

Appendix 2

Collaborative approaches to employability and skills development - developing an agreed approach

Background

1. The current economic downturn has sharpened the focus on the need for targeted, timely interventions to address the challenges of unemployment and skills development.
2. While support mechanisms are in place, it is clear that those furthest from the labour market are finding it increasingly difficult to access employment. Equally, the diversification of the city's economy and the need to focus on developing new, high value-added sectors has identified the need for the alignment of economic growth and employability agendas at local level.
3. The background work on developing the draft Belfast Employability and Skills plan identified a range of key organisational and operational obstacles hindering collaborative approaches to employability policy and delivery in the city of Belfast.
4. One of the major challenges identified was the issue of alignment with an agreed strategy, incorporating realistic targets, to which all participating organisations could contribute through existing – and potentially new – collaborative activity, at limited additional cost (if any).
5. DEL, as the principal statutory body responsible for employability and skills issues, has a key role to play in resourcing and managing a range of interventions which are delivered by a large number of organisations across the city and the wider region. Other partners, such as Belfast City Council and Department for Social Development, also fund a range of support activities which directly or indirectly impact on these issues.
6. The Social Investment Fund (SIF), agreed by the Northern Ireland Executive in March 2011, is intended to provide “an integrated approach to enhance economic growth, employability and the sustainability of communities”. The fund is likely to be focused on 8 “investment zones” which are those areas in greatest social need.

Invest NI are also working on a “short-term employment scheme” (STES) which will allow them to focus on projects to support the rebuilding of the economy, possibly looking wider than those target sectors which were agreed as a priority in a less difficult economic climate.

7. To date, consideration has not been given as to how these resources might be brought together to deliver a set of agreed objectives at a city level, within the framework of an integrated economic strategy for the city.
8. There are a number of key factors which are driving this approach at present. These are identified below.

Drivers for change

9. The key drivers for change at this time include:
 - The Belfast City Council draft “Employability and Skills Strategy” (March 2010)
 - The profusion of small EU-funded employment-related projects (a new round of funding to be in place from April 2011)
 - Internal work within DEL on developing effective partnerships as part of the Modernising the Employment Service Programme
 - Internal work within Belfast City Council to consolidate external partnerships to ensure agreed approaches to enhancing the quality of life in the city
 - The draft NI Executive economic strategy (February 2011) which identified the need for a range for short and medium term (as well as longer-term) interventions to address the current employment challenges
 - Budgetary constraints across government
 - Proposals for a revision of the Belfast masterplan and discussions around a possible integrated economic strategy for the city

- National-level welfare reforms which will have a disproportionate impact on those areas of the city which experience high levels of deprivation and worklessness
- A decrease in labour demand coupled with growing unemployment levels.
- A new round of tendering for a range of services, including LEMIS and Steps to Work.

LEMIS and the evaluation report (FGS McClure-Watters, October 2009)

10. The FGS McClure Watters report on the evaluation of the LEMIS programme recommended that the LEMIS Stakeholder Forums should be abolished once arrangements were put in place with the new councils (11 were proposed) and the Workforce Development Forums to provide the link between LEMIS providers and employers. However, given that the Review of Public Administration which recommended these changes has not been fully implemented to date, this proposal had to be reviewed.
11. DEL has indicated that it still wishes to push ahead with a review of the stakeholder arrangements – not only for LEMIS but across a range of employability and skills interventions. To this end, senior officers have made contact with Belfast City Council and with other local authorities to explore options for establishing and managing local stakeholder groups to ensure better congruence between policymakers and providers and to ensure that provision is led by and meets employer needs.

A possible model – the City Strategy approach

11. As part of the preliminary work on the Belfast Employability and Skills plan, the City Strategy model was identified as one that partners may consider for implementation in Belfast.
12. In GB the city strategy initiative was first announced in the welfare reform green paper of January 2006. It intended to combat the issues of worklessness and

poverty in urban areas by empowering local institutions to develop local solutions. They key aims were to:

- Significantly improve employment rates (particularly among the most disadvantaged)
 - Ensure that individuals were better able to find and remain in work
 - Improve the skills of individuals so that they could progress in work.
13. Fifteen “pathfinder” areas were selected for an initial two year period (later extended for a further two years). The initiative concluded in March 2011.
14. The initiative was about aligning resources and providing the freedom to innovate and tailor services to local needs through partnership working. Although some initial seedcorn funding was provided to successful pathfinders, city strategies were largely focused on getting better value from the services provided. There was also an opportunity to identify and plug gaps and to develop and offer supplementary services to individuals or groups of clients.
15. An evaluation of phase 1 of the city strategy initiative has identified a range of lessons around the central/local relationship tensions; partnership and focus and labour demand issues. This information is a useful learning resource for any similar partnership initiative in this field.

