



**Northern Ireland
Assembly**

Anthony Tohill
Chief Executive
Mid Ulster District Council - Dungannon
Dungannon Office
Circular Road
Dungannon
BT71 6DT

26 November 2020

Dear Mr Tohill,

CRIMINAL JUSTICE (COMMITTAL REFORM) BILL

The Criminal Justice (Committal Reform) Bill was introduced into the Assembly on 3 November 2020. The Bill passed Second Stage on 16 November 2020 and the Committee Stage commenced on 17 November 2020.

The Committee for Justice would welcome your views/comments on the content of the Bill.

Your written submission should be structured to address specific clauses or the Schedule of the Bill. If appropriate, it should include any amendments you wish to propose to the text of the Bill. Information regarding the Bill can be obtained from the Assembly's website <http://nia1.me/4b5> or can be provided on request by emailing the Committee at committalreformbill@niassembly.gov.uk

The closing date for written submissions is **Friday 15 January 2021**.

Written evidence should be submitted in Word format and preferably by email to committalreformbill@niassembly.gov.uk or, by post, to The Committee Clerk, Room 242, Parliament Buildings, Ballymiscaw, Stormont, Belfast, BT4 3XX.

Unless indicated otherwise it will be assumed that those submitting written evidence have no objection to it being made public by the Committee.

If you have any queries or require any further information please contact the Committee Clerk, Christine Darrah, on 028 9052 1629.

Yours sincerely

Christine Darrah

Christine Darrah
Clerk to the Committee for Justice



24th November 2020

Dear Stakeholder

Re: EU Successor Funding in Northern Ireland: Position Paper for Society of Local Authority Chief Executives NI (SOLACE NI)

I am pleased to provide you with a copy of the Executive Summary of SOLACE NI Position Paper in relation to EU successor funding in Northern Ireland, developed with the support of NILGA the Northern Ireland Local Government Association.

The full Position Paper can be accessed via the following link:

<https://www.nilga.org/media/2171/241120-final-ni-spf-position-paper-24-november-2020.pdf>

As you will be aware and as part of its plans for exiting the EU, the UK Government pledged to establish a Shared Prosperity Fund. In July 2018, James Brokenshire (Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government) made a Written Statement setting out more details about the Fund. The main points of this statement were:

- The purpose of the Fund is “to reduce inequalities between communities across our four nations”;
- The method for doing this is “strengthening the foundations of productivity as set out in our modern Industrial Strategy to support people to benefit from economic prosperity”;
- The Government will “respect the devolution settlements in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland” so that the Fund works across the UK;
- Consultation on the design of the Fund would take place later that year.

Although the UK Government has not yet published a consultation on the fund, the wider local government sector in Northern Ireland have had serious concerns that unlike our counterparts in Wales and Scotland, the co-design and regional consultation approach to this future funding, has not yet materialised in Northern Ireland.

Therefore, SOLACE NI took the decision to collectively consider its position and that of the local government sector on the future Shared Prosperity Fund. The outworking of this was the production of a set of principles and recommendations that we believe, will ensure that the SPF will have maximum impact on the challenges and opportunities that exist throughout Northern Ireland. In publishing this report, both organisations believe that it:

- provides definite opportunities to address the issues and historic limitations of the previous local approach to structural funding;
- demonstrates the need that the Shared Prosperity Fund in Northern Ireland must be developed and co-designed through structured collaboration and co-production with partners including Invest NI, local authorities, education, health, the voluntary sector, and industry. This approach can be used to produce more effective impacts, if co-designed in partnership with central government, for the future management and delivery of the Shared Prosperity Fund; and
- articulates strongly the position that through partnership, both central government departments and councils can work together, to align the priorities of the Programme for Government with local Community Plans, providing social cohesion, economic development and infrastructure development for our local areas, yielding enormous results from this package of funding.

We also strongly contend that the funding levels from all EU Funds into Northern Ireland should not be reduced. We appreciate that those levels are proportionately higher than other regions of the UK. However, it is clear that this was designed to address the unique needs of Northern Ireland (as a post conflict society) which are still significant and would deteriorate further if sustainable financial support was to be reduced.

We are hopeful that you find this report to be informative and trust that this work will generate some engagement across all tiers of government and among interested organisations around this crucial issue for Northern Ireland.

