



The tide of change in local government in Northern Ireland

An examination of the potential impact
of the Review of Public Administration on
relationships between district councils and
the voluntary and community sector

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1. Introduction

This research paper sets out to inform the sector on the tide of change in local government likely to come as a result of the Review of Public Administration (RPA). It will lead to far reaching changes to local government in Northern Ireland. The new system is designed to place local government, with the sector and other relevant stakeholders, at the heart of local decision-making. This will require the forming of new relationships between the sector and district councils.

There is a requirement for all stakeholders to prepare to operate in this new environment. In order for this new system to work, all stakeholders must be fully committed to these changes. The new system of local government in Northern Ireland will require fundamental changes on the part of councils and the sector. If handled efficiently this has the potential to ensure a bright future for the sector here. However without due preparation, there is a risk that many in the sector could find themselves struggling to survive in the new environment.

NICVA felt that a full picture could only be developed by looking at the issue from both the perspective of district councils and the voluntary and community sector. This will allow for a full examination of current relationships and to determine future building blocks which will be required for such changes. This research paper presents a picture of current relationships and challenges for the future from the perspective of council officials currently involved in community development. In the coming months, a second research paper will be available on these changes from the perspective of the sector. The purpose of these research papers is to raise awareness of what will be required to operate in the new environment.

2. Objectives

The objectives of this briefing paper are:

- To examine why there is a need for the RPA.
- To examine what the RPA will mean to local councils and their relationship with the sector.
- To examine current relationships between councils and local voluntary and community organisations.
- In preparation for RPA implementation, this research will examine the logistics of partnership arrangements.
- To examine awareness and understanding of the Review of Public Administration, in particular understanding of the role of community planning in the new local government arrangements.
- To determine what councils and the sector should be doing to prepare for the changes that must be in place by 2009.

3. Background — why there is a need for a Review of Public Administration

The Review of Public Administration was launched in June 2002 by the Northern Ireland Executive but because of the suspension of devolution it has been taken forward by direct rule ministers. There has been much talk about the Review of Public Administration and the fundamental changes it will bring about when fully implemented. With regard to local government in Northern Ireland, the RPA represents much more than a restructuring of local government structures. It will in fact lead to far-reaching changes of all aspects of the system.

The RPA proposes a two-tier model of public administration. The regional level would be responsible for policy development, strategic development, setting standards of service delivery and delivering regional services. It is proposed that most of the service delivery will occur at the sub-regional model. This envisages stronger local government which will be responsible for a much wider role of direct service delivery with all service delivery organisations in their council area.

The combination of years of conflict and direct rule in Northern Ireland developed a system whereby much policy came directly from Westminster and many of the powers of local government were eroded (Knox, 1999). Power was also placed in the hands of quangos and other non-elected governmental bodies. The system of public administration and governance during this period was described as suffering from a democratic deficit. The limited service role of councils has impacted on the work of many council chambers. Phrases such as ‘zero-sum politics’ and ‘either/or politics’ developed to describe the high degree of polarisation in council chambers in Northern Ireland. The system was created to function under direct rule and there is a general consensus today that Northern Ireland finds itself both over-governed and over-administered.

The changes to local government will include a reduction in the number of councils from 26 to seven by 2009. The new councils will be given much more power and responsibility. In order to deliver effective government this should be done on a power-sharing basis. In the new system the council will be at the heart of the community, working to transform the social and economic life of its local area.

4. Does the sector fit into this review?

In many respects the democratic deficit provided the perfect catalyst for the development of new forms of governance, particularly involving the voluntary and community sector. During the years of direct rule, voluntary and community organisations have been involved in many partnership arrangements with government. It has been widely acknowledged that the voluntary and community sector played a key role in the search for a political settlement in Northern Ireland. The Good Friday Agreement (1998) clearly acknowledged a role for the voluntary and community sector in future governance arrangements. Since then, all significant policy initiatives, including the Compact, the Taskforce Report, Positive Steps and A Shared Future, alongside the RPA have

