This research has employed a mixed-methods approach to explore the independence of the voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland based on a literature and policy review, an online questionnaire completed by 179 individuals from 166 organisations (including 83 chief executives), focus groups and interviews. The quantitative data should be treated as indicative of the mood and concerns of the sector at this time. The qualitative methods were employed to capture understandings of independence and threats to independence in greater detail, and were conducted with representatives of both the sector and government.
All interviewees and survey respondents, at some level, recognise that both the environment and the relationship between government and the VCSE sector are changing. However, these changes are, for the most part, happening incrementally.

**Emphasis on bottom-up reform:** There are calls from government for the sector to engage in a bottom-up process of rationalisation whereby organisations will begin to merge, collaborate and work in more formalised partnerships. However, some sectoral interviewees explain that government has an unrealistic expectation that there will be an organically driven shift towards more mergers and collaboration.

**Subcontracting:** As service contracts have been scaled up in ways that exclude many smaller and medium sized organisations, it is common for smaller and locally based organisations to have a subcontracting relationship with a private sector or regional VCSE organisation. This has also slowed the reform and rationalisation processes. While subcontracting can create the impression of sectoral diversity, the relationship between contractor and subcontractor is often based on a very limited definition of partnership.

**Mission drift:** In the quest for organisational survival, according to a number of funders, some organisations have found themselves in difficulties as they try to align their mission and structures with government funding streams. Some government officials, as well as some sectoral interviewees, suggest that certain sections of the sector are trying to operate in a system that is no longer there and it is the view of some interviewees that many organisations have been slow to take any ownership of impending changes.