

Department for
Communities
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Voluntary and Community Sector Infrastructure Support Policy Framework Consultation Report

November 2026



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1.0 Introduction

This report provides an overview of the work undertaken by the Department to consult on a new Infrastructure Support Policy Framework for the Voluntary and Community Sector in Northern Ireland. The Framework put forward draft proposals to support a thriving Voluntary and Community Sector in Northern Ireland through a commitment to continued government investment in sector infrastructure and to improving the way that government works with and for the sector.

The Department undertook extensive pre-consultation engagement with key stakeholders which helped shape proposals for future support. Public consultation on the proposals was launched on 15 November 2023 and closed on 9 February 2024. The online publication and questionnaire were complemented by a series of consultation events.

The Department received hundreds of contributions to the consultation which have been integral in helping shape a finalised policy framework. It is however worth noting that the feedback was wide-ranging and some of what was shared fell outside the scope of this consultation.

This report provides details on the engagement undertaken as well as the responses and feedback received.

Finally, the report sets out the changes which have been made to the Infrastructure Support Policy Framework as a result of the feedback.

2.0 Pre-consultation Engagement and Evidence Gathering

The Department conducted extensive engagement between March and June 2023 to inform a refresh of our approach to supporting sector infrastructure and the development of an integrated policy framework to underpin future funding programmes.

We engaged with a wide range of organisations in the sector, including those supported through our existing funding programmes as well as those that are not. Engagement included a series of roundtable discussions and events with the sector, a survey to identify key priorities and need and a number of targeted sessions with various parts of the sector and vulnerable demographic groups. Hundreds of organisations participated, the majority from the voluntary and community sector, but also other departments, local government, and independent funders.

We also worked closely with a Stakeholder Reference group comprising a range of sectoral interests, drawing on their lived experience, expertise, and knowledge, and together explored a range of insights and ideas in the design of innovative approaches.

Through this engagement, desk research, and survey data findings, we were able to identify the current needs and priorities for future support of the sector.

Detailed information on our **Pre-consultation Engagement and Evidence Gathering** was published as part of the public consultation and provided:

- A summary of evidence and what we heard
- An overview of our engagement methodology, including reference group information
- A summary of reading and desk resources

3.0 Consultation Engagement

A draft Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) Infrastructure Support Policy Framework was developed based on what we heard throughout our pre-consultation engagement. We launched the draft Policy Framework for public consultation on 15 November 2023, and it ran for 12 weeks, closing on 9 February 2024.

As we had done during pre-consultation, we continued to adopt an inclusive engagement approach bringing together Voluntary and Community sectoral representatives from both urban and rural locations, including those supported through existing funding programmes and those not. Again, we were pleased with the interest shown in the policy framework and the willingness of so many people to take part in our engagement events, both in person and virtually.

Over the four months we spoke to over 250 people from a broad spectrum of organisations in the voluntary and community sector, along with other departments, other funders and local government.

Engagement involved a range of methods to seek views on our proposals and included:

- Six engagement events with 134 people in November and December 2023: four in person in Dungannon, Derry/Londonderry; Ballymena and Belfast; and two virtual events.
- Two further meetings with our Stakeholder **Reference Group** during the consultation period. At our November meeting, we discussed the draft policy framework and schedule of engagement and there were initial discussions on proposed commissioning approaches. At the January meeting, we were able to provide feedback from engagement events and questions were considered on "getting delivery right" which included the relationship between regional partners, number and geographical spread of sub-regional/local partners, rural needs, equality duties, relationship between general infrastructure organisations and volunteer centres and the relationship between infrastructure organisations and local councils. Reference group members also fed into discussions on reporting against outcomes and measuring impact.
- Additional engagement took place during January and February 2024 at the request of organisations or where it was felt gaps existed. This included internal staff workshops, meetings and events with the Community Faiths' Forum, Women's Sector, Volunteer Centres, Children/Youth Sector and local government. We engaged with 109 people over the course of these additional events.

Key messages from consultation engagement events

Public consultation events were an important opportunity to discuss proposals and the needs of the sector more generally and each one allowed for contributions and responses from participants.

A Mentimeter Poll was carried out at several of the events and there was a general agreement that the policy framework was moving in the right direction and making a positive contribution. The policy refresh and public consultation were welcomed with key concepts embedded, such as communication, engagement, collaboration and partnership.

The key messages we heard at our engagement events included:

Collaboration

- Shared outcomes were welcomed.
- There is a need for better collaboration between funders, between departments, between the department and the sector and between sector organisations.
- Responsibility for improved collaboration lies on both sides of VCS and the public sector.
- Organisations need to work better together to maximise benefit to local communities with less resources available.
- The sector is invested heavily in and needs to work better together. Sharing resources can make it easier to tackle complex issues that might be beyond the capacity of a single organisation.
- The policy framework reflects a new way of thinking. Life has changed and this has challenged old ways. Communication and collaboration are key elements at departmental level and community level. There is a disconnect between regions and working groups which need to reconnect and collaboration to be re-introduced.
- There needs to be better complementarity between local government and the Voluntary and Community Sector.

Regional Support/Delivery model

- Strong leadership and advocacy role needed moving forward.
- There is a need for strong links and collaboration between regional and local infrastructure organisations to strengthen the influence of the sector and build on existing opportunities.
- Regional organisations must ensure they deliver across all geographies and all communities.
- Case made for thematic support. Large corporate/voluntary/membership organisations don't always voice the needs and concerns of all groups across the sector.
- There is an Age Friendly Officer in each Council area, however there is no resource to create a network. A rights-based network would be very beneficial.
- There was much discussion on the need to reframe the proposed delivery model in the draft policy framework.
    - Proposals and language suggest a hierarchical structure.
    - Concern that generalist organisations appear to have been given priority.
    - Opinion that much of the work of women's sector infrastructure organisations is at regional level.
    - Concern that the women's sector was not specifically mentioned in the draft policy framework.
    - Proposals around sub-sectoral support challenged – the term "sub-sectoral" did not make sense for many people
    - Need exists within rights-based groups and with budgetary constraints, collaboration and working smarter will be very important.
    - Call for clarity around different levels of support and how they fit together.
    - Social Inclusion Strategy headings could be used to develop a specialist network to ensure voice of disability, gender equality and LGBTQi+ for example is heard.
    - Should be consideration given to intersectionality, for example the voice of women with disabilities, migrant women and LGBTQi+.
    - Naming the women's sector within the policy framework would remove the gender neutrality concern.

Funding/Sustainability

- Welcomed commitment to improve funding practices and to sustainable investment.
- Welcome close funding relationship with Department for Communities and engagement with organisations on the ground.
- Focus on infrastructure support and core costs was welcomed.
- Suggested use of language around investment rather than funding.

- Call for the sector to be treated as other sectors, with 3-5 / 5-10 year business plans.
- General anxiety over future resourcing.
- Adequate resourcing required over longer term.
- Funding for core costs allows organisations to secure other funding for delivery and consider other ways to increase their sustainability.

Succession Planning/Forward Thinking

- Greater emphasis on succession planning required as this is a key priority area moving forward.
- Work to be focused on attracting young people to join the sector and then supporting them within the sector. Creation of pathways into the sector.
- Good provision for senior leadership training and support. Need for greater provision of leadership training and support for lower levels of staff for future development and sustainability.
- Space for innovation, idea development and forward thinking would be welcomed.

Assets

- Strong tradition of community organising to be further developed and invested in.
- Investment in community infrastructure is important but also the sharing of assets to ensure maximum usage and impact.
- Need for investment in alternative energies to address climate change.
- Digital priorities moving forward.
- Need for support with assets at more local community organisation level as well as with larger voluntary organisations.

Volunteering

- Importance of volunteering across the sector.
- Value of work carried out by volunteer centres in different areas.
- Recruitment and retention of volunteers is a challenge.
- Need to attract more young people into volunteering.
- Call for adequate resourcing for volunteers.

Value of the Sector/Impact

- Welcomed focus on ambition to gather robust data on the sector and the impact VCS organisations are making in society.
- General feeling that the sector is under-valued.
- Need to raise the value of community development.
- Would be very beneficial to identify a better way to cohesively measure outcomes and impact across the sector.

Faith sector

- Value of work carried out by faith-based organisations in supporting communities.
- Importance of including minority faith groups.
- Value of collaboration and sharing of resources.

Rural

- The value of Rural Support networks and the fact that there is solid rural support infrastructure in existence.
- Reference to rural areas welcomed.
- There are areas where a defined network works well and an ambition to extend this to areas where this isn't happening.

Joint Forum

- Refresh of Concordat and change of name welcomed.
- Call for increased visibility of the Joint Forum and updates on progress being made.
- Representation must be from across sector and across region.
- Integration, joint working and better sharing of communication were highlighted as important.
- New values and ways of working and the work carried out to co-produce these will go some way to ensuring the relationship between the sector and government will be strengthened.

4.0 Analysis of Consultation Results[1]

We sought views on the proposed Infrastructure Support Framework via a public consultation which launched on 15 November 2023, lasting 12 weeks, closing on 9 February 2024. The survey was published on the NI Direct Consultations webpage **(NI Direct - Citizen Space)** and publicised via the Department's X Channel. An overview of the responses provided is below:

Respondents to the online survey

A total of 118 respondents completed the questionnaire online and 83 respondents returned an electronic version of the questionnaire by email, however, 8 organisations provided two or more responses (9 responses overall).

These multiple responses were reviewed and one overall response for each organisation was included in the analysis. The overall response was generated by manually reviewing the multiple responses to each individual question. Following this review, a total of 192 responses were included in the analysis. The base numbers shown in the tables throughout the report may vary as all respondents did not provide a response to every question. In addition to those who completed the questionnaire, 6 respondents provided comments via email. Their responses are included in the 'Comments' sections of the report.

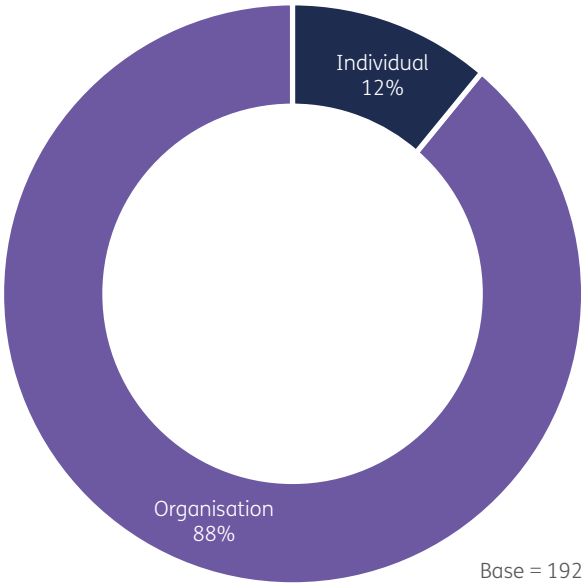
(Please note that percentages in charts may not sum to 100% due to rounding)

[1] Voluntary and Community Sector Infrastructure Support Policy Framework Survey Summary of Responses, report produced by DfC Professional Services Unit, 13 May 2024

Summary of Responses

Question 1: Are you responding as an individual or on behalf of an organisation?

(88%) said they were responding on behalf of an organisation.



Base = 192

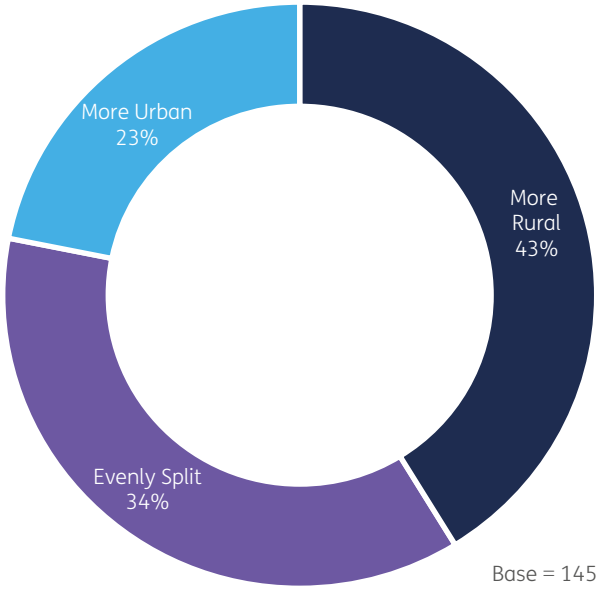
Organisation Details

Question 2: What is the name of your organisation?

Annex A contains the list of consultation respondents.

Question 3: Does your organisation operate more in urban or rural areas?

Over two-fifths of those responding on behalf of an organisation (43%) said they operated in a more rural area whilst around a third (34%) said they operated in an area that was evenly split. Over a fifth (23%) of respondents said their organisation operated in a more urban area.



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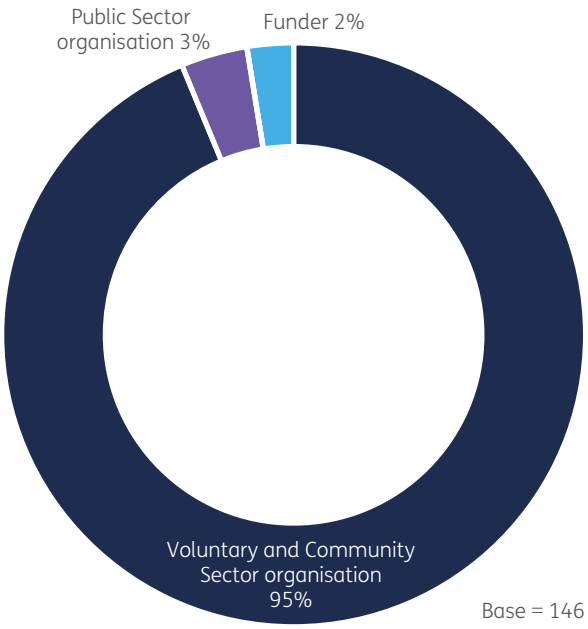
Question 4: Which of the following best describes your organisation?

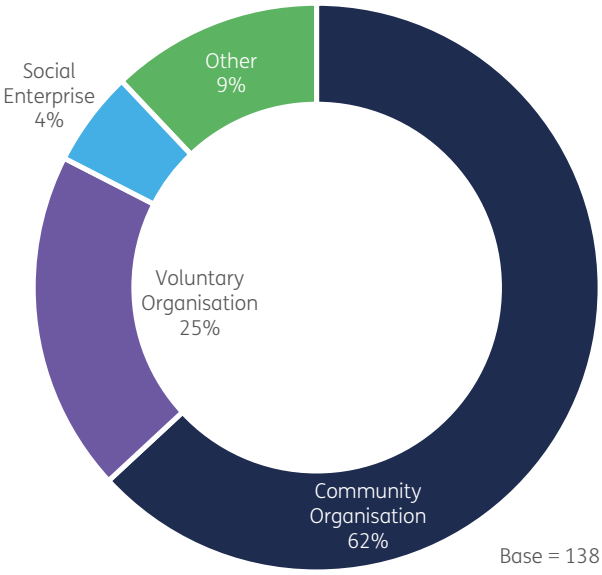
95% said they were a voluntary and community sector organisation whilst 3% said they were a public sector organisation or funder (2%).



Base = 146

Question 5: If you are answering on behalf of a voluntary and community organisation, which of the following best describes your organisation?

62% of those responding on behalf of a voluntary and community organisation said they were a community organisation, whilst a quarter (25%) said they were a voluntary organisation and just 4% said that they were a social enterprise. 9% said that their organisation was best described as 'other'.

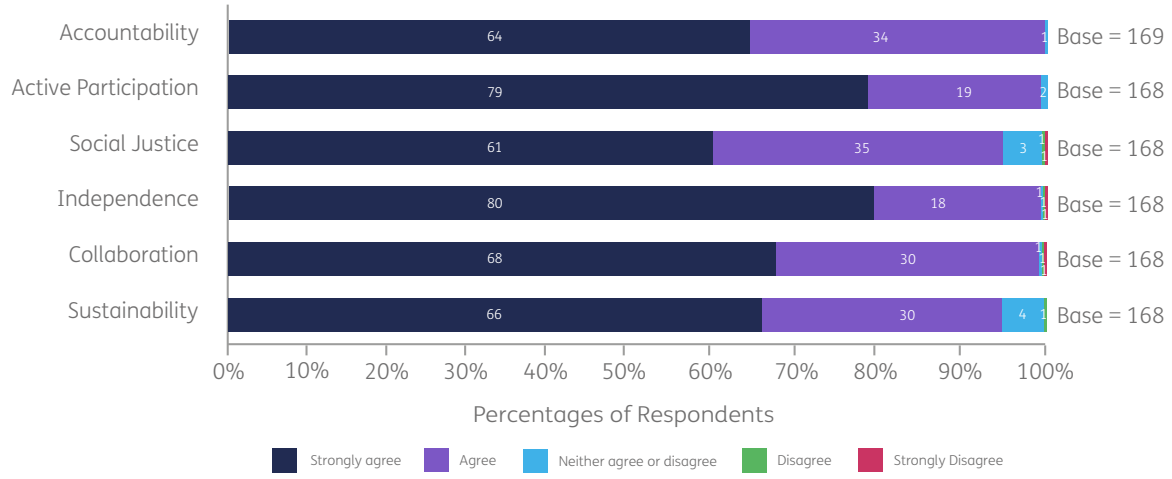


Base = 138

Supporting the Sector's relationship with Government

Question 6: The Joint Forum has proposed a draft framework of values and practices as a foundation for a future Concordat. To what extent do you agree with these values and practices as a way of supporting the relationship between Government and the Voluntary and Community Sector?

Over nine in every ten respondents agreed or strongly agreed with each of the values and practices of the proposed draft framework, with three-fifths or more respondents strongly agreeing with each. One per cent or less of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with each of the values and practices.



Please share anything you would like to add specific to each of the individual values.

A selection of comments are presented below.

Accountability Value (32 comments)

- All partners should be equally accountable.
- Trusted relationships/partnerships and time/investment required.
- Better culture of accountability/clear accountability mechanisms required.
- 'Leadership' is missing from description of value.
- Future Concordat should be open, honest and fully accountable with regular briefings to the wider sector.
- Transparency in procurement should be standard practice.
- Social value and a level playing field for local organisations to deliver local services and programmes.
- Future role of Forum needs to be reviewed and needs to be more effective.

Active Participation Value (36 comments)

- VCS to be involved in co-design of funding streams/ empowered to have control of certain areas of delivery.

- Develop & resource a partnership forum where all V&C organisations can come together to share learning, resources and network.
- Value should mention volunteering and active participation requires a regional infrastructure body focused solely on volunteering.
- An appropriately funded community and voluntary sector in local areas offers potential for long term capacity, succession planning and an effective future for the sector.
- Need for genuine and effective succession planning to ensure sustainability of the sector.
- Encourage involvement of all communities including Section 75 and marginalised groups.
- Broaden the DfC supported regional partners group to include organisations with specific oversight/insights into Section 75 groups, proposed structure to facilitate participation is imbalanced.
- Further detail required on review and monitoring of participation arrangements.
- Future role of Forum needs to be reviewed and needs to be more effective.

Social Justice Value (29 comments)

- Rural issues
  - Application of the Rural Needs Act by duty holders has not produced the outcomes rural communities had hoped to see.
  - Include reference to additional challenges people from Section 75 categories face when they live in rural communities as well as any other intersectionality.
  - Adoption of a needs-based bottom-up approach to support provided to the rural Community & Voluntary sector is required which engages the local community in the design and delivery of strategies, decision-making and resource allocation.
- Legislation
  - A future Concordat should have a legal footing and should be accountable to the public, via elected representatives.
  - Whilst the legislation has provided "protection" it is not alleviating all issues faced by individuals categorised within Section 75.
  - Proposals could go beyond the 'act with due regard' statement to a more pro-active commitment to utilize those legislative duties as a mechanism to reduce or remove existing inequalities.
- Groups
  - No attention of men when considering Section 75 groups.
  - Women need to be considered/ represented.
  - Involve groups who experience inequality and discrimination.

  - A future Concordat must ensure that government fulfils its statutory obligations to Section 75 groups and any citizens who are societally disadvantaged.

- Poverty not mentioned, more people in poverty in the jurisdiction than ever before and no anti-poverty strategy.
- Communities should be able to voice differing views and still be supported by the Department.
- Support should be available to increase resilience/capacity within VCS.
- Provide opportunities for VCS to shape & provide innovative solutions.
- Future role of Forum needs to be reviewed and needs to be more effective.

Independence Value (30 comments)

- Trusted relationships are at the heart of this and require time, investment and consistency to succeed.
- Concordat should be independent with secretariat & governance functions carried out by independent third party.
- Investment
  - Clear long term support package will be necessary otherwise the strains already existing within the sector will only grow.
  - The sector has been unfairly resourced for years.
  - The sector is losing staff who are finding they get paid better elsewhere.
  - Department should be more flexible with regards to the budgets it allocates and moving funding from one area to another.
- Support for 3rd option listed in Ways of Working ('Support the sector's capacity to challenge, innovate and add value to public policy and decision-making').
- Voluntary and community sector should be involved in decision making from the beginning of the process.
- Future role of Forum needs to be reviewed and needs to be more effective.

Collaboration Value (39 comments)

- Partnerships / Relationships
  - Relationships and trust are important in establishing effective collaboration.
  - Government Agencies need to work closer with councils.
  - Collaboration and partnership need to be stronger and should follow the principles of co-production.
  - Difficulty in collaborating when funding is awarded in a competitive basis.
  - Tendency amongst the sector to act as individual organisations rather than together.

  - What is the baseline current approach and what are we working to when we say 'improved' regarding inter-sector engagement in planning and co-design?

- Co-design
  - Co-design needs to involve properly funded staff from community sector at the beginning of all discussions and on the most important decision-making panels.
  - Development and agreement of a set of values and principles related to co-design should be included.
  - Need for openness and transparency around what government can and cannot do with regard to co-design.
- Leadership
  - Leadership from DfC to show where alignment exists and potential for collaboration exists.
  - Leadership visibility is crucial to successful collaboration.
- Resources/support
  - Support is required for collaboration which takes time and investment.
  - VCS needs resourced and skilled up to play an equal part in these partnerships and forums.
  - Collaboration may also mean sharing resources to ensure efficiencies.
  - Tensions and resource demand evident in the multitude of partnerships created by the public sector e.g. Community planning, partnerships in the health service, local infrastructure etc.
- Create and encourage opportunities for shared learning and knowledge exchange between sectors.
- This value needs to be supported by commissioning frameworks which embed cross departmental budgeting for programmes and interventions that deliver on the Programme for Government outcomes.
- Inclusion of faith sector by name in the concordat as they are relied upon by the voluntary and statutory sectors to support people in poverty using funds generated by faith sector donations.
- Future role of Forum needs to be reviewed and needs to be more effective.

