

Witness Name: Jonny Currie

Reference.: M9/R9R/NICVA

Dated: 23 October 2025

UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF JONNY CURRIE

I, Jonny Currie, will say as follows:

Part A: Background and Context

1. The Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) was established in 1938 as the Northern Ireland Council for Social Services. It serves as the umbrella body for the voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector in Northern Ireland. NICVA supports over 1,300 member organisations across urban and rural settings, ranging from large regional charities to small grassroots community groups. Our services include governance advice, funding support, research, policy development, and advocacy.
2. NICVA has long-standing relationships with equivalent bodies in the other UK nations—NCVO (England), SCVO (Scotland), WCVA (Wales), and The Wheel (Ireland)—and regularly collaborates with them on shared learning, policy coordination, and UK-wide advocacy. These connections helped contextualise our approach to the Covid-19 pandemic response and contributed to mutual learning across the devolved nations.
3. At the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020, NICVA pivoted rapidly to become a key coordination and communication hub for the VCSE sector in Northern Ireland. We worked particularly closely with the Department for Communities (DfC). NICVA played a lead role in shaping the formation of the Emergencies Leadership Group (ELG), a cross-sector body that brought together departmental officials and sector representatives to coordinate emergency support. NICVA jointly convened the group with DfC and acted as co-secretariat under a jointly agreed remit.
4. To help understand and evidence the challenges facing the sector, NICVA conducted a series of surveys between March and August 2020. These were distributed to approximately 1,100 VCSE organisations. Findings revealed a widespread cessation of services, dramatic income loss, and a steep reduction in volunteer availability. For example, in our August 2020 survey, 73% of organisations reported suspending services, and over 50% indicated that between 76% and 100% of their volunteers were no longer active. Survey findings were submitted to DfC and are available online.

Part B: Cooperation and Joint Working

5. NICVA's relationship with DfC was constructive, responsive, and built on a foundation of mutual trust. NICVA engaged with DfC through both formal and informal channels. The ELG, established in March 2020, met weekly during the initial months of the pandemic and less frequently thereafter, concluding in April 2021. NICVA supported the group, helped set agendas, and shared sector intelligence gathered from our member organisations. ELG meeting minutes and summaries were maintained jointly by NICVA and DfC.
6. The ELG was tasked with delivering six objectives, which included: gathering collective expertise and funding knowledge; identifying shared priorities; agreeing mechanisms for delivery; coordinating responses regionally and locally; empowering communities to co-deliver; and supporting recovery. NICVA contributed to all six by facilitating two-way communication, representing diverse voices from the sector, and helping to co-design funding responses. Our engagement in this regard was documented in working group notes and ministerial briefings.
7. In addition to the ELG, NICVA supported the VCS Emergencies Reference Group, which provided a platform for wider representation, particularly from Section 75 groups and smaller organisations. This group met fortnightly and played an important role in ensuring more inclusive input into the pandemic response. However, some Reference Group members later expressed frustration at not having equal influence or access to decision-making as ELG members, which NICVA communicated to DfC officials both verbally and in written updates.

Reference Group members:

8. *"...did not feel that they had any influence in shaping the emergency response... Those who referred to membership of the Reference Group as 'the second prize' said that, because they represented sections of the population who were most impacted by the pandemic, they believed they should have been on the decision-making body."* (pages 18-19) Exhibit JC/01 [INQ000655898]
9. NICVA also led communications across the sector. We repurposed our websites—nicva.org and communityni.org—as central information hubs, updated multiple times daily. A Covid-19 email bulletin was issued weekly to over 6,000 subscribers, and we hosted over 30 webinars on topics such as infection control, digital delivery, and emergency funding. This infrastructure ensured that vital information reached a wide cross-section of organisations quickly and reliably.
10. One barrier to effective collaboration was the lack of early alignment with the Civil Contingency Framework. The ELG operated outside this structure initially, leading to confusion about its mandate. Integration improved over time, but clearer roles and formal frameworks would have enhanced coordination from the outset. NICVA recommends that VCSE emergency engagement structures be embedded in statutory emergency plans in the future.
11. *"There was some initial confusion, and associated friction, as to how the DfC's Emergency Response Programme connected with the Civil Contingency Framework (CCF). ... DfC did not engage sufficiently with the Councils before its establishment*

but this was due to the huge time pressures they were under. ... All participants in this evaluation were agreed that in any future emergency the ELG needed to have a clear role and fit within the broader CCF.”(page 20) [Exhibit JC/01 [INQ000655898]]

