

Viewfinder 7



Key Findings

- Since the introduction of the smoking ban, 78.1% of respondents in the voluntary and community sector have created a smoke free policy for their organisation.
- Over three quarters (76.4%) of respondents feel that the transfer of power to the Northern Ireland Assembly where politicians will have to move beyond green and orange issues to deal with 'real issues' that affect society will be difficult.
- The vast majority of Viewfinder respondents believe the draft Code of Good Governance is a positive development, but almost three quarters of respondents feel they would need further support and guidance to assist them adhere to its principles.
- Partnership working is very common in the sector, with 81.8% of organisations which responded currently involved in some form of partnership working with other organisations.
- In recognition of the important role of partnership working in the sector almost two thirds of respondents would like more advice on due diligence.
- Just under half of respondents find strategic planning difficult (48.9%).

This Viewfinder provides an examination of a wide range of issues which are currently affecting the voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland. This includes the introduction of the smoking ban, devolution of power, the new draft Code of Good Governance, collaborative working in the sector and the issue of planning for the future.

Stubbed out

The smoking ban was introduced in April 2007. Before its introduction there was much discussion, both positive and negative, about the impact of such a ban. So months later, what is the reality of living in a smoke free country? One thing is for certain, gone are the days of walking into a crowded bar, restaurant or office to be greeted by a cloud of smoke.

At the beginning of the summer of 2007, Viewfinder explored the reality of living and working with a smoking ban in Northern Ireland. Over nine in every ten individuals (94.3%) surveyed believe the smoking ban is a positive development, with only 3% of individuals surveyed not believing this to be the case.

The core reason for this ban being introduced was based on the fact that smoking is the greatest cause of ill health and preventable death in Northern Ireland. 91.3% of all Viewfinder respondents believe that the complete smoking ban in public places in Northern Ireland will improve the health of people in this country.

A high profile campaign has surrounded the introduction of the smoking ban in Northern Ireland and a website has been created to keep people informed and offer advice on the issue at: www.spacetobreathe.org.uk/.

When Viewfinder respondents were asked about advice available to ensure you comply with the legislation, an overwhelming majority (91.3%) feel there is sufficient advice available.

In response to the smoking ban in Northern Ireland, 78.1% of respondents in the voluntary and community sector have created a smoke free policy for their organisation.

The Viewfinder survey found that less than four in every ten respondents had provided an external smoking area for staff and clients, and the majority of these respondents (91.3%) who had not provided an external smoking environment said they do not intend to create one.

The results of this short survey have found that individuals in the voluntary and community sector are very supportive of the reality of living and working in a smoke free environment.

Devolution

The devolution of power to the Northern Ireland Assembly on 8 May 2007 marked the beginning of a new political tide in this country. 93.7% of all Viewfinder respondents believe that the devolution of power to Northern Ireland is a positive development, with only 0.9% of individuals strongly disagreeing.

Political parties that once were almost polar opposites during the years of direct rule, now together hold the positions of first minister and deputy first minister. The new governance arrangements of Northern Ireland were initially characterised with photographs of the Rev Ian Paisley, First Minister, laughing with the Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness. Many people in Northern Ireland are now breathing a sigh of relief, as 'normal politics' are the issues that make media coverage, as opposed to the 'blame game' and 'either/other' politics that for so long divided this country. However that is not to say change will be easy.

A legacy of conflict still remains and only real commitment can begin to make the small changes required to assist this country to move forward. Viewfinder respondents were asked at the beginning of summer 2007 if they felt that political parties are committed to working together. Over two thirds of respondents felt that political parties are committed to working together with only 2.1% disagreeing. Interestingly 29.8% of respondents did not hold an opinion on this matter. This is unsurprising, given the fact that previous efforts of a devolved assembly in Northern Ireland have been short lived. Recent events in the political arena demonstrate that the honeymoon period

may be coming to an end, with the allegation from the Social Development Minister that minutes from an Assembly meetings on 8 October 2007 was altered by some executive colleagues.

