



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Social Development

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Volunteering Strategy: Ministerial Briefing

9 May 2013

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

## Committee for Social Development

### Volunteering Strategy: Ministerial Briefing

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**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Mr Alex Maskey (Chairperson)  
Mr Mickey Brady (Deputy Chairperson)  
Ms Pam Brown  
Mr Gregory Campbell  
Mrs Judith Cochrane  
Mr Michael Copeland  
Mr Sammy Douglas  
Mr Fra McCann

**Witnesses:**

Mr Nelson McCausland	Minister for Social Development
Mr Jack O'Connor	Department for Social Development
Ms Tracey Teague	Department for Social Development

**The Chairperson:** I thank the Minister and his colleagues for being here to present to the Committee on this issue this morning. The papers are in members' packs. I remind members that the session is being reported by Hansard.

First — and although this is under 'Matters Arising', I want to raise it while the Minister is here — members will recall that we discussed the distribution of the welfare reform leaflets last week, and the Committee took the view that that should not happen. I thank the Minister for his swift response, upon hearing the Committee's decision, in asking the Department or the agency not to distribute those leaflets. As I understand it, some were distributed in some constituencies. I do not know how widespread that was; I have only heard reports from North Belfast and South Antrim. The Minister may wish to remark on that at a later point. Again, the Committee took a decision, and the Minister responded very quickly.

Minister, I will leave it to you to deliver your presentation on the regional infrastructure support programme. However, before we get into that, I want to say that the volunteering sector made representations to us on the basis that it felt that there has not been, what it called, meaningful or serious engagement between the sector and the Department since, I think, September last year. So, you might want to address that matter. We are raising it with you because the sector raised it formally with us. Over to you, Minister.

**Mr Nelson McCausland (The Minister for Social Development):** Thank you, Chairman. I am pleased to be here this morning to outline our intentions on how Northern Ireland's first ever volunteering strategy can be successfully implemented.

I begin by recognising the very important scrutiny role that you and your Committee perform. I hope that by the end of the session this morning, any issues of concern will have been addressed. In order to successfully apprise you of how I intend to take volunteering forward, I think that it is first appropriate to take you back over recent events and milestones.

You will recall that I launched Northern Ireland's first ever volunteering strategy and action plan in March 2012. It meant that, for the first time ever, we had a clear and agreed road map of where we wanted to go with volunteering and, through the 38 actions in the action plan, had detailed directions on how to get there. The strategy did not emanate from some secret, private deliberations by officials in the Lighthouse Building, but rather from a detailed and lengthy consultation process with all the key volunteering stakeholders. It was an in-depth consultation over a period of time. It took over two years to complete, and we had more than 300 written contributions to the consultation. The volunteering strategy is a distillation of those views, and, in my view, it is the cornerstone for delivering volunteering in Northern Ireland.

Implementation of the volunteering strategy presented opportunities for designing new ways of assisting the development of volunteering, and I was, and remain, determined that those opportunities should not be squandered. I wanted to ensure that the values of volunteering were recognised across all society; that groups and sectors that contribute significantly to volunteering, but had never received any assistance, were helped; and that, where possible, resources were concentrated on front line volunteering delivery. That was the basis for my decision in summer 2012 to tender for strategic partners who would help provide the necessary volunteering infrastructure, together with advancements in the volunteering small grants programme and the development of a new volunteering innovation programme.

You are aware of my decision in September 2012 to terminate that process in light of concerns about the level of co-operation and collaboration between organisations. That decision was not taken lightly, but I considered it necessary in order to deliver on the volunteering strategy. The time since September has allowed officials and I to revisit our operational and implementation needs for the volunteering strategy. Therefore, I am happy to share our findings with you this morning, and more widely, following our discussion.

I did not see the need to go back across all the volunteering stakeholders, as the strategy remains valid and current, and it is popular. I took into account the many opinions I have heard as Minister regarding volunteering and how it might better reflect the needs of society. I am now determined that new arrangements will come into effect from October 2013 and that they will operate until the end of the current comprehensive spending review period.

Although I have retained the level of resources available to me to support volunteering, I have taken the opportunity to rebalance the allocation of those resources. Front line volunteering activity will be enhanced, and the thrust of the rebalancing will be to ensure that resources are targeted at implementing the volunteering strategy, not merely at maintaining existing support. The thrust of the new arrangements that I am implementing is that support for small grants will increase to £600,000 from the current £300,000; that the volunteering innovation programme will receive £500,000 each year, increasing from the current £300,000; and that volunteering infrastructure will decrease from the current figure of just over £1 million to £600,000.

