



NICVA Briefing for Members of the Social Development Committee

SUMMARY

1. As the umbrella representative organisation for the voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland, NICVA has over 1,000 members. NICVA offers comprehensive advice to member organisations on charity law, funding, finance, personnel and policy matters. More detail on the current funding situation in the voluntary and community sector is provided at Annex A.
2. NICVA is concerned that as public spending contracts in Northern Ireland and many sources of funding come to an end, the voluntary and community sector will be badly affected. A brief snapshot of just some of NICVA's members shows 54 organisations facing the combined loss of over 130 jobs, loss of support to over 160 volunteers, leading to a resultant loss of services to over 6,500 people.
3. A smaller more strategic Peace III, the loss of money to the Big Lottery Fund due to the Olympics, the running down of the Executive Programme Funds for Children and Young People, the ending of the Community Investment Fund, changes to Neighbourhood Renewal and the passing on of 3% so-called efficiency savings to organisations are all affecting frontline services and ultimately the viability of the organisations and the services and jobs they provide.
4. NICVA has raised the issue of efficiency savings in departmental budgets simply being passed on as direct cuts with a resultant impact on services with DFP for over four years. We have recently raised the matter again with the Health Minister and with the Finance Minister. There is now evidence that this is happening and cuts applied universally reward the inefficient and punish the efficient.
5. After a brief survey of a number of sub-sectors of the voluntary and community sector, NICVA has come up with the following funding problems currently manifesting themselves:
 - Services for families at risk are under threat as funding comes to an end. For example, funding for Homestart schemes across Northern Ireland will run out in March and no decision on new funding has yet been made. In terms of cost effectiveness, it costs Homestart £422 to support a child and its family for one year compared to £83,950 to support a child in care for one year.

- After schools projects are also under threat. A number have already closed. In June 2008 current funding ceases for 250 projects and quite a number will close, eg Camowen Partnership in Omagh is facing 23 job losses through the closure of projects in three local areas. PlayBoard estimates an amount of £3 million over the next three years is required to sustain existing services. This amount does not take account of additional provision being created which would assist with meeting child poverty targets.
- Local community relations projects which do not think they will be funded under Peace III have already had to lay off staff and some staff have been put on monthly contracts. The closure of Dergfinn Partnership, a cross-border project involved in peace-building initiatives with disadvantaged communities for over ten years, will result in the loss of services to over 100 participants.
- A number of groups providing support to victims are laying off or have already laid off staff. The main effect will be felt at the end of June this year. Peace III Priority 1.2 has only just opened for application and there will be a substantial reduction in the monies available.
- Many women's groups have had poor relationships with councils in the past and they are unsure about getting funding from the elements of Peace III that are council-led. Community-based training for women has an uncertain future and there are considerable worries within community-based groups with regard to sustainability. Kilcooley Women's Education and Development Group faces possible closure on 30 June 2008 if no funder is found. Along with eight job losses, 250 women and 40 children will be affected by loss of provision.
- Aware Defeat Depression, a small organisation working in mental health and receiving only £20,000 per year, is currently receiving only 68% of the costs of the services it provides for a health trust and meeting the remainder from other charitable income. It has been told it will be cut by 9% over the next three years. Raising charitable income is extremely difficult in an increasingly competitive environment. This service is extremely cost-effective, involving large numbers of volunteers (staff/volunteer ration is 1:8) who themselves have experience of the medical condition. Cuts to services such as this run counter to the NI Executive's intentions to care for more people in the community and to implementation of the Bamford Review recommendations. Vital support services need to remain in place.
- Provision for young people is also under threat. Public Achievement, a civic youth work project working directly with 300 young people through 40 volunteers mostly in areas where the Youth Service is absent or has pulled out, is facing a considerable shortfall due to the

imminent closure of four funding schemes covering staff and 40% of overheads. Corpus Christi Youth Club in Belfast facing a withdrawal of annual funding will result in seven staff losing their positions and the restriction of access to informal and recreational services for over 450 young people.