The transfer of power to the Assembly brings with it real responsibility, whereby politicians must go beyond the green and orange politics to address real issues that affect all aspects of our society. Over three quarters (76.4%) of respondents feel that this will be difficult, with only 9.1% of respondents not believing it will be difficult.

In the past politics in Northern Ireland has been criticised as suffering from a 'democratic deficit' with much of the political decisions coming directly from Westminster. Over three quarters (78.9%) of Viewfinder respondents believe that the new devolved Assembly offers voluntary and community groups the opportunity to influence policy making.

The new Assembly made a decision to revisit the issue of the Review of Public Administration (RPA). Eight in every ten (80.1%) Viewfinder respondents are of the opinion that in any re-evaluation, community planning should remain central to the role of the new councils and any other institutions under the RPA. Recognising this as an important area, NICVA, Community Technical Aid and Rural Community Network have organised a seminar at NICVA on 23 November 2007 to discuss the potential of community planning in relation to providing better services and how voluntary and community organisations can get involved in the process.

As the Assembly revisits the issue of RPA there is a chance that the final decision will result in

a loss of coterminosity, ie a loss in shared boundaries between councils and other bodies, such as health, education, housing and police. This issue was examined in the Viewfinder survey and there were some strong opinions on the issue.

Over half of Viewfinder respondents (54.7%) believe that if this was to occur it will be a disaster and will leave us worse off than before the RPA started.

The new draft code of good governance

Positive Steps (2005) stressed that a proactive approach to promoting good governance in the sector is needed. The voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland has recognised this need and a good governance group has developed a Draft Code of Governance, made up of seven principles. It is designed to ensure standards of good governance in the voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland.

The Code is not intended to be mandatory but rather sets out best practice to help and support management committees/boards of any size. It is envisaged that voluntary and community organisations can state compliance with either the full Code or the principles of the Code. Organisations will be able to use the Code as a tool to develop good governance.

At the beginning of the summer Viewfinder respondents were asked were they aware of the new draft Code of Governance. At that time 70.6% of respondents were aware. Of the respondents who were aware of the Code of Governance, 85.1% believed it was a positive development, with only 0.9% of respondents

not believing this to be the case. 14.1% of respondents did not have an opinion on the Code of Governance. This is perhaps reflective of the fact that the development of a draft Code of Governance is a relatively recent phenomenon.

An overwhelming majority of Viewfinder respondents (95.9%) stated that their organisation would be interested in signing up to a Code of Governance. If an organisation voluntarily signs up to the Code of Governance, it agrees to adhere to seven principles of good governance. Viewfinder respondents were asked if they felt they would need further guidance and support to adhere to the principles and the results are displayed in Figure 1 (above right).

Figure 1 illustrates that over three quarters of Viewfinder respondents believe that they would require more guidance and support to adhere to the principles. In recognition of the need for such advice and support, the Good Governance working group is going to apply for funding to publish the code and promote its usability. The group envisages that an online support guide will be available, where each of the principles of the Code of Governance will be linked to appropriate information and advice.

Collaborative working and mergers

Voluntary and community organisations are increasingly looking at ways in which to

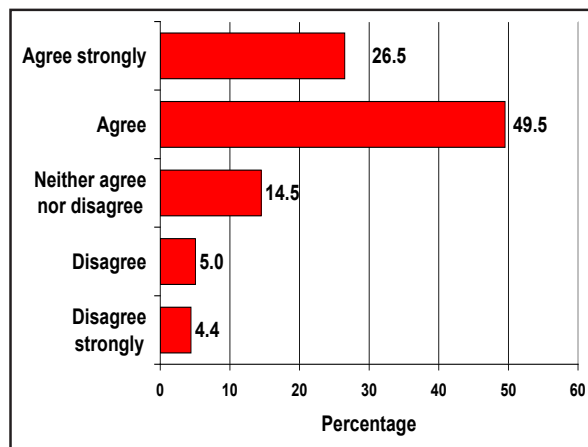


Figure 1 – further guidance and support would be needed to adhere to the principles of the Code of Good Governance

provide a better service to their beneficiaries. Mergers between charities are not uncommon and some organisations are joining forces with others to work on projects either on an informal or formal basis.

