



Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action

Comments on the Review of Public Administration in Northern Ireland

February 2004

CONS-253

1. Introduction

*So, as we begin the 21st century we look again to the voluntary and community sector to help us rekindle the spark of civic services that fires the building of strong civic communities; **to reform the operation of public services and build the bridge between the needs of individuals living in those communities, and the capacity of the state to improve their lives.***¹ (Our emphasis)

1.1 NICVA (the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Review of Public Administration consultation document issued by Ian Pearson MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, in October 2003. NICVA sees this Review as a crucial task facing both the Northern Ireland Executive/Assembly and Minister Pearson. We are mindful of the importance of the Review best summed up by the (then) First Minister's comments in the Assembly when he argued that *“this is an opportunity of a generation to put in place a modern, accountable, effective system of public administration that can deliver a high quality set of public services to our citizens”*². The importance of this Review has not been lost on the voluntary and community sector; not least because of the role it will continue to play as a key social partner working to tackle disadvantage and inequality.

1.2 By way of background, NICVA estimates that there are between 4,500 and 5,000 voluntary organisations in Northern Ireland with a gross income of approximately £660 million per year.

The primary purposes of organisations in the voluntary and community sector are: education and training; economic/community development and employment; and advice, advocacy and information.

The main beneficiaries are: children, young people; older people; and people with disabilities and special needs.

The principal methods of delivery and performing activities are: providing services (eg care, counselling and training); providing advocacy, advice and information; and providing buildings, facilities and open space.³

1.3 The sector's *raison d'être* is to address issues of social need and socio-economic deprivation. More specifically, this includes:

- Identification of, and concern with, social need/social issues.
- Commitment to improve life opportunities for disadvantaged individuals/communities.

¹ 'The Role of the Voluntary and Community Sector in Service Delivery: A Cross Cutting Review'. HM Treasury (2002: 3).

² (Hansard - Northern Ireland Assembly, 25 February 2002).

³ The lists represent the top three purposes, beneficiaries and methods of delivery, in rank order (NICVA, *State of the Sector III*, 2002: 16-18).

- Identification and implementation of policies, practices and programmes that offer added value to the lives of disadvantaged individuals/communities.
 - Improved representation for (and sometimes with) the priority group/area to address issues of exclusion.
 - Mobilisation of resources linked to voluntary effort and/or organisational development, to better serve the overall objective.
 - Delivery of services to, and campaigning to improve access to services for, those individuals/communities experiencing deprivation and/or social need.⁴
- 1.4 To elicit the views of the voluntary and community sector on the Review document, NICVA organised two workshops, one in Belfast on 19 January 2004 and one in Cookstown on 3 February 2004, and invited all affiliated groups to attend. The format of the workshops included a presentation from a member of the Review Team, an input from the RPA's Panel of Experts, and an independent academic analysis. Workshop participants were then invited (in groups) to address a number of specific questions to help focus the discussions. Consultees did not adopt a slavish adherence to the 23 questions posed in the Review document.
- 1.5 In the first place, this was considered too many questions in a consultation paper, some of which were overlapping. Second, codified responses to a large number of questions would have stifled general discussions on the essence of the document and, finally, the voluntary and community sector has a specific interest in public administration not adequately highlighted in the series of questions posed. To better reflect the interests of the sector, the workshops focused their discussions around three broad themes:
- Delivering and improving public services.
 - Participative democracy.
 - Public service users.
- 1.6 Before reflecting responses to these themes in detail, we would like to make some general comments on the Review. Firstly, it is important in any discussion of public services to recognise that citizens are not 'consumers' in the normal sense of the word. The relationship between the citizen and the state is not the same relationship as that between the consumer and Marks & Spencer. Citizens contribute to public services as a tangible, collective expression of social solidarity which characterises our welfare state. We do not necessarily get back exactly what we pay in and it is therefore inappropriate in a document such as the Review consultation document to adopt a consumerist language or model. The response by informed and active citizens to public services is much more complex than this model would allow for. According to a recent discussion paper produced by the then Policy Innovation Unit within the Cabinet Office:

⁴ 'Rationale for Government Support of the Sector' A O'Reilly, A Wightman and A Kilmurray (2003).

