

4 June 2013

Ms Catherine Taggart
Community Services Manager
Belfast City Council
City Hall
Belfast BT1 5GS

VOLUNTEER NOW
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Keef

Dear Catherine

I am writing to inform you that the DSD Minister announced on the 9 May that there would be a c. 50% reduction in funding support for the work of the volunteering infrastructure and that this directly impacts on the delivery of volunteering support services provided by Volunteer Now. I have attached some more detailed briefing information for you that sets out the information regarding the Ministerial statement and the impact it will have. It is still unclear what the exact funding cut for Volunteer Now will be and while we are working on a c. 50% cut I am aware that this may be not be the case and could potentially be a more negative figure.

Volunteer Now provides regional infrastructure support to the promotion and development of volunteering across Northern Ireland which allows us to deliver, for example, the web site, a 'one stop shop' for volunteering information and good practice and regional promotional/recognition campaigns such as Volunteers Week. We also provide a dedicated local service to support volunteering across 15 Council areas one of which is Belfast City Council.

Volunteer Now exceeds the annual targets set by the DSD for recruitment of volunteers in relation to meeting our funding obligations. We have a track record of supporting volunteer involving organisations across Belfast to build best practice, maximise impact and enhance the volunteer's experience. We also work in partnership with Council staff to promote, support and develop volunteer involvement in community life. For example we have been involved with Council staff in promoting and supporting the successful Christmas Connections volunteer campaign. We provide support and information to staff on managing volunteers. The services and expertise provided by Volunteer Now is recognised by Council staff as an important resource that adds value to volunteering across the City. The City Council supported the European Year of Volunteering and regularly supports Volunteers Week recognition for volunteering.

We are concerned that the funding cuts we are faced with will be detrimental to the services we provide across Belfast, the extent of the cut and the short timeframe of implementation from 1st October mean that there will be staff losses for Volunteer Now and a reduction in the infrastructure services we provide. The limited lead in time for this substantive change does cause us concern. The other concern we have is that there would appear to be limited understanding within the DSD of what Volunteer Now as an organisation delivers. In that regard I would ask Belfast City Council to consider the issues raised in this letter and the attached briefing and to write to the DSD Minister outlining the important support you have had from Volunteer Now, the positive impact of the services we deliver and your concern that the funding cuts will have a detrimental effect on the development of volunteering in the City.

Thank you for your consideration of this information. Best wishes.

Wendy Osborne OBE
Chief Executive Officer
T: 028 9023 2020
W: www.volunteernow.co.uk

Wendy



 **INVESTORS
IN PEOPLE**

129 Ormeau Road,
Belfast, Co. Antrim BT7 1SH
E: ormeau@volunteernow.co.uk

34 Shaftesbury Square,
Belfast, Co. Antrim BT2 7DB
E: info@volunteernow.co.uk

Broughshane House, 70 Main Street
Broughshane, Co. Antrim BT42 4JW
E: broughshane@volunteernow.co.uk

Fermanagh House, Broadmeadow Place,
Enniskillen, Co. Fermanagh BT74 7HR
E: enniskillen@volunteernow.co.uk

Ballybot House, 28 Cornmarket,
Newry, Co. Down BT35 8BG
E: newry@volunteernow.co.uk

Urgent Briefing from Volunteer Now: The DSD Minister has recently taken the decision to make a substantive cut to funding for the volunteering infrastructure which will have a negative impact on the work of Volunteer Now in providing support for volunteers and volunteer involving organisations.

The following Ministerial Statement was made on the 9 May 2013 regarding future support for the volunteering infrastructure – ‘volunteering budget remains at £1.7million pa (Small Grants increase to £600k (previous c£300k), Innovation Fund increase to £500k (previous c£300k) and **Infrastructure reduced to £600k (previous c £1.1m)**’.

Context: Volunteer Now has lived with uncertainty about the funding regarding the volunteering infrastructure regionally and locally since 2010. This uncertainty increased last year when issues emerged over the six proposed support funding contracts that were initiated in March/April 2012; this procurement process was terminated by the Minister last September.

In the last year Volunteer Now has endeavoured to remain true to the spirit of the vision that created our merged organisation, we believe in volunteering, we believe in an integrated infrastructure support model and we believe in what we do as Volunteer Now to promote, support and add value to volunteer involvement in Northern Ireland.

