



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Social Development

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Volunteer Infrastructure:
Briefing from Volunteer Now

6 June 2013

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mickey Brady (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Paula Bradley
Ms Pam Brown
Mr Gregory Campbell
Mr Michael Copeland
Mr Sammy Douglas
Mr Mark Durkan
Mr Fra McCann

Witnesses:

Mr Joe McVey	Volunteer Now
Ms Wendy Osborne	Volunteer Now

The Deputy Chairperson: I welcome Wendy Osborne, the chief executive of Volunteer Now, and Joe McVey, the chairperson of Volunteer Now. I advise members and officials that this session will be reported by Hansard.

Mr Joe McVey (Volunteer Now): Thank you very much, Chair. I am Joe McVey, chairman of Volunteer Now, and with me I have Wendy Osborne, who is the chief executive of Volunteer Now. What we would like to do this morning, with your permission Chair and that of the Committee, is to offer you an oral summary based on the paper that we submitted earlier, and that is in response to, and in light of, the Minister's announcement on 9 May.

Our presentation, as you will gather, will try to highlight our concerns in relation to the direction of travel and the impact that we feel that will have on the infrastructure in Northern Ireland in regional and local support for the infrastructure for volunteering. I will hand over to Wendy to provide the briefing. We are very happy to take questions. Thank you.

Ms Wendy Osborne (Volunteer Now): I thank the Committee for seeing us this morning. I want to touch briefly on the whole notion of infrastructure support. To clarify, since 2004 in Northern Ireland, there has been an ongoing policy discussion about the role of voluntary and community sector infrastructure support organisations. Policy has been recommended to highlight the importance of infrastructure support in providing support, development, co-ordination, representation and promotion to add value to the delivery of front line services.

Eighty-thousand-plus volunteers are involved with voluntary and community sector organisations, so the promotion of volunteering and the provision of access to information and training to support the contribution of volunteers are increasingly important, I would say.

In 2012, following consultation, a policy decision was taken, and the voluntary and community unit (VCU) within the Department for Social Development (DSD) set out the new regional infrastructure support services programme (RISSP). That included the thematic areas of generic support, advice services, women in disadvantaged areas, faith and volunteering. Regional support for volunteering is provided by Volunteer Now, funded by the VCU through the RISSP programme. Locally and sub-regionally, the VCU funds volunteer centre services; for example, Volunteer Now provides such a service across 15 designated council areas, and sub-regional network organisations provide infrastructure support for the voluntary and community sector. An example of that would be the North-West Community Network.

In April 2010, in relation to the volunteering infrastructure specifically, the Volunteer Development Agency and nine of the local volunteer centres merged to create the new organisation Volunteer Now. Six of the volunteer centres decided not to join the merger. The organisations that created Volunteer Now believed that an integrated organisation would provide a more consistent and effective service for the promotion and support of volunteering. The volunteering strategy, which is a Northern Ireland Executive strategy, states:

"A high quality volunteering infrastructure has a key role to play in the successful delivery of a Volunteering Strategy."

The strategy lists some of the things that the infrastructure provides, which are policy development; research; training, recruiting and supporting volunteers; promotion and specific issues relating to volunteer involvement; promotion of volunteering; recruitment of volunteers; assistance with good practice in relation to the protection of children and vulnerable adults; and the development of standards in relation to volunteer management and support. All of these are delivered by Volunteer Now. It also says that a priority action under the strategy is to support an integrated infrastructure that provides appropriate services across Northern Ireland.

Although organisational funding decisions have not yet been made, the indications from the Department are that the £600,000 annual figure for the volunteering infrastructure support is considered sufficient to deliver the volunteering strategy; that this funding covers the delivery of regional and local infrastructure services; that the funding will support consistent service delivery across every district council area; that the funding will have a focus on meeting disadvantage, for example within neighbourhood renewal areas; and that the funding will also cover supporting volunteer development and practice as required in those organisations allocated small grants. The Department has indicated that the amount available on an annual basis to the volunteering infrastructure is £1.1 million, yet the allocation of funding as stated in the government funding database is £1.339 million. That would mean £1.1 million for local infrastructure and £220,000 for regional volunteering infrastructure. It is unclear which figure is correct, however, at the very least, it represents a 50% cut. To Volunteer Now's knowledge, no other infrastructure support organisations funded by the VCU have received this level of funding cut, and where there have been cuts, for example of 25%, those have been graduated over a period of time. The level of the funding cut for the volunteering infrastructure is substantial, and that, coupled with the 1 October implementation, creates organisational difficulties that will necessitate job losses in Volunteer Now and a loss of services to support volunteering at a local level.

