



Independence of the voluntary sector in Northern Ireland: changing narratives, changing relationship

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The independence of the voluntary sector is one of the most critical challenges for civil society not only in Northern Ireland, but also more broadly in the [UK](#) and far beyond. There are three main reasons for this.

First of all, the ability of voluntary organisations to stay true to the mission and values they were founded upon is being challenged by the contemporary funding environment. For example, the tremendous [shift](#) from grant-based funding to service contracts has made organisations vulnerable to situations where contractual obligations pull them away from the central mission of the organisation.

Second, the ability of organisations to exercise an independent voice to keep checks on government is being compromised. Organisations should be able to exercise critical voice and campaign without fear of retribution, yet this is increasingly not the case. For example, some public service contracts now contain [gagging](#) clauses preventing organisations from speaking out.

Third, the nature of the funding environment and the shift from grants to contracts has also meant that the space for innovation and risk taking is disappearing from the way the voluntary sector organisations conduct their work. Thinking outside the box and providing innovative, locally relevant services used to be a core Unique Selling Point of voluntary sector, but [remains a challenge](#) in the current contracting environment.

Our research investigated these issues in the Northern Irish context and how independence plays out in the relationships between government and the voluntary sector. Commissioned by the [Building Change Trust](#), the findings are detailed in the first interim [report](#) (January 2016) and in the final [report](#) and its [summary](#) (November 2016).

Changing environment of independence

Some of our key survey findings suggest, for example, that organisations with their majority of funding from government were less likely to worry about the impact funding was having on independence (Figure 1). Over 80% of chief executives think that government has not devolved decision-making power to communities and that increased competition for funds is making collaborative, trusting relationships more difficult to develop.

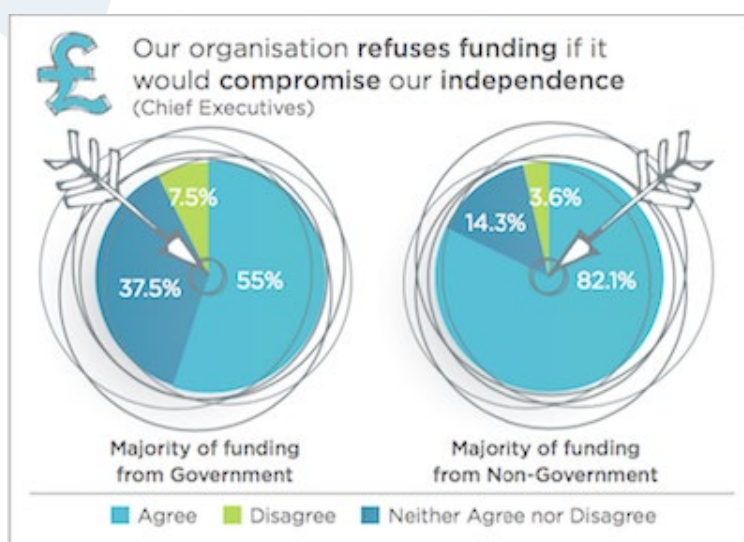


Figure 1

From the perspective of the voluntary sector organisations, our findings suggest in response to the above

dynamics it is possible to detect a degree of behaviour change among some organisations, particularly those working more closely with government. We identified four such behaviour ‘types’, illustrated in figure 2. These behaviours not only stem from the challenges to independence, but end up reinforcing these challenges.



Figure 2

A changing government narrative

The interviews with government representatives and the emergent new policy rhetoric seem also to confirm this a shift away from the ‘equitable partnership’ between voluntary sector and government. What we see in its place is the beginnings of a process of ‘partial decoupling’, not dissimilar to what has been put in motion by Westminster administration.

This research process has captured a moment when the relationship between government and the voluntary sector is undergoing a fundamental readjustment. This has meant it was both a highly opportune as well as a challenging time to be conducting such research. With the message of a new relationship being communicated by the government, it may also be an opportune time for the voluntary sector to reflect on the models and traditions that have guided voluntary action in the past decades, and ensure it is actively engaged in shaping the conversation as to what the relationship between the sector and government will look like in the years to come.

Notes

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