*“Public value provides a broader measure than is conventionally used within the new public management literature, covering outcomes, the means used to deliver them as well as trust and legitimacy. It addresses issues such as equity, ethos and accountability. Current public management practice sometimes fails to consider, understand or manage this full range of factors ... Citizens often place a strong value on ‘public’ issues such as distributional equity and due process.”*⁵

- 1.7 In general terms, any discussion of changing structures within public services should be focused on outcomes. The models presented in the consultation document, being high level, gave no opportunity to judge how outcomes would be affected and therefore decisions were very difficult. Any future elaboration on any of these models should attempt to indicate which would provide the most impact in terms of improving outcomes for service users, and in improving equality and human rights. These principles should be integrated at the highest levels and any decisions taken should be screened for impacts at the earliest possible stage.
- 1.8 There was a general sense expressed to NICVA that there is too much bureaucracy involved in the delivery of public services and in governing Northern Ireland. Although no clear single model was put forward, voluntary and community organisations agree with the analysis that our current complicated picture of Boards, Trusts, NDPBs, Departments, Councillors and MLAs requires simplification. There was also an acknowledgement that, whatever change is instituted, it will be disruptive and difficult. There is clearly a need to introduce change gradually to ensure that services are not adversely affected and that staff morale is not damaged by change.
- 1.9 NICVA’s consultations highlighted the fact that it may not be possible to find one model that fits all services and also enhances local democratic accountability. The Review is attempting to examine two connected issues – the delivery of public services and the structures for local governance. It seems clear that in the interests of improved governance, representation and advocacy should be devolved to the lowest possible level. However, this does not necessarily imply that service delivery or policy decision making should also be at that level. There is also the need to consider the most efficient size for economies of scale.
- 1.10 A key factor in the discussions of the voluntary and community sector was the role of local councils in future public administration. It would be fair to say that the sector is split between theory and practice on this issue. On the one hand, in theory the sector can see that there are benefits in locally elected representatives taking decisions and having responsibility for service provision — this is representative democracy in action. On the other hand, there is a lack of trust between voluntary and community groups and local councils in some areas. Many community groups feel they will be treated badly or unfairly and there is therefore perversely a perception that in reality a

⁵ **Creating Public Value:** An analytical framework for public service reform, Gavin Kelly and Stephen Muers, Strategy Unit, October 2002.

broadening of the role of councils would not be of benefit to the community. There is also a fear that this might destroy some of the more collaborative, partnership approaches to participative democracy and governance that have been developed if some councils took a narrow view of their role and wanted to be doers rather than animators or enablers.

- 1.11 There is also concern regarding dual mandates as almost two-thirds of current MLAs also hold local council seats. If there is to be, for example, a scrutiny role for councils, will this result in self scrutiny? How will budgetary decisions be taken where there are possible conflicts of interest?
- 1.12 As regards the characteristics of public administration set out in the document, NICVA is unclear as to how 'scope of the public sector' constitutes a characteristic. However the remainder of the characteristics listed are vital for the delivery of an effective and efficient public administration and should act as underlying principles of any new arrangements. NICVA would attach particular importance to the characteristics of cross-community concerns, equality and human rights and community responsiveness and partnership working.

2. Delivering and Improving Public Services

Some hold that there are services - especially those to vulnerable or hard to reach groups - that the voluntary and community sector is especially better placed to deliver than either the or the market. And others go even further and claim that the voluntary and community sector's ability to bring special skills and experience to service delivery - to bring its own unique 'added value' - make it the presumed provider of all public services.⁶

