



Funders Forum

for Northern Ireland

NAVIGATING
THE ROAD AHEAD

Annual
Conference
Report
2022

Funders Forum

for Northern Ireland

NAVIGATING THE ROAD AHEAD

ANNUAL CONFERENCE SUMMARY REPORT CLIFTON HOUSE, BELFAST 7th NOVEMBER 2022

In November 2022, the Forum hosted its Annual Conference with members and invited representatives.

The conference created a platform for Trusts & Foundations with an interest in Northern Ireland to network, collaborate and share practice, focusing on two key areas:

1. **Navigating the road ahead:** An opportunity for delegates to reflect on the shifting economic, political and cultural landscape in which they operate.
2. **Managing future shocks:** Supporting the VCSE sector to navigate change and crisis as it responds to immediate and longer-term challenges, from cost-of-living to climate crisis.

The conference aimed to build upon lessons learnt from the pandemic and ongoing impact of the cost-of-living crisis.



CONFERENCE CONTRIBUTORS

Reflecting on the changing economic, political and cultural landscape in Northern Ireland



Lauri McCusker,
Fermanagh Trust
[Panel Chair]



Avila Kilmurray,
Migration &
Peacebuilding
Executive,
Social Change
Initiative



Siobhán Harding,
Research & Policy
Officer,
Women's
Regional
Consortium



John Campbell,
BBC NI
Economics
and
Business Editor

VCSE Sector Conversations



**Christine
McKeown,**
Ashton
Community
Trust, Belfast



Anne Monaghan,
Pat Murphy's
House,
Ederney, County
Fermanagh



Alison Gordon,
Bangor
Courthouse,
Bangor



Foreword

Fionnuala Walsh,
Chair, FFNI

The Funders Forum for Northern Ireland (FFNI) is made up of representatives of organisations who fund and make grants in Northern Ireland. We represent a mix of independent and semi-independent funders and the Forum provides us with a valued space for learning, networking, sharing information and collaboration.

We have been proud to work with the communities across Northern Ireland who stepped up to help people through the COVID-19 pandemic. Those organisations and individuals within the NI Voluntary Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector are once again rallying to support communities most affected by the current cost-of-living crisis.

We know the VCSE sector also faces a number of challenges which need to be resolved to allow the sector's vital work in communities across NI to continue.

There is an urgent need for flexible, multi-year core funding to provide breathing space for organisations to deliver their work. There is also an increasing need for infrastructure to sustain small grassroots organisations and space for sectoral leaders to plan for the future.

More information about our membership can be found on our website:
www.fundersforumni.org

In November 2022, we hosted our annual conference, bringing together members and invited representatives to consider the shifting economic, political and cultural landscape in Northern Ireland and ways in which we can best support the VCSE sector to navigate change and crisis as it responds to immediate and longer-term challenges, from cost-of-living to climate crisis.

The conference built upon lessons learnt from the pandemic. COVID-19 demonstrated that in times of urgent need, funders can mobilise, adapt and flex, enabling the VCSE sector to deliver essential services for their community. As we navigate the current cost-of-living crisis, with potential to impact negatively at a scale not experienced at a local level in recent times, the conference provided a space for discussion on the role of funders in investing for greatest impact, in the short, medium and long-term.

The morning discussion focused on the shifting political, economic and cultural landscape at a global and local level and the impact for the VCSE sector over the coming years, from changing demographics to a looming mental health and debt crisis. The afternoon session, informed by pre-conference consultation, invited three diverse place-based sector organisations to reflect on their response to change and crisis at a community level and role and fit of funders within this.

This summary report outlines the key findings from the conference and recommendations for funders as we seek to invest for greatest impact for the sector. A number of actions focus on our response to the current crisis and closely reflect commitments presented previously in our FFNI Position Statement on the cost-of-living crisis, from flexible and accessible emergency funding programmes to operating more on a trust basis. There are, however, a number of broader, longer-term actions identified for funders, including:

- [strategic partnership working](#)
- [a focus on digital connectivity](#)
- [increased investment in research and advocacy](#)
- [clearer commitment to sustainability and climate action.](#)

There is much work to be progressed over the coming months by the Forum, informed by these summary recommendations. The quality and richness of discussion throughout the conference is, in no small part, due to the compelling context presented by invited speakers and I would like to thank contributors for giving of their time and expertise so generously, including Avila Kilmurray, Social Change Initiative; Siobhán Harding, Women's Regional Consortium; John Campbell, BBC NI Economics and Business Editor; Lauri McCusker, Fermanagh Trust; Christine McKeown, Ashton Community Trust; Anne Monaghan, Pat Murphy's Tearooms; and Alison Gordon, Bangor Courthouse. Particular thanks is due to Padraic Quirk and Angela Hodgkinson, Social Change Initiative, for undertaking bespoke sector research for the conference.

