

Department for
Communities
www.communities-ni.gov.uk

Voluntary and Community Sector Infrastructure Support Policy Framework

November 2026

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Ministerial Foreword

I am delighted to bring forward this Voluntary and Community Sector Infrastructure Support Policy Framework, which refreshes and consolidates the policy basis for future infrastructure support provided through my department. The Policy Framework sets out how my department will work with, and on behalf of the Sector, supporting a spirit of partnership and a clear focus on the impact of government investment in voluntary and community organisations across Northern Ireland.



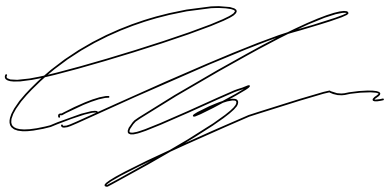
Voluntary and community organisations play a vital role in supporting our communities, creating deep-rooted connections and insights into local needs and priorities. It is a diverse and independent sector that reflects our values as a society and allows people to mobilise and take action around the issues and causes which matter most to them. Voluntary and community organisations, including a diversity of faith-based groups, provide opportunities for people to play a role in their communities to create better places for people to live. Working independently and in collaboration with each other, these organisations are often at the forefront of meeting immediate social needs through their services and also in advocating for social change and support for the most vulnerable in society.

In addition to deep social impact, they also deliver important economic outcomes, creating jobs, volunteering and development opportunities. The Sector is also a key partner in the delivery of public services, working with multiple Government bodies to provide their expertise and resources to help us deliver on a range of Executive priorities.

As Communities Minister, I want to thank the voluntary and community sector for their role in developing this policy framework and for the huge response to the Department's development of and consultation on a draft policy framework. We received hundreds of contributions, many of which were detailed and thought-provoking and I appreciate the time and effort taken by those who participated in the extensive engagement process. It is clear that the process of meaningful engagement and public consultation has brought expertise and lived experience to help design and shape our plans moving forward. The consultation responses, which are being published alongside this policy framework, provide a wealth of insights that will help to shape our future delivery.

In July 2025, I launched the new Partnership Agreement between Government and the Voluntary and Community Sector in Northern Ireland, with the full endorsement of the Northern Ireland Executive. This Agreement sets the tone for a renewed and productive relationship, one that is rooted in mutual trust, shared values and collaborative working. It reflects our collective commitment to delivering better outcomes for communities across Northern Ireland.

I am committed to ensuring that my department responds to the needs and priorities identified by the staff and volunteers from across the sector. Delivering against the ambition of this policy framework will be an opportunity to build on a strong foundation of partnership and to demonstrate our shared values and commitment to working together through the Community Faiths' Forum and the Joint Forum between Government and Voluntary and Community Sector. It will also be an opportunity to refresh and refocus the support that is available to the sector and ensure that it is inclusive and accessible to all voluntary and community organisations.



Gordon Lyons, MLA,
Minister for Communities

Introduction

The Department for Communities has lead responsibility within government for championing and supporting the work of the voluntary and community sector across the Northern Ireland Executive. The Department has invested in the work of a range of infrastructure organisations under various programmes over many years as a way of supporting good practice across individual organisations and supporting the convening power of the sector – enabling both grassroots action and regional support around areas of shared interest across the sector.

This Infrastructure Support Policy Framework has been developed to reflect the changing needs and priorities in the community and voluntary sector and to enable sustained delivery of effective sectoral support by a range of community partners, working collaboratively towards agreed outcomes.

Sectoral Engagement and Consultation

Final proposals are based on extensive engagement which was carried out by the Department between March and June 2023 followed by additional **public consultation** and engagement on draft proposals from November 2023 to February 2024.

Final proposals reflect what we heard and the key messages from stakeholders and will underpin the Department's future investment in voluntary and community sector infrastructure support.

Overview of Contents

Section 1: Understanding the voluntary and community sector.

This section contains an overview of our understanding of the voluntary and community sector, its key characteristics and relationship with government.

Section 2: Supporting the Sector's relationship with Government.

This section lays out a set of core values and ways of working which underpin the relationship between the voluntary and community sector and government.

Section 3: Government Investment in Sector Infrastructure.

This section describes the vision, outcomes and priorities for investment which the Department will pursue as a means of supporting a thriving voluntary and community sector.

Section 4: Delivering the ambition.

This section describes five key areas where the Department can lead and support the sector in achieving the vision and shared outcomes:

- Creating effective partnerships.
- Sustained investment in sector infrastructure.
- Applying and championing improved funding practices.
- Improving understanding about the work and impact of the sector.
- Creating a more enabling regulatory and policy environment.

Section 1:
Overview of the sector

Understanding The Voluntary and Community Sector

Voluntary and community organisations can be understood as part of a wider "civil society": a very broad definition that includes everything outside the state (public sector) and the market (private sector) and is also sometimes called the "third sector" or the "social sector".

When we talk about the "voluntary and community sector" we mean the collective of independent, not-for-profit organisations that support a wide range of social, environmental and economic outcomes and rely to a large extent on voluntary contributions through their boards of trustees, formal volunteering and donations. The sector spans a very diverse range of organisations in terms of scale and focus of operations and interests.

Volunteers define and drive this sector, but organisations will also all have a formal structure or constitution. They are self-governing and independent from government or the private sector. They have social objectives and work to benefit the community. They may operate a social enterprise or community business, but any profits will be re-invested for community benefit. This document will use the term Voluntary and Community Sector (abbreviated to VCS) or "the sector" to refer to these organisations.

