



Department for
Communities

An Roinn
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Department for
Commonities

www.communities-ni.gov.uk

Voluntary and Community Sector Infrastructure Support Framework

**Draft Framework: Proposals for Consultation
November 2023**

Introduction

The Department for Communities is seeking views on draft proposals for future support of the Voluntary and Community Sector in NI.

This document puts forward draft proposals to support a thriving Voluntary and Community Sector in Northern Ireland through a commitment to continued government investment in sector infrastructure and to improving the way that government works with and for the sector.

The proposals are geared towards the achievement of a clear ambition for what joined up government support can help achieve in the sector, underpinned by shared values and practices which aim to support the relationship between government and the sector.

The document has been produced with the support of a multi-stakeholder Reference Group and has benefited from the contribution of over 300 people through a series of pre-consultation workshops and discussions and from the input of 430 organisations to our survey of sector needs:

<https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/consultations/consultation-voluntary-and-community-sector-infrastructure-support>

Section 2 of the document has been developed collaboratively by the Joint Forum between Government and the Voluntary and Community Sector which includes representation from across the sector, all government departments and local government.

Consultation arrangements:

We are inviting responses via **Citizen Space** or email by **9 February 2024**

Please check our website for details on consultation events

[communities-ni.gov.uk/articles/community-and-voluntary-sector-infrastructure-support-future-plans](https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/articles/community-and-voluntary-sector-infrastructure-support-future-plans)

If you require this document in an alternative format or if you have any other questions please contact:

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Section 1: Overview of the sector

This section contains an overview of our understanding of the voluntary and community sector, including how government has traditionally supported the sector through funding of sector infrastructure organisations.

Understanding The Voluntary and Community Sector

Voluntary and community organisations can be understood as part of a wider “civil society”: a very broad definition that includes everything outside the state (public sector) and the market (private sector) and is also sometimes called the “third sector” or the “social sector”.

When we talk about the “voluntary and community sector” we mean the collective of independent, not-for-profit organisations that support a wide range of social, environmental and economic outcomes and rely to a large extent on voluntary contributions through their boards of trustees, formal volunteering and donations. The sector spans a very diverse range of organisations in terms of scale and focus of operations and interests.

Volunteers define and drive this sector, but organisations will also all have some sort of formal structure or constitution. They are self-governing and independent from government or the private sector. They have social objectives and work to benefit the community. They may operate a social enterprise or community business but any profits will be re-invested for community benefit. This document will use the term Voluntary and Community Sector (abbreviated to VCS) or “the sector” to refer to these organisations.

The Department for Communities recognises the vital contribution of the sector in representing the interests and values of people and communities and in promoting societal wellbeing and resilience. Across government we rely on the sector to directly support communities, to advocate for the most vulnerable in society and to contribute to the co-design and co-production of public services.

There is no single database of Voluntary and Community sector (VCS) organisations. Our understanding of the makeup and conditions of the sector comes from the formal register of charities, from surveys of large membership organisations like the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA; www.nicva.org), the Rural Community Network (RCN; www.ruralcommunitynetwork.org) and CO3 (the Chief Executive Officers of the Third Sector www.co3.org.uk) and from qualitative feedback from formal and informal engagement with sector leaders, workers and volunteers.

Organisations and workforce:

The register of charities in NI (charitycommissionni.org.uk) currently sits at over 7,800 organisations and this provides an important source of information about non-profit organisations but it doesn't tell the whole story.

Many charities would not be considered as voluntary and community organisations (for example, our universities are registered as charities) and conversely, we know that there are lots of small, independent, often volunteer-led organisations operating at a community level that are not registered as charities but which are part of the Voluntary and Community sector. Research¹ suggests the total number of VCS organisations could be up to 3-5 times the number of formally registered groups.

NICVA estimates that over **53,000** people work in the Voluntary and Community Sector in NI and the sector accounts for a bigger share of the active workforce in NI than at a UK level (7% in NI compared to 3% at a UK level²). Women account for a greater share of the VCS workforce than the overall NI workforce – a feature also found in other parts of the UK and in Ireland.

Income:

A large proportion of organisations in this sector operate with very lean budgets. Charity commission data shows that 29% of organisations have an annual income under £10,000 and only 21% have incomes above £100,000. 40% of respondents to the Department's recent survey of sector organisations reported annual income of under £50,000. NICVA estimates the annual income of the sector at £819m, 56% of which comes from government departments and agencies, 22% from public donations and 13% from earned income.

The Department for Communities is the single biggest government funder of the work of the sector (contributing 49% of the central government funding going to the sector each year, around £222m).

