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Health & Community Sector Survey 2024



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MANAGING PARTNER
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At MW Advocate we work in the areas of communications, public policy and in helping our clients to advance their agenda in a meaningful and sustainable way.

Like everyone else in Northern Ireland who are tuned into the politics of this region, we called for and looked forward to the return of the NI Executive and Assembly, and as we know devolution was restored in February this year.

As we approach the end of 2024 it is an appropriate time to assess the impact of devolution so far and whether the third sector is feeling the benefits of having a restored Assembly and local Ministers. In the first of what will be a series of sectoral studies we have engaged with the health & community sector; health being the issue which affects every family in Northern Ireland.

Over the years we have worked with health charities, campaigning bodies, private organisations and with the Department of Health and we know both the challenges faced by the sector and the importance of ensuring that we get the best health service that is possible for people who live here.

We are grateful for those health and community focussed organisations who took time to engage in our survey and who gave us detailed feedback on their experience with devolution. By completing the survey and helping to highlight experiences with the NI Assembly, positive or negative, you are helping to inform the way society engages with politics, and to improve that engagement for the better.

We hope you find this report useful, and we look forward to continued engagement with your organisation.

MW Advocate is an award-winning **communications and research consultancy working with** public, private and third sector clients including FTSE 100 companies, leading social economy and charity organisations, landmark tourism and arts venues and major infrastructure developers and energy suppliers.



Survey Findings: Northern Ireland's Restored Executive – High Engagement, Low Impact

Less than a year after the Northern Ireland Executive was restored, MW Advocate conducted an extensive survey of health and third-sector organisations.

The survey aimed to understand the current policy and financial climate, exploring whether the restored Executive has meaningfully supported or advanced these organisations' work and goals.

The findings reveal a landscape of high engagement but limited tangible outcomes, shedding light on both optimism and challenges in this pivotal sector for Northern Ireland.

A Snapshot of the Sector

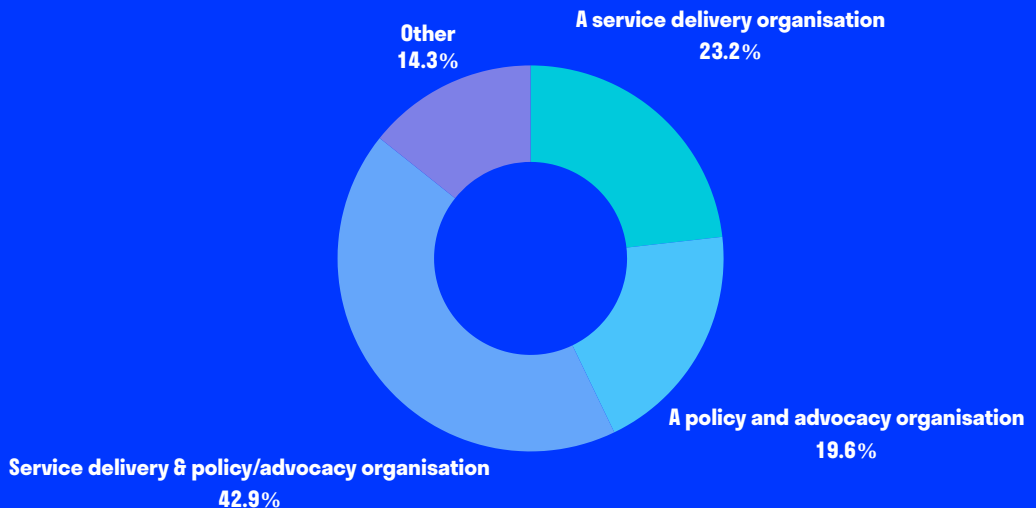
The survey highlights the diverse roles that organisations in the health and third sector play. Just under a quarter (23%) are focused exclusively on service delivery, working directly with communities and individuals.

Meanwhile, 20% specialise in policy and advocacy, striving to influence decision-makers and shape public policy. The largest group, 43%, blends both approaches, highlighting the dual role these organisations often undertake—meeting immediate needs while advocating for systemic change.

An additional 14% fell into an “other” category, encompassing professional services firms and consultants who provide vital support to the sector.

This blend of roles underscores the sector’s complexity and its interdependence with government structures. Organisations are not only service providers but also key voices in shaping policies that affect Northern Ireland’s most vulnerable communities.

► Which of the following best describes your organisation?



