The UK and the Republic of Ireland have experienced huge improvements in wellbeing in the last 100 years, however a number of complex social problems persist. Could a new relationship between the state and individuals hold the key to solving these difficult social problems?

The Carnegie UK Trust believes we are at the beginning of a fundamental shift toward more empowered citizens and communities and a more enabling state. With the help of Carnegie Fellow Sir John Elvidge we are engaging with key stakeholders across the UK and Republic of Ireland to better understand this movement and what this would mean for public service delivery. We will be looking for opportunities for shared learning as we go.

This report summarises the issues raised at our round table discussion on the Enabling State in Belfast at Carnegie Falls Road Library on the 13 December 2012. Roundtable discussions were also held in Cardiff, Dublin, Newcastle, Dunfermline and London during December 2012 – February 2013.

We hope you find the report of interest and we would be pleased to hear your views. Please contact Jenny Brotchie, Policy Officer at jenny@carnegieuk.org or on 01383 749757. You can find our discussion paper here.
1. The Northern Irish context

The very issue of statehood remains at the heart of the Northern Ireland conflict: ‘are we British?’ (the Unionist position) or ‘are we Irish?’ (the Nationalist stance). The discourse on ‘The Enabling State’ therefore had an additional edge.

The most recent 40 years of conflict abound with examples of state power, abuse of state power (the Finucane Report was issued on the same day as the Belfast event, just as flag protests also erupted), non-state actors’ involvement – legal and illegal – ‘state within a state’ services, and ‘in and against the state’ paradoxes.

Northern Ireland also shares a land border with another state, Ireland, with a different political economy, currency, media and culture, enabling direct membership of European and international bodies such as the Council of Europe and the UN.

Nevertheless, Northern Ireland enjoys a strong civil society, partly forged out of crisis and a vigorous community and voluntary sector. The new political stability, following the Belfast (Good Friday) and St Andrews Agreements of 1998 and 2006 has allowed participation in and observation of the two states of the UK and Ireland on a similar devolutionary timeline to that of Scotland and Wales.
2. Key Themes

Three key themes emerged from the Belfast roundtable:

- A divided political system.
- Transparency, risk and responsibility.
- Equality, Human Rights and civil justice.

The issues covered within these themes are expanded upon in sections 2.1-2.3.

2.1 A divided political system

The consociational model of power-sharing government adopted at Stormont has brought a form of ‘compulsory coalition’ with five parties in government and an ‘opposition’ of only four out of 108 MLAs. It is sometimes described as good for the peace process (binding everyone in), but rotten for good governance, prone to gridlock and negative veto. However, it has brought consensus on a number of key issues (e.g. Programme for Government, a four-year Budget, and Economic and Investment Strategies).

A tendency to bureaucratic solutions as a defence against allegations of discrimination however has led to audit arthritis, procurement paralysis, consultation fatigue and public appointment sclerosis – leading to frustration amongst those arguing for progressive advances and more urgent social change. A ‘managerial state’ has a place, but that alone is insufficient for full responsiveness, especially if it tends to the technocratic and top-down, too.

The energetic voluntary and community sector has worked hard to open up access to the state in all its forms and provide channels for the sometimes angry voices of the otherwise voiceless. Flexible and creative responses to the violence and civil conflict that dominated the agenda for
four decades built a solid respect for the non-governmental sector, winning it social partnership status with the state and a global recognition for peace-building and conflict resolution.

At its worst, however, a real disconnect has emerged, exemplified at the time of the roundtable by the Flags protest1 which was articulated by previously unknown and uncoordinated, but now passionate and militant activists. In this context, a distinction was drawn by some workshop participants between ‘capacity’ and ‘capability’, with the former often equated with less sustainable ‘grant-writing and form-filling’ as opposed to the latter’s implications of a wider skill base in community organising and development.

Participants identified some features of the divided society that would bear further examination:

- **Access to government could be better structured and explained**: joined-up government for joined-up communities needs the ‘plumbing underneath the rhetoric’. Less internal trading-off, bargaining and deal-making – more openness and partnership. New ways of working for new times.

- **Sharing of best practice**: those departments and public bodies that enjoyed stronger external relationships might capture those successes and share them more widely.

- **Less sterile consultation exercises**: ‘consultation fatigue’ is widespread. Consultation processes need revivified. Less consultation, better delivered through dialogue and a move beyond compliance.

- **A light touch audit and accounting environment**: so often promised but rarely implemented, must now be realised.

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1 The Flags protests emerged against a decision on 3rd December 2012 to restrict the flying of the Union Flag from Belfast City Hall to a number of ‘designated’ days.
• **Policy development through co-production:** rather than behind closed doors.

• **A better understanding of engagement:** with the dynamics of (compulsory) coalition government for civil society.

• **Clearer protocols on the autonomy of NGOs:** to engage with, contest and challenge government and residual paramilitary and local political forces.

2.2 Transparency, risk and responsibility

All states depend on their reputation for openness. Indeed they are often measured on various published scales transferred on to league tables with extensive Freedom of Information legislation on most countries’ statute books. The ability of a state to open up to dialogue, negotiation and consensus-building with non-state actors however, often seems more difficult – power relationships seem to persist.