Sustainability Value (36 comments)

- Financial sustainability
  - Investment/resources required.
  - There should be a strategy for the sector which includes adequate core funding arrangements, and which encourages VCS organisations to collaborate rather than compete against each other.
  - Organisations require longer funding contracts/streams.

- Need funding support for post asset transfer acquisition to achieve sustainability.
- Consideration of the social enterprise business model.
- Sustainability does not mean forever organisations; closure is sometimes the best form of sustainability.
- Increasing pressure on charities to be sustainable in a very shrinking and competitive funding situation is putting intolerable strains on volunteers.

• Environmental sustainability

- Welcome references to climate justice and working practices that are socially just and ask that DfC and DAERA consider how this is implemented in practice across the VCS.
- Additional challenges in rural communities in reducing carbon with dependence on cars, poor public transport and active travel infrastructure and older poorly insulated homes heated by oil or solid fuel. DAERA and other Departments need to reframe some of these change processes in a more positive way.
- Citizen education, engagement and participation needs to go hand in hand to meet emissions reduction targets and co-designing solutions at community and household level will play a key role in making the transition.
- Points 1 - 3 could be more robust to ensure the sector(s) meet the climate strategy by 2030.
- Look at the Welsh approach in the Well-being of Future Generations Act 2015.
- More proactive statements on the link between sustainability and prevention and early intervention policy and resourcing. Include a reference to the Sustainable Development Goals.

• Role of Forum needs to be reviewed and needs to be more effective.

Question 7: Please let us know if you think there are gaps in the proposed framework of values and practices or anything additional that you would like to see included.

There were 118 comments overall in response to this question and a selection of comments is presented below.

Rural (43 comments)

• The Social Justice value should also reference the additional challenges people from Section 75 categories face when they live in rural communities as well as any other intersectionality.

• Education and support for sustainability is vital for rural communities.

Climate (43 comments)

• DfC and DAERA to consider how working practices around climate justice are implemented in practice across the VCS.

- There are additional challenges in rural communities in reducing carbon with dependence on cars, poor public transport and active travel infrastructure and older poorly insulated homes heated by oil or solid fuel. DAERA and other Departments need to reframe some of these change processes in a more positive way.
- Citizen education, engagement and participation needs to go hand in hand to meet emissions reduction targets and co-designing solutions at community and household level will play a key role in making the transition.

Funding (22 comments)

- Transparency in procurement/local funding.
- Longer funding contracts for future planning and sustainability.
- Cross Departmental support would be a huge benefit, the voluntary and community sector through its work will impact all government departments and each should be supportive of the wider work.
- Values require investment of time and resources to achieve outcomes.
- Cannot attract qualified staff without reasonable salaries, training etc.
- Training of a new generation of professional fundraisers is required.
- Provide a Post Asset Acquisition Investment Fund.
- VCS needs resourced and skilled up to play an equal part in partnerships and forums.
- A well-resourced local sub-regional community development infrastructure offers the potential for long term capacity which provides succession planning and sustainability.
- Offer funding opportunities particularly to small voluntary sector organisations in rural areas.

Co-design (15 comments)

- A set of principles related to co-design should be developed and agreed.
- Department should be clear with others about the limits of participatory approaches and co-design processes.
- Groups need to be involved in decision making policies which will shape their future and challenge the decision makers

Role of the Joint Forum (12 comments)

- Role of the Joint Forum needs to be reviewed including membership and further separate consultation on the scope of the Concordat would be welcomed. The Forum and Concordat are much needed but could be more effective.
- To date no clear representation of the children and young people's sector on the Joint Forum. Ensure delivery of services to the under 25's and their families is facilitated within the Joint Forum and in future engagement work.

Best practice (11 comments)

- Consideration of other standards/models of good practice:

- NI Executive 'Scoring Social Value' policy.
- All Ireland Standards for Community Work.
- Sustainable Development Goals.
- United Nations Principles on Older Persons and the themes contained in the World Health Organisation's Age-Friendly Communities Framework.
- Review of several equality strategies in the South of Ireland (Migrant Integration Strategy, National Strategy for Women and Girls, National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy) by the Centre for Effective Services (CES).

Communication, Respect, Equality and Fairness (10 comments)

- Include a value around equality.
- Equality and fairness of funding needed.
- Fairness and equity should be integral to any actions taken within the voluntary sector.
- A genuine commitment to equity and respect between government and the VCSE sector through entities such as the Joint Forum and across wider government.
- The proposed framework of values and practices are great but need to be implemented with true communication and genuine respect and fairness.
- Ensure everyone is contacted and given the opportunity to represent.

Collaboration & Partnerships (9 comments)

- Collaboration across central & local government, the voluntary and community sector and statutory partners will be vital to delivering the values outlined within the framework.
- The value of collaboration will be undermined by removing certain streams of support, and moving all the organisations that were previously eligible for ring-fenced support into a "sub-regional and sub-sectoral" category, which will foster competition for survival, rather than mutual collaboration.
- Foster better collaboration between funders to align investments behind shared outcomes like those in youth work.
- The section on collaboration should include reference to local authorities as a key sector/stakeholder in this work, particularly through the Community Support Programme.
- Develop and resource a partnership forum where voluntary and community organisations can come together to share learning and resources and network to enhance the work that is going on at grassroots level.
- Develop partnerships that support project co-design between the government, VCS and third sector to improve the lives of young people & the communities they live in.

Structural Changes (6 comments)

- The value of independence runs the risk of being compromised by the suggested approach, which would see more significant power consolidated into a small number of organisations, with sub-sectoral and sub-regional groups kept separate. This would grant a large amount of influence to the regional anchor organisation.
- It appears organisations have already been selected by the Department including the 'anchor' organisation (NICVA) and their partners in the 'regional infrastructure delivery partnership', which although not specifically named in the consultation document, have been released as, 'a focus on rural need' (Rural Community Network (RCN)), 'leadership' (CO3), 'volunteering' (Volunteer NI) and 'asset ownership/ management' (Development Trust NI – (DTNI)). This calls into question all the other values.
- The sensible approach would be to encourage independence by diffusing responsibility among organisations, and to therefore allow the regional anchors to be genuinely independent. As it stands, there is a real risk that other organisations in the sector will come to see the regional anchor as functionally a part of the Department itself.
- Concern that the proposals will mean the loss of key infrastructure that currently supports the sector, and that the new structures proposed may inadvertently undermine the values laid out in the proposals for a revised Concordat.

Support for certain groups (4 comments)

- Not enough support in Women's Sector west of the Bann.
- Funding required for support of young men/boys.
- Need for decision makers to undertake training in gender budgeting and adopting a gender lens to address the inequalities faced by over half the C&V workforce.
- Promote equality of opportunity between people of different ages and support community infrastructure that helps tackle the social disadvantage facing many older people.

Information and Monitoring (4 comments)

- Exploration of opportunities for collaboration or sharing of information within the VCS sector itself particularly among infrastructure organisations and also within and across government departments.
- There is a clear gap in terms of access to information and managing expectations. Departments should be open and honest about the information they cannot share and the reasons for that.
- Important that clear standards and mechanisms for monitoring adherence to these principles are put in place.

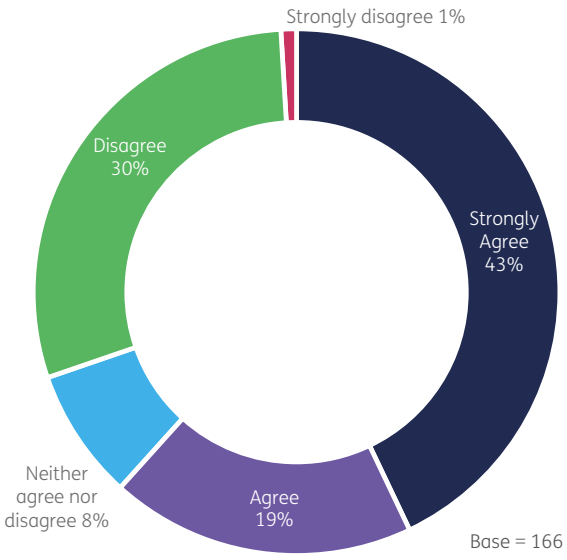
Other (42 comments)

- Concern about the sustainability and feasibility of the proposed structural changes.

- There is reference in the framework to sustainability, collaboration, partnership working and accountability. These are areas that require further consideration and explanation.
- The lack of proposals for concrete delivery is a gap that needs to be addressed, in order to demonstrate how the Concordat can operate effectively and ensure all stakeholders can have confidence in the process.
- Social value, and, where appropriate, an effort to level the playing field for local organisations to deliver local services and programmes (against outside private sector interests) would be welcome.
- The use of technology and data is an increasingly important area under Accountability where training and support can be targeted. This can include issues such as data protection, and to identify potential risks in relation to Artificial Intelligence and social media.
- Propose that the 'Accountability' value title be changed to 'Integrity'. Acting with integrity, shapes and informs actions, behaviours and decisions and would therefore include the practice of being accountable.

Question 8: The Joint Forum has been considering options to ensure that a future Concordat/agreement leads to meaningful change and an improved relationship between the sectors. To what extent do you agree that a future Concordat/agreement would be strengthened if a legal duty were created to require NI Executive Ministers to act in compliance with the concordat values and practices when making decisions and carrying out ministerial responsibilities?

Over three-fifths of respondents (62%) agreed or strongly agreed that a future Concordat/agreement would be strengthened if a legal duty were created to require Ministers to act in compliance with the values and practices when making decisions. In comparison, three in every ten respondents (30%) disagreed or strongly disagreed that a Concordat/agreement would be strengthened in this way.



Question 9: The Joint Forum is keen to hear views on what the ambition and scope of a new Concordat/agreement should be between Government and the Voluntary and Community Sector.

Please share any thoughts, ideas or challenges below.

There were 136 comments overall in response to this question and a selection of comments is presented below.

Joint Forum & Concordat (75 comments)

- The Forum needs to be appropriately resourced to be able to function effectively.
- To date the work of the Joint Forum has been significantly limited by a lack of commitment and inconsistent attendance by department representatives and its ambition.
- Participants must be from a level that can make or influence Departmental decisions.
- The scope of a new Concordat should include the process by which individuals are recruited to the Joint Forum, as well as mechanisms for gathering and disseminating insights and knowledge across the sector.
- A more inclusive, transparent and independent and accountable Forum not chaired by the selected 'anchor' organisation or any of the selected 'regional infrastructure delivery partnership' organisations.
- Sector needs to be confident that they have the right representatives on the Forum and representation should be reflective of the entire sector.
- To date this structure does not feel relevant to smaller organisations even though it should be the mechanism for support and lobbying etc.
- It would be helpful to demonstrate how the values set out in the proposal can be included in practice. This would assist in identifying how effective the Concordat can be, as it will only operate effectively if it is embedded in day to day working and operational practice.
- These proposals would benefit from a clearer conceptual separation between the Concordat and the Infrastructure Support Framework.
- It may be that there is an overarching Concordat/agreement and that there are segmented streams of specialism that represent sub-sectors.
- A new Concordat can raise awareness of the important contribution of the VCS in representing the interests and values of people and communities and to promote societal wellbeing.
- Government has helped create, and now resources, a complex web of supports and in some cases confusion and potential duplication. Propose DfC develop a Concordat between all public sector bodies investing in Community Infrastructure.
- How will the Department prevent duplicating investment in Community Infrastructure and Community Support through Councils?
- The Joint Forum and Regional Infrastructure organisations should have a role in the proposed redesign of Councils Community Support Programme.

- Lack of focus on the development of joined-up thinking within the public sector, including this framework consultation and the People and Place review, which have fundamental overlaps.
- The concordat must include the faith sector as this sector is contributing to the wellbeing of society with very little financial support from Government.
- Rename concordat as agreement.
- The Role of the Joint Forum needs to be reviewed.
- Welcome a further separate consultation on the scope of the Concordat as it could be more effective.

Funding (58 comments)

- A core element of the new agreement must be improved funding practices. These new practices should apply to all government departments, be kept under review, and subject to independent evaluation.
- Multi-year, full-cost recovery tendering processes that offer better long-term planning, better value for the public purse, and eliminate unhealthy competition between organisations. This can be done by encouraging collaboration and pooling of resources through commissioning as opposed to procurement.
- Transparency in procurement and local funding.
- If public sector funding continues to see the same levels of austerity as over the past decade, then core funding for VCS infrastructure support will continue to reduce relative to overall level of need.
- Address the barriers to smaller VCSE organisations in accessing Government funding.
- Important that the Community and Voluntary sector have the same conditions as contracts with the private sector that reflect value for money, longer term contracts and sustainable conditions such as pensions, sick leave etc.
- Sufficient monies built into contracts to give charities a chance of creating a small surplus of unrestricted reserve which would improve sustainability, currently no surplus in government contracts can be made.
- Assessment of the impact on beneficiaries before deciding to end or reduce funding schemes and programmes, and ensure a minimum of three months' notice in writing when changing or ending a funding relationship or other support.
- Development of a community asset transfer scheme which includes a review of publicly owned unused premises across Northern Ireland.
- Investment in VCSE infrastructure and support organisations to support the development of the sector.

Legal Duties (55 comments)

- The new Agreement should be based on a more statutory/legal footing and adhered to by both the VCSE sector and government department members.
- It would be a useful step if a legal duty were created to require NI Executive Ministers to act in accordance with agreement values and practices when making decisions and carrying out ministerial responsibilities.
- A legal duty on Ministers to act in compliance with Concordat values & practices is unlikely to make any difference to decision making as Departments and Ministers will prioritise statutory commitments with immediate legal consequences if statutory commitments are ignored.
- A legal duty to require NI Executive Ministers to always comply with Concordat values and practices may not always be feasible in exceptional circumstances, however, an alignment with the PfG outcomes can minimise the instance of exceptional circumstances.
- Further details on what the duty would entail, the governance arrangements, independence, monitoring and enforcement would require greater exploration.
- Would encourage consideration of the potential for a more comprehensive set of duties to encourage a cultural shift within public services towards more collaborative, sustainable and citizen-involved ways of working. The Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 offers a useful model.
- Restricting the legal duty to Ministers only will limit the potential for the new agreement, especially given political instability in Northern Ireland. A better approach may be to have a set of duties that is less prescriptive, more aligned to the fundamental values articulated in the agreement, and where the legal responsibility would rest with government departments.
- Any new Concordat should include legal duties for local government as well as central government.
- The legislative support that is needed by the sector is broad and varied and primary legislative priorities that are needed include legislating for civic participation and decision making and legislating for the collective right of ownership of land and property assets.

Partnership & Collaboration (23 comments)

- C&V sector to be treated as equal partners and the Concordat to function within an ethos of valuing the sector better.
- Clear understanding of roles and terms of engagement based on mutual respect.
- Would like to see the new Concordat/ agreement open up a new opportunity for a cultural shift in how all Government departments work with the VCS not just the Department for Communities.

- In order to create the cultural and working changes suggested within the framework, it is important that DfC engages early with all other Government Departments to ensure that they are aware of this work.
- Engage and work with VCSE organisations at the earliest possible stage and ensure VCSE organisations have a greater role and opportunity in the delivery of public services through review and possible reform of commissioning arrangements.
- Co-production and co-design should be central in the development and delivery of outcomes.
- There does not seem to be any explicit reference in the Draft Framework to collaborative funding approaches. SCI's report on Reducing Inequalities and Improving Well-being includes examples of outcome-focused funding models supporting more integrated approaches to addressing societal issues.

Communication (14 comments)

- Openness and transparency
- Create two-way meaningful communication.
- Engagement within the sector, through infrastructure networks and other engagement mechanisms, will be vital to ensure confidence in the Concordat on both sides, and ensure the Joint Forum has the most up to date evidence on needs, priorities and good practice within the sector locally.
- A level playing field that will take on feedback from the groups that work at a grass roots local level and not just regional organisations.
- Helpful and important to know how the wider sector can support the Joint Forum and keep up to date on how it is operating.

Monitoring & Outcomes (3 comments)

- Values and practices may very easily become meaningless without the adoption of agreed outcomes.
- In relation to the core set of values the Forum should set achievable goals which are S.M.A.R.T. (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-bound) and 'task and finish' groups should be included where appropriate to advance the work.
- A new Concordat should commit all parts of the statutory sector to adopting an outcomes-based approach.

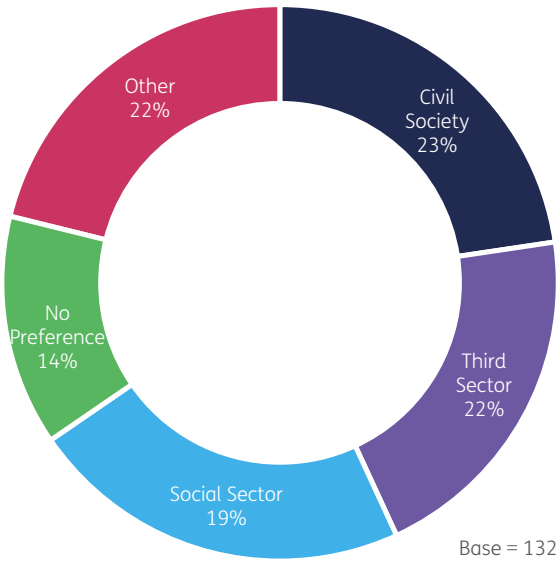
Other (32 comments)

- A commitment to ensure that inequalities across our society were actively targeted and eradicated. This could be achieved by the introduction of additional binding equality duties in a Northern Ireland Bill of Rights or other measures that create direct commitments to equality of outcome.
- More effective action on the kinds of stubborn societal inequalities and poor outcomes that persist in NI despite years of targeted initiatives will require a cultural shift towards more collaborative, sustainable and citizen-involved ways of working.

- Appropriate understanding of the needs of under-represented and disadvantaged groups and ensure these are taken into consideration when designing and implementing policies, programmes, and services.
- Whilst DfC have and should continue to play a core-funding role for infrastructure support, the value and role of the VCS core infrastructure is pivotal to the successful delivery of other department priorities and should be recognised as such.
- Imperative that consultation with service users is not an afterthought but is centre and front of any new strategy development and incorporated into the implementation, monitoring and evaluation stages.
- Ensure the independence of VCSE organisations to deliver their mission, including their right to campaign, regardless of any financial relationships with Government.

Question 10: The 2011 Concordat was framed as an agreement between Government and the voluntary and community sector. The Joint Forum believes that a future Concordat should apply to a wider range of "civil society" organisations: a very broad definition that includes everything outside the state (public sector) and the market (private sector). This is also sometimes called the "third sector" or the "social sector". There is some debate around the term we should use when we speak about this broader sector. Which would be your preferred term?

Around a fifth of respondents each said that their preferred term would be 'civil society' (23%), 'third sector' (22%) or 'social sector' (19%) whilst over a fifth of respondents (22%) suggested an 'other' term to describe this broader sector.



Base = 132

If Other, please specify below.

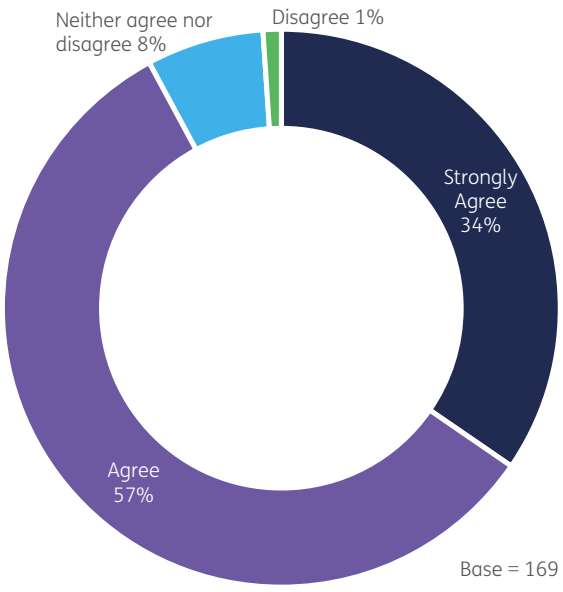
Nineteen of the twenty-seven respondents who provided a preferred term suggested 'Community and Voluntary Sector'. Thirteen respondents did not like the use of the term 'third sector' with some saying it suggested the sector is ranked behind both the private and public sectors.

Vision and Headline Outcomes (for infrastructure support)

Vision

Question 11: The draft framework proposes a vision for infrastructure support. To what extent do you agree with this vision?

Just over nine in every ten respondents (91%) agreed or strongly agreed with the proposed vision for infrastructure support with just one per cent of respondents disagreeing with the vision.



There were 70 comments overall in response to this question and a selection of comments is presented below.

Comments – Agreed/strongly agreed with Vision (51 comments)

Funding (10 comments)

- The Vision should include sector's contribution to economy/jobs.
- It must include 'trusted relationships and investment'.
- A commitment to invest in the infrastructure and staff should be included.
- Adequate funding/resources required.
- Investment in digital infrastructure.
- Core running costs for organisations need to be resourced adequately to enable organisations to operate effectively.
- Annual funding arrangements prevent proactive planning and delivery of services and increase bureaucracy and uncertainty which put strain on the workforce of both sectors.
- To work through only one infrastructure support organisation as a Regional Infrastructure Anchor is not ideal.

Operation (5 comments)

- Sector has a much broader role than service delivery.
- Vision requires a very focussed and agreed mechanisms/platforms/streams to be in place to support the diversity of the sector.
- Additional consideration of the detailed operation of the scheme is needed.

- Some proposals elsewhere in this document will not facilitate the Vision in the way that they could.

Programme for Government (4 comments)

- As long as the Programme for Government is up-to-date and realistic.
- Mention of the Programme for Government implies an importance of government outcomes (which relate to all sectors) rather on agreed outcomes for the VCS.
- Relevant and valuable outcomes are delivered by the sector, but these do not always fall under the remit of any Programme for Government.
- The Department has developed 4 headline outcomes to articulate what success looks like against this vision.

Other (33 comments)

- Agree with the Vision.
- The Vision outlined is quite wordy and could be narrowed to become clearer.
- Needs buy in from the government.
- Consider an outcome aimed at succession planning for leadership in the sector.
- One infrastructure support organisation as a Regional Infrastructure Anchor is not ideal, important that there is respect for diversity in including different membership organisations in this vision.
- Important to harness the wealth of experience the seven current volunteer centres have.
- Work to do in the area of partnership & collaboration.
- Consideration should be given to the definition or common understanding of "innovation".
- Concern about the vision referring to challenge.
- Prefer inclusion of 'local activity and action' rather than 'action'.
- Is Sector truly 'independent' given the proposals and specific selections detailed further in the document.
- Would encourage an explicit reference to how the Sector has a role and responsibility in helping government deliver on their S75 duties.