Strategic questions remain unanswered. Why have the volunteering infrastructure organisations been treated differently from other infrastructure support organisations when a decision was taken to ring-fence support for volunteering as one of the regional infrastructure themes? Why does that appear to have been put aside without further consultation, with no apparent differential now between regional and local? If the funding support for the volunteering infrastructure is, as stated in the government funding database, £1.339 million, why is the Department using the figure of £1.1 million?

The volunteering strategy endorses the need for a robust volunteering infrastructure to deliver the strategy, and it is unclear why DSD has so radically reduced funding for infrastructure support and, why, in particular, it has failed to support the integrated model of volunteering infrastructure that was established by the merged organisation, Volunteer Now.

I move now to the impact of the funding cut. Volunteer Now provides a regional volunteering support service and a dedicated local service across 15 council areas, covering a population of 1.2 million — 70% of the Northern Ireland population, including 68% of the population who live in neighbourhood renewal areas. It contributes to meeting the objectives of the volunteering strategy and has consistently delivered support to enhance front line services. The bread-and-butter services, such as

the promotion of volunteering, access to guidance and training and recognition for volunteering, will be severely depleted, and the cuts time frame provides no opportunity to seek other funding or to manage that in a reasonable manner.

In the briefing that you received, I have highlighted that, last year, we received 5,500 registrations for volunteering; we generated £2.4 million of media coverage for volunteering; we distributed more than 50,000 leaflets about volunteering, including more than 20,000 targeting information for the unemployed; we trained 1,500 people; we gave out 10,000 volunteer recognition badges; and, in volunteers' week alone, organisations received 21,000 pieces of merchandise from us, free of charge, to allow them to support their volunteering at local level.

We are concerned that that level of support will be severely depleted by the news of the funding cut, and we remain concerned that there is a limited awareness of the value of what the infrastructure services provide to volunteering across Northern Ireland.

We ask the Committee to consider the questions that we ask today and to raise them with the Department for Social Development, particularly the process regarding available funding, allocation, decision making, lack of stakeholder engagement and limitation. We also ask you to endorse the need for a robust and appropriately funded integrated volunteering infrastructure to support the delivery of the volunteering strategy; table a motion in the Assembly on volunteering and the impact of the cuts to the volunteering infrastructure; and to request the Minister to look again at the amount of funding available for volunteering and to provide a more equitable rebalancing of resources to avoid the detrimental loss of volunteering infrastructure support services.

The Deputy Chairperson: Thank you very much. Before I bring in other members, I have a few questions. From recent correspondence with the Department, it is clear that £500,000 has been redirected from volunteering infrastructure support to volunteering small grants, which is £300,000 from £600,000 per annum, and to innovation fund projects, which, I think, is £300,000 to £500,000 per annum. In your briefing, you ask that there be a more equitable rebalancing of resources to avoid the detrimental loss of volunteering infrastructure support services. The revised approach seems to be redirecting funds to front line services, which many people would support. Can you describe what a better balance would look like, in your view?

Ms Osborne: They say £1.1 million, but the government funding database indicates that the allocated funding is £1.3 million, so there is an anomaly. There is £1.1 million for local infrastructure, under the government funding database, and £200,000 for regional. I do not know what has happened there. The £1.1 million to £600,000 is substantial, but if it is £1.3 million to £600,000, it is even more substantial. I am not sure about those figures, and we need clarification on that. On front line services, Volunteer Now has always believed that more support for volunteering is important. We fought for a volunteering strategy, and we have always fought for resources for volunteering. We do not have an issue about more money for small grants and more money for innovation. However, we do have an issue with the volunteering infrastructure being devalued as part of that process. It is the volunteering infrastructure that stands in Asda and in Tesco promoting volunteering, that supports those organisations that will get innovation funding, and which supports the organisations from small grants.

Organisations with substantial involvement in volunteering, such as faith-based and sporting organisations, tell us again and again that the issues for them are recruitment and retention; it is an issue of recruiting the number of volunteers that they require. It is a similar position across the voluntary and community sector. Therefore, providing infrastructure support that drives people to organisations is fundamental to increasing volunteering in Northern Ireland. The most important thing about retention is that when a volunteer is recruited, retaining them becomes the second most important bread-and-butter issue. We provide the information, support and training that allow organisations to enhance the volunteer experience, which, hopefully, will enable volunteers to have a greater impact and to get something from it. We believe that those foundational services are also important to adding value to the innovation programme and to small grants. It seems that rebalancing will merely deplete an infrastructure that will be even more necessary.

