

# PIVOTAL

in partnership with Save the Children UK & the Trussell Trust

Scoping Work for

Tackling Destitution, Poverty and

Economic Insecurity in Northern Ireland:

*A Summary of Findings*



JOSEPH  
ROWNTREE  
FOUNDATION

*6 December 2023*

## Context and Introduction

Pivotal, in partnership with the Trussell Trust and Save the Children, is pleased to present this summary of its scoping study findings. During autumn 2023, we consulted over 50 organisations (VCSE, public and academic) through 23 interviews and seven themed focus groups and reviewed and summarised 12 reports concerned with poverty in Northern Ireland.

This document summarises the key findings from interviews, focus groups and a literature review. Further detailed notes as well as recommendations for action were delivered to JRF at the time of writing.

### 1.1 Key observations and trends: Voluntary, Community & Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector

**Size and Scale:** Based on 2018 figures (most recently available data) the VCSE sector made up circa 7% of NI's workforce in 2021 compared with a UK average of 3%. Its size is undoubtedly connected to a similarly disproportionate public sector (accounting for circa 27% of employee jobs in NI compared with a UK average of 18%) but may also be tied to other cultural differences and a legacy of the conflict which stimulated much community activism. Whilst proportionately larger than the VCSE sector in GB, given the size of NI, there are many close associations within the VCSE sector and between it and public agencies. The size, scale and closeness of associations creates opportunities to offer a helpful testbed for trials/pilots, with the potential for learning to be applied across the UK and the Republic of Ireland (RoI).

**Current Challenges:** Whilst uncertainty is not new to the VCSE sector, in NI or elsewhere, the factors combining to create the current particularly challenging landscape were identified in <sup>1</sup>NICVA's July 2023 Cost of Living Crisis<sup>2</sup> report and include:

- Absence of NI's Executive and Assembly since February 2022 resulting in: delayed decision making; a halt on the progression of departmental strategies / actions plans; budget cuts (e.g. DoH core funding cuts affected 23 charities) including loss of longer-term budgets; and widespread frustration and disillusionment. When the Executive and Assembly are in place, their inherent instability means that it struggles to do timely and effective policy-making in many cases.
- Brexit 'fallout', particularly the loss of ESF funding, resulting in instability for staffing and planning.
- Emergence from the pandemic which exposed infrastructural weaknesses in health, education, and communities and accelerated the population's mental and physical health needs.
- Cost of living crisis (for organisations and individuals) with a marked rise in community groups / women's groups etc. for whom crisis support has become their focal point where previously it was not. This has also been felt in larger organisations, for example, Save the Children shifting from supporting children's development to responding to immediate material needs through grants.
- A sense that many organisations feel they are just about capable of maintaining service delivery with little capacity for anything additional, including policy work.

There is a sense that VCSE organisations are 'standing in the gap' between failing government policy and intervention and people's experiences, and they are being allowed to continue to do so. What would happen if these sticking plasters that the VCSE sector is applying were to be ripped off? Yet, in the face of challenging times in the past, and in the present, there also remains across the sector a determination and commitment to continuing to serve the most marginalised communities.

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<sup>1</sup> A membership organisation representing VCSE sector across Northern Ireland.

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[https://www.nicva.org/sites/default/files/files/004767%20NICVA%20Cost%20of%20Living%20ES%20Report%2031%20July\(1\).pdf](https://www.nicva.org/sites/default/files/files/004767%20NICVA%20Cost%20of%20Living%20ES%20Report%2031%20July(1).pdf)

**Relationship with public sector including funding:** VCSE organisations have traditionally been highly dependent on often prescriptive and <sup>3</sup>inflexible public funding, which can restrict their potential to be most impactful and stifle innovation. However, as public funding is reducing, NI is shifting towards more innovative solutions; experimenting with community wealth building, for example. There has also, historically, been poor or incomplete evaluation of the impact of public spending which has impacted on the VCSE sector's culture and practice. Although this is changing slowly, several interviewees were concerned that there was no strategic intent behind funding recently released by DfC to every local council for anti-poverty initiatives. Each council has adopted a different approach and several interviewees questioned the effectiveness with which the money is being spent.