Comments – Neither agree nor disagree with Vision (10 comments)

- Need to be clear what is meant by `collaboration` and `partnership` and how that is translated in practical terms.
- Add a recognition of the sector's role in sharing learning, advocacy for vulnerable communities and its advice on policy.
- Vision and headline outcomes should take into account the role of the Community and Voluntary Sector as essential partners in upholding the rights of Section 75 groups.

- Address funding/resourcing/engagement of statutory services for organisations operating in Neighbourhood renewal areas before developing and implementing new concordats, visions and delivery mechanisms.
- Dependent on funding.
- Would need to be a lot more cross-departmental collaboration.
- Don't have faith around delivery.
- Issues using volunteers.

Comments – Disagree/strongly disagree with Vision (2 comments)

- Three separate visions in one paragraph, too much emphasis on service delivery. It doesn't consider the role and practice of community development in the VCS sector.

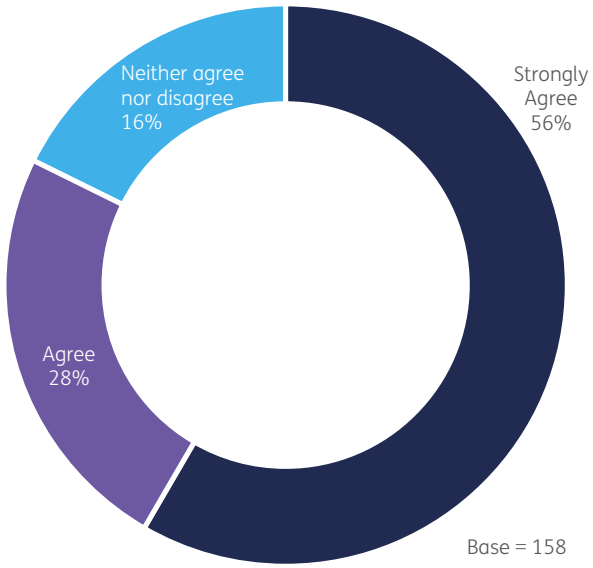
Further Comments (where no response to Question 11) (7 comments)

- Include wording 'adequately resourced' in Vision.
- Vision and outcomes can only be sustainably achieved with long-term funding from government departments that is adequate to provide infrastructure organisations with the resources, personnel and stability to develop their leadership capacity.
- It is not clear how much/how long funding will be made available by DfC for sector infrastructure partners.
- Concern at the possible loss of key parts of infrastructure that previously existed, with the proposed new structures potentially inadvertently undermining the values set out for the proposed Concordat between Government and the sector.
- Concern regarding the lack of specific equalities strands across the framework given DfC has lead responsibility for cross-Governmental equality and social inclusion strategies.
- Clarity needed for scenarios where disagreements arise between the Department and key partners, or between the sub-regional and sub-sectoral organisations and the partner/anchor organisations.
- The vision that is articulated in the draft Framework, is best delivered through a collective community development approach, informed by the values outlined.
- In advance of legislative commitment to improving wellbeing and reducing inequalities, suggest that the role of the VCS and associated sectoral infrastructure could be expressed in a way that recognises its broader and independently set goals to improve outcomes for people and place in the long-term.

Leadership and Advocacy headline outcome

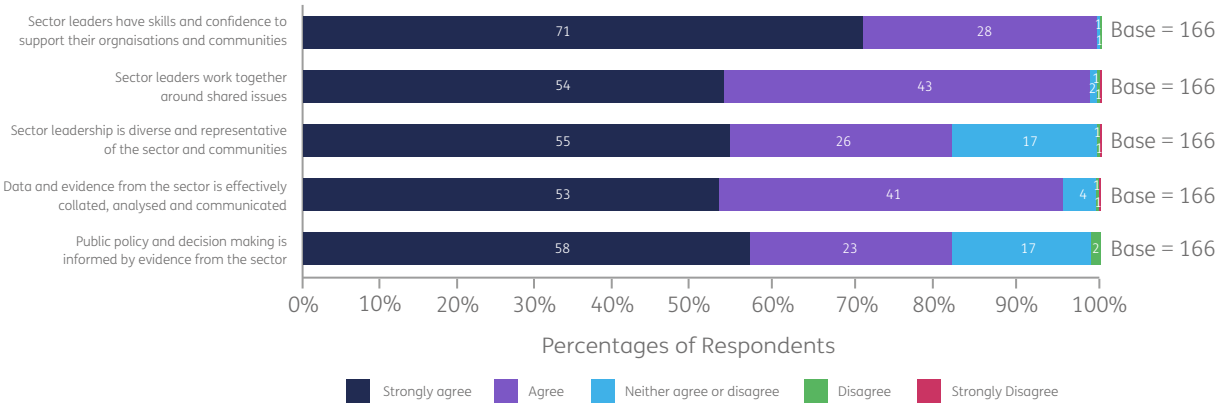
Question 12: To what extent do you agree with this Leadership and Advocacy headline outcome?

Over four-fifths of respondents (84%) agreed or strongly agreed with the leadership and advocacy headline outcome, whilst no respondents disagreed with the outcome.



Question 13: To what extent do you agree with the supporting outcomes?

Over nine in every ten respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the supporting outcomes relating to the 'skills and confidence' of sector leaders (99%), sector leaders working together around shared issues (97%) and sector data and evidence being collated, analysed and communicated (94%). Just over four-fifths of respondents (81%) agreed or strongly agreed with the supporting outcomes relating to evidence based public policy and a 'diverse and representative' sector leadership. Only 2% or fewer respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with each of the supporting outcomes.



Question 14: If you would like to expand on your answer please do so below.

There were 114 comments overall in response to this question and a selection of comments is presented below.

Data/Evidence (74 comments)

- Data and evidence gathered from the community and voluntary sector must be given appropriate weight and consideration and used effectively to influence public policy and decision making.
- Data collection needs to be meaningful, proportional and purposeful and as easy as possible for organisations of all sizes to provide. It should not require a lot of extra work or duplication beyond what is currently provided to commissioners.
- There needs to be a degree of standardisation so that the data collected is meaningful, however, there needs to be a degree of flexibility in how evidence is presented.
- Evidence needs to be based on an inclusive, robust and representative, statistically viable sample size.
- The data should be shared across all leaders to ensure openness and transparency and filtered down to all organisations.
- It is important to disaggregate data between larger and smaller organisations to separate out voluntary from community organisations to enable more detailed analysis of the sector.

- Analysis of data and evidence must be 'Outcomes based'. Qualitative analysis needs to be undertaken with a focus on impact rather than volume.
- DfC should ensure comprehensive data, analysis and insight is regularly gathered to support communities most at risk of emergencies.

Funding/Resources (56 comments)

- To have effective leadership and delivery we need qualified effective staff that we can attract with salaries that match the public sector.
- Allocation of resources for leadership development and continuous professional development within organisations.
- The sector has to be adequately resourced to undertake policy and influencing work, as it is often additional to existing target and workloads.
- There are opportunities to involve the sector and civil society in direct decision-making through participatory budgeting.
- Adequate resourcing of the sector to collect data and measure outcomes, as well as to support with co-production and co-design.

Leadership (56 comments)

- Leadership roles across the voluntary and community sector are broad and varied. May be useful to point to what is understood to represent leadership at a regional and sub-regional level and how it is envisaged that these roles will be invested in to work towards delivery of the supporting outcomes.
- Vitally important that sector leaders are provided with the necessary tools and skills to articulate and advocate on behalf of their communities and representative groups/organisations.
- There are different levels of support required to reflect different levels of experience in individual organisations.
- Leadership in this sector requires a sound understanding of corporate governance, charity law and regulations, charitable financial management in particular the management of restricted funds.
- Need to consider an outcome aimed at succession planning for leadership in the sector.
- Should make reference to sector leaders and sub-regional/regional representative bodies connected with networks outside of NI.
- Important to recognise the intolerable stress leaders in the sector have faced in previous years and ensuring staff retention is very important.
- Sectoral leaders within the broader community and voluntary sector need to be aware of and also promote the needs of other sector grouping such as women's sector, disability, age etc.
- The principle of Leadership collaboration on matters of shared interest is hugely important.

Other (25 comments)

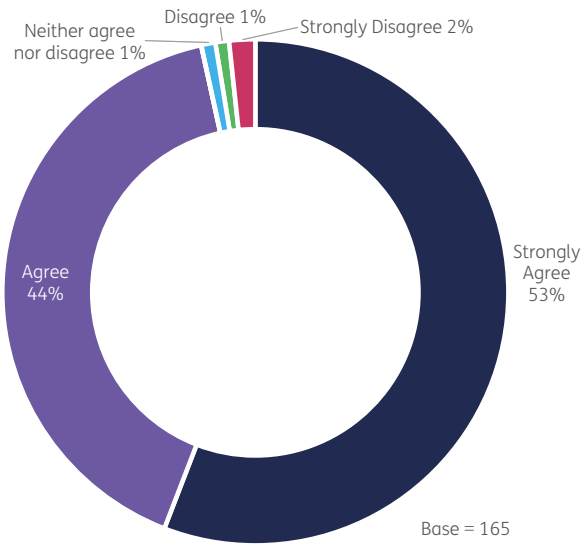
- Agree with the proposed headline and supporting outcomes.

- Suggest 'needs and interests' is used within the Vision statement.
- A further supporting outcome should be included which ensures the independence of VCSE organisations to deliver their mission, including their right to campaign, regardless of any financial relationships with Government.
- Suggest adding new supporting outcome 'Sector leaders encourage, nurture and support leadership from within the community.'
- Suggest adding new outcome 'inclusion of leadership and advocacy for fair terms and conditions for staff and volunteers within the sector'.
- Update second supporting outcome to include 'common goals and shared issues'.
- Fifth supporting outcome is weak, suggest rewording to 'Evidence from the sector is used in public policy and decision making'.
- Propose that reference be included, to addressing and strengthening the knowledge, skills, competencies and professional development of the workforce, to recognised and appropriate standards, both within the VCS and within local councils.
- The grouping of advocacy and leadership in the Vision statement is not intuitive.
- Public policy and decision making should be co designed with the sector.
- The Public Policy and decision-making supporting outcome requires a change in mindset from the Public sector.
- The Sector communicates within the government systems presented but these are outdated & very limited.
- Collaboration should be supported not only between individual VC organisations but sectoral bodies.
- The detailed practical operation will be vital, and this requires further development.
- Consultations to inform the policy and decision making should be done in a way that is meaningful whereby those involved are informed of the changes.

Volunteering headline outcome

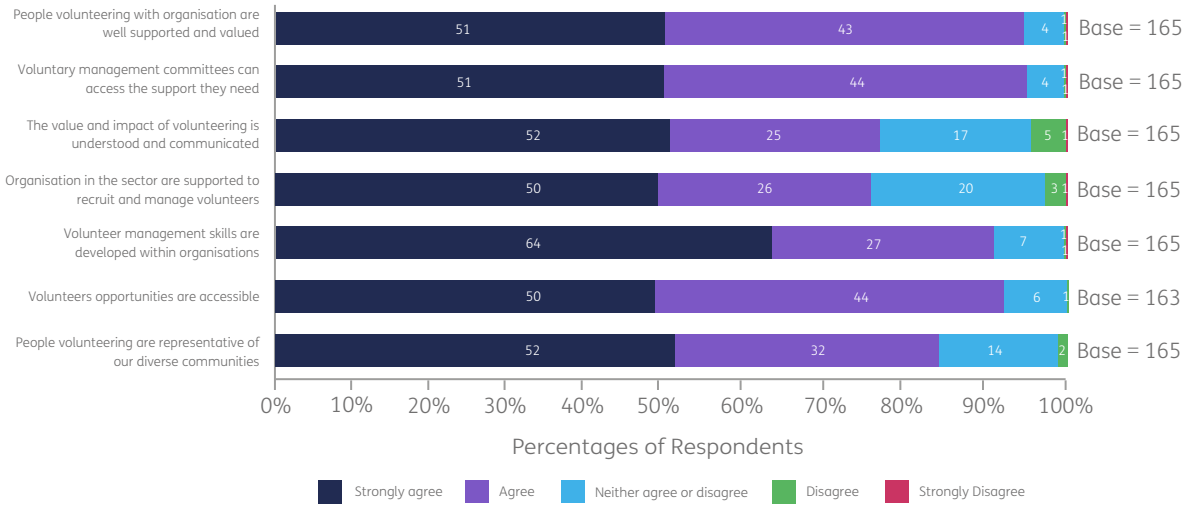
Question 15: To what extent do you agree with this Volunteering headline outcome?

Over nine in every ten respondents (97%) agreed or strongly agreed with the volunteering headline outcome whilst only two per cent of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the outcome.



Question 16: To what extent do you agree with the supporting outcomes?

Over nine in every ten respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the supporting outcomes relating to voluntary management committees accessing support (95%), volunteers being well supported and valued (94%), volunteer opportunities being accessible (93%) and volunteer management skills being developed (91%). Around four-fifths of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the remaining supporting outcomes. Around one in every fourteen respondents (7%) disagreed or strongly disagreed with the supporting outcome relating to the value and impact of volunteering being understood and communicated whilst the proportion disagreeing with the other supporting outcomes was four per cent or less.



Additional comments (4 comments)

- There are relatively few paid staff in rural VCS organisations outside of infrastructure support organisations at sub regional and regional level. This shapes the nature of community development support for rural organisations with more work delivered in the evenings and weekends, leading to less focus on HR/staff management and more focus on governance, good practice and volunteer management.
- There has been a decline in volunteering, partly due to the pandemic and the fact that the CVS workforce, as well as being voluntary, is an older cohort in rural community groups. These factors need to be taken into consideration as the new Support Framework is developed.

Question 17: If you would like to expand on your answer please do so below:

There were 99 comments overall in response to this question and a selection of comments are presented below.

Recruitment and Retention (53 comments)

- The number of volunteers reduced significantly following the Pandemic, and while numbers are growing steadily, more needs to be done before the VCS sector can be seen as sustainable.

- Community groups have a shortage of volunteers and committee members, and many groups will be forced to close due to this reason.
- Rural infrastructure organisations have seen a decline in volunteering, partly due to the pandemic and the fact that the community and voluntary sector workforce, as well as being voluntary, is an older demographic.
- Succession planning in terms of volunteer recruitment and sustaining their involvement can prove difficult, particularly in more rural areas where infrastructure and services are not readily accessible to support opportunities e.g. rural transport in evenings.
- Any Regional Volunteering strategy should consider the volunteering potential of the public and private sectors looking at how to mobilise such resources and the messaging required around that. Promotion to the general public is also a key factor in increasing the level of public awareness of volunteering.
- A three-to-five-year Regional Volunteering Strategy or Framework should be developed and be adequately funded to mitigate and reverse the current decline in volunteer numbers and hours.
- It might be useful to consider the nature of volunteering and civic engagement in societal change and the context of digital engagement and virtual exchanges.
- Organisations have cited the level of bureaucracy regarding policies and procedures has been off putting for volunteers.
- Volunteering is essential to the VCS and supporting the sector to provide accessible, high-quality volunteer opportunities for people of all ages and backgrounds is essential.
- Some organisations don't support staff who wish to volunteer or see the benefit in it.
- More needs to be done to support organisations supporting volunteers & more support for the volunteers themselves.
- Diversity & Inclusion must be included as part of a long-term objective to support capacity building.
- Significant support and recognition are required for those volunteers in Governance roles. It can be a big commitment to be an active Board member and at times committees do not have all the skills required, particularly around HR challenges.

Funding / Resources (27 comments)

- The necessary resources need to be put in place to achieve the outcomes identified and should be provided on a multi-year, sustainable basis and adjusted in accordance with inflation.
- The level of scrutiny around funding needs to be based on the level of funding received.
- If we want to achieve the type of sector the strategy describes, then a

more integrated regional approach to infrastructure and resource planning is required.

- Volunteering needs resourced at grassroots to help develop and strengthen what is in place e.g. training, HR, legal support.
- Voluntary and community organisations should be resourced to meet volunteer 'out of pocket' expenses.
- The sector has to be adequately resourced to undertake policy and influencing work, as it is often additional to existing target and workloads.
- Rural areas, in particular, rely largely solely on volunteers as they have had much lower levels of investment than urban areas. This is further compounded by the centralisation of government, public services and private sector provision which sees resources skewed away from rural areas consistently. This disparity needs to be addressed in any future structures and distribution of resources / investment.
- Lack of funding for men's groups.
- Recognise and resource leadership support across the region especially on the Governance side.
- Research shows that investment in volunteering returns huge social and monetary gains, and this should be reflected in the future infrastructure.
- Volunteers should not be seen as a legitimate replacement for paid positions. It is critical that paid positions within the sector are on a level to attract and retain the skilled workforce required.
- Different communities and types of volunteers will require more support and investment to be able to volunteer.
- Some of the barriers to wider engagement require financial support e.g. to enable translation or disabled access. Barriers also exist because of the benefits system which are beyond the control of organisations.
- From our experience more and more volunteers are registering with additional support needs and as a Volunteer Centre we have limited resources to match the growing need.

Recognition (6 comments)

- More recognition of volunteers and publicity of this recognition is needed. Recognition need not be expensive, with simple events that show appreciation of local heroes which are attended by well-known people and senior officials would go a very long way.
- Volunteers should be valued within our society and volunteering championed across all sectors. It would be a positive step to consider not only how we can improve how we demonstrate the value of volunteers but also see opportunities across a wider range of sectors – not only the VCS.
- DfC had a volunteering support programme where funding was available to advance those organisations heavily reliant on volunteering. It was axed, which reflected the value placed upon volunteers.

Data (3 comments)

- Specialist volunteering research and data collection is a crucial outcome.
- It is important to disaggregate data between larger and smaller organisations to separate out voluntary from community organisations to enable more detailed analysis of the sector.
- Evidence from the sector to inform public policy and decision making will be dependent on how the data from the sector is effectively collated, analysed and communicated.
- Evidence needs to be valued by government to analyse the impacts when carrying out EQIA's, policy and budget proposals.

Other (76 comments)

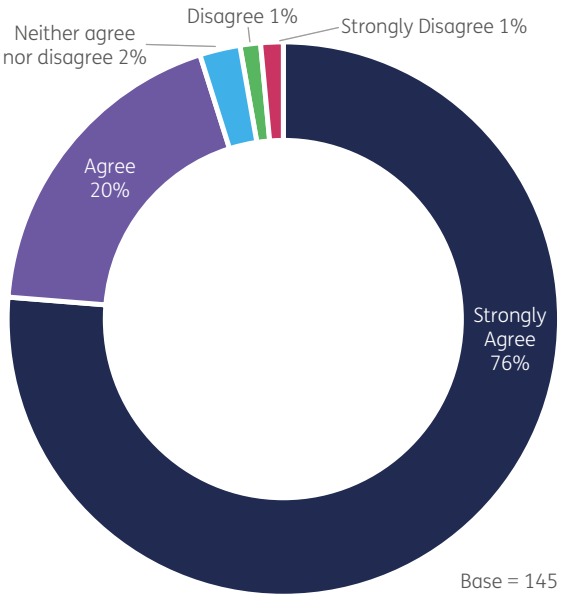
- Welcome the support for volunteering and the focus on volunteering in the Framework.
- There are many different "levels" of volunteering and there needs to be a clearer distinction between them. There needs to be a more distinct difference between Volunteering and Voluntary activity.
- Clear guidelines for organising and supporting volunteering would be great.
- A change management process was put in place in 2008 to rationalise the volunteering sector in Northern Ireland. This process needs to be completed so that we have a genuinely integrated approach to volunteering in Northern Ireland.
- The vast majority of community and voluntary organisations in rural areas are managed and staffed by volunteers and there are relatively few paid staff in rural organisations outside of infrastructure support organisations at sub regional and regional level. This shapes the nature of community development support for rural organisations with more work delivered in the evenings and weekends leading to less focus on HR/staff management and more focus on governance, good practice and volunteer management.
- Because the faith sector makes a major contribution to dealing with poverty and are relied upon by the Statutory and voluntary sector to provide the necessities for people in their communities, volunteers can feel exhausted. The support of a coordinator for the faith sector is vital to pull various organisations together to gain mutual support and value.
- Volunteering can add additional pressure on charities and their boards.
- Volunteer led organisations, delivering significant public service outcomes, should never be a substitute for the statutory responsibilities of public bodies.
- The sector relies fundamentally on highly skilled and trained professionals to deliver professional, legally compliant and best practice informed services, and this must be recognised.

- The proposed VCS Civil Contingencies Partnership should reflect the vital and longstanding contribution of volunteers in emergency response and provide greater opportunities for local volunteers to support emergency planning, response and recovery.
- More could be done to integrate the efforts of the VCS into emergency response structures. DFC should seek to establish two-way relationships within the sector, enlisting their help, not just when volunteers are needed, but also enable them to feed information and insight to and from grassroots in planning, response, recovery and learning.
- Clarity is needed in terms of what 'support' means, organisations, boards and individuals must be supported but this could be with an array of different needs.
- Supporting outcomes around volunteering should also apply to paid staff within the sector.
- Expand the value aspect so that social value is articulated, understood and valued.
- There may be a degree of overlap when it comes to implementing some of these supporting outcomes- supporting outcomes 4 & 5 and supporting outcomes 6 & 7.
- Supporting outcome 7 could increase the risk of tokenism within organisations to ensure they are representative and that the wording of the outcome could create undue pressure. Alternative language could be 'everyone should be able to volunteer.'

Core Capacity and Resilience headline outcome

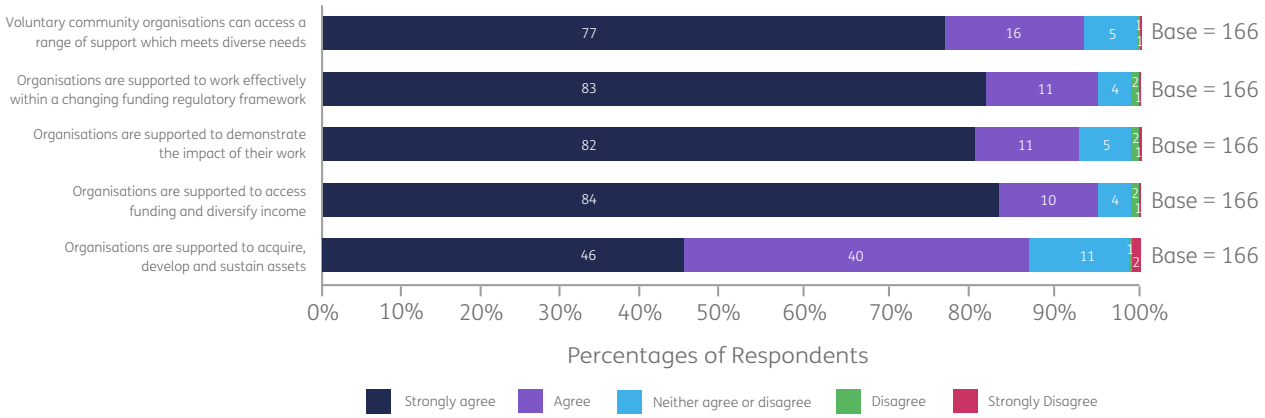
Question 18: To what extent do you agree with this Core Capacity and Resilience headline outcome?

