

**Policy Manifesto 2006
Draft**

Prepared at NICVA, 29 September 2006

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Our vision

Our vision is of a society where all citizens are treated as equals, where sectarianism and discrimination are not tolerated, and where respect for human rights is regarded as the norm. We want to see a society that is developed sustainably and that is active and engaged with its democratic structures. We want to see a prosperous society where the benefits of prosperity are felt by all. The voluntary and community sector enshrines the principles of participation and inclusion which should also form the basis of good policy making and governance. We believe that the proposals made in this manifesto can contribute to the achievement of this vision.

The voluntary and community sector is a major force for change in Northern Ireland. What the sector has to offer is a profound experience of civic life – of a world where everyone is equally valued as an individual, where individuals come together for the common good, and where the everyday concerns of ‘normal’ politics are to the fore.

A vibrant civic culture is critical to a well-functioning, inclusive society. Civic associations have the capacity to achieve virtuous circles of growing trust, confidence and cohesion. Government increasingly depends on NGOs (non-governmental organisations) in complex societies where it can neither know nor do everything. Research shows that NGOs enjoy greater trust on the part of citizens than governments or the private sector.

If supports are not put in place to enable excluded groups to participate in democracy, then inequalities are exacerbated. The voluntary and community sector fulfils this role through providing such supports. The not-for-profit ethos of the sector means that it actively seeks to build collective or community profit (capital) within economically and socially deprived communities when it is delivering services. The sector’s ethos – treating everyone as an individual, involving users and constantly evaluating – can offset the dangers of one-size-fits-all bureaucracy and stagnation that many big state organisations suffer.

The voluntary and community sector also has a role to play in reconciling Northern Ireland’s divided society. Strong civic networks can offset sectarian divisions and work at community level has the potential to encourage outward-looking and outward-reaching development rather than inward-looking competitive communities.

Background – state of the sector

The voluntary and community sector is a large and diverse body of organisations in Northern Ireland. There are around 4,500 voluntary organisations here with a paid workforce which extends to almost 29,000 people or 4.4% of the Northern Ireland workforce. The voluntary and community sector employs more people than are respectively employed in construction, transport or the financial sector. There are over 75,000 active volunteers engaged in added value, unpaid work on behalf of their organisations. The income of the voluntary and community sector in 2004 was

around £614 million. The sector's assets stand in the region of £756 million (housing associations' assets would be additional to this).

Voluntary and community groups contribute to almost every aspect of life in Northern Ireland. It is generally accepted that three out of every five adults in Northern Ireland have an association with some form of voluntary or community organisation. As individuals, many people play a small or large part in the life and activities of those organisations. Underpinning all of the issues in the manifesto is this commitment of people to voluntary action, whether this is in a governance role, providing a local voice or in the delivery of local services. Voluntary participation is a strong indicator of an inclusive and thriving civil society.

Much of the work of these organisations has taken place on the edge of society. In putting the manifesto together, a recurring theme was the demand to see the services and activities which have been funded piecemeal brought into the mainstream. The sector has since our last Manifesto been seeking a strategic approach to resourcing community development, community work, and a broad range of services to those experiencing poverty and exclusion. We are hopeful that government's response to these issues, articulated in *Positive Steps* will begin to move us in the right direction. Local political parties should also recognise the value of voluntary action and make commitments to removing barriers to volunteering and to supporting a strong volunteering infrastructure. This manifesto encourages Northern Ireland's political parties to take up the issues which count with ordinary people here and to make a difference with the opportunities of devolution.

Devolution

This manifesto was developed and produced during a period of suspension of devolution. This has caused great uncertainty in many policy areas in which voluntary and community organisations operate. Organisations have expressed the expectation that important decisions will not go unmade which would resign their work to a state of limbo. There is, however, also a need to ensure that important decisions affecting the future of Northern Ireland are not made in the absence of informed public debate. The unaccountable legislative process under direct rule has been of particular concern.

Voluntary and community organisations began to see great benefits under devolution in Northern Ireland. Access to local politicians, greater closeness to the decision-making process, the opportunity of greater legislative scrutiny and a sense of real accountability are among the changes that were beginning to become evident.

One of the most tangible benefits of devolution was the annual Programme for Government. For the first time, the people of Northern Ireland could see clearly set out what government policies would be and what actions would be undertaken. The process was obviously a developing one, with changes being made each year to improve both consistency of content and quality of consultation prior to final agreement. The voluntary and community sector could see itself starting to play a real role in the formation of policy at this level and felt itself being heard by politicians. This process has been rolled back somewhat in the more limited consultations round the Priorities and Budget documents produced by direct rule administrations in the past three years and we would very much like to see the socially progressive agenda that was developing take centre stage once more.

Charity finance

Irrecoverable VAT is estimated to cost charities in the UK somewhere in the region of £500 million. NICVA and other organisations have long been calling for this situation to be remedied. The UK Government recently urged charities to abandon campaigns to reduce the rate of irrecoverable VAT. However, NICVA believes government should introduce further reductions and exemptions in VAT for charitable activity and seek a solution to the issue at European level. In particular, Ministers should take action to defend zero-rate reliefs which could be abolished under new European Commission proposals. The Charities Tax Reform Group estimates that in future UK charities could be paying £1 billion a year in VAT and associated compliance costs.

Charity finance is characterised by short-term funding. This leads to insecurity for organisations, staff and services. Three-year funding terms as a minimum should be the norm among grant-making bodies. We await the outworking of *Positive Steps* and its focus on longer term, outcome focused funding as this is what the sector has long been requesting. Added to short termism, the boom and bust scenario of European funding in Northern Ireland plus the downturn in investment income which some charities have faced, compounds the problems of a sector struggling to recruit, retain and train high quality staff to carry out vital work.

We very much welcome the opportunity of Peace III and the programme for Competitiveness and Employment that will accompany it. Although the size of the funding for Peace will be reduced, both the Peace II extension and the third peace programme were by no means guaranteed. We welcome the recognition that these funds are badly needed and that the job of building peace and promoting reconciliation is a long term and probably costly one. In the new context of A Shared Future, we look forward to the Peace III money being spent in a very focused way on delivering peace and reconciliation outcomes.

Relationships between the charitable and business sectors are steadily developing in Northern Ireland, but changes in the way that corporate donors claim back tax on donations to charity have caused confusion. Some companies do not realise that they have to pay the donation gross to charities, claiming the tax back directly, as opposed to the previous system where the charity claimed the tax back for them. Government should raise awareness of this change within the business community.

Northern Ireland should also put in place legislation to recover assets in dormant charity bank accounts. In situations where funds cannot be accessed due to the death of trustees, banks currently hold on to the money which was intended for charitable purposes. This should be remedied as soon as possible. We welcome the UK announcement that a dormant accounts fund is being established and the consultation on how money should be used, but would like to see a Northern Ireland version with monies from Northern Ireland financial institutions going to charitable causes in this region.

Volunteering

Volunteering is ‘the commitment of time and energy for the benefit of the community, environment or individuals outside one’s immediate family. It is undertaken freely and by choice without concern for financial gain.’ Volunteers are the backbone of

the voluntary and community sector and volunteering also occurs in the statutory and private sectors. Volunteers are not the same as employees and in its dealings with volunteering Government must be clear about this distinction.

The promotion of good practice in the management of volunteers is a key priority. The Investing in Volunteers quality standard is one example of how organisations in all three sectors can achieve excellence in volunteer management. Organisations should be encouraged to implement the standard. Many parts of the statutory sector have developed good practice for involving volunteers and this must be expanded in new structures arising from the Review of Public Administration (RPA).

The RPA provides an opportunity to enhance active citizenship. Government and political parties in NI must ensure their support for volunteering throughout the RPA process by supporting a strong volunteering infrastructure including the Volunteer Centres network in both rural and urban areas, as it is estimated that up to 90% of rural organizations rely on volunteers.

The contribution of volunteers often goes unrecognised. We need to develop a culture that values volunteering and views it as an activity for everyone. Politicians and political parties should lead the way by championing volunteering and recognising volunteers in the communities they represent.

The present government has publicly recognised the value of volunteering through programmes like the Year of the Volunteer 2005. Yet funding programmes to support volunteering in the UK are often not implemented in Northern Ireland. Involving young people as volunteers is an important way of encouraging a culture of active citizenship. However recent developments in the UK to support youth volunteering have not been replicated in NI. Government must explore ways of sustaining and developing volunteering by young people in NI.

Everyone who lives in Northern Ireland should be able to volunteer. Government and political parties can help overcome existing barriers to volunteering by recognising all of the costs associated with volunteering as legitimate expenses in funding applications. People in receipt of social security benefits or seeking asylum should be able to volunteer without incurring financial penalties.

The protection of children and vulnerable adults is an important issue. Northern Ireland has been leading the way in implementing accessible methods of assessing the suitability of volunteers for certain roles. Changes to the present police record checking system are inevitable but government and political parties should ensure that any changes conserve best practice already developed and do not create an additional barrier for volunteers and organisations eg police checks should remain free.

Positive Steps

NICVA and its members welcomed the focus being placed on the long-term future of the voluntary and community sector through the establishment of the Taskforce on Resourcing the Voluntary and Community Sector and government's response to its work in *Positive Steps*. The voluntary and community sector urgently needs a strategic approach to its long-term funding. Destructive cycles of short-term funding have led to very uneven development and loss of skills and experience. As yet the impacts of proposed changes remain to be felt.

The fact that the implementation of *Positive Steps* is being driven by the Social Development Minister is very important. However, the sector is concerned at the low level of awareness of the policy across government departments and the slow speed at which change is being implemented. Expectations were raised by the process of consulting on the work of the Taskforce and many organisations have been optimistic that *Positive Steps* will bring real change. Swift action is now needed to make the commitments a reality.

Core funding

The issue of core costs is of critical importance and is recognised in *Positive Steps*. Organisations that don't exist can't run projects, so pure project funding is the least sustainable way of resourcing the voluntary and community sector. The UK Treasury's cross-cutting review of the role of the sector in service delivery recognised that "there is no reason why service providers should not include the relevant proportion of overhead costs within their bids for service contracts. These are part of the total costs of delivering a service."

