



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Social Development

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Volunteering Infrastructure Funding:
DSD Briefing

8 July 2013

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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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
Mr Sammy Douglas
Mr Mark Durkan

Witnesses:

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

The Chairperson: We now have a departmental briefing. With us this morning are Jack O'Connor and Tracey Teague. You are both very welcome.

I remind members that this has been an ongoing issue of concern. We have raised it with the Department on a number of occasions. It is a recurring theme, and the essential issue is around the policy, including the rationale, and so on, of rebalancing — as it is called — the volunteering infrastructure funding. Members have a number of pieces of relevant paperwork.

I thank Jack and Tracey for being here at relatively short notice, because the Committee is concerned that it is not getting a full grasp of this, particularly given the arguments from Volunteer Now, which is saying that the extent of the rebalancing of money will have devastating implications. There is also an ongoing argument, which I know that you and other departmental officials dispute, around the quality or substance of engagement between Volunteer Now and the broader Department, I do not mean with you personally.

Mickey Brady chaired the end of the previous meeting, which I had to leave, so I ask him to encapsulate the Committee's thinking.

Mr Brady: The Committee was concerned because all this is coming very quickly. From my discussions with Volunteer Now, I know that there are a couple of issues. Obviously, £600,000 is going to be divided up. Volunteer Now said that it has been told that it is not entitled to know the criteria. I have been involved in the voluntary sector, and I know how, for instance, the volunteer bureau in Newry works and what it does. Volunteer Now has said that it could lose 15 to 20 staff.

So there are issues around the rationale for this happening. We have a volunteering strategy that seems, on the face of it, to be a good thing, but it ultimately means that long-established volunteering

organisations will suffer. I cannot see the rationale for that. Any reduction, apart from losing staff, which will have a devastating impact, raises issues around capacity-building for volunteers.

At last count, Newry probably has around 500 volunteers. They do a befriending service. They do an early morning call to elderly people. They do a sitter service. They do all sorts of things that save money for the statutory agencies, including the trust and various others.

I also sit on the Health Committee, and there seems to be a certain contradiction, because we are constantly being told by the Health Minister that the voluntary sector will play such an important role in maintaining people in the community, and all of that. Yet here we have, on the other hand, another Department that is cutting resources. I am just putting that into context.

On Thursday, the Committee felt that there were issues that did not appear to have been resolved satisfactorily to give us some idea of why the money was being cut and how that would work out for organisations such as Volunteer Now. If it loses 15 to 20 staff — and they are saying that there are going to be compulsory redundancies — that is a huge issue for them.

That is the context for why the Committee felt it necessary to convene the meeting.

Ms Tracey Teague (Department for Social Development): Thank you, Chair and Committee members, for the opportunity to come back up. Jack is here, and he knows much more of the detail behind it. However, I will recap on some of the issues that you have raised.

The focus has been on the rebalance around delivering the strategy; there is no question about that. In delivering the strategy, some issues were about making the infrastructure much more effective, but also about tackling some areas that have traditionally not been targeted by volunteering, such as sport, disability and faith.

The £1.7 million has not changed; the same pot of money will be going in. In gathering evidence to determine that £1.7 million, it was about looking at how it should be directed to deliver the strategy. Without a doubt, there has definitely been a shift. Previously, most of the money went towards infrastructure support. The difference is that there has been a huge shift towards innovation projects, and this will be achieved through the use of organisations such as Volunteer Now and the North West Volunteer Centre.

To give you a sense of this, we have £600,000 still supporting the volunteering infrastructure and £500,000 going towards innovation projects. It might be worthwhile touching on some of those projects to give you a sense of what that means.

Volunteer Now has a project, and I am going to use a number of them, in and around volunteer skills records. This looks at recording all the skills that somebody gains through volunteering. That would be in addition to what they will be awarded by way of infrastructure support. It fits in with some of the findings we have from the omnibus survey. For example, we know that 12% of people said that they would be encouraged to volunteer if they could improve their skills and job opportunities through the skills that volunteering would develop for them.

The North West Volunteer Centre has a proposal in under the innovation projects. If it is approved, it would be in addition to any infrastructure support that it has. The proposal is to recruit, train and support people with a disability as a volunteer. The omnibus survey has shown what would encourage people to volunteer: 6% said that they would be involved, if they could, even though they have a disability and an illness. Again, innovation is being used to do that.

Finally, Cookstown and Magherafelt Volunteer Centre, which would also get money under the infrastructure, has put in a proposal called Carefully Yours, which relates to Transforming Your Care. That is around community health champions and volunteers in local communities who will engage with people about the benefits of health and help them through some of the issues they will find.

