Centre for
Cross Border Cooperation

Consultation Response on the Northern Ireland Executive's Programme for Government 2024-2027

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1. About The Centre for Cross Border Cooperation

The Centre for Cross Border Cooperation (CCBC), 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, between the island of Ireland and Great Britain, in 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, and will therefore focus on the core issues with relevance to the Centre's mission.[1]

Although we have chosen not to make an online submission, our response nevertheless clearly indicates at the start of the relevant paragraphs the specific question being addressed in the online questionnaire.

2. General Comments

To demonstrate explicitly a shared commitment and leadership, the Centre recommends that the Programme for Government (PfG) acknowledge the importance of cross-border cooperation (North-South *and* East-West) in the Ministerial Foreword, as well as signalling its role in relevant sections. North-South and East-West cooperation and relations are crucial for delivering peace and economic prosperity in Northern Ireland, and for maximising its full potential. Northern Ireland's pro-active cross-border engagement will play a critical role in delivering the Executive's Programme for Government Missions—"People, Planet and Prosperity"—and the cross-cutting commitment to "Peace", and in playing its full role in shaping the North-South and East-West cooperation agendas.

We welcome the proposal in the PfG under the Priority "Reform and Transformation of Public Services" to partner with international experts from a range of disciplines, and to work on a cross-border basis in delivery of strategic objectives. Where relevant and of mutual benefit, cross-border cooperation can provide more effective and sustainable delivery of public services, reducing pressures on Northern Ireland's finances through the unnecessary duplication of provision in specific circumstances.

The Centre also welcomes the proposal under the mission of "Building New Foundations" to *"work with the Irish Government to develop our rail networks and to provide more accessible public transport for our rural and disabled communities"* (p 62). We note that delivery is envisaged over the next ten years, however, accessibility in many Border communities is currently problematic, particularly given cuts to Community Transport in recent years. The Centre urges the Executive to take the necessary steps to ensure that accessible transport for rural communities and people with disabilities is counted among its immediate priorities. It is also important to ensure that public transport routes connect with services and locations on

[1] This response was authored by Edel Quinn, Research Associate at the Centre for Cross Border Cooperation

either side of the border in order to facilitate travel for work, education, public services and retail.

The Centre for Cross Border Cooperation welcomes the reference to the North South Ministerial Council, the British Irish Council and InterTradeIreland, as well as the East-West Council (which we presume has been superseded by the new UK Government's establishment of the Council of the Nations and Regions) and Intertrade UK, in the 'Shaping a Better Tomorrow' section, which focuses on longer-term planning. However, while the broad objective of supporting Northern Ireland's SMEs is linked to the NSMC, BIC and InterTradeIreland, and exchanging information to ensure Northern Ireland is best informed to maximise its global position is linked to the East-West Council, the Centre recommends that more specific objectives are set out. Moreover, it is important to recognise the role that can be played by other actors that contribute to and support Northern Ireland's economic activity and its prosperity, who also work on a North-South, East-West, European and wider basis, including those in the community and voluntary sector.

3. Response to the Online Consultation Questionnaire
Core Area One: Doing What Matters Most Today

Priority 1: Grow a Globally Competitive and Sustainable Economy

How much do you agree that the priority 'Grow a Globally Competitive and Sustainable Economy' should be included in the Programme for Government?

The Centre strongly agrees that this priority should be included in the PfG. However, growing Northern Ireland's economy cannot be achieved by taking a single jurisdictional approach or outlook. A cross-border approach and outlook will be needed at both a Northern Ireland level, and at the level of the border region where people live, work, study, invest and visit in a catchment area that functions on a cross-border basis. The Centre recommends that the PfG should recognise that these people make an important contribution to harnessing economic potential, driving productivity, reducing carbon emissions, delivering good jobs and redressing regional imbalances. The PfG should address the economic contributions of these communities and ensure that policies are "border-proofed" at all stages from planning through implementation, thereby not only ensuring policies do not inadvertently create obstacles to their ability to contribute to a globally competitive and sustainable economy, but also – and perhaps most importantly – that they identify unexploited potentials that can only be properly captured through cross-border cooperation.

The draft Programme for Government has set out actions that we plan to take under the priority 'Grow a Globally Competitive and Sustainable Economy'. How much do you agree that these are the right actions to take?

The Centre agrees that the PfG plan to address these four challenges is important and welcomes actions indicated in the Department for the Economy's Sub-Regional Economic Plan. We believe that an explicit acknowledgement by the Executive of the need to work on a cross-jurisdictional basis, where this is appropriate, is essential to progress many of the actions contained in this priority area.

