



Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action

NICVA's response to the
Draft National Strategic Reference Document

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1 Introduction

1.1 NICVA (the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action) is the umbrella body for the voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland. It provides its 1,130 members with information, advice, training and support services on a wide range of issues, together with representation for the sector as a whole.

1.2 NICVA works to achieve progressive social change, based on equality and equity, working through a community development approach, to empower local communities to pursue their own needs and agendas.

1.3 NICVA has a keen and longstanding interest in the development of the structural funds in Northern Ireland. Likewise the voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland have actively engaged in the design and implementation of the programmes here.

1.4 We are pleased to have this opportunity to comment on the draft NSRF and the NI chapter in particular. Our comments will not follow the set questions posed in the document.

2 A suite of funding

2.1 The massive changes in the European Union over recent years have meant that the Cohesion Policy has had to take a new direction and now looks towards the new member states. NICVA believes that this is right and we see NI's move away from Objective One status as presenting as many opportunities as it does challenges. The changes to the Cohesion policy also present us with a new funding structure. In our comments on the CSG we agreed with this new strategic approach and welcomed the move towards greater integration between Community priorities and national and regional development plans.

2.2 NICVA believes that the available structural funds in NI (Peace III, Interegg and Employment and Competitiveness) should be viewed as a suite of funds alongside mainstream government funding. We believe that taking a strategic approach to the funding available from government sources will be beneficial for both the sector and government alike. This will involve identifying what kinds of work need to be supported and determining which type of funding is the most appropriate. This approach is also compatible with the move towards developing a Structural Funds programme which is more aligned to Member States priorities.

2.3 If this approach is to be a success it will involve open and honest discussions between the voluntary and community sector and officials from relevant Departments about areas such as priorities, future developments and types of work likely to be supported. Programmes such as Peace III and Competitiveness and Employment should be designed in tandem and the current timescale for consultation on the Territorial Cooperation and Competitiveness and Employment Operational Plans should make this possible. For example measure 3.3 of the current BSP programme in NI supports community infrastructure bodies. Given the renewed importance of the Lisbon agenda in this round of the Funds and the requirement that 75% of funding

should support actions that are Lisbon compatible, it is difficult to see how community infrastructure will be supported in the 2007 round of funding. If the 'suite of funding' approach was to be adopted discussions could be held about the most appropriate place to support this activity. The same could be said of the important ESF type training initiatives that will no longer be supported by the Special Programme for Peace and Reconciliation which will only provide ERDF funding in 2007-2013.

3 Structure of the NSRF.

In our comments on the draft Community Strategic Guidelines NICVA expressed agreement at the move towards a more streamlined framework for the structural funds. We were pleased to see the commitment to ensuring greater ownership of the funds 'on the ground'. We commented on the strong emphasis on social partnership and stressed "*the creation and representativeness of such partnerships should be a pre-requisite of the National Strategic Framework and Operational Plans and Member States should be required to report on the establishment and maintenance of partnership arrangements*" It is therefore disappointing to note that the NSRF makes reference to partnership but does not elaborate on what this will mean in practice. One of the consequences of the streamlining of the structural funds is that the Community Initiatives have been mainstreamed into the new priorities. NICVA is keen to ensure that 'mainstreamed' does not mean 'disappear' and important aspects of the community initiatives, such as the partnership model of equal, are genuinely represented across the funds. We would suggest that the NSRF should make an explicit commitment to maintaining and developing social partnership across the programme and the operational plans should elaborate on what this will mean in practice.

4 50/50 split

NICVA agrees with the decision that the funds should have a 50/50 split between ERDF and ESF. However we would point out that the funds should be used in a complementary manner to make a real impact on the areas of economic inactivity, social exclusion, removing the barriers to employment, long term unemployment and skills development.

5 ESF Programme.

5.1 We agree with the priorities outlined for the new ESF programme. We were pleased to note the importance of tackling economic inactivity, as an assault on economic inactivity was one of the main demands made by the voluntary and community sector in NI in its campaign for a robust anti - poverty strategy.

5.2 Bearing in mind that the Lisbon agenda was about creating '*more and better jobs*' we are pleased to see an emphasis on helping people into '*sustainable employment*' and the importance of skills development, training and life long learning. Paragraph 8.2 below outlines the importance of the voluntary and community sector in helping to deliver on these priorities. NICVA firmly believes that in many cases the voluntary and community sector is best placed to develop and deliver flexible, innovative and

effective programmes that are accessible to people who have been out of the labour market or a learning environment for some time.

6 NRSF and Territorial Cooperation.

Territorial Cooperation is an important element of the structural funds in NI. Therefore it is disappointing that officials were not in a position to include details of this objective in the NRSF. However we do understand the reasons behind this. NICVA has warmly welcomed the €200million for Peace III and the expected matched funding from the UK and Republic of Ireland governments and we look forward to engaging with the SEUPB on the design of both Peace and Interreg in the near future.

