



Ulster Unionist Party Response to the Social Investment Fund Consultation

December 2011

Introduction

The Social Investment Fund Consultation Document was finally published in September 2011 following agreement in March 2011 for the establishment of a Social Investment Fund (SIF) totalling £80 million over the next four years. The SIF was subsequently included in the 2011-15 Budget which the Ulster Unionist Party could not support for a variety of reasons.

The Ulster Unionist Party welcomes the opportunity to comment broadly on these proposals at this stage.

Objectives

The strategic objectives of the SIF (paragraph 2.02) are to support communities to:

- Build Pathways to Employment
- Tackle the systematic issues linked to deprivation
- Increase community services
- Address dereliction

The Ulster Unionist Party is supportive of these objectives. We do however recognise that each of the four objectives need to be tackled using more than the SIF to ensure that real progress is made and communities see tangible outcomes.

It may be more beneficial to have a more targeted Fund which is clearly focussed on a particular overall objective rather than attempt to set up the SIF as a 'panacea' for the broad themes of poverty, unemployment and physical deterioration. Whilst these themes are commendable, they should mainly be dealt with through the administration of routine government practices.

Investment Zones

The Consultation Document sets out that there are 8 possible 'investment zones' (paragraph 2.03) which are:

- Greater North Belfast

- West Belfast and Greater Shankill
- Greater East Belfast, North Down and Ards
- Greater South Belfast and Lagan Valley
- Londonderry and Greater North West
- Antrim area
- North Antrim
- Border

We would express concerns at this stage that the proposed investment zones do not identify all areas of need in Northern Ireland. As well as that, areas such as Mid Ulster, the Ards Peninsula and the West of the province in general are examples which seem to be particularly neglected.

The Ulster Unionist Party would like to see the investment zones looked at again with a view to restructuring to ensure a balanced approach has been taken as well as greater clarity around the methods used to identify the proposed zones.

Delivery

The SIF Consultation Document recommends that Steering groups are established for each investment zone (paragraph 3.02). The role of these Steering Groups will be to identify priority needs, coordinate the development of strategic area plans and consult with stakeholders. We would have some specific issues regarding the Steering Groups in that political representation will be representative of the investment zone and OFMdFM would be solely in charge of identifying groups and individuals for membership of these Groups. This perpetuates the feeling that the SIF is a DUP/Sinn Fein 'slush fund'. There is also an issue in that representation within Steering Groups would be almost impossible to match to the investment zones as proposed. Therefore, individuals and groups from a certain area will be tasked with decision making on funding allocations for areas other than their own. We are also keen to explore broadening the representation on the Steering Groups to potentially include other aspects of business or financial institutions.

There is a certain lack of clarity over the funding of the SIF. £80 million has been allocated over the 2011-15 budget period, however, given that we are already into year 2 we have been told that funding not spent will be re-profiled from year 1 to years 2, 3 and 4 (paragraph 2.05). The Ulster Unionist Party would like to see these plans in more detail.

The draft Programme for Government identifies that the SIF will be split into two groups of £40 million. One group of £40 million is to address the first 3 objectives outlined above and the other £40 million is to address solely dereliction. We would like to know the rationale behind the division of monies in this way as well as more detail on what tackling the general term of 'dereliction' entails.

Timescale

The consultation document sets out a challenging timescale, bearing in mind the consultation process, for the capacity building stage of the SIF (paragraph 4.02). With no steering group in place, external facilitators can be used; however, the time scale proposed is extremely tight in order to gather all of the necessary information to be in a position to identify the needs of an area.

Conclusion

The Ulster Unionist Party has obvious concerns about the SIF fund, however, we support the rationale behind the Fund and want to see it utilised in a constructive and targeted fashion. It is imperative that those communities most in need are given the benefit of this £80 million and the process of administering the Fund should be as inclusive as possible.