

# Response to Department of Finance Briefing on Northern Ireland Budgetary Outlook 2018-2020

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The Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA) is a regional organisation operating across Northern Ireland, with a mission to advance women's equality and participation in society by working to transform political, economic, social and cultural conditions. The organisation was established in 1983 and focuses on working with women and community organisations located in disadvantaged and rural areas. WRDA is a membership organisation with over 190 members including women's groups, organizations and individual members.

### **Process of Inviting Feedback on the Budget Briefing**

WRDA wishes to note our concern about the process relating to the *Briefing on Northern Ireland Budgetary Outlook 2018-2020*. We endorse the following comments made by our partners Women's Aid regarding the circumstances of this briefing being put before the public:

We note that the Briefing is not a budget or draft budget and is not categorised as a consultation. However, the document sets out specific 'Departmental Scenarios' and 'Departmental Overviews and Impacts' in respect of three possible choices available to an incoming Executive (or the NIO). These 'scenarios' are very clearly policy proposals. The document is also considerable in length at 143 pages and considerable in scope. Therefore we are concerned that not treating this as a consultation, with the process and procedure that goes with it, will result in scant examination of extremely important issues that may have significant, long-ranging impacts on the whole of our society. It is clear that this is a consultation document in all but name, and with that comes the obligation to at least engage in an 8-12 week consultation process. That has not happened – the period for response is 5 weeks, a period which included Christmas. This is in breach of the Department of Finance's equality scheme. As noted by CAJ, "*a public authority's proposed or adopted policies do not fall outside the definition of policies subject to the application of Section 75 by virtue of being called something else.*"

We are also concerned that the consultation process cannot realistically be a meaningful exercise if the final budget is to be in place by early February. This allows no time whatsoever for consideration of views and feedback submitted via this process.

While we appreciate that the current process is an 'unusual step' in the absence of a Minister or a working Executive, it does not mean that proper, meaningful consultation should be eschewed in favour of a rushed process which disregards the Department's obligations as regards equality screening and impact assessment. In fact, we would submit that in the absence of an Executive, these procedural consultation safeguards are of even greater

importance. It is incumbent upon the Department in these uncertain times that the most vulnerable and marginalised in our society, including those falling under the section 75 protected characteristics are not forgotten or marginalised further.

Difficult decisions may have to be made, but this cannot be at the expense of those with greater care and support needs or particular vulnerabilities. This is why rules on equality assessment and process are in place. We are reminded of previous budget processes where individual Departments made rushed, swingeing cuts, that had a cumulative impact on the women's sector. Without a regional overview of cuts, and with no grounding in equality and human rights obligations, many organisations providing vital services to those most in need in our society saw their funding cut multiple times from different Departments working in their individual silos. A similar approach in this budgetary cycle would be devastating.

## **Content of the Briefing**

WRDA's main aim in providing feedback is to highlight the impact of public spending cuts on women, their access to public services on which they are more likely to depend, and on programmes that address gender inequality. We note the general budgetary pressures on all departments here and the desire to maintain quality public services within the resources available. The briefing is helpful in that it explores a range of practical ways that can be achieved, including the need for changes to how public services are delivered. For example, 'in the longer term, public services can be transformed to improve outcomes while living within resources.' WRDA takes no issue with transformation that helps improve public services but this must also be accompanied by increased investment. Otherwise, recent experience tells us that those transformations are only likely to decrease the quality and accessibility of public services.

*Strategic Context* – the Programme for Government, as the briefing points out, hasn't yet been agreed. In fact it is our belief that this document is the first time the outcomes framework has been published since the public consultation closed over a year ago. There is much information missing from the public domain about how this version has been arrived at and how the feedback from consultees was incorporated. The women's sector raised concerns about the framework that do not appear to have been addressed.

*Economic context* – economic growth measures referred to give a limited insight into the real nature of the NI economy as we have illustrated in our programme for government response. A growing body of work by feminist economists demonstrates that economic models that fail to address the unsustainability of systems of unpaid or low paid work, such as caring work, which women dominate are fundamentally flawed and therefore an unsuitable basis for economic policy. Many economists are extremely critical of the failure of governments to consider non-market activities

when planning economic strategies and question the effectiveness of traditional measures of growth which do not include this social contribution to support economic activity. We want to see a gender analysis applied to the economic context that underpins this budget briefing in order for it to make visible the differences between men and women's participation in and benefit from economic growth.

