



Subject:	Voluntary and Community Sector Infrastructure Support Framework- Draft Framework: Draft BCC Consultation response
Date:	6 February 2024
Reporting Officer:	David Sales, Strategic Director of City and Neighbourhood Services
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Restricted Reports	
Is this report restricted?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Please indicate the description, as listed in Schedule 6, of the exempt information by virtue of which the council has deemed this report restricted.	
Insert number <input type="checkbox"/>	
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Information relating to any individual2. Information likely to reveal the identity of an individual3. Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the council holding that information)4. Information in connection with any labour relations matter5. Information in relation to which a claim to legal professional privilege could be maintained6. Information showing that the council proposes to (a) to give a notice imposing restrictions on a person; or (b) to make an order or direction7. Information on any action in relation to the prevention, investigation or prosecution of crime	
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Call-in	
Is the decision eligible for Call-in?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

1.0	Purpose of Report/Summary of Main Issues
1.1	The main purpose of this report is to advise members of Department for Community (DfC) consultation relating to the Voluntary and Community Sector Infrastructure Support Framework and seek members' approval for the draft response to be submitted in advance of the deadline of 9 th February 2024.
2.0	Recommendation
2.1	Members are asked: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To note the consultation exercise, consider the draft response that has been prepared and approve that this is submitted as a formal council response. To note that the consultation ends on Friday 9th February and approve that the draft response is issued in advance of that deadline. Any additional comments from February Council can be issued by officers to DfC after the formal end date of 9th February.
3.0	Main Report
3.1	<p>Background information</p> <p>Members may be aware that DfC is carrying out a programme of work aimed at refreshing the policy frameworks for its voluntary and community sector support. To this end, a consultation was launched by the Department on 15 November 2023. The current open consultation relates to DfC's investment in the voluntary and community sector infrastructure support. This investment is currently made primarily through organisations operating at a regional level such as NICVA, Advice NI and Volunteer Now.</p> <p>The Department's engagement took place between March and June 2023 and involved a range of methods to inform the shape and design of new policy and funding frameworks. This included the formation of a stakeholder's reference group, open invitation workshops, roundtable discussions, targeted workshops with different subsectors such as Age, LGBTQ+, Minority Ethnic communities, Disability, Women's sector, and local government officers as well as a survey to explore headline needs and priorities.</p>
3.2	<p>Sector infrastructure organisations are defined as'... 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).</p> <p>The full consultation document, supporting materials and online questionnaire can be accessed at Voluntary and Community Sector Infrastructure and Support Policy Framework - NI Direct - Citizen Space The following is a summary of the main elements.</p>
3.3	The draft framework identifies an overarching vision of "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,

	<p>innovation and challenge”. It identifies the need for a spectrum of infrastructure support across four headline areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leadership and Advocacy • Collaboration and Partnerships • Capacity Building (practical skills and resilience) and • Volunteering <p>The infrastructure support framework is built on six core values;</p> <p>Value 1: Accountability Value 2: Active Participation Value 3: Social Justice Value 4: Independence Value 5: Collaboration Value 6: Sustainability</p>
3.4	<p>The framework identifies five key areas where the DfC can lead and deliver in support of sector outcomes:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 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
3.5	<p>Although this consultation is centred on the framework to support to regional organisations DfC also notes that it will work with local government to redesign the community development element of the Community Support Programme (CSP) and align it with the vision, outcomes and delivery priorities of the Voluntary and Community Sector Infrastructure Support Framework.</p> <p>Members will be aware that Council received significant funding through the CSP. Officers received approval at last month’s committee to develop a new Community Support Plan for the city and engagement with DfC will form part of that work to ensure that any emerging plan aligns with any changes to the Community Support Programme and any other relevant programmes.</p>
3.6	<p>Response to Consultation</p> <p>The draft Belfast City Council response to this consultation is provided in Appendix 1. Members are asked to consider this document and approve its submission as the formal Belfast City consultation response.</p>
3.7	<p>The key elements to note in the response are;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognition that DfC provided a range of engagement methodologies during its information gathering stage that was appropriate and inclusive.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The draft Framework clearly articulates DfC’s intention and sets out the infrastructure support needs, core values, vision, headline outcomes and identified areas where DfC can maximise its impact. • Council broadly agrees that each element of the framework sets out reasonable ambitions that will underpin support to regional support organisations which are relevant to the implementation of the framework. • The draft framework presents the DfC’s intention and is high level, Council’s response notes that resourcing and implementing the aspirations outlined have yet to be discussed and that this should include consideration of the CSP and how local organisations are supported. There is reference in the framework to sustainability, collaboration, partnership working and accountability. These are areas that require further consideration and explanation. • Although focussed on regional infrastructure organisations, the council response notes that there is little reference to the relevance of these organisations in supporting smaller groups, neighbourhood community based organisations and communities of interest. The definition of support provided by Community Infrastructure Organisations (sub-regional), Community Infrastructure Organisations (sub-sectoral) and Volunteer Centres is useful but further detail on how these will interact with each other to provide accessible support should be considered. • The role of Local Authorities is mentioned but is very limited. The response highlights that the role of local council in providing support to the sector, through provision of funding and investment and partnership working needs to be specified in the Framework. In particular, Community Planning needs to be specified in the Framework and its function and relationship with regional support organisations elaborated on. • The response reiterates the need to work with local government to redesign the community development element of the Community Support Programme. <p><u>Financial and Resource Implications</u> No implications at present for Belfast City Council</p> <p>3.8</p> <p><u>Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment</u> No implications at present for Belfast City Council</p> <p>3.9</p>
4.0	Appendices - Documents Attached
4.1	Appendix 1 – Draft Belfast City Council Response to Voluntary and Community Sector Infrastructure Support Framework

