

## **North-West Community Network Response to:**

*Draft Budget and Programme for Government 2008-2011 and Draft Investment Strategy 2008-2018*

North-West Community Network is a membership-led community development organisation meeting the needs of the community & voluntary sector in the North-West. The organisation has circulated the three draft documents amongst its membership since their release and has delivered, in partnership with NICVA, a NW consultation event. NWCN is now pleased to have the opportunity to respond to the content of the draft documents as part of the consultation exercise.

It is worth recording at this point that much consternation has been expressed around the closing date for the consultation, coming at the tail-end of the traditional Christmas break. Not only this but, in terms of the openness of the consultation and the import of the draft documents themselves, it is felt that there may not be adequate space to properly assess what is sure to be a broad range of consultation responses. If sufficient time is not available for due examination of public reaction to the draft proposals, it will be difficult for any suggestions made to feature in the final documents. There is an opportunity here for the NI Executive to showcase best practice around consultation, and to deliver feedback, in a variety of formats, on what elements of all submissions have been taken on board, which have not and the reasons guiding any decisions on these.

Having sought response from community & voluntary sector groups in the North-West, NWCN makes the following comments:

- A general welcome is issued to the abiding principles of
  - providing good leadership and working energetically in the interests of everyone
  - working in partnership as an Executive, and across the public, private and voluntary sectors
  - raising standards across Government
  - delivering fair outcomes and social improvements



- and the two cross-cutting themes:
  - A better future: fairness, inclusion and equality of opportunity will be watchwords for all of our policies and programmes; and
  - Sustainability: building a sustainable future will be a key requirement for our economic, social and environmental policies and programmes.

Within this welcome is uncertainty on how the term “A better future” has come to the fore, seemingly at the expense of the Executive’s own policy document “A Shared Future”. A better future is a worthy and expected ambition but it does not come with the core recognition that Northern Ireland is a society that is coming out of conflict but one that retains significant issues around division and intolerance, and not just along the traditional lines of the two main communities.

Failure at government level to incorporate this realism into its priority and investment programme risks an approach that is short-sighted and therefore unable to map to ongoing issues at community level.

Furthermore, it has been widely remarked upon that the draft documents, and in particular the draft Programme for Government, while listing five priority areas, are undoubtedly making the first one key among these with possible opportunity cost to the others. Though the language and the diagram exists that bind all five areas together, there is also trepidation that there could be competing interests rather than mutual inclusivity between them.

While the plan to “grow a dynamic innovative economy” is one with which there is no argument, it is the seeming separation of economic from social development that many struggle with. A strong economy is one that is founded upon inclusion and a gap reduction in quality of life between richest and poorest. It will be to the benefit of Northern Ireland as a whole if prosperity can be enhanced but the effects need to be felt by all, not just those already best-placed to take advantage of wealth-creation opportunities.



If social policies aimed at reducing inequalities, in health, education, housing etc, are not central to economic development, a more differentiated and disparate society is likely to ensue. Trickle-down economics have been seen to be ineffectual in other areas, not least the Republic of Ireland, leading to a greater concentration of wealth in fewer hands, certainly not the addressing of persistently high levels of all forms of poverty that exist throughout Northern Ireland. Here again, there needs to be greater recognition of and attention to the realities facing disadvantaged communities, both rural and urban.

Government itself released the Anti-poverty Strategy – Lifetime Opportunities – yet this policy does not run right through its draft proposals barring lofty targets such as a 50% reduction in Child Poverty by 2010, but nothing in the way of how this will be achieved.

Recognising the parameters within which these draft documents were generated and the legacy dimension, there seems to be lacking an overall vision or aspirational landscape for what Northern Ireland will look like based on the delivery of these proposals. Northern Ireland does indeed require significant attention to its economy but any boost to business/entrepreneurial activity needs to be accompanied by resourced, targeted and measurable social policy that will in itself, through tackling inequalities and disadvantage, create even more potential for a well-educated, healthy and competitive workforce.

Nowhere can this need be seen more clearly than in assessing the alarmingly high levels of ill-health across Northern Ireland, across age-groups and across communities. If the Executive wishes to “use prosperity to tackle disadvantage” it needs to show greater commitment to the promotion of health & wellbeing rather than sustaining a primarily “ill-health” service. Most additional investment in health services will go towards treating those who are ill, and there is a direct association between poor standards of health and levels of disadvantage. In economic terms, a more Social Model approach to health and wellbeing makes perfect sense as, for example, early intervention education on healthy lifestyles will lead to less treatment for a range of



maladies in later life, in an era when the cost of health treatments is rising. There are positive sounds on a health-promotion approach but little in the way of concrete actions.