Productivity: We note the commitment to increase productivity through supporting greater investment in Research & Development, technology and investment in skills enhancement, including a focus on inclusion. In terms of R&D, technology and innovation, as noted by the

OECD,[2] the optimal approach needs to be on an all-island basis, and therefore the PfG needs to create space for that context and provide the structures at operational level.

We note that the PfG proposes to drive productivity through enhancing engagement between universities and business, with the public sector acting as a key enabler. CCBC believes that the community and voluntary sector also brings a wealth of expertise and experience in leadership, partnership working, and delivery of inclusive education training and capacity building initiatives which can contribute to this objective, which should be reflected in the PfG. Trade Unions have an essential role to play, engaging with frontier workers to ensure that their issues are clearly identified and addressed with employers.

The City and Growth Deals referenced in the PfG (p.16) are welcomed by the Centre. For example, the September 2024 announcement of the Derry and Strabane City Deal will have huge positive impact across the north-west region (which is cross-border) and beyond. The Centre also welcomes the "unpausing" of the Mid South West region and Causeway Coast and Glens City and Growth Deals announced by the Chancellor Rachel Reeves in the budget on 30th October.

Good jobs: We welcome the commitment to introduce new Employment Rights Legislation and the Good Works Charter, to ensure better quality jobs and promote healthier work-life balance. The Centre reiterates the need for cross-departmental working and approaches which address the needs and rights of people living in the border region.

It is well documented that thousands of people cross the border for work, and this reliance on cross-border employment is especially prevalent in border counties. The recent ESRI study on cross-border working suggests that there are between 17,827 and 19,282 cross border workers on the island of Ireland. This figure aligns with estimates from the Centre for Cross Border Cooperation's Border People project. In fact, as far back as 2001, a report commissioned by the North South Ministerial Council indicated a similar figure i.e. that 18,000 people commute to work or study across the border[3]. A lack of data on the exact number of cross-border workers is commonly regarded as an obstacle to cross-border mobility in other border regions. As a result, the Centre recommends that specific (legislative and policy-related) recognition is given to the existence of cross-border workers within the Northern Ireland labour market, as part of the interconnected all-island labour market. Ensuring that workers' rights in Northern Ireland keeps pace with Great Britain and Ireland is essential for economic competitiveness and the ability to attract much needed skills.

The risk of divergence of workers' rights on this island, and between the UK regions is of significant concern. This new Employment Rights Legislation provides an opportunity to create local solutions that address specific labour market challenges on and between these islands (North-South and East-West). It is important that cross-border workers' and employers' rights, entitlements and obligations are clear and not bound in unwieldy administrative processes.

The Centre's flagship Border People project provides support to citizens and workers who cross the border regularly. Through the provision of information, support and advice, the project aims to remove obstacles to cross-border mobility by empowering citizens so they can

[2] OECD, Regions and Innovation: Collaborating across borders (2013)

[3] https://borderpeople.info/site/wp-content/uploads/Briefing-5-revision15June2016.pdf

fully embrace opportunities on either side of the border. In close collaboration with the mainstream advice services, the project also supports advisors as they assist workers with a variety of complex cross-border challenges.

Many of the challenges encountered are a result of cross-border workers falling between gaps in legislation, policy and practice. This happens mainly due to cross border workers being overlooked at design stage and/or being incorrectly grouped with migrant workers (who live and work in a single jurisdiction).

Decarbonisation: CCBC welcomes the aspiration to achieve self-sufficiency in clean and affordable energy, growing a green economy. We reiterate the importance of taking an all-island approach to decarbonisation and wider green/environmental issues, and to setting clear targets. The Centre's Senior Research Associate and Development Economist, Niall O'Donnellan, has authored a timely and relevant report, *Accelerating Growth: Progressing Globally Ambitious Sectoral Clusters on the Island of Ireland,*[4] which we believe will be helpful to inform next steps towards a green economy.

Regional balance: CBCC welcomes the commitment to regional balance in the PfG. In order to ensure regional balance our economic development must be able to capitalise on cross-border and all-island opportunities, and be attentive to the specific nature of the border region. It must reduce barriers for people who wish to live, work, learn and move across the border to access services, visit as tourists, and contribute to growing a competitive and sustainable economy alongside wider social and cultural life. In order for the economy in the border region to thrive, the PfG must recognise that the catchment area goes well beyond the border.

