Response ID ANON-4S4R-ZJ8E-E

Submitted to Voluntary and Community Sector Infrastructure and Support Policy Framework
Submitted on 2024-02-09 15:48:18

Section 1 - Introduction

1 Are you responding as an individual or on behalf of an organisation?

Organisation

Section 1 - Organisation Details

2 What is the name of your organisation?

Organisation name:
Barnardo's Northern Ireland

3 Does your organisation operate more in urban or rural areas?

More urban

4 Which of the following best describes your organisation?

Voluntary and Community Sector organisation

Section 1 - Voluntary and Community Sector

5 If you are answering on behalf of a voluntary and community organisation, which of the following best describes your organisation?

Voluntary organisation

If Other, please specify below::

Section 2 - Supporting the Sector's relationship with Government

Section 2 cont'd - Supporting the Sector's relationship with Government

6 The Joint Forum has proposed a draft framework of values and practices as a foundation for a future Concordat. To what extent do you agree with these values and practices as a way of supporting the relationship between Government and the Voluntary and Community Sector?

Values and Practices - Value 1: Accountability:
Strongly Agree

Values and Practices - Value 2: Active Participation:
Strongly Agree

Values and Practices - Value 3: Social Justice:
Strongly Agree

Values and Practices - Value 4: Independence:
Strongly Agree

Values and Practices - Value 5: Collaboration:
Strongly Agree

Values and Practices - Value 6: Sustainability:
Strongly Agree

Please share anything you would like add specific to each of the individual values: Accountability:

Active Participation:

Social Justice:

Independence:

Collaboration:

Sustainability:

7 Please let us know if you think there are gaps in the proposed framework of values and practices or anything additional that you would like to see included:

Gaps in proposed framework of values and practices:

We support, in principle, the proposed framework of values and practices, with some concerns within the process so far, that the active participation of the Children's Sector or Children and Young People has not been adequately included. There is currently no clear or democratic representation of our Sector within the Joint Forum itself, which we think excludes a huge range of services and stakeholders from active participation, which is necessary to ensure a whole government response.

Barnardo's NI has been working collaboratively as part of the Reimagine Children's Collective to increase our capacity to respond jointly and constructively to the Independent Review of Children's Services published by the Department of Health in June 2023. This has been done through an approach that embodies many of the ways of working listed as crucial in delivering the value of active participation within this section. We have also made a public statement on the need to increase trust and collaboration within and outside of our Sector, with a whole-government approach that understands the importance of relational capacity in facilitating systems change. It is, therefore, vital that in the practices that deliver the values envisioned in this framework, inclusion of the Sector delivering services to the 0-25s and their families is facilitated within the Joint Forum and in the future engagement work it envisions.

We also want to note that in relation to ways of working, it may be helpful to look at other models of good practice in this area in other jurisdictions. This is partly a response to our assessment that we need to learn from what hasn't been working (since 2011 and earlier) and to anticipate some of the barriers that we might encounter in this process.

For example, the learning from the Evaluation by the Centre for Effective Services (CES) on the effectiveness of the processes for implementation of three key Equality Strategies in the Republic of Ireland (Migrant Integration Strategy -MIS, National Strategy for Women and Girls – NSWG, National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy NTRIS) is potentially a useful resource. They looked at how civil society organisations were involved in developing implementation plans, what was best practice in implementing national equality or human rights strategies or policies, which processes and how effective were those used by government to implement the MIS, NSWG and NTRIS and how they could be improved for successor or future strategies. There are key recommendations and insights that could directly inform what further approaches could be helpful to reset and reimagine the relationship between the whole of government and our Sector in Northern Ireland and what mechanisms could be introduced to actively monitor their success or failure.

The full report is available here https://www.effectiveservices.org/journal/realising-the-promise-of-equality-policy.

8 The Joint Forum has been considering options to ensure that a future Concordat/agreement leads to meaningful change and an improved relationship between the sectors.To what extent do you agree that a future Concordat/agreement would be strengthened if a legal duty were created to require NI Executive Ministers to act in compliance with the concordat values and practices when making decisions and carrying out ministerial responsibilities?

Strongly Agree

9 The Joint Forum is keen to hear views on what the ambition and scope of a new Concordat/agreement should be between Government and the Voluntary and Community Sector.

