



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Social Development

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Regeneration Bill: Northern Ireland Council  
for Voluntary Action

26 March 2015

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

## Committee for Social Development

Regeneration Bill: Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action

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**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Mr Alex Maskey (Chairperson)  
Mr Mickey Brady (Deputy Chairperson)  
Mr Jim Allister  
Mr Roy Beggs  
Mr Gregory Campbell  
Mr Fra McCann  
Mr Sammy Wilson

**Witnesses:**

Ms Jenna Maghie	Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action
Mr Seamus McAleavey	Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action

**The Chairperson (Mr Maskey):** This morning, we have Seamus McAleavey and Jenna Maghie from the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA). You are both very welcome to the Committee. I refer members to page 17 of their meeting pack. Seamus and Jenna, without any further ado, are you happy enough to give your presentation?

**Mr Seamus McAleavey (Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action):** Yes. Thank you very much, Chair and members, for your invitation to come along. Jenna will make our introductory comments. Then, obviously, we will be happy to take questions from the Committee.

**Ms Jenna Maghie (Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action):** I echo Seamus's thanks for having us here today. You will already have received our note. I do not intend to talk through all of it. It will come as no surprise to the Committee that our main focus in the Bill is neighbourhood renewal. NICVA has been supportive of the Bill as a whole, which is part of the wider local government reform process. We are really happy for regeneration powers to transfer as part of this. We think that councils are closest to their communities and therefore really well placed to use these powers. We think that the delay to 2016 is welcome if this will allow the extra time for proper scrutiny and to ensure that the process runs smoothly. I think that it is important to recognise that this has led to some concern and uncertainty for voluntary and community sector organisations. Change does this, and we just hope that councils are mindful of this throughout the rest of the process.

In the paper, we have noted our concerns regarding funding for regeneration and neighbourhood renewal. Whilst we recognise perhaps that hypothecation runs contrary to the idea of devolving these powers to councils, we feel that any money that is transferred for anti-poverty measures, social need etc should be used for this purpose. You will also see that our key concern is round the definition of "social need", "regeneration" etc. We feel that a common term across all councils would be helpful. It would stop 11 different council areas working to 11 different levels and, most importantly, leading to 11

varying outcomes across Northern Ireland for people who are affected by this. We think that a common definition would assist those voluntary and community sector groups and others who seek funding in more than one council area. It reduces bureaucracy and admin. It also increases the opportunity for cross-council cooperation and allows for better and easier best-practice sharing. It will make it much easier for councils to work together across their areas. It also makes it really easy to see those areas that are underperforming against targets on a shared definition if, in every area, that can be related back to one common thing.

We think that there is potential for the Committee to monitor the process as it is transferred and implemented and the rest of the process is gone through. Unless Seamus has anything else to add to that, we are really happy to take questions.

**The Chairperson (Mr Maskey):** OK, Jenna. Thank you. A couple of members have indicated already.

**Mr Allister:** Thank you. I think that you are right to draw attention to the fact that social need, for example, is wholly undefined both, if I recall correctly, in this Bill and anywhere in legislation. I do not think that there is even a definition in the Social Need (Northern Ireland) Order 1986. That would seem to be a recipe for what you have put your finger on; that you therefore could have a patchwork of different perceptions across the 11 councils. I take it that that would not be in anyone's interests.

**Mr McAleavey:** I think that that is true, which is one of the reasons why we are looking for some coherence across all councils with an adequate definition, so that you can maintain a programme that is likely to deliver reasonably in the same way across Northern Ireland. Like in the discussion around community planning, the counterbalance to that is that we believe that councils should be able to focus on what they think are the greatest needs in their areas. It is important to have a framework. Imagine if people just went off and did whatever they thought fitted the programme.

**Mr Allister:** Is that not almost what this legislation says? Clause 1(2) states that what can be funded can be:

*"anything not falling within paragraphs (a) to (e) which the council considers will benefit the district."*

It really is a blank cheque.

