The Future of the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise Sector in Northern Ireland

MAY 2018
BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

What is the future of our society?
What are the positive differences that our voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) organisations working together and with others can make to people’s lives and places into the future?
What needs to be done to create the environment to enable this sector – our sector – make those differences?

We are in chaotic and uncertain times. Locally we have no executive, assembly or properly functioning government and the ramifications when the United Kingdom leaves the European Union remain unknown. We are a more diverse yet still divided society. Locally and globally we have significant environmental challenges, conflicts, the acceleration in the use and impact of new technology in work and communications.
The world has changed hugely in the last 10 years and the coming decade will see more changes – how we and our children and grandchildren live, learn, work, communicate, travel, consume, are treated and cared for.

In the midst of those changes, like the many changes that have gone before, the desire of people to come together in communities of interest or place and work together for positive change will undoubtedly endure.

But enduring might mean just surviving and responding to change driven by others as opposed to having a role in shaping it and thriving.

We are not keen on an only just surviving voluntary, community and social enterprise sector here in Northern Ireland.

An only just surviving sector won’t realise the best outcomes for people and places.

In late 2016, with support from the Big Lottery Fund, we commenced our VCSE Futures project as a platform for the sector, its funders and policy makers to consider how to build an enabling environment that supports the sector to achieve the best outcomes for the people and places it works with.

This “Agenda for Change” is the culmination of that work. Work that has included:

• 16 regional and thematic consultation events with the sector, with funders and policy makers,
• desk research and consideration of other processes looking at the future issues facing the sector across the UK and in Great Britain including the NPC State of the Sector initiative and Civil Society Futures, the inquiry into the future of civil society in England, work by Big Lottery Fund and others
• the commissioning of 8 opinion pieces from a number of authors looking at issues as diverse as the future of the arts sector and the decline of adult education here.
Seven Key Areas

In this ‘Agenda for Change’ we have laid out the seven key areas that we have and suggest some actions associated with them that in our opinion could contribute to the future development of our sector and more importantly the positive differences made to people and places.

Our two priority areas for change and development are Voluntary Action and Civic Activism.

In our limited time remaining, before we close in December 2018, we will be working to highlight these issues and explore if and how they and the suggested actions might be endorsed and taken forward by the sector, funders and policy makers alike.

Whilst our work is concluding we believe there is a lesson for the future in how the leadership and resources of funders can be used differently and in transformative ways. We were a first for Northern Ireland, a life limited charitable Trust to focus on and support change. The need to focus on and support change remains for the future and we encourage others to consider carefully how that might best be done from here on.
Context

Our sector’s power doesn’t rely on organisational legal structures, it doesn’t rely on recruiting and employing staff, fundamentally it relies on people freely giving their time to help themselves and others achieve change. Voluntary action is underpinned by volunteering, without volunteers there is no voluntary sector.

Some ideas for action

If the work of volunteers and voluntary organisations in contributing to a better society is to be properly valued and encouraged then we need new ideas and approaches to develop and support volunteering and the sector needs to take the lead role in enabling this:

- Our new Programme for Government (PFG), for all its strengths, is poorer for the absence of an outcome focused on “Communities”, such as they have in Scotland “We have strong, resilient and supportive communities where people take responsibility for their own actions and how they affect others” – the sector could work together to advocate for this in an updated PFG.
- We endorse the calls and work by others for a Community Rights/Empowerment Act – a legislative framework for Northern Ireland that comprehensively supports our communities to do things for themselves, and to make their voices heard in the planning and delivery of services. It has the potential to be transformative.
- We need more radical action to develop volunteering here including involving young people (18 – 29) in organisation governance and older people in mission related work.
- Small organisations occupy a special place in our communities, this must be properly recognised with a need to provide comprehensive support for and remove barriers to their work with and their involvement of people.
- We need to review community development training and support and develop a plan to invest in theory and practice in communities. Community development should not mean - what can I get for my organisation and community?

