



CHURCH OF IRELAND
Church and Society Commission

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Dear members of the Executive, Programme for Government Consultation Team

The Church and Society Commission (CASC) of the Church of Ireland has prepared the attached submission to the Northern Ireland Executive Office's consultation on the Draft Programme for Government for 2024-2027.

CASC is an advisory group, serving the Standing Committee of the General Synod, and engages with legislatures and governments on a variety of issues, including legislation. The mission of CASC is to provide oversight and direction for the Church of Ireland's work, in respect to social theology in action. CASC's views only become representative of the Church of Ireland after being approved by its General Synod.

Yours Sincerely,

Most Rev Dr Michael Jackson, the Archbishop of Dublin
Chair
Church and Society Commission
Church of Ireland

Response to the Draft Programme for Government 2024 to 2027

The Church and Society Commission (CASC) was developed in 2013 to provide oversight and direction of the Church of Ireland's work in respect of social theology in action. Part of its aim is to identify, contribute to, encourage and challenge areas of living today where the mission of the Church can be active, and the love of God shared more widely than solely inside the Church. As such we welcome the opportunity to respond to the consultation process regarding the Draft Northern Ireland Programme for Government for the period 2024 to 2027.

We welcome the publication of the Draft Programme for Government and commend the Executive's commitment to outlining its strategy and vision for the coming three years. The priorities identified in the Draft Programme reflect important challenges and opportunities facing Northern Ireland, particularly in areas identified being People, Planet, Prosperity and in particular Peace.

While the overarching goals of the Draft Programme are positive and ambitious, there are several key areas that, we believe, require particular attention and emphasis to ensure that these ambitious objectives are met.

Economic Recovery and Development

We acknowledge the Executive's desire to drive economic recovery and its commitment to foster a sustainable and resilient economy. However, there is a need for more detailed plans around how these goals will be achieved, particularly in relation to job creation and sustainability and tangible support for small businesses given that Northern Ireland has an abundance of small independent businesses who have found the post-Covid climate extremely challenging. The Draft Programme outlines broad commitments to support entrepreneurship but clearer policies on funding mechanisms, tax relief, and training support are needed to ensure that businesses can thrive in a challenging economic landscape.

Cutting Waiting Times in Healthcare

The emphasis on healthcare reform is critical, especially as we continue to grapple with the lasting effects of the Covid pandemic and the overwhelming, and unprecedented, additional stress this place on our Health and Social Care services which were already stretched prior to 2020. We welcome measures intended to reduce waiting lists but believe the Draft Programme in its current format provides insufficient detail on how the Executive plans to address the critical staffing shortages in healthcare, particularly in nursing, general practice, and mental health services. We recommend a strategy that includes both recruitment and retention efforts which will directly impact progress on reducing waiting lists and times. Further, regarding mental health and wellbeing, we feel that more resources need to be allocated to ensure that waiting times are reduced and access to services is expanded, particularly in more rural regions.

Better Support for Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs

The Draft Programme outlines a long-term plan of positive, transformative action for the education sector as it relates to children with Special Educational Needs (SEN), important proposals that we welcome. We are, however, concerned that the Draft Programme focuses solely on SEN children and gives no mention to the wider issues facing education such as underachievement, the impact of socio/economic factors on children and young people in education, the lack of core funding, and the pressing need for renewal of much of the schools estate across Northern Ireland.

Investing in education and skills more generally is vital to future-proofing the workforce. In an increasingly digital economy, we believe the Draft Programme should have a stronger emphasis on bridging the digital divide and supporting schools with the necessary infrastructure and training.

As regards Special Educational Needs, more details need to be provided to indicate how the Executive propose to support the Education Authority and recruit the necessary skilled workforce. This workforce can then provide early detection and diagnosis of Special Educational Needs and ensure that a clear protocol is developed to provide necessary support. In addition, we believe that more schools should be provided for specialist education for those with Special Educational Needs. The property of school buildings that are closing in more rural areas could be repurposed to provide these facilities.

