

# Committee Matters

An assessment of the characteristics, training needs and governance role of voluntary management committees in Northern Ireland

## Summary Report 2003

---

# Background

The Volunteer Development Agency is the lead organisation in Northern Ireland for the promotion and development of volunteering. The Investing in Building Active Communities initiative aims to build the capacity of volunteers, volunteer-involving organisations/groups and the volunteering infrastructure. A key strand of this work is supporting voluntary management committees. In order to provide a framework for this work it was necessary to initiate research into the characteristics, role and support needs of management committees across Northern Ireland. This research, the first of its kind, was undertaken by the NICVA Research Unit and overseen by a research reference group representative of the voluntary, community and public sectors.

## Objectives of the research

- To gather information on the current characteristics of volunteers on voluntary management committees, for example, age, gender, disability and other socio-economic characteristics.
- To examine the involvement, satisfaction levels and attitudes towards volunteering of voluntary management committees.
- To identify how voluntary management committees perceive their governance role, including organisational policy/practice.
- To identify significant issues and challenges relating to governance faced by voluntary management committees.
- To identify the collective training and support needs of voluntary management committees.
- To assess the quality and quantity of and satisfaction with existing training and support provision accessed by voluntary management committees as a group.
- To identify areas of weak provision/gaps in terms of the training infrastructure for voluntary management committees.
- To provide a baseline against which to monitor future trends.
- To direct the work of the Volunteer Development Agency by clarifying priorities for the development of services to voluntary management committees, eg support, information, training.

## Methodology

In the absence of a centrally maintained register of charities in Northern Ireland, a sample of 1,600 voluntary and community organisations was constructed from NICVA's database, SectorNet. Each organisation in the sample received a questionnaire that asked for information regarding the composition, structure and procedures in terms of their management committee. The individual who is the key link with the management committee was then asked to forward a number of questionnaires to individual committee members. These management committee questionnaires dealt with the attitudes and experiences of individuals who serve on management committees. Seventeen focus groups were held across Northern Ireland to help develop the understanding of the experiences and attitudes of individuals who volunteer their time to sit on management committees.

A total of 558 organisation questionnaires were returned, which from a sample of 1,600 gave a return rate of 35%. In relation to the management committee questionnaires, a total of 1,094 were returned, giving a return rate of 7% from a sample of 16,000.

## Introduction

*"Voluntary management committees are at the heart of both the community and voluntary sectors in Northern Ireland. Anything we do to support and develop them must not only lead to more people feeling more confident and capable of working on a committee, but also increase their passion, commitment and motivation".* Kevin Ford, Rural College, April 1997

We have some idea about the overall function of management committees. We know there is a large body of individuals who commit their energy and time, voluntarily, to ensuring the organisation they represent is given a sound basis from which to develop and serve the community or individuals it intends to help. However, beyond these simple facts we know very little else about the people and relationships that make up voluntary management committees or the specific contribution they make to the voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland.

Equally, we know that to underestimate the contribution such individuals make would be a mistake. In reality however it is often the case that the level of personal involvement invested by these individuals is overlooked and undervalued. These individuals through their altruistic obligation to a community or issue are essentially the invisible force driving forward the voluntary and community sector - yet they remain an unknown and under-researched population.

This research project has two very clear aims at its core - first, to determine the demographic profile of voluntary management committee members and second, to assess the attitudes of such individuals towards governance, training and support and their ultimate motivations for devoting time and energy towards fulfilling this vital role.

# Findings

## Committee involvement

- 'Management committee' (58%) is the most commonly used term to describe an organisation's governing body.
- On average a single management committee consists of ten individuals.

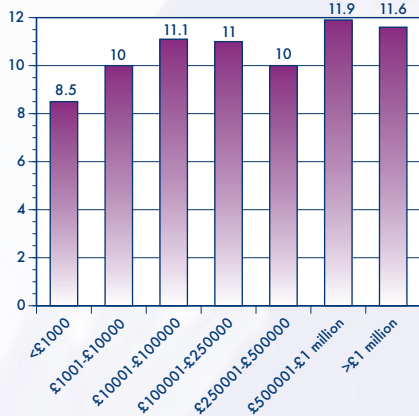


Figure 1: Average size of management committees by economic size

- 50% of management committee members are on the management committee of more than one organisation.
- There are an estimated 42,315 places on voluntary management committees in Northern Ireland. This translates into an estimated total of 33,519 individuals.

## Committee composition

- 54% of all committee members are female (estimated total of 18,200 females).