Volunteers:

Volunteer effort underpins the VCS. There are around 33,000 people who are members of voluntary management committees across NI; this is a critical role for organisations of every type and scale across the sector. VCS organisations are also an engine for all kinds of other volunteering activity which is defined as 'the commitment of time and energy, for the benefit of society and the community, the environment, or individuals outside (or in addition to) one's immediate family. It is unpaid and undertaken freely and by choice.' The data we have on volunteering is limited but surveys suggest that approximately 28% of the adult population in NI is regularly involved in some form of volunteering³. In addition, almost half (49%) of all young people volunteer with clubs, campaigns or organisations, often as a way of developing skills and experience.⁴ 39% of adult volunteers give their time with churches and other faith-based organisations (the single biggest beneficiary) followed by 29% of volunteers giving time to sports organisations. Other organisations benefiting from volunteer commitment include community and neighbourhood groups, youth and education organisations and a wide range of organisations which care for individuals and the environment.

1 [New \(birmingham.ac.uk\)](http://www.birmingham.ac.uk)

2 [UK Civil Society Almanac 2022 | Home | NCVO State of the Sector | NICVA](#)

3 [Experience of volunteering by adults in Northern Ireland 2019-20 \(communities-ni.gov.uk\)](https://communities-ni.gov.uk)

4 [Engagement in culture, arts and sport by young people in Northern Ireland 2019 \(communities-ni.gov.uk\)](https://communities-ni.gov.uk)

Volunteering levels around certain activities increased significantly during the recent COVID 19 pandemic but the overall impact of the pandemic has been mixed, creating some new opportunities but also some significant challenges for recruitment and retention of volunteers. Many VCS organisations are currently reporting concerns about the sustainability of volunteering and voluntary boards, as the difficult COVID legacy is being exacerbated by the cost of living crisis.

The sector's relationship with government:

A key feature of VCS organisations is operational independence and self-governance. The sector is organised around distinct social objectives and for community benefit (not to work on behalf of a government department or agency or a local council). However, government recognises the vital contribution of the sector across a wide range of activity and there is a strong relationship between the work of each sector:

- ✓ **Regulation:** government is responsible for shaping the conditions in which the sector operates, including regulation of charities and business, safeguarding, health and safety, employment law etc. It is important that regulation is proportionate and that VCS organisations understand relevant legislation and “good governance” requirements.

- ✓ **Policy and decision making:** many VCS organisations exist to create change, improve conditions for their communities (of place or of interest) and address what they see as unmet needs. A key function of many organisations is to advocate on behalf of specific interests and draw attention to particular evidence or lived experience. It is important that government processes are transparent and accessible and that VCS organisations understand how they can participate and advocate effectively.
- ✓ **Funding:** Many VCS organisations receive public funding and therefore make specific delivery arrangements with government– either through grant agreements or formal contracts. How this funding is administered (from advertising of opportunities to awarding of funding, grant/contract management and evaluation of impact) is a key part of the relationship between government and the sector. It is important that funding is administered fairly and without excessive bureaucracy and that VCS organisations understand how they can access and account for funding.

Supporting the “Infrastructure” of the Sector

Sector infrastructure organisations are those whose main purpose includes providing support to other voluntary and community organisations: building capacity and skills within the sector through training, advice, information exchange, convening, policy work, consultancy and providing platforms and access to resources (including physical spaces).

VCS infrastructure organisations play a vital role in supporting and enabling voluntary and community action at both a regional and local level. Some organisations work across the whole region and provide core support to organisations across the sector while other sector infrastructure organisations meet more local or specialist needs or work specifically with a distinct sub-sector of the VCS.

The Department for Communities has invested in the work of a range of infrastructure organisations under various programmes over many years⁵ as a way of diffusing good practice across individual organisations and supporting the convening power of the sector – enabling both grassroots action and regional organising around areas of shared interest across the sector.

This represents a small proportion of the overall annual investment by the Department in the work of the sector, but it has substantial impact across the breadth of VCS organisations. The core funding traditionally provided by the Department to sector infrastructure organisations has also allowed them to leverage other sources of funding and income generation, increasing their overall effectiveness and impact on behalf of the sector.

The Department has surveyed VCS organisations and led an extensive programme of engagement to explore the range of needs and priorities for future infrastructure delivery. This process has confirmed the need for a spectrum of infrastructure support across four headline areas:

- **Leadership and Advocacy**
- **Collaboration and Partnerships**
- **Capacity Building (practical skills and resilience) and**
- **Volunteering**

A summary of engagement methodology and feedback is available [HERE](#)

⁵ For example the Regional Infrastructure Support Programme (RISP), the Community Investment Fund, Volunteering Infrastructure Support Programme, Community Asset Transfer

DfC is not the only government supporter of sector infrastructure and nor should it be. The nature of the sector means that both public and independent funders have an interest in supporting capacity building linked to specific policy priorities. However, we recognise

that there is scope for greater alignment and collaboration between government funders around shared outcomes and this is something that we will be seeking to develop through the design and commissioning of future support arrangements.

Section 2: Supporting the Sector's Relationship With Government

This section has been developed collaboratively by the Joint Forum between Government and the Voluntary and Community Sector (the “Joint Forum”).

