



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Finance

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Replacement Funding Streams and PEACE
PLUS Programme: Department of Finance;
Special EU Programmes Body

8 May 2024

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for Finance

Replacement Funding Streams and PEACE PLUS Programme: Department of Finance; Special EU Programmes Body

8 May 2024

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Matthew O'Toole (Chairperson)
Ms Diane Forsythe (Deputy Chairperson)
Dr Steve Aiken
Miss Nicola Brogan
Mr Paul Frew
Mr Eóin Tennyson

Witnesses:

Mr Dominic McCullough	Department of Finance
Ms Laura McDonald	Department of Finance
Mr Tony Simpson	Department of Finance
Mr Paul Beattie	Special EU Programmes Body
Ms Gina McIntyre	Special EU Programmes Body

The Chairperson (Mr O'Toole): Joining us from the Department are Tony Simpson, deputy secretary for strategic policy and reform; Dominic McCullough, director of strategic funding division; and Laura McDonald, deputy director of strategic funding division. Joining us from the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) are Gina McIntyre, chief executive of SEUPB, and Paul Beattie, who is the managing authority director. We will hear from the Department first. After that, we will bring the SEUPB witnesses in to get their perspective.

We will start with the Department. Thank you very much, folks, for coming to brief us. Thank you for being patient. We have a lot going on with the Budget having just arrived and a Budget debate coming in a few weeks, so we wanted to take evidence on that. We also wanted to get an early briefing from you on where we are with replacement EU funds and how that is working out. We still have an agreed amount from the success with PEACE PLUS, but the European social fund (ESF) and other EU funds are being replaced by funds such as the Levelling Up Fund and the Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF). We wanted to get a briefing from you on how that is working, or not working, from your perspective, or otherwise. We ask you to make a brief opening statement, and then we will have questions.

Mr Tony Simpson (Department of Finance): OK. I thank the Committee for the opportunity to update it on these two important issues. As you outlined, Chair, we will start with our UK engagement and then bring in our colleagues to talk about PEACE PLUS. You will have received the briefing papers with information on our engagement with the UK Government (UKG) on EU replacement funds. We are happy to take questions on that in a moment.

First, I will talk about our role. It was very clear that, following the EU exit process, Northern Ireland would lose access to a number of significant funds that were previously delivered through Executive structures. In response to that, the Executive mandated our Department to lead a cross-departmental work stream to assess the loss of those funds and respond to future funding issues. In 2019, an official policy position on the Northern Ireland ask from the Shared Prosperity Fund was developed by a cross-departmental work stream that was led by the Department of Finance. That was agreed by the NICS board, and then, when the Executive returned in 2020, they endorsed it.

On our engagement with the UKG to date, at the outset, I will say that we have always sought to work as constructively as possible with our colleagues in Whitehall Departments, and we continue to do so towards —.

The Chairperson (Mr O'Toole): They have not.

Mr Simpson: Perhaps. Not to our satisfaction.

Information sharing has been largely one-sided, with us providing information from our perspective, including technical advice and guidance, but it has not really been reciprocated to a satisfactory level. We would say that there is a lack of understanding in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) as to how Northern Ireland government works, and that has led to avoidable issues in how the SPF and the other funds on the levelling-up agenda have operated. The Finance Minister recently provided evidence to the House of Commons Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee on that lack of understanding and capability, as we see it, in DLUHC. While engagement has improved with that Department over the last year, we are still having to press those officials to provide information before it is put in the public domain. That lack of information sharing has prevented Northern Ireland Departments being able to engage fully in the delivery of the likes of the SPF, once it has landed, and other funds.

Finally, as we indicated in our paper to the Committee, the most pressing issue for me is to get clarity on what happens when the Shared Prosperity Fund ends next year. We have been pressing on that for some time. We have been calling for substantive engagement on any successor funds to ensure that, first, they are of the correct magnitude and size to replace the funding that has been lost and that, secondly, they are set up in such a way that their delivery is appropriate for Northern Ireland. Recently, the House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee recommended that current recipients of SPF funding should have clarity before the end of the first quarter of this year, which is June. We stand ready to work with DLUHC on that, but —.

