

Department for Social Development

REGIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE PROGRAMME

REVIEW AND CONSULTATION

2010



Department for
**Social
Development**

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Foreword

The Regional Infrastructure Programme is a Department for Social Development funding programme administered by the Voluntary and Community Unit. It is aimed at supporting a small number of key organisations which are involved, at a regional level, in playing a supporting, co-coordinating or development role in relation to voluntary and community sector organisations, particularly in those policy areas which are the responsibility of the Department for Social Development.

Now is an appropriate time to conduct a review of the Regional Infrastructure Programme to ensure that it is appropriately geared to help support the voluntary and community sector across all of Northern Ireland and that it is helping to make a real difference to the lives of local people and local communities.

This review, together with the development of a new policy framework to govern relationships between government and the voluntary and community sector (Concordat), new arrangements for increasing the number of volunteers and new arrangements for the support of local voluntary advice services, collectively create a programme of change designed to enhance support for the voluntary and community sector through a challenging period of increasing demand and limited resources.

I would like to thank Community Places and the Department's Analytical Services Unit for their work in helping to inform the review to date. I am now pleased to launch this consultation document and look forward to hearing your views and suggestions on what we hope will be one of our key programmes over the coming years.

Maeve Walls
Director, Voluntary and Community Unit

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BACKGROUND

The existing Regional Infrastructure Programme (RIP) has been in operation for approximately 20 years, during which time it has remained largely unchanged. The programme, as it currently stands, is aimed at supporting the core costs of key organisations involved at a regional (Northern Ireland-wide) level, in playing a supporting, coordinating or development role in relation to the voluntary and community sector, particularly in those areas which are the responsibility of the Department for Social Development. Funding is made available to assist the delivery of regional support to the voluntary and community sector where there is evidence of need and where provision is not otherwise available.

Aims of the review

The aims of the review of the Regional Infrastructure Programme are to ensure that:

- (a) The programme remains relevant to Government objectives and the needs of the Department;
- (b) Priorities for support to the voluntary and community sector are clearly identified and prioritised;
- (c) The criteria for the programme are clearly stated; and
- (d) Regional support is geared to help the voluntary and community sector improve its relationship with public bodies and maximise its contribution to public life in Northern Ireland.

It is vitally important to ensure that the programme is appropriately targeted to achieve best results and assist with the delivery of priorities for government and public service agreement objectives, and that the philosophy of the programme is in harmony with any new Concordat between the voluntary and community sector and the Northern Ireland government. It is also important that we can clearly demonstrate the impact of the programme for its users on the ground and in local communities.

WHAT IS 'REGIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE'? WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Infrastructure is a metaphor from architecture. A building does not stand simply by piling brick on brick. There need to be foundations, support for the roof and services to connect it to utilities. Organisations need the equivalent in terms of access to skills, communications, professional and customer networks, and other sources of expert knowledge that single organisations, especially small ones, cannot acquire in isolation.

It is widely understood that infrastructure is essential to support a thriving business sector or effective public services. How much more so in the voluntary and community sector (VCS), where many organisations are created by local residents on a shoestring? The voluntary and community sector is a vital part of society which other sectors rely on but often take for granted. This sector, which underpins so much else, relies in turn on its own form of infrastructure.

Support for VCS infrastructure in Northern Ireland at regional level is crucial and the Department for Social Development is proud to support this role. We are reviewing how we carry out this vital function and this document invites you to help shape the way we do it by commenting on a number of key questions. These questions are contained separately in our supplement questionnaire. You can download this questionnaire in word format from the DSD website or answer online here <http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/TJW6JQ6>. Hard copies are also available on request. We recommend you complete the questions as you move through this document, considering the relevant questions as indicated.

By its nature infrastructure is often not very visible. It is important that both government and people as a whole understand why it is essential in this sector and how much society relies on it; so we start by restating some of the basic realities.

VCS infrastructure can be defined as:

the combination of capacity, skills, physical resources and structures which support community and voluntary organisations in serving their communities and helping them to meet their needs both through their own groups, organisations and initiatives and through negotiation with public authorities and partnerships.¹

1. Deloitte MCS, *Research to Develop a Methodology for Identifying Areas of Weak Community Infrastructure*, DSD 2004, p6, adapted

It has also been observed that VCS infrastructure is 'an asset base having as much importance in underpinning social and economic activity as roads and telecommunications'²

What happens when VCS infrastructure is weak? There are...³

- few community organisations
- low levels of volunteer participation
- high feelings of isolation
- low self esteem and poor perception of the area and community
- poor relationships between the community and statutory organisations
- community organisations work in isolation, not linked to wider community networks.