The Department for Communities recognises the vital contribution of the sector in representing the interests and values of people and communities and in promoting societal wellbeing and resilience. Investing in infrastructure organisations enables them to support and empower organisations, such as community groups, women's groups and faith-based groups, who in turn directly support our communities and the most vulnerable, ensuring their voices are amplified and their needs addressed.

There is no single database of Voluntary and Community sector (VCS) organisations. Our understanding of the makeup and conditions of the sector comes from the formal register of charities, from surveys of large membership organisations like the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA; **www.nicva.org**), the Rural Community Network (RCN; **www.ruralcommunitynetwork.org**) and CO3 (the Chief Executive Officers of the Third Sector **www.co3.org.uk**) and from qualitative feedback from formal and informal engagement with sector leaders, workers and volunteers.

Organisations and workforce:

The register of charities in Northern Ireland(**charitycommissionni.org.uk**) currently sits at over 7,200 organisations and this provides an important source of information about non-profit organisations but it doesn't tell the whole story.

Many charities would not be considered as voluntary and community organisations (for example, our universities are registered as charities) and conversely, we know that there are lots of small, independent, often volunteer-led organisations operating at a community level that are not registered as charities, but which are part of the Voluntary and Community sector. Research[1] suggests the total number of VCS organisations could be up to 3-5 times the number of formally registered groups due to a large number of micro and informal groups that are not captured by statutory registers.

NICVA estimates that over **53,000**[2] people work in the Voluntary and Community Sector in NI and the sector accounts for a bigger share of the active workforce in NI than at a UK level (7% in NI compared to 3% at a UK level). Women account for a greater share of the VCS workforce than the overall NI workforce – a feature also found in other parts of the UK and in Ireland (73% of Northern Ireland VCS workforce and 68% of UK VCS workforce)[3]

Income:

A large proportion of organisations in this sector operate with very lean budgets. Data suggests that 29% of organisations have an annual income under £10,000 and 33% have incomes above £100,000[4]. The Department carried out a survey in February – April 2023 to gather information on the needs and priorities of VCS organisations and volunteers and 40% of respondents reported an annual income of under £50,000. NICVA estimates the annual income of the sector at £876m, 62% of which comes from government departments and agencies, 16% from public donations and 14% from earned income. The Department for Communities is the single biggest government funder of the work of the sector (contributing 47% of the central government funding going to the sector each year, around £247m).

Volunteers:

Volunteer effort underpins the VCS. It has been estimated that there are around 33,000 people who are members of voluntary management committees across Northern Ireland; this is a critical role for organisations of every type and scale across the sector. VCS organisations are also an engine for all kinds of other volunteering activity which is defined as 'the commitment of time and energy, for the benefit of society and the community, the environment, or individuals outside (or in addition to) one's immediate family. It is unpaid and undertaken freely and by choice.' The data we have on volunteering

1 New (birmingham.ac.uk)

2 State of the Sector | NICVA

3 UK Civil Society Almanac 2024 | NCVO

4 Income and Expenditure | NICVA

is limited but surveys suggest that in 2022, over two-fifths of all young people (44%) had volunteered with clubs, campaigns of organisations. Around a third of all young people who responded said they did not volunteer but would like to in the future. The most frequently cited areas where young people volunteered in 2022 were "sport or exercise" (64%), "children or young people's activities (outside school)" (36%), "hobbies/ arts clubs" (21%), "church/faith based" (17%) and "local community or neighbourhood groups" (15%)[5].

Surveys indicate that in 2024/25, just under half of adults (46%) had volunteered (either formally or informally) within the previous year, 34% had volunteered informally in their communities[6]. The organisations most frequently cited that adults formally volunteered with during 2023/24 were Church/Faith Based (36%), Sports (25%) and local community, neighbourhood or citizens groups (16%).

Volunteering with faith-based organisations is a meaningful way to contribute to local communities while supporting initiatives rooted in compassion, inclusion and social justice. Much of this work is around community development and social support, with a focus on supporting the most vulnerable individuals and families. Other organisations benefiting from volunteer commitment include community and neighbourhood groups, youth and education organisations and a wide range of organisations which care for individuals and the environment.

Across the voluntary and community sector, organisations are reporting significant difficulties in recruiting and retaining volunteers, and growing concerns about the sustainability of volunteering and the stability of voluntary boards. NICVA's "Making a Difference" survey highlighted that 49% of organisations faced difficulties recruiting staff and 42% faced difficulties retaining staff in 2022/2023,[7] The pressures created during the pandemic have not fully abated, and in many cases have been intensified by current economic conditions. As a result, ensuring a reliable and resilient volunteer base remains one of the most pressing issues facing VCS organisations going forward.

The sector's relationship with government:

A key feature of VCS organisations is operational independence and self-governance. The sector is organised around distinct social objectives and for community benefit (not to work on behalf of a government department or agency or a local council). However, government recognises the vital contribution of the sector across a wide range of activity and there is a strong relationship between the work of each sector:

5 Experience of volunteering by young people in Northern Ireland

6 Experience of volunteering by adults in Northern Ireland (Findings from Continuous Household Survey 2024/25, NISRA)

7 Making A Difference: Reflections from the Challenges facing the VCS Workforce, NICVA July 2024

- ✓ **Regulation:** government is responsible for shaping the conditions in which the sector operates, from regulation of charities and business, safeguarding, health and safety, employment law etc. It is important that regulation is proportionate and that VCS organisations understand relevant legislation and "good governance" requirements.
- ✓ **Policy and decision making:** many VCS organisations exist to create change, improve conditions for their communities (of place or of interest) and address what they see as unmet needs. It is important that government processes are transparent and accessible and that VCS organisations understand how they can participate effectively.
- ✓ **Funding:** Many VCS organisations receive public funding and therefore make specific delivery arrangements with government– either through grant agreements or formal contracts. How this funding is administered (from advertising of opportunities to awarding of funding, grant/contract management and evaluation of impact) is a key part of the relationship between government and the sector. It is important that funding is administered fairly and without excessive bureaucracy in line with the Partnership Agreement between Government and the VCS in Northern Ireland, its values, ways of working and fair funding principles. It is also important that voluntary and community organisations understand how they can access and account for funding.