As always, the historic Clifton House was an inspiring and fitting backdrop for the day's discussion. Thank you to Belfast Charitable Society for their generosity and to all other funders that contributed financially to the conference running costs.

I hope that these summary findings prove useful for us all as we navigate the road ahead, through ongoing change and crisis for the VCSE sector in Northern Ireland. The conference created a reflective space for collective learning and acts as a touch point for FFNI work in 2023. I look forward to the journey ahead with the Forum.

Fionnuala Walsh



From left: Avila Kilmurray, Migration & Peacebuilding Executive, Social Change Initiative; Siobhán Harding, Research & Policy Officer, Women's Regional Consortium; Fionnuala Walsh, Chair, FFNI; Lauri McCusker, Fermanagh Trust; John Campbell, BBC NI Economics and Business Editor.



From left: Christine McKeown, Ashton Community Trust, Belfast; Anne Monaghan, Pat Murphy's House, Ederney, County Fermanagh; Paula Reynolds, Belfast Charitable Trust; Joanne Kinnear, Ashton Community Trust, Belfast; Alison Gordon, Bangor Courthouse, Bangor.

Key Summary Findings

A shifting political and cultural landscape at a global and local level: “Blue sky thinking with a grey sky threatening”

“Seven years ago, we wouldn’t have been thinking of Brexit, Cost-of-living crisis or Covid. So, who knows what lies ahead?”

Conference delegate

- Since 2018, there have been challenges to the democratic norms. Conflict in Syria, Afghanistan and Ukraine have wide repercussions, as have global phenomena such as the COVID-19 pandemic and climate crisis.
- There is constitutional change ahead to navigate, not just for Northern Ireland, but for all of the UK.
- Changing demographics and the 2021 Census findings have potential to have significant implications for Northern Ireland society.
- New communities continue to settle in Northern Ireland. Integration needs to widen with a focus on maximising the opportunities increased diversity brings while tackling the increase in far right activism.
- We are poorer than we were a year ago. Between April 2021 and 2022, the value of a typical workers’ wages reduced by 5% and typical public sector wages have not increased in 10 years.
- Recession will impact on taxes, benefits, pensions and public services.

A sector firefighting or working to a strategy?

- At a local level, the ongoing political instability and stalemate in Stormont has impacted significantly on longer-term strategic planning and implementation of existing policies.
- Statutory funding for Northern Ireland communities has been untapped and/or delayed, overlaid by ongoing and additional cuts in services. As a consequence, applications to funders have been over-subscribed, with a focus on immediate need.
- By necessity, the sector is firefighting.

Funders need their own voice – **“this is needed for real social change – not standing in the gap and treating the symptoms”**

Conference delegate



“I’m trying to hold up the last domino before it crushes me.”

Evidence presented for
Crushed by Cost-of-Living, Stormont

The relenting domino effect of poverty: A looming debt and mental health crisis

- The impact of the cost-of-living crisis is like dominos falling, one onto the next - rising cost of gas and electricity, school uniforms and supplies, adult mental health problems and child mental health problems.

- The squeeze on household budgets has led to increased debt and inability to service debt repayments.
- Not only are we living through a cost-of-living crisis but we also have a looming debt crisis.
- Debt and struggling to make ends meet have significant impacts on people’s mental health.
- At times of crisis, women are the shock absorbers in the home and the poor are the same for society.

“I worry when I go to bed at night thinking about my debts. There isn’t a week goes by without worrying about paying for something. I’m always worrying, it’s horrible to be always worrying about money.”
WRC Research

Recruitment of workers and volunteers at tipping point.

- VCSE workers continue to be drawn away from the sector to other employment, by more favourable Terms & Conditions including better pensions and flexible working hours.
- The reduction in volunteering since the pandemic, particularly governance roles, has not abated and is further impacted by the cost-of-living crisis, as people take on more paid employment.
- This gap is not necessarily being met by new, younger volunteers, with many seeking very bespoke types of volunteering, quite different from traditional roles.
- The subsequent shortage in skills and manpower is leaving the sector vulnerable and working at less capacity.