The consequences are equally dire for residents and public services :⁴

- many people do not realise that the issues that concern them are shared by others and can be affected by joint action
- the most disadvantaged people receive poor quality public services yet are least confident and skilled at representing their needs to authorities
- some of the groups that do exist remain small and exclusive, dominated by cliques who keep decision-making to themselves
- community organisations fail to adapt to changing circumstances or miss out on opportunities to expand or change direction
- community leaders are not properly selected and held accountable and may flounder or be ineffective on partnership boards
- different interests in communities are unable to reach a consensus or vision and their interests do not register in public decision-making
- sections of the local population are not able to participate in activities because prejudices and cultural differences are not tackled
- public agencies and departments that need to engage with local communities are unaware of each other's efforts, lack insight into how communities work and have few channels for dialogue with them.

And here is a picture of the results where there is regional support :⁵

- the level of participation in local associations has risen markedly
- many people feel confident and able to shape the quality of their lives
- associations come together to tackle large issues
- there have been improvements in the local economy, education, safety, health, environment, housing and the image of the area
- there is local leadership and vision.

2. Armstrong and Mack, *Scoping Study on Weak Community Infrastructure Programme*, CENI, 2003, p32

3. according to Deloitte, *ibid* p26

4. according to *The Community Development Challenge*, CLG, 2006, p10 [condensed]

5. from Dick Atkinson: *Civil Renewal: Mending the Hole in the Social Ozone Layer*, Brewin Books, 2004, p73 [condensed]

RATIONALISING RESOURCES WHILST GROWING OUR VISION

It is clear that in present conditions resources for infrastructure support, like all other government resources, will be under severe constraints. There is a danger that if infrastructure is weakened, the voluntary and community sector across the region may dwindle just when it is needed more than ever. Research by NICVA in September 2009 showed an increased demand for services as a result of the recession whilst 13% of organisations had made staff redundant and a further 21% expected to make redundancies soon. ⁶

This is damaging to wider society in multiple ways, not only in the sector itself but on all other public issues:

‘The impact of the recession ... on the third sector includes an increased demand for key services, including welfare rights, housing and debt counselling and likely declines in income from investments and charitable giving and public sector income. Capacity builders undertook surveys of the impact of the economic downturn on support providers in July-Nov 2009, with 389 responses. These showed:

- increased demand from frontline services;
- 42% of support providers have faced reduced income over the past 12 months;
- 44% expected reduced income next year;
- 85% considering collaboration , 75% looking at rationalising their services, 53% considering cutting staff’.⁷

The Department for Social Development sees itself as being in partnership with the voluntary and community sector to ensure that positive outcomes are sustained and further developed over the long-term future. For the past three years it has been gathering evidence and conducting investigations in preparation for putting its support for, and dialogue with, the VCS on a more strategic, comprehensive, outcome-oriented basis.

This exploration has been overtaken by recession, and now, along with all government functions, faces a period of constraint. DSD has decided nevertheless to press on and lay the basis for long term development, even though the initial steps will have to be highly selective. We believe that whilst we will inevitably have to phase-in any innovations over a period until economic conditions improve, it is better for morale and for the interests both of government, the sector and wider society as a whole, to see that there is a clear direction of travel towards a more ample solution. In this consultation we are therefore asking the sector and other stakeholders to join with us in determining the best way forward, both to the larger, longer term vision and to the way we should prioritise initial steps to build momentum.

6. NICVA, *Impact and Reaction of the Voluntary and Community Sector to the Recession in Northern Ireland*, April 2010

7. Shared Intelligence, *Sustainable Models of Support Services, Overview Report*, Capacity Builders, Feb 2010, 2.9-3.1

THE CONSULTATION

This stakeholder consultation is set out in the form of 19 questions across seven sections. The questions are then presented together in a convenient response booklet.

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Section A: VISION FOR A NEW PROGRAMME

We propose the following long-term vision for a new Regional Support Programme for the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS). This is an ideal to work towards rather than an immediate objective.