Infrastructure

Voluntary and community sector infrastructure is not about bricks and mortar. A strong infrastructure not only allows new work and new organisations to develop, it supports and resources those already there and facilitates networking which encourages sharing. Good infrastructure builds social capital, reinforcing networks and developing a resource that is not depleted but strengthened by use. *Positive Steps* has recognised this and the Department for Social Development's review of support services for the sector is expected to provide a clear framework that will make the sector's infrastructure robust and sustainable.

The sectoral infrastructure within the voluntary and community sector allows for an overall strategic view to be developed, which individual organisations would have no capacity to do. An effective infrastructure is also a system of structures for democratic accountability and shared learning. Economies of scale can be achieved with regard to innovation through the development and delivery of programmes by region-wide agencies that can be sensitised to local needs via the local group or networking infrastructure.

The outworkings of the Review of Public Administration make the issue of infrastructure even more crucial. New council areas producing community plans will require organisations to work in a more joined up and collaborative way than they ever have before within and across new boundaries. Robust support structures for the sector will enable equal participation in the new community planning structures and allow a strong voice to be captured. Support and investment will be required to allow the sector to get to this point and capacity building will be required as much for voluntary and community organisations as it is for local councils in coming to terms with the new processes and structures.

Policy development and consultation

The voluntary and community sector has a wealth of experience to contribute to the policy development process. Under devolution, the sector hoped to use its knowledge to enrich and help provide a sound evidential base for policy making. Government in Northern Ireland appears to be recognising that a proactive partnership approach to policy, involving stakeholders at as early a stage as possible, is the best route to

effective policy making. Consultation which involves producing a finished piece of work, usually in printed form and circulated to a huge number of organisations, inspires more cynicism than enthusiasm.

There are good models of participative policy making across a range of government departments, where voluntary and community organisations and others have been involved before a consultation document was finalised. This, however, does place considerable burdens on organisations, especially smaller organisations with project funding whose resources are just sufficient to deliver their core work. Policy for them is an added luxury and yet they have much to contribute through their practical experience of working in communities.

Government must find ways of making consultation more targeted and effective and more accessible to communities which will never respond in writing. The range of potential methods of public involvement should be recognised, along with a willingness to be innovative. Voluntary and community organisations must also be supported in developing the capacity to fulfil their role in the policy making process. The sector was disappointed that *Positive Steps* did not offer additional resources to improve the policy capacity of organisations, instead leaving this as a job for the sector itself.

Audit/monitoring

Voluntary and community organisations across Northern Ireland are still struggling under the burden of audit and monitoring requirements imposed by funders. Not only are huge amounts of time spent on chasing short-term funding, but equal amounts are spent accounting for every penny and providing original receipts – sometimes to several different funders at once. The Audit Office report published in 2002, *Investing in Partnership: Government Grants to Voluntary and Community Bodies*, sets out good practice for payment and accounting by public bodies. However, the recommendations of this report still do not seem to have filtered down to those actually administering government grants where procedures seem to become ever more petty, restrictive and with questionable effect in terms of proper accountability. There is even the possibility with economic appraisals that the cost of the appraisal can exceed the cost of the project. *Positive Steps* has recognised this problem but as yet, aside from a risk management system introduced by DSD, the burden of audit does not seem to be lightening.

The voluntary and community sector is very conscious that it is spending public money, whether this comes from the public directly in donations or whether it comes through trusts, foundations or statutory funders. Organisations thus recognise the need for monitoring and evaluation. The challenge of accountability leads many organisations to jump through hoops to justify their spending of very small amounts of money, often to the detriment of the work itself. The voluntary and community sector is treated differently from the private when it comes to accounting for work done.

While no-one in the voluntary and community sector would argue for lack of transparency or accountability, there must be some degree of proportionality between the amounts under consideration and the audit regime which accompanies them. Audit and monitoring should be equal to the job but not consume astronomical resources that really should be targeted on the primary activity.

All of this also means that funders, especially government, are becoming more and more risk averse. This makes it increasingly difficult to secure funding for anything innovative or new – the very things at which this sector excels.

Sustainable development

One issue the sector is keen to see pursued across all government departments is sustainable development – integrating environmental, social, economic and cultural considerations as laid out in the Sustainable Development Strategy for Northern Ireland. The sector recognises the importance of taking into account the immediate and long-term impacts of decisions to ensure that today's development is not taking place at the expense of future generations.

It is crucial that sustainable development is not ghettoised as an environmental issue, but that the Sustainable Development Strategy is owned and implemented right across every government department so that the social, economic, political and environmental can proceed hand in hand without any one damaging the long-term interests of the others.

Sustainable development is in keeping with the principles of social inclusion and equality as it ensures that resources are not squandered by the few at the expense of the many in future generations. The sector has a key role to play here as the sustainable development strategy cannot be delivered by government alone. Behavioural change is required if we are to live genuinely sustainable lives and voluntary and community organisations can play a part in educating and encouraging the public to change attitudes and lifestyle choices so that we can learn to live within the resources available to us on a more equitable basis.

Anti-poverty policy

NICVA believes that Northern Ireland needs a proper, co-ordinated strategy for social inclusion. Voluntary and community organisations have expressed their disappointment that the draft anti-poverty strategy that was produced in two iterations within the last three years has failed to propose clear targets and policies for the eradication of poverty and social exclusion.

The sector calls on government and political parties to provide political leadership on this issue and to set out clearly what must be achieved with timeframes and measurements. Only then should departments be asked how they will meet these targets. We require new policies and real resources to tackle poverty and inequality if Northern Ireland is to be a just society with a vibrant economy.

Review of Public Administration

The Review of Public Administration will have a major impact on the voluntary and community sector. The number, shape and role of local councils, the health and education structures and resulting new models of service delivery open up real opportunities for new working relationships and service provision. They also offer the potential of joining up services for the citizen so that those with whom our sector works can be faced with a no-wrong-door policy for accessing public services, rather than a bewildering array of organisations with different responsibilities.

The voluntary and community sector sees particular potential in the new community planning proposals. These offer a unique opportunity to take a holistic view of local needs and plan accordingly with key decision makers and the voluntary and community sector at the table. As mentioned above under Infrastructure, organisations in the sector face the challenge of organising themselves and devising structures to capture the diverse voices of the sector. We welcome the potential to streamline partnership structures to improve communication and sharing of information and make best use of time of those voluntary and community sector representatives who put a great deal of voluntary effort into attending partnerships which often seem to have no impact on each others' work.

There are, however, fears about the future at a time of such change and reorganisation. As the focus of many public bodies turns inwards, voluntary and community organisations could slip down the list of priorities. Funding relationships will change and current funders will disappear. This will require the build up of new relationships and underscores the centrality of the Compact to all relationships between the sector and the various parts of government.

The sector is also embarking upon an era of new relationships with councils, as the bodies that will have responsibility for community development, community relations, rural and urban development and many other functions that affect the sector. We look forward to constructive and creative working links with the new councils.

Joined-up government

The problems real people face rarely fall conveniently into the structure of government departments and agencies. 'Joined-up government' is now a buzz phrase. But it is far more difficult to practise than preach. Paradoxically, joined-up action on the ground is often best achieved by a voluntary organisation brokering a partnership which engages a range of statutory bodies.

Organisations working flexibly on the ground in identified areas of need have a much greater capacity to respond to the challenges of exclusion and division. As a recent Audit Office report recognises, "NIAO considers that aspects of government's support for the voluntary and community sector, including partnerships, lend themselves to cross-cutting targets, to help departments to focus on shared priorities."

The voluntary and community sector calls on government to recognise and to capitalise on the value of working with the sector to deliver 'joined up' end results, especially in delivering cross-cutting strategies such as A Shared Future and Sustainable Development. We have seen examples where lack of joining up has meant that vital policy areas can slip through the net, for example in the development of the Children and Young People's Strategy children's organisations were told that child poverty would be dealt with in the forthcoming anti-poverty strategy — in the initial development of the anti-poverty strategy they were told the other strategy would deal with it.

The sector also calls on departments and agencies to find ways of working to provide a more holistic service to end users, rather than a complicated picture of government where needs can fall between stools or be passed from one place to another without responsibility resting anywhere. The potential of the Review of Public Administration to produce more user-focused, joined up services must not be missed.

Implementation of strategies

A view raised again and again in the production of this manifesto is that, while we have many fine strategies on paper, we have yet to see real implementation that will bring change on the ground. The Children and Young People's Strategy, A Shared Future, Positive Steps, Investing for Health, The Racial Equality Strategy, the Domestic Violence Strategy and many more must be more than words on a page. They need focused action plans which flow from their strategic aims (not vice versa) with measurable and time bound targets and appropriate budgets. Without these they remain merely statements of good intentions and will never bring about change.

Consideration of specific policy issues now follows this general introduction.

A sample of the policy recommendations contained in this manifesto:

- Stop economic discrimination against young workers by raising the National Minimum Wage for young people to the same level as other workers and abolish the lower age limit and allow 16-17 year olds who are living independently access to social security benefits in their own right and at the same level of those over 25.
- Ensure that high quality, affordable, age appropriate and accessible childcare is available to all children in Northern Ireland regardless of their age or where they live.
- Develop integrated stakeholder neighborhood plans in local areas which can integrate into a wider community plan.
- Put in place a new ambitious target which ensures that 80% of all households in Northern Ireland live within ten minutes of a public transport stop.
- Review how the allocation of resources using the Noble Index of Deprivation is made and ensure a complementary measure that takes account of the rural assets is developed.
- Ensure political parties designate spokespeople on race equality and develop action plans to tackle racism, including institutional racism, based on the vision, principles and shared aims of the race equality strategy.
- The new community planning mechanisms to be introduced under the Review of Public Administration should be obliged to demonstrate how each plan will combat poverty. An obligation to do this should be included in the statutory guidance.
- Resource and deliver a targeted education programme to support key health and social care professionals to identify and appropriately respond to issues of elder abuse in care settings and in the community.
- Develop a Men's Health Strategy for Northern Ireland similar to the process followed in the Republic of Ireland.
- Commit to legislating for a Bill of Rights, including socio-economic rights, substantive equality and enforcement provisions. This must include facilitating the Roundtable on the Bill of Rights to encourage agreement between political parties, the voluntary and community sector and other social partners and encouraging all political parties to engage actively in the Bill of Rights process.
- Fundamentally review the House Sales Scheme (commonly known as the Right to Buy Scheme) to ensure an adequate supply of social housing lettings over the long term.
- Investment in healthy living options should be substantially increased (eg promoting sport and exercise, 'walking buses' to school, open play areas and green space). Emphasis should be given to physical activity such as walking and cycling that is integrated into people's everyday lives.

