



Invest 
Northern
Ireland
Building Locally
Competing Globally

Results of an Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) on Invest NI's Business Development Solutions Programmes

November 2007

Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998

Executive Summary

This report presents the results of an Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) on Invest Northern Ireland's Business Development Solutions suite of programmes and follows the Draft Report that was issued for public consultation in July 2007.

The draft report, which is still available from Invest NI or from its website (www.investni.com/equality), detailed the information that was reviewed, identified potential adverse impacts and provided preliminary policy recommendations as to how the policy should be modified to lessen adverse impacts.

Two written responses to the draft report were received from the voluntary, community and trade union sectors, and verbal feedback from the consultation meeting held in Invest NI on 31st August 2007. Issues raised were considered alongside existing data in coming to the final decisions as presented in this report. We believe that the proposed actions will promote equality of opportunity between all Section 75 groups and we would like to thank all those who have contributed to this EQIA.

Further copies of this report are available on Invest NI's website at www.investni.com/equality

If you have any queries about this document and/or its availability in alternative formats (including Braille, disk and audio cassette, and in minority languages to meet the needs of those who are not fluent in English) then please contact:

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Introduction

Section 75 (1) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 requires that Invest Northern Ireland (Invest NI) shall, “in carrying out its functions relating to Northern Ireland, have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity” between the following groups:

- Persons of different religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status or sexual orientation;
- Men and women generally;
- Persons with a disability and persons without; and
- Persons with dependants and persons without.

In addition, and without prejudice to these obligations, Invest NI is also committed to having due regard to the desirability of promoting good relations between persons of different religious belief, political opinion or racial group.

Invest NI’s Equality Scheme, approved by the Equality Commission on 19 November 2003, sets out how Invest NI will fulfil its statutory duties under Section 75.

The scheme acknowledges Invest NI’s commitment:

- to carry out Equality Impact Assessments (EQIAs) and reviews on existing policies and
- to develop new policies as required. Following such a policy review, the Business Development Solutions (BDS) suite of programmes was screened and it was determined that it should be subjected to an EQIA. The EQIA commenced in 2005.

BDS Priorities

Our Corporate Plan 2005 – 2008 outlines the following BDS actions:

- Assist our clients to become more competitive, encouraging them to be more entrepreneurial, innovative and internationally focused.
- Define our clients more clearly, in effect, those companies which offer greatest potential to have a positive impact on the economy; focusing our efforts on working with these clients.
- Continue the shift from assisting projects that increase capacity to those that build value added, innovation and entrepreneurial capability.
- Encourage the continued move from grant support to the use of repayable forms of assistance and private sources of finance.
- Increase emphasis on attracting financial services and software development projects, for which Northern Ireland offers good opportunities.
- Prepare for the likely impact of the European Union's Review of Regional Aid.

BDS Aim

The primary aim of BDS is:

To help companies grow by focusing on capability-building factors which will contribute to increasing competitiveness, international expansion and investing in research and development.

BDS Background

Invest NI has significantly revised how BDS programmes and services are made available to new and established clients and companies to take account of a rapidly changing marketplace, and in line with our Corporate Plan 2005 – 2008.

Invest NI clients are:

- Businesses starting up or at an early stage of development (usually less than two years from starting), in the manufacturing and international tradable services sector, which demonstrate the ability and capability to grow in external markets

- Established businesses, in the manufacturing and international tradable services sectors, which have the commitment and capability to grow, particularly in export markets

- Businesses able to demonstrate that currently, or over the next three years, that they will have:
 - a) Total sales of over £100,000 per annum; and

 - b) External sales (i.e. outside of Northern Ireland) greater than 25% of turnover or greater than £250,000 per annum.

BDS programmes which support the Accelerating Entrepreneurship Strategy, can be accessed on the basis of projects brought forward by newly established and existing Northern Ireland businesses.

These programmes can be customised to the specific business needs of individual clients, because Invest NI recognises that the issues facing individual clients may vary considerably. Companies seeking BDS support for

the first time will normally work closely with a Client Executive on the support and funding services available.

The Client Executive will also help companies apply for relevant BDS schemes and programmes. By determining the needs of the business, Invest NI can then work with the company to decide appropriate support.

Potential BDS clients can range from one or more individuals, who approach Invest NI with a business proposition, to established enterprises seeking assistance to expand. BDS has been designed to be sufficiently flexible and responsive to meet the needs of a diverse client base whilst ensuring that support and assistance is offered in a fair, reasonable and proportionate manner.

Many clients who engage with BDS, and in particular those representing existing or newly established businesses, normally move through two stages:

1. An individual client's needs are assessed, for example by means of a Business Health Check and associated diagnosis of its strengths and weaknesses.
2. Engagement with a wide portfolio of programmes and services designed to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of the company. Selective Financial Assistance can then be made available where this is deemed appropriate.

While the system is responsive to individual circumstances it is also sufficiently robust and flexible to ensure that funding and support opportunities accurately reflect the merits of each application.

BDS funding is provided through Invest NI from several sources, including EU support.

Consideration of Data and Available Research

Invest NI considered a wide range of data and research on BDS, its programmes and campaigns. These were summarised and fully covered in the Draft Consultation Report.

Initial Recommendations to Mitigate Adverse Impact

The following actions to prevent potential adverse impact were recommended in the Draft Consultation Report. Consultees were then invited to comment on these, along with the data on which they were based.