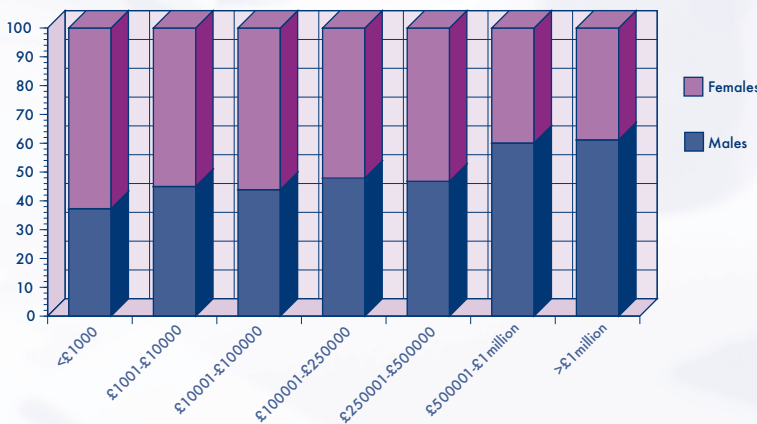


Figure 2: Gender of individual committee members by income

- In organisations with an income of more than £500,000, three out of every four Chairpersons are male (75%).
- 66% of individuals serving on management committees are aged 45 and over. Only 3% are aged under 25 years old.

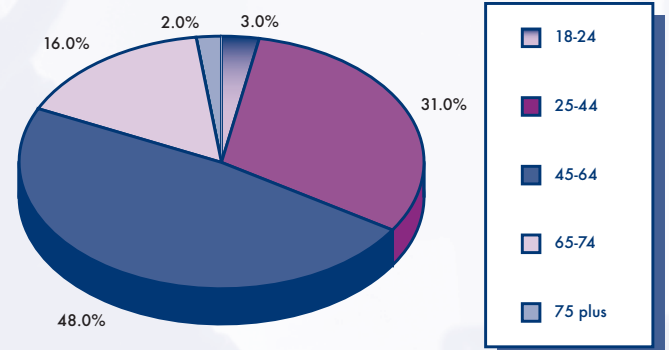


Figure 3: Age composition of voluntary management committees

- Less than 30% of organisations monitor the perceived religious background of their management committee members (28%).

## Recruitment of committee members

- 81% of individuals serve on a management committee in their own time (includes service users).

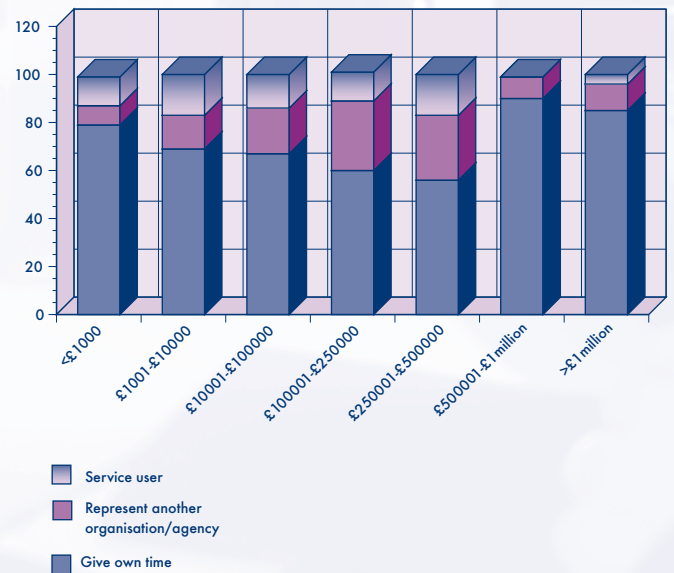


Figure 4: Reasons for participation by income

- 54% of organisations have an election where their members or the community decide upon the new committee.

- 7% of organisations have no formal process to select new committee members.

## The governance relationship

- Where no formal selection process is in place, the balance of skills and experience on a committee is greater than in any other category.
- As the economic size of the organisation increases, then the likelihood that the committee will be more involved in some form of strategic development also increases.
- The committee's relationship with management is constantly shifting between consent, difference and disagreement depending on the issues being faced and the circumstances.
- Three out of four (76%) committees regularly review the external environment for changes that may affect the organisation's long-term strategy.

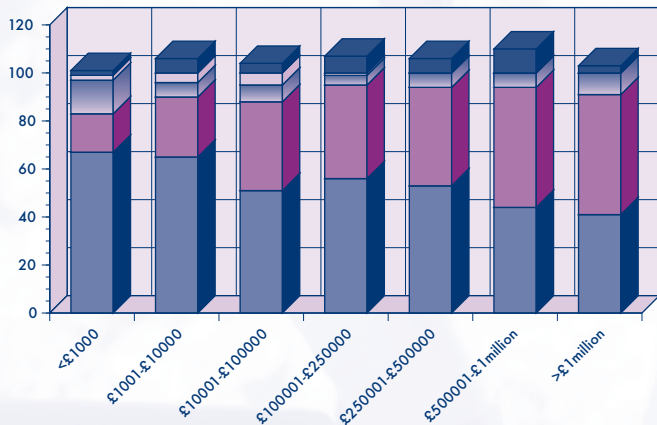


Figure 5: Methods by which appointments to the management committee are made by income

- Appointed by virtue of a position in another organisation
- Appointed by another body/agency
- No formal selection process
- Nominated/co-opted by current committee
- Elected (by membership/community)

## Motivations

- The main reason for becoming a committee member is the individual's 'commitment to the cause of the organisation' followed by 'wanting to be more involved in their community'.
- The majority of individuals have served on a committee for between one and three years (31%). 13% have served on a committee for more than eleven years.
- 'Reduced or inadequate funding' and 'not being able to do everything that is needed' represent the two main areas of dissatisfaction individuals associate with serving on a management committee.