Some people say that providing small grants is not strategic, but my view is that recognising, celebrating and supporting volunteering is strategic and that this programme will be clearly recognised as strategic to volunteering in Northern Ireland. Others might argue that innovation does not provide support for volunteering, but my view is that supporting new organisations and projects that have never been supported in the past is vital to volunteering. Projects that support people with disabilities to get involved in volunteering, and developing volunteering partnerships across the three largest sporting organisations in Northern Ireland, can only be seen as positive to the development of civil society. Others might say that I should support the existing infrastructure as before, with the available resources, but with the volunteering strategy now in place, my view is that we can clearly target our resources at what we want to deliver, and my task is to deliver the best for volunteering for Northern Ireland.

I hope that the Committee has found that update helpful. I am happy to answer any questions you might have, and officials are here to provide any detail or context that is required.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you very much for that presentation, Minister. I will open it up to members to raise issues, but, before I do, I have two points. How do you think the new proposals will enhance greater collaboration in the broader sector?

**Mr McCausland:** You picked up on the word collaboration. That has been one of the difficulties. As yet, there have not been the collaboration and co-operation that are required. That was why we ran into the difficulty previously. At that time, we went out for five regional infrastructure themes. The generic, general infrastructure support eventually went to the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA). Then there was advice, where you had Citizens Advice and the independent sector coming together and co-operating. The Churches' Community Work Alliance was the organisation that came forward from the faith sector. So, there was a single approach, or a single line there, for each of those three sectors. There were two sectors, and this was one of them, where that did not happen. There was division and differences between organisations and, on that basis, we decided to terminate because there was not going to be buy-in from everybody. That is why we are taking this somewhat different approach.

There are five organisations in the Association of Independent Volunteer Centres. There is a separate organisation up in Londonderry, in the north-west, and there is Volunteer Now. So, altogether, there are seven organisations, and we will be looking at delivering at a subregional level rather than a single organisation delivering for all of Northern Ireland. There is not the level of co-operation or collaboration necessary to achieve that.

On reflection, we also think that a lot of the support for volunteering groups is of a generic nature, which is probably also in the remit of the NICVA contract to deliver general support for organisations. If you have a local organisation run by volunteers, and they need advice on committee skills, or whatever, those are general skills that can be acquired; they are not unique to volunteering. They apply across all the sectors. If those are taken out, local support — promoting volunteering, matching volunteers with organisations and raising the profile of volunteering — can all be done at the local level, and you would have seven organisations delivering. There is an opportunity for collaboration in delivering the small grants, because that will be a single tender. There will be a single organisation delivering the small grants scheme across the Province, and there is an opportunity for folk to come together to collaborate on that.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you, Minister. I have one point before I open the meeting to members. As you know, the volunteering strategy and action plan was agreed by the Executive and published in March 2012. It looked at supporting integrated infrastructure as a priority. Can you elaborate on how this might deliver that?

**Mr McCausland:** There are always those issues of practical realities on the ground. As I went round talking to all those organisations — and I think I met most of them over a period of time — there were very divergent views. That is why we have taken this approach. It was not that there were divergent views about the strategy; everybody bought into the strategy and thought that it was good, but organisations have their positions and their local identity, and trying to get that collaboration between them just proved impossible. You can lead a horse to water but you cannot make it drink, as the saying goes, and the difficulty here was getting that collaboration. However, I think this is an operational matter. The key principles about taking volunteering forward are there, everybody has bought in to them and I think this is the best way of meeting those aspirations.

**Mr Jack O'Connor (Department for Social Development):** To take those points forward, one of the key actions of the strategy was developing a volunteering strategy steering group. As you are aware, and as the Minister has pointed out, the support that we have been providing for infrastructure over the past number of years has been only a certain part of the infrastructure. We have not supported all volunteering infrastructure because we do not have enough resources. We are trying to get all the key stakeholders within that steering mechanism so not only do we have the volunteer centres, which have been financially supported by the Department, but others such as sporting and arts organisations with an interest in volunteering and conservation activities and other Departments collectively driving forward the implementation of the strategy. So, that allows us to send out messages to everyone who is involved in volunteering and then to measure the impact and delivery of the strategy. That is how we see collaboration being enhanced.

