

**RESPONSE OF THE COUNCIL FOR PUBLIC AFFAIRS OF THE  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN IRELAND TO THE NORTHERN IRELAND  
EXECUTIVE CONSULTATION ON THE PROGRAMME FOR GOVERNMENT:  
DRAFT OUTCOMES FRAMEWORK**

MARCH 2021

### **Background**

1. The Presbyterian Church in Ireland (PCI) has over 217,000 members belonging to 535 congregations across 19 Presbyteries throughout Ireland, north and south. The Council for Public Affairs is authorised by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland to speak on behalf of PCI on matters of public policy. Through its Council for Social Witness the Church seeks to deliver an effective social witness service on behalf of PCI and to the wider community, through the provision of residential care, nursing care, respite care and supported housing for vulnerable people including the elderly, those with disabilities and those transitioning from the criminal justice system. The Council for Global Mission helps to lift our gaze as a denomination from the island of Ireland to the work of developing mission overseas, and brings issues of global concern to the attention of the wider church, including those which have a local impact like multicultural relations and stewardship of creation.
2. PCI welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Programme for Government Draft Outcomes Framework and notes the encouragement to those responding to think about what they might bring to the PfG Outcomes [page 8], particularly in terms of delivery and developing innovative approaches. The past 12 months have demonstrated perhaps more than ever that no one sector, statutory, business, voluntary, community or faith can operate in isolation. It is only through our collective efforts that the desired outcomes to facilitate societal wellbeing can be realised, with an environment created in which all of us can flourish and reach our full potential.

3. While church buildings have been closed many congregations, across all denominations and none, have demonstrated their heart for responding practically to those in need, building on existing relationships with their local communities, or developing new ones through befriending opportunities, support for foodbanks, volunteering with community organisations, meal deliveries, and providing premises as vaccination centres. It is hoped that these collaborative relationships can continue as we all begin to emerge from the restrictions placed on us because of the pandemic, and learn to navigate a new normal. PCI is more than willing to engage as a significant partner in the delivery of Programme for Government outcomes through the use of premises, partnering in the delivery of services and providing personnel.

### **General comments on the outcomes framework**

4. On the one hand there is little that can be disagreed with regarding the proposed draft outcomes outlined in the consultation document. Each of the outcomes covering every aspect of life in Northern Ireland articulates an aspiration which everyone can support. However, without an overarching vision for society, or an agreed set of values, there is a danger that they will stand alone without fully realising the synergies and connections between each one. For example, in the realm of education while of course our children and young people must be trained and equipped to be active participants in the labour market, we must not also lose sight of the value of education as something which is more than simply market-led.
5. In 2016 PCI articulated its own vision for society as a “more reconciled community at peace with each other, where friend and foe working together for the common good can experience healing [and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ]”<sup>18</sup>.
6. We recognise that these outcomes are necessarily “high level” with the detail to be worked out by Ministers in their respective departments, working across departments as necessary. Each outcome refers to a number of strategies, some of which are not yet published and are being developed, while others are coming to the end of their time period. It is vital that these strategies are not developed in isolation and that there is intentional engagement with other departments and sectors which may be impacted, or which may have a contribution to make. For example, historically the areas of health and education have not worked well together whether due to silos, budgetary constraints or other factors. However, to give our children and young people the best start in life and provide the conditions where everyone can reach their potential and enjoy long, healthy, active lives, there must be more intentional and constructive engagement between departments and their key stakeholders. Rather than perceiving other sectors or

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<sup>18</sup> [Vision for Society Statement - Presbyterian Church Ireland \(presbyterianireland.org\)](https://www.presbyterianireland.org/vision-for-society-statement)

departments as competitors in the allocation of scarce resources, collaborative working can facilitate more efficient and effective actions in order to realise these outcomes.

7. Blockages or obstructions to delivery that exist within the system must also be identified and mitigated to allow these outcomes to be realised. For example, as a service provider for adult residential care we have experienced a discrepancy in approach not only between Trust areas but also within Trusts. Anecdotally through our pastoral work we are aware that individual care can also vary between Trusts. Key priorities and outcomes must have resonance for every day lived experience.

### **Specific comments on the draft outcomes**

8. Our children and young people have the best start in life
  - a. We welcome the focus on capability and resilience, which is required at all levels of society. We would suggest that building on social, cultural and environmental awareness should include and be mindful of spiritual awareness.
  - b. We note that there is only one brief mention of Special Educational Needs (SEN) under this outcome despite the large number of children and young people who are impacted and the significant financial resources involved, and recommend a greater focus here, particularly for those transitioning from formal educational pathways.
  - c. Ensuring access to “fit for purpose schools” must mean that schools which have been on the list for refurbishment or redevelopment for many years are not overlooked when it comes to area planning.
  - d. There is a clear need for wider and more comprehensive early years provision. Providing the necessary support and interventions early in life can have a positive impact and reduce the need for interventions at a later stage.
9. We live and work sustainably – protecting the environment
  - a. The impacts of climate change and the responsibility to call for climate justice are global issues with local implications. The past year has caused us to appreciate and value our local green spaces in a new way, and our collective imagination has been sparked to consider what might be possible to ensure that these continue to be sustained and enhanced for the generations to come.
  - b. We believe that we are all called to be stewards of creation and that our everyday actions, lifestyle choices and behaviours have an impact wider than just ourselves. We support priorities that further sustainable development, effective stewardship and which make the places where we live and work more positive environments.
  - c. In pursuing this outcome efforts should be made to avoid unintended consequences, for example introducing a regime of building regulations which result in it being unaffordable to build a house.