**Mr McAleavey:** It is wide.

**Mr Allister:** It is foolishly wide, is it not?

**Mr McAleavey:** That is why, as I say, we would like to see some coherence brought to it with a common definition and programme for neighbourhood renewal.

**Mr Allister:** The name of the Bill is the Regeneration Bill, which speaks to me of things economic, first and foremost. We are going to regenerate areas within council areas that need regeneration. Should the focus not be up front and in lights on economic regeneration?

**Mr McAleavey:** I think that regeneration covers more than the economy. The general fabric of an area is very important to economic regeneration as well. Regeneration covers something much wider than purely economic measures, let us say.

**Mr Allister:** Yes, but if we are going to attain regeneration, the primary focus surely will be economics.

**Mr McAleavey:** I think that it is a major focus, but, as I say, improving the fabric and the general health and well-being of people in the area is all part of the regeneration and renewal of an area.

**Mr Allister:** There is obviously a limited pot of money.

**Mr McAleavey:** Absolutely.

**Mr Allister:** Therefore, it is all the more important to get it sharply focused.

**Mr McAleavey:** Obviously, the Bill has wider powers. The bit that we were focusing on here was the neighbourhood renewal pot that is transferring from the Department for Social Development. We would like to see that being ring-fenced. That is the commentary that we hear from voluntary and community groups across Northern Ireland. One of the things that they fear is that it might just disappear and go into some of the broader things.

**Mr Allister:** Neighbourhood renewal, at the moment, is premised and defined by the Noble indices. Surely, if you are to give a commonality of approach across Northern Ireland to avoid the patchwork approach under the Regeneration Bill, you will have to remove that focus.

**Mr McAleavey:** Well, it uses the Noble indicators, I suppose, to focus on the 10% most disadvantaged wards in Northern Ireland.

**Mr Allister:** That is where the money goes.

**Mr McAleavey:** Yes. If you are running something that is an anti-poverty programme, you need to use some indicator that tells you that you will focus the resource —

**Mr Allister:** You are running a regeneration programme.

**Mr McAleavey:** That is the wider Bill. I am talking about the neighbourhood renewal aspect. We saw that as an anti-poverty programme that was attempting to deal with the areas that were worst off.

**Mr Allister:** So, you want to cling to the Noble indices.

**Mr McAleavey:** We would want to use a set of indicators that show which areas are worst off and how you might target certain resources in those areas.

**Mr Wilson:** Following on from the point that Jim asked about, is there not a distinction to be made between this Bill, which is about regeneration, and the issue that you have raised about social need? Regeneration does not necessarily always have to be targeted at areas where there is extreme social need. In fact, sometimes, regeneration outside those areas could benefit the areas that are totally deprived because there may be more chance of success. Are we bringing two issues together that are separate issues? I would like your view on that.

**Mr McAleavey:** I see your point. At times, we need to invest in different areas, different places and different sets of people in ways that help them best. I agree with you that investment that takes place outside areas of social need can be and is very beneficial to people from those areas. One of the things that this programme does is to help people by better equipping them to take advantage of that.

Are you asking whether neighbourhood renewal should be part of the Bill and transfer to councils or should it be kept separate? Is that your question?

**Mr Wilson:** Neighbourhood renewal is obviously part of regeneration, so, by its definition, a Regeneration Bill needs to include that. You have placed an emphasis on having a standard definition of social need. Tying that in with a Regeneration Bill that is much wider than dealing with just social need is confusing the issue.

**Mr McAleavey:** As I said, that was our comment about the neighbourhood renewal aspect that is transferring from DSD to councils. I accept what you are saying about the Regeneration Bill having a much wider aspect or powers.

**Mr Wilson:** Rather than having a standard definition of social need — to follow on from the point that Jim raised — would it not be more desirable to deal with the ways in which the money can be spent, rather than the groups on which it would be spent? If we tie it in just to social need, there may be groups or areas that would not qualify under a very strict definition of social need, but it could be spent on things that are not necessarily regenerative or are not renewal projects either. Do we not need to look more at how the money is spent or the things on which it can be spent? In other words, we look at what constitutes renewal and regeneration, rather than what groups or areas should qualify.