Connectivity is critical to including diverse voices, regeneration of communities, investment in communities and mental health and wellbeing.

- Regeneration in rural communities is now more viable, post-covid, with the development of work from home, however all communities need to have access to high-quality broadband connectivity.

- Online resources continue to be an important lifeline for small grassroots community organisations, seeking support and advice from funders.
- The shift online has allowed for a diversity of voices and conversations with people from all walks of life.

There is a need for increased research and advocacy for the sector.

- There is a dearth of up-to-date sector research at a local level, informed and co-designed by lived experience.
- It is important to have access to a multi-layered perspective, looking at the bigger trends and opportunities for Northern Ireland communities and acting as a platform for civic conversations and new collaborations.
- It is difficult for funders wanting to invest locally, to have an indication of the needs of the sector in Northern Ireland, distinct from another region. Strategic philanthropy, with the intention of making longer-term impact is a challenge with the lack of research and data. There is a need for a stronger evidence base.
- It's difficult for small organisations to undertake independent research to identify the need.
- Advocacy has been starved of resources and requires increased and renewed investment.

To 'build back better' needs to include sustainability.

- Northern Ireland needs to implement strategies on greener energy in order to meet the climate targets in place. Funders have a role to play in taking a stance on sustainability, preparing the VCSE sector for the challenges ahead.



Key Reflections from Discussions

1 Create stability for the sector

Funders should consider developing and acting upon a common definition in relation to full cost recovery and create stability and capacity for longer-term planning through multi-year funding, a commitment to become Living Wage funders and to support meaningful investment in the development of volunteers.

2 Maintain focus on social justice, voice and advocacy

“Open spaces for voices have been silenced”

Conference speaker

Advocate for the needs of the sector and raise the profile of social justice issues.

Create space for conversations and invest in advocacy, social justice and activism.

3 Seek to address the causes as well as the symptoms

Funders need to address the cause, not always funding the crisis as it arises and invest in development of research to support this to happen. Independent funders should remain ‘additional to’, not ‘instead of’.

4 Maintain independence and autonomy

Independent funders have more scope and flexibility than statutory funders, so have a lot more autonomy in what and how they can fund. Funders should continue to connect and build trust with statutory bodies and share learning in relation to what works in their investment.

5 Fund for the future: be proactive on climate action

Seek to embed environmental outcomes and benefits in grants processes and invest in programmes with an environmental focus.

As funders, consider and promote ethical investment.

6 Share learning and research

Invest in quantitative and qualitative research at a local level, identifying need distinct to Northern Ireland and embedding co-production and lived experience in the planning and design. Identify examples of best practice and share across funders and government departments.

7

Shift and create new power within communities

Continue to fund directly at grassroots level, investing where it is needed most and building upon community assets.

8

Invest in leadership within communities

Invest in leadership in communities and the sector and allow for a diversity of experiences to come through, balancing established with emerging voices.

9

Increase partnership working

Funders should seek to work more collegiately in their funding, networking and convening events and scope opportunities for funding collaborations with potential for greater and longer-term impact.

10

Find digital solutions for more equitable grant-making

Seek to find digital solutions that can increase access to funds for the sector and support more targeted grant-making for funders.

“People shouldn’t have to tell their stories over and over, they should only have to tell it once to get the support they need. People don’t need to be retraumatised. Trust should be at the core of this.”

Conference speaker

Funders Forum
for Northern Ireland

Conference Delegates

Architectural Heritage Fund
Association of Charitable Foundations
BBC Children in Need
Belfast Charitable Society
Community Development and Health Network
Community Foundation for Northern Ireland
Department for Communities, Northern Ireland
Enkalon Foundation
Fermanagh Trust
Gillen Family Foundation
Greystone (IOM) Limited
Groundwork NI
Halifax Foundation NI
James Kane Foundation
John Ellerman Foundation
Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust
Kathleen Graham Trust
LFT Charitable Trust
National Churches Trust
Pilgrim Trust
Rank Foundation Ltd
Rethink Ireland
Social Change Initiative
Sported NI
St Stephen's Green Trust
The National Lottery Community Fund
The National Lottery Heritage Fund
The Pilgrim Trust
The Wood Foundation
Ulster Garden Villages

www.fundersforumni.org
info@fundersforumni.org

Funders Forum
for Northern Ireland