

***Positive Steps* – First monitoring report**



SECTION 1

Positive Steps was launched in March 2005 to an expectant voluntary and community sector. The document was Government's response to *Investing Together*, the report of the Task Force on Resourcing the Voluntary and Community Sector, and was the culmination of a process that was first proposed in the Harbison Report published in 2000.

NICVA's Monitoring Role and the Implementation of 'Positive Steps'

One of the many issues outlined in the *Positive Steps* document was the need to assess and monitor the impact of the recommendations on the voluntary and community sector. NICVA has agreed with DSD that this first report would be a short update and that a full report would be done in six months' time. NICVA conducted a survey to examine the views and opinions of NICVA members on how they feel *Positive Steps* has impacted upon them. The survey was circulated to all NICVA members during February and a response rate of 17.9% was achieved. This is attached in Section 2.

The purpose of this section of the paper is to provide an update on the work NICVA has achieved in response to the issues arising out of the 'Positive Steps' document. The key areas identified as having a significant impact and resource implications for NICVA were:

- (1) NICVA's role in policy skills training and development.
- (2) NICVA's role in developing a skills strategy.
- (3) The development of an ICT strategy for the voluntary and community sector.
- (4) Improving governance and accountability.
- (5) NICVA's monitoring role and the implementation of 'Positive Steps'.

(1) NICVA's Role in Policy Skills Training and Development

The 'Positive Steps' document states: "*The voluntary and community sector plays an important role in the development and implementation of government policies ... the voluntary and community sector is well placed to develop training materials and skills to assist organisations to engage in the policy development process ... the Joint Forum should take this forward and work should begin soon with a view to identifying training materials required and any skills gaps.*"

Policy development has always been a core role for NICVA and was the driving force behind the development of the Public Affairs Unit. 'Positive Steps' provides an opportunity for us to take forward and consolidate this key piece of work by developing the Policy Development skills within the sector at large.

The three existing policy fora continue to meet. Ten ‘Everything you ever wanted to know about policy but were afraid to ask’ seminars have been planned for the year. The first seminar was held in January and was attended by 24 people. The evaluations show that 80% of attendees rated the seminar as very or quite useful. There are at least ten people registered for each of the five seminars that will take place before the summer.

Four different training courses are being offered in a variety of venues in partnership with local networks. The popular introduction to lobbying ‘Know your Ps from your Qs’ will be held five times. Past participants on this course expressed an interest in more information on dealing with the media and a new ‘Media Master class’ course has been developed. The first two sessions of this are fully booked and we have organised a fourth session for one organisation which wanted six of its employees to avail of the training. The other training sessions ‘Making Policy Work for You’ and ‘Human Rights – an Agenda for Change’ will begin in late March and are beginning to receive bookings.

Material for each of the sessions is being placed on the website to form a policy toolkit on each of the areas covered.

In addition NICVA has been working with OFMDFM on an interactive policy training tool which could be used as an introduction to what policy is, how it is made and how to get involved. The concept has been discussed with the sector in two meetings so far and has been warmly welcomed. Two voluntary and community sector representatives have been agreed as part of the steering group in OFMDFM that will take the project forward.

A series of European Information roadshows has been planned for 2006 in conjunction with the European Commission office and local community networks.

(2) NICVA’s Role in Developing a Skills Strategy

There is clear evidence that voluntary and community organisations face considerable skills gaps and shortages. Research in the last two years has demonstrated skills shortages in management leadership and ICT, as well as a broad range of occupational specific skills for care, conservation, etc. Sector specific skills also need to be addressed such as fundraising and managing volunteers. NICVA is the Northern Ireland partner on the UK Voluntary Sector Workforce Development Hub which is currently recognised by the Sector Skills Development Agency (SSDA), not as a Sector Skills Council but as a ‘Sector Skills Body’.

NICVA has engaged with the Skills for Business Network through the SSDA in Northern Ireland to promote the voluntary and community sector and to ensure

that the Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) engage with those organisations relevant to their particular footprint, for example the Skills for Justice will work closely with the government agencies such as the Probation Board as well as the voluntary sector organisations such as NIACRO and Extern. Key relationships have been developed with Skills Active, Skills for Health, Skills for Justice, Asset Skills, and Lifelong Learning UK. NICVA hosted a workshop with these Sector Skills Councils to examine how they can meet the needs of their constituent groups within the voluntary and community sector.

Work continues on a UK wide basis as NICVA is a member of the Workforce Development Hub. The Hub has recently submitted a three year business plan and funding application to SSDA to ensure this work continues.