- Local community development work is at serious risk. For example the Mornington Project in South Belfast is facing closure at the end of June 2008 after 19 years of community development work. Ten members of staff will be lost as well as services to over 500 users delivered on a weekly basis.
 - Advice services in rural and urban areas are also facing an uncertain future. Causeway and North Down Citizens' Advice Bureaux are each losing community outreach workers. These workers provide a valuable service to 1,200 isolated individuals who would otherwise not have been able to access CAB.
 - Changes to Neighbourhood Renewal will mean that in the Galliagh area of Derry seven projects, including the ground-breaking Good Morning North West programme which provides a daily service to 628 vulnerable older people, will close their doors resulting in the loss of 24 jobs. In East Belfast the Community Drugs Awareness programme (CODA) will lose five members of staff and the counselling, personal development, training and education services they provide to between 300-400 people a year in East Belfast will cease. The LifeStart programme based in Ballymagroarty provides home-based parenting and family support to 200 families with children under five across the Outer West area of Northern Ireland. The loss of Neighbourhood Renewal will mean this service will cease with the loss of three full-time jobs.
6. As funding dries up, organisations will close without there being any overview of what services are essential, what organisations are strategically valuable and what the impact of closure will be. NICVA has asked the Minister for Social Development to bring forward a White Paper on the Voluntary and Community Sector to provide a context for its policy and funding relationship with the sector
 7. NICVA has asked the outgoing Minister for Finance and Personnel, Peter Robinson, to commission an Efficiency Scrutiny of the delivery of public services by voluntary and community organisations to determine their real value for money.
 8. For more information contact Frances McCandless, Director of Policy, NICVA, on 028 90 87777 or frances.mccandless@nicva.org

BRIEFING FOR THE SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE ON FUNDING FOR VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS

APPENDIX A Detailed Report

1.0 NICVA

1.1 As the umbrella representative organisation for the voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland, NICVA has over 1,000 members. NICVA offers comprehensive advice to member organisations on charity law, funding, finance, personnel and policy matters. NICVA works to ensure the sector is represented at every level, and that the voice of the sector is facilitated through the media and into the corridors of power.

2.0 CURRENT FUNDING ENVIRONMENT

2.1 NICVA is concerned that as public spending contracts in Northern Ireland and many sources of funding come to an end, the voluntary and community sector will be badly affected. Combined with this, the public sector drive for 3% efficiency savings is frequently being passed on to voluntary and community organisations as straightforward cuts. This will affect frontline services and ultimately the viability of organisations and the services and jobs they provide.

2.2 There is no sign of an overall government strategy for the voluntary and community sector. As funding dries up, organisations will close without there being any overview of what services are essential, what organisations are strategically valuable and what the impact of closure will be.

2.3 NICVA has asked the Minister for Social Development to bring forward a White Paper on the Voluntary and Community Sector to provide a context for its policy and funding relationship with the sector.

2.4 A brief snapshot of just some of NICVA's members shows 64 organisations facing the combined loss of over 151 jobs, loss of support to over 169 volunteers, leading to a resultant loss of services to over 7,550 people.

2.5 There are some notable funding changes under way.

3.0 TRANSITION FROM PEACE II TO PEACE III

3.1 NICVA does not believe that it makes sense to talk of a 'gap' between Peace II and Peace III as they are such different programmes and it is

unlikely that many of the organisations supported under Peace II will be funded under Peace III. This latter is a much reduced amount of money and is to be spent via a more strategic programme, largely, as far as the voluntary and community sector's involvement is concerned, through local strategic peace plans developed by clusters of councils.

