@communities-ni.gov.uk

Voluntary and Community Sector Secretariat

Kathy Maguire, NICVA

Email: kathy.maguire@nicva.org

Annex 1 Attendee List

In Attendance - Public Sector Group	
Raymond Caldwell	Public Sector Group Chair/Joint Chair Joint Forum, Department for Communities (DfC)
Anne Armstrong	Department for Communities (DfC)
Nichola Creagh	Department for Communities (DfC)
Pearse Moore	Department of Finance (DoF)
Laura Sturgeon	Department of Finance (DoF)
Katie Devlin	Department of Agricultural, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA)
Claire Johnston	The Executive Office (TEO)
Conor McNickle	The Executive Office (TEO)
Elaine Colgan	Department for the Economy (DfE)
Gavin Hamilton	Department for Infrastructure (DfI)
Glenda Davies	Department of Education (DE)
Ruth Jamieson	Department for Communities (DfC)
Antoinette Kennedy	Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA)
Roisin Kelly	Public Health Agency
In Attendance – VCS Panel Members	
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
Jenny Potter	NICVA

Roisin McLaughlin	Northwest Community Network
Colm McDaid	Supporting Communities
Irene Sherry	Ashton Centre
Gareth Eannetta	NIACRO
Frances Campbell	Community Transport Association UK
Melissa Frame	Start 360
Janet Schofield	CAN
Kathy Martin	CDHN
Manus Maguire	Cliftonville Community Regeneration Forum
Diane Ewart	TADA RSN
Guest Speakers/Attendees	
Mary McManus	Living Wage NI
Marty Hagan	ARC Fitness
Nii Mensah	African Caribbean Community Network
Jonathan Mensah	African Caribbean Community Network
Lynn Connolly	Foyle Food Network
Patricia O'Donnell	Foyle Food Network
Joint Secretariat	
Kathy Maguire (Notetaker)	NICVA
Aideen Logue	Department for Communities (DfC)
Audrey Fallon	Department for Communities (DfC)
Lorraine Gallagher	Department for Communities (DfC)
Apologies	
Judith Poucher	Clanrye Group
Anne Mc Vicker	Women's Resource & Development Agency
Samantha Gallagher	Rural Community Network

Michael Briggs	EBCDA
Alison Allen	Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA)
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)
Julie McCormack	The Executive Office (TEO)
Chris Gardner	The Executive Office (TEO)
Keith Forster	SOLACE NI
Marc Bailie	Department of Health (DoH)
Martina Brennan	Department for the Economy (DfE)