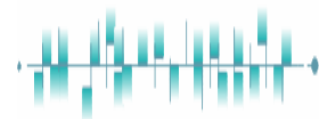




**The Voluntary and Community Sector  
Infrastructure Framework**

**Summary of findings  
Discussion Paper**



Blueprint Development Consultancy

November 2006

# 1. Summary of views and comments

## 1.1 Introduction

Views and comments have been sought from the sector through a combination of questionnaires, focus group discussions and individual interviews and case studies. The agreed approach has been to seek views and comments from a broad cross section of organisations while responding to any individual or group that expressed any interest in participating in the process. The following is a summary of the key issues and messages arising during the process, with the detail provided at Appendix 2.

## 1.2 What are the key messages arising from the consultation?

### 1.2.1 *The place and value of infrastructure support organisations*

Those individuals and organisations consulted emphasised the need to forcibly remind Government of the unique role and contribution played by the sector. Those providing services are motivated by a commitment to service, to their communities of interest and are connected by core values and ideals. Those organisations are not simply low cost service providers. Relationships, trusts, and networks all play an important part in fashioning the support infrastructure. Local services, local providers are seen to be important elements in the complex web of support structures. A further key element is the independence of support organisations allowing the lobbying and advocacy roles to be undertaken effectively.

The place, role and importance of such organisations is meant to be enshrined in the Compact, however there is a perception that this is not in evidence in terms of practical Government support for the sector and specifically for support organisations .

### 1.2.2 *Sectoral Providers*

Building upon the above there was a unanimous endorsement of the critical role of sectoral providers. This was expressed in a number of ways:

*“...Having local knowledge, an understanding of the needs of the sector and building up trust within the Sector ...”*

*“....Advocacy can only be delivered upon if led by an independent organisation, unconstrained by government/public body influence...”*

*“....Organisations within the sector operate in accordance with the principles and values of community development - non - sectoral bodies have no requirements and much less the compunction to do likewise...”*

*“...Community and voluntary sector organisations have a track record of delivering services to disadvantaged communities. Organisations have very close links to the local community, this ensures local participation in governing the group and helps to focus the service provision to local needs...”*

*“...Organisations within the sector are people focused, not for profit & provide hands on approach. They respond to locally identified need. They have built up trust within the area of benefit and have a working relationship with those whose needs they seek to address...”*

### *1.2.3 Current Structures*

There is an acceptance that there is a need for rationalisation. However this must respect and reflect certain key issues: - the need for a local presence; the rural context for many organisations; cultural and community barriers that impact upon accessing and providing services. This is not simply an interface issue but reflects deep seated divisions and loyalties that transcend new imposed boundaries.

Those support organisation interviewed highlighted the issue of inadequate resources, staff being constantly overstretched and the difficulty of planning. A simple example of this was a rural support organisation with over 200 members which was unsure whether it was going to be in business in the following week. Realistically it was difficult to see how this organisation can offer support when its own future was hanging by a thread. The nature of short term funding and the challenge posed in relation to reduction in core funding means that the uncertainty of this organisation would be understood by most support organisations.

### *1.2.4 Measuring Contribution and Impact*

There was general support for the need to seek and implement appropriate methods for measuring impact. What remains a concern is the confusion from Government and funders in failing to distinguish between monitoring and evaluation. In considering this issue, questions were raised around the support for social capital indicators and toolkit which were supported within DSD but have not carried across other Government Departments.

### *1.2.5 Benchmarking and Quality Standards*

Both areas generated considerable discussion. It was suggested that benchmarking requires some agreement around definitions, membership, functions and principles. In terms of quality standards, there was no evidence of a reluctance to develop and implement appropriate standards. What is not acceptable is for current “industry” standards e.g. ISO, IIP, Charter Mark, to be considered as the only acceptable standard. There was interest and support for appropriate standards developed from within the Sector, provided these were endorsed across Government.