- By 2009, establish an independent Environmental Protection Agency with the power to enforce environmental legislation.
- Commit to sustainable procurement to ensure that equality and New Targeting Social Need considerations are built into investment and development programmes from specifications and design to location of buildings, pricing strategies and recruitment policies.
- End the discrimination against children with special needs, whose education must be properly resourced whether in a special or mainstream school. Pre-school children with special education needs in the voluntary and independent sectors should receive the same financial and personal support as is available to those in statutory nursery places.
- Polling stations and election literature should be made fully accessible to people with disabilities.
- As part of the implementation of the Review of Public Administration, partnerships should be streamlined, perhaps as sub or themed partnerships within the community planning partnership, to ensure that work on community safety, policing, domestic violence and other areas is connected, integrated and making use of the same information.
- An effective community development strategy across the seven new local authorities should be developed and resourced. This strategy should build on existing local provision, develop and expand it, and build greater social capital in each area.
- The government's forthcoming Comprehensive Spending Review (2007) must redress the gross under-funding of child and family services in NI, compared to spending levels elsewhere in the UK.
- Implement the proposal in the draft Work and Families (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 to give carers the right to ask employers for flexible working hours.
- Ensure that changes in education move us closer to integrated education, rather than peripheral sharing of facilities, and that teacher training includes anti-sectarian awareness techniques, diversity and conflict management – both for new teachers and those already in post. There is also an urgent need to incorporate these elements into the school curriculum.
- Move the level of arts funding closer to that in Britain and the Republic by establishing a genuine cross-party movement to raise public per capita spend on the arts to £9.00 by 2009.
- Ensure that a level playing field exists for the contracting of advice services from government departments and their agencies. Departments should embrace the full cost recovery model if a quality and professional advice service is to be delivered.

ADVICE SERVICES

The need for independent, non-statutory advice and representation is underpinned by the important principle that everyone, including government, is subject to the law. This is part of the essential checks and balances of a healthy democracy. Therefore the recent Northern Ireland Advice and Information Strategy consultation published by the Department for Social Development is to be welcomed as a significant step in the realisation of a system that places the needs of the end user at its core.

Independent advice effectively targets groups prioritised by Targeting Social Need and is committed to social justice principles. The vast majority of advice given is in the areas of social security, debt, housing and employment, with over half of all advice sector work in the area of social security.

A vibrant network of independent advice agencies exists across Northern Ireland. For instance, in 2004/05 Citizens Advice dealt with 220,495 enquiries an increase of over 6% on the previous year, while members of the Association of Independent Advice Centres dealt with 225,206 enquiries from 112,472 people. However, there are gaps in provision with demand far exceeding supply. Literacy problems, an inability to articulate need and lack of knowledge mean that thousands of people are denied access to their rights, contributing to social exclusion.

Accessing sustainable sources of funding is a key challenge for the independent advice sector but it is imperative that government recognises that it has a duty to support access to independent information, advice, advocacy and representation services for everyone in Northern Ireland. This includes advice services for minority ethnic communities, migrant workers and asylum seekers. It is hoped that the Northern Ireland Advice and Information Strategy will ensure there is adequate funding to ensure that the strategy is fully implemented.

Political parties and the Assembly should:

- Fully consider the implications for advice services under the Review of Public Administration and ensure that the independent advice sector is actively engaged in the community planning process.
- Acknowledge the specialist nature of advice for women/childcare and ensure that under the Northern Ireland Advice and Information Strategy the cross cutting nature of advice is not lost at the expense of a one size fits all approach towards the delivery of advice services.
- Ensure that a level playing field exists for the contracting of advice services from government departments and their agencies. Departments should embrace the full cost recovery model if a quality and professional advice service is to be delivered.

Arts in the voluntary and community sector

“Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.”

Article 27, Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Voluntary and community arts are key components of social cohesion, particularly in rural areas; they challenge social exclusion and provide sustainable opportunities for all people to practise the arts and crafts themselves. They deliver on the Arts Council’s aim of putting ‘Art at the Heart’ and government must recognise the dynamism and potential of arts activity within the voluntary and community sector to transform society in Northern Ireland.

Community arts is the expression of original artwork created and produced by people linked through neighbourhood or community of interest and combining significant elements of access, participation, authorship and ownership. It is the collaboration between professional artists and communities where the community and artists are equal contributors. It engages with marginalised individuals and communities.

Voluntary arts are those arts and crafts that people undertake for self-improvement, social networking and leisure, but not primarily for payment. In Northern Ireland one in ten adults actively make or do art in art groups led by volunteers. These groups make up 23% of the voluntary sector and the 160,000 volunteers who run them account for a third of all volunteering.

Government and political parties should:

- Adopt an ‘Arts Proof’ policy across central and local government to include:
 - Involving representatives of the arts in social, economic and environmental consultation and planning process.
 - Actively promoting use of the ‘percentage for arts’ scheme.
 - Consult on the potential arts use of all new publicly funded building/renovation projects.
- Move the level of arts funding closer to that in Britain and the Republic by:
 - Establishing a genuine cross-party movement to raise public per capita spend on the arts to £9.00 by 2009.
 - Actively protecting and promoting un-biased local authority funding for arts in the voluntary and community sector post RPA.
 - Providing adequate and secure long-term funding to the voluntary and community arts infrastructure in order to provide networking, training and development.
- Make access a key priority by enabling people from new communities, isolated and marginalized groups to participate in and enjoy the arts by providing support to
 - Reduce physical, financial and social barriers.
 - Reduce attitudinal barriers, primarily through exposure
 - Develop access points to the sector including individual access.

Ensure the sector is able to take its place at the table in informing government policy and delivering public services by:

- Ensuring consultation with the sector is proactive, timely and transparent.

- Ensuring the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and its Non-Departmental Public Bodies acknowledge and implement the Compact.
- Providing capacity development funding and training to enable arts groups to build partnerships with government agencies.
- Establishing and resourcing an arts researchers' forum to support evidence based policy making and service delivery planning.

A Shared Future

Voluntary and community organisations have welcomed the publication of A Shared Future and the first draft Triennial Action Plan to accompany it. Sectarianism is a problem which is found at every level of society across Northern Ireland, not a localised issue for interfaces or disadvantaged neighbourhoods. The policy document recognises the seriousness of this as a policy challenge for the first time, but is weak in many areas – there are few concrete targets, no dedicated budget and little emphasis on key areas such as children and young people. We now need a clear action plan with measurable targets and timeframes which translates all of the policy into actions, not just selected parts.

There is frustration that full implementation of the Shared Future policy seems to be awaiting political progress. While this is ultimately essential, implementation of the policy must proceed now. If the policy is really to bring about change, we need a clear mechanism whereby any government policy must demonstrate how it contributes to A Shared Future, before funding is granted. This also requires a strong monitoring function.

The voluntary and community sector has a clear role to play in healing social divisions and increasing community cohesion when Northern Ireland's society is changing and our challenges go beyond the traditional orange and green to wider ethnic and cultural diversity. This includes the involvement of women in the process, in keeping with government's international obligations. Unfortunately, much of the good practice and expertise resident in the sector is in danger of being lost due to the uncertainty of short-term funding. We now need a clear link between Positive Steps, which promises the introduction of longer-term, outcome focused funding for the sector, and the delivery of A Shared Future.

Future developments must be capitalised upon to increase the impact of A Shared Future. These include the Comprehensive Spending Review, the Review of Public Administration and Peace III. We call for a genuine investment in A Shared Future through a proper budget to resource its implementation, a central role for the policy in structures flowing from the RPA such as community planning and a Peace III programme tightly focused on peace and reconciliation outcomes.

We therefore call on government and political parties to:

- Ensure the RPA delivers A Shared Future by placing the policy at the centre of statutory guidance to be developed for community planning, so that every community plan contributes to a shared society. We also need to develop a robust code of conduct for elected representatives.
- Ensure that changes in education move us closer to integrated education, rather than peripheral sharing of facilities, and that teacher training includes anti-sectarian awareness techniques, diversity and conflict management – both for new teachers and those already in post. There is also an urgent need to incorporate these elements into the school curriculum.
- Implement extended schools provision in a non-segregated manner.
- Institute an awareness raising campaign that the problem of sectarianism highlighted in A Shared Future is not solely about interface or disadvantaged

communities, but is about everyone in Northern Ireland, including the middle classes and political parties.

- Ensure that plans for all new development, such as that in Titanic Quarter, on the Crumlin Road site and Cathedral Quarter in Belfast set out clearly how they will implement A Shared Future in terms of shared housing, education and public space, particularly if a proportion of social housing can be made available in every new development, as happens in the Republic.
- Develop and implement a new policy for preserving existing mixed/shared areas across Northern Ireland so that the housing market alone does not drive residential mixing.

Carers

According to the 2001 Census, 185,000 people act as carers in Northern Ireland, looking after sick and dependent relatives. There is a growing and welcome awareness within government and statutory agencies of the needs and value of carers. However, this must now quickly be converted into practical and positive impacts on their daily lives.

It is important that equality and human rights form the basis for deciding on policies and delivering services in all departments and public bodies, notably the new trusts created under the Review of Public Administration. This includes equality for the Section 75 group of people with dependants and equal access to services in all parts of Northern Ireland. Equality proofing of policies to assess their impact on people with dependants should be improved.