Appendix 1- Voluntary and Community Sector Infrastructure Support Framework - Draft Framework: Draft BCC Consultation response

Overview

The Department is carrying out a programme of work aimed at refreshing the policy frameworks for our voluntary and community sector support. This includes agreeing with our partners on the outcomes that we should prioritise in future years. A review of sectoral needs will inform how we can better support the sector to deliver outcomes set out in any future Programme for Government.

Engagement

As part of this review, we engaged with a wide range of organisations in the sector, to draw together their collective experiences, understand key priorities and needs, listen to ideas and opinions, and add voice and input to help us shape future programmes for whom the refresh will deliver. We have also engaged with other departments, local government, independent funders and established a reference group comprising of a range of sectoral interests.

Our engagement approach involved a range of methods to inform the shape and design of new policy and funding frameworks and took place between March and June 2023.

Definition

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).

Identified Needs

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

Core Values and Ways of Working

Value 1: 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.

Value 2: Active Participation

A shared commitment to the active participation of all stakeholders in Northern Ireland, which seeks to address inequalities of power and ensures genuine opportunities for participation, involvement, and influence. 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.

Value 3: 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.

Value 4: 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.

Value 5: 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.

Value 6: Sustainability

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

Belfast City Council strongly agrees with the values and practices outlined as a way of supporting the relationship between Government and the Voluntary and Community Sector.

Resourcing and implementing the aspirations outlined have yet to be discussed and that this should include consideration of the CSP and how local organisations are supported. There is reference in the framework to sustainability, collaboration, partnership working and accountability. These are areas that require further consideration and explanation. The section on collaboration should include reference to local authorities as a key sector/stakeholder in this work, particularly through the Community Support Programme and Community planning structures and opportunities.

Belfast City Council strongly agrees that a future Concordat/agreement would be strengthened if a legal duty were created to require NI Executive Ministers to act in compliance with the concordat values and practices when making decisions and carrying out ministerial responsibilities.

Belfast City Council has no preference on the term used to refer to a wider range of "civil society" organisations: a very broad definition that includes everything outside the state (public sector) and the market (private sector).

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"

Belfast City Council strongly agrees with the intention of Vision within the context of delivering on government outcomes. Further thought will be given to how the Vision relates to our Community Planning outcomes, themes and priorities.

Headline Outcomes

The Department has developed 4 headline outcomes to articulate what success looks like against this vision:

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.

Volunteering headline outcome

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

Collaboration and Partnership headline outcome

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

Belfast City Council strongly agrees with the four headline outcomes. However, we recognise that the outcomes also need to reflect that the VCSE sector works within a wider system that includes local government, communities, service users, funders, partnerships and networks and that all parts of that system need to play an active part.

Council notes that it would be useful to clarify the definition of sector-led and to clarify whether work be led by the VCSE sector. If this is the case, detail on how the VCSE sector will be resourced to undertake this work and what the governance arrangements will be to ensure accountability.

Delivering the Ambition

DfC's 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

Belfast City Council agrees with the five delivery areas.

Council welcomes the department's commitment to working in partnership with sector infrastructure organisations to ensure effective delivery against the agreed vision and outcomes and the creation of a regional infrastructure delivery partnership covering the

whole of NI. Further consideration should be given to the role of local government and community planning in delivering support and resources to achieve sector outcomes.

Belfast City Council welcomes the commitment to redesign the Community Support Programme in partnership with local government and align it with the vision, outcomes and delivery priorities of the Voluntary and Community Sector Infrastructure Support Framework. We welcome the Department for Communities recognition of 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.

Council suggests that further detail on how Community Infrastructure Organisations (sub-regional), Community Infrastructure Organisations (sub-sectoral) and Volunteer Centres will interact with each other to provide accessible support to small locally based organisations should be considered.

We welcome the intention to provide sustained investment. A commitment to fund organisations and service provision beyond short-term funding cycles and ensure sustainability will contribute significantly to achieving the stated Vision. Council agrees with the Indicative Priorities for Investment.

Measuring impact and sharing data will contribute significantly to our understanding of sector, its services and needs of the users and communities. We will give further thought to the how we gather and share this information and its contribution to evidence-based decision making.

Statutory Assessments

Belfast City Council agrees with the conclusion of the equality screening exercise.

Rural Needs Impact Assessment

Belfast City Council cannot identify any further issues that the proposed draft framework presents for rural communities at this time.