

UKSPF Northern Ireland Partnership Group
4th July 2023, 3pm-5pm
Erskine House, 20-32 Chichester St, Belfast

Members attending:

Name	Organisation	Sector
John Osborne (Chair)	DLUHC	UK government
Ciaran Hayes – Deputy Director, Economy Group	NIO	UK government
Harry Welsh, NIO	NIO	UK government
Lisa Toland – Senior Manager, Economy - on behalf of John Greer	SOLACE (Belfast City Council)	Local government
James Dylan, representing Professor Sir Ian Greer, Vice Chancellor	Queen’s University Belfast	Higher education/skills
Celine McStravick - CEO	NICVA	Voluntary and community
Valerie McConville - CEO	CO3	Voluntary and community
Phil Murray – Policy and Public Affairs Manager, representing Christopher Morrow	NI Chambers of Commerce	Business
Kate Beggs – Director for NI	National Lottery Community Fund	Funders

Secretariat

The meeting was supported by DLUHC officials: Chris Taylor, Karis Hewitt, Phil Lloyd and Paula Armstrong (in person) and Conor Harrison (online).

1. Chair’s Welcome and Introductions

The Chair welcomed members to the meeting, noting:

- Declarations of members interests for all members and nominees.
- Apologies from Prof Sir Ian Greer (Queen’s University, Belfast), Adrian McCreesh (Mid Ulster District Council/SOLACE), and John Walsh (Belfast City Council/SOLACE).
- CBI did not attend the meeting due to a pause in engagement.

2. Progress update since the last meeting

DLUHC and NIO officials provided a short overview of wider context including:

- Engagement with bodies across NI on issues such as Investment Zones and seeking to maximise opportunities regarding the Windsor Framework.
- Engagement with the Northern Ireland Civil Service in the context of a challenging funding landscape.

DLUHC officials provided an overview of progress since the last meeting:

Economic Inactivity Projects

DLUHC officials provided a thematic and geographic overview of the 18 projects contracted, noting the total investment value of £57.6m, £15.6m more than originally allocated, in

recognition of the quality of proposals submitted, scale of the economic inactivity challenge and intent to optimise geographic and thematic spread.

Members noted that:

- The collaboration seen in organisations coming forward with joint bids was comprehensive and welcome;
- Timing of the decisions was sub-optimal for bidders, particularly regarding staff-planning.
- First payments totalling of £11.3m had been paid to most projects, and that the next tranche of funding will be due in December, subject to validation of performance reports before release of funding. DLUHC noted that the aim is to pay as soon as possible after each reporting period but recognised that this does result in payment partially in arrears for the following funding period.
- A workshop session is being planned in the coming weeks to set out reporting and other requirements to contracted EI projects.

DLUHC officials noted suggestions from members around reporting and payment schedules, which will be subject to further consideration.

Enterprise Support Service (ESS)

DLUHC officials provided Members with a short overview of the commissioned proposals from the 11 Councils in NI for ESS.

Members broadly endorsed the proposals, noting that:

- Belfast City Council (BCC) representatives provided further detail on the proposals to simplify the support eco-system and reflect local need;
- Support for the idea of wrap-around support for varying levels of business maturity and extending beyond the current business plan support;
- Sectoral tailoring was important, as were barriers for female entrepreneurs, such as childcare issues, which BCC representatives agreed to take away when procuring the third-party elements of the service.

Assessment is ongoing with selection recommendations expected to Ministers in due course.

Innovation, Manufacturing and Sector Support

DLUHC officials gave an update on discussions with Department for the Economy and Invest NI officials on initial proposals for manufacturing, innovation and sector support.

Members expressed general support for the proposals, noting:

- Recognising that New Deal for Northern Ireland provides support at the introductory/advice-level for innovation, creating an opportunity for UKSPF to support intermediate level innovation support.
- That there is a strong need for green sector growth as a key priority which could be brought forward at a faster pace.
- Support for clustering linked to 10 x sectors/opportunities.
- Support for the concept of female led business grants, recognising female-led businesses are an under-represented cohort.

Members also noted the need for aligned marketing with the Enterprise Support Service to avoid confusion and ensure complementarity.

Multiply

DLUHC officials gave an update on discussions with Department for the Economy on initial proposals for a package of Multiply support covering a range of linked projects across Northern Ireland.

Members expressed general support for the proposals, noting:

- That community and voluntary sector involvement was essential in delivering Multiply support – not simply as a source of beneficiaries, but as potential deliverers in community settings that are more accessible to people with numeracy barriers.
- Belfast City Council highlighted its digital badging method for recording non-accredited learning. This may be a suitable vehicle across Northern Ireland to record learning in a recognisable way for individuals and employers, and BCC is happy to discuss its use with the Department for the Economy.

3. Evaluation

DLUHC officials outlined the evaluation strategy for the fund, which was published in March 2023 on gov.uk, covering fund-level evaluation, intervention level evaluation and place-based case studies.

Members noted that:

- Development of a fuller evidence-base was welcome, especially for under-evaluated interventions.
- Their views were welcomed on how to select 3 x NI UKSPF place based case studies (for example rural or urban locations, geography or other factors).
- Timescales for evaluation to inform successor funding to UKSPF were challenging, and that it is likely that emerging or interim findings will need to be used in taking any future fund design decisions.

4. Terms of Reference (ToR)

Members noted updated terms of reference to reflect the delivery phase of the fund. This included proposed review groups for the Supporting Local Business and Economic Inactivity funding streams.

Members suggested that:

- Review groups might be more appropriate if project-led with the potential for Partnership Group members joining as appropriate.
- Regular workshops/sessions with deliverers may be of value and have been useful in delivery of other funds.

5. Any Other Business

None.

6. Date of next meeting

Date to be arranged, likely to be end of September or early October.

Meeting concluded 1650 hours.