*Funding sources* – it is essential to highlight that the resource available to the NI departments is overshadowed by the ongoing intransigence of the UK government in the face of growing evidence that austerity is not an effective route to economic growth. The ideologically driven programme of cuts to public spending that the Conservative government has been delivering across the UK over most of this decade, continue to be felt in Northern Ireland through the real terms reduction in the block grant. We recognise the limitations this imposes on all those involved in making spending decisions here in Northern Ireland but must reiterate that gender equality will continue to be at risk until the UK government makes new commitments to increase their investment in public services and social security.

*Fresh Start funding* – while the women's sector fought hard for mitigations to be introduced regarding welfare reform we are increasingly aware of the risk of huge regression in people's quality of life after the funding to provide these mitigations runs out in 2020. There needs to be cross-departmental forward planning to ensure that the many equality and rights issues which led to the mitigations are not subsequently ignored at the end of this period.

*Confidence and supply deal* – we note the ongoing confusion around the terms under which the resources agreed by the DUP and the UK government can be drawn down. The women's sector is particularly interested in the fact that '[t]he Department of Finance has asked to draw down £20 million of funding in relation to health and education pressures in 2017-18 and is keeping the drawdown under review.' As a number of programmes that would impact on women and address gender equality sit within the policy remit of both the Department of Health and the Department of Education, such as childcare or maternal mental health services, we hope to see new funding allocated in order to progress them.

*Corporation tax* – as we have previously highlighted in our women's sector research 'Women at the Cutting Edge' we do not support the reduction in corporation tax should it be devolved to Northern Ireland. We find it unconscionable that any incoming Executive could approve a measure that 'would represent a net reduction to the Northern Ireland Budget of around £250 million per annum' as the budget briefing document points out. Gender inequality will suffer if this level of reduction in public spending is applied and there is currently no strong evidence to suggest that the projected economic benefit would be large enough to redress this in the short to medium term.

*Raising additional revenue* – as those listed reflect just a list of ideas that the Department of Finance believe are available to the NICS at this point, we will not be responding to each one in detail. At such a time as these measures are being put before the public as concrete proposals for income generation we will then provide a detailed evidence base on how they are likely to impact on women, particularly

those experiencing multiple inequalities through other factors such as disability or socio-economic status.

However, it has to be noted that all of these suggestions will put additional financial strain on ordinary people struggling to keep up with an increasing cost of living in the midst of lower wages, job insecurity and cuts to social security. This is unacceptable to us, particularly in light of the wider context of ideologically driven austerity agenda of the UK government which we have already discussed. Making it harder for women to get their children to school, pay their rates, cover shortfalls in their social housing rent or obtain domiciliary care services for their elderly relatives is only going to further entrench women's poverty and inequality while the UK government fails to maximise the taxation potential that exists from the wealthiest in society.

### **Departmental Scenarios**

Within the detailed departmental responses to the 3 scenarios there are some proposals that are extremely concerning in terms of the sustainability of the women's community and voluntary sector and programmes of work to address gender equality.

*DAERA* – the fact that 'the cessation of all Rural Affairs programmes' is a proposal included under all 3 scenarios leaves the rural women's sector in fear for their existence. WRDA endorses the response provided to the Department of Finance by the Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network which highlights:

'Rural women are currently in receipt of only [1.3% of NI government funding](#). How will the Department of Finance ensure this balance is redressed in the new budget; as per [The Rural Needs Act](#) without financing Rural Affairs Programmes? This is the first proposed budget which is required by the Rural Needs Act 2016 to rural proof proposals. As such we would expect to see a rebalancing of funding for rural women in line with the [Programme for Government](#) Outcome 'We prosper through a strong, competitive, **regionally balanced economy**'. This should mean an increase in resources for rural women in real terms and not a cessation of support. The current proposals would mean women in our two cities would receive support (through [Regional Infrastructure Support Programme](#)) but rural women can expect none.

DAERA is currently the only Department in the Executive helping NI meet its International Human Rights [CEDAW Article 14](#) obligations to rural women and [NIRWN](#) has been named in successive reports as the only NI government supported resource for rural women. The next CEDAW shadow reports are due in by June 2018; what will NI report as their commitment to Article 14 if they proceed with the cessation of all Rural Affairs programmes?'

