



**CHURCH of IRELAND GENERAL SYNOD
CHURCH in SOCIETY COMMITTEE
Social Justice and Theology (NI) Sub-Committee**

**SUBMISSION TO THE OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND
DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER**

Overview

The consultation covers three documents:

- Draft Programme for Government 2008-2011;
- Draft Budget 2008-2011;
- Draft Investment Strategy 2008-2018.

In addition there are 23 Public Service Agreements (PSAs) published on the website as an annex to the Programme for Government.

The Draft Programme for Government 2008-2011 sets out the Executive's strategic priorities and key goals which have directed the allocation of resources as set out in the Budget and Investment Strategy. The over-arching aim is to build a peaceful, fair and prosperous society in Northern Ireland, with respect for the rule of law and where everyone can enjoy a better quality of life now and in years to come. Within that aim, there are five key strategic and interdependent priorities listed:

- Growing a Dynamic, Innovative Economy;*
- Promote Tolerance, Inclusion and Health and Well-Being;*
- Protect and Enhance Our Environment and Natural Resources;*
- Invest to Build Our Infrastructure;*
- Deliver Modern High Quality and Efficient Public Services.*

The Programme for Government highlights the key goals and actions the Executive will take to drive forward those priority areas

The Draft Budget sets out the expenditure plans for the Northern Ireland Departments in 2008-2011. This takes account of the 2007 Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) which offered a smaller increase in resources for Northern Ireland than previously granted. Accordingly, the need for Departments to make cash-releasing efficiencies is emphasised, as such savings remain in Northern Ireland for use in funding public services here.

The Draft Investment Strategy 2008-2018 sets out the longer-term framework for creating a sustainable 21st century infrastructure, reflecting the same strategic priorities.

The Executive intends to finalise delivery plans for each priority area in the coming months, which will provide detail on schemes and timescales. Notably, in the Investment Strategy the priority area of *Growing a Dynamic, Innovative Economy* is placed at the core of achieving success in the other four priority area. That is very clearly the central message of these documents: “It’s the economy, stupid.”

Priorities and Challenges

Introduction

The Programme for Government reads like a manifesto, optimistic and aspirational, promising a lot of apple pie all around. This is a high-level document with ambitious aims described in smooth rhetoric so it is difficult to provide any forensic analysis or meaningful critique. The significant decisions will come when the Executive has to move beyond anodyne statements of good intent into firm, detailed policy-making and implementation on the ground, tacking politically sensitive and controversial issues that are largely avoided in these documents. That will be the real test for viability of the devolution settlement.

At this stage, any detail the Programme for Government contains is found in Tables of Key Goals and associated actions for each of the five priority areas. Even there, in most cases it is not explained how each goal will be achieved. There is no detail on approaches or mechanisms. The “how will that be done” question goes unanswered – in fact it is largely not asked. Potential conflicts between competing goals are not addressed. Nor is there a detailed legislative programme included.

The framework of 23 PSAs has Tables of Objectives, Actions and Targets with, we are told, a focus on addressing key cross-cutting issues and challenges - perhaps a recognition that achieving joined-up government is very difficult at any time let alone for an enforced coalition administration. Some of the Actions and Targets are more specific than others, but there are some tired and vague recitals and some that reflect routine work in progress; actions and targets like “*Development and implementation of a Higher Education strategy*”, “*Ensure the central role of the rights of the child*” and “*Manage and develop NI cultural infrastructure*”, need to be further refined.

In summary, the lack of detail in the Programme for Government, even when supplemented by the PSA framework, is a theme underlying many of the following comments.

Priority: Growing a Dynamic, Innovative Economy

In relation to the key goals for *Growing a Dynamic, Innovative Economy*, many questions arise. What mechanism will be used to halve the private sector productivity gap with the UK average (Goal 1)? Where will the jobs come from to increase the employment rate from 70% to 75% (Goal 2)? What steps will achieve growth of up to 15% in the creative industries sector (Goal 6)? The actions mentioned in this section of the Programme for Government cannot in themselves match the 11 key goals set out on page 6. Close attention to the PSA framework will be essential to achieve progress here; for example, the PSAs on *Productivity Growth, Skills for Prosperity, Increasing Employment* and *Supporting Rural Businesses* set high targets that will involve close co-operation from DETI, DEL, DRD and DARD. Can we really look forward to that level of co-operation?