Section 2:
Supporting the sector's relationship with Government

Section 2: Supporting the Sector's Relationship with Government

The Department for Communities has lead responsibility within government for championing and supporting the work of the Voluntary and Community Sector across the Executive. The Department's shared facilitation (alongside NICVA) of the **Joint Forum between Government and the Voluntary and Community sector** is a key mechanism for supporting the relationship between the sectors.

The Joint Forum includes representatives from the Voluntary and Community Sector and the Public Sector, including local government, working together on a shared agenda. The Joint Forum reflects the distinct yet complementary roles of both sectors in contributing to the social, economic, environmental, and cultural life of Northern Ireland and the belief that by collaborating and working better together, we can increase our impact.

The **Partnership Agreement** between Government and the VCS, launched by the Communities Minister in July 2025, was developed by the Joint Forum and has been endorsed by the NI Executive. Reflective of today's challenges, it aims to guide relationships between the sectors, to improve impacts and outcomes for individuals and communities across Northern Ireland.

The Partnership Agreement contains a set of shared values, ways of working and fair funding principles, which when incorporated in relationships and arrangements between the sectors, should lead to better informed decisions. The values and ways of working which should underpin the relationship between the sectors were shared in the draft policy framework and were strongly endorsed through the public response to consultation. Further detail on the response to the consultation can be found **HERE.**

The Department for Communities is committed to applying these values and ways of working and to promoting them with our Arm's Length Bodies, other government Departments and local government.

Summary of key commitments in Section 2

The Department will support the strategic relationship between the voluntary and community sector and government through adopting and promoting the Partnership Agreement between Government and the VCS, its shared values, ways of working and Fair Funding Principles and will provide continued support for the operation of the Joint Forum between Government and the VCS.

Section 3:
Government investment in sector infrastructure

Government Investment in Sector Infrastructure

Sector infrastructure organisations are those whose main purpose includes providing support to other voluntary and community organisations: building capacity and skills within the sector through training, advice, information exchange, convening, policy work, consultancy and providing platforms and access to resources (including physical spaces).

VCS infrastructure organisations play a vital role in supporting and enabling voluntary and community action at both a regional and local level. Some organisations work across the whole region and provide core support to organisations across the sector while other sector infrastructure organisations meet more local or specialist needs, working specifically in defined geography or with a distinct section of the VCS.

The Department for Communities has invested in the work of a range of infrastructure organisations under various programmes over many years[8] as a way of supporting good practice across individual organisations and supporting the convening power of the sector – enabling both grassroots action and regional organising around areas of shared interest across the sector. This represents a small proportion of the overall annual investment by the Department in the work of the sector, but it has substantial impact across the breadth of VCS organisations. The core funding traditionally provided by the Department to sector infrastructure organisations has also allowed them to leverage other sources of funding and income generation, increasing their overall effectiveness and impact on behalf of the sector.

It is worth noting that the Department for Communities is not the only government supporter of sector infrastructure and nor should it be. The nature of the Sector means that both public and independent funders have an interest in supporting capacity building linked to specific policy priorities. The distinctive role for the Department for Communities is in our support for a core number of infrastructure organisations which can deliver a baseline of support for the sector against the range of outcomes identified.

Continued strategic support from the Department for Communities will not displace other more specialist and technical support but we see it as important that we will simplify and streamline our current arrangements and create better synergies between the different levels of support available.

8 For example the Regional Infrastructure Support Programme (RISP), the Community Investment Fund, Volunteering Infrastructure Support Programme, Community Asset Transfer

Baseline of core sectoral support	Baseline of local sectoral support	Targeted sectoral capacity building
Baseline of core support for sector organisations to meet regional priorities. Complements more local and/or specialist infrastructure offering.	Supporting core infrastructure support needs of VCS organisations within a distinct geography. Complements regional, local and/or specialist infrastructure offering.	Includes specialist infrastructure support (in line with distinct policy priorities of departments, agencies, councils or independent funders) and direct investment in delivery organisations to build capacity. Complements support funded by DfC.
Lead funder: DfC	**Lead funder: DfC**	**Multiple Funders**

The development of this policy framework has been informed by new research and extensive engagement and consultation with sector organisations to explore the range of needs and priorities for future infrastructure delivery. Information on engagement and consultation responses can be found **HERE.**

A vision[9] and a framework of outcomes has been developed and shaped through engagement and discussion with sector representatives and tested through public consultation which sets out the ambition for what strategic government support and investment can achieve. The vision received strong support in consultation responses, being agreed or strongly agreed by 91% of respondents.

The vision and outcomes will be the basis for future investment and evaluation of impact by the Department and we have identified indicative priorities for investment linked to what people have told us they need and value the most for future support.