Over nine in every ten respondents (96%) agreed or strongly agreed with the core capacity and resilience headline outcome whilst only two per cent of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the outcome.



Question 19: To what extent do you agree with the supporting outcomes?

Around nine in every ten respondents agreed or strongly agreed with each of the supporting outcomes relating to the core capacity and resilience headline outcome whilst just three per cent or less of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the supporting outcomes.



Question 20: If you would like to expand on your answer please do so below.

There were 126 comments overall in response to this question and a selection of comments is presented below.

Collaboration & Support (70 comments)

- The Framework should also support networking, developing partnerships and collaboration and mentoring between community organisations.
- The future model should incentivise collaboration and partnership rather than competition.
- For years the sector has been encouraged to actively compete with other organisations to secure an ever-decreasing pot of funding resulting in a fragmented sector and fragmented services.
- It is important to recognise that more partnership and collaboration between VCSE organisations is required going forward and that assistance is provided in respect of this e.g. the supportive role provided by Collaboration NI in the past.
- There should be a greater emphasis on the benefit of sharing best practice and networking with other organisations. There should be new "mentoring" schemes to allow new staff/volunteers to learn from the more experienced people in the Sector.
- Absolutely essential to ensure that anchor organisations and networks are working to a clear framework setting out requirements, mechanisms for engagement and sharing networking opportunities.
- One of the most useful roles of the infrastructure organisations will be in building that resilience in the sector through upskilling of VCS organisations in areas such as leadership, fundraising and

tendering, advocacy, policy development and demonstrating our value.

- A support mechanism needs to be in place to enable organisations to exit and wind up their affairs.
- It is important that the faith sector continue to be supported by the NICVA community faiths forum as the sector derives support from each other across all faiths.
- The diversity of type, service and experience across the spectrum of VC organisations requires that the range of supports match need.
- In the first supporting outcome it is difficult to estimate how much of an impact unspecified forms of support will make.
- Potential overlap between the volunteering and core capacity & resilience headline outcomes in relation to the 'support for management committees' and 'governance' bullet points.

Funding/Assets (57 comments)

- Include a commitment to longer term sustainable funding including multi-year funding and full cost recovery.
- Need funding which supports employees' terms and conditions of employment; in built flexibility within contracts to vary allocation of funding and an acceptance that third sector organisations need to build contingency reserves.
- Changing the funding model will be a key determinate in whether the vision and hopes of this Concordat can be realised.
- With the withdrawal or ending of certain funding streams in recent years, 'replacement' funds increasingly do not meet the needs of these groups, or the groups are often ineligible to apply. This is not an issue that can be addressed by an increase in skills.
- The bureaucracy associated with many forms of funding is often disproportionate.
- Many organisations do not have sufficient expertise in diversifying income and building financial resilience, support required.
- Funding needs to recognise new ideas / initiatives and be willing to take risks.
- With statutory funding declining in many areas, community and voluntary organisations need to show the value of what they do to new potential funders by measuring and showing impact however may lack resources to do so.
- Investment readiness is a core support need for VCO's transitioning through a growth curve.
- Increased investment in digital infrastructure and data capabilities would directly achieve the supporting outcome around helping organisations "demonstrate the impact of their work".
- The core funding programme closed in 2009, therefore there is no support currently available to seek within DfC for core activity.
- Any future RISP Program to ensure more strategic long-term investment in the sector, networks capacity at a sub-

regional/regional level to support groups and appropriate levels of investment in Core Capacity from a centralised source.

- No funding for men or boys.
- Organisations should be encouraged and supported to look at alternative income options including acquiring, developing and sustaining assets to use for the benefit of the entire community.
- Acquiring assets can be a helpful approach for sustainability for some but not necessarily all V/C organisations as it wouldn't be appropriate in every case.
- Sometimes having assets to manage can put extreme pressure on voluntary committees as quite often these are funding reliant and cannot generate enough income themselves.
- C&V groups need to acquire assets and take ownership of community buildings etc to cut the costs of increasing rents etc.
- Need to be clear about what is meant by 'assets', physical assets or community assets.
- Definition of assets should be rooted in a community development approach, whereby people, skills and experiences are all classed as assets.

Other (24 comments)

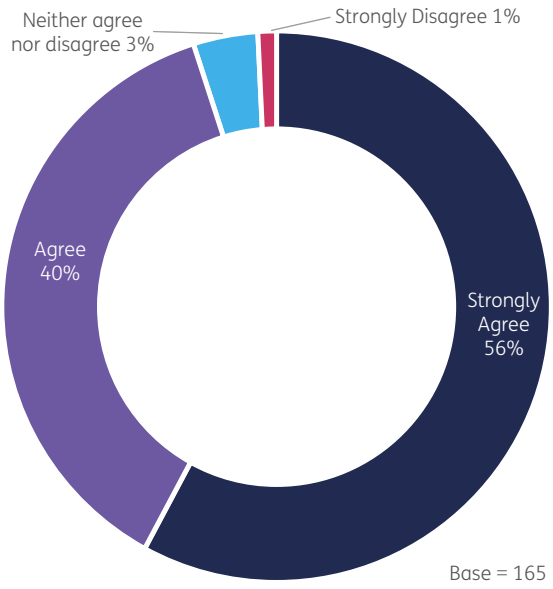
- Agree with the core capacity and resilience outcome and supporting outcomes.
- The sustainability of organisations within the sector requires resources to develop core capacity and resilience with consideration given to the challenge of recruitment and the importance of maintaining staff wellbeing.
- Encouraging organisations to continue to deliver what works but enabling innovation to trial new services as demand and society's needs change.
- The term 'core capacity' is a broad term and can be interpreted differently for every organisation depending on their size, number of contracts etc.
- Local councils are not best placed to deliver community/employability programmes, the staff are not on the ground and therefore not motivated.
- Staff shortages and turnover, as well as recruitment make it more challenging to achieve all outcomes highlighted in this document.
- The use of Outcome Based Accountability (OBA) mechanisms affords the opportunity to regularly review progress against stated outputs and identify any outputs areas which are performing below target, and which are, therefore, in need of additional intervention or revised programme approaches.
- While it is important that supported organisations are held accountable for defined outcomes, it is also important that the monitoring structures are not too intensive, where the reporting is disproportionate to time spent on delivery.
- Shared agreement on what the outcomes are and how they are measured.

- If we want to see volunteering developed as part of a strategic response to large-scale crisis events, then it needs high-level coordination. To build resilience we need a sector that is structured in a way that can be strategic, mobilise resources and work responsively with local actors to ensure that the sector plays an effective and sustainable role along with mainstream statutory providers.

Collaboration and Partnership headline outcome

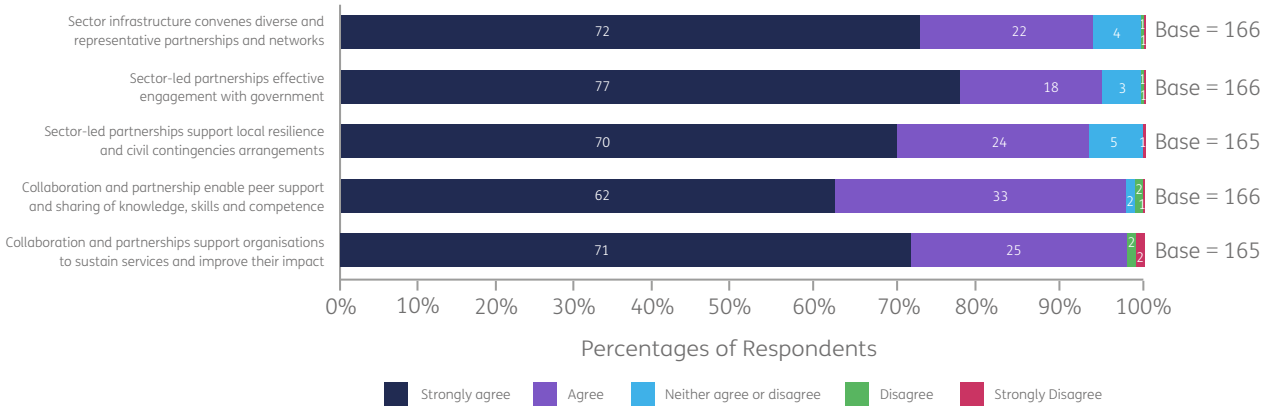
Question 21: To what extent do you agree with this Collaboration and Partnership headline outcome?

Over nine in every ten respondents (96%) agreed or strongly agreed with the collaboration and partnership headline outcome whilst only one per cent of respondents strongly disagreed with the outcome.



Question 22: To what extent do you agree with the supporting outcomes?

Over nine in every ten respondents agreed or strongly agreed with each of the supporting outcomes relating to the collaboration and partnership headline outcome whilst just three per cent or less of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the supporting outcomes.



Question 23: If you would like to expand on your answer please do so below.

There were 104 comments overall in response to this question and a selection of comments is presented below.

Collaboration/partnerships (14 comments)

- Government should be encouraged to advocate for and provide support to organisations to form meaningful partnerships that will benefit the entire community.
- Partnerships must be meaningful with respect and dignity and all partners bring skills and resources to the table.
- Collaboration fosters trust and strengthens relationships between organisations within the voluntary sector and with other stakeholders...these relationships are essential for long-term sustainability and successful partnership working.
- There is also an important distinction between simple sharing and more meaningful development, which can lead to greater levels of community control and empowerment.
- Local government should play a bigger role in developing partnerships and mentoring relationships between social sector organisations.

Funding (14 comments)

- With funding pots reducing and the need for funding increasing it is becoming more difficult to be successful in securing funding to address emerging needs.
- A key challenge facing the VCS is the over-reliance by Government on 'tendering and procurement' which creates winners and losers and encourages competition rather than collaboration.

- When resources are stretched and funding becomes an issue, competition can make partnership working more difficult, so this should be considered.
- Money is not secured and there is not enough money to sustain business without another source of income.
- Uncertainty about our funding and therefore it's a very difficult sector to be in.
- The system needs addressed, with open and transparent process only funding organisations to do regional support work, not fund their operational programmes.
- Encourage this continued co-ordinated approach to using public funds in an effective manner.
- More funding and resources for men's organisations.

Sharing knowledge (8 comments)

- Sharing skills and knowledge is important, but applying these learnings is key to growth and long-term development.
- It would be useful to separate and identify the appropriate outcomes to support the convening, collaboration and partnership working, resource and knowledge sharing within the wider and diverse community and voluntary sector family.
- Cross fertilization of organisations with specialised fields has the potential to bring about innovation and development.
- Opportunities for organisations to participate in skill exchange programs.

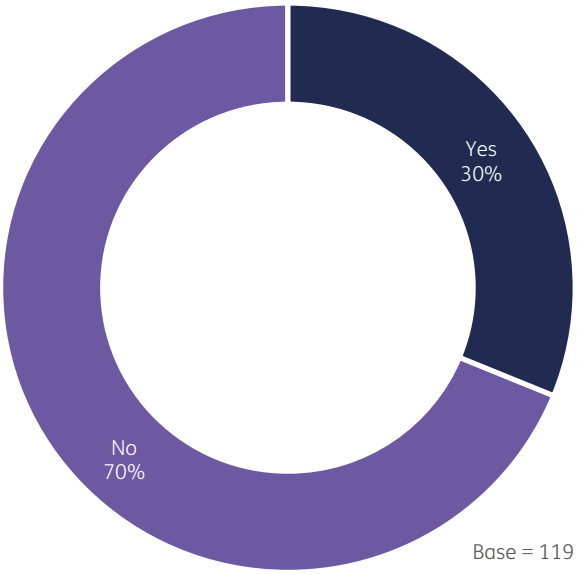
Other (13 comments)

- Might the supporting outcomes be strengthened with an emphasis on 'should', or similar? E.g., 'Sector led partnerships 'should/must/will' be 'directed/encouraged/expected' to support local resilience and civil contingency arrangements.
- Should include reference to how sector infrastructure and sector-led partnerships support government policy-making processes, delivery of Executive strategies, and implementation of new legislation.
- The initial sector infrastructure that DFC decides to support needs to already be those broad sector wide organisations.
- There needs to be an understanding of why and where we feel we are – the experience of unmet expectation.
- I think it is important that it is sector led as they know best what communities need and how best to engage.
- There's a need to have grass root BAME communities at the table for a true representation.
- There has been a distinct lack of understanding of the nature of the faith-based community sector and this document reinforces this.
- Recognise sectors where there is potential for enhanced levels of delivery. The youth work sector is an excellent example of a sector that could be a strategic resource.

Vision and Headline Outcomes

Question 24: Are there any key elements or themes missing from either the vision or headline outcomes?

Three in every ten respondents (30%) said there were key elements or themes missing from either the vision or headline outcomes.



Base = 119

If yes, please provide further information.

There were 54 comments overall in response to this question and a selection of comments is presented below.

Collaboration (25 comments)

- Consideration should be given to how we can learn from and build on this strategic partnership going forward.
- Need to strengthen and encourage better and more effective multi-agency working and to move away from the current transactional relationship.
- Clarity on the role of the Joint Forum and how it will contribute to a new vision would be welcomed.
- Inclusion, as appropriate in 'sector-led partnerships' and 'collaboration' opportunities should be considered in order to maximise the potential.
- Clarity on the roles and relationships of each sector.

Implementation (12 comments)

- The outcomes framework including the summary of commitments is somewhat high level and negates specific, measurable outcomes and associated actions.
- Keen to see a detailed implementation plan for the framework which should set out outcomes and actions.
- Future implementation plans are defined by clear indicator sets which are regularly monitored and evaluated to help ensure accountability and prevent the framework being subject to 'drift'.
- Too often the agenda is set before the C&V sector is invited to join.

Funding (9 comments)

- Significant under-investment and funding cuts over the past number of years have inflicted long term damage to the sector leading to staff redundancies, closure of services and ultimately less support for children and families.
- It is not a skillset issue; it is a support & funding stream issue.

- Implement compelling multi-year funding.
- Funding impacts innovation and growth.
- Funding investment for post asset transfer is critical for sustainability of services.

Learning (8 comments)

- Consideration should be given to how we can learn from and build on this strategic partnership going forward.
- Departmental learning from system realities in social sector allowing for and encouraging practical inter-departmental collaboration.
- Reflective practice should exist to welcome learning and value both successes and failures, as the learning is equally valuable.

Health & Wellbeing (3 comments)

- Positive benefits on mental wellbeing of being a volunteer, basic human need to give back to the community.
- The theme of health and wellbeing may be too specific under the core headlines.
- Importance of preserving the wellbeing of those working in the sector.

Other (17 comments)

- Not enough emphasis on engagement with the local community.
- A stronger strategy for small rural organisations to tap into volunteer support.
- Regional infrastructure needs to be truly regional.
- Reducing duplication and placing beneficiaries first.
- While digital skill enhancement is mentioned in other headline outcomes, we feel it should also appear in the Core Capacity and Resilience section.
- This consultation refers to women as a sub-regional and sub-sectoral category for support. Reducing the visibility of the Women's sector within the infrastructure support programme from a headliner to a sub-category is disappointing and unacceptable.
- Agree but believe this outcome should also include a commitment to co-design and that the supporting outcomes should include a commitment to ensuring a co-design model to be adopted by Government.
- What is missing is a recognition of the value of the faith sector and the importance of the current Lead from Government through the NICVA coordination of the sector.
- Difficulty getting balance and for 'other' organisations to have a voice.

Further Comments (where 'yes' not selected for Question 24)

Funding (11 comments)

- Challenge is the overreliance by Government on 'tendering and procurement' which creates winners and losers and encourages competition rather than collaboration.

- Not a skillset issue, it is a support & funding stream issue.
- A fair and effective funding approach that enables long-term sustainability of the VCS, an agreed benchmark for salaries would be a useful baseline.
- An approach to parity of funding would signal a clear intent of the value of the VCS to achieving the Executive's overarching PfG commitments.
- Indication of the resources and funding that will be attached to the implementation plan.
- A post asset transfer acquisition investment fund must be part of this.
- The inhibiting factor for age sector community and voluntary sector groups is the lack of sustainable funding in the sector.

Collaboration (4 comments)

- If the VCS is to become more collaborative, then some more creative ways of encouraging collaboration will need to be employed.
- Partnership working should be enabled and encouraged by funders but not necessarily required.
- Support the existing Sub-Regional Networks and their collaboration with NICVA to sustain services and improve their impact.

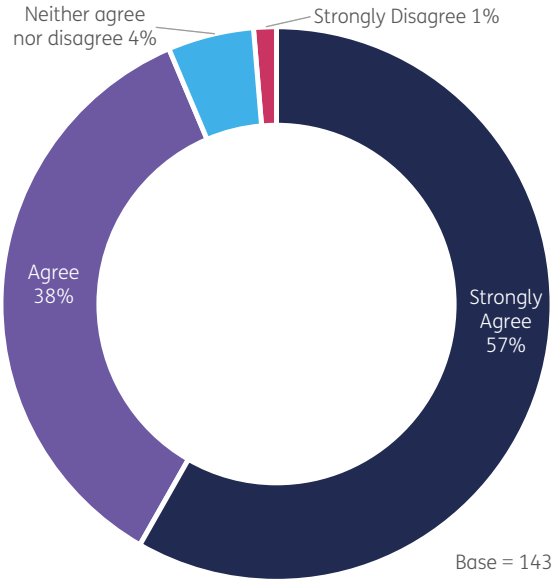
Other (16 comments)

- There must be clear delivery criteria, to ensure the sector as a whole can benefit from infrastructure support more effectively than to date.
- The outcomes also need to reflect that the VCSE sector works within a wider system that includes local government, communities, service users, funders, partnerships and networks and that all parts of that system need to play an active part.
- It is clear that the focus of this paper is on enhancing the robustness of the organisations within the sector rather than the outcomes that are achievable with more robust organisations.
- These should be kept under review in line with Joint Forum engagement with VCS organisations.
- It is not the skills that are missing but the acknowledgment and valuing of them.
- Further evaluation of all existing systems, organisations and partnerships is important before any changes to infrastructure support are made.
- The area that we would recommend highlighting further would be excellence in Governance as we recognise that it is critical to organisational culture, sustainability and growth.
- Community Asset Transfer opportunities for groups to grow.

Delivering the Ambition

Question 25: The Department has suggested five key areas for delivery against the proposed outcomes. To what extent do you agree that focusing on these delivery areas will support the outcomes framework?

Over nine in every ten respondents (95%) said they agreed or strongly agreed that focusing on the five suggested key delivery areas will support the outcomes framework.



If you would like to expand on your answer, please do so below.

There were 44 comments overall in response to this question and a selection of comments is presented below.

Comments - Strongly Agree/Agree that focusing on these delivery areas will support the outcomes framework (38 comments)

Collaboration/Partnerships (15 comments)

- Agree with the five key areas outlined.
- DfC and other departments must ensure that they work with the com/vol sector in order to create policy.
- It is imperative that all government departments are part of this process and adopt the same approach, particularly to funding and collaboration.
- Effective partnerships can only take place where the 3rd sector is able to engage and input into wider plans to ensure targeted and effective funding.
- The key to delivering on the above Outcomes is clear strategic direction from DfC working alongside the sub regional/ regional networks and NICVA.
- Feel the values and principles of partnership working are not strongly stated enough within the statement 'creating effective partnerships'.
- The use of the term 'sector infrastructure partners' could be better defined and clarified - this indicates not all the sector will be consulted.
- Believe that these 5 key areas should include a commitment to co-design processes and key principles of co-design.

Funding/Resources (8 comments)

- Welcome the inclusion of 'applying and championing improved funding practices'. Further detail required on how best practice will be scoped and agreed.

- Sustained investment in sector infrastructure needs to be at both regional AND local level.
- Funding practices should include multi-year funding and full cost recovery.
- Staff in the sector need to have security and to have career aspirations that are supported by the sector.

Other (23 comments)

- Visible and senior government leadership is required to achieve these 5 key points.
- Further detail on how best practice will be scoped and agreed e.g. will this be comparison with government approaches in other jurisdictions or will consideration be given to approaches used by grant-making trusts.
- The last point, regarding the understanding of the work of the sector and the impact of its work is particularly vital; the Department has some way to go to fully appreciate the specialism and expertise that exists in the sector.
- A similar focus on rural need is required at the Community infrastructure organisation sub-regional level.
- It is important to invest in the faith sector as in many ways it is from this sector that the Government get substantial dividends for a small investment.
- Would suggest 'Working to reduce duplication /risk of duplication' should be considered.
- Ensure that all sectors are represented i.e. voluntary youth work sector, those working with men etc.
- Agree that progress is needed in each of these areas across the community and, in particular the sports and physical activity sector.
- This is ok as long as the department checks they are actually supporting and working in partnership across all regions including Ards North Down - the women's infrastructure currently neglects Ards North Down.

Comments - Neither Agree nor Disagree that focusing on these delivery areas will support the outcomes framework (2 comments)

- Unclear what an integrated framework of support geared towards a common outcomes framework would look like in practice.
- Rather than discussing ways to champion improved funding practices, the Department must listen to calls from the sector.
- It is essential that the Department engages with the sector primarily through the Joint Forum, and not solely through the infrastructure support scheme.

Comments - Strongly Disagree that focusing on these delivery areas will support the outcomes framework (1 comment)

- Believe there will be little change made.

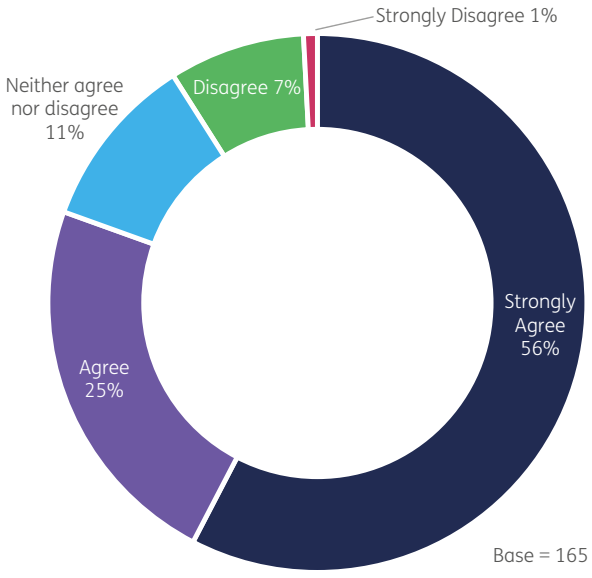
Further comments (where no response to Question 25) (4 comments)

- Welcome that one of the Framework's five priority areas for delivering its outcomes is to 'develop effective delivery partnerships'
- These measures should be strengthened by providing more opportunities for co-production between statutory and VCS organisations.