In noting the 3% efficiency saving targets for each department, it has been commented that this will be much easier to achieve for those departments with much larger budgets and greater scope for economies of scale and functional support in areas such payroll; it will be a much more onerous task for those departments with relatively small budgets. Applying this efficiency target at individual department level also sends a message that seemingly conflicts with the concept of joined-up government – could equal or higher efficiencies not be achieved by greater cross-departmental co-operation and streamlining?

Amongst the Key Goals and commitments attached to each of the Strategic Priority areas, many are welcomed in the context of raising the quality of life for all, which requires attention to the barriers that prevent many from working towards achieving their full potential.

In growing an economy that will necessarily rely on SMEs and a skilled workforce, it has been recognised that the NI school and working-age population has certain characteristics that need to be addressed, not least high levels of poor numeracy and literacy skills. This puts an important focus on the education system that NI is moving towards but we are as yet uncertain as to what this will look like. From an infrastructural viewpoint alone, it is imperative that the overhaul of NI's education system is detailed, consulted upon and delivered as quickly as possible so that it can quickly meet the needs of current and future generations.

Similar urgency needs to be applied in sharing the detail on the review process to which the Review of Public Administration has been subjected. It was of course the right of the re-established Assembly to take stock of decisions on the future shape of public services made under Direct Rule. It is now time however for these deliberations, and associated consultation, to

issue into the public domain so that everyone knows exactly the geographical configurations, the lines of responsibility and accountability, and the resource capital and capacity that will deliver at community level the priorities that have been agreed upon centrally. The lack of overt reference to the heel-dragging process that has been RPA creates doubt about all aspects of the restructuring of public services. It is obvious that both financial and time investment will be needed to drive through whatever decisions are made – that these will have impact on a three-year Programme for Government seems obvious to state but this recognition is not markedly evident in the draft documents.

The issue of timelines is also pertinent in considering the Investment Strategy which covers a ten-year timespan though the PfG and Budget only bridge a period of three years. There is no issue with having longer timescales for a programme of large scale public works – it is the finance structure that causes concern, it only being secured for the three years of the PfG. What certainty is there that hoped for private finance will be secured, and is it absolutely clear that this style of economic development provides best value for the ordinary person? And on top of the £793m achieved through departmental efficiency savings will be added the sale value of government-owned estate and holdings – there is only one bullet in that chamber and once divested, what are currently assets become recurrent budgetary costs, most likely at rates driven by profit generation.

Sustainability and the inclusion of environmental policies are described within the cross-cutting themes but NI needs a body with sufficient authority and impact to ensure that described commitments are delivered and key goals are met. Without an oversight or even policing agency to ensure these outcomes, as yet, in terms of green issues, under-informed NI will be left to its own devices in dealing with the very real demands of a changing and currently unsustainable environment. Also, while developing physical infrastructure to support economic development is to be welcomed, this needs to be delivered in a way that encourages environmental awareness and good practice. Roads development should surely be matched by a higher proportional



investment in public transport – the draft proposals see this latter figure at less than half of what is going to be applied to upgrading the roads network.

There is a welcome for the implicit recognition that regional disparities have not only occurred but have been sustained for far too long and with particular negative effect on the North-West. Infrastructure projects and support have been outlined but the North-West is entitled to ask: “what has happened to the dualling of the A6 Derry – Dungiven route?”

Throughout the responses to the draft documents is the call for more social outcomes to be visible and committed to – in the form of clear and resourced policies with measurable goals. The strong feeling is that the Programme for Government does not adequately deliver this.

The Network and its membership have an obvious interest in how all government proposals might impact on NI society as a whole; it does however have a particular interest in what they will deliver for the community & voluntary sector and what they will mean for the services they provide.

In this respect, the rolling out of a Charity Commission for NI is to be welcomed, as is the reference to Advice Services and Volunteering strategies, though these were already in train before the PfG and cannot be seen as new commitments. In keeping with comments throughout this response, it is essential that each of these receives sufficient funding to help them meet the needs that generated and guided their conception.

There is reference to a revised version of the Compact as a framework for how government and the sector will work together but that is all. There is no outright commitment to supporting the Community & Voluntary sector and no reference to what remains to be delivered on Positive Steps. Those looking for clear signal that Government sufficiently values the contribution of the sector stand to be disappointed, as do those who looked forward to a new mutually supportive structure being delivered via the Support Services Strategy. Given the operational difficulties that have plagued the outworking

of the Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy, it is extremely disappointing to see the budget for this decrease in net terms over the period of the programme. Many will see this as a further squeeze on valuable grassroots community activism and community development in general. The sector has always provided key public services but it provides much more than that in the form of advocacy, innovation and a conduit to understanding the impact of public policy. Without a strong, inclusive Support Services Strategy, ongoing investment in the most deprived urban areas and completion of Positive Steps commitments, it would seem that the sector is being shaped into a service-provider only future – this would be counter-productive and remove from Government's reach a valuable partner in the ongoing development, implementation and review of public policy.