Please share any thoughts, ideas or challenges below::

Barnardo's NI and the Reimagine Children's Collective believes the ambition and scope of a new agreement should be to help facilitate a cultural shift that involves the whole of government, and therefore should not be restricted to relations with the Department for Communities alone.

Children's Sector Services, as one example, interact with a host of different departments, representing a diverse range of civil society in important decision-making processes as well as providing services that are crucial in delivering statutory duties for the 0-25s as well as their families. We call for a reimagined approach in terms of all governmental interactions with our Sector - where our common participatory practices around community-based dialogue, co-design and active feedback mechanisms are not an add-on at the end of consultation processes, but are valued and enabled from the conception phases of policy strategy development, throughout their life cycles and importantly, in assessing and monitoring their implementation (or lack of it).

We believe we can collectively play a vital role as partners, in helping policy makers recognise the importance of intersectionality across different departmental strategic frameworks and incorporating it more effectively into policy cycles and implementation plans.

A foundational aspect of achieving this cultural shift will need to include a radical transformation of Northern Ireland's Commissioning Environment for our Sector. As a member of the Reimagine Children's Collective, we are calling for multi-year, full-cost recovery tendering processes that offer better long-term planning, better value for the public purse, and eliminate unhealthy competition between organisations. This can be done by encouraging collaboration and pooling of resources through commissioning as opposed to procurement, which in turn will ensure better regional coverage, coordination and parity of access to provisions across NI.

We believe all of this should be within the scope of this new agreement and that NICVA and the Joint Forum (with an additional, clear representation of the Children's Sector) are well placed to include the diverse range of community and voluntary organisations in this important conversation to shape new funding processes. It will be important that community-assets of all sizes feel seen, heard, valued and have a strong sense of agency in the process.

10 The 2011 Concordat was framed as an agreement between Government and the voluntary and community sector. The Joint Forum believes that a future Concordat should apply to a wider range of "civil society" organisations: a very broad definition that includes everything

outside the state (public sector) and the market (private sector). This is also sometimes called the "third sector" or the "social sector".There is some debate around the term we should use when we speak about this broader sector. Which would be your preferred term?

No preference

If Other, please specify below::

Section 3 - Vision and Headline Outcomes (for infrastructure support)

11 The draft framework proposes a vision for infrastructure support. To what extent do you agree with this vision?

Strongly Agree

If you would like to expand on your answer please do so below::

Section 3 cont'd - Vision and Headline Outcomes (for infrastructure support)

12 To what extent do you agree with this Leadership and Advocacy headline outcome?

Strongly Agree

13 To what extent do you agree with the supporting outcomes?

Agree leadership supporting outcomes - Sector leaders have skills and confidence to support their organisations and communities:
Strongly Agree

Agree leadership supporting outcomes - Sector leaders work together around shared issues:
Strongly Agree

Agree leadership supporting outcomes - Sector leadership is diverse and representative of the sector and communities:
Strongly Agree

Agree leadership supporting outcomes - Data and evidence from the sector is effectively collated, analysed and communicated:
Strongly Agree

Agree leadership supporting outcomes - Public policy and decision making (central and local government) is informed by evidence from the sector:
Strongly Agree

14 If you would like to expand on your answer please do so below:

Comments leadership and advocacy outcome:

It is important that data collection and reporting is meaningful and proportional, not burdensome. Additionally, data that is collected must serve a function, rather than collecting data for the sake of it, or as part of standard procedure. Data collection must be review to ensure that continues to be meaningful, proportional and purposeful.

Section 3 cont'd - Vision and Headline Outcomes (for infrastructure support)

15 To what extent do you agree with this Volunteering headline outcome?

Strongly Agree

16 To what extent do you agree with the supporting outcomes?

Agree volunteering supporting outcomes - People volunteering with organisations are well supported and valued:
Strongly Agree

Agree volunteering supporting outcomes - Voluntary management committees can access the support they need:
Strongly Agree

Agree volunteering supporting outcomes - The value and impact of volunteering is understood and communicated:
Strongly Agree

Agree volunteering supporting outcomes - Organisations in the sector are supported to recruit and manage volunteers:
Strongly Agree

Agree volunteering supporting outcomes - Volunteer management skills are developed within organisations:
Strongly Agree

Agree volunteering supporting outcomes - Volunteer opportunities are accessible:
Strongly Agree