We agree that a thriving Further and Higher Education sector is critical for a strong, regionally balanced economy, and in this context, the Centre recommends the PfG commits to removing barriers to Further and Higher Education to ensure that students can move freely to access courses on either side of the border. The Centre welcomes the commitment to expand the expansion of Ulster University's Magee Campus through the outworking of the Magee Taskforce. This is vital for the development of the North West border region. It will have significant impacts at cross-border level, enhance opportunities, skills and innovation and has the potential to contribute to a strong, regionally balanced economy and society.

The Centre believes that the commitment to develop a Tourism Strategic Action Plan, should incorporate a cross-border, all-island approach.

The CCBC welcomes the Sub-Regional Economic Plan and believes that it offers significant potential to achieve greater regional balance and increased prosperity in Northern Ireland. Importantly, it correctly identifies how its objectives can be more properly achieved through cross-border, North-South and East-West cooperation. The Centre has produced a briefing in response to the publication of the Sub-Regional Economic Action Plan in October 2024, which contains further details on this matter.[5]

Priority 2: Deliver More Affordable Childcare

[4] https://crossborder.ie/newsite/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/2023-Accelerating-Growth-Donnellan.pdf

[5] https://crossborder.ie/reports/briefing-note-on-the-northern-ireland-department-for-the-economys-sub-regional-economic-plan/

How much do you agree that the priority 'Deliver More Affordable Childcare' should be included in the Programme for Government?

The Centre for Cross Border Cooperation agrees that this priority should be included within the PfG. Many workers cross the border to work in Northern Ireland and make use of childcare services, thus contributing to the economy. In the border region this can help make childcare services more viable and facilitates women entering or returning to the workforce.

The draft Programme for Government has set out actions that we plan to take under the priority 'Deliver More Affordable Childcare'. How much do you agree that these are the right actions to take?

The Centre recommends that the proposed initiatives apply and be accessible to people on a cross-border basis. The Centre recommends that the priority actions should ensure there are sufficient levels of childcare available in the border region and ensure that frontier workers who are coming across the border to work, from south to north particularly, are supported to access affordable childcare close to their workplace. In addition, any barriers should be removed for these workers to access any of the schemes to which they are entitled. This will support their participation in the labour market, promote gender equality and help grow the economy in border regions.

We welcome the commitment to ensuring robust data collection, and recommend that data is gathered on the provision and uptake of affordable childcare in border regions, in order to help identify trends, including gaps in provision and barriers to accessing childcare for cross border workers, in order that they are addressed.

Priority 3: Cut Health Waiting Times

How much do you agree that the priority 'Cut Health Waiting Times' should be included in the Programme for Government?

The Centre strongly agrees that this is a crucial immediate priority for the NI Executive's PfG. We recognise that this priority aligns closely with the priority "Reform and Transformation of Public Services". We recommend that the PfG recognises the importance of taking a cross-jurisdictional approach to reducing health waiting lists.

The draft Programme for Government has set out actions that we plan to take under the priority 'Cut Health Waiting Times'. How much do you agree that these are the right actions to take?

The Centre notes that the PfG sets out the scale of the crisis in accessing essential health and social care appointments, assessments and treatment in a timely way. We acknowledge the challenging budget decisions facing all Executive Departments at this time, including the Department of Health. The Centre recommends that the PfG should set out clear targets for reducing waiting lists within a specific time period. We recommend that a twin-track approach of urgent reform and immediate remedial responses is required. We note with concern the proposed cuts to the Department of Health's 2024-25 budget, contained in the recent EQIA[6], including a cut to the Waiting List Initiative, which appear to contradict the Programme for Government priority.

[6] https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/consultations/equality-impact-assessment-2024-25-budget-outcome

The Centre for Cross Border Cooperation strongly supports the principle of "improving health through primary, community and social care, set out in the Programme for Government." However, we would suggest that there may be additional challenges in recruiting and retaining staff to primary, community and social care settings in many border communities, particularly where there may be duplication of the offer on either side of the border, and where pay differentials could place Northern Ireland in a difficult position. Therefore, the Centre strongly recommends that the PfG commits to identifying potential cross-border actions to address this issue in the border region.

We believe that it is important for the Department of Health and the Health Trusts to consider the potential of cross border patient flows as a means to retain services in hospitals in the border region. Hospitals and elective care centres located within it may be made more viable and efficient by serving patients from a catchment area which extends beyond the border, and this approach may also prove to be more responsive to the needs of patients and families living in the border region.

