

The Voluntary and Community sector and the Programme for Government

A Manifesto for Change

Three keys to unlocking the potential of community and voluntary action

The Challenge of Delivering the Programme for Government

1. The emergence of the current Programme for Government and its outcome-based focus is based on the realisation that Northern Ireland needs major policy transformation. It is also based on the acceptance that this change will not be achieved in a three-year budget cycle. We are facing a range of challenges – social, economic and environmental. The impetus for change is also driven by the notion of a ‘burning platform’ upon which NI policy and public services sits. The do-nothing option is clearly the worst option.
2. Whilst government has made inroads into reducing poverty, it is clearly still a major problem and its cost is manifest in the demand for public services, particularly health services. Even in times of austerity and a budget squeeze the Department of Health budget had risen from £4.7B to £5.4B.¹ That is before the additional spending associated with the COVID-19 crisis.
3. It is recognised in the PfG that the gap between poor people and better off people is large on so many indicators: life expectancy c7 years²; greater incidence of cancer (1.6 years of deprivation gap); circulatory diseases (1.4 years); and higher rate of suicide (1.2 years of deprivation gap). The PfG further recognised that regarding healthy life expectancy the gap grew even larger with a higher rate of early onset chronic illness amongst people in disadvantaged areas.
4. So, what can be done to close these inequality gaps and promote health, well-being, and a better future with opportunity for all? A decent income, a warm home, and an adequate diet are important. Good public services, a high quality, local environment and not least health and education have a major role to play. Increasing literacy scores will in turn increase productivity and income levels. Most of these levers are in government’s hands and a greater focus on cross cutting departmental and local government co-operation could make them even more effective. However, what about those potential levers that are not?

¹ Before COVID 19 additional finances

² Health Inequalities – Life Expectancy Decomposition 2019 DoH

Covid-19 Crisis

5. The COVID-19 crisis has had a major impact on society in Northern Ireland in the last six months. But it has been obvious that community and voluntary organisations offered the framework for people to respond and act. Proof, if it were needed, that these organisations while having a primary defined role are also incredibly adaptable structures that harnessed spontaneous responders to the crisis.
6. From the end of March, they organised support for vulnerable members of the community with food, medicines, and contact checking for people in need of additional help. This adaptability, spontaneity and speed is a valuable resource in times of need but crucially the existing organisations, whether community groups, sports organisations or other bodies provide the inherent organisational structures to channel voluntary action that benefits communities. However, the shutdown also impacted on many voluntary and community sector organisations who have been unable to carry on some of their activities and are facing economic and sustainability challenges.
7. Prior to the COVID-19 emergency NICVA had been discussing the need for government to get a better understanding of the potential of community and voluntary action in Northern Ireland. By community and voluntary action we mean non-statutory activities, activities in community and voluntary groups that are not required by statute law. However, these activities contribute massively to the potential success, or not, of the high-level outcomes that the Programme for Government has the ambition to achieve. Like better health outcomes, improved community safety, tackling isolation or improving the life chances of children. The Environmental NGO sector for example, has been advocating for a Green Recovery, focusing on jobs, economic development and health benefits for all.

Community and voluntary action covers paid and unpaid activities and voluntary, community and social enterprise organisations employ a significant number of people in Northern Ireland, over 50,000 in all³.

Tackling areas of deprivation

8. Neighbourhoods that have been designation areas of deprivation have had special schemes developed over the years with an objective to reduce the deprivation and improve the lifetime opportunities of that community. While undoubtedly they have had some success, those areas remain the most deprived. The current programme, Neighbourhood Renewal, needs to be reviewed and upgraded. It needs most to be long-term in its approach and be related to mainstream public expenditure in the area. Government cannot expect relatively small additional expenditure to resolve bigger problems that mainstream expenditure in health and education fails.