Agree volunteering supporting outcomes - People volunteering are representative of our diverse communities:
Strongly Agree

17 If you would like to expand on your answer please do so below:

Comments volunteering outcome:

Section 3 cont'd - Vision and Headline Outcomes (for infrastructure support)

18 To what extent do you agree with this Core Capacity and Resilience headline outcome?

Strongly Agree

19 To what extent do you agree with the supporting outcomes?

Agree capacity supporting outcomes - Voluntary and community organisations can access a range of support which meets diverse needs:
Strongly Agree

Agree capacity supporting outcomes - Organisations are supported to work effectively within a changing funding and regulatory framework:
Strongly Agree

Agree capacity supporting outcomes - Organisations are supported to demonstrate the impact of their work:
Strongly Agree

Agree capacity supporting outcomes - Organisations are supported to access funding and diversify income:
Strongly Agree

Agree capacity supporting outcomes - Organisations are supported to acquire, develop and sustain assets:
Strongly Agree

20 If you would like to expand on your answer please do so below:

Comments capacity and resilience outcome:

It is important for statutory bodies to see a clear distinction between charities and the voluntary & community sector and private firms or private equity. In contrast to business-enterprises, charities do not answer to shareholders driven by profit margins, and instead are required by law to use their funds to deliver high-impact and quality services to the children and families they serve. This crucial distinction is not currently reflected in how the tendering and commissioning "marketplace" is set up or in how our services are more vulnerable to cuts within a more constrained financial climate such as the context we are in now.

The current model also inhibits our ability to collaborate & coordinate effectively. Changing this model, we believe will be a key determinate in whether the vision and hopes of this Concordat can be realised.

Section 3 cont'd - Vision and Headline Outcomes (for infrastructure support)

21 To what extent do you agree with this Collaboration and Partnership headline outcome?

Strongly Agree

22 To what extent do you agree with the supporting outcomes?

Agree collaboration supporting outcomes - Sector infrastructure convenes diverse and representative partnerships and networks:
Strongly Agree

Agree collaboration supporting outcomes - Sector-led partnerships support effective engagement with government:
Strongly Agree

Agree collaboration supporting outcomes - Sector-led partnerships support local resilience and civil contingencies arrangements:
Strongly Agree

Agree collaboration supporting outcomes - Collaboration and partnership enable peer support and sharing of knowledge, skills and competence:
Strongly Agree

Agree collaboration supporting outcomes - Collaboration and partnerships support organisations to sustain services and improve their impact:
Strongly Agree

23 If you would like to expand on your answer please do so below:

Comments collaboration outcome:

Section 3 cont'd - Vision and Headline Outcomes (for infrastructure support)

24 Are there any key elements or themes missing from either the vision or headline outcomes?

Yes

If yes, please provide further information::

Barnardo's NI agrees, in principle, with the vision and headline outcomes and believes that the vision captures the key elements of shared interest between government and the voluntary and community sector. However, we feel that the outcomes framework including the summary of commitments is somewhat high level and negates specific, measurable outcomes and associated actions.

Whilst we acknowledge that an outcomes framework should be at a higher and more strategic level, it must be underpinned by action plans that contribute to each indicator and a transparent mechanism for measuring the progress and impact of actions. The latest draft Programme for Government (2021) is based on such an outcomes-based approach that requires government collaboration with key stakeholders and partners, including the voluntary and community sector.

Often, the 'implementation' phase is secondary or 'late' in the policy cycle and can be viewed as an afterthought following a consultation process. However, it is well known that even the most robust policy or strategy will seldom succeed if effective implementation planning is not given serious attention, or the fiscal resources required. Given this, we are keen to see a detailed implementation plan for the framework which should set out thoroughly how outcomes and actions will be employed and measured against the commitments, as well as an indication of the resources and funding that will be attached to it.

Additionally, we ask that future implementation plans are defined by clear indicator sets which are regularly monitored and evaluated to help ensure accountability and prevent the framework being subject to 'drift'. Data collected through this mechanism should be continually analysed to make improvements to the framework or to refine processes in the implementation plan.