Priority 4: Ending Violence Against Women and Girls

How much do you agree that the priority 'Ending Violence Against Women and Girls' should be included in the Programme for Government?

The Centre strongly supports this priority and emphasises the need for cross-border cooperation. We recommend full and urgent implementation. We note that at time of writing, five women have been murdered by femicide in the past six weeks. We further note that at least one of these cases involves a cross-border element. Gender-based violence is an island-wide issue, and cooperation between jurisdictions is crucial for addressing it effectively.

The draft Programme for Government has set out actions that we plan to take under the priority 'Ending Violence Against Women and Girls'. How much do you agree that these are the right actions to take?

The Centre welcomes the actions outlined and recommends the NI Executive and relevant arms-length bodies examine and are supported to maximise the positive impacts of working on a cross-jurisdictional basis.

Priority 5: Better Support for Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs

How much do you agree that the priority 'Better Support for Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs' should be included in the Programme for Government?

The Centre recommends that the NI Executive addresses the unique circumstances of children and young people with special educational needs, and their families, who live in the border region. Any barriers to accessing employment or services across both jurisdictions should be identified and mitigated at planning stage and not as an afterthought. In this regard, the Middletown Centre for Autism stands as an example of best practice.

The Programme for Government has set out actions that we plan to take under the priority 'Better Support for Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs'. How much do you agree that these are the right actions to take?

The Centre recommends that the NI Executive gives consideration to the unique circumstances of children with special educational needs and their families who are living in the border region and working or accessing services across both jurisdictions. The Centre recommends adopting border proofing methods to maximise efficiency, avoid duplication and help ensure that services are planned to meet the needs of people who are crossing the border.

Priority 6: Provide More social, affordable and sustainable housing

How much do you agree that the priority 'Provide More Social, Affordable and Sustainable Housing' should be included in the Programme for Government?

The draft Programme for Government has set out actions that we plan to take under the priority 'Provide More Social, Affordable and Sustainable Housing'. How much do you agree that these are the right actions to take?

Priority 7: Safer Communities

How much do you agree that the priority 'Safer Communities' should be included in the Programme for Government?

The Centre supports the Safer Communities priority and recommends that cross-jurisdictional cooperation continues to develop, particularly in relation to people living in the border region to address organised crime and ensure community safety for migrants and asylum seekers.

The draft Programme for Government has set out actions that we plan to take under the priority 'Safer Communities'. How much do you agree that these are the right actions to take?

We recommend that the importance of cross-jurisdictional cooperation be emphasised, particularly in relation to organised crime/paramilitarism and links to community safety and confidence in policing among migrants and people seeking asylum. A recent report from the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) mission in Ireland, *An Assessment of Migrant Safety and Community Policing in Border Regions between Ireland and Northern Ireland*, [7] points to concerns in these areas.

Priority 8: Protecting Lough Neagh and the Environment

How much do you agree that the priority 'Protecting Lough Neagh and the Environment' should be included in the Programme for Government?

The Centre urges the PfG to prioritise cross-border cooperation in all environmental protection initiatives, which we believe are essential in the planning and delivery of effective responses to the huge challenges ahead. We recommend the establishment of an independent, funded Environmental Protection Agency which has enforcement powers.

The draft Programme for Government has set out actions that we plan to take under the priority 'Protecting Lough Neagh and the Environment'. How much do you agree that these are the right actions to take?

The Centre welcomes the plan to introduce Northern Ireland's Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP), and recommends that the EIP recognises the island of Ireland as one biogeographical region. As one biogeographical region, ecosystems, habitats and species

[7] Chisholm A.,Willekers L.,(2024)An Assessment of Migrant Safety and Community Policing in Border Regions between Ireland and Northern Ireland. International Organisation for Migration, London.

need to be protected and enhanced on a cross-border basis. By way of example, part of the catchment of Lough Neagh stretches across the border into Co. Monaghan. Therefore, it is important that environmental protection, regulation and coordination operates at a north-south level. Waterways Ireland and the Loughs Agency, two of the six North-South implementation bodies established under the Belfast/ Good Friday Agreement, are exemplar organisations for transboundary ecosystem management and protection who have developed models of good practice that are internationally recognised.

Priority 9: Reform and Transformation of Public Services

How much do you agree that the priority 'Reform and Transformation of Public Services' should be included in the Programme for Government?

The Centre agrees with the proposed priority to Reform and Transform Public Services.