Context

Our sector plays a crucial role in identifying peoples’ and communities needs with organisations then taking action both individually and collaboratively to meet those needs and/or hold others with responsibility to meet them to account. This ability to identify, articulate needs and to work to meet them has resulted in many organisations being contracted to help deliver public services. The support from government to the sector has changed over time to reflect this.

However, a key function of our sector is also in supporting and developing active citizens and in facilitating greater citizen involvement in public policy and decision making at all levels.

In a changing and uncertain Northern Ireland our sector can and should do much more to develop active citizens and play a greater role in policy and decision making. The lessons of our peace process have been shared around the world but now it’s time that we look outward to learn the lessons from elsewhere that put innovating and developing civic activism at the centre of relationships between the public and decision makers and inward to examine if and why our civic voice has stagnated and identify areas where this role is working well.

Some ideas for action

- A new collaborative initiative between independent funders and the sector could develop and support a suite of new and innovative civic activism projects across Northern Ireland connected to networks of best practice elsewhere.
- National Standards for Community Engagement have been developed for the public service in Scotland through the work of the Scottish Community Development Centre. Such an approach would be helpful here.
- Civic innovations such as participatory budgeting and participatory grant making have transformative potential, both public and independent funders can do more to support their development.
Our 5 key cross-cutting and enabling actions

We recognise the scope, scale and complexity of the work carried out by our sector right across Northern Ireland and beyond in both communities of interest and geography.

We have many thousands of organisations, paid staff and volunteers working to make lives and places better.

Our view is that two critical priorities for the future of the sector relate to its roles in enabling volunteering and developing more active citizens. These are flip sides of the same coin and are what distinguishes our sector from other sectors.

However, given the variety and the importance of the work of the sector in developing and delivering needed services, in providing services under contract and in advocating and campaigning for social change across a whole range of issues, we have also identified five cross-cutting themes where we believe action taken can help strengthen the sector in all of its roles and functions.

Context

Our sector is made up of organisations and people committed to making a positive difference to people and places. We must be clearer about the difference we plan to make and need to better understand and communicate whether or not we are making that or other differences.

A focus on impact practice can bring benefit to individual organisations, sub-sectors, funders and policy makers and in turn enable more of a difference be made to people and places. Our outcomes focused Programme for Government requires that we all act differently to plan and consider the difference we are making.

Some ideas for action

Much progress has been achieved through the work of Inspiring Impact UK, NI and other initiatives, but much more remains to be done to transform our funding, commissioning and delivery culture to one of planning and focusing resources and actions on outcomes and achieving them.

• We need to maintain a focus on supporting more and better impact practice within the sector, with funders and with policy makers – this can be achieved through future development of the Inspiring Impact Programme and also through commencement of the proposed new Regional Infrastructure Support Programme by government.

• We need actions to develop better relationships and understanding between the VCSE sector and other stakeholders in respect of the sector’s public service delivery role.

• We endorse the calls by others and the work done for a Social Value Act for Northern Ireland and suggest a review of procurement policy is also needed given the challenges of Brexit and the opportunities to be gained via localism.

Context

Innovation – the development and implementation of new and better solutions – is as much a necessity in our sector as it is in the private and public sector and it must be nurtured and supported in appropriate ways. Expecting it to happen by accident is not a strategy that will deliver good results.

More open and social innovation processes are appropriate in our sector as the function of innovation must be primarily on making more of an impact on needs as opposed to only growing individual organisations.

Some ideas for action

• We need innovation specific funding and support programmes for the VCSE sector in Northern Ireland including a particular focus on the potential uses of new and digital technology for mission related activity.

• We need to see the development and resourcing of social innovation policy within government and the embracing of that on a cross departmental basis in the context of our outcomes focused Programme for Government.

Context

We live in an unequal and still divided society where the complexity of and interrelationships between social issues and needs is increasingly recognised.

Our sector grapples with making a contribution to better lives and places within an often competitive contract culture and where joined up government remains an aspiration.

Yet we rarely work in isolation and positive change almost always relies on a combination of activities and organisations, often acting at different points in time.

We’ve gathered evidence that collaboration does make a positive difference to organisations beneficiaries.