Yours sincerely,



Jacqui Dixon
Chair, SOLACE NI

EU Successor Funding in Northern Ireland: Position Paper for SOLACE NI Executive Summary



November 2020



Introduction

ekosgen were commissioned in early 2020 by the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives in Northern Ireland "SOLACE NI" to undertake a research study to explore the future of EU Successor Funding in Northern Ireland. This Executive Summary provides a brief overview of the findings and sets out the recommendations for Northern Ireland. This report has been developed with the support of NILGA, the Northern Ireland Local Government Association.



Context

Now that the UK has left the EU, the UK Government has begun the process of developing a replacement investment mechanism for the EU Structural Funds. The Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF) will address regional disparity and structural economic challenges, and drive innovation, productivity, and sustainable economic development.

The Ministerial Statement of July 2018 strongly links the Shared Prosperity Fund to the UK Industrial Strategy, tackling inequalities between communities by raising productivity, and with an implied geographical focus on those economies which are furthest behind. In Northern Ireland, a refreshed economic strategy is underway, as well as a number of emerging strategies; for example skills and employability and rural development, all of which will align with the UK Industrial Strategy. A future SPF for Northern Ireland must take cognisance of and align to the priorities in these new strategies which will underpin the new Northern Ireland Programme for Government.

The UK SPF will be resourced within the context of the current spending review. At this stage we know the following from the UK Government:

- SPF is a successor to EU Structural Funds, not a continuation.
- There is no commitment to rolling forward current Structural Fund allocations by programme or area and no commitment to taking forward ERDF and ESF financial breakdown across priorities and themes.
- It will have a specific UK remit and be shaped by UK policy objectives, in particular, the Industrial Strategy, not EU Structural Funds heritage.

- It is not clear which Departmental budgets the UKSPF will be funded from.

The distribution and delivery of structural funds is overseen by government departments of the Northern Ireland Executive. Invest NI is the sole intermediate body for the entire Investment in Jobs Programme. Whilst local authorities also have a role in the management and delivery of programmes and initiatives and are match-funders for much of the activity, they do not act as accountable bodies. They do, however, have an important role to play going forward in co-designing (and managing aspects of) the SPF, and sharing their experiences and expertise with the Northern Ireland Executive as the SPF model emerges.

In addition to ensuring that the spending power provided by EU funding is preserved through the SPF, it is also essential that the UK Government respects Northern Ireland's previous status as a transition area for the purposes of EU funding in this new funding regime. This is significant as, although Northern Ireland accounts for only about 2.8% of the UK population, it receives 5% of the UK allocation of EU funds. This will ensure that funding will continue to be concentrated in areas to increase productivity and lessen economic inactivity. Such a commitment would also acknowledge and support Northern Ireland in moving forward as a post-conflict society.

It is also crucial that other funds should not be forgotten, in relation to this new funding regime, such as Peace funds (which may not be extended after this round), as well as ad hoc funds through the European Committee of the Regions.



How Northern Ireland has successfully invested Structural Funds

Since 2000 over the last three EU programme periods Northern Ireland has received some €1,750 million of structural fund support. In the current 2014-2020 programme ERDF and ESF funding has amounted to €492.4 million. This investment is arguably more focused in Northern Ireland versus the rest of the UK - a strategic decision, to target structural funds at the areas or issues of greatest need, address evident market failure and structural economic disparity in Northern Ireland.

Achievements through the current programme (ERDF and ESF) include:

900 Northern Ireland businesses are engaged in R&D.



There has been a 75% increase in the number of high-growth SMEs.



46,704 participants have been supported through access to employment interventions and **11,038 participants** through social inclusion interventions.



30,719 Apprenticeship NI participants have received ESF support.



In particular, Local Economic Development (LED) delivery (through ERDF), and locally delivered employability (through ESF), have been a vital component of Northern Ireland's delivery. The 11 local authorities have demonstrated their capability in the management and disbursement of Structural Funds, from the point of view of procurement, audit, compliance, etc. and also in fulfilling the strategic role they hold in place-making.

They have managed the delivery of LED projects totalling over £14 million in eligible spend, in many cases in collaboration with partner Councils. The approach to delivering City and Growth Deal interventions is further demonstration of this capability and expertise.

