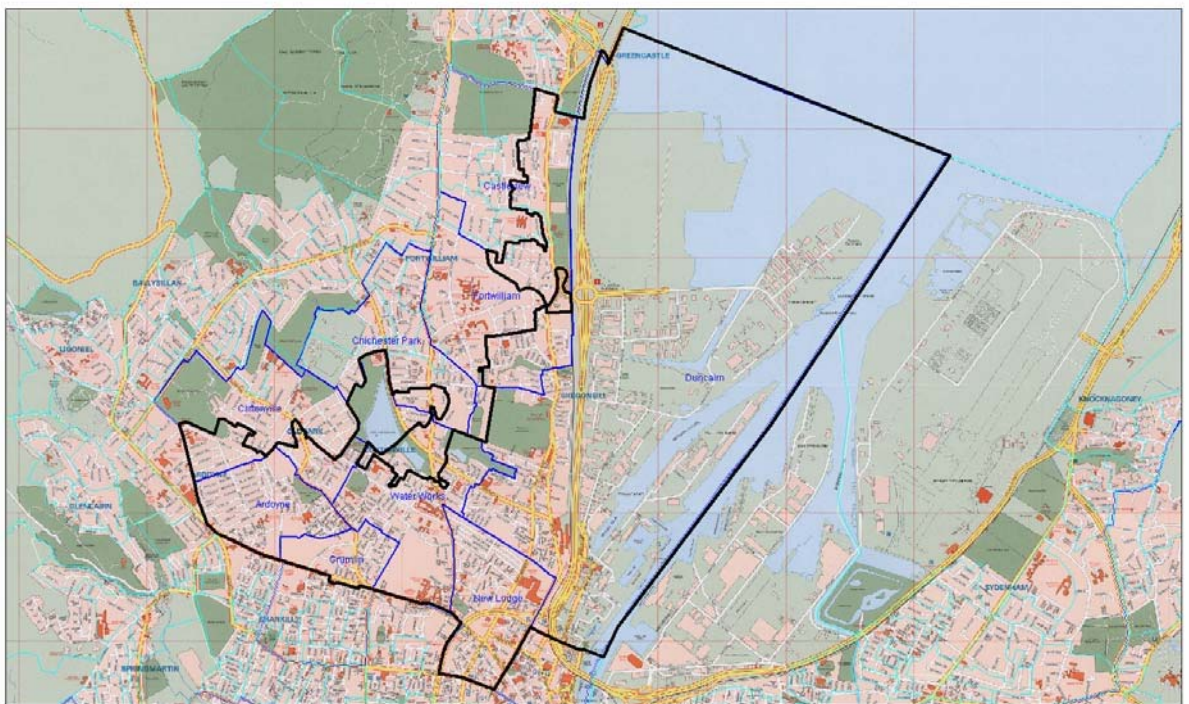


North Belfast Partnership Board URBAN II

Evaluation of Social Economy Support Programme

Executive Summary

July 2005



Urban II area

- Urban II area
- 1883 ward boundary

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1 Introduction

- 1.1 The URBAN II Programme in North Belfast was allocated €17m (including a contribution of €10m from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF)) and is focused on three main priorities (and a range of measures within these priorities):
- Priority 1: Developing the potential of physical and social resources;
 - Priority 2: Developing the potential of people resources; *and*
 - Priority 3: Developing the potential of the Programme through technical assistance.
- 1.2 In October 2002 the North Belfast Partnership Board (NBPB) invited tenders for the design and implementation of a support programme entitled the Social Economy Support Programme (SESP), under Measure 2.2 'Developing the Social Economy and Community Business' of Priority 2. This Measure aims to develop the capacity of the social economy to regenerate inner North Belfast.
- 1.3 The tender for the delivery of the SESP was subsequently awarded to Social Economy Solutions (SES) in November 2002, for approximately £100k with an additional £54k for business planning services agreed at a later date. The SESP had three main objectives: to develop social entrepreneurship, community business activity and the capacity of the intermediate labour market in the URBAN II area.
- 1.4 The programme was designed with four key stages as follows: Stage 1: Awareness Raising and Recruitment Programme; Stage 2: Capacity Audit; Stage 3: Capacity Programme (e.g. through 'open door' training courses and tailored mentoring); *and* Stage 4: Submission and Assessment of Grant Proposals.

Evaluation Methodology

- 1.5 Research for this evaluation was undertaken by PwC between late March and early May 2005. The overall findings were drawn from a number of interviews which were conducted with the main stakeholders involved in the SESP (including representatives from the NBPB and SES past and present); a range of other organisations active in policy and/or the delivery of support to the social economy sector; and representatives from all 24 groups which participated in the SESP.
- 1.6 The remainder of this executive summary considers each of the key issues with regard to the programme's four key stages in turn before analysing the findings and discussing conclusions and potential future direction for the SESP.