1. Assess the most appropriate way of setting up an effective equality monitoring strategy in conjunction with the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland.
2. Over and above the selection criteria that apply to BDS as a whole, where a programme or scheme has introduced additional criteria then these should be clearly defined and set out; any potential adverse impacts associated with these criteria must be considered.
3. Where any BDS programme deliberately targets certain groups then the reasons for this targeting must be made transparent. A review of programme accessibility will also be undertaken to ensure consistency of approach.
4. Ongoing training of front line staff and in particular Client Executives in Section 75 is essential. Where external consultants are employed then their responsibilities under Section 75 must also be made clear, this includes any training requirements.

5. Each programme must make clear, in all documentation, that materials can be made available in alternative formats where necessary and on request.
6. Marketing of BDS programmes and services among minority communities will be considered as part of a broader positive action programme.
7. All application forms must use a format with clear fonts, layout, and colours etc. that are accessible to those with special needs.

Formal Consultation

The EQIA report was published in July 2007, making clear that Invest NI was keen to consult as widely as possible on its findings and including preliminary recommendations as to how to mitigate adverse impact. These actions were taken:

- The report was issued to all consultees in our Equality Scheme and to any members of the public on request.
- Prominent advertisements were placed in the Belfast Telegraph, Irish News and News Letter, inviting comment on good practice.
- A copy was posted on Invest NI's website and on the intranet.
- A consultation meeting was made available with representatives of particular interest groups in August 2007.
- Invest NI put in place systems to ensure that the scheme was available in accessible formats, and in a timely fashion.

Written and Verbal Submissions

Invest NI received two written submissions and a consultation meeting in August 2007 yielded verbal comments regarding BDS programmes.

These verbal and written comments are summarised below:

- Invest NI should help women in business move to the next step. Could Invest NI develop a programme specifically targeted at helping women to export?
- The “Get on Board” programme is a specific programme for women who would like to become directors. Would Invest NI consider offering a programme like this?
- Would Invest NI consider offering women only trade missions as women can feel intimidated attending trade missions with men who have been established in business for many years?
- Would it be possible to twin with the women’s network in New York and could Invest NI facilitate this?
- There is a feeling that Invest NI is not a friendly organisation to approach. The untapped women who want to start up a business won’t go through LEA’s and as Invest NI want to attract this section of the population would it be worth considering advertising and promoting women’s programmes and initiatives more?
- The EQIA acknowledges the under representation of women using the BDS service, attributing this to the corresponding under representation of women in business generally. However the EQIA does not examine why women are under represented in business generally or investigate how women could be better served by Invest NI.

These comments specifically address gender issues in relation to Invest NI and while the observations are noted and are welcome, they must be set against the range of initiatives that Invest NI has developed to address the under-representation of women in certain sectors of the labour market. By way of example, since the draft EQIA report was first published, Invest NI has put in place the programme “Innovative Pathways to Female Entrepreneurship”, through its Regional Economic Development Team, and remains responsive to the needs of women at work.

With reference to women-only initiatives, Invest NI continues to operate its programmes so as to provide equality of opportunity for all. This is mindful of our obligations under Section 75 and the anti-discrimination legislation and also in line with our corporate mission, aims and values.

As an organisation we would also be reluctant to head down the route of providing specific programmes for specific minorities as this would be unmanageable with regard to equitable treatment across all Section 75 grounds, may be unlawful and, at a more practical level, would detract from the essential networking that is gained by attending these programmes in the first place and meeting a wide range of people and companies from across a sector. The gender initiatives that Invest NI continues to support operate along with this overriding principle.

Response to Disability Action

Our other written response came from Disability Action and centred around various disability-related issues and in particular the monitoring of staff and client companies. A detailed response has been sent to Disability Action addressing their concerns and hopefully providing further clarity on particular issues.

Invest NI does monitor its staff in line with the Fair Employment and Training Order. Monitoring forms supplied to all prospective staff at application stage record five of the nine grounds (age, religious belief, ethnic origin, gender and disability).

We also currently monitor all those individuals who take part in our Accelerating Entrepreneurship Strategy programmes through the application process which takes into account seven of the nine categories (age, religious belief, ethnic origin, gender, disability, marital status and dependants).

However given that monitoring of client companies presents itself as a more complex issue in comparison with the monitoring of individuals, we have awaited guidance from the Equality Commission. Having now received this guidance we are about to introduce a monitoring strategy in April 2008 which can be rolled out across the organisation and which will eventually provide us with more in-depth information on our client companies. This point has also formed part of the EQIA results as outlined in this report.

Decisions on the EQIA

Following the consultation, Invest NI will:

1. Set up an effective equality monitoring strategy in conjunction with the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland.
2. Additional criteria for programmes or schemes will be clearly defined and set out; and any potential adverse impacts associated with these criteria will be considered.
3. When a BDS programme targets certain groups then the reasons for targeting these groups will be made transparent. A review of programme accessibility will also be undertaken to ensure consistency of approach.

4. There will be ongoing training of front line staff and in particular Client Executives in Section 75. Where external consultants are employed then their responsibilities under Section 75 will also be made clear, and this will include any training requirements.
5. Each programme will make clear, in all documentation, that materials can be made available in alternative formats where necessary and on request.
6. Marketing of BDS programmes and services among minority communities will be considered as part of a broader positive action programme.
7. All application forms will use a format with clear fonts, layout, and colours etc. that are accessible to those with special needs.

Monitoring for Adverse Impact in the Future and Publication of the Results of Such Monitoring

Invest NI is currently establishing a monitoring system for the organisation to allow the impact of the policies on relevant groups by the Section 75 dimensions to be monitored.

This information will be reviewed annually and the results widely and openly published. Policy will be revised accordingly if this monitoring shows a greater adverse impact than predicted, or if opportunities arise which would allow for greater equality of opportunity to be promoted.



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