Similarly within the voluntary and community sector, issues of internal transparency are now beginning to be asked – covering governance, user involvement, accountability and transparency of the sector itself, with some concerning examples of lapses and omissions. A new paradigm is required for the new generation of organisations in a changing and developing relationship with the state.

Issues discussed included:

• transferring the focus of the transparency searchlight from process audit to an examination of the transparency of outcomes;

• shining the spotlight on impact with better use of Social Return on Investment techniques and a fairer balance between risk and reward;

• further rigorous self-examination within the voluntary and community sector as standards to which others are held must equally apply to all those seeking recognition and partnership.

2.3 Equality, Human Rights and civil justice

A large part of the negotiations of the accommodation of the Northern Ireland question centred on principles of human rights, equality, parity of esteem and the administration of justice. There is much experience and casework on which to draw in this context of a debate on the role of the state.

The 1998 Northern Ireland Act enshrined tough equality principles in law and established a powerful Equality Commission (alongside a still separate Human Rights Commission) to regulate, advise and promote equality in Northern Ireland. NGOs played a full part in these debates and in the subsequent monitoring of their implementation on both sides of the border.

Debate in Belfast raised a number of pertinent challenges:

• The mythology of progressive communities contesting a regressive state was thoroughly debunked, with examples from integration of minority ethnic groups, ‘hard-to-reach’ (or ‘seldom heard’?) marginalisation, and less publicly popular causes being evidenced.

• Could a firmer human rights underpinning help to mitigate the exclusion of less articulate or favoured voices, including those from out with the prevailing political bloc?

• Given continuing obstacles in the way of full access to justice for all individuals and groups, is there a place for civil justice as mediator, rather than merely as a provider of permissions?
3. What does an Enabling State mean in Northern Ireland?

The ‘empowered citizen’ may be more relevant within the contested state of Northern Ireland than that of the ‘enabling state’. The concept of the ‘empowered citizen’ would reverse the ‘top-down’ notion, giving expression to a more grassroots salience, while all the time recognising – and managing expectations about – the limitations of the state. Especially if the very structure of the state and its scope remains unsettled, if not actively challenged.

It was suggested that a fresh starting point, building on points of unity and common ground across a divided community, could be located in a new test: ‘What is good for society?’ A focus on impacts and outcomes (the Scottish tradition of grassroots-led community education, its current ‘Outcome Agreement’ model, and its community planning progress were all widely admired) and measuring new approaches by their application to all, their fairness and their contribution to reversing multiple inequalities may be a good starting point. The forthcoming Review of Public Administration (RPA) offers up huge potential for transformative approaches in localism, decentralisation, subsidiarity, deploying the power of well-being and locally-led community planning. Traditionally organised in vertical bunkers, government could relax, encouraging more horizontal collaboration, both within and outwith the public sphere, both at Stormont level and locally.

Many examples were cited of extra-governmental action that had flourished. These included: the Bogside Community Association (1972-76); the integrated education experiment (and its latter-day cousin, shared education) and the current debate on enhanced social enterprise in and from a community-based and focussed social economy.

Community asset transfer was discussed as a huge current opportunity for government to show willing on these principles, not to transfer liabilities, nor to hold the all-empowering equity behind, but to share in deploying state resources creatively and with a powerful social purpose – the enabling state indeed!
4. Next Steps

Our engagement with stakeholders in each jurisdiction is now complete. We are now carrying out an extensive literature review and seeking out practical examples of an enabling state in action. Our findings will inform our final enabling state project outputs which we expect to publish in summer 2013.

You can keep up to date with our progress by visiting our enabling state project page and by following @CarnegieUKTrust, #enablingstate on Twitter.

To sign up to our Enabling State newsletter please get in touch with Jenny Brotchie, Policy Officer at jenny@carnegieuk.org.

Belfast Roundtable Attendees
Anne Moore, Save the Children Northern Ireland
Avila Kilmurray, Community Foundation for Northern Ireland
Bill Osborne, Building Change Trust
Breedagh Hughes, Royal College of Midwives, NI
Brendan Heaney, Diabetes UK (NI)
Brian Pelan, View Digital
Derek McCallan, Northern Ireland Local Government Association
Heather Moorhead, Northern Ireland Confederation
Johann Gallagher, Strategic Investment Board Limited
Michael Wardlow, Equality Commission (Northern Ireland)
Nuala O’Neill, Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors
Ruth O’Reilly, The Detail TV
Paul Mullan, Heritage Lottery Fund Northern Ireland
Stewart Finn, NICVA
Tracey Teague, Department for Social Development in Northern Ireland
Quintin Oliver, Carnegie Advisor in Northern Ireland
Martyn Evans, Carnegie UK Trust
Jennifer Wallace, Carnegie UK Trust
Sir John Elvidge, Carnegie Fellow
Jenny Brotchie, Carnegie UK Trust
The Carnegie UK Trust works to improve the lives of people throughout the UK and Ireland, by changing minds through influencing policy, and by changing lives through innovative practice and partnership work. The Carnegie UK Trust was established by Scots-American philanthropist Andrew Carnegie in 1913 and we are delighted to be celebrating our centenary in 2013. Please see our website for further information on our centenary plans.

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July 2013