As a regional organisation WRDA would be opposed to any departmental scenario that could lead to the closure of key rural community infrastructure organisations or grassroots groups doing vital work promoting inclusion and equality for rural women.

*Department for Communities* – it is clear from the DfC response to scenarios 1 and 2 that there could be some pressure on their ability to promote equality, meet the needs of vulnerable people and support the community and voluntary sector organisations who are an essential part of that work.

However, scenario 3 clearly present the most worrying projections. Despite not naming any specific proposed cuts, there is a sense that scenario 3 would lead to widespread roll back on public service provision, the closure of women's organisations, and the inability of the department to deliver Programme for Government equality outcomes. The destruction of the community and voluntary women's sector would have a devastating effect on gender equality and would result in the State regressing on its international obligations to respect, protect and fulfil women's socio-economic rights. Any scenario that would have this level of impact would be unacceptable to our sector, to the public generally and to the international bodies tasked with monitoring the UK's performance on gender equality.

*Department for the Economy* – while this section contains limited information regarding the potential impact of all scenarios on women, WRDA would be critical of the fact that the first potential cut to services listed under the key challenges is the cessation of training and skills programmes for the most disadvantaged members of our community. Considering the huge sums of money that the Department is engaged in distributing to the private sector, it is demonstrates a worrying approach to prioritisation that the first identified cut would be one affecting people most in need.

*Department of Education* – Despite the assurance that this department will be exempt from reductions, we are concerned to read; 'Whilst the Department would seek to avoid reducing core services, reductions to the funding of Early Years and Youth Services may also have to be considered in order to operate within its budget.' The women's sector, along with children's organisations and trade unions, has long been campaigning for meaningful action on childcare. Since 2016 the Department of Education has had responsibility for this area of policy and has failed to present the childcare strategy for executive approval or indicate how childcare provision will be delivered. If early years services are potentially facing further cuts this will compound the impact of the childcare vacuum further.

WRDA calls for investment in childcare so as to end the stalemate and finally deliver the Executive's policy commitment to ensure affordable, accessible, high quality childcare for all families.

*Department of Health* – While this department is also exempt from reductions, it is clear that the existing underinvestment in health services makes current work difficult to sustain. The information provided on the proposals for allocation of the relevant section of the Confidence and Supply Agreement leaves some gaps in terms of priority issues for women. These include:

- No mention of perinatal mental health services and the implementation of the 11 recommendations in the [RQIA's 2016 review](#). This review provided evidence of failures to implement the Integrated Perinatal Mental Health Care

Pathway (2012) and called for urgent action in a number of areas. The most pertinent of these were the establishment of specialist perinatal mental health teams in each trust and the establishment of an in-patient mother and baby unit for Northern Ireland. It is our view that these action should be included in any proposed spending of the £50 million allocation for mental health with urgency.

- An implementation pathway for the clear policy commitment from the previous health minister to increase the number of IVF cycles available on the NHS. This has cross-party support and just requires resources in order to bring practice in line with the NICE national guidelines.

*Department for Justice* – It is vital that this department is able to resource new work on domestic violence and abuse. When Ministers are in place, WRDA will be supporting Women’s Aid and other survivors’ organisations to call for a renewal of the legislative progress made in this area before the collapse of the Executive. This reform is urgent with Northern Ireland falling further and further behind in legal protections relative to GB and the RoI and so it should be reflected in next year’s budget. The UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women has also recommended the roll out of specialist domestic violence courts and will likely do so again when the UK is next examined later this year. This service was also supported by the outgoing Minister and therefore just needs a budget allocation.

*The Executive Office* – WRDA is concerned that the projected challenges include significant cuts to ‘advice and support services on equality issues from ECNI’ and the Community Relations Council and its funded groups. With sex discrimination still the 2<sup>nd</sup> most common issue on which the ECNI has to support complainants, it is vital that women continue to have access to support in challenging discrimination. There are further challenges to equality law ahead as Britain exits the EU and it is therefore even more important to resource our equality and human rights bodies to ensure accountability for legal protections. The Community Relations Council also provides core and programme funding for many community based women’s groups doing innovative work promoting the inclusion of women in peacebuilding and conflict transformation. This work is necessary in order to meet international standards on women’s participation in post-conflict societies and should it cease to be funded there will be a regression in this area.