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PRESS RELEASE

No: 464/2012

Date: 23rd July 2012

CHIEF MINISTER REFLECTS AFTER HIS FIRST BUDGET

After announcing his first Budget, the Chief Minister has had the opportunity to reflect on some of the achievements of his Government over the last few months.

‘I think that this week’s announcements on housing will be remembered as one of our biggest legacies,’ said the Hon Fabian Picardo. ‘We are making huge investments in estates which have been neglected for many years and I hope that we will be able to give our tenants some say in the final appearance of their newly-refurbished homes. Significantly, these plans will also allow us to take over 200 families off the Housing Ministry’s waiting lists which is another initiative in-line with our manifesto commitments.’

‘Education has also been of our top priorities,’ added Mr Picardo. ‘In fact we are spending over 20% more on education this year than the previous Government spent last year. When the new academic term starts in September, our schools will have 47 new teachers and 28 new Classroom Aides – and we have done away with a ridiculous system of ‘permanent supply teachers’: these teachers worked for several years with no formal contract of employment and with fewer rights than other teachers.’

‘Most people will also have seen that the RGP has taken delivery of two new high-speed boats in the last few weeks. We pressed for this purchase while we were in Opposition and, whilst it is true to say that the old Government had researched various options, we decided to proceed with this purchase as soon as we came into power. In fact, it was one of our first decisions.’

The Chief Minister is also keen to stress the ‘Green’ credentials of his Government. ‘We have reconvened the Gibraltar Climate Change Forum, we have made changes to Import Duty to promote environmental measures and, of course, we have announced that Vice-President Al Gore will be speaking at our ‘Thinking Green’ forum in October - an event that is already attracting lots of international interest.’

The Health Authority has also seen a host of major initiatives. ‘We are employing 33 more nurses, we have introduced Nurse Practitioner prescriptions, commissioned a new mental

health facility, purchased three new ambulances and opened up the GHA's Board meetings. We significantly increased the health budget, quadrupled the funding for new equipment and I am particularly proud of our smoking cessation programme.'

'I should also add that I was pleased that, in the Budget, we were able to announce an increase in Civil Service pay (when there is no such increase in UK) and that we were able to increase Disability Allowance and to abolish the import duty on vehicles adapted for use by disabled people.'

'Of course, not everything has moved as quickly as I would have liked,' added the Chief Minister. 'I am frustrated as everyone else at the delay in opening the new airport terminal. The administration offices have now moved across into the new terminal but we are still waiting for the training of the baggage handling staff to be completed.'

'I think we are all proud of the amount we have achieved and the number of manifesto commitments we have completed,' concluded the Chief Minister. 'But we won't slacken off – there's still a great deal for us to do.'