1. Introduction - About CIEH

CIEH is a professional membership and awarding body and the voice of the environmental health profession. We exist to improve public health and wellbeing by supporting our members in the public, private and third sectors.

We provide information, evidence and policy advice to local and national government, regulators, members, stakeholders and the wider environmental health workforce.

CIEH provides a range of professional qualifications and work-based learning solutions including eLearning, corporate training solutions and consultancy services.

As a campaigning organisation, we aim to promote improvements in environmental and public health. We are based in the UK with offices in London, Wales and Northern Ireland.

2. Budget Outlook for N. Ireland

Many concerns regarding the lack of a functioning Executive and Assembly were crystallised in recent weeks with the publication of the Budget Outlook for Northern Ireland (NI) by the Department of Finance. The document states “The budgetary pressures across the public sector, and particularly in health and education, far outweigh the budget available and continuing with the same pattern of spend as in previous years is simply unsustainable.”

Whilst the document sets out some options for balancing the budget it is evident that difficult decisions need to be made, and urgently, in order to meet the challenges. Ultimately these decisions must be made by democratically elected representatives. We sincerely hope that our Executive can be swiftly returned to guide policy and investment in this very challenging time.

3. Challenges

The Budget for NI is naturally of concern to all the organisations who have an interest in public policy including CIEH.

However, Brexit presents equally significant challenges, and particularly for NI. The absence of an executive at this time leaves NI further vulnerable in that, unlike other regions of the UK, NI has not to date had the same opportunity for a full representative voice within the negotiations. The absence of an executive as we enter the next stage of negotiations becomes even more significant. Many policy areas within which our members work, for
example food safety & standards; environmental protection; and health and safety have been significantly and positively driven by the EU. It is our view that, in order to remain economically competitive, NI, as for the rest of the UK, needs to retain, enhance and strengthen legislative provisions in key areas of public protection, quality and standards. This work will require a functioning executive or, in its absence, an alternative.

4. Transformation

At the end of 2016 the Executive concluded its consultation on the draft programme for Government (PfG) for NI. This PfG represents a significant divergence from previous plans in that it is focused on outcomes rather than that inputs. Furthermore, the outcomes have been derived through an extensive public engagement process which means that the PfG represents a much more comprehensive expression of priorities that actually matter to the people of NI than has hitherto been the case. All of this is positive and we commend it. However, the absence of an executive during 2017 has negatively impacted the progression of the PfG.

Whilst the Northern Ireland Civil Service continues to work on the development of action plans and implementation for PfG, it does so without the ministerial leadership and direction that is vital to the process. Given that Wellbeing is the central focus of PfG, which we very much welcome, it is imperative that NI has suitable democratically accountable mechanisms in place to progress PfG.

5. Air Quality

Air Quality has reached the top of political agendas from the City of London, The Republic of Ireland to the United Nations. NI, as for other parts of the UK, has its own unique challenges in this arena. Failure to address these challenges will ultimately add additional pressures to an already overburdened health service, as well as potentially impact the NI economy. Within the PfG Air Quality has been identified as a key area requiring improvement. We are aware that DAERA Officials are currently working to develop a new draft Air Quality Strategy for NI, as part of addressing the challenges. Asides from the potential issues that may arise as a result of budgetary pressures which, as we have already articulated also require a functioning executive to resolve, the lack of ministerial input could in effect result in delay in the endorsement of much needed policy interventions.

6. The Agri - Food Economy

The importance of agri – food for the NI economy is both well documented and understood. In relative terms the food economy is significantly more important to the overall economy in NI compared with other parts of the UK. Our members support the economic development of this vital industry through their work on both food safety and environmental protection.
Through the Food Standards Authority, a fundamental change programme for the way in which the UK regulates its food supply and ensure public protection is under way.

There are significant differences in the performance of the current regime comparing NI with other parts of the UK, in particular England. Without Executive Ministerial accountability there is a danger that an inappropriate model will be imposed on NI that could have real and significant consequences for our food economy.

7. Conclusions

CIEH welcomes the Committee’s inquiry on the impact felt by organisations of the lack of Executive Ministers.

Overall, the impacts may be summarised as unaccountability, uncertainty, delays and a potential policy vacuum in terms of progressing vital policy issues namely NI budget challenges; implementation of the Programme for Government and Brexit challenges.

We would take this opportunity to encourage all of the political parties to find a way to return to Executive and to deliver positive outcomes for the people of Northern Ireland.

CIEH would be delighted to provide further evidence to the Committee if there are any issues it would like to discuss further.

29 December 2017