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Assembly Brief - CBI commentary on Programme for Government's first Delivery Report for the period 1 April 2008 to 31 March 2009

The Programme for Government 2008-11 is a critical document

- 1 The Programme for Government (PfG) is the key strategic tool for the Executive (and agreed by the Assembly), providing the direction and ambition of what the Executive intends to achieve over the three year period to March 2011. At its launch in early 2008 the PfG was welcomed by CBI Northern Ireland, particularly with the development of more strategic, outcome focused approach with stretching goals, clear lines of accountability and the commitment to regular reporting.
- 2 CBI Northern Ireland welcomes the publication of the Delivery Report. Having assessed the document we have concluded that it provides a fair assessment of progress which has been achieved in the first full year of the programme. Significant progress has been achieved across a wide range of goals and PSA targets, though in many cases this is the 'low hanging fruit' and the focus now must be to deliver effectively on some of the more challenging goals. Many aspects of the Delivery Report are particularly welcome:
 - Transparency regarding progress in delivering the PfG
 - Clarity in presentation and understanding – the traffic light system works well (though some different annotation ie cross-hatching would be useful to highlight targets where there is a lack of data)
 - Attention being focused on key areas where performance is not being achieved or there is a serious risk of underachievement

However some care is needed when focusing on overall performance as there is clearly significant difference in the importance that can be attached to different PSAs.

- 3 With such a diversity of goals and objectives, and recognising the scale of the economic downturn which has occurred since January 2008 one might anticipate less progress in some areas. This is indeed true and has been reflected in the 'red flagging' of the productivity goal – though we should recognise that good progress has been achieved in year 1 with the principle concern being that in the current economic environment achieving the targets established in years 2 and 3 will be particularly difficult. However it must also be recognised that many of the goals and objectives are not impacted by the broader economic environment. The key message here is that while the overall strategy remains correct **the Executive must demonstrate leadership with a new sense of urgency, dynamism and speed, an even greater focus on application and delivery and where**



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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appropriate some re-prioritisation of goals and objectives. We hope this report can lead to a much needed debate on strategic priorities.

4 In Section Six of the report five areas have been identified for review where progress has not been achieved, or where there is a significant risk that targets will not be achieved. We strongly welcome the approach taken and proposal to review these issues, though we recommend below one further area which we believe should be subject to review due to its strategic importance. The five areas identified for 'accountability meeting's are identified below with some brief comments:

- **Promoting the study of STEM subjects:** we welcome the importance attached to this issue and agree with the need for decisive action to achieve the objectives set
- **Green House Gas Emissions and Sustainable Development:** this is an importance strategic issue which cannot be divorced from the Strategic Energy Framework. NI is lagging the rest of the UK and Executive commitment and concerted action is needed across all Departments
- **Tourism:** this sector provides significant employment opportunities and the current weakness of sterling provides an excellent opportunity to increase promotional and marketing activities in external markets
- **Regeneration:** while some good progress has been achieved there is a lack of transparency regarding progress and key issues/barriers in many schemes. We also accept that the economic situation will have potentially a more significant impact in this area
- **Productivity Growth:** this must remain a key goal in the medium/longer term. Progress in year 1 has been encouraging though the external economic environment is significantly more challenging. There have also been encouraging responses by Invest NI and the Dept of Employment and Learning to the downturn. **However CBI believes the important goal of 'Increasing the Employment Rate from 70% to 75% by 2020' should become the top priority for the Executive.**

CBI recommendations arising from Delivery Report

5 The Delivery Report raises a number of issues which deserve further consideration.

- **We recommend that an 'Accountability meeting' should be held to discuss the 'Employment Rate' goal and to agree an appropriate response.** This is an important strategic goal, with implications for many other priorities/targets. With unemployment rising sharply and employment falling, the target will be particularly difficult to achieve. CBI members are particularly concerned about rising youth unemployment which is expected to grow considerably for a further 12-24 months and could potentially remain high for a considerable period
- **We recommend that consideration is given to involving external/independent input with specific expertise and/or experience in the 'accountability meetings'** – we believe this could add considerable value and perspective to the deliberations and arising actions
- **To provide confidence and transparency we recommend the publication of an 'action register'** with clear concise actions/dates/responsibilities for at least the RED listed items/'accountability meetings
- **Consideration should be given to recognising in some way where performance and success is well ahead of expectation**

Finally, CBI members believe the Executive, and Assembly should be planning now for a long period (post 2011) of protracted fiscal constraint and to consider how within such a fiscal environment public services can be protected if not enhanced.

CBI Northern Ireland, September 2009