That all voluntary and community sector organisations are able to access key infrastructure support to enable the sector to flourish, enhance the quality of its work, contribute maximum value to Northern Ireland society and maintain constructive dialogue with all levels of government and public bodies

Please refer to questions 1 – 2 of our questionnaire

Section B: TAKING STOCK

A. The existing situation – strengths

- RIP has played a key part in the major contribution made by VCS organisations to the wellbeing of people and communities in NI over the past 20 years
- A variety of evaluations have been carried out over the past 3 years to lay the basis for a more effective and comprehensive programme to meet future needs

B. The existing situation – weaknesses

- An arbitrary pattern of funding has grown up historically
- It is not always clear what outcomes have been aimed at or are being achieved
- Support delivery appears to be patchy – there is no overall map relating extent of need to extent of service. Some organisations appear to have limited reach, and it is not clear whether the bulk of VCS organisations are receiving support
- The ‘influence’ role appears to be underdeveloped in many of the existing Regional Infrastructure funded organisations
- There is no clear relationship between core funding and quality or extent of delivery

The programme currently works through 10 funded organisations:

Churches Community Work Alliance

Women’s Centres Regional Partnership

CO3 –Chief Officers Third Sector

Advice NI

Law Centre NI

Citizen’s Advice

CENI (Evaluation)

Community Change

Volunteer Now

NICVA

C. Opportunity

- Create a fresh, comprehensive vision of how need should be met across the whole sector and set in motion a framework to achieve agreed outcomes and impact over the long term

D. Threat

- Government funding is likely to be very constrained for at least the next few years

Please refer to questions 3 – 4 of our questionnaire

Section C: COVERING THE REGION

The aim of the programme is to support the Voluntary and Community Sector across the whole of Northern Ireland. This has been estimated as including at least 4,600 organisations. These cannot all be reached and served directly by the existing regional infrastructural organisations. How can we make sure that so far as possible they all get access to the support that they need?

The Department is seeking to work with a small number of organisations who can demonstrate coverage across Northern Ireland, or a number of organisations coming together to work collaboratively to demonstrate coverage across Northern Ireland.

Many small organisations may not be reached by the programme, either because they are new, or because they do not know where to look for support, or because they are not in a specific network which communicates regularly with them. The programme needs to plan how these organisations can be included 'in the loop' to receive support.

There may be some tension for infrastructure bodies between trying to serve as many organisations as they can directly, and channelling support through sub regional and local authority-level infrastructure bodies. If mainly by channelling, there may be questions about whether the sub regional and local council-level bodies are sufficiently well spread and effective to transmit this support.

Ways that more organisations could be reached might include:

- Ensuring that constantly widening reach is built into the criteria for funding organisations
- Ensuring that widening reach is built in to the development plans of funded organisations
- Publicising the programme's offer through other Government Departments and regional, sub regional and local public bodies.

Please refer to questions 5 – 6 of our questionnaire

Section D: KEY FUNCTIONS OF A NEW PROGRAMME

The current rationale is based on supporting a mixture of ‘generic’ and ‘thematic’ functions. These are defined differently in different documents. Sometimes the term ‘specialist’ is added. We think it is clearer to stay with the main two terms and to define them as such:

Generic infrastructure organisations provide expertise on selected support functions for all VCS organisations across the region, either directly or through other intermediaries

Thematic infrastructure organisations provide a package of support shaped to the needs of VCS organisations of a specific type or concerned with one of the Department’s specific policy issues across the region

The logic of the generic/thematic division reflects a belief that

- there are certain functions which are needed across the sector but which require guidance and support based on specialised expertise such as only an organisation dedicated to that function could be expected to develop (‘generic’); and
- there are functions which could be delivered by a number of different organisations but are delivered best by being integrated into a package adapted to organisations of a particular kind, focused on a specific issue or constituting a network with its own identity (‘thematic’)

‘Specialist’ is not an organising category – it could apply to both generic and thematic functions in different ways.

Both types need to be, or become, **region-wide** across Northern Ireland.

IN THE NEW PROGRAMME:

Generic functions are likely to include:

General support to and representation of the sector

Volunteering

Organisational development

Leadership

Policy influence

Finance, Governance and Quality Assurance

Community development as an aspect of the work of all organisations

Service improvement and quality

Advice on funding and income generation

Networking and collaboration

Themes might include:

Voluntary Advice Policy

Knowledge and skills about specific policy issues

Issue-specific policy influence

Community Development by specialist CD organisations or projects

Please refer to questions 7 – 10 of our questionnaire

Section E: OUTCOMES

We identified earlier that the programme and funded organisations were not always clear about what outcomes were being aimed at or achieved. We see outcomes as being about:

- What service is delivered to whom
- Quality – how do the recipients transmit the benefit to their users?
- Reach and volume – what proportion of potential beneficiaries are accessing the service?

The programme needs clearer outcomes both in itself and in order to link with related developments such as the Review of Public Administration. We believe that the new remit for all funded organisations should include:

- Showing outcome-oriented planning and evaluation
- Showing baselines of achievement and a plan for continuous improvements in quality and efficiency
- Showing how the programme will develop to serve other organisations of same types who are not in the existing membership or networks
- Showing how the outcomes will be monitored and evaluated for impact.