- 3.2 There are other parts of Peace III which voluntary and community organisations will be able to access, namely the victims strand administered by the Community Relations Council and Border Action, which should facilitate direct application for money in the same way that previous programmes have done. Also, there will be scope for more regional, thematic programmes to be funded.
- 3.4 Peace II funded over 7,000 projects and over 5,000 of these have already come to an end. The remaining projects are mostly due to end by June this year. Although European funding has only contributed some 9% to the overall income of the voluntary and community sector (NICVA *State of the Sector IV*), for small organisations it has formed an important part of their funding mix and without it, continuation of their activities may not be possible.
- 3.5 Organisations running successful programmes, conscious of the ending of Peace II and other time bound funding programmes, traditionally look towards mainstream funding to continue their work. However this is proving extremely difficult given the general squeeze on existing resources and the drive to find efficiency savings. For example the Shankill Stress and Trauma Centre was aware that its funding under Peace II was coming to an end and so began negotiations with the local health trust to secure funding to support its professional trauma counselling services in North and West Belfast. The Shankill Stress and Trauma Centre has worked closely with the Department of Health via its trusts since it began its work 21 years ago. However they now believe that mainstream funding will not be a possibility as a result of the need to find efficiency cuts. This means that the Shankill Stress and Trauma Centre is facing closure or a severe scale back of its operations from August this year resulting in 125 people per month from North and West Belfast no longer receiving support.

4.0 OTHER SOURCES OF FUNDING

- 4.1 There are, of course, other sources of funding open to voluntary and community organisations. From NICVA's latest figures, some 35% of income comes from government and around 32% from the general public. Only a tiny fraction of the sector's income (1.7%) comes from business. This is lower than in other parts of the UK.
- 4.2 Funders such as the Lottery are increasingly important, however the Big Lottery Fund itself has been affected by the funding of the London Olympics. In Northern Ireland we could be facing approximately £80

million in lost revenue for good causes. To put this in context, the Big Lottery Fund's entire budget for 2006 to 2009 was £90 million. The loss is made up from a combination of transfer from National Lottery distributors (the National Lottery Distribution Fund) to help meet the cost of the facilities and infrastructure for the 2012 Games, additional money from sports lottery distributors for the Olympics, so-called 'cannibalisation' with people switching to an Olympic Lottery game instead of the normal game whose proceeds go to good causes and contributions to a legacy trust for Olympic themed events.

- 4.3 In recent years, as a result of government's Positive Steps policy, additional funds were introduced – a Community Investment Fund (£5 million over three years) and a Modernisation Fund to encourage a level playing field in service provision (£3 million over three years). These funds are due to come to an end next year (although there is a possibility that the Community Investment Fund may continue) further adding to the funding stress in the sector.
- 4.4 In addition, the Children's Fund, which followed on from Executive Programme Funds, is to be run down over the next three years, putting services for children and young people at risk. This has supposedly been mainstreamed into departments; however, not all departments involved seem to be releasing funds.
- 4.5 Other funds which have been reduced or ended include Department of Education funding for community relations and after schools and Youth Service funding. This will have a major impact on the sector and on service provision. 2,800 childcare places in 57 projects right across Northern Ireland are at risk if the funding for School Age Childcare Projects, which runs out at the end of June, is not extended. The funding scheme, which operates through the Executive Children's Fund, provides parents with affordable, accessible childcare to enable them to return to training, education or employment opportunities. To date 2,829 parents have returned to work thanks to the childcare offered by the relevant school age childcare projects involved in the initiative which currently funds 2,800 childcare places. A further 210 parents have joined training courses while children are cared for under the funding initiative.

5.0 EFFICIENCY SAVINGS

- 5.1 All statutory bodies are tasked with finding 3% efficiency savings for each of the next three years. In some instances, notably in health trusts, these are being passed on as cuts directly to voluntary and community organisations providing frontline services. In other cases there will be no increases in line with inflation – resulting in the equivalent of an 8-9% cut over three years.

