

JOINT FORUM COMMUNIQUÉ

JOINT FORUM between GOVERNMENT and the
VOLUNTARY and COMMUNITY SECTOR

15 May 2015

1. The meeting of the Joint Forum was held in the offices of the Northern Ireland Council on Voluntary Action (NICVA), Duncairn Gardens, Belfast.
2. Today's meeting was chaired by Michael Donnelly, Head of the Department for Social Development's (DSD) Voluntary and Community Unit (VCU). Anne O'Reilly, Joint Chair, from the Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network (NIRWN) was also present.
3. Normal Joint Forum business was suspended for discussion on the impact of the NI Executive's 2015/16 budget efficiencies on the Voluntary and Community Sector.

KEY POINTS

1. In addition to the usual departmental representatives a number of senior officials attended the Joint Forum: **Willie Gribben** from the Department of Justice; **John Noble**, Department for Education and Learning; **Linda Wilson**, Department of Education; and **Margaret-Rose McNaughton**, Office of the First and deputy First Minister.

Overview from Voluntary and Community Sector

2. The meeting was opened by **Seamus McAleavey**, Chief Executive of **NICVA**. Seamus outlined concerns he had been expressing since the start of the recession in 2008 at the potential for disproportionate budget cuts to be imposed on the Voluntary and Community Sector. Seamus said he had recently met with the First and deputy First Ministers about the lack of strategic overview and the cumulative effect that cuts from the 2015/16 Budget were having on organisations. Highlighted the unintended consequences of individual Departments making funding decisions in isolation to what was happening in other

Departments, as a particular problem.

3. He went on to highlight the fragility of many organisations with little reserves to pay for redundancies and drew a parallel with the Voluntary and Community Sector in GB where a transition fund had been provided to help organisations adjust to reductions in funding.
4. **Lisa McElherron, Head of Policy in NICVA**, outlined the trends emerging from NICVA's 'CutsWatchNI' survey which was set up to track the effect funding decisions were having across the Sector. Lisa reported that early survey responses were highlighting job losses and that children and young people's groups being most affected so far.

Case Studies

5. A number of case studies to highlight how the cuts were impacting across all aspects of society were presented by:
 - **Kate Clifford from the Rural Community Network;**
 - **Eddie McDowell, Churches Community Work Alliance;**
 - **Anne McVicker, Women's Resource and Development Agency;**
 - **Geoff Nuttall, World Wildlife Fund NI; and**
 - **Jonnie Currie, East Belfast Community Development Agency.**
6. The case studies highlighted:
 - a greater impact on rural populations served by small, isolated voluntary and community groups providing vital services for children and the elderly. The groups servicing these 'hidden' populations were often not linked to larger regional organisations and were at greater risk of closure and services being lost;
 - 'no-notice' redundancies being made as a result of last minute cuts in funding;
 - multiple-source funding leading to a greater impact as a result of each funder's cuts;
 - the disproportionate effect on vital frontline services provided for, and by, women in the community and on Government priorities for women;
 - funding cuts in one area directly affecting another i.e. a group not being able to deliver a recently secured contract because a cut in core funding meant fewer trained staff were available to deliver

the contract;

- environmental impact - land protected under EU legislation not being maintained, which will result in EU fines at a later date;
- Statutory providers making cuts to East Belfast groups - the only service deliverers in the area – with the expectation of them continuing to provide family support and a range of other statutory services at a time when referrals are increasing;
- the domino effect, i.e. cuts to Early Years funding impacting on youth work and race relations;
- the expectation that the Sector would continue to deliver services because of the vulnerability of the people involved;
- groups sharing administrative resources to reduce management costs hit harder than groups that remained independent.

The role of OFMdFM

7. The First and deputy First Ministers have appointed two Junior Ministers to look into the crisis affecting the Voluntary and Community Sector. **Margaret-Rose McNaughten**, Director of Equality and Strategy in the Office of the First and deputy First Minister has been appointed to work with the Junior Ministers to examine the processes of Departments, map where cuts have been made, the impact these cuts will have on organisations and services and to present findings to the First and deputy First Ministers. Margaret-Rose acknowledged that a **Transition Fund** had been provided for organisations in GB and while she has arranged to meet officials in the Department of Finance and Personnel, cautioned against expectations of a similar fund being made available in NI.

Overview and Next Steps

8. The consensus view was that early and continuing dialogue was vital with the Concordat as the conduit for navigating relationships with Government and it was agreed that a sub-committee to the Joint Forum should be established with senior representation from Departments including Finance Directors.
9. **Seamus McAleavey** highlighted the fact that this wasn't simply a matter of transactional arrangements - the Stormont House Agreement recognised the commitment to engaging with civic society in key social, cultural and economic issues and said the message to the First and deputy First Ministers is that Government will have to engage with the

Sector to develop a vision for Northern Ireland. Jonny Currie rounded the discussion adding that Government representatives on the Joint Forum collectively owned responsibility for the impact of the cuts, stating that Sector service users are also government's service users.

Date of next meeting

1. The next meeting will be scheduled for 23 October 2015 in NICVA.

Further information

Further information on the role of the Joint Forum and the topics under discussion can be obtained from:

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