Invest Northern Ireland has also utilised ERDF monies to help support innovation in business and assist job creation. It is crucial that Northern Ireland's enterprise agency can continue to provide such financial support.

Northern Ireland's Rural Development Programme (NIRDP) has supported rural economies over a number of years and is a significant source of funding; local authorities have delivered projects totalling £17.82 million to date. This type of investment will need to be supported by a similar fund if rural communities are to continue to thrive and grow. A successor to the NIRDP must be considered alongside discussions about the new SPF.

The SPF should be designed to unlock the potential, and improve the connectivity and accessibility of, Northern Ireland's rural areas, support rural businesses and close the gap between income levels in rural and urban areas.

Northern Ireland's local authorities are an important part of the delivery of Structural Funds. They act as a very effective link between the regional level operational programmes and the local level, providing important, geographically specific knowledge and interpretation so that local needs are met. They are also an important mechanism for establishing a growth pipeline of businesses for progression to intensive support through Invest NI.

EU Funding has also played an important investment role in supporting major capital projects that have been transformational to local economies. Examples include the Giant's Causeway visitor centre, which received nearly £6 million of ERDF funding. This visitor centre has acted as a magnet for tourism and a catalyst from which a range of people and industries have benefitted. The Waterfront Convention Centre also received significant EU funding investment, which has helped to create more business, attracting greater number of tourists, which has seen local investment in the development of hotels positively impacting the local economy.



Limitations of the Structural Fund Approach

Although Northern Ireland's local authorities have achieved many successes in their use of Structural Funds, the approach adopted to managing, overseeing and using the funding has many limitations, and has become more bureaucratic and unwieldy over time. Particular issues include:

- A perceived lack of alignment between regional and local priorities, and priorities in urban and rural areas. Priorities need to be developed with the flexibility to respond to local need identified in Community Plans and outlined in the Executive's Programme for Government, and clusters of need, for example geographical clusters of local authorities, and/or thematic or sectoral clusters. A more place-based approach to planning and investment is required.
- The centralised approach adopted for decision making and managing EU funds has resulted in local authorities having less scope to deliver discretionary activity which is based on local priorities and need. This presents difficulties in delivering holistic packages of support that combine different structural and even other funds. Eligibility rules which exclude the funding of capital expenditure projects have also served to minimise the benefits which can be derived from other types of structural fund investment, for example, in business growth.
- Over-engineered application and administration processes, lengthy timescales for project approvals, and match-funding requirements have combined to reduce the overall impact and benefit derived from the Structural funds. These factors prevent some organisations from applying for funding and make others cautious of doing so; projects are designed to meet the funding criteria rather than being innovative and maximising benefits. Too much time and resource is spent on administration rather than those activities which will have an impact on the economy.
- A lack of robust and transparent monitoring of outcomes and impacts, as opposed to outputs, of structural fund investment at both regional and sub-regional level has worked against understanding where investment has made the most impact.





Priorities for Northern Ireland

The UK Government has stated that the SPF will tackle inequalities between communities and raise productivity in those parts of the country whose economies are furthest behind. This is key to the levelling up agenda and the aim for the Northern Ireland SPF will be to 'level up' within NI and between NI and other parts of the UK by taking a place-based approach to inclusive growth.

The NI SPF is likely to focus on strengthening the foundations of productivity to ensure that people benefit from economic prosperity, i.e. it will both support economic growth and ensure that growth is inclusive. It is important that EU Successor funding continues to support rural development programmes. It is therefore incumbent on the UK Government and Northern Ireland Executive to ensure that rural funding is protected in the same manner as the arguably more urban-focused ERDF and ESF funds.

Addressing the potential impacts of COVID-19 in Northern Ireland will also be key. Research suggests

that productivity is down by 25-30%, GDP will reduce by 8.1% in 2020, the economy will contract by 7-10% and over 200,000 will be impacted. The SPF must recognise that the scale of the interventions will increase as a result of the pandemic and that many of the groups previously supported by European funds are likely to be adversely impacted by the economic consequences of the pandemic.

Protecting businesses from the potential negative impact of Brexit will also be a consideration, as is the opportunity that Brexit presents for Northern Ireland as an access to the single market. Priority areas for focus are likely to be skills and employment, business growth, innovation, places and infrastructure.