7 Lisbon compatibility.

7.1 NICVA has long been concerned that the vision of a social Europe is being sacrificed in the rush to move forward with the jobs and growth agenda. We joined with other civil society representatives in March 2005 to urge the Spring Council meeting to “*recognise that the social, economic, and employment policies should not be seen as competing choices but should be designed in an integrated approach as mutually reinforcing*”. The Spring Council for its part did go some way to reaffirming all three pillars of the Lisbon Strategy (social, economic and environmental) by stating, for example, that “*social inclusion policy should be pursued by the Union and by its Members States*”. We understand that 75% of activity supported from 2007-2013 should be clearly related to achieving targets related to Lisbon. With this in mind it is essential all three of the pillars on which the Lisbon strategy is based must receive adequate importance in national strategic frameworks, operational programmes and ultimately in the projects supported by the cohesion policy.

7.2 Under the ESF programme in Northern Ireland it is suggested that the programme should support actions designed to remove the barriers which prevent people entering the workforce. For Northern Ireland this will mean tackling difficult issues around long term unemployment and economic inactivity. We agree with the NRSF when it suggests that this might include “*flexible, local employability approaches to reduce the personal barriers to entering employment faced by the unemployed, economically inactive and disadvantaged groups*”. The voluntary and community sector in NI has been leading the way in developing innovative and effective actions designed to encourage people to return to learning and/or move into the labour market. This work is often carried out in local areas and will invariably be designed in an accessible way the meets the needs of the user groups eg provision of childcare, support for those with a disability. In many of these cases, and this is even more true for the very hard to reach, the actions will not lead to a recognised qualification or job placement. However support for these ‘first step’ type actions is vitally important if we are serious about really tackling economic inactivity and long term or generational unemployment. For this reason it is vital that these types of actions are viewed as important contributors towards progressing the Lisbon agenda in NI. NICVA has heard from some sources that this might not be the case and so in order to avoid confusion we would recommend that the Commission or relevant Managing Authority

should publish clear guidelines on what actions are to be included in the 75% of the funds which are to be earmarked as contributing towards the Lisbon Agenda.

8 Making the funds accessible.

Given that PEACE III funding will not contain an ESF element in the 2007-2013 programming period and bearing in mind the points made in paragraph 7.2 above, this proposed round of ESF funding must be assessable to organisations in the voluntary and community sector. One of the biggest barriers to this will be the move from a 75% to a 50% intervention rate for European funding under the Competitiveness and Employment objective. Finding matched funding of 50% will be extremely difficult for voluntary and community organisations. We recommend that the design of the programmes in the Operational Plan should consider this very serious issue by exploring ideas such as providing matched funding at source from mainstream government expenditure. This would also be consistent with the principles that the 2007-2013 round of funds should be complementary to existing government expenditure priorities. Some delivery bodies in Peace II operate successful small grants programmes of up to £25,000 and this option could also be considered for ESF. The grants could be co-financed by the delivery body and the monitoring and reporting requirements should be proportional to the amount of the grant. This could be similar in some ways to the global grants scheme currently operating in England.

9 Aligning with existing priorities.

The NSRF outlines the key Northern Ireland policies and priorities for economic development. They are:

- Economic Vision/Regional Economic Strategy.
- Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland 2025
- Regional Development Strategy for Northern Ireland 2025
- Regional Transportation Strategy
- Sustainable Development Strategy
- UK National Reform Programme
- 'A Shared Future'

This is a welcome development. Policies such as the Economic Vision were drawn up in partnership with the social partners and so provide a good model for determining how and where investment is needed in Northern Ireland. It is vitally important that the priorities from 'A Shared Future' influence the spending of Structural Funds in Northern Ireland. If we are serious about creating a peaceful and prosperous society, we cannot only invest in creating communities that are equal but separate. All of the areas in which the Structural Funds will be active, such as investment in infrastructure and labour market interventions, have their part to play in the creation of a shared Northern Ireland. However, it is very disappointing that Targeting Social Need is not mentioned in this list. We understand that the direct rule Ministers in NI are finalising the anti-poverty strategy "Creating Life Long Opportunities" and it is difficult to comment on the role it should play without having seen the content. However we firmly believe that the Structural Funds should be invested in the areas – both geographical and thematic, that need it most. This is, after all, the underpinning principle of the Cohesion Policy and we would like to see that translated into action in the design and implementation of the Policy in NI.

10 Distributing the Structural Funds across the regions.

We also believe that the principle of distribution according to need should be applied to how the Structural Funds are allocated to the different regions of the UK. The formula used should not be based on population alone but should also take into account the regional disparities that exist across the UK. The formula should consider issues such as levels of economic inactivity, physical and technological infrastructure, employment rates, long-term unemployment rates and workforce skills. It is also the case that unlike other UK regions Northern Ireland will be moving from Objective One transitional to Competitiveness (which replaces Objective 2) for the first time. It is reasonable to suggest that this should also be taken into account when allocating funding for the region.

11 Conclusion

In general NICVA agrees with the new, more streamlined and strategic direction of the Structural Funds. However we have serious concerns about current distortion of the Lisbon Agenda and are keen to see the social and environmental pillars adequately represented in the NSRF and the Operational Plans which will follow. NICVA agrees with the focus on long term unemployment, economic inactivity, skills development and life long learning that will drive the Structural Funds Programme in NI and the voluntary and community sector as a whole will be an important partner in delivering on these aims.

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