

Ministerial Foreword

This consultation seeks your views on the future Competitiveness and Employment European Structural Funds Programmes in Northern Ireland. Structural Funds have played an important part in the social and economic development of Northern Ireland over the last 30 years. The Funds have helped Northern Ireland to improve our relative prosperity and we have moved through full Objective 1 status for the programming period 1994 to 1999, Transitional Objective 1 status for 2000 to 2006, and will now be a Competitiveness & Employment Region for 2007 to 2013.

The EU Budget Agreement reached under the UK Presidency in December 2005 recognised the need to extend EU Cohesion Policy across an enlarged EU. With this has come a re-direction of EU Structural Funds towards the new Member States in recognition of their greater needs. This makes it more important than ever for Northern Ireland to target its Structural Funds on areas where they are likely to have most impact. The UK is committed to the Lisbon goals of mobilising EU and national resources to improve competitiveness and employment and we view these programmes as an opportunity to help Northern Ireland become a leading, knowledge-based region, with a high-quality of life and an attractive environment able to compete in a fast-changing, global economy. Northern Ireland will have £325 million EU funding for Competitiveness and Employment for 2007 to 2013 and we want to ensure that this is focussed on high value, innovative activities which complement our existing national strategies and that we deliver these through efficient delivery structures.

The plans set out in this document propose for the Competitiveness Programme to offer key additional spending in promoting innovation in all areas, increasing

investment in research and technological development both public and private, promoting enterprise and entrepreneurship, and creating a better climate for doing business in Northern Ireland. The Employment Programme will focus additional spending on removing barriers to work, equipping people with the necessary skills to enter the workforce and improving the existing skills of people already in work. Both Programmes will be required to meet their statutory equality obligations. Also, in line with the Government's Anti-Poverty and Social Inclusion Strategy for Northern Ireland which I launched last month, these EU Programmes will aim to deliver expenditure programmes that target poverty, disadvantage and multiple deprivation in urban and rural areas.

I welcome and look forward to your views on this consultation, before we submit operational programme proposals to the European Commission in the first half of 2007.

PETER HAIN, MP

Secretary of State for Northern Ireland