### *1.2.6 Governance*

Again a stronger regulatory framework is not perceived to be a barrier or obstacle. Most welcomed it or could point out how their respective policies and practices are currently robust and best practice. Most respondents cited the level of scrutiny and audit the Sector is currently subject to.

The change and pressure points here will be more evident with smaller groups and volunteers. This will in turn, it is suggested, reinforce the need for robust infrastructure support. It is perceived that support organisations will free volunteers, local groups and workers to simply get on with the work.

#### *1.2.7 The Review of Public Administration*

This is clearly acknowledged as the key development in shaping the focus and future sustainability of infrastructure bodies. While the topic generated a range of responses, two key issues emerged: Firstly the critical importance of the sector being strongly represented at a regional and sub-regional level; secondly a fear that the new Council structures will lead to greater pressure on infrastructure organisations, based on current experiences. One possible solution suggested was to ensure that local area agreements with Councils should be required to have legislative support.

#### *1.2.8 New Technology*

New Technology is welcomed and much used, providing access to information, as a tool for consultation and lobbying. While the value was recognised there was also a concern that an overdependence on technology undermines the importance of the human face. It was also emphasised that smaller, voluntary groups do not have ready access to the technology that is perhaps taken for granted in larger better resourced organisations.

#### *1.2.9 New Demands for Services*

From a support perspective there was recognition that the regulatory framework will require additional support to assist smaller groups cope with the administrative and compliance environment. Equally as the demand on support organisations grow there will be a requirement to help such organisations cope with expansion and development issues.

As the support environment changes there will be a need for greater emphasis on signposting and collaboration between the various elements of the wider infrastructure family.

Examples of areas where new demands may arise include community and cultural changes with the development of new minority ethnic communities and in certain areas an ageing community.

## **1.2 Summary**

Views and comments from over 100 organisations provide a useful cross section of views from within the sector. The above summary suggests a willingness to accept change moving to a more rational structure provided a number of important principles and safeguards are put in place. At the core, is a strong belief that a robust infrastructure needs to be appropriately funded by Government directly and indirectly through the new Local Council structures.

## 2. Developing an outline framework [section 6 in the main report]

### 2.1 Proposed framework

Informed by the above it is possible to suggest an outline framework which may gain the support of the sector and be used to influence the Department of Social Development and in turn Government.

Current structures have been the subject of considerable scrutiny. Colin Knox<sup>1</sup> in his Working paper to the Task Force described the messiness of the current structures that have evolved through time and circumstances. Others during the consultation process described the structures and relationships as resembling a spider's web or honeycomb of close and overlapping relationships and structures.

While mindful of the strengths and weaknesses in the current structures, the question remains what type of structure would meet the needs of the sector and the wider communities of interest, while giving confidence to Government and the new Councils.

Informed by the views offered and building on the work of the Task Force it may be useful to suggest a number of building blocks as follows:

- **Purpose**

The purpose of the Infrastructure framework is to maintain, build and develop the sector. To fulfil this role, the framework needs to be robust and adequately funded. It will need to be supported from within the sector, centrally from Government and locally by the new Local Authority structures. Any framework must be appropriate ie, recognising the organic growth of the sector and the current environment. Moving from the current position to a new state will be through evolution and collaboration of organisations rather than imposition. Underpinning and delivering on this role will be dependent on an explicit and real commitment to the Compact across Government.

- **Definition**

The current framework is characterised by the range, the number and the ability of organisations to self classify. Moving from this loose position to a "tighter" definition was proposed by The Working Group to the Task Force as follows: "„ Infrastructure can be defined as any organisation playing a supporting ,co-ordinating or development role in relation to voluntary and community organisations at regional ,sub regional or local level..."

- **Core functions** were described as: representation and participation, advice, information and signposting, campaigning and advocacy, public policy, collaboration, service delivery, raising awareness and organising networking events. Critically infrastructure organisations needed to be **primarily engaged** in all the above functions.

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<sup>1</sup> Resourcing the Voluntary and Community Sector: Infrastructure Working Group 2003.

