**Strengthening VCSE sectors participation and representation in community planning in Belfast:** Summary of workshop feedback

**Belfast**

## 1.0   Introduction

The voluntary, community and social enterprise sector (VCSE) is a cornerstone of a democratic, pluralist, inclusive society.  It challenges, provokes, serves and offers an 'outlet for outrage' in concert with the public (statutory) and private (business) sectors.

In troubled times, as Belfast has experienced over recent decades, the VCSE sector has held society together, relieved unbearable pressures and provided a vision for a better future. As Council elections take place in 2019, we underline the critical significance of electoral and participative democracy operating in alignment - often uneasily, sometimes in tension - but quintessentially in the same direction, giving voice to the voiceless, hope to the hopeless and purpose to the dispossessed.

Belfast Community Planning Partnership values the sector and is eager to deepen its partnership in recognition of the energy, ideas and contribution that the sector makes. Our engagement process over recent weeks has reinforced the understanding of interdependence and beneficial mutual interests.  We were struck by the commitment of the sector within a realistic framework of what can be delivered.

Within this summary, we have collated the key themes, issues and suggestions received during four workshop sessions held in March 2019, attended by over 100 people from 73 VCSE groups and organisations, and written submissions, including online (a full list of organisations and groups who participated in the engagements is provided in Appendix 1).

Our next steps are to utilise this input and energy with further proposals for developing the Partnership's approach to working with the VCSE sectors, and developing this within a framework of agreed values and behaviours – with a focus on building arrangements that deliver meaningful outcomes for beneficiaries on the ground.

'Representativeness' is easy to demand but harder to ensure. We were impressed at the concept of 'articulation' as a way of demonstrating the range of inputs that local groups can guarantee, including services and advocacy.

We commend the direction of travel and invite continued engagement to ensure authenticity and accountability.  Together we can improve and enhance, apart we flounder in our own self-serving sectoral silos.

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## 2.0 Summary of key themes from VCSE workshops and engagement feedback.

A series of workshop conversations with VCSE sector participants were held during March 2019 as follows:

| | |
|---|---|
| 6th March 2019, 1.30pm | Farset International |
| 12th March 2019, 6.00pm | Skainos Centre |
| 13th March 2019, 1.30pm | Crescent Arts Centre |
| 25th March 2019, 6.00pm | NICVA |

These conversations were framed in the context of the recent introduction of community planning in Northern Ireland and the subsequent establishment of the Belfast Community Planning Partnership and publication of the Belfast Agenda in late 2017.

Building on previous engagement with the sector, and on review of models for VCSE participation and representation in community planning, in Northern Ireland and further afield, views were sought on the following 3 areas/forms of engagement, where the CPP had identified as opportunities for engaging the sector in the community planning process:

- Formal engagement/representation on Community Planning Partnership structures, facilitated via a 'Sectoral Panel' or 'Forum';

- Participation in Action planning or problem solving engagements, usually around community plan themes

- Keeping informed and up to date with news, information about community planning and giving views via wider Community Planning Partnership consultation and engagement activity.

A summary of the feedback received in relation to each of the 3 areas is collated below.

## 2.1 Establishing a sectoral forum/panel

- Purpose/roles of panel should include:

    o Facilitate sectoral participation in the formal Community Planning Partnership structures (e.g. Strategic Partnership and Boards), by providing a mechanism for sectoral delegates to be selected and sent to attend and advocate/advise on behalf of others.

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- o Provide a platform for a sectoral Panel to connect with the wider VCSE sectors in Belfast, to enable seeking of views so that these can be reflected/advocated into the CPP by the Panel?

- o Advocate and advise (articulation of sector views and expertise) into action planning and shaping of the community planning process from sector viewpoint, including shaping of future reviews of the community plan.

- o Provide feedback to wider VCSE sectors on panel activity, achievements and impact.

- Participants felt the purpose and role of the panel needs to be made clear, and that a draft terms of reference is needed to provide a clearer basis for comment. The terms of reference should:

  - o Be clear and ensure clarity of purpose

  - o Ensure meaningful participation (not tokenistic) is facilitated by the CPP

  - o Ensure participation of Panel members is meaningful, e.g. attendance should be monitored, need for clear role descriptions/code of conduct for Members?