Mr McVey: If you add to that the number of volunteers coming to the fore, the demand on services, and more groups being supported through small grants and innovation, our concern is about who will provide support. As you cut the infrastructure deeper, there is no level of support that will be available to deliver the strategy.

The Deputy Chairperson: Yesterday, we received a letter from the Department that states that a process of engagement has commenced with all volunteer infrastructure organisations and that that will determine the way forward for volunteering infrastructure support and, therefore, ensure the implementation of the volunteering strategy. Have you been involved in those discussions? What are the threats, as you see them, to the successful implementation of the volunteering strategy as a result of the revised way forward? I know that there have been problems in the past. You mentioned non-engagement.

Mr McVey: As chair of Volunteer Now, over the past year, I have had several discussions with other chairs, and we have also tried to engage with departmental officials and with the Minister. They spent the past year trying to identify what, from their point of view, is the best way to roll out infrastructure support. We met two weeks ago and were given detail about what the cuts will be. In fact, until the Minister came along on 9 May, we did not know what the detail would be. Since that, we have engaged with the Department. At our meeting two weeks ago, the Department was simply setting out the direction again; there was no detail other than officials saying, "Here is the budget." They have promised to do follow-up meetings to tell us how that affects each organisation. As Wendy said, these cuts are coming in at the beginning of October, which means that, in the next three or four weeks, all the organisations concerned will have to respond. That means responding by looking at a reduction of services and of staff.

The Deputy Chairperson: Have they given you idea of the dates for the follow-up meetings?

Mr McVey: Yes; we have a follow-up meeting next week. My understanding is that meetings with the other centres are taking place next week as well.

Mr Douglas: Thank you, Joe and Wendy, for your presentation. Wendy, the last time you were at the Committee, you mentioned the upsurge in volunteering for the Olympics. Can you give us an update on that? Is that still the case, and does it mean more work for you and other groups?

Ms Osborne: The profile of volunteering was raised in 2012, and the Committee will know that we are fortunate in Northern Ireland to have the World Police and Fire Games. Within two months, 5,200 people registered to be volunteers for that, and almost 3,000 will be at the biggest training event for volunteering ever across these islands, as we are billing it. That is happening at the end of June, when almost 3,000 volunteers who are part of the World Police and Fire Games will come together for their orientation.

Almost half those 5,200 people have never volunteered, which is a fantastic legacy. Once they have finished with the World Police and Fire Games, we want to hold on to that 50% to encourage them to volunteer in the community. That is what all those legacy issues are about.

Any research that NICVA does on the state of the sector asks about volunteering. The trend across the voluntary and community sector is that people will require more volunteers. There is a drive in policies such as Transforming Your Care towards much more community engagement, which requires more volunteers. We are approaching an agenda that has greater need for volunteers, and part of that is to make sure that we have the volunteers prepared to do that.

Mr Douglas: You mentioned the limited awareness of the value of volunteering. Most of the 108 MLAs have been involved in volunteering; that is the background for many of us. We are still involved in volunteering whether through sport or at a local level. How can we create an awareness of what you were talking about, Wendy? There must be a reason why it is limited.

Ms Osborne: The limited awareness of what the volunteering infrastructure does is an issue for us. You cannot sit on your laurels on volunteering; it is important to continue to promote what people do and why they do it.

I think that all MLAs are aware of the importance of volunteering because most were volunteers. The other thing is that some volunteers do not see themselves as volunteers — it is just something that they do, which is perfectly fine. It is about constantly raising awareness, and volunteers' week this week is a great way of doing that. We just launched an exhibition of portraits that will visit libraries in Northern Ireland over the next year, showcasing ordinary people doing extraordinary things and having fun doing so. It is important to get messages out constantly.

That is what Volunteer Now thinks that we do well. We are a focus for volunteering; volunteering is our business. Anybody who sees me coming will know that I will talk to them about volunteering. You have to keep getting the message out. I am afraid that we will lose the ability to do that.