**The Chairperson:** Thanks for that, Jack.

**Mr F McCann:** Thank you for the presentation, Minister. I agree that, in many ways, small grants especially are an essential part of the process. It gives recognition to the many people who volunteer for different activities, and it shows them that there are people who are willing to support them in whatever activity or event they are running. Sometimes, when people look at volunteering, they look at the big events. You might get thousands of people volunteering for a couple of days or a week. I have raised the issue a number of times about the fact that many local communities rely on volunteers for festivals or residents' associations. Many of those volunteers are on benefits, and because they have to be available for work, that rules out a lot of the activity and work that they could be doing. Is there anything that would allow the Social Security Agency (SSA) to take on board the volunteer aspect of people on benefit?

**Ms Tracey Teague (Department for Social Development):** We are exploring that, Fra, with our social security colleagues, because it impacts on jobseeker's allowance, where you have to say that you are available for work at all times. We are in the process of looking at the legislation on that, which is very strict. It says that you have to declare yourself available for work.

**Mr F McCann:** I have raised this issue a number of times over the years, and I hope that something is sorted soon, because it seems to be one of those things that might be difficult and might be put on the back burner. In the past, I have seen people in social security offices saying that they are working in the local community and being chastised because their activity makes them unavailable for work.

**Mr McCausland:** There is a booklet about this.

**Mr O'Connor:** We have worked with SSA colleagues, because everyone recognises that volunteering is a healthy way to help people back to employment, and we have produced a booklet, which we have distributed to all volunteering organisations across the SSA network. It allows people who are on benefits to see how they can volunteer but still maintain their benefits. There is a step-by-step guide for each of the benefits. That is already in place, and I will make sure that I supply some copies to the Committee Clerk for distribution to you.

**Mr F McCann:** It also needs to be supplied to the people who are making decisions in offices.

**Mr O'Connor:** We have passed that through our network.

**The Chairperson:** Sammy, welcome back to the Committee.

**Mr Douglas:** Thank you, Chairman. As you know, I asked to be back on this Committee. As someone said, I am strange man.

Minister, thank you very much for your response. Jack referred to your relationship with other Departments. Not so long ago, you were in Tullycarnet, where Harry Flynn is doing a smashing job with the football team, working with parents and dozens of volunteers. This strikes me as being a health issue as well. It is about improving and encouraging health, and Eddie Rooney from the Public Health Agency has been out to look at how it can support disadvantaged people through their taking up free membership for a year. Can you talk about your relationship with some of the other Departments? Are they feeding into the strategy and, just as importantly, putting in resources?

**Mr McCausland:** The volunteering strategy steering group has interdepartmental representation. I do not have the detail on the working of that, so maybe one of the officials can come in.

**Ms Teague:** On innovation, we are looking for people to come forward with projects, and part of the role of the volunteering strategy steering group will be to come forward with volunteering projects, issues and ideas. Things such as Transforming Your Care will encourage volunteering in the community, and the opportunities will come through the steering group.

**Mr O'Connor:** I will give you an example. We are supporting a programme in Northern Ireland for the Special Olympics. It is a cross-cutting and cross-departmental programme with five or six Departments, including the Health Department, the Department of Education and the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. Our objective is to look at the volunteering aspect and build the body of volunteers involved. There is one about social inclusion, and there is a bit about health and a bit about education. Across all Departments, we are all putting into the one kitty and, hopefully,

getting outcomes that will deliver for each of us. As the Minister said, the steering group is looking at these innovations and opportunities and trying to make them real.

**Mr Brady:** Thank you very much for your presentation. I want to follow on from what Sammy said. There is a very long-established volunteer bureau in Newry, based in Ballybot House. It has a sitter service that allows carers the opportunity to have respite. It also makes early-morning calls on older people to ensure that they are OK. There is a cross-over.

You said that you pulled the pin last September because of the lack of collaboration. In a sense, there is always a degree of friction around funding and all of that in the voluntary sector. Do you think that the proposed strategy will increase or enhance that collaboration? It is a matter of common sense and getting people to move forward in the same direction. The voluntary sector would be much more involved with the proposals in Transforming your Care. It seems that there is a need for much greater collaboration.

**Mr McCausland:** I think that our approach will, in time, increase co-operation and collaboration. It is a difficult area and, as you say, there is always competition and issues between different groups. However, over time, this will help to improve that.

**Mr Brady:** I have a question relating to Fra's point about the benefit aspect. Under the proposed Welfare Reform Bill, people will be expected to look for work for 35 hours a week, which will decrease any opportunity that they might have for voluntary work. The timescale for that might need to be addressed.