Awareness-Raising and Recruitment of Groups to the SESP

- 1.7 A total of 24 groups participated in the programme which was broadly in line with the contractual targets set for the programme. The SESP was successful in attracting groups with a broad range of sectoral orientations/project ideas. The programme was tasked to recruit from the URBAN II area comprising the following wards in North Belfast: Fortwillian, Duncairn, Waterworks, Cliftonville, Ardoyne, Crumlin, New Lodge, Castlevew and Chicester.
- 1.8 This evaluation found that there was a predominance of groups from wards in which the population was predominately Roman Catholic relative to the population of the URBAN II area (based on the 2001 census data). Interestingly, the majority of groups within the NDPB database also resided in areas where the population was predominately Roman Catholic. However, the database was not the only tool used for awareness raising. Advertisements were placed in local papers and Programme Management Executive members were also asked to promote the programme within their community.

- 1.9 The finding that groups from wards in which the population was predominantly Roman Catholic tended to take up the programme reflects a broader trend in Northern Ireland which indicates a need to fully engage the Protestant community in community development activity. In view of this, there may be constraints in terms of the future potential for a social economy approach across the URBAN II area, in that Protestant communities may have to engage more so in the community development arena first, before progressing to community economic development (i.e. the social economy).

Capacity Audit

- 1.10 The purpose of the capacity audit was to conduct a general 'organisational health-check' of participating groups, with particular reference to the potential for a social economy approach. This was to be the main tool to aid the groups in tailoring the impending support from the SESP to their needs, reflecting the inherent flexibility in the design of the programme.
- 1.11 All 24 groups recruited to the SESP completed the capacity audit with SES consultants. The views expressed by the groups were largely very positive about the value of the capacity audit and the fact that it represented a logical first step to subsequently tailor the support from the SESP. Further to the capacity audit, 5 of the 24 groups decided not to progress with any aspect of SESP support. However, the withdrawal of five groups at this stage should not be viewed as a 'failure' within the delivery of the SESP, rather that the support was subsequently tailored to the groups who had the most potential to benefit from the programme.

Open Door Training

- 1.12 The open door training programme entailed ten separate one day sessions which were rolled out twice. Groups were under no obligation to attend any or all of these sessions, however they were encouraged by SES to select the training modules most appropriate to their needs as identified at the capacity audit stage.
- 1.13 Due to the low levels of attendance at these training sessions, it was often not possible to facilitate an effective group dynamic and debate. Although it should be noted that the majority of the groups who availed of the training provided broadly positive feedback.

Individual Group Mentoring

- 1.14 Sixteen of the 24 groups who were accepted on to the SESP availed of individual group mentoring support. Each organisation was entitled to a maximum of 12 days mentoring although the actual amount received differed from group to group.
- 1.15 The majority of mentoring exercises focused on developing organisations' business plans, although some mentors also helped groups undertake some market research to assess the viability of their social economy project, whilst others set up workshops/planning days involving organisations' clients, management committees and staff to tease out strategy plans for the forthcoming years.
- 1.16 Furthermore, most organisations who availed of the mentoring indicated having received highly satisfactory or satisfactory levels of support. Whilst only two of the groups indicated dissatisfaction with the quality of support received in terms of mentoring, there were fairly widespread views expressed in terms of resourcing issues within SES (e.g. staff turnover, resource constraints).

Support with Business Plans

- 1.17 Thirteen groups in the SESP gained support from the SES to develop business plans which was largely delivered through the mechanism of mentoring sessions. The majority of groups availing of business plan support indicated that they had received highly satisfactory or satisfactory levels of support.

- 1.18 Of those groups which did not receive support, seven did not request it as they felt that they had the internal capacity to develop a business plan, one was unaware that support for a business plan was provided under the programme, one requested support and reported that they never received it and the remaining group paid a consultancy firm to write their business plan on their behalf due to time constraints.

Progression of Groups through the SESP

- 1.19 Of the 24 groups which participated in the SESP, 15 availed of the open door training, 16 obtained individual group mentoring and 13 drafted a business plan with support from the SESP. This level of progression is broadly in line with contractual targets set between NBPB and SES at the outset.
- 1.20 To date, eight groups have been successful in their applications for URBAN II grants towards planned social economy projects with one further business proposal currently under assessment. In addition, two groups are currently participating in development support to complete business plans.
- 1.21 It is important to highlight that the successful award of funding support from URBAN II should not be viewed as the most important output of the programme. As indicated by the research findings presented above, each of the programme's main components contributed to progressing participating groups towards social economy projects.

