



**Ulster Unionist Party Response to the draft 2011-2015
Programme for Government**

Introduction

The Ulster Unionist Party is pleased to have the opportunity to respond to the Executive's draft Programme for Government (PfG) which sets out plans and priorities for 2011-15 period.

We welcome the eventual publication of the draft PfG even though it took until 17th November, over five months after the election, to bring forward.

The Ulster Unionist Party has long called for the PfG to be brought alongside the Budget, the Economic Strategy, and the Investment Strategy. This has not been delivered and, if it were, would facilitate a joined up approach which recognises the reconciliation which is needed between these documents.

Draft PfG Commitments

The draft PfG contains 76 commitments and we welcome a number of them in delivering positive and progressive outcomes for Northern Ireland, for example:

- Host a significant international golf tournament
- Provide financial and other support across government to ensure the success of the *Our Time Our Place* initiative in 2012 including marking the centenary of Titanic's Maiden Voyage
- Develop sports stadiums as agreed with IFA, GAA and Ulster Rugby
- Progress the upgrade of key road projects and improve the overall road network to ensure that by March 2015 journey times on key transport corridors reduce by 2.5%

There are also a number of commitments which lack aspiration as they are already imminent, including:

- Host the World Police and Fire Games in 2013
- Substantially complete the construction of the new Police, Prison and Fire Training College
- Ensure that there are no increase in student fees beyond the rate of inflation for Northern Ireland students studying here

Whilst we broadly welcome many of the commitments within the PfG, there are a number which we would seek further clarification. Each point could be discussed in detail, however we have decided to only comment on points which we have concerns/further questions on.

Priority 1 – Growing a sustainable economy and investing in the future

Support the promotion of over 25,000 new jobs – 25,000 appears a significant and ambitious number; however, in context that there are currently over 60,000 registered as unemployed, we believe that a more challenging target is a necessity. We would also like more clarity around the breakdown of these jobs as well as the definition of ‘supporting the promotion’ of new jobs.

Invest in social enterprise growth to increase sustainability in the broad community sector - The social economy accounts for a significant proportion of the Northern Ireland economy in terms of both economic activity and employment. We would wish to see further support offered to enable such schemes to provide a range of tailored services to best meet each of their client needs.

Eradicate Brucellosis in cattle in March 2014 – Whilst we support the inclusion of this commitment, we are concerned as to why there is no similar commitment given to eradicating tuberculosis. With no target, the Department can stand accused of demonstrating complacency in tackling the problem. The UUP would wish to see a pilot badger cull scheme within the Assembly mandate.

Develop strategic plan for agri-food industry - Many financial institutions and economists are identifying agriculture, as well as the wider rural economy, as a sector with very strong future growth figures. However the sector has been repeatedly neglected and not given the attention that it deserves. The UUP welcome the introduction of a Food Strategy Board, however we are concerned that there is a possibility of duplication under Enterprise Ireland. We firmly believe that the new Food Strategy Board should become a challenger to Bord Bia in the Republic of Ireland.

Creative industries Innovation Fund - This fund has actually been allocated less money over a longer period of time. We believe the creative industries need to be supported further than what this fund can offer. We are also concerned that the screen industries are not mentioned throughout the PfG despite recent successes such as ‘Game of Thrones’.

Develop Maze/Long Kesh as a regeneration site of regional significance – We reject the proposed ‘Conflict Resolution Centre’ at the Maze and we wish to see this site progressed in a practical way which is inoffensive to victims and survivors.

Tourism – The PfG commits to increasing visitor numbers to 3.6 million and tourist revenue to £625 million by 2013. However, overseas visitor revenues have continued to fall over the last number of years and this trend looks set to continue. Treating tourism numbers and revenues as a whole hides this problem unfortunately. There is no definite plan to deal with this problem.

Priority 2 – Creating opportunities, tackling disadvantage and improving health and wellbeing

Integrated and Affordable Childcare – We believe that affordable childcare is the most important issue for many working families in particular working mothers and mother wanting to return to work. The allocation of an extra £3 million is derisory and will have very limited impact.

Child Poverty – We recognise this area as fundamental as we move forward and it is our view that there should be a specific Northern Ireland target for child poverty.

Deliver 8,000 social and affordable homes - The proposed 8,000 social and affordable homes falls far short of what is clearly needed. Given that the Housing Executive is currently in the process of formulating the new 3 year Draft Social Housing Development Programme for the period 2011/12 – 2013/14, we believe this to be an ideal time to review the housing targets. The information provided within the draft Programme for Government was also incomplete – we would like to know how many social and affordable houses, broken down into separate categories, are to be built in each of the financial years.

Introduce and support a range of initiatives aimed at reducing fuel poverty across Northern Ireland including preventative interventions - Given that it is widely accepted that more than 50% of the population are in fuel poverty, it is wholly unacceptable that so little focus was given to it within the draft Programme for Government. The UUP have recently published a 9 point action plan as to how we would like to see the Northern Ireland Executive deal with the crisis. The publication can be found on the following link - <http://uup.org/images/fuelpoverty1.pdf>

Bring forward a £13m package to tackle rural poverty and isolation in the next 3 years – The Executive must dedicate the resources necessary to target the causes of social isolation and help those living in poverty in rural areas throughout Northern Ireland. Whilst the total sum of that package was £16m, the UUP still believe this to be wholly inadequate. We would wish to see this commitment being carried through within a cross-departmental strategy.

Social Investment Fund – This fund has insufficient resources to meet all of the demands which are envisaged for it. Further clarity is also needed around the division of the money into two £40 million blocks and the definition of dereliction has not yet been outlined.