Part C: The VCSE Sector in Response to the Pandemic

12. The VCSE sector in Northern Ireland responded rapidly and effectively to the pandemic, often ahead of statutory services. NICVA's survey data indicated that more than 42% of organisations introduced entirely new services—such as prescription deliveries, food support, welfare calls, and mental health initiatives. Many organisations shifted to online delivery almost overnight, despite lacking dedicated resources or infrastructure.
13. The financial impact on the sector was immediate and severe. In our August 2020 survey, 18.3% of respondents reported losing over 75% of their income, and a further 26% lost between a quarter and a half. The most affected were small-to-medium-sized organisations reliant on fundraising, trading, or earned income, which disappeared overnight. NICVA shared this intelligence with DfC and used it to advocate for emergency support. These findings were formally shared in ELG briefings and contributed to DfC's internal decision-making.
14. Volunteer capacity also declined drastically. Health concerns, shielding advice, and lockdown restrictions meant that long-standing volunteer pools—particularly older volunteers—could no longer participate. Over half of the organisations surveyed reported that 76–100% of their volunteers were unavailable. NICVA worked with partners to promote safe volunteering and supported the roll-out of the COVID-19 Community Helpline and the Pharmacy Delivery Scheme, both of which depended heavily on community volunteers.
15. In June 2021, NICVA co-hosted a virtual conference with the Minister for Communities to reflect on the sector's pandemic experience and identify lessons for recovery. Feedback from this event helped inform NICVA's subsequent recommendations to DfC and other government stakeholders.

Part D: Economic Support for the VCSE Sector

16. NICVA was directly involved in advising DfC on the design and delivery of several emergency support schemes. These included the £15.5 million Charities Fund, the VCSE Covid Recovery Fund, and the Covid-19 Community Support Fund distributed via local councils. Our involvement was both formal—through ELG representation—and informal—via regular correspondence with senior officials.
17. *“DfC support was not, of course, limited to their funded services. Respondents also commended the Minister and DfC for the timely design and delivery of the £15.5m Charities Fund, for example, to support organisations at risk of imminent collapse.” (pages 11-12) [Exhibit JC/01 [INQ000655898]]*

18. Our advocacy played a role in securing changes to furlough policy. Initially, organisations receiving partial public funding were ineligible to furlough staff. NICVA raised this issue repeatedly at ELG meetings, and in direct communications with DfC officials. This advocacy is reflected in ELG meeting notes from April and May 2020. DfC subsequently lobbied the Department of Finance, which revised its guidance to allow part-funded roles to be furloughed. This policy change provided vital relief to a significant number of VCSE organisations.
19. NICVA also called for flexibility in existing DfC contracts. Many funded groups were unable to meet original targets due to pandemic disruption. DfC responded positively by suspending contractual targets and assuring funded organisations that salary payments would continue. This approach reduced administrative burden and allowed organisations to focus on frontline delivery. These discussions were documented in ministerial briefings and sector updates.
20. While the financial support was widely welcomed, some challenges persisted. Smaller or unconnected organisations found it difficult to access schemes due to complex eligibility criteria or lack of visibility. Communication about available funds was sometimes inconsistent, especially when local councils or other intermediaries were involved. NICVA helped bridge these gaps by providing direct support, simplified guidance, and webinars.
21. *“Another important area – as always - was communications and the mixed messages that respondents believed came from across local and regional government. They stressed the need for planning to include strategies to get clear and consistent information out - at regional, local and community level – in order to avoid the confusion that arose during the pandemic. “NICVA led the communications between the ELG and the wider VCS... respondents particularly commended the ‘really, really beneficial’ database that NICVA developed, which provided information on the Covid supports available throughout NI.” (pages 23-24) Exhibit JC/01 [INQ000655898]*
22. Feedback from the sector highlighted concerns about the abrupt cessation of support in mid-to-late 2021, even as community needs remained high. Some Reference Group members felt their perspectives had not been fully considered in the winding down of schemes. NICVA recorded these views and communicated them to DfC during final ELG sessions.
23. *“Members of the Reference Group who took part in this evaluation found it valuable in terms of hearing about what the ELG was doing, but did not feel that they had any influence in shaping the emergency response. All expressed surprise that the Reference Group meetings stopped suddenly, and without prior notification. They were particularly concerned that the meetings should have ended when, in their view, community need was still ongoing.” (Page 18) Exhibit JC/01 [INQ000655898]*

Part E: Other Economic Support Schemes and Issues

24. NICVA supported organisations that were ineligible for UK-wide schemes such as the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS) and the Self-Employed Income Support Scheme (SEISS). Many VCSE organisations—particularly those with mixed funding

models—found these schemes ill-suited to their realities. NICVA raised these issues with DfC and helped develop local alternatives such as the Charities Fund.