For further information on the operation and work programme of the Joint Forum and full list of current members please visit the NICVA website:

www.nicva.org/groups/joint-government-and-voluntary-sector-forum-joint-forum

Supporting the Relationship Between Government and the VCS

The Department for Communities has lead responsibility within government for championing and supporting the work of the Voluntary and Community Sector across the Executive. The Department’s shared facilitation (alongside NICVA) of the Joint Forum between government and the voluntary and community sector is a key mechanism for supporting the relationship between the sectors.

The Concordat between Government and the Voluntary and Community Sector, published in 2011, set out a shared vision and agreed commitments to work together as social partners to build a participative, peaceful, equitable and inclusive community in Northern Ireland. In September 2022 former Communities Minister Deirdre Hargey identified the need for a renewal and recommitment of the “Concordat” or agreement and invited the Joint Forum to take forward this work, in anticipation of aligning this with a future Programme for Government.

The Joint Forum has confirmed that any new Concordat/Agreement should act as a framework for improving partnership working which recognises and supports the contribution each sector makes to improving the lives of individuals and communities. It should recognise the importance of the voluntary and community sector to a healthy, just and prosperous society, and set out how Government will work alongside and support the sector as a key partner in the years to come. A renewed Concordat/Agreement should be based on a recognition of the distinct yet complementary roles of both sectors in contributing to the social, economic, environmental, and cultural life of Northern Ireland and the belief that by collaborating and working better together, we can increase our impact and agency.

As a foundation for a future Concordat agreement, the Joint Forum has articulated the following set of core values and ways of working which should guide the relationship.

Accountability

A shared commitment to act with high standards of integrity and professionalism.

This includes being open, honest, and transparent in the interests of a shared and common agenda and demonstrating mutual respect, and accountability for our actions and in our decision making.

Ways of working that will deliver for this value:

1. Timely, open and honest communication with stakeholders about progress, challenges, and decision-making.
2. Accountability across both sectors for actions and decisions, promoting a culture of responsibility.
3. Adherence to established guidelines on ethical behaviour and decision-making.
4. Commissioning, grant & procurement processes are transparent and consistent.
5. Clear arrangements for managing change to policy, programmes, and services.

Active Participation

A shared commitment to the active participation of all stakeholders in Northern Ireland, which acknowledges and seeks to address inequalities of power.

This is rooted in the shared belief that communities and people have the right, and should be empowered to, identify their own needs and interests and the outcomes required to meet these.

Ways of working that will deliver for this value:

1. Participatory approaches to formulating public policy underpinned by strategic commitment and investment.
2. Capacity building and resources to empower stakeholders to effectively participate in decision making and discussions.
3. Informed and deliberative approaches and processes valuing relevant expertise and lived experience.
4. Inclusive mechanisms that ensure diverse voices are taken into account in decision-making processes.
5. Participation methods are regularly monitored and reviewed to identify and address any power imbalances.

Social Justice

A shared commitment to human rights, equality, and anti-discrimination. This involves promoting, advancing, and protecting human rights and equality in our society while recognising the intersectional impacts of inequality and discrimination experienced by individuals, groups, and communities.

Ways of working that will deliver for this value:

1. Uphold and promote international human rights standards.
2. Act with due regard to statutory Section 75 and Rural Need commitments.
3. Advocate for policies that support marginalised individuals and communities.
4. Pursue and prioritise work that will help to address inequalities.
5. Ensure work to tackle inequalities is informed by lived experiences.

Independence

A shared understanding of the need for an independent, resilient, and sustainable voluntary and community sector to meet shared societal outcomes; recognising and supporting the sector's legal rights to give voice to civic society, to participate in, shape, comment and challenge public policy and decision making and to determine and manage its own affairs.

Ways of working that will deliver for this value:

1. Maintain organisational autonomy while seeking ways to collaborate and engage with government.
2. Articulate and communicate the sector's rights and responsibilities to engage in policy discussions.
3. Support the sector's capacity to challenge, innovate and add value to public policy and decision-making.
4. Sustain investment and resourcing of the work of the sector.

Collaboration

A shared commitment to promoting and sustaining opportunities for relationship building, collaboration and partnership working between our sectors, and to broadening shared experience and understanding, for the benefit of the communities and people we serve.

Ways of working that will deliver for this value:

1. A culture of collaboration and cooperation across the sectors is fostered.
2. Platforms for regular interaction and knowledge-sharing between the sectors are available.
3. Participatory and collaborative approaches to formulating public policy and programmes are championed and resourced.
4. A mutually agreed set of values and principles for collaboration and ‘partnership-working’ is agreed and adopted.
5. Improved inter-sector engagement in planning and co-design of programmes and public services.

Sustainability

A shared commitment to climate justice and sustainable development, including promoting cultural, environmental, economic, and socially sustainable policies and practices.