Many interviewees highlighted their concerns over duplication and waste within public spending. VCSE organisations contribute to a range of structures, committees and sub committees administered by Government departments and other public agencies. Yet, a growing number of VCSE leaders are disengaging from these, and from seemingly endless consultation on strategies that have either not been adopted or have not secured resource for implementation.

**Large number of smaller organisations.** Most contributors pointed to a fragmented sector with a preponderance of small organisations, lacking in regional / national infrastructure and facing various uncertainties regarding funding and strategic direction. Yet, the legacy of the conflict has contributed to a vibrant and committed civic activism across Northern Ireland, with many community organisations close to marginalised communities. Larger charities, umbrella organisations and statutory agencies may, by contrast, feel further from the grassroots.

**Competition:** The management of public contracts creates competition which can lead to a breakdown in trust, and many feel that the public sector either does not appreciate or does not understand the implications of this. Particularly in a small region, this impacts on relationships and can, at times, reduce appetite for collaboration, even in the policy sphere.

## **1.2 Poverty-related policy work**

**DfC's Anti-Poverty Strategy:** DfC's Social Inclusion Unit was tasked with taking forward four new strategies: Anti-Poverty; Disability; Gender Equality; and Sexual Orientation. In 2020 an Expert Advisory Panel was commissioned to prepare a report outlining the themes, key actions and gaps in provision which an Anti-Strategy should prioritise<sup>4</sup>. Progress towards a draft strategy was to be made with the input of a co-design group, made up of VCSE organisations and chaired by NICVA and a cross-departmental Working Group. This process encountered various difficulties and has stalled since the collapse of the NI Executive in 2022. NICVA are, however, hoping to reconvene the group in the coming months.

**Capacity for policy work in the VCSE sector:** While there is generally good collaboration between organisations on policy issues, it is often thematic and disparate. Significant policy contribution is often constrained by scarcity of unrestricted funds on which there are a growing number of demands. Policy staff tend to be hired in relatively junior positions, often with wide remits, with limited capacity or budget for substantive policy analysis and development. However, there is a helpfully strong tradition of policy

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<sup>3</sup> Narrow eligibility criteria that does not always reflect what organisations may want to prioritise, disproportionate auditing and reporting requirements and inflexibility in amending budget headings.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/system/files/publications/communities/dfc-social-inclusion-strategy-anti-poverty-expert-advisory-panel-recommendations.pdf>

work being informed from the ground up. The Cliff Edge Coalition is the most significant anti-poverty collaboration with clear asks and wide sectoral reach.

**Data and evidence:** data which can evidence poverty and analysis of available data is generally weak. This means that where there is an evidence base behind poverty campaigns, it has often been qualitative rather than quantitative.

### **1.3 Key messages**

The key messages which emerged and have shaped our recommendations were:

- JRF is universally regarded as the UK's expert in presenting and understanding issues relating to poverty and destitution. It has the credentials required to build potential solutions and the credibility required to bring these to the attention of decision makers in Government.
- There are pockets of helpful policy work ongoing in NI relating to tackling poverty, and there are a large number of voluntary and community organisations working in this space. However, most organisations' primary focus is service delivery, with policy contributions being made by one Policy Officer or a small team, most often supported by the CEO.
- There is a rich heritage of community activism and rights-based approaches across NI yet considerable gaps including:
  - Data collected to build an evidence base of people's experiences of poverty and destitution (including problematically small sample sizes where data sets do exist).
  - The skills required to analyse and present data to help inform decision making.
  - Connected to the gaps within data and analysis, there is a gap in public understanding about what causes people to fall into poverty.
  - Understanding of how individuals and society can build routes out of poverty and a sense that this is possible.
  - Leadership capable of co-ordinating current fragmented and thematic attempts at policy collaboration.
  - Leadership capable of leading a public discussion about the experiences and nature of poverty in today's NI.
  - Understanding how NI can best apply learning from other jurisdictions (Scotland, Wales, England and Republic of Ireland).
  - Envisaging how additional revenue that NI may require to implement solutions may be raised.
- JRF's contribution to NI's policy efforts is to be welcomed, with many organisations keen to lend their support to JRF as it establishes a presence here. There is a strong expectation that JRF will work collaboratively and support others' contributions.

