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Submission to the Northern Ireland Executive's Consultation on the Programme for Government Framework 2016-2021

20 December 2016

This document has been prepared by the Centre for Cross Border Studies as a contribution to Northern Ireland Executive's Consultation on the Programme for Government Framework 2016-2021.¹

About The Centre for Cross Border Studies

The Centre for Cross Border Studies (CCBS), based in Armagh, Northern Ireland, has a strong reputation as an authoritative advocate for cross-border cooperation and as a valued source of research, information and support for collaboration across borders on the island of Ireland, Europe and beyond.

The Centre empowers citizens and builds capacity and capability for cooperation across sectors and jurisdictional boundaries on the island of Ireland and further afield. This mission is achieved through research, expertise, partnership and experience in a wide range of cross-border practices and concerns (for more details visit www.crossborder.ie).

The response that follows, therefore, is closely informed by the Centre's particular knowledge of and experience in cross-border socio-economic development involving a range of sectors from both Northern Ireland and Ireland, including public bodies, business and civil society. **Crucially, it is also informed by the Centre's submission to the Consultation on the Draft Programme for Government Framework, and will therefore focus on only some of the core issues raised in that submission that have not been reflected in the latest iteration of the Pfg.**²

The Programme for Government Framework

Whilst CCBS's original expression of support for the adoption of a new approach to the Programme for Government is broadly maintained in relation to the Framework that is the subject of this second

¹ This response was authored by Dr Anthony Soares, Deputy Director of the Centre for Cross Border Studies.

² The submission to the Draft Programme for Government Framework can be accessed here: <http://crossborder.ie/submission-to-the-northern-ireland-executives-consultation-on-the-draft-programme-for-government-framework-2016-2021/>.

consultation, we are nevertheless disappointed at its continued lack of explicit acknowledgement of the value of cross-border cooperation. As we stated in the first consultation, “it is vital that we recognise that our wellbeing in Northern Ireland is dependent on the wellbeing of the citizens of the neighbouring jurisdiction, and of those further afield, and that any resulting programme to improve wellbeing for all in Northern Ireland crosses with those of others beyond our borders. Failure to recognise this and to engage in a process that seeks to address wellbeing in isolation – concerned exclusively with outcomes, indicators and measures limited by a border – will result in missed opportunities to achieve greater degrees of sustainable wellbeing”. Therefore, **CCBS recommends again that the PfG Framework includes explicit reference to cross-jurisdictional cooperation in Outcomes where such cooperation would be beneficial.**

The introduction to the Programme for Government Consultation Document states: “There are of course some issues on which the parties in the Executive do not share a single view – our different positions, for example, on the referendum on EU membership are well understood. We will work together to ensure that Northern Ireland’s interests are protected and advanced and the benefits of North/South cooperation are fully recognised in any new arrangements which emerge as regards the United Kingdom’s future relationship with the European Union” (p.4). **If the Executive truly believes in the “benefits of North/South cooperation”, then the PfG should reflect that belief, and make clear that such cooperation can contribute to the ultimate objective of delivering “improved wellbeing for all our citizens”. In this regard it is disappointing that the word “border” does not appear once in the entire PfG Framework document, even though the improved wellbeing of communities living in border areas, for example, could in many instances be accomplished through cross-border cooperation.**

Moreover, **whilst the agreed outcomes that reflect where Northern Ireland wants to be in the long-term should not be influenced by Brexit or other issues not immediately within the powers of the Executive or Assembly, it is nevertheless important that the PfG enshrines an active outlook to Northern Ireland’s external relationships, and makes note of the need to build communities’ capacity to establish and maintain such relationships, including on a North-South basis.** There is a balance to be struck between distorting the PfG’s overarching outcomes due to an excessive focus on the UK’s future relationship with the EU, and being conscious of the PfG’s role in ensuring that Northern Ireland’s cross-jurisdictional socio-economic connectivity is properly safeguarded. **This connectivity must be more explicitly enshrined in the PfG.**

The Programme for Government Outcomes

Although CCBS stands by the recommendations it made in its submission on the Draft Programme for Government Framework, this submission will focus on only two outcomes as paradigmatic of the lack of explicit reference to cross-border cooperation in outcomes where such cooperation would be beneficial: Outcome 1 (“We prosper through a strong, competitive, regionally balanced economy”), and Outcome 10 (“We are a confident, welcoming, outward-looking society”).