The above still leaves room for organisations large and small to claim a role and potential funding. A useful contribution to the question of definition was offered in VONNE Research (2004)<sup>2</sup> classifying organisations as follows:

### **Primary Infrastructure Organisations (PIOs)**

Infrastructure services to other voluntary and community organisations and who provide **all four elements** of infrastructure services – support and development, voluntary and community organisations whose main purpose is the provision of co-ordination, representation and promotion.

This category can be further sub divided into:

- **Generalist PIOs**, which provide infrastructure services to all types of voluntary and community organisations.
- **Specialist PIOs**, which provide services to groups who work on particular issues or who have particular interests or identities.

### **Secondary Infrastructure Organisations (SIOs)**

These are defined as voluntary and community organisations who either provide some infrastructure services to other groups as a subsidiary activity to their main front line activities, or who provide all aspects of infrastructure services but only to their local branches or members.

### **Tertiary Infrastructure Organisations (TIOs)**

The Report defines these as groups from outside the voluntary and community sector who provide some infrastructure support to groups, eg Local Authorities or enterprise agencies.

Within this broad definition a further refinement or filter would be to discontinue the current practice of self classification and ensure that organisations meet the above and following criterion:

## **2.2 Core Principles**

These may be considered as values, qualities and practices of belief that bind the infrastructure together and would include the following:

- **Independence:** owned and controlled by member organisations and by the sector, independent from central and local government.
- **Membership:** the organisation must have a clearly defined membership base which influences and directs the mission and development of the organisation. This should be evident in the processes in place in terms of communication, consultation, involvement in the management and board. A loosely defined or passive membership or mailing list is not adequate.

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<sup>2</sup> see page19 in the main report

- **Quality Standards:** the organisation must have reached or is striving for a recognised quality standard .e. IIP, ISO 2001, Charter Mark, PQASSO, or more appropriately a standard designed and monitored by the sector.
- **Governance:** the organisation must be able to demonstrate best practice in governance and management standards.
- **Financial Stability:** the organisation must be able to present a minimum of five years externally audited accounts and evidence of robust financial systems.
- **Equality and Shared Future:** demonstrate a commitment in policy and practice in the promotion of equality of opportunity and good relations.
- **Collaboration:** committed to recognising the strengths, expertise and knowledge of other partners.
- **Funding:** infrastructure organisations must receive appropriate funding to allow them to deliver their core function. This should cover core costs for a minimum of five years.

## 2.3 Suggested Models

Informed by the above it is possible to suggest a number of models and sets of relationships which are appropriate for the sector.

### 2.3.1 Need and Choice

One of the key elements emerging from the consultation process was the importance of responding to local need and having choice in terms of how and where support is sought and delivered. From a local perspective it would be important that these elements are maintained as follows:

This would require greater collaboration between providers providing at tapestry or jigsaw working together as appropriate to need and local circumstances

### 2.3.2 Regional and Sub Regional Coverage

The development of the new Council/"Super Council" model whether seven or eleven and the restructuring of Health and Education will require a different model at a local level. In terms of the role of Generalist Infrastructure Organisation who met the above criteria it is possible to suggest a model as set out overleaf:

Within each Council area, there would be one key infrastructure organisation linking closely with NICVA and with member groups. In larger centres such as Belfast and Derry there may be a need initially for more than one such organisation. In turn the infrastructure organisation would link in closely with member groups and satellite offices in local communities providing a local point of presence.

Such local offices would provide an opportunity for linking and sharing of services and expertise possibly with specialist organisations such as the Volunteer Bureaux, Citizens Advice, YouthNet and may operate full time or part time. The latter may see local centres evolving like a "constituency office" for the sector.

In turn this structure would support and be supported by the range of specialist, secondary and tertiary support organisations encouraging collaboration as follows:

### *2.3.3 Funding*

Any change in current structures may be perceived as an overall reduction in numbers, local coverage and support. The converse will be a more robust, function structure. The impetus and catalyst for change will be appropriate and adequate medium term funding.