Carers are individuals with their own needs who nevertheless care for others with a wide range of needs and abilities in what can be very complex and emotionally charged relationships. Carers have to be respected for their commitment and recognised for taking on responsibilities which would otherwise fall to the statutory sector.

Priority should be given to the funding of carers. The carer's allowance is paid only to people caring for more than 35 hours per week and is entirely inadequate; it should be replaced by the equivalent of the national minimum wage. At present carers lose the allowance completely if they earn more than £84 in any one week. This is a disincentive to work and a barrier to reducing the level of economic inactivity in Northern Ireland. Other models in Europe should be studied to find best practice. In the short term the carer's allowance should be classified as an entitlement rather than an income replacement benefit. In addition, people lose carer's allowance once they begin to receive their pension and the rules on pension credit are complicated and not well known to carers or even social security staff. Carer's allowance should be regarded as income so that it can continue to be paid to people on pensions.

Political parties should promote and meet the demands of carers as follows:

- A system of respite care should be put in place which is adequate, flexible, reliable and of the quality needed to meet the needs of carers and those they care for.
- Training programmes for carers should be flexible, of high quality and based on their individual needs, ascertained through a more thorough, in-depth carer's assessment. Carers also need access to general education and training, helped by special measures to give them full access eg through e-learning or payment of substitute caring cover.
- Carers' unpaid work must not replace proper statutory and professional provision when it is appropriate. Carers should be assisted to understand human rights law, to know what to expect of a quality service and to be able to engage with health professionals to achieve that.
- Resources should be allocated to enable the provision of proper practical and emotional support systems for carers.

- Carers have extensive needs for information about their rights and benefits as carers and about the varying needs of the people to whom they provide care. An integrated information system for carers should be put in place offering timely and appropriate information through a range of mechanisms to ensure maximum coverage. The development of relevant community and primary health care professionals and support organisations is important as they have a critical role in channelling information to carers in isolation.
- Support organisations should be properly resourced to carry out proactive work for and with carers. The new health and social services trusts should be required to consult carers on matters affecting them.
- The proposal in the draft Work and Families (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 to give carers the right to ask employers for flexible working hours should be implemented.
- Carers should be entitled to regular checks on their mental and physical health to ensure that any problems are diagnosed and treated at an early stage.
- The process of housing adaptations should be simplified and greatly speeded up. If a need is assessed the client should be entitled to the change without undue delay.

Children and Families

Since the last policy manifesto the needs of children and families have been steadily moving up the policy agenda. The creation a post of Minister for Children in NI is welcome and should be protected in any new arrangements that emerge as a result of the Review of Public Administration. Having cut the Children's Fund in late 2005 and placed many services for children and young people in NI at risk, in early 2006 the government established the Priority Children and Young People's Funding Package (2006/2008) which comprises a number of cross-cutting themes and measures targeted at vulnerable children and young people in NI. In relation to the OFMDFM strategy '*Children and Young People – Our Pledge; A Ten Year Strategy For Children and Young People In Northern Ireland 2006/2016*' the sector particularly , welcomes the government's recognition of the inter-connectedness of children's lives such as links between good health and good education outcomes and between poverty and poor health outcomes.

However despite this increased focus on the needs of children and families many of the action points recommended in this manifesto have remained unchanged since 2003. The rights of children and their families in NI have been breached by the introduction of ASBO's and the recently launched ten year Strategy for Children and Young People, though generally welcome, falls far short of being the implementation plan for the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) as was originally envisaged. This illustrates the fact that we now need to see a cross-government action plan to implement the Strategy informed by the framework of the UNCRC and addressing the outstanding recommendations of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in it 2002. The Children and Young People's Fund needs to be rolled out in a transparent and assessable format as a matter of urgency.

Room for Improvement; a manifesto for children in NI (see www.nch.org.uk) emphasised that 'every child deserves the chance to reach their full potential and no child should be forgotten or invisible in our society. All children and young people should have someone to turn to for help, support and advice whenever they need it'. When planning children's and family services it is important to remember that many children experience multiple disadvantages as a result of their race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, disability or membership of a minority group, such as Travellers and family circumstances, eg the 11,000 children in NI, living with domestic violence. Their voices are frequently unheard or forgotten. Investment in preventative measures and early intervention is also vital. Families and parents should be defined in their broadest sense and it is important that attention is paid to the holistic needs of children and young people and the family unit they live in – what ever form that might take. The voice of children must be central to decision-making processes that affect their lives and public authorities must ensure they are appropriately to engaging appropriately with all children regardless of their age.

Government and political parties should:

- Ensure government Departmental Action Plans and related policies and strategies, such as the Anti-Poverty strategy demonstrate a clear sense of inter-connectedness and joined up working. They should explicitly address the high rates of child and infant mortality and high levels and incidence of child poverty, disability and/or child and adolescent mental ill-health in NI and inequalities in educational attainment which tend to impact especially on most disadvantaged children

- ensure the government’s forthcoming Comprehensive Spending Review (2007) redresses the gross under-funding of child and family services in NI, compared to spending levels elsewhere in the UK
- Support and advocate for equal protection for children under the law - a ban on physical punishment of children and young people in NI and the comprehensive development of educational initiatives on positive parenting.
- Public authorities should be held to account for their Section 75 obligations to ensure that children are afforded equality of opportunity in policy and practice, and that they are properly consulted.
- Ensure that the Family Support and Parenting Strategy is developed in partnership with key stakeholders including parents and children. The strategy should have clear vision and action points and relate to existing strategies such as the Strategy for Children and Young People and the new Anti-poverty Strategy.
- Implement the recommendations of the “Getting it right for Children when Parents Separate or Divorce” report. In support of this there should be provision of free and confidential family mediation services and social workers with specialist training in family breakdown
- Ensure quality and affordable registered childcare places for all children are available in all areas of Northern Ireland – not only those included in the Sure Start programme
- Provide clear information and guidance to all stakeholders on the implementation of extended school hours programmes including the role of the voluntary and community sector and its impact on the personal development of children and young people.
- In a context of A Shared Future support developments to expand and resource integrated education.
- Support initiatives designed to combat bullying.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

“Community development in Northern Ireland is a process which embraces community action, community service, community work and other community endeavour — whether geographical or issue-based — with an emphasis towards the disadvantaged, impoverished and powerless within society. Its values include participation, empowerment and self-help and while it is essentially about collective action, it helps to realise the potential of both individuals and groups within communities. In the interest of developing this potential, community development challenges prejudice, sectarianism and the unequal distribution of resources — both in terms of financial resources and of access to skills and knowledge ...”

Community Development Review in Northern Ireland, March 1991

Community development is about the participation of communities in the decisions which affect their lives; it is not simply about consultation. The proper process must be in place to ensure that people’s voices are heard. The community development process provides a route for communities to engage with political parties, elected representatives, local councils and government in Northern Ireland.

Support for community development has increased in Northern Ireland through its vibrant community and voluntary sector. However, whilst government and local authorities accept the process, understanding and application are still patchy. There is no clear strategic framework for community development in Northern Ireland. An opportunity now arises with the outworking of the Review of Public Administration which places responsibility for community development practice with the new local councils to develop a Strategic Framework supporting community development across all sectors. Community development cannot thrive in an atmosphere of constant financial instability and the news of a Community Investment Fund with an initial £5 million established by government as part of ‘Positive Steps’ was very welcome indeed. This initial development needs to be built on and enhanced in the years to come.

- Political parties should commit to establishing a strategic framework, with reference to those working in the field, for the long-term promotion of community development across all sectors and as a working method for engaging with communities across all public bodies. This should be informed by the National Occupational Standards for Community Development.
- A community development approach to engagement with the community should be incorporated into the community planning partnership process.
- An effective community development strategy across the seven local authorities should be developed and resourced. This strategy should build on existing local provision, develop and expand it, and build greater social capital in each area.
- Political parties should commit to the values underpinning community development and respect and promote the concept of self-help and community action conducted locally in a non-party political way. Communities should be assisted to analyse their own circumstances and develop their own ideas to influence the policies that impact on them.
- Comprehensive Community Development training programmes should be made available for staff from all sectors who engage with communities on policy development and in the delivery of key programmes to the community.

Community safety

Community safety is an issue which concerns many parts of the voluntary and community sector. There is a general feeling though, that the issue of community safety has a low priority within government and that insufficient resources have been made available for implementation of the many strategies related to it. For example, the community safety strategy for older people promised in 2002 has yet to issue for consultation.

There is also a lack of clarity about linkages between the many structures and partnerships dealing with community safety and related issues. The District Policing Partnerships, Community Safety Partnerships, domestic violence forums and others while having their own respective clear roles and functions have no structured effective mechanisms for sharing of expertise or collaborative working with other relevant partnerships. The implementation of the Review of Public Administration, through community planning, provides an opportunity to ensure that time and resources are being used to best effect in streamlined, integrated partnership structures that capture local needs and provide clear accountability.

The fear of crime often has as much of an impact on quality of life as the fact of crime. As the public perception targets young people as a threat to community safety, there is a real need for effective intergenerational work to break down stereotypes and explain behaviours. Schools, the youth service and voluntary and community organisations should all be involved in building relationships which can help to reduce the fear of crime.

Under-reporting of crime is a common concern across the voluntary and community sector and innovative new ways should be sought to encourage people to report crime. This is also connected to confidence in prosecution and conviction rates and these must be pursued stringently, particularly in relation to hate crime in all its forms.

We call on government and political parties to ensure that:

- As part of the implementation of the Review of Public Administration, partnerships should be streamlined, perhaps as sub or themed partnerships within the community planning partnership, to ensure that work on community safety, policing, domestic violence and other areas is connected, integrated and making use of the same information.
- As an interim measure, the voluntary and community sector should be better represented at the strategic level of the community safety partnerships as these are currently imbalanced in favour of statutory agencies.
- Hate crime in all its forms must be effectively investigated and prosecuted.
- The domestic violence and sexual violence strategies should be integrated and their immediate implementation properly resourced.
- If there is devolution of policing and criminal justice, this should be undertaken in such a way as to minimise partisanship and ensure the highest standards in the administration of justice.
- The composition of the police and criminal justice agencies should better reflect the diversity of Northern Ireland.

