



Appendix 1: Belfast City Council draft response to the consultation on the Concordat between Government and Voluntary and Community Sector

1. We welcome the *Concordat* and the Executive's recognition of the important role the voluntary and community sectors (VCS) have to play in civic society.
2. In the foreword to the consultation the Minister acknowledges: *'All of us, in central and local government, public bodies, and the VCS share the ambition of improving public services, ensuring value for money, and making a difference to people's lives.'* The Minister continues, *'it is increasingly important that Government and VCS work in partnership to build a better society'*.

Belfast City Council welcomes this recognition by the Minister of the inter-dependence between sectors in building a strong civil society, including the roles of both central and local government.

3. However, in the body of *Concordat* the definition of 'government' appears to be restricted to central government and does not include reference to the role of local government. Belfast City Council would suggest that the interface between local and central government and the legislative frameworks within which they operate is central to the functions of civil society. The *Concordat* does not recognise this inter-dependence.
4. On 30th November 2010 the Environment Minister announced policy proposals for the reform of local government, commenting: *'Our vision is of a strong, dynamic local government that creates vibrant, healthy, prosperous, safe and sustainable communities that have the needs of all citizens at their core.'* Belfast City Council would suggest that this vision for strong, dynamic local government is reflected within the *Concordat*.
5. Increased collaborative working between local and central government and the VCS is important not only in reducing administrative burdens but, more importantly, in fostering creative opportunities for shared design, production and delivery of services. The need for greater co-operation and more effective approaches is heightened as demand for public services increase during a time of budget constraints.
6. Local government's current relationship with the VCS is considerable. Belfast City Council not only offers advice, support and funding to the sector through the work of our Community Services section, but we also have a large number of linkages through the work of many of our other council services and units – often in partnership with central government. For example our grant schemes that offer direct financial support to the VCS is partially funded through the DSD's Community Support plan which itself recognizes the key connecting role played by local government in work at the neighbourhood level with the community and voluntary sectors.

7. Local government is ideally placed to facilitate the move towards Community Planning and emerging Power of Well-being responsibilities. However, such proposals will bring long-term profound challenges as well as opportunities. In establishing that local government is best placed to identify local need the Executive must also acknowledge and identify the correlation between recent Bills, policies and strategies, which will impact on the remit of local authorities.
8. Given the important role of local government in both the current and planned future arrangements, Belfast City Council would have welcomed an opportunity to influence and be a partner in the development of the Concordat.
9. The Council welcomes the move beyond the 'principles' approach of the 1998 Compact. We applaud the inclusion of an agreed set of commitments to ensure the successful implementation of the new pledge and note that a body has been allocated responsibility to review progress and approve additions. However, the council is concerned that the current membership of the Joint Forum does not include representation from local government and suggest that this absence will further weaken the clear role that local government should play in support of the shared Concordat vision.
10. The Council would welcome an early review of the Terms of Reference and the Membership of the Joint Forum in order to address this and any other identified gaps. Furthermore, we feel that appropriate mechanisms should be agreed to ensure member engagement within their sectors in order to ensure a heightened awareness and ownership of the Concordat and to facilitate proactive involvement of, feedback to, and influence from, constituency groups.
11. The new Joint Forum should then review the current Commitment Programme to ensure it reflects the needs and opportunities of the enhanced partners.
12. Belfast City Council welcomes the commitment that partners should work together to implement an outcomes focus to funding. However, we feel that this outcomes approach should not be limited to funding arrangements but should be extended to all areas of partnership work.
13. The Council would welcome the inclusion of a Communications Plan to ensure awareness of and access to the principles and values set down in the new agreement. Furthermore this would support constituency influence of the Commitment Programme and accountability arrangements for its implementation. This would also ensure a collective responsibility to engage and to inform and thus improve engagement and involvement.
14. The Concordat should consider accountability arrangements for all partners. The current language would suggest that this focus is on the voluntary and community sector. Given the ethos of the Concordat and the stated principles and values, perhaps the language might be rephrased to recognize that accountability is a key responsibility for all partners.