**Mr McAleavy:** We look at neighbourhood renewal as an area-based intervention, and it is focused on the areas that are worst off in Northern Ireland. I accept what you say about the different types of activities and groups and what it might be best to spend the money on. Our concern is that, if we do not begin to define something, the whole thing could simply dissipate. The money could simply go into the mainstream funding of councils, and councils could decide to do things that are very far removed from the original intention of the neighbourhood renewal programme.

**Mr Wilson:** Do you accept that, even if you get a standard definition of social need, you would not stop councils using money for things that would not or could not be defined as renewing or regenerating an area? Is that not where the focus needs to be, rather than on a standard definition of social need? The focus ought to be on what constitutes renewal or regeneration, and, therefore, the Bill should tighten up on the kinds of things that the money can be spent on.

**Mr McAleavy:** Yes, and, in our case, the focus needs to be on what helps people who are most in need to benefit from the renewal opportunities that might arise from regeneration.

**Mr Wilson:** It has been pointed out that it is not very well defined, but, by putting the emphasis on targeting areas that fall within whatever the definition is of social need, you might be missing out on regenerative and renewal opportunities that could benefit people and areas that fall inside that definition but do not require the action in those areas.

**Mr McAleavy:** Yes, and I would expect a lot more resources to be expended as well. As I said, we were looking at this particular transfer of funds, but we expect that there would be a lot more resources deployed by councils and that they will also pick up on the things that you are talking about, Sammy.

**Mr Brady:** Thanks for the presentation. I would have thought that targeting objective need is a fairly fundamental issue, and it is inextricably linked to regeneration. The words "clinging on to" sound almost like desperation. That has not been the case with neighbourhood renewal. I think that, in a lot of areas, neighbourhood renewal has been used very wisely and very well, certainly in my constituency. Obviously, there may be councils that have not used it particularly well, and that is why I think that you are quite right about having a uniform approach to it. It is about targeting social need and about making sure that areas that need it get it. To be perfectly honest, this idea of it being not used in the way that it should be is not acceptable.

Has there been contact with any of the super-councils on how they might approach it? I am thinking about the lead-up to it. Obviously, there have been transition committees and all of that kind of thing. The other thing that you mentioned is the ring-fencing of advice. I think that that is important because of the changes in benefits. Advice centres will inevitably be under a lot more pressure, and I think that it is important that that is addressed. Obviously, mainstream funding is the answer. While we are waiting on that to happen, I think that it is important that advice centres get as much support and, indeed, funding as possible.

**Mr McAleavy:** We have had some discussions with officials who will be responsible for the new super-council areas, but it is very early days. You hear mixed views in what councils are saying about neighbourhood renewal. I know that there are big concerns amongst a lot of them that the budget is now transferring at a time when it will be cut back severely and things like that. I think that it causes worry to them, and it certainly causes worry to organisations that have been involved in neighbourhood renewal. I think that it is a time for many, both in councils and in organisations that have been working on the neighbourhood renewal programme, when things will be fraught.

Independent advice services in Northern Ireland have received funding from a whole range of different areas. One of the things that our research in NICVA and research from across the UK through our association with the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) shows is that, in times of recession, there are areas where demand from the voluntary sector rises sharply. That is generally for organisations that work with people on employment-related issues and unemployment and the area of mental health. The other such area is advice; the demand on advice services really goes up. Obviously, as we implement welfare reform in Northern Ireland, we expect that there will be a lot more demand on those services across a very broad range of organisations. That is why we highlight that here, in that we think that lots of people will be looking for advice outside the system with regard to their relationship with the Social Security Agency and others.

**Mr Brady:** Do you think that a wider discussion on the neighbourhood renewal aspect is still needed, because the Noble indices are from the 90s?

