

A Position Statement from representatives of the Joint Forum Voluntary & Community Sector Panel¹ on the ongoing Cost of Living Crisis.

Access to the means to live a life of personal dignity is now beyond the reach of too many people in Northern Ireland (NI). Crisis, heaped upon crisis is decimating the personal and collective health, wealth, and well-being of the community at large.

Many families barely survive on the margins of social security, with access to quality public services declining at an alarming rate. Economic inactivity and inter-generational unemployment are a lived experience for many people and employment opportunities, where they are to be found, are in a low wage economy populated by the new working poor. Now we are told that middle income earners will also experience financial pressures due to the increased 'cost of living', now labelled as our latest crisis.

Many factors are blamed for the cause of the cost-of-living crisis, but whatever they are, their impact will be borne most heavily by those without the means to weather the storm.

Throughout the Covid pandemic, the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) were frontline support providers. They were the social glue that held people and place together, ensuring our most vulnerable remained connected and able to access key public services. As we face into the 'Cost of Living' crisis, as a sector we will do so again, not because it is expected of us, but because it is what we do, in times of plenty and in times of crisis.

However, we need to ask, *'How prepared are we in the Voluntary and Community Sector to respond?'*

We face into this crisis against a backdrop of years of decimation to funding of the sector, in capital investment and in revenue. There are limited opportunities for full cost recovery in service delivery, inflationary uplifts or ability to utilise underspend. We face the continued expectation that the voluntary and community sector, do more for less and plug growing gaps in our wider public sector services.

Many voluntary and community sector organisations now face soaring energy and fuel bills, alongside rent increases and facilities management costs, with little financial buffer available to respond to this. The services we as a sector provide, the staff we employ, the volunteers that work with us, are all operating under great stress. The buildings we own, the warm centres we are proposing to open, the food poverty services we deliver and the wider public good we deliver are all at risk, without access to adequate support.

¹ See Notes to Editor

Without adequate means to attract and retain staff we limit our capacity to meet need head on. If organisations are forced to close community buildings due to the soaring costs of energy or heat, we lose the ability to deliver vital services. The Voluntary and Community Sector is at the front end of the crisis to come but it needs help to respond. If it is to triage the problem and provide solutions it needs immediate assistance.

To that end as a panel, we are all calling for the following:

1) *Restoration of the NI Executive*

The immediate restoration of the NI Executive to agree a multi-year budget and agree and deliver the policy solutions needed, including the implementation of targeted emergency measures. Political inaction in the face of such a crisis is simply not acceptable. The Northern Ireland Executive has significant policy-making powers, particularly regarding social security, that could be deployed to shield those most acutely at risk due to the cost-of-living crisis.

2) *Dedicated Financial Support for the Voluntary and Community Sector*

Urgent support from Government, is needed for the sector that is substantial enough to meet the scale of the challenge. We need an immediate inflationary/cost of living uplift to all public sector contracts, and a rate hiatus for community owned and managed assets without delay. Initiatives are needed to look at how community and voluntary sector organisations can address growing fuel and energy costs in the longer term, including investment in environmental and energy saving measures.

3) *Targeted Support for Individuals and Families most acutely at risk*

We support the urgent calls across civic society of the need for targeted supports for low-income individuals and households, including those in receipt of benefits. This includes the Uprating of benefits in line with inflation/cost of living increases, a Pause on reductions from Universal Credit for prior overpayments / sanctions, and the Removal of the benefit cap and two-child limit.

Additional investment in energy efficiency measures and initiatives is also needed so that those on low incomes can affordably heat and power their homes both now and in the future.

Notes to Editor:

The Joint Forum between the Government and the Voluntary and Community Sector NI commonly known as the **Joint Forum** is made up of representatives from central and local government (Public Sector Group) and the voluntary and community sector (Voluntary and Community Sector Panel) in Northern Ireland. It was established in October 1998 with the purpose of promoting regular dialogue between the voluntary and community sector and Government departments. It facilitates an open discussion about the relationship between the two sectors.

The Joint Forum is supported by NICVA and the Voluntary and Community Division in the Department for Communities (DfC).

The Joint Forum Voluntary and Community Sector Panel (VCS Panel) is made up of 15 representatives from across the voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland.

You can view the current list of voluntary and community sector representatives [here](#).

You can read more about the Joint Forum [here](#).

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