

---

# Summary Report

---

## Summary of the Evaluation of the Active Community Initiative

April 2001 – June 2004

---

Department for Social Development  
Voluntary & Community Unit  
3<sup>rd</sup> Floor, Lighthouse Building  
1 Cromac Place  
Belfast  
BT7 2JB

March 2006



# Foreword

The Active Community Initiative was a UK-wide initiative promoted by government in 1999 which aimed 'to help rebuild a sense of community throughout the UK, by encouraging and supporting all forms of community involvement'. In Northern Ireland, a Working Group was established to develop a local plan, within the framework of the overall UK Strategy. Our objectives focused on bringing about a change in attitudes to volunteering and community involvement, increasing the number of volunteers, broadening the base of volunteers and aligning this volunteering initiative with others within the primary focus on building community empowerment.

Community Evaluation Northern Ireland (CENI) was commissioned at an early stage to produce an independent evaluation of the scheme. This report was finalised in late 2005. The Final Report itself looks at the operational effectiveness of the funding programme, how the programme has contributed to the achievement of the objectives and has identified key lessons that have emerged from the evaluation. This Summary Report is a précis of the Final Report and its findings. Copies of the full Final Report can be found on the Department for Social Development website ([www.dsdni.gov.uk](http://www.dsdni.gov.uk)).

Overall the Initiative was successful in achieving its four principal objectives. There is evidence that it brought about positive changes in attitudes to volunteering and community involvement amongst volunteers themselves, recipients of volunteer services, professionals and members of the wider community. It succeeded in broadening the volunteer base and was very successful in recruiting new volunteers. Collaboration and partnership working to align initiatives played a key role in many of the projects and there were many instances of empowerment for both individuals and communities.

On behalf of the Department I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge and thank those in the ACI Northern Ireland Working Group and the ACI Monitoring Group, especially Bob Bunting OBE for the important contribution he made as chair of these groups. Thanks are also due to the Volunteer Development Agency for their work in managing the grant programme on behalf of the Department. There are also a host of organisations and government bodies without whose help the Projects would not have been so successful. Most importantly I would want to pay tribute to the dedication and commitment of the volunteers without whom the success of the Initiative could not have been achieved.

Finally, I would like to express my thanks to Community Evaluation Northern Ireland and to the members of the ACI Evaluation Reference Group for the comprehensive work they have done in managing and completing the evaluation. The evaluation was dependent on the commitment of the project organisers. Some projects were selected as case studies and are documented in greater detail. CENI has provided us with a valuable report that not only documents the processes involved but also explores the outcomes and benefits of the work undertaken.

I commend the report to you and to all those who took part in it, especially those in the projects that were selected as case studies.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Dave Wall". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a solid horizontal line.

Dave Wall  
Director Voluntary and Community Unit  
Department for Social Development

# Contents

<b>1 The Active Community Initiative</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>2 Evaluation Approach</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>3 Main Findings</b>	<b>7</b>
Bringing about a change in attitudes to volunteering and community involvement	9
Increasing the numbers of volunteers	11
Broadening the base of volunteers to make volunteering an inclusive process	11
Acting with other initiatives to promote a community empowerment approach	11
<b>4 Key Learning</b>	<b>14</b>
Learning in relation to the ACI Northern Ireland Action Plan	14
Learning emerging from the operation of the ACI funding programme	15
Learning relating to the four ACI objectives	16
Learning from the evaluation approach	17
<b>5 Case Studies</b>	<b>18</b>
The Blind Centre Eye Help Desk Information Service Project	18
Impact Project - Regeneration of South Armagh (RoSA).	19
NICEM Volunteering Project	19
The SHARE Me Too Project	19
The SHEP (Sexual Health Education by Peers) Project	20
Foyle Women's Aid Court Advocacy Project	20
<b>6 Further Information</b>	<b>26</b>

# 1 The Active Community Initiative

1.1 ACI was a UK wide initiative with the aim *'to help rebuild a sense of community throughout the UK, by encouraging and supporting all forms of community involvement'*. Within Northern Ireland, the Department for Social Development, through the Voluntary and Community Unit, made available funding of £1.8 million to deliver the Initiative over the period April 2001 to June 2004. The Initiative focused on four principal objectives, namely:

- Bringing about a change in attitudes to volunteering and community involvement;
- Increasing the number of volunteers;
- Broadening the base of volunteers to make volunteering an inclusive process;
- Acting with other initiatives to promote a community empowerment approach.

1.2 These were to be achieved primarily by two complementary approaches; firstly, through the implementation of a comprehensive Action Plan with a focus on key action points and secondly, through a grant funding programme.