³ NICVA [State of the Sector](#)

9. The long-term aspect does not refer to the length of time the programme runs but the planned period for delivery and commitment. One to even three-year commitments to projects that renew, even for 10 years, is not a 10-year plan.
10. The new PfG also focuses a lot on co-production and the importance of user and deliverer experience being brought together to gain improvement. It also places emphasis on achieving outcomes. A Neighbourhood programme should establish the desired outcomes it is trying to achieve and then let the local organisations formulate their response and programme activity. If they fail to deliver the change required then the programme should change, up to and including the delivery agents. The overriding objective is to concentrate funds where they get the best return and to end funding for activities that do not achieve positive results. To do otherwise is to penalise those people most in need.

Harnessing the Power of Voluntary Action To Deliver for Society

11. Clearly independent, non-statutory organisations abound in Northern Ireland and mostly have a positive influence on society. Citizens are active in these organisations, large and small, community groups, sports organisations, clubs, societies, self-help groups, charities helping others etc.
12. A significant number of these organisations have a relationship with government through its agencies and often have a transactional funding relationship, but the vast majority do not. They operate in a completely self-contained way as individual organisations. They probably, in most cases, contribute to a good society; and government has always wanted to encourage that. By and large, freedom of association encourages people to take things into their own hands within the law and do things for themselves.
13. Being active in these organisations gives people a greater feeling of having control over their lives and an increased possibility of achieving desirable goals.
14. Community and voluntary action delivered through community and voluntary organisations has a huge contribution to make to delivering better outcomes for our people across every aspect our lives. This contribution is delivered through a vast range of activities and services and has the potential to help Government across every Department meet its social, economic, and environmental objectives.
15. However, for a range of reasons, this potential is not always being fully realised and barriers still exist to unlocking it. This manifesto identifies three 'keys' we believe could unlock these barriers and allow the full potential of voluntary action to be realised. Consideration also needs to be given to how to develop and sustain longer term community action in areas which have not had such

significant amounts of funding for example in many rural areas and smaller towns outside the main urban centres.

Three Keys to Unlocking the Full Potential of Voluntary Action

Key 1 – Improving Government Understanding and Policy on the Role and Contribution of Community and Voluntary Action

16. Mutual understanding and trust are key to any collaborative relationship. To make the relationship between the government and the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector as effective as possible, we need to ensure government has a full and accurate understanding of the role, nature and value of the VCSE sector and that the VCSE sector understands how government operates and the basis on which it prioritises and makes decisions. Accompanying this mutual understanding there must be trust and mutual respect in order for collaboration to flourish and to achieve successful co-delivery of positive outcomes for NI society.
17. Many have reported positive experiences of co-working between the VCSE sector and government departments and agencies during the Covid-19 pandemic, with more flexible and less bureaucratic approaches being taken by government to supporting the sector to respond to the crisis resulting in positive outcomes. We can learn lessons and build upon this experience to encourage a similar approach to collaboration between all government departments and agencies and the VCSE sector to deliver across all of the Programme for Government outcomes.
18. Government should consider its position on the role of community and voluntary action, and work with the VCSE sector to create **a Northern Ireland Executive** policy on supporting and encouraging this non-statutory action, recognising that it touches every aspect of society here. It flows across and through the other sectors public and private. Politicians, civil servants, health professionals, businesspeople, religious, teachers, unskilled workers, pensioners and the unemployed are all involved in community and voluntary groups. It is not exclusive to a 'certain type.' So, what should government do to help, rather than hinder this massive resource? Government and NICVA should establish a **review mechanism**, involving the whole of the VCSE sector, to consider next steps to action this work. Particular attention should be given to rural areas where voluntary action might be sparse compared to urban centres. Stagnation has caused inertia in funding programmes; an options planning paper needs to be produced. Scarce financial resources need to be prioritised because for the last number of years cuts have often been levied across the board degrading all activities equally and detrimentally. **A ten-year transformation strategy** associated with the PfG should be developed by government in partnership with the VCSE sector in order **to fully harness the activities of the sector**. The outcome is to help it flourish and not hinder its progress inadvertently though increasing regulation both direct and indirect. The work that the Minister has

committed to fix the Charity Commission NI registration and other matters is one aspect of that. The ten-year strategy should have a clear implementation plan and timetable, with accountable review mechanisms built in but also be live and able to respond to reflect societal and economic changes.