We recognise the importance of evidencing outcomes and see it as essential in order to feed back into and constantly improve the organisation and hence our whole programme. All successful organisations invest a fraction of their resources in obtaining such intelligence in order to detect weaknesses and gaps and plan remedial action, and equally to register successes and build further upon them. We would expect funded organisations to allocate 3% - 5% of their core funding to this function.

On the next page there are seven types of outcome which we would like to see the programme achieving, followed by three questions about them.

TYPES OF OUTCOME Because of this Programme:

- | |
|--|
| 1. Voluntary and community organisations across Northern Ireland have access to the services and support they need to function effectively and efficiently. |
| 2. Front line voluntary and community organisations achieve their objectives better than before. |
| 3. Front line voluntary and community organisations provide an improved quality of service to their customers. |
| 4. Front line voluntary and community organisations are helped to obtain and better manage resources, and conduct business effectively. |
| 5. The voluntary and community sector (including smaller local organisations) make a valued and effective contribution to policy development and improving service delivery. |
| 6. There is increased voluntary and community development activity across Northern Ireland. |
| 7. There are improved working relations, better collaboration and more effective partnerships across the voluntary and community sector. |

Please refer to questions 11 – 14 of our questionnaire

Section F: PROGRAMME CRITERIA

Existing criteria are shown in the panel to the right.

These have served well in the past but we feel they are not necessarily adequate for a new system because they are descriptive of types of activity rather than outcomes that have to be met or quality that has to be achieved.

The existing commitment of the programme is to fund organisations' core costs. This gives stability to the funded organisations but means there is no visible or structural relationship between the level of grant and the volume or effectiveness of activity.

Questions have also been raised about how long the funding agreements should run for. Some commentators have argued for five years or even longer to ensure stability but we are concerned that a guaranteed grant for a long period could induce complacency and reduce the incentive to constant improvement.

CURRENT BROAD CRITERIA

Representation and participation on behalf of their membership or sector

Advice and information (eg mentoring, signposting, making funding bids)

Public policy – consultation, influence

Support for community development (empowerment, inclusion, equity, partnership, collective action)

Encouraging collaboration between voluntary and community sector organisations

Delivery across Northern Ireland

We have identified the following examples of possible new criteria. We intend that a small number of organisations, or consortia, will be selected which between them can best:

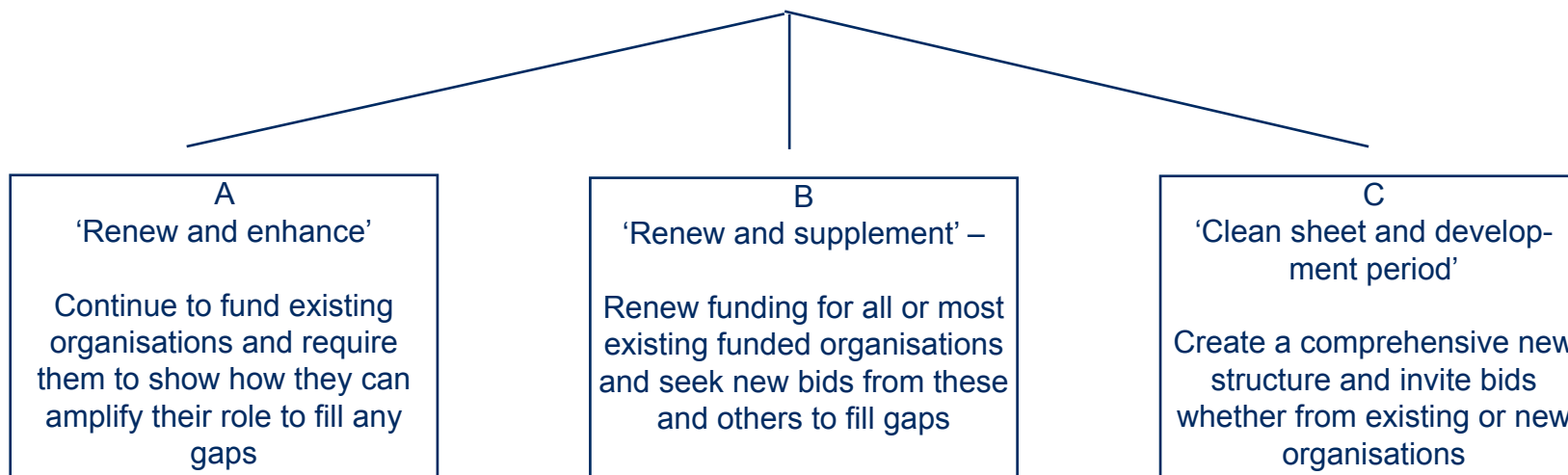
- 1 Perform the functions prioritised by the programme (see p13) and contribute to achieving its vision;
- 2 Demonstrate that they have the capacity and expertise to deliver these functions;
- 3 Provide coverage across all of Northern Ireland, in both urban and rural areas (not front line service delivery);
- 4 Address disadvantage as an intrinsic part of the work;
- 5 Address diversity and inclusiveness, ensuring needs of Section 75 Groups are met;
- 6 Identify and target unmet need and potential;
- 7 Specify and provide evidence of outcomes and impact;
- 8 Demonstrate administrative efficiency;
- 9 Show planning for continuous improvement in quality and reach; and
- 10 Clearly demonstrate need for services offered.