1.3 The action points in the Action Plan were drawn up by a Northern Ireland Working Group under the following headings:

- **Research** to establish current level of volunteering and community involvement, to identify attitudes towards volunteering, to identify barriers to involvement and to identify those groups who are under-represented.
- **Promotion and publicity** to recognise the value of volunteering and community involvement and to contribute towards an increase and a broadening of the base of volunteering activities.
- **Policy and practice** to publicise and incorporate policies and good practice into all sectors so that active communities becomes an underlying principle for the public, private and voluntary/community sectors.

- **Volunteering infrastructure** to support the volunteering infrastructure in order to identify and match the needs of volunteers with the available opportunities.
- **Demonstration projects** to encourage and test new approaches to volunteering and community involvement and to transfer best practice lessons.
- **Monitoring and evaluation** to gauge the success of the ACI in addressing its four local objectives.

1.4 The Plan indicated one or more 'lead partners' who would be responsible for the implementation of each of the points contained under these headings.

1.5 The ACI funding programme involved the provision of main grants of £25000 - £30000 per year for up to two years. In addition, a small grants programme involving one-year grants of up to £10000 was also established.

## 2 Evaluation approach

2.1 Community Evaluation Northern Ireland (CENI) was awarded ACI funding to develop a project which would provide monitoring and evaluation support to the Initiative. CENI's approach acknowledged the importance of conducting a summative evaluation that was methodologically rigorous and provided accountability. It also recognised the value of generating learning about 'active community'. A formative approach was therefore adopted, involving the design of an evaluation framework which was implemented throughout the duration of the Initiative. The framework identified the following Terms of Reference:

1. To describe and review the implementation of the ACI NI Action Plan.
2. To evaluate the ACI funding programme in relation to the following:
  - a. Effectiveness of the promotion of the funding programme;
  - b. Effectiveness of the grant funding programme in targeting resources appropriately;
  - c. Outputs of the funding programme;

- d. Extent to which the funding programme contributes to the achievement of four ACI objectives;
- e. Operational effectiveness of the funding programme with reference to administrative systems and financial procedures.

2.2 The methodology adopted to address these Terms of Reference included monitoring of activities by the key lead partners involved in the implementation of the Action Plan; monitoring and reporting undertaken by projects funded through the ACI funding programme; case studies of six main grant projects; and consultation with a range of stakeholders. The approach included the provision of training and support to grantees, in order to both enhance their commitment to collecting data, and to develop their capacity to produce information which could be used for the purposes of their own development and sustainability as well as feed into the external evaluation.

### **3 Main findings**

- 3.1 The review of the implementation of the Action Plan indicates that progress was made against most of the identified actions including:
- The conduct, publication and use of a number of research exercises, designed to establish levels of volunteering and community involvement, identify attitudes and barriers to involvement and identify those groups who are under-represented;
  - A range of activities aimed at promoting and publicising voluntary involvement amongst a wide range of target audiences;
  - Activities targeted at influencing policy in order to ensure that the themes of volunteering and community involvement were reflected across a range of strategic developments, as well as work focused on developing and promoting standards of good practice;
  - Supporting the development of the volunteering infrastructure through investment in the development of organisational capacity to develop volunteering opportunities;
  - The provision of funding to demonstration projects in order to test and identify lessons about volunteering and community activity.

- 3.2 The evaluation also demonstrates the importance of the ACI funding programme in contributing to the implementation of the Initiative in Northern Ireland. The funding programme was not part of the original ACI Northern Ireland Action Plan. However, the securing of funds from DSD enabled the provision of main and small grants to voluntary and community projects in order to address issues of volunteering and community activity. In this sense, the funding programme became the most tangible mechanism by which the Initiative was progressed within Northern Ireland.
- 3.3 In terms of outputs of the programme, a total of 18 projects were awarded main grants totalling just over £1 million. In addition, almost £428,000 of funding was awarded in small grants to 70 projects. Almost all the projects were funded under the two main themes of Addressing Barriers to Volunteering and Active Citizenship in Areas of Weak Community Infrastructure as well as, to a lesser extent, Innovation and New Approaches and Mentoring themes.
- 3.4 The evaluation considered a number of aspects of the operational effectiveness of the ACI funding programme. In terms of its promotion, this was undertaken through a range of mechanisms, including the provision of roadshows throughout the region. The findings indicate that the promotional campaign was effectively focused on ACI targeted groups and that it was successful in eliciting the required responses for both the main grant, and to a lesser extent, the small grant programmes. In relation to targeting resources appropriately, the evaluation found a close correlation between selection criteria and ACI objectives. The selection process ensured that funded groups met the identified criteria and it was found that there was an appropriate fit between the groups funded, the themes and the targeted population. The geographical spread of the projects was also found to be fair and equitable. The evaluation also found that VDA provided appropriate and effective administrative systems and financial procedures for the operation of the programme.
- 3.5 The evaluation assessed the funding programme's contribution to the achievement of the four key objectives of the Active Community Initiative as follows.