19. The development of a formal policy and strategy on community and voluntary action, should also be accompanied by measures to build positive relationships and trust between government and VCSE sector, learning lessons from positive examples of joint-working from recent experience with regard to the Covid-19 pandemic and from other experiences.
20. In addition, to fully realise the contribution which the sector can make, there is a pressing need to ensure that Government, across all of its remit, activities, departments and statutory agencies has a full understanding of how our thousands of community and voluntary organisations, working across many different fields, can contribute to positive outcomes for society and what will help or hinder them in doing this. **Guidance and induction materials for both** elected representatives and officials across all Government departments and agencies should be produced in partnership with the VCSE sector to help inform Government officials about voluntary and community organisations and their activities, and about how they can best work with these organisations to maximise delivery of PfG outcomes. This guidance should set out principles for effective partnership working between the sectors and describe what constitutes good practice as well as providing illustrative, positive case study examples.
21. In turn, **guidance and information on how Government operates** to deliver outcomes should be developed for voluntary and community organisations, to help them understand better the processes of government and how best to engage with them.
22. The above guidance could help dispel many unhelpful myths and misconceptions that stand in the way of productive partnership between the sectors; deepen mutual understanding; and in so doing foster the trust needed to achieve genuine collaboration and co-delivery of the PfG outcomes.
23. In addition to the above guidance, other practical measures should also be considered for developing stronger understanding and working relationships between VCSE sector organisations and government including secondments, cross-sectoral placements or job-shadowing, networking, and joint training opportunities. The establishment of VCSE Sector Champions in Government Departments championing the role of different parts of the VCSE sector could also play a valuable role in increasing understanding and strengthening relationships between the sectors.

Recommended Actions –

- NI Government should work with the VCSE sector to develop a Northern Ireland Executive Policy on the role of community and voluntary action designed to encourage non-statutory action and maximise its benefits for NI society
- NI Government in partnership with the VCSE sector should develop a ten-year strategy with a clear implementation plan and timetable for harnessing the potential of community and voluntary action to deliver the PfG outcomes
- NICVA and the VCSE sector should work with government to develop a Guide to help inform Government officials and elected representatives about VCSE organisations and their activities, and about how they can best work with these organisations to maximise delivery of PfG outcomes. This guidance should set out principles for effective partnership working between the sectors, describing what constitutes good practice with positive case study examples.
- Complementary guidance should also be developed for the VCSE organisations on the activities and decision-making processes of Government to inform how they can best engage.
- Measures should be developed to foster stronger understanding, trust, and working relationships between VCSE sector organisations and government including secondments, cross sectoral placements or job-shadowing, and the establishment of VCSE Sector Champions in Government Departments to encourage greater Government understanding of and collaboration with different parts of the VCSE sector.

Key 2 – Unblocking Key Barriers and Creating a Supportive Environment

Funding relations between Government and the voluntary and community sector

24. This is a difficult area and often a bone of contention between funder and those funded. The bureaucracy around this regularly grows and increases and quite often begins to defeat the purpose. In 2015 government published a Code of Practice for Reducing Bureaucracy in Grant Funding to the Voluntary and Community Sector. It was the culmination of a major piece of work lead by the DSD, DFP, NIAO and NICVA. Notwithstanding more positive recent experiences with regard to the flexible and swift delivery of funding related to the Covid-19 pandemic, much of the previously reduced bureaucracy surrounding wider government funding for the VCSE sector has crept back into the system and this now needs to be reviewed and corrected. The key objective is to get the best value for the public pound in support of the objectives of the PfG.
25. Indefensible caps on employer contributions to staff pensions limiting them to 3% must stop as it ensures pension poverty in face of a wider government objective to get employees to provide more for their retirement. The PfG focus on outcomes needs to be honoured rather than an almost exclusive process centred

on spending processes that is often characterised by minutia. Most importantly there are three methods of funding open to government: grant; grant-in-aid; and procurement. Procurement type processes, even for grants, have come to dominate, with a wide range of different processes. Grant-in-aid seems only to be used now to fund government ALBs, possibly except for DoJ's funding of Victim Support. Even NICVA's funding relationship with DfC as part of the RISP programme was procured based on the activities delivered. This leaves out the possibility that government might want to fund such a body because of its role as a representative and support body for the voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland. That is more than a transactional relationship to deliver effective services.