- 2.1 There has been some concern in Northern Ireland following the discussions on Public Private Partnerships, the Private Finance Initiative and the establishment of the Strategic Investment Board that public services might be taken out of the public realm and delivered by the private sector. Given concepts of public value (see 1.6 above), it is clear that citizens value the shared 'public' nature of public services. The voluntary and community sector views itself as able to play a vital part in this public realm, encouraging citizen participation and involvement, and it can play a key role in public service delivery that is not allied to the profit-making ethos of the private sector.
- 2.2 Citizens often experience public service delivery as 'fractured' and not joined up at the point of delivery. Thus services appear unable to provide a holistic approach to the holistic problems of real people. Schools, transport and health are not connected in ways that make life easier. On the contrary, it is sometimes necessary to be an expert on the shape and structure of the public sector before it is even possible to identify who is responsible for dealing with an issue or providing a service among the plethora of departments, agencies, NDPBs and councils.
- 2.3 The delivery of public services should be citizen focused with every effort made to ensure that citizens receive a quality service which is easy to access. There are obvious models for this approach. In Ontario, Canada, a Review of Public Administration was carried out in 1995 and as a result one of the key principles applied is the 'no wrong door' policy. The onus is on the public servant to ensure the customer gets the service required; therefore the official has to ensure that the referral is to the correct person and that the query will be handled without further delay. There is a core funded free information line available to all citizens to help them find the service they require, over all three levels of government. The Ontario Blue Pages initiative lists all public services as services that would be recognised by the citizens rather than just agencies, departments and divisions. Similarly in the Netherlands one-stop-shops have been developed allowing the citizens to access a variety of public services under one roof with the onus on the public servant to direct queries to the appropriate agency or department. In both these examples e-government plays a substantial role. In the UK a similar pilot is being run by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. NICVA would strongly recommend that, whatever delivery mechanisms are finally decided upon, the option of one-

⁶ 'The Role of the Voluntary and Community Sector in Service Delivery: A Cross Cutting Review'. HM Treasury (2002: 15).

stop-shops bringing an integrated point of contact as close to local citizens as possible should be strongly considered.

- 2.4 The voluntary and community sector is often uniquely placed to deliver services which are 'joined up' at the point of need. For example, services working with young people may focus on health, education and training which cut across at least three government departments.
- 2.5 The Review document makes reference to the 'emerging role' played by the voluntary and community sector in the delivery of public services. It argues that from their original advocacy role, organisations within the sector have now evolved to become service providers in their own right, providers of services on behalf of central or local government, and full partners with local government in managing specific programmes.⁷
- 2.6 This is a passing reference to the sector and does not do justice to its involvement as a full social partner in the delivery of public services envisaged, for example, by the Task Force on Resourcing the Voluntary and Community Sector. In the Task Force consultation document (*Pathways for Change*) it is argued:

*“The voluntary and community sector does, and should, continue to make a major contribution to the delivery of public services, particularly to vulnerable or hard to reach groups. Greater involvement of the voluntary and community sector should be encouraged where it can lead to an improvement in these services.”*⁸

- 2.7 Importantly, therefore, the Task Force argues that there is the potential for greater engagement of the sector in the delivery of services. At present the lack of skills, knowledge and resources acts as a barrier to the sector's participation in the delivery of improved public services. That said, there are areas where the voluntary and community sector may be best placed to deliver services as its structures enable organisations to operate in environments where the public sector has found difficulty in reaching vulnerable and excluded groups. For example, all new social housing in Northern Ireland is now provided by the voluntary housing association movement. Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown, writing in *The Times* on 11 January 2001 commented:

“In the next five years the role of Government will shift even more from the old directive and controlling to enabling and empowering voluntary action. Increasingly the voluntary sector will be empowered to play a critical role ranging from under five provision and preventative health to adult learning and the war against unemployment and poverty... A clearer distinction is now being drawn between advancing the public interest and equating the public interest with state ownership, bureaucracy and centralised administration. We

⁷ 'The Review of Public Administration in Northern Ireland' (2003), Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, section 3.7, page 15.

⁸ 'Pathways for Change' (2003), Department for Social Development, section 4.9, page 12.

can demand that a service be promoted in the public interest without wishing that Government manages that service.”

- 2.8 A recent study by HM Treasury on the voluntary and community sector has argued that these structures enable it to demonstrate more easily a range of specialised skills and experience needed to deliver services. The crucial features which the sector, at its best, may be able to demonstrate are:
- *Specialised knowledge, experience and/or skills.* This may come through direct experience of the user perspective - the sector is closer to the user than most statutory bodies. An example of this might be former paramilitaries or ex-prisoners working with young offenders.
 - *Particular ways of involving people in service delivery whether as users or self-help/autonomous groups.* An example here would be an organisation working closely with users themselves or their families and friends to plan and deliver services. Families of the victims of terrorist violence have typically formed self-help groups in an effort to support each other. A number of services which began in the sector such as childcare have now become mainstreamed.
 - *Independence from existing and past structures/models of service.* Voluntary and community organisations are not bound by structures or rules in the ways in which more traditional public sector agencies are. They are independent and so can try to deliver services in new and innovative ways. The dead hand of audit trails now evident in the public sector which have made civil servants risk-averse have not affected the voluntary and community sector to the same extent, although arrangements in initiatives such as Peace I and II have pushed the sector in that direction. Despite this, the voluntary and community sector is still able to take risks responsibly and to be creative and flexible in a way that is difficult for statutory bodies.
 - *Access to the wider community without institutional baggage.* Public service workers are often perceived as representatives of an authority which certain groups (eg young people at risk) have learned to mistrust. The voluntary and community sector is independent of government and therefore free to be unequivocally on the user's side. However, access to the wider community in the Northern Ireland context often means divided communities. Not only does this result in duplication of services but, in the case of the voluntary and community sector, it can spawn a range of single identity providers.
 - *Freedom and flexibility from institutional pressures.* The sector can offer responsive services which are user-centred (eg Foyle Search and Rescue) as they are not driven by budgets and targets within the public sector. At best they can be flexible and innovative rather than prescriptive.⁹

