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E-mail response sent to: Budget@infrastructure-ni.gov.uk

12 June 2023

Dear Dr Harrison,

Response to: DfI Resource Budget 2023-24 Equality Impact Assessment Consultation

The Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) is the largest professional institute for planners in Europe, representing some 27,000 spatial planners. RTPI NI represents the RTPI in Northern Ireland, with 750 members. The Institute seeks to advance the science and art of planning, working for the long-term common good and well-being of current and future generations. The RTPI develops and shapes policy affecting the built environment, works to raise professional standards and supports members through continuous education, training and development. This response has been formed drawing on the expertise of the RTPI NI Policy and Research Forum which includes a cross section of planning practitioners from the private and public sectors and academia from across Northern Ireland.

RTPI NI advocates an approach to budget setting which encourages long term sustainable behaviours and works towards the aims of the Climate Act, albeit we appreciate the Department faces budgetary constraints and difficult decision making at this time. We would therefore urge against any action to cease or significantly reduce funding for Community Places' planning advice service, a reduction or cessation of wastewater treatment, community transport services, or public transport provision. These services are vital to ensure public health, equality of opportunity and access to the most marginalised and disadvantaged communities.

Ceasing or reducing funding for Community Places could mean an end to the only free independent planning advice service available in Northern Ireland. This would have a disproportionate impact on disadvantaged and marginalised individuals and their ability to exercise their participation in the planning system, and to navigate what are often complex and technical planning processes. The need to improve engagement in, and accessibility of, the planning system was recently emphasised in the Department for Infrastructure's report 'Planning Your Place: Getting Involved', published in March 2022.

A well-resourced, plan-led, positive and transparent planning service, which is proactive in engaging local communities, can bring together objectives across services and help achieve inclusive development and climate action goals. A strong, engaged and inclusive plan-led system is essential if developers and communities alike are to have confidence that development will be successful and sustainable.

The proposed cessation of grant aid for the service would have a disproportionate impact on older people, people with disabilities, parents and carers with dependants, women, rural dwellers, interface communities and those who face barriers due to literacy or digital skills and who need support to exercise their right to participate in the planning system on an equal footing.

Reduction or cessation of wastewater treatment could have a hugely detrimental impact on our natural environment, contaminating and destroying natural habitats, harming ecosystems, and causing dangers to public health.

Significantly reducing or ceasing funding for community transport would have a disproportionate impact on older people, people with disabilities, parents/guardians/carers, and rural dwellers, who rely on these transport services to access essential goods and services which they would not be able to otherwise due to their lack of access to private transport and other barriers such as neurodiverse needs or mobility difficulties.

A proposed reduction in public transport provision would also have a disproportionate impact on older people, people with disabilities, and the lowest income groups who do not have access to a private car. Without access to affordable and well-developed public transport links, essential goods and services are not accessible. Consequently, this has a detrimental impact on equality of opportunity - those without a car are essentially cut off from large areas of the country.

In the current climate crisis, public transport provision and uptake should be improved and become the more attractive option compared with use of the private car, if we are to reduce emissions and reach our climate action goals. Therefore, development of public transport provision and support for its uptake would not only improve connectivity and social inclusion but promote climate resilience.

We acknowledge that the decision for where to make budgetary cuts is not an easy one. Consideration should be given to the more strategic view, of the location of development and the infrastructure that is required to support it. Evidence shows that larger settlements, with higher densities and mixed land use, can increase levels of self-containment, bring efficiencies with infrastructure such as water and road infrastructure provision, reduce the need to travel long distances to access amenities such as schools and shops, enable more cost-effective public transport provision (which reduces the need to travel by car and the concomitant emissions), and can encourage continued physical activity, economic participation and social interaction for an ageing population. Therefore, cost savings, physical wellbeing, and climate resilience, can all be impacted by the settlement patterns which are approved through planning. The planning system has a vital role to play in the economic and sustainable development of Northern Ireland.

For clarification on any of the points made above, please contact RTPI NI on 020 7929 8333 or e-mail Joanna Drennan at Joanna.Drennan@rtpi.org.uk

Yours sincerely,

Joanna Drennan
RTPI NI