

Development Department

Your reference
Our reference # 110833
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Being dealt with by: Mark McCann
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Una Gilmore
Voluntary & Community Unit
Department for Social Development
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Dear Una,

RE: Consultation on the Review of the Regional Infrastructure Programme

Thank you for providing Belfast City Council with the opportunity to respond to your consultation document. The values outlined in the policy align with a number of our own corporate values, particularly ensuring equality of opportunity and developing good relations, providing value for money and improving services and also working with partners across Belfast to ensure that our combined efforts contribute to the continued success of our city.

For the rest of this feedback please find attached our responses based on the sections noted in your consultation questionnaire.

Please note this response is subject to full Council ratification at its meeting in October 2010..

Yours sincerely

Catherine Taggart
Community Development Manager

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Belfast City Council's response to the consultation on the Review of the Regional Infrastructure Programme

Our details

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Are you responding as an individual? No

If you are responding on behalf of an organisation, please give the name of the organisation, a brief account of its membership and how the views of your colleagues were gathered.

Belfast City Council. The consultation document was considered at a special briefing session with Members on 1 September 2010. Meetings were also held with officers to address the draft policy and questions in more detail. Recommendations were passed to the Development Committee for further comment and ratification.

Our response to the questions:

3. Vision for a new programme

1. We would suggest that the draft text does not represent a clear vision statement. (It is actually a mission statement.) The vision for the Regional Infrastructure Programme (RIP) should instead present a straightforward (and short) description of the future possibilities engendered by a successful RIP programme.

2. Such a statement, we believe, should make reference to the government's wider understanding of successful community development goals and the commitment to enhanced quality of life in communities across the region. We believe this would provide a much sharper focus for the mission of the RIP and its associated objectives.

3. We would suggest that in order to fully articulate such a vision the programme should be viewed within the context of DSD's wider review of its Urban Regeneration and Community Development framework. We note that the quoted timescales for the RIP review do not appear to lend themselves to this approach and would suggest that such an alignment be considered.

4. Belfast City Council is currently developing its own strategy for community development work. We are keen to ensure that our strategy fully aligns with DSD's Urban Regeneration/Community Development framework review. It will be important for us that the vision for the RIP is likewise aligned to ensure that its relationship with local government is clear.

5. A more appropriate name for the programme might be Regional Infrastructure Support Programme – to identify that the programme is not the actual regional infrastructure but is a support service for the infrastructure.

4. Taking stock

1. The council notes the important role that regional infrastructure organisations have played over the past twenty years. And we agree that there are skills and services required by the sector which are more efficiently and effectively delivered by

organisations operating at the larger regional level. Economies of scale alone allow for greater efficiencies.

2. Page 6 makes reference to general observations about the impact of the VCS. However, we are surprised at the paucity of evaluation data that has been made available on the RIP as part of this consultation. It would have been helpful to describe the actual impact (or even the accumulated outputs) of the programme over the past twenty years. It's noted on page 7 that DSD have been gathering such evidence over the past three years. Access to this evidence would have allowed consultees to make a much more informed response to the consultation. As it stands, there is little data from which to gauge the success or otherwise of the RIP.
3. We would suggest that the two 'strengths' listed in the simple SWOT analysis (page 10) do not do justice to the programme. For example, strengths might also include the accumulation of skills, knowledge and expertise contained within these organisations which would not be available otherwise. It might also include the existence of a network linking public bodies to VCS organisations right across Northern Ireland.
4. Weaknesses: Many of the weaknesses described are not necessarily weaknesses of the programme. Instead they actually describe weaknesses in the monitoring and evaluation model that has, to date, been applied to the programme. Therefore many of the weakness statements are suppositions in the absence of objective data, (eg. 'unclear outcomes', 'no overall map of need', 'unclear as to whether the VCS is getting proper support', etc.). We would suggest that a proper evaluation of the programme should be carried out before weaknesses can be identified and that this objective data be used to inform a new programme.
5. We would suggest that the 'Opportunities' include a proper examination of external changes that can contribute to a better, more effective programme. While not means exhaustive these could include:
 - The opportunity to align with DSD review of urban regeneration/community development frameworks
 - DSD's review of its advice and information strategy
 - The review of DSD's Community Support Programme – many aspects of which overlap with the aims of the RIP
 - The review of public administration - particularly the transfer of community development functions to local government. While the RPA is on hold there continues to be work at local government level – on community development, local area working, etc which would present opportunities for the programme
 - Recent theory and practice on the role and support of 'infrastructure' and how this could contribute to the programme – for example, the contribution of CFNI/CENI's social assets research project or Belfast City Council Strategic Neighbourhood Action Programme – particularly its work on measuring the level of service capacity at the local area level.
 - The challenge to the local VCS faced with reduced budgets and the drive for greater efficiencies and rationalisation. While this is in many ways a threat to the sector - it can also be considered as an opportunity for the programme.

