

Roger Downey,
Acting Director of Finance,
Department of Regional Development,
Room 4.27,
Clarence Court,
10-18 Adelaide Street,
Belfast,
BT2 8GB

15th February 2011

-FROM THE PRESIDENT-

Dear Sir,

**DRAFT BUDGET 2011-2015: SPENDING AND SAVING PROPOSALS WITHIN DEPARTMENT
FOR REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

I am writing in response to the consultation document on the above issued during December.

The Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU) represents a major component of the Rural Community in Northern Ireland. Our members and associated family own or control the majority of land in Northern Ireland and play a vital role in the economy. In particular, most of our members are rural road users thus it is highly appropriate that we respond to this consultation.

The Ulster Farmers' Union understands the need to make a budget response to the economic climate however, this must be done in a way that does not inhibit economic recovery or endanger public safety. We feel that an appropriate balance must be met and that all government departments should be striving to stimulate the economy.

The major areas of concern for the UFU are:

1. Reductions in Road Maintenance Activities

During the recession Northern Ireland's agri-food sector has been an important source of stability for our economy. The majority of these businesses are located in district towns and rural areas and rely entirely on road transport, particularly on rural roads.

The UFU notes one of the Executive's priorities in the Budget 'is to simulate the economy...' and one of the department's objectives is to maintain safe and sustainable transportation networks and assess the regional imbalance. We feel this proposal would inhibit DRD and the Executive from meeting its priorities/objectives and would simply lead to very poor quality rural roads resulting in a significant rural vs. urban road imbalance.

Many of our roads were left in an extremely poor condition following the recent extreme weather. This is most prevalent on rural roads as they are considered lower priority routes on the basis of usage. During the freeze, the majority of rural roads were not treated with salt therefore a thick layer of ice remained for the

duration of the cold weather spell. Since the subsequent thaw, large potholes have become common and verges have been eroded. Much of this remains untreated and is a significant road safety concern. If roads are allowed to degrade to a very poor standard they may become 'beyond repair'. Each rural road that becomes poor would have a significant cumulative affect on the entire rural road network. It is worth noting that as part of their Road Safety proposals, the Department of the Environment highlighted that there are more collisions on rural roads than on urban roads in NI. These proposals mentioned that timely road maintenance activities are essential to improving road safety so we believe that any reduction in road maintenance activities would be in direct opposition to DOE's objective and would significantly infringe on rural road safety.

The UFU feel that DRD must also consider the importance of good quality rural roads to help facilitate the movement of agricultural produce/inputs, commonly using heavy vehicles. Our reliance on rural roads must also be considered, particularly with the absence of efficient transport links in rural areas and the fact that such a large proportion of our population live in rural areas. Poor rural road conditions could have an impact rural dwellers accessing emergency health care quickly. For example, there is no Accident and Emergency hospital in Co Tyrone but several rapid response ambulances attend emergency calls and bring patients to the nearest hospital (Altnagelvin, Erne or Craigavon). Degenerating rural roads could potentially impact upon response times.

Collection of surface water has become more common on rural roads. This is a result of various factors including weather patterns and more impermeable surfaces in rural areas. In addition to these, road drains become blocked quickly. The UFU are concerned that this will become a more significant issue due to the proposed reduction in gully emptying

Currently rural roads are often neglected in terms of grass cutting which causes overgrown hedges that impair sightlines at road junctions. So any proposal to further reduce frequency of verge cutting would impact on road safety.

The UFU are concerned with the proposed saving measure from a reduction in weed control. This is a statutory responsibility of Road Service to control noxious weeds on any of their ground to prevent their spread. This obligation is strengthened in the Wildlife and Natural Environment Bill which is progressing through the NI Assembly. This causes significant problems for landowners and can represent an animal welfare problem. If noxious weeds are left to spread uncontrolled they will spread indiscriminately through neighbouring fields. Certain weeds can be fatal to livestock if ingested.

The UFU note that DRD are exploring ways to deliver maintenance. The UFU feel details of these should be included as part of the consultation paper but would suggest that collaborative working between farmers and DRD Road Service could help deliver much of the maintenance duties such as gully maintenance, grass cutting etc;

2. Level of funding to NI Water

The recent water crisis has highlighted the need to improve/invest in the water infrastructure in Northern Ireland, following years of underinvestment. The UFU support DRD's commitment to honour the Regulator's assessment (Price Control or PC 10) but would warn that this may have been underestimated given this assessment was made prior to the significant scale of the recent water crisis.

The UFU suggest that the issue of water charges is revisited given that so much investment is needed in our water and sewage infrastructure. The UFU would strongly advocate that there should be universal metering of water supplies where every household would be charged in relation to the actual amount consumed rather than the capital value of their home. This system would encourage the conservation of water supplies.

The UFU feel that the introduction of water charges would collect the necessary revenue to improve our water infrastructure and commit to recommendations from PC10. This solution should 'free-up' money to be made available to road maintenance activities.

3. Rural Transport Fund

This will have a significant impact on isolated rural dwellers, particularly on vulnerable groups where this initiative may be their only means to access regular medical care. In rural areas there is an absence of an efficient public transport links so affected people will not have an alternative system to fall back on. The UFU would urge DRD to relook at this proposal with a view of ensuring that rural dwellers are not severely disadvantaged.

4. Rathlin Ferry Subsidy

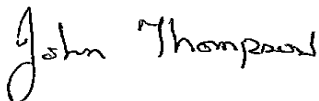
The UFU stress that any reduction in subsidy should not lead to increases in fares for passengers or lead to an unreliable service. This ferry service represents the only link to the mainland for some Rathlin Island residents and it is vital that this small community is not unfairly disadvantaged.

In conclusion, the UFU feel that this budget will have a significant impact on rural areas and is likely to extend the rural urban divide.

We are prepared to meet with you if you wish to discuss or want further clarification on any of the points which we have made.

I trust that the UFU's views will be fully considered as this process is further progressed

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John Thompson". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'J'.

President