Ways of working that will deliver for this value:

1. Promotion and investment in working practices that are environmentally and socially just and sustainable.
2. Sustainability considerations are integrated into decision-making processes.
3. Advocate for climate justice and the importance of sustainable practices among stakeholders.

Summary of key commitment in Section 2:

The Department will support the Joint Forum to bring forward proposals for the renewal of the strategic agreement or “Concordat” between government and the sector

Citizen Space [LINK](#)

Please go to questions (6-10) if you would like to share your thoughts on this section

Section 3:

Vision and Outcomes

This section describes the vision and the range of outcomes which government investment in sector infrastructure can achieve.

Our Ambition for Sector Infrastructure Support

The Voluntary and Community Sector is comprised of a diverse range of independent organisations. This document does not claim to speak on behalf of such a diverse sector or to state what the sector sees as a vision for itself or for society.

However, as the lead government department working on behalf of this sector, DfC has a responsibility to set out a clear vision for what strategic government support and investment can achieve. The following vision and framework of outcomes has been developed in discussion with sector representatives over recent months. The vision captures the key elements of shared interest between government and the sector and the outcomes elaborate on that vision, under four (interconnected) headline areas: Leadership and Advocacy; Volunteering; Core capacity and Resilience; Collaboration and Partnership. The vision and outcomes below articulate “what success looks like” and will be the basis for future investment and evaluation of impact by the Department.

Vision:

“A confident, independent and collaborative sector which empowers and sustains local action and volunteering; a sector that represents the diversity of our communities and supports the delivery of inclusive and accessible services and programme for government outcomes through partnership, innovation and challenge”

Leadership and Advocacy headline outcome:

Strong leadership and effective advocacy within the sector promotes the interests of our diverse communities and enables community connection and engagement.

Supporting Outcomes:

- Sector leaders have skills and confidence to support their organisations and communities.
- Sector leaders work together around shared issues.
- Sector leadership is diverse and representative of the sector and communities.
- Data and evidence from the sector is effectively collated, analysed and communicated.
- Public policy and decision making (central and local government) is informed by evidence from the sector (including the lived experience of people in our communities).

Volunteering headline outcome:

Volunteering activity is enabled and supported to maximise benefits for individuals, organisations and communities.

Supporting Outcomes:

- People volunteering with organisations are well supported and valued.
- Voluntary management committees can access the support they need.
- The value and impact of volunteering is understood and communicated.
- Organisations in the sector are supported to recruit and manage volunteers.
- Volunteer management skills are developed within organisations.
- Volunteer opportunities are accessible.
- People volunteering are representative of our diverse communities.

Core Capacity and Resilience headline outcome:

Core capacity and resilience of organisations within the sector is sustained and further developed to enable people and communities to thrive.

Supporting Outcomes:

- Voluntary and community organisations can access a range of support which meets diverse needs.
- Organisations are supported to work effectively within a changing funding and regulatory framework.
- Organisations are supported to demonstrate the impact of their work.
- Organisations are supported to access funding and diversify income.
- Organisations are supported to acquire, develop and sustain assets.

Collaboration and Partnership headline outcome:

Effective collaboration and partnership enhance the impact of the sector's work.

Supporting Outcomes:

- Sector infrastructure convenes diverse and representative partnerships and networks.
- Sector-led partnerships support effective engagement with government.
- Sector-led partnerships support local resilience and civil contingencies arrangements.
- Collaboration and partnership enable peer support and sharing of knowledge, skills and competence.
- Collaboration and partnerships support organisations to sustain services and improve their impact.

Citizen Space **LINK**

Please go to questions 11 to 24 if you would like to share your thoughts on this section

Section 4: Delivering the Ambition

This section sets out proposals for how the Department will work with the sector and other partners to deliver against the ambition of the vision and outcomes described in Section 3.

Delivering Outcomes: Supporting the Vision

Delivering against the ambition of the proposed vision and outcomes of this framework will require sustained investment from government in sector infrastructure and improvements to how we work with and for the sector.

Our recent engagement and discussion with stakeholders points to **five key areas** where the Department for Communities can lead and deliver in support of sector outcomes:

1. **Creating effective partnerships:** working with sector partners, with government and independent funders.
2. **Sustained investment in sector infrastructure:** commissioning an integrated framework of support geared towards a common outcomes framework.
3. **Creating a more enabling regulatory and policy environment:** delivering the agreed reforms to charity regulation and strategic policy.
4. **Applying and championing improved funding practices:** exploring, developing, applying and sharing good practice.
5. **Improving understanding about the work and impact of the sector:** collating, interpreting and sharing data and evidence.

The following pages set out more detail and specific proposals for these five key areas.

Citizen Space **LINK**

Please go to question 25 if you would like to share your thoughts on this section

1. Delivering outcomes through effective delivery partnerships:

The Department for Communities recognises that how we identify and work with partners is critical and will require sustained commitment over time that enables trust and effective working relationships. This section focuses on the Department's direct relationship with sector infrastructure organisations and local government.

