



Submission to the Northern Ireland Executive's Programme for Government Framework Consultation



Introduction

The Workers Party welcomes the opportunity to comment on the proposed *Programme for Government* and to be able to set out what we consider to be the priorities for working people across a wide range of social, economic and political concerns.

The *Programme for Government* consultation paper identifies the importance of “*putting citizens first*”, “*working in partnership with people and communities*”, making “*real and lasting positive change...towards improved wellbeing*” and achieving “*game changing actions*”.

These are of course important objectives, and ones which should underpin any and all political programmes. However, these objectives apply as much to those designing and implementing the programme as they do to the strategy itself.

No aspect of social or political life is free standing, and the Workers Party welcomes the commitments contained in the consultation document to joined up, cross departmental and cross sectoral working. It will be fundamentally important that these commitments last beyond the Programme's launch and are reflected in ongoing and comprehensive consultation with all sections of civic society.

The adoption and roll out of this Programme must be seen against the current and historical realities of life in Northern Ireland, as lived by many thousands of citizens.

The lived reality

Hospital waiting lists and many other aspects of healthcare provision are in crisis. They have been for many years and pre date the Coronavirus pandemic.

Public housing provision has fallen dramatically in the last decade and an already unacceptable crisis continues to be exacerbated.

Levels of **child poverty** represent a scandal which none of us should be prepared to accept. It's reporting in statistical averages masks specific areas of inordinately high deprivation and the endemic and long-term nature of the crisis.

Our **education system**, in addition to its failing of working-class children, continues perpetuating division, legitimising sectarianism and propping up the phoney ‘two communities’ model.

The current pandemic has helped to identify a number of social and economic issues and has brought back into focus a number of others. Chief among these has been the impact which Coronavirus has had on **women** in particular.

These additional pressures and problems are compounding the daily difficulties faced by women and young girls in Northern Ireland. A *Programme for Government* must plan for a strategic response and the implementation of a comprehensive raft of legislation, initiatives, funding, supports and cultural change to radically improve and secure the position of women in this society.

Northern Ireland’s **economic strategy** is based on a low wage economy and a foreign direct investment model which thwarts the development of an indigenous skills base leaving workers and their families at the mercy of multinational companies as they shut up shop and move on to locations of higher profits and lower wages.

Securing, in legislation, **the rights of citizens** in Northern Ireland continues to be an unnecessarily long, arduous and uphill struggle. This *Programme for Government* must use the opportunity to comprehensively re-dress that significant and damaging deficit.

It is against these strategic imperatives that the Workers Party is responding to the *Programme for Government* consultation.

Economy



The Northern Ireland economy needs sustained and coordinated development and investment. Our local skills base needs enhanced and protected. Only a hands-on government led strategy can secure jobs and develop a confident, thriving and indigenous manufacturing, scientific and service base.

That commitment to intervention, support and direction in pursuit of a developed local skill base must form the cornerstone of an economic programme

Growing a skilled and educated workforce must be supported by planned and funded apprenticeship schemes, tuition free further education and free and accessible return to work programmes for all those seeking to re-enter the workforce.

While welcome, recent progress on the development and availability of broadband services falls far short of current and projected need. Northern Ireland must become a digital exemplar for its citizens, its economy and for its long-term economic sustainability.

Public confidence in the processes adopted in a *Programme for Government* is paramount. Nowhere is that more important than in the development of an energy strategy.

Transparency on energy policy

To demonstrate transparency, best practice, value for money and environmental credibility the *Programme for Government* should include an external audit commission, comprised of energy experts from local and GB universities and independent energy commissions.

The Energy Oversight body should also be positioned to make recommendations on programmes to address fuel poverty.

All obstacles in the path of full economic participation by citizens and the objective of full employment in Northern Ireland, should be identified, addressed and overcome.

A priority amongst those must be the provision of available, accessible and affordable child care programmes.

Workers' Rights



As a significant step towards economic development the *Programme for Government* should commit to a comprehensive charter of Workers' Rights signalling the securing of existing legislation and the development of additional safe guards including protecting the working time directive and replacing the National Minimum Wage requirement with a Living Wage.

The *Programme for Government* should pledge to establish a working group of trade union representatives, employment law specialists and representatives of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission – to report within six months with recommendations for the basis of a Northern Ireland Workers' Rights Bill.