⁹ 'The Role of the Voluntary and Community Sector in Service Delivery: A Cross Cutting Review'. HM Treasury (2002: 16-17).

- 2.9 In addition, services provided by the voluntary and community sector can add value beyond that provided under contract. These additional benefits accrue through the use of volunteers, donations and the reinvestment of surpluses into the services provided. Since volunteers or donations should not fund statutory services, the extra welfare gain is wholly additional to the service and hence is over and above that which is contracted by the state.¹⁰ The Review clearly provides an opportunity to examine how public procurement processes in Northern Ireland can help to underpin the development of the social economy, where all profits are reinvested to the benefit of communities.
- 2.10 In a recent study for the Task Force on Resourcing the Voluntary and Community Sector it was found that, although not as pervasive as in the rest of the UK, the sector in Northern Ireland already plays a significant role in the delivery of public services, to the value of at least £30 million. However inconsistencies in terms of contracting across government departments, statutory agencies and district councils have meant that there is not always a level playing field.
- 2.11 As mentioned above there are specific benefits and knock-on effects (added value) to be gained relating to social capital and community cohesion by maintaining and developing the sector's presence in service delivery. However, the study found this may be threatened by the continuation of an over-zealous and extremely competitive approach to the contracting of services which may have serious long-term consequences for both the infrastructure of the voluntary and community sector, and communities. This approach also goes against the grain of progressive government policy.¹¹
- 2.12 The issue of the public sector contracting services through the voluntary and community sector is not without difficulties. There is a wide range of experience within the sector from those who have not collaborated with government to bodies actively involved in contracting services with the public sector. Concerns have been raised that as the sector becomes more involved in providing services under contract, their independent role of campaigning, lobbying government and advocacy on behalf of their client constituency is compromised. In short, the sector becomes incorporated into the public sector's remit and is neutered because of its increasing reliance on income streams from statutory bodies to maintain its existence.
- 2.13 On the other hand, there are examples of organisations (eg Help the Aged) which exercise both a strong delivery role and lobby extensively for their sector. Similarly, an increasing involvement in service delivery under contract encourages the sector to become more professional in its functions and is already happening through social economy activities in which the sector is active.

¹⁰ 'The Role of the Voluntary and Community Sector in Service Delivery: A Cross Cutting Review'. HM Treasury (2002: 17).

¹¹ 'Drifting Off Course? A study in contractual relationships between the government and the voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland', Task Force on Resourcing the Voluntary and Community Sector, DSD (2004).

- 2.14 The Review of Public Administration needs to take into account that society in Northern Ireland is changing. Our society is gradually becoming more diverse and an increasingly educated and articulate public is expressing different needs and expectations. It is important that we design services and structures to meet the needs of a population that is ethnically and culturally diverse, which incorporate human rights and equality standards as the norm. It is also important to recognise that in a modern society casting a vote once every three or four years is not sufficient for citizens to feel they have had their say in decision making.
- 2.15 The Review of Public Administration consultation document is seen by some voluntary and community organisations as elected bodies (at the level of Stormont and local government) reasserting their authority after years of government by quango. During the Direct Rule era, the sector grew to meet the needs of vulnerable or hard to reach groups which were not being met by public bodies and politicians. Now politicians want to recover some of the ground which they see as being lost to the sector, and relationships have suffered as a consequence. As one Unionist MLA put it “*it is time for the sector to stand aside*”¹².
- 2.16 This of course seems to ignore the entire spirit of the *Partners for Change* strategy which is predicated on a vision of government “*working with the voluntary and community sector, to build a just and inclusive society which meets the needs of the people of Northern Ireland, particularly in those areas in greatest need*”¹³. Therein one of the core themes is government and the sector 'working together':
- Working together to ensure that the voluntary and community sector is actively involved, and afforded the opportunity to contribute to the development, implementation and monitoring of policy developments in order that their expertise might inform policy making processes, particularly in relation to equality and Targeting Social Need.
 - Working together to share good practices, to build on the experience of government and the sector, in addressing need and effecting change and to develop and maintain mechanisms enabling greater communication between government and the sector.
 - Working together to deliver services.¹⁴