The literature review found that the NI poverty and destitution literature appeared to be lacking in volume and richness compared with GB and RoI. Around 370,000 people are living below the poverty line – one in every five people. There are many correlations regarding the nature and experiences of poverty with the rest of the UK. For example, of households in poverty, 46% are single person households (compared with 32% overall) and pension age individuals are shown to be less common in or at risk of poverty. Nearly one

in every three in poverty is a child, and many experts in NI believe that taking action to raise the position of households with children above the poverty line makes sense as a strategic priority.

One of the striking differences in NI is the scale of stubborn economic inactivity and particularly the level amongst the disabled population. Only just over one in three disabled people in NI work, compared to over half in UK. Addressing this represents the potential to make significant change at a population level. Educational under attainment and lack of aspiration is most keenly felt in areas where trauma and other life-limiting legacies of the conflict and ongoing divisions are most prevalent. However, NI has too often focused on place centred approaches, missing pockets of deprivation in more affluent areas.

**1.4 Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats for JRF’s consideration**

<b>Key Strengths for JRF Consideration</b>	<b>Key Weaknesses for JRF Consideration</b>
Small place with good connections – can help to facilitate progress / test pilots	Large number of small organisations, many of which may be regarded as unsustainable. Most are experiencing extreme budget pressures.
Passion, commitment and track record of organisations and individuals across the sector in the face of multiple challenges over many years: individuals and organisations willing to go beyond remit of roles to have an impact for communities.	Potential for duplication and competition for funding / service delivery.
Strong connection to marginalised communities most impacted by issues relating to poverty amongst community organisations.	Weaker data, research and policy capacity.
<b>Opportunities for JRF</b>	<b>Threats for JRF</b>
Opportunity exists to add to policy work ongoing: helping to build towards greater confidence, focused direction and improved collaboration.	Instability of the NI Executive and Assembly limits the opportunity to secure policy impact.
Close connections to communities mean opportunity exists to engage people affected by the issues, in research and in generating solutions.	JRF may find limited focused policy, data and research capacity with which to engage.
JRF is held in high regard, with expectation that it can contribute to building bridges and contribute to a more helpful culture.	It may at times be challenging to lead collaborative approaches.
A large number of organisations are keen to work with JRF on issues that matter.	Unrealistic expectations may be placed upon JRF regarding what it may be able to achieve with many demands on JRF’s resource.
A growing hunger for new solutions and to find new ways of working in the face of escalating challenges and reducing resource.	Organisations may need considerable support to think innovatively.
Can JRF work to expose some of the ways in which public spending may not be achieve value for money?	Shortage of public funding to implement potential solutions may limit how much happens in response to JRF recommendations and/or create opportunities for JRF to contribute to public discussions regarding NI's revenue raising options.

**Summary Findings**

Table 1 summarises the findings from the scoping study. This work is being driven by JRF’s keenness to increase its policy contribution to Northern Ireland to a level at least comparable to its efforts elsewhere in the UK. However, it will be important for JRF to clarify *intent* (i.e. what its Trustees hope to achieve by this investment). A clear headline aim will help to determine what JRF does in practice. For example:

***To contribute to the transition of Northern Ireland to a more equitable and just future, free from poverty, in which people (and planet) can flourish.***

