

30 September 2009

To Whom It May Concern

**Re: Social Economy Enterprise Strategy 2009-2011**

As a social enterprise dedicated to giving a voice to those most marginalised within our society, The Cresco Trust welcomes this opportunity to respond to the draft Social Economy Enterprise Strategy led by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

The Cresco Trust, established in 2003, is committed to enhancing the skills, through non-traditional learning methods, of those disadvantaged within the labour market. We do this through the delivery of funded interventions, social enterprise activity and research. The Cresco family includes a *Ben & Jerry's* Partnership (Castle Court, Belfast), Mission Hall Quilts (Fountain Street, Derry/Londonderry) and Cresco Consultancy (Pump Street, Derry/Londonderry).

**General Comments**

While appreciating the sterling efforts offered in support of social enterprise activity by key individuals within DETI and indeed Invest NI, overall we are disappointed by the content of the strategy finding it lacklustre and uninspiring. Cresco found little of anything new therein. We are concerned that, even as it stands, the strategy will fail to make an impact as there is no dedicated budget set aside for its implementation. Coupled with the lack of political will at ministerial level to advocate on behalf of the social economy and the lack of buy-in on the part of government departments (as evidenced by the delay in developing this draft strategy and the absence of personnel from departments other than DETI at the consultation events), we struggle to see how this strategy can be adopted in any meaningful way as a template for developing the social economy sector in Northern Ireland.

**Objectives**

The fact that the three strategic objectives identified in the strategy for 2009-2011 are the same as for the 2004 strategy suggests that targets were not met under the last strategy and progress not achieved otherwise we should surely have a differing set of priorities for the next two years. Given the lack of resources available for the implementation of the current draft strategy, there appears to be no reason to believe that any meaningful progress will have been made when it comes to the formulation of another strategy in

another five years' time. It is entirely possible that the same strategic objectives will then be wielded once more.

While appreciating the need for a wider understanding of the term 'social economy', from a practitioner's point of view, this discussion has grown superfluous. What limited resources have been available to the sector seem to have been spent on numerous seminars and conferences aimed at defining social enterprise and the social economy. While that may have been useful in the early years, grassroots social enterprise now need those resources to be spent on aiding their development and growth, helping them become sustainable businesses in the long term.

### **Actions**

As a transition strategy, we are particularly concerned over the lack of detail as to the enhanced role for local councils in their delivery of social economy policy and programmes in the near future under the Review of Public Administration (RPA).

We feel the lack of departmental buy-in is reflected in the woolly language of the action setting in section 4. Having well thought out SMART goals may have been more effective in exhibiting the buy-in of departmental personnel and in convincing the sector of that buy-in.

### **Monitoring and Evaluation**

Given the lack of SMART goals in the strategy, it is difficult to imagine how reliable and effective monitoring and evaluation of its implementation may take place. In any case, monitoring and evaluation are resource intensive activities which may seem redundant to the practitioner given the low levels of innovation and specificity in the strategy.

### **Moving Forward**

We believe that the sector in Northern Ireland needs quality leadership to take it forward. We are of the opinion that this leadership is currently unavailable within the sector here and question the ability of the Social Economy Network (SEN), the body professed to do so, to steer a course for the development of the sector especially in the face of such political apathy. The track record of the SEN has been hitherto unimpressive. We feel that continued reliance on the organisation as it currently stands for innovation and change is worrying for the sector.

In summary, Cresco is disappointed by the lack of innovation and meaningful actions and targets contained in the new draft strategy. Cresco believes, however, that in the absence of any definitive leadership either from within the sector or from government, social entrepreneurs by their very nature will continue to respond to the challenges facing the sector by either innovating themselves or selecting instances of global best practice and adapting them to the local environment.

Yours faithfully

Margaret Lee

Chief Executive