## **Bringing about a change in attitudes to volunteering and community involvement**

3.6 ACI aimed to act as a mechanism for bringing about a change in attitudes to volunteering and community involvement. The case studies which were conducted as part of the evaluation indicated that the funded projects had successfully contributed to attitudinal change from a range of different perspectives, including volunteers themselves, recipients of volunteer services, carers (of volunteers and recipients), professionals and members of the wider community. Obviously, this work was carried out in a number of very different contexts, but the evaluation suggests that a number of approaches were successful, to greater or lesser degrees, in bringing about such changes. These included:

- Raising awareness of value of volunteering – amongst agencies and organisations using volunteers, the recipients of volunteer services, volunteers themselves, and the general public;
- Presenting a ‘professional’ image – in the sense of providing quality services and volunteers being appropriately skilled to perform these as well as organisations and agencies utilising good practice guidelines for volunteering;
- Providing appropriate training – to add to the quality of the services provided as well as to make volunteering a more attractive proposition for potential volunteers;
- Making volunteering a valued activity – in addition to the quality of the services to ensure that volunteers are performing tasks that are valued both by themselves and by the other stakeholders concerned;
- Being seen to be making a difference – in terms of the volunteering input being seen to make a difference to the quality of life of the recipients or community and/or their own wellbeing;
- Providing opportunities for mutual support – this is a process that motivates most volunteers to become involved, particularly those who may otherwise feel marginalised from society;
- Matching the skills of marginalised volunteers with appropriate opportunities (including, where required, within a secure/supportive environment);

- Making the volunteering opportunities relevant to the specific interests of the targeted group (especially with young people and members of minority ethnic communities);
- Providing basic capacity building and building trust in areas of weak community infrastructure;
- Addressing fundamental cultural barriers in relation to minority ethnic groups.

3.7 All of these approaches involved developing volunteering as an inclusive activity with an emphasis on volunteers as individuals with individual needs, facilitating rewarding volunteering placements and providing appropriate skill development measures. Publicity was another overriding factor. Working with as many agencies and organisations as possible, and organising promotional events, were also effective ways of bringing about changes in attitudes to volunteering and promoting it in a positive light. The 'professional' approach of the volunteers and projects was instrumental in changing the attitudes of both volunteers and representatives of other agencies, including professional personnel, in relation to the value of volunteering and the contribution it can make to the quality of life, both of the volunteers and those receiving volunteering services. They also brought a considerable sense of self worth to the volunteers themselves. ACI projects were also instrumental in complementing/augmenting the work of key service providers and, through this, relieving the pressure on carers and overstretched health and social service agencies. This contributed to a greater recognition of the value of volunteering from a wide range of agencies and organisations, carers and the wider community. Innovative and creative approaches were also crucial to changing attitudes to volunteering and community activity within a number of different settings, particularly when combined with organisations that had a successful 'track record' of involvement in tackling sensitive issues.

3.8 The central theme cutting across all the achievements in relation to changing attitudes to volunteering and voluntary activity is the development of volunteering as an inclusive activity, with an emphasis on volunteers as individuals with particular needs, as well as facilitating rewarding volunteering placements and providing appropriate skill development measures.

### **Increasing the numbers of volunteers**

- 3.9 The ACI funding programme set a target for increasing the number of volunteers by 1500 over its two-year period of implementation. Monitoring of the projects indicates that a total of 3673 volunteers were recruited - this does not take account of volunteers recruited through the demonstration projects - thereby considerably exceeding the original target. Of these, 2537 (69.1%) were first time volunteers.

### **Broadening the base of volunteers to make volunteering an inclusive process**

- 3.10 ACI aimed to broaden the base of volunteers through recruiting individuals from sections of the population previously under-represented; namely, black and minority ethnic groups, people with disabilities, young people aged 24 and under, older people over 65, people with dependent children and people with other caring responsibilities. The evaluation indicates that, overall, both the main and small grants were successful in relation to recruiting volunteers from under-represented categories, with less than 15% *not* belonging to one or other of the targeted groups. Just over a third of those recruited were young people aged 24 or less, just less than a quarter were people with dependent children and over one in ten were older people over 65. There were smaller *overall* totals in relation to the categories of black and minority ethnic groups, people with disabilities, and those with other caring responsibilities. However, in relation to the first category, the main grant projects had greater success here, with nearly a quarter of those recruited being black or from a minority ethnic group; this was significant given the relatively small number of people from these groups in Northern Ireland.

### **Acting with other initiatives to promote a community empowerment approach**

- 3.11 In terms of 'acting with other initiatives', the evaluation demonstrates the way in which the funding programme contributed to the development of effective partnership working as well as some of the benefits accruing from this approach including facilitating the process of engagement, consolidating relationships, building trust (and improving communication), improving accessibility – by marginalised groups to services as well as by agencies and

organisations to marginalised groups - and increasing the potential for innovation and creativity (both as a process as well as an output).