- There should be a change in legislation to introduce indeterminate sentences for the most high risk sex offenders, as has happened in England. We also need a mature public debate, involving the media, about dealing with sex offenders, accompanied by an integrated policy for their accommodation.

DISABILITY

People with disabilities should have equal rights and opportunities within an inclusive society. Power over vital areas which have a major impact on the quality of life for disabled people still remains with Westminster.

Despite recent legislative changes which have manifested themselves in many improvements to the lives of disabled people, they continue to find themselves far from the heart of society, quite literally living on the margins. People with disabilities must have the right to engage directly with decision makers and to secure access to mainstream services in all areas. There needs to be a greater awareness of disability issues among statutory providers and politicians, which must be matched with a greater focus on improving public attitudes towards people with disabilities.

To reflect the needs and aspirations of all disabled people in Northern Ireland, a commitment to the following changes is necessary:

- There is a real need to develop comprehensive access policies to bring improvements in access to public facilities for all disabled people.
- Government should promote compliance with all aspects of the Disability Discrimination Act.
- Enabling disabled people to move out of poverty should be an immediate government priority to allow them to live full and independent lives.
- There is still a chronic shortage of accessible housing, therefore priority should be given to providing properly resourced community care services as personal assistance is the cornerstone of independent living for many disabled people. A proportion of future housing must be planned as accessible.
- People with mental health issues and those with learning disabilities should be fully supported when dealing with the criminal justice system.
- Polling stations and election literature should be made fully accessible to people with disabilities.
- All disabled children and young people should have the right to choose mainstream education and all disabled adults should have access to lifelong learning and careers information and guidance.
- A comprehensive strategy should be produced for services for people with learning disabilities in Northern Ireland, as has already been done in Scotland, Wales and England.
- There is a need for up to date statistics related to people with disabilities to ensure that service planning and provision accurately reflect the current situation.
- Transition programmes for people with disabilities should be recognised and adequately resourced in order that the individual is given every opportunity to move from education or a community service to supported employment

- Realignment is required from the focus on training to moving people into work; subsequently greater attention should be given to resourcing supported employment, of which ongoing support is a key component.

EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Northern Ireland has the capacity to become a learning community which promotes the development of all children and adults. We can move from a society of failure, including selection at the age of 11 and shockingly low rates of adult literacy, to one where everyone can improve their education and skills through lifelong learning.

There is too much focus on academic qualifications on the one hand and excessively narrow vocational skills on the other. We need to emphasise life skills, personal development, independent thinking and the broad skills needed for citizenship and employment. The guiding principles should be respect for human rights, equality and the creation of a shared, prosperous society in Northern Ireland.

Resources for adult education need to be rebalanced. Community organisations (including women's centres, homeless projects, centres for out-of-school young people etc), should be given long-term core funding to promote education and training. They are best placed to reach marginalised and disadvantaged groups, listen to their needs and promote partnerships with statutory education providers.

Publicly-funded facilities such as schools should be available to local people, including older adults. Libraries are important local learning points and centres of information, including internet access for those affected by the 'digital divide'.

Education has a crucial role to play in tackling sectarianism and racism. We could move towards a shared society by actively promoting integrated education, with the added advantage of reducing the waste of public resources eg in separate teacher education colleges.

Progress requires joined-up thinking and partnership and co-operation among and between statutory, voluntary and community organisations. In addition to the Review of Public Administration reforms, there should be a single department responsible for education and training in order to create a seamless system of lifelong learning for everyone.

We urge government and political parties to:

- Abolish academic selection and create the entitlement curriculum for all pupils; encourage co-operation among schools and colleges to achieve the best possible education for all children in each area.
- End the discrimination against children with special needs, whose education must be properly resourced whether in a special or mainstream school. Pre-school children with special education needs in the voluntary and independent sectors should receive the same financial and personal support as is available to those in statutory nursery places.
- The Department of Education should publish a clear policy on disaffected children in out-of-school projects covering issues including recognition, mainstream funding and access to resources such as in-service training.
- Early childhood deserves special attention because it creates the foundation for later learning. Money spent at this age is a good investment since it can help create contented and well-balanced children who are ready to begin school. Children aged 0-6 should have an enriched curriculum based on play,

creativity and the development of social skills. All-day care should be provided in a network of extended schools or children's centres. This could also enable parents to participate more freely in adult education.

- The system of qualifications should be simplified within the credit accumulation and transfer framework and an active campaign should be launched to inform the public, including employers, about it.
- Access to further and higher education should be made truly open to all and funding should be allocated to ensure this can happen eg maintenance allowances for low-income groups and benefits for 16-18 years olds on part-time courses. It is also important to recognise that 'recreational' courses are an important route into education and training for adults with low or no qualifications and should be funded in the same way as certified courses. There should be no minimum class size for courses promoting basic skills.
- Students should have access to specialist staff teaching English as an Additional Language, which should be treated by the Department as literacy/essential skills work. Access to mother tongues should also be available in schools.

Equality

Equality is fundamental to the vision in the Good Friday Agreement of a peaceful, inclusive, prosperous, stable and fair society. It requires reconciliation, tolerance, mutual trust and the protection of human rights for all. A robust anti-poverty strategy, a shared future, Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act, a bill of rights and effective strategies to promote equality are needed to create this vision.

Equality represents a fundamental part of international human rights law. A human rights approach would provide the overarching framework for public policy because it has explicit links to government obligations under international human rights law. It also encourages empowerment and participation of vulnerable people; emphasises equality and non-discrimination; ensures accountability through legal remedies; and uses indicators to monitor implementation of policy at all levels of government.

The equality duties of Section 75 (1) have brought some successes and occasionally prevented public bodies from ignoring equality in favour of saving money and promoting populist proposals. But public bodies often misinterpret equality to mean 'same treatment' at all times when in fact S75 is about the active promotion of equality of opportunity. Therefore affirmative or positive action programmes may be needed in order to correct disadvantage and create a level playing field. For example, since domestic violence affects many more women than men, more resources should be targeted at the women's sector rather than divided equally among men's and women's groups.

To develop the equality agenda, public bodies should:

- Comply with S75 as it is written in the legislation and in light of the Equality Commission's guidance and make commitments in their equality schemes to promote equality for all in line with international standards ratified by government.
- Improve the interpretation and implementation of S75, including allocation of resources, direct consultation with those affected by the policy, collection and publication of baseline information, target setting and monitoring for impact, commitment at senior level and the training of all staff, especially those involved in the front-line delivery of services.
- Respond to the need for change identified by Promoting Social Inclusion groups, the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People and the Review of Mental Health and Learning Disability.
- Report on what they have achieved under the positive duty to promote equality of opportunity as well as what has been achieved in tackling discrimination, which is a negative duty,.
- Subject high-level policies to equality impact assessments (EQIAs), especially Priorities and Budget and large change programmes, such as education reform, which have major equality implications.
- Build equality and New Targeting Social Need (TSN) considerations into investment and development programmes, from specifications and design to location of buildings, pricing strategies and recruitment policies.

- Ensure that planning takes account of the rapidly changing demographics in Northern Ireland, especially the large increase in migrant workers.

Environment

We live on a bountiful planet, but not a limitless one. If everyone in the world used up resources at the same rate as we do in Northern Ireland, we would need three planets. We need to move from this 'three-planet living' to 'one-planet living', the real goal of sustainable development.

The new NI Sustainable Development Strategy has gone a long way towards meeting the demands of the last NICVA Manifesto but further progress now depends upon the Strategy's full implementation. Sustainable development is not only about the environment; it has implications for all government departments. The decisions we make today have far-reaching social, economic and environmental impacts – for people living in Northern Ireland, for people living in other parts of the world and for future generations. This requires real joined-up thinking and actions. Joined-up governance is at the core of sustainable development. Strategies developed by one department must be taken seriously and implemented by all departments if the desired outcomes are to be achieved. Successful implementation of the Review of Environmental Governance through the prompt adoption of its recommendations will be a critical step in protecting the environment for everyone's benefit.

Departments and agencies must further develop the practice of working in partnership with those outside government, particularly on issues such as planning which have a direct effect on communities. Everyone has a right to access open, green spaces but it is often the most disadvantaged who are least able to do so and who are most likely to suffer all forms of environmental injustice. While there are welcome improvements in community planning being proposed in the Review of Public Administration, more promotion is needed for shared community spaces. The benefits for health and wellbeing, and community safety cannot be underestimated. Work is being undertaken to establish the real economic values of the environment, in terms of the provision of ecosystem services, recreation, landscape and pollution control. Such research can be helpful in ensuring that the environment is properly valued and protected by government and the people.

In this context government should:

- ✓ By 2007, begin the implementation of '*First Steps Towards Sustainability*' and its associated communications strategy across all sectors. Adopt and implement an agreed set of sustainable development indicators by 2007 and monitor their progress through regular published reports thereafter.
- ✓ By 2008, complete the Review of Environmental Governance, integrating it with the Review of Public Administration in order to ensure effective environmental protection.
- ✓ By 2009, establish an independent Environmental Protection Agency with the power to enforce environmental legislation.
- ✓ In addition to applying the Eco Homes assessment process for all social housing funded by government, setting energy efficiency standards significantly higher than those required by building regulations, extend equivalent standards through BREEAM and CEEQUAL for all publicly funded building projects by 2009.
- ✓ By 2009, introduce a third party right of appeal in the planning system.

- ✓ Commit resources to ensure that Northern Ireland meets the international commitment to halt biodiversity loss by 2010.
- ✓ By 2008, agree a clear strategy and time-bounded implementation plan for the protection and management of our protected landscapes and historic environment.

HEALTH AND WELLBEING

The voluntary and community sector has always been involved in health issues as both an advocate and service provider; State of the Sector IV records 440 organisations working on health or social care. It is essential that the role of the sector is fully appreciated and that statutory bodies build on the improvements that have been made in recent years in involving the sector in developing and delivering health strategies.