The Chairperson (Mr O'Toole): That is for recipients rather than people who are simply bidding, yes?

Mr Simpson: Yes. I suppose that it is anyone who may have an interest in that fund, but recipients will certainly face a cliff edge, as we faced before, on that funding. We stand ready to work with DLUHC on that, but, given that we are sitting here in May, that seems quite challenging. It is entirely within the gift of Whitehall to do that.

The Chairperson (Mr O'Toole): Just to confirm, are these previous recipients of the SPF who were, probably in most cases, legacy recipients of European funding? Maybe not all were legacy recipients, but most were, I presume, and they were then successful in getting SPF.

Mr Simpson: Now, that funding will come to an end.

The Chairperson (Mr O'Toole): Yes.

Mr Simpson: Obviously, we had seen before —.

The Chairperson (Mr O'Toole): Will it run out at the end of the financial year 2023-24?

Mr Simpson: Yes.

Ms Laura McDonald (Department of Finance): No, it is 2024-25.

Mr Simpson: Yes, 2024-25. As you will see, what we saw before was organisations having to put staff on protective notice and so on and concerns around whether they would be able to continue to provide the services that they provide.

The Chairperson (Mr O'Toole): So, basically, these are people who are funded under SPF to the end of the next financial year.

Mr Simpson: This year.

The Chairperson (Mr O'Toole): This financial year.

Mr Simpson: Yes, 2024-25.

The Chairperson (Mr O'Toole): That is what I mean, yes.

Mr Simpson: I am happy to take any questions.

The Chairperson (Mr O'Toole): Grand. That is really useful. It sounds as though you have profound concerns, leaving aside the deficiencies in quantum. Before we get on to the process concerns, it is worth confirming the kind of quantum. Our briefing says — we talked about this for a long time — that, collectively, we are significantly down on the relevant EU funds disbursed in Northern Ireland. Is £40 million the right number for the gap between what we got and what we get?

Mr Simpson: It is £30 million on average annually.

The Chairperson (Mr O'Toole): It is £30 million on average each year. OK.

Mr Simpson: Yes.

The Chairperson (Mr O'Toole): Can you just explain something? To make this real for people who are listening — sometimes, we get too wonkish — will you outline which organisations in Northern Ireland have lost funding and what things have stopped happening as a result of losing that money? Just give examples; I am not asking you to name every single project. What types of things have stopped happening as a result of losing that money?

Mr Simpson: Laura might be able to answer that.

Ms McDonald: That is probably more a question for the policy Departments that delivered ESF, rather than the Department of Finance, which does not deliver the programmes. The organisations that received ESF in particular are those in the voluntary and community sector. There was the European regional development fund (ERDF) and small business support. There was also a little bit around communities and place, so community groups will have received that as well.

The Chairperson (Mr O'Toole): ESF was for things like community-run training programmes, particularly, but not exclusively, in areas of greater social and economic need. Do we know how many specific schemes in Northern Ireland have had to close or discontinue a particular strand of work? Again, it would be better to ask the Economy Department.

Ms McDonald: It is incredibly difficult. It is an Economy question, but it would be very difficult to assess that. A number of projects were funded under ESF, and there is another SPF cohort that may have similar outputs, but SPF does not cover the scope of the interventions that ESF did. It would not really be possible. It would be like comparing apples with pears, really.

The Chairperson (Mr O'Toole): They made a policy decision not to fund training, for example, in the same way. They do not think that it is —.

Ms McDonald: No. There seems to be a gap for those who are furthest removed from the labour market — those who actually need help to get to the point where they can utilise SPF to get into the labour market. There seems to be a little bit of a downfall there. Again, we are not privy to the data that DLUHC holds. Economy holds the rest of the data. That is just our perception.