  - o Confirm commitment of the CPP to treat VCSE sector as partners

  - o Include arrangements for membership to be refreshed  (a number of timeframes were suggested, either 2, 3 or 4 year terms, the most common suggestion was every 4 years, in line with the time period of reviewing the community plan.

- Panel purpose and role should be based on a set of principles that are agreed at the outset:

  - o Equal commitment of both VCSE and statutory sectors

  - o Clear what is expected, and what you will get back

  - o Openness and transparency

  - o Well advertised and inclusive

  - o Innovative (not more of the same)

- The roles of panel members also needs to be made clear, a role description would help provide clarity on what is required/expected from the role:

  - o time commitment (e.g. number of meetings expected)

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- o activity/behaviours (e.g. seeking views of others, reflecting views of others in Panel, providing feedback)

- o standards of conduct (e.g. how to deal with vested/conflicts of interest)

- How the Panel selects delegates to send to the CPP should be considered in advance – there needs to be consideration in advance of what the process for identifying 'Delegates' should be, as this may influence what membership of a Panel should be sought from the sector.

- Membership of a panel should be sought to ensure balance and coverage of:

  ❖ Area/City geography – needs to reflect whole city.

  ❖ Thematic  - needs to reflect Belfast Agenda priorities.

  ❖ s75 interests – needs to ensure seldom heard voices are included.

- Other comments relating to membership highlighted:

  - o Thematic coverage particularly important and should be prioritised.

  - o Some suggested that geographic coverage may happen by default if you consider s75 interests.

  - o Also needs a balance of large and small organisations

  - o Mix of paid VCSE staff and volunteers

  - o Needs to ensure grassroots/local based organisations views are connected and reflected in.

- A large number of participants at the workshops highlighted the need to try and **use what exists already** to connect with the sector, and to see if membership of a VCSE Panel could be drawn from existing forums/networks:

  - o *'consider building membership of a panel from what exists already'*.

  - o Undertake a mapping exercise to understand linkages of existing forums, networks and organisations to understand coverage of city geography, thematic and s75 interests.

  - o Ensure a balance against the desire for new faces – to bring creativity and fresh ideas to the fore.  There is a strong desire not to have the "same old faces".

- Process for populating the Panel/Forum should use a nomination and selection process whereby:

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- o There is total transparency to ensure sector wide trust, buy in and sustainability

- o Nominees should be required to have support from more than one geographical area of the city.

- o Criteria should be applied to ensure that nominees have:

  - ▪ Thematic involvement across a number of Belfast Agenda priorities (how many – at least 1? Or more?)

  - ▪ Area/city coverage?

  - ▪ S75 coverage?

  - ▪ Links to existing networks/forums to connect with others in the sector

  - ▪ Experience and expertise, know their thematic area/cohort and be able to articulate the views of others (organisations, networks and forums – not just their own view or that of their own organisation).

- o Alternatives suggested  included:

  - ▪ Group existing networks and forums around the Belfast Agenda themes/priorities and invite nominations to a Panel

  - ▪ Hold an election process (candidates identified based on criteria)

  - ▪ Run a formal appointments process (similar to PCSPs and other appointments)

## 2.2 Sectoral involvement with the CPP in action planning and problem solving

- This is where many VCSE organisations want to play a role – many organisations want to be able to shape interventions based on their knowledge of what is needed and what works.

- Effective participation of the right people/organisations/networks in these conversations needs a central resource to co-ordinate (broker)

- Utilise existing networking organisations and forums where possible.

- Vitally important to ensure grassroots groups/people are also involved at this level to share the story behind the baseline and what works at local level – suggestions to connect via Neighbourhood Partnerships/Community Forums.

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- Thought is needed as to how the CPP identifies and invites participation in action planning – could this be shaped by advice from the Panel and brokering with existing thematic networks/forums (networking/navigator role to support this?)

- Participation in this space also needs to utilise broader communication and sectoral awareness raising – see below.

## 2.3 Broadening sectoral awareness and participation: General communication and engagement, seeking views and feeding back to the sector.

- A VCSE Panel needs to connect to wider sector and seek views to support its role in advocating and advising on the sector's behalf.

- CPP also needs to engage, consult and raise awareness with wider VCSE sectors in relation to the community planning process, and at key stages during review and development of the community plan, and in communicating its impact.

- This is a vital participation and feedback loop to ensure inclusivity and transparency in community planning.

