



The *elle*
Community
Foundation
Northern Ireland

**Time to Act – Capitalising on the
Potential of Philanthropic Giving in
Northern Ireland
Event Summary**

Wednesday 20 May 2026
St Comgall's, Belfast





Introduction

This event, “Time to Act: Capitalising on the Potential of Philanthropic Giving in Northern Ireland,” was hosted by the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland (CFNI) on 20 May 2026 in Belfast. It brought together a cross-section of stakeholders to test the appetite for, and explore the opportunity to develop, a more strategic approach to philanthropy in Northern Ireland, while emphasising the urgent need to move from discussion to tangible progress.

The discussion convened philanthropists, funders, civil society leaders and civil servants from across Northern Ireland, Ireland and the wider UK, reflecting a shared recognition that unlocking the full potential of philanthropy will require coordinated action across sectors and jurisdictions.

This summary is intended to capture the key themes and insights emerging from the keynote, panel discussion and wider contributions from participants, providing a clear reflection of the dominant messages and areas of consensus from the event.

We are grateful to all those who contributed to the discussion, and in particular to the speakers and panellists for their leadership and insight:

- Rory Brooks CBE, Philanthropist and Board Member of the Charity Commission for England and Wales
- Frances McCandless, Chief Executive of the Charity Commission for Northern Ireland
- Mervyn McCall MBE, Philanthropist and Entrepreneur
- Lauri McCusker, Chief Executive of The Fermanagh Trust (representing The Funders’ Forum for Northern Ireland)
- Cllr Paul Doherty, Deputy Lord Mayor of Belfast City Council and founder of Foodstock
- Adrian Johnston MBE, Innovation Commissioner for Belfast and Chair of CFNI
- Éilís Murray, Chief Executive of Philanthropy Ireland

Their contributions were instrumental in shaping a constructive and forward-looking conversation on how philanthropy can play a stronger, more strategic role in addressing the challenges facing Northern Ireland.

We are also grateful to Belfast City Council for their sponsorship and support in organising this event.

RÓISÍN WOOD

Chief Executive Officer

Róisín Wood





Overview

- The event convened cross-sector leaders from philanthropy, government, business and civil society to catalyse momentum towards a more strategic approach to philanthropy in Northern Ireland
- It combined a keynote, panel discussion and audience engagement, with a strong emphasis on moving from discussion to action, including building support for a future steering group
- Next steps will include convening those who expressed an interest in joining the cross-sector steering group to create an action plan to progress this work

Core Messages

- There is a clear opportunity, and urgency, to enhance the scale and impact of philanthropy in Northern Ireland in response to:
 - Rising demand on services
 - Declining public and philanthropic funding and the value of charitable giving
 - Regional imbalance in investment
- The conversation reinforced the importance of philanthropy being systematic, strategic, and collaborative, not ad hoc or incidental

Key Theme and Insights

1. There is a need for a strategic, systematic approach to philanthropy in Northern Ireland

- There was strong consensus on the importance of:
 - Developing a coherent, structured ecosystem for philanthropy
 - Moving from “serendipitous” to “systematic” giving
- Participants emphasised the need for:
 - Clear definitions and shared understanding of philanthropy
 - Leadership signals from government, including political and civil service champions
 - Clarity of purpose, such as that created through the establishment of the Office for the Impact Economy in England and the implementation groups established to embed the National Philanthropy Policy in Ireland



2. While philanthropic giving has increased, there are fewer donors

- While the value of philanthropic giving may be increasing, the number of donors is declining, highlighting the need to:
 - Broaden participation
 - Attract new donors and normalise all forms of giving across society

3. Philanthropic funding has a distinct role to play

- Philanthropy offers unique advantages:
 - Flexibility and agility compared to public funding
 - Ability to take risks, test and learn, and absorb failure
- However, it should:
 - Act as a partner to government, not a substitute for statutory services

4. Storytelling, good data and visibility will drive awareness and engagement

- There is a need to strengthen:
 - Data and metrics to demonstrate impact
 - Storytelling to inspire and inform donors (e.g. lived examples, case studies)
- Making impact visible is key to:
 - Building confidence
 - Enabling informed decision making
 - Increasing participation

5. The voluntary and community sector needs to prioritise collaboration over competition

- Call for a shift to an “era of collaboration” across the voluntary and community sector, emphasising the need for joint working, shared learning and collective storytelling
- Recognition that stronger collaboration will:
 - Improve outcomes
 - Make better use of limited resources



6. We need to build a culture of giving

- Northern Ireland already has a strong culture of generosity, including among those with limited means
- But there is a need to:
 - Increase awareness, especially among younger people
 - Help individuals see and feel the impact of their contributions
- Informal networks, community examples and peer learning were highlighted as powerful drivers

7. There is a need to focus on the role of intermediaries and enablers

- Professional advisers can:
 - Bridge the gap between capacity to give and opportunities to give
- Institutions such as CFNI and sector bodies are seen as:
 - Key to connecting actors and building infrastructure

8. Northern Ireland has specific opportunities

- Some unique strengths were identified:
 - “Compactness” – proximity between need, decision-makers, resources and solutions
 - Strong civic infrastructure and trusted institutions
- There was also recognition of the particular context facing the voluntary and community sector, including:
 - Legacy of conflict
 - Reliance on limited funding sources
 - Structural inequalities





Conclusion

The discussion marked a critical inflection point, recognising that philanthropy must be scaled, structured and better coordinated.

Participants were encouraged to:

- 01 Start conversations**
- 02 Support the development of a shared approach and future structures**
- 03 Identify opportunities to contribute**

The conversations indicated that there is strong appetite across sectors to:

- 04 Develop a clear strategy aligned with NI priorities**
- 05 Establish mechanisms (e.g. steering group) to take this forward**
- 06 Build a pipeline of donors and champions**

The event successfully mobilised consensus and momentum, shifting the conversation from why philanthropy matters to how it can be organised and grown more effectively in Northern Ireland.

CFNI will build on these insights to drive the conversation forward, drawing on the expressions of interest gathered at the event to identify areas of consensus and explore practical mechanisms for embedding a more strategic approach to philanthropy within government policy and wider system leadership.

The bigger opportunity...

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