It is vital that the new UK SPF is properly resourced and Northern Ireland's future allocation must be at least equivalent to the current programme's level of funding, as well as being correctly targeted, and appropriately managed to secure the best possible outcomes for the whole country. This must then be reflected in the SPF for Northern Ireland.





Developing a Shared Prosperity Fund to meet Northern Ireland's aspirations

As the quantum of money available to Northern Ireland will be set at Westminster and provided as a block grant, it is vital that the money remains ring-fenced for the purposes set. It must be hypothecated so that it can be directed to activities that are additional and deliver value-added benefits for Northern Ireland and its sub-regions.

The key factors which need to be considered in determining the SPF in Northern Ireland are as follows:

- Allocation should be built around the foundations of productivity, namely: ideas; people; infrastructure; business environment; innovation; and places.
- Community Planning, aligned to the Programme for Government, has a central role to play and should guide the shaping of SPF overarching priorities.
- SPF must demonstrate how the achievement of sub-regional priorities will contribute to regional objectives and how these then support UK level ambitions.
- SPF funding must align with, be able to support, and be supported by other strategic priorities and sources of finance.
- The SPF in Northern Ireland must be developed and co-designed through structured collaboration and co-production with partners including Invest NI, local authorities, education, health, the voluntary sector, and industry.
- Adopting a three-year funding period for projects with an annual review to enable issues to be identified, changes in context, and fine tuning to optimise performance.
- SPF nationally and regionally must have built in flexibility to respond to changing and unanticipated needs. This could be responding to COVID-19 recovery planning and the needs of particular groups such as young people, or of sectors, or of areas.
- There must be careful consideration of attitude and articulation to risk to encourage innovation and achieve the right balance between level of risk and potential returns.
- Supporting a business pipeline from new start to growth and high growth with a continuum of support that is integrated with other interventions and activities, such as skills development.
- SPF must recognise the importance of cross-border opportunities and initiatives including the opportunities of having a land-based 'border' with the single market, and have the flexibility to support these where appropriate.
- The level of management and administration should be commensurate with the spend and should recognise the existing mechanism and assurances in place with local government as a trusted partner.





Allocation and management

There is strong support in Northern Ireland to move to a transparent allocation system based on need and opportunity to support inclusive growth, achieve a balanced economy across all rural and urban areas, and close the productivity differences within the region, and between the region and other parts of the UK.

Allocation of the SPF must be considered at three levels: national level e.g. for strategic infrastructure, regional level and local level for council and community interventions; without alignment to local priorities, rebalancing cannot be achieved and cannot reflect place-based development.

Relationships between the Managing Authority, local authorities, delivery partners and other relevant bodies should be based on partnership working, moving away from purely transactional relationships while maintaining clear lines of accountability. Devolution of SPF responsibilities such as project appraisal, management and delivery should be asset-based, recognising the strengths and capabilities of all organisations and where there may be a gap in capability and/or experience, addressing it through knowledge sharing and capacity building.

There is a need to recognise the value of community plans as multi-partner plans delivering Programme for Government priorities for local areas involving local, central and other relevant partners. SPF priorities and allocations need to link back to the

needs and issues outlined in these Plans and set regionally through the Programme for Government. There is a need for a true place-based policy co-produced between central and local government to inform allocations and investment on a broader scale.

Local authorities have an important role to play here as more than service providers, but hubs for local businesses and co-investors in local regeneration and business and community development programmes. Their role at the local level allows them to consider regional and local strategies to meet local need and opportunities working alongside and with local stakeholders and service providers and delivery agents.

There is a greater role for local government working with central government partners in the management and delivery of SPF moving forward. If approached in a spirit of co-design and complementarity new processes could be streamlined and better aligned without creating another layer of bureaucracy.

Whilst effective management and delivery are important, there is a need to measure performance too. A robust monitoring framework with indicators that assess actual outcomes and impacts, which can be compared and aggregated at different spatial levels and across types of activities, is needed with the aim of driving and managing performance and informing decision making.

Opportunity and learning

There is now the opportunity for all partners to use national and regional evidence to shape the new SPF so that it aligns with all strategies and funding streams and is directed at national and regional priorities. Use past experience to rethink and carefully design what the SPF will do, how it is managed, allocated, delivered, and monitored so that it is simple, fit for purpose, efficient and not unduly onerous.