In relation to Outcome 1, the PfG notes: “With reference to regionally balanced growth, respondents highlighted the important role of towns and cities, and Belfast and Derry/Londonderry in particular, as centres of development and employment. Others highlighted the important and distinct contribution made by economic activity in more rural areas” (pp.18-19). **The omission of any reference to the border, whether in relation to the concern for regionally balanced growth or in**

relation to cross-border economic activity, is of serious concern. If, in terms of the latter, the omission is due to uncertainty over the future of cross-border trade following the UK's exit from the EU, then this could be interpreted as a lack of ambition or commitment on behalf of the Executive in relation to the border region.

Attention is given to cross-border and North-South trade in the Delivery Plan for Indicator 21 (External Sales) where, for example, it is stressed that "Maintaining and growing cross border trade will be a hugely important factor in sustaining momentum in our growth of external sales", and that "the role of InterTradeIreland is likely to become more critical to our success" (p.11).³ However, **this acknowledgement of the importance of cross-border trade, as well as the need to highlight the place of border regions in the context of a regionally balanced economy, must be translated from the Delivery Plan to the core text of the PfG Framework itself. The cursory statements "Strengthen links between north and south, east and west, and internationally", and "We reiterate our commitment to facilitating harmonious and mutually beneficial relationships among the people of these islands" under Outcome 1 (in the "What will we do?" section), are insufficient for these purposes.**

In terms of Outcome 10 ("We are a confident, welcoming, outward-looking society"), CCBS reiterates its recommendation that this Outcome should be changed to "We are a confident, welcoming, outward-looking society **with the capacity to cooperate across borders**".

As Outcome 10 is currently framed it is less about a Northern Ireland society that is actively outward-looking, and rather as one that is welcoming to those who are themselves outward-looking and have the capacity to translate that into action. This can be seen in statements such as "We [...] aspire to respecting, to valuing, the enrichment of our society that our visitors and newcomers bring", and "We want [...] to build people's confidence, to give communities the sense that they have a valuable and valued place in society, so that they can feel empowered to greet people from different backgrounds in a positive way" (p.130). While these are desirable objectives, overall Outcome 10 undervalues the role Northern Ireland society could play in making connections across borders. Moreover, it is instructive that of the Delivery Plans associated with this Outcome only that relating to Indicators 30 and 40 (total spend by external visitors, and Nation Brands Index respectively) makes any reference to the Republic of Ireland, and even here it is in the context of making Northern Ireland more attractive to visitors from that jurisdiction.

Therefore, CCBS strongly recommends that this Outcome explicitly refer to capacity-building measures that will allow people to be initiators in the increase of links with the wider world. The Executive also has to be judged on its own confidence and ability to make and exploit links with the ROI, actively encouraging policy-makers to assess the potential for cross-border linkages when designing policy. As it is currently framed, the PfG does not properly project Northern Ireland society as outward-looking.

³ Northern Ireland Executive, <https://www.northernireland.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/newnigov/dp-external-sales.PDF> [last accessed 20/12/2016].

Conclusion

Whilst CCBS broadly welcomes the innovative approach to the Programme for Government, and sees its overarching ambition as worthy, **CCBS strongly recommends that the final version of the Programme for Government views all sections of Northern Ireland society as partners for all of its Outcomes, and that explicit references be made to the cross-border opportunities for delivery of those Outcomes. This too demands openness and leadership that denote genuine confidence in Northern Ireland, which cannot be properly reflected if the cross-border and/or North-South dimensions are side-lined to the margins of the final Programme for Government Framework.** We are cognisant of the fact that the detail of the Delivery Plans could be seen as the “flesh” on the skeleton of the PfG’s framework, and that therefore the latter may not necessarily encapsulate all the specific issues of importance to particular sectors, but CCBS nevertheless believes that the framework should denote more strongly its openness to cross-border and North-South collaboration in achieving the ambition of “Improving wellbeing for all”.