26. For that part of the sector that does have a funding relationship with government there needs to be an honest conversation started about the future financial environment. Whilst resilience is a good thing, too many organisations are struggling on in the hope that things will get better. **A funding policy and assessment framework needs to be developed** with objective criteria, setting out the funding priorities well communicated will help organisations make choices on their future. Government needs to work with the VCSE sector across the many and varied funding relationships and models which exist between different departments and agencies and different parts of the VCSE sector to redesign funding and develop funding models that are transparent, flexible and prioritise support for sector activities based on their delivery of PfG outcomes. As part of this process, the role of non-government funders in supporting VCSE sector organisations to deliver PfG outcomes also needs to be considered.

27. Future funding models must also recognise that year on year Government funding for VCSE organisations severely limits their ability to deliver outcomes creating job insecurity for staff and undermining long-term planning to tackle long-term societal issues. Future models should seek to provide multi-year funding and/or flexibility for spend to be carried forward between financial years in order to respond to changes in the patterns of demand and need for the services and activities being provided. Also, there needs to be adequate turn around time to submit applications or tender documents as very short timescales (e.g. two weeks) can put undue pressure on organisations.

Creating a Supportive Legislative and Policy Environment for Voluntary Action

28. Voluntary and community organisations have wide-ranging legal obligations under charity law and other legislation with which they have to comply, for example in relation to charity registration and reporting to the charity commission; governance requirements for their independent governing boards; safeguarding; or the management of their volunteers. The ever-increasing burden these requirements place on organisations can be a barrier or disincentive to voluntary and community organisations to continue their work, on top of many other pressures. Government should **work with the VCSE sector to review the legal requirements placed on voluntary and community organisations** and seek to

identify where undue legal burdens are being placed upon organisations that act as a disincentive or outright threat to the continuation of voluntary action with the consequent loss of public benefit. Where these burdens are necessary, government should ensure that adequate support is provided where needed, including to smaller groups, to be able to manage these requirements.

29. As part of this, there should also be a **health check and re-affirmation of those public policies and legal incentives** that exist to recognise and support the public benefit role of charities (which currently all NI voluntary and community organisations must legally register as), such as rates relief, which are repeatedly, and in NICVA's view unfairly, challenged, generating further ongoing uncertainty for hard-pressed charities. The review should seek to both re-affirm existing positive public policies to provide certainty to organisations and also identify where further policy incentives to voluntary action could be introduced. Consideration should also be given to whether specific sub-sectors of the VCSE sector face specific challenges due to policies that affect their particular activities (e.g. social enterprises)

Recommended Actions –

- NI Government should work with the VCSE sector to jointly review the various funding relationships and models which exist between it and voluntary and community organisations to evaluate which models are most effective in supporting voluntary action to deliver PfG outcomes. The review must have the buy-in of all relevant government and sector stakeholders; draw on national and international best practice; and have a clear plan and timetable for delivery. Lessons should be drawn from positive experiences from the current Covid-19 pandemic and other examples of flexible, non-bureaucratic, outcomes-focussed government and non government funding for VCSE activities that are based on trust. The review should result in the development of funding models across all Government departments and statutory agencies that are transparent, flexible, and prioritise support for VCSE sector activities based on their delivery of PfG outcomes.
- NI Government should also consider under the above review how its policies can support the funding and income generation models of organisations that do not receive public funding but rely on earned income, fundraising and trading (social enterprise) activities, as well as those for whom these represent a major proportion of their income, alongside public funding.
- Government should work with the VCSE sector to review the legal requirements placed on voluntary and community organisations with a view to reducing undue burdens and disincentives to voluntary action.
- As part of the above review, government should undertake a healthcheck and re-affirmation of those public policies and legal incentives designed to encourage community and voluntary action (e.g. rates relief) to identify where these need to be either re-affirmed or built upon to create a supportive

environment, including consideration of specific policies affecting specific VCSE sector sub-sectors (e.g. social enterprises)

