

Our Ref: MW/KM

25th January 2011

Mr Peter McCallion,
Committee Clerk,
Committee for Social Development,
Room 412,
Parliament Buildings,
Ballymiscaw,
BELFAST
BT4 3XX

Dear Mr McCallion,

Re: Draft Budget 2011-2015

I refer to your letter dated 14th January and am pleased to offer some comments and observations on the proposed Draft Budget.

Supporting Communities NI (S.C.N.I.) is an independent charitable organisation which champions community participation by developing groups, supporting active citizenship and building cohesive communities. At the same time, and in partnership with the NI Housing Executive, S.C.N.I. supports and facilitates the Housing Community Network which was formed in response to the need for housing and related policies to be developed with and on behalf of local communities. S.C.N.I. works with locally based interagency partnerships and has been actively supporting community participation in such initiatives as Neighbourhood Renewal and the Shared Neighbourhood Programme. S.C.N.I. works with nearly 400 local community organisations which cover the rural and urban areas in all parts of the province. Many of these groups provide core and important services to local communities and would find it very difficult to do so without the support and advice from independent organisations such as S.C.N.I.

Primarily we note and are gratified by the continued support of the Department to the work of S.C.N.I. and indeed our colleagues in the Housing Rights Service; we regard this as recognition of the work and worth of both organisations in support of the Department and its partner bodies.

Draft Budget Summary

S.C.N.I. welcome the fact that this is a 4 year proposal/allocation of budget by D.S.D. – this will allow for better planning for all services across all D.S.D. delivery agencies and will provide clarity to agencies to deliver services in a more co-ordinated and collaborative way.

S.C.N.I. understands the rationale behind D.S.D.'s reduction of 40% capital spend as reflected in the overall N.I. Executive's Draft Budget – nevertheless S.C.N.I. feels that the impact on new build housing targets as well as improvements to existing N.I.H.E./H.A. stock may be short sighted in the long term.

Departmental Priorities

S.C.N.I. concurs with the Department's 3 broad strategic objectives over the next 4 years.

S.C.N.I. are in a position to assist D.S.D. to deliver on all 3 of these objectives as they are reflected in our 3 year Strategic Plan and related Aims/Objectives (copy enclosed).

S.C.N.I. has been a supportive and active partner to the Department, the Housing Executive and local councils in developing and regenerating neighbourhoods and communities; we recognise what has been achieved to date and welcome the continued commitment to community development, community participation and regeneration contained within the Draft Budget. The impact of the recent severe weather on some of the most vulnerable households and communities and the response by community organisations and public bodies to the challenge illustrates the importance of maintaining this commitment to frontline services and to the interagency partnerships that ensure services are properly and efficiently delivered. The Department should therefore ensure that it sustains support and resources to local community development.

Budget Cuts

S.C.N.I. is concerned at the long term impact of cuts in capital that will be made available to NI Housing Executive and believes that this will necessarily lead to some deterioration in the overall housing stock. Through the Housing Community Network, considerable concern has been expressed at the extent of fuel poverty in NI and how this can have seriously adverse impacts on family life and in the life opportunities subsequently available to children and young people. Whilst we welcome the commitment to addressing fuel poverty through existing schemes, we believe that more creative and innovative responses will be required, including restructuring the way the Housing Executive is financed to resource necessary maintenance and improvement work.

Through the Housing Community Network, S.C.N.I. has been piloting with the Housing Executive, the engagement of community representatives in monitoring and assessing the performance of N.I.H.E. in the delivery of certain housing services. We believe this to be an essential part of the partnership between D.S.D., N.I.H.E. and local communities and it has the potential to provide cost effective scrutiny of the housing functions and services to the benefit of the landlord and communities. We hope that budget reductions and cuts will not prevent this scrutiny role from developing further.

Urban Regeneration/ Community Development


We welcome the continued support for community development and voluntary activity and for such programmes and initiatives as Neighbourhood Renewal, Areas at Risk and Small Pockets of Deprivation and the regulation of charities. S.C.N.I. has been an active and supportive partner to

statutory organisations and the community and voluntary sectors and has long seen the benefits of supporting the participation of local communities in the delivery of services, programmes and initiatives which have an impact on people and neighbourhoods. S.C.N.I. has also been supporting the creation of more cohesive, safe and sustainable communities through a range of different mechanisms and believe that a strong case can be made for ensuring that support for this work is sustained particularly during times of financial stress and increasing unemployment.

S.C.N.I. believes that it is vital that the Department continues to support community development and makes available independent advice support and training to local community groups and representatives to ensure that such organisations can function effectively and efficiently and in compliance with charity regulations.

If you required any further clarification on any of the points, observations or comments please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely,
For SUPPORTING COMMUNITIES NI

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'B. Holmes', written in a cursive style.

Brian Holmes
Director