NICVA has worked with the public and private sectors through the Management and Leadership Network in the development of the Management and Leadership Development Strategy for Northern Ireland (and in particular the section relevant to the voluntary and community sector) which was launched at the DEL Skills Conference on 28 February 2006. NICVA continues to promote management and leadership development opportunities through the NICVA Management Development Programme which has provided training opportunities for 527 individuals since its inception in September 2003.

Engagement with the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) will continue and in particular to establish the relationship between the DEL Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland and the development of a skills strategy for the voluntary and community sector. NICVA is also planning to run a seminar promoting Investors in People in association with the department.

(3) The Development of an ICT Strategy for the Voluntary and Community Sector

NICVA continues to have significant contact with the e-Government Unit of OFMDFM which has been charged with leading on the government side of an ICT Strategy for the sector. NICVA's Chief Executive is also the Chair of the Information Society Working Group which develops the best use of ICT through Structural Funds investment. NICVA continues to develop the portal site www.communityni.org as a platform for the sector at large in Northern Ireland to promote itself and its activities to the public. The site is currently receiving 80,000 page views per month.

NICVA will lead on the development of an ICT Strategy for the sector. There is little doubt that this is a broad, complex and difficult task. It is NICVA's perspective that the development of an ICT Strategy is about developing a change and modernisation strategy for organisations and should not be viewed as a technology strategy. Given our existing work, NICVA is well placed to take the

lead role in co-ordinating the development of the strategy and the ICT Working Group which NICVA facilitates will be formalised and expanded to meet this task. Some desk research into ICT trends and other geographic region or sector strategies has taken place and NICVA continues research into technology and applications as a first step.

(4) Improving Governance and Accountability

As good governance in the sector is important to NICVA, it constantly reviews and improves on all of the governance related services it provides. The Governance and Charity Advice section of www.nicva.org has just been revamped to provide members and visitors alike with a more accessible and up to date sub-site. Information and advice available range from guidance on running your committee, key committee roles and legal structures through to the latest in the review of Charity Legislation here and its potential implications for the governance of the sector. Work is continuing on the development of an innovative way to present governance advice on www.communityni.org.

NICVA has also continued to work in collaboration with other sectoral bodies and government departments on the production of the Department for Social Development's Best Practice in Finance and Governance guide to ensure that this guide is used by funding departments/agencies within government as a supportive tool for groups. NICVA has also been working with the Governance Practice Group and it has made a significant contribution to the technical development and content of the www.diycommitteeguide.org site developed by the group.

Much work continues at a grassroots level in developing and delivering on good governance across the sector by NICVA and many other organisations. However NICVA has also identified a need for strategic consideration of many governance issues. Therefore NICVA has watched closely the development of the Governance Hub in England and is a member of its associated Implementation Group for the National Occupational Standards for Trustees and Management Committees.

In light of the above NICVA has initiated discussions with a few key governance providers around the development of a hub type body for Northern Ireland. NICVA and the Volunteer Development Agency are to host an event in the next few months to bring together those with an interest in governance delivery and move this forward. It is anticipated a hub type body here would have a few key functions such as being the forum for debate on matters such as kite marking, promoting the good practice guides which have been developed and the work of others from the sector, sharing information and best practice, promoting trusteeship and ultimately reducing duplication and confusion about delivery.

SECTION 2

One of the many issues outlined in the *Positive Steps* document was the need to assess and monitor the impact of the recommendations on the voluntary and community sector. This survey examines the views and opinions of NICVA members on how they feel *Positive Steps* has impacted upon them. The survey was circulated to all NICVA members during February and a response rate of 17.9% was achieved¹.

Before examining the results of this particular survey, NICVA looked at how aware the sector is of *Positive Steps*. In June 2005 a few months after the publication of *Positive Steps* a question was asked on NICVA's Viewfinder survey to test awareness of the document. The results showed that two-thirds (65.8%) of *Viewfinder 4* respondents were aware of the *Positive Steps* report and 36.8% of respondents believed the report represented a serious commitment from government to invest in the future of the sector. However 49.5% of respondents did not have an opinion as to whether or not the document represented a serious commitment on the part of government. Obviously when this survey was undertaken, *Positive Steps* had only been published a few months earlier, so it is perhaps unsurprising that respondents had yet to make up their mind about the document and its subsequent impact.

So what is the situation one year on, how has the sector reacted to the recommendations in *Positive Steps* and is the sector more aware of what the process for implementing *Positive Steps* is?

