



SOUTH BELFAST PARTNERSHIP BOARD

Arrangements for supporting the Voluntary and Community Sector
Policy and Innovation Team
Department for Communities
Voluntary and Community Division
Lighthouse Building
1 Cromac Place
BELFAST
BT7 2JB

1st November 2016

RE: Consultation on Proposals for the Provision of Strategic Support to the Voluntary and Community Sector in Northern Ireland 2017-2021

I write to you on behalf of the South Belfast Community Support Group (CSG) in response to your consultation on '**Proposals for the Provision of Strategic Support to the Voluntary and Community Sector in Northern Ireland 2017-2021**'. The CSG consists of a number of elected representatives from community and voluntary groups that operate in South Belfast and seeks to represent the collective views of the communities they represent.

South Belfast Partnership Board brings together all sectors – community, statutory, political and private – to strengthen and better target the efforts being made by the community, the private sector and the Government to tackle in partnership the economic, social and environmental problems which affect people in the most disadvantaged areas of South Belfast.

We welcome the opportunity to respond to the above consultation. Please see our response below under the five categories: Vision, Outcome 1, Outcome 2, Outcome 3, and Outcome 4:

South Belfast Partnership

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Vision:

We agree with the vision statement and welcome the support to further make the sector more resilient and sustainable. We recommend that the vision should take into consideration that;

- Proper support and funding is in place for vulnerable and disadvantaged communities.
- Recognition is given to the vast time and effort which currently goes into the CVS and acknowledged that the same level of service will not be delivered unless time and effort is sustained by both the CVS but also by the Department.

Outcome 1:

We agree that support and focus on governance and capacity, policy advocacy and co-design is important, and we also welcome an Outcomes Based approach, however:

Although we welcome Co-designing as it opens up opportunities for meaningful and effective delivery in our communities, we do however recommend the following for it to be successful:

- The process must be carried out equitably, and led from the bottom up.
- Appropriate mechanism and support must be in place.
- Leadership on a cultural shift within the Department and the Councils must be prioritised. We would be concerned about buy-in and commitment from the Council in terms of linking in with Community Planning. Projects could be stalled unnecessarily.
- Implementation of the UN's Habitat III recommendations to ensure meaningful co-designing processes that contribute to long term positive outcomes at community level.

- We recommend that the current democratic and well-functioning structures of the Belfast Area Partnerships and Neighbourhood Renewal Partnerships who support the CVS and connect it to Government, Council and private sector are recognised as key support structures in the future. These structures are unparalleled and should be central to the plan for strategic support and added to the priorities. The loss of the structures at this stage could further upset an already precarious situation in the sector and delay or prevent reaching the outcomes outlined in this consultation document, particularly around sustainability, efficiency and inclusiveness.

Outcome 2:

We welcome the focus on sustainability of the sector, however we are concerned that in the context of hardship caused by Brexit, austerity and welfare reform, relying on income from enterprises (social enterprises or not) to sustain the important work of the sector is in actual fact rather unsustainable. Given the general

failure rate of new enterprises being as high as 56% in the first five years¹, it is extremely precarious to push the sector in this direction. It requires a completely different skills set and additional capacity to set up and run successful enterprises. Also, it should be recognised that a local market for these enterprises to create substantial surplus to replace current income from funding might not exist.

We are concerned that the focus on social economy models will create a two-tiered sector. Small groups who are not able, or in cases where it isn't appropriate to run an enterprise will be left behind and not receive the support they need to carry out valuable work and services in disadvantaged areas and communities.

Likewise, some services in the sector are linked to a higher cost base such as those associated with delivering disability services that are safe, accessible and effective. A more realistic outcome within e.g. the disability sector would be Effectiveness and Innovativeness. Funding reliance is entirely appropriate for some organisations and groups, indeed necessary to deliver quality and accessible services.