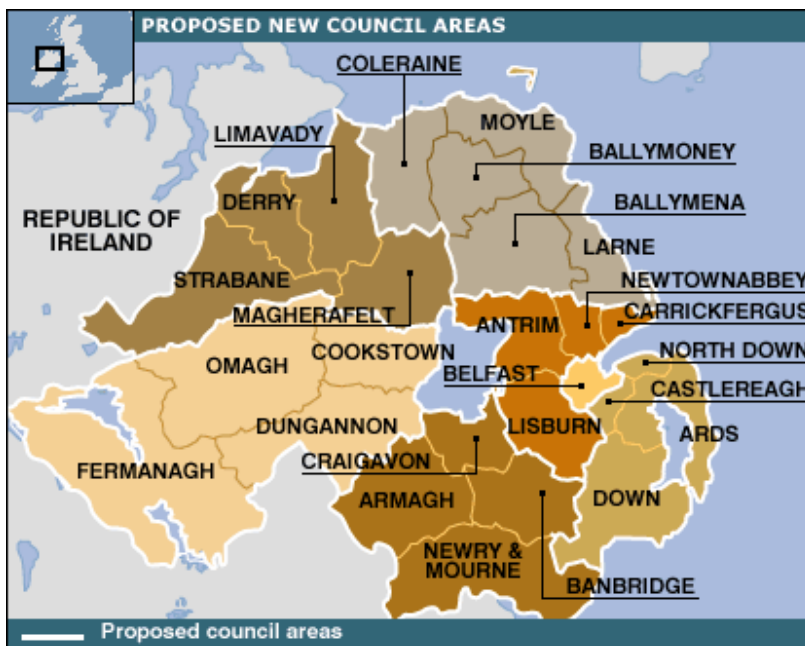
acknowledged that the sector has a part to play in the future shaping of Northern Ireland. However this is not to say that the sector will survive in its current form. The need for modernisation and efficiency in the sector has never before been so essential. It is time for the sector to begin to put its own house in order so it is prepared for future arrangements.

5. What will the changes mean to local government in Northern Ireland?

It was announced on 22 November 2005 that the new system of local government in Northern Ireland would see the reduction in the number of councils from 26 to seven. The new councils will be formed as follows:

- Belfast
- Coleraine, Moyle, Ballymoney, Ballymena and Larne
- Carrickfergus, Newtownabbey, Antrim and Lisburn
- North Down, Newtownards, Castlereagh and Down
- Craigavon, Armagh, Banbridge, Newry and Mourne
- Derry, Limavady, Strabane and Magherafelt
- Fermanagh, Omagh, Cookstown and Dungannon

Figure 1: Proposed new council arrangements in Northern Ireland



Source: BBC news website on http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern_ireland/5264164.stm (18 August 2006)

In the new arrangements councils will have responsibility for a wide range of functions including planning, local roads, community development, community relations, urban and rural regeneration and some housing services.

6. Community planning

A major change announced by the RPA is the introduction of ‘community planning’. This has been described as the glue in the new system of administration. Community planning will have a legislative basis whereby local councils will be required to involve the voluntary and community sector, along with other relevant stakeholders in decisions that affect the local community. This will involve working in partnership with these stakeholders to create a community plan. In addition under the ‘power of wellbeing’ councils may take steps to improve the economic, environmental and social well-being of the community

The RPA suggests that the process of establishing a community plan is as important as the product itself, particularly in encouraging community involvement and enhancing local democracy. It is anticipated that this will lead to better co-ordination and use of existing resources. This presents an opportunity for the sector to be represented at the decision-making table. However there are a number of questions which must be answered. Who should sit at the table? How will they represent the views of the sector? How will they feed back information to the sector? These questions should be answered in the next stage of the work of the sub-groups set up under the RPA to flesh out the details of community planning.

Community planning and the power of wellbeing are currently used in other parts of the UK and the Republic of Ireland and key informants are seeking to learn from their experiences when developing community planning to be used in Northern Ireland. Regardless of the outcome, one thing is certain — this new system will require new relationships to be forged between the sector and local government. The challenge of sharing resources will not just be confined to government, but will also face the sector. Organisations need to be resourced for such change in terms of awareness and capacity building.

7. Learning from experience of community planning

The proposed inclusions for legislation on community planning in Northern Ireland are largely based on Scottish legislation and an element of English legislation on community planning. In preparation for the changes likely to come with this new legislation, it is possible to try to learn from the experience of community planning elsewhere.