The sector believes that active policies to tackle poverty and social exclusion are essential to improving health and wellbeing. It is an issue that spans all government departments and public bodies (eg education, employment, sport, the arts, transport, fuel poverty) and therefore requires co-ordinated strategies to be effective.

Human rights and equality demand that the needs of all client groups must be considered, including migrant workers and asylum seekers who may have special health needs and may have difficulty understanding how to access health services.

We believe there is a serious mismatch between government's stated objectives and its funding decisions. In particular, the amount of money devoted to prevention and promoting healthy lifestyles is grossly inadequate compared with spending on acute services. Increased investment in the voluntary and community sector, with its ethos of community development, would allow it to step up its contribution to health, exercise and wellbeing; to the reduction of health inequalities; and to empowering marginalised individuals to consider their own health needs.

Government and political parties should commit to changes that aim to achieve a healthy and active population:

- Core funding should be awarded to voluntary and community organisations to promote health and wellbeing, especially among disadvantaged groups, and projects should be funded on a full cost recovery basis
- Investment in healthy living options should be substantially increased (eg promoting sport and exercise, 'walking buses' to school, open play areas and green space). Emphasis should be given to physical activity such as walking and cycling that is integrated into people's everyday lives.
- People should also be given greater opportunities to volunteer, to do education and training courses and to be involved as active citizens, since participation promotes good health, especially among older people.
- Greater priority should be given to ensuring people have access to healthy and affordable food and are aware of the importance of good food; this should include healthy meals in schools.
- The Review of Public Administration provides an opportunity to cut bureaucracy and increase the involvement of users and communities. The new system should adopt best practice in involving and consulting users and representative groups in the voluntary and community sector.
- Recommendations arising out of the mental health review should be fully implemented; in particular there is a need for improved services for young people with mental health problems.

- A high quality health service must include effective advice, information and counselling (eg on bereavement).
- The role of the voluntary and community sector in developing self-management programmes for people with long-term medical conditions needs to be recognised and those organisations involved as full partners in any new expert patient programme.

HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS

Having a decent home is fundamental to personal wellbeing and social inclusion. It provides security, promotes health and gives a firm platform for creating social networks, capitalising on educational opportunities and securing employment.

In the 2003 Policy Manifesto in 2003 a number of actions aimed at ensuring that everyone in Northern Ireland would have access to an adequate, affordable and accessible home were recommended. Three years on little has changed and indeed the level and nature of housing need and homelessness has continued to worsen, as follows:

- Last year (2005/06) 20,121 households presented as homeless.
- Homelessness in Northern Ireland has increased by 59% over the last six years (12,694 in 2000-01).

Northern Ireland has a high owner occupancy rate (currently at 72%) and this may continue to rise as 93% of all new builds last year were in the private sector. However owner occupation is not a viable option for everyone and as the average house price in Northern Ireland continues to rise (25% over the last year alone) there is a greater need for a mixed housing stock and well resourced supported accommodation. This cannot happen in the circumstances where social housing is sold off (Right to Buy) and is replaced at a lesser rate than sales and demolitions combined.

The provision of appropriate housing is not just about bricks and mortar it has wider societal impacts and is a key determinant in tackling many interconnected social problems. There must be a recognition that housing changes and shapes communities and the environment in Northern Ireland is changing at a fast pace, with private developments and second homes to the fore. The question remains, where do vulnerable people, including migrant workers, fit into the current system and how can they be better supported to live independently?

We suggest that a *Spend to Save* argument is vital in the field of housing. Good housing, ensures health and well-being, prevents re-offending and provides a place for our children and young people to feel secure and to develop into active citizens.

Political parties and the Assembly should:

- Develop an overarching, comprehensive strategy for housing in Northern Ireland which encompasses all types of tenure.
- Accept and implement and resource the recommendations made in the Promoting Social Inclusion report into homelessness in Northern Ireland.
- Ensure that a range of options for access to housing is available through social housing, the private rented sector, the owner-occupied sector and through equity sharing (co-ownership) to prevent homelessness.
- Review the decision to transfer the Supporting People function in the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to the proposed new Councils without undertaking any consultative exercises.

- Urgently review the funding arrangement for crisis and short term accommodation in relation to the provision of a block grant for the provision of such facilities from Housing Benefit.
- Review the model which estimates the level of need for new social housing and review the mechanisms currently in place to deliver social housing in Northern Ireland.
- Support the development of a system whereby a balance between the concerns of the communities and the right of vulnerable homeless groups to access accommodation in the community can be met.
- Fundamentally review the 'House Sales Scheme; (commonly known as the Right to Buy Scheme) to ensure an adequate supply of social housing lettings over the long term.
- Where appropriate encourage and develop the provision of an integrated approach to supported accommodation to aid vulnerable individuals back into communities.
- Government should establish a migrant worker emergency rehousing fund to reimburse voluntary and community organizations which provide hostel places to migrant workers who are not entitled to government assistance with emergency accommodation.

Human Rights

Northern Ireland is marred by high poverty levels and also by higher levels of inequality than Great Britain; the gap between rich and poor is increasing with significant numbers of individuals not benefiting from the overall growth in economic prosperity. Around one in every two children currently live in poverty with child deprivation almost twice the GB average. Poverty is suffered by 500,000 people including 150,000 children, a quarter of the adult population is functionally illiterate, 530,000 people are economically inactive, health inequalities are increasing, working class children and children from vulnerable groups experience educational inequality, low-income families, especially those with a sole earner, struggle to survive, poverty is increasing among single parent families and households containing disabled members. The number of households presenting as homeless went above 17,000 in 2004, the lack of appropriate accommodation affects access to rights to healthcare, education, social services and a healthy environment for Travellers, asylum seekers are often subject to detention and removal, racist and homophobic attacks are on the increase and exploitation of migrant workers is common-place.

The promotion of human rights can provide the vision of a better society than this, where sectarianism and discrimination are not tolerated, where respect for human rights is regarded as the norm and where the most vulnerable and poorest members receive the highest protection. The government has ratified most of the international human rights instruments. The European Convention on Human Rights has been incorporated in domestic law by the Human Rights Act. These instruments mean that government departments are duty bearers with a legal obligation to respect, protect, promote and fulfil the rights contained in these treaties. They also provide standards against which to judge the government's decision-making and actions.

Almost 70 % of people surveyed in Northern Ireland think a Bill of Rights is essential or desirable (65% Protestant and 73% Catholic); with 76% saying either it is essential or desirable to have specific protection of economic and social rights (79% Catholic and 66% Protestant)

To meet the entitlements and needs of all, especially the poorest and most disadvantaged, government and political parties should:

- Comply with international commitments to ensure core obligations to adequate social and economic rights, such as adequate accommodation, education, health, remuneration and social protection.
- Comply with all international human rights treaties ratified by the UK government, including the concluding observations from the various treaty monitoring bodies.
- Ratify the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights optional protocol to provide a complaints mechanism at the international level and ratify the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families.
- Provide appropriate budgets to support the range of strategies for, inter alia, children and young people, race equality and New Targeting Social Need, and conduct the budgetary analysis required to provide transparency about resource allocation across policy areas.

- Human rights proof all draft legislation and policies to ensure compliance with the UN international standards and European Social Charter, as well as the European Convention on Human Rights.
- Commit to legislating for a Bill of Rights, including socio-economic rights, substantive equality and enforcement provisions. This must include facilitating the Roundtable on the Bill of Rights to encourage agreement between political parties, the voluntary and community sector and other social partners and encouraging all political parties to engage actively in the Bill of Rights process.
- Introduce amended legislation in the next legislative term to ensure among other things that the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission has the power to enter places of detention and to compel the production of documents.
- Ensure human rights provides an overarching framework by explicit linkages to government obligations under the international human rights instruments, effective participation of the most affected, recourse to remedies and development of agreed human rights indicators to monitor implementation of policies at all levels of government, including community planning.
- Provide and disseminate information and provide awareness-raising and education about human rights to contribute to a human rights culture.

MEN

In recent times the contribution that men make to society is often shrouded with negativity. More often than not, it is only these negative aspects of men's lives, such as young men and anti social behaviour, that are reported. There is, of course, a real need to challenge this negativity and to highlight the positive contribution that men make to society.

Resources only tend to be allocated to "problem males" (eg, when large numbers die from suicide or are abusive to their partners or are in trouble with the law). This approach should be reviewed in order to ensure that there is a more coherent and visionary strategy from government that supports the positive development of men and boys.

It should be stated clearly that the men's sector does not see itself as being in competition with the women's sector and is a strong advocate of the development of policies that are gender sensitive. There is an inherent interdependency between males and females, and policies and strategies should recognise and embrace this interdependency.

However, there should not be a one-size-fits all approach towards addressing issues that affect men. Males, themselves, are a diverse group with a range of specific needs. Yet, there is a general consensus that current public sector initiatives rarely actively target men in community contexts or seek to identify their range of concerns.

Many practitioners in the men's sector find themselves isolated and working on the margins without sufficient resources or a supportive policy context for their endeavours. Indeed, most advances that have been made in this field are attributable to individual visionaries (both men and women) who recognise, and are committed to, the need for action. The vast majority of such initiatives have been spearheaded by the voluntary and community sector without any statutory support.

Political parties and the Assembly should

- Develop a Men's Health Strategy for Northern Ireland similar to the process followed in the Republic of Ireland.
- Ensure that the Men's Health Strategy for Northern Ireland is underpinned by extensive research into men's health-seeking behaviours; the development of innovative and pioneering health promotion initiatives; the setting of specific targets to improve male health and increase male life expectancy within a given time period; the provision of sufficient resources to meet the outcomes outlined in the strategy.
- Support the establishment of appropriate mental and emotional support services which can help men to deal with times of crisis or upheaval in their lives. At present, many men turn to alcohol or drugs as a coping mechanism.
- Develop strategies and provide sufficient resources to pilot new approaches to engaging men in adult education programmes. This should be one part of a wider action plan to address the increasing failure of males in the education system.