Shared Education – We agree with the commitments which are made in relation to shared education but we believe that it should be made clear that these are milestones which lead to our vision, which is a single education system for Northern Ireland. The Department of Education, particularly its Minister, must make a clear declaration of support for this as a prominent direction for the future of Northern Ireland's education system.

One Year Pre-School Education – Whilst we support the provision of pre-school education places to every family that wants it, we must ensure that these places are within a reasonable distance from the family home. We also call upon the Department of Education consider revoking the July/August birthdays admissions criterion in time for the preschool admissions process for the 2013-14 academic year

Improve thermal efficiency of Housing Executive Stock and ensure full double glazing in its properties – 60% of Housing Executive stock across Northern Ireland does not have double glazing and therefore this commitment will be a significant undertaking. More detail is needed.

Advance the relocation of Headquarters of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development - Several aspects of the commitment give the UUP considerable concern. Firstly there is still doubt regarding the financial resources available for this project. We would call upon the Department to consider all suitable vacant public properties before proceeding with a new build.

Priority 3 – Protecting our people, the environment and creating safer communities

Implement a levy on single use carrier bags by 2013 – This measure should be environmentally driven, rather than being done for revenue raising opportunities. Unfortunately this appears not to have been the case and the situation of having a fixed £4million per annum accounted for within the Department of Environment budget was deeply unsatisfactory. We call upon the Minister of

Environment to ensure that the administration of this scheme is delivered in a simple and cost effective manner which ensures minimum bureaucracy and cost to both businesses and the Department.

Continue to work towards a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by at least 35% on 1990 levels by 2025 –Without targets laid out in legislation, Northern Ireland’s carbon reduction commitments will only continue to be discretionary. We would wish to see a clear commitment within the Programme for Government to introduce climate change legislation. An increase in global temperatures is now inevitable, therefore Northern Ireland must realise that not only is inaction not an option; but that a degree of adaptation will now be necessary.

Priority 4 – Building a strong and shared community

Cohesion, Sharing and Integration Strategy - We support this initiative, believing it to be an important building block in integrating communities. We are disappointed that little progress has been made up to this moment. We will work together with other parties and interested groups to ensure a positive outcome.

Priority 5 – Delivering high quality and efficient public services

Establish the 11 new council model for Local Government by 2015 – The Ulster Unionist Party remain opposed to the 11 council model. The economic and civic advantages of a 14/15 council model are clear to see. We would ask that a commitment to commission an economic appraisal for the 14-15 council model be included.

A UUP European Perspective

The draft Programme for Government has failed to adequately recognise the urgent need of the Northern Ireland Executive to engage more fully with Europe. Northern Ireland will be termed a “more developed region” under the next round of structural funds and will certainly be in line for a much less reduced share of future funding in initiatives. As a result it is imperative that the Programme for Government should reflect the Northern Ireland Executives commitment to engage with Europe in order to fully utilise the opportunities available and get the best deal out of Europe for Northern Ireland

While Europe is given little to no mention throughout the document many of the commitments set out could be better achieved through European engagement. For an example, the commitments to increase FDI by £300million and also to support £300 million investment in R and D by businesses are areas in which European advice and funding would be essential. Nowhere in the document does it outline the Executives priorities to utilise FP7 or Horizon 2020 programmes which is a disappointing development given that Horizon 2020 will be the largest fund for research and innovation anywhere in the world from 2014-20.

Northern Ireland has benefited greatly from Europe in previous years and it is a well-known fact that we are not fully utilising many of the opportunities that are currently available, particularly with regard to funding. Given the current economic downturn and the need to source new ways of financing public and private projects the programme for government needs to better reflect the Executives need to be fully engaged with and, benefiting from the European Union.

Additional points the UUP would like to see included within the Programme for Government;

- Take forward the recommendations of the view of the budget process in order to simplify the current structure which is complex and cumbersome
- Introduce 2 hours of physical activity in all schools to all pupils to promote physical well-being
- Tackle the cost and inefficiency associated with avoidable delay within the Criminal Justice System
- As proposed by the British Heart Foundation, we would like to see a commitment to community resuscitation
- Recognise the importance of Social Care in both supporting primary and secondary care in protecting the vulnerable.
- Introduce legislation to ban smoking in cars with children
- Ensure the removal of unregulated transfer tests with a lasting outcome to the post-primary transfer process which identifies a child's individual strengths
- Introduce a dependably funded Mortgage Rescue Scheme
- Oversee the introduction of a Groceries Code Adjudicator, including a clause which enables third parties to make complaints on behalf of their members
- The abolition of the Agricultural Wages Board
- Legislation which puts right the current inadequacies in the regulations governing aspects of the ownership of private properties which comprise part of multi-unit developments
- A review of the Northern Ireland Environmental Agency in order to make it more representative of the concerns of whom it most closely works with

A full list of commitments which the UUP would like to be included can be found at - http://uup.org/images/full_uup_pfg.pdf

Programme Arrangements and Delivery Framework

The UUP is concerned with the level of detail which is given as regards the delivery of the PfG and the mechanism to support this. The draft document simply states at the moment that detailed guidance will be produced. Given the lack of delivery on the last PfG, with only around 55% of targets being met, it is crucial that we get this area right and that detailed guidance should accompany this document.

Conclusion

Overall, we welcome the PfG and will continue to engage constructively with other parties as we seek to deliver positive outcomes for the people of Northern Ireland.

The previous PfG was far from a success and we wish to ensure that this current draft contributes further. The way to do that is not through setting vague targets which lack aspiration; it is through working hard to achieve the challenging targets which we set ourselves.

Many of the commitments are not quite where they should be, as outlined above, and the Ulster Unionist Party would like to see this consultation process result in the improvement and strengthening of many of them.