The Chairperson (Mr O'Toole): I want to come back to the process concerns. There is a principled issue about the propriety of a Whitehall Department funding that directly. Certainly, in my view — I am not speaking as Chair but as a political representative — it undermines the devolution settlement, in that it is funding directly without any specific democratic input from elected representatives like us, let alone you as officials. There is also a question about the governance structure of the overarching partnership group, specifically in relation to SPF, that was set up. I do not know whether it was set up when the institutions were down, but, in any case, it does not comply with section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. Does that mean that, theoretically, it could be unlawful for a Northern Ireland Minister or official to participate in that partnership group?

Mr Simpson: The Department took the view that it would not be able to participate in that group because it was not designated under section 75. We had asked to see its equality impact assessment to see whether we could form a view as to what legal risk would be associated with our participation, but, despite our requests to DLUHC, it did not share that information with us, so we could not form a view on that prior to Ministers coming back. The Department took the view that it was unable to participate.

The Chairperson (Mr O'Toole): For the sake of argument, it might, theoretically, be possible for, say, a group of community and voluntary sector organisations to judicially review that. I am not asking you to predict that that would happen, but that is the type of legal risk to which you might be exposed; that they would bring a judicial review against you. At the minute, they cannot do that, because you are not participating in it, but they could, theoretically, should they have counsel and the funding to do it, bring a judicial review against DLUHC. OK. That is helpful.

You mentioned, in a fairly diplomatic way, that the engagement with Whitehall has been challenging. Can you outline in a little more detail the ways in which it has been challenging? You mentioned delays. For a start, it has not confirmed to organisations in year whether they will have funding next year. What are the other ways in which it has been challenging to engage with Whitehall?

Mr Simpson: We have been trying to engage with Whitehall throughout the process, not only prior to the launch of the Shared Prosperity Fund and on its delivery but on other levelling-up funds. We have been asking for sight of information on its plans and intentions, what the funds are and how it will launch them, but that is not being shared with us. Often, the first time that we hear something is when it is in the public domain. The big challenge for us is that, sometimes, the funds are designed in such a way that they do not lend themselves to being smoothly delivered in Northern Ireland. There is a lack of appreciation of the different structure of government and different role of local authorities here. A lot of the responsibilities that rest with local authorities in England do not rest with councils here; they rest with Departments. The generally accepted principle is that those funds will, ideally, be delivered as closely as possible to the citizen. In England, that might mean through local authorities. The same boilerplate approach is applied here as is largely taken in England, but local authorities here do not have the ability — the tools and levers — to deliver that funding. In Departments here, we are therefore left trying to retrofit and find solutions to a policy that was designed without Northern Ireland in mind.

The Chairperson (Mr O'Toole): The obvious example of that would be with regeneration powers. Theoretically, if SPF money is used to acquire disused premises or a disused piece of real estate in a town or city for regeneration purposes, it is legally difficult for a local authority here to do that, because it does not have the vires to do the regeneration stuff. Is that the kind of thing about which you are talking?

Mr Simpson: Yes, potentially.

Dr Aiken: May I interrupt? My apologies, Chair, but I have to head off. I apologise, ladies and gentlemen. I am sure that the rest of the session will be extremely interesting.

The Chairperson (Mr O'Toole): OK. Thanks, Steve.

Mr Simpson: An example of that is the announcement of the long-term plan for towns (LTPT) scheme, where, again, we have found that the councils do not have the levers to deliver that for which the scheme's funding would typically be designed. We are now trying to find a way in which to make it more operable.

The Chairperson (Mr O'Toole): What therefore happens? Can you give any specific examples of where something like that has happened?

Ms McDonald: When the Levelling Up Fund was launched, it prohibited the Department for Infrastructure from applying under the transport theme. Department of Finance officials intervened on behalf of the cross-departmental work stream, which led to the approach being changed so that the Department for Infrastructure could apply under the transport theme. That intervention did not, however, extend to the Department for Communities applying for historic monuments or libraries, for example. There were therefore actual barriers to Departments applying for things that they have the vires to deliver.

The Chairperson (Mr O'Toole): If and when they do participate, is it possible that Departments could theoretically be subject to judicial review under section 75? Is that a risk, given that the Shared Prosperity Fund's Northern Ireland partnership group does not comply with section 75?

