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Executive Programme Funds

Kathryn Barr

This briefing note follows a request from the Northern Ireland Assembly Committee for Communities on the effectiveness of the previous Executive Programme Funds in relation to their impact on Children and Young People and improving Cross-Departmental working and stakeholder engagement.

This information is provided to Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) in support of their duties, and is not intended to address the specific circumstances of any particular individual. It should not be relied upon as professional legal advice, or as a substitute for it.

Key Points

- The Executive Programme Funds (EPFs) were allocated from 2001-2006. The Funds were designed to support cross-cutting initiatives linked to the first Programme for Government (2001-2005). Unlike the other Funds, the Children's Fund included a distinct funding stream for voluntary and community organisations.
- Evidence to assess the effectiveness of the EPFs is limited. When contacted, Departments and other relevant bodies generally reported holding no relevant evaluation information
- The EPFs were intended to encourage Departments to work together on shared priorities. However, the limited evidence available suggests this ambition was not fully realised.
- In 2021, the Committee for Finance and Personnel highlighted a number of issues in relation to the bidding process for EPF funding, including a lack of cross-cutting bids and a lack of consultation with the relevant Committees by Departments.
- Direct rule was in place from 2002-2007. The Northern Ireland Office (NIO) has indicated it does not hold information on the decision to end the funds.
- Given the limited evidence available, Members may wish to note that it is difficult to draw firm conclusions on effectiveness, particularly in relation to outcomes for children and young people.

Introduction

On 12th March 2026, Northern Ireland Assembly Committee for Communities held an evidence session with the Department for Communities and the Department of Finance on *Children Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015*.¹ The Committee agreed to ask RaISe to draft a paper on the effectiveness of the previous Executive Programme Funds (EPFs) in relation to their impact on Children and Young People and improving Cross-Departmental working and stakeholder engagement.

RaISe requested information from The Executive Office (TEO), the Department of Finance (DoF), the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) and the Public Records Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI). DoF and NIO returned no relevant information, while the information provided by TEO and PRONI was limited.

This paper therefore draws on available material from official documents, Northern Ireland Assembly and UK Parliamentary records, and relevant public commentary.

Background to the Executive Programme Funds

The funds were set up following the first Programme for Government (PfG), to assist with the development of new policies, services, programmes and projects of major importance². They were intended to promote Departmental co-operation, and to address multi-dimensional issues in a cross-cutting way.³

There were five initial priority areas:

- Social Inclusion/ Community Regeneration Fund;
- Service Modernisation Fund;
- New Directions Fund;
- Infrastructure/ Capital Renewal Fund; and
- Children's Fund

¹ NI Assembly, Committee for Communities, [Minutes of proceedings Thursday 12 March 2026](#)

² NI Executive, Programme for Government 2001, NI Assembly Library 351.416 NOR, pp. 6-7

³ NI Assembly, [Executive Programme Funds: First Allocations](#) Hansard 02/04/2001

In 2002, the New Directions and Service Modernisation Funds were replaced by an Innovation and Modernisation Fund.⁴

In response to a question in the House of Commons, NIO outlined that the amounts allocated from each of the EPFs were as summarised below, totaling over £500 million.⁵

Table 1: Executive Programme Fund Allocations (million £)

Fund	2001– 02	2002– 03	2003– 04	2004– 05	2005– 06	Total
Children's	2.9	6.3	17.2	6.0	5.9	38.3
Innovation/Modernisation	0.0	11.7	53.8	75.8	94.2	235.5
Infrastructure	9.1	29.0	41.2	0.0	0.0	79.3
New Directions	7.2	25.0	36.4	0.0	0.0	68.6
Service Modernisation	6.6	8.4	7.4	0.0	0.0	22.4
Social Inclusion/Community Regeneration	7.4	21.1	38.9	1.7	0.0	69.3
Total allocations	33.2	101.5	194.9	83.6	100.1	513.3

⁴ Executive Position Report to the Northern Ireland Assembly: Developing the Programme for Government Budget 2003-04, NI Assembly Library, 351.416 NOR p. 34.

⁵ House of Commons Question, [Executive Programme Funds, 27/06/2005](#), Vol 435, 5431. Please note that the House of Commons Library has been unable to locate the details of the underlying projects referred to in the response (Email correspondence between RaISe and Hof C Library, April 2026).

The initial general eligibility criteria for the Funds included:⁶

- A clear and effective link to one or more of the Programme for Government priorities;
- Direct benefits generated through cross-cutting work involving more than one department;
- Consistency with statutory obligations on equality and policy commitments to Targeting Social Need;
- Additionality;
- Value for money and transparent and containable costs;
- Inability to proceed without EPF assistance;
- Transparent and containable costs; and
- Innovation

Initial funding allocations

In the first allocation of EPFs announced on 2nd April 2001. 62 of the 139 bids submitted across the five funds were successful, and were awarded £146 million over three years.⁷ Successful bids included support for children through a range of interventions in education and social services; the Toome bypass, and investment in e-government.⁸

In questions following the announcement of these allocations, a number of Committee Chairs raised concerns, including the lack of new and innovative schemes that were cross-cutting in nature.⁹

