Women's Regional Consortium

Department of Finance
Clare House
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Belfast
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Submitted via email to: budgetconsultation@finance-ni.gov.uk

5th March 2026

Dear Department of Finance

Re: Consultation on Draft Budget 2026-2029/30

Due to pressure of time and workload we are unable to complete a full response to the Department of Finance consultation on the Draft Budget 2026-2029/30. We wish to endorse the responses to this consultation by the Women's Policy Group (WPG) and by the NI Women's Budget Group (NIWBG) both of which we are members of.

Please accept this letter as our response highlighting the following issues:

- We welcome the move to multi-year budgeting to allow for better long-term planning and sustainability. However, on its own multi-year budgeting will not result in better budgets as highlighted by our colleagues in the NIWBG. It must be accompanied by better cross-departmental working, more in-depth analysis of impacts and innovative decision-making. We are extremely concerned that any benefits to be gained from having multi-year budgets will be completely negated by inadequate levels of funding for vital public services.
- We note with great concern the adverse impacts of this Budget outlined in the EQIA and in particular note the table on page 4 of the EQIA which shows a range of potential adverse impacts across the equality groups. We note with alarm that for some departments major adverse impacts are identified across all the equality groups (Department for Communities) or for most of the equality groups (Department of Health, Department of Finance, Department of Infrastructure). We also note with great disappointment that no positive impacts have been identified for any department across any of the equality groups.
- We welcome the publication of an Equality Assessment of the draft Budget and the identification of a range of impacts. We agree with the NIWBG that the analysis provided is more of a snapshot of impacts as opposed to an in-depth assessment of the impacts on each equality area. We remind the

Department that it is not enough for an EQIA to simply identify adverse impacts but that they have a responsibility to take proactive measures to promote equality of opportunity. Equality Commission for NI guidance states: *"If it is decided that the policy has an adverse impact, the public authority must consider measures which might mitigate the adverse impact, and alternative policies which might better achieve the promotion of equality of opportunity."* [1] The consideration of mitigating measures and alternative policies is at the heart of the EQIA process and the guidance[2] states:

> *Ways of delivering policy aims which have a less adverse effect on the relevant equality category, or which better promote equality of opportunity for the relevant equality category, must in particular be considered. Consideration must be given to whether separate implementation strategies are necessary for the policy to be effective for the relevant group. The following must be considered:*
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> - *How does each option further or hinder equality of opportunity?*
> - *How does each option reinforce or challenge stereotypes which constitute or influence equality of opportunity?*
> - *What are the consequences for the group concerned and for the public authority of not adopting an option more favourable to equality of opportunity?*
> - *How will the relevant representative groups be advised of the new or changed policy or service?*
> - *If an economic appraisal is necessary – What are the costs of implementing each option? Will the social and economic benefits to the relevant group of implementing the option outweigh the costs to the public authority or other groups?*
> - *Does the public authority have international obligations which would be breached by, or could be furthered by, each of the options?*

We support the NIWBG call for the Department to incorporate this guidance within their analysis and development processes of the draft Budget and cumulative EQIA.

- Research shows that women are more likely to be in receipt of social security benefits, more likely to be in low-paid, part-time and insecure work, more likely to providing care and more likely to have to make up for cuts to public services through unpaid work. All these existing gender inequalities have been worsened by the Cost-of-Living Crisis and it all contributes to keeping women's incomes lower over their lifetimes and puts them at greater risk of poverty.

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[1] Practical Guidance on Equality Impact Assessment, Equality Commission for NI, February 2005 https://www.equalityni.org/ECNI/media/ECNI/Publications/Employers%20and%20Service%20Providers/Public%20Authorities/EQIA-PracticalGuidance(2005).pdf

[2] https://www.equalityni.org/ECNI/media/ECNI/Publications/Employers%20and%20Service%20Providers/Public%20Authorities/EQIA-PracticalGuidance(2005).pdf (page 30)