Those are some early proposals that have come in. So, although the money has been rebalanced, it is still there to go out and deliver the strategy; it is just going out in a different mechanism. That has very much been the basis of looking at how much money needs to go to which area. The small grants amount, as you know, is £600,000. That will go out to tender, so there will be opportunities for the infrastructure organisations to consider bidding for that tender. That is in addition to whatever they get on infrastructure and innovation.

We have supplied information on the criteria for the proposals that need to come in on the application. There is no doubt that there have been difficulties with some organisations. We have had one-to-one bilaterals with each of them. Jack has talked in detail with each of them. We have given them indicative amounts towards what a proposal should come in for under infrastructural support. We are working with them. We see them very much as partners in this. That is how we are working with them in working up the proposals. We very much value the relationship that they deliver. As I mentioned, we have a number of other strategic partners with whom we work in the volunteering world, not simply the organisations that we provide infrastructure funding to. The volunteering strategy steering group is very important. It not only includes the infrastructure groups, but is wider than that, because there are a lot of organisations that do not receive infrastructure funding but that certainly support volunteering in their communities.

Mr Jack O'Connor (Department for Social Development): To some extent, it has been a question of choice, for the Department and VCU in particular. Now that the strategy is in place, we see it very much as our task to operationalise that in the best way possible. Our considered view was that rebalancing from supporting infrastructure to more front line delivery would help to deliver the strategy.

The innovation projects that Tracey mentioned are vital to that. For example, the GAA, Irish League soccer and Ulster rugby employ six or seven people who were not employed this time last year in volunteering. They will be delivering to us 2,000-plus volunteers each year for a development programme with the Conservation Volunteers, who would not have been supported under the old regime. However, they are promising to deliver to us 6,000 volunteers over the next two or three years, with 3,000 of them coming from areas of disadvantage, which is a target in the strategy for us and the Department.

We would be negligent if we did not avail ourselves of those opportunities. Although we would love to have money to support the existing infrastructure, there had to be a rebalancing. However, we feel confident that we are still allowing enough resources to go into infrastructure support.

Ms Teague: We will evaluate the strategy in 2014-15 and revisit it if it has not worked.

The Chairperson: Are we at a point where organisations such as Volunteer Now are making arguments to criticise the policy and, perhaps, the process, and you are rejecting them? You say that the process that you are embarking on and the strategy that you are pushing forward will get you substantially more volunteers. Will that be at a cost to Volunteer Now and its staff and volunteers?

Mr O'Connor: We have got to the place where Volunteer Now is open to apply under the innovation programme. I said to Volunteer Now that being at the forefront of volunteering in Northern Ireland, if it cannot come up with an innovative volunteering project, there will be issues from my perspective. In discussions that I had with Volunteer Now last week, it estimated that it will lose up to 14 staff. We will continue to work with the organisation to minimise the loss of staff. However, the path that we have chosen is the right one to deliver the strategy.

Mr Brady: I worked in the voluntary sector for nearly 12 years. Sammy has vast experience, probably more than I have. Volunteer Now is a core organisation that has been around for a long time. The volunteer bureau in Newry has been around since 1982 or 1983, which is a long time. It took them a long time to get established. You are now saying, in a sense, that all that will go by the board. You said that rugby, soccer, etc, will create six jobs, but Volunteer Now will lose 14 or 15 members of staff, from what you said.

How is that a rebalancing? If it is, it is very much weighted the wrong way. You spoke about innovative projects for disabled people. My experience in Newry is that disabled people are volunteers, always have been and have always been encouraged to participate, so there is nothing new about that.

In rebalancing, all I can see is that core organisations that have been doing very good work for many years will suffer as a result of the strategy. A strategy is being put in place — rightly so, to encourage innovative schemes. I do not think that anybody would argue with that, but you have to maintain the infrastructure. As far as I can see, the infrastructure is not being maintained.

You spoke about 14 jobs being lost. Volunteer Now is talking about possibly 15 to 20. It is a negative strategy if that is the way that it is going to work out. It is like everything else: there is a vision and then there is a strategy. The vision might be wonderful, but as the strategy rolls out, it might impact

adversely on those who have done so much to bring volunteering to where it now is. In many ways, without those people, you would not have a strategy. This has to be a two-way street. The Department has to work hand in hand with them.

We have been told that there have been all sorts of disagreements. I know that there have been issues about different organisations not affiliating to Volunteer Now, and so on. That is a different issue, in a sense, because core funding is going to be badly affected. I am not sure that the Department can justify what it is doing in that respect. I certainly do not agree with what you are doing because it is going to adversely affect organisations that have done work that, in many cases, has not been recognised. That is my view, and I just wanted to put that on the record.

