



Funders Forum

for Northern Ireland

**Annual
Conference
Report
2021**

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for Northern Ireland

ANNUAL CONFERENCE, CLIFTON HOUSE, BELFAST 4th NOVEMBER 2021

In November 2021, the Forum hosted a one-day hybrid conference, with members and invited representatives.

The conference focused on two key issues:

1. The stability, certainty and sustainability of the community and voluntary sector as we emerge from the pandemic.
2. The role of funders in tackling climate change.

These two issues were identified through an assessment of the environment by Forum members.

The purpose of the conference was to:

- Create space to discuss these issues in an open and constructive peer environment informed by insight from the sector.
- Develop the next steps for the Funders Forum to work collaboratively with each other, the sector and stakeholders to address some of the issues raised across the day.





Foreword

Fionnuala Walsh,
Chair, FFNI

The Funders Forum for Northern Ireland (FFNI) is a membership forum made up of representatives of organisations who fund and make grants in Northern Ireland. The Forum is a mix of independent and semi-independent funders with access to significant resources, recognising the different funding roles and independence of its members. We bring funders together, in a confidential space, to network, share information and collaborate.

More information about our membership can be found here:

<https://www.fundersforumni.org>

Over the past two years, the Forum has gone from strength to strength due, in no small part, to the leadership and commitment of Paula Reynolds, outgoing Chair, and from the contribution of individual members through focused working groups. The addition of a dedicated secretariat role funded by the National Lottery Community Fund, and generosity of the Belfast Charitable Society and Clifton House in providing a welcoming space in which to share learning, has enabled the Forum to operate effectively at an incredibly difficult time for the sector. I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the significant resource and effort committed to date which have culminated in this conference and report.

Through our work, the Forum has identified a number of long-term issues for the VCSE sector in Northern Ireland that have been reinforced during the pandemic and which, with our various remits, we can address. These include:

- An urgent need for flexible, multi-year funding, shifting from project-based to core funding, supporting the sector as it starts to recover.
- A shared understanding of the importance of Full Cost Recovery (FCR) across Forum members, Government and the sector.
- A need to identify financial support for infrastructure projects and/or organisations in Northern Ireland to help volunteer-led, smaller grass-roots organisations to recover, with potential for additional COVID funding to be used for this purpose.
- A need to invest in leadership within the sector to allow for recovery, resilience and succession planning.

We have committed to sharing insights and learning collaboratively, with each other and other key stakeholders, to better support the sector. We aim, as a collective, with significant investment and a depth of insight, to make a constructive and impactful contribution to these key issues in the road ahead, recognising that purposeful collaboration can create the conditions to build back better and build back fairer.

I was delighted that one of my first roles as new Forum Chair was to take part in our annual conference in November in Clifton House and I am pleased to introduce this report, which highlights important issues explored within the conference, from future-proofing the sector to our role in tackling climate change. I believe this report will increase our understanding of the cross-sector issues previously identified by the Forum and emerging needs to be addressed.

The conference is a starting point for future work in 2022. We are keen to progress the actions identified collectively in the conference over the next year and liaise with each other and our colleagues across the UK and Ireland, to share learning and increase understanding of the issues relevant to the sector in Northern Ireland.

As a Forum, we invest in every part of life in Northern Ireland, across all age ranges and types of communities, in physical and natural environments, in economic and social justice, disadvantage, peace-building and the most marginalised in our society. The pandemic has demonstrated that funders can respond effectively in times of urgent need and crisis and with the insight garnered through events such as this conference, we aim to best support the VCSE sector through this challenging period.



Panel Discussion: VCSE: A Shifting Landscape

How is the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector changing and what are the emerging issues that funders need to address?

Panellists were invited to share their insight on how the VCSE sector is changing and the emerging needs and issues that funders need to recognise, focusing on future leadership, community education and collaboration, informed by the 'Community Leadership in the West' partnership project.

Fermanagh Trust in partnership with the Rural Community Network and Holywell Trust is delivering 'Community Leadership in the West,' an ambitious five-year project engaging, developing and supporting the next generation of leaders. Through targeted training, skills development and support, this project aims to build capacity at a local level, enable leaders to effectively address emerging challenges and amplify community voice and influence at a statutory and government level. The project is funded by The National Lottery Community Fund.

Morning session discussion panellists from left: Paula Reynolds, Panel Chair (Belfast Charitable Trust), Gerard Deane (Holywell Trust), Kate Clifford (Rural Community Network), Fionnuala Walsh (Chair, FFNI) and Lauri McCusker (Fermanagh Trust).





Kate Clifford, Rural Community Network

Kate has 25 years of experience working and volunteering in the community sector in rural Northern Ireland. Since 2013 she has held the post of Director of Rural Community Network and has experience of working with government departments and international agencies on issues of rural development, peacebuilding, gender equality, poverty and health inequalities.