9 The Voluntary and Community Sector is comprised of diverse, independent organisations, dedicated to wide-ranging social, environmental, and economic goals. The Department does not claim to speak on behalf of such a diverse sector or to state what the sector sees as a vision for itself or for society. This is a vision for what effective infrastructure support can achieve.

Vision:

"A confident, independent and collaborative sector which empowers and sustains local action and volunteering; a sector that represents the diversity of our communities and supports the delivery of inclusive and accessible services and Programme for Government outcomes through partnership, innovation and challenge".

- The **vision** captures the key elements of shared interest between government and the sector.
- The **headline and supporting outcomes** below elaborate on that vision, focused on four (inter-connected) delivery areas: Leadership; Volunteering; Capacity and Resilience and Collaboration and Partnership
- The **indicative priorities for investment** reflect the needs of the sector and cover key areas of activity which infrastructure support can deliver to sustain a thriving sector.

The Outcomes[10] which describe the ambition for sectoral support:

Leadership:

Strong leadership within the sector promotes the interests of our diverse communities and enables community connection and engagement.

Supporting Outcomes:

- Sector leaders have skills and confidence to support their organisations and communities.
- Sector leaders work together around shared issues
- Sector leadership is diverse and representative of the sector and communities.
- Data and evidence from the sector is effectively collated, analysed and communicated.
- Public policy and decision making (central and local government) is informed by evidence from the sector (including the lived experience of people in our communities).

Volunteering:

Volunteering activity is enabled and supported to maximise benefits for individuals, organisations and communities.

Supporting Outcomes:

- People volunteering with organisations are well supported and valued.
- Voluntary management committees can access the support they need.
- The value and impact of volunteering is understood and communicated.
- Better understanding of volunteering through research and data collection.
- Organisations in the sector are supported to recruit volunteers.
- Organisations in the sector are supported to manage volunteers.
- Information on volunteering is easily accessible
- People volunteering are representative of our diverse communities.

10 The Supporting Outcomes under each of the headline outcomes are not listed in order of priority or weighting

Capacity and Resilience:

Capacity and resilience of organisations within the sector is sustained and developed.

Supporting Outcomes:

- Voluntary and community organisations can access a range of support which meets diverse needs.
- Organisations are supported to work effectively within a changing funding and regulatory framework.
- Organisations are supported to demonstrate the impact of their work.
- Organisations are supported to access funding and diversify income.
- Organisations are supported to acquire, develop and sustain assets.

Collaboration and Partnership:

Effective collaboration and partnership enhance the impact of the sector's work.

Supporting Outcomes:

- Sector infrastructure convenes diverse and representative partnerships and networks.
- Sector-led partnerships support effective engagement between the sector and government.
- Sector-led partnerships support community resilience and civil contingencies arrangements.[11]
- Collaboration and partnership enable peer support and sharing of knowledge, skills and competence.
- Collaboration and partnerships support organisations to sustain services and improve their impact.

Indicative Priorities for Investment [12, 13]

Leadership:

- Leadership development (developing leadership capacity within VCS organisations at different levels, including a focus on staff retention, succession planning, driving change and growth, peer mentoring, coaching, building collaboration and partnerships).
- Supporting people with lived experience to become leaders.
- Support for effective representation around policy and decision making (developing the skills and knowledge within organisations) .
- Development and sharing of good practice on inclusive engagement methods.
- Knowledge exchange mechanisms (both virtual and in-person; formal and informal; networks, seminars, conferences etc).
- Digital communication resources (to maximise reach and impact and enable effective sharing and dissemination of information).
- Research creating meaningful data and supporting a greater understanding of the health and impact of the voluntary and community sector.
- Building skills and confidence on participatory methods and practices throughout the sector.
- Building capacity in impact practice and disseminating evidence into policy and practice.

Volunteering:

- Supporting the core work of volunteer centres (Infrastructure organisations that provide support and expertise within the local community to potential volunteers, existing volunteers and organisations that involve volunteers. The Department will invest in the core work of a network of volunteer centres to support the identified volunteering outcomes).
- Supporting the work of volunteers in management positions (developing skills and knowledge of, for example, volunteers on management boards and also support to encourage increased levels of volunteering in this area).
- Supporting organisations to manage their volunteers.
- Digital resources to support volunteering: accessible, user-friendly resources, to promote advice, guidance, volunteer-matching.
- Research to improve available data and increase understanding on issues affecting volunteering, the impact of volunteering and the future of volunteering.
- Outreach and communication to promote awareness and volunteer recruitment.
- Recognition and reward initiatives for volunteers.
- Opportunities for sharing good practice in working with and managing volunteers, and standardising delivery

11 Existing infrastructure-funded resources may be temporarily redeployed during the response phase of a civil contingency emergency, subject to approval.

12 The Indicative Priorities for Investment under each headline outcome are not listed in order of priority or weighting.

13 Final decisions on investment priorities will be based on budget availability and the proposals put forward by sectoral delivery partners.

Capacity and Resilience:

- Online resources (maintaining key data relevant to the sector including funding sources and regulation).
- Directory of local infrastructure support, better signposting to increase awareness of support available.
- Supporting leaders to commission, tender and oversee the work of third parties, for example, consultants and academics.
- Succession planning.
- Ad hoc support and advice in response to changing needs
- Training programmes and resources (digital and in-person delivery with a flexibility to meet diverse needs), including post training consolidation and direct/hands on support/ peer mentoring, with a focus on:
    - Income diversification (including accessing funding sources; income generation; tender writing and fundraising).
    - Business planning and Innovation.
    - Governance.
    - Monitoring, impact measurement, and reporting.
    - Acquiring, developing and managing assets (acquisition and development of land and buildings; support to manage and maximise assets including marketing, increasing accessibility and sign-posting to properly utilise and level up existing facilities).
    - HR, staff recruitment and development.
    - Managing conflict and mediation.
    - Building resilience of organisations and staff, volunteers and management committees; being responsive and flexible to meet changing/emerging needs.
    - Community development theory, values and practice.

