

UKSPF Partnership Group
26 March 2024, 11.30am-1.30pm
Erskine House, Chichester St, Belfast

Members attending

Name	Organisation	Sector
John Osborne (chair)	DLUHC	UK government
James Dillon (representing Prof Sir Ian Greer)	Queens University Belfast	Higher education/skills
Valerie McConville	CO3	Voluntary & community
Adrian McCreesh (left meeting at 12.45)	SOLACE (Mid Ulster District)	Local government
Celine McStravick	NICVA	Voluntary & community
Phil Murray (representing Suzanne Wylie – left meeting at 12.35)	NI Chamber of Commerce	Business
Lisa Toland (representing John Walsh)	SOLACE (Belfast City Council)	Local government
Harry Welch	NIO	UK government

Secretariat

The meeting was supported by DLUHC staff – Chris Taylor and Rebekah Bleakley (in person), and Karis Hewitt and Benjamin Ekpenyong (via Teams).

Apologies

Apologies were received from Professor Sir Ian Greer (Queens University Belfast – represented by James Dillon), John Walsh (represented by Lisa Toland) and Suzanne Wylie (Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce – represented by Phil Murray).

1. Chair’s welcome

The Chair welcomed members and nominees to the ninth UKSPF Northern Ireland Partnership Group meeting and noted the declaration of members’ interests.

2. Progress since the last meeting

DLUHC officials provided an update on activities undertaken since the last meeting, including on the Northern Ireland budget position and potential implications for the fund.

2.1 Funding allocation to date

DLUHC officials gave an updated overview of UKSPF funding allocated to NI to date:

- The UKSPF NI budget has been reduced by £22.6m which was repurposed to increase the NI Executive’s budget by £708m to support important public priorities, needs and opportunities. This does not affect existing projects.
- Two new projects discussed at the last PG (£5.9m for Multiply numeracy support and £11.2m for local business innovation support) have now been approved. These will be announced at the inaugural East-West Council today (26 March 2024).
- We have now committed £93m, representing 90% of the revised UKSPF NI budget.

2.2 Update and feedback on Economic Inactivity projects

DLUHC officials updated members on the Economic Inactivity portfolio:

- Contract Managers have established a regular schedule of project visits, to maintain awareness of progress and challenges.
- DLUHC have now made the final payments for 2023/24, totalling 96% of what had been forecast for 23/24.
- The team have also facilitated two workshops with projects to help to clarify requirements around referral and output/outcome reporting.
- Projects have been provided with an updated external assurance scope, which adjusts the timeframe from six months to five, to help projects deal with financial year-end reporting and in response to feed back.
- Evaluation work is ongoing, with some of our business support and EI projects already working with our evaluation partners. We would like to thank projects for the effort they've been putting into this. We are also working on intervention-level and process evaluations.
- The next reporting window will run from the 1-21 April. We will send out the reporting template this week (before Easter). We will review the performance shown through these year-end reports to inform our next round of payments in June.

Feedback was received from members on the programme budget, spend reprofiling, and the challenges of winding down at the end of 2024/25.

2.3 Future funding – post 2024/25

DLUHC officials invited members to provide any views on the programme as it enters its final year, and any factors that would affect delivery, noting interest from members and their wider stakeholders in any plans for funding after March 2025.

Members acknowledged the inherent challenges of planning during a likely election year, but highlighted the impact that uncertainty relating to future funding would have on programme delivery, including:

- Staff leaving the third sector for more secure or higher-paid employment in other sectors, especially in a tight labour market. Some projects were concerned about redundancy payments and having to issue protective notices
- Potential lasting impact on capacity of the third sector as a whole, and a reduced capacity to tackle economic inactivity in Northern Ireland.
- Potential delivery hiatus, reducing the successful impact of UKSPF projects.
- Potential pressure on other public sector resources, such as LMPs.

Members were keen to explore any measures that members/wider stakeholders can take to help ensure that funding decisions are made well before March 2025. DLUHC officials confirmed that decisions relating to additional funding and/or an extension to the funding period beyond 2024/25 is a matter for the next Spending Review. The Department noted members' and projects' need for clarity and members stated they would collate and provide further information on specific, real-world impacts of an announcement of future plans in line with Spending Review timelines on the people and economy of Northern Ireland, to help inform decision-making.

3 Options for the remaining 2024/25 UKSPF NI budget

DLUHC officials set out the remaining unallocated budget for 2024/25 alongside key considerations:

- To date the majority of UKSPF in NI has been allocated to People & Skills interventions, followed by Supporting Local Business interventions, with the smallest allocation to Communities & Place. Compared to the original UKSPF NI Investment Plan, the People & Skills allocation is markedly higher.
- The remaining budget is currently approximately £9.8m, although subject to change depending on the level of reprofiling agreed between 23/24 to 24/25 for projects. DLUHC is also in receipt of a £680k Multiply funding request, but this has yet to be assessed.
- There was no scope to increase existing projects with Invest NI, DfE (Multiply) or the Enterprise Support Service.
- Additionally, the competitive process for awarding Economic Inactivity funding, and absorptive capacity during 2024-25, mitigates against additional funding to EI projects.

In summary, a new commission via an NI public body/ies was considered the most practical way to deploy the remaining funds, subject to an agreed delivery method, equalities analysis, additionality and Ministerial approval.

DLUHC officials set out the main options, taking account of deliverability, contribution to UKSPF objectives, and value for money:

Communities & Place investment through local authorities

Members noted that:

- Value for money from the initial Communities & Place investments (Green Spaces Development) was good.
- Currently, the proportion of UKSPF investment in NI allocated to Communities & Place is by far the lowest of the three investment priorities, which is almost inverse to allocations in England, Scotland and Wales.
- Pride in place remains a priority for the NI Investment Plan and there is a portfolio of project proposals, with local community buy-in already, which could be funded through UKSPF.
- Communities & Place investment, especially if encompassing a wider scope of potential interventions and delivered through local authorities, is likely to have relatively strong deliverability.

People & Skills investment through Labour Market Partnerships/DfC

Members noted that:

- Upskilling is a key need for employers in many areas, as noted in the Plan – but significant funding for tertiary education is already available through the PeacePlus programme
- As the remaining UKSPF budget is quite small, dividing it into different investment priorities would likely reduce effectiveness. In view of this, they endorsed an investment in Communities & Place for the remaining budget, alongside potentially identifying People & Skills investments as reserve projects in event of underspend being identified.

4 AOB

None.

5 Date of next meeting

Members agreed to schedule the next meeting for 4 June 2024