3.12 There were a number of overriding benefits that were a product of all or most of these processes. These included the capacity for collaboration – the extent to which partnership arrangements enabled projects to draw on the support of other agencies and expertise as well as their own - and proactivity – the extent to which organisations were enabled to take the initiative, make decisions and implement measures, based on anticipated needs and preventative interventions, that complemented the work of other agencies and organisations. Not least was the openness and accountability engendered through the development of trust and the experience of working collaboratively. All of these processes generated considerable added value and enabled projects to identify and meet needs that would not have been otherwise part of their remit, but which were associated with some of the most marginalised and excluded sections of the population.

3.13 The evaluation also assessed the extent to which a community empowerment approach was achieved in relation to the key dimensions of personal development, development of community infrastructure, promoting positive action and active citizenship. The findings indicate that:

- The volunteers were personally empowered by their experience on the programme in terms of indicators such as personal confidence, self-esteem, and skill development. In addition this empowerment was often extended to recipients of the volunteer services.
- In relation to the development of community infrastructure, the funding programme had made a significant contribution to the development of organisations, new initiatives, and networking between projects, organisations, and agencies and between these and local communities and communities of interest.
- In relation to promoting positive action, the funding programme had contributed to the promotion of social inclusion of previously disadvantaged, marginalised or socially excluded sections of the population and enabled projects to take a more active role in addressing issues concerned with equity and fairness.

- In relation to addressing active citizenship, the programme promoted a number of very varied opportunities for participants to play a more active role in their communities and wider society.

3.14 In addition to assessing the elements of acting with other initiatives and promoting a community empowerment approach, and closely related to these, the evaluation also considered the extent to which the funding programme contributed to the development of social capital in Northern Ireland in relation to each of the intended outcomes outlined in the social capital model for evaluating voluntary and community based activity. The key findings are as follows:

- Bonding outcomes – The intended beneficiaries were empowered through being given confidence, skills and leadership capacity. They were also enabled to contribute to the development of infrastructure through participation in organisations and projects which were representative and inclusive. The programme also promoted bonding through promoting the connectedness between the various stakeholders and their communities.
- Bridging outcomes – The intended beneficiaries were able to engage with other communities (where appropriate) and sectors through participating in relationships and networks. They were also able to participate in structures and processes that made their community more accessible to outside communities (where appropriate) and sectors. The projects were also able to demonstrate a number of innovative and creative approaches that facilitated their communities to adapt to change.
- Linking outcomes – On a much wider level, ACI was one of a number of initiatives in recent years concerned with promoting the linkages of local communities and communities of interest with access to power and resources. It was partly able to achieve this through the resources made available and in meeting the objectives of the funding programme. Within the context of the convergence between the interests of government agencies and the community and voluntary sector in recent years, ACI has enabled this to be developed further, and provided an opportunity for collaborative learning from the experiences of the projects in meeting the four ACI grant funding programme objectives.

## 4 Key learning

The evaluation identified learning in relation to a number of key areas as follows:

### **Learning in relation to the ACI Northern Ireland Action Plan**

- 4.1 The design and implementation of the ACI Northern Ireland Action Plan involved stakeholders from a number of agencies and organisations who were able to bring together a range of relevant experience and expertise. The background, skills and experience of the Chair were also important in terms of supporting the process. The Action Plan itself was sufficiently flexible to allow for new actions to be implemented as needs were identified, and to establish appropriate structures to manage and oversee the Initiative and its attendant funding programme. However, it would have benefited from the application of ‘SMART’ criteria to some of the actions identified, to ensure greater clarity and measurability of progress and outcomes.
- 4.2 The evaluation also identified lessons in relation to a number of the specific actions of the Plan. While the use of a number of research exercises was an important factor in establishing baselines and identifying issues that were to inform the implementation of the Plan, and the funding programme, this might have benefited if some baseline data had been collected in relation to specific issues such as attitudes to different types of volunteering and community activity. There was also an issue around the lack of awareness of, or timing, of demonstration projects that were intended to test and identify lessons for the future development of ACI. The learning generated through some of them was either not available on time or was not disseminated to a number of stakeholders, who might have benefited from it. These stakeholders included members of the ACI Monitoring Group and representatives of funded projects.
- 4.3 There were also a number of issues related to the actions around policy and practice development. The design and implementation of the Action Plan emphasised the importance of cross-sectoral and interdepartmental engagement, and the forging of linkages between ACI and other relevant initiatives. Amongst those consulted for the evaluation, developing and