**Mr McAleavey:** It is always wise to review these things. Noble was not the first, and there was then a second set of indicators put in place. It is always wise to review, because obviously times change and things move on.

**Mr Beggs:** Thanks for your presentation. As others have said, the current definition is very wide. In fact, you could exclude a lot of that paragraph and just go with the bit that says that assistance can be for anything that the council decides will benefit the district. Equally, that could replace much of paragraph 1 because it is much wider than some of the other areas. You are saying that you would like it to be entirely or largely focused on areas of disadvantage, and I can see a benefit in having some flexibility. Have you got an idea, perhaps from some of your sister organisations, of how this support is treated elsewhere and how the definition could be amended to better reflect your concerns?

**Mr McAleavey:** Roy, as I said, our focus on the definition was with regard to neighbourhood renewal funds. Generally, we would agree that, if you take things like well-being, the council should be able to look widely at its remit. In terms of liaising with our other councils in Scotland, England and Wales, no, I do not think that we have anything that would shed any extra light on it. Things are not that different in other places. In a lot of indicators, like life expectancy, the difference can be stark between neighbourhoods that are relatively close. They are dealing with the same issues and problems that we have, which shows that a general policy will not necessarily impact on those areas that are worst off.

**Mr Beggs:** We, as a Committee, should be looking at how the legislation is drafted in other areas to see if there are ideas that enable it to be, if not concentrated on that, at least directed by it to a degree. I can see a benefit in having significant flexibility because there can be a difficulty if it ties in too much. Equally, it would be wrong if this simply went into the economic development pot of the council. It could conceivably do that and still meet the legislation as currently constructed.

**The Chairperson (Mr Maskey):** That is a useful and constructive idea.

**Mr Campbell:** You are welcome along. I have one query on your submission. You said that, "ideally", NICVA would like to see the Committee retain a scrutiny role and take an overview of this. How do you think that that would work? How do you think that local councils would operate under that sort of overview system?

**Mr McAleavey:** They might not like it.

**Mr Campbell:** Having spent 30 years in a council, I can say that that is probably an understatement.

**Mr McAleavey:** Yes, they might see it as big brother looking down and watching. The thought that struck us is that, when you are transferring a major programme like this that has run within a Government Department for over 10 years, it might be a good idea to watch how it develops. There might be significant learning. I am not quite sure if you have the power to do that. We are just saying that, ideally, it would be a good idea if we follow where this goes over the next three or four years. We think that the Committee might be an appropriate place for that.

**Mr Campbell:** Even for a period of time.

**Mr McAleavey:** Just to see. Transferring a major programme might go very well. It might go disastrously. As Roy said, the money might just disappear into some other aspect of council funding and that is that. There could be unintended consequences. There could be deliberate consequences. It might be useful to follow that and see what exactly happens.

**The Chairperson (Mr Maskey):** I think that it is fair to say that the Department will retain some responsibilities in those high-level policy decisions, albeit functions will be transferred, so the policy department will still have a role and responsibility and, therefore, the Committee will continue to have that as well. It is a question of getting the balance right and working constructively with people and all the rest of it, whether it is with local government or the Department. That is important.

**Mr F McCann:** Thank you for the presentation. You are raising a number of issues that have been talked about widely within many groups. Quite a number of concerns have been raised about having one policy across 11 councils. Roy made the point about people having control over the budget and it being used for things other than dealing with deprivation or regeneration. I have argued long and hard over the years, and I believed that neighbourhood renewal was an excellent programme, but it was probably wrongly delivered in many ways. I think that the Department, whilst having the lead, was probably let down by quite a number of other Departments that did not see it as their job to deliver neighbourhood renewal. When you talk about other regions, you used to jealously look at the amounts of money that may have been available from councils.