Lauri McCusker, Fermanagh Trust

Lauri is Director of the Fermanagh Trust and has overseen the development of the Trust's work for 23 years. A strong community development advocate, Lauri recognises the power of local convening and working collectively to improve people's lives.



Gerard Deane, Director of The Holywell Trust

Gerard Deane has been Director of Holywell Trust since 2014 and is a Director of Developing Healthy Communities, CO3 and The Junction. He has worked in the third sector since 1995, overseeing a number of community-based and social enterprise projects.

Summary of Panel Discussion

The VCSE sector is operating within a changed landscape

The pandemic has wrought changes, however, the sector was already operating in a challenging environment.

In the 1990s, funders helped develop robust infrastructures across urban and rural settings which could support small and specialist groups. Funders supported significant investment in skills development and education at a grassroots level for the benefit of communities. This targeted investment in community development and infrastructure supported the growth and development of future leaders.

Today, civil society in Northern Ireland is impacted by a lack of such investment, with too few community development practitioners emerging. Many experienced in the field have left the sector because of burnout; others have been attracted to roles in different sectors.

The sector needs to retain an independent voice

It is important that the sector is not 'house trained'; that it retains an independent voice and feels able to speak out where they see injustice and inequality. This can prove difficult for communities where there is a power imbalance - e.g. where an organisation is a service provider for Government and feels unable to challenge against injustice.

Future leaders need to recognise where power imbalance exists and be robust enough to be a voice for their community, challenging government and others in order to tackle poverty and social injustice in their own sector.

Communities are stronger together

A central tenet for community development in Northern Ireland is that we are stronger together. It remains important to work towards inclusion and peace-building, supporting leadership which enables communities to flourish and look to the future.

We need to build back fairer and invest across Northern Ireland

Whilst the sector may be changing, some challenges are not new and have impacted our communities for 30+ years. At grassroots level, projects are traditionally of lesser value and tend to be managed by volunteers, whereas larger funds are distributed to bigger organisations and delivered by paid staff.

There is less funding in the rural sector and income levels have always been heavily skewed to the larger urban areas; with a lot of community and voluntary professional organisations based in Belfast.

If we want to build and develop civil society, funders need to meaningfully invest in community leadership across Northern Ireland.

While we need to build back better, we also need to build back fairer.

Volunteering and the pandemic

The pandemic has had a significant impact on volunteering. Although some people have volunteered more in their local community as they have not had to commute, others have found free time again for other pursuits. Many have become housebound or are no longer with us.

It is anticipated that COVID-19 will continue to have a significant impact on volunteerism in the longer term.

We need to address an ageing volunteer sector

A significant number of governance volunteers are aged over 60 years. A Community Leadership in the West survey found that 75% of governance volunteers are ages 45 and over. Online succession planning sessions hosted by Leadership In the West to encourage and seek out future leaders have attracted hundreds of participants. There is significant interest and potential that needs to be tapped into.

Funders, government and communities working towards transformation

Trusted relationships between funders and communities are vital and allow funders to take more risks.

Whilst Northern Ireland is still a divided society, it is incumbent on funders to consider what part they play in retaining and rewarding that division – creating ‘two of everything’.

We all need to challenge ourselves, to stop and think and ask, is there a better way of doing this?

Trust works both ways and the process of change is a long one. There is currently little space for transition, with levels of deprivation and political influence and control mechanisms remaining unchanged for some communities. A number of community organisations need to adapt and change.

As funders we need to consider how we can play a part in this and engage with Government and communities on this journey.

We all have a role in transformation. Funders need to invest in future leaders and start building risk into who and what they fund. It can be easy to support the ‘safest bets’. The sector needs to develop its voice, purposefully moving away from traditional gatekeeping that perpetuates division and the systems that support this.

A strong sector with an independent and influential voice needs to be developed to make change, but it’s a long-term process. In addition, continued professional development is key with people choosing to work in a structured and supported sector.



Group Discussion

Small group discussions considered key issues for the VCSE sector and the role of funders.

Key Issues from Conference:

- Sector requires capacity to influence, challenge and shift power where necessary.
- The imbalance of funding from the public sector impacts on community independence and power to challenge. Independent funding is required to maintain a strong and balanced sectoral voice.
- Succession planning and future-proofing for the next generation is a critical issue for the sector.
- Lack of investment in community education and networks has weakened the sector.





Future Considerations for Funders:

- Encourage promotion and value of community including citizenship education, particularly in schools, recognising that it is critical for young people to develop knowledge, skills and understanding of playing a full part in society as active and responsible citizens.
- Identify role models and mentors to inspire potential leaders, young and old.
- Support ways in which to encourage new or young people to consider a meaningful career in the sector.
- Consider programmes of support, focused on professional and career development.
- Seek to build longer-term relationships and funded programmes.
- Look to ways in which to support infrastructure and skills development for communities.
- Empower communities to have an independent voice and where relevant, act as a conduit for the sector.
- Consider volunteering and mentoring organisations, building direct experience and understanding of the issues facing organisations.
- Reflect on the impact of maintaining the status quo and funding the 'safest bets'.