Mr Dominic McCullough (Department of Finance): There would always be a risk, but it would be for each Department to decide whether it would be willing to take that risk. Departments obviously do not want to be in the position of acting against compliance with section 75. It is also worth pointing out, however, that the Department for Infrastructure applied and was not successful, so, as such, it did not have that decision to take.

Ms McDonald: Departments can satisfy themselves that the project that they are going to deliver for a very distinct area within an overarching programme complies with their section 75 liabilities. It is the overarching programme that does not have that —.

The Chairperson (Mr O'Toole): OK. Departments can therefore assure themselves that they have discharged their duties in a compliant way.

The Community Ownership Fund is a bit newer than the Shared Prosperity Fund and the Levelling Up Fund. Have you seen any improvements in governance or in Whitehall engagement with that fund?

Ms McDonald: The Community Ownership Fund is a little bit different from all the others. Again, it does not come through our Departments, and there is no interaction between it and them. It does ask for opinions on deliverability and strategic fit, but that is as far as it seeks comments from Departments. The fund uses a local agent in Northern Ireland, which is Development Trusts Northern Ireland (DTNI), to help applications progress through the system to the point at which they are ready to be submitted. The fund also runs the competition differently. It is run in windows or rounds, so it is a continual fund, not one big open competition to which everybody applies at the same time. It is therefore differently run, and it seems to be delivering a significant percentage of money in Northern Ireland —

The Chairperson (Mr O'Toole): OK.

Ms McDonald: — but it does not fall under the vires of a Department to deliver.

The Chairperson (Mr O'Toole): This is my final question before I bring in Committee members. You said that the Community Ownership Fund asks for input. I do not want you to name particular schemes, but, given that it is run on a continual basis, does that mean that, when it asks for input, it will then say that it has received a bid from a certain sporting group or a certain arts group?

Ms McDonald: No, it will close the window for applications.

The Chairperson (Mr O'Toole): Will it come to you with those applications and ask for your opinion, or will it ask for your opinion up front?

Ms McDonald: No. It will come to us with the applications that it has shortlisted and ask for commentary on them.

The Chairperson (Mr O'Toole): That presumably puts you in a relatively invidious position, because, again to do with section 75, you are asked to give a view without —.

Ms McDonald: That view, however, is restricted to being on deliverability and strategic fit, not any other aspect of the application.

The Chairperson (Mr O'Toole): OK. You are strictly limiting your input. I think that I understand what you are saying, but there is intuitive concern there.

Ms Forsythe: I thank you for briefing the Committee and for your answers so far. We have talked about the impact on the community and voluntary sector (CVS). Last year, the impact of the approaching cliff edge was such that a number of groups came to me, and, as a result, we launched the new all-party group (APG) on voluntary and community sector. Its first meeting was last week, at which we listened to organisations' stories and heard about the impact on them all, and it is dire. It is a very real situation, and they are a great group of people to get together in a room.

Many different organisations provide significant support in Northern Ireland. Stepping Stones presented evidence to the APG that 13 groups provide direct support to disability-related organisations that get people into the workplace. They are all at risk, as they do not know what is happening with funding. That issue cuts across all sectors, of course, but really significant impacts were outlined. A point that Stepping Stones made to the APG was that the cliff edge is going to hit organisations sooner, because staff will need to be put on protective notice, and not even from next March but from December this year. Have you any idea of a timeline for when we will see answers for those people?

Mr Simpson: In short, no, we do not have an indication of a timeline. We have continually raised post-2025 funding at a working level since early last year. The Minister of Finance raised the issue at the Finance: Interministerial Standing Committee (F:ISC). It is a concern for not just for us but Scottish and Welsh colleagues. We have pressed the case for funding at a very senior level and at ministerial level. Everyone is therefore aware of the challenges posed, but, as I said at the outset, funding is in the gift of Whitehall, and we are largely reliant on its providing funding. We are, however, pressing the case and making sure that Whitehall is clear about the very real impacts that the cliff edge will have here. It means not just a delay in getting things done but real challenges being posed for the groups that you have discussed.

