

Belfast City Council



Our reference:

Date:

Ms. Gina McIntyre
7th Floor
The Clarence West Building
2 Clarence Street West
Belfast
BT2 7GB

Dear Ms. McIntyre,

Consultation on EU PEACE PLUS Programme 2021-2027

Belfast City Council welcomes the opportunity to input into the initial proposals, which will underpin the new EU PEACE PLUS programme 2021-2027 and recognise the transformative potential that the programme presents for Belfast and wider region. We look forward to ongoing engagement and co-design approach to firming up and bringing forward the programme.

In submitting its response, the Council commends the European Commission and Government on its clear commitment to further invest during a period emerging from the Covid-19 pandemic, which has further widened major inequalities that already existed across the city and region.

In addition to providing feedback on the specific questions contained in the online consultation survey, there are a number of strategic comments the Council would wish to highlight as set out below. We believe that these should be considered as they seek further strengthen the potential of the programme and take account of local delivery structures and opportunities.

Strategic considerations in developing EU PEACE PLUS Programme

- 1. Scope of programme** – We are supportive of the proposed focus of the emerging programme and the associated thematic pillars. The Council believes that this programme presents a huge opportunity to address many of the ongoing challenges facing the region and its capital city. Furthermore, it provides a chance to work across government and sectors to create a new collaborative partnership which supports co-design and shared delivery.
- 2. Scaling opportunity and impact through Community Planning** - Community planning, the duty led and facilitated by councils, has massive potential to materially assist the EU PEACE PLUS programme, but importantly, in its own right, is a citizen and locality-based statutory instrument to materially contribute to Covid Recovery and future public services delivery. The Council-led Community Planning Partnerships need to be utilised to their full potential with greater integration into wider Policy delivery, with the subsequent Community Plans being inter-departmentally recognised as hubs for locality based joint investment.

We therefore welcome the reference to community planning in Theme 1 but would also highlight the conflict in narrative to exploring other governance relationships. As a Council we seek further engagement with SEUPB on how we build upon existing community planning structures in supporting this programme and development of co-design local Community Peace Action Plans.

- 3. Concentration of need and opportunity in Urban Areas** - Cities have an important role in creating sustainable economic growth and acting as regional hubs for both employment,

creativity and innovation as well as being concentrations of deprivation and need. The programme consultation document from SEUPB refers to ‘Smart **Towns and Villages**’ but needs to also include reference to ‘smart cities and hubs. An Innovation and Growth Commission has been established and Innovation Commissioner in place within Belfast.

The Programme has a clear and “*renewed focus ... on rural and border communities in particular through initiatives which will support regeneration and reimagining of rural areas*”. However, this should not be at the expense of support for regeneration and reimagining urban areas. We would urge the Programme not to ignore the challenges faced by the region’s urban centres, particularly because of the impact of COVID19 and to recognise the role of urban centres in supporting economic and social life beyond their geographic boundaries at a regional level. While the benefits of agglomeration mean that cities are places of productivity, creativity and opportunity; they are also places where inequalities in education, housing and health are most exposed. There remains a clear need for sustained focus on peace and reconciliation efforts in cities/urban areas, as recent events have shown.

4. **Encouraging and embedding real partnership and co-design approach** - The Council believes that this programme presents a huge opportunity to address many of the ongoing challenges facing the region and its capital city. Furthermore, it provides a chance to work across government and sectors to create a new collaborative partnership, which supports co-design and shared delivery.

We note that emerging programme proposals outlines ‘how government, community and individuals will work together to build a united community, based on equality of opportunity and the desirability of good relations and reconciliation and will achieve change against key priorities’ (programme document, page 13). We look forward to better understanding how this broad aim translates into financial commitment to building inclusive, diverse communities. As with previous Peace programmes it is welcome that there are specific horizontal principles on equality which are stipulated by the European Commission under EU Programme including PEACE PLUS, and that applications under the Programme will be assessed against these requirements.

We welcome that the content of the Programme has been developed through community engagement, including citizens that are most marginalised, underprivileged communities, BAME communities, disabled persons and women accessing education and business. This demonstration of the Peace Plus Programme as a mechanism to promote equality of opportunity is further reflected in the diverse range of linked policies including strategies relating to disability and older people. We welcome SEUPB’s commitment to monitoring for equality of opportunity.

Whilst it is welcome that the Programme Development process is supported by a Programme Development Steering Group (PDSG), comprising of members with expertise in issues relating to social inclusion, gender equality and non-discrimination, and how these relate to peace transition – this development is at the macro level. This demonstration of commitment to equality of opportunity should be reflected at local level.

5. **Thematic Feedback** – the following section outlines a number of strategic considerations linked to the thematic proposals set out in the consultation document. This feedback is submitted given the current limitations and functionality of the online survey.
 - (i) **The Empowering communities** theme refers to institutional capacity but also needs to also focus on building community and civic capacity to support implementation and sustainability.