- Broader communication with the VCSE sector also overlaps with need for ongoing and regular communication and engagement with the citizen – therefore some tools for citizen participation will be useful for organisations and groups in VCSE sectors to engage.

- How should this happen?
  - Needs to be inclusive – use a register or database for organisations and groups to opt in?
  - **Sectoral events** (e.g. Sectoral assemblies, conference, drop in events, roadshows… key is getting people as close as possible to the citizen)
  - **Online** – website and social media (with 2 way flow of information) – also surveys, online discussion forum – e.g. suggestion to look at examples in Brazil.
  - Use questionnaires.
  - There is a **role for managing this interface** between the CPP, Panel and wider sector – Networking management, and Co-ordination role (e.g. A navigator/networker/ engager? – or a team of engagers? – vital to build links at grass roots level in communities – e.g. link with existing community forums in

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local areas) Need to explore what role BCC Community Services staff can play in this?

o Need to map current thematic networks and forums to connect to.

o May need to establish area community forums? (N S E & W?)

o Needs to take account of accessibility issues – illiteracy levels? Language barriers? Plain English? Not everyone online? Make it visual?

o Multi forms of communication are required – events, print, online/new technology. Also utilise existing forms of communication (e.g. city matters)

o All engagement with the wider sector needs to be 2 way.

o Needs to be a balance of staged engagement and ongoing/continual dialogue.

o Needs to ensure dissemination of info re CPP and Boards activity.

o Needs to be innovative – use Participatory budgeting and other techniques – citizens assembly?

o Co-production needs to be at the heart – do with, not to.

## 3.0   Next Steps

Building on feedback received to date, Belfast Community Planning Partnership will now work to develop more detailed proposals for strengthening VCSE sectors participation and representation in community planning in Belfast.

As part of this process, we intend to continue our engagement with the VCSE sectors over the coming months, to ensure that any arrangements taken forward are fit for purpose and help to create the value and impact that the Belfast Agenda aspires to.

To stay informed and keep up to date about further developments and opportunities to get involved, sign up to our mailing list at www.belfastcity.gov.uk/communityplanning

# APPENDIX 1

The following organisations and groups from voluntary, community and social enterprise sectors attended the workshops and contributed to the feedback:

Action Mental Health
Active Communities Network
Alzheimer's Society
Belfast Drug and Alcohol Coordination Team
Belfast Food Network
Belfast Healthy Cities
Belfast Hills Partnership
British Heart Foundation
British Red Cross
Business in the Community
Cancer Lifeline
Cedar Foundation
Centre for Effective Services
Cliftonville Community Regeneration Forum
Community Places
Connswater Community Greenway Trust
Development Trusts NI
Dundonald Ladies Community Group
East Belfast Community Development Agency
East Belfast Independent Advice Centre
EastSide Partnership
Ethnic Minority Sports Organisation NI
Extern NI
Fáilte Feirste Thiar
Falls Womens Centre
Focus: The Identity Trust
Forthspring Inter Community Group
Forward South Partnership
Full Service Community Network
Glen parent youth group
Greater Shankill Partnership
Greater Village Regeneration Trust
Groundwork NI
Guide Dogs
Healthy North Belfast
Heron Bros Ltd
Holy Trinity Centre

Joshua Project
Ligoneil Improvement Association
Lower Oldpark Community Association
National Energy Action
National Lottery Heritage Fund
National Trust
NB Housing
New Lodge Duncairn Community Health Partnership
NICVA
North City Business Centre
Northern Ireland Women's European Platform
Peasparkbelfast
Playboard NI
Presbyterian Church
Queen's Graduates Assoc, the U3a, Women's Forum
Queen's Students' Union
Red Cross
Sandy Row Community Forum
Shankill Women's Centre
Small Steps
Southcity Resource and Development Centre
Start360
Stronger Together Network
The Cedar Foundation
The Prince's Trust
The Vine Centre
The Young Foundation
UnLtd - The Foundation for Social Entrepreneurs
Upper Andersonstown Community Forum
Upper Springfield Development Trust
Upper Springfield Trust Youth Team
Volunteer Now
Wandsworth Community centre
West Belfast Partnership Board
Womens Support Network

## APPENDIX 1

The workshops were also attended by the following statutory organisations:

Belfast City Council

Belfast Health and Social Care Trust

Department for Communities

Department of Justice

Health and Social Care Board

Libraries NI

Northern Ireland Housing Executive

Public Health Agency