- 5.2 Voluntary and community organisations often provide services to the most vulnerable and hardest to reach members of our society. They do so at a cost which is subsidised by the additional income which they raise; thus the contracted amount they receive from statutory organisations is very rarely the full cost of providing the services. The generosity of the public, the investment of private trusts and the income generation activities of the organisations themselves are subsidising the provision of public services in most cases.
- 5.3 NICVA therefore thinks it is adding insult to injury that some organisations have been told, without consultation, that they will not be receiving inflationary uplifts this year and that, in addition, they will be facing a cut of 3% of their funding for each of the next three years. Although these are being presented as efficiency savings, there has been no attempt to determine if any inefficiencies actually exist. We think it unlikely, as services costs are usually pared to the bone. Instead, government funders appear simply to be passing on their 3% savings targets to the providers of front-line services.
- 5.4 Our fear and that of our members is that the most vulnerable will suffer from these cuts to front-line services, the very things which the Northern Ireland Executive has stated it wishes to avoid. Voluntary and community organisations consider themselves adept at maximising resource utilisation – something to which the public sector is increasingly turning its attention. We would like our members to be encouraged in this, rather than penalised or forced to accept terms that are unsustainable.
- 5.5 For example, there will be no uplifts in line with inflation this year in the Supporting People budget. This programme currently funds a range of housing support services in over 900 schemes, providing support to approximately 23,000 service users at any one time, including families, older people, single homeless, as well as individuals with specific vulnerabilities (eg physical and mental disabilities, substance misuse issues, etc). Services range from staffing provision in sheltered housing schemes to housing-related advice services. These services play a crucial role in enabling vulnerable people to secure or maintain a tenancy or remain in their own home – alternative services could prove much more costly. Due to underfunding in recent years combined with lack of uplift, one service providing organisation will find itself with a deficit of £755,000 at the end of the next three years from one service alone. A second provider will face a deficit of £104,984 for the coming year.
- 5.6 In recent years, services have absorbed the net increase in staff costs due, for example, to the cumulative impact of NJC pay scales and NILGOSC pensions. One large housing association has already made savings of 14% on existing services. Year on year efficiency gains on top of this are not sustainable.

6.0 NEIGHBOURHOOD RENEWAL

- 6.1 There have been problems across Northern Ireland with Neighbourhood Renewal. The Social Development Minister's speech to the Neighbourhood Renewal conference in 2007 made clear that: "Neighbourhood Renewal is not simply about funding and, particularly, it is not just about sustaining local or individual projects or groups simply because they have always been funded in the past. It is not a continuation of past programmes. The community sector will continue to play a vital role in delivering services, but there must also be acceptance of the fact that my Department will not be in a position to provide financial support to all existing community organisations."
- 6.2 While organisations accept that Neighbourhood Renewal is supposed to be about improving delivery of services and tailoring them better to meet local needs, it has been disappointing for local groups to find that the programme has funded new development workers in areas where existing groups struggle to get funds. Other problems have included which neighbourhoods are in and which are outside of Neighbourhood Renewal areas, a lack of statutory buy in and a lack of strategic direction with funding being drip fed rather than logically allocated and based on need. Expectations raised by Neighbourhood Renewal have contributed to funding problems in some areas.
- 6.3 DSD has reassessed Neighbourhood Renewal funding and plans to cease funding projects which it considers to be the responsibility of other departments. Since those departments may not agree to meet the shortfall, services previously funded by Neighbourhood Renewal may now have to close. In the Galliagh area of Derry seven projects, including the ground-breaking Good Morning North West programme which provides a daily service to 628 vulnerable older people, will close their doors resulting in the loss of 24 jobs. In East Belfast the Community Drugs Awareness programme (CODA) will lose five members of staff and the counselling, personal development, training and education services they provide to between 300-400 people a year in East Belfast will cease. The LifeStart programme based in Ballymagroarty provides home-based parenting and family support to 200 families with children under five across the Outer West area of Northern Ireland. The loss of Neighbourhood Renewal will mean this service will cease with the loss of three full-time jobs.

7.0 CONSEQUENCES OF THE GENERAL FUNDING ENVIRONMENT

- 7.1 After a brief survey of a number of sub-sectors of the voluntary and community sector, NICVA has come up with the following funding problems currently manifesting themselves:
- Services for families at risk are under threat as funding comes to an end. For example, funding for Homestart schemes across Northern

Ireland will run out in March and no decision on new funding has yet been made. In terms of cost effectiveness, it costs Homestart £422 to support a child and its family for one year compared to £83,950 to support a child in care for one year.