How ought JRF to work?	What might JRF do?	What might the focus of the work be?	How might JRF work?	Who might JRF work with?
<i>Principles</i>	<i>Activity</i>	<i>Priorities</i>	<i>Practicalities</i>	<i>Collaborators</i>
<p>JRF is encouraged to work in ways which are characterised by and which will encourage:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collaboration</li> <li>• Independence</li> <li>• Aspiration</li> <li>• Determination</li> <li>• Sensitivity to Context</li> <li>• Cross-Jurisdiction (recognising NI’s connections to UK and RoI)</li> </ul>	<p>Key areas for activity which have come to the fore include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Data Analysis</li> <li>• Economic Modelling</li> <li>• Research</li> <li>• Inform and influence public discussion about poverty</li> <li>• Build Relationships</li> <li>• Equip the sector</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Child Poverty</li> <li>• Housing solutions</li> <li>• Infrastructural inequalities</li> <li>• Economic inactivity</li> <li>• Education &amp; Skills</li> </ul>	<p>With no single organisation emerging as a partnership contender (equivalent to Bevan Foundation), the two models proposed for JRF to establish a team within NI are:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b><i>1. Collaborative independence</i></b></li> <li><b><i>2. Identify an anchor host</i></b></li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• JRF encouraged to recognise considerable relevant activity ongoing when implementing plans to establish work in NI.</li> </ul>

**Table 1**

Table 2	How ought JRF to work? <i>Principles</i>
<b>Collaboration</b>	JRF coming to work in NI without regard for work ongoing is NOT an option. There is a universal expectation that JRF will identify and lend support to initiatives already under way. Representatives across the statutory and VCSE sector expect to see JRF adding value to existing work by bringing: a national perspective; expert opinion; deeper analysis; and credibility capable of representing evidence and need expertly to policy makers. Whatever model JRF adopts to work within, there is an expectation that it will be deeply collaborative.
<b>Independence</b>	To be successful, JRF will need to combine the best of collaboration and independence. Interviewees unanimously told us not to lose the JRF brand and its independence from other voluntary initiatives and from Government. There is a strong perception that this is key to JRF’s credibility in presenting / adding weight to arguments and its ability to work with any organisation, free from baggage of association.
<b>Aspiration</b>	In the context of much despair, exhaustion and frustration in the sector and in communities, NI needs to be reminded to lift our vision and so to learn from and aspire to good practice elsewhere. There is a strong perception that, if JRF adopt the right approach, it can help to lift aspiration and create energy to reform public debate about poverty and destitution and instil a confidence in possibilities that is difficult to generate from within. JRF also have the potential to instil aspiration, confidence and belief in the VCSE sector by drawing alongside and investing in its skills and capacity.
<b>Determination</b>	Keeping seemingly intractable issues to the fore consistently is felt to be of great importance. JRF is widely regarded as an expert in producing and bringing forward credible research and evidence – it is encouraged to do this persistently and consistently in NI until it generates results. This will require invested determination from JRF leadership and Trustees – a JRF NI team alone is unlikely to achieve this.
<b>Sensitivity to Context</b>	It is undeniable that the current political situation, the legacy of the conflict, ongoing division and paramilitary influence (particularly in the most disadvantaged communities) all combine to create a distinct situation and distinct challenges, particularly for people living in poverty. This must be accounted for. Yet, it is also the case that issues in NI are not always as distinct as they may be perceived from the inside or the outside. We need to accept that NI can learn from a cross-jurisdiction approach. JRF are universally encouraged to come and have a team to be physically based here. This will be necessary in order to understand the issues, build relationships, help to build up skills within the sector and deliver analysis.
<b>Cross-Jurisdiction (recognising connections to UK and RoI)</b>	<p>NI needs different perspectives and outside influences that bring challenge and ask helpful questions. Attempts to bring new ideas are to be welcomed and, whilst it may be challenging at times to apply practice from GB to NI, there is merit in doing so.</p> <p>There is also a call for JRF to sense check national work for relevance to / application in NI. Always consider: <i>‘Is learning we’re picking up elsewhere relevant to NI? How might it apply?’</i> Maximise opportunities to address any disconnect between Westminster and NI.</p> <p>Increasingly, NI’s VCSE looks to RoI as well as GB for ideas, collaborations and structures to work within. JRF is encouraged to do likewise.</p> <p>Accounting for size and closeness of associations, NI can offer a helpful testbed for trials/pilots, with the potential for learning to be applied across the UK and RoI. It is important to recognise and work towards NI’s potential to contribute to the broader picture.</p>

