Written Evidence submitted by the Building Change Trust for the
Northern Ireland Affairs Committee’s inquiry into Devolution and
democracy in Northern Ireland – dealing with the deficit (DDD0009)

Background:

The Building Change Trust was established in 2008 by the Big Lottery Fund as a £10 million, 10 year investment to support transformation and innovation in the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector in Northern Ireland.

The founding partners of Building Change Trust were the Community Foundation for NI, Rural Community Network, Community Evaluation NI, Volunteer Now and Business in the Community.

Since 2013 one of the Trust’s strategic themes has been ‘Creative Space for Civic Thinking’ the aim of which is to “enable the Northern Ireland Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise sector to better facilitate meaningful participation of individuals and communities in decision-making processes that impact upon their lives”.

To this end the Trust has resourced and commissioned the following actions over the 2014-2017 period:

- A Civic Activism Programme – grants and support to VCSE organisations to experiment with creative approaches to civic engagement around issues including welfare reform, renewable energy, public transport, community planning and fact-checking
- Establishment of the NI Open Government Network in 2015 and resourcing its work over the 2015 – 2018 period
- Research into the independence of the VCSE sector – carried out over the 2014-2016 period by Ulster University
- Research into the health of democracy in Northern Ireland from a ‘deliberative democracy’ perspective – the Beyond Voting report is accessible online here: http://civicactivism.buildingchangetrust.org/beyond-voting
- Convening and facilitating dialogue with civil society, public sector and political representatives around deliberative democracy innovations including resourcing of a region-wide Participatory Budgeting support project and part-funding of a Citizens’ Assembly pilot to take place in 2018
Submission:

Inquiry questions:

- If an Executive cannot be restored, what options exist for restoring accountability and democracy in Northern Ireland?

- What models have been used in the past when the Assembly has experienced periods of suspension or long periods with no Executive? Are any of these models useful now or is a fresh approach required?

- The impact on services, business and communities of the lack of an Executive;

- The impact on budgeting and legislative timetables, particularly the budget for the next financial year;

- Potential measures for making institutions in NI more able to tolerate similar collapses of devolved government;

- The gap left in EU negotiations and alternatives for NI’s voice in talks.

NB. The below evidence is the Trust’s response to the above questions ‘in the round’ rather than providing specific answers to each

1. When considering the health of democracy in Northern Ireland it is important to think beyond the parameters of the current suspension of the institutions. Using a ‘deliberative democracy’ lens which emphasises the role of citizens, our Beyond Voting research found that there were already some serious weaknesses across the various dimensions of Northern Ireland’s ‘deliberative system’ prior to the collapse of the Executive.

2. Most importantly, from the Trust’s perspective, this relates to a failure to involve citizens in any meaningful way in decision-making, whether it be in resolution of political crises or in the formulation of policy and legislation. In this context, Northern Ireland’s democracy has become overly dependent on elections as almost the sole mechanism for resolving societal problems. However elections in Northern Ireland tend to function mainly as a measure – and even here a blunt, non-deliberative one - of public opinion on the constitutional question and related matters of identity. They have not provided a clear view of public opinion, much less engaged the population in deliberation, around any of the many other social, economic and political challenges urgently needing resolution.

3. This is a key reason why public trust in the devolved institutions is at such a low point – the NI Life & Times Survey in 2015 found that just 11% of people think the NI Assembly has achieved “a lot”, contrasted with 31% who think it has achieved “nothing at all”. The same survey in 2014 found that just 17% of people felt that the NI Assembly was giving ordinary
people more of a say in how Northern Ireland is governed; and that just 11% of people were satisfied at how MLAs were doing their jobs (66% were dissatisfied).

4. This self-reinforcing combination of polarised politics, a distrustful public and a narrow democratic model overly dependent on elections, if left unaddressed, will continue to drive institutional instability and prevent consensual solutions to challenges emerging in the long-term. Ultimately it could be the undoing of the peace process.

5. There is no alternative to the restoration of the Executive and Assembly – they are fundamental to democracy and accountability in Northern Ireland. However, both by way of helping the restoration of the institutions to happen and by way of supporting their long-term functionality, serious and sustained efforts must be made to engage and meaningfully involve the public in decision-making.