Much more of this collective ethos needs to develop in the thinking of the Review of Public Administration. There is a sense within the voluntary and community sector that as 'democracy grows' or if devolution takes root, there is somehow less room for the sector. This would not only represent a missed opportunity, but would constitute a threat to the investment of time, energy

¹² Fred Cobain, quoted in C McCall and A Williamson (2001) 'Governance and Democracy in Northern Ireland: The Role of the Voluntary and Community Sector after the Agreement' *Governance* 14(3): 363-383.

¹³ 'Partners for Change: Government's Strategy for Support of the Voluntary and Community Sector 2001-2004', Department for Social Development, page 5.

¹⁴ 'Partners for Change: Government's Strategy for Support of the Voluntary and Community Sector 2001-2004', Department for Social Development, page 41.

and money that has gone into building the capacity of the voluntary and community sector. As a recent leader column in the Guardian (19 February 2004) noted: *“It was the prime minister who neatly divided the 20th century in two: in the first half the country learned it could not achieve its aims without the help of government; in the second, that government could not achieve the nation’s aims without the help of the voluntary movement.”*

- 2.17 The Review document highlights the perceived inequalities in the public appointments process including ‘lack of representativeness’ and concerns about the accountability of public bodies. This Review process presents a great opportunity to vitalise community involvement in public bodies. Concerns were also voiced at NICVA’s consultation seminars about services such as health and education being moved into the remit of councils and it was felt this is not a practical option. Local government should not be about big service delivery because local government will become centralised and remote from the citizen as it has in Great Britain. When decisions are made about the future of services currently under the authority of public bodies, it is key that community involvement is retained and that there is a statutory duty on providers to report to and seek advice from District Councils. There is a great deal of experience within the voluntary and community sector and this should be actively sought out through more proactive and equitable recruitment to public appointments.

3. Participative Democracy

*At the root of all definitions of democracy, however refined and complex, lies the idea of popular power, of a situation in which power, and perhaps authority, rest with the people. That power or authority is usually thought of as being political, and it often takes the form of an idea of popular sovereignty - the people as the ultimate political authority. But it need not be exclusively political. Democracy is not always taken to signify only a form of government, or of choosing a government; it may be a term applied to a whole society.*¹⁵

- 3.1 Due to its recent history Northern Ireland has developed a complex web of mechanisms that seek to ensure equity of provision, equality and participation. Many communities are now represented on a much wider range of bodies than their local council and, although there are currently too many overlapping partnerships, a move towards less direct participation would be a backwards step. Consultees in the workshops which informed this submission were concerned that the opportunities for participation on non-departmental public bodies and partnerships would diminish and that participative democracy would suffer as a consequence. They cited positive experiences of working on Local Strategy Partnerships, Investing in Health and District Policing Partnerships as evidence of the role which the voluntary and community sector and the local people they represent can play in both policy formulation and implementation of public services. A way needs to be found of enhancing the role of local democracy without diminishing participation in decision making. Examples such as local community planning on the new Scottish model would allow for much direct input alongside the role of local elected representatives.
- 3.2 Currently, however, some public bodies exercise poor civic leadership and their behaviour reinforces sectarianism rather than providing good examples in cross-community working. Specific local councils were singled out for criticisms in this regard. Some councils, it was argued, were more transparent in their dealings with the sector than others. Councillors can have 'pet projects' which are awarded funding year-on-year at the expense of others. Other voluntary and community organisations have circumvented highly 'political' councils by establishing relationships with officials who take a much more rational approach to supporting the sector. The emergence of community support plans in councils, instigated by the Department for Social Development, will help the sector identify local opportunities and work with local authorities.
- 3.3 Civic leadership is a key function of locally elected representation and this can be effected either in conjunction with or divorced from a service provision role. What is important is that local concerns are fully articulated and advocates exist to help make change possible in response to community needs. The role of civic leadership does not rest solely with elected representatives, but they must play a lead part. In different parts of the world this civic

