

**DEPARTMENT  
FOR SOCIAL  
DEVELOPMENT –  
DRAFT BUDGET 2010**

**COMMENTS BY  
NORTHERN IRELAND  
PUBLIC SERVICE  
ALLIANCE**

**January 2011**

## **Introduction**

The Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance (NIPSA) is Northern Ireland's largest trade union representing almost 47,000 members throughout the civil and public service in Northern Ireland.

Within the Department for Social Development NIPSA has over 5600 members in the Social Security Agency (SSA), the Child Maintenance and Enforcement Division (CMED) and the Core Department.

The DSD Departmental Committee of NIPSA (herein after referred to as the Departmental Committee) is extremely concerned at any proposals which would impact on the service which DSD provides to the vulnerable communities in Northern Ireland.

This is particularly so at a time when the employment register is rising therefore increasing the work which the DSD employees in the SSA have to undertake.

Predications are that the Westminster government's cutbacks in public expenditure will mean up to 30,000 job losses in the public sector in Northern Ireland with a corresponding loss in the private sector. Even if, in that worse case scenario, 60,000 additional people were seeking work this would have a dramatic impact on the level of work expected by staff in the SSA. To have cutbacks in services at a time when there is a need for increasing staff would be absolutely unacceptable.

At this stage the NIPSA Departmental Committee notes that the DSD Minister Alex Attwood MLA has not given his agreement to the draft budget for his Department.

## **Summary**

1. NIPSA notes the position set up in paragraph 2 about the financial baseline figures and the proposed increases and decreases in expenditure over the next period. As far as the SSA and the CMED are concerned we note that there is to be no change in expenditure from 2010-11 through to and including 2014-15. The comments that we made earlier about the absolutely essential increase in workload for the SSA refers.
2. We are also concerned about the significant reduction in capital expenditure for the SSA from £2.3million in 2011/12 to £1million in 2014/15. NIPSA would point out to the Committee that one of the measures which the Department has adopted over the last number of years, to bring it into line with developments in the Department of Work and Pensions in Great Britain, is to integrate the Social Security and Employment functions into Jobs and Benefits Offices. At present there are still 8 towns where the Jobs and Benefits functions are not integrated and the staff are still working in either Social Security offices and Jobcentres. Management have advised NIPSA that there is not the funding to roll out the final 8 offices and this inevitably would lead to a situation where claimants in some areas of Northern Ireland will not be receiving an integrated service which is provided in the vast majority of Jobs and Benefits Offices.

## **Departmental Priorities**

3. NIPSA believe that the priorities set out by the Department to contribute to tackling poverty, creating urban centres which are sustainable etc, and building the foundations for a shared future cannot be achieved by cutting the numbers of staff who deal with customers on a daily basis. Previous surveys of customers have shown that they prefer a face to face service. NIPSA would argue that this is required more than ever at a time when more and more people are requiring the services for the very first time due to the economic downturn.
4. In respect of the points made in paragraph 4, whilst the draft budget recognises the challenges facing the SSA due to the Welfare Reform Agenda it cannot

equate those challenges by cutting staff levels. To date, due to the continuing economic slump and the subsequent increased demand for the safety net of the social welfare system, the increased demand has not been met for the similar rise in staffing levels. This has meant that staff are working longer hours and also a considerable number of weekends to meet the existing demand. Consequently it is only through the professionalism, hard work, dedication and goodwill of staff that the service has been maintained to date. Given that the Northern Ireland Executive has decided to impose a 2 year pay freeze and there already is a recruitment freeze in the Civil Service leaving increasing levels of vacancies, the morale of staff is at an all time low. The commitment of staff to provide the highest quality of service is reaching breaking point.

### **Budget cuts**

5. NIPSA recognise that the redesigning of delivery Models in social security to improve levels of customer service, to date, has not worked. The Customer First Initiative, formerly the Strategic Business Plan, developed by the former DSD Minister Margaret Ritchie MLA MP, has concentrated on providing, in the main, a telephony service to customers. This is at a time when many people are seeking social security services for the very first time and the lack of availability of face to face contact within the North District (the pilot area for the Customer First Initiative) has proved frustrating for customers. NIPSA believe that if initiatives such as Customer First are to be rolled out across Northern Ireland, the service provided will only deteriorate. Instead of a move to centralise functions under Customer First NIPSA believe that existing centralised benefits such as the Employment Support Allowance should be decentralised away from Belfast out to the local office network throughout Northern Ireland where local people can gain access to local experienced staff face to face. The fact that there is no access to expert advice on Employment Support Allowance from those who administer the benefit apart from telephone enquiries has proved extremely problematic and has led to widespread dissatisfaction from the public who not only require and expect the service but who are entitled to it.