I agree with you that we need one definition of neighbourhood renewal and how it is run. There are times when people move away and use the money for other things. I believe, as Alex said, that the Department needs to retain that overview and, having come through that, give the Committee an opportunity to discuss any difficulties or problems that may arise. That is crucial, because one of the things about neighbourhood renewal — I agree with you — is that regeneration means different things to people. You talked about building capacity, and it was about neighbourhood renewal itself, the well-being of the citizens within those socially deprived areas and the regeneration of communities. I do agree, as I said last week about some of the stuff that Sammy said, that there are regeneration projects that can take place outside an area that will benefit that area, but the chance to regenerate the communities that suffer from severe social deprivation offers the opportunity to people to progress out of poverty and deprivation. I agree with you that we need to have that overview and we need to know where it is going. It is like the old argument about aspects of community planning and other aspects of change, and what you ended up with was the definition of a community development worker; every council had a different concept of what community development was. You need to start to pull the threads of that together if you are ever to have an effective programme.

**The Chairperson (Mr Maskey):** We will take a wee break here till Sammy fixes his telephone.

**Mr Wilson:** Sorry, Chair. I thought that I had got away with it by staring at the wall. Clearly, I had not.

**The Chairperson (Mr Maskey):** I was on your case. Sammy, you are on next.

**Mr Wilson:** I want to come back to the point that we were discussing. Defining social need would tighten down where the money was spent. Jim raised the point about how you tighten down on what the money is spent on. We could have some discussion as to whether or not we should always target just areas of social need, but that is another issue.

First, Seamus, do you have any concerns about the way in which the money was spent in the past?

**Mr McAleavey:** Yes.

**Mr Wilson:** Secondly, what suggestions do you have for tightening down not on where the money is spent, as you have already told us that you want a standard definition of social need, but on how the money is spent?

**Mr McAleavey:** One of the areas where neighbourhood renewal did not fulfil its promise is that, in the beginning, it was to be a 10-year strategy and a strategic thing, and I do not think that it ever achieved that. What I thought would have come out of it was that, if you decided to invest in an area where there were problems, you would have a plan for 10 years and expect that it would take that time to reasonably turn it around. There is a world of evidence from academics to show that.

It is also about focusing on how you get the best bang for your buck. We do not do enough to collect data to show us what does and does not work well. I complained over the years about the system of accounting for public money and how it is followed. It focused heavily on vouching and on making sure that money was all spent properly and accounted for properly, but there was not enough emphasis on what the public pound was trying to buy. Treasury guidance keeps telling us that, if you do not focus on the outcome that you are trying to achieve, everything else is lost, and, in effect, the rest does not matter. You can account for the money well but flush it all down the toilet. I would have placed much more emphasis on collecting data and understanding what activities worked well, and I would have invested more money in those and discarded the things that did not work well. That can be difficult, because people can have lots of objections to it, but I would drive a programme like this much more by the data and information that is gathered and by feedback that tells you what works well. Other places are beginning to do that.

**Mr Wilson:** From your experience, what should we have in clause 1? It is about the things that you spend the money on. Jim mentioned it. Should it be more about physical regeneration rather than the softer end of regeneration and renewal? If there is a role for the softer end, whether that be building the capacity of groups or whatever, are there specific programmes that you feel have been essential to doing that kind of thing? What limits would you place on the kinds of programmes that the Bill directs you to spend the money on?

**Mr McAleavey:** Let us look at soft skills. In the modern world and the economy that we now have, soft skills are one of the highest premiums that employers are looking for across the board. When you talk about soft skills, it sounds unimportant, but I think that they become really important. Investing in things that improve the soft skills of people in disadvantaged areas could increase their employment opportunities.

When it comes to general economic regeneration, the environment that we live in and create in Northern Ireland will shape and attract inward investment. The physical environment is very important; it is about the schools that are available and what the people who work for these companies think of the place. Why will they want to locate here? Those issues are incredibly important. It is about trying to marry all those issues — developing talent and attracting and maintaining it — so that you can create a place that people want to stay in. Soft skills are incredibly important.