¹⁵ A Arblaster (1994: 9) *Democracy*, Open University Press: Buckingham quoted in N Deakin (2001) *In Search of Civil Society* Palgrave: Basingstoke.

leadership is embodied in various ways, from the small local mayors in French villages to the large Canadian local authorities. Some deliver services, some do not, but among their key functions is responsible leadership which embodies a shared civic vision for the area they represent.

- 3.4 There was a broad welcome for the importance of accountability as an organising principle in the Review of Public Administration. The voluntary and community sector would welcome holding public bodies much more to account for their performance in the delivery of public services, not least because it is felt that the sector is often left to deal with the failings or inadequacies of functions provided by statutory bodies. That said, examples of good collaborative practices were cited as constructively involving the sector, typical of which were highly participative arrangements that the Northern Ireland Housing Executive employ via tenants associations and customer panels. More of this is needed, with the voluntary and community sector actively contributing to a community planning process in equal measure to elected representatives.
- 3.5 The potential role for the voluntary and community sector has been acknowledged by the Northern Ireland Executive in its vision outlined through the *Programme for Government*:

“Regeneration of our society in the fullest sense means that we have to tackle issues of equality and human rights, poverty and social disadvantage, renewal of the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods, sustaining and enhancing local communities and improving community relations.... In tackling these issues we have the advantage of a vibrant and extensive community and voluntary sector which already makes significant and critical contributions to many areas of life. A key challenge will be to build on this community capacity and to involve it in policies and programmes aimed at strengthening our community well-being.”¹⁶

- 3.6 Local councils in Northern Ireland are currently pressing to obtain powers of 'well-being' conferred on local authorities in England and Wales under the Local Government Act 2000. This would allow councils the powers to do anything they consider likely to promote or improve the economic, social or environmental well-being of their areas. This offers the prospect of local compact arrangements between the voluntary and community sector and councils similar to other parts of the United Kingdom. In short, this amounts to inclusive community governance in which the voluntary and community sector can become actively involved in policy formulation and service delivery at the local level.
- 3.7 At the level of central government the *Partners for Change* strategy has undoubtedly given a firm commitment to collaborative working between civil service departments and the voluntary and community sector. The Voluntary and Community Unit (within the Department for Social Development)

¹⁶ Northern Ireland Executive Programme for Government, 2001: 2.1.1.

describes how the voluntary and community sector has become a key social partner in the processes of government. That involvement, it argues, “*reflects a more developed and mature relationship and role within Government than anywhere else in the United Kingdom, Ireland or indeed Europe.*”¹⁷ The *Partners for Change* strategy suggests a significant role for the voluntary and community sector in the decision-making process of every government department. Its strict monitoring arrangements, overseen by the Joint Forum¹⁸ which scrutinises annual progress reports that must be signed off by ministers, implies departments cannot afford to pay lip service to partnering the sector.

- 3.8 The Review of Public Administration must reinforce, rather than fracture, these arrangements at central and local government levels through any proposed changes in the administrative architecture of Northern Ireland. Recommendations for structural reconfiguration must be mindful of the pre-existing partnership arrangements that have been brokered between the voluntary and community sector and the public sector in its widest manifestation. Hence proposals for functional changes coming out of the Review should be cognisant of the wider ramifications for social partners beyond their impact on public bodies and non-departmental public bodies only.

¹⁷ Voluntary and Community Unit, 2002, 'Voluntary and Community Research in Northern Ireland', Belfast, Department for Social Development.

¹⁸ A Joint Government/Voluntary and Community Sector Forum was set up to discuss issues of mutual concern and to monitor the operation of *Partners for Change* in practice.

4. Public Service Users

*Members of the public have relationships with people who provide a service, not with the organisation behind them.... Trust in individual service providers like doctors and police officers has remained consistently high over the past 20 years, but trust in the organisations and institutions they work for is lower and has declined in recent years.*¹⁹

- 4.1 The final category for consideration by consultees in the voluntary and community sector was public service users. Many of the people the sector serves are socially excluded and may not have adequate access to public services or feel distanced from the services they receive. This is borne out by empirical evidence from the Omnibus data²⁰.