**Mr McCausland:** I want to pick up on a point that we have not gone into, if I may, Chair.

**The Chairperson:** Please do, Minister.

**Mr McCausland:** The innovation fund is one of the most important elements of this approach. We mentioned the work with Gaelic, rugby and football. I think that £160,000 was invested this year in trying to enhance volunteering in that sector. There was work with Outdoor Recreation and the Royal National Institute for the Blind. It might be helpful if Tracey were to give you an outline on disability, outdoor activity, sport, and so on, so that you can get a sense of what they are and the amount of support that is making a difference to those activities.

**Ms Teague:** I thought that it would be useful, and we can follow it up in writing if that suits. Outdoor Recreation has a mountain bike volunteer programme and a community walk leadership scheme, and it works in conjunction with the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and the Department for Culture, Arts and Leisure. Some private sector funding is also involved, so it is not all government-funded. The Campaigner's Active Network initiative works with the Royal National Institute for the Blind. It allows people with visual disabilities to get involved in volunteering. Those types of new and innovative ideas are coming through. Let's Stick Together is a voluntary support group for new parents, which gives advice and guidance on parenting skills. There are also other schemes in the pipeline, including Business on Board, which strengthens the not-for-profit sector. There are a number in the pipeline and a number have already been funded. If it would be helpful, we could give you an update to give you a sense of the broad range of projects that are coming forward.

**Mr McCausland:** We have introduced the innovation fund and enhanced the small grants. There is £600,000 in small grants. Grants may be around £1,000 for an organisation, which means that at least 500 groups across Northern Ireland would benefit from that due to the fact that we have doubled the amount of money going into the small grants.

**Ms Teague:** It might be helpful to give you some feedback. Organisations have told us that a £1,000 grant can make a huge difference to an event that they are holding in their small community centre. Therefore, that has fed into the analysis of where the money should go to promote volunteering.

**Mr Durkan:** I thank you and your colleagues for that briefing. One of the reasons for terminating the process was lack of collaboration. We have covered that. The other one was the potential for a legal challenge regarding the process. What were the circumstances and facts that indicated that there was potential for a legal challenge?

**Mr O'Connor:** I can respond to that. I have an institutional memory of the process. We put out the tender, as you will be aware, last summer. We indicated the outcome of that and started discussions with potential partners. The Department then received legal correspondence from one of the organisations that had been involved in that process. We took that to the Departmental Solicitor's Office. The view of the departmental solicitor was that, in a case scenario or under certain conditions, that could be seen as the start of a legal challenge that could have led to judicial review and the stalling of the process of appointing our strategic partners. We then had to make a decision as to whether to pursue our original intention or advise the Minister to abort the process.

**Mr Durkan:** Was there any threat of legal challenge to the termination of that process and then the extension of the existing —

**Mr O'Connor:** No. There was nothing further. We took best advice from our departmental solicitor, and that was the course of action that was recommended. Following that decision, there was no further legal correspondence.

**Mr Copeland:** My question is sort of related to that, and it is based on rumours and whispers. I understand that Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC) is investigating the nature of "unpaid work", and that volunteering could, according to HMRC, be viewed as unpaid work in some respects. Are we sure that, at no stage in the future, those organising or engaging people to volunteer or to engage in volunteering activity will not find themselves liable for the tax and national insurance that should have been paid had the work been remunerated?

**Mr McCausland:** HMRC does not fall within my remit, I am glad to say. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Copeland:** It is a question, however, Minister, that is whispered in the galleries. I just want to be sure of the definition of volunteer work. What is volunteering, and how does it differ from work? That must be nailed down, because there are certain classifications that are now liable to tax and national insurance, such as internships, for example, which are slightly different.

**Mr O'Connor:** Certainly, in the strategy, we proposed a definition of volunteering, which is universally agreed across —

**Mr McCausland:** We will enquire about that, and get back to you.

**The Chairperson:** No other members wish to speak. Let us remind ourselves: as you say yourself, no one has any issue with the strategy, so it is agreed by all. You have had a steering group in place to try to take the thing forward from last year to where we are now. It would be helpful if we could get some more information because we do not have the details of how you are taking this forward. You have gone on to explain some of that, but it would be helpful if members had access to it as quickly as possible. I presume that you will monitor the situation to see whether they are delivering greater collaboration and supporting the objective of an integrated infrastructure?

**Ms Teague:** If I may, an evaluation is planned in 2014-15, just to make sure that this new package of funding, and how it is directed, is delivering against the strategy. So there will be a formal mid-term evaluation, which we will share with the Committee.

**The Chairperson:** OK. Are members happy enough with that?

*Members indicated assent.*

**The Chairperson:** Thank you, Minister, and Jack and Tracey, for the presentation this morning, for answering members' questions and continuing to keep an oversight of the strategy.