6. NIPSA recognises that the frontline nature of the SSA is well recognised and understood however it is clear from initiatives such as Customer First and the Centralisation of the Employment Support Allowance in the Belfast City Centre location that such initiatives do little to provide a face to face access service to the Agency's customers. NIPSA believes that this impacts negatively on those most vulnerable in society and dilutes the current service provided by the Agency to customers who need its services more than ever.
7. NIPSA would be very concerned at some of the proposals set out in paragraph 6.5 and especially in relation to the scaling back what are considered to be "lower priority programmes". It is of fundamental importance that the Programme Protection and Debt Recovery retain some if not all of the monies recouped from these initiatives. We are also extremely concerned at the proposals to scale back benefit uptake. This is about providing information to the public on benefits to which they are entitled.
8. It is surely wrong in a democratic society to withhold information from the weak, the vulnerable, the elderly, and those in need of benefits that they are entitled to. NIPSA recognise that the programme Protection and Debt Recovery could be a valuable revenue stream for the Agency to fund extra resources in relation to tackling poverty. As all of the monies recouped are all given directly back to the Treasury there is no funding available to resource these initiatives as they are not viewed as frontline priorities. NIPSA believe that such "slash and cut" policies from the Westminster government should be strongly opposed.
9. Mention is made in paragraph 6.6 of urban regeneration and community development initiatives. NIPSA has always opposed the widespread use of consultants throughout the civil and public service. We are not opposed to continuing attempts to reduce the level of expenditure. However we believe that Urban Regeneration plays a critical role as does Neighbourhood Renewal in the work of the DSD. The services provided to the communities are rightly recognised as critical to community development and further cutbacks will inevitably impact on the service provision.

10. NIPSA note the responses from politicians of all parties to protect frontline services but would point out that there is a critical need to understand the role of backroom services. Staff who provide an absolutely essential job in human resources, finance etc are very concerned that their role is not recognised by politicians. Because they are not providing a frontline service doesn't mean to say that they are not providing a top class service. No organisation can run without a backroom service and diligent, committed staff.
11. We note that reference is made to the HR Connect contract charges. The HR Connect has been an unmitigated and complete disaster. It is a gross abuse of public money that considerable expenditure is provided to a service which is totally inadequate and has demonstrably failed the Civil Service.
12. Every survey of staff has shown that they have absolutely no confidence whatsoever in the HR Connect system. The fact that the system is limping along is only because of the considerable extra expenditure which DSD and other Departments have put in to keeping this discredited privatised activity alive on a life support system. DSD, as indeed other Departments should recognise, that this system has failed and that the contract should be renegotiated.
13. NIPSA note that paragraph 6.8 indicates that the CMED's budget will be cut further. At least we recognise that the Minister and the Department accept that any cutbacks in expenditure will directly impact on the amount of child maintenance collected and arranged for children. As the whole intention of the CMED is to recoup money for children any cutbacks in services will have a direct impact on the frontline service i.e. on the service provided to vulnerable children.
14. The commitment to no compulsory redundancy in the Housing Division, whilst welcome, is also concerning. It suggests that there may be voluntary redundancies or at the very least a cutback in the service provided. The Housing Division provides a critical support to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive which is the jewel in the crown in public services in Northern Ireland and has been for many years.

## Summary

15. NIPSA recognises that the Committee may feel that NIPSA is not in support of the cuts and that would be absolutely correct. We believe that the budget is being set on the premise that the cuts are a fact of life and must be imposed. NIPSA, as the largest union in Northern Ireland and as a the leading affiliate of the Northern Ireland Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions have submitted to the Northern Ireland Executive and to the Assembly our alternative proposals for funding of public services.
16. We would draw the DSD Assembly Committee's attention to these proposals as an alternative way of dealing with the current financial situation.
17. The NIPSA DSD Departmental Committee are happy to provide additional comments either orally or in writing to the DSD Assembly Committee and we thank them for this opportunity of contributing to the debate.

**nipsa**

---

NORTHERN • IRELAND • PUBLIC • SERVICE • ALLIANCE