sustaining such linkages, and ensuring that the theme of ‘active communities’ was fully embraced by all relevant stakeholders at policy and practice levels, was seen as being crucial to ongoing promotion of the concept. There were, however, some concerns expressed about the lack of a future strategy for volunteering and active communities as ACI drew to its conclusion, although emerging developments such as the redesign of the Community Volunteering Scheme (CVS) and the emphasis placed in the *Task Force*<sup>1</sup> report on the need to encourage and support volunteering and active citizenship may begin to address some of these. Linked to this were concerns about the difficulties faced, at project level, of securing funding to sustain the work on promoting active communities and voluntary activity which had been initiated under the ACI funding programme. The final issue related to the overall aim for ACI – to rebuild a sense of community by encouraging and supporting all forms of community involvement. The main lesson to be drawn from this was that it was somewhat unrealistic, in the Northern Ireland context (and with the limited resources available), for ACI to achieve this on its own, particularly since the region is still emerging from a lengthy period of political instability, upheaval and inter and intra community conflict. In this sense the aim (which was given from the UK government) needed to be re-interpreted within the Northern Ireland context and re-defined accordingly within the context of other major, and contemporaneous, initiatives and interventions such as ‘Partners for Change’<sup>2</sup> and ‘Peace 2’. These issues point to the importance of a ‘joined up’ approach in terms of relating the Action Plan to other key policy initiatives and interventions, particularly in relation to transference of the learning generated through ACI to future programmes or strategies for promoting community involvement and reconstructing society in Northern Ireland.

### **Learning emerging from the operation of the ACI funding programme**

- 4.4 The evaluation demonstrated the importance of a well-developed promotional campaign in terms of eliciting responses to the funding programme, including those from difficult-to-reach groups and communities. The provision of roadshows and follow-up advice on the application procedure was particularly

---

<sup>1</sup> “Investing Together – Report on the Task Force on resourcing the Voluntary and Community Sector” VCU, DSD October 2004

<sup>2</sup> ‘Partners for Change: Government’s Strategy for Support of the Voluntary and Community Sector: 2001 2004’ VCU/DSD (2001), and ‘European Union Programme for Peace and Reconciliation 2000-2005 (Peace 2).’

useful in areas which lacked an appropriate supporting infrastructure. The evaluation highlighted the need to ensure the availability of appropriate developmental support, particularly for small projects with limited capacity and/or specialist needs, especially where these are a particular target group for the funding programme. The matching of selection criteria and programme objectives was also important in terms of ensuring the appropriate targeting of resources, as was the investment in time and effort in developing the necessary procedures for project selection. The composition of Selection Panels, from a broad base of backgrounds, experience and expertise, was also important. Finally, there were issues in relation to the time-limited nature of the funding programme, which meant that some projects were perhaps unable to meet their full potential, or to consolidate their position and ensure sustainability.

### **Learning relating to the four ACI objectives**

4.5 This evaluation provides concrete and detailed examples of good practice in relation to the four ACI objectives that should be of interest to practitioners and policy makers alike. These include the following:

- **Changing Attitudes to Volunteering** – The evaluation has highlighted ways of making volunteering a more attractive proposition for potential volunteers as well as increasing the value ascribed to volunteering by the recipients of volunteering services, agencies and organisations that may be considering using volunteers, either directly or through using the services of other organisations volunteers to complement their own services/activities. It also includes a number of ways in which volunteering can be presented in a more positive light to the general public.
- **Increasing the number of volunteers** – The evaluation highlights important learning in relation to the context within which projects aiming to recruit volunteers operate and the relationship between this and the characteristics of the targeted groups of volunteers. It also emphasises the importance of focusing on the quality of the volunteering experience as a means of assessing success rather than a pre-occupation on increasing numbers. Crucial learning emanating from the evaluation has indicated the need for a focus on the frequency, intensity and quality of the activity and the level of support required as well as the longer-term outcomes and benefits for individuals and communities.

- **Broadening the base of volunteers to make it a more inclusive process** – The evaluation identifies crucial learning in relation to the need for appropriate infrastructural and capacity building support in order to make volunteering and voluntary activity a more inclusive process that will enable more marginalised and socially excluded sections of the population to become more actively involved in their communities.
- **Acting with other initiatives to promote a community empowerment approach** – The evaluation highlights substantial learning in relation to good practice in initiating engagement with other agencies/organisations, consolidating partnerships, improving accessibility, innovation and creativity. These practices, combined with the other achievements of the funded projects, have contributed to our learning in relation to ways of promoting a community empowerment approach to voluntary activity through facilitating personal development, developing community infrastructure, taking positive action, and promoting active citizenship.