**Mr Wilson:** How do you include that — you agreed with Jim when he made the point — but do not leave the Bill with a clause that simply states those things, so that you do not miss the issues that you are talking about and spending anything else that a council feels is worthwhile?

**Mr McAleavey:** As I said, our emphasis was on the neighbourhood renewal programme that is *[Inaudible.]*, and I would not leave that wide or leave a catch-all clause that allows that. I take your point that, if you have catch-all clause that allows you to do anything in the Bill, maybe the rest of the Bill does not count for an awful lot. I can see exactly the point that you are making.

**Mr Wilson:** A catch-all clause does not make sense in the context of the Regeneration Bill, but I was trying to establish whether you would like it to list the kinds of things that would constitute regeneration or renewal, and the physical and softer issues that could be funded.

**Mr McAleavey:** That would be no bad thing. Guidance on what exactly we are talking about with regard to regeneration would be good for everyone. It may be difficult to get agreement on some of that, but it would be good to have advice and guidance rather than creating the notion of doing whatever you want.

**Mr Wilson:** Your submission states that you want a standard definition of social need, money ring-fenced for advice and neighbourhood renewal, and councils to be monitored. Is there any point in devolving these matters to councils when you are going to tie them up in this way?

**Mr McAleavey:** It is not tying them up. As I said, we have thought about this. There is no point in transferring powers and resources to councils if you tell them that you want them to run something exactly the way it was run. All you are doing is making a council the manager of a central government programme. We accept that. We are saying that it should not just be an opportunity to change something drastically, whereby you accept the money and say, "Whatever went before is nothing to do with us. We're going to do our own thing". Transition needs to be managed well. As I said, quite a lot of organisations deliver neighbourhood renewal, and they are clearly wondering what will happen with all this. The way in which this is managed is very important. Ultimately, as the councils develop, they will change the emphasis and direction of a lot of what is delivered. We expect that to happen.

**The Chairperson (Mr Maskey):** I want to ask you about two issues. First, given the status of the concordat between the Department and the sector that you represent, what level of discussion or consultation has there been with NICVA as the Bill developed?

**Mr McAleavey:** There has been significant discussion over time. There have been some rocky periods. Neighbourhood renewal, for example, was to have transferred to councils earlier. That did not work out, and a lot of concerns were raised at the time. When we talk to our member organisations that are involved in neighbourhood renewal, there is a lot of concern. They are not quite sure what is happening and what will happen. That is a big issue. You also hear talk that some

councils might not want neighbourhood renewal, given the budget position. I do not know whether that is true, but it adds to the concerns that are flying around.

**The Chairperson (Mr Maskey):** I did not necessarily expect you to give a full answer to that question. Obviously, there are a lot of concerns — we are all aware of them — from a range of organisations that are not sure about what is happening. My point is that your organisation is a key element of the concordat, so, if the Department and NICVA are working together in concert — whether you disagree or not, it does not matter — at least that should bridge some of the communication gaps. I am making that point to emphasise that there is no point in having a concordat if it is not utilised fully and properly.

Secondly, you raised the issue of shared space and any obligations on local government to deal with that. If I remember correctly, the NILGA presentation referred to councils having to take regard of community planning and upcoming T:BUC policies. Will you elaborate on your thinking on shared space? Will it be sufficient to have guidelines attached to the Bill and so on?

**Ms Maghie:** NILGA's point is almost exactly the same as the one in our submission: shared space and inclusive communities have a key role to play in the regeneration of their areas. Councils, through community planning, will be led by their communities and their demands. We thought that it was important to note that that is not referenced in the Bill at all, but, as you said, councils will obviously have responsibilities through T:BUC and community planning to give regard to the development of shared places in their area.

**The Chairperson (Mr Maskey):** Seamus and Jenna, I thank you both for attending and helping the Committee in its deliberations on the Bill on behalf of your organisation. No doubt we will discuss the matter again at some stage in the future.