Mr McCullough: We learned lessons from the previous cliff edge about the importance of getting early movement from Whitehall Departments. Laura and her team have met senior officials in DLUHC to stress the importance of the matter, because the last place in which we want to be is the same place in which we were a year or so ago when there was a cliff edge. We were lobbied heavily to help out at that point. We have taken the lessons from then and applied them to the next time, and we will try to ensure as far as possible that there is early movement and a clear indication of how funds will be delivered, the scope for their delivery and the funding that will be made available. We have therefore commenced that work.

Ms Forsythe: Thank you very much. If you need specific examples in order to build a case, I welcome any engagement with the all-party group. We have a lot of great examples from great organisations.

My experience locally has been that of a lot of negative feedback on the administration of PEACE PLUS and the role of the local councils in that. How do you feel the programme is running, and is there a large disparity across council areas?

Mr McCullough: A lot of work is going on with local councils, and Gina and I will be happy to bring you up to date on that in the second part of the session.

Ms Forsythe: Thank you.

Mr Tennyson: I have one brief question. Has the profile for how money has been distributed across the devolved regions changed significantly since European funding streams changed to replacement funding streams? Has the method for distributing the money and the share for each devolved nation changed dramatically since EU exit?

Mr McCullough: The Shared Prosperity Fund is a replacement for EU funding, while the Levelling Up Fund is not a direct replacement. We have a breakdown of the allocations per Government. We can give you that information.

Mr Tennyson: That will be interesting to see.

Ms McDonald: The allocations tend to be at a Barnett level of funding rather than at a European level. We would have done better out of EU funding than out of Barnett funding. We receive about 4% of the Shared Prosperity Fund, but that is less than we would have received had we remained in the EU and had access to the ESF and the ERDF. It is the same with other funding streams that were shut down after Brexit, such as farm funding.

The Chairperson (Mr O'Toole): There are no further questions from members on this part of the evidence session. If there are no other points that you wish to raise or draw to our attention, I thank you very much, Tony, Dominic and Laura, for your evidence. We have covered some really important points.

We will now bring in colleagues from the Special EU Programmes Body to give us their perspective. I welcome Gina McIntyre and Paul Beattie. We engaged with you a bit at the predecessor Finance Committee, but it would be helpful to get your view on the replacement funding. We will hear an opening statement from you, and I will then open up the meeting to questions from members.

Ms Gina McIntyre (Special EU Programmes Body): Thank you very much for the invitation to attend to update you on the work of the SEUPB and the implementation of the PEACE PLUS programme. By way of background, the Special EU Programmes Body is a North/South body. We answer to the Department of Finance, which is why we are here, and also to the Department of Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform (DPENDPDR) in Ireland.

Our brief is quite clear. It is to deliver within communities innovative programmes and projects that support peace and create opportunities for future prosperity. We have the statutory remit to manage EU funding programmes in Northern Ireland and the border counties of Ireland.

We have provided a briefing paper that updates the Committee on where we are at and particularly on the impact of the past 25 years. We have had some very challenging journeys. Our projects have really dug deeply into communities and looked at how they might provide support at a local level to create a more prosperous, thriving and hopeful place in which to live.

Reflecting on that past quarter of a century, I can say that we are very proud of the work that our projects have done and of what they have achieved. They have a track record of delivering all the programmes, which have a considerable impact. We work across many of the Departments in Northern Ireland and Ireland, up to 14 at times, because the programme partners are the EU, the Northern Ireland Executive, the Government of Ireland and, since Brexit and the new programme, the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

We are privileged to be able to access material in those Departments and their expertise on policy, but we rely on our statutory and community partners to help inform our work, what we should fund and the way in which we should address the challenges that are there.

We have promoted an awful lot of work on reconciliation and on supporting victims and survivors, on providing opportunities for prosperity and on providing access to essential services in border areas. We have also focused very much on social cohesion, building trust, improved health and well-being, economic growth, regeneration and the protection of our natural environment through the previous Peace and INTERREG programmes, which we have had for 25 years.

Leaving a tangible legacy is important for those programmes, as is creating a visible shared space with capital builds. We have been lucky to have many projects of which you may be aware, such as the Peace Bridge in the north-west, the Skainos Centre and the Girdwood Community Hub. The Newforge Community Development Trust and the Waterside Shared Village are recent additions to the shared space projects.

