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Dear Melanie McGinnis

**RESPONSE TO THE CONSULTATION ON THE DRAFT PROGRAMME FOR  
GOVERNMENT, DRAFT BUDGET AND DRAFT INVESTMENT STRATEGY**

I am writing on behalf of Rights in Community Care (RICC) an umbrella grouping of organisations including Law Centre (NI), Carers NI, Age Concern, Help the Aged, UNISON, Disability Action and Alzheimer's Society NI who have a perspective that rights must be integrated into the practice of community care. The group promotes a culture of rights and entitlements in the delivery of community care services by stimulating debate on the strategic use of law, campaigning and political representation to give support to those adversely affected by current community care policies.

We welcome the opportunity to comment on the draft Programme for Government, Budget and Investment Strategy and will focus our comments primarily on the Programme for Government and the Budget.

We support and endorse the Executive's over-arching aim '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.' However, we are unsure that the draft Programme for Government and the supporting budget is able to best meet this aim. There is a very real concern that there are insufficient resources allocated within the draft Budget to support the measures and aims outlined within the draft Programme for Government. This raises considerable alarm regarding how realistic or sustainable the promises made within the Programme for Government are.

We welcome the aim within the draft Budget to give older people 'a strong independent voice' and the statement that the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister is 'committed to ensuring an enhancement of rights for older people and to making a real difference to their day-to-day lives.' The recent announcement that a review has recommended the appointment of an Older People's Commissioner is welcome and the appointment of a Commissioner will be an important mechanism in helping to achieve this aim. We look forward to further information regarding the role and remit of the Commissioner for Older People in the near future.

The extension of free public transport during 2008 to everyone aged 60 and over is welcome and recognises the importance of equality and social inclusion. We have some concerns, however, regarding the uptake of and access to public transport in rural areas which will need to be considered.

We were disappointed that despite the passing of a unanimous motion within both the Transitional Assembly and the Assembly for the introduction of free personal care as a priority it has not formed part of the Programme for Government or been provided for in the draft Budget. OFMDFM state in the draft budget that it wants to support the most vulnerable in society, which must include real tangible benefits to those most at need; older people, children and people with disabilities. The provision of free personal care would be a significant step forward in achieving this aim. We would welcome further information regarding the review of free personal care which was due by the end of October 2007 but has not yet been completed or made public.

We are pleased that the language within the draft documents reflects a shift in priority from a previous focus on 'ill health' to a wider sense of promoting 'wellbeing'. This change is very welcome; however, more detail on the preventative care agenda for older people would have been welcome. The health promotion activities which are referred to in the draft Budget focus on screening exercises, which relate primarily to preventing the effects of disease or illness once found, rather than promoting wellbeing as a whole which could prevent disease or illness from occurring in the first instance.

Despite many assurances by both the Transitional Assembly and the Assembly that implementing the recommendations of the Bamford Review of Mental Health and Learning Disability and the development of mental health and learning disability services in Northern Ireland is a priority, it was disappointing that mental health and learning disability were given only a brief mention in the Programme for Government. While the commitment 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' is commendable as previously mentioned it remains to be seen whether the funding allocated to mental health in the draft budget is able to deliver on this aim.

We note that as with the bids for mental health and learning disability DHSSPS bids for primary and community care services were well above what was allocated in the draft budget. DHSSPS state that bids of £26million, £41 million and £89 million were submitted but only expenditure of £3million, £7 million and £19 million are funded by the draft Budget.

While the allocated funding will enable the provision of additional respite packages to support carers of people with a physical or sensory disability the limited funding will mean that additional funding for services for carers including respite care for those dealing with highly dependent adults with complex needs will not be available. Furthermore, proposals to improve care services by expanding the range of services

and responses to older and vulnerable people will not be taken forward and long waiting times for care packages will continue.

The Carers and Direct Payments Act (Northern Ireland) 2002 gives carers the right to request an assessment of their individual needs and places an obligation on Trusts to meet the needs of carers as assessed, including the need for respite care. The Act contains a duty to provide the services required yet no extra funding was earmarked to meet the requirements of the Act. It is disappointing that yet again funding to ensure carers receive their statutory right to an assessment has not been forthcoming. A knowledge based economy, as supported by the draft Programme for Government, Budget and Investment Strategy, will still require the support of caring professions; the status of these jobs must be acknowledge and raised. We would urge the Executive to consider the economic advantages gained by the commitment of individuals becoming carers in Northern Ireland and reconsider the allocation of funding to ensure that carers receive the support and services they so desperately require. Moreover, greater support for carers is likely to reduce the call on primary health care and the need for institutional and residential care alternatives.

While the Budget recognises a higher number of working age population until 2024, there is no mention of the commensurate rise in older people. For example, by 2023 the number of people over 65 will exceed the number of children, a rise which will only continue. Given the fact that there is currently a default retirement age of 65, the Executive will need to look at the practicalities of what is needed in terms of investment and infrastructure for an ageing population.

As it stands the draft Programme for Government and Budget if implemented will, we fear, result in a continued loss of momentum in community care services and further prolong the struggle of service users, families and carers who had hoped that devolution would herald a transformation of services and provide the support which is so urgently required. We would call for a reconsideration of the allocation of funding for community care services in Northern Ireland to ensure this does not occur.

Yours sincerely

Laura Niwa  
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Law Centre (NI) for Rights in Community Care