Support organisations who qualify must receive a minimum of 3-5 years funding to cover core costs and core services. This principle is embedded in the Compact and Priorities for Government but appears to have been ignored or overlooked in Government response to the Sector and is clearly flagged up in recent statements from the new Minister for the Third Sector in recent speeches and is a central feature of the Review.

While the DSD through the VCU is primarily concerned with infrastructure support, part of the challenge for the DSD in developing its strategy is to ensure that all Government Departments' commitment to sectoral support organisations is actually being fulfilled.

At a sub regional level support will be sought from the new local Councils. Based on experience and consultation to date this can not be left to goodwill. The English experience and concerns expressed recently by the Urban Forum will require safeguards in place to ensure that local agreements between the sector and the Local Councils have some legislative force and that the "local compact" is translated into a local funding agreement and a seat at the community planning table.

### 3. Conclusions

From the above work to date it is possible to suggest a number of key messages and raise a number of questions which may inform and influence a sectoral response. These are presented and summarised as follows to encourage discussion ;

The sector is in a state of flux, in a changing environment, under pressure of funding and resources while increasingly tasked to deliver against demanding targets. At a time of uncertainty and struggle, it is perhaps difficult to ask organisations to stand back and consider the wider picture and even at times, the needs of the communities they are serving.

Conversely the pressures and concerns expressed suggest the need for a robust support framework that can build and enhance the broad spectrum of voluntary and community organisations. The issues of quality standards, benchmarks and impact are of increasing importance. The ability to demonstrate impact and promote quality standards and continuous improvement may be the basic standards for any organisations seeking to be considered a support organisation.

The work of the Task Force specifically in relation to a support framework and set of principles has considerable merit and is still relevant. Supporting clear definitions and moving from self classification is required if the sector is going to be sustainable. Rather than being imposed, a Sectoral view from within would have greater merit.

Certain basic principles need to be reinforced.

- One relates to the Compact, what force or weight does this carry within Government or will carry at the level of Local Councils?
- Secondly while it might appear to be a given, the unique added value and contribution of organisations within the Sector needs to be recognised. The support structures and services offered by sectoral providers are not a poor relation to statutory or Local Authority providers.

The experience from Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland, while of interest differs in terms of scale, structural arrangements, funding levels and culture to make transfer difficult. What we are faced with in Northern Ireland are structures that have evolved with a strong local flavour of networks and organisations which cannot readily be stood down.

RPA will require re-orientation and rationalisation. Given the layers of support currently available which are unlikely to be supported or funded a more rational approach may be focused on encouraging collaboration and sharing rather than reduction through the withdrawal of funding. Again making the transition will require support and a commitment from government that those organisations providing support have a future at least in the medium term.

## 4. Implementation

Moving from the current position to a more robust infrastructure will require careful negotiation and be an evolving process, recognising the historical reason for the current shape of the infrastructure. It is also important that the future development of the infrastructure is perceived to be directed and controlled by the Sector, maintaining its independence. Consideration of these issues must also be balanced by a need to take action quickly given the pressures and demands facing the support organisations.

In moving forward to an agreed position it may be useful to consider the following steps:

### **Establishing an Infrastructure Forum/Action Group.**

Drawn from the representative organisations and in partnership with Government and the Local Authorities this would consider and agree the following: the likely shape of infrastructure support over the next five years; and issues including entry standards; classification and accreditation.

Given the scope of the task, this work would need to be adequately resourced. The Action Group would be responsible for determining an appropriate funding package and for leading on negotiations with Central Government. In tandem with this the Forum would be charged with agreeing a timetable for implementation.

### **Developing a Terms of Reference for the Action Group**

This may be considered as a task for the current steering group in partnership with the Department for Social Development.

### **Establishing the Action Group**

Ensuring appropriate membership and levels of participation.

### **Developing an Operational Plan for the Action Group**

This would include targets, timescales, outputs and impacts over a limited life span of 12-18 months.

**Please send your views on the document to Gordon McCullough by 12 December 2006, either by fax or by email to:**

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