In the Peace IV programme, we had 95 projects, which totalled about €250 million. All those projects were able to change direction during COVID and were able to complete. We are just completing on the last five shared space projects. They are the capital elements, which we just could not get finished by the end of the programme period, which was December 2023.

In the next few months, we will see the Shankill Women's Centre, the Black Mountain Shared Space project, the Courthouse Shared Space Creative Hub in Bushmills, the Connecting Pomeroy project and the Monaghan Peace Campus open. The Monaghan Peace Campus will open on Friday.

The INTERREG programme probably operated at more of an institutional level and therefore may be less well known. It gave a lot of support to SMEs, research and innovation, the environment, sustainable transport, transport, health and social care, and greenways.

In the past 25 years, over the two programmes, €3.39 billion has been put into the region, for over 23 projects. That money has touched the lives of over two million citizens, which is not an insignificant number.

We are absolutely honoured and privileged to have the new PEACE PLUS programme. It will deliver €1.14 billion across six thematic areas, which are set out in your papers. I am, of course, happy to talk about those. We have delivered just over €250 million of funding since we started our awards in December. We focused on areas that we thought needed some support first, such as the youth sector. It received our first awards, with €45 million going to it. So far, there has been €13 million allocated for shared learning and €13 million for local government community interventions, which are the councils' local community action plans.

Just last week, €20 million was allocated for youth mental health projects and £20 million for geothermal energy. The latter funding will provide a boost to research and innovation as we work towards unlocking the region's significant green energy potential.

Social inclusion sits at the heart of all those programmes and every other activity that we undertake. It is all about increasing citizens' access to quality care, particularly in the border regions, and looking after the environment, because the environment is vital for our citizens' social and economic future and also because fauna, flora, fish and rivers do not recognise borders. It is therefore really important that we be able to work together.

An area that may be of particular interest to the Committee is work that we will be rolling out in the middle of the year: the change maker funds. They will be distributed at a local, grassroots level. They are grants of under £100,000 for projects, and we hope to commence those funds later in the summer. Pobal is the statutory agency in Ireland that is responsible for community delivery. We have just appointed the Northern Ireland delivery partner to work alongside Pobal, and it is setting up to do that work. It will be really important work, which will provide a unique opportunity for small groups to get involved with the programme in the areas of regeneration, collaboration and shared prosperity opportunities. Unfortunately, it is needed now more than ever in our region. I therefore hope that it will be able to provide some support, because, across the two areas of change maker funds, there is €40 million worth of funding. We do not intend to roll it all out at any one particular time. Rather, we will roll it out annually, releasing perhaps €5 million or €10 million at a time. I look forward to working with the Department and the Committee in the future as we continue the implementation of PEACE PLUS.

The Chairperson (Mr O'Toole): Thank you very much, Gina. That was extremely helpful. The six thematic areas are as follows: building peaceful and thriving communities; delivering economic regeneration and transformation; empowering and investing in our young people; healthy and inclusive communities; supporting a sustainable and better-connected future; and building and embedding partnership and collaboration. From memory, some of the consultation and input on those thematic areas happened in 2020 or 2021.

Ms McIntyre: Yes.

The Chairperson (Mr O'Toole): It was around about then. What input, if any, will the new Executive have? Now that you have established the ground rules and priorities, are you going ahead with delivering PEACE PLUS and keeping the Executive abreast, or do they have an ongoing input? They are obviously a stakeholder, but they are not directing you in any sense.

Ms McIntyre: They are not. We took the political views of the parties when we were designing the programmes. We looked at the priorities in Northern Ireland and those of the EU and the Government of Ireland. We also did a public consultation. Over 1,000 people attended consultation events, and we received 500 written submissions. We therefore got an awful lot of input into the design of the programme.