Mr F McCann: I was on the organising committee to represent Belfast City Council at the Special Olympics in Dublin some years ago. Belfast hosted the US team, and up to 1,500 people stayed in the city. I was always amazed at the goodwill shown to people who volunteered to work with people. You are right: people were always ready and willing to come forward for the tall ships and the events that you talked about.

Why do you think the Department took those steps with regard to the present proposals? Is it change for change's sake, is it making it better or is it reallocating money that would be spent better elsewhere?

Mr McVey: The Minister and officials use the term "rebalancing". In every walk of life, you need to rebalance and look at what you are doing. No one could criticise the support for small grants and innovation; we are very supportive of that. Our concern is that it has gone too far in the sense that rebalancing will damage the infrastructure that will support more people coming forward and support innovation.

I think that they have taken rebalancing to the extent that, as one of the other chairs said, it is like taking your car in to get the wheels rebalanced only to discover that you have only two wheels and are being told that you can do more and go faster on two wheels than four. That is our concern: the amount of rebalancing is a step too far.

Mr F McCann: Therefore, what are we seeing is that, rather than trying to spread additional resources out, it is trying to spread the existing resources out into a wider field.

Mr McVey: In doing so, I think that it will have a damaging effect on the infrastructure.

Mr Campbell: It was a very good presentation. In talking about the "big society", the Prime Minister is just reinventing what is, effectively, good volunteering. It seems to me that there are two separate things here. You raised the issue of it not actually being £1.1 million but, by your reckoning, £1.3 million. We need to drill down to get an answer to that anomaly, if it is an anomaly. Is it £1.1 million or £1.3 million? We can park that and try to get to the bottom of it. Hopefully, that should be straightforward.

When you cut away all the red tape, looking at it objectively, as I am trying to do, will it be the case that, if we stick with the £1.1 million figure — set aside the other issue for a moment — the Department will be saying, in effect, that it is going to take the £1.1 million, which was to be deployed for infrastructure, and divide it into two columns for small grants and innovation programmes, and so divide one pot of money in a different way? For me, the answer to the question — again, set aside the anomaly of the amount — is going to be which is going to be more effective in delivering better volunteering for more people. I imagine that you are going to say that the infrastructure support system delivered a, b, c and d, but I assume that the Department will say that it could more effectively deliver better another way.

I want to see both sides of the argument so that I can make up my mind. Would the plan A infrastructure, which is the way you would prefer, be better because that is what it does and what it will do in the future? The Department would then counter it by saying, I presume, that it thinks it could be done better another way. I would like to see those two columns filled out, and then I think that I could make an objective decision. At the moment, it seems to me that a pie that has been carved up in a particular way is being re-carved up, and then we are being left in the position where you or somebody else might like us to say, "Can you help us here?" I want to see those two columns filled out so that I as a Committee member can say that I would go for plan A, or maybe I would go for plan B because I think it would be more effective and deliver better than plan A.

Ms Osborne: Can I say something technically about the small grants? At present, the infrastructure administers small grants, but the small grants administration has been removed from infrastructure support, although we administer it at the moment. The infrastructure also supports those small organisations because when the small organisations get the money, they sometimes need support. For instance, the small grants at the moment have been tailored to encouraging unemployed people,

so a certain number of our volunteers have to be unemployed. We provide the support to enable organisations to think that through.

When I asked the Department about the small grants that are now ring-fenced separately and whether the small grants administration would be about providing that level of volunteering support, it informed me that it is not about that. The small grants administration will literally be getting people to fill in an application form, making a judgement about that and giving them the money, then making sure that the money is accounted for. The infrastructure will still have to provide support to small grants, so the rebalancing in relation to that technicality seems a bit odd, to my mind. In the past year in Volunteering Now, we had 250 small grants, and we did 140 support visits. That is not about their grant. The support visit is to help them to improve their volunteering. It seems to me that, by doing it that way, you lose out and it does not necessarily add value.

Mr Campbell: That is helpful. At least, I am clear now as to small grants and how you administer and deliver support under your preferred model. If we heard the Department's proposals about how it would plan and intend to deliver under its model, we could begin to get an objective view as to which would be the better method of delivery. So that is helpful.

The Deputy Chairperson: Following on from that, one of your proposals is that the Committee endorse the need for this robust and appropriately funded integrated volunteering infrastructure, and you have explained that to some degree. We need to get more clarity from the Department on that. As Gregory said, we could then strike a better balance as to what is required. Perhaps we could do that. We can seek clarity from the Department on what it actually proposes. You have been very clear as to your views. The Department has given some detail of what it intends to do and would like to do, but now we need to get down to more specific detail. If the Committee agrees, we can seek that clarity.