The real opportunity lies in addressing the inequalities in Northern Ireland and between Northern Ireland and other parts of the UK and as with other regions, to build on strengths, enhance productivity, and embrace green growth and the opportunity presented by its border with the EU single market.



A new approach

The means by which the Shared Prosperity Fund will be managed and delivered is as important as the finance available. There is an opportunity to move away from the Structural Fund programme approach and its limitations, to more effective arrangements, which take account of how partnerships and policy have evolved over the last EU programme period in Northern Ireland.

The principles set out in the table below should be viewed as an integrated package of measures that work as a whole, rather than a menu of options.

Principles and recommendations for a new approach in Northern Ireland

Principle	Commentary
National Framework	UKSPF should set a national framework defining high level strategic direction, objectives and priorities and alignment with UK strategies.
Regional and sub-regional priority setting	There must be a commitment and processes at regional level to set strategic priorities. These should be developed in partnership and based on an evidence-based assessment of need. At a sub-regional level, there must be scope to identify and invest in activities that will address local priorities and reflect the local context. This must be an underpinning principle that all stakeholders sign up to. Ownership of sub-regional funded activities should rest with local partners.
Outcomes based	Progress and achievements should be measured as outcomes and impacts, rather than activities and outputs. KPIs should be set that capture progress as well as final outcomes e.g. progress towards employment.
Flexible, single pot	There must be an assumption of trust so that monies can be disbursed with as few restrictions as possible, balanced with the right degree of scrutiny. Monies should be provided in Northern Ireland with no restrictions on capital and revenue allocations or prescriptive allocations by theme. Spend should be based on identified need and a holistic approach covering, for example, investment in skills, business support, infrastructure, innovation and so forth. There should be a strategic approach to spend, combining all available funding sources to maximise value for money. Business support (including social enterprises) should be business-led and include support to invest in the workforce, in equipment, in processes, as well as advice, and specialist business development support.
Maximum devolution of management and delivery	Northern Ireland should work towards devolving management and delivery to sub-regions where there is sufficient capacity and capabilities. For some activities, there will be a rationale for clusters of areas and partnerships who could act as intermediate bodies, and a regional approach with flexibility for distinctive local need. Where appropriate, the approaches used successfully through the city and growth deals could be replicated.
Attitude to risk	Being overly risk averse can inhibit impacts and limits the opportunity to test and learn from new and innovative approaches. SPF at UK and regional levels should set an attitude to risk that allows for innovation and moves away from simply funding 'more of the same'.
Fit for purpose systems and processes that are actively used	Management, appraisal, monitoring and verification processes should be fit for purpose, not overly complex and proportionate to the level of funding and scale of activities. They should be used to review and drive performance. Additional layers and processes should not be added over time unless there is a clear rationale and demonstration of added value. Management and monitoring systems and processes should be, as far as possible, harmonised with those of other funds and their activities. This will make for a more efficient use of project management and administration time and generate consistent data.



These recommendations are set within the context of the role that the SPF will play in Northern Ireland's economic development and the emerging strategies of the NI Executive and the developing Programme for Government. The principles and recommendations set out here would make SPF in Northern Ireland more effective and efficient than the current EU Structural Fund Programme.

The evidence sitting behind this Position Paper has been prepared through detailed research and extensive engagement with a wide range of organisations with regional and sub-regional remits. This ethos of co-production should continue.





Derry City & Strabane
District Council
Comhairle
Chathair Dhoire &
Cheantar an tSrátha Báin
Derry Cittie & Strabane
Districk Council

Our Ref: TJ/C375/20

13 November 2020

Mr Anthony Tohill
Chief Executive
Mid Ulster District Council
Dungannon Office
Circular Road
Dungannon
BT71 6DT

RECEIVED

17 NOV 2020

CHIEF EXECUTIVE

Dear Mr Tohill

At a Meeting of Derry City and Strabane District Council held on 29 October 2020, the following Motions were passed:

Council will recall that a motion was moved at the December 2019 Council meeting calling for action to combat poor air quality in the council area. Officials advised at that time that the motion was premature, given the imminent publication of a report which might have a bearing on the motion. Council notes that the report has since been produced but does not have a bearing on the motion.