Table 3		What might JRF do? Activity
Data	Context including Gaps Identified	<p>Inadequacy of available, disaggregated data was universally highlighted, and there is a strong sense that this inhibits our ability to build a strong evidence base regarding the extent of poverty and destitution experienced in NI and the potential for change. Economists consulted highlighted the absence of robust quantitative analysis of poverty, with many policy campaigns being based on qualitative studies.</p> <p>Whilst there is universal acceptance of the merit in JRF’s work incorporating data analysis, research and campaigning for policy change, there are also cautionary voices calling for this to be undertaken purposefully. Data sets should be selected with the purpose of building a particular evidence base and work towards action-orientated solutions.</p>
	Proposed Activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Keep watching brief on the (appropriate) use and/or collection of data sets, carry out audits of what is and is not available locally and bring any deficiencies or needs to the attention of DfC, NISRA and others.</li> <li>• Make offers to DfC, NISRA and others where JRF could work with them to help to: plug gaps and support data gathering / analysis / commissioning polls etc. There is also potential merit in adding a layer of poverty questioning to Northern Ireland Life &amp; Times survey which is administered by <a href="#">ARK</a>.</li> <li>• Take lead in data analysis, helping ensure data is used to the full and is made accessible to and understandable by VCSE sector and communities</li> <li>• Equip others in public and VCSE sector to better understand and interrogate data for themselves</li> </ul>
Modelling	Context including Gaps Identified	<p>Modelling’s potential importance was raised frequently, but, similar to data analysis, this should be used towards goals with practical purpose, for example, strengthening evidence or presenting need for informed decision by providing costs and opportunity costs of various scenarios. Some (piecemeal) modelling has gone on. Outside of the <a href="#">UU Economic Policy Centre</a>, few people in NI have the necessary modelling skills. Commissioned work has been conducted by national agencies including WPI Economics.</p>
	Proposed Activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Economic modelling to add weight to arguments, or illustrate the costs (and opportunity costs) of policy options.</li> </ul>
Research	Context including Gaps Identified	<p>There was consensus that there is potential value in highlighting issues and developing recommendations from research to inform debate and policy decisions. There was widespread recognition that JRF would bring much-needed academic rigour to this. However, there was also a note of warning: any research should be action-orientated, capable of informing policy work and campaigning. Research should be based on ‘grounded’ approaches which recognise the expert opinion of people affected by the issues and their ability to work towards solutions rather than others identifying solutions to be ‘done to’ them. The sense of frustration within VCSE at present at lack of action in NI generally needs to be acknowledged and accounted for, although only a small minority questioned the need for better data and</p>

