Building Change Trust hosted a round table discussion on the future shape of the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector in Northern Ireland.

What is your assessment of the current state of the sector in Northern Ireland and its preparedness to meet the challenges of the future, organisationally and societally?

Bill Osborne

A negative outlook is that without any government or continuity of funding, you’re not going to have a sector which is able to manage its affairs efficiently or effectively. It’s not fair that the sector which is delivering quite a substantive number of services to the disadvantaged, disaffected and the vulnerable, should have to depend on short-term funding.

On the other side of that, the resilience of individuals and groups of individuals within the sector ensures that ways and means are found to challenge and deliver. While the organisations may not be prepared, people themselves will respond and we see that through social media campaigns and crowd-funding. The issue for us within the sector is how we deal with these two opposites.

Julie Harrison

I feel consistently positive about the community and voluntary sector. It is a massively diverse sector, there is huge energy in it and people with lived experience can and should be listened to. They are the ones who continue to drive change in communities. However, there has always been a tension between the desire to work together to deliver outcomes and the reality experienced by community and voluntary sector groups in terms of partnership with the public sector. I think we have a way to go to genuinely understand that the sector is more than just about delivering services for somebody else.

Lauri McCusker

My assessment is broadly optimistic. It’s a busy world and people are time-poor, but we still have many good people who want to do their bit and are making a difference. Many communities in the part of the world that I live in are underpinned by the voluntary effort of credit unions, sporting organisations, pre-school education and faith-based organisations. There are challenges, but for many of those people they don’t look to government, they don’t look to Belfast and in many cases, they don’t even look as far as Enniskillen. They look to each other, to their neighbours and to their communities. I’m optimistic that this will continue.

Arthur Scott

The main concern is the uncertainty around funding. We’ve had a series of one-year budgets, which makes it very difficult to plan and to attract the right calibre of people to fill the paid positions within the community and voluntary sector. On the other hand, I continue to be inspired by the high levels of commitment that people demonstrate. You can’t buy the passion and value of volunteer effort.
One thing that we’re absolutely sure of is that, of the 9,000 voluntary and community groups in Northern Ireland, the vast majority of them have no financial relationship with government or any of its bodies. We forget about them when we start talking about the sector and we need to be a bit more conscious that there isn’t one sector. In that, one organisation doesn’t look like another.

The positive aspect is, the more activity pursued by people and organisations, the better the result for wider society. Even if I don’t participate, I may reap the benefits of a better, safer community where people will look out for each other. People in our organisations and sector will rise to challenges as they have done in the past.

Anne-Marie McClure

The Ulster Bank and CO3 Third Sector Index, which we have been compiling for several years, would qualify that our members continue to be optimistic about the future in spite of the challenges. However, the reductions in government funding and donations are a concern as that space becomes more contested. Many are highlighting a vulnerability in their cash flows, skills shortages, problems recruiting staff and leadership issues.

As a volunteer myself, I recognise the value of volunteerism. However, there is a challenge of recruiting younger people into the role and a recognition that volunteerism is not resource neutral. The wonderful thing is the people who adapt to the challenge are also keen to negotiate any problems.

What impact is the political stalemate having on the current and future work of the sector?

Arthur Scott

At the start of the stalemate a number of organisations approached us with innovative and new proposals about how to address social issues or particular situations where they thought they could make a difference. In the past we would have had the facility to put together a case and seek to secure funding but in the current position we’re unable to do that. That has been frustrating for the sector and for officials. In the interim we have engaged regularly with the sector and continue to do what we can within the existing parameters and programmes and the draft Programme for Government to try and support the sector with the challenges that face us.

Bill Osborne

An obvious example of the impact is the Reclaim Fund (NI Dormant Accounts). When I started as Chair of Building Change Trust that fund was around £0.5 million and today it’s touching upwards to £15 million. Failure to release that money to the sector doesn’t just lie with the current stalemate but obviously the lack of current decision-making has a very direct impact. During the worst period of austerity, we’ve had a fund that we haven’t been able to use for 10 years. Whether that’s because of political ineptitude or the current situation, it’s damnable. Especially when you look at how the rest of the UK is maximising that fund and making gains.

Seamus McAleavey

Failure to implement that scheme was due to a lack of political consensus and so the stalemate has been there a lot longer that the current situation. Where we find ourselves now is disastrous, both for the sector and Northern Ireland at large. The lack of decision-making is causing stagnation. We have also had four years of an annual budget process, which is no way to run a voluntary or community organisation, never mind the
whole of Northern Ireland. I would go further and say that the stalemate is doing damage. All of the services are becoming more and more impaired as time goes on.

