



NI WOMEN'S BUDGET GROUP

NORTHERN IRELAND WOMEN'S BUDGET GROUP (NIWBG) RESPONSE TO DoH DRAFT BUDGET 2021-22 OVERVIEW AND EQUALITY SCREENING

Department of Health

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The Northern Ireland Women's Budget Group (NIWBG) is made up of organisations and individuals from the women's sector, trade union movement, academia and wider civil society in Northern Ireland, with the aim of implementing a gender equal economy. The members of the NIWBG scrutinise policy and budgetary matters with a gendered lens to bring attention to the different ways in which women and men are affected by government-level decision-making. It aims to provide policy- and budget-makers with policy analysis to secure substantive equality for women and men through the assessment of gender impact.

The NIWBG works with a range of organisations in Northern Ireland on devolved issues and with sister organisations in Wales, Scotland, England and Ireland on East-West and North-South issues.

We hope that our response to this overview will be considered by the Department of Health when assessing the equality impacts of their allocated budget.

If there are any questions or comments regarding the NIWBG's response, please direct them to the Coordinator for the NIWBG, Alexandra Brennan (info@niwbq.org).

INTRODUCTION

We acknowledge the challenge that exists in the allocation of limited public funds. However, a tight budget is even more of a reason to properly assess “...*that all possible steps are taken to protect the most vulnerable in our society and to ensure that the impact on them is a key consideration where cuts in services are being considered*”¹. It is not evident from the Department's screening how equality has been considered.

Transparency and accessibility are crucial in the consultation process. This screening document was released on 08.02.2021, just over two weeks before the closing date for the overall Budget. A consultation period so far short of the Department's equality scheme commitments prevents consultees engaging in the process. In addition, it is impossible for a cumulative assessment to be presented along with the draft Budget when it is consulted upon, as advised by the Equality Commission². In the recent past substantial significant consultation has issued in several policy areas as well as the Programme for Government Outcomes and Budget. By not meeting equality scheme commitments regarding timeliness, the Department is seriously limiting the opportunity for meaningful engagement and missing the essential contribution consultees can make to evidence-based policy making.

This response highlights some points in respect of the lack of data and proper analysis conducted in this equality screening, but the Women's Policy Group response provides a more detailed picture. Additionally, the Bespoke Feminist

¹ Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (ECNI) (2014). *Budgets and Section 75: a short guide (Section 75 and Budgets short guide.pdf (equalityni.org))*

² Ibid.

Recovery Plan Summary Report is tailored to this Department and looks at what can be done specifically within the Department to mitigate or resolve inequalities. We support both documents and recommend that the Department takes their content into consideration.

EQUALITY SCREENING

Including equality considerations in the budgets and budgetary process requires gender disaggregated data, departmental-specific and high-level equality objectives and monitoring structures. The lack of gender-disaggregated data hinders our ability to effectively advocate on behalf of women and leaves decision-makers with data that presents a false narrative – one where the diversity of experiences between women and men is unaccounted for and therefore absent in crucial policy and budgetary decisions.

We recommend that where gender-disaggregated data is available, it must be used to inform the decision-making process. Where there is no gender-disaggregated data, the Department need to request that it is recorded. Having this information is key to completing the equality analysis required by Section 75. Without it, equality assessments do not capture the realities of existing inequalities and they lack the robust evidence needed to influence policy and budgets.

This assessment is required at the earliest opportunity in the budget process and as further decisions are made in finalising the budget, not only to inform decision-makers about their budget's effects on equality, but to ensure the budget is both clear and transparent regarding the assessment of predicted impacts. The lack of

understanding of the different experiences of women in Northern Ireland is evident in this equality screening. For example, this document only touches upon a handful of ways that women's equality will be hindered by a reduced budget. There was no mention of the failure to properly commission abortion services³, the low levels of support and value for paid and unpaid carers⁴, the multi-year waiting list for gender transition-related healthcare⁵ and the disproportionate impact of austerity on women's health⁶, to name a few. The Department acknowledged that the proposed budget would have a "major impact" on women⁷, but we want to ensure that all health inequalities experienced by women are considered by decision-makers. It is essential that sufficient consideration of women's inequality, paired with robust evidence, is reflected in this document to secure equality outcomes.

GENDER BUDGETING

Assessing for equality impact is essential to the budgetary process to ensure that decision makers meet their Section 75 commitments and to improve policy and decision making to secure better service provision. A scoping study (2013)⁸ commissioned by the Equality Commission considers how gender budgeting tools can be used in meeting Section 75 requirements and how the international models have useful application in Northern Ireland. Quinn concludes that applying impact

³ WPG (2020). *Covid-19 Feminist Recovery Plan* (<https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/WPG-NI-Feminist-Recovery-Plan-2020.pdf>)

⁴ WPG (n 2)

⁵ BHSCT FoI Request, June 2020

⁶ British Medical Association (BMA) (2016). *Health in all policies: health, austerity and welfare reform: A briefing from the board of science* (<https://www.bma.org.uk/media/2086/boshealth-in-all-policies-austerity-briefing-2016.pdf>)

⁷ DoH (2021). *High Level Equality Screening Budget 2021/22* (<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/consultations/health/doh-high-level-equality-screening-budget-2021-22.pdf>)

⁸ Sheila Quinn (2013). *Equality Responsive Budgeting* ([Equality Responsive Budgeting \(equalityni.org\)](http://equalityni.org))

assessment processes to mainstream gender equality is ‘...a worthwhile enterprise, both in terms of the recognised demand for a deeper application of the Section 75 duties to the budget process but also in terms of the wealth of methodologies associated with gender responsive budgeting which are adaptable to the Northern Ireland context’ and ‘vital [at] all levels of government ... as a means of fulfilling Section 75 duties’⁹.

We recommend that gender budgeting and gender analysis be incorporated into the Department’s equality assessment process and that the Department builds capacity for gender and equality mainstreaming in the Budget process. We would be pleased to meet with the Department to further discuss gender budgeting as a tool to help fulfil the Department’s Section 75 requirements.

END OF CONSULTATION RESPONSE

⁹ Quinn (n 6)