We must think beyond organisational boundaries and consider how organisations and activities fit together as part of impact networks and then take risks and work together to achieve change. This type of impact focused collaboration will require significant time, effort and support.

Some ideas for action

• A dedicated support programme to support impact networks within the sector and involving other stakeholders where appropriate is needed.

• We need new and appropriate support arrangements to support other collaborative working arrangements including on an area basis, mergers, joint advocacy and so forth.
Some ideas for action

- Further analysis of the components of resilience and sustainability in our sector and in subsectors will help enable action to be taken through policy, practice, support and funding to support a more resilient and sustainable sector.
- We need the urgent release of the current Northern Ireland dormant accounts and plans for future dormant assets to support sustainable development of the sector and its work and impact.
- Grant making by public and independent funders is of critical importance to the work of the sector and its future development, there’s a need and opportunity to develop it through increasing both transparency and innovation. Such innovation can include longer term funding and simpler, more aligned reporting and new models of funding.
- We need to identify and remove bureaucratic and other barriers to the efficient and effective functioning of organisations to enable them to focus more on making a difference. It may be timely to look again at reducing bureaucracy in funding to the sector.

What needs to happen

- We need to take a range of actions – planning, resourcing, training and support to develop sector leadership at all levels and to enable a renewed and more resilient sector.
- Organisations need supported to develop and implement strategies and actions around succession for our leadership to be fit for the future
- Leadership development must encompass roles for beneficiaries and volunteers - we need to develop our activist leaders from the bottom up
- We need to consider and develop mechanisms to bring our thinking and action to old and new problems alike and develop our roles of thought leadership
- Our future impact and success will require leaders and leadership skills capable of leading networks and networked organisations this will take specific investment and support.

Context

Increasingly organisations in our sector are focused on managing services and worrying about sources and amounts of funding and income. The current priority seems to be survival.

Whilst we cannot predict the future, as organisations we can be prepared for it or even better as a sector we can invent it by demonstrating through our work what might be possible. The case studies throughout this document set out a brilliant array of examples of how organisations are adapting and responding to changing needs and circumstances.

If we want a better society, it isn't good enough that a key sector that can contribute to this is only just surviving and worse that there is an absence of both policy, resources and decision making to deal with this challenge.

We need a strong, confident, risk taking sector. A strong resilient sector can work better and together with others and make more of a difference to people and places.

Context

Being a leader, at whatever level, in our sector is challenging. Leaders are tasked with both leading social change and leading an organisation, with maintaining independence yet working collaboratively, with remaining people centred but using new technology, all in an unstable and changing context and often difficult financial circumstances.

The paradigm of the strong individual leader focused on sustaining an individual organisation is certainly redundant for the future, if it ever was considered an appropriate model for our sector in the past.

Leadership in our sector comprises both organisations and individuals with each playing complementary and often overlapping roles.

The leadership challenge for the future is for both individuals and organisations to lead networks and networked organisations as it is these more than anything else that will enable the impacts we are seeking to be accomplished.

This will require new thinking and action and development and resourcing of the right knowledge, skills and behaviours.
There is no single solution, simple or complex to be taken forward by any single entity to support the development of our sector in order that it can make more of a difference to people and places.

Within each of the 7 themes we have identified, we have suggested some key actions, there will be others, and it’s also the case that these themes are interdependent.

If progress is to be made it will require focused work, dedicated resources and genuine collaboration.

In our final months we are committed to working with key partners in the sector, its funders and policy makers to try and realise support and resources to take some actions forward.

We offer this document as both a challenge to and an opportunity for the sector, its funders and policy makers.

We are grateful to all who participated in this process and to the Big Lottery Fund who supported it. A special word of thanks goes to our facilitation team - Drs Helen McLaughlin and Pamela Montgomery and from the Interaction Institute for Social Change, Dr Louise O’Meara and Stevie Johnston.

This is summary version of the Agenda for Change Report. All the material from VCSE Futures is hosted on our website: www.buildingchangetrust.org/VCSE-Futures and we encourage you to consider it.