### **Learning from the evaluation approach**

- 4.6 Finally, there were lessons to be learned from the approach adopted to the evaluation itself, and its potential transferability to other initiatives. The combination of both formative and summative elements provided the opportunity for the evaluators to work with key stakeholders throughout the duration of the Initiative, and, in particular to work with the Evaluation Reference Group to adapt and modify the evaluation methodology according to need. It also enabled the provision of support in monitoring and evaluation to the funded projects, and facilitated early engagement with the six projects identified as case studies. These factors had the benefit of enhancing the evaluators' understanding of the context in which the Initiative overall, and the funded projects, were operating, ensuring co-operation from those required to generate information, and assisting in the provision of high quality quantitative and qualitative data. The approach also provided an opportunity to practically apply the social capital model of evaluating community based and voluntary activity in Northern Ireland to a programme of this scale.

## 5 Case Studies

- 5.1 Six projects were selected to act as case studies for the evaluation. These were to be representative of the funding themes and targeted groups under the programme. They were also selected to ensure that the projects and work involved would be as representative as possible of the main grant funding programme as a whole in terms of geographical spread, type of work and political/ethnic identity of the targeted population. In this sense it was anticipated that the information gained from the case studies, taken in conjunction with other sources, would provide a vein of contextual learning that would be transferable to other similar sets of circumstances.
- 5.2 In this Summary Report brief outlines for five of the case studies are given and a full detailed case study has been provided for the sixth – Foyle Women’s Aid Court Advocacy Service Project. Full details of all of the case studies are in the Final Report available on the Department for Social Development website – [www.dsdni.gov.uk](http://www.dsdni.gov.uk).

### **The Blind Centre Eye Help Desk Information Service Project**

- 5.3 The Blind Centre for Northern Ireland was established in 1978 to provide direct services to blind and visually impaired people of all ages across Northern Ireland. Its main office is in East Belfast and it has rural centres in Omagh and Coleraine. Its aim is to enhance the quality of life for blind and visually impaired people through direct services, leisure, communication, and research. There are currently 5,500 registered blind and partially sighted people living in Northern Ireland and another 25,000 people with sight loss.
- 5.4 The Blind Centre’s Eye Help Desk Information Service was established to provide information to individuals and their families and carers who are attending Ophthalmic Outpatients clinics at selected hospitals throughout Northern Ireland. The unique and innovative part of the programme was to ensure that each Desk was staffed by both sighted and visually impaired volunteers. This meant that individuals could not only get information but were also likely to engage with a volunteer who might have had similar experiences and who would be able to empathise with them, understand their concerns, and so offer a more comprehensive service.

### **Impact Project - Regeneration of South Armagh (RoSA)**

- 5.5 Regeneration of South Armagh (RoSA) was formed in 1989 and currently has a membership of over 60 rural based groups from across South Armagh, reflecting different aspects of rural life. The organisation seeks to be representative of the wider community and to be open to all groups in the area regardless of religion, geographical location or gender.
- 5.6 The Impact project (IMProving ACTive Citizenship throughout rural Armagh) focused on border areas and sought to work primarily with the Protestant community, specifically young people. The central aims of the project were to improve awareness among the rural youth and border Protestant community about the availability of volunteering opportunities and to assist individuals and groups to identify and learn from good practice in rural voluntary activity.

### **NICEM Volunteering Project**

- 5.7 NICEM (Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities), which was established in 1994, is involved in developing support and services for minority ethnic groups and individuals living and working in Northern Ireland and acting 'as a voice' within the black and ethnic minority sector. It seeks to deliver a number of initiatives and services to advance the needs of and increase awareness of ethnic minority groups and acts to influence policy to tackle discrimination.
- 5.8 The Volunteering Project was aimed at building capacity for small minority ethnic community groups. The main focus of the work would involve supporting and assisting small ethnic minority groups, providing training programmes, administrative and office support, help to access funding and assisting and supporting the setting up of new ethnic minority groups

### **The SHARE Me Too Project**

- 5.9 The SHARE Centre was established primarily as a holiday activity centre in 1981 as one of Northern Ireland's projects to celebrate the International Year of the Disabled. The Centre is located on the shores of Lough Erne in County Fermanagh and welcomes over 10,000 residential visitors and 7,000 day visitors each year, making it Ireland's largest outdoor centre.

- 5.10 The Me Too Project aimed to develop high quality volunteering opportunities for people with a physical disability, learning disability, sensory disability or illness. The project aimed to provide a total of 40 volunteering places over the two-year period and to establish an infrastructure for volunteering at the Centre that would allow it to continue to offer volunteering opportunities to people with a disability beyond the lifetime of the funded project.