Creating effective partnerships

Question 26: To what extent do you agree with the proposed approach to delivering regional infrastructure support?

Around four-fifths of respondents (81%) said they agreed or strongly agreed with the proposed approach to delivering regional infrastructure support whilst around one in every thirteen respondents (8%) said they disagreed or strongly disagreed with the proposal.



Additional comments (15 comments)

Rural (7 comments)

- The Department's approach to regional infrastructure support and Community infrastructure organisation sub-regional level should include a specific focus on rural need.
- The vast majority of community and voluntary organisations in rural NI are managed and staffed by volunteers. This shapes the nature of community development support for rural organisations with more work delivered in evenings with less focus on HR, staff management and more focus on governance, good practice, and volunteer management.
- Decline in rural VCS volunteering due to the pandemic and an older workforce demographic.
- Consideration of the voluntary nature of the VCS in rural communities during the redesign of the Community Support Programme.
- With over 1/3 of the population living in rural areas it is clear that 'Rural' needs a fairer share of funding that is resourced on a full cost recovery basis.
- Important that the excellent trust and relationships built-up between DAERA and the organisations currently with a rural remit are not lost or diluted.
- Very important that 'Rural' does not get lost during any sharing or transfer of functions between DAERA and DfC.

Collaboration (6 comments)

- Build on the existing assets and avoid unnecessary competition within the sector.
- Recognise that collaboration often involves a common goal and a resource to meet the needs.
- Consider how investment in community development support by other Departments is seeking to support and complement work undertaken through the VCS Infrastructure Support Framework.
- Degree of overlap between sub regional & sub sectoral community support organisations, they need to work together to share expertise and meet support needs at the local level.
- The Regional Infrastructure organisations cannot 'be all things to all people' so it is essential that the Framework is based on solid foundations with strong memorandums of understanding between the regional partnership members, the Department and Local Anchor Infrastructure Organisations.
- It is essential to set out how learning from existing infrastructure support partnerships, including skills and relationships developed, will be preserved, and built upon.
- Essential sub sectoral structures are clearly defined, with relevant sub sectors named and specific collaboration arrangements set out.

Co-design (2 comments)

- Approaches to delivering regional infrastructure should be reflective of the wider community and co-design included in the process, with ongoing reviews by the Department.
- Co-design of the community development element with VCS and the programme subjected to a full public consultation including Rural Needs Impact Assessment.

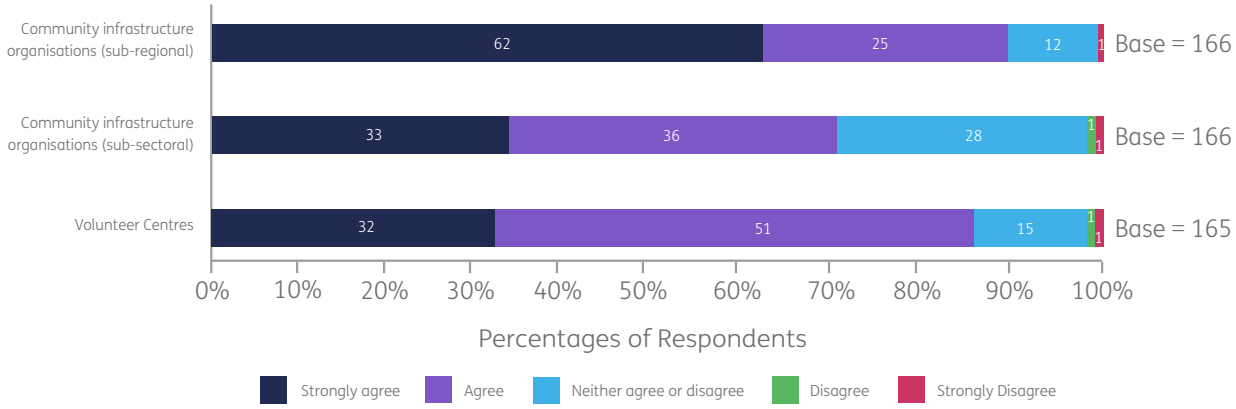
Other (10 comments)

- The value of independence may be compromised by the suggested approach, which would see more significant power consolidated into a small number of organisations, with sub-sectoral and sub-regional groups kept separate. This would grant a large amount of influence to the regional anchor organisation.
- Large regional voluntary organisations with a membership base should be self-sustaining. If they are providing a service of value their members will pay for it.
- In order for the regional partners group to be 'balanced and inclusive', it is not enough for it to only include generalist organisations.
- Essential the framework focuses on the 'Customer' and a bottom-up approach rather than historic infrastructure and what is often a top-down approach.

- Ensure that all sectors are represented.
- We do not think that this delivery partnership will be given 'the resources to convene and support sector leaders at a regional level' as outlined in the plan.
- The proposal to remove existing sectoral infrastructure networks, such as the women's RISP, is not based on evidence or review of effectiveness.
- Clarification on where the proposed framework originates and what consultation it is based on, including how the reference group has shaped the proposed structure.
- Clarify how the structure will operate in practice, set out what criteria and requirements are built into the infrastructure support scheme in relation to engaging organisations within the sector, identifying, and addressing needs identified by the sector, and developing networking both within the sector and with Departments.

Question 27: To what extent do you agree with the need for three types of local infrastructure support?

More than four-fifths of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the need for sub-regional community infrastructure organisations (87%) and volunteer centres (83%) whilst around seven in every ten respondents (69%) agreed or strongly agreed with the need for sub-sectoral organisations. Two per cent or less of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the need for each of the three types of local infrastructure support.



Additional Comments: (15 comments)

Organisations (5 comments)

- Need for local community-based anchor organisations being the drivers linking into regional support organisations knowledge and expertise.
- DfC needs to challenge other Departments when more collaborative approaches to commissioning services and support from the VCS are appropriate.
- This question specifically states that these are 'local' infrastructure, how can a NI regional organisation be considered 'local'?
- The 'sub' in 'sub-sectoral' gives the feeling that it is less than or beneath the other sectoral infrastructure partnerships. It was acknowledged with the Department that changing the name from 'sub-sectoral' to 'specialist' may help address some of the hierarchy issues.

Groups (5 comments)

- Concerned that voices from Section 75 groups may not be sufficiently represented if the Department mainly deals with NICVA and the Joint Forum as many smaller organisations do not engage with NICVA.
- The role of older people's organisations will become more important as the number of people aged 65 and over is due to increase.
- Specialism is easily lost and very difficult to replace, and once lost, some of the smaller organisations could take years or decades to re-establish themselves.

- Connecting the groups represented in the Department's Social Inclusion Strategies (Gender Equality, LGBTQI+, Disability, Anti-Poverty) along with the proposed Racial Equality Strategy to this 'specialist' group could help to clearly identify who these specialist groups are and connect Departmental plans to adequate resourcing and partnership.

Women's sector (4 comments)

- The loss of a strand specifically for women is a mistake that sends concerning messages about what value the Department puts on the women's sector.
- Practical support will be lost if there is no dedicated strand for women's work, and the longer-term risk will ultimately be a loss of smaller organisations as a whole at the expense of the larger and non-specialist VCS organisations.
- Concerned about the removal of the women's RISP from regional support and its inclusion in 'sub-sectoral' partnership as 'local'. This represents a failure to recognise the NI wide regional value of the work undertaken by the women's sector and by not holding specific funding the women's sector regional organisations will have to compete with other 'sub-regional' organisations who may have very different niche work.

Funding/support (3 comments)

- Important to support smaller user-led organisations offering rich local knowledge and often engage with the most vulnerable and hard to reach people in our society.
- A key challenge facing the VCS is the overreliance by Government on 'tendering and procurement' which creates winners and losers and encourages competition rather than collaboration.
- Observed investment in urban and city areas whilst west of the Bann have been forgotten.

Rural (2 comments)

- It is imperative that support continues to rural community groups.
- Lack of service provision for rural dwellers with regard to transport, health services, support for rural farming families, youth, lack of parks and sports facilities.
- We have an aging population and have the impact of fuel and food poverty in rural areas.
- With current environmental issues affecting rural locations and the new legislation about nitrates in farming more support is needed for the rural community.
- Funding for rural community organisations must be ring fenced within both the sub-regional and local government community support programmes.

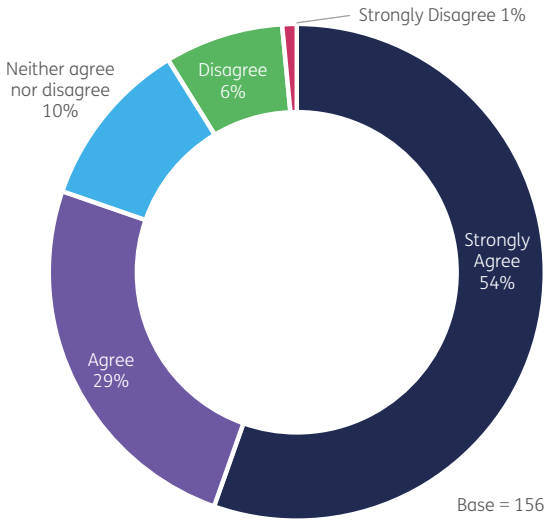
Other (1 comment)

- Encourages the Department to consider how other equally important themes (Assets, Finance and Enterprise / Innovation) are integral to the Support Framework and the delivery of this in relation to the capacity of the Regional Infrastructure support and the

Local anchor Infrastructure support organisations.

Question 28: To what extent do you agree with these commitments?

Over four-fifths of respondents (84%) agreed or strongly agreed with the commitments relating to creating effective partnerships whilst around one in every fourteen (7%) disagreed or strongly disagreed with the commitments.



If you would like to expand on your answer, please do so below.

There were 114 comments overall in response to this question and a selection of comments is presented below.

Comments - Strongly Agree/Agree with these commitments (79 comments)

Rural needs (76 comments)

- Welcomes the acknowledgment that a focus on rural need is required as one of the key elements of the regional infrastructure delivery partnership.... Believes a specific focus on rural needs is appropriate as a key element of the Department's approach to regional & sub regional infrastructure support... A similar focus on rural needs is required at the Community infrastructure organisation sub-regional level.
- There are relatively few paid staff in rural VCS organisations outside of infrastructure support organisations at sub regional and regional level. This shapes the nature of community development support for rural organisations.

Co-design (46 comments)

- Would expect that the VCS would be involved in co-design of this process and that any redesigned programme would be subject to full public consultation including Rural Needs Impact Assessment.
- Departments must build effective connections, embed co-design and also effectively resource the sectors to support delivery against the outcome framework.
- If the community support programme is to be redesigned it must be with infrastructure partner involvement. This needs to be a co-design process.
- The redesign should include consultation with community leaders local and regional partnerships.

Funding (37 comments)

- DfC needs to consider how investment in community development support by other Departments...is seeking to support and complement work undertaken through the VCS Infrastructure Support Framework and the CVS more generally.

- Appropriate investment in each is vital for the entire C&V sector to be supported and sustained to address vital needs in communities.
- CSP needs completely reviewed and redesigned with resources allocated to support the sub-regional Infrastructure Support Networks across NI working in partnership with NICVA.
- It is not completely clear from the information provided what the distinctions and allocation of funding will be to each level of operation.
- Funding for rural community organisations must be ring fenced within both the sub-regional and local government community support programmes.
- An indicative priority for investment to promote effective succession planning should be included under this outcome.
- Many of the funding resources distributed through the Department have not received an uplift to their contracts and the impact in real terms to organisations delivering service has been further hindered by the Covid-19 pandemic, rising energy costs and the broader cost of living crisis.

Partnerships (14 comments)

- More collaboration & partnership is required between funders & those delivering work in local communities.
- The networks already exist and therefore it would be easy to set up a good working partnership for all involved.
- The various roles of differing partners need to be valued and respected both in terms of their collaboration and differences.
- Every member should bring strengths to the table within a partnership and the delegated organisations should be carefully selected to maximise the opportunities for partnership building.
- Rather than trying to create “new” partnerships the department should seek to adequately resource and build on the current partnerships. “New” partnerships should be only considered in areas of weak infrastructure.
- It is important to establish partnerships which are both effective and efficient. Different ‘regional’ organisations have a particular expertise or skillset in specific areas of work.
- DfC supported regional partners group should be broadened to include organisations with specific Section 75 groups which would have the effect of making sure the model is more responsive to rights, equality and social inclusion.

Other (22 comments)

- We are concerned that the Department's policy position appears to point to only one regional infrastructure partner. A network of regional infrastructure organisations would be a better way of framing this.
- To ensure fairness and equity and to recognize the diversity of the sector, the anchor organisation cannot have the monopoly on infrastructure support and

receive most of the investment.

- Regional will have an integral role in this vision but the local presence will always be at the heart of the community it needs to work from the ground up.
- There must be a transparent and open process for recruitment/membership of the regional infrastructure delivery partnership and the selection of the three types of community infrastructure partners.
- Agreeing on assumption that all these organisations would be community led and adequately resourced in a long-term basis.
- It needs to change from the current system, which is outdated and, in some instances, don't work.
- Include the Community Faiths Forum.
- There's a need to factor in the need of Minority Ethnic communities including Single identity and wider support organisation working across the province.
- Gender budgeting and gender lens training should be mandatory for all those involved in policy and budgetary decision-making processes.
- Outreach with local community groups/ leaders.
- Please also consider engagement with private sector membership/support organisations that could add value.

Comments - Neither Agree nor Disagree with these commitments (11 comments)

Collaboration/Partnerships (6 comments)

- Concerned that the current proposed structure within this consultation is potentially imbalanced in that it appears that in this format, there will be a lot of resource from Dept. of Communities targeted at the level of the regional anchor and a smaller number of Department for Communities supported organisations that will be the regional infrastructure partners.
- The proposed approach to delivering regional infrastructure support is flawed because it does not pay enough attention to sub-sectoral community infrastructure organisations working on behalf of a vulnerable demographic.
- Believe DfC should look beyond structures and partnerships with the VCS and develop a more joined up approach with other government departments.
- There is an opportunity for the Department to harness the power of existing collaborative networks and unique expertise by developing strong working relationships with regional sub-sectoral community infrastructure organisations.
- The existing partnerships should be strengthened, recognised and adequately resourced to increase their effectiveness.

Funding (4 comments)

- It is critical that there is alignment between local and central government on funding practices and outcomes.
- There are instances where local delivery can be enhanced in cultivating direct funding relationship with delivery agencies on the ground.
- My experience in even organisations that cover NI wide the funding doesn't get equally split over their offices therefore areas have a decrease in services.
- From my experience in all over-reaching funding and partnerships is that everything becomes very Belfast centric.

Section 75 groups (3 comments)

- Opportunity to broaden the concept of a Department for Communities supported regional partners group to include organisations with specific Section 75 groups.
- Possible that the role of regional sub-sectoral organisations has been overlooked because there is not sufficient emphasis in the vision and outcomes relating to the role of civil society in supporting government to protect the rights and promote equality of opportunity for Section 75 groups.

Other (3 comments)

- Further clarification is required on how the proposed structure has been developed, how it will operate, how it will be monitored and how the community and voluntary sector as a whole can stay informed and involved with infrastructure support development and monitoring.
- The Community Support programme needs to be completely reviewed and redesigned and appropriately resourced to support the sub-regional Infrastructure Support Networks across NI working in partnership with NICVA.
- This section lacks practical application and does not match the ambition outlined in earlier sections.

Comments - Disagree/Strongly Disagree with these commitments (10 comments)

Categorisation Concerns (8 comments)

- The Department has identified the need for three types of community infrastructure partners including sub-regional; sub-sectoral; and Volunteer Centres. In our considered opinion, this is too complicated, overlapping and wasteful.
- A risk that categorising organisations into 'sub-regional' and 'sub-sectoral' will lead to increased competition for funding.
- Our concern is that the sub-sectoral category is too vague and broad to be able to include, and guarantee inclusion of, those groups that are particularly vulnerable.
- We do not agree with some of the proposed partnerships and their make-up reach. Q27 refers to the three types of 'Community infrastructure partners as 'local infrastructure support', regional organisations are not local. Given

these three partner definitions, some organisations will actually be both sub-regional and sub-sectoral, leading to confusion.

- The sub-sectoral category appears too broad to guarantee inclusion of all necessary groups, particularly those who are vulnerable to being excluded by mainstream funds.

Women's sector (4 comments)

- We do not see NICVA as being best placed to represent the women's sector.
- Many women's groups will lack the eligibility to be able to apply for generic grants and other forms of support, and without the guard rail of a dedicated women's RISP programme...minoritised and marginalised groups will be lost.

Further Comments (where no response to Question 28) (12 comments)

Co-design Process (10 comments)

- We would highlight the need for openness and an inclusive approach to the co-design of infrastructure support with a range of delivery partners.
- We would expect that the VCS would be involved in co-design of this process and that any redesigned programme would be subject to full public consultation including Rural Needs Impact Assessment.
- Local community leaders need to be consulted and supported to engage with the redesign.

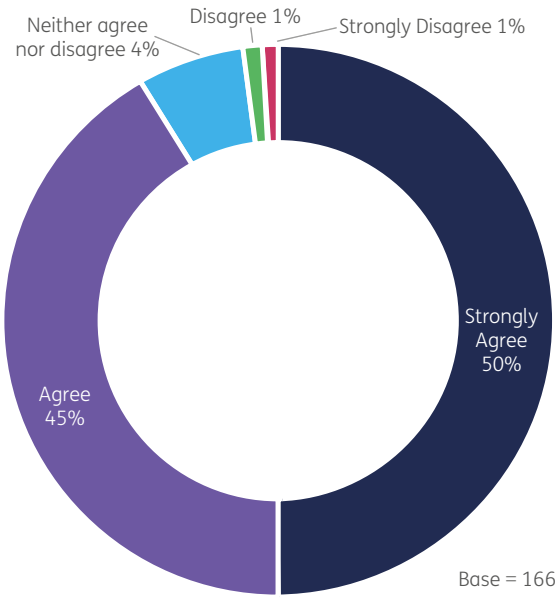
Rural Needs (8 comments)

- Believe a specific focus on rural needs is appropriate as a key element of the Department's approach to regional & sub regional infrastructure support. A similar focus on rural needs is required at the Community infrastructure organisation sub-regional level.

Sustained investment in sector infrastructure

Question 29: To what extent do you agree with these priorities for investment under the leadership and advocacy headline outcome?

Over nine in every ten respondents (95%) agreed or strongly agreed with the priorities for investment under the leadership and advocacy headline outcome whilst just one per cent disagreed or strongly disagreed with the priorities.



Question 30: Can you suggest any other priorities?

There were 108 comments overall in response to this question and a selection of comments is presented below.

Job security and Recruitment (57 comments)

- Terms and conditions in the CVS have not kept pace with inflation. This has led to a move to the public sector by many people previously employed in the CVS and has prevented the recruitment of staff from the public sector into the CVS.
- There should be a culture of security within the sector for staff, volunteers and communities so they can move from constantly trying to survive rather than thrive.
- Ensure that the VC sector is seen as an attractive and rewarding sector to work, in which its employees develop personally and professionally.

Succession Planning (56 comments)

- An indicative priority for investment to promote effective succession planning should be included under this outcome.
- Within Succession Planning organisations need support to identify the roles that will need to be filled in the future, the skills competences and experience required.
- We recognise the pressures at the centre of government, but issues like planning and investment for the future, including the building of reserves, must be addressed.

Learning and Development (10 comments)

- The Indicative Priorities for Investment should include reference to supporting the development of a skilled and professionally qualified workforce.
- Recognised third level learning and development programmes with accredited outcomes for leaders to grow their careers in the Social Sector
- The Framework needs a focus on peer mentoring, knowledge exchange and best practice networking.
- Knowledge exchange mechanisms could include the private sector to access additional skills, different perspectives, new networks and also help enhance understanding within the corporate world of the V/C sector and its expertise.
- Hosting a yearly community conference so ideas can be shared and new relationships built in person - talks, displays, workshops.
- Training for the sector on use of updated IT is needed.
- Resources to be set aside to support skills development of Minority Ethnic communities' leadership.

Inclusivity (8 comments)

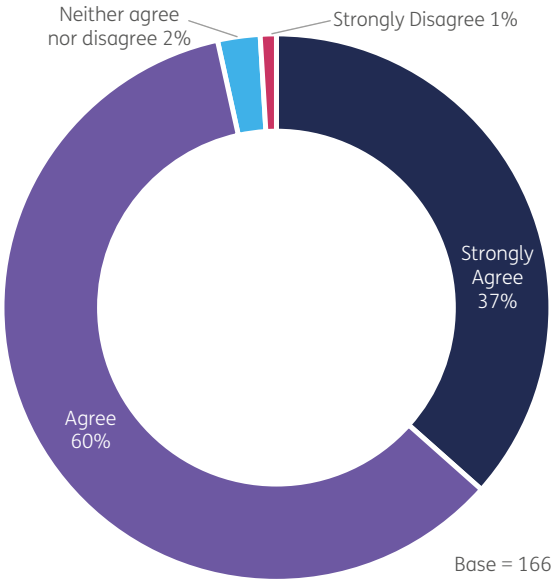
- There needs to be inclusion, openness, and transparency within the sector.
- Ensure all sector leaders undertake comprehensive gender equality training and gender budgeting programmes so as to be more fully informed when decisions are made on behalf of the sector.

Other (31 comments)

- The sector needs significant investment, and sensible budget timelines.
- Challenging competitive funding models and encouraging joint-working within sub-sectors and across sector
- Supporting leaders to secure funding for their organisation via grants, tenders, and social enterprise.
- Funding Investment needed to support post-asset requisition to allow groups to become sustainable and to grow.
- No matter what is done the lack of accessible and affordable transport will continue to be a barrier to growth for the social sector.
- More collaborative working between departments around shared outcomes in government to prevent multiple reporting and funding requests.
- Collaboration and strategic review skills for the sector to enable transformation and allow the sector to thrive.
- Our concern is with the removal of the Women's RISP and its necessary inclusion in the "sub-sectoral" division.
- We would suggest reference to supporting people with lived experience to become leaders and advocates be included in the list of priorities.
- Recognising success, at local levels, regional levels and across NI.
- Should not entirely focus on developing digital, online resources and directories for the VCS as this mode of engagement creates barriers for many older people's groups and networks.
- Using models that are asset-based, learning from their impact, and employing and encouraging similar practices...will create a significant shift in practice and a powerful forward step.