Collaboration and Partnership:

- Development and facilitation of the Joint Forum between government and the VCS.
- Development and facilitation of the Community Faiths' Forum including raising the profile and understanding of faith-led community work.
- Development and facilitation of regional networks of infrastructure organisations, increasing connectivity, relationships and sharing of resources and assets (to include all DfC supported infrastructure consortia).
- Development and coordination of peer learning/peer exchange programme (learning from existing sector expertise).
- Sectoral collaboration and shared learning opportunities within Northern Ireland and with other jurisdictions.

Summary of key commitments in Section 3

Renew investment in voluntary and community sector infrastructure support.

Section 4:
Delivering the ambition

Section 4: Delivering the ambition

Delivering against the ambition of the proposed vision and outcomes of this policy framework will require sustained investment from government in sector infrastructure and improvements to how we work with and for the sector.

The Department will focus on **five key areas** where we can lead and deliver in support of sectoral outcomes. This approach has been strongly endorsed through the response to public consultation, where 95% of consultation respondents said they agreed or strongly agreed that focusing on these five key delivery areas will support the outcomes framework.

1. **Sustained investment in sectoral infrastructure:** commissioning an integrated framework of support geared towards a common outcomes framework.

2. **Creating effective delivery partnerships:** working with sector partners, and coordinating investment with other parts of government.

3. **Applying and championing improved funding practices:** exploring, developing, applying and sharing good practice

4. **Improving understanding about the work and impact of the sector:** collating, interpreting and sharing data and evidence.

5. **Creating a more enabling regulatory and policy environment:** delivering the agreed reforms to charity regulation and strategic policy.

4.1 Delivering outcomes through sustained investment in sector infrastructure

We will invest in the work of sector infrastructure organisations to deliver core support to voluntary and community organisations. This sectoral support will meet the ambition of the policy framework and deliver against the shared outcomes.

Responses to public consultation highlighted that sustainability is an issue for the sector. This was reflected in concerns about short-term fragmented funding, wage costs for staff, succession planning due to an older workforce and volunteer profile and an interest in income generation and asset management. We heard that longer term and core funding will improve organisational capacity and efficiency, sustaining delivery and supporting better outcomes. Under this policy framework, the Department is making a commitment to longer funding timeframes, in recognition of the ambition of the outcomes we want to support and the need to support the stability of partner organisations and their ability to plan and deliver support to the sector.

In targeting and prioritising our investment we will seek to:

- Commission sectoral support from within the voluntary and community sector. We will continue to invest in voluntary and community sector organisations, creating an environment in which the passion, commitment and expertise of the sector can flourish.
- Prioritise our investment based on evidence of need, experience and impact and the track record of infrastructure organisations.
- Recognise the need for both regional and local support and the need for support across all council areas that is inclusive and accessible to all.
- Build on existing assets in the voluntary and community sector (people assets, physical assets, digital assets) and avoid unnecessary competition. We want to build on what has already been developed and is working well, harnessing and further developing the expertise, skills and knowledge abundant in the sector.
- Ensure that new competitive grant processes are informed by engagement with sectoral representatives.
- Recognise the specific contribution of women's sector infrastructure organisations to supporting equality and investment priorities.
- Encourage and facilitate collaboration between delivery partners in the various Infrastructure Support consortia (investing in an integrated, collaborative offering).
- Invite collaborative bids for funding which include proposals for sharing of assets, resources or facilities.

- Continue to encourage, support and facilitate a network of faith-based organisations to work together promoting shared interests, acknowledging the important contribution of faith-based organisations in the voluntary and community sector, and ensuring the continued support, development and strengthening of the Community Faiths' Forum and its network as an effective vehicle for collaboration, engagement and the advancement of common priorities.
- Invite collaborative bids for funding which highlight distinctive contribution of partners and minimise duplication of effort and unnecessary competition.
- Invest in a baseline of core infrastructure support that is complementary to other more specialist support available to the sector (linked to either government or independent funders).
- Invest in the core costs of organisations which are capable of making a substantial impact against the outcomes framework. Investing in core costs of our delivery partners will enable leverage of investment from other sources, thus increasing the impact of investment.
- Develop an integrated reporting framework that allows us to measure, record and share information on the impact of departmental investment and the contribution of sector infrastructure to the desired outcomes.
- Work closely with DAERA to ensure maximum impact from our joint investment in the sector and support infrastructure organisations with a rural focus.
- Develop better alignment and collaboration within the Department for Communities and with other government funders through the design and commissioning of future support arrangements.

4.2 Delivering outcomes through effective delivery partnerships

The Department for Communities recognises that how we identify and work with partners is critical and will require sustained commitment over time that enables trust and effective working relationships. This section focuses on the Department's direct relationship with sector infrastructure organisations.

The Department's distinctive role is to invest in a core number of infrastructure organisations which can deliver enabling support to the sector aligned with the agreed outcomes.

The public consultation set out proposals to simplify and streamline our current arrangements and create better synergies between the different levels of support available.