Awareness

In relation to awareness of *Positive Steps*, 74.8% of respondents are aware of the publication. This represents an almost 10% increase since June 2005. At the most basic level the general awareness and recognition of the document are relatively high as is shown in Table 1 below:

¹ The response rate would have been higher but for the postal strike in Belfast which ran between 31/1/06 and 17/2/06 and covered the period that the survey was live. Attempts were made to ensure that as high a response rate as possible was achieved by placing the survey on www.communityni.org as both a download and an online survey. A poll was also taken on the CommunityNI website about the impact *Positive Steps* has had. (60% of the 43 respondents to the poll felt that *Positive Steps* has had no impact on their organisation thus far).

Table 1: Awareness of *Positive Steps*

	n	%
Yes	119	74.8
No	40	25.2

Base: 160 (1 missing)

It is clear that general awareness levels of the existence of the document are relatively high and this is perhaps not surprising given that the Task Force and *Positive Steps* have been the focus of a great deal of debate in the sector over the last year.

However, it is one thing to be aware of the document but it is another to understand the processes that will ultimately make the recommendations a reality for those working in the sector. Clearly there is only so much information that can be elicited via a survey, therefore we had to trust respondents when they said they were aware of the process to implement the recommendations of *Positive Steps*. Nevertheless, Table 2 below gives some indication of the level of awareness of those respondents who had stated they knew the *Positive Steps* document existed.

Table 2: Awareness of the process to implement the recommendations in *Positive Steps*

	n	%
Yes	64	59.8
No	43	40.2

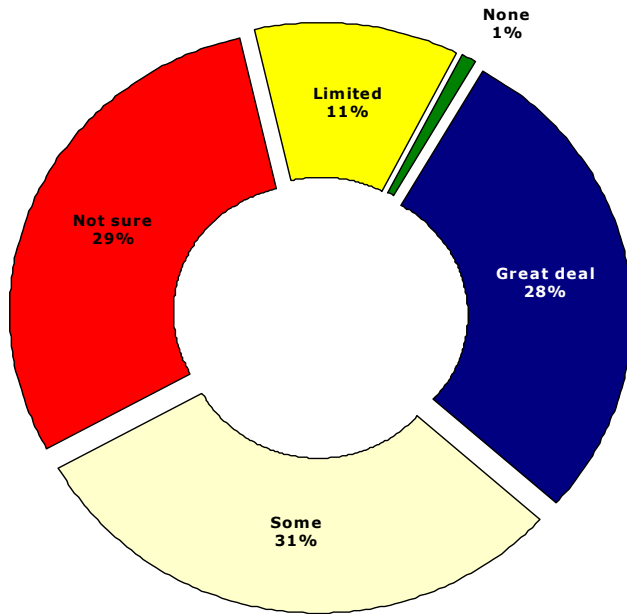
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Almost six out of ten respondents felt they were aware of the process to implement the recommendations of *Positive Steps* which is a fairly positive outcome given the complexities often associated with implementing government policy. It would appear that the message is getting out to organisations about the process but as mentioned previously it was not possible to fully ascertain the level of understanding respondents have regarding the processes.

Impact

The same respondents who stated they were aware of the *Positive Steps* document were then asked to assess the impact they believed the recommendations outlined in *Positive Steps* would have on the voluntary and community sector over the next five years.

Figure 1: Perceived impact of *Positive Steps* over the next five years



Base: 109 (10 missing)

Figure 1 shows that 58.7% of respondents believe that the recommendations will have some or a great deal of impact on the sector. However, that is not to say the respondents interpreted this to be a positive impact but as something that will happen as a result of *Positive Steps*. Approximately one in ten respondents felt that *Positive Steps* was going to have a limited impact or none at all over the next five years, so at the most basic level the majority of respondents feel that the recommendations in *Positive Steps* will have an impact upon the sector.

One other interesting feature to emerge from this analysis was the relatively large number of respondents who were unsure if the recommendations were going to have an impact (29.4%). As was mentioned previously this could be attributed to the fact that the implications of the recommendations are not fully understood within the sector. Looking at this issue in a little more depth the analysis shows that respondents who were aware of the process to implement the recommendations of *Positive Steps* were more definite about the impact *Positive Steps* would have. For instance 67% felt that *Positive Steps* was going to have a great deal or some impact over the next five years compared to 39% of respondents who were not aware of the process to implement *Positive Steps* (50% of this group were unsure about the overall impact).

Continuing to assess the impact of *Positive Steps* on the voluntary and community sector, all respondents (regardless of their awareness or otherwise of *Positive Steps*) were asked

to rate how the relationship between government had changed since the publication of *Positive Steps*.