Sectoral Infrastructure Partnerships:

We will work in partnership with **sector infrastructure organisations** to ensure effective delivery against the agreed vision and outcomes.

In targeting and prioritising our investment we will seek to:

- Commission sectoral support from within the voluntary and community sector.
- Prioritise our investment based on evidence of need and impact and the track record of infrastructure organisations.
- Build on existing assets in the voluntary and community sector (people assets, physical assets, digital assets) and avoid unnecessary competition.
- Encourage and facilitate collaboration between delivery partners and support a network of organisations capable of

connecting and working together (investing in an integrated, collaborative offering).

- Invest in a baseline of core infrastructure support that is complementary to other more specialist support available to the sector (linked to either government or independent funders).
- Invest in the core costs of organisations which are capable of making a substantial impact against the outcomes framework.
- Develop an integrated reporting framework that allows us to measure, record and share information on the impact of departmental investment and the contribution of sector infrastructure to the desired outcomes.

The complexity and diversity of the VCS can also be seen in the shape of current sector infrastructure provision and the range of partnership and engagement structures or mechanisms. The Department for Communities is not the only government supporter of sector infrastructure and nor should it be. The nature of the sector means that both public and independent funders have an interest in supporting capacity building linked to specific policy priorities. This includes funding specialist sectoral support organisations and also direct investment in organisational capacity building, for example through the Dormant Accounts Fund.

The distinctive role for the Department for Communities is in our support for a core number of infrastructure organisations which can deliver a baseline of support for the sector against the range of outcomes identified.

This continued strategic support from DfC will not displace other more specialist and technical support but we will simplify and streamline our current arrangements and create better synergies between the different levels of support available.

The section below outlines in more detail how we envisage the complementary roles of regional and sub-regional or sub-sectoral partners:

Regional (cross sectoral) support

The Department will seek to work with a **regional infrastructure delivery partnership** covering the whole of NI, capable of designing and delivering appropriate training and support and with the resources to convene and support sector leaders at a regional level (including supporting a network of community infrastructure partners) and deliver an integrated programme of research and data development for the sector.

Role of Regional Infrastructure Anchor: In line with our commitment to build on existing assets and avoid unnecessary competition within the sector the Department proposes to work with NICVA as a **Regional Infrastructure Anchor** in recognition of the unique role that NICVA has in terms of membership, networks, expertise and other assets. The Regional Anchor role will be complex and challenging and will require strong leadership and delivery capability and the Department considers that NICVA is best placed to fulfil this role.

Regional infrastructure partners: We propose to invite NICVA to co-design a programme of infrastructure support with a range of sector partners that can deliver against the full outcomes framework in a way that is balanced and inclusive. The Department will expect this partnership to deliver a range of core supports in line with our indicative priorities for investment, to include a focus on rural need, leadership, volunteering and asset ownership/management. The Regional Infrastructure Delivery Partnership will support and complement the contribution of a network of community infrastructure organisations providing a more localised tier of infrastructure support across different geographies and sub-sectors.

Sub-regional/Sub-sectoral support

The Department will seek to work with a network of **Community infrastructure partners** which supports the diversity of community and voluntary action across council areas. Community infrastructure partners will provide a baseline of community development and volunteering infrastructure support and will be expected to operate as a collaborative network. Community Infrastructure Partners will work closely with Regional Delivery Partners where appropriate to identify and meet sectoral support needs and the role will include delivery of direct training and advisory programmes, peer support and mentoring work, local convening and stakeholder engagement, survey and data collection.

The Department has identified the need for three types of **Community infrastructure partners**:

Community Infrastructure Organisations (sub-regional): Infrastructure organisations which meet the general infrastructure support needs of VCS organisations in a defined geographical area, providing inclusive, accessible services to any organisation operating in a locality.

Community Infrastructure Organisations (sub-sectoral): Infrastructure organisations which support a significant sub-sector of organisations working on behalf of a vulnerable demographic and where those organisations have distinct infrastructure support needs arising from the nature of their work, that aren't met through general infrastructure support.

Volunteer Centres: Infrastructure organisations that provide support and expertise within the local community to potential volunteers, existing volunteers and organisations that involve volunteers. The Department will invest in the core work of a network of volunteer centres to support the identified volunteering outcomes.

Partnership with local government:

The Department for Communities works with local government across a wide range of shared policy interests. Local government initiatives on community development have been supported by DfC under the longstanding “Community Support Programme” which dates back to 1975.

The Department for Communities recognises the distinct role of local government in supporting grassroots community development activity within council areas which will be enabled and enhanced by the provision of high quality regional and sub-regional sectoral infrastructure support.

We will work with local government to redesign the community development element of the Community Support Programme and align it with the vision, outcomes and delivery priorities of the Voluntary and Community Sector Infrastructure Support Framework.