- After schools projects are also under threat. A number have already closed. In June 2008 current funding ceases for 250 projects and quite a number will close, eg Camowen Partnership in Omagh is facing 23 job losses through the closure of projects in three local areas. PlayBoard estimates an amount of £3 million over the next three years is required to sustain existing services. This amount does not take account of additional provision being created which would assist with meeting child poverty targets.
- Local community relations projects which do not think they will be funded under Peace III have already had to lay off staff and some staff have been put on monthly contracts. The closure of Dergfinn Partnership, a cross-border initiative involved in peace-building initiatives with disadvantaged communities for over ten years, will result in the loss of services to over 100 participants.
- A number of groups providing support to victims are laying off or have already laid off staff. The main effect will be felt at the end of June this year. Peace III Priority 1.2 has only just opened for application and there will be a substantial reduction in the monies available.
- Many women's groups have had poor relationships with councils in the past and they are unsure about getting funding from the elements of Peace III that are council-led. Community-based training for women has an uncertain future and there are considerable worries within community-based groups with regard to sustainability. Kilcooley Women's Education and Development Group faces possible closure on 30 June 2008 if no funder is found. Along with eight job losses, 250 women and 40 children will be affected by loss of provision.
- Aware Defeat Depression, a small organisation working in mental health and receiving only £20,000 per year, is currently receiving only 68% of the costs of the services it provides for a health trust and meeting the remainder from other charitable income. It has been told it will be cut by 9% over the next three years. Raising charitable income is extremely difficult in an increasingly competitive environment. This service is extremely cost-effective, involving large numbers of volunteers (staff/volunteer ration is 1:8) who themselves have experience of the medical condition. Cuts to services such as this run counter to the NI Executive's intentions to care for more people in the community and to implementation of the Bamford Review recommendations. Vital support services need to remain in place.

- Provision for young people is also under threat. Public Achievement, a civic youth work project working directly with 300 young people through 40 volunteers mostly in areas where the Youth Service is absent or has pulled out, is facing a considerable shortfall due to the imminent closure of four funding schemes covering staff and 40% of overheads. Corpus Christi Youth Club in Belfast facing a withdrawal of annual funding will result in seven staff losing their positions and the restriction of access to informal and recreational services for over 450 young people.
- Local community development work is at serious risk. For example the Mornington Project in South Belfast is facing closure at the end of June 2008 after 19 years of community development work. Ten members of staff will be lost as well as services to over 500 users on a weekly basis.
- Advice services in rural and urban areas are also facing an uncertain future. Causeway and North Down Citizens' Advice Bureaux are each losing vital community outreach workers. These workers provide a valuable service to 1,200 isolated individuals who would otherwise not have been able to access CAB.

7. POTENTIAL NEW SOURCES OF FUNDING

- 7.1 In November 2007, Finance Minister Peter Robinson announced that a consultation would take place early in 2008 into priorities for distribution of dormant accounts in Northern Ireland. It is estimated that between £10 million and £20 million will be released initially with further, reduced funds released on an ongoing basis. This will represent Northern Ireland's share of an Unclaimed Assets Fund, made up of money lying in bank accounts that can no longer be reconnected with its owners.
- 7.2 It is now expected this consultation will happen after the summer. Conservative estimates suggest funding will not hit the ground until 2010.
- 7.3 The Department of Finance and Personnel will be consulting with other Northern Ireland departments and possibly other stakeholders prior to launching the public consultation. Following public consultation they will decide on priorities and issue directions to the Big Lottery Fund for funding programmes. NICVA has been in touch with DFP to take part in pre-consultation discussions before a paper is drafted for the public consultation.
- 7.4 A pre-consultation meeting was held at NICVA on 31 January 2008, by open invitation, to discuss the dormant accounts fund distribution and consultation.