The draft Programme for Government has set out actions that we plan to take under the priority 'Reform and Transformation of Public Services'. How much do you agree that these are the right actions to take?

We welcome the proposal to work cross-jurisdictionally in the transformation programme, and partner with experts from industry, academia, and with civil servants from the UK, Ireland and internationally.

Cross-jurisdictional collaboration can provide opportunities for maximising efficiency and impact, which may include the provision of services to citizens in the neighbouring jurisdiction. Sharing services may not only better meet the needs of people living in the border region, but could also increase the critical mass of catchment population and improve viability of services. People's needs may be best and more efficiently served, by the provision of shared cross-border services, where appropriate. Planning future services, such as in health or further and higher education, must consider the potential of these approaches in real and tangible ways.

The Centre believes that it is essential to monitor and assess how reform and transformation of public services are impacting in the border region. It is vital to ensure that public services work well in these areas, to contribute to the realisation of the Executive's objective of achieving Better Regional Balance and a Globally Competitive and Sustainable Economy.

The Centre recommends that the NI Executive border proofs its policies on Reform and Transformation to ensure people in border communities have access to quality public services. In particular, we recommend that any reform and transformation process considers the needs of people in border communities, the higher cost of providing public services to them, the challenges of providing public transport in those areas, and the greater distance citizens may have to travel to access services.

Core Area Two: Building New Foundations

How much do you agree that these are the right commitments in relation to the plans for investment in infrastructure?

The Centre believes that the list of proposed actions to be carried out in the medium term, require urgent action. There are significant opportunities for cross-border working to

maximise benefit for people in Northern Ireland. We await publication of the Investment Strategy for further details.

Core Area Three: Shaping a Better Tomorrow

The Executive have set out a long-term strategy to deliver three Missions, People, Planet and Prosperity, as well as a cross-cutting commitment to Peace. How much do you agree with a Missions-based approach?

Further development of positive North-South and East-West relations are crucial for delivering peace and prosperity in Northern Ireland. Positive cross-border engagement will play a critical role in delivering the Executive's Programme for Government Missions—"People, Planet and Prosperity"—and the cross-cutting commitment to "Peace." The three Missions should consider how the opportunities and challenges they seek to address, engage with and impact people and communities living in the border region. It will be important that the cross-cutting commitment to Peace ensures that people in the border region feel the benefit of a growing, globally competitive and sustainable economy, and the positive impacts delivered through implementation of all the priorities.

The Centre welcomes reference to the North-South Ministerial Council, the British Irish Council and InterTradeIreland in respect of supporting our economy, small business and maximising trade with GB, Ireland, the European Union and beyond. In similar vein, we welcome reference to the East-West Ministerial Council and Intertrade UK.

In order to effectively address the identified challenges, the Executive must prioritise North-South and East-West cooperation. Cross-jurisdictional collaboration is essential, especially in border communities, to meet the objectives laid out in the Programme for Government.

Understanding Missions by Tracking Wellbeing

The draft Programme for Government outlines how it will measure progress through a Wellbeing Framework. How much do you agree with the proposed approach?

The Centre welcomes the Stronger Economy measures on Employment Rate, Economic Inactivity, Northern Ireland Composite Economic Index, External Sales Rates, Research and Development, and Skills. The inclusion of an indicator on earnings, in light of the Executive's current proposals to introduce a Good Jobs policy, would be a very helpful indicator to measure progress. We are aware of reliable data on this subject, including the Office for National Statistics' Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings (ASHE).[8] We welcome the fact that the indicators are broken down to local authority level, something which is necessary to measure and track progress in the border region.

The Indicator which measures 'International Reputation', sets out the lead measure to be the National Brand Index, stating: "The Anholt-GfK Roper Nation Brands Index measures global perceptions of 60 countries across six dimensions: Exports, Governance, Culture, People, Tourism, and Investment and Immigration."[9] This is an important indicator, and every effort should be made to resolve the obvious issue of being included in an Index composed of nation-states rather than regions or sub-national polities. However, CCBC recommends the

[8] https://www.ons.gov.uk/surveys/informationforbusinesses/businesssurveys/annualsurveyofhoursandearningsashe

[9] https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/topics/nation-brands-index

inclusion of an additional dimension measuring Northern Ireland's membership of international networks and partnerships (through its institutions, organisations and businesses).

4. Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the consultation. For more information or for clarification on any point please do not hesitate to contact the Centre. The Centre consents to being listed in the Annex and for extracts being included in the published Departmental response.

ENDS

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