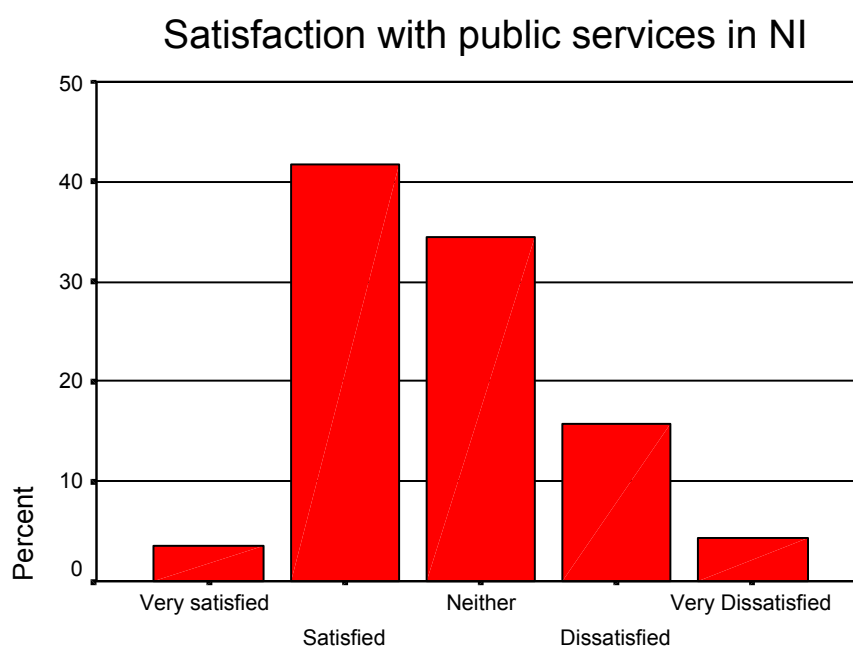


Figure 1

- 4.2 In the first place, satisfaction with public services is not particularly high. In the October 2002 Omnibus survey, respondents were asked about their overall satisfaction with public services in Northern Ireland²¹. The results show that 45% of respondents were satisfied or very satisfied with public services; 20% stated they were either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with public services; and 34% reported they were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied (see figure 1).

¹⁹ Audit Commission (2002), 'Trust in the Public Sector'. London: Audit Commission.

²⁰ The Northern Ireland Omnibus Surveys are conducted by the Central Survey Unit of the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) and comprise a random sample of around 1,200 people drawn from district council areas in Belfast, and a cluster of councils in the east and west of Northern Ireland. For further details on the findings of this research see Tony O'Brien research bulletins at www.rpani.gov.uk.

²¹ N = 1196 (excludes 'refusal' and 'don't know' responses).

- 4.3 Second, respondents were asked if there were any groups in society which were treated less well in the provision of public services. Older people ranked highest with 37%; followed by people with disabilities (16%); people on low incomes (6%); and people of different racial groups (5%) (see table 1). What is striking about these data is the fact that many of these socially excluded groups are the people with whom organisations in the voluntary and community sector work.

TABLE 1: GROUPS TREATED LESS WELL IN PUBLIC SERVICES

	Ranked choice ²²	Number
Older people	37%	382
People with disabilities	16%	170
People on low incomes	6%	62
Different racial groups	5%	54
Children and young people	4%	38
Rural communities	4%	37
People with particular religious beliefs	3%	30
Different sexual orientation	1%	13
People with dependants	1%	7
Married people	<1%	4
People of particular political opinion	<1%	3
Men or women	<1%	3
Other	23%	235
Total	100%	1,038

- 4.4 Finally, survey respondents were asked how should the voluntary and community sector be involved in public services in Northern Ireland. Some 38% of respondents stated they should have a role in providing services, 25% in planning services, 18% in policy development, and 17% in lobbying (see table 2). Combined with information from Figure 1 and Table 1, these data would suggest public support for the active involvement of the voluntary and community sector in providing services to the most vulnerable in society.