		<p>research. JRF might consider its primary focus should be on quantitative input, with others in the sector and academia more capable of qualitative research.</p>
	<p>Proposed Activity</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Select themes / topics to explore through qualitative research, drawing heavily upon quantitative evidence.</li> <li>• Seek out appropriate research partners with relevant reach and credibility and consider how JRF may support or resource them.</li> <li>• Build bridges between academic research and action-orientated, community-based initiatives with practical drive: involve and engage people affected by the issues throughout including in finding solutions.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Inform and influence public discussion about poverty</b></p>	<p>Context including Gaps Identified</p>	<p>There is demand for leadership to stimulate rounded and better informed public debate about: the nature of poverty; experience of poverty; routes out of poverty; and the types of just responses that will be required to create a more equitable society. In NI’s comparatively socially conservative society, engaging with concepts of justice and equity and the transition this may require will be challenging. The ‘Just Transition’ debate regarding the green economy is beginning to gain traction. JRF is regarded as well-placed to lead this, and to equip others in the VCSE to find their voice in this and related matters.</p> <p>Social mobility has all but disappeared from NI’s communities. What contribution could a public discussion about aspiring towards a more equitable society contribute, from this perspective, and that of enduring educational under-attainment?</p> <p>There are, in addition, a number of voices advocating for JRF to be involved in working towards / advocating for ways in which NI may raise revenue, recognising that advocating for expensive solutions to socio-economic problems is not realistic in the current national climate and particularly so in NI’s political and economic context. There is certainly a disconnect between the NI Assembly’s devolved powers and revenue generating ability. Work ongoing by the Fiscal Council and the current public consultations on revenue raising measures are of relevance and JRF may consider having some input into these debates.</p>
	<p>Proposed Activity</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Help to frame public conversations about poverty and equip others to do so</li> <li>• Contribute to debate about how revenue may be raised to pay for emerging solutions</li> </ul>
<p><b>Build Relationship</b></p>	<p>Context including Gaps Identified</p>	<p>JRF is already well regarded by a wide range of individuals and agencies. A local presence will enable JRF to build on its foundation and continue developing trust, credibility and relationships. JRF is regarded as expert, independent and trusted. Whilst NI’s political situation is very challenging, there is strong sense of the value of JRF building relationships with government policy makers, politicians and others, many feeling JRF will be receive a warmer reception than local voices (academics, activists or others). Many welcome the potential for JRF to amplify their local voice - representing their work and adding the national perspective.</p> <p>There is growing frustration at the seemingly endless consultation and strategising from NI government departments and lack of action or impact – this was a feature of life even before the latest Stormont collapse.</p>

	Proposed Activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Build on relationships already established in politics, policy and VCSE organisations.</li> <li>• Invest in maintaining existing and building new relationships, particularly in a small region, where many transactions depend on personal connections.</li> <li>• Introduce national perspectives to decision makers.</li> </ul>
Equip the Sector	Context including Gaps Identified	<p>Whilst there is considerable policy activity ongoing, it has often been perceived to be fragmented and current challenges within the VCSE sector have reduced capacity: many charities are channelling energy into maintaining service delivery with much reduced capacity for policy. Many (though not all) policy roles are comparatively junior, requiring CEO or other senior staff input to gain traction.</p> <p>Research, modelling and analysis capacity is low.</p> <p>Much policy work is disparate: whilst there is collaboration, it tends to be thematical not cross-cutting. Several VCSE leaders are engaged in important policy work being informed from ‘ground up’ and they merit support.</p>
	Proposed Activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Invest resource in upskilling Policy staff and others in VCSE sector and perhaps also in the Civil Service to: interrogate &amp; present data; undertake research; support their ability to challenge; create opportunities for sharing and generating ideas; and help to amplify their voices.</li> </ul>