The Reimagine Children's Collective, as a group, value multi-agency collaboration and know that building strong and strategic partnerships is key to supporting babies, children, young people and families. However, significant underinvestment and funding cuts over the past number of years have inflicted long-term damage to the sector leading to staff redundancies, closure of services and ultimately less support for children and families. We note the commitment to bring forward proposals to renew the strategic 'Concordat' and ask that the Department reflect on the outcomes of the 2011 'Concordat'.

In short, how effective was it in delivering its vision? In light of the details above, it will be of no surprise to the Department that many community and voluntary organisations feel that they have not benefited from the efforts of this work. Therefore, consideration should be given to how we can learn from and build on this strategic partnership going forward. We feel that now is the time to strengthen and encourage better and more effective multi-agency working and to move away from the current transactional relationship.

Furthermore, we welcome further clarity on the role of the Joint Forum in driving the delivery of the commitments made in the framework and are keen to have representation from the Children's Sector on the forum. Efforts should also be made to ensure that views from this consultation process are accurately reflected in any further texts, and/or when they are not, dialogue with stakeholders should remain open regarding how and why such decisions were made.

Section 4 - Delivering the Ambition

25 The Department has suggested five key areas for delivery against the proposed outcomes. To what extent do you agree that focusing on these delivery areas will support the outcomes framework?

Strongly Agree

If you would like to expand on your answer please do so below. Note that additional sections of this survey will allow space for more comments on the detail of these delivery areas.:

Section 4 cont'd - Delivering the Ambition

Section 4 cont'd - Delivering the Ambition

26 To what extent do you agree with the proposed approach to delivering regional infrastructure support?

Strongly Agree

27 To what extent do you agree with the need for three types of local infrastructure support?

Agree local infrastructure support - Community infrastructure organisations (sub-regional):
Strongly Agree

Agree local infrastructure support - Community infrastructure organisations (sub-sectoral):
Strongly Agree

Agree local infrastructure support - Volunteer centres:
Strongly Agree

Section 4 cont'd - Delivering the Ambition

28 To what extent do you agree with these commitments?

Agree

If you would like to expand on your answer please do so below::

The current structure is imbalanced and in order to address this, DfC supported regional partners group should be broadened to include organisations with specific Section 75 groups which would have the effect of making sure the model is more responsive to rights, equality and social inclusion, which should all be at the heart of how government supports the VCS.

There should be representation the regional partners group from the women's sector, age sector (including children and young people), disability sector and any other sectors that have a suitable organisation providing regional support to their sector. These organisations should not be viewed as sub-sectoral as they serve the whole region in relation to their Section 75 remit.

Section 4 cont'd - Delivering the Ambition

29 To what extent do you agree with these priorities for investment under the leadership and advocacy headline outcome?

Strongly Agree

30 Can you suggest any other priorities?

Other investment priorities leadership outcome:

Section 4 cont'd - Delivering the Ambition

31 To what extent do you agree with these priorities for investment under the volunteering headline outcome?

Strongly Agree

32 Can you suggest any other priorities?

Other investment priorities volunteering outcome:

Section 4 cont'd - Delivering the Ambition

33 To what extent do you agree with these priorities for investment under the core capacity and resilience headline outcome?

Strongly Agree

34 Can you suggest any other priorities?

Other investment priorities capacity outcome:

Section 4 cont'd - Delivering the Ambition

35 To what extent do you agree with these priorities for investment under the collaboration and partnership headline outcome?

Strongly Agree

36 Can you suggest any other priorities?

Other investment priorities collaboration outcome:

Section 4 cont'd - Delivering the Ambition

37 To what extent do you agree with this commitment?

Strongly Agree

If you would like to expand on your answer please do so below::

Section 4 cont'd - Delivering the Ambition

38 To what extent do you agree that improving charity regulation will support positive outcomes for the sector?

Strongly Agree

If you would like to expand on your answer please do so below::

Section 4 cont'd - Delivering the Ambition

39 To what extent do you agree with these commitments?

Strongly Agree

If you would like to expand on your answer please do so below::

Together with members of the Reimagine Children's Collective, Barnardo's NI strongly agrees with these commitments.

As a group, we value multi-agency collaboration and know that building strong and strategic partnerships is key to supporting children, young people and families. However, we often see and experience the negative impacts of current funding practices, including uncertainty and vulnerability as a result of short-term funding and contracts.