Lauri McCusker
The Assembly’s role is to give oversight and direct policy development. Without it, we’re not only facing that lack of direction in managing resources but if we want to realise our goal of creating social change, we don’t have the ability to advance the legislative framework necessary in areas such as Community Rights to buy and a Social Value Act.

Anne-Marie McClure
The Ulster Bank and Co3 3rd Sector Index Q1 2018 shows 86 per cent of respondents recognised a negative impact on their organisation. Some of the main issues highlighted uncertainty and a lack of political leadership. Funding was also a major concern for some, but not all of our members. Some Co3 members are delivering much needed local services in good faith with no financial security.

I question the lack of a universal approach across the departments. The lack of a policy-led strategy has been raised but it is noticeable that the various departments are dealing with the sector in different ways. The Department of Justice, for example, has been moving forward with new programmes. I would ask why civil servants aren’t working better together to ensure that there is a conduit for the funding available.

Bill Osborne
The real impact is being felt because of a lack of decision-making. As citizens and as a sector we are being left totally disempowered. Not knowing what the future has in store, for many, is the frustrating bit. While we would all like to see devolution restored, there is an acknowledgement that it wasn’t perfect. However, if it’s not coming back, action needs to be taken that allows us to engage with a decision-making process.

Julie Harrison
There is a benign assumption that the current situation is steady state. It’s not. It’s at least stagnation and in some places, it is harmful. There is a lack of movement on the big challenging reforms and a lack of real engagement with people about the requirements of those reforms. It’s worth noting that the lack of a comprehensive spending review also makes it incredibly difficult for civil servants who also don’t know, year-on-year, how much they have and what they can continue do.

Lauri McCusker
Prior to the stalemate, there were agreements and parties were working together to some extent. In the absence of that, there is a return to ‘us and them’. What the sector hasn’t been able to do is find its voice and express their needs to those politicians. We haven’t been able to create a public discourse where people are campaigning for the return of an Executive. The danger is, particularly in the current climate of Brexit, that society is becoming passive to the current climate. We need to be conscious of the dangers of this in the long-term.

Where do you feel action is required for the future development of the sector?

Bill Osborne
We’ve engaged with a whole host of people over the last year to provide some sort of structure for people to think about the future. Some of the work we have been doing around civic activism involves encouraging people to think about the thought space within which a debate can be facilitated. This means leading and playing a part in that conversation, ensuring that we don’t become regarded merely as a service delivery mechanism for the State or others. We actually have a freedom to think and to articulate voices and concerns.
Lauri McCusker

One of the things we need to be very cognisant of is ensuring that the systems, structures and regulations being put in place do not discourage volunteerism. I am convinced by what I see day and daily that this is already happening. When making decisions we must ask ourselves, ‘does this encourage volunteerism, or does it not?’ Similarly, another area requiring action is the utilisation of technology in a way which delivers for the social good, rather than acts a hindrance. I don’t think the community and voluntary sector is having serious conversations around that. Increasingly, technology is contributing to social isolation, obesity, addiction and a reduction in social capital. This must be countered and technology’s social potential maximised.

Arthur Scott

From a policy perspective, it’s about increased collaboration and inclusive leadership through co-design and co-production. It’s about broadening the conversation to identify the best actions and how to prioritise the available funding. In terms of supporting civic activism, this could be enhanced through a place-making approach to policy interventions which helps people to articulate their needs, engage with officials about pursuing these and also to utilise skills and talents in local communities. Likewise, volunteering trends have changed – whereas once you may have had individuals joining an organisation and volunteering for 25 years or more, now there is much more evidence of episodic volunteering. Will there be the people to maintain the community led services that people have relied on and benefited from for years?

Julie Harrison

For me it’s not about structuring volunteering, it’s about listening to people in that space. We don’t always need to design policy solutions – sometimes people with lived experience have the answers. I suppose for us, as a funder, I think it’s our job to listen and support that. At another level, how does the sector continue to find its voice in the absence of politics and convene together? Everyone is having these conversations in their own silos, but we’re not all at City Hall looking for a return of the Executive. There is something to be said for a collective voice.

Seamus McAleavey

We’ve moved into a society where, if something goes awry, people question what government did to prevent it from occurring and so we have more regulation. The danger is that the regulation becomes suffocating. Historically in the UK and Ireland, there was a context in which the government did not really interfere to any great extent and there was a relief from bureaucracy. We need to strike a balance. Innovation and collaboration are key. We talk a good game when it comes to collaboration, but we actually operate in organisational silos. There is a need to make the best use of resources and to focus on the beneficiaries.