Council endorses the thrust of the December 2019 motion as now resubmitted:

Council acknowledges that poor air quality has harmful effects on human health, especially on the health of the elderly, the infirm and young children;

Council recognises that urgent action needs to be taken to tackle air pollution. Council commits to increasing its air quality monitoring across its council area, including of harmful PM2.5s, PM10s and ammonia;

Council will create an air quality action plan and adopt World Health Organisation standards for PM2.5;

Council will bring forward draft policy options for discouraging the installation of fossil fuel heating and wood burning stoves in all new planning projects. Council will devise a set of criteria to be agreed by Members above which an air quality assessment will be required to accompany planning applications;

Derry

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John Kelpie MEng., CEng., MStructE., MIEI

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Council will organise a series of seminars to upskill members on Current Air Quality issues. Council will write to all other councils urging them to pass a similar air quality motion;

Council will write to the Northern Ireland Executive asking for an update on the effectiveness of the air quality monitoring station at Brooke Park since the station was moved from its original location at the junction of Creggan Road and Marlborough Terrace;

Council will underline to the Executive the urgent need for a NI Clean Air Act to include WHO threshold for PM2.5

I would appreciate your consideration in this important matter would be grateful for a response in relation thereto.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'John Kelpie', with a large, stylized initial 'J'.

**John Kelpie
Chief Executive**

Alison McCullagh
Chief Executive



Fermanagh & Omagh
District Council
Comhairle Ceantair
Fhear Manach agus na hÓmaí

Our Ref: Democratic Services

Date: 13 November 2020

Email: democratic.services@fermanaghomagh.com

Mr Adrian McCreesh
Interim Chief Executive
Mid Ulster District Council
Ballyronan Road
MAGHERAFELT
BT45 6EN

Dear Adrian

Re: Coronavirus Pandemic impact on Further and Higher Education Students

At a recent meeting of the Council, Members unanimously agreed the following Motion:

"Due to the ongoing Coronavirus Pandemic Fermanagh and Omagh District Council recognises the unprecedented strain that further and higher education students from our district are facing. This council;

- **Recognises that the young people of this district are contributors to our society today and the workers of the future and that we as a Council need to fight for their rights and entitlements.**
- **Acknowledges the very serious situation our student population have been left in due to the current Coronavirus Pandemic including being burdened with student fees here in Ireland (north and south) and in Britain.**
- **Notes that the majority of students are receiving online classes and only having to physically attend class, in a limited capacity, in certain subjects.**
- **Further recognises, that due to students being told by government to return to university and college, they are tied down into contracts paying high rent for accommodation with no legal means of escaping from these.**
- **Also acknowledges that those students who are studying from home, within the district area, are faced with one of the worst broadband infrastructures on this Island.**
- **Further notes that many students supplement their income with part time jobs to support themselves, but many are now unable to access these jobs, leaving many of them in severe financial strain.**

As such this Council shall write to all the Political Party leaders in the Northern Ireland Executive to ask them to put in place an appropriate package of financial support for all students at this time.

This Council will further write to the other 10 Councils asking them for support in this motion”.

Representations have been made by the Council to all Party Leaders in the NI Executive as requested in the Motion.

I would be grateful if you would bring this correspondence to the attention of your Council, so that your Members may consider supporting our Council's position on this matter.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Alison McCullagh'.

Alison McCullagh
Chief Executive

From the Office of the Minister
Diane Dodds MLA



Councillor Cathal Mallaghan
Chair
Mid Ulster District Council
Eileen.Forde@midulstercouncil.org

Netherleigh
Massey Avenue
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02890 529202
email: private.office@economy-ni.gov.uk

Our Ref: CORR-5324-2020

9 December 2020

Dear Cathal,

Mid Ulster District Council motion regarding the ‘Students Deserve Better’ Campaign

Thank you for your correspondence of 8 December 2020 regarding the Mid Ulster Council’s motion supporting the ‘Students Deserve Better’ campaign.

While my Department is responsible for higher education policy in relation to teaching and research, as autonomous institutions, the HEIs are ultimately responsible for their own policies in relation to student accommodation. This includes setting the cost and also ensuring there are robust protocols in place to minimise the spread of Covid 19. My Department has no role in determining the cost of student accommodation, whether that is for university-managed Halls of Residence or private rental.