Question 31: To what extent do you agree with these priorities for investment under the volunteering headline outcome?

Over nine in every ten respondents (97%) agreed or strongly agreed with the priorities for investment under the volunteering headline outcome whilst just one per cent strongly disagreed with the priorities.



Question 32: Can you suggest any other priorities?

There were 42 comments overall in response to this question and a selection of comments is presented below.

Support (16 comments)

- Seek to distinguish between the different levels of volunteering/voluntary activity, supporting, promoting, motivating and investing in the retention of the valuable voluntary contribution.
- Support should be given to the volunteer centres to work collaboratively across the region, standardising delivery for equity and accessibility for all.
- Organisations are to be supported to recruit and support volunteers including management committees.
- The recruitment and retention of volunteers (many of whom suffer from burn-out) require constant support and on-going capacity building.
- Support of volunteers from groups who are under-represented in volunteering, such as autistic and neurodivergent people.
- Women make up a huge portion of volunteers, there should be gender support for women volunteer centres.
- Volunteer Centres need to continue with support to get Access NI checks done.
- Directory of local infrastructure support, better signposting to increase awareness of support available.
- Volunteer management skills are something that should appear here.
- We would suggest an additional priority of sharing good practice in working with and managing volunteers across the VCS.

Recruitment (5 comments)

- There needs to be a new generation of volunteers recruited in the voluntary sector with more emphasis on succession planning within committees.
- Volunteering in the VCS is challenging and what can help attract new volunteers and retain volunteers is watching/hearing the stories and also engaging with other volunteers.
- Lots of recruitment of volunteers lies outside of the volunteer centres.

Funding/Investment (4 comments)

- Government must ensure provision of sufficient financial resources to support these priorities and that no additional burden falls to local government or CVS.
- Funding for men's needs.
- Investment readiness.

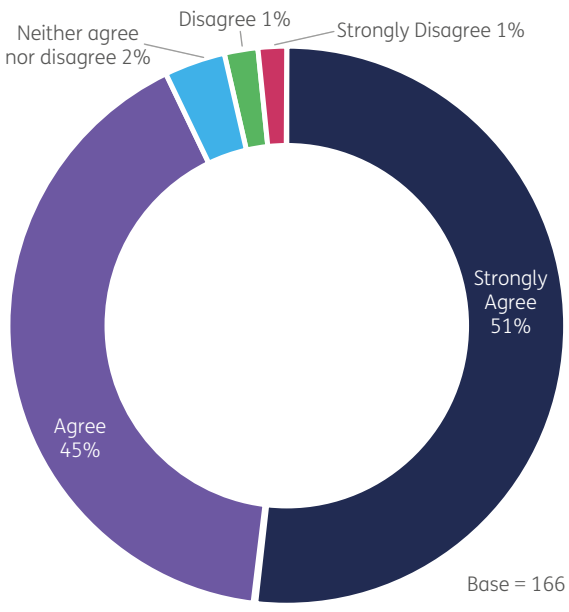
Other (16 comments)

- Broadly agree with the priorities included but suggest that developing collaboration across the VCS and between VCS and government / council will require a level of investment by DfC.

- While the proposed priorities are welcome and appropriate, it is vital that volunteer centres link effectively and meaningfully to the sector as a whole.
- Not sure what 'Volunteer Centres' are defined as, because they mean different things across boroughs, clarity on this would be helpful.
- Question over digital resources - is this proposing a centralised system or that e.g. funding would be available for organisations in order to commission a system relevant to their specific needs?
- We agree with the outcome although sole digital resources to support volunteering is not ideal as it is not accessible to all potential volunteers.
- I would urge DfC to consider leadership for the faith sector so that it is not lost.
- Recognition is a very high priority - it reinforces those recognised and attracts new volunteers.
- Review the CSP Volunteer Celebrations/ Award Programs currently delivered by Councils.
- Data collection by statutory bodies that has been disaggregated by age is difficult to access and therefore it is hard to track the impact of the work of VCS organisations at a population level.
- Investment in men's needs and organisations.

Question 33: To what extent do you agree with these priorities for investment under the core capacity and resilience headline outcome?

Over nine in every ten respondents (96%) agreed or strongly agreed with the priorities for investment under the core and resilience headline outcome whilst just two per cent disagreed or strongly disagreed with the priorities.



Question 34: Can you suggest any other priorities?

There were 82 comments overall in response to this question and a selection of comments is presented below.

Learning/Training (45 comments)

- The Framework needs a focus on peer mentoring, knowledge exchange and best practice networking.
- Training isn't the only option, as capacity, time and funding constraints are all barriers to attending and implementing learning that is taken away from training.
- Ensure organisations and their leaders (inc voluntary directors) have the requisite skill set and or access to knowledge and expertise held by infrastructure support organisation.
- These suggested training programmes focus on governance, the scope is too narrow, the needs of the diverse range of VCS sector organisations go beyond this.
- Training resources and programme delivery needs to be delivered locally, accessible and available in a timely manner to meet the needs of the sector.
- It is essential that training programmes support and strengthen community development knowledge, skills and competences.
- This will only add value if community organisations have core staff in to sit the training and manage current staff to ensure these resources are utilised.

Support/Well-being (41 comments)

- Recruiting, supporting and managing volunteers.
- The directory of local infrastructure support, better signposting to increase awareness of support available.
- To build resilience in organisations we must support and build the resilience and wellbeing of the people within it.
- Opportunity to look at the wider health and wellbeing of staff and volunteers within the sector, given the challenging environments.
- We think the ad hoc support is important as we need to be able to meet emerging needs of our communities.
- Increasing awareness of support should not focus on online resources and directories. Evidence demonstrates that sustained, in-person, on-the-ground engagement with communities is the best form of signposting and ensuring that people get the support they need when they need it.

Collaboration/Partnerships (38 comments)

- Collaboration and partnership building are important areas requiring further development.

Funding/Assets (14 comments)

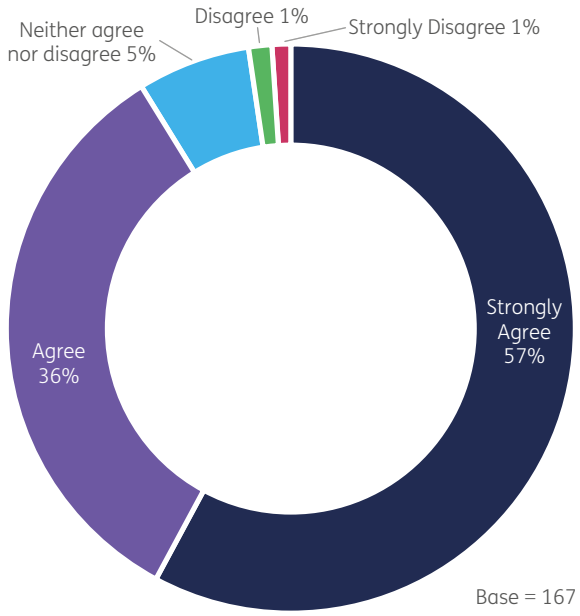
- Concerned about the level of financial support offered to VCS infrastructure organisations which has been either static or in decline for over a decade.
- Needs proper core, sustainable investment.
- A change in our funding landscape is central to stabilising the core function and resilience of our sector.
- Resources to participate on an equal footing, full cost recovery.
- Emphasis should be placed on signposting funding that offers “core salaries” and “full cost recovery”.
- Investment into a central service that could provide this to sectoral organisations, reducing their spend and allowing a collective, more cost-effective support service.
- Financial Management in this sector is substantially different from the public and private sectors as such a priority not just for the sector but for those who fund it.
- Funding Investment for acquiring assets is critical for sustainability and growth.
- There should also be investment in supporting communications capacity in the sector.
- If the VCS is increasingly expected to take on ownership of and develop assets on a trading basis then significant thought needs to be given to how these models will impact on disadvantaged communities or individuals.
- Question the inclusion of ‘Acquiring, developing and managing assets’ as a sub-section.

Other (15 comments)

- With the increasing move to regional/ subregional procurement, it is very hard for smaller organisations to compete within this and yet their work is not always valued or seen to fit the mould.
- Flexibility around approach and delivery will be required as the changing needs of the sector inevitably happen and occur.
- Reducing duplication should be a key priority.
- Environmental sustainability should be included as a priority area under core capacity and resilience.
- The term “impact management” would benefit from being expanded. Organisations would benefit from more routine use of evidence in the design of programmes and services, in the training of staff and volunteers.
- It is vital to include specific requirements for infrastructure organisations to undertake regular, formal engagement with organisations in the sector to identify needs within the sector and set out annual plans for addressing these needs.

Question 35: To what extent do you agree with these priorities for investment under the collaboration and partnership headline outcome?

Over nine in every ten respondents (93%) agreed or strongly agreed with the priorities for investment under the collaboration and partnership headline outcome whilst just one per cent disagreed or strongly disagreed with the priorities.



Question 36: Can you suggest any other priorities?

There were 83 comments overall in response to this question and a selection of comments is presented below.

Collaboration/partnership (61 comments)

- It is vital that the sector as a whole can build its capacity to engage with decision makers, and access opportunities to do so through policy development processes, as well as direct engagement facilitated by infrastructure support organisations.
- Clarification of the defined sectoral partnerships is needed to ensure all sectors are effectively represented.
- Identification and provision of a number of proactive, engaged and creative "champions" for the sector, not bound to overseeing grant management or outcome delivery but enabled to be available "connectors" between, within and alongside communities.
- There should be consideration of supporting organisations to develop partnerships with private sector organisations to enhance financial sustainability.
- The effectiveness of existing partnerships needs to be appraised competently and independently.
- Theme/issue based shared learning opportunities could help streamline services and explore collaborative partnerships.
- Include the faith sector! It's just being ignored at the moment.
- Strongly supports the call for proportionate bureaucracy in the funding relationship between government and the sector.
- There should be clear linkages between volunteering and some of the other work mentioned here, in particular the Civil Contingencies and Resilience Partnership work.

- The Joint Forum and VCS Civil Contingencies/ Resilience Partnership must be reflective of the voice of the Northwest.

Forum (49 comments)

- The strategic stakeholder forum needs to be clearly defined and build on the work and experience of the Joint Forum.
- Recommended from evidence of other programmes, that there is visibility and commitment of senior leaders in taking forward the stakeholder forum.
- Open and transparent application process for the Joint Forum replacement, which is very Belfast centred with the same old faces who have been on it for decades.
- I have never received any information about what goes on or asked for our opinion.

Funding/Investment (6 comments)

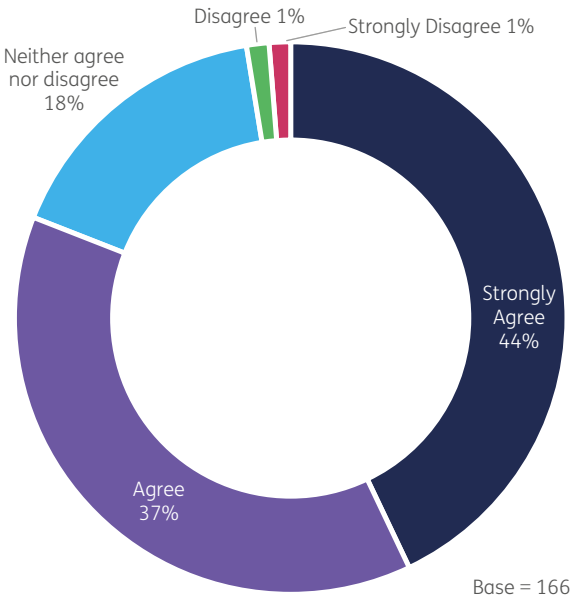
- Investment in a regional dedicated organisation for volunteering such as Volunteer Now.
- Important that the investment supports the infrastructure support groups to come together, identify common goals and issues, and engage in collective action.
- There needs to be investment given to resource VCS organisations time to be part of any forums, networks, or groups.
- Further work undertaken as part of the implementation of the review to explore what full cost recovery means in practice for organisations at both regional and sub regional levels.
- Developing collaboration across the VCS and between VCS and government/council will require a level of investment by DfC.
- Effective participation in cross sectoral partnerships needs to be adequately resourced to remain sustainable long term.
- A missed opportunity in the last investment round was the lack of interaction between CIF funded groups, Neighbourhood Renewal, local delivery partners and regional infrastructure organisations.
- Strongly believes that the VCS needs to employ all staff at the rate of the Real Living Wage.

Other (7 comments)

- Peer learning and peer exchange should focus on the considerable existing expertise within the sector.
- Men and boys need a good, funded service.
- Concerned that this structured approach is top-heavy and will favour large organisations with generalised concerns over smaller, more specialised, and often vital parts of the VCS infrastructure.
- Further work is required to map how resource allocation translates to services commissioned as part of any tendering processes.
- Commitments to co-design including the development of a model of best practice should be included as a priority area.

Question 37: To what extent do you agree with this commitment?

Just over four-fifths of respondents (81%) agreed or strongly agreed with the commitment relating to sustained investment in sector infrastructure whilst around 1% disagreed or strongly disagreed with the commitment.



If you would like to expand on your answer, please do so below.

There were 76 comments overall in response to this question and a selection of comments is presented below.

Comments - Strongly Agree/Agree with these commitments (56 comments)

Funding/support (49 comments)

- Concern about the level of financial support offered to the sector and VCS infrastructure organisations which has been either static or in decline for over a decade.
- The funding is short term, fragmented, does not address "full cost recovery" and has been significantly reduced over the last 14 years of "austerity".
- Investment in the VCS infrastructure support framework will be required long term as many of our groups operate in areas of market failure and provide facilities and services that will never be viable on a market basis.
- A minimum of three-year contracts for any funding programmes.
- We are losing experienced members of staff with multiple skills who are irreplaceable due to frozen funding whilst minimum and fair wages increase.
- Investment must be sufficient for the level of what is being asked for, and the outcomes hoping to be achieved.
- Future investment in infrastructure organisations must take into consideration geographical location, collaborations, delivery of services and outcomes achieved.
- Renewed investment in sector infrastructure supports needs to be local as well as regional as one complements the other.
- Concerns around just how the investment will be managed across the sector and whether all resources will flow through NICVA and decisions on who is funded decided upon by the 'Regional Infrastructure Partnership '.

- Investment in sectoral support bodies is vital to ensure a consistent message given across the regions.
- The current level of investment in the faith sector should at least be retained, if not expanded, given the level of use by other sectors of it in terms of poverty.
- DfC and DAERA need to commit to equity of investment between urban and rural VCS support.
- Clear plan to improve the investments in rural communities & that future policies/ plans/strategies are rural proofed.
- All the strong rural communities who are now sustainable after 20 years had greater opportunities to develop capital assets in to late 1990s because there was capital funding available.
- Employment and running costs have increased substantially and there appears to be a focus on income generation which can be at odds with social justice values which organisations are committed to.
- Strongly supports the call for proportionate bureaucracy in the funding relationship between government and the sector. There is over regulation and micro-management by some Departments and funders which results in the 'discretion to manage' budgets being taken out of the hands of the Trustees of the charity and left with the funder.
- There should be clear outcomes set for investment and impact reviewed regularly to ensure infrastructure support organisations are providing sound support and delivering value.
- The VCS needs to employ all staff at the rate of the Real Living Wage.
- The sector was invaluable during the Pandemic and deserves to have the support and resources to develop and grow.
- Further work undertaken as part of the implementation of the review to explore what full cost recovery means in practice for organisations at both regional and sub regional levels.
- Further work is required to map how resource allocation translates to services commissioned as part of any tendering processes.
- If the VCS is increasingly expected to take on ownership of and develop assets on a trading basis then significant thought needs to be given to how these models will impact disadvantaged communities or individuals.

Rural (36 comments)

- The end of the NI Rural Development Programme is, we believe, a threat to the future viability of rural community development and will have negative impacts on business development in rural communities.
- Frustrated at the lack of progress on DAERA's Rural Business and Community Investment Fund.

- DAERA investment has been vitally important to the community development support infrastructure across rural Northern Ireland over the past decade at both sub regional and regional level. However, the level of support offered by DAERA has been limited.
- The level of revenue resource funding made available from DAERA has almost halved in the past decade while contract delivery requirements have increased as have running costs.

Collaboration/ partnership (5 comments)

- This review has provided a welcome opportunity to work alongside the Department to explore what a clear vision for what future strategic government support and investment can achieve by working together.
- We look forward to promoting this vision for a renewed level of investment in Community Infrastructure Support across NI.
- Ensure that the voluntary youth work sector is included in future plans.
- Would welcome the opportunity to share technical skills and expertise as part of such an opportunity.

Other (3 comments)

- Concerned that the structures will favour larger organisations over those that provide more specialised infrastructure support.
- Do not agree with the change for the women's RISP strand from a 'regional support structure' to a sub-sectoral partner.
- Capacity is currently low and so is confidence. Those with experience are aging and young people are not attracted into the sector. We are currently not being used as an addition to government support but instead of - there is a lack of resilience in the sector and a lack of valuing what we do.

Comments - Neither Agree nor Disagree with these commitments (15 comments)

Rural (13 comments)

- DfC and DAERA need to commit to equity of investment between urban and rural VCS support. The limited level of investment has resulted in rural infrastructure support organisations increasingly under pressure to generate funding from other sources to remain viable.
- The end of the NI Rural Development Programme is, we believe, a threat to the future viability of rural community development and will have negative impacts on business development in rural communities.
- Frustrated at the lack of progress on DAERA's Rural Business and Community Investment Fund.

Funding/investment (12 comments)

- Concerned about the level of financial support offered to VCS infrastructure organisations which has been either static or in decline for over a decade.

- Investment in the VCS infrastructure support framework will be required long term.
- Employment and running costs have increased substantially and there appears to be a focus on income generation which can be at odds with social justice values which organisations are committed to.
- If the VCS is increasingly expected to take on ownership of and develop assets on a trading basis then significant thought needs to be given to how these models will impact on disadvantaged communities or individuals.

Comments - Disagree/Strongly Disagree with these commitments (2 comments)

- Long term strategic investment is required to support the sector.
- Employment and running costs have increased substantially and there appears to be a focus on income generation which can be at odds with social justice values which organisations are committed to.
- VCS organisations have an unwelcome portion of their time allocated to finding the funding necessary to cover the basic running costs of the organisation. Time could be used more effectively if there was adequate Core funding of infrastructure support organisations.
- Funding will go to organisations who already have funding.
- So much promised for so long that it is difficult to be overtly supportive!
- These bodies need new thinking around development and implementation. We need to move beyond paper-based projects, processes, procedures, and protocols!

Further Comments (where no response to Question 37) (2 comments)

Funding/investment (1 comment)

- If the VCS is increasingly expected to take on ownership of and develop assets on a trading basis then significant thought needs to be given to how these models will impact on disadvantaged communities or individuals.

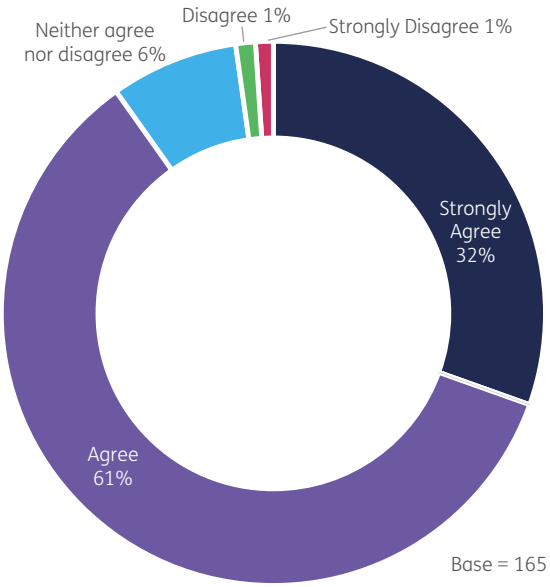
Other (1 comment)

- To support a circular economy, any rents paid to infrastructure organisations should be conditional on occupancy in a community building.

Creating a more enabling regulatory and policy environment

Question 38: To what extent do you agree that improving charity regulation will support positive outcomes for the sector?

Over nine in every ten respondents (93%) agreed or strongly agreed that improving charity regulation will support positive outcomes for the sector whilst just one per cent disagreed or strongly disagreed this would support positive outcomes.



If you would like to expand on your answer, please do so below.

There were 74 comments overall in response to this question and a selection of comments is presented below.

Comments - Strongly Agree/Agree with these commitments (64 comments)

Regulation process (60 comments)

- The introduction of the Independent Stakeholder Forum has demonstrated a firm commitment by the regulator to be better engaged with the sector which is welcomed. Although it needs to be properly resourced in order to fully respond to the needs of the sector.
- Worried that current legislation is so bureaucratic and a burden that smaller VCS organisations are put off and decide not to register.
- A new "Tiered" system needs to be incorporated to allow small charities to meet basic compliance requirements and provide minimal returns.
- The regulation must be proportionate to the capacity and activity of the organisation.
- In the current 'partnership' the VCS often despairs at the lack of the same levels of accountability when regulation fails in the Public Sector.
- To assist and enhance the Charity Commission in developing good governance within the sector; identify and deal with organisations that are in crisis; the complex governance issues and risks for a charity that operates multiple companies; the financial fund management of charities particularly the matter of restricted funds, loans to subsidiary companies; charitable investment or financial insolvency.
- Consider the complicated nature of the faith sector.

- Too much regulation puts off good people from participation especially volunteers who are at the core of Boards, and Trustees of organisations.
- Improve access to the Charity Commission and have standard processes.
- Improving charity regulation is a positive step.
- The regulation must be clear and have the right purpose.
- We support the implementation of recommendations arising from the Independent Review of Charity Regulation in NI and would believe a de minimis threshold of £20,000 annual income is implemented before registration with the Charity Commission is required.
- A review of current regulation practices in Northern Ireland against that undertaken by regulating bodies in other jurisdictions would be a helpful benchmarking exercise and may inform suggested improvements.

Support (7 comments)

- Improve the support given to charities undergoing regulation.
- The reform process needs to consider potential impact changes may have on smaller charities and ensure support is readily available to organisations if impacted.

Accessibility (2 comments)

- Charity Commission is not very user friendly; the website is not great and uploading annual return is very confusing and there is no support when you ask.

