



## Crisis of Democracy in Northern Ireland

The NIWBG is made up of organisations and individuals from the women's sector, trade union movement, academia and wider civil society with the aim of securing a gender equal economy. The democratic deficit, the Budget crisis, and the cost-of-living/mental health/environmental crises not only prevent us from reaching our aim, but erodes progress that has already been made around attaining equality. At this point in time, we have no Executive, no Budget and no mitigations in place to protect people from impacts that are already being felt. Experts predict that without a robust response from decision-makers, the effects will be detrimental - not acting quickly to mitigate these crises is actively harming society.

The current budget process is particularly abnormal, and the budget allocations delivered by the Secretary of State are not only highly restrictive but put undue pressure on officials to make decisions that should be reserved solely for elected representatives. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child have called for the Budget imposed by the Secretary of State to be scrapped due to its detrimental impact on children. This applies to all groups protected under Section 75, but especially women as children's poverty is women's poverty.

While the entirety of the UK is struggling under the impacts of the cost-of-living crisis, Northern Ireland is particularly affected. Northern Ireland is a 'low-wage' economy, with the highest rate of economic inactivity across the four nations. We have the highest uptake of Universal Credit and equivalent legacy benefits in the UK and more people cutting back on essentials than anywhere else in the UK.

Departments are faced with 10-20% cuts, with no ministerial leadership, and all in-year funding is to be returned to Treasury. At a time where Northern Ireland is faced with multiple crises, proposed cuts are being made to the most essential services, such as the Holiday Hunger Payment, Discretionary Support Fund, and turning off street-lights during the Winter months. The Community/Voluntary Sector, which filled the gaps in government services following the 2010s austerity measures, are also facing funding cuts and imminent closures. While the most vulnerable in Northern Ireland suffer from the cuts to essential services, cuts to the Community/Voluntary Sector reduce the amount of advocates to fight against cuts to services.

The abnormality of this budget cycle also means that planning procedures that occur during a typical budget process have not taken place. Without the fulfilment of these procedures, the equality screening and impact assessment consultation comes too late in the process and is inadequate for full consideration of the impact of these spending decisions on women.

It is predicted that there will be another overspend this year from Departments, which would put further pressure on future budget cycles. With wide speculation that the restrictive Budget is a tactic to get the Northern Ireland parties back into government, this approach is similar to sanctions - the citizens with no control over the situation are worst impacted, with no end to the government collapse in sight.

Northern Ireland needs a functioning government and a budget that delivers for its people. Without these basic necessities for a functioning society, we will continue to see the crisis in democracy create and exacerbate countless other crises.

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