

Appendix 2

Call for Evidence - new Social Economy Work Programme from April 2024

Response from Belfast City Council

1. What are your views on the overall approach of the work programme – connecting a smaller number of objectives to the activities required and the outcomes that would demonstrate success?

- Agree in principle with need for more focused approach to support the sector
- In our view, the proposed competitive process and very limited numbers of businesses to receive support may mean that those in most need cannot get access to the support they need
- We consider that the department needs to recognise the distinctive nature of the sector. This may mean – among other things – that there may be more support required at the early stages of development than might be the case for other businesses. This does not necessarily reflect any lack of potential for growth in the future
- We propose that a more effective approach for DfE would be to work collaboratively with 11 councils through NIESS support. The service already has a target for social enterprise engagement and the Growth and Scaling elements of NIESS will target those companies identified in themes 1 and 2 of the outline support plan – this would make a more effective use of resources. NIESS is fully aligned with 10X ambitions
- The support provided needs to recognise the specific nature of the social enterprise sector: while the targeted support is helpful and will support greater alignment with the 10X ambitions, account will need to be taken of the current baseline position. This is likely to mean the need for additional networking support and potentially additional handholding support for social enterprises to move them towards 10X growth ambitions. Councils have committed to undertaking some of this work in each local area but it is important to note that the nature of the sector means that there can be a long lead-in time with resources required to inspire, explore and help develop ideas, before moving to growth in the terms of 10X.

2. What are your views on the 4 proposed objectives?

- We consider that there is a logical structure to the four objectives that would be expected for any sector growth plan
- We would welcome additional engagement to discuss the balance of the workplan and associated resources e.g. direct business support versus networking/cooperation and coordination
- We consider that the councils can make a significant contribution to the delivery of objectives 1 and 2 through their NIESS activity in particular and would welcome the opportunity to work more closely with DfE to agree a collaborative action plan. Belfast City Council is acting as lead council for the service and would be happy to identify a contact point for engagement.

3. Do you have any comments on any of the objectives in the proposed work programme

(please indicate which activity number(s) you are commenting on)?

- Our overarching commentary is around the risk of the current proposal duplicating rather than adding value to existing provision, particularly the activity supported through NIESS. With regard to the specifics of some of the proposals:
 - Actions 1.1; 1.2; 1.5; 1.7; 1.8; 2.2; 2.5; 3.3 and 3.4 – we see specific opportunities for enhanced collaboration with NIESS – we are supportive of the proposals in principle but consider that the sector could benefit more from this investment if it was channelled through and/or designed alongside the NIESS support. We would be happy to work alongside DfE and other partners on targeting of specific locations, sectors etc.
 - Action 1.1 – we consider that the timelines identified for this are unrealistic – they should be more flexible, in line with organisational needs
 - Action 1.3 – we are aware of the Social Enterprise Mark accreditation but we also understand that it can be costly for organisations to maintain membership – we feel that there is a need for further engagement with the sector to test the value of this proposition
 - Action 1.4 – we acknowledge the need to share information on funding availability but we feel that this needs to be balanced with a longer-term push towards financial sustainability and away from a reliance on grant funding
 - Action 1.6 – we consider that there is a more proactive and two-way engagement that can take place between the social enterprise sector and the private sector – this will move the relationship beyond a “tokenistic” approach to involving social enterprises in the supply chain. We consider that a strong network organisation (such as SENI) can play an important role in managing this engagement
 - Action 2.1 – we would be keen to have access to the information generated from this survey and would be happy to tailor our support to ensure alignment with needs identified
 - Action 2.3 – we are fully supportive of the idea of an annual conference and awards and we have seen the benefits that these can provide for the sector. We would be happy to work with DfE and delivery partners to consider how these are built into a wider programme of awareness-raising and support events for the social enterprise sector

- Action 2.4 – very supportive of this opportunity to raise ambition and to promote good practice of our local social enterprise sector – and keen to enhance participation levels, resources permitting.
- Action 3.1 – based on the commentary around significant opportunities for alignment and collaboration, we would welcome and support a forum through which there can be a focus on the social enterprise sector. We consider that the roll-out of NIESS can provide significant insights to support future growth in the sector and would be keen to align the group with our emerging governance structures for NIESS
- Action 3.2 – we consider that the cross-departmental group presents an opportunity to maximise buy-in across all departments and would encourage DfE to consider how the agenda for this group can be elevated to raise the level of ambition and drive tangible progress
- Action 4.2 – we are supportive of this survey and consider that this is critical to create a shared understanding of current performance and to track the impact of investment. We consider that, once undertaken, it should be reviewed on a regular basis and shared among partners in order to focus future investment plans.

4. **Are there other measures of success you would like to propose for any of the activities**

(please use activity numbers)?

- Overall participation numbers on targeted business support activities appear to be limited – councils would be happy to discuss planned levels of engagement through NIESS to consider whether there is an opportunity to review and increase these as appropriate
- It may be appropriate to create a baseline around grant income versus earned income and to seek to increase the latter over time – based on initial survey work set out in action 4.2.