Summary of commitments in Section 4.1

Create new range of partnerships with sector infrastructure organisations to support delivery against the outcomes framework

Redesign the Community Support Programme in partnership with local government.

Citizen Space [LINK](#)

Please go to questions 26 to 28 if you would like to share your thoughts on this section

2. Delivering outcomes through sustained investment in sector infrastructure:

We will invest in sector infrastructure partners to deliver regional and sub-regional programmes of support to organisations across the sector to meet the ambition of the proposed outcomes.

Indicative priorities for investment against each headline outcome are summarised in the pages below, reflecting the needs highlighted through our sector-wide survey and engagement events.

The Department's commissioning process will:

- support sectoral participation on the detail of these programmes.
- support collaboration with other government funders aligned to shared policy outcomes.

Final decisions on investment priorities will be subject to budget availability and the proposals received through the commissioning process.

Headline outcome: Strong leadership and effective advocacy within the sector promotes the interests of our diverse communities and enables community connection and engagement.

Supporting Outcomes

- Sector leaders have skills and confidence to support their organisations and communities.
- Sector leaders work together around shared issues.
- Sector leaders are representative of the diversity of our communities.
- Relevant data and evidence from the sector is effectively collated, analysed and communicated.
- Government policy and decision making is informed by evidence from the sector.

Indicative Priorities for Investment

- Leadership development (developing leadership capacity within VCS organisations at different levels, including a focus on staff retention, succession planning, driving change and growth, peer mentoring).
- Support for advocacy and effective representation (developing the skills and knowledge within organisations).
- Development and sharing of good practice on inclusive engagement methods.
- Knowledge exchange mechanisms (both virtual and in-person; formal and informal; networks, seminars, conferences etc).
- Digital communication resources (to maximise reach and impact and enable effective sharing and dissemination of information).
- Research creating meaningful data and supporting a greater understanding of the health and impact of the voluntary and community sector.
- Building skills and confidence on participatory methods and practices throughout the sector.

Headline outcome: Volunteering activity is enabled and supported to maximise benefits for individuals, organisations and communities

Supporting Outcomes

- People volunteering with organisations are well supported and valued.
- Voluntary management committees can access the support they need.
- The value and impact of volunteering is understood and communicated.
- Organisations in the sector are supported to recruit and manage volunteers.
- Volunteer management skills are developed within organisations.
- People volunteering are representative of our diverse communities.
- Volunteer opportunities are accessible.

Indicative Priorities for Investment

- Supporting the core work of volunteer centres (Infrastructure organisations that provide support and expertise within the local community to potential volunteers, existing volunteers and organisations that involve volunteers. The Department will invest in the core work of a network of volunteer centres to support the identified volunteering outcomes).
- Supporting the work of volunteers in management positions (developing skills and knowledge of, for example, volunteers on management boards and also support to encourage increased levels of volunteering in this area).
- Digital resources to support volunteering : accessible, user-friendly resources, to promote advice, guidance, volunteer-matching.
- Research to improve available data and increase understanding on issues affecting volunteering, the impact of volunteering and the future of volunteering.
- Outreach and communication to promote awareness and volunteer recruitment
- Recognition and reward initiatives for volunteers.

Headline outcome: Core capacity and resilience of organisations within the sector is sustained and developed

Supporting Outcomes

- Voluntary and community organisations can access a range of support which meets diverse needs.
- Organisations are supported to work within a changing funding and regulatory framework.
- Organisations are supported to demonstrate the impact of their work.
- Organisations are supported to access funding and diversify income.
- Organisations are supported to acquire, develop and sustain assets.
- Income diversification (including accessing funding sources; income generation; tender writing and fundraising).
- Business planning and Innovation.
- Governance.
- Monitoring, impact measurement, and reporting.
- Acquiring, developing and managing assets (acquisition and development of land and buildings; support to manage and maximise assets including marketing, increasing accessibility and sign-posting to properly utilise and level up existing facilities).

Indicative priorities for investment

- Online resources (maintaining key data relevant to the sector including funding sources and regulation).
- Directory of local infrastructure support, better signposting to increase awareness of support available.
- Training programmes and resources (digital and in-person delivery with a flexibility to meet diverse needs), including post training consolidation and support/ peer mentoring, with a focus on:
 - HR, staff recruitment and development, succession planning.
 - Building resilience; being responsive and flexible to meet changing/emerging needs.
 - Ad hoc support and advice in response to changing needs.

Headline outcome: Effective collaboration and partnership enhance the impact of the sector's work

Supporting Outcomes

- Sector infrastructure convenes diverse and representative partnerships and networks.
- Sector-led partnerships support effective engagement with government.
- Sector-led partnerships support community resilience and the NI Civil Contingencies Framework.
- Collaboration and partnership enable peer support and sharing of knowledge, skills and competence.
- Collaboration and partnerships support organisations to sustain services and improve their impact.