- Address deficiencies in the recruitment and retention of male workers in what are traditionally viewed as "women's professions" — especially teachers in nursery and primary schools, family and childcare work and the nursing profession.
- Research in greater detail the issue of domestic violence against men and the need for dedicated support services as well as looking at alternative custodial models of working with male perpetrators.
- Ensure all training of agencies, professionals, policies and procedures connected to family law is based on equality of treatment
- Support the increased involvement of men in family life and associated caring duties by: extending the length and rate of Paternity Pay; providing resources to develop innovative models of parenting education for fathers; commissioning qualitative and quantitative research into the needs of local fathers; ensuring that family support services actively include fathers in their provision.

Older people

Our population is ageing quickly, but the maze of policies and lack of connection between them means that older people living here face discrimination, poverty and lack of recognition of the very positive contribution they make to their communities. In Northern Ireland in 2004, there were 233,400 people over the age of 65, or 14% of the population, with further variation in some areas. By 2015 this is set to rise to 293,700, or 16%, and the increase will be highest in the 70+ age group, with numbers predicted to more than double in the forty years from 2001. The Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (2002), which will be implemented by the UN Economic Commission for Europe, calls for changes in attitudes, policies and practices at all levels in all sectors so that the enormous potential of ageing in the twenty-first century may be fulfilled. The UK Government is a signatory this and has also produced a UK-wide strategy Opportunity Age.

Poverty and discrimination are significant barriers to older people enjoying a full quality of life and must be proactively addressed by political leaders and public bodies. Employers should be supported to promote age diversity in the workforce, to ensure the continued economic activity of older people. Older people want equality of opportunity and a quality of life acceptable for all. They want to have support both socially and economically to make choices such as how long to work, which would require flexible working patterns, and access to lifelong learning and any associated funding. They want to feel safe in their homes and communities and to be full participants in society. They want recognition of the major social and economic contribution they make as carers and volunteers. Shared issues, such as transport, isolation and the impact of the centralisation of key services are also exacerbated in rural areas.

The Review of Public Administration presents new opportunities for older people to become involved, in Community Planning or through new structures such as Elders Councils, and these must be investigated and seized where possible. Older people need a representative with adequate powers and resources to protect and promote their welfare and rights, therefore legislation should be brought forward to create the position of an Independent Commissioner for Older People. In addition to rolling out the Anti-Poverty Strategy and producing a Single Equality Bill with equal recognition for all grounds, government should:

- ✓ Implement the Ageing in an Inclusive Society strategy, in full consultation with those who formed it and including older people themselves in the process.
- ✓ Introduce free personal care for all people living in residential and nursing homes, standardise and integrate delivery of care provided in the home, and ensure that patients and their families are given clear and concise information, particularly in regard to cost.
- ✓ Provide greater funding for both research into and treatment of the mental health needs of older people.
- ✓ Resource and deliver a targeted education programme to support key health and social care professionals to identify and appropriately respond to issues of elder abuse in care settings and in the community.
- ✓ Introduce free public transport for women aged between 60 and 65 until the equalisation of pension age, extend the concessionary fares scheme to cover community transport, and make wider transport provision in rural areas where no public or community transport is available.

- ✓ Increase benefit uptake among all those who are entitled, including provision of guidance on completing applications and identification of passport benefit entitlements.
- ✓ Consult widely on and implement the Community Safety Strategy with older people and their representatives, ensure that older people have access to information on reliable tradespeople to carry out adaptations and small jobs, and encourage all Community Safety Partnerships to use the example set by Belfast CSP.

Poverty

The voluntary and community sector believes that it is desirable to build a socially cohesive and just society. Research has shown that the most socially cohesive regions in Europe, with smallest gaps between rich and poor, are the most successful. To achieve this in Northern Ireland we need a robust anti-poverty strategy to inform and direct other policies, owned by all those involved.

There has been dissatisfaction with the process to produce a strategy thus far. Voluntary and community groups have spoken with a clear and united voice on this issue. We believe that an effective anti-poverty must involve some redistribution of wealth and this requires an act of political will, not merely an administrative exercise. So far there has been too much emphasis on the poorest as passive recipients of change and not enough focus on the major gaps between rich and poor, implicating the whole of society in the problem and the solution. There has also been an understandable emphasis on work as a route out of poverty, but this is not a solution for those who are past working age, cannot work for reasons of illness, disability, or caring responsibilities and those who are in very poorly paid jobs. 56% of children in poverty live in households where one adult works and yet this has not lifted them out of poverty.

Northern Ireland's strategy needs to recognise that simply lifting policies from Great Britain will not be sufficient in a divided society, emerging from conflict, which is changing and becoming more diverse at a rapid rate. On the other hand, a massive investment in quality childcare, as is happening in England, would make a major contribution to helping women and carers into work. Issues specific to Northern Ireland, such as the high cost of fuel and the monopolies on utilities which mean that the poorest have no choice but to pay high prices, must be tackled.

We recommend that:

- A robust, focused and measurable anti-poverty strategy should be published for Northern Ireland with clear headline targets and timescales, including an NI child poverty target, and a defined budget.
- The new community planning mechanisms to be introduced under the Review of Public Administration should be obliged to demonstrate how each plan will combat poverty. An obligation to do this should be included in the statutory guidance.
- Rates and water charges must not penalise those on low incomes – the protections introduced for the initial three year introductory period must be guaranteed as permanent.
- The Minimum Wage should be rigorously enforced in Northern Ireland and should be increased towards a living wage.
- Northern Ireland's planned £16 billion infrastructure spend must demonstrate a contribution to reducing poverty – plans for departmental spending must demonstrate this contribution clearly.
- Working Tax Credit should be an incentive to work. It has become a burden for those faced with overpayments. Northern Ireland's politicians should lobby

for changes to the Tax Credits system to reduce its complexity and propensity to punish those on low incomes who need support.

Race/ethnicity

Northern Ireland is undergoing major demographic change due to the impact of globalisation and the enlargement of the European Union. The increasing inward migration means we must increasingly acknowledge that our society not only consists of Catholics and Protestants but also many different minority ethnic and religious groups.

This developing multi-ethnic society includes minority ethnic and faith communities long established as part of our society as well as citizens of other countries and none. Some of the most vulnerable members of our society such as Travellers, asylum seekers, refugees and minority ethnic women and children fall within the protection of the Race Relations Order and section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act.

Unfortunately the reality is that racism is on the increase with daily reports of racist attacks which also include islamophobic and anti-semitic incidents. These attacks are only the most visible manifestation of personal prejudice and racism in institutions, which perpetuates existing inequalities and creates new ones.

We have to start thinking about the needs of this diverse society and planning for a shared future, on the basis of human rights and equality for all.

Above all we need to take a human rights approach to race equality based on the effective participation of minority ethnic groups, explicit linkages to government obligations under international human rights instruments and the ability to hold government to account through monitoring and recourse to remedies.

To meet the entitlements and needs of minority ethnic people and organisations, government and political parties should:

- Ensure the effective implementation of the Race Equality Strategy and 'A Shared Future' policies on the basis of international human rights standards.
- Ensure political parties designate spokespeople on race equality and develop action plans to tackle racism, including institutional racism, based on the vision, principles and shared aims of the race equality strategy.
- Put in place appropriate monitoring across the whole of the public sector in both employment and service provision. Guidance should also be provided on how to ensure comprehensive data on all groups, particularly in the context of changing demographics and the multiple identities of people in ethnic minorities. This is also essential for the proper planning of public services on the basis of accurate and reliable data.
- Take an employment rights approach to tackle the exploitation of migrant workers rather than an immigration control approach. Immigration law may be a reserved matter but ensuring equal access to public services such as health, education and accommodation is the responsibility of Northern Ireland government, including local government. This will take on added importance during and following the implementation of the Review of Public Administration. To ensure race equality, it is vital that race relations are treated as an integral part of equality and good relations.

- Oppose measures that introduce unequal civil rights in relation to the social assistance safety net such as the lack of entitlement to benefits to migrant workers under the Workers Registration Scheme, even though they are paying taxes.
- Tackle institutional racism and build capacity in the public sector by implementing the recommendations in the Macpherson report on the murder of Stephen Lawrence across all public services, including anti-racism training, monitoring and engagement with the minority ethnic sector.
- Ensure adequate funding, including core funding for minority ethnic organisations to enable capacity building for equal participation.
- All government bodies should be fully compliant with the Section 75 statutory duty in their work on minority ethnic issues.

Rural Development

People are at the heart of rural communities, however, the focus of rural development initiatives within government remains centred on agriculture and the environment. Both are important but the process of community rural development is a positive force that stimulates social cohesion and helps communities develop and grow and one that should not be overlooked. There is still tension between agriculture and rural development and a lack of recognition of the interdependence of urban and rural areas, and the diversity within and between rural areas. These larger issues should be addressed to ensure social and spatial equity throughout Northern Ireland.

Therefore in the absence of a Rural White Paper the need for effective rural proofing is all the more important to ensure that government policies are not disadvantaging individuals living in rural areas.

The vision for rural development, which should be central to the Rural White Paper, is the development of sustainable rural communities which make a contribution to the regional economic and social wellbeing of Northern Ireland. Nevertheless poverty, social exclusion and inequalities still persist in rural Northern Ireland, though they are often hidden and isolated. The application of the Noble Index of Deprivation by funders has exacerbated problems as rural areas often miss out on vital resources because the index cannot take account of local sensitivities that are masked in the wider index.

Political parties and the Assembly should:

- Ensure that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development is a champion for all rural issues and that all rural development strategies are clearly articulated.
- Ensure that there is effective representation from the rural sector during the community planning process, which recognises the multiple issues that impact upon rural development. In addition, there should be active community involvement in the formulation of local development plans.
- Review how the allocation of resources using the Noble Index of Deprivation is made and ensure a complementary measure that takes account of the rural assets is developed.
- Ensure that the Rural White Paper recognises, endorses and develops the existing rural community infrastructure (Rural Community Network, Rural Support Networks and community organisations) and that it is properly resourced at all levels, from government departments through to District Councils.
- Recognise that rural areas are becoming increasingly diverse but the impact of segregation and sectarianism is still significant. Therefore people and communities should be supported in their efforts to develop a shared future.