- Women's Regional Consortium research[3] has repeatedly shown the impact of financial hardship and poverty on the lives of women in NI. It has shown that a decade of welfare reform and austerity policies and the ongoing Cost-of-Living Crisis have hit women harder. The impact has created a perfect storm where women on the lowest incomes are struggling to meet their most basic needs, facing difficulties making ends meet and providing for their children and families, getting into debt, having to access foodbanks and seeing their mental and physical health suffer as a result.
- We therefore note with great concern the range of adverse impacts on 'men and women generally' identified in the EQIA. As the NIWBG outlines *"without intervention from government, women, particularly the most vulnerable women and other protected equality groups, will continue to face deepening inequalities. Therefore, it is key that equality, particularly gender equality, is at the heart of this budget."* It is clear from this draft that gender equality is not at the heart of this budget as can be seen from the table on page 4 which shows major or minor adverse impacts for 'men and women generally' across all the departments.
- There is a real need for a budget which targets and prioritises those living in financial hardship, deprivation and poverty. Given that our child poverty statistics show that one in four children in NI are living in poverty this should give real cause for alarm and result in urgent action. Child poverty is fundamentally linked to women's poverty and the economic status of women and is a particular issue in lone parent households[4] which are predominantly female.
- The Minister states at the start of the draft Budget that the *"financial challenges remain considerable"* and that the proposals do not provide the level of funding he would wish to see directed to public services. We share the concerns of many others in the Community and Voluntary sector and beyond that this constrained level of funding will be totally inadequate to meet some of the Executive's most critical areas of work including the Anti-Poverty and the Early Learning and Childcare Strategies.
- We also note with disappointment that the draft includes no funding for the Social Inclusion Strategies. While the draft document notes one of the Department for Communities main functions as promoting social inclusion there is no mention of the Social Inclusion Strategies or ringfenced funding for these.
- We support the statements made by both the NIWBG and the WPG in relation to Gender Budgeting: *"Gender budgeting is good budgeting; it encourages*

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[3] Impact of Ongoing Austerity: Women's Perspectives, Women's Regional Consortium, March 2019
https://womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/March-2019-Impact-of-Ongoing-Austerity-Womens-erspectives.pdf
The Impact of Universal Credit on Women, Women's Regional Consortium, September 2020
https://womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/September-2020-The-Impact-of-Universal-Credit-on-Women.pdf
Women Living with Debt, Women's Regional Consortium, September 2022
https://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Women-Living-with-Debt-1.pdf
Women's Experiences of the Cost-of-Living Crisis in Northern Ireland, Women's Regional Consortium & Ulster University, June 2023
https://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Womens-Experiences-of-the-Cost-of-Living-Crisis-in-NI-2.pdf

[4] Child poverty on the island of Ireland, Economic & Social Research Institute, January 2025
https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/RS199.pdf

greater transparency of government processes, more in-depth assessments of how policies and budgets affect constituents and closer cooperation between governmental and non-governmental stakeholders. It encourages a more targeted approach to the spending of public money, which will improve policy outcomes. Implementing gender budgeting mechanisms would provide decision-makers with the tools to recognise and mitigate gendered economic impacts and promote gender equality."

- As outlined by the NIWBG the OECD has stated that aligning the annual budget with strategic policy goals and priorities is key to good budgeting[5]. However, this remains largely aspirational and we share the concerns of our NIWBG colleagues that "*the priorities identified in the Programme for Government receive piecemeal funding when considering the size of the overall Budget, particularly the allocation for Ending Violence Against Women and Girls."* This is despite the well documented scale of the problem of violence against women and girls in Northern Ireland and the clear need for investment and action in this area.
- With regards to the Transformation Fund we share the concerns of the NIWBG that the funding awards do not appear to lend themselves to a change in delivery and process but act rather more like one-off funding awards to temporarily deal with a pre-existing problem. Like our colleagues in the NIWBG and WPG we encourage the use of the Transformation Funding to change the "business as usual approach" which is leading to the continually spiralling crisis in public finances and also highlight that the current funding does not facilitate cross-departmental transformation which is so needed.
- As a member of the Cliff Edge Coalition we welcome the inclusion of the welfare mitigations funding in the draft. We also welcome the additional funding for welfare mitigations due to the removal of the two-child limit. This was a cruel welfare reform policy which undoubtedly increased child poverty levels and we are pleased that this funding will ensure that families and children in Northern Ireland will see the full benefit of the removal of this policy through the mitigations package.

Kind Regards

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[5] OECD (2019). OECD Good Practices for Performance Budgeting (https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/oecd-good-practices-forperformance-budgeting_c90b0305-en.html)