



Northern Ireland
Assembly

**COMMITTEE FOR SOCIAL
DEVELOPMENT**

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

Inquiry into Town Centre Regeneration

24 September 2009

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Simon Hamilton (Chairperson)
David Hilditch (Deputy Chairperson)
Mickey Brady
Alex Easton
Jonathan Craig
Mary Bradley
Anna Lo
Caral Ní Chuilín

The Chairperson (Mr Hamilton):

The next item on the agenda is the Committee's inquiry into town centre regeneration. Members will recall that last week we agreed to seek some further written evidence, and in your packs you will find something to that effect with respect to the Scottish Government's town centre regeneration fund, which is worth some consideration. Members also have a copy of the Committee Clerk's information and guidance on that fund, a list of frequently asked questions about it, and a summary of the first tranche of funding, including a list of locations where the fund was used.

The Scottish Government made £60 million available in 2009-2010 through that fund. The fund will support local community and business leaders to make lasting improvements to town centres across Scotland through capital investment programmes. The types of capital activity that were supported included improving pedestrian vehicle access or parking provision; attracting increased footfall; diversification of the mix of services and amenities; acquisition of gap sites

and vacant properties, streetscape improvements and remodelling of existing premises. The fund accepts applications from cities, towns and district centres irrespective of size, and only one applicant from a given town centre will be successful. All applications are subject to a four-stage appraisal process.

The first stage is the initial sift to ensure eligibility of applicants. The second stage is the scoring against criteria undertaken by the Scottish equivalents of DSD and NILGA, interestingly. Stage three is consideration by an independent panel, on which representatives from local government are included, to ensure that small and medium-sized towns also benefit fairly. Stage four is the consideration of the decision by the Scottish Government and their Ministers. The guidance indicates that the timescale for applications is short, and that applications are sought from district councils, voluntary organisations, town centre partnerships and so on. The guidance also indicates that the Scottish Government has launched a learning network that is to play a key role in evaluating the impact of the town centre regeneration fund. It also aims to better connect key stakeholders and help them to learn from one another.

I think it is an interesting concept, the merits and benefits of which are fairly obvious. It does not contradict what the Committee has been discussing as regards town centre regeneration, but I think it adds some benefit in that it ring-fences funding for that purpose. It is therefore worth consideration by the Department. Given what the Department has done on other issues, I am worried about the ring-fencing of funding for this type of activity, wherever the money goes to. The Scottish model also has the potential to ensure some geographical spread of funding. It may be worthwhile for the Committee to consider recommending that the Department, at the very least, considers a replica of the scheme, or a scheme on a smaller scale, perhaps involving a couple of the criteria and ring-fencing a smaller amount of money for a few of those activities; for example, remodelling of existing premises or a public realm, which would be specifically up for grabs in a competitive fund. I am happy for members to discuss the issue to see whether it is something that we could take forward as a recommendation.

Mr Craig:

I am fairly sympathetic to that viewpoint. We have discussed it in relation to other issues, and it is clear that if funds are not ring-fenced for any such scheme then money will be re-routed somewhere else at the whim of someone else. It is abundantly clear that that is going to happen in the future. That said; another aspect of the visit intrigued me greatly. It is probably outside the

remit of the Committee's report, but it has repercussions on what happens with regard to local government and how such schemes are implemented. The liaison officers from the Scottish Parliament actually sat on the boards that implemented the scheme, which enabled them to give direct feedback to the Scottish Parliament. I thought that that was an intriguing idea.

If we are going to follow up with the reform of local government and outsource some of the responsibility for town centre regeneration to local government, we need to somehow feedback the idea to the Executive that that is a good idea about how to keep communications open between the new local councils and the Assembly with regard to that. The Executive or Minister should be told that we noted that extremely good and effective way of keeping communications open between the two and feeding back any issues and problems that there were. There was more or less an instantaneous response.

Ms Lo:

I did not visit Glasgow, but when the Committee went to Boston we saw how small projects in different districts could trigger others to do the same, such as removing those horrible grilles, for example, and having something more attractive. When one or two shops started doing it, that triggered others to replicate it. I am quite happy to support the idea of spreading it out to other districts.

Ms Ní Chuilín:

Jonathan Craig raised the question that I was going to ask under "Any Other Business", but it is pertinent to the issue. I think that the Committee should consider — on geographical spread or according to issues — having meetings with some local councils. My particular interest is in neighbourhood renewal. The Department will give us a run down on the report, but how do we link in to that, because, whether we like it or not, members are seen to be responsible for that transition, good, bad or indifferent. It is worth the Committee trying to develop relationships, perhaps under different themes. Town centre regeneration could be one of them.

I do not know if it is in our remit, but we have an ability to call for people and papers; perhaps we could try to do something under that. I do not want to add to our very busy workload, but I think that, in preparation for the RPA, it would be worthwhile to hold a couple of one-off meetings. I am concerned that, unless there is ring-fencing and budgets are agreed as part of the RPA, projects such as this, and all the work that we have done, which I feel is good work, will be

totally lost. I do not think that we will have any stamp on schemes aimed at improving the lives of people. Maybe it is something to be considered.

The Chairperson:

I think it is a good idea to ask the Committee Clerk to explore how we could do that. You are right that, particularly with new councils, it might prove difficult, in that there is nobody there to talk to at the minute. It is not as though the new councils are sitting in shadow mode at the moment.

The Committee could also explore the possibility of talking to the town centre regeneration groups, because they will still remain in the areas post-RPA. If there were some ring-fencing of funds for town centre regeneration, the argument could be made that that would remain at a central level. That would be the case post-RPA, and it would ensure that that money is there.

Ms Ní Chuilín:

Almost at an arm's length basis?

The Chairperson:

Yes, and the Department will want to stay involved. It will still set the policy in that area, and it will be involved in ensuring that the policy is implemented in the correct manner. It will then be up to local councils or districts to bid for funds.

Mr Brady:

I agree with Jonathan. It was very clear from the Committee's visit that there was a direct link with the Scottish Parliament, and everyone was aware of what was happening, from the groups on the ground, right back to the legislators. That seems like a common-sense approach.

Ms Ní Chuilín:

I have not been involved with councils for quite some time, and I am not really au fait with what transitional committees are in place. I know that Belfast is not changing much under the RPA, but one of its committees is a transitional committee.

Mr Craig:

Yes that is the committee that deals with policies and resources. I have met with that committee,

because I chair the same committee in Lisburn and Castlereagh. That committee is transitional, because it is dealing with a unique problem.

Ms Ní Chuilín:

Would you be opposed to meeting under an umbrella of neighbourhood renewal? Unless we can pick themes, and begin to do some of the work —

The Chairperson:

We are moving towards a different issue. The Committee will direct the Committee Clerk to take that idea away and see how practical it is. I do not think that it is a bad idea. It is worth exploring how possible and effective it is under the current arrangements.

I detect a note of positivity in the Committee about the idea of a town centre fund. Perhaps when the Clerk has drafted something, the Department could then consider a similar fund for Northern Ireland. We will also include feedback that will be garnered post-RPA. The Committee should consider that as soon as possible.

The Committee has also talked about doing something in the local area, rather than just on the Floor of the House when we launch the report. Therefore, we will consider engaging with the people at the local level when the report is finalised, which will hopefully be before the RPA is implemented.

Mrs M Bradley:

Is the Committee sure that all of the transitional committees are working in all of the RPA areas.

The Chairperson:

That is not an issue for the Committee. However, I believe that that is the case, but we can find that out.

Are members agreed that the Committee should amend the report and make a draft recommendation along the lines that we have discussed?

Members indicated assent.