Major Challenges: Funding tops the list

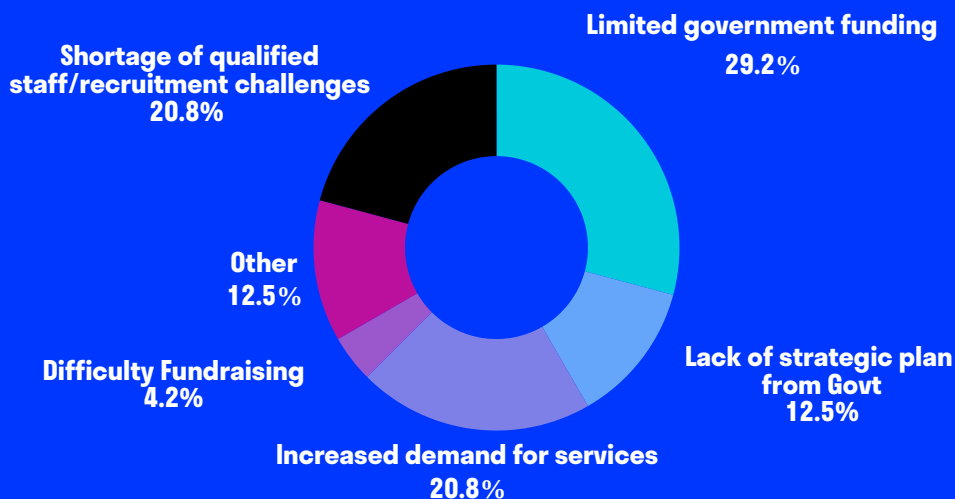
When asked about their primary challenges, organisations painted a picture of strain and uncertainty. Almost a third (29%) cited limited government funding as their biggest hurdle. This concern reflects years of underinvestment, compounded by growing demand for services and financial instability, both in government and in households.

Demand for services itself ranked as a top issue for 20% of respondents, highlighting the increased pressures many organisations face. This challenge is tied to broader socio-economic issues in Northern Ireland, including relative high levels poverty, mental health crises, and extreme healthcare backlogs.

A further 20% pointed to recruitment and staffing difficulties, emphasising the shortage of qualified professionals in the sector. This issue spans a lack of specialists and general staff, exacerbated by competition with better-funded sectors and a limited talent pool.

Other challenges included the absence of strategic planning by the Northern Ireland Executive or relevant departments (12.5%) and difficulties in private fundraising (4.2%). Together, these issues reveal a sector grappling with limited resources while trying to meet escalating needs.

► What are the primary challenges your organisation is currently facing?



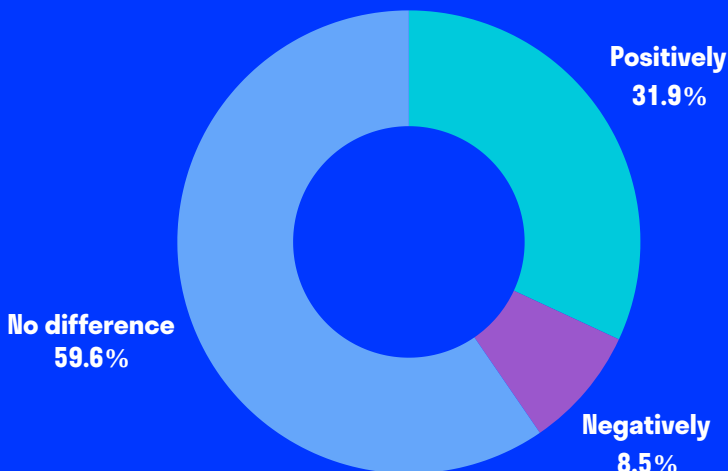
The impact of the restored NI Executive

One of the survey's most intriguing findings is the limited perceived impact of the restored Executive on third-sector organisations. While devolution was widely celebrated as a step forward for Northern Ireland, 60% of respondents reported that the restoration of the Assembly and Executive had made no difference to the impacts their organisations are having.

