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FOR PERSONAL ATTENTION:

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Melanie, a chara,

RESPONSE TO THE DRAFT EQIA CONSULTATION

I wish to respond to the draft Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) consultation on the Programme for Government, Investment Strategy and Budget.

The Programme for Government (page 22) states: “Equality is an important issue for the Executive and for society. We are determined to address all forms of inequality, and ensure that fairness, inclusion and equality of opportunity will be watchwords for all their policies and programmes.”

This is a welcome commitment. However it is absolutely vital that the Executive translates such commitments into practical outcomes.

The Programme for Government (page 7) recognises the need to “develop new and innovative measures that will address existing patterns of socio-economic disadvantage and target resources and efforts towards those in greatest objective need”.

Unfortunately, the draft EQIA does not recognise in detail the “objective need” faced by people living in West Belfast.

According to the NISRA *Multiple Deprivation Measure 2005*, 2 of the wards in the Colin area of West Belfast ranks in the top ten most deprived wards.

Moreover, the historical disadvantages faced by people living in West Belfast are widely recognized. For example

There are high rates of unemployment, a severe lack of investment, above average rates of suicide and issues of drug and alcohol mis-use.

In light of those facts, I believe that the Executive must now revise its Investment Strategy and systematically reallocate funding from the Quarterly Budgetary Monitoring Rounds over the next three years to address the existing patterns of objective need evidenced in West Belfast, which the Programme for Government has declared the Executive is committed to tackling.

In particular, the Executive should start addressing the disadvantage experienced by people living in West Belfast by committing to the urgent delivery of the following projects: Investment in Employment, Infrastructure and in Health and education.

The Programme for Government, Budget and Investment Strategy do not include detailed programmatic measures for pro-actively tackling the long-standing patterns of disadvantage and legacy of structural socio-economic and political discrimination which continue to afflict a variety of respective sectors of society in the Six Counties. That must be corrected.

In so doing, particular regard must now be given to the results of the *Labour Force Survey Religion Report 2006* (published by OFMdFM in March 2008) which reaffirmed the persisting realities of socio-economic disadvantage, including those previously identified in the *Labour Force Survey Religion Report 2005*, such as *inter alia* the following facts:

- **Catholics are less likely to be economically active than Protestants;**
- **Catholics are more likely to be both unemployed and economically inactive than Protestants;**
- **Catholics are more likely than Protestants to be renting social housing, and are less likely than Protestants to be owning their own homes;**
- **Catholic women are substantially more likely to be disadvantaged on socio-economic grounds than Protestant women.**

It should also be noted that the NISRA *Multiple Deprivation Measure 2005* demonstrated that the most deprived areas of the Six Counties are predominantly within north and west Belfast, and the greater Derry City area. This deep deprivation affects a considerable number of areas which are broadly inhabited by the Catholic/Nationalist/Republican community, as well as affecting a smaller number of areas which are broadly inhabited by the Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist community.

These areas need to be effectively and urgently targeted with special measures to ensure long-term and substantial investment programmes which effectively impact, for example, on people, projects, skills, housing, apprenticeships, entrepreneurship, infrastructure, jobs, and recreational and socially-beneficial facilities.

The *Labour Force Survey Religion Report 2006* also re-affirmed the persisting structural reality of geographical and regional inequalities which have been inflicted upon citizens living, in particular, in north and west Belfast, and west of the Bann, and which had previously been evidenced by the deprivation maps produced as part of the *NISRA Multiple Deprivation Measure 2005*. These persisting structural regional inequalities disproportionately and unfairly affect citizens from the Catholic/Nationalist/Republican community.

The draft EQIA properly recognised that the highest levels of household income are in the rural east of the Six Counties, while the lowest levels of household income are in the rural west of the Six Counties. The draft EQIA also noted, at paragraph 5.6:

“The Executive has highlighted the key role economic growth can play in addressing poverty, exclusion and inequality. In this regard ... (the evidence) ... would appear to indicate a close relationship between economic and employment opportunities and levels of deprivation. In light of the revelations at sub-regional level, effectively addressing poverty, exclusion and inequality may require consideration of measures to specifically promote economic growth and job creation, particularly in high value sectors, in areas of economic disadvantage”. (Emphasis added)

However, having reached the logical conclusion that specific mitigating measures may be required to promote economic growth and job creation “in areas of economic disadvantage”, the draft EQIA inexplicably failed to consider or recommend any such mitigating programmatic measures in its conclusion and preferred instead to purport that the general priority of ‘Growing a Dynamic, Innovative Economy’ would suffice. That is not a sustainable position, and the final EQIA must outline detailed programmatic proposals and effective mitigating measures on this, as well as other highlighted issues, for the Executive and individual Departments.