Indicative priorities for investment

- Development and facilitation of a strategic stakeholder forum for VCS and government (currently the Joint Forum between government and the VCS).
- Development and facilitation of regional networks of infrastructure organisations, increasing connectivity and supporting relationship building (to include all DfC supported infrastructure partners).
- Development and coordination of peer learning/peer exchange programme (learning from Community Academy model and Collaboration NI).
- Development and facilitation of a VCS Civil Contingencies/Resilience Partnership.

Summary of commitment in Section 4.2:

Renew investment in sector infrastructure supports

Citizen Space [LINK](#)

Please go to questions 29 to 37 if you would like to share your thoughts in on section

3. Delivering outcomes through improved regulation of charities

The Department for Communities is committed to creating a more enabling regulatory environment for the Voluntary and Community Sector through the implementation of the recommendations arising from the Independent Review of Charity Regulation in NI

The Report of the Independent Review of Charity Regulation was published on 20 January 2022 and represents a significant opportunity to improve charity regulation in NI. It comprises 93 recommendations which cover a number of linked themes and represents a significant opportunity to make much needed improvements in charity regulation (for both charities and their beneficiaries), with the desired outcome to see the Charity Commission for Northern Ireland (the Commission) becoming an enabling regulator.

The Department's response to the Independent Review was published in November 2022. The Department is developing one-year and five-year action plans to take forward the recommendations **of the Independent Review of Charity Regulation in NI, including:**

- A prospective Scheme of Delegation for the Commission to allow some of its statutory functions to be delegated to staff in accordance with the Charities Act (Northern Ireland) 2022.
- The introduction of Charitable Incorporated Organisations, a legal form for charities (already available in England and Wales, and Scotland) that would provide protections for trustees and eliminate dual regulation with Companies House.
- A Charities Bill to implement approximately 20 recommendations such as those linked to proportionality of annual reporting, amendment of errors in the original drafting of s167 of the Charities Act (Northern Ireland) 2008 (which is unique to NI and deals with charities registered in another jurisdiction but operating for charitable purposes in NI), and additional powers for the Commission, such as a statutory warning power.

In addition, a cross-sectoral working group is currently developing consultation materials to support the introduction of a £20k registration threshold for charities.

The Commission's three year Strategic and annual Business Plans will set out how the Commission will take forward the recommendations that fall to them. More information can be found on **The Charity Commission for Northern Ireland (charitycommissionni.org.uk)**

Summary of Commitment in Section 4.3

Improve the regulation of charities

Citizen Space [LINK](#)

Please go to question 38 if you would like to share your thoughts on this section

4. Delivering outcomes through improved funding practices:

The Department recognises that our funding practices are a key factor in our ability to create and sustain effective partnerships with sector infrastructure organisations, and more widely to meet the challenge of “fair funding” and proportionate 'bureaucracy' in the funding relationship between government and the sector.

The current framework of rules and guidance that governs the funding relationship with the VCS is interpreted and applied differently by different funders. Sometimes this is justifiable and necessary, depending for example on the nature of a project, the track record of a delivery organisation and the level of risk involved. In other cases, it arises from poor funding practices and leads to an unnecessary bureaucratic burden which, at worst, can undermine the intended outcomes of the funding investment. We are committed to learning from others to improve our funding practices and, where needed, to identify scope for public sector improvement and changes to the current framework of governance to better support outcomes for the sector and citizens. We will continue to work across government, local government and non-government funders to identify and share good practice.

Our key mechanisms for this will be the Joint Forum between government and the VCS and the NI Funder’s Forum.

The commissioning of new infrastructure support programmes will be used as an opportunity for the Department to apply and demonstrate good practice: fair funding in support of the framework of outcomes; recognising the need for flexibility over the lifetime of programmes in response to changing sectoral needs and/or delivery challenges; applying “full cost recovery” through a contribution to core organisational costs and committing to longer term (three to five year) funding allocations to sustain delivery and support organisations to meet outcomes.

Summary of Commitment in Section 4.4

Support strategic relationships with government and non-government funders

Apply and champion fair and improved funding practices

Citizen Space [LINK](#)

Please go to question 39 if you would like to share your thoughts on this section

5. Delivering outcomes through improving understanding about the work and impact of the sector

The Department recognises that we need to make improvements to how we commission, collate, consider and communicate data if we want to understand what the sector needs and how best to support those needs. This will require a focus on both qualitative and quantitative information.

Sector infrastructure organisations are a rich source of information and insight on the health and impact of the sector, arising from their direct work with people involved at all levels across the sector. Working with delivery partners, we will develop an integrated reporting and evaluation framework that will allow us to capture and understand the key metrics and indicators that should shape the delivery of infrastructure support.

We also recognise the need for robust data on the “big picture” dynamics within the VCS that are of interest to a wide range of policy makers, funders and organisations. We will work with sector partners, NISRA, government, independent funders and academia to develop our evidence base and promote understanding of the sector.

