



Policy



Women's Regional
Consortium

Quarterly Zine
Jan-March
2026



INTRODUCING OUR QUARTERLY ZINE POLICY EDITION

By Megan McClure Botha | WRDA

The Consortium and many of the Consortium partners work for policy change as part of our work. In this edition of our quarterly zine we take an in-depth look at that policy change in action.

The Women's Budget Group reflects on policy progress of gender based budgeting in the multi-year budget, mainstreaming gender budgeting has been a feature of the work of several Consortium partners.. The Women's Resource and Development Agency follows the WBG article with a new campaign to change the policy around access to bathroom facilities in schools. Finally, an article from the Women's Policy Group brings this edition to a close by celebrating a policy win, the scrapping of the Two Child Tax Credit Cap.

We hope you find the information contained in this edition useful as we continue to ensure a voice for women from disadvantaged and rural areas.



NI
WOMEN'S
BUDGET
GROUP

GENDER BUDGETING IN NI: PROGRESS, GAPS AND PRIORITIES FOR THE MULTI-YEAR BUDGET

By Alex Brennan | Women's Budget Group

As we inch towards the end of the financial year, it is important to look back at the progress made in the area of gender budgeting within the Department of Finance (DoF), how that is currently reflected in the budget process, and where there are shortfalls. With the upcoming multi-year budget, it is more crucial than ever that the process is transformed to be efficient, transparent, and clear.

Progress 25-26 Budget Year

Before the beginning of the 25-26 financial year, a gender budgeting motion was debated and agreed in the Assembly. The motion called on DoF to, “*...work with Executive colleagues to introduce comprehensive gender-responsive budgeting measures for the 2025-2026 Budget, including the introduction of thorough gender impact assessments, the allocation of resources to proactively address and reduce gender inequalities, and the use of transparent monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to assess measures aimed at improving gender equality.*” Since this passed, the DoF asked each Department to provide an Equality Budget Statement to go along with their final budget package which is a common gender budgeting tool used across the world in various contexts. DoF themselves produced an Equality Statement which outlined how the Department plans to use budget allocations to address inequalities across Northern Ireland. While DoF identified a number of major and minor adverse impacts, a few positive impacts to equality were identified across Section 75 groups, including the group ‘*Men and Women Generally*’.

DoF also published a report, [PfG Alignment to Final Budget 2025-26](#), which aimed to connect the Final Budget allocations to the priorities of the Programme for Government (PfG). This document is significant as best budgeting practice calls for the annual budget to be drafted against the aims and priorities of an overarching, strategic document such as the PfG. As opposed to demonstrating a link between the Budget and the PfG, the document only recognised the lack of a link between the two. Connecting the Budget and the PfG needs to be a priority for the Department, but this document is at least a positive development that will allow DoF to measure its progress in future.

2026-29/30 Budget

Despite these small but positive progressions within DoF, the upcoming multi-year budget has been set with numerous acknowledgements of the difficult financial situation, with shortfalls across departments. It is crucial that, for this multi-annual budget to be successful, thorough equality analysis informs decisions around spend and connected to the PfG, the Equality Statement exercise is repeated and analysed against the previous year's Statement, and that robust timelines, costings, and monitoring opportunities are outlined for each year of the Budget at this point in time. It is also crucial that, along with continuing the Equality Statement and the PfG Alignment documents, the Department continues adopting new gender budgeting tools that will help target resources to tackle inequalities in the face of restricted finances.



RESTRICTED ACCESS TO TOILETS IN SCHOOL IS A HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUE - POLICY CHANGE NEEDED

By Megan McClure Botha | WRDA

The Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA) and Menstruation Matters have launched a new [survey](#) to shed light on the issue of restricted bathroom access in schools across Northern Ireland. The survey, closing at 5pm on Friday, 13th February 2026, seeks input from pupils, parents, and medical professionals to gather information in the extent and impact of bathroom access restrictions in our schools.

Access to toilet facilities is a human right, yet reports continue to surface of students being denied this right during school hours. Such restrictions can force pupils to miss valuable class time, risk bathroom accidents, and force students to disclose unnecessary personal medical details to schools. These measures may also place undue pressure on NHS services, in cases where students are asked to provide doctor's notes for bathroom access.

WRDA and Menstruation Matters intend to quantify the scale of this problem and understand its impact on students, the school environment, and healthcare professionals. The survey aims to gather evidence that will support recommendations to the Departments of Health and Education, as well as the Education Authority, advocating for school environments that respect the human rights of young people.

WRDA & Menstruation Matters Survey on Access to Toilet Facilities in Schools

The survey closes on Friday 13th February at 5pm.



