

Briefing on the UK Shared Prosperity Fund

Timescales and gaps in employability funding provision

Voluntary organisations are often best placed and are the most effective at reaching and supporting those furthest from the labour market whom mainstream provision often can't reach, by delivering frontline interventions that are tailored to the specific and complex needs of their client groups. European funding has played an instrumental part in enabling the sector to provide this support. Under the current 2014-20 ESIF programmes the sector is supporting over 45,000 people and over 900 social businesses, with an EU investment of over £152million. As we are approaching the end of the ESIF programmes, these projects are rapidly coming to a close. With the UKSPF not readily available yet, we can already see the voluntary sector inevitably losing staff, expertise and infrastructure that will need to be re-built from scratch at great cost, and several organisations will face the risk of closing down entirely.

Engagement and involvement of the sector

It remains unclear at the moment how the UKSPF will be delivered in each region and how the voluntary sector will be funded and involved. Since the submission of the regional investment plans local authorities have been working on setting out the structures and delivery arrangements, whilst still waiting for the UK Government's approval of the plans. During this period, however, only limited information has been made available publicly on the content of the plans and on how interventions will be funded. This is causing great uncertainty for many voluntary organisations, especially those that don't have close links and regular engagement with local authorities. Keeping the sector informed and involved could help ensure that organisations are prepared when funding becomes available.

Another key concern for the voluntary sector is around the risk of inconsistency in operation across the regions, which could lead to organisations having to comply with different rules and procedures. We are hoping to see joined up work in this space, involving the voluntary sector in the discussions about setting up a system that works for the people most in need as well as the organisations that support them.

Governance arrangements

We welcome the Welsh Government's suggestion to explore how the Strategic Forum for Regional Investment in Wales could be used as a platform to ensure the strategic oversight and the appropriate scrutiny of the Fund and its delivery. A coherent governance structure could enable coordination on a national level to minimise duplication and maximise the impact of the funding, and it could provide an opportunity for a wide range of stakeholders to feedback and raise any issues. We would like to work with the Welsh Government and other stakeholders from various sectors to review the Terms of Reference of this group and to ensure that the third sector is sufficiently represented.