This framework reflects **what we heard** from the sector and responds to a number of key priorities identified, recognising a clear need for sectoral support at both a regional level across Northern Ireland and at a local level, for a distinctive focus on volunteering and on infrastructure support for the women's sector. There is no hierarchy between the four integrated strands of investment - these each meet distinctive geographic, specialist and sectoral need and are at their most effective when working in collaboration to support and complement each other. The four strands of the infrastructure programme will be aligned to a common set of outcomes, enabling a cohesive, integrated approach that strengthens impact across the voluntary and community sector

Our Infrastructure Delivery Partners

The complementary roles of regional, local and specialist partners:



Future Investment

This integrated policy framework includes four strategically aligned funding strands.

CORE / THEMATIC	LOCAL
Core Infrastructure Support Consortium	**Volunteering Infrastructure Support Consortium**
Women's Infrastructure Support Consortium	**Local Infrastructure Support Consortia**

It is expected that the membership and delivery arrangements of the Core Infrastructure Support Consortium, Womens' Infrastructure Support Consortium and Volunteering Infrastructure Support Consortia will be reviewed every five years, while Local Infrastructure Support Consortia will normally be reviewed every three years. Reviews may take place sooner where required. This approach will provide opportunities for new organisations and partnerships to participate in future funding rounds while ensuring continuity of support and the effective delivery of outcomes.

CORE / THEMATIC SUPPORT

The Department recognises the importance of strong, coordinated infrastructure support 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 including those of women's organisations are effectively represented and supported. The following two strands set out how this infrastructure support will be delivered through complementary consortia working at regional and thematic levels.

Core Infrastructure Support Consortium

The Department will work with a Core Infrastructure Support Consortium covering the whole of Northern Ireland, capable of designing and delivering appropriate training and support and with the resources to convene and support sector leaders at a regional level (including supporting a network of local infrastructure support consortia). The Core Infrastructure Support Consortium will also be in a position to deliver an integrated programme of research and data development for the sector to improve our understanding of the work, health and impact of the sector.

Role of Core Infrastructure Consortium Lead/ Anchor: In line with our commitment to build on existing assets and avoid unnecessary competition within the sector, the Department will work with NICVA as a **Core Consortium Lead** for the Core Infrastructure Support

Consortium in recognition of the unique role that NICVA plays in terms of membership, networks, expertise and other assets. The Core Consortium Lead role will be complex and challenging and will require strong leadership and delivery capability, and the Department considers that NICVA is best placed to fulfil this role.

Core Infrastructure Support Consortium Partners: We will invite NICVA to co-design a programme of infrastructure support with a range of sector partners that can deliver against the full outcomes framework in a way that is balanced and inclusive. The Department will expect this partnership to deliver a range of core supports in line with our indicative priorities for investment, to include a focus on **rural need, supporting faith-based VCS organisations, leadership, volunteering and asset ownership/management.**

We will invite NICVA to include a continuation of their shared facilitation of the **Joint Forum between Government and the Voluntary and Community Sector** in their programme of work and to continue to further develop this key mechanism for supporting the relationship between the sectors.

We will also invite NICVA to build upon their facilitation of the **Community Faiths' Forum** which plays a crucial role in fostering collaboration, representation and social impact among faith-based organisations. The Department recognises the value of this platform for collaboration and its ability to bridge the gap between faith-based organisations delivering in their communities, policy makers and the broader voluntary and community sector.

Women's Infrastructure Support Consortium

The response to sectoral engagement and public consultation has highlighted the need for continued specialist infrastructure support for the women's sector.

The Department will seek to work with a **consortium of women's sector organisations** that are able to provide infrastructure level support to the wider women's sector. Guided by the supporting outcomes and indicative priorities for investment, the consortium will identify and highlight the priority areas where support is most needed.

This may include for example, building capacity (skills and leadership); amplifying women's collective voice; ensuring policies reflect women's needs, and ensuring local women's concerns and issues are channelled into regional and national forums.

Consortium applications will be invited following a programme of engagement and communication with the sector and a Women's Infrastructure Support Consortium will be appointed through an **open call, competitive grant process. The consortium will designate a Consortium Lead** to act on behalf of all partners.

The Women's Infrastructure Support Consortium, under the direction of its appointed Consortium lead, will be expected to operate collaboratively, sharing expertise and good practice, and will be expected to complement and work alongside the other Infrastructure Support consortia to maximise impact.

LOCAL LEVEL SUPPORT

The Department will seek to work with **Local Infrastructure Partners** in a number of consortiums 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 has identified the need for two types of Local Infrastructure partners:

Volunteering Infrastructure Support Consortium

The Department will work with a network of Volunteer Centres who will form a **Volunteering Infrastructure Support Consortium.**

Consultation responses greatly welcomed support for volunteering and the focus on volunteering within the policy framework. We heard much about the challenges facing volunteering, particularly around recruitment and retention, and a call for greater support, and recognition for volunteers. We will invest in the core work of infrastructure organisations that will provide **support and expertise within the local community to potential volunteers, existing volunteers and organisations that involve volunteers.**

Established volunteer centres will be invited to submit a collaborative bid, under the direction of a **Consortium Lead,** for investment in core work towards the delivery of volunteering supporting outcomes and indicative priorities, building on legacy and expertise. The consortium, led by its appointed consortium lead organisation, will be expected to work collaboratively, sharing expertise, learning and best practice within their own network and with the other Infrastructure Support Consortia.

Local Infrastructure Support Consortia

The Department will work with Local Infrastructure organisations which meet the infrastructure support needs of VCS organisations in a **defined geographical area,** providing inclusive, accessible services to relevant organisations operating in a locality.

