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Dear Ms McGinnis

As a psychiatrist, I am deeply concerned about the lack of provision for mental health in the draft Programme for Government. While I welcome the Executive's recognition of the need to promote tolerance, inclusion and health and well-being within our society, it is unclear to me how this can happen for the 20% of the population with mental health problems. Indeed, I am worried that the net affect of this draft budget will be a reduction in overall funding towards the service areas of mental health and learning disability.

I welcome the promise of moving mental health services into the community. An appropriate balance of hospital and community services is essential to build a world-class mental health service and to allow individuals with mental health problems to live full and active lives, but I do not see how this is achievable. Building community services will require considerable short-term investment, and there is no room for this in the budget allocation for mental health.

While mental health need is greater in Northern Ireland than the rest of the United Kingdom spend here is much lower. Mental health spend accounts for about 8% of the Health and Social Care budget in Northern Ireland, compared to 12% in England. Poor mental health is strongly associated with unemployment, poor education, low income or material standard of living, in addition to poor physical health and adverse life events, and the impact that this has on individuals, their carers and society as a whole is not being considered in this Programme for Government.

In England there has been recognition of the need for coordinated Cross-Government action to address the impact of mental health on the lives of individuals, but also on their economic activity. Mental health problems cost the economy around £12 billion a year, and the Government's response to this has been an emphasis on helping people with mental health problems to retain jobs or moved back into the workforce, including a bold plan to increase investment in talking therapies from £5 million a year to £170 million a year by 2010.

The Northern Ireland Executive cannot afford to ignore what is happening elsewhere. The Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health has very recently calculated that the total cost to employers of mental health problems among their staff is equivalent to £1,035 for every employee in the UK workforce. Using the most recent workforce figures for Northern Ireland, this equates to a cost to Northern Ireland employers of more than £745 million.

We need the sort of forward, joined-up thinking that is seen in Scotland and increasingly in England here in Northern Ireland. We need investment in mental health services.

I call on the Executive to increase the allocation to mental health services and to look at mental health issues across government.

Yours sincerely

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