Quote from member:

“[We are] concerned at the potential adverse implications for service delivery of the document’s treatment of sustainability, including its demotion of core cost grant reliance, particularly in the case of delivery for vulnerable cohorts in [...] disadvantaged districts.”

We strongly recommend that support structures are in place, particularly in the precarious environment that the CVS operates in. The Belfast Area Partnerships and the Neighbourhood Renewal Partnerships have created strong networks for collaboration and support. This is a valuable infrastructure that ensures delivery of co-designed action plans and positive outcomes in disadvantaged areas and communities. The Partnerships are unparalleled and should be central to the plan for strategic support and added to the priorities. It is crucial that they are strengthened to continue to provide leadership towards change, including providing support on behalf of the Department to the plethora of vital groups and organisations providing services in our disadvantaged communities.

We also welcome the introduction of alternative finance/income sources. Three points that we encourage you to consider carefully are;

- Funding for services and groups not appropriately run as social enterprises is secured and guaranteed.
- That a proper and meaningful implementation of e.g Community Asset Transfers, Social Impact Bonds is put in place. The Community Asset Transfer policy has been in place for two years now, but we have yet to see substantial projects emerging. It is vital that the Government buys in to a shift in ‘culture’ and allows community groups to buy assets at a favourable and affordable price in return for significant social return on investment.
- Better access to affordable and flexible start-up capital is vital for success.

¹ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/businessclub/11174584/Half-of-UK-start-ups-fail-within-five-years.html>

In relation to digital delivery of services we would be concerned that many clients in our disadvantaged and elderly communities do not have appropriate access to internet, and could therefore be cut off from vital services and communications. What measures are in place to guarantee equal access to services in a scenario of digital-only services in the future?

There is a concern that the limited capacity of groups/organisations will be diverted from service delivery on the ground to dealing with operational challenges and perhaps cutting corners to sustain the enterprise, rather than delivering quality services. Social enterprises may in fact have double or triple bottom lines (social and environmental capital) but nevertheless are surplus/income driven first of all.

Outcome 3:

We welcome that the distinctive needs of particular constituencies to inform policy development, particularly in relation to women in development. Our concern is that 'Inclusiveness' remains aspirational for many constituents. We therefore recommend that other constituencies are explored for inclusion, such as disability, and around cultural sensitivity and racial equality. Specific outcomes with achievable and meaningful goals for these communities should be put in place.

Long term funding should be made available for constituencies with distinctive needs to ensure services are sustained in the context of austerity and hardship. It may not be appropriate for some services and groups to deliver through social economy models, but this should not prevent them from sustaining their work.

Outcome 4:

We support the development of a new Volunteering strategy and action plan. We also recommend to take into consideration:

- Grants for volunteering schemes must be available to all communities and groups within the sector, particularly at the most local/grassroots level as they are of vital importance to delivering schemes and supporting initiatives and services.
- Volunteers cannot replace paid staff or funding.
- Volunteering to be made more attractive by adding personal development opportunities.
- Specific support structures for different constituencies, e.g. voluntary youth sector are put in place.

Quote from member:

"In relation to the voluntary youth sector, it is imperative that support structures are put in place at government level to promote and enhance the priorities for youth government document. This needs to be in relation to job descriptions, the amount of volunteers, and consideration needs to be given to the measures of deprivation. A detailed data system to record,

monitor and evaluate information needs to be implemented. “

Quote from member (grassroots group):

“We cannot access TCV volunteer schemes because they charge and we as volunteers have no money to pay for that charge. [Similar projects have] secured money to fund TCV ... We did not want to take the route of making grant applications (because we are purely voluntary!) so we can't 'buy' volunteers to support our existing volunteers!”

I trust you find our input helpful and we look forward to the publication of the final document. If you wish to discuss any of these issues raised, please don't hesitate to contact Sophie Rasmussen, Urban Regeneration Officer, Tel: 02890 244 070 Ext 11, E: sophie.rasmussen@southbelfast.org

Yours sincerely,

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