Mr Durkan: I concur with a lot of what Mickey said. What sort of assessment process do the bids for the innovation project go through? You said that organisations that were unhappy have bids in for innovation project funding. At this moment, they are just bids or proposals, so how will they be assessed? Will there be a regional element to it or anything like that?

Mr O'Connor: It will depend on the proposal that comes forward, but there is no bar against regional activity being considered. Initially, the assessment will be with my team because we are the volunteering team, and it will undergo normal economic appraisal and assessment processes as per departmental regulations. It will also go the volunteering strategy steering group, where all key stakeholders involved in volunteering, public sector and the third sector, will be engaged, so they will give a view as well.

Mr Durkan: If a couple of organisations from different areas in the North put in similar bids or proposals that you deemed worthy of funding and, therefore, funded the projects, would that not create the very duplication or replication that these steps were meant to do away with?

Mr O'Connor: It would be up to us to recognise potential duplication, and through discussion, we hope that we could encourage people to work co-operatively and collaboratively. We would meet them and ask them to join up, so that it would have greater impact. Our key objective is to move forward on the strategy. We recognise the work that volunteer supporting organisations have done and they have been financially supported by the Department for a long time, but there are key volunteering organisations in Northern Ireland that have not received any funding. We are here to deliver on the volunteering strategy.

Mr Douglas: Tracey, at paragraph 2.5 in your response paper, you said:

"There was no need for duplication and a clear need for the infrastructure organisations to work in a more co-ordinated and consistent way."

Do you believe that there is duplication presently and that volunteering is not co-ordinated as it could be?

Ms Teague: Yes, that is our view of the review of the evaluation of the funding that we previously gave out; that there was a lack of co-operation and collaboration among the organisations that exist. There is, therefore, a drive to make sure that, in future contracts, there is closer working and closer co-ordination, particularly in some of the big PR events that are held. Those should be open to all the organisations; in fact, they should be organised in conjunction with one another. In some instances, there is a lack of evidence of that. Also, there is a database for the recording of volunteering activities, and our evidence has shown that there was not the co-ordination and collaboration needed in populating that database.

You know yourself that databases are only as good as the information that is put into them, so there is a job of work there for us to continue to work with all the organisations to make sure that that is properly populated. Yes, there was an issue around that. Also, we did a review — I think we mentioned it in the paper — that looked at the current guidance that is out there for volunteer organisations. I have to say in tribute to those organisations that the quality and the standard of information that they have is very high, so, therefore, that begs the question of whether we need to fund that again as that is already there. That is all taken into consideration.

Mr Douglas: Finally, can you give us an update on the small grants programme? Where are we with that at the moment?

Mr O'Connor: We are in discussion with the Central Procurement Directorate and we hope to go to open tender in August. The expectation is to have an intermediary body in place by September, and we will be opening the grant programme this financial year. There will then be a programme for the next financial year.

Mr Brady: I have just a couple of points to make. You mentioned lack of collaboration. I would have thought that the advent of Volunteer Now showed very much that there was collaboration, because various organisations are affiliated to it and it is now like an umbrella group, which seems to be a sensible approach. I know that there is another organisation that some bureaux did not join. That was their choice.

The other thing is that, surely, if you have different bureaux in different parts of the North doing the same work, that cannot be duplication because they are doing it in their own particular area. So I am not sure how that figures.

You mentioned PR and that some people might have felt excluded. Is that the rationale? Are people complaining because they felt that, as smaller groups, they were not included? My experience of volunteer organisations is that they are as inclusive as they possibly can be. So, I am sure that anyone who had particular problems with not being included would certainly have the right to put that forward very forcibly. I am not sure how the issue of exclusion bears up. It just seems to me that a decision has been taken that: "We are going to cut money, and this is how we will do it. End of story."

It is all very well to say what wonderful work they are doing, but they can only do the work if the resources and the infrastructure are there. Without that, as far as I can see, volunteering, as we know it, will be in dire straits. You say that there are six new workers and they have promised to deliver x number of volunteers, that is speculative to say the least. The reality is that the organisations that are there, in the situation at present, are doing that delivery. They are doing the work and it seems to me grossly unfair that they are being targeted, and they are being targeted, however it is dressed up.

I will leave it at that.

Mr O'Connor: It is certainly not our intention to target anyone. The way forward is through the delivery of the strategy. Members will have received a copy of the omnibus survey, in which we commissioned questions on volunteering. That is a part of our evidence base. Within it, you will see that, though volunteer supporting organisations were getting over 70% of the money that we have for volunteering, they were delivering 3% of the volunteers. That meant that 97% of volunteers were being delivered by other activities that had not been supported by government, and we thought it important for that imbalance to be addressed so that we could increase the support to organisations other than just to volunteer supporting organisations. Not a penny has been lost to volunteering, and we believe that we will get better value for the money that we put in under the system proposed than under the old one.

