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Ms Melanie McGinnis  
Economic Policy Unit  
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30 December 2007

Dear Ms McGinnis

#### CONSULTATION ON DRAFT PROGRAMME FOR GOVERNMENT, DRAFT BUDGET

The Ulster Gliding Club wishes to protest strongly against the draft Budget allocations for sport current expenditure for the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL), which are swingeing cuts for 2008-09 and 2009-10.

Money spent on sport pays dividends, many times over. In the long term it will save huge sums, if spent wisely. Sport helps to make a healthy community, contributes to tourism, and improves social cohesion and Northern Ireland's image at home and abroad.

In October 2007, DCAL published its "NI Strategy for Sport and Physical Recreation 2007-17", which it developed "with the co-operation of other Government Departments." It looks good - on paper - although some of its targets are much too modest. But how does cutting funding for sport fit that Strategy? And what kind of message does cutting DCAL current expenditure on sport by about 19 per cent in 2008-09 send to the public, including the thousands of volunteers on whom sport depends? That seems to be one of the heaviest cuts in the entire budget for 2008-09. Even in 2009-10, the sport current expenditure budget will still be about 6 per cent below 2006-07 (draft budget, p 62).

Yet Northern Ireland sports facilities are far inferior to the rest of the UK, and need substantial expenditure to improve them. And Northern Ireland sport is under-funded compared with the arts - about 30 per cent less is spent on sport per head of population.

Low levels of physical activity have become a major public health problem. The Chief Medical Officer in Northern Ireland has warned that Northern Ireland "is facing an obesity timebomb" (2006 report). "[Y]et obesity is just one of possibly 20 chronic diseases and disorders for which low activity levels are a known contributory factor" (Chief Medical Officer (England) report *At least five a week – Evidence on the impact of physical activity and its relationship to health* (2004), p 28).

The Executive's *Draft Programme for Government 2008-2011* rightly states (p 8)-  
"The overall health status of our population needs urgent attention. We continue to have higher than average mortality from coronary heart disease, cancer and stroke, while obesity levels, particularly among our children, are rising at an alarming rate."

The *Programme* gives as one of its aims the promotion of “tolerance, inclusion and health and well-being”. It rightly states that significant challenges remain to be addressed, adding (p 7)-  
“Too many of our people, particularly the most vulnerable, continue to live within communities which experience high levels of poverty, disadvantage and exclusion. They are more likely to suffer from poor health.”

How will cutting the DCAL sport budget help to improve these aims and improve overall health, especially that of “the most vulnerable”?

The health service will be faced with enormous costs in the future, and will probably be over-burdened, if present trends in obesity are not quickly halted, and then reversed. Obesity “reduces life expectancy and can also lead to considerable health problems” (Chief Medical Officer, Northern Ireland, 2006 report). The World Health Organization estimates that physical inactivity is responsible for the following proportions of “disability-adjusted life years” in developed countries-

23% of cardiovascular disease for men and 22% colon cancer;

15% of type 2 diabetes;

12% of stroke for men and 13% for women;

11% of breast cancer.

Sport can play a vital part in helping to improve and safeguard the province’s health in these and other areas - and even save lives. But only about 32% of Northern Ireland adults in the D and E socio-economic groups participate in sport regularly. Only 17% of disabled adults in Northern Ireland took part in sport once in a recent year. Under 30% of older people (over 60) engage in sport even once a year. All these disadvantaged groups - and their health - will suffer if these cuts go ahead. The cuts are scarcely a suitable policy to promote inclusion - indeed they are the exact opposite.

The case for supporting sport financially is overwhelming. DCAL’s budget for sport should not be cut. Instead, it should be increased in real terms.

I am copying this letter to the Minister of Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure.

Yours sincerely

RALPH ERSKINE

Hon. Secretary, Ulster Gliding Club