"Access to toilets is a matter of dignity and privacy, and a human right. Too often we hear that some schools, especially secondary schools, heavily restrict students' access to toilets during class time. Considering that children are in school for a large part of the day, this becomes a significant issue meaning children are sometimes choosing between going to school and risking the humiliation of accidents, period leaks, etc. Access to toilets is a human rights issue, and we want to advocate for young people to the decision makers who can make a difference. By taking part, you can help us to do that effectively." – Elaine Crory, Women's Sector Lobbyist

"Periods don't pause for class - and neither do basic bodily needs. Students deserve the dignity and agency to use the toilet for periods or any other health need. Some schools call this 'disruptive,' but surely student wellbeing and dignity must come first. Access to toilets is a basic right, not something that should come with conditions or a doctor's note." - Katrina McDonnell, Director of Menstruation Matters

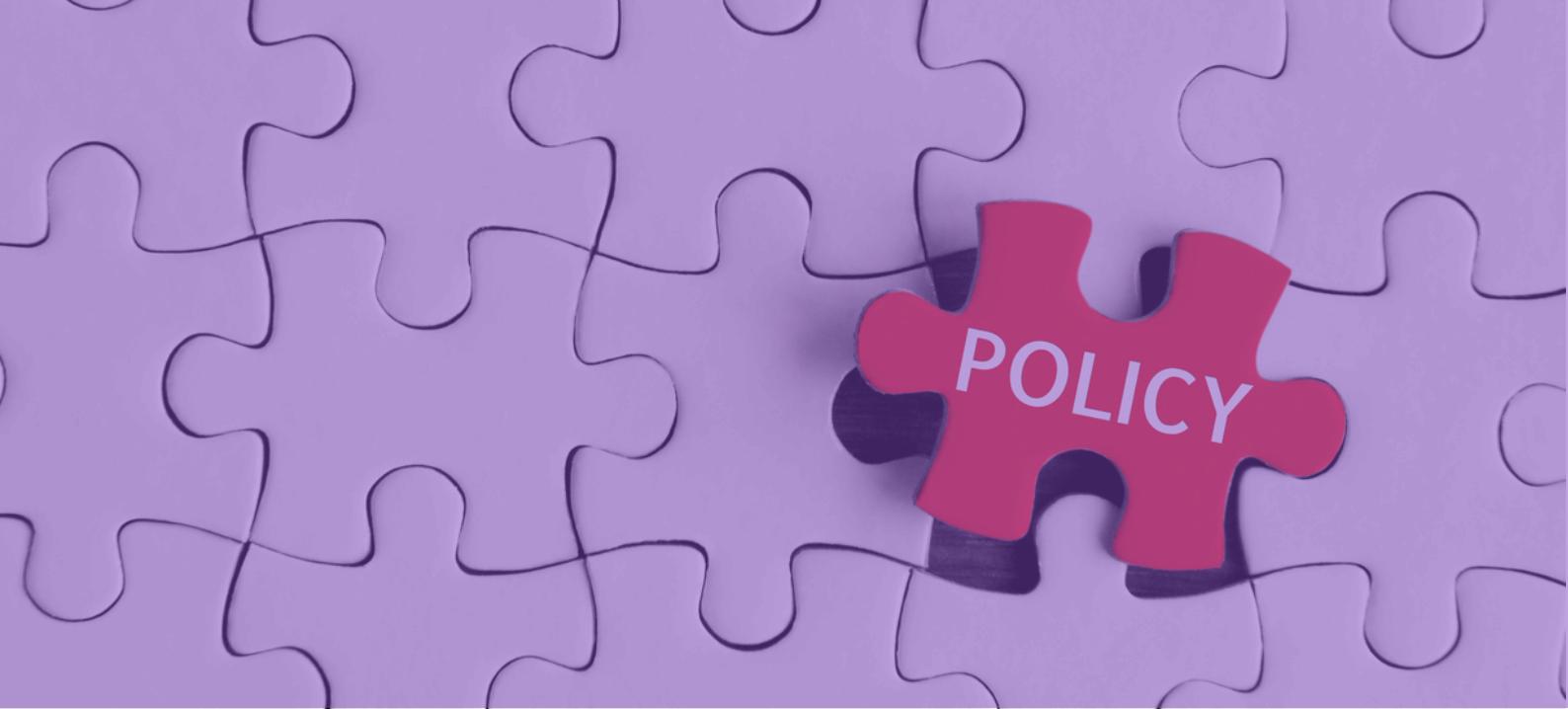
The survey is open to:

- Pupils attending schools in Northern Ireland
- Parents and guardians of school-aged children
- GPs and medical practitioners working in Northern Ireland

All responses are confidential and may be anonymised for inclusion in the final report and in communications with decision-makers. The findings will be unveiled at a special event in March 2026, and will underpin efforts to lobby for policy reforms that uphold every student's right to safe and accessible bathroom facilities.

Have your say and help shape the future of our schools by completing the survey.

Download the flyer for your school, GP's surgery, or parent's group.



POLICY WIN: THE SCRAPPING OF THE TWO-CHILD LIMIT!