- (ii) **‘Youth and Mental Health and Wellbeing’** – is a major issue for the city and goes beyond ‘Youth’, effecting older groups, particularly with the impact of Covid which has contributed significantly to creating mental health and social wellbeing challenges and widened existing health inequalities which existed across the city and wider region. Addressing health inequalities, with a specific focus on mental health and social wellbeing is a key focus of the Belfast Agenda and work of the community planning partnership within Belfast.
- (iii) **Learning and Together Education Programme** – council would like to make SEUPB aware of the established Educational Inequalities Task Group, which has been formed under Belfast Agenda and community planning to develop and manage the delivery and coordination of programmes and projects to address educational inequalities across Belfast.
- (iv) **Collaborative Health and Social Care** - Addressing health inequalities, with a specific focus on mental health and social wellbeing is a key focus of the Belfast Agenda and work of the community planning partnership within Belfast. Strong partnership with health colleagues, communities and service users in place and work underway to create an enhanced and integrated care system within the city and wider region. Council would also like to highlight the associated importance of supporting the development of innovative community based health care interventions, particularly with a focus on early intervention and prevention – this is particularly important in areas adversely affected by the NI conflict and its legacy where community trauma has to be addressed through holistic approaches.
- (v) **Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing in addition to Theme 3.** Belfast’s Community Planning Partnership is determined to work in collaboration to create a healthier city. The interrelated societal challenges linked to drugs, alcohol and mental health were identified as a key area of focus which was felt could be addressed in a more collaborative and holistic way. The Partnership recently agreed to explore a complex lives model to support vulnerable people and those ‘at risk’ from alcohol, drugs and mental health challenges.
- (vi) **Rural Regeneration and Social Inclusion** there is no reference to Urban Regeneration and Social Inclusion. There is a concentration of deprivation, social issues and need for investment in urban areas and overall regional benefit will only be achieved when urban regeneration and rural regeneration work effectively together.
- (vii) **Supporting a sustainable and Better Connected Future.** – We recommend inclusion of ‘digital connectivity’. *Accessible environment makes a contribution to people having long, healthy active lives* – Council is well positioned to enhance and transform public parks and open spaces particularly in areas with high health inequalities. Investment in Council open spaces, particularly in segregated areas across the city, increases the number of venues where people from different backgrounds can meet. This investment could also connect different areas of the city through linking open spaces and promote enhanced access to the environment.
- (viii) **Enhanced Sustainable Travel connectivity** – we strongly support proposal for new rail rolling stock and infrastructure upgrades to facilitate the introduction of an hourly service between Dublin and Belfast. Also, we would like to see potential investment in cycling infrastructure included in this programme. Council strongly supports the focus and proposed investment in **‘Strategic Planning and Engagement’** to increase cross border collaboration. We highlight the work being taken forward through the Belfast Regional City Deal in strengthening collaboration across local government in NI and exploring opportunities to further enhance cross border relation including economic and commuter (e.g. Dublin-Belfast Economic Corridor) and wish to explore how we can develop stronger relations with Dublin and other economic hubs in context of UK’s exit from EU.

- (ix) Council strongly supports the focus and proposed investment in **‘Maintaining and Forging Relationships between Citizens’**. It is important to note that the legislation and statutory guidance for community planning outlines the need for Community Planning Partnerships to ensure they seek to involve the ‘Community’ (in its widest sense) in the community planning process, to ensure that community has a voice into the process and that views are taken into account. While the recently established Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise Sectoral Advisory Panel (Belfast) increases participation and representation of the third sector in Belfast within community planning the Partnership would also have aspirations to increase the involvement of the wider community or citizens within the community planning process, particularly with a local focus. Considering the population of Belfast has grown in excess of 340,000 residents this is clearly a challenging task. We suggest the potential creation of an ‘Innovation Fund’ to enable and encourage the development of innovative ideas and demonstrator pilots/interventions to address societal and community challenges, which has been further exacerbated by the Covid-19 Pandemic.
- (x) **Equality** - The gathering of evidence/information for Section 75 categories is grouped into a single overall category. Similarly needs, priorities and experiences groups some of the nine identities. This approach means that when the screening questions are applied the flow from evidence to policy impact is not always clear – for example evidence on disability reads across to needs of disabled people, and the impact of the programme and appropriate mitigations can be comprehensively considered. We fully acknowledge the challenges of the screening process, particularly at the macro level, however consideration of providing evidence in this way could help to inform development and delivery of the programme to a more inclusive and diverse population. We welcome the references to language and access requirements and also references to proposed legislation to deal with language and culture issues – the fund could also be used to promote understanding of the issues relating to indigenous minority languages in Northern Ireland.

The Council looks forward to building upon the work of the previous PEACE and INTERREG programmes and continuing to work in partnership with SEUPB at every opportunity to deliver on the ambitious set out within these proposals and to contribute positively to building peace and prosperity across Northern Ireland.

We look forward to further engagement with the SEUPB and NI Executive colleagues to discuss how we can collectively ensure we maximise the impact of the PEACE PLUS programme. This will include the role of local authorities, working in partnership, in co-designing and implementing impactful projects, programmes and interventions under the thematic area outlined as well as developing the Peace Action Plans.

Should you require clarification in respect of the appended information please do not hesitate either myself or my colleague Ryan Black Director of City and Neighbourhood Services at BlackRyan@belfastcity.gov.uk

Thank you for the opportunity to input the views of Belfast City Council on this important programme.

Yours sincerely

Councillor Christina Black

Chair of Strategic Policy and Resources Committee
Belfast City Council