Research commissioned by the Office of First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) (2005) examined community planning in operation in the UK and Ireland; this included an examination of the Scottish model of community planning. The Local Government in Scotland Act (2003) provides the statutory framework for the community planning process. The Act places a duty on local authorities to prepare community plans and to form Community Planning Partnerships with the public, private and voluntary sectors. The partnerships are also required to form ‘themed’ partnerships agreed by all the partners and led by the partner best placed to lead on appropriate themes. Community

planning in Scotland places a strong emphasis on making connections between national priorities and those at regional, local and neighbourhood levels. This is viewed as a way to ensure that partnerships can help assist deliver national priorities in such a way that most suit local needs.

Through analysis of five case studies a number of issues emerged as most relevant to the RPA and in particular the community planning process to come in Northern Ireland. It was found that it is essential to have sufficient lead in time to establish sound and working relationships. The case study analysis also found that partners at elected member and chief executive or director level are seen to be the most successful. In addition the level of understanding that partners have of each other's organisations cannot be over-estimated. It is essential that work is done to build relationships between the partners; this can require structured training to remove what may be power imbalances between the partners. There also should be strong government support of community planning. Experience of community planning in practice has demonstrated that active voluntary and community involvement is essential. These are issues which should be taken into consideration in the development of the community planning process in Northern Ireland.

8. Methodology

This research set out to examine current relationships between local councils and the sector and to determine what support the sector requires during this time of change. Two councils in each of the proposed new council areas were randomly selected (with the exception of Belfast as it will largely remain in its current form). Council officials working in community development in each of the councils were selected, as these individuals are viewed as working closely with the sector in each of the council areas.

In terms of engagement with key council officials it was decided that face to face interviews would be most appropriate, as it provides an opportunity to gather first hand perceptions of current relationships between councils and the sector, as well as to determine future support needs. The interviews were carried out in the period of late May to early July 2006.

The quotations used in this briefing paper are non attributable to specific councils. It was felt more important to build a picture of the key issues emerging than to try and make comparisons between councils.

9. The development of partnerships between councils and the sector

Partnership arrangements between government and the sector have a long history in Northern Ireland. During the years of direct rule community activity was channelled into a range of partnerships with government as a way to offer direct participation into unaccountable political structures (Wilson, 2000). In this period the voluntary and community sector participated in policy making in Northern Ireland to a degree that is unusual elsewhere (McCall & Williamson, 2001). The design of the European Union Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland and the

Border Counties of Ireland (EUSPPR) stressed the need for local participative structures. It included Sub-Programme 6 which contained a District Partnership initiative, based on establishing cross-sectional structures drawing evenly from public, private, voluntary and community sectors and local council officials to operate in the 26 council areas (Murtagh, 2001). It has been claimed that the District Partnership Programme gave Northern Ireland's voluntary and community sector a more central role with regard to issues of regeneration and local development than any of the other EU partnerships in any other of the member states (Williamson et al, 2000). The district partnership initiative has claimed considerable success in Northern Ireland (Greer et al, 1999; Murtagh, 2001) with partnerships now viewed as a vital component of political life in Northern Ireland.

“In short, the partnerships have been successful as a result of cross-sectional good-will and collaboration and an enormous amount of personal commitment from members to achieve the goal of a more stable and equitable society at a local level. Moreover, partnerships have not performed as ‘talking shops’ but have sought to make a real difference by virtue of their funding. Undoubtedly this brought a sense of purpose to the work of Board members.” (Hughes et al, 1998, p 184)

The Peace II programme recognised the strength of partnership working in Peace I. In the second programme it changed the composition of the partnerships into an equal bi-partite structure made up of:

1. Local government and the main statutory bodies
2. Social partners, including the voluntary and community sector, trade unions and private sector.

The new partnership arrangements were called Local Strategy Partnerships (LSPs). A key concern of the Peace II Programme was to promote local regeneration and sustainability, particularly in areas of high social need and high conflict. Local Strategy Partnerships (LSPs) were set up to secure local agreement and community participation in progressing actions that were consistent with local integrated strategies and plans. A review of the Peace II programme found that LSPs are generally an effective way of working together and *“in terms of implementation processes, research has pointed out that LSPs can add significant value” (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2005, p27)*. However, these partnership arrangements have not been without problems and the review also found that the financial progress of LSPs was disappointing. Funding complications impacted on the delivery of some LSPs and in addition there was a feeling of ‘power imbalances’ between the sector and local government in some LSPs.