TABLE 2: ROLE OF VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY SECTOR

	Rank order	Number
Providing services	38%	396
Planning services	25%	256
Policy development	18%	185
Lobbying	17%	175
Advocacy	2%	28
Total	100%	1,040

- 4.5 Voluntary and community organisations are concerned that, since those who are most disadvantaged often use public services most, their voices should be heard in planning and delivery. Genuine participative democracy means that people should not feel cut off from the services they are receiving and should

²² Table 1 excludes 'refusal' and 'don't know'.

feel able to influence decisions. There is no clear view on whether this is best done through models of successful non-departmental public bodies, such as the Housing Executive, or through advocacy by locally elected representatives. However, we would stress once more that changes to structures must be focused on outcomes at the end of the day, and particularly on outcomes for those most disadvantaged within our society who rely most heavily on public services.

5. Conclusions

- 5.1 Having considered the sector's role under three themes – delivering and improving public services, participative democracy and public service users – what are the implications for the Review of Public Administration? The Review document makes passing reference to the emerging role of the voluntary and community sector in the delivery of public services and calls for its role 'to be considered as the Review progresses'²³. NICVA is arguing in this submission for a much more enhanced role for the voluntary and community sector in the future delivery of public services.
- 5.2 This enhanced role could include the following:
- Helping to design and plan the delivery of services in partnership with the public sector. The voluntary and community sector should be involved in planning the delivery of services, even if it is not the provider of choice. It is at the planning stage where the possibilities of how it might be involved can be fully explored.
 - Helping to deliver a particular service as part of a local partnership with LSPs, local councils, health trusts, government agencies and non-departmental public bodies.
 - Delivering statutory services directly through conventional contracting.
 - Complementing core public service delivery by enhancing the quality of service through volunteers.
- 5.3 Where statutory services continue to be delivered by the public sector, the voluntary and community sector has the skills to improve the quality of planning or delivery of new and existing services, or enhance statutory services through the use of volunteers. Importantly, the voluntary and community sector can bring innovation to the delivery of services.
- 5.4 In contracting with the voluntary and community sector to deliver services, government must ensure that regulation is proportionate and the independence of the sector is upheld. The more government encroaches on the voluntary and community sector through regulation and control, the greater the risk that the traditional features of the sector which attract government in the first place are diminished.²⁴
- 5.5 NICVA is also arguing to strengthen the mechanisms which will facilitate participative democracy under any of the five models of public administration outlined in the document. In other words, whether the preferred outcome is a more centralised system, an increased role for public bodies or stronger local government, the voluntary and community sector must be afforded opportunities to work with the public sector as a social partner. Existing mechanisms for participative democracy through, for example, partnership arrangements, local compacts with councils, *Partners for Change* with central

²³ 'The Review of Public Administration in Northern Ireland' (2003), Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, section 3.7, page 15.

²⁴ 'Service Delivery' - detailed background paper on 'The Role of the Voluntary and Community Sector in Service Delivery: A Cross Cutting Review'. HM Treasury (2002).

government or, more generally, the Civic Forum must not be lost in any public administration arrangements which result from the Review. For the voluntary and community sector the principles of working are more important than the structures which emerge, and the key principle must be a collaborative approach to public services which recognises the strengths that the sector brings to such a partnership. NICVA is unable to choose any one of the five models proposed by the consultation document as there is no clear consensus, given the models are so high level. There is a feeling that ‘the devil is in the detail’ and at this stage voluntary and community organisations are interested in enshrining the principles that are most important rather than selecting a theoretical model on minimal information.

- 5.6 NICVA is also arguing that the delivery of public services should be citizen focused with every effort made to ensure that citizens receive a quality service which is easy to access. NICVA recommends that, whatever delivery mechanisms are finally decided upon, the option of one-stop-shops bringing an integrated point of contact as close to local citizens as possible should be strongly considered.
- 5.7 A focus on enhanced outcomes must be the key test of any new structures adopted as a result of this Review. Furthermore, equality and human rights considerations must be central both to the provision of services and the structures of governance.
- 5.8 Importantly, public service users are less interested in who provides services, than in seeing that services are delivered on time, as efficiently as possible, meet their needs, are equitable and are accessible when they are needed.²⁵ The voluntary and community sector can play a key role in providing and planning services and policy development for the most vulnerable in society. This role must be formally recognised in any new arrangements emerging from the Review of Public Administration.

²⁵ See Tony O'Brien Omnibus Survey Research Bulletin - September/October 2002 at www.rpani.gov.uk.