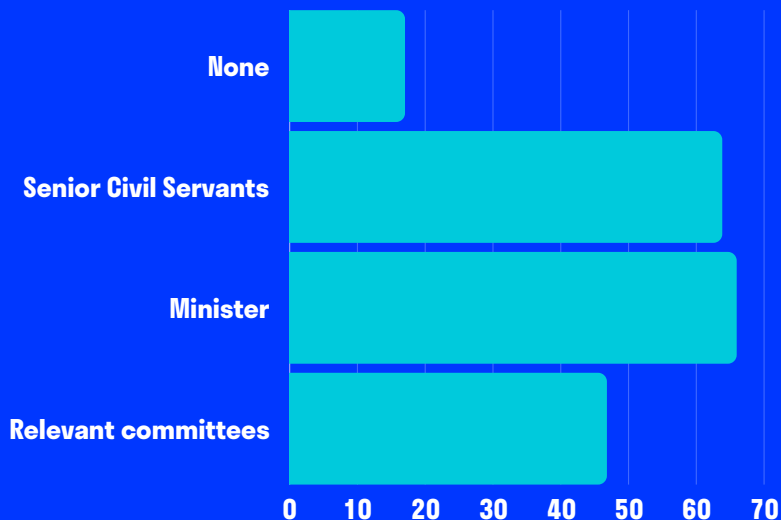
Only 32% of respondents felt the restoration had a positive effect on their organisation, while 8.5% said it had negatively impacted them.

This raises a pressing question: why is the restored Executive struggling to make its presence felt in such a vital sector?

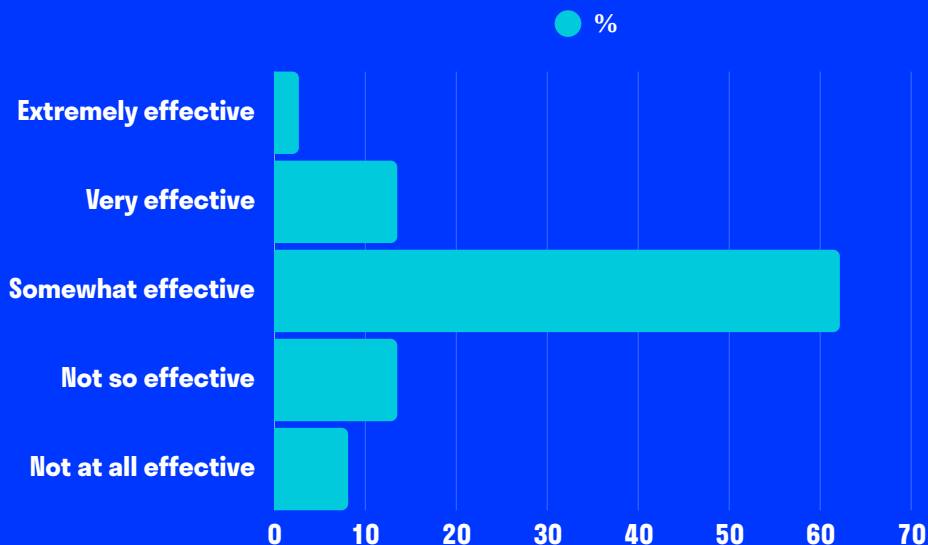
➤ Since the February 2024 restoration, how has the restoration of the Northern Ireland Executive affected your organisation's work?



➤ Since the restoration have you had any direct engagement with ...



➤ How would you describe the engagement?



Engagement: High levels, Mixed outcomes

Despite this limited impact, the survey revealed high levels of engagement between organisations and senior officials. Sixty-three percent of respondents reported engaging directly with senior civil servants, while 66% had interacted with Executive Ministers.

Engagement with NI Assembly scrutiny committees was lower at 47%, possibly due to the slower pace of legislative scrutiny and competing demands on committees' time.

While engagement levels are encouraging, their effectiveness is less so. Seventy-eight percent of respondents described their interactions with Ministers, senior civil servants, and committees as "effective," but the majority - 62.2% - categorised them as only "somewhat effective." Just 2.7% found their engagement "extremely effective."

This raises important questions. Is there an expectations gap between third-sector organisations and government representatives? Or does the Executive's limited fiscal room for manoeuvre constrain its ability to respond to the sector's needs?

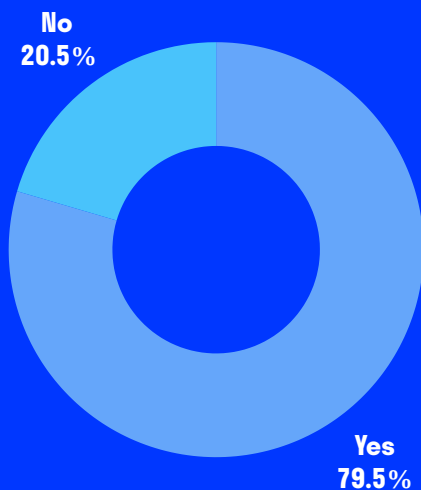
MLAs outshine Departments

Engagement with MLAs was significantly more positive. A striking 80% of respondents reported direct engagement with their local representatives, with 89% describing this engagement as effective or extremely effective. This outweighed the number of organisations who felt contact with Ministers was extremely effective.