The concept of ‘working together’ at the local council level has become increasingly ‘in vogue’ and in recognition of the vital role voluntary and community organisations play in Northern Ireland community support plans have been set up in each of the council areas. These plans have their origins in the review of the district councils’ community services programme that was undertaken by the Department for Social Development (DSD) in 2000. The purpose of these plans is to enable groups to express their needs and for

councils to support them. NICVA carried out a *Viewfinder* survey in June 2006¹ which found that 42.6% of respondents were aware of a community support plan in their area; of the respondents who were aware of the community support plan, 40.9% of individuals stated their organisation had been involved in the development of the community support plan.

Under the current system, councils in Northern Ireland are involved to varying degrees in providing and supporting the following services for the voluntary and community sector.

- Community halls and community centres - councils can provide funding for the running, management and maintenance of these halls and centres.
- Funding community development - in the form of grant aid. This funding can be in the form of a seeding grant or a technical assistance grant or a capacity building grant.
- Community development/capacity building - this can include advice giving and training.
- Community relations/good relations.
- Representation on forums.

Through the above work both formal and informal relationships have been formed between councils and the sector. Based on the interviews for this research it was found that over half of the council officials (61.6%) felt that they had a good or fairly good relationship with the sector in each of their areas. However 15.3% of council officials felt they had a satisfactory relationship and 23.1% felt they had a poor relationship with the sector. It is not unusual that such a diversity of relationships exist ranging from very good to poor. The forming of partnership arrangements is a delicate task and if not handled carefully can result in frustration on both parts.

In addition, a recent survey carried out by NICVA (*Viewfinder 5, 2005*²) examined relationships between the sector and local councils. 40.6% of respondents described their relationship as good or excellent, 39.2% described their relationship as satisfactory and 20.2% of respondents described their relationship as poor or extremely poor. This survey also found that 32.7% of respondents felt local councillors sideline the needs of the sector, with another 43.5% of respondents not holding an opinion on the matter. In addition, this survey examined if respondents felt that the future role of community planning will give the sector a stronger voice in shaping the local community. This revealed that 17.8% of respondents do not feel the change will give the sector a stronger voice in shaping the local community and a further 36.9% of respondents did not hold an opinion on the matter. 45.3% of respondents are more positive and feel it will give the sector a stronger voice. The results of this survey indicate that in many respects the jury remains out with regard to the effect these changes will have on the sector. However the sector cannot afford simply to wait on the final outcome of the re-organisation of local

¹ *Viewfinder 6* survey was circulated in June 2006 to 881 NICVA members. There was a 27.2% response rate.

² *Viewfinder 5* survey was circulated in late November 2005 to 895 NICVA members. There was a 33.5% response rate.

government; this is the time for the sector to prepare. Doing this will increase the sector's chances of playing an integral part in any new arrangements in Northern Ireland.

10. The logistics of partnership working

It is important to look at what is actually involved in the process of partnership arrangements given that, with the changes with the RPA, closer partnership relationships will be required between councils and the sector. The importance of involving the sector in local decision-making has been articulated by the National Audit Office (2004):

“Services designed and delivered without community input risk wasting public money because they will be unused or underused if they are not what people need.” (Getting Citizens Involved: Community Participation in Neighbourhood Renewal, 2004, p 23)

It is felt that involving the sector has the potential to improve decisions, as the information used will come from multiple sources and information can be obtained which is not normally available when acting alone (Weale, 2002).