With this in mind, we certainly welcome the Executive's undertaking (on page 48 of the Draft Budget) to review and consult on its priorities and performance each year.

Reading the Draft Budget alongside the Programme for Government, it is clear that improvement in the economic situation is essential for any progress for Northern Ireland. Without enhanced economic growth and greater productivity, we cannot hope to achieve the key goals across the five priority areas. In the Draft Budget there are targets and actions in respect of the four drivers of productivity – skills, enterprise, innovation and infrastructure – but the tone of the Budget document is more cautious than the Programme for Government. Notably it is recognised that a big constraint lies in the lack of fiscal policy instruments made available by HM Treasury and now that we know the Varney Review is not going to deliver much extra assistance to Northern Ireland, we have to be concerned about the economic prospects.

With these problems and a global downturn, including our traditional problems of high energy and fuel costs, the outlook is not reassuring, but some would argue that it is not good enough for the Executive or our politicians to blame outside factors or other people. Northern Ireland people, given this opportunity of devolution and reconciliation, now have to take responsibility for our own future, help ourselves and each other and work ourselves out of economic disadvantage. The task for all of us is to build optimism in our communities and get on with working together, using our skills and talents of innovation and creativity, especially in locally-based industrial and agricultural enterprises. Without renewed confidence and co-operation, for example, we cannot tackle another negative feature highlighted in the Budget – the high level of economic inactivity amongst our working age population. All of this requires co-operation not just from our political representatives but more broadly in our communities. It is disappointing, therefore, that the issue of investing in “Shared Future” activities is not addressed adequately. Another confidence-building measure would be some movement in dealing with the needs of victims of the Troubles who are barely mentioned in these documents.

Priority: Promote Tolerance, Inclusion and Health and Well-Being

Looking at the key goals for the second priority area, to *Promote Tolerance, Inclusion and Health and Well-Being*, similar questions about lack of detail arise. For example, how will the Executive reduce child poverty by 50% by 2010 (Goal 1), when it does not have tax-raising powers and it appears tied to United Kingdom benefits and minimum wage rates, especially given that the Government has failed to reach its own targets in this area? The PSA targets are focussed largely on benefit issues but recent research indicates there is a significant level of child poverty amongst families in work but trapped in badly paid jobs. Economic progress is key to tackling this social problem so we welcome the recognition that job creation should concentrate on jobs with salaries above the Northern Ireland Private Sector Median (PSA 3, page 10).

In this section of the Draft Programme for Government, Goal 4 is welcomed – “Ensuring that by 2013, anyone with a mental health problem or learning disability is promptly and suitably treated in the community and no-one remains unnecessarily in hospital.”. It is surprising, however, that there is no commitment to full and speedy implementation of the Bamford proposals (although Bamford is mentioned with approval in the Draft Budget and there are some PSA targets reflecting this). The Bamford Report is the product of thorough and costly research and consultation amongst practitioners, users of

the current services and other experts and we would have hoped for more progress in implementation by now. This omission causes concern that there is not yet serious commitment to addressing the problems which have been clearly identified in this area, where Bamford estimated £50m would be needed over the next 3 years. Likewise, the absence of any reference in the Programme for Government to goals or actions focussed on care of the elderly is very disappointing. The experience of many elderly people and families struggling to make good arrangements for elderly relatives coping with dementia or other physical or mental disabilities is that there is a severe lack of first-class services.

We share the well-publicised concern about the level of health care funding. We have seen Mr McGimpsey's campaign for increased resources and we must say that if the Minister himself is not confident of success then how can the consumers of health services feel confident? We understand the focus on economic improvement in the Programme for Government and Budget but people here and now have problems in health care provision and will expect the new administration to deliver improvement in primary and community care and hospitals.