The Draft Programme proposes cross-system working and cross-departmental collaboration as an element of its proposals towards improving SEN education. This thinking could and should be applied more broadly. Forming working relationships with the community and voluntary associations should be encouraged and a shared outcomes agenda adopted, with a goal of providing local community learning and a sense of community responsibility.

Protecting the Environment and in particular Lough Neagh

While the Executive's ambition for a green economy is welcome, we urge a stronger focus on supporting industries to transition to sustainable practices, including specific timelines and investment plans. It is also important to provide incentives for the public to consider the economic value of using solar power or heat pumps to which other parts of the UK have access.

Climate change is one of the most pressing issues of our generation. If not solved it will have a devastating impact on our natural resources. However, to meet the targets outlined in the Draft Programme we believe that more aggressive action may be required. The Executive should provide more clarity on the level of public and private investment needed, as well as a concrete roadmap for achieving the renewable energy targets. Further, it is essential that the Draft Programme integrates more detailed particulars on how it proposes to encourage stronger commitments to biodiversity, ensuring that land-use policies and agricultural practices are aligned with conservation goals. A significant programme of community education and learning needs to be put in place to attain the required targets and to sustain them.

Providing More Affordable and Sustainable Housing

The Draft Programme sets ambitious targets for housing development, but without sufficient attention to affordable housing and homelessness prevention measures, these targets may not address the growing need for accessible homes. The number of social homes being built against targets is woeful and the number of homeless individuals and families has never been higher. Homelessness represents a profound threat to dignity, well-being and social cohesion in Northern Ireland. The experience of Covid showed that homelessness could be tackled with success, but the situation has, disappointingly, regressed.

Paramilitary influence continues to hinder the fair development and allocation of social housing, particularly in areas with strong sectarian divides. It deters investment, skews access through intimidation or favouritism, and disrupts efforts for safe, cohesive neighbourhoods. Addressing this influence is crucial to ensure social housing truly serves community stability and equitable access.

Ending Violence Against Women and Girls

The experience of Covid has illustrated plainly for all to see that our society has a problem of violence against women and girls that must be addressed. This proposal requires long-term commitment and energy. A balance needs to be struck to ensure that boys and young men are not alienated or demonised in this quest but are ambassadors of change within local communities. The early intervention outlined in the proposed actions may be the most effective means of changing attitudes in a way that not just responds to but actively works to prevent this violence.

More Affordable Childcare

Childcare costs are steadily rising and are preventing many, especially women for pursuing careers and achieving their true potential. Whilst employment strategies are tackling the “glass ceiling,” it is the prohibitive costs of childcare that prove the greatest barriers to women reaching an equal opportunity in the higher echelons of corporate society. The pursuit of equality demands that tackling the costs of good quality childcare is undertaken as a huge leap in this drive, and we see how better financial support has leveraged a positive economic return in England and Scotland.

Safer Communities

The challenge of creating a balanced, safe and thriving community is huge. Economic downturn, continuance of paramilitary control and the lowest number of police officers we have seen in recent years will continue to undermine community safety. To add to this mix, we have the recent upswing in racism and anti-immigrant violence witnessed across the UK and Ireland. Funding a police service to meet the needs of the society in which it operates is not something that can simply be avoided without knock-on effects. If our community is not safe, then the other aspects of the Programme of Government will flounder.

Conclusion

While the Draft Programme for Government for Northern Ireland 2024-2027 sets out a ambitious and necessary vision for the future, success will depend on the implementation of clear, detailed, and measurable strategies. We understand also that success is not possible by the Executive acting alone. The Church of Ireland can help in promoting good community relations and providing our communities’ viewpoint on new structures. We in CASC would welcome any such opportunities which are presented to the Church, so that we can all work together to see a future with a healthy Northern Ireland benefitting all members of the community.