- 7.5 There was full consensus that NICVA should play a role in informing and engaging the voluntary and community sector in consultation on dormant accounts distribution.
- 7.6 The priority directions which DFP will give to the Big Lottery Fund will have to be additional to Exchequer expenditure. Many at NICVA's pre-consultation were concerned that the dormant accounts funds would be used for government projects and not for voluntary and community organisations. Participants felt the additionality principle would need to be upheld. The government definition of additionality is "*Distinct from government funding and adds value. Although it does not substitute for Exchequer expenditure, where appropriate it complements government and other programmes, policies and funding.*"
- 7.7 Others were concerned that the funds would not be distinct enough from lottery funds, given the preferred distributor, the Big Lottery Fund. The suggestion was made that a selection panel be set up separate to current project selection panels at BIG to oversee the dormant accounts distribution and therefore protect its distinctiveness.
- 7.8 There was significant common ground supporting the use of dormant accounts funds for the ongoing development and sustainability of organisations across the whole voluntary and community sector in line with areas identified under Positive Steps. It was discussed that considerable research, analysis and debate had taken place to develop 'Positive Steps' and that this could provide a good framework for funding benefits to the whole sector.
- 7.9 Many identified ongoing running costs as the key gap in funding available to the sector. The contributors pointed out that there are many opportunities for 'project' funding but new and current projects could only be sustained and developed by securing key operational costs, such as directors, finance and fundraising salaries, overheads and organisational development costs.
- 7.10 Some expressed exasperation with funders' demands to continually design new and innovative projects to secure funding whenever the ongoing needs were the real priority and just needed to be sustained. Many also expressed that funding should be accessible to smaller and medium sized organisations – not just larger voluntary organisations.
- 7.11 Positive Steps has identified a number of areas which could revolutionise the efficiency and effectiveness of the whole sector. The potential for dormant accounts funding is itself referenced in Positive Steps (3.6). A comprehensive list of the areas identified in Positive Steps is appended at the end of this brief. While some of these areas have begun to be tackled by Community Investment Fund and Modernisation Fund funding, many expressed the belief that this has not gone far enough and some expressed disappointment at what has been achieved under Positive Steps to date. Research by NICVA into

progress on Positive Steps also suggests a great deal more needs to be done.

- 7.12 While the detail of Positive Steps was not discussed, many agreed with the proposal to choose priorities which could benefit any (if not every) organisation in the voluntary and community sector – while allowing an opportunity for each sector to represent its own priorities in addition to this.

For more information contact Frances McCandless, Director of Policy, NICVA, on 028 9087 7777 or frances.mccandless@nicva.org

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APPENDIX B

FINANCIAL INFORMATION ON VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS

Income

- The total income of the sector was £614.56 million in 2003/04.
- Income has fallen by 10% (£72.9 million), in real terms, since 2000/01.
- Since 2000/01 the biggest single fall in sources of income was investment income which fell by 72% (in real terms).
- 50% of all income is generated by only 5% of the sector.
- Government remains the largest funder, spending £216 million (35% of total income) on the activities of the sector.
- One in every five organisations is dependent on 75% or more of their income from government sources.
- The general public gives £199 million (32% of total income) to the sector. This equates to £12.72 per person per month.
- Income generated via the private sector represents just 1.7% (£10.45 million) of total income.

Expenditure

- Total expenditure in 2003/04 was £590.59 million. This equates to 96.1% of total income.
- The cost of undertaking activities in the furtherance of charitable objects (for example, the delivery of services) was the main type of charitable expenditure. The sector spent £422.95 million (71.6%) on charitable activities in 2003/04.
- Staff costs accounted for 52.9% of total expenditure (£312.32 million).
- Fundraising and publicity costs accounted for only 1.8% of total expenditure. In 2000/01 for the UK as a whole the cost of fundraising and publicity equated to 6.3% (£1.3 billion) of total expenditure.
- In 2003/04 it is estimated that the voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland spent £5.24 million (0.9%) on training and development for staff.

Assets and Liabilities

- Total assets of the voluntary and community sector were worth £755.84 million in 2003/04.
- Overall the asset base of the voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland has increased by 0.7% between 2000/01 and 2003/04.
- The value of investments fell sharply between 2000/01 and 2003/04 — by 44.5% in real terms since 2000/01.
- Liabilities in 2003/04 totalled £192.89 million, 25.5% of overall net assets.

People

- There are an estimated 28,932 paid employees in the voluntary and community sector. Seven out of every ten employees are females.
- This figure represents 4.4% of the total Northern Ireland workforce.
- The voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland employs 5.1% of the overall UK voluntary and community sector workforce. Latest estimates place the UK voluntary sector workforce at 569,000 people.
- Nearly six out of every ten paid employees work in an organisation with an income of over £1 million.
- There are an estimated 75,780 volunteers formally attached to voluntary and community organisations.