The Minister of Finance and Personnel acknowledged that the first round of allocations did not achieve the degree of cross-cutting activity, interdepartmental bid development and programme planning that the Executive had wanted to see.¹⁰

⁶ Papers held by TEO – 106/01 – Executive Programme Funds Part I, seen by RaISe

⁷ NI Assembly, [Official Record 02/04/2001](#)

⁸ NI Executive, Programme for Government 2001, NI Assembly Library 351.416 NOR, p. 7

⁹ NI Assembly, [Official Record 02/04/2001](#)

¹⁰ NI Assembly, [Official Record 02/04/2001](#)

Committee for Finance and Personnel Report and Next Steps

The second allocation round, in late 2021, only awarded funding for the New Directions, Service Modernisation and Social Inclusion/Community Regeneration Funds. In this round, 89 bids were submitted, of which 31 were successful.¹¹ Following the closure of bids for the second round of allocations, the former Committee for Finance and Personnel published a report on the bidding process for the EPFs in 2001.¹²

The Committee considered that the process had failed on a number of fronts, including how Assembly Committees were consulted by Departments on bids, and the volume and variable quality of bids submitted. It found the process wasteful, prone to encouraging over-bidding against a finite budget, and in need of better management to encourage joint working between departments. The Committee also raised concerns about the limited number of cross-cutting bids submitted by groups of Departments for initiatives spanning multiple functions.

The Committee recommended a review of the bidding process, a reduction in the frequency of bidding rounds, and a limit on the number of bids. It also recommended that Departments be encouraged to submit cross-cutting bids, supported by central direction on coordinating action and establishing benchmarks and best practice.

Shortly after this Report was published, the Minister of Finance and Personnel Mark Durkan, made a statement in the Assembly, announcing the successful bids in the second round.¹³ He thanked the Committee for their report, and outlined that the Executive agreed to review the arrangements. He noted that the funds had strong potential to promote cross-cutting work and support initiatives led by groups of Ministers. In the debate that followed, several MLAs raised concerns about the lack of cross-cutting measures, although most contributions focused on individual funded or unfunded projects.

¹¹ NI Assembly, [Official Record, 3rd December 2001](#)

¹² NI Assembly, Committee for Finance Personnel, [Report on Executive Programme Funds: Second Tranche Allocations](#), 02/01 R (16/10/2001)

¹³ NI Assembly, [Official Record, 3rd December 2001](#)

The Minister also described how Departments could act as sponsors for other bodies, such as non-departmental public bodies or the community and voluntary sector, and noted that officials were consulting on allowing the community and voluntary sector to apply directly to the Children's Fund (discussed below).

In early 2002, papers held by TEO suggest that the then Minister for Social Development, Nigel Dodds, felt the EPF process created additional bureaucracy and unmet expectations.¹⁴ He believed greater cross-cutting work was needed, but that more efficient mechanisms existed through the Programme for Government and the Spending Review process.

The Executive Position Report to the Assembly in June 2002 confirmed that a review of the operation and management of the EPFs had been undertaken, resulting in changes including amendments to fund-specific criteria. The New Directions and Service Modernisation Funds were replaced by the new Innovation and Modernisation Fund.¹⁵

Direct Rule

The Executive was dissolved from October 2002, until May 2007. Initially, the Funds continued to be administered in accordance with procedures previously agreed by the Northern Ireland Executive.¹⁶ During Budget 2003, Ministers concluded there was not a strong case for retaining a separate process to manage and allocate the relatively small amounts within EPFs, and priorities were instead managed as part of the central budget process.¹⁷ However, the intention was initially that the Children's Fund would continue.

In response to a question in the House of Commons in November 2005, the NIO Minister Angela Smith outlined that there were no plans at that stage to reinstate the EPFs, but that future packages would build on their positive

¹⁴ Papers held by TEO – Exc/2/2001 – Executive Programme Funds, seen by RaISe

¹⁵ Executive Position Report to the Northern Ireland Assembly: Developing the Programme for Government Budget 2003-04, NI Assembly Library, 351.416 NOR p. 34.

¹⁶ House of Commons Question, [Executive Programme Funds, 02/12/2002](#), Vol 395, 83103

¹⁷ Papers held by TEO - 09/01/03/04 - Children's Fund Voluntary and Community Sector, seen by RaISe

aspects, focusing on priority areas and encouraging a cross-cutting approach to the underlying issues.¹⁸

Mark Durkan, then MP for Foyle, and a former Minister of Finance and Personnel and deputy First Minister, called on the UK Government to restore funding mechanisms such as the EPFs, with particular reference to funding for children and young people.¹⁹

RaISe asked NIO for information it held in relation to the EPFs and the rationale for closing them. NIO have advised it does not hold this information.²⁰

Children's Fund

Gordon Brown, then Chancellor of the Exchequer, announced the establishment of the Children's Fund in 1999. It was intended to provide additional resources, beyond mainstream and earmarked funding streams, to support voluntary and community organisations and enable services to work together to help children overcome poverty and disadvantage.²¹