25. *“DfC also succeeded in influencing government policy on occasion. One practical example of this relates to the furloughing of staff. While furloughing was a solution for many to protect their financial position, furloughed staff were not allowed to volunteer in their own charity. NICVA made representations to DfC in terms of consolidating staff funding for part-funded staff to free up space to furlough people. DfC, in turn, raised the issue with the Department of Finance, which eventually agreed to the proposal, thereby helping many organisations to manage looming deficits.” (Page 12)*

Exhibit JC/01 [INQ000655898]

26. Sector-specific funds such as the Artists Emergency Programme and the Stability and Renewal Programme for Organisations were also welcomed. However, access issues persisted, particularly for groups without dedicated administrative capacity.

27. NICVA identified significant regional disparities in access to funding and support. Organisations outside Belfast or without established links to government were more likely to miss out. NICVA used its communication channels to raise awareness and supported efforts to increase equity of distribution.

28. *“The membership of the ELG was predominantly from Belfast, leaving huge swathes of NI unrepresented. For that reason, although members acknowledged the inherent difficulties in establishing the ELG in the ‘heat of battle,’ they agreed that the poor geographical representation had been a significant oversight.” (Page 17)*

Exhibit JC/01
[INQ000655898]

29. There were few formal public-private partnerships during the pandemic response. NICVA believes this was a missed opportunity, particularly in relation to logistics, supply chains, and digital infrastructure. Stronger collaboration between sectors could enhance future resilience.

30. NICVA collected multiple reports of organisations being at risk of collapse, despite existing support. These reports were documented through NICVA’s Covid-19 impact surveys, and shared with DfC in briefing papers. This evidence contributed to the creation of subsequent emergency funding rounds.

31. Overall, organisations valued DfC’s responsiveness and the targeted nature of its schemes. However, there was room for improvement in terms of inclusive engagement, clear communication, and more consistent access across the sector.

Part F: Unintended Gaps and Volunteering

32. NICVA raised concerns about groups excluded from support due to eligibility criteria or lack of representation in ELG structures. These included smaller grassroots organisations, minority ethnic groups, and some rural communities. These concerns were raised both through the ELG Reference Group and via written feedback to DfC.

33. *“All respondents acknowledged that the membership of the ELG was likely to have excluded important organisations, even though most were unable to identify which organisations those might be. It was recognised that the ELG had been formed ‘on*

the hop' and there had been no time, therefore, to compose eligibility criteria or consult widely within the VCS." (Pages 17-18) [Exhibit JC/01 [INQ000655898]]

34. Gaps were exacerbated by the absence of pre-existing data, unclear communication processes, and limited capacity among some groups to navigate funding systems. NICVA recommends that future emergency planning include pre-defined inclusion mechanisms and a shared database of sector organisations.
35. *"Another important area – as always – was communications and the mixed messages that respondents believed came from across local and regional government. They stressed the need for planning to include strategies to get clear and consistent information out – at regional, local and community level – in order to avoid the confusion that arose during the pandemic. Last but not least, respondents stressed the need to introduce data sharing arrangements going forward. Some also believed there had been a lack of consistency in the application of GDPR... In concluding this section on the lessons learned during the pandemic, it is pertinent to note a recommendation that a couple of the respondents made... They proposed that a manual be developed to share the loopholes or alternative options that ELG members discovered when having to surmount regulatory barriers... This would be especially helpful for smaller groups 'sitting outside the circle of knowledge or circle of influence' in the event of another emergency." (Pages 22-23) [Exhibit JC/01 [INQ000655898]]*
36. DfC funding helped sustain key volunteering initiatives during the pandemic. NICVA helped promote volunteer opportunities and supported safe re-engagement. However, the sector's reliance on informal networks highlighted the need for a more structured volunteer strategy.
37. Resources for training and retaining volunteers were unevenly distributed. A more coordinated approach to volunteer management—including safeguarding, digital skills, and role clarity—would enhance future preparedness.

Part G: Lessons Learned and Recommendations

38. Key lessons learned would include the importance of:
 - Trust-based funding models with reduced bureaucracy;
 - Early establishment of cross-sector leadership structures;
 - Integration of the VCSE into formal emergency frameworks;
 - Proactive and GDPR-compliant data sharing;
 - Inclusive representation across the sector; and
 - Practical preparedness tools such as an emergency response playbook.
39. NICVA recommends that these lessons be embedded in future emergency planning at both departmental and Executive levels. The pandemic response demonstrated the central role the VCSE sector plays in protecting and supporting vulnerable communities. Formal recognition of that role through better planning, funding, and communication is essential.

Statement of Truth:

I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true. I understand that proceedings may be brought against anyone who makes, or causes to be made, a false statement in a document verified by a statement of truth without an honest belief of its truth.

Personal Data

Signed:

Name: Jonny Currie
Date: 23 October 2025