Table 4	What might the focus of the work be? Priorities
<b>Child Poverty</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Child poverty concerns are recognisable across the UK with child poverty ruining childhood and setting children on a trajectory of poor life outcomes. A rise in demand experienced by funders indicates escalating needs in the face of much reduced resource, yet these are falling below the radar: charities and academics would be raising dire situation at Stormont; this focus is lost (even within the media).</li> <li>• Lack of parity over childcare provision with GB is a major concern.</li> <li>• Links between deprivation and statutory children’s social care services are already well established and research here can be built upon.</li> </ul>
<b>Housing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Housing stock and relative housing costs has kept NI’s performance ‘down’ the national poverty rankings to date. However, this may change.</li> <li>• Significant challenge of ageing, deteriorating stock (no significant investment since 1970’s &amp; 80’s).</li> <li>• Reports of private development clauses for social housing not reflecting current demands and shrinking private rental stock.</li> <li>• Unchanged Housing Allowance: growing % households falling behind in payments. (Private rent increased 8.5% in past year in Belfast).</li> <li>• JRF has already highlighted NI as having highest prevalence of poverty amongst homeowners in UK.</li> <li>• Significant gaps in housing related data, yet there are willing partners to partner with JRF to help address this.</li> </ul>
<b>In-Work Poverty / Economic inactivity</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Economic inactivity is the highest in UK and barriers to work are overwhelming and overlapping at individual and community level.</li> <li>• What may be regarded as ‘good work’ / protections for employees against unscrupulous practices / insecure employment all require investigation.</li> <li>• Restrictions on where people can travel for work (divided communities) and cross border options for those living in border areas restrict options.</li> <li>• Potential for community wealth generation to raise aspiration, particularly in rural areas is gaining traction (e.g. Village Catalyst Grant Scheme).</li> </ul>
<b>Disability &amp; Ill Health</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 2/3 households in poverty have a disabled member.</li> <li>• Funders observe increased demand for projects addressing health (physical and mental) inequalities including poor access to services.</li> <li>• Highest rates of economic inactivity amongst disabled population in UK. <sup>5</sup>White Paper on Health &amp; Disability: opportunity for refocus.</li> <li>• Will increased working from home open up new possibilities for people with disabilities to enter labour market? Could NI be a testbed for this?</li> </ul>
<b>Infrastructural inequalities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rural infrastructural weakness. NI has worst subsidised transport in UK, impacting on rural communities most and transport monopoly restricts community transport solutions that could compensate for Translink’s limited rural provision (may help address economic inactivity).</li> <li>• Importance of understanding / accounting for particular difficulties faced in rural North West.</li> </ul>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/articles/transforming-support-health-and-disability-white-paper>

Education & Skills

- Significant adults skills & education gaps limits growing and modernising economy (DfE 10X Skills Strategy in place, yet little resourcing of it).
- Educational under-attainment persists despite multiple policy reports over years. Current funding cuts because of budget problems at DoE.
- Increasing interest from Irish Govt (through Shared Island Fund) in investing in educational initiatives in NI (though politically sensitive).
- Belief in potential for JRF to apply learning from UK (especially Scotland). Importance of adult education sitting alongside any initiatives here.

Table 5

How might JRF work? *Practicalities*

Potential models for how JRF might operate in Northern Ireland

JRF has not had the advantage of building a relationship with a potential partner over time to ‘test’ the potential for partnership as it did in Wales with Bevan Foundation. Forming an exclusive partnership without the opportunity to test alignment of ambition, priorities and values over time would be high risk for JRF (and any selected partner). If a partnership is formed which is unsuccessful (or is even perceived as being so), this may damage JRF’s reputation (its most valuable asset in NI). In addition, there is no single organisation in NI with focus and expertise on poverty (or related matters), so no single leading contender.

Over time, a potential future partner may emerge. But in the absence of a potential close partnership now, we propose two possible models for JRF’s consideration:

- **Model 1 - independent collaboration:** new JRF NI team leads delivery through a series of collaborations with a programme budget to supplement its work and reach
- **Model 2 - a host organisation arrangement:** new JRF NI team is hosted by another organisation with whom it works closely, yet still maintaining its own identity and independence. Further collaborations and a programme budget would be the same as Model 1.

Over the course of this scoping study, interviewees were asked to comment on what type of structure JRF should consider adopting. No one advocated for a full partnership arrangement, for the reasons outlined above. Approximately half advocated for JRF selecting one key host organisation in which to anchor itself (Model 2). The remaining half advocated for collaborative independence (Model 1).

There are a number of pros and cons relating to each option, and, in our view, there is no right or wrong decision to be taken. Each option has merits. JRF should base its decision on what it regards to fit best with its organisational culture, values and ambition. Bear in mind that *how* JRF enters Northern Ireland (i.e. upholding the principles summarised in Table 2) and how it communicates with those already working here will speak as clearly, if not more clearly, than whichever model it chooses to adopt.