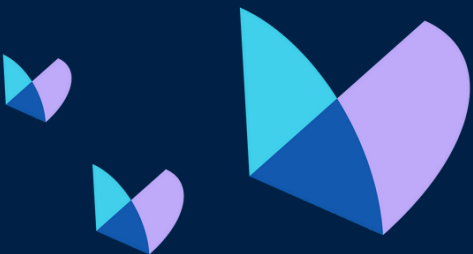


Consultation Response:

Voluntary and Community Sector Infrastructure Support Policy Framework

February 2024



Introduction

Nexus has almost 40 years' experience offering a specialised professional counselling service to people impacted by sexual abuse and abusive relationships. We can provide support to anyone impacted by sexual abuse from age 4 and upwards, availability of children's counselling depends on available funding. We currently also provide support services to adults who are age 18+, identify as male, and who have been impacted by abusive relationships (domestic abuse) as an adult or child. Our Early Intervention and Prevention Training team provide a range of bespoke training and workshops that are available to schools, workplaces, volunteer groups, higher education institutions, individual practitioners, community groups, sports teams, voluntary and charity groups, and businesses.

As a charity that relies on government funding, external grants, donations and the work of volunteers, Nexus welcomes this comprehensive review of Northern Ireland's Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS). Our organisation strongly believes in the work of the sector and the contributions from volunteers, advocates, and leaders in the community. We value the support and input from our volunteers, community partners, and fellow charity organisations that work across Northern Ireland, and we believe that the network of groups of experts and service users is a vital forum for discussing new projects, evaluating current work, and progressing awareness and support.

The following comments, suggestions, and questions are based on our expertise and experience as a charity operating in the Voluntary and Community sector.

Background

The Department for Communities drafted this proposal with the help of a multi-stakeholder Reference Group and has benefited from the contribution of over 300 people through a series of pre-consultation workshops and discussions and from the input of 430 organisations to our survey of sector needs.

This proposal was also developed collaboratively by the Joint Forum between Government and the Voluntary and Community Sector which includes representation from across the sector, all government departments and local government.

Section 1 Summary

This section provides an overview of the Department for Communities' understanding of the voluntary and community sector, including how government has traditionally supported the sector through funding of sector infrastructure organisations. Section 1 identifies the following Priority Infrastructure Support Areas for the Voluntary and Community Sector:

1. Leadership and Advocacy
2. Collaboration and Partnerships
3. Capacity Building
4. Volunteering

Nexus Response:

Nexus agrees with the proposed values and practises, however, we would highlight that while the Framework stresses that data and evidence from the sector should be effectively collated, analysed and communicated as 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), that it should be made explicit in the Framework that this also applies to the data and evidence that government hold as this informs the sectors approach and is often not easily accessible.

Section 2 Summary

This section was developed collaboratively by the Joint Forum between Government and the Voluntary and Community Sector (the “Joint Forum”). Section 2 identified the following Values for a Future Concordat Agreement that will act as a framework for improving partnership working between the voluntary and community sector and the Government:

1. Accountability
2. Active Participation
3. Social Justice
4. Independence
5. Collaboration
6. Sustainability

Nexus Response:

Nexus agrees with the proposed Future Concordat. We would like to highlight that it will be important to engage with small, medium and large VCS organisations to scope the needs and views of all those offering vital services from grass roots initiatives to community of interest groups and up to regional and national charities. Ensuring views are captured at each level. This engagement exercise should be inclusive and accessible to maximise participation and optimise feedback. We would also emphasise the benefits of proposed changes (values, outcomes and actions) being made on a ‘statutory footing’ as this will strengthen monitoring and accountability.

Section 3 Summary

The Department for Communities has a responsibility to set out a clear vision for what strategic government support and investment can achieve. The proposed Vision is below:

"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"

Section 3 also proposes the following Outcomes to guide government investment:

1. Leadership and Advocacy
2. Volunteering
3. Core Capacity and Resilience
4. Collaboration and Partnership

Nexus Response:

Nexus agrees with the proposed vision. A sustained and effective infrastructure is integral to ensuring a fit for purpose VCS that can plan and deliver responsive services and supports in line with programme for government priorities. VCS recognises the challenging economic climate in the statutory sector; however, annual funding (as opposed to 3-year funding) arrangements not only prevent proactive planning and delivery of services but also increase bureaucracy and uncertainty which put strain on the workforce of both sectors. This needs to be addressed to ensure a sustainable infrastructure.

Nexus strongly agrees with the proposed outcomes and would note that it is also important that data and evidence from Government is effectively collated, analysed and communicated and that data from both sectors can be read across to ensure we get the clearest picture of issues on the ground.

Section 4 Summary

Section 4 sets out proposals for how the Department will work with the sector and other partners to deliver against the vision and outcomes in Section 3. The stakeholder engagement identified the following key areas for delivering the ambition:

1. Creating effective partnerships
2. Sustained investment in sector infrastructure
3. Creating a more enabling regulatory and policy environment
4. Applying and championing improved funding practises
5. Improving understanding about the work and impact of the sector

Nexus Response:

Nexus agrees with the need for new improved funding practices and welcome the inclusion 'applying and championing improved funding practices. 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. Including the parameters of the scoping exercise will help to manage VCS expectations on potential outcomes. We also believe that 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, particularly in line with growth of Community of Interest Companies.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Nexus welcomes the Department's proposed Framework for supporting the Voluntary and Community Sector. We would like to see a further commitment to developing partnerships with fellow Voluntary and Community organisations as part of a strategy to engage with local communities and strengthen already existing support mechanisms. We also want to emphasise the benefits of these proposed changes - the values, outcomes and actions - being made on a statutory footing as this will strengthen monitoring and accountability.

We welcome this proposed framework to strengthen the support and infrastructure for Voluntary and Community services and we look forward to supporting the framework and engaging in future outcomes.

Further Information



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