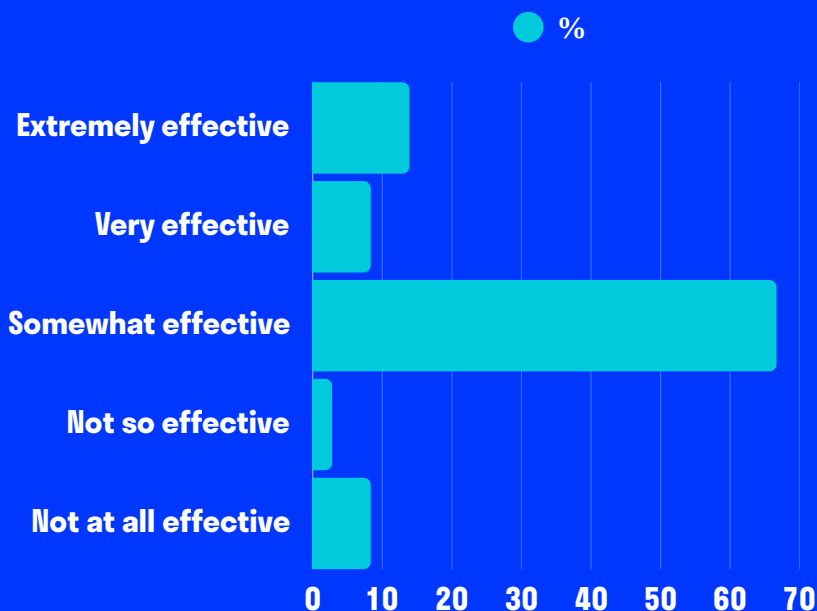
The higher satisfaction with MLAs likely reflects their accessibility and focus on local issues. Many MLAs maintain close ties to their constituencies, making them more responsive to specific concerns.

While the restored Executive may struggle with systemic change, MLAs appear to be delivering at the grassroots level.

➤ Since the restoration have you had any direct engagement with MLAs?



➤ How would you describe your engagement with MLAs?



Service Delivery: Little Impact

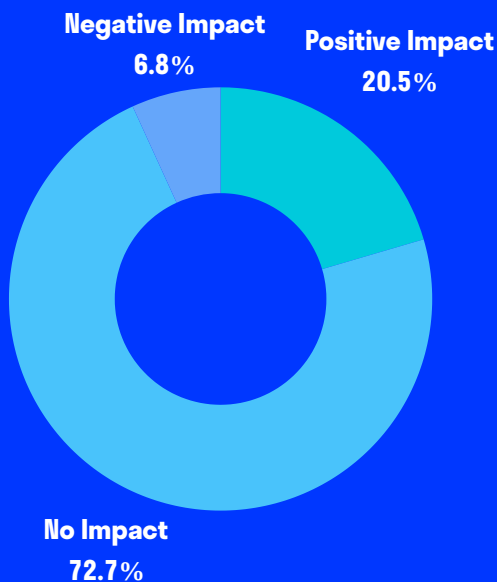
Another surprising finding which on the surface could be seen as surprising was the limited impact of the restored Executive on service delivery. Seventy-three percent of respondents said it had no impact, while only 20.5% noted a positive effect.

It would also be fair to draw the conclusion that the organisations in the health and community sector have developed sufficient resolve when it comes to service delivery that they carry out this role unaffected by political turbulence which, let's be frank, is not a new phenomenon in Northern Ireland.

This does present a challenge for the Executive - how can conversations between the government and the sector, which are happening, translate into actionable outcomes.

The organisations we surveyed are glad to see the Executive restored, now they want to see it beginning to deliver meaningful change for the sector and its beneficiaries.