Mr Brady: Can I just query that? You said 3%?

Mr O'Connor: That is what the survey tells us.

Mr Brady: What about the 97%? How did they come to volunteering?

Mr O'Connor: It is about how the respondents heard about volunteering. I have a copy of the papers in my bag. People heard about it through supporting organisations, church groups, family and friends. That was the majority. We cited some of the figures in the strategy. Only 3% of the volunteers came across an opportunity through volunteer centres.

Ms Teague: It was actually: 40% by word of mouth; 37% from someone already involved in volunteering in the organisation; 27% from church and religious organisations; 12% through school, college or university, and so it goes down, and it is 3% from volunteer centres. We are conscious that it is a survey, so it must be read in the round and it can be interpreted in different ways. We do not read it bluntly. However, it would be different if it were a higher percentage, but it is 3% from volunteer centres in the survey.

Mr Durkan: The "word of mouth" or the "knowing someone else who volunteers" categories could be done through the volunteer centre.

Ms Teague: Exactly, and we are conscious of that. With respect to collaboration and people having a voice, there are seven key organisations. We do have Volunteer Now, and we have the North West Volunteer Centre. Then we have Causeway, Omagh, Limavady, Cookstown and Craigavon, who make up a membership of their own, the Association of Independent Volunteer Centres, but they are seen as separate entities. We are working very closely with those seven to try to bring them around the table and to have that much more collaborative approach, and, again, that will be part of a measurement of the success of the strategy that there is that better collaborative working.

The Chairperson: OK. There are no other members indicating any further contribution. There was a suggestion earlier that there are arguments back and forth, and I do not see anything new, additional, or different from what we have been hearing. Obviously, there is a strategy, and nobody appears to be disagreeing with that strategy. As Mickey Brady said, it is about how the strategy is implemented.

One organisation in particular is significantly contesting the assertion that is being made by you, but I do not know where that leaves us at the moment. I just want to put this again just for the record; you are both making it very clear that the work that you will be doing in what you call rebalancing resources will present a dividend in the additional numbers of people being involved in volunteering. Obviously, Volunteer Now is saying that that is going to come at the expense of its ability to provide that infrastructure, and it believes that that will degrade the volunteering product. You are countering that entrenchedly.

I do not know what else there is left for us to do. We can note it, agree with it, seek to have it monitored; it is really up to members here to decide. I am at a wee bit of a loss myself. It is difficult to argue for members around the table. Again, this is for the record, it is difficult to actually argue against evidence that is presented to you. Have members any further questions, proposals or recommendations or should we note what we have heard so far?

Mr Brady: My view is that if you have a strategy, surely it has to take along with it the main players. What seems to be happening with this particular strategy is that it has alienated the people who should be in most agreement with it, which seems to be a strange way to think for any kind of strategy.

The Chairperson: Again, one option that we have is to write to Volunteer Now. We are getting an argument from Volunteer Now and we have had that responded to by the Department on a number of occasions. So it has been an ongoing and probably fairly thorough discussion. We are being reminded here again this morning that Volunteer Now is at liberty to apply for the innovation fund element as well, and that those discussions are ongoing. None of us is in the room when those discussions are taking place, so we have to take what we are being presented with.

Short of saying that we do not like it — and, as I said earlier, people are saying that they agree with the strategy overall — it is about how the strategy is implemented. It seems to me that the best thing that we can do is monitor how the strategy is being implemented. It is probably fair to say that members really do find this uncomfortable, and it is the reason why they have raised this repeatedly. I am just trying to be fair. People find it a wee bit uncomfortable that something that could be good in producing a lot more people involved in volunteering could be at someone else's expense. I suppose that we are concerned about that, but that is the argument that is really being put to us. If you are saying that you are involved in discussions with Volunteer Now and that this will definitely produce a much greater dividend in more people being involved in volunteering, it is up to us to monitor the outworking of that, and we would hope that you would work with organisations such as Volunteer Now.

I am not suggesting that you are not working with Volunteer Now, but again, for members' sake, we would like to be satisfied that there would be good work done with the organisation — because it is like everything else, it has been involved for a long time, it has done a lot of work and has a lot of experience, and we do not want to see that being lost. Is that a fair encapsulation of the concerns of the Committee? Are members happy with that?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: On that basis, Jack and Tracey, could I thank both of you for being here this morning. Thank you very much.