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Dear Joanne Delaney,

Belfast City Council Corporate Plan 2008-2011 and criteria for the City Investment Strategy

The Committee on the Administration of Justice (CAJ) was pleased to receive a copy of the above consultation document. We were unable, however, to provide you with written comments before the closing date of 5 September 2008. In cases such as this where a consultation runs over the summer holiday months, CAJ recommends that public bodies as a rule should extend their consultation period beyond the normal response time so as to facilitate a more inclusive consultation process over a holiday period.

As an organisation with a strong interest in ensuring the promotion of equality and targeting of need with respect to investment and regeneration programmes, CAJ feels that it is important for us to make some comment on the draft document, notwithstanding the fact that the deadline for comments has lapsed.

CAJ's main concern in reading the above document is the lack of focus, and indeed acknowledgement of the needs of communities and areas which have yet to experience the benefits of economic growth and development that has occurred within the city generally. Indeed, we are mindful of a report published earlier in the year which found that:

*“the extent of disparities within Belfast today are remarkable and based on our research **unlikely to change significantly over the decade ahead** (author’s emphasis). In the 2001 Census year, differences in resident employment rates ranged from 77% (Orangefield) to 32% (Falls), while the difference in the graduate share of working age population ranges from 59% (Malone) to 2%*

*(Crumlin) (Table 4.5). In 2001 the Census reported 14 wards with less than 50% resident employment (Table 4.6). By 2015 we forecast 12 to remain in this classification (Table 4.6). At this level of employment these areas will remain acutely disadvantaged and largely unaffected by Belfast's strong economic performance."*¹

In light of these findings, we are somewhat concerned that neither the draft Corporate Plan, nor the criteria for the City Investment Strategy, specifically identify how of the most deprived parts of the city can be brought into the mainstream of the wider economic development that is proposed for the city.

We note for example that the City Investment Strategy Criteria merely refers to the fact that projects must "*bring financial or other economic returns on investment which benefit the city*". As the above statement shows however, benefits to the city generally need not, and in all likelihood will not, benefit those areas experiencing the highest levels of deprivation.

We also note that in relation to values, the document refers to the value of the diversity, and the fact that the Council will "treat all communities and people equally". Again, the problem with this approach is that clearly certain communities within Belfast need specific, targeted action in order to ensure that they can participate fully in the development of the city. Equal treatment for such communities will merely replicate existing patterns of disadvantage.

We also note that in relation to the strategic themes, one of those listed is "better support for people and communities". Admittedly, there is a reference here to a reduction in health and social inequalities; however it is the view of CAJ that economic as well as social inequalities should be a priority for the Council. In this context, we are of the view that the theme of "better opportunities for success across the city" - which deals with regeneration, growth, and prosperity - needs to specifically make reference to the priority of addressing *economic* inequalities. Otherwise, the issue of inequality and need might be seen as merely located within the realm of social service provision, rather than linked to interventions in the area of economic development.

Equally, it is clear that if the existing patterns of disadvantage within the city are to be addressed, then it is necessary that *all* areas of the Council's work play a role in bringing about the necessary change. This includes, for example, the theme of better care for Belfast's environment. The link between the promotion of equality and sustainable development has in fact been exemplified recently by the publication by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland of their recent Guidelines on "Equality of Opportunity and Sustainable Development in Public Sector Procurement".

¹ Belfast skills demand and supply, Final Report, January 2008 published by Regional Forecasts, p.46

CAJ is of the view that both the Corporate Plan and the Investment Strategy Criteria should be redrafted in order to acknowledge and specify how existing patterns of inequality, particularly economic inequality, across Belfast can be reduced. Otherwise, it is clear that the patterns predicted above over the coming decade will result in substantial sections of the population of the city failing to obtain a share in the increased wealth and prosperity that the Council seeks to help create.

We look forward to hearing your views on these matters.

Yours sincerely,

Tim Cunningham
Equality Project Worker