Key 3 – Valuing the voice of community and voluntary actors and civil society

30. Many voluntary and community organisations bring huge benefit to the community and society by challenging where public policies are having negative effects and developing and advocating proposals for new and improved public policies and legislation. The on-the-ground experience of groups working with different communities and sections of society and the research carried out by many voluntary and community organisations is a hugely valuable resource that should be welcomed and harnessed by government.
31. Internationally there is a worrying trend (e.g. in Turkey, Hungary, China) towards rejecting and even taking direct measures to exclude voluntary, community and civil society voices from public debate. Whilst much less stark, in other ways UK legislation such as the Lobbying Act is also creating uncertainty and discouraging voluntary and community organisations from fulfilling their valuable advocacy role.
32. Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise Organisations have multiple roles to play in informing public debate and policy, whether through participating in wider civil society engagement mechanisms such as social partners and civic forums alongside other non-government sectors (business unions, farmers unions etc); or supporting citizen engagement through citizens assemblies; or representing different groups within society and societal issues with whom and on which they work.
33. We believe measures need to be taken to ensure not only that policies and legislation create an encouraging environment for voluntary and community voices to be heard and to inform public debate and government policy, but also that the guidance for government proposed under Key 1 above, includes guidance on the value of the voluntary and community sector's role in challenging, informing and reflecting the impacts of public policies, as well as helping to inform the development of new and improved policy solutions and laws that will deliver better outcomes for all.
34. We would encourage government to establish a range of mechanisms to encourage structured voluntary/community and civic engagement ranging from citizens' assemblies to social partner and civic forums, recognising the benefits of an 'Open Government' approach.
35. We would also encourage Government across all departments and agencies to review its mechanisms and capacity for engagement with VCSE sector organisations to consult on and co-design particular areas of policy, recognising the limitations of traditional consultation approaches and the value of early engagement with VCSE sector organisations when developing policy. This

should include reviewing and identifying positive examples of government/VCSE sector engagement to develop policy both locally and from elsewhere (e.g. Scottish Participation Framework and Health and Social Care Alliance statutory engagement model). Consideration should also be given to mapping and making greater use of channels of engagement through which Government can reach out to the VCSE sector including local and thematic networks.

36. It is important to consider not just what are effective mechanisms and structures for engagement but also how to create a culture of Government/VCSE sector engagement. This should include reviewing the current levels of experience and expertise in Government to engage with VCSE organisations and identifying how capacity, skills and resources in this area could be enhanced. Also, measures that encourage regular ongoing contact between government and VCSE organisations should be encouraged as a means of developing trust and closer cross-sectoral working relationships. This should include clear lines of communication and points of contact with communications teams within departments on an ongoing basis and not just during consultation periods.

Recommended Actions –

- NI Government should work with the VCSE sector to review and ensure that public policies and legislations are creating an encouraging environment for voluntary and community voices to be heard and not creating disincentives
- NI Government should work with the VCSE sector to ensure that the Community and Voluntary Action Guide for government officials proposed above (Key 1) includes guidance on the value of the voluntary and community sector's role in challenging, informing and reflecting the impacts of public policies, as well as informing the development of new policies and legislation.
- NI Government should work with the VCSE sector to ensure appropriate representation of the sector on a range of civic/civil society engagement mechanisms
- NI Government should work with the VCSE sector to review and develop its capacity and mechanisms for engagement with sector organisations to consult on and co-design particular areas of policy. These should draw on positive local, national and international examples of government/VCSE sector engagement to develop policy. Consideration should be given to cross-sectoral 'Design Groups' or 'Project Boards' comprising Government and VCSE sector representatives to look at specific policy issues.
- NI Government should map and make greater use of existing channels of engagement through which Government can reach out to the VCSE sector including local and thematic networks.
- NI Government should explore with the VCSE sector opportunities to encourage/develop a culture of meaningful Government/VCSE sector engagement through more regular ongoing contact between government and VCSE sector staff. This should include clear lines of communication and points of contact with communications teams within government departments and agencies on an ongoing basis and not just during consultation periods.

NICVA
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