

22 December 2011



Mr Ricky Irwin
OFMDFM
Castle Buildings
Stormont Estate
BELFAST
BT4 3SR

Dear Ricky

RE: Social Investment Fund (SIF) Consultation

I wish to thank you and Orla for attending the recent Board Meeting of the Rural Development Council (RDC) and outlining to members regarding the proposed Social Investment Fund.

Members and Senior Management within the organisation have had an opportunity to discuss and welcome the £80m Social Investment Fund and support the aspirations outlined in the consultation document. RDC as a thought leader in Rural Development recognises the aims and objectives of the Social Investment Fund as being highly relevant to the fabric of rural society.

Having reviewed the Consultation Document we would like to make the following comments:

Social Investment Fund High Level Overview

We acknowledge the aim of the Social Investment Fund is to “reduce Poverty, Unemployment and Physical Deterioration” and that these are vital elements for facilitating the future re-balancing of austerity in Northern Ireland. This is complementary to RDC values particularly in relation to building confidence with local communities to bring about positive change working towards the vision of a living, working, sustainable, shared countryside (see Appendix 1).

In our experience there is a perception that we as a community in Northern Ireland and indeed community organisations, funding agencies, policy departments, private organisations and government have an understanding of Poverty, Unemployment and Physical Deterioration. It is essential that there are clear joined up definitions agreed and clarity relating to these aims and the supplementary Strategic Objectives.

The Strategic Objectives identified namely Building Pathways to Employment, Tackling the Systemic Issues linked to Deprivation, Increasing Community Services and Addressing Dereliction are strongly embedded in both rural and urban Northern Ireland. There is no doubt that these challenges place additional demands on the social, economic and environmental development of the region as a whole. However, we would raise concern that these appear to be high level and thought needs to be given to how effective and efficient the implementation and impact of these will be within the proposed eight investment zones.

RDC
17 Loy Street
Cookstown
County Tyrone
BT80 8PZ
Tel 028 8676 6980
Fax 028 8676 6922
email info@rdc.org.uk
www.rdc.org.uk



Consideration needs to be given on how the Strategic Objectives could be prioritised against evidence of need. We also strongly recommend that an appropriate monitoring and evaluation process is built into the implementation of the Fund to ensure flexibility to meet identified during the Programme life cycle.

Proposed Options for Delivery of Funding/Proposed Management Structures

We are aware that the consultation document does contain a section on Rural Proofing. However the identification of the aims of the Fund being delivered through potential areas and cascaded into the potential eight investment zones in our view does not adequately reflect rural circumstances as it tends to favour larger settlements to the exclusion of rural areas.

In particular, consideration should be given to the existing proposed eight investment zones to ensure that a more equitable rural focus is established. Rural communities account for 4 out of 10 people and make a significant contribution to the region and therefore Government Policy and Programmes should represent this reality.

Whilst welcoming an area based planning methodology we would emphasise that the proposed approach should be complementary to existing strategies and plans within Northern Ireland such as the Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme (Axis 3) as administered by Local Action Groups. The Social Investment Fund should also contribute to existing programmes in terms of possibly providing match funding, the leveraging of additional funding or as a single funder

We would raise caution regarding the implementation of the plan and the need to ensure that the processes, systems and procedures do not become over bureaucratic. The delivery of the Fund should be distributed through a methodology drawn from a high level of experience in administering public grant funding within proper corporate governance procedures in a timely and flexible manner.

I have attached the consultation questionnaire (see Appendix 2) with additional comments for consideration against the specific questions posed.

I hope that you find the comments provided useful as you finalise the document and should you wish to discuss further please do not hesitate to get in contact with either myself or Joy Hadden.

Yours Sincerely



Tony McCusker
RDC Chair

RDC
17 Loy Street
Cookstown
County Tyrone
BT80 8PZ

Tel 028 8676 6980
Fax 028 8676 6922

email info@rdc.org.uk
www.rdc.org.uk