5. Additional issues

1. There are a number of additional issues that need to be addressed while 'taking stock' of the programme. These include:
 - The equality Impact of any re-organised programme. Will the changes have a detrimental effect on Section 75 groups?
 - What are the current needs of the sector? Are the current capacity needs of the sector understood? Are there gaps? Is there over provision? Are these geographical or thematic?
 - How does the programme directly impact on the quality of life of communities? Any analysis of its strengths and weaknesses should directly link its work with the sector right through to front line service delivery and the success of such delivery in contributing to quality of life.
 - The contribution to the review of the Taskforce report on resourcing the Voluntary and Community Sector.

6. Covering the region

1. While Section C examines the challenge to the RIP organisations in providing coverage to the entire VCS in Northern Ireland, we would suggest that this is neither entirely practical or desirable. Instead the programme should focus its resources based on the priorities and needs of the sector. This would require a more detailed understanding of the existing VCS infrastructure (in particular its weaknesses) and the sector's ability to respond to the needs of communities across the region. As noted previously, for such an approach to work the RIP would need to be firmly embedded within shared government goals for community development.
2. We would note the reference to sub-regional and local council level delivery. There is no reference to the role of local councils in contributing to community development goals through, for example, DSD's Community Support Programme (CSP). There is an opportunity here to align the infrastructure support provided by local councils with that of the RIP.

7 & 8. Key functions of the new programme

1. The definitions of 'generic' and 'thematic' functions are not clear and would need further explanation. The consultation document does not explain the advantages to the programme or the sector of making the division.
2. We would note that many of the generic functions listed overlap with other government strategies and programmes. For example government thinking on advice, information and volunteering are all influenced by other strategies. We believe it would be important to consider whether there is a risk of duplication of approaches or conversely, opportunities for joined up thinking on this generic work.
3. There is a continuing challenge to the voluntary and community sector to be able to demonstrate the impact of resource investment: this challenge is ever more relevant in the current financial climate. There is however no reference to sector support needs in relation to facilitating a new outcomes culture or for the related operational skills support, processes and tools.

9. Outcomes

1. While we welcome the emphasis of the evaluation on outcomes we would suggest that such a model is seriously flawed if the evaluation model does not have a focus on the impact of the programme's activities. This connects back to our earlier comment that the programme should have a much stronger vision of the future possibilities it is trying to engender.
2. We would suggest that the ultimate aim of the programme is to support organisations in impacting on quality of life of communities across the region. Unless there is a clear understanding of this impact then the programme will be challenged on its effectiveness. Measuring impact is of course much more difficult than measuring outcomes but there is certainly scope to begin to address this challenge with a revised programme.
3. We would agree with the importance of participating organisations participating in monitoring and evaluation and in the creation of an intelligence base. We would note however, that in measuring impact, wider societal measures would play a part in any evaluation model – and may be beyond the scope of the participants.

10. Programme criteria

1. While we agree with most of the draft criteria proposed in the consultation document we would suggest that potential participants in the programme should not be solely responsible for the identification and targeting of need.
2. As previously noted, if there is a clear understanding of the needs of the sector – based on its ability to deliver service required by communities, then the programme should be able to construct a 'menu' of infrastructure support needs. As part of the criteria of the programme, eligible organisations should demonstrate their ability to deliver these support needs to client organisations.

11. Options for a new approach

1. Option A – Renew and Enhance: While creating least disruption we believe this option would perpetuate the current weaknesses in the programme and would not be an effective or efficient approach.

2. Option B – Renew and supplement: We believe this would exacerbate the current weaknesses in the programme and would not address the long term problems around clarity of focus and lack of evidence about the impact of the programme.

3. Option C – Clean sheet and development period: This would have serious implications for those organisations currently supported by the programme and would threaten to undermine the significant support that many of them deliver to the CVS. At a time of uncertainty within the sector, we would suggest that the continued existence of support organisations is vital. However, we would suggest that there are fundamental flaws at the heart of the programme and that a fundamental development period is required.

12. Suggestions for a new programme

1. We would suggest that an alternative option should be considered - 'Option D'. This would take the best aspects of option A and option C. In this option, existing groups would be funded under current arrangements for a pre-defined period of time. During this period, a comprehensive review would take place and a new structure created. This would allow time for participating organisations to prepare for any new demands from the programmes. It would also allow time for parallel policy developments across Government to inform the review (including, for example, the CSR and DSD' review of urban regeneration and community development framework).