Mr Durkan had referred to the UK Government's Children's Fund and calls for something similar in Northern Ireland, as the time the EPFs were being developed.²² However, he later clarified in the Assembly that he did not intend to simply replicate the UK Government's Children's Fund.²³

In the first round of the EPFs in 2001, projects which successfully bid for the Children's Fund included:²⁴

- specialist residential units for vulnerable children
- a school age mothers programme
- wraparound schemes for disabled children

¹⁸ House of Commons Question, [Children's Fund, 23/11/2005](#), Vol 439, 29526

¹⁹ [House of Commons Hansard Debates for 7 Feb 2006 \(pt 3\)](#), columns 44-46

²⁰ Correspondence between NIO Officials and RaISe, 01/06/2026

²¹ House of Commons Library, [The Children's Fund and funding arrangement](#) (2004)

²² Institute for Government, [Transcript: Ministers Reflect: Mark Durkan](#) (2018)

²³ NI Assembly, [Official Record, 3rd December 2001](#)

²⁴ Papers held by TEO – 106/01 – Executive Programme Funds Part I, seen by RaISe

The Children's Fund operated differently from the other EPFs, as it included a funding stream aimed specifically at non-governmental organisations, particularly in the voluntary and community sector.

Around the time of the first funding round, an interdepartmental working group was established to work with the voluntary and community sectors to develop potential projects that could be supported by allocations from this fund in the future²⁵. A subsequent consultation on the Children's Fund closed in early 2002. RalSe requested information on this consultation, but the files are part of a cache of unstructured physical files held by TEO that are awaiting release under the Annual Sensitivity Review process and were not available to inform this paper.

The bidding process for the community and voluntary to apply for the Children's Fund opened over summer 2002, with awards announced in March 2003, when the NI Executive was not operating. Funding of £17 million was awarded for 101 projects over three years.²⁶ Organisations which received funding included the NSPCC, Youth Action and several local Women Aids.²⁷

Reflections on the EPFs

Writing in 2001, Robin Wilson and Rick Wilford, researchers who led a team monitoring the outworkings of the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement, argued that an absence of mutuality within the Executive undermined the EPFs, noting that 57 of the 62 successful bids in the first round of EPF expenditure came from single Departments.²⁸ This is consistent in papers held by TEO which suggest that Executive discussions on the EPFs in 2001 identified a need for better cross-cutting work.²⁹

²⁵ Northern Ireland Assembly, [Executive Programme Funds: First Allocations](#) Hansard 02/04/2001

²⁶ Papers held by TEO – OFMDFM 11/1/02/13 – Children's Fund, seen by RalSe

²⁷ Papers held by TEO - 09/01/03/04 - Children's Fund Voluntary and Community, seen by RalSe Sector

²⁸ R Wilson and R Wilford, [Northern Ireland: Endgame](#), in *The State of the Nations 2001: The second Year of Devolution in the United Kingdom*, edited by A Trench (2001) p. 98.

²⁹ Papers held by TEO – OFMDFM - Executive Programme Funds – 106/01, seen by RalSe

A *Belfast Telegraph* article from 2001 took a more positive view, describing the conversion of the Programme for Government into an action plan as among the most constructive decisions taken by the Executive.³⁰ It noted, however, that the initial successful bids might be seen as a 'cherry picking' exercise, drawing on more easily agreed items in the absence of a fuller strategy. In the same article, Dermot Nesbitt MLA, then a junior Minister, defended the decisions as reflecting a strategic view of PfG priorities, describing them as '*necessary building blocks*'.

Writing again in 2004, Wilson and Wilford suggested that the EPFs had demonstrated Ministers' willingness, particularly within the Office of First Minister and Deputy First Minister, to build cross-party cooperation.³¹

In a 2018 interview, Mark Durkan offered his personal reflections on the EPFs.³² He described their purpose as supporting and raising the profile of Executive priorities that might otherwise be absorbed into departmental routine, but noted resistance at times to allocating money to the funds, with monitoring rounds used to top up funding.

On the Children's Fund specifically, Durkan explained that the intention was for one arm of the fund to take bids directly from the non-government sector. He considered that, in practice, Education and Library Boards and Health Boards generally worked with local providers to encourage bids, rather than relying on slippage money from monitoring rounds, as a more strategic approach to funding.

He also reflected that bids from departments under the fund's governmental arm were often of lower strategic quality than those from the non-government sector, comparing the process to '*signing each other's sponsor sheets*'. As a result, some budget was reallocated to the non-governmental arm.

³⁰ John Simpson, [Making a programme into an action plan](#), *Belfast Telegraph*, 10/04/2001

³¹ R Wilson and R Wilford, [Northern Ireland: Renascent](#) (2004) p. 31.

³² Institute for Government, [Transcript: Ministers Reflect: Mark Durkan](#) (2018)

Conclusion

After desk research, and engagement with Northern Ireland Departments, NIO and PRONI, there is insufficient information available to provide a detailed analysis of the effectiveness of the EPFs, in particular their impact on Children and Young People and improving cross-departmental working and stakeholder engagement.

However, the available information suggests that they did not result in the level of interdepartmental working that was originally hoped for. Nevertheless, over £500 million was allocated through the Funds, which were intended to align with the Executive's priorities.