➤ **In general, how has the restoration of NI Executive affected your organisation's service delivery?**



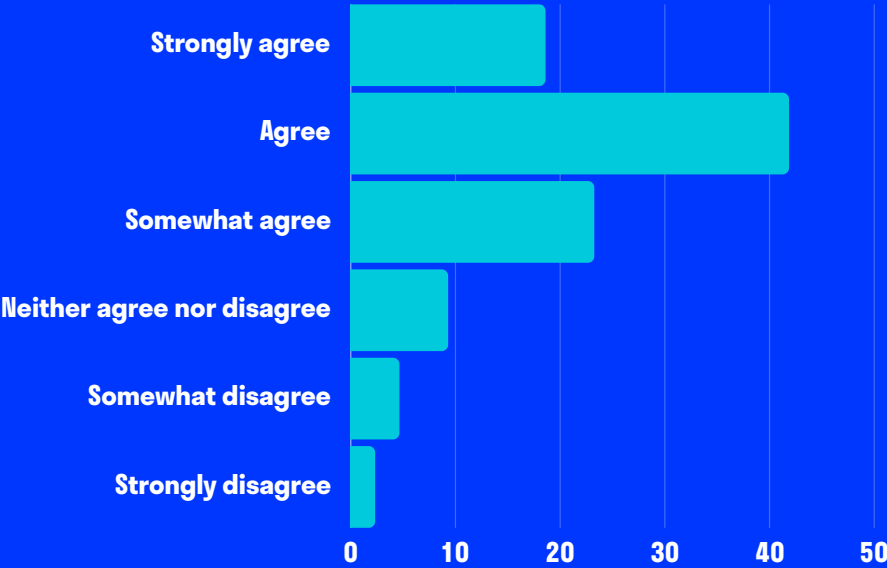
The Case for Devolution

Despite the frustrations highlighted in the survey, there is overwhelming support for the restored Executive. A remarkable 84% of respondents agreed that its restoration has been a good thing, even if its current impact is limited.

When asked which form of government works best, 95% favoured the locally elected Assembly Executive over direct rule. This is a strong endorsement of devolution and reflects the goodwill that still exists toward the institutions.

➤ **From my professional perspective, the restoration of the NI Executive has been a good thing. Please state your level of agreement.**

● %



➤ From my professional perspective, the following form of government works best:



What Needs to Change?

The survey results underscore the need for the Executive to enhance its impact on the health and third sector. Several key areas require attention:

1. Increased Funding: Limited government funding remains the sector's biggest challenge. While fiscal constraints are a reality, targeted investments in high-impact areas could make a significant difference. The third sector must use its voice to identify these areas and ensure they are properly resourced.

2. Strategic Planning: The absence of a clear strategic plan in certain areas from the Executive is hampering progress. Organisations need a roadmap which aligns government priorities with sector needs. While the draft PFG is welcome, there remains an array of issues where there has been a lack of strategic direction for years if not decades.

3. Enhanced Engagement: While engagement levels are high, their effectiveness must improve. This could involve clearer communication of what is possible and a more collaborative approach by NI Executive departments to problem solving.

4. Legislative Focus: As the legislative programme of Executive departments hopefully gains momentum, it is important that health and third sector organisations are active in influencing policy and shaping legislation.

Looking Ahead

This survey – the first of what will be an annual event – reveals a sector that is engaged but slightly frustrated; optimistic yet realistic about the challenges it faces. The restored NI Executive has an opportunity to build on the goodwill highlighted in the survey, turning high level engagement into tangible outcomes.

As Northern Ireland hopefully begins to navigate a period of relative political stability, the health and third sector will remain a cornerstone of its social fabric.

Ensuring these organizations have the resources, support, and partnerships they need will be critical—not only for their success but for the communities they work with.

In a region marked by its resilience and commitment to progress, the message from the sector is clear: devolution is the preferred path forward, but it must deliver more. The Executive has the mandate and the momentum – now it can deliver results.

Moving from strategy to delivery with devolution - Cancer Focus



On the key question of the value of the Assembly and having a devolved Minister in place **Richard Spratt, Chief Executive of Cancer Focus** is unequivocal - the Charity is in a better position to deliver on its key objectives now under devolution than with a suspended Assembly.

As a leading local cancer charity, Cancer Focus supports individuals and families affected by cancer. Through their care and support services, they stand with cancer patients and their loved ones, offering guidance and compassion at every step of their journey.

Beyond care, their mission also extends to prevention, through a variety of programmes aimed at helping people lower their risk of developing cancer, empowering healthier choices for a brighter future. This includes funding scientific research to progress understanding of the causes and advancing treatments for the disease. Additionally, they advocate for better health policies, ensuring that the community is safeguarded for generations to come.