A Bill of Rights



The Good Friday Agreement committed the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly to the introduction of a Bill of Rights. Twenty three years later that commitment has not been met.

There remains considerable political opposition to the adoption of a Bill of Rights by a number of parties in the Assembly. The citizens of Northern Ireland have a right to expect a statement of the rights and of the justice which each can demand of the state and the provision of the means whereby those rights will be enforced if they are infringed.

Those parties which continue to oppose and obstruct this form of democratic assurance must be held to account, but the inclusion of a specific and time tabled commitment to the introduction of a Bill of Rights to establish, consolidate and protect basic civil rights and fundamental freedoms, is an imperative for any serious *Programme for Government*.

Women in Northern Ireland



The struggle for women's equality, inclusion and recognition in Northern Ireland has been long, hard and is ongoing.

There is not an aspect of society - social, political, cultural, economic or academic – that is not enhanced by the participation, involvement and contribution of women.

Yet there remain economic, social, historical, entrenched and misogynist-based barriers at every turn.

As outlined above, the failure to introduce a Bill of Rights is a running sore. While such a Bill would apply to all citizens it is still imperative that specific legislation safeguarding and protecting women is brought on to the statute books.

Similarly, there are specific workplace, and access to the workplace, issues, which disproportionately effect women. These too must be catered for in legislation, social structures and in training schemes.

A decision by the Executive to include in the *Programme for Government* a commitment to the appointment of a Women's' Minister, with a cross departmental brief, would signal intent to address these issues and contribute to the process of redressing the deficit of women's rights and their role in our society.

Children and Young People



The *Programme for Government* can progress its draft objectives of giving children and young people the best start in life and helping everyone to reach their potential by committing funding and resources to:

- an enhanced Early Years programme,
- addressing our appalling levels of child poverty,
- our inadequate and inconsistent mental health services
- the grossly inadequate employment support for young people
- educational underachievement, and
- giving 16-year-olds the vote.

Health, Social Care and Wellbeing



The crucial and heroic role played by local health and social care staff in dealing with the C19 pandemic should not need restating. Nor should the many sacrifices they have made during the last year be minimised or forgotten.

Northern Ireland's response to the pandemic would not have been possible without a centrally funded, centrally planned and professionally delivered health and care service.

That acknowledgement needs to be up front and central in the forthcoming *Programme for Government*.

It also needs to be reinforced by a solid and binding commitment to securing, supporting and funding our NHS as a matter of principle. The *Programme for Government* needs to unambiguously declare against NHS privatisation by policy, erosion or stealth as we are witnessing in other countries who follow the neo-liberal capitalist model.

Listening to and working with

The previously stated desire to 'working in partnership to achieve game changing outcomes' can be demonstrated and confirmed by a *Programme for Government* which listens to as well as works with health and social care staff and their representatives. Top-down re-organisation and change would be as unacceptable an approach as it would be insulting.

Issues of pay, resources, workforce planning waiting lists and the privatisation of services are pressing and immediate. The *Programme for Government* needs to set out an inclusive, comprehensive and co-ordinated approach to these and other matters.

Our health and social care services and staff need the re-assurance that the fundamental lessons of the pandemic have at least been understood and that actions on them will be taken forward at Executive level.

Future proofing

Future proofing the service in terms of remuneration, resources, equipment, supply chains, training, funding and unambiguous lines of communication is a priority.

There are also a number of standout issues which require inclusion in the health and care component of the *Programme for Government* – particularly if we are to achieve a '*caring society that supports people throughout their lives*'.

Currently the cost of the personal care component of residential care is borne by the client. That burden should be removed. It has been done successful in other parts of the UK. It can, and should, be done here.

Almost a year ago the UK government set out the steps required to commission abortion services consistent with the regulations. The Executive has failed to act. These services and supports must now become available and accessible as a matter of urgency.

Mental Health funding in Northern Ireland is at least 26% below that of the rest of the UK. That must be addressed immediately and accompanied by the adoption of international best practice models of care to shape a service fit for purpose.

Of course, the *Programme for Government* will inevitably fall far short of the expectations of a socialist party which requires the complete transformation of our social system and society but it is important, particularly in the context of the pandemic, to make concrete demands at every opportunity for the provision of social and economic measures to meet the needs of working people.



6 Springfield Road, Belfast BT12 7AG
www.workerspartyelection.wordpress.com
workerspartyni@yahoo.co.uk

March 2021