It is also necessary to record that, according to the October 2003 report *Bare Necessities – Poverty and Social Exclusion in Northern Ireland: Key Findings*, the following inequalities exist (reflecting the other facts already outlined herein):

- **in terms of religion, 36% of Catholic households are in poverty as opposed to 25% of Protestant households;**
- **in terms of national identity, 37% of households identified as ‘Irish’ are in poverty as opposed to 25% of households identified as ‘British’;**
- **in terms of political affiliation, 43% of all households supportive of Sinn Féin are in poverty, as opposed to 32% of DUP households, 30% of SDLP households and 19% of UUP households – this means that households supporting Sinn Féin are 2.26 times more likely to be in poverty as households supporting the UUP.**

In more general terms, varying inequalities and discriminations continue to be faced by women from all backgrounds – but particularly Catholic women; people from the Gay/Bisexual/Lesbian/Transgender community; people with disabilities; certain elements of both the younger peoples and older peoples sectors; people with different ethnic backgrounds, in particular Travellers, as

well as new citizens; and people with differing marital circumstances or dependants status, such as lone parents.

Given the significant extent of Irish speakers in the Six Counties, and the established fact that people from a Catholic/Nationalist/Republican background tend to be generally disproportionately disadvantaged, the glaring failure by the Department for Culture, Arts and Leisure to bring forward a strategy to the Executive for protecting and enhancing the development of the Irish language in accordance with the statutory duty arising from Section 15 of the NI (St Andrews Agreement) Act 2006 represents a significant failure to promote equality within the Programme for Government. The draft EQIA did not even acknowledge this flagrant omission and that, in itself, is deeply concerning. Accordingly the final EQIA must acknowledge the statutory duty on the Executive to adopt a strategy to protect and enhance the development of the Irish language, and this acknowledgement must involve an explicit recommendation requiring action as a means of promoting equality.

I believe it is absolutely imperative for the final EQIA to recognise all of the respective objective needs outlined herein, and to recommend appropriate amendments or ameliorative options to the Executive in respect of effectively and progressively delivering equality outcomes across all Departments through the Programme for Government, the Investment Strategy and the Budget.

If such appropriate amendments or ameliorative options are not included in the final EQIA, then it is clear from all the available evidence that variously affected Section 75 sectors will remain unfairly disadvantaged and/or that significant opportunities to promote equality will have been lost.

Any such failures in the final EQIA would raise significant questions about the manner in which the statutory equality obligations arising from Section 75 and Schedule 9 to the NI Act 1998 are being discharged.

Finally, I wish to raise concerns, which I have received, criticising the manner in which the entire EQIA process has been conducted. These relate to reports about:

- failings to fully mainstream the seven-stage EQIA process throughout the development of the draft Programme for Government, Investment Strategy and Budget which was commenced under the previous administration in February 2007;
- failings to publish a draft EQIA last October in conjunction with the general consultation on the draft Programme for Government, Investment Strategy and Budget;
- failings of every other Department – except for Regional Development, Education, and Agriculture and Rural Affairs – to conduct a public equality consultation on their Departmental priorities within the draft Programme for Government, Investment Strategy and Budget;
- failings during the current draft EQIA consultation process to provide adequate and widespread notice of invitation, and to circulate advance Executive summaries of all relevant material, to a fully representative list of consultees;

- **failings during the current draft EQIA consultation process to even notify local district council Equality Officers, or seek local councils' lists of consultees, in advance of formal public consultation events being held within the respective council jurisdictions, which could have ensured wider awareness of such events and involvement in this consultation process.**

These concerns need to be fully acknowledged and addressed in the final EQIA document, including an explicit commitment that such failings will be corrected in the future.

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