By Siobhán Harding | Women's Support Network

There are very few policy wins these days but the scrapping of the two-child limit is a really important one. The scrapping of this cruel policy by the Chancellor Rachel Reeves in the Autumn 2025 Budget has been the result of many years of campaigning by the women's sector, the Community & Voluntary sector and beyond who saw its impacts on children and families and on rising child poverty levels.

The two-child limit was introduced by the Conservative Government as part of a package of welfare reform changes in an attempt to cut spending. The policy prevented tax credit and benefits claimants from receiving an additional amount (child element) within these payments for any third and subsequent children born after 5 April 2017 which most recently has meant the loss of over £3,500 per child per year.

The policy intent for the two-child limit was that people on benefits “should face the same financial choices about having children as those supporting themselves solely through work.” However, research shows that almost 60% of the children affected by the two-child limit live in households that contain at least one working parent. Figures also show that the policy has had a minimal impact on birth rates but instead increased child poverty levels causing financial hardship and distress.



SCRAPPING THE TWO-CHILD LIMIT

“My anxiety is through the roof, it makes me feel so depressed that I can’t afford to feed my kids properly and do the things I want to do with them. It would make a massive difference to my life, a hell of a difference, if the two-child limit was scrapped. It would definitely improve my mental health and improve our quality of life.”

*Sarah (not her real name) has six children aged from one to 15. Sarah only receives help for her two oldest children as a result of the two-child limit in Universal Credit

**Cliff Edge
Coalition NI**

In Northern Ireland the two-child limit has a disproportionate impact because family sizes are bigger – 21.4% of families in Northern Ireland have three or more children compared to 14.7% in the UK. Figures show that one in ten children in Northern Ireland live in households impacted by the two-child limit. Of the 13,810 households impacted over 48,300 children were living in these households with 17,410 of those children not eligible for payments as a result of the two-child limit. We know that the two-child limit does not only impact on the third and subsequent children but on all the children in the household as well as their parents who struggle to manage financially on reduced amounts of benefits.

Aside from the costs to the children and families affected by the policy the wider costs of child poverty are significant. The Northern Ireland Audit Office have reported that the annual cost of child poverty in Northern Ireland is between £825million and £1billion per year. The scrapping of the two-child limit is therefore vital in helping to address Northern Ireland’s shocking child poverty figures where one in four of our children are living in poverty.

In scrapping the two-child limit, Rachel Reeves stated: “I believe every child has equal worth and deserves an equal chance to achieve their promise. The biggest barrier to equal opportunity is child poverty. Because for every child that grows up in poverty, our society pays a triple cost. The first and the heaviest is to the child.....and there is also the cost of supporting a family in poverty which ends up in the lap of overstretched councils.....then there is the future cost to our economy and to our society, of wasted talent and a welfare system that bears the cost of failure for decades to come.”

The women’s sector has long campaigned for the ending of the two-child limit and the associated rape clause which allowed for an exemption to the policy if parents could prove the child was conceived as a result of rape or an abusive relationship. When the policy was introduced the Women’s Policy Group wrote a paper opposing the two-child limit and the rape clause outlining the key equality and human rights impacts of the implementation of these measures.

Many women's sector organisations are also members of the Cliff Edge Coalition which is a coalition of over 100 organisations who came together to sustain and strengthen crucial welfare reform mitigations including lobbying to end the two-child limit. The Coalition is driven by a common goal to address poverty levels in Northern Ireland and advocate for a stronger social security system to protect the most vulnerable. One of the Coalition's key strengthening asks was the removal of the two-child limit and significant lobbying work was carried out by the coalition over a number of years and in the run up to the Autumn 2025 Budget to push for the scrapping of the policy.



Campaigners from across the Community & Voluntary Sector at Stormont in November 2025 calling for the scrapping of the two-child limit ahead of the Autumn Budget

The two-child limit is closely linked to another welfare reform policy called the Benefit Cap and both policies cause multiple and overlapping harms to children particularly in larger families. The Benefit Cap limits the total amount of social security benefits a household can receive. A mitigation payment is currently in place for the Benefit Cap in Northern Ireland until 31st March 2028. The scrapping of the two-child limit will make more people subject to the Benefit Cap and therefore entitled to this mitigation payment. It is vitally important that this mitigation payment continues so that families can enjoy the full benefits of the scrapping of the two-child limit. The Cliff Edge Coalition continue to campaign for the extension of the Benefit Cap mitigation in Northern Ireland beyond March 2028.

The removal of the two-child limit is due to take effect in April 2026 and the Cliff Edge Coalition are seeking assurance that legislation to secure this change in Northern Ireland will be progressed in the same timeframe. The scrapping of this policy will make a massive difference to the children and families who are impacted by it enabling them to better afford essentials such as food and heating and will undoubtedly help to address rising child poverty levels as well as putting extra money into local economies.

As a sector we are delighted to see the end of this heinous policy which disproportionately impacts on women causing them significant financial and emotional distress. We believe that removing this policy is an investment in children helping to improve their educational outcomes and life opportunities. The future depends on investing in all our children not just some.

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