As we roll it out, the Executive can provide input particularly by encouraging communities to get involved with the small funds that I just mentioned. There are opportunities for groups to access them directly at a smaller level. Those opportunities were not available in the past, because, as the funds decreased over the 25 years, the projects had to become more strategic. They became larger, which

meant that only organisations with capability could access the funding, because they were having to administer millions of pounds. I really want the Executive to help by encouraging people to apply for the cross-community small grants, as well as for the cross-border ones under theme 6.

The Chairperson (Mr O'Toole): OK. On what is being funded, the programme runs until —

Ms McIntyre: 2030.

The Chairperson (Mr O'Toole): — 2030. When will work have to start on agreeing a new programme, given that a lot of PEACE PLUS was agreed in principle in about 2018 or 2019? It was agreed earlier in the Brexit process. Rolling over Peace funding was something on which they could agree.

Ms McIntyre: That is right.

The Chairperson (Mr O'Toole): Will the work need to start fairly soon in order for a successor programme to be agreed for 2030?

Ms McIntyre: Absolutely. The work starts now. In fact, I have already started engaging at a Brussels level on the benefits of the programme and its impact on our region. Work has to start now.

Mr McCullough: It is important to stress that the work on developing a new Peace programme involves a political decision that needs to be taken. You are right, Matthew: PEACE PLUS first came into existence as part of the withdrawal agreement in 2019. It would be great to have direction at a political level. Gina and her team have a core role to play in developing the programme with politicians and us.

Ms Forsythe: Thanks very much for that, Gina. I am really interested in the change maker funds. You mentioned smaller pots and getting funding out to community groups. Who will administer the funds? Can people apply directly, or will it be done through local councils?

Ms McIntyre: The administration will be done directly through Pobal and the Northern Ireland delivery agent.

You raised a point earlier about councils, Diane. At the public consultations, one of the things that we heard was that some smaller groups felt that they could not access council funds. We gave funds to councils so that funding could be delivered on the ground, thus taking the pressure off the administration side, but, apparently, that sometimes did not happen, with groups finding it hard to access funding. What we therefore did was set up the change maker funds specifically so that people could access them without having to go through the councils.

Ms Forsythe: I really welcome that. My question was about the disparity among different councils. I received a lot of feedback from disheartened people who felt that it was a closed shop and that they were not able to access training through PEACE PLUS. The approach of different councils is very different. They are not necessarily picking the best projects or are going with one project per district electoral area (DEA). I have therefore had some concerning feedback. It is an excellent programme if it does what it is meant to do, but it is about making sure that the process is correct. I take on board Dominic's point about the need for political direction. That is a key point, which I will take on board as we try to shape how the money gets to where it should get to in order to achieve the best intended outcomes.

Ms McIntyre: That is disappointing to hear at this stage. All the councils were given an allocation of funds based on their population and deprivation index, so they do not have to compete with one another. They all have to follow the same process in the same three areas, however. This time, because of what we heard in the past, we instructed them that they had to develop and co-create their plans with the community at a very local level. They have all been given the same support and process to follow. Over the past 18 months, we have supported the councils in the development of their plans and governance arrangements. We will review those plans when they come in and make sure that they meet all the necessary criteria. So far, only two have been awarded funding. There are another, I think, six or seven under assessment, and funding will be awarded over the next couple of months.

Ms Forsythe: Brilliant. I may write to you separately on that, Gina. I really welcome the consultation and the direct feedback that you have got. That is what I have heard from the community and from groups.

The Chairperson (Mr O'Toole): Is that you finished, Diane?

Ms Forsythe: Yes.

The Chairperson (Mr O'Toole): Members, please indicate if you want to come in.

I have one question. A major part of PEACE PLUS has always been its cross-border element. One issue that has been raised with me on a number of occasions is that of some of the post-Brexit bureaucratic challenges. In some cases, they are relatively low-level challenges, while, in other cases, they are a little bit more than simply bureaucratic, such as the concerns around the sharing of data. We have separate data regimes on either side of the border. The UK still has equivalence, but there are issues to work through, particularly if you are dealing with, for example, data that needs to be shared. A cross-border project working with kids, for example, would need to share data. There are other issues, such as insurance issues with community transport vehicles. I have heard, not just anecdotally but from projects about a whole range of new mini issues and disruptions. Are you hearing that? If so, are they things that you can help people work through?

