



UPC RESPONSE TO PROGRAMME FOR GOVERNMENT AND BUDGET 2008-2011

Introduction

Ulster People's College delivers community development and citizenship education across Northern Ireland. Since its inception in 1982 it has been committed to contributing through education, training and development to a just, democratic and non-sectarian society with improved social and economic conditions and participation for those who have been disadvantaged and excluded.

The College welcomes the political progress that has taken place in Northern Ireland and the move away from violence. It supports the goal of building a better future and the aspiration of a peaceful, fair and prosperous society contained within 'Building a Better Future'.

Specific comments

1. Economy and Social Disadvantage

Within the programme there is an assumption made too quickly and too readily that economic development will directly contribute to the reduction of inequalities. The relationship between economic progress and reducing social and economic disadvantage and inequality is by no means straightforward or inevitable. There are welcome commitments in the programme to addressing economic inequality, including the commitment to eradicate child poverty by 2020. But this will not happen without a vigorous anti-poverty strategy.

2. A Shared Future/A Better Future

Whilst the programme makes clear links between social transformation and inclusion and the need to deliver a peaceful, prosperous, fair and healthy society there is an absence of policy commitments that address sectarianism, division and the legacy of the conflict. As many individuals and organisations have commented all reference to the Shared Future policy has been dropped this is a backward step. Promoting good relationships is an essential part of creating a better future and it should be seen as complimentary to the promotion of equality in all areas of public policy and life. We believe that within the programme there should be a specific budget for Good Relations with a strong emphasis placed on supporting work that supports conflict transformation

3. Adult Education

Northern Ireland has the highest level of adults in the UK with little or no educational qualifications. We have an unequal education system that favours those who do well and works against those who do not do well. At a time when the inequalities that arise from selection at 11 are being addressed by the Executive it is regrettable that spending in further education is being cut whilst spending in higher education is proposed to increase over the lifespan of the programme.

A particular concern is that within the overall cut in FE spending the DEL section in the programme budget refers to making efficiencies by “examining the outcomes achieved from current levels of support to external organisations”. This could lead to a cut in support for voluntary and community organisations at a time when there is already a threat to adult education provision within disadvantaged communities.

A bid in the Comprehensive Spending Review for resources to implement the Access and Engagement policy within further education was not successful. A direct consequence of this is that those furthest removed from education and learning will have fewer opportunities to return to learning. UPC believes there should be finance made available to support adults with little or no qualifications back into learning. This is an essential part of any meaningful strategy to tackle educational disadvantage, combat economic inactivity amongst adults and reduce levels of poverty.

19th December 2007