We expect these organisations to deliver a range of support to organisations in their local area in line with the agreed framework of headline outcomes, supporting outcomes and indicative priorities for investment.

We will ensure there is good geographical coverage and that voluntary and community organisations in every council area have the support of a Local Infrastructure Support Consortium providing **inclusive and accessible service**s for all.

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.

The Local Infrastructure Support Consortia will be appointed through an **open call, competitive grant process.** We will be seeking collaborative bids for investment in core work towards the delivery of the policy outcomes and indicative priorities. Consortium applications will be invited following a programme of engagement

Summary of commitments in Section 4.2

Create a new range of consortia with sector infrastructure organisations to support delivery against the framework of outcomes and supporting outcomes.

4.3 Delivering outcomes through improved funding practices

The Department recognises that our funding practices are a key factor in our ability to create and sustain effective partnerships with sector infrastructure organisations, and more widely to meet the challenge of "fair funding" and proportionate bureaucracy in the funding relationship between government and the sector.

The current framework of rules and guidance that governs the funding relationship with the VCS can be interpreted and applied differently by different funders. Sometimes this is justifiable and necessary, depending for example on the nature of a project, the track record of a delivery organisation and the level of risk involved. In other cases, it arises from poor funding practices and leads to an unnecessary bureaucratic burden which, at worst, can undermine the intended outcomes of the funding investment.

The Partnership Agreement between Government and the VCS in Northern Ireland, developed by the Joint Forum, endorsed by the Northern Ireland Executive and launched by the Communities Minister in July 2025, contains shared values, ways of working and a set of Fair Funding Principles to underpin the funding relationship and build good practice between Government and the Voluntary and Community Sector. The Fair Funding Principles are interconnected and applicable to both funders and funded bodies, with the aim of supporting long term planning, proportionality, and stability for VCS organisations and enabling the best use of public funding and greater impact on our communities.

It is intended that the principles, in general, will have applicability to all funding arrangements but require different emphasis depending on the funding purpose and the category of funding arrangement used.[14]

The Department is making a commitment to applying these values and ways of working and to promoting them with our Arm's Length Bodies, other NI Executive Departments and has recommended their adoption to local government.

We are committed to learning from others to improve our funding practices. We will continue to work across government, local government and non-government funders to identify and share good practice. Our key mechanisms for this will be the Joint Forum between government and the VCS and the NI Funder's Forum.

14. The principles should be read in conjunction with and do not override key accountability, financial and budget guidance, public sector budget periods or procurement policy and legislation that is in place.

Fair Funding Principles

1. Collaborative and Trusting Partnership Working

Develop collaborative and constructive funding relationships that enhance mutual understanding, and are underpinned by trust, mutual recognition and respect for each other's distinct roles, contributions and constraints

2. Fairness

Funding considers all the necessary costs to deliver services, the timescales for delivery and impact for our communities to achieve more cost-effective use of public funds and promote stability.

3. Proportionality

Considered approaches, proportionate and relevant to the value and complexity of the funding, supporting effective delivery and value for money.

4. Outcomes Focused and Impactful

Focus on mutually agreed outcomes, to ensure the most effective and efficient use of public funds for maximum impact and value to society.

5. Responsive, Agile, and Flexible

Respond and adapt to changing priorities, circumstances, needs and evidence by being flexible and agile in our approach.

Summary of Commitment in Section 4.3

Support strategic relationships with government and non-government funders

Apply and champion improved funding practices through adopting and promoting the Partnership Agreement between Government and the VCS, its shared values, ways of working and fair funding principles.

4.4 Delivering outcomes through improving understanding about the work and impact of the sector

The Department recognises that we need to make improvements to how we commission, collate, consider and communicate data if we want to understand what the sector needs and how best to support those needs. This will require a focus on both qualitative and quantitative information. The Department has an interest in demonstrating the impact of our investment and we also recognise the need for robust data on the "big picture" dynamics within the VCS that are of interest to a wide range of policy makers, funders and organisations.

We will work with sector partners, NISRA, other government departments, local government, independent funders and academia to develop our evidence base and promote understanding of the sector. The Department is keen to get a better understanding of the overall composition and health of the sector, including the faith sector, and areas where there may be weaker capacity or barriers to participation.

Sector infrastructure organisations are a rich source of information and insight on the health and impact of the sector, arising from their direct work with people involved at all levels across the sector. Working with delivery partners, we will develop an integrated reporting and evaluation framework that will allow us to capture and understand the key metrics and indicators that should shape the delivery of infrastructure support. We will gather and share information on the impact of departmental investment and the contribution of sector infrastructure to the outcomes which this framework seeks to achieve.

The Department for Communities recognises the distinct role of local government in supporting grassroots community development activity within council areas. Local government initiatives on community development have been supported by DfC under the longstanding "Community Support Programme" and the Department recognises councils as a vital part of sustaining local community infrastructure and supporting local place-based interventions.

As part of our commitment to improving data and understanding of the sector, we will improve how we work with local government to demonstrate how our funding is meeting local needs and aligning with the Department's strategic priorities for the voluntary and community sector and community development.

Summary of Commitment in Section 4.4

Boost data and insights from VCS infrastructure investment across the Sector.

Improve understanding of the work and impact of the Voluntary and Community Sector.

