



The Centre for Cross Border Studies
39 Abbey Street ❖ Armagh BT61 7EB
Tel: +44 (0) 28 3751 1550 ❖ Fax: +44 (0)28 3751 1721
Email: crossborder@qub.ac.uk ❖ www.crossborder.ie

***Submission to the Northern Ireland Executive's Consultation on the
Programme for Government Draft Outcomes Framework***

22 March 2021

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 Draft Outcomes Framework.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, between the island of Ireland and Great Britain, elsewhere 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. **It is also informed by the Centre's submissions to the [Consultation on the Draft Programme for Government Framework](#) and the [Programme for Government Framework 2016-2021](#), and will therefore focus on only some of the core issues with relevance to the Centre's mission.**

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

The Programme for Government Draft Outcomes Framework: General Comments

1. In their Foreword to the Consultation Document, and reflecting on the prevailing context, the First and Deputy First Minister state: “In responding to the pandemic we have learned a great deal about working in partnership with others – not just across central government, but with other sectors too, including local government, the private sector and the community and voluntary sector” (pp.3-4). Similarly, the introduction to the Consultation Document offers the following reflection:

COVID-19 has exposed flaws in traditional models and approaches to public services, but it has also progressed thinking and practice around new and different ways of working. Most importantly, it has demonstrated very clearly that, when it comes to putting in place fast and effective responses to challenges and problems, governments cannot do it by acting alone. Rather, a whole societal approach is needed – an approach which draws together scientific and technical expertise, combines it with local knowledge and information about what might work at community or individual level, and which uses relevant data to target where need is greatest. That means government working across departmental boundaries and the wider public sector as well as with partners in other sectors – in local government, academia, the private sector, with the community and voluntary sector and beyond (p.5).

2. Given what is known of the nature of the Coronavirus pandemic and the approaches required to address it, the failure of this Consultation Document to acknowledge how the Northern Ireland Executive needs to work across *jurisdictional* boundaries is remarkable. By refusing to indicate how success in dealing with this ongoing public health crisis *has and will continue* to rely on Northern Ireland’s ability to cooperate not only on a North-South basis with the Irish Government, but also on an East-West basis with HM Government and the other devolved administrations in the rest of the United Kingdom, is suggestive of a crucial lesson not having been learnt.

3. In their Foreword to the [Draft Programme for Government Framework 2016-2021](#), the First Minister and the then Deputy First Minister referred to Executive commitments “to work through the North South Ministerial Council and the British Irish Council to build and maintain relationships across these islands” (p.6). Whilst recognising differences among the parties in the Executive in relation to the referendum on the UK’s membership of the EU, the introduction to the 2016 [Programme for Government Consultation Document](#) stated how the Executive would “work together to ensure that Northern Ireland’s interests are protected and advanced and the benefits of North/South cooperation are fully recognised” (p.4). Despite what the pandemic has shown us, there are no similar statements supportive of North-South (or indeed East-West) cooperation in the current Programme for Government Draft Outcomes Framework.

4. The failure of a public policy document of the stature of the current Programme for Government Draft Outcomes Framework Consultation Document to explicitly recognise the

importance of cross-jurisdictional cooperation not only means we continue to see the Northern Ireland Executive not making similar substantive contributions to shape the North-South policy arena as the Irish Government has done (as in its [Project Ireland 2040 National Planning Framework](#) or, more recently, its [Programme for Government: Our Shared Future](#)), but it also means the Northern Ireland Executive is missing the opportunity to demonstrate leadership by championing and encouraging stakeholders and communities in Northern Ireland to exploit where it is relevant the possibilities offered by collaboration within and across these islands.

5. It is to be welcomed how “the Executive recognises the importance of continuous civic engagement and it sees that as an essential aspect of the Outcomes-based approach moving forward” (pp.8-9). However, there also needs to be recognition that those in the community and voluntary sector require adequate resourcing in order to devote time and capacity to such continuous engagement, otherwise there is a significant risk that those organisations with greater resources will be better positioned to put forward their views and plot the future direction.

Comments on Specific Outcomes

6. **“Our children and young people have the best start in life”** (p.12): Some of the key priority areas associated with this outcome present opportunities for potential cross-border approaches, especially for border communities, which should be given explicit recognition. This includes the identification of the need for “taking a strategic approach to area planning i.e. ensuring all have access to fit for purpose schools and supporting our education sector, including integrated and shared education” (p.12), where such planning should take into account communities located on the other side of the border that could provide the critical mass necessary to sustain education provision in more rural border areas. Similarly, in relation to border communities a cross-border approach could facilitate the Executive’s aim of “supporting and enabling parents into work with accessible and affordable childcare” (p.13).

7. **“We live and work sustainably – protecting the environment”** (p. 14): Although the rationale for taking a cross-jurisdictional approach to this outcome and many of its key priority areas would appear obvious, there is no acknowledgement of this.

8. **“We all enjoy long, healthy active lives”** (p.18): Particularly for border communities, the stated desire to “ensure everyone has access to high quality care when they need it” (p.18), and the key priority areas of Inclusion and Tackling Disadvantage (which means addressing “the issues that lead to inequality and disadvantage in terms of health and healthcare”, p.18), and Mental Health and Wellbeing (which means “Ensuring access to a comprehensive array of early intervention and healthcare services to address mental health issues where they present”, p.18), is more likely to be fulfilled through a cross-jurisdictional approach. This may include through the provision of services to citizens in the neighbouring jurisdiction, which could offer the necessary critical mass to sustain a particular service for Northern Ireland communities in the border region.

9. **“People want to live, work and visit here”** (p.29): If the Northern Ireland Executive is truly committed to its objective “to build on international relations and enhance our reputation, deal

with the impacts of EU Exit and the COVID-19 pandemic, attract investment and help grow our economy” (p.29), it needs to show that through an explicit acknowledgement that it is conscious of the need to work on a cross-jurisdictional basis where this is appropriate. Otherwise there would be the assumption of a lack of self-confidence that would stand in contradiction with the mission of building international relations.

Conclusion

10. The openness and leadership necessary from the Northern Ireland Executive to work in partnership with others in delivering the Programme for Government cannot be properly reflected if the cross-border, North-South and East-West dimensions are absent from the Outcomes Framework. We are cognisant of the fact that the detail of any Delivery Plans could become the “flesh” on the skeleton of the Outcomes Framework, and that therefore the latter may not necessarily encapsulate all the specific issues of importance to particular sectors. Nevertheless, the Centre for Cross Border Studies believes the final version of the Outcomes Framework should denote explicitly its openness to cross-border, North-South and East-West collaboration in achieving its ambitions.