NICVA Logo

**Consultation Response: Programme for Government 2016 – 2021**

**1. About NICVA**

NICVA (the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action) is the umbrella body for the voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland. It provides over 1,000 members with information, advice, training and support services on a wide range of issues, together with representation for the sector as a whole.

NICVA works to achieve progressive social change, based on equality and equity, working through a community development approach, to empower local communities to pursue their own needs and agendas.

**2. Introduction**

NICVA welcome the opportunity to respond to the consultation on the draft Programme for Government for 2016-2021. It is particularly pleasing to be doing this so early in the Assembly term, relative to previous mandates.

As usual our response is informed by sustained engagement with NICVA members. Directly relating to this draft of the PfG we have held a number of engagement events with over 100 of our members including a number on the individual delivery plans.

Whilst we are pleased with the speed at which this draft PfG has been produced, it is a difficult to make overall comments as we have not yet seen the Economic Strategy, Investment Strategy or Social Strategy; all of which have been identified as key pillars for this PfG.

**3. Substantive Comments**

**Outcomes/Indicators**

We welcome the simplification of the outcome/indicator/measure structure to a two layered approach. Making this approach as simple as possible is more in keeping with Outcomes Based Accountability (OBA) methodology and will be more accessible for citizens.

We welcome how the outcomes and indicators have been laid out in an infographic so readers can clearly see what indicator is attributable to what outcome.

As we stated in our response to the draft PfG Framework, we are supportive of the move to an OBA methodology. Many organisations in our sector have led the way in measuring impact and outcome. We do have some concerns around the huge challenge to NICS leadership required to implement this approach. At our consultation events the commitment to cross departmental working was evident across all officials we engaged with. However, this was countered by a lot of the

same language we have experienced for many years with some issues being passed off as another Department’s responsibility.

NICVA had previously asked about a formal statutory duty to cooperate when Departments were restructured. In its absence the cultural change necessary will require careful management.

**Partnership working**

We welcome the strong emphasis on partnership working between government and the voluntary and community sector in delivering the objectives of the PFG. We especially welcome this given the emphasis on strong collaborations within the OBA methodology. We urge the Executive to expand on this further to support collaborations between sectors as well as government.

It is also important to note that when there is a focus on innovation by the Executive, there is a tendency to focus exclusively on higher education institutions and the private sector. The voluntary and community sector has a wealth of innovative potential when supported by policy and government levers such as [procurement.](http://www.nicva.org/resource/fostering-innovation-through-public-procurement) We would urge the Executive to consider the innovative power of the voluntary and community sector in policy and to support collaborations between the voluntary and community sector and universities in the same way it does with business in Outcome one.

**Relationship between PfG and Budget**

Whilst understanding the reasons, we are disappointed to be facing another one-year budget. A longer term budget to suit this longer term plan is a necessity, more strategic and efficient. It has even greater detrimental impact on partners as in our sector when contracted to deliver public services. We hope the next budget will cover the entire period from 2018-2021 with allocations based on PfG Commitments.

This is indicative of how separate the Budget and PfG are as processes. For future Programmes for Government we would hope to see more effort to bring them in line with each other.

**Targets and Data Sets**

In our response to the draft Framework we made a call for the inclusion of targets, even short/medium/long term targets, which we do not feel undermine the OBA process. However, following further engagement we appreciate that targets are not being considered for a range of reasons. If this is to be the case the online dashboard which has been promised, that shows how the curves are turning, must

be made available as soon as possible and crucially in a clear and accessible format so it is easily understood by all citizens.

Our concerns remain about the sets being used and their ability to be disaggregated along section 75 groups and at super output area level. Government must ensure NISRA and SROs prioritise this in the collection of their data. If this is not the case it may well be that we are turning the curve on a particular issue, but not for everyone in society.

We are reiterating our call that all data should also be made available in an open, useable and machine readable format. UK government policy now makes the assumption that all data will be open by default and only restricted for national security or data protection reasons such as personal identifiable information. We hope a similar attitude is taken to the data associated with the PfG.

**Delivery Plans and SROs**

We strongly welcome the production of the delivery plans however there is significant disparity in content quality and quantity. We appreciate that they are living documents, and governments intention is to continually update them throughout the lifetime of this PfG. However, the approach taken and differences between each mean that it is difficult to comment on them.

We welcome the transparency of each SRO’s responsibilities and that each SRO will welcome separate submissions on their delivery plan throughout the lifetime of the PfG. We have also been pleased at how many SROs has welcomed engagement with our sector throughout the development of their delivery plans.

**Tackling Division**

With regard to the content of the specific outcomes we, along with many in our sector, still feel there is merit in a specific outcome relating to community relations and peace building. In our initial response we called for an outcome such as “we live in a peaceful society” we continue to support that call and would like to see serious consideration given to its inclusion alongside relevant indicators. These indicators could include, work on legacy issues referred to in the Fresh Start Agreement and other conflict related issues. The measures associated with this outcome could be found in the annual Peace Monitoring report produced by Community Relations Council.

Related to this we note that the “vision” laid out in the initial Framework has now become a purpose. Whilst being supportive of the initial vision we called for a reference to tackling division, we think this still stands. It could now read “Improving wellbeing for all – by tackling *division,* disadvantage and driving economic growth.”

This inclusion would go some way to countering our belief that the PfG as currently written lacks ambition to tackle division. The focus is placed only on “shared” not on integrated, which a key difference, shared perpetuates segregation rather than promoting integration.

**Conclusion**

In concluding we would like to reiterate NICVA’s support for the move to an OBA based PfG We are pleased at the level of engagement that has been undertaken and how the input of the VCSE has been received thus far.

In our view the cultural shift required to an outcomes based approach in the delivery of this programme for Government is immense and will require a service wide induction and training programme to ensure a change in emphasis and pressure points of accountability.

It should also be mirrored with a change of approach at the Public Accounts Committee, again with the emphasis being placed on outcomes and this is a matter for MLAs. It should be recognised that in attempting to change intractable problems will mean trying new methods that will not always be successful. If tried and they fail, then we should stop and pivot towards an alternative strategy. Learning from mistakes should be encouraged rather than pretending everything can have a positive outcome. Evaluation processes should be about learning, what works and what at times doesn’t work – it should not fall into the trap of reporting only that everything went well and all funds were properly spent and accounted for.

NICVA believes major milestones for review should be set, where SROs have to report on progress on delivery. The focus should be on what positive impact is present in turning the curve. If that is little or none then the SRO must report on what changes they propose to deliver on their actions. As the PfG goes through its course, probably across two mandates, SROs should be judged on how responsive they were and the adjustments they made, or not, to achieve the success desired and set out in the PfG.

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