4.5 Delivering outcomes through improved regulation of charities

The Department for Communities is committed to creating a more enabling regulatory environment for the Voluntary and Community Sector through the implementation of the recommendations arising from the Independent Review of Charity Regulation in NI

The Report of the Independent Review of Charity Regulation was published on 20 January 2022 and represents a significant opportunity to improve charity regulation in NI. It comprises 93 recommendations which cover a number of linked themes and represents a significant opportunity to make improvements in charity regulation (for both charities and their beneficiaries), with the desired outcome to see the Charity Commission for Northern Ireland (the Commission) becoming an enabling regulator.

The Department's response to the Independent Review was published in November 2022 and the Department is progressively taking forward the recommendations **of the Independent Review of Charity Regulation in NI in addition to other reforms requested by the sector, including:**

- A Charities (Amendment) Bill to amend the Charities Act (Northern Ireland) 2008 to address approximately 18 recommendations of the Review including those linked to proportionality of annual reporting, and additional powers for the Commission, which includes a statutory warning power. The Bill will also provide clarity in relation to section 167 of the Charities Act (Northern Ireland) 2008 which applies to institutions which are not charities under the law of Northern Ireland, but which operate for charitable purposes in or from Northern Ireland;
- Introduction of a registration threshold for charities;
- Regulations to allow Charitable Incorporated Organisations, a legal form for charities (already available in England and Wales, and Scotland) that would provide protections for trustees and eliminate dual regulation with Companies House will be progressed in the next mandate; and
- A review of the audit threshold for NI charities, taking account of developments in England and Wales and Scotland.

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.**

Summary of Commitment in Section 4.5
Improve the regulation of charities.

Summary of Commitments

Commitment	Timeframes[15]	Who will drive delivery?
The Department will support the strategic relationship between the voluntary and community sector and government through adopting and promoting the Partnership Agreement between Government and the VCS, its shared values, ways of working and Fair Funding Principles and will provide continued support for the operation of the Joint Forum between Government and the VCS.	Joint Forum Work Plan will be taken forward to align with current Assembly mandate.	The Joint Forum between Government and the Voluntary and Community Sector.
Renew investment in voluntary and community sector infrastructure support.	Commissioning commencing in 2026/27. Phased implementation from 2027/28. (See timeline for phased implementation below)	The Department for Communities.
Create new range of consortia with sector infrastructure organisations to support delivery against the outcomes framework.	Phased Implementation: Implementation of the VCS Infrastructure Support Policy Framework will be phased to support an orderly transition from existing arrangements and the effective development of delivery partnerships. Subject to budget availability, implementation is expected to proceed in three phases:	The Department for Communities and sector infrastructure partners.

15 Timeframes are subject to decisions of Ministers

Commitment	Timeframes	Who will drive delivery?
	• Phase 1 (from April 2027): Core Infrastructure Support Consortium. • Phase 2 (from October 2027): Volunteering Infrastructure Support Consortium. • Phase 3 (from April 2028): Women's Infrastructure Support Consortium and Local Infrastructure Consortia. The phased approach recognises that effective infrastructure support depends on strong collaborative partnerships and well-developed consortium arrangements. It will provide potential delivery partners with sufficient time to form consortia, establish governance and delivery arrangements, and develop services aligned to the outcomes framework. It will also provide local organisations with clear advance notice of future opportunities, supporting meaningful engagement in consortium development and helping to ensure sustainable, geographically inclusive infrastructure support across Northern Ireland.	

Commitment	Timeframes	Who will drive delivery?
Support strategic relationships with government and non-government funders	Ongoing – from now, aligned to PfG and funding cycles.	The Department for Communities. The Joint Forum between Government and the VCS. Funders' Forum for Northern Ireland.
Apply and champion improved funding practices through adopting and promoting the Partnership Agreement between Government and the VCS, its shared values, ways of working and fair funding principles.	Ongoing as part of implementation of this Policy Framework and the Partnership Agreement between Government and the VCS in Northern Ireland.	The Department for Communities. The Joint Forum between Government and the VCS.
Boost data and insights from VCS infrastructure investment across the sector	Implementation from 2027/2028 onwards.	The Department for Communities. Infrastructure Delivery Partners.
Improve understanding of the work and impact of the Voluntary and Community Sector	Ongoing as part of implementation of this Policy Framework.	The Department for Communities. Infrastructure Delivery Partners. The Joint Forum between Government and the VCS.
Improve the regulation of charities	From 2023 onwards.	The Department for Communities. The Charity Commission for Northern Ireland.

Annex 1 - Statutory Assessments

Section 75, Equality and Good Relations: Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 requires public authorities, in carrying out their functions relating to Northern Ireland, to have due regard to the need to promote equality between all Section 75 groups. Without prejudice to these obligations, the Department is also required, in carrying out its functions relating to Northern Ireland, to have due regard to the desirability of promoting good relations between persons of different religious belief, political opinion or racial group.

Amendments have been made to the policy framework which mitigate any minor impacts identified in the equality screening of this policy framework. On that basis, the decision is that the policy framework should not be subject to a full equality impact assessment.

Link to Equality Screening Document

Rural Needs Impact Assessment: The Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 introduced a new duty on NI departments, district councils and other public authorities to have due regard to rural needs when developing, adopting, implementing or revising policies, strategies and plans and when designing and delivering public services.

The Department, under a commitment to rural proof, is also required to identify the potential impact on rural areas and if appropriate, make adjustments to take account of rural circumstances. As part of development of this draft framework, 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.

The Rural Needs Impact Assessment was revised following public consultation, taking into consideration additional issues raised.

The Rural Needs Impact Assessment is available on request at: **vcsinfrastructure@communities-ni.gov.uk**

Available in alternative formats.

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