TRANSPORT

Northern Ireland is over-dependent on the motor car and this is one of the major failures in public policy development of the last forty years. Public transport facilities are improving but there is still considerable work to be done the impact of which falls disproportionately on people with low incomes or restricted mobility. Poor, or in many places no, public transport is a major contributor to social exclusion and isolation. The voluntary and community sector supports the Regional Transport Strategy for Northern Ireland as it affects local communities and is excited by the proposals contained with the new Accessible Transport Strategy and the establishment of the Mobility and Inclusion Unit (MIU) to “champion” the strategy. Nevertheless the announcement of a Passenger Transport Authority is to be welcomed and it is hoped that its remit will ensure the licensing and procurement of transport services are targeted in the areas of most need. It is hoped that the development of an overall strategy for social transport in Northern Ireland will tackle many of the inequalities with regard to access to transport.

However, we are concerned that the overall balance of proposed investment continues to favour private means of transport at the expense of public provision, which makes a greater contribution to social inclusion and cohesion in both rural and urban areas. It is also important that all transport policy be considered in relation to social inclusion, community cohesion, child welfare and environmental damage. Community transport can play a significant part in tackling the imbalance between public and private transport — an imbalance that is environmentally unsustainable. Community transport currently involves large numbers of volunteers in the provision of services including:

- Providing support to help people access training and employment
- Transporting children and young people to activities and events.
- Enabling people with disabilities to secure access to everyday services.
- Providing those living in isolation with access to social, leisure, shopping, health, visiting and other services.
- Assisting patients to clinics and hospitals.

Political parties and government should commit to:

- Giving priority to investment in public transport across the region.
Government should take the lead as public sector employer and develop travel plans that promote sustainable methods of transport.
- Reducing the ever-growing dependence on cars through greater than planned investment in sustainable and healthier alternatives such as Safe Routes to School, cycling and walking.
- Putting in place a new ambitious target which ensures that 80% of all households in Northern Ireland live within ten minutes of a public transport stop.
- Putting in place a North/South policy on public transport investment.
- Expand the Rural Transport Fund and the Transport Programme for People with Disabilities further to meet the needs of people who cannot access mainstream services.

- Extending the Bus Service Operators Grant (BSOG) to a range of community groups with Small Bus Permits in line with England, Scotland and Wales.
- Extending the concessionary fares scheme to allow disabled people and older people who cannot access existing public transport to use their concession on other transport services. All eligible passengers should receive equal access to services.
- Supporting the Eco-Schools Programme in relation to promoting sustainable development in transport.

URBAN REGENERATION

It is commonly accepted that any approach to urban regeneration goes beyond the physical and economic, and is effective in including communities. The voluntary and community sector welcomes the intention to transfer responsibility for urban regeneration and neighbourhood renewal to local government in Northern Ireland and expects that an effective link will be made between politicians and local communities. The critical mechanism is the new proposed community planning partnerships in which voluntary and community groups will be willing to play their part to make effective strategies for dynamic change. Most importantly a statutory duty will be placed on key public bodies to participate in the process but social partners will also be engaged drawing them into the community planning and urban regeneration process.

While much has been done in terms of urban regeneration in Northern Ireland, there is still the necessity to hone an effective delivery mechanism capable of delivering the outcome of the strategy in a staged and timely way.

Political parties and the Assembly should:

- Establish baseline information on the current state of urban regeneration in each area.
- Set a vision for urban regeneration, what it is trying to achieve and an effective delivery mechanism with a structured planning process which can deliver a strategy in a timely and effective fashion.
- Key indicators need to be established to measure success which are based on quality of life and the impact in areas targeted for regeneration.
- Provide and resource the community planning process which links the bottom up planning with strategic development.
- Develop integrated stakeholder neighbourhood plans in local areas which can integrate into a wider community plan.
- Identify the skills and knowledge required by different sets of players involved in neighbourhood renewal and develop the skills and knowledge of key stakeholders, including the voluntary and community sector.
- Ensure that the new local authorities as lead bodies in co-ordinating urban regeneration take cognisance of best practice in other countries to help develop their planning processes.
- Secure the long-term commitment from government departments and other statutory bodies to the regeneration process in each local authority area.
- Move to outcome focused funding where voluntary and community organisations and other bodies are engaged as part of urban regeneration processes.

Women

2005 saw the publication of Gender Matters, the gender strategy for Northern Ireland. The development of the strategy was long awaited by the women's sector and the sector was actively involved in its development. However the strategy produced by OFM/DFM fell far short of its potential. The overarching cause for concern was the move from a women's strategy to a gender strategy. This was a worrying development based on the mistaken belief that the promotion of women's rights and equality is somehow related to the denigration of the rights of men. When tackling historical, structural and cultural inequalities against women adopting a gender neutral approach will never be enough.

The women's sector through its provision of women only services provides a unique and effective vehicle for the empowerment of women and the development of the necessary skills to tackle inequalities and discrimination. The sector must be adequately resourced and its right to provide women only services must be protected.

In many communities women are the innovators and drivers of change eg rural women are at the forefront of farm diversification schemes. This energy and commitment needs to be harnessed, strengthened and translated into all areas of public life.

Politicians and policy makers should:

- Lead the way in living up to United Nations Resolution 1325 by using existing legislation to include at least 40% of women in civic and public life. Political parties should implement the Sex Discrimination (Election candidates) Act 2002 by ensuring that women are nominated for winnable positions both within the party and at elections.
- Ensure that all women are able to participate in community education and learning. Women should have a choice of flexible opportunities including well resourced, high quality accredited and non-accredited learning provided by community and voluntary organisations. The barriers which prevent women returning to education such as the availability of affordable childcare must be removed. The Department of Employment and Learning needs to engage with community and voluntary training providers to establish how best opportunities for women in this area can be supported and expanded.
- Take decisive action to tackle economic inequality experienced by women. In particular rates of statutory maternity pay should be raised to allow parents to avail of the recent changes to parental leave entitlement, changes to legislation should be made to allow women who are not in the work force to accrue enough contributions to entitle them to a full state pension and young women and girls should receive information on a wide range of educational/training opportunities including those occupations in which women are traditionally underrepresented.
- Ensure that the next action plan to implement the Tackling Violence at Home strategy, due in 2007 contains tangible, measurable and resourced actions. Support for the 24 hour helpline for women experiencing domestic violence should be maintained.
- Engage relevant public bodies and voluntary agencies to develop an integrated strategy to deliver services on all forms of violence against women. This includes

issues such as rape, trafficking and sexual violence in the home. Further, measure the implementation against standards outlined in 'Making the Grade' publication from the Women's National Commission.

- Ensure that high quality, affordable, age appropriate and accessible childcare is available to all children in Northern Ireland regardless of their age or where they live.

Sections 6 – 12 of the Childcare Act (2006), which places a duty on Local Authorities in England to ensure that sufficient registered childcare places are available to meet the needs of their communities and a duty to provide advice and information to parents, should be extended to cover Northern Ireland in order that a Childcare Information Service is available to all parents in need of advice.

- Ensure access to non-directive information and advice on sexual health, contraception, fertility and all other women's health issues.
- Ensure women have access to the financial resources necessary to allow them to pursue legal cases and oblige absent fathers to meet their financial responsibility to their children. Authorities in Great Britain, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland should work together in this area.

Young people

Young People are vital members of society in Northern Ireland. The rights of young people are not something that is conferred on them by society in return for good behaviour – they are inalienable human rights to which everyone is entitled. All young people are entitled to the same rights as adults but also have additional rights conferred on them by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The UNCRC is a set of non-negotiable and legally binding minimum standards and obligations which the Government has ratified and should be delivering for all children and young people in Northern Ireland. It is imperative that the UNCRC is fully implemented in Northern Ireland. Recent developments such as the introduction of ASBO's are an illustration of Government breaching the rights of young people and the recently launched ten year Strategy for Children and Young People, though generally welcome, falls far short of being the implementation plan for the UNCRC. Government must address all of the UNCRC Committee's recommendations when it reports to it on 2007 and be seen to be making real progress in addressing the failings identified in the Committee's 2002 report

Young people are entitled to have a say in all matters which affect them, to have their views taken into account and to have their best interests given the most importance when adults make decisions for them. This includes meaningful participation in any decisions and services that will have an impact on their lives and the lives of their families and communities. The creation of the office of NI Commissioner for Children and Young People and its role in facilitating consultation with young people is to be welcomed and NICCY should be adequately resourced to decentralise its work in order to reach more young people all over Northern Ireland.

All children and young people are entitled to these rights, including young people who are vulnerable or hard to reach such as homeless young people, looked after young people, young people in the criminal justice system, young lone parents, young people with a disability, young people from minority ethnic groups, young carers and young people from the Travelling community.

Government and parties should:

- Act as advocates for the positive promotion of the rights of young people. This will involve ensuring that young people are aware of their rights as well as developing and implementing policies and practices which protect these rights.
- Support and develop initiatives designed to encourage active citizenship amongst young people. Examples include the development of shadow councils and the proposed District Youth Networks. Politicians should ensure that these structures are inclusive of all young people.
- Ensure, through the inspection regime, that schools and colleges are open, welcoming and tolerant environments which embrace the diversity of people who live in Northern Ireland and recognise the role that community based activities have in contributing to young people's development.
- Review the current apprenticeship schemes to ensure that young apprentices are entitled to the National Minimum Wage and given quality placements which will help them develop their skills.
- Stop economic discrimination against young workers by raising the National Minimum Wage for young people to the same level as other workers and abolish the lower age limit and allow 16-17 year olds who are living

independently access to social security benefits in their own right and at the same level of those over 25.

- Develop and implement a comprehensive careers service that is accessible to all young people including those who are not in the school system
- Resource support and advocacy services for young people who are living with drug and alcohol abuse.
- Ensure young people receive adequate non-judgemental and assessable information on issues related to sexual health and emotional development and support initiatives designed to combat bullying.
- Recognise the alarming rates of suicide and self harm amongst young people in NI and provide accessible and appropriate information and support to meet the mental and emotional health needs of young people.