Table 3: Changes in the relationship between government and organisations since the publication of Positive Steps

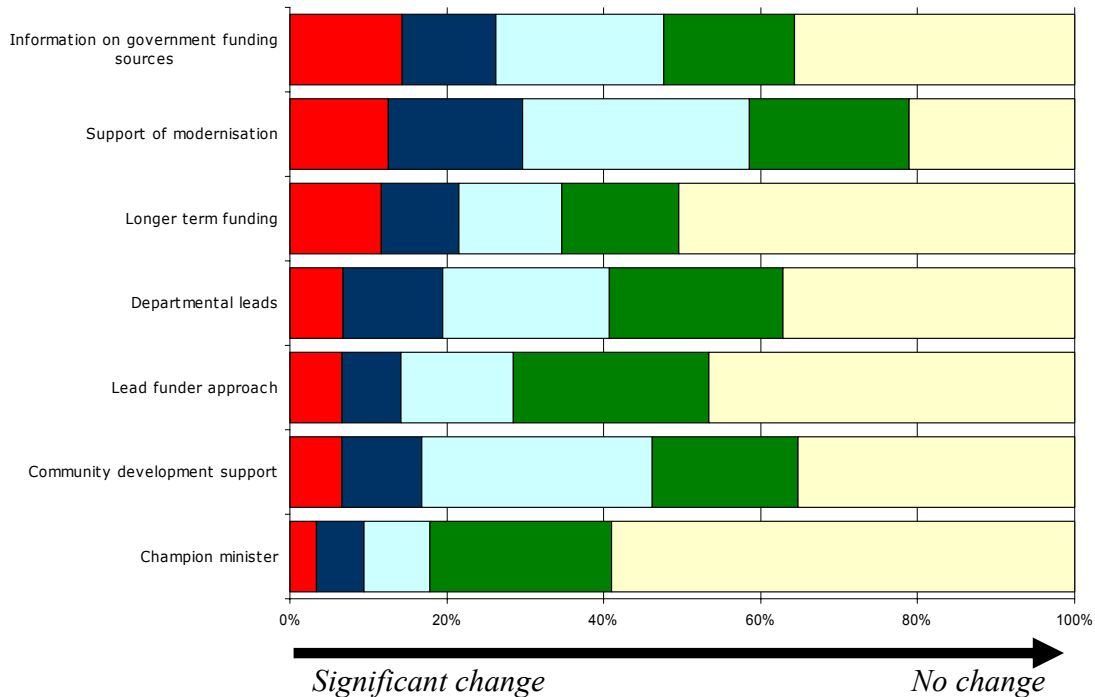


Table 3 above shows that the provision of information on government sources of funding was the area in which respondents have witnessed the most significant change between their organisation and government since the publication of *Positive Steps*. Developments such as the VCU website which lists government grants to the voluntary and community sector (www.volcomgrantsni.gov.uk) have obviously made an impact. Also linked to funding is the perceived change in the government’s support of modernisation in the sector. This has been most manifest in the launch of the Modernisation Fund which has released £3 million over three years to increase capacity within the sector to become more involved in public service delivery.

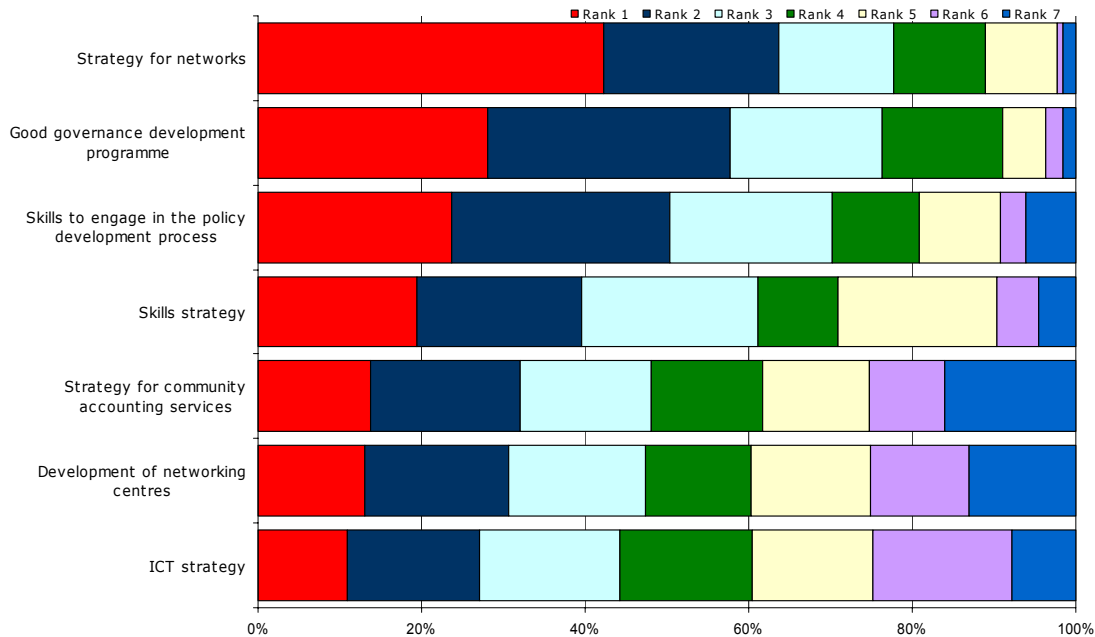
At the other end of the scale the area where respondents felt there has been little change has been in the increased visibility of a champion minister for the voluntary and community sector. This is perhaps understandable given the fact direct rule ministers have a much wider portfolio of departmental responsibilities compared to their local predecessors.