Regarding tuition fees, my Department is responsible for determining the annual maximum tuition fee level that can be charged by higher education institutions in Northern Ireland. However, it is a decision for the higher education institutions to determine what they wish to charge Northern Ireland and EU domiciled students, up to that maximum level. This includes any decision regarding whether a student should receive a refund or reduction of this fee. My Department has no remit in determining whether students should receive a refund or reduction of their tuition fee as a result of disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Students who find themselves in financial hardship may be eligible to receive an award from the Support Funds made available by my Department. This financial year, I secured an additional £1.4m from the Executive and a further £1.4m from the Department’s own budget for these Support Funds, making a total of £5.6m available to support students facing genuine financial hardship.

Mental health is a key priority for the Department, the Executive and all of Northern Ireland. My Department is represented on a cross-departmental working group, recently established to support the development of a Mental Health Strategy for those struggling with mental health issues, including students.

As autonomous bodies, the universities are responsible for their own policies and procedures in relation to mental health provision. Each university takes the health and safety, including mental wellbeing, of students very seriously and each has an extensive variety of mental health provision available for students. Additional funding was granted during the early stages of the pandemic for additional hardship funds for HEIs. They have the use of this money and they oversee its expenditure. My officials also conducted an internal review of Mental Health provision within the HE sector and we were pleased to note a robust and proactive offering available across the institutions. I am pleased that the Mental Health of our student population is treated so seriously and this level of service is provided.

Higher fee charging HE providers are required to use at least 10% of their additional fee income to fund outreach and retention activities that help disadvantaged and under-represented students to continue their studies. This includes students with a disability, including mental health conditions. HE providers have demonstrated through their annual Widening Access and Participation Plans that they recognise growing concerns in relation to mental health and have a number of programmes in place, some of which are specific to mental health conditions and some which offer support more generally. HE Providers have flexibility to use this additional fee income as they choose, subject to the Department's approval, which could be on additional mental health provision.

I fully recognise the importance of alleviating digital poverty amongst higher education students especially given the importance of online teaching in the current situation. My Department already provides a non-repayable maintenance grant to students from lower income households, which can be used to purchase the necessary IT equipment to complete their course. As well as this grant, the universities have a range of measures in place to help reduce digital poverty among their students.

For example, Ulster University provides access bursaries to students from families on income support; students can decide how to spend the bursaries themselves, including on technology. Ulster University also uses the Department's Widening Access Funds to stock its libraries with laptops, for students from a widening access background to use on a loan basis. Ulster University has also created a Technology Support Fund, whereby the University procures and provides securely imaged laptops for its most disadvantaged students, to enable them to adapt to teaching and learning in the hybrid, dual teaching mode envisaged for the 2020/21 academic year. The University has committed to supplying 1,000 laptops free to students who meet the eligibility criteria.

Queen's University has recently introduced a long-term laptop loan scheme, with no loan or hire fees to the student, to enable and support students who may be unable to access the relevant equipment to study online due to financial hardship, digital exclusion, or circumstances specifically related to Covid-19. Queen's is also seeking to ensure that students will have access to digital resources on-site, for example in the library, where Public Health regulations permit.

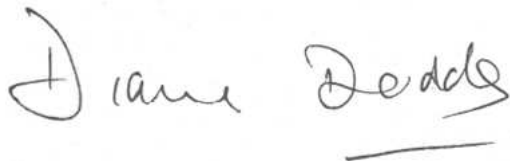
Students at Stranmillis University College have ready access to significant IT equipment and infrastructure across its campus, including a number of dedicated IT rooms. IT facilities are also available in the University College's library. As well as

being able to access on-campus IT equipment, students at St Mary's University College can borrow laptops from the institution if needed.

Regarding students traveling home for Christmas, there are a number of cross-cutting issues currently being worked through, involving a variety of Departments. For this reason, the Executive Office has been asked to co-ordinate these plans, and a Task and Finish Group has been established to do so.

The various Departments involved are working collectively with other partners to develop and communicate a package of advice and support to help students stay safe, and to travel home safely at Christmas. This includes engaging with the local HE providers to agree a phased end to the semester and the facilitation of a move to online learning. The measures will also involve testing for students. Public health authorities are working to agree the operational aspects of a testing programme to inform arrangements for student travel, while the relevant authorities will be engaged to consider the impacts on public transport.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Diane Dodds". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line underneath the name.