Comments - Neither Agree nor Disagree with these commitments (4 comments)

Reporting requirements (4 comments)

- Insisting that small organisations (charities) be registered as Charities causes huge admin effort and issues trying to maintain annual reports.
- Often guidance and policy can be confusing or put additional burdens on voluntary organisations who are trying to ensure they meet requirements.
- The charity commission's burdensome reporting should be on a "tiered" basis. A Senior Citizens group in a small area should not have to carry out the same level of reporting that a sub-regional support group does.
- Many small capacity groups are dissolving their group due to unnecessary pressure put on them by the charity regulations.

Other (4 comments)

- 'Enabling regulatory' is not a good choice of words, as almost contradictory. Not clear what the positive outcomes would be.
- Any work that supports the likes of Charity groups by the regulator is needed.

- The outline of a 'more enabling' environment recognises the need for a supportive structure to NI Charities - there has been feedback of the challenges from regulators who are seen to be in too much of an enforcement role.
- Introduction of Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO) into NI Charity Law.

Comments - Disagree/Strongly Disagree with these commitments (1 comment)

- Charities with millions in reserves? Nothing done

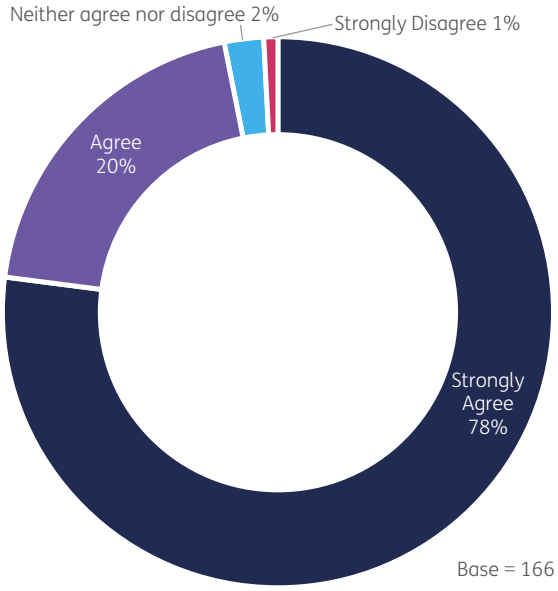
Further Comments (where no response to Question 38) (3 comments)

- There is a need to improve charity regulation to support positive outcomes for the sector.
- We support the implementation of recommendations arising from the Independent Review
- Would believe a de minimis threshold of £20,000 annual income is implemented before registration with the Charity Commission is required.

Applying and championing improved funding practices

Question 39: To what extent do you agree with these commitments?

Over nine in every ten respondents (98%) agreed or strongly agreed with the commitments relating to applying and championing improved funding practices whilst just 1% disagreed or strongly disagreed with the commitments.



If you would like to expand on your answer, please do so below.

There were 114 comments overall in response to this question and a selection of comments is presented below.

Comments - Strongly Agree/Agree with these commitments (97 comments)

Funding practices (75 comments)

- Substantial investment in the VCS is needed to help sustain the sector; recognise the substantial contribution to society and to demonstrate strong and equal partnership between NI government and VCS.
- Funding practices based on a relational approach, with flexibility and adaptability work much better and have a stronger impact for participants.
- Funding should be accountable but also tiered to assist various levels of support with a lighter touch around monitoring to help build capacity, skills, and confidence of newer/smaller/volunteer only organisations to build up to bigger funding pots and requirements.
- A new funding model must include more proportionate scrutiny of the community and voluntary sector. Current systems of reporting are often burdensome and time-consuming for the staff working in our services, often made more complex by differing systems of reporting across and within departments. Any new framework from the Department of Communities should look to create greater synergy and uniformed systems of reporting.
- Further work is required to map how resource allocation translates to services commissioned as part of any tendering processes. New outputs have been added to contracts without a recognition of the additional resource required to deliver them. This has particular significance in rural communities where additional travel time and travel costs for staff or volunteers can accrue which must then be met from somewhere else in the organisation's resources.
- Funding practices need to consider the additional financial pressures on rural groups to adequately support their local people.
- Aligning this sector with other funders would be positive.
- Access to match funding from non-government funders would leverage insight and evidence and allow for the testing and evaluation of new initiatives whilst current services are being delivered.
- Opportunity to look at innovative funding practices such as mainstream and participatory grant making Participatory Budgeting.
- Too many closed schemes on historic funding contracts dating back almost two decades.
- Clarity on how funding decisions are made.
- Priority is an Investment Fund (Capital) as in Scotland and England
- The VCS needs to employ all staff at the rate of the Real Living Wage.

Collaboration (59 comments)

- The VCS needs to be respected and trusted by all Departments.
- The pandemic provided an opportunity for the sector to show that we were best placed to lead and respond "on the ground" at a crucial time when many statutory/private sector organisations were unable to do so.
- The value of non-government funders in a trusted partnership with government and the VCS is critical to the future innovation and development of services.
- We value multi-agency collaboration and know that building strong and strategic partnerships is key to supporting children, young people and families.
- The development of a new framework provides the opportunity to reset the relationship between statutory funders and the community and voluntary sector.
- Effective partnership between government and the Sector relies on mutual understanding, respect, and value for each other's work.
- The relationship between the NICVA Community Faiths Forum works well and should be retained and strengthened.
- We strongly support the call for proportionate bureaucracy in the funding relationship between government and the sector. Currently the sector is over-regulated in relation to funding requirements when compared to funding allocated to public/private sector organisations.
- Over regulation and micro-management by some Departments and funders results in the 'discretion to manage' budgets being taken out of the hands of the Trustees of the charity and left with the funder.
- Pick non-government intermediary funding bodies who are not Anti the faith sector... blocks many excellent faith-based organisations who have "the advancement of religion" as a charitable purpose.
- The practice of competitive tendering has reduced the potential for collaboration.

Full cost recovery (56 comments)

- A new funding model including full cost recovery is essential to improving funding practices and promoting financial sustainability.
- Explore what full cost recovery means in practice for organisations at both regional and sub regional levels.

Long-term funding (20 comments)

- Uncertainty and vulnerability are a result of short-term funding and contracts.
- A move to commissioning cycles of 3-5 years will allow VCS organisations to focus on service delivery and the ability to respond to emerging challenges.
- Longer contracts would encourage a more strategic use of resources and support efficiency within departments.

- Longer term investment to help assure staffing and expertise and where year on year applications is not required.
- Competitive salaries and funding whole-programme costs will go a long way in developing a cohesive, collaborative, and forward-thinking sector, whilst retaining the best personnel to do the job.
- This sector has continually been underfunded and Government departments need to ensure that funding the sector is not an 'add on'.

Fair funding (8 comments)

- Fair Funding is a right and should be embedded as a fundamental principle of all Gov/Vol sector relationships.
- Fair funding helps voluntary organisations maintain their independence and autonomy, deliver high-quality programs and services and promotes equity and ensures that resources are distributed fairly among voluntary organisations, regardless of their size, location, or focus area.
- Fair funding facilitates collaboration and partnerships within the voluntary sector and with other stakeholders.
- The 'fair funding' would be a milestone worthy of support. Preferential funding has been a recurring matter in the sustainability and growth of certain organisations.
- A Fair funding process should not be inefficient or cause duplication and unnecessary rivalry between organisations.
- Championing fair and improved funding practices is welcome.

Sustainability (7 comments)

- Financial sustainability of the sector should be a core element of any framework the Department develops.
- It is essential to ensure clear pathways to sustainability are promoted, identifying clear communication with all the sector regarding funding and improved funding practices will improve the equitable access and knowledge of potential financial support.
- When contracts roll on to another year, there is often no uplift in line with inflation, meaning that services that were commissioned years previously, are expected to deliver the same support with a real term reduction in their funding. This is an unsustainable financial model and has resulted in the closure and scaling back of services.

Comments - Neither Agree nor Disagree with these commitments (1 comment)

Funding practices (1 comment)

- It is unclear from the proposals set out in the consultation document exactly what is intended with fair and improved funding practices.

- It is vital that funding programmes are transparent, clear in structure and wherever possible offer medium term certainty, with proportionate monitoring and reporting requirements.
- Essential that government funding remains accessible to a diversity of organisations, as this secures the sustainability of the sector as a whole, while also increasing the potential to reach all communities and service users.
- Funding programmes must retain a focus on the specific expertise offered by organisations working with different marginalised and vulnerable groups and include a priority on this in both grant and tender scoring.
- It is vital that infrastructure support is targeted proportionately, with specific and dedicated support to small organisations to build their capacity to access funding, individually and within relevant consortia.
- It is vital that engagement with the sector in all its diversity informs future government funding practices.

Further Comments (where no response to Question 39) (14 comments)

Partnerships/ Collaboration (6 comments)

- We encourage the Department to work with the Department of the Economy and other relevant agencies to work with the sector to introduce Paid apprenticeships in Community Wealth Building with host organisations including local infrastructure organisations.
- The Department's recognition of the need for fair funding practices in order to sustain effective partnerships with sector infrastructure organisations is very welcome.
- We welcome the Department's commitment to learn from and work with others to improve funding practices and the commitment to work across government, local government and non-government funders to identify and share good practice.
- Welcome the opportunity to work collaboratively with the Joint Forum and the Department to share learning and intelligence and work collectively to effect a transformational change in the funding ecology to strengthen the sector.
- We strongly support the call for proportionate bureaucracy in the funding relationship between government and the sector.

Funding (14 comments)

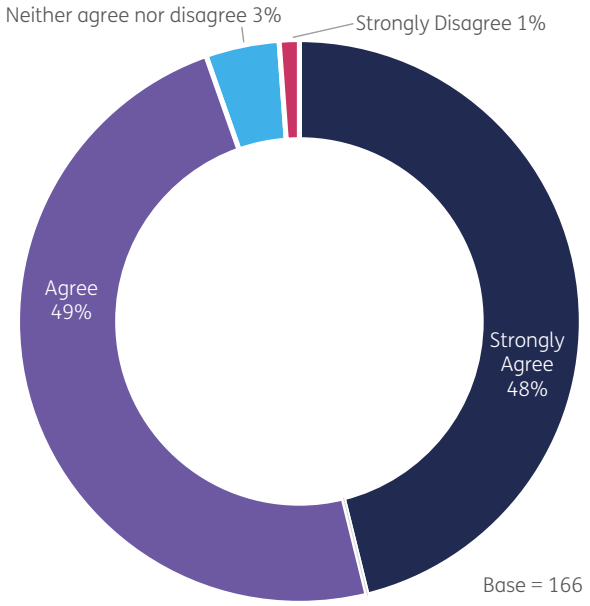
- We welcome the aim to champion improved funding practices but request greater detail be provided on how this will be implemented, potentially with a case study outlining commonly faced issues.
- Provide case studies and guidance that encourage longer-term restricted funding models across departments supporting youth work.

- We would like to see further work undertaken as part of the implementation of the review to explore what full cost recovery means in practice for organisations at both regional and sub regional levels.
- A change to the administration of funding should have a significant and positive impact on the sustainability and strength of the voluntary and community sector.
- It is essential that the Department considers the diversity of funding models to which different voluntary and community sector organisations operate.
- Champion the simplified core costs model used by SEUPB and was used in the ESF programme i.e. overheads and programme costs are established as a percentage of staffing costs.
- Too much of the funding within our sector is time-bound project based. When budgetary pressures fall on Departments, it is often these projects and organisations which bear the brunt of cost saving measures.
- Longer term and core funding will deliver financial security/sustainability, better outcomes and provide job security.
- Increase use of full cost recovery funding models, reflecting the true cost of projects.
- Further work is required to map how resource allocation translates to services commissioned as part of any tendering processes. This has particular significance in rural communities where additional travel time and travel costs for staff or volunteers can accrue which must then be met from somewhere else in the organisation's resources.
- Develop a simplified funding stream that will increase youth volunteering within and beyond their local communities.
- Key learnings already from the Blueprint programme align with ambitions outlined in the Departments VCS Infrastructure Support Framework document – particularly the need for long terms investment, flexibility over the lifetime of a programme and applying "full cost recovery" through a contribution to core organisational costs and longer term.

Improving understanding about the work and impact of the sector

Question 40: To what extent do you agree with these commitments?

Over nine in every ten respondents (96%) agreed or strongly agreed with the commitments relating to improving understanding about the work and impact of the sector whilst one per cent strongly disagreed with the commitments.



If you would like to expand on your answer, please do so below.

There were 102 comments overall in response to this question. A selection of comments is presented below.

Comments - Strongly Agree/Agree with these commitments (91 comments)

Faith Sector (49 comments)

- The faith sector provides almost 40% of volunteering for the community and provides vital support in many rural locations, yet this Framework largely ignores the need for infrastructure support for faith-based VCS organisations. These groups have unique support needs and are very often overlooked because they are largely self-sufficient relying on their faith communities for funding rather than seeking investment from independent or statutory funders.

Knowledge and data (37 comments)

- Welcome the Department's recognition of the need to enhance data practices, including commissioning, collating, analysis, and dissemination of data. This would provide a better understanding of the VCS needs and how to effectively support them.
- Data should be updated on an ongoing basis to ensure that the most effective and efficient delivery of services by NI civil society.
- The data should include qualitative and quantitative and provide user friendly distilled data sets and analysis that can be used to influence delivery and policy.
- Any research and data collection should be considered at a regional level, or looking at multi-national studies as this will allow for comparison and benchmarking.
- Data commissioned, collated, and communicated on the work and impact of the sector should include consideration of the sector's contribution to the overall wellbeing of communities and civil society, including the most vulnerable and disadvantaged, and of the social

return on investment realised from supporting the sector.

- Data regarding the VCS should be coordinated by the regional infrastructure partner. This enables the development of expertise in the sector and provides a trusted source of information.
- Recommended to collect the following types of data on a systemic basis and making them publicly available: Demographic Data, Service Data, Volunteer Data, Outcome Data, Satisfaction and Feedback.
- Valuable opportunity to reassess how data can demonstrate the value of the community and voluntary sector and promote consistent data collection across all government departments.
- There is not enough useful and informative data to display the impact of the sector.
- The Department does not always understand or appreciate the value of the data collated and gathered by some organisations within the VCS.
- Agreed frameworks, methodologies and supporting resources need to be adopted to produce valid and reliable measures and methods to assess the impact of the voluntary sector.
- A digital audit could be one way to boosting data on the sector.
- The development of cyclical qualitative research across the various specialisms within the sector will improve the understanding of the needs of groups and has the potential to revolutionise how the sector is supported in the longer term.
- Offer training for organisations and the digital capacity to gather data.

Collaboration/ Partnership (15 comments)

- The C&V sector should be valued partners regarded with parity and not deemed 'less' than partners by the department.
- Further detail on how Community Infrastructure Organisations (subregional), Community Infrastructure Organisations (sub-sectoral) and Volunteer Centres will interact with each other to provide accessible support to small locally based organisations.
- The commitment to boosting data related to the community and voluntary sector aligns with the broader goals of evidence-based policymaking and efficient resource allocation, which are applicable across all government departments.
- A fundamental need is for Departments to listen to the VCS on the published data and whether it is fit for purpose.
- Prior to any new "data capture" all departments should compile a list of information held on their current databases and share these with other departments.
- The com/vol sector could benefit from a greater understanding of the breadth/ scope of the sector (particularly at

local level) and that the infrastructure organisations should lead on this.

- Department in partnership with stakeholders need to make improvements to how the funding is commissioned, and information on the sector is collated, to ensure the needs of the sector are considered.
- The Faith sector needs to be included.
- The RISP review process to date has improved current communication channels between the collective CDNF Networks at a Sub-Regional, Regional and Departmental level and could be further developed.

Rural (4 comments)

- Invest in digital infrastructure to help capture the impact of the work in rural areas.
- Need for greater differentiation within the sector as rural and urban have different contexts, the border region adds a further layer of complexity with cross border working vital in that region.

Concordat/forum (3 comments)

- Communication should be developed on as a priority for the new concordat / forum.
- The new Concordat / Forum should focus on Departments requiring a better understanding of the Com/Vol sector with all departments engaging to reduce silo mentality.

Monitoring impact (3 comments)

- The Department needs to realise that data monitoring is time intensive for those involved and this should be reflected in the funding granted to each organisation.
- Concerned at increased work impact on VCS of methods for 'boosting data collection'.

Co-Design (1 comment)

- If surveys and research designs are being created, it is important that there is a co-design approach with the Voluntary & Community Sector to ensure the right questions are being asked and the right information is being gathered.

Other (5 comments)

- Good news stories need to be shared widely.
- More understanding of the diverse nature of the sector and the different types of work that is delivered.
- It is vital that infrastructure support includes strengthening research capacity in the sector as a whole.

Comments - Neither Agree nor Disagree with these commitments (1 comment)

- Agree that understanding of the sector could be boosted unless this increases the workload for volunteer-reliant communities.

Further Comments (where no response to Question 40) (9 comments)

Data collection (5 comments)

- Hard to track the impact of the work of VCS organisations at a population level as it is difficult to access data disaggregated by age.
- Public policy making and funding decisions should be based on meaningful data about the levels of need, the impact of VCS interventions, the resources required to achieve meaningful impacts and the potential costs if this work is not resourced.
- Connecting funding decisions to data would strengthen the relationship between government and the VCS by preventing the kind of cuts seen in recent budgets.
- Invest in digital infrastructure for real-time impact data capabilities among funded youth work providers.

Collaboration/partnership (4 comments)

- Identify several sector champions to advocate on behalf of the sector directly to DfC and another government department.
- Create space for the voice of the VCS to be heard at the local council level.
- A better understanding of what we do and the impact it makes will result in true partnership working with government.
- It is important that VCS organisations and government work together to improve data collection to inform future decision making.

Benefits (2 comments)

- Pleased the Department recognises the need to improve the understanding of the work and impact of the sector through enhanced data collection and interpretation.

Rural (2 comments)

- Need for greater differentiation within the sector as rural and urban have different contexts, the border region adds a further layer of complexity with cross border working vital in that region.

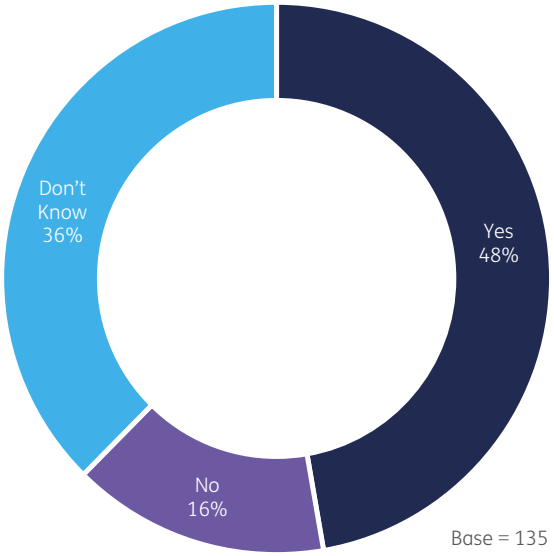
Gender equality (1 comment)

- Inclusion of gender disaggregated data, departmental-specific and high-level equality objectives, and monitoring structures to effectively advocate on behalf of women.

Statutory Assessments

Question 41: Do you agree with the conclusions of the Equality Screening exercise?

Just under half of respondents (48%) agreed with the conclusions of the Equality Screening exercise whilst around one in every six respondents (16%) did not agree with the conclusions.



If no, please provide your reasons.

There were 34 comments overall in response to this question. A selection of comments is presented below.

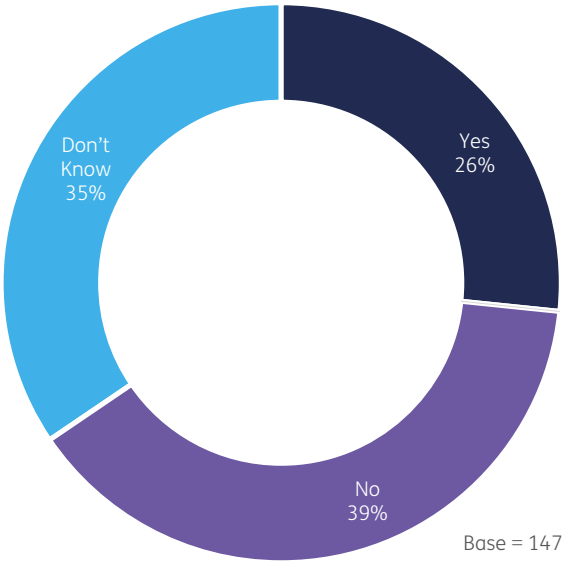
- A full equality impact assessment should be carried out to identify any adverse impacts.
- A full EQIA is necessary in order to examine the impact of these proposals on older people as a protected Section 75 group.
- The VCS in rural areas is volunteer managed and led and many volunteers are older people who face barriers to volunteering or who may be discouraged from volunteering in future.
- Section 75 groups living in rural communities are likely to face additional barriers accessing support and services due to barriers associated with distance, poor public transport infrastructure and less well-developed broadband and mobile phone connectivity in some rural areas.
- The proposals to alter infrastructure support mechanisms are likely to have extensive impacts across the sector, which in turn will affect communities and service users, many of whom are disadvantaged in some way, and/or represent S75 groups.
- The proposed changes to VCS infrastructure support include the loss of a dedicated regional infrastructure support programme for the women's sector, something which arguably represents a detrimental impact on the women those organisations represent.
- There is a need to undertake gender equality training and adopt a gender lens in policy making and budgetary decision-making process.
- The Equality screening exercise recognises the significant amount of work carried out by women's organisations but assigns no negative impact to the proposed changes, despite the fact that the Women's RISP programme is to be discontinued.

- Open competition may result in no women's organisations being funded to provide infrastructure support, either sub-regionally or sub-sectoral.
- No support for men or young lads.
- Faith sector not included – could a faith impact assessment be carried out?
- Could the definition of the V&C sector be expanded to ensure that faith-based social action is included.

Further Comments (where 'no' not selected to Question 41) (13 comments)

- It is too complicated/long.
- Agreement with the conclusions.
- Equality regulations are not supportive of communities where both Protestants and Catholics live. The resources are not put into shared communities, resulting in a failure to support the bringing of a mixed community together.
- The Department should be looking for ways to promote equality, such as the inclusion of groups that are not represented in the proposed partnerships.
- Including equality considerations in this infrastructure requires gender disaggregated data, departmental-specific and high-level equality objectives, and monitoring structures.
- The lack of gender-disaggregated data hinders our ability to effectively advocate on behalf of women and leaves decision-makers with data that presents a false narrative.
- A notable difference from the previous infrastructure partnerships is that 'Women' has been replaced with 'Sub-Sectoral Partners'. It is crucial that 'Women' are specifically mentioned, either in a strand or as a 'Specialist' group, to prevent gender-neutral approaches to partnership and resourcing.