Overall the number of respondents who stated they had witnessed significant changes since the publication of *Positive Steps* is relatively low. Of course a number of these initiatives will take a period of time to embed in the sector. The type of organisation and their relationship with government can also be an influencing factor in this assessment.

Respondents were then asked to rank the importance of the various areas that were outlined in *Positive Steps* that were deemed to require future support and development.

Table 4: Areas of importance for organisations where support and development are required (ranked)

Overall the development of a strategy for networks/infrastructure/support agencies was



ranked the most important area for organisations in terms of future needs². There has been significant debate surrounding the future of networks and infrastructure agencies and it is clearly an issue that resonates with the respondents to this survey. This issue is followed by good governance development and the development of skills to engage in the policy development process in terms of being important to respondents.

Looking at the other end of the scale, the development of an ICT strategy was viewed to be the least important area in terms of future support and development. This could be attributed to the fact that there is limited understanding of what an ICT strategy will entail for the sector.

Finally, respondents were asked to describe their hopes and expectations in terms of what they believe *Positive Steps* will be able to achieve in the future. Listed below is a selection of these comments:

² A total of 42 organisations which describe themselves as networks responded to this survey. In relation to the importance of a strategy for networks/infrastructure agencies, 60% ranked this particular issue as the number one area of importance to them. One out of every four non-network organisations ranked this area as their number one priority for future support and development.

- *A more joined up approach to community development and education incorporating social exclusion and health.*
- *A true and equal partnership with government.*
- *At the moment fairly pessimistic as there is little or no sign of the values or approach within Positive Steps influencing government departments other than DSD.*
- *Fear that small groups aren't subsumed into larger networks and clarity about what networks actually do and how communities can tap into them.*
- *Full cost funding.*
- *Greater implementation of the partnership which includes adequate financial resources for the sector, greater recognition of experience of the sector and its contribution to society in Northern Ireland.*
- *Greater interaction between government and voluntary sector at a grassroots level rather than regional HQ level.*
- *I am unaware of it having any significant impact on a lot of community groups working on the ground, many groups are still waiting to see how the policy manifests itself in reality.*
- *I hope that Positive Steps ensures that organisations like ours which is small, successful and innovative are not all swallowed up by the larger charities which are becoming more like big business - there needs to be room for diversity.*
- *I think that Positive Steps might well become Negative Steps in respect of cuts in funding etc.*
- *Investment and time is required to achieve results - partnerships are vital to avoid duplication, training required to ensure necessary skills and expertise on the ground.*
- *Joined up thinking re funding strategy and core funding for essential voluntary services under threat.*
- *Long-term hopes are to have the voluntary and community sector sustainable and gain more recognition in government for the excellent work going on in community.*
- *Longer term outcome focused funding as well as a strategy for networks and community development support.*
- *More co-ordination of funding/strategy developments.*
- *More long-term, stable funding and cross-departmental working.*
- *My expectation is that government will work in a more proactive partnership with the community sector, that it will understand and recognise the work of the sector and fund accordingly.*
- *Partnership working, less duplication, more funding.*
- *Positive Steps will not make much progress until all departments and agencies (not just DSD) put it into action including allocating appropriate resources.*
- *Quietly optimistic and positive.*
- *Raise awareness of under-represented groups and help identify need for longer term funding.*
- *That it will have a credible time frame to put recommendations into practice.*

- *To deliver some respite from the stress associated with two year funding cycles thereby freeing up time and resources to get on with actual service delivery.*
- *We believe it is one of the best things to come our way in years but we despair that government and civil servants don't share this and may be more interested in getting us to jump hurdles to show things cannot work rather than focusing on how things can work.*
- *While I have quoted the document to funders the EHSSB seemed unaware of Positive Steps so I have no expectation from them - they are one of our main funders*
- *Would like to think it will lead to more security for community sector but fear that fewer will receive funding and only if they are delivering good policy.*