Purpose of the local partnership forum - a proposal

16. Building on the previous work undertaken and on similar partnership initiatives elsewhere, it is suggested that the purpose of a local partnership forum would be to encourage inclusive economic growth by making mainstream employment support function better and identifying innovative approaches to employability support for specific groups, sectors and locations, if appropriate.
17. As in the case of the city strategy partnerships, the focus would be on:
- Improving employment rates (particularly among the most disadvantaged)

- Helping people find work and stay in employment
- Improving the skills of individuals so that they could progress in work.

18. This type approach could also contribute to:

- Improvement in the quality of life, health and education for people in areas of greatest need
- More cohesion of services to boost and develop confidence within communities
- Improved life chances for children and young people.

19. Following a strategic review to agree priorities and areas of action, the forum may consider the development of a concerted programme to address these issues with a focus on results and tangible impact on the ground. It should ensure a “whole city” view of employment services and skills development provision, while taking account of local needs and variances.

As such, its role in Belfast would be to:

- Develop and agree an overarching strategic framework covering the breadth of the worklessness and skills agenda in Belfast, which informs and shapes partner organisations’ business plans
- Mobilise mainstream and discretionary funds to deliver the agreed strategy
- Address gaps in provision and barriers to delivery that hinder progress in achieving the agreed priorities
- Develop and manage appropriate data management systems which support enhanced labour market intelligence and help target interventions to ensure delivery of agreed targets
- Monitor performance against target

- Share best practice from partner organisations and wider to enhance the quality of provision.
20. New ways of inter-organisational working will undoubtedly require cultural change however effective partnership working as envisaged has the potential to extend the worklessness brief to new policy domains and elevate the profile of employability in policy debate.

Representation

21. It is proposed that a strategic “board” be established to oversee and direct the work, ensuring that strategic decisions are translated into operational commitment and action in delivery. It is possible that a number of operational sub-groups/working groups would be established, as appropriate.
22. While it is not possible to identify the specific composition at present, it is considered that senior personnel from a number of key organisations should be involved. These may include:
- The local authority – Belfast City Council
 - Department for Employment and Learning
 - Other appropriate government departments (INI/DSD/OFMDFM)
 - Employers’ representatives (BITC)
 - Chamber of Commerce/other business organisations
 - Universities/further education college(s).
- In order to ensure effective decision-making, it is proposed that the core board should remain fairly small, with operational activity devolved to appropriate action/working groups. The final structure is likely to reflect the priorities identified from the initial analysis.
 - A proposed structure is outlined in Appendix 1 of this paper. It is essential that the structure supports a series of action rather than become a “talking shop” therefore representatives should be senior officers within their respective

organisations, capable of making decisions and committing to action, on behalf of their organisation.

Management

23. The board and working groups will require a secretariat to provide ongoing management support and to ensure coordination between the partners represented on the groups.
24. Initial discussions have taken place between DEL and Belfast City Council to consider how these resources may be provided, possibly through a secondee from DEL on a fixed-term basis. Further discussion on this matter will be required and approval from both organisations to the proposed approach must be in place before this management structure can be agreed.

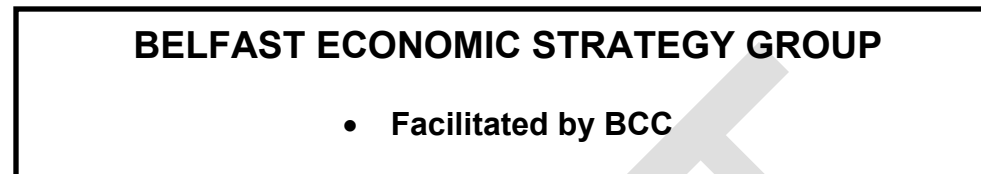
Proposed next steps

- Draft policy paper presented to Belfast City Council
- Policy paper presented to DEL Senior Management Group and Board for approval
- Submission to new DEL Minister for approval as pilot approach for designated city areas
- Representation to strategic board discussed and agreed

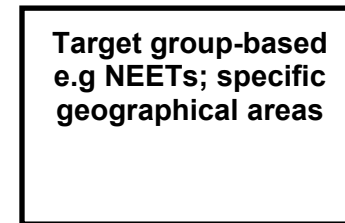
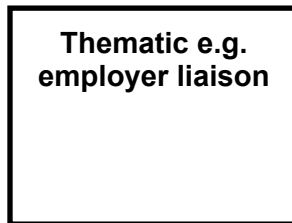
It is envisaged that the board would meet 4 times per year and the working subgroups 6 times per year.

- Date set for first meeting at which key priorities are agreed
- Subgroup representation established and date set for first meeting
- Ongoing reporting to Belfast City Council and other key stakeholders.

**Appendix 1 –
operational structure -
options**



**Operational/
work groups - options**



Issues to be finalised:

- Structure
- Representation
- Budgets
- Leadership
- Engagement
- Strategy v service delivery
- Targets
- Reporting
- Resourcing