Anne-Marie McClure

We have started to put an awful lot of time and effort into managing risk rather than meeting need. Leadership must be shown to strike a balance here, because this is the space within which the sector exists and can effect change. Leadership is also required to force the sector to challenge itself. This means using technology and whatever resources are available to determine what works and how we serve our citizens best. This is where collaboration needs to occur. Any decisions which are taken must have citizens’ needs at their core.

How can VCSE organisations contribute to better lives and making Northern Ireland a better place?

Julie Harrison

We’re currently working on a UK-wide...
strategy to support civil society, which covers a lot of the topics discussed here today; such as leadership, support for digital innovation and support for different financing models. I don’t think it is up to us to have a ‘vision’ for the sector, instead our job is to listen and respond. We recognise that when at its best, the sector is a partner, an innovator and offers a voice from articulated lived experiences by people who understand what the solutions are. We’re keen to support the sector in its role of supporting communities.

Lauri McCusker

The sector has notably tackled some issues extremely well. The Credit Union movement, for example, highlights how volunteers convened to create a world-leading model that could then be replicated for wider good. However, there are also areas where we haven’t done that well, for instance, around fuel poverty. There have been many pilots and some great innovative models but we have never cascaded them up. There are many examples of good practice that haven’t been taken to scale and my vision is that, not only do we learn the good practices from one another but that policy makers and funders see the value of taking these to scale.

Seamus McAleavey

Our sector is the place where social change is driven. It has always been the case that change takes place down in communities, it sweeps through society and then governments follow. Providing the opportunities for that to happen and recognising that organisations can be a vehicle for social change is key.

Another key issue is that of dealing with innovation cynicism and striking a balance between the existing and the new. I’m very much pro-innovation but for some in the sector it has become a dirty word, viewed as ‘they only want to fund new shiny things’ and a neglect of the effective things that are done day and daily. For me, innovation is about constant adaptation and moving to do things better. Establishing the correct balance is important.

Anne-Marie McClure

Our vision would be that there is capacity within the sector to deal with the change that needs to happen. This exists right through from those in leadership positions to those supporting volunteers; attempting to promote new thinking and new ideas into the sector. We need to develop a system that recognises need and if there is an initiative working to meet that need, we mainstream it. Also, the sector as a whole continues to shine a light on its best-practice for encouraging the participation of service users and develops its offering of opportunities to those most vulnerable to step up to a place where they can become active citizens.

Arthur Scott

Based on the support the Department provides at a strategic level for the sector, the outcomes that we would like to see would be a sustainable and innovative sector that has navigated and implemented change. That the sector is effective and efficient, with volunteering remaining integral to its success.

What is the most important area for improvement/development to meet the future challenges of the sector?

Anne-Marie McClure

A lot of innovation or positive change is being stymied by the fact we are managing risk rather than meeting need. While I believe managing risk and adding audit processes adds value, it shouldn’t be something we spend the majority of our time working with and through. Also, the needs of vulnerable groups are more complex than ever and require a collaborative approach. How we effectively deliver support ‘collaboratively’ is the nut we need to crack in Northern Ireland. It will make amazing change if we get it right.
Seamus McAleavey
For those government-linked organisations we are going to have to do something about their ‘mile-wide inch-deep’ status. Resources are under real pressure and the current financial relationship is dire. We are in a position of stagnation and we as a sector will have to reflect ourselves on how we make best use of diminishing resources and to ensure that priority areas are funded and funded well. Agreeing those priorities will be challenging for the sector.

Arthur Scott
The Department encourages facilitating co-production and ensuring a diversity of views and ideas are captured and factored in to addressing the challenges and achieve the best outcomes. This approach recognises that government needs to work with others to deliver and that has to be wider and more collaborative conversations to find new ways of doing things.

Lauri McCusker
Volunteer empowerment and helping those volunteers develop their skillset to get to a position where they can create change and make a contribution. One area which needs this focus is community education. As a society we don’t currently invest in educating those willing people, particularly the next generation, to become community leaders. I’d like to see more people given that access so that they are in a position to engage and collaborate with government effectively.

Julie Harrison
To some extent we have lost sight of how important community development is and we have stopped talking about it. If you want to do community development training now you have to go to university. That can’t be right. We’ve lost track of the basic learning opportunities and need to make sure that good local community development is supported, valued and available to the younger generation.

Bill Osborne
I think the sector needs to assess its role in public service delivery. The expectation on our services has grown rapidly and we have to configure whether we feed that level of expectation or look at our role in managing it. Another area is around governance and the way governance is conducted. More and more organisations are closing in the current climate and I think we have a responsibility to not only initiate new organisations but also to administer end-of-life palliative care. We need to ensure that people are leaving these organisations with dignity and transitioning rather than being left with a bad taste about involvement in the sector.