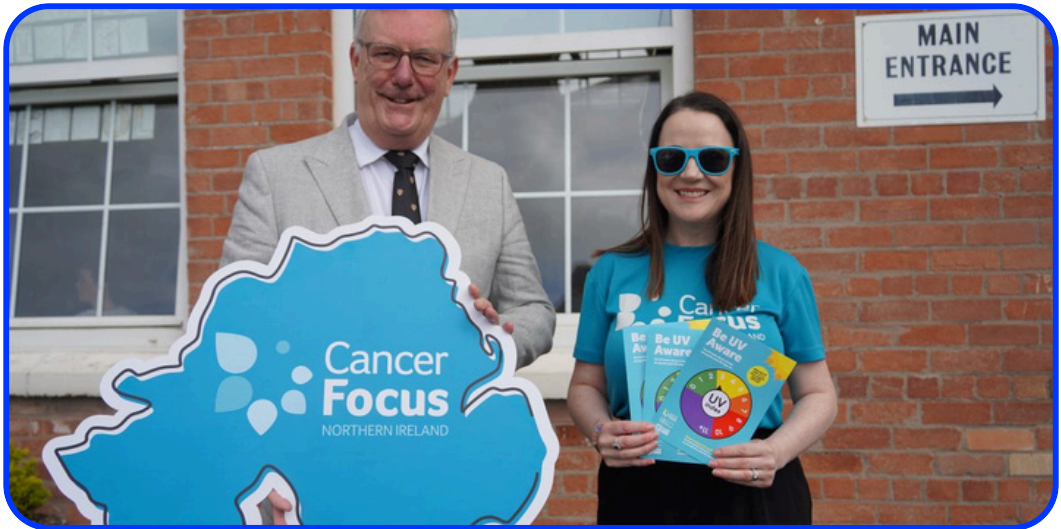
Richard has had plenty of engagement with Mike Nesbitt since he took on the role of Health Minister, and earlier this year with previous Minister Robin Swann. Prior to the suspension of the Assembly the First and deputy First Ministers were on hand in 2022 to help launch the long awaited Northern Ireland cancer strategy.

That document was unveiled to much fanfare and Richard feels that the absence of a Health Minister in the two years which followed delayed progress with implementing the strategy.

While funding remains an issue, some progress has been made this year: "Mike Nesbitt has been clear that he sees cancer as a priority area and of course we welcome that. From a cancer policy position, the strategy was launched just before assembly last went down and that led to a policy and practical vacuum. There has been some progress since restoration in some areas, but we are constrained by the public funding squeeze.

“But we will always value the opportunity to engage with local Ministers who have a local interest in making things better for people who live here. The challenge for all of us involved in tackling cancer is to move beyond the publication of a strategy to its actual delivery.

The issue of Minimum Unit Pricing of alcohol is one which Cancer Focus has pursued for a number of years, and it has been on the political agenda in the past without progressing into public policy. The Health Minister recently set out his intention to bring forward legislation in this area. Richard believes the policy is now closer to becoming reality, and that would not have happened without the personal commitment from the Minister.



Sport driving health & wellbeing - Special Olympics Ulster



While Special Olympics Ulster is first and foremost a sports organisation, its work crosses boundaries into health promotion and community development.

"Sport is the driver," explains **Shaun Cassidy, the Director of Special Olympics Ulster**, "but we also focus on things like health and wellness, and most importantly, creating opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities to thrive not only in sports but in all aspects of life."

The organisation's broad scope includes weekly training sessions, competitions, and health programs. Its efforts extend beyond athletes to include family members and volunteers, all of whom are integral to the success of the program and its ability to engage in community outreach.

One of the primary obstacles facing Special Olympics Ulster, as with many charitable organisations, is funding. For their work in Northern Ireland they are largely government-funded, drawing support from various departments, including the Department for Communities, the Department for Education, and the Department for Health. While this support is crucial, it has not always been consistent or sufficient.

"The funding has been increasingly difficult to secure," Shaun explained. "Every year, we face the challenge of maintaining our funding levels, especially with the competing demands on public finances."

Despite this, Special Olympics Ulster has cultivated strong relationships with key government departments, notably through advocacy and the success of its programs.

However, funding remains a key issue, and the organisation often faces the challenge of balancing its grassroots mission with the high-profile demands of more established charities and community organisations.

