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Independence of the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector in Northern Ireland

CHANGING NARRATIVES, CHANGING RELATIONSHIPS:

A New Environment for Voluntary Action?

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1 INTRODUCTION

The research² presented in this briefing set out to explore the independence of the voluntary, community and social enterprise [VCSE] sector in Northern Ireland. The research enhances our understanding of how organisations think about the notion of independence, their relationship with government and the wider environment within which they operate. During the research process, the researchers explored the highly complex eco-system of voluntary organisations in Northern Ireland, relationships within the sector and relationships between organisations and government funders.

The findings of the research, as presented later in this briefing, would suggest that the term 'VCSE sector' overplays the coherence of what is an extremely diverse field of more or less formal groups, associations and organisations. For this reason, it is extremely difficult to make generalisations that apply in all circumstances or for all organisations. Individuals and organisations within the sector and beyond can critically reflect on the extent to which the narrative being articulated by VCSE workers, volunteers and government officials is in keeping with their own experiences, understandings and observations and use this as a starting point for debate and discussion. However, after the participation of hundreds of individuals through surveys, interviews, focus groups and engagement events it is possible to draw out some tentative context-specific conclusions, especially for those organisations that are managing relationships with government funders.

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Previous research that had investigated and discussed voluntary sector independence in the wider UK context helped inform this research. Of particular importance was the work of the Baring Foundation³ and their three-fold conceptualisation of independence :

- **Independence of purpose** – this refers to the ability of organisations to stay true to their mission and values.
- **Independence of voice** – this concerns the extent to which organisations are able to exercise a critical voice, protest, campaign and negotiate without fear of negative consequences or retribution.
- **Independence of action** – this concerns the ability of organisations to design and deliver effective activities and services, take risks and innovate and respond to beneficiaries' needs creatively.

Secondly, the Independence Panel⁴ had produced four important reports on the broader context for voluntary sector action and threats to the sector's independence in the UK. In 2015, the fourth and final report concluded that:

- There has been a loss of the sector's distinctive identity and respect for its independence.
- There is a lack of meaningful government consultation with the sector.
- Statutory funding is not supporting a strong, independent and diverse sector, and poor commissioning and procurement practices fail to draw on the distinctive strengths of voluntary organisations.
- There are ineffective safeguards for sectoral independence.
- There are threats to independent governance.

However, it was clear from the earliest stages of the research process that, in a VCSE sector as diverse as the one in Northern Ireland, there was little agreement or shared understandings of the meaning of independence, nor was there shared understandings of what 'threats to independence' would look like. The research found that independence is a highly relative and context-dependent concept and it is understood in very particular ways by those that hold different positions in the complex web of intra-sectoral and government-sector relationships. The Baring Foundation's framework of purpose, voice and action provides a useful starting point for beginning a discussion about independence, but it fails to capture the complexity and relational nature of organisational and sectoral independence.

Research process

This research has employed a mixed-methods approach to explore the independence of the voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland based on a literature and policy review, an online questionnaire completed by 179 individuals from 166 organisations, including 83 responses from chief executives. The quantitative data should be treated as indicative of the mood and concerns of the sector at this time. In addition, qualitative methods such as interviews and focus groups were employed to capture understandings of independence and threats to independence in greater detail.

2 KEY FINDINGS:

Finding 1: Changing organisational roles and relationships

During the research process it quickly became apparent that in order to capture independence in a relevant and meaningful way, at least in the Northern Irish context, the focus needed to be on relationships, rather than on trying to elucidate the particular characteristics of independence around the themes of voice, purpose and action. This led us to an alternative framing using the notions of agent, competitor, mimic and reticent, thus highlighting the relational nature of independence. What is clear from the research is that individual organisational actions, when looked at in the aggregate, are changing the nature of organisations, relationships within the sector and relationships between government and the sector. These four roles and characteristics are closely linked to the types of pressures that VCSE organisations are currently experiencing due to both reduced funding and increasing competition for resources.

³ <http://baringfoundation.org.uk/fourth-and-final-report-of-the-panel-for-the-independence-of-the-voluntary-sector/>

⁴ <http://www.independencepanel.org.uk/>

Finding 2: Changing policy rhetoric and sector-government relationships

Another central finding of the research concerns the changing nature of the relationship between government and the sector. This is evidenced by the more instrumentalist language in both policy rhetoric and in primary data. The new narrative captures a shift away from past visions of “equitable partnerships” and a steady process of “partial decoupling” of government and the sector. This rhetorical shift means that the trajectory of government policy in Northern Ireland is now largely following that set out by the Westminster administration, and while there is still rhetorical support for the sector, much of this seems to be in line with Conservative Party rhetoric of ‘supporting volunteering’ and independent action. It would seem that, with a restructuring of the relationship between the state and the sector, and a decoupling that is similar to that being driven by Westminster policy, government-funded organisations may have to align their objectives more closely with government objectives.

Finding 3: Multiple barriers to reform

Most participants in the research suggested that the environment within which sector organisations operate is changing. Some participants also suggest that change is happening too incrementally and that this is leading to an unstable environment that can be difficult for organisations to negotiate. Drawing on themes and concerns raised by key informants involved in the research, it is possible to identify those issues that individuals perceive to be barriers to reform and to the stabilisation of the environment.

Emphasis on bottom up reform: There are calls from government for the sector to engage in a bottom-up process of rationalisation whereby organisations will begin to merge, collaborate and work in more formalised partnerships. However, some sectoral interviewees explain that government has an unrealistic expectation that there will be an organically driven shift towards more mergers and collaboration.

Subcontracting: As service contracts have been scaled up in ways that exclude many smaller and medium sized organisations, it is common for smaller and locally based organisations to have a sub-contracting relationship with a private sector or regional VCSE organisation. This has also slowed the reform and rationalisation processes. While subcontracting can create the impression of sectoral diversity, the relationship between contractor and sub-contractor is often based on a very limited definition of partnership.

Mission drift: In the quest for organisational survival, according to a number of funders, some organisations have found themselves in difficulties as they try to align their mission and structures with government funding streams. Some government officials, as well as some sectoral interviewees, suggest that certain sections of the sector are trying to operate in a system that is no longer there and it is the view of some interviewees that many organisations have been slow to take any ownership of impending changes.

Party Politics: A concern of some interviewees is the perception of an overly close relationship between politicians and some voluntary and community sector organisations. Though the lobbying of a local representative could be characterised as a desirable norm of local politics, there is a concern that local lobbying could be disrupting long-term goal setting.

Lagging policy language and rhetoric: The policy rhetoric hasn’t always caught up with the new realities. Recent consultations continue to draw on rhetoric that ignores the processes of coercive managerialism captured in this research. The ongoing use of “equitable partnership” language creates a narrative that is in competition with and obfuscates a new policy language that positions the sector much more as an agent of the state or as a separate sphere of activity from the state.

3 CONCLUSION

This research process has captured a moment when the government-sector relationship is undergoing a fundamental readjustment. This has made it both a highly opportune and challenging time to conduct such research. The environment in which organisations exist is undergoing rapid change and organisations are struggling for survival as resources become more limited. The expectations placed

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on organisations are also rapidly changing, but these expectations are not yet fully formed or clearly articulated through a shared government narrative.

With a new message being communicated to the sector by government, with a changing environment for voluntary and community action and a changing relationship between the government and the sector, it may be time for the sector to reflect on the different models and traditions that have guided voluntary and community action over the decades. This research has captured what are incipient discussions about the future nature of voluntary and community action. What the future relationship between the sector and government will look like is far from decided, and both government and the sector can construct a new narrative that is reflective of the new political and economic realities.