It is important to recognise that while the potential benefits of including the sector in decision-making are high, the associated process of including the sector in local decision-making challenges the many ways in which elected members and council officials have traditionally worked (Clarke and Stewart, 1998). Experience *“suggests that legitimacy and credibility depend on how strongly a governance structure is rooted in the community”* (McKieran et al, 2000, p 26). Therefore in order for these relationships to extend beyond the rhetorical level, elected representatives and council officials must develop new skills and competencies (Biersdorff, 2001). Research carried out by Seargeant and Steele (1998) highlights the potential difficulties facing elected members in partnership arrangements where the sector is involved in decision-making:

“Elected and appointed members of Committees and Boards should be involved in and informed about the process ... there were a number of instances of members expressing reservations about the validity of public consultation, particularly the more participative methods, encroached on their own responsibility for representing the public and deciding policy.” (Seargeant and Steele, 1998, p 50)

In addition, the accusation of being ‘unrepresentative’ has been used in the past to undermine community representatives in some partnership arrangements. There have been some accusations of these arrangements being undemocratic and being made up of the ‘usual suspects’. However research carried out by K. Maguire and F Truscott (2006) has found that there is no reason why different forms of democracy and representation cannot coexist. This argument was made as different forms of democracy and representation demand accountability, either through an elected mandate or a community of interest.

In this piece of NICVA research a number of council officials acknowledged that some Councillors find it difficult to share their political space and may find the new arrangements with a statutory duty to involve the sector in community planning challenging.

“They will not be happy, many of them are very territorial and will not be happy with sharing their space.” Council A

“There may be an argument from them [Councillors] that they question why do they need to share their space?” Council L

“There is a dichotomy - the sector see it [community planning] as a way to empower local communities and Councillors will see it as a dilution of their powers.” Council I

The nature of Northern Ireland politics has impacted on our Council chambers and phrases such as ‘zero-sum politics’ and ‘either/or politics’ developed to describe the high degree of polarisation within council chambers in Northern Ireland. In this research there was somewhat of a split in opinion between council officials on whether ‘zero-sum politics’ dominate council chambers and whether it will continue to do so in the future.

“Either/or politics tend to dominate the headlines but there is a lot of good work going on.” Council L

“Councillors in this area have always worked relatively well together.” Council G

“I feel that the green and orange politics of councillors will always remain and I worry that more power will make real services become politicised.” Council B

“I feel that this will only begin to change if we fully go with the ‘Shared Future’ document but I feel that this would have to be forced to begin to see changes.” Council D

The polarised nature of politics in Northern Ireland should not preclude effective working relationships. The experience of the district partnership programme in Northern Ireland is evidence that councillors in Northern Ireland can work well together and with others and succeed. The RPA has now clearly set out that future arrangements will require much closer working relationships with one another and the sector, particularly through community planning. This process will also be influenced by whether devolution is restored to Northern Ireland by 24 November 2006. If this occurs there will be a layer of local democracy below a functioning locally elected Assembly. If devolution is not restored to Northern Ireland, councils may be the only locally elected tier of governance in Northern Ireland, sitting below direct rule ministers in the Northern Ireland Office. If direct rule remains, some have expressed concerns that the seven council chambers may be dominated by unionist or nationalist parties once again characterised by zero-sum

politics. This scenario makes the model of power sharing and governance within the new councils all the more vital as it would be operating without a model of power sharing above it at the Northern Ireland-wide level.

11. Preparing for the unknown

The timeframe for implementation of the RPA is actually very short, as everything must be in place by 2009. Various pieces of legislation will then be drafted to allow changes to happen. Richard MacKenzie was appointed as the Local Boundary Commissioner on 1 June 2006. He is responsible for setting the boundaries of the seven new council areas. The plan is to hold elections late in 2008 so that shadow structures can be in place before 2009. A working group has been formed to oversee the changes set out in the RPA, and a number of sub-working groups have been formed. The voluntary and community sector is represented on some of these groups and the sector representatives are committed to sharing information and receiving feedback.

NICVA felt it was important to have sector representatives on a number of sub-working groups including - community planning, governance, estate policy, capacity for local government and central/local government relationships. The minutes of these sub-group meetings are currently available on the NICVA website and they detail the progress to date. Despite the various mechanisms and processes to filter through the progress of RPA, this research revealed that as yet this information does not appear to be reaching council officials in any detail.

“I do not feel this council is preparing. We are being drip fed information. I know there is a governance committee set up, but operationally we know very little.”
Council D

“There is a huge amount of uncertainty and a lot of misinformation. I feel the information should be a lot clearer.” Council F

“There is limited information. I get my information primarily from the papers and NICVA website, as the working groups have not reported yet.” Council H

Some council officials stressed that their limited knowledge of the changes likely to come with the RPA is affecting their ability to help the sector prepare for this change.