Volunteer Now has been an advocate for the establishment of a strategic policy endorsement for volunteering and we fully support the NI Executive’s Volunteering Strategy. In that context we welcome the DSD’s additional funding support for small grants and for innovation associated with delivery of the Volunteering Strategy. However it is very disappointing and highly detrimental to the promotion, support and development of volunteering that additional funding for these programmes is at the expense of the services, delivered by the volunteering infrastructure.

Volunteering Strategy: The Volunteering Strategy for Northern Ireland states that a ‘high quality volunteering infrastructure has a key role to play in the successful delivery of a volunteering strategy. There is a range of services, which infrastructure support organisations provide to enhance the capacity of all sectors involving volunteers. These services may include policy development, research, training on recruiting and supporting volunteers, information on specific issues relating to volunteer involvement, promotion of volunteering, recruitment of volunteers, assistance with good practice in relation to the protection of children and vulnerable adults and the development of standards in relation to volunteer management and support with governance’. **The priority action is to ‘support an integrated infrastructure which provides appropriate services across Northern Ireland’.**

The impact of the Ministerial announcement: While organisational funding decisions have not yet been made the indications are from the DSD that the £600,000 annual figure for the volunteering infrastructure support is considered sufficient to deliver the Volunteering Strategy; that this funding covers both delivery of regional and local infrastructure services; that the funding will support consistent service delivery across every district council area; that the funding will have a focus on meeting disadvantage e.g. within Neighbourhood Renewal areas and that the funding will also cover supporting volunteer development and practice, as required, within those organisations allocated small grants.

The level of funding cut for the volunteering infrastructure is substantial and this coupled with a 1st October implementation does create organisational difficulties that

will necessitate job losses within Volunteer Now and loss of services to support volunteering at a local level.

It is unclear why the DSD appears to have devalued the work of the volunteering infrastructure. **Volunteer Now delivers a regional service across Northern Ireland and a local service across 15 local authority areas which cover a population of over 1.2 million (69% of the NI population).** Volunteer Now has for example delivered and substantively exceeded its volunteer number targets across the 15 council areas in which it operates. It is contributing to meeting the objectives of the Volunteering Strategy and has consistently delivered support to enhance front line services including:

Promotion of volunteering e.g. last year

- We received 5,500 volunteer registrations (10% from unemployed people); supported over 3,000 organisations registering 3,800 opportunities that provided 16,000 volunteer placements across N Ireland;
- We held 541 information/promotion events across the province;
- We supported 157 local volunteering information points across NI;
- We distributed over 50,000 leaflets about volunteering including 20,000 targeted information for the unemployed;
- Over 100,000 unique visitors accessed information/training/registered for volunteering opportunities etc on website;
- We generated total media coverage £2.4m (£1m local and £1.4m regional).

Guidance and Training e.g. last year

- We trained over 1,500 people in volunteer management practice with 98% reporting improved practice as a result of training and over 100 people gaining recognised qualifications;
- We trained over 400 volunteers with 215 receiving accreditation;
- We dealt with 5,866 queries for specific information around volunteering as well as over 325 face to face support meetings;
- We supported over 250 small grant holders including making over 140 support visits;
- We had 20,000 downloads of our good practice publications; sent regular briefings and updates to 600 member organisations.

Recognition for volunteers and volunteering e.g. last year

- We provided for volunteers (free of charge) over 10,000 badges and to date over 7,000 volunteer certificates to over 600 organisations to recognise the contribution of volunteers;
- We supported 11 high profile recognition events across NI;
- We supported 63 organisations to gain the national quality award Investing in Volunteers;
- We raised the profile of volunteering in 31 public policy responses.

We believe it is vital that those who work with us and avail of our services are aware of the full implications of what has been announced. It is important to emphasise that we are deeply concerned that an expert and credible resource that has been developed over 40 years to support and add value to volunteering in Northern Ireland will be severely depleted.

We would encourage you to write to the DSD Minister, Nelson McCausland MLA, to highlight how Volunteer Now has supported you and volunteering in your organisation or area.

Wendy Osborne OBE, Chief Executive Officer, 30 May 2013