Ms McIntyre: Yes, we are hearing that. We expected it, to be honest, given what happened with the Brexit vote. If you look at investment area 6.1, you will see that there is a significant amount of money for strategic planning and engagement. Thematic area 6 is to do with building and embedding partnership and collaboration, so that investment area can help address legal and administrative challenges. It is not very project-related as such, as it is not activity. Rather, it is about the legal and administrative challenges.

We have been inundated now. Before, it was a bit of a slow burner. I do not think that people realised that the opportunities were there, or perhaps they did not realise some of the challenges that were going to be presented. We have now been inundated with potential ideas, and those are in the area of data collection — exactly what you say — networking, Administrations working together North, South, east and west. Moreover, we are hearing about disaster recovery, about which you were talking, with emergency vehicles working together across the border. There is a particular focus in the programme on rural areas.

We have been heartened by what we are seeing. We expect calls to open later in the summer, or perhaps in September. We have funded up to only €2 million so far, so there is still quite a bit to go.

The Chairperson (Mr O'Toole): You talked about how you interact with Departments, the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) and the Irish Government, and, of course, the EU and the UK Government. Do you have, for example, formalised engagement on some of the cross-border activity on tourism with Tourism Ireland, or, indeed, with Fáilte Ireland, Tourism NI and InterTradeIreland? Do you have formalised memorandums of understanding (MOUs) with them?

Ms McIntyre: We do not have MOUs. We have funded projects with them in the past. They, particularly those bodies in the tourism sector, have been speaking to me about potential PEACE PLUS projects. That is exactly what you were talking about under investment area 6.1. There are opportunities there for marketing, for networking and for sharing expertise. They could do joint marketing across the border. They have been looking at that, and I am expecting them to come in with a project.

You asked how the Executive could help. We are making sure that we collaborate with the other funders in the region. Those include city deals, the Shared Prosperity Fund and the Shared Island Fund: anywhere that we can collaborate in order to make a better investment from the fund. If you become aware of someone — say, the International Fund for Ireland (IFI) — doing work that is similar, talk to us in case there is something that we can do, or encourage people to do, to make our investments have a better impact.

The Chairperson (Mr O'Toole): Thank you very much. I am just going to pause you there, because I need to double-check that we are quorate.

The Committee Clerk: We are quorate, but we are going to lose the quorum in a few minutes, and I need to ask members some questions about the forward work programme. My apologies.

Are members content that we start the Committee meeting at 1.00 pm next week and on 22 May?

Members indicated assent.

The Committee Clerk: Also, are members agreed that we undertake the usual Budget scrutiny engagement process of writing to other Committees to ask for information on their Budget scrutiny? The information would include Hansard reports and any other commentary that they want to make.

Ms Forsythe: On that, we will receive a departmental briefing on 22 May. Most Departments will be in a position to brief Committees during that week. In the correspondence, can we ask the Committees to forward that information at their earliest convenience, not necessarily waiting until our next meeting? We know that we will need the information between meetings to allow us to come to an agreed position. We might need to have a short, extra Finance Committee meeting.

The Committee Clerk: Are members agreed?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson (Mr O'Toole): This is the glamour of democracy. *[Laughter.]* Thank you for bearing with us while we had bits of business to do. It was extremely helpful to us, Gina, because Standing Orders dictate that we have to have a certain number of members present in order to make substantive decisions. I appreciate the open door to being able to engage with you and give you feedback, which slightly contrasts with certain other funds that are not being administered with quite such openness.

No other Member has a question. Thank you very much for coming to brief us, and for your patience. This is a relatively warm room, so we will now release you. Hopefully, you will get to enjoy some of the sunshine for the rest of the afternoon and evening. The session has been most useful. We will follow up with you on a variety of points. Do not expect us not to be annoying you in the future. That was a useful introductory steer on where we are at with EU replacement funds, or lack thereof, and, indeed, on the SEUPB. I expect that we will want to take further evidence in the not-too-distant future. Thanks Gina, Tony, Dominic, Laura and Paul.