### **The SHEP (Sexual Health Education by Peers) Project**

- 5.11 The HIV Support Centre, where this project is based, was initially established as the AIDS Helpline Northern Ireland 1986 by a group of friends who recognised a need for information on HIV locally. The organisation has two main areas of work – education and support. The mainstay of the education programme is the freephone telephone helpline which receives in excess of 4,000 calls a year. Training and information is provided to support to individuals, community and voluntary groups as well as statutory agencies.
- 5.12 In the SHEP Project the HIV Support Centre was to act as the lead partner providing the expertise, training (accredited) and monitoring of the peer educators, working in partnership with other organisations from which young people were to be drawn. The aim of the project was to ensure that all communities, whether geographically based or communities of interest, would have access to a trained young person who would have expertise in sexual health issues.

### **Foyle Women's Aid Court Advocacy Service Project**

- 5.13 Foyle Women's Aid (FWA), as part of the wider Women's Aid movement, seeks to address the issue of domestic violence in the community, through working with and for women, children and young people affected by domestic violence. The organisation's mission statement is:

*To eliminate domestic violence in the community by working for, and with, all women, children and young people affected by domestic violence to ensure their voices are heard and needs met.*

- 5.14 Foyle Women's Aid seek to meet this objective by delivering a number of services including a refuge centre and a drop-in centre providing support for those affected by domestic violence. The Court Advocacy Service (CAS) was set up as a

response to the growing number of women coming forward to report situations of domestic violence and seeking safety and support through the criminal justice system. For women who have already been through a very traumatic experience, finding a way through the legal system can be both confusing and intimidating, and further adds to the challenge of taking action against an abusive partner.

- 5.15 Within this context, the CAS supports women who need to attend court due to any issue related to domestic violence, including court appearances in relation to child contact, non-molestation and child occupancy orders, residency orders, separation and divorce, assault and rape. The service is provided through Court Advocate volunteers, trained by Foyle Women's Aid, who support women going through the court service by accompanying them to appointments with solicitors, Court Welfare Officers, Court hearings, PSNI, the Probation Service, and other relevant agencies.
- 5.16 The aim of the ACI funded Project was to recruit more volunteers and to provide training for volunteers working as court advocates. The project originally aimed, as stated in the application for funding, *'to increase volunteer numbers and capacity in urban and rural communities and in ethnic minority groups to support victims and witnesses of domestic violence crimes'*. Foyle Women's Aid operates throughout the North West of Northern Ireland, spanning Limavady, Strabane, Derry City and the surrounding rural areas. The service operates in a number of areas characterised by weak community infrastructure, and seeks to build community capacity and support in areas where women would previously not have been active.
- 5.17 The project has a pre-existing compulsory eight-week training course for all volunteers within Foyle Women's Aid. Becoming a Court Advocate volunteer requires a further twelve weeks of specialised training, and is therefore focused on individuals who are extremely committed to volunteering and who wish to access further training and become more 'professional' as volunteers.
- 5.18 The total award offered by ACI was £49,752 of which £37,069 was dedicated to staff costs. The role of the core staff worker - the Court Advocacy Support Worker - was to develop a training course for volunteers, promote knowledge of volunteering and training operations, promote the service and provide support to volunteers working as court advocates. The Court Advocacy Service project was managed and co-ordinated by Foyle Women's Aid and began in April 2002 with the appointment of

the Court Advocacy Support Worker. An accredited training course was developed and delivered in the autumn of 2003 and in the spring of 2004.

- 5.19 The case study of Foyle Women's Aid particularly highlights the ways in which this project had helped to address the ACI objective of changing attitudes to volunteering at a number of levels. In part, this came through the emphasis placed on 'a professional attitude' toward their volunteers. Volunteers remarked that, through the project, their increased level of skill and knowledge made them feel more positive about volunteering and this was also related to the work they were doing. The volunteers also felt that having completed a 12 week accredited training course, and the specialised role which FWA gave to court advocacy workers, made them feel more professional about their volunteer role:

*'You feel more professional definitely. Having been through the course you can say 'I'm a trained court advocate, I'm doing my NVQ now or whatever'. Rather than just 'I'm with Women's Aid' - you have some experience'*  
(Strabane Court Advocate).

- 5.20 A representative from Derry City Council noted that the approach taken by FWA to volunteers and volunteer training, specifically in the court advocacy service, was having an influence on other organisations within the city:

*'That programme has advocated that if you're bringing volunteers in it has to be structured and with proper training. The whole structure must be set up in a very professional matter and other groups do notice that'* (Derry City Council Representative).

- 5.21 Volunteers felt that solicitors had changed their view of them and of the professionalism of volunteers through their contact with the service (volunteers accompany women to meetings with solicitors as well as in court):

*'Sometimes I find the solicitors look at us and wondering why we're asking, but it's part of our duty now being a court advocate. We're seeing things that maybe the solicitor wouldn't want to see. The solicitors treat us well because they know we've done our training and they know we have the correct information'* (Strabane Court Advocate).