10. We have an equal and inclusive society where everyone is valued and treated with respect
  - a. We are concerned that issues of legacy remain unresolved both in Northern Ireland and with our neighbours in the rest of the United Kingdom and Republic of Ireland. The continued impasse over the issue of the victims' payments scheme remains of grave concern to PCI.
  - b. Sectarianism, identity and legacy will always be contentious, and it would be naïve to suggest otherwise. However, acknowledging that they are difficult should not consequently mean that they are not addressed. Programmes and strategies like 'Together: Building a United Community' go some way to making an impact, but much has been funded through additional monies into the NI budget, for example as a result of the 2015 'Fresh Start Agreement' or from European funds.
  - c. Resourcing this outcome from sustainable and recurrent funding provides a stability for the sectors involved and provides a stronger foundation for innovative approaches to tackling the issues arising as a legacy of the conflict, but also disadvantage and inequality in terms of welfare and poverty. Government should continue to collaborate with the voluntary, community and faith sectors in pursuing these outcomes.
  - d. Promoting and protecting rights can only be of benefit to the people of Northern Ireland if an approach is found which seeks to build relationships across identities and communities rather than set them up in competition with each other. Respect reminds us of our inter-connectedness, and rights cannot be divorced from our relationships, and our responsibilities within those relationships. An overarching vision for society in Northern Ireland, or shared values, would provide a strong foundation from which this outcome could develop.
  
11. We all enjoy long, healthy, active lives
  - a. The number of strategies detailed at the end of this outcome demonstrate the widespread nature of this outcome, which encompasses us all from our first to final breath. The first priority area is described as 'Access to Health' and this perhaps could be changed to 'Access to Healthcare'. We do not underestimate the current challenges faced by the health and social care sector in Northern Ireland, and wish to commend them for their work and activities which have often gone above and beyond the call of duty in response to the global pandemic.
  - b. Reform of health and social care must be transparent, properly resourced and well-communicated. Many of the reports which have already been undertaken in this regard have not yet been implemented and rather than undertaking new reviews and initiatives perhaps these could be revisited and their recommendations re-evaluated in light of how services have changed over the past 12 months.

- c. We welcome the focus on mental health and wellbeing and recommend that prevention is prioritised alongside early intervention. Partnership with the community, voluntary and faith sectors is vital in this regard, including finding ways of empowering and equipping people to promote mental health and wellbeing in their own spheres of influence.

#### 12. Everyone can reach their potential

- a. We welcome the inclusion of capability and resilience in this outcome as these skills are just as important once we leave formal education and into adult life, as they are for our children and young people. Again, the past year has reminded us that life can be uncertain, building capacity and resilience amongst the population to better cope when life becomes difficult is a positive preventative measure. There is huge potential for churches to be able to play a part in this, especially in the context of engaging with parents whose children attend youth organisations and events, or older people who can access lunch clubs and other groups.
- b. While we agree that young people must be equipped to engage effectively with the labour market, and have the right skills to meet demand, we would suggest that it is important not to lose sight of the view that education has a higher value than simply being labour market-led. Encouraging intellectual development also has wider societal benefits.

#### 13. Everyone feels safe – we all respect the law and each other

- a. We reiterate our concern about the unresolved issues of legacy and the impact that legacy continues to have in communities across Northern Ireland, both rural and urban. Legacy exists not only in unresolved crimes and quests for truth and justice, but also in the continued hold that paramilitary activity has on local communities, not least in continued incidences of intimidation and so-called “punishment attacks”.

#### 14. We have a caring society that supports people throughout their lives

- a. The response to the pandemic has demonstrated that as a society overall we are prepared to do what it takes to care for those who need our collective support. However, our lived experience of the pandemic has also highlighted the fact that our individual circumstances have a significant bearing on our ability to cope with the challenges of everyday life.
- b. PCI welcomes the key priority area which will highlight the improvement of quality of life for those of us with disabilities. However, this covers a broad spectrum from those disabilities that are visible, to those that are unseen; inclusive of physical, learning, sensory or mental health disabilities. While accepting that this is a high-level document there is a danger that over-generalisation can mask opportunities to make a real and significant difference to the lives of many.

- c. PCI also believes that a caring society will intentionally protect people through all stages of their lives including good end of life care, and recommends that this is included as a priority area for this identified outcome. Access to good, well-resourced palliative care affords dignity to those reaching the ending of their lives and provides necessary support to their families. Many of the organisations which provide this care outside of formal healthcare settings rely on philanthropic and charitable donations to sustain their operations. PCI therefore echoes the calls from others for a greater focus on palliative and end of life care within the PfG outcomes framework, which would be adequately resourced.
- d. In addressing social issues such as social isolation and loneliness PCI recommends greater collaboration between government departments, statutory agencies and organisations in the voluntary, community and faith sectors, utilising and building on existing social networks.

Handwritten signature of Rev Daniel Kane in black ink, featuring a stylized 'K' and 'ane'.

**Rev Daniel Kane**  
**(Convener, Council for Public Affairs)**

Handwritten signature of Rev Trevor D Gribben in black ink, with a horizontal line underneath.

**Rev Trevor D Gribben**  
**(Clerk of the General Assembly)**