In terms of education, there is a welcome goal of improving GCSE performance for children from less-advantaged backgrounds, but there is no reference in the Programme for Government to structural reform of school provision and of course no consensus on post-primary arrangements. On this latter issue, the current impasse must be resolved without further delay or destructive confrontation. It is surprising that the PSAs on *Helping our young people to achieve through education* (PSA10, page 18) and *Raising Standards in our schools* (PSA 19, page 27) contain no targets or actions directed at this issue even though it is shaping up to be one of the most intractable and divisive issues facing us. Equally inexplicably, there is no direct reference to the matter in the draft Budget for the Department of Education. This appears to be a case of avoiding difficult issues for as long as possible in the hope that they will go away because there is no agreement on the appropriate solution.

Priority: Protect and Enhance our Environment and Natural Resources

In relation to the priority to *Protect and Enhance our Environment and Natural Resources*, there is the statement that everyone can agree with: "At a local level, therefore, action is needed to protect our built heritage, our landscape and marine environment and to reduce our impact on climate change." (page 10). Again, however, the real issue is how the key priorities embodied in that statement are to be achieved. There are also issues here about possible conflict between environmental protection and the proposed infrastructure developments such as road building and other construction projects. For example, how do we reconcile Goal 7 "To halt the loss of indigenous species and habitats by 2015" with these infrastructure developments? In this area – as in others – the challenge for government lies in its ability to resolve conflicts amongst competing policy objectives. Although key priorities are stated, there is no immediate commitment to reform Northern Ireland's environmental protection structures as part of the effort to achieve these objectives – for example, by establishing an independent agency to replace the present Environment and Heritage Service within the DoE. There is no reference to establishing National Parks in Northern Ireland even though much work has been done on this and one might have expected some indication of the way ahead.

Priority: Invest to Build our Infrastructure

Within the priority of *Building Infrastructure*, the key goals and actions require very substantial expenditure both immediately and in the longer term. The neglect of past years has to be paid for now. However, success here will not only require new financial resources on an unprecedented scale. We should also ask if the Northern Ireland public sector has the expertise and skills necessary to deliver in these areas – project planning and management, contract negotiation and drafting, performance supervision, design, risk management, procurement, funding arrangements etc. Experience in many of these areas may not be available locally and expensive mistakes could be made if the necessary skills are not engaged.

Priority: Deliver Modern High Quality and Efficient Public Services

The final priority area looks to *Deliver modern high quality and efficient public services*, again with key goals and actions. Some of these are already in hand. The focus is largely on saving money, and if that can be done at the same time as “bringing government closer to people, revitalising public services and responding to the increasingly diverse nature of our society”, then of course everyone will be delighted. It is noted, however, that the proposal to reduce bureaucracy involves setting up a new government unit, a Performance Efficiency Delivery Unit, just as Sir Humphrey himself would have proposed. In reality, it may be that, when it comes to working out the details, the demands generated by this Programme for Government mean we will have to spend more on public sector salaries and consultancy, not less. Overall the Programme for Government, Budget and framework of PSAs will place very heavy demands on our public sector employees, beyond what they have been asked to meet in the past. We wonder if the scale of this challenge is fully appreciated and if effective action can be taken to ensure that “NICS staff have the right skills and expertise” as directed under PSA 21 (page 29).

Mapping Church of Ireland Engagement

For the most part, these Consultative Documents are drafted in general terms, leaving the specific details for another time. The main thrust of the papers is the need to grow the Northern Ireland economy, but beyond that it is difficult to identify a unified social policy approach. The Programme for Government makes promises in just about every direction, not all well-defined or measurable, and not all deliverable.

We are working towards a Church of Ireland approach that sets out the parameters for our engagement with the Northern Ireland Executive over the next few years. With this brief in mind, it is suggested is that we accept the emphasis on economic development as a first priority and then continue to press for social policy reforms and actions that reflect our pastoral concerns. We want to identify our priorities and set out our own coherent and principled policy guidelines. It is suggested that our focus should be on support for the individual within the family as the key unit of our society. That will lead us to concentrate on areas such as:

- Employment (with jobs above minimum wage levels)
- Social housing

- Family dispute mediation and support
- Child contact with non-resident parent
- Mental health provision
- Suicide prevention and support
- Alcohol and substance abuse
- Care of elderly.¹

We also have well-established and important interests in community relations issues and in the management of schools.

¹ Further to *Ethical Issues and Care of the Elderly* (2007) and *Resources and Rationing in Health Care* (2004) prepared by the Medical Ethics, Science and Technology Sub-Committee.