5.22 The professionalism of the court advocates, their level of training and commitment had changed the attitudes of those who come in contact with the service towards the individual volunteers and volunteering. In a letter responding to the service one solicitor stated:

*'We have found in practice in dealing with women who have been the victims of domestic violence that (the project) has provided an invaluable support. It is an extremely trying and emotional time for clients in this position and we have found from comments by our clients that (the project) greatly assisted them' (Solicitor).*

5.23 The Court Advocacy Service volunteers have considerable contact with a range of organisations, particularly the Courts Service in Derry Court and PSNI. While these organisations recognise the stress on women who go through the court system because of domestic violence, they often do not have the time or resources to give individual support. Within this environment, the Court Advocacy Service provides an invaluable way of helping women through a difficult process:

*'The like of the Courts Service, it's amazing, they can't believe the service that we're offering because of the volunteering in this area. Working with the Foyle Trust and the Court Welfare Officer and different people, solicitors and all that have really had a major impact on the service. They just think that it's amazing that we do supply support for solicitor's appointments, court welfare officer, (going to) court. In terms of referrals from agencies, in terms of solicitors, they refer women to us first and tell them that the service is run' (Court Advocacy Support Worker).*

5.25 That agencies are willing to refer women to the service is a reflection of the confidence they have, both in FWA and their volunteers. These positive experiences then, as with solicitors, contribute to a more positive view of volunteers and volunteering and, as more volunteers go through the service, and as more volunteers become available, it is likely that statutory agencies will increasingly recognise their value in providing crucial services and support.

5.26 Related to this professional image of volunteering is the appropriateness and quality of training provided to volunteers. This is important for changing volunteers' own attitudes to volunteering, as well as other people's attitudes to them. It is also important for ensuring that volunteers were receiving some kind of tangible reward

for their efforts, whether for personal satisfaction or to help further their future careers.

- 5.27 For instance, given the responsibility and role of court advocates in the FWA project, staff recognised that the service tended to appeal to a certain type of volunteer - often those with a professional background or a high level of awareness regarding domestic violence issues. For such a group, the professionalism of the training and a recognition of their giving time and commitment to the project were perceived as important:

*'What's changing in the attitudes to volunteering is that they are looking for that certificate – they're looking for something out of it as well. What am I going to get for giving my time free? And you can't blame them... It is lovely to give back to volunteers too – a kind of excellence mark on our training. Getting it accredited gives it the excellence mark, means that it's recognised. They walk out with recognised qualifications and they're getting it free, in return for their services to the organisation'*(Court Advocacy Support Worker).

- 5.28 Volunteers also changed their attitudes to volunteering if they felt that what they were doing was making a difference, both to their own lives and those of others. Many of the women in the court advocacy role with the FWA project had volunteered in the hope of making a difference in the lives of other people and had found that being a volunteer had also made a major difference to their own lives.

*'You do feel like you've made a difference and in your own life that's fantastic'*(Derry Court Advocate).

- 5.29 All of the volunteers interviewed with this project were extremely positive about their experience of volunteering as court advocates and felt that their involvement with the service had benefited them individually as well as benefiting the people they support. They identified their role very clearly as 'being there' for women who have suffered from domestic violence and making the experience of going to court a less intimidating and stressful one. The service, then, was assisting women through what can be an extremely traumatic experience of reporting and taking action against perpetrators of domestic violence. Those who had used the service were clear that this support had made a tremendous difference to them, and to their experience of the court system:

*'They've been here to support me through thick and thin... I've been able to talk to them and somebody accompanies me to court every time I go to court which has been every two weeks. It makes a very big difference - I couldn't do it on my own. I couldn't. I've found it very helpful - I was completely ignorant of court or anything to do with it, so it was great for me'* (Service Recipient).

- 5.30 This experience of the support of volunteers undoubtedly impacts on the impressions service users had of Foyle Women's Aid and of the voluntary sector. One service recipient remarked that her experiences had eroded her faith in people, but the experience of the court advocates was helping her to trust people again. For women for whom domestic violence cases are still very immediate, it is unlikely that the service will immediately create greater involvement in the community or voluntary sectors. However, in the longer term, the positive experience of the service is likely to impact upon perceptions of volunteers and volunteering. This FWA case study also noted that often family members of service recipients and, eventually recipients themselves, consider becoming involved in court advocacy as a direct result of their experiences of the programme.

## **6 Further Information**

For further information about The Active Community Initiative or about this Summary report or the full report please contact:

Paul McGuigan  
Department for Social Development  
Voluntary & Community Unit  
3<sup>rd</sup> Floor, Lighthouse Building  
1 Cromac Place  
Belfast  
BT7 2JB

Tel: 028 90829127

Email: [Paul.McGuigan@dsdni.gov.uk](mailto:Paul.McGuigan@dsdni.gov.uk)