Panel Discussion: Addressing the Climate Crisis

Acting on the climate crisis – how do we as funders lead, inspire and support communities to take positive action on this critical issue?

This session explored climate change within a Northern Ireland context and ways in which funders can drive and support effective solutions for change. Panellists were asked why it is so urgent, how it impacts other charitable causes and how funders can make a difference, through grant-making, operations, advocacy and investment.

Afternoon session discussion panellists, from left: Sean Kelly (Northern Ireland Environment Link, NIEL), Fionnuala Walsh, Panel Chair (Chair, FFNI), Cormac Matthews (Our Bright Future) and Isobel Loughran (Footprints Women's Resource Centre).





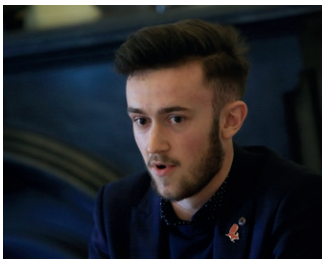
Sean Kelly, Northern Ireland Environment Link (NIEL)

Sean Kelly is Development Manager for NIEL, the networking and forum body for organisations interested in the natural and built environment of Northern Ireland. A key role for NIEL is to inform and influence policy on the natural environment.



Isobel Loughran, Footprints Women's Resource Centre

Isobel is CEO of Footprint's Women's Resource Centre, located in the heart of a community in West Belfast. The organisation provides daycare, family support, training and education and have developed a community garden and thriving social supermarket.



Cormac Matthews, Our Bright Future

Student Cormac Matthews is a member of Our Bright Future, a young advocates group that is part of a network of 31 projects across the UK. It brings together the youth and environmental sectors to support young people in acting as catalysts for change in their local environment and community.

Summary of Panel Discussion

The climate and nature crises are essentially one and the same thing. Everyone needs to play their part in the solution but there is a lack of joined up political leadership in Northern Ireland in relation to climate change and nature protection, with no legislation in place.

The first environment strategy for Northern Ireland is imminent but it will not be effective unless it contains meaningful binding targets.

Northern Ireland is lagging behind the rest of the UK and Ireland in relation to climate change.

Funding is project focused rather than tackling climate change or biodiversity. The Department of Agriculture Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA), National Lottery Heritage Fund and Peace Plus are the primary funders with others, including National Lottery Community Fund, now placing the issue as a funding focus.

Small-scale funding is very important but there is a pressing need to tackle the big issues. Plastic bag levy and initiatives such as recycling are all starting points but consideration needs to be given to air quality, water quality and pollution, as well as joined up thinking on an all-island basis.

Funders need to consider the environment in everything they fund. The UN's sustainable development goals offer a good framework and organisations providing funding need to prioritise the environment and encourage environmental and sustainability with impact on climate change in all their work.

Funders need to showcase the exemplar projects that are tangible, replicable and can make a difference.

Funders need to be flexible, demonstrate imagination and fund projects that directly and indirectly fund climate change.

There is a distinct link between climate change and other issues such as mental health, particularly impacting on young people. It is critical that everyone works towards a sustainable ecosystem.

Group Discussion

Informed by the panel session, group discussions focused on 'greening' of organisational strategies, intersections between climate change and other charitable ambitions such as mental health and poverty; and ways in which funders can drive sector behavior towards climate change and the environment.

Key Issues from Conference:

- There is no climate change legislation in Northern Ireland as a framing reference point.
- Young people are most impacted by climate change and anxious for the future. Funders need to learn from young people and not be complacent on this issue.
- There has been no significant focus on climate change across funders.
- Funders are unsure as to how to make and assess changes within their organisations and through their philanthropic giving.
- Funders need to take a considered approach and not deepen existing inequalities such as lack of access to transport and digital poverty.
- Climate change is not the great equalizer. There is a direct correlation between poverty and climate change and those that are already disadvantaged and marginalised will be most impacted.

Future Considerations for Funders:

- Learn from young people, re-framing climate change as a crisis and commit to being a part of the solution.
- Identify relevant strategies, resources and best practice examples for sharing with members in a purposeful manner.
- At an organisation level, commit to educating and informing staff and Trustees. Large and small funders alike can consider how to support and sustain physical assets and align internal and external policies and funding programmes to climate action.
- At an operational level, inform and educate applicants and drive behaviours in terms of rethinking their organisational and/or project objectives and goals. Funders can assimilate climate action into all types of programmes and consider changing what they fund, building in flexibility to allow communities to change and respond.
- Profile best practice examples, including projects which highlight intersectionality.
- Consider signing up to joint public initiatives such as the ACF's Funders Commitment on Climate Change.
- Seek to advocate and influence, amplifying sustainability as a priority for everyone.

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