6. The Civic Forum was one such mechanism set out under Strand One of the Good Friday Agreement and since its suspension in 2002, no equivalent mechanism has been found to replace it. Any successor however, must address some of the concerns expressed about that particular model – not least that its membership was not sufficiently representative of the public as a whole.

7. In recent years a whole host of ‘democratic innovations’ have emerged as methods of engaging the public in deliberation and decision-making. Citizens’ Assemblies are one particularly notable example that have been used most recently and most ambitiously in the Republic of Ireland, both in the form of the Irish Constitutional Convention (2012 – 2014) and the ongoing Irish Citizens’ Assembly. Both these initiatives have been used to involve the public in generating fresh thinking and providing widely acceptable solutions to social, economic and political challenges where politicians – and by extension elections – had failed to do so over a number of years. Most notably the Constitutional Convention gave rise to the referendum on equal marriage, but also considered a series of political reforms.

8. A Citizens’ Assembly is a randomly selected group of citizens – broadly representative of the public in terms of age, gender, socio-economic background and other criteria which vary by case – given a topic or topics to consider and deliberate on over a fixed time period. They hear from expert witnesses, review written evidence, they debate and deliberate and finally they formulate and vote on resolutions which form their recommendations to the relevant body – usually a parliamentary assembly or committee.

9. The Trust has provisionally resourced an independent, pilot Citizens’ Assembly initiative to take place in Northern Ireland in 2018 (if sufficient match-funding can be raised) and has been engaging with politicians from across all the main parties in relation to this. The purpose of this is to demonstrate the effectiveness of Citizens’ Assemblies as a method for finding acceptable solutions to a specific issue in a way that complements the role of elected representatives and institutions. However ultimately to be at their most effective, Citizens’ Assemblies should be put on a statutory footing.
10. In the event of the institutions’ restoration the NI Assembly and/or Executive could use models such as Citizens’ Assemblies to find solutions to contested or difficult issues where politicians cannot reach agreement. However in the immediate term consideration should be given to whether the Northern Ireland Office could commission a Citizens’ Assembly to consider and recommend solutions to one or a number of the issues – perhaps aspects of political and institutional reform - that have led to the institutions’ collapse. This would take time but would ultimately identify solutions broadly acceptable to the public that could stand the test of time.

11. In the longer-term, however it will take much more than a Citizens’ Assembly to fully restore public trust and re-invigorate democracy in Northern Ireland. Our Beyond Voting research highlights a number of areas where action may be needed:

- Reform of the political institutions – especially use of the petition of concern as a blocking mechanism for issues beyond its originally intended purpose
- Lack of an effective citizenship curriculum
- Deprioritisation of the arts
- Lack of diversity in appointments to Non-Departmental Public Bodies
- Under-representation of women in politics and public life
- A media environment lacking in journalistic depth and increasingly dependent on the polarising tendencies of social media
- A lack of legislation with demonstrable effects on the Northern Ireland population
- A lack of openness and transparency in the practice of government – for example failure to adhere to Freedom of Information requirements
- Widespread perceptions of patronage networks being used to curry influence and distribute funding
- Government consultation that tends to be formulaic, tokenistic and dominated by the ‘usual suspects’ rather than offering real opportunities to the public to have influence over decisions

12. In identifying solutions to any or all of these challenges it is the Trust’s view that the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector – as well as civil society more broadly – has a crucial role to play. Our research into the independence of the VCSE sector has identified that the government’s relationship with and conceptualisation of the VCSE sector has become more and more an instrumental one that sees the sector’s role primarily in terms of the delivery of public services.

13. However the sector is much more than this and should be viewed as an intermediary between citizens and the state, helping individuals and communities articulate their voice and have meaningful influence on decisions taken. In doing so the sector can bring much needed creativity and innovation, demonstrating best practice – such as Citizens’ Assemblies – that can be later adopted by government. This broader role of the sector needs to be
embraced and accepted in any efforts to deepen public engagement and rebuild public trust in the devolved institutions in Northern Ireland.

14. The below links provide further information on the Trust’s work and the issues outlined above:

- Beyond Voting research: http://civicactivism.buildingchangetrust.org/beyond-voting
- Civic Activism Toolkit: http://civicactivism.buildingchangetrust.org/tools-directory
- UK Citizens’ Assembly on Brexit (2017): http://citizensassembly.co.uk/brexit/about/

15. The Trust would be willing to provide further detail by way of oral evidence to the committee if that would be of interest.

20 December 2017