Question 42: A Rural Needs Impact Assessment has been completed in line with the Department's duty under the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016. The needs of people in rural areas have been identified and taken into consideration with the aim of providing balanced infrastructure support provision across all geographies. Do you think the proposed draft framework presents any other issues for rural communities?



Around a quarter of respondents (26%) said they thought the proposed draft framework presented other issues for rural communities whilst just under two-fifths (39%) said they thought it did not.

If yes, please provide further information.

There were 66 comments overall in response to this question. A selection of comments is presented below.

- Poor transport services in rural areas.
- Lack of services in rural communities including limited or no broadband access.
- Factors around geographical coverage and accessibility.
- Prevalence of community relations issues in some rural areas where patterns of land holding are long established and have resulted in communities which are deeply segregated.
- Older community halls which are less likely to be disabled accessible and may be more difficult to heat with less scope to transition to low/zero carbon heating.
- It often costs more to deliver the same service in rural areas as in urban counterparts, with staff travel costs associated with delivery against outcomes being significantly higher than urban areas.
- The additional challenges in rural communities around meeting zero carbon targets and need to consider how those discussions are facilitated at community level.
- It is poor practice that respondents had to email to request the Rural Needs Impact Assessment.
- A full Rural Needs Assessment is required, alongside a full EQIA, to ensure the proposals adequately support rural communities and service users.
- While rurality is not a S75 category, there is a need to be clear about how the voices and needs of rural communities are captured and that their infrastructure needs are likely to be different particularly delivery of infrastructure support services.
- Many CVS groups across rural communities come from a faith perspective which is not acknowledged in the consultation document or RNIA.
- Welcome the fact that future infrastructure support based on this policy framework will be designed in collaboration with DAERA.
- The RNIA should have considered how the VCS infrastructure support framework will complement and support the delivery of the Rural Business Community Investment Fund developed by DAERA in partnership with rural stakeholders to replace the EU funded Rural Development Programme.
- An older volunteer profile in rural areas and as a consequence there may be a lack of digital skills in the rural CVS.
- Not enough support for men in rural communities.
- Acknowledge that the restricting of the Department's support to the sector will negatively impact rural women due to the removal of W-RISP.

- It simply often costs more to address the barriers for rural women's participation which is why thorough EQIA screening, and Rural Needs Impact Assessments are so vital.

Further Comments (where 'no' not selected to Question 42) (38 comments)

- All future programmes need less complicated Impact Assessments.
- A review of this needed to bring into line with the needs of rural communities & what is required for those engaging with rural groups.
- Further attention needed in terms of how barriers can be overcome would be helpful.
- Many CVS groups across rural communities come from a faith perspective which is not acknowledged in the consultation document or RNIA.
- The Framework proposed has a vision of 'A confident, independent sector which empowers and sustains local action and volunteering...' The reality is that in rural areas volunteers invariably must use their own car due to the lack of public transport; rural women are less likely to have access to a car for their exclusive use and the cost of fuel is a real barrier to participation even for those who do.
- Lack of community infrastructure and services.
- Digital connectivity is challenging with the increase in hybrid mode of delivery.
- An older volunteer profile in rural areas and as a consequence there may be a lack of digital skills in the rural CVS.
- Prevalence of community relations issues in some rural areas where patterns of land holding are long established and have resulted in communities which are deeply segregated.
- The additional challenges in rural communities around meeting zero carbon targets and need to consider how those discussions are facilitated at community level.
- Older community halls which are less likely to be disabled accessible and may be more difficult to heat with less scope to transition to low/zero carbon heating.
- Rural communities receive limited funding within present programmes; only 1.3% of rural funding is focused on rural women, despite this constituting a major population group in Northern Ireland. Streamlining funding is likely to further reduce funding available to rural groups, many of which are small and volunteer led, which is likely to reduce overall support and advocacy for rural communities.
- Open competition may result in no women's organisations being funded to provide infrastructure support, either sub-regionally or sub-sectoral.
- Very little support for rural women in the region of Ards North Down

- We welcome the fact that future infrastructure support based on this policy framework will be designed in collaboration with DAERA.
- The Department for Communities pre-engagement phase was very accessible to rural people.

Summary of Comments

Several key points emerged from the respondents' comments and qualitative feedback, and a summary of these is provided below.

There were some concerns raised regarding the proposed infrastructure changes including having a regional 'anchor' organisation and the risk that this could disadvantage smaller or local VCS organisations. With regards to the Joint Forum, it was felt that there was a need for the Forum to be fully representative with clear communication to the wider sector, including local grassroots organisations. Respondents emphasised the importance of ensuring the framework is inclusive of a range of groups, including repeated calls for recognition of the women's sector, inclusive representation at the regional level, explicit reference to the faith sector, and support for the rural sector.

It was noted that collaboration is key, not just between the voluntary and community sector and central government but also across central government and between central government and local government. There is the need for genuine partnership between the sector and government, including continuation of co-design and also sharing knowledge and skills through sectoral partnerships. Independence of the sector should also be valued.

Sustainability is an issue for the sector in terms of short-term funding; wage costs for staff; succession planning due to an older workforce and concerns around the focus on income generation and asset management. Longer term and core funding will deliver financial security/sustainability, better outcomes and provide job security. It was also noted that competition for funding discourages collaboration. The number of volunteers has reduced significantly following the Pandemic, and while numbers are growing steadily, more needs to be done before the voluntary and community sector can be seen as sustainable particularly in rural areas.

Respondents supported further data collection to better understand the sector's impact; however, they stressed that any application, monitoring, and evaluation requirements should remain proportionate and avoid unnecessary bureaucracy.

How Consultation Feedback Informed the Final Policy Framework

The Department has now published a finalised **VCS Infrastructure Support Policy Framework** incorporating changes made in response to consultation feedback and reflecting Ministerial priorities.

An overview of the key changes made is laid out below.

Supporting the Sector's Relationship with Government

The set of values and ways of working which were co-produced by Voluntary and Community Sector and Public Sector members of the Joint Forum between Government and the Voluntary and Community Sector were strongly endorsed in public consultation, with nine in every ten respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing with what was being proposed. These core values and ways of working underpin the Partnership Agreement between Government and the Voluntary and Community Sector in Northern Ireland, which was launched by the Communities Minister in July 2025, having been endorsed by the Northern Ireland Executive. These remain unchanged in the VCS Infrastructure Support Policy Framework, with the department making a commitment to applying the Partnership Agreement, its values, ways of working and fair funding principles and to promoting them with our Arm's Length Bodies, other government departments and local government.

There was significant interest shown in the Joint Forum throughout our engagement particularly in relation to geographic and sectoral representation and communication/ engagement. We received 136 comments overall in relation to the question requesting views on the ambition and scope of a new Concordat or Partnership Agreement, with many thoughts, ideas and challenges put forward. Consideration was given to responses received in the development of the new Partnership Agreement between Government and the Voluntary and Community Sector in NI, which has replaced the 2011 Concordat. The current VCS panel of the Joint Forum commenced its term in December 2024. The panel expanded from 15 to 20 members, strengthening the balanced representation across the sector, reflecting geographical distribution, size of organisation, sectoral interests and urban/rural perspectives.

Vision and Outcomes

The proposed vision and headline outcomes were strongly endorsed in the consultation. Following Ministerial consideration, the first headline outcome has been simplified from 'Leadership and Advocacy' to 'Leadership'. The Department considers advocacy, participation, representation and policy engagement to be fundamental elements of effective sector leadership and these remain reflected throughout the policy framework. Some amendments were

made to the supporting outcomes and indicative investment priorities in response to comments and suggestions received. These changes include clearer wording and the addition of elements where consultees had identified gaps.

Examples of this include:

- The addition of a new Volunteering Supporting outcome: **"Better understanding of volunteering through research and data collection"** to reflect the importance of and the commitment to improving data and understanding of the sector.
- The addition of a new Leadership Supporting outcome: **"Supporting people with lived experience to become leaders"** reflecting the value of lived experience and increasing opportunities for staff and volunteer development within sector organisations.
- The addition of **"Succession Planning"** as an indicative investment priority within the Capacity and Resilience headline outcome.
- The addition of **"Development and Facilitation of the Community Faiths' Forum"** as an indicative priority within the Collaboration and Partnership headline outcome to recognise the need for support for faith-based organisations within the sector.

We have also clarified that the supporting outcomes and indicative investment priorities are not listed in order of priority or weighting. The full list of outcomes and investment priorities can be found in the **Voluntary and Community Sector Infrastructure Support Policy Framework.**

Future Delivery

We received many comments from our public consultation around the future delivery structures proposed within the draft policy framework. In some cases, respondents endorsed areas we had identified as key priority investment areas and in others, changes have been introduced, taking account of what we heard.

- **Support for rural infrastructure organisations**: the proposed provision of regional support with a rural focus within the Regional Delivery Partnership was greatly welcomed. There was a clear appeal for DfC and DAERA to work together to ensure programmes are complementary and considerations are given to geographical coverage and issues particular to rural communities and vulnerable demographic groups in rural areas.
- **Role of the faith sector**: The value of the current infrastructure support being provided through the Community Faiths' Forum was strongly voiced, with appeals for the current post of project coordinator for faith engagement to continue and for a network of faith-based organisations to be encouraged, supported and facilitated to work together to promote shared interests. Responses highlight that mobilising the faith sector to meet current challenges is important and since many organisations in the faith sector continue

to be self-funded, effective infrastructure is needed to support this cost-effective contribution to society. Several responses from organisations with a more rural focus highlighted that many VCS groups across rural communities come from a faith perspective. We were asked to give more explicit consideration to supporting the faith sector given the reliance of both the VCS sector and statutory sector on the faith sector in dealing with poverty within communities.

- **Role of Volunteer Centres**: We heard that it is important to harness the wealth of experience built up in volunteer centres. Feedback informed us of the need for volunteer centres to work effectively in a network, sharing experience and learning and adopting a more integrated approach. We also heard about the importance of volunteer centres linking effectively and meaningfully to the wider sector. The proposed volunteering supporting outcomes were strongly endorsed in consultation responses with over nine in every ten respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing with them.

- **Volunteering infrastructure support at a regional level:** the proposal to invest in volunteering infrastructure support at a regional level as well as continuing local support for volunteering was strongly endorsed. Responses emphasised the need for strategically coordinated regional volunteering support to include policy influence through building of evidence and data, as well as ensuring volunteering is effectively planned, coordinated and connected to wider work.

- **Regional support for asset management/ ownership:** Consultation responses showed strong support for incorporating asset management/ ownership into regional-level infrastructure investment with stakeholders acknowledging the need for this specialist support in the sector. There were calls for Community Asset Transfer support, specialist guidance and support around governance and risk assessment.

- **Regional recognition of the women's sector:** The consultation highlighted strong concern that the removal of a dedicated women's strand would lead to the loss of practical, specialist support and undermine the visibility of the regional role played by women's sector infrastructure organisations. Respondents emphasised the value of rights-based organisations working collaboratively, bringing complementary expertise and perspectives that enable a holistic understanding of the issues affecting women and their communities. They also stressed the importance of ensuring stronger alignment between sectoral infrastructure support and the Executive's wider commitments under its Social Inclusion agenda, noting that many structural inequalities disproportionately affect women.

- **Consideration of a sub-sectoral strand:** While consultation responses demonstrated broad support for maintaining some mechanism to recognise and support specialist and equality-focused organisations, qualitative feedback raised substantive concerns about the proposed sub-sectoral strand. Respondents indicated that the scope of this strand appeared too

broad; it was unclear which organisations would benefit; and there was potential for overlap with the sub-regional (local) strand. Concerns were also raised about the risk of increased competition for limited resources, which could disadvantage smaller specialist organisations.

Taking this evidence into account, and reflecting the Minister's priorities, the Department has decided not to proceed with a separate sub-sectoral strand. Instead, the Framework will retain dedicated infrastructure support for the Women's Sector, recognising both the scale of consultation concern and the central role women's organisations play in addressing persistent gender inequalities and supporting wider social inclusion. In addition, all delivery strands will include provision of inclusive and accessible support, ensuring that organisations representing a diverse range of equality groups can access the infrastructure support within the overall model.

Overview of the Final Delivery Model

Framework Delivery model

The Department has introduced a refreshed VCS Infrastructure Support Policy Framework with four integrated investment workstreams:

- **Core Infrastructure Support Consortium**
- **Volunteering Infrastructure Support Consortium**
- **Local Infrastructure Support Consortia**
- **Women's Infrastructure Support Consortium**

CORE / THEMATIC SUPPORT

The Department recognises the importance of strong, coordinated infrastructure that can support voluntary and community organisations across Northern Ireland at both sector-wide and specialist levels. Investment at this level will strengthen organisational capacity, enhance collaboration, and ensure that the diverse needs of the sector are effectively represented and supported.

LOCAL LEVEL SUPPORT

The Department will seek to work with Local Infrastructure Partners in a number of consortia which support the diversity of community and voluntary action across council areas, ensuring there is good geographical spread. Community infrastructure partners will provide a baseline of community development and volunteering infrastructure support and will be expected to operate as collaborative consortia.

Local Infrastructure Partners will work with the Core and Women's strands of support, as well as with local councils where necessary to identify and meet sectoral support needs. Their role will include delivery of direct training and advisory programmes, peer support and mentoring work, local convening and stakeholder engagement, survey and data collection.

The Department will use council areas as the primary basis for the planning and delivery of local infrastructure support. It is anticipated that there will typically be one Local Infrastructure Support Consortium serving each council area: however, this may vary depending on factors such as geographic size, population, levels of need and the scale of funding available. The Department will retain flexibility to support alternative arrangements where these provide the most effective and efficient means of delivering infrastructure support. Funding allocations will take account of both population and deprivation factors within each council area, ensuring resources are directed in a manner that reflects differing levels of demand and need across Northern Ireland.

Delivering outcomes through improved funding practices

Our commitment to apply and champion improved funding practices was strongly endorsed, with 98% in agreement or strong agreement. We received a significant number of comments in relation to funding, and we heard clearly during our engagement about the ongoing challenges in the sector around

funding. A set of Fair Funding principles were co-produced by members of the Joint Forum between Government and the Voluntary and Community Sector, and several engagement events were held within the sector to share and get feedback on these. The Fair Funding principles and ways of working are included in the Partnership Agreement between Government and the VCS in Northern Ireland, endorsed by the Northern Ireland Executive in June 2025 and launched by the Communities Minister in July 2025. These aim to underpin the funding relationship and build good practice between government and the VCS. We have included the Fair Funding Principles in the VCS Infrastructure Policy Framework to demonstrate the Department's commitment to applying the principles and to promote their application to other Northern Ireland Executive Departments, their public bodies and their Arm's Length Bodies including recommending their adoption to all local authorities in Northern Ireland.

Improving understanding about the work and impact of the sector

The Department's commitment to improving understanding about the work and impact of the sector was also strongly supported with 96% of respondents stating they agreed or strongly agreed with the commitment. Improving and enhancing data practices, including around the commissioning, collating, analysis and dissemination of data was welcomed and the department will work with the sector and other partners to progress this work. This will be a key focus for implementation and will involve a robust approach to oversight and reporting with future partners.

Delivering outcomes through improved regulation of charities

93% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that improving charity regulation will support positive outcomes for the sector. The Department is progressively taking forward the recommendations of the Independent Review of Charity Regulation in Northern Ireland in addition to other reforms requested by the Sector.

The Department introduced a Scheme of Delegation, as recommended by the Review, in February 2025, allowing the Commission to delegate some of its statutory functions to staff in accordance with the Charities Act (Northern Ireland) 2022.

The Commission's three year Strategic and annual Business Plans set out how the Commission take forward the recommendations that fall to it. Progress against recommendations is reported on annually by the Commission in its **Annual Report and Accounts.**

Statutory Assessments

All comments received have been considered relating to the conclusions of the Equality Screening exercise and the Rural Needs Impact Assessment completed as part of the refresh of the VCS Infrastructure Support Policy Framework.

Following consultation feedback, changes to the Policy Framework including retaining a Women's Sector strand, strengthening rural focus, and recognising the faith sector, have been embedded to ensure equality considerations are fully reflected. More

broadly, there is also a commitment to ensure delivery strands will provide inclusive infrastructure support, ensuring that organisations representing a diverse range of equality groups can access the assistance they need within the overall model. No adverse equality impacts are identified.

On the basis that no adverse equality impacts are identified in the finalised refreshed VCS Infrastructure Support Policy Framework, the policy framework will not be subject to a full equality impact assessment.

Having considered feedback and responses received during public consultation, additional issues in relation to the social and economic needs of people in rural areas have been identified and taken into consideration with the aim of providing balanced infrastructure support provision which meets the needs of organisations operating in both urban and rural areas.

Finally

We would like to thank everyone who took part in our pre-consultation and consultation process. We had hundreds of people participating both in-person and virtually with our engagement events and we had hundreds of responses overall to the public consultation on sectoral support, including many very detailed, thoughtful contributions. The level of engagement reflects the strength of feeling from across the sector and this has been fundamental in supporting our analysis of current infrastructure policy and programmes, where change needs to be made and where our future investment priorities lie.

The Department for Communities understands that policies that are informed by the real challenges faced by individuals and communities will be more effective and have more inclusive policy outcomes, and we look forward to continuing to work with the sector and our partners as we implement this new policy framework.

Annex A

List of Respondents to the Voluntary and Community Sector Infrastructure Support Consultation ACCORD[2]

- Action for Children NI
- Advice NI
- Age Friendly Network NI
- Age NI
- AIEB
- Annaghmore LOL
- Ardoyne Association
- Ards Development Bureau & Community Network
- Ards Peninsula Villages Partnership
- Armoy Community Association
- Arts & Business NI (A&B NI)
- Ashton Community Trust
- Association for Real Change (ARC NI)
- Ballybeen Women's Centre
- Ballywalter Community Action Group
- Barnardo's Northern Ireland
- Belfast City Council
- British Red Cross
- Brocagh Emmets GFC
- Broughshane Improvement Committee
- Broughshane and District Community Association Ltd
- Business in the Community Northern Ireland
- Caledon Rovers FC
- Carrickfergus Community Forum
- Cashel Community Development
- Causeway Volunteer Centre
- Centre for Effective Services (CES)
- Children in Northern Ireland
- Cloughey Community Development Association
- CO3 - Chief Officers Third Sector
- Coagh & Drummullan Network Group
- Community Development and Health Network (CDHN)
- Community Development Networks Forum (CDNF)
- Community Leadership in the West
- Community Organisations of South Tyrone & Areas Ltd (COSTA)
- Community Places
- Community Transport Association

[2] Responses on behalf of organisations are listed, individuals are not named

- COPNI
- Counselling All Nations Services (CANS)
- County Armagh Grand Orange Lodge Community Development Committee Limited
- County Down Rural Community Network (CDRCN)
- Craigavon and Banbridge Volunteer Bureau
- Curran Cultural Heritage & Community Association
- Cushendall Development Group
- CWSAN
- CYCUL
- Derry City & Strabane District Council
- Desertcreatives
- Desertmartin Parish church
- Development Trusts NI (DTNI)
- Drumellan Community Association
- DSG 2010
- Dungannon Silver Band
- East Belfast Community Development Agency
- East Belfast Mission
- Eskra Community Association
- Eskra Emmets GFC
- Extern
- Falls Community Council
- Fermanagh Rural Community Network
- Fermanagh Trust
- Finnis Rural Development Association
- First Steps Women's Centre
- FOCUS (Omagh)
- Focus on Family Nurturing & Development Centre
- Footprints Women's Centre
- Foyle Womens Information Network
- Friends of the Little Woods
- Funders Forum NI
- Glens Vintage Club
- Glor na Speirini
- Halifax Foundation for Northern Ireland
- Heart of the Glens Festival
- Homeless Connect
- Human Rights Consortium
- Include Youth
- Irish FA Foundation
- John Bosco Community Organisation
- Kilcooley Women’s Centre
- Knockinroe Flute Band
- Knockmany Running Club
- Knocknagin Hall Committee
- Law Centre NI
- Limavady Volunteer Centre
- Lisburn & Castlereagh City Council
- Lough Neagh Rescue

- Maghera Cross Community Links
- Magherafelt
- Markets Development Association
- Maydown Community Association
- Mencap NI
- Mid Ulster Volunteer Centre
- Millisle Youth Forum
- Moneymore Activity Group
- Muintir na Mointeach Ltd
- Newry, Mourne and Down District Council
- Nexus
- NI Committee ICTU
- NI Rural Women's Network (NIRWN)
- NI Sports Forum
- NI Women's Budget Group (NIWBG)
- NIACRO
- NICVA
- North Down Community Network
- North West Community Network
- North West Volunteer Centre
- Northern Area Community Network
- Northern Cricket Union
- Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE)
- Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance (NIPSA)
- NSPCC
- Omagh Forum for Rural Associations
- Omagh Futsal Association
- Omagh Volunteer Centre
- Orchardville Society Ltd
- Parenting NI
- Phoenix Masonic Lodge Caledon
- Playtime Nursery Eskra
- Pomeroy Development Projects
- Poyntzpass Community Regeneration Co Ltd
- Portadown 2000
- Portaferry Community Collective
- Rathlin Development & Community Association
- Regional Resilience Team (Civil Contingencies)
- Rural Area Partnership in Derry Ltd (RAPID)
- Rural Community Network (RCN)
- Rural Health Partnership
- Saintfield Community Association
- Seahaven Park Homes Residents Association
- Social Change Initiative
- Social Enterprise NI
- Society of St Vincent de Paul
- Specialisterne NI
- Sport Uniting Communities Partnership
- Sported
- St John Bosco Community Association

- Supporting Communities
- Tamnamore Community Development Association
- The Antrim, Down and Armagh Rural Support Network (TADA)
- The Brain Injury Foundation
- The Community Foundation for Northern Ireland
- The Confederation of Community Groups
- The Erne District Chinese Families' and Friends' Association
- The HUBB Community Development Resource Centre
- The National Children's Bureau
- The Resurgam Community Development Trust
- The Village Garden (Broughshane) Ltd
- The VSB Foundation
- Thrive Ireland Ltd
- TinyLife
- Training For Women Network Ltd (TWN)
- Tullylagan Pony Club
- Ulster GAA
- Ulster Rugby
- UNISON NI
- Versus Arthritis
- Volunteer Centres NI
- Volunteer Now
- VOYPIC (Voice of Young People in Care)
- Warehouse Open Centre CIC
- Waterside Women's Centre
- Whitemountain & District Community Association
- Women’s Centre Derry
- Women’s Platform
- Women’s Regional Consortium
- Women’s Resource and Development Agency (WRDA)
- Women’s Support Network (WSN)
- Women's TEC
- Youth Alive
- YouthAction NI

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