“It is difficult to know, there is no guidance to work with the other councils we will be linked with ... at the minute it is difficult for us to advise the sector as we don't know how it will be laid out.” Council C

The key question to ask is what can be done now in preparation for these changes.

12. Emerging issues

In this research with council officials a number of issues emerged as being important to prepare for the changes to come with the RPA. These issues included capacity building, co-operating and networking and building on current strengths. It was generally felt that attention to these issues, on the part of both the council and the sector, would be essential to future successful working relationships.

- **Capacity building to prepare for change**

This research revealed a general feeling that there needs to be training and capacity building for Councillors, council officials and the sector to prepare for these changes. It will not be possible for this agenda to be tagged onto existing structures. The new council arrangements will demand a repositioning of everyone. It was also felt that there is also a need for stronger relationships and networks to be developed.

“I feel for this to work and for councillors to fully meet the needs of their mandate there must be proper training. Not half day training, but proper accredited training ... we need to start building relationships with other areas ... Training should be available to the sector to help them engage in the new arrangements.” Council C

A number of seminars have already been carried out on the changes in the RPA and there are more of these seminars scheduled for the autumn. These seminars are an opportunity to build understanding of the likely changes to come from the RPA.

- **The need to co-operate and network with others**

The council’s need to co-operate

As the council structures in Northern Ireland are formed this will require closer co-operation between council officials of bigger council areas. In this research, council officials were asked about their understanding of the changes likely to come from the RPA. All council officials were aware of the new council structure that will come into effect in 2009. Some council officials indicated a degree of apprehension about the prospect of merging with other councils. There was a degree of nervousness that there would be a loss of local identity.

“After the RPA local services need to be provided to local people or it will be a disaster. To have one community team for an entire council area would be a disaster.” Council A

“We have no relationship with [named council] and [named council] and I wonder how we will work with these councils ... Our groups don’t work well together and I worry that our professional voluntary organisations may not be robust enough to operate in the bigger council area.” Council C

“We will be joining with [named council] etc. We will be on the perimeter and I fear that we will be left behind.” Council E

“I feel there will be a loss of local identity.” Council F

“We are not a huge area and at the minute we know the groups we fear this will be lost. It is the small things of support that will go.” Council G

“Groups are expressing a fear of isolation.” Council H

This fear of ‘loss of local identity’ is unsurprising, with any change, it is natural for a level of apprehension to exist. The current system of 26 councils has existed for some time in Northern Ireland, and many people associate with their local council area. However the RPA has clearly stated that a reduction in the number of councils in Northern Ireland from 26 to seven is designed to create a much more effective system of governance.

The proposed two tier model of administration will focus on policy development at the regional level, with service delivery being brought to the sub-regional level. It is anticipated that this will lead to a more effective system that will hopefully eradicate duplication in the public sector and the voluntary and the community sector.

The changes outlined in the RPA are essential to ensure Northern Ireland can create a new, more accountable public sector, working together with a common vision of a world class Northern Ireland.

The sector’s need to co-operate

The legacy of direct rule in Northern Ireland has also impacted on the voluntary and community sector. For many years, voluntary and community groups sprang up as a response to unelected government in Northern Ireland (Morrison and Livingstone, 1995; cited in Greer, 2001, p 58). The dominance of ‘either/or’ politics in this country also impacted on voluntary and community organisations. In many areas, voluntary and community groups were developed almost exclusively for one side of the community (NICVA, 2003). As a result, there remains much duplication in the sector and insufficient sharing of resources. It is estimated that there are 4,500 voluntary and community organisations in Northern Ireland. These organisations provide a wide and diverse range of services.

The Taskforce on Resourcing the Voluntary and Community Sector’s report, *Positive Steps*, has encouraged collaboration in the sector. Its purpose is to assist the sector to be better placed to cope with social and economic change and imminent changes to the funding environment. The changes outlined in the RPA also indicate that in order to succeed in the new structures there is a need for voluntary and community groups to co-operate. The voluntary and community sector needs to modernise to ensure maximum

effectiveness and efficiency in delivery of services, as the public and private sectors are being encouraged to do. This will require a degree of rationalisation in the sector. It will be essential to ensure the sector is robust enough to operate in the new environment. This feeling was echoed by council officials during this research.