Summary of Commitment in Section 4.5

Boost data on the VCS

Improve understanding of the VCS

Citizen Space [LINK](#)

Please go to question 40 if you would like to share your thoughts on this section

Summary of Commitments

Commitment	Timeframes ⁶	Who will drive delivery?
Bring forward proposals for the renewal of the strategic agreement or “Concordat” between government and the sector	Proposals to a new Executive in 2024 to support the next programme for government period.	The Joint Forum between Government and the VCS
Create new range of partnerships with sector infrastructure organisations to support delivery against the outcomes framework	In place from 2025	The Department for Communities with other departments and sector infrastructure partners
Redesign the Community Support Programme in partnership with local government	Co-design period: 2024 Implementation: 2025 onwards	The Department for Communities with other departments and NI local government Councils (community development, community planning and civil contingencies)
Renew investment in sector infrastructure supports	Commissioning in 2024 Implementation from 2025	The Department for Communities and other relevant departments.
Improve the regulation of charities	Five year plan (2023 – 2028)	The Department for Communities The Charity Commission for Northern Ireland

⁶ Timeframes are subject to decisions of Ministers

Commitment	Timeframes ⁶	Who will drive delivery?
Support strategic relationships with government and non-government funders	Ongoing – from now, aligned to PfG and funding cycles	The Department for Communities The Joint Forum Funders Forum for Northern Ireland
Apply and champion improved funding practices	Commissioning 2024 New multi-year funding arrangements in place from 2025 Oversight and reporting – 3-5 years	The Department for Communities The Joint Forum
Boost data and insight on impact of the VCS	2025 onwards – aligned to new infrastructure partnerships	The Department for Communities Infrastructure partners NI Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) and NTU Data Insight Lab
Improve understanding of the VCS	2025 onwards	The Department for Communities and other departments Infrastructure partners The Joint Forum

Annex 1 - Arrangements to support public consultation:

We are inviting responses via [Citizen Space](#) or vcsinfrastructure@communities-ni.gov.uk by **9 February 2024**.

We are keen to discuss the proposals outlined in this draft framework and will be running a number of in-person and online events to support further stakeholder engagement.

Details of events can be found at:

[Community and Voluntary Sector Infrastructure Support - future plans | Department for Communities \(communities-ni.gov.uk\)](#)

If you require this document in an alternative format or if you have any other questions please contact: vcsinfrastructure@communities-ni.gov.uk

Annex 2 - Pre-consultation engagement and evidence gathering

The Annex 2 document, which can be found on the [DfC website](#) provides:

- A summary of evidence and what we heard through our pre-consultation engagement
- An overview of our engagement methodology, including reference group information
- A summary of reading and desk resources

Annex 3 - Statutory Assessments

Section 75, Equality and Good Relations:

Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 requires public authorities, in carrying out their functions relating to Northern Ireland, to have due regard to the need to promote equality between all Section 75 groups.

Without prejudice to these obligations, the Department is also required, in carrying out its functions relating to Northern Ireland, to have due regard to the desirability of promoting good relations between persons of different religious belief, political opinion or racial group.

Equality screening of this policy framework has identified no adverse impacts. On this basis, the decision is that the policy framework should not be subject to a full equality impact assessment.

Rural Needs Impact Assessment: The Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 introduced a new duty on NI departments, district councils and other public authorities to have due regard to rural needs when developing, adopting, implementing or revising policies, strategies and plan and when designing and delivering public services.

The Department, under a commitment to rural proof, is also required to identify the potential impact on rural areas and if appropriate, make adjustments to take account of rural circumstances. As part of development of this draft framework, issues in relation to the social and economic needs of people in rural areas have been identified and taken into consideration with the aim of providing balanced infrastructure support provision which meets the needs of organisations operating in both urban and rural areas.

If you wish to comment, you have the opportunity to do so by responding to the relevant questions

Citizen Space [LINK](#)

Please go to questions 41 & 42 if you would like to share your thoughts on this section

Annex 4: Privacy, Confidentiality and Access to Consultation Responses

For this consultation, we may publish all responses except for those where the respondent indicates that they are an individual acting in a private capacity (e.g. a member of the public). All responses from organisations and individuals responding in a professional capacity will be published. We will remove email addresses and telephone numbers from these responses; but apart from this, we will publish them in full. For more information about what we do with personal data please see our consultation privacy notice.

Your response, and all other responses to this consultation, may also be disclosed on request in accordance with the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA) and the

Environmental Information Regulations 2004 (EIR); however all disclosures will be in line with the requirements of the Data Protection Act 2018 (DPA) and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (UK) 2016/679.

If you want the information that you provide to be treated as confidential it would be helpful if you could explain to us why you regard the information you have provided as confidential, so that this may be considered if the Department should receive a request for the information under the FOIA or EIR.

Available in alternative formats.

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