DIANE DODDS MLA
Minister for the Economy

Annex A – Draft Response

From the Office of the Minister
Diane Dodds MLA



Mr Cáthal Mallaghan
Chair of Mid-Ulster District Council
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Your Ref: C220/20

Our Ref: CORR-5321-2020

11 December 2020

Dear Cáthal

Processing and administering of funding related to the COVID-19 pandemic

Thank you for your correspondence dated 8th December 2020 regarding the processing and administering of funding related to the current COVID-19 pandemic.

I appreciate the consideration being given to this matter and the offer from you and your fellow councillors in Mid-Ulster District Council. The need for central and local government to work closely together at this time is one that I fully concur with, and I do believe that the Executive have demonstrated our collective support for this approach, through some of the funding packages that have been devolved through the councils in recent months.

With regard to some of the current schemes for which my Department has lead responsibility, the Coronavirus Business Restrictions Support Scheme (CRBSS) and the Newly Self-Employed Support Scheme (NSESS) are both being administered on our behalf by InvestNI.

Applications for the Part A of CRBSS opened on 28th October 2020. Part A is supporting businesses which are restricted within the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No.2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 but who are not eligible for the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme (LRSS), which is administered by the Department of Finance.

The first payments for the CRBSS were issued on 14th November 2020 and as of 8th December, just over £12 million has been paid to 2544 applicants.

Part B of the CRBSS, which has been designed to support, amongst others, businesses that are in the supply chain of those that have been required to close or cease operating during the current and extended period, opened for applications on 19th November 2002 and the first payments were issued on 8th December 2020. This

was primarily due to a concentration on the high volume of Part A payments and the complexity in confirming a 'supply chain' organisation as per the eligibility criteria. As with all new schemes such as this one, I am sure that you would agree that due diligence and scrutiny is very important for all of our public funding initiatives; to ensure that implementation runs according to the programme design, and most importantly, that the support is directed at the precise audience for whom it is intended.

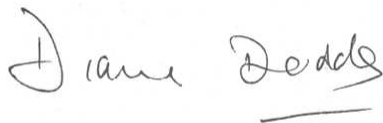
Applications for the NSESS have started to arrive in from 3rd December 2020, and the first payments are due to be made week commencing 14th December.

The Executive has launched a number of additional financial support packages that are being worked on at present. Information on all of these schemes, including eligibility criteria and the application process will be published on the NI Business Info website, see below

<https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/campaign/coronavirus-updates-support-your-business>

This is a very live and fluid situation and I, along with my Executive colleagues will continue to engage with local government representatives and officials in relation to COVID-19, especially to consider the support that will be required to help businesses and the economy to respond to this pandemic, and the best way to distribute this support.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Diane Dodds', with a horizontal line underneath the name.

DIANE DODDS MLA
Minister for the Economy

From the Office of the Minister
Diane Dodds MLA



Councillor Cáthal Mallaghan
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Our Ref: CORR-5323-2020

11 December 2020

Dear Cáthal,

Mid Ulster District Council Petroleum Licensing Motion

Thank you for your letter dated 8 December 2020 seeking a response to the motion which was passed at a meeting of Mid Ulster District Council on 26 November 2020.

I note that you have also written to the First Minister and deputy First Minister. The Executive Office has requested that I reply on its behalf, as Petroleum Licensing matters fall under the jurisdiction of my Department.

As you will no doubt be aware, policy regarding the issue of Strategic Planning Policy is the responsibility of my Executive colleague, Ms Nichola Mallon MLA, the Minister for Infrastructure. I therefore have no comment to make on those matters.

As you will be aware on 13 October 2020, in response to a Private Members' Motion in the Northern Ireland Assembly on Onshore Petroleum Licensing and Drilling, I outlined my position with regard to petroleum development, as well as my intentions with respect to the handling of two current Petroleum Licence applications. I have given a commitment that given the cross-cutting and controversial nature of petroleum exploration and development, it will be a matter for the Northern Ireland Executive to make the final decisions on what Northern Ireland's future Petroleum Licensing policy will be.

The full transcript of the debate is available at the link below (see page 28 onwards) <http://data.niassembly.gov.uk/HansardXml/plenary-13-10-2020.pdf>.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink that reads 'Diane Dodds' with a horizontal line underneath.

DIANE DODDS MLA
Minister for the Economy