

Briefing on Northern Ireland Budgetary Outlook 2018 – 2020

Comments by

Sustainable Northern Ireland

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Sustainable Northern Ireland (SNI) is a networking and forum body for statutory and non-statutory organisations concerned with the pursuit of sustainable development in Northern Ireland. We work closely with councils to promote and deliver sustainable development policy and practice at a local level. Our work programmes encourage organisations to integrate the principles of sustainable development throughout their operations and business planning functions, and deliver bold and innovative projects to promote economic, social and environmental wellbeing. Sustainable NI, its Board of Directors and wider public sector membership brings together a range of knowledge, experience and expertise which can be used to help develop policy, practice and implementation in the field of sustainable development.

Nichola Hughes
Sustainable NI
Bradford Court, Upper Galwally
Belfast, BT8 6RB
P: 028 9590 9351
E: nichola@sustainableni.org
W: www.sustainableni.org

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Introduction

SNI is principally concerned with working to deliver a more sustainable future for Northern Ireland, which relies heavily on access to a healthy and resilient environment.

In this response, we offer comments on the stark scenarios outlined in the draft budgetary outlook briefing for 2018-2020 and the impact they may have on the environment and wider regional sustainable development goals.

Key points

- The environment should not be treated as an 'easy target' for funding cuts. Cuts to environmental and sustainability programmes will have negative impacts on all areas of government responsibility, such as health & well-being, tourism & recreation, undermining the outcomes-based Programme for Government. Most sustainable development activities also deliver substantive economic benefits for the public purse, and it is critical that these programmes are supported to soften the blow of the proposed budgetary cuts. It is widely accepted that environmental damage is significantly more expensive to clear up than it is to prevent. In addition, non-compliance in environmental law will expose government and other statutory bodies to risk of legal challenge. Cutting these programmes now is likely to lead to much higher expenditure in the future.
- The silo approach (ie. separate departmental budgets) to determining the budget does not implement the 'whole of government' ethos underpinning the Programme for Government. While the protection of health and education budgets is understandable, it has a detrimental impact on the other departments. This issue needs to be addressed.
- Balancing the budget will require a combination of the three broad choices outlined - cuts to Departmental allocations; a reduction in some existing services and policies; and additional income generated from citizens.
- Raising additional revenue from citizens is unavoidable. This may necessitate increased household rates and water charges, prescription charges and a reduction in concessionary fares on public transport. There are also opportunities to raise further revenue specifically for environmental work through levies, modelled on the successful carrier bag levy. Means testing ensures the most vulnerable citizens in society are protected from any new proposals.
- DAERA is likely to be the Department most affected by Brexit. It has an essential role to play in policy development post-Brexit and therefore must be given sufficient resources to ensure the best possible policy framework upon leaving the EU. Under the scenarios outlined, DAERA will not be able to deliver 'day one readiness' after Brexit. DAERA also still has an obligation to manage existing EU funds in a compliant manner, including approximately £300million of CAP funding. This situation is made more difficult given the excessive, cumulative cuts DAERA (and predecessor Departments) has suffered in the past 4-5 years.

- DAERA is directly responsible for the delivery of 5 of 6 indicators under Outcome 2 of the draft Programme for Government. If the PfG is to achieve its ambition, adequate resourcing is essential to support delivery plans.
- Northern Ireland has weaker environmental legislation and enforcement compared to other UK jurisdictions. Cuts to the DAERA budget will exacerbate these weaknesses which will have severe economic, social and environmental consequences for the region. Northern Ireland is already the UK region most at risk, in terms of failing to protect our internationally important environmental resource.
- The DAERA Environment Fund is an essential long-standing partnership between government and the environmental NGO sector. This funding arrangement represents value for money in terms of helping to deliver government's strategic objectives. Cuts to Environmental Programmes will devastate the environmental sector. It must be retained to enable organisations to deliver vital functions and management services that are provided by statutory agencies in other jurisdictions, as well as protecting jobs in the eNGO sector. It should be noted that the Environment Fund is already targeted at delivering statutory outcomes.
- The availability of European, Lottery and independent Trust funding for the environment sector is set to reduce significantly. Heritage Lottery Fund have already notified the sector that two natural heritage schemes are closing. In this context, ongoing partnership with government is vitally important.
- In the face of potential staff reductions within DAERA and potential future budgetary cuts and staff reductions in the local government sector, the eNGO sector is a key delivery partner that can help support government functions in an efficient and cost-effective way and help 'soften the blow' of a potential Voluntary Exit Scheme.
- With a relatively small government input through the Environment Fund, NGO's tap into a volunteer workforce of over 350,000, manage over 314,000 acres of land for environment benefit, spend over £20m in the NI economy, and leverage in £3.20 for every £1 invested in core funding.
- 'Asset transfer' should be explored to transfer responsibility for managing sites and parks to the eNGO sector. This could deliver cost savings and enable nominal charges to be introduced at certain sites for services like car parking

Conclusion

SNI is very concerned about the implications of the proposed budget scenarios for the unique environment and heritage of NI. Reducing investment in protecting and enhancing our internationally important environmental assets puts NI at risk of undermining the Prime Minister's assurances that the nation will remain a "leading actor" on climate change and environmental policy following Brexit' and her commitment to ensure the Government becomes the first "to leave the environment in a better state than we found it".

The environment should not be treated as an 'easy target' when it comes to budget scenario planning. The environment is the foundation for our society and economy and is the critical resource upon which future well-being and prosperity depends. Inadequate resourcing will lead to grave long-term social, economic and environmental consequences.

This is a critical moment that requires investment not disinvestment to strengthen the partnership between government and the eNGO sector to deliver win-win outcomes for our society. Disproportionate cuts to the DAERA budget could threaten this important relationship, which will further jeopardise the delivery of environmental outcomes in Northern Ireland.

Given the need to retain investment levels in the environment, Government should progress new revenue raising schemes, such as additional levies on plastics and deposit return schemes, as a matter of urgency. We would be pleased to work with DAERA to progress new opportunities and to continue to work in partnership with government to ensure that the capacity of environmental organisations like Sustainable NI and also the 11 NI councils is retained in the context of this challenging budget situation.

This short submission serves only to offer some limited comments on the plethora of issues to be considered in depth as part of any budgetary decisions in Northern Ireland. We will be pleased to provide additional opinion if it will be helpful.

Nichola Hughes
Executive Director
Sustainable NI
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