



Commissioner for **Older People**  
for Northern Ireland

Department for Communities  
Causeway Exchange  
1-7 Bedford Street  
Belfast  
BT2 7EG

By email: [vcsinfrastructure@communities-ni.gov.uk](mailto:vcsinfrastructure@communities-ni.gov.uk)

8<sup>th</sup> February 2024

**RE: Voluntary and Community Sector Infrastructure and Support Policy Framework**

Dear Sir / Madam

I am writing in response to the proposed *Voluntary and Community Sector Infrastructure and Support Policy Framework*.

The Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland (COPNI) welcomes this ambitious framework to support the voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland, alongside your acknowledgement of the diversity within the sector and the importance of user-led voluntary and community organisations.

The Department for Communities has clearly undertaken extensive engagement, and we hope that with further co-design and relationship-building with the sector, next steps will enable organisations of all sizes and technical ability to engage with the Department and better support local communities across Northern Ireland.

To support future activity, COPNI would highlight the National Council for Voluntary Organisations' yearly *UK Civil Society Almanac*<sup>1</sup> as a positive example of sector mapping and impact assessment. The UK's former Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport's (now DSIT) has also published *The Role of Voluntary, Community, and Social Enterprise (VCSE) organisations in public procurement*<sup>2</sup>, which offers

---

<sup>1</sup> [Impact - Impact | UK Civil Society Almanac 2023](#) <div class="acknowledgement"> <h2 class="acknowledgement--text">This page was last reviewed for accuracy on <b>12 October 2023</b> </h2> </div> <div class="share-text">This page was last reviewed for accuracy on <b>12 October 2023</b> </div> | [NCVO](#)

<sup>2</sup> [VCSE Procurement \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)



Commissioner for **Older People**  
for Northern Ireland

insight into some of the barriers faced by voluntary and community organisations when engaging with procurement as an alternative to grant funding. Significantly, this report highlights the diversity that exists within the sector, and the implications that this can have when designing interventions.

While your draft framework suggests awareness of and steps to ensure different organisations and voices are supported, COPNI would further highlight the importance of supporting smaller user-led organisations. These organisations offer rich local knowledge and often engage with the most vulnerable and hard to reach people in our society. Such organisations typically face additional barriers not experienced by other voluntary and community organisations, for example, they may not have awareness of, or the capacity and infrastructure required to participate in, planned government initiatives.

In the context of an ageing population—the number of people aged 65 and over is projected to overtake the number of children in Northern Ireland by mid-2027<sup>3</sup> —the role of older people’s organisations and organisations supporting the needs of older people will therefore become more important. It is vital that DfC considers how best to support these user-led organisations during the implementation of the framework, particularly in areas of complex need where generalised outreach from larger charities may be less appropriate, and in areas where protected characteristics intersect, e.g., age, gender, race, and disability.

COPNI commends the ambitions of the Policy Framework. Should the Department wish to consult further on the role of voluntary and community organisations in supporting an ageing population, please do get in touch.

Best regards

**Conor Tinnelly**  
**Policy Advice and Research Unit**  
**Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland**

---

<sup>3</sup> [2020-based interim population projections - statistical bulletin \(nisra.gov.uk\)](https://www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/2020-based-interim-population-projections-statistical-bulletin)