Programme Staffing, Administration and Monitoring

- 1.22 The research conducted suggests that the key SES individuals, the business development manager and the training co-ordinator were all highly competent and dedicated members of staff who were fully committed to the delivery of the programme.
- 1.23 However, the SES appears to have experienced two main difficulties which served to weaken the overall impact of the programme. Firstly, there was a fairly widespread view amongst participating groups that SES 'overstretched' themselves in taking on the SESP. This situation was further exacerbated by staff changes within SES towards the end of the programme. Secondly, there was a clear need for greater levels of ongoing monitoring/quality checks within the programme, to maintain levels of customer satisfaction.
- 1.24 Finally, the 'Touchstone Group' was established within the SESP project management structure to provide a forum for funders of social economy initiatives to co-ordinate their efforts and to provide support and guidance for the SESP. However, this group was disbanded by the NBPB in November 2003, which on reflection, was perhaps too early in view of the range of social economy interventions that have been introduced in the interim.

Impact of the SESP on Participating Groups and Local Communities

- 1.25 Of the 24 groups that participated, involvement in the programme was deemed to have made little or no impact in five cases to date. Of these five groups, three felt unable to participate due to staff/resource constraints and the remaining two groups only participated to a small degree as they considered their organisation as having sufficient capacity, skills and experience to develop social economy projects. The evidence suggests that the programme has made a positive impact on the majority of the remaining groups such as: facilitating organisational improvements, encouraging transition to community economic development and supporting applications for URBAN II funding.
- 1.26 However, it should be noted that there are a number of enabling and constraining factors in the URBAN II area which should be acknowledged in assessing the

performance and impact of the SESP. These factors are considered in detail within the main evaluation report.

- 1.27 The evaluation also considered the impact which the SESP has had to date on the relations and contact within the URBAN II area (i.e. at a community level), through capturing some of the 'social capital gains' attributable to the programme. In terms of the nature of social capital developed, involvement in the SESP was deemed by respondents to have made a greater contribution to the development of 'bonding capital' (i.e. having increased the level of confidence in the community) vis-à-vis 'bridging capital' (i.e. having increased networks and links between community groups/organisations) or 'linking capital' (i.e. having increased the profile of the groups among public forums/public sector representatives).

Value for Money

- 1.28 The overall level of investment in the programme was £153k. The SESP provided varying degrees of support for 24 organisations and a number of other interested organisations which attended the open door training. The programme appears to have offered reasonable value for money. This is further reinforced when reviewed against comparable programmes (e.g. Belfast LSP Social Economy Belfast).

Additionality and Complementarity with other Social Economy Initiatives

- 1.29 In terms of capacity building support to start and develop social enterprises, there are a few other key interventions, some of which were introduced after the start of the SESP. The main initiatives include: the Community Business Start-up Programme and Enquiry Development Programme¹, Ulster Community Investment Trust (UCIT) and Belfast LSP Social Economy Belfast Programme (all of which are discussed in more detail in the full evaluation report).

Future Directions

- 1.30 Overall the SESP made a positive contribution to the social economy environment in the North Belfast area, and as a result there is now a 'bedrock' of existing groups/projects to build on. Looking forward, it would be appropriate to focus on the projects in the post start stage to consolidate and build on what has been achieved thus far.
- 1.31 In the medium term, a key role for any follow up to SESP could be to 'signpost' social enterprises at a reasonably advanced stage of development to other forms of support (e.g. potentially in conjunction with Invest NI). Similarly 'signposting' to UCIT in terms of loan finance to support growth and development of some of the existing social enterprises supported thus far by SESP is also recommended.
- 1.32 A focus on mentoring (at the post start stage) where groups/projects have a dedicated mentor is recommended, as well as the facilitation of 'networking' between groups. In addition, some funds could potentially be set aside for specific training relevant at the post start level linked to training needs analysis at individual group level. All of the above should be strategically co-ordinated with other current provisions and accordingly some form of the 'Touchstone' group should be re-invigorated.
- 1.33 In terms of the delivery of future support, two main options are open to NBPB. The first would be through an external approach, potentially seeking a number of experienced social economy sector organisations/individuals to be included in a 'bank of mentors' reporting to NBPB. The second option would be to recruit a social

¹ This programme is soon to be re-launched as the Social Entrepreneurship Programme.

economy specialist to a staff post within NBPB who would work with the pool of participating groups to provide mentoring support and 'signposting'.

- 1.34 Finally, it is suggested that any future support has a more comprehensive ongoing internal monitoring regime (in terms of ongoing customer satisfaction, tracking and capture of social capital outputs/outcomes).