Please refer to questions 15 – 16 of our questionnaire

Section G: OPTIONS FOR A NEW APPROACH

We are considering whether the new approach should be based on a fresh, comprehensive view of the sector's needs and potential, or seek improvement by incremental steps. Either way we would need to plan carefully for transition from the present pattern.

We have identified three alternative possibilities:



Each of these has implications for the pattern of funding:

Existing funding would be likely to have to be spread more thinly to make space for new functions

Existing funding would be likely to have to go further: organisations may have to do more within a standstill or reduced budget

Existing funding would be temporarily sustained so far as budget allows, whilst creating a new structure to make better use of funding and create a long term framework for expansion

Please refer to questions 17 – 19 of our questionnaire

Responding to this consultation

A twelve week period for the submission of comments on this consultation document will extend from 5th July 2010 until 30th September 2010. Correspondents are asked to submit their views as early as possible during this period to allow as much time as possible for consideration.

We have identified a number of key questions in relation to this consultation. These questions are contained separately in our supplement questionnaire. You can download this questionnaire in word format from the DSD website or answer online here <http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/TJW6JQ6>.

If you require a printed copy of the response booklet, it can be requested from the Voluntary and Community Unit (VCU) at the contact details provided in this section.

Alternatively should you only wish to respond to a particular element of this consultation and do not wish to complete the consultation response booklet, then you can submit your comments referring to the relevant question. For example:

Question x – I/We consider that.....

All responses not submitted electronically must be made in writing and attributable so that there is an objective record of the view expressed. Your name, address and organisation name (if applicable) should be clearly stated. Responses should be submitted before the closing date. Responses should be sent to:-

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While we cannot accept responses by telephone, general enquiry calls may be made to the above number.

The information you send us may be passed to colleagues within the Department and published in any summary of responses received. Under the Freedom of Information Act all information contained in your response may be subject to disclosure. More information about the Freedom of Information Act is at Appendix A.

If you require any further information, or wish to discuss your proposed response in general terms, please contact us at the above address or telephone 028 9082 9430.

NEXT STEPS

Following detailed consultation analysis, it is anticipated that a new framework for Regional Support, together with appropriate transitional arrangements, will be finalised by early November 2010.

Appendix A - Freedom of Information

Freedom of Information Act 2000 – Confidentiality of Consultations

The Department will publish a summary of responses following completion of the consultation process. Your response, and all other responses to the consultation, may be disclosed on request. The Department can only refuse to disclose information in exceptional circumstances. Before you submit your response, please read the paragraphs below on the confidentiality of consultations and they will give you guidance on the legal position about any information given by you in response to this consultation.

The Freedom of Information Act gives the public a right of access to any information held by a public authority, namely, the Department in this case. This right of access to information includes information provided in response to a consultation. The Department cannot automatically consider as confidential information supplied to it in response to a consultation. However, it does have the responsibility to decide whether any information provided by you in response to this consultation, including information about your identity should be made public or be treated as confidential. If you do not wish information about your identity to be made public please include an explanation in your response.

This means that information provided by you in response to the consultation is unlikely to be treated as confidential, except in very particular circumstances. The Lord Chancellor's Code of Practice on the Freedom of Information Act provides that:

- the Department should only accept information from third parties in confidence if it is necessary to obtain that information in connection with the exercise of any of the Department's functions and it would not otherwise be provided
- the Department should not agree to hold information received from third parties "in confidence" which is not confidential in nature
- acceptance by the Department of confidentiality provisions must be for good reasons, capable of being justified to the Information Commissioner.

For further information about confidentiality of responses please contact the Information Commissioner's Office (or see web site at: <http://www.informationcommissioner.gov.uk/>)