## Training and support

- 35% of organisations operate a formal induction process for new committee members.
- Almost three quarters of organisations, that have a formal induction process provide 'printed materials' or 'briefings by staff or other committee members'.
- The majority of committee members would like an 'updateable handbook of current good practice' in relation to management committees made available.
- The most important training and support topic was identified as 'committee roles and responsibilities' followed by 'legal responsibilities/issues'.

## Structures and processes

- On average organisations will hold nine committee meetings per year.
- In total 85% of all organisations stated that average attendance at committee meetings totalled more than half of all committee members.
- 37% of committee members serve on committees where they are re-elected every year. This is followed by 28% of committee members serving on committees where they are permitted to serve for an indefinite period.
- In total, 44% of organisations have some sort of formal sub-committee(s), with this being far more likely amongst organisations with an income of more than £250,000.

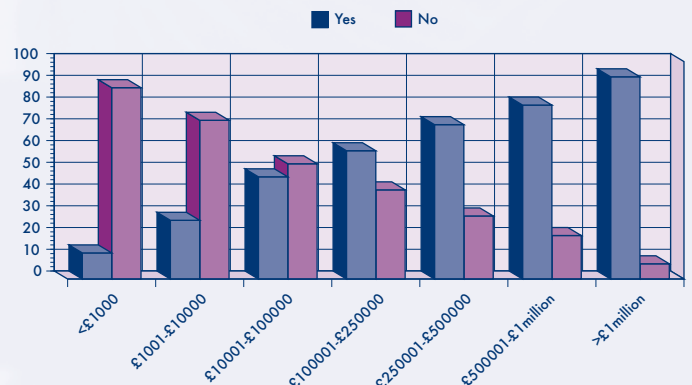


Figure 6: Formal sub-committees by income

# Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on the findings of this research project and are aimed at the Volunteer Development Agency, policy makers, funders, training providers and the wider voluntary and community sector.

**Raise awareness of the valuable role undertaken by voluntary management committees.**

A Northern Ireland wide awareness campaign to promote the valuable contribution made by management committee members should be developed.

**More effort should be made to attracting new and more diverse committee members.**

A number of initiatives should be developed which are designed to help organisations, particularly smaller ones, attract new and more diverse committee members.

**There must be greater recognition of the diverse role and capacity that exists across management committees depending upon economic size and stage in the development of the organisation.**

Policy makers, training providers and funders need to ensure policy, advice and guidance recognise these differences and are more clearly targeted.

**Greater focus should be placed on the co-ordination and promotion amongst key networks/organisations of their existing services for management committees.**

The Volunteer Development Agency should take the lead with regard to the co-ordination and promotion of such an approach.

**Clarification is required surrounding responsibility for setting standards of practice and the regulation of management committees.**

Under the current Scoping Study of Charity Law in Northern Ireland and any subsequent consultation, the role of the Charities Branch (Voluntary and Community Unit, DSD) in relation to setting standards of practice should be clarified.

**Information surrounding good practice for management committees should be more accessible in the form of an updateable handbook.**

The Volunteer Development Agency, Charities Branch and other key support organisations in the voluntary and community sector should coordinate a review of good practice relating to voluntary management committees.

# Conclusion

The most basic message to emerge from the research is that 'size matters' and greatly affects the characteristics and role of management committees.

Research findings indicate that management committees of larger organisations tend to be more structured, making more use of sub-committees and tend to have greater numbers serving on their committees. They also appear to hold on to their management committee members for much longer than smaller groups. Larger organisations are more likely to provide a formal induction process and have a budget for committee member training and development. The management committees of smaller organisations tend to have more formalised processes in terms of the election of new committee members but are more inclined to have difficulties recruiting new committee members. In addition, the formal support available to committee members tends to increase with the size of the organisation.

It is clear from the research that support services and guidance for voluntary management committees should more accurately reflect the diversity amongst committees, not just size but the stage of development and activity of the organisation. This includes more appropriate support resources specifically targeted and made more accessible to smaller organisations with an income under £100,000.

## Acknowledgements

The research was carried out by NICVA (the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action) and overseen by a Research Reference Group chaired by Professor Jimmy Kearney (Centre for Voluntary Action Studies, University of Ulster). We would not, of course, have had the data on which the project is based without the many management committee members throughout Northern Ireland who took the time to complete the questionnaires or to attend focus groups. Through their participation in the project, they have had a say in how they would like to be supported in the future. The Volunteer Development Agency expresses its gratitude to all individuals and organisations that took part or assisted in any way with this important piece of research.



129 Ormeau Road, Belfast BT7 1SH  
Tel: 028 9023 6100 Fax: 028 9023 7570 Email: [info@volunteering-ni.org](mailto:info@volunteering-ni.org) Website: [www.volunteering-ni.org](http://www.volunteering-ni.org)

The full research report is available at [www.volunteering-ni.org](http://www.volunteering-ni.org) and can be downloaded from the publications page.