

Lord Mayor, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen. Good Morning.

I'd like to thank Dr Bill Smith the Chair of VSB for his kind invitation to speak today. I'm pleased that VSB have taken the lead and developed the *Creative Extremists* conference and I am pleased that my Department has worked alongside VSB, Belfast City Council, NICVA and VDA to enable this event.

I think our discussion today about volunteering and civil society is a very timely one. Today's economic climate certainly presents challenges for government, the voluntary sector, business and indeed for people across Northern Ireland. For my part I continue to press for funding for social housing to bring improved living conditions for families and much needed jobs to the construction industry. Unemployment levels are rising and I have secured 150 extra staff in the Social Security Agency to ensure that people who become unemployed receive the best possible service.

But these circumstances also provide us with opportunities. Opportunities to grow together as a society, coming together to meet the social challenges we face, joining together to tackle disadvantage in all forms.

We have much to do, much to aim for and much that we can achieve by all of us playing our part. Government cannot meet all of the challenges and take advantage of the opportunities alone; we must work together – central government, local government, voluntary, community and private sectors in building a better Northern Ireland.

As I look around the room I see many people whom I had the opportunity to talk with at the reception in Hillsborough last night. Today provides us all with an important opportunity to continue those conversations from last night and I'm sure that the distinguished line up of speakers today will inform opinion, highlight good practice and most importantly inspire **action**.

As Social Development Minister I have responsibility for policy in regard to all aspects of volunteering. I strongly believe that volunteers are the backbone of our society. In economic terms formal volunteering is worth over £500 million in Northern Ireland. More importantly it has a huge beneficial impact across society both for volunteers and for people who avail of the valuable services they provide. Volunteers are the lifeblood of our communities. Volunteering is a cornerstone of civic life.

This year there is a real need to support organisations to help them recruit new volunteers and support their existing ones.

At a time when many smaller organisations may be finding it difficult to raise funds and with increased demands being placed on their services it is essential to provide support for them and their volunteers.

That is why I am pleased to announce that this year an additional £130,000 is being made available through small grants. This means that a total of £330,000 will be available as small grants to local organisations to support volunteer involvement.

I want to encourage the growth of volunteering and provide new and better experiences for volunteers. I want us to create the conditions that enable volunteering to flourish.

I am taking forward the development of the first ever Volunteering Strategy for Northern Ireland. The consultation document has been to the Social Development Committee and is in the final stages of preparation for me to take it to the Executive which I believe should firmly endorse it. I expect there to be a full consultation on it this summer.

I firmly believe in a fair and inclusive society for all, in a better future for everyone in Northern Ireland and the Strategy will convey a strong message about the value of volunteering and how it can strengthen us as a region - connecting citizens and communities, reinforcing the fabric of society and creating a more inclusive and cohesive society.

The Strategy will provide us with the opportunity to take forward many actions to ensure that volunteering thrives in Northern Ireland.

There will be opportunities for Government, at central and local level, to publicly acknowledge and support the huge contribution volunteers make to civic society and the beneficial impact they have on individuals and communities.

There will be opportunities for everyone to value volunteering for the part it plays in building strong vibrant communities and a healthy participative democracy. We need to recognise that volunteering contributes to the building of social capital and progressive social change.

There will be opportunities to help organisations to embrace good volunteer management as an essential tool to recruit, support and retain their volunteers – to ensure that proper support and infrastructure is available to meet the needs and expectations of volunteers and volunteer involving organisations.

There will be opportunities to promote and encourage Employer Supported Volunteering within government and across the public and private sectors. We must make it easy for employers of all sizes to become involved.

Volunteering can enhance social inclusion and there will be opportunities to make volunteering truly accessible and open to all and to work together to ensure volunteers have an enjoyable, rewarding and meaningful volunteering experience.

There will be a role for everyone in realising this Volunteering Strategy, from volunteer involving organisations, central and local government, to employers from all sectors.

I know that you here today share my interest in and passion for volunteering and recognise the significant contribution that volunteering makes to Northern Ireland society.

As I said earlier we have much to do, we have much to aim for, much we can achieve. Let's begin today. Thank you.

Margaret Ritchie
Minister for Social Development
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