“The sector needs to develop links with the council and we [council officials] need to develop further links with them. Also in order for a viable future they [the sector] need to work with other groups.” Council A

“The sector should be forming links with similar groups in other areas.” Council E

- **Building on our strengths and learning to grow**

The value of the voluntary and community sector is widely acknowledged in Northern Ireland. In an environment of change it is important that the sector also reviews its own position. This research highlighted the strengths of the sector, which includes commitment, diversity and the growth of professionalism. It also clearly demonstrated there is a need to look at the issue of sustainability which includes strategic planning, co-operating with others in the sector and sharing resources. There is also a feeling that the sector needs to start viewing local government as a partner. In order to make these changes the sector will require support.

“On the positive side, some groups have had real success ... On the other side there is low community development and weak infrastructure in a number of interface areas.” Council A

“There is a huge amount of voluntary commitment. There is a huge amount of groups and a lot to be learned and shared between groups ... However historically there has been weak community infrastructure in this area and we are still playing catch up.” Council G

“On the positive side there is a huge role for social development. However on the flip side there is a lot of parochialism. A lot of groups want to do their own thing and are not strategic enough.” Council F

“There are some people involved in voluntary and community activity for a long time and have experience ... However a number of these people hold important positions such as chairs and in some cases they have become stale.” Council D

“It is a positive thing that they [the sector] are so active ... But sustainability is a key issue that needs to be looked at and taken on board. Resources are limited and not every group needs a hall, so there should be more sharing of resources.” Council H

“On the negative side I feel there still exists an element of ‘you owe us something’, ‘the statutory sector owes the voluntary sector’ in some elements of the sector.” Council I

“On the positive side it is very professional and it is very focused and they are delivering very good work on the ground. On the negative side some should try to start to look at local government as partners rather than always seeing themselves in conflict with them.” Council J

13. Conclusion

This research paper set out to provide an insight into some of the changes likely to impact on local government as a result of the RPA and how they will impact on the sector. The changes to come with the RPA will require much closer working relationships between the council and the sector when it comes to local decision-making, particularly with the new role of community planning. The success of the future arrangements will be very much dependent upon the commitment of all stakeholders. Of course this is an ongoing process, nothing is set down in stone yet and these findings are from the perspective of council officials. There is evidence of inconsistency across the councils in terms of awareness and preparation for the changes to come. Despite this, a number of issues have been raised as key issues to assist in future arrangements, as detailed in the following pages.

13. An overview of key findings

Key issues for the sector today

- Effective strategic planning is essential to the sustainable running of organisations in the sector.
- Organisations in the sector should review their services and ensure they can provide best value to the people they serve.
- Voluntary and community organisations need to find ways increasingly to co-operate and share resources with other organisations in the sector.
- Community planning offers a real opportunity for the sector to become involved in local decision-making; this will require closer working relationships to be built with both council officials and councillors.
- The sector should be making it a priority to avail of the opportunities to prepare for the changes to come from the RPA, such as the seminars, working groups and conferences focused on the RPA. Information on these events is regularly updated on the NICVA website.
- The reality of working in a bigger council area will require voluntary and community groups to look beyond their immediate areas to see what is available and what is needed in the wider council area.

Key issues for councils today

- It has been shown that services developed without community involvement risk being unused or under-used. Councils should recognise the importance of fully embracing the changes to prepare for their new roles, particularly with regard to community planning and the power of wellbeing.
- The RPA will require councils to be much more involved in local decision-making. Both council officials and councillors will require capacity building and formal training to prepare them to work effectively in the new structures.
- In recognition of the closer relationships that will be required following the RPA, councils should be working to build the capacity of local groups.
- Councils should not wait until 2009 before trying to form links with their new ‘sister’ councils. Council officials and councillors should be encouraged to engage with these councils.

The next stage of this work will be to examine the understanding of the tide of change in local government to come in Northern Ireland from the perspective of the sector. This

will involve exploring how, if at all, the sector is preparing to operate in the new environment. This work is viewed by NICVA as essential to raise awareness in the sector of the changes to come in Northern Ireland. This will enable the sector to prepare so that it is in a position to operate in the new environment come 2009.

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