For more information see the full *State of the Sector* report on www.communityni.org

APPENDIX C

NICVA

NICVA began its life in 1938 as the Northern Ireland Council for Social Services (NICSS) in response to high levels of unemployment in Northern Ireland. It championed a programme of social action through welfare clubs, youth hostel tours, YMCA summer camps and a Committee for Women. In 1949 NICSS opened Pine Lodge, a home for the elderly on the Belmont Road, Belfast. This marked the Council's growing responsibility as an 'umbrella' organisation for projects which tackled social deprivation in the community.

Over the last 64 years NICSS has become increasingly well known. Its name changed to the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) in 1986 in recognition of the expansion of the voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland. Today NICVA represents the interests of its members and over 4,500 voluntary and community groups. NICVA still maintains close contact with its sister Councils — the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO), the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations (SCVO) and the Wales Council for Voluntary Action (WCVA). NICVA also has very close contact with The Wheel in the Republic of Ireland. A Five Councils meeting takes place every six months and joint work is carried out on research in the voluntary and community sector and in establishing joint positions on issues which affect the sector on a UK wide basis.

As an umbrella representative organisation for the voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland, NICVA has over 1,000 members. Full members, of which there are 945, are independent voluntary and community organisations. NICVA also has 78 subscribers to NICVA services. These include all District Councils in Northern Ireland and some statutory bodies which have an interest in or relationship with the voluntary and community sector.

NICVA receives a core grant from the Voluntary and Community Unit in the Department for Social Development to support its activities. The core grant amounts to around 40% of NICVA's total running costs. NICVA receives further income from independent charitable trusts, donors and its own earnings from membership fees, provision of training and the hire of facilities to the sector.

NICVA is an independent body with charitable status and is a company limited by guarantee. The organisation is owned by its members who elect the board of trustees or Executive Committee. The Executive Committee is responsible for the strategic direction and Development Plan of the organisation. Operational issues are the responsibility of the Chief Executive and the senior management team.

NICVA offers comprehensive advice to member organisations on charity law, funding, finance, personnel and policy matters. With a dedicated communications team, NICVA works to ensure the sector is represented at

every level, and that the voice of the sector is facilitated through the media and into the corridors of power.

NICVA members benefit from great discounts on the sorts of things they need to survive; from computer and communications equipment, through to liability insurance. Member organisations also receive regular email and printed updates on the work of the sector, and discounted entry to the Grant Tracker funding resource.

Since September 2000 NICVA has been located in Duncairn Gardens which is right on the peaceline between Tigers Bay and the New Lodge. This location has been a very successful move and the building was officially opened by Seamus Mallon MP, Deputy First Minister, on 4 April 2001. The premises continue to provide voluntary and community groups with conference and meeting facilities. The number of organisations which are making use of these facilities has increased from 876 in 2002 to 1,238 in 2006, an increase of 41%. The facilities are let to voluntary and community groups and associated government agencies at rates which are around 50% less than commercial rates.

In 2005 NICVA launched the Community NI website (www.communityni.org). Community NI is the central resource for information, news and discussion on the voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland. NICVA developed this site to promote the sector. The principle behind the site is that every voluntary, community or charitable organisation will be signposted and have the opportunity to publish their information, whether that be a newsletter, press release, job advertisement or event. All organisations registered with NICVA are accessible through the site, and new organisations and users are encouraged to register. Community NI gives charities and voluntary and community bodies the opportunity to promote themselves on the internet, to share their resources and expertise, and publicise events, news and perspectives on events affecting the sector here. The website has been a huge success and has attracted over a million visitors since it was launched. More recently NICVA has launched www.communitybuyer.org which is a website designed to help the voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland to find suppliers/companies which provide the products and services they require. The site aims to provide guidance for members and the sector when purchasing products and services, safeguard the sector in purchasing specialist goods and services and to create a level playing field for companies which supply necessary products and services to the sector.

NICVA continues to represent its members and the wider voluntary and community sector on matters of policy. NICVA's third Policy Manifesto was launched in January 2007.