"Disability services always seem to be the first to face cuts when funding is tight," Shaun notes, referencing a trend in which services for individuals with intellectual disabilities are seen as less urgent compared to other public health needs. "It's a challenge we face regularly, but we understand there is only so much funding available."

At its core, Special Olympics Ulster operates at the community level, providing ongoing support and engagement for individuals with intellectual disabilities and their families. With 52 clubs across the Ulster region, Special Olympics Ulster reaches hundreds of athletes on a weekly basis, delivering sports, health programs, and volunteer opportunities.

The community impact is profound. Not only does the program promote physical health, but it also fosters a sense of belonging, pride, and achievement. Family members become deeply involved in the process, whether as supporters or volunteers, creating a ripple effect that enhances the lives of everyone in the community.

"When we engage with athletes, we're also engaging with their families," the representative explained. "It's not just about what happens on the sports field. It's about creating opportunities for everyone to be a part of something bigger."

Special Olympics Ulster continues to advocate for greater recognition and support from both the government and the broader public. Shaun stressed the importance of government partnerships in meeting the needs of individuals with intellectual disabilities, highlighting the need for a balanced approach that combines charitable fundraising with public sector investment.

"We cannot do this alone," the representative concluded. "We rely on government support to provide essential services, but we also need the public's help through fundraising and volunteering. We are a charity, but we are also a vital service, and we need both streams of support to continue making a difference in the lives of people with intellectual disabilities."

**Special
Olympics**
Ulster



Leading the Charge for Autism Support - Autism NI



Since becoming CEO of Autism NI in 2017, Kerry Boyd has been instrumental in advancing autism services in Northern Ireland. Despite improvements since the charity's foundation in 1990, significant challenges remain, particularly in diagnosis, funding, and support, amid rising demand for services.

"In 1990, autism was barely recognised in Northern Ireland, and with no diagnostic framework, families had no choice but to travel to England for assessments," Kerry explains.

This glaring gap led to the creation of Autism NI, originally known as "Parents and Professionals for Autism." Its mission was simple yet critical: support families and build awareness of autism in a society that had little understanding of the condition.

Local diagnosis services only began in the late 1990s," Kerry notes, highlighting the legacy of delayed diagnoses, which continues today.

"Currently, one in 20 school-aged children is diagnosed with autism, though the true numbers may be higher. Combined with the rise in adult diagnoses, demand for services has never been greater."

Autism NI now employs 30 professionals across fields like psychology, education, and care, delivering early intervention, family support, and training to over 3,000 parents and professionals annually. Its helpline fields 7,500 calls each year, providing critical assistance to families.

"Despite our efforts, meeting the rising demand is difficult," Kerry notes. "Our annual income is £1.2 million, with half raised through direct fundraising and most of the remainder provided by Trusts and foundations or direct revenue. Unfortunately, government funding accounts for a mere £30,000—a glaring shortfall that limits our ability to grow services."

The lack of robust government funding underscores the critical role of political support. Kerry acknowledges the positive contributions of the NI Executive, particularly the recent introduction of an Independent Autism Reviewer:

“The appointment of Ema Cubitt as an autism reviewer is a crucial step toward accountability and progress,” Kerry asserts. “Her role ensures the autism strategy is implemented and delivers real, measurable support, even amidst the political instability at Stormont. This milestone wouldn’t have been achieved without a Minister in place to drive it forward.” However, Kerry stresses the importance of addressing broader systemic issues.

“Mandatory teacher training in autism is still not in place, which creates inconsistent support across schools,” she says. “The ongoing bureaucratic tussle between the Department of Health and the Department of Education exacerbates issues around direct support for children with autism, leaving many without the educational resources they need.”

Equally concerning is the lack of tailored mental health services for autistic individuals.

“High suicide rates among autistic people highlight the urgent need for specialised psychological training and support systems,” Kerry says. “We are working closely with Departments to emphasise the critical importance of improving these services.”

For Kerry, the future of autism services in Northern Ireland hinges on three key factors: addressing funding gaps, providing robust training for educators and healthcare professionals, and establishing consistent support mechanisms for families and autistic adults.

“Political stability is vital for driving these changes,” she emphasises. “A functioning and stable NI Executive and Assembly are essential for ensuring that autism services can meet the growing needs of our community.”

Kerry remains optimistic. “In a region where autism services were once non-existent, progress has been made. But our journey is far from over,” she says. “It’s up to all of us—government, professionals, and advocates—to ensure a future where every individual with autism can access the support they need to thrive.”



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