Has anyone anything further to add?

Mr Durkan: I concur, Chair. I thank Wendy and Joe for their presentation. Wendy, you said that due to the level of the cut and its timing, it will create organisational difficulties that will necessitate job losses in Volunteer Now. Can you expand on that?

Ms Osborne: It is difficult at the moment, because we need to know how much the Department will allocate to Volunteer Now. We do not know that at present. We may get indicative figures next week when we meet the Department. It is only then that I can start to look at it. Of course, the trustees and the senior team have had to think about the organisation and how to avoid destabilising it. I would say that more than 10 people in Volunteer Now will be made redundant. I hope that we can keep that figure below 20, and hopefully below 15. However, at present, I believe that it will be at least 10.

Mr Durkan: That will have a massive impact on the 10 personally and also on the ability of the organisation to perform.

Ms Osborne: The trustees have already agreed a complete review of the organisational structure because it will have an impact across the organisation. One cannot just say that we will remove this or that; it does not work like that. It will have an impact across the organisation. That is what we are looking at, at present.

The Deputy Chairperson: At the moment, are people being put on protective notice?

Ms Osborne: Not at the moment, but that will definitely happen. We plan to go out to consultation with staff at the beginning of July. When you work these things back, 1 October is very close.

Mr Brady: Yes. It will happen very quickly.

Mr Copeland: Thank you, Wendy and Joe. That was really very interesting. Does your infrastructure support role include advising groups that orchestrate or oversee volunteers as to sources of funding outside the small grants system? Is that a part of what you provide? Someone may have an idea, and a group of volunteers might want to pursue that aim but as a consequence need funding assistance. Outside the small grants, which I understand that you have a role in, does your organisation offer any advice on alternative sources of funding that such a group may be able to avail itself of?

Ms Osborne: NICVA has a funding database. We do not believe in duplicating what is already there, so we signpost people to other places where we think they can get information. If it is about volunteering, because of our expertise, we might say to them that if they are looking for funding for volunteering, they might think about presenting it in such and such a way. We can provide a capacity-building support for volunteering. That is what we do.

With respect to small grants, it is my experience that small groups require a very little amount of money. They do not want the level of accountability that comes with funding, and they usually just want to do what they want to do in their own patch, and that is perfectly fine. We support them to try to be realistic about the funding that they require and what they want to do to make sure that they can add value to what they are doing.

Mr Copeland: Do you find the same groups or the same personalities involved in groups recurring on an annual basis? In other words, do they, in some way, directly or indirectly, forwardly calculate that they got a small grant last year and, as they are doing the same thing, will get it this year? Or, does it alter, change and grow?

Ms Osborne: According to the criteria for small grants, you have consistently been able to go forward for a small grant again. I have no idea whether the new regime will change that. Some organisations have had small grants before and get one again. The issue is that those organisations probably have no other route to get the funding of a small grant. Furthermore, because it is government funding, there is a level of accountability and bureaucracy around it. Only a certain number of small organisations have the capacity to do that. We should not underestimate the capacity that it takes to put in a government funding application, to be accountable for that money, to keep the receipts and to do all the things that they have to do. Once some of them realise what they have to go through, they decide that they do not want to do it.

Mr Copeland: Lastly, with your indulgence, Deputy Chair, what constitutes the upper and lower limits of a small grant?

Ms Osborne: At the moment, the average small grant is between £500 to £1,000. Small grants also go to organisations that have an income of less than £100,000. In the main, however, they go to organisations that have a much smaller income than that. I am thinking of an organisation in Sailortown, in Belfast, which received a small grant. It receives no other funding, and its volunteers do fantastic work, so the small grant is very important to them. However, even more important to that group is the other support that we give it as an organisation to help it and its volunteers to do what they want to do as best they can. I came across them in our offices this week, and I would say that that support is as helpful to them as giving them a small cheque.

The Deputy Chairperson: Nobody else has any questions. Thank you very much; that was a very informative presentation. Thank you for coming.

Mr McVey: Thank you, Deputy Chairperson. This is volunteers' week, and, as part of that, we have brought along some badges, which members might like to wear. They cost £1 each, and they claim you as being a local hero. Or, you may want to hand them out to constituents.

The Deputy Chairperson: Modesty forbids, but I am sure some people will.