



NICVA comments on Regeneration Bill.

Background to NICVA

NICVA (the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action) is the umbrella body for the voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland. It provides over 1,000 members with information, advice, training and support services on a wide range of issues, together with representation for the sector as a whole.

NICVA works to achieve progressive social change, based on equality and equity, working through a community development approach, to empower local communities to pursue their own needs and agendas.

General comments

NICVA welcomes the opportunity to inform the Committee on our concerns around the Bill.

We note the decision to delay the transfer of these powers to Council until 2016 and whilst this is disappointing given the amount of time that has been spent on the reform of local government, we hope this will give time to build capability in communities and in those councillors who have been elected to the super councils in relation to these new powers.

NICVA has been supportive of the devolution of powers to new councils, responsive and responsible councils are best positioned to deliver local regeneration as they are closest placed to the needs of the community and have the knowledge and the understanding of their communities. This coupled with a robust planning system which should taking input from and account of the needs, and voices, of the community should lead to Councils being well placed to tackle regeneration, social need and deprivation.

We recognise that the reform of local government allows new super councils the opportunity to set policies and make decisions directly applicable to their locality. However, in relation to "social need," "deprivation" and "regeneration" NICVA is concerned that there is no definition of these terms to give all councils a standard measure to work towards. Currently there is uniformity from the Department in relation to the neighbourhood renewal criteria: under these proposals we could end up with 11 different interpretations of an area of deprivation.

Without a standardised definition, the aims and, more importantly, outcomes could be wildly different across council areas.

Additionally a shared definition would allow for shared aims across council areas and potential cross council working. It would also ensure that aims and outcomes are robustly monitored and any underperforming councils could easily be recognised.

As we noted in our response to the draft budget, NICVA has concerns around the transfer of the budget for Neighbourhood Renewal to Councils not being ring-fenced for this purpose. Again this raises the issue of potential wide differentials in activities and outcomes across council areas.

The delay in progressing this Bill and the budget issues that are entwined with that has led to a great deal of uncertainty in the voluntary and community sector. We would prefer to see Neighbourhood Renewal Funding ring-fenced when it is transferred to Councils to allow this important work to continue unaffected and uninterrupted. Again with robust oversight to ensure all Councils are performing on this important work.

It is essential that should this money be ring-fenced it is used in partnership with the voluntary and community sector to deliver services and not just taken in-house by the council. This is important as over years the voluntary and community sector have built up knowledge and the ability to tackle these issues, to lose this expertise would undoubtedly have a detrimental impact on the ability of councils to tackle deprivation. Ideally NICVA would like the Committee to retain a scrutiny role in this, taking an overview of who is delivering services in an area, where anti-poverty money is going and the outcomes/impacts of this work.

NICVA would also concur with the query from Mickey Brady on funding for advice centres, during the Committee Briefing on the Bill from Departmental Official. As the changes implemented by the roll out of the Welfare Reform Bill begin to take hold, more and more pressure will be placed on advice centres. Ideally NICVA would like to have had a statutory right to advice contained the Welfare Reform Bill. In the absence of this we believe it is essential that funding for advice centres is ring-fenced when this power is passed to councils.

NICVA would note concern that currently within the Bill there is no commitment to promote shared space as a part of a council's regeneration responsibility. Shared space and inclusive communities have a key role to play in the regeneration of an area and a commitment to this would send a strong message across all council areas.

To conclude, NICVA welcome the Bill as part of the wider reform of local government and looks forward to working with the Committee and elected representatives throughout its legislative passage.

For more information contact

Jenna Maghie
Policy Development Officer
NICVA
61 Duncairn Gardens
Belfast
BT15 2GB

Tel: (028) 9087 7777

Email: jenna.maghie@nicva.org