Viewfinder found that the majority of organisations which responded to the questionnaire (81.8%) are currently working jointly on projects with other organisations. As can be seen from Figure 2 on the right, there are various methods of partnership working used.

Approximately 40% of all organisations involved in partnership working are involved in formal arrangements. The remainder of organisations involved in partnership working is either on an informal basis, or a mixture of both formal and informal arrangements. Just over half (55.6%) of organisations involved in partnership arrangements have a written agreement of the partnership. When embarking on partnership arrangements it is important to consider a written agreement which will outline the purpose of the arrangement, as well as stating

roles and responsibilities of the key stakeholders. This will ensure all parties in the partnership arrangements are protected.

Of the organisations surveyed which are currently not involved in partnership arrangements, approximately one quarter (25.4%) have thought about the possibility of merging with another organisation and 11.1% have begun this process. Approximately one in ten organisations (11.7%) which would consider a merger or partnership arrangement have sought professional advice on this issue.

To consider the issue of a partnership arrangement or a merger can seem like a minefield to many organisations

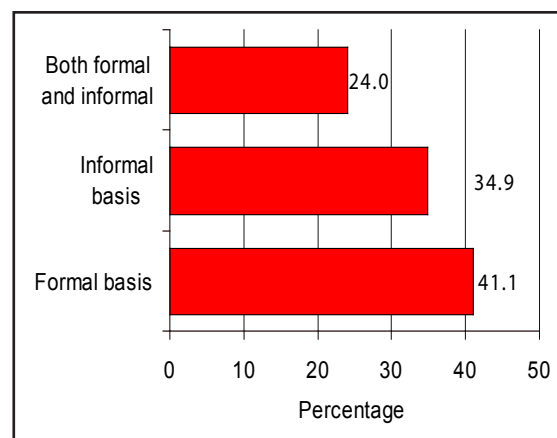


Figure 2 – the arrangements of those organisations involved in partnership working

in the voluntary and community sector. When considering a partnership or merger arrangement it would be advisable for organisations to undertake the process of due diligence. This involves the investigation of another organisation in advance of completion of a merger. It involves the steps organisations take to assure themselves that a merger or a collaboration involving significant financial or reputational risks, is in the best interests of their organisation. Approximately two thirds (63.5%) of

Viewfinder respondents would be interested in learning more about due diligence. In response to this, NICVA has organised a number of sessions on due diligence.

Planning for future

Strategic planning can be a real stumbling block for voluntary and community organisations but never before has it been so essential. No longer is it sufficient for voluntary and community organisations to view strategic planning as a 'luxury' or an 'add on' to their work. In order to survive and flourish in today's environment, particularly when organisations are in receipt of public funding,

there is a requirement to be able to plan for the future. This requires a real investment in strategic planning.

91.6% of organisations surveyed believe that insecure or short-term funding makes strategic planning difficult. While the issue of strategic planning can seem almost ironic in an insecure and volatile funding environment, the existence of a strategic plan can be the very thing that assists organisations, as it requires organisations to analyse both the internal and external environment when planning for the future.

Just under half of respondents stated that they find strategic planning difficult (48.9%).

Interestingly 60.8% of respondents feel that they could benefit from further guidance and support on strategic planning.

The Viewfinder survey was circulated to NICVA members at the beginning of the summer of 2007 and there was a 37.1% response rate. If you would like further information about the survey or how to include questions in future Viewfinders, contact Leeann Brady as follows:

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NICVA would like to thank everyone who took part in this survey. Your contribution is greatly appreciated.