While 'sustainability' has been identified within the core values of the proposed framework in the context of climate justice and sustainable development, it is imperative that financial sustainability of the sector is also included as a core element of any framework the Department develops. This development of a new framework provides the opportunity to reset the relationship between statutory funders and the community and voluntary sector.

We would like to highlight several areas of change that would strengthen and encourage more effective multi-agency working and move away from the current transactional relationship.

Firstly, longer term funding arrangements must be put in place to offer greater stability and certainty for both the VCS workforce and the children, young people, families and communities our services support. Currently, many services commissioned by statutory agencies are funded on a short-term basis. This results in uncertainty for the children and families we support, and the staff that work in those services, as well as significant time and resource spent re-tendering for services that we currently deliver.

Longer contracts would encourage a more strategic use of resources and support efficiency within departments, allowing VCS organisations to improve services, innovate and provide continuity and stability for children, families, and staff. A move to commissioning cycles of 3-5 years will allow VCS organisations to focus on service delivery, rather than funding applications, and the ability to respond to emerging challenges.

Secondly, a new funding model must include more proportionate scrutiny of the community and voluntary sector. Current systems of reporting are often hugely burdensome and time-consuming for the staff working in our services, often made more complex by differing systems of reporting across and within departments. Any new framework from the Department of Communities should look to create greater synergy and uniformed systems of reporting.

Thirdly, a new funding model including full cost recovery is essential to improving funding practices and promoting financial sustainability. Currently, where statutory agencies are commissioning VCS organisations to deliver services, these contracts are often not awarded at full-cost recovery, meaning the voluntary and community sector is left to subsidise the delivery of services commissioned by the statutory sector.

Furthermore, where contracts roll on to another year, there is often no uplift in line with inflation, meaning that services that were commissioned years previously, are expected to deliver the same support with a real term reduction in their funding. This an unsustainable financial model and has resulted in the closure and scaling back of children's services.

As a member of the Reimagine Children's Collective, we are calling for multi-year, full-cost recovery tendering processes that offer better long-term planning, better value for the public purse, more proportionate bureaucracy and provide a more effective way to collaborate together.

Section 4 cont'd - Delivering the Ambition

40 To what extent do you agree with these commitments?

Strongly Agree

If you would like to expand on your answer please do so below::

We welcome the Department's recognition of the need to enhance data practices, including commissioning, collating, analysis and dissemination of data. This would provide a better understanding of the community and voluntary sector's needs and how to effectively support them. The commitment to boosting data related to the community and voluntary sector aligns with the broader goals of evidence-based policymaking and efficient resource allocation, which are applicable across all government departments. We support the development, in partnership with the sector, of a region-wide integrated reporting and evaluation framework. This framework would provide a way to monitor progress, identify areas for improvement and make informed decisions about service provision and resource allocation.

Currently, there are gaps in data regarding the community and voluntary sector in Northern Ireland. This hinders the ability to quantify the nature and extent of the services offered by the community and voluntary sector and the impact this has both on specific groups and society in Northern Ireland as a whole. To address this, we recommend collecting the following types of data on a systemic basis and making them publicly available:

• Demographic Data: Collect information on age, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status and geographic location to understand what services are being used by what groups including marginalised or vulnerable populations.

• Service Data: Gather data on types of services used, frequency of use, duration of engagement and waiting lists to analyse trends over time.

• Volunteer Data: Address the current lack of data on the value volunteers contribute to the sector, including their economic impact and annual hours donated.

• Outcome Data: Capture data on outcomes and impacts of services, such as changes in behaviour, health status or quality of life to assess intervention effectiveness.

• Satisfaction and Feedback: Collect qualitative and quantitative feedback from service users to inform service delivery and feed into the proposed integrated reporting and evaluation framework.

We see this as a valuable opportunity to reassess how data can demonstrate the value of the community and voluntary sector and promote consistent data collection across all government departments. We suggest an ongoing review to maintain the usefulness and relevance of the collected data.

Annex 3 - Statutory Assessments

41 Do you agree with the conclusions of the Equality Screening exercise?

Not Answered

If no, please provide your reasons::

42 A Rural Needs Impact Assessment has been completed in line with the Department's duty under the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016. The needs of people in rural areas have been identified and taken into consideration with the aim of providing balanced infrastructure support provision across all geographies. Do you think the proposed draft framework presents any other issues for rural communities?

Not Answered

If no, please provide further comments::

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