

Women's Policy Group NI

The Rt. Hon. Chris Heaton Harris MP
Secretary of State for Northern Ireland
Northern Ireland Office
Erskine House, 20-32 Chichester Street
Belfast BT1 4GF

Via email to: correspondence@nio.gov.uk

17th May 2023

Dear Secretary of State,

We are writing to you as a coalition of organisations and individuals from across the Women's Sector and beyond, including the LGBTQI+ sector, human rights organisations, and trade unions. We are deeply concerned and dismayed at your most recent Written Ministerial Statement, particularly in the context of recent funding losses and cuts, and the impact of these circumstances on the women we serve.

In recent years, policy choices made by successive Governments, both in Stormont and in particular in Westminster, have squeezed the Community and Voluntary Sector and particularly the work of that sector in providing for women, children, and the most marginalised communities in Northern Ireland, including migrants and LGBTQI+ people. In difficult financial conditions, and in a post-conflict society, these organisations have risen to the challenge of providing support to those most in need.

In addition to the detrimental impact this budget will have on the Community and Voluntary sector, it will have a similarly devastating impact on the delivery of public services and the operation of local Government departments. The unsustainable and cruel cuts to funding for schools, limitations on Discretionary Support payments for individuals in financial need, and the managed decay of health services through chronic underfunding will have monumental impacts on the wellbeing of people, children, families and communities across Northern Ireland. Increasing financial hardship will drive people deeper into poverty, problem debt and may force many into dangerous forms of borrowing including paramilitary lending, something this Government has recognised the need to tackle.

We know that, where statutory services fall short, people in Northern Ireland turn to their Community and Voluntary Sector for support. Programmes currently slated for cuts or closure, help women to get the support and skills they needed to move into work, and childcare provided there helps to ensure that women can access the support they need. Tackling the high economic inactivity levels in Northern Ireland has long been a focus for Government. Despite the fact that our economic inactivity levels have been higher than other regions for many years with the female inactivity rate consistently higher than the male rate there is a need for greater investment in this area and not less. The cocktail of devastating cuts across the public and community sectors will create a vacuum that will be filled only by more suffering, more destitution, and more harm to our communities.

It is also important to note that internationally, UN human rights mechanisms including the CEDAW Committee have repeatedly issued recommendations to the UK to ensure protections for women in Northern Ireland are put on an equal footing with those elsewhere in the UK. The Council of Europe in 2022 also warned that the position at that time was deepening inequalities, and urged for rights based approaches to all decision making. The impact of this budget on services means that *de facto* provision and protections for women are likely to fall further behind in Northern Ireland, and as such constitute a breach of UK obligations to comply with international human rights conventions.

We are appreciative of the current political situation, and mindful that there was overspend by various departments in the previous mandate. We understand the need for financial restraint also, but the cuts that Government departments are now obliged to make are due to a decision by the UK Government, and by yourself as Secretary of State. Further, to require those deep cuts in the timeframe specified will be devastating to the Community and Voluntary Sector. The impact of this on the people that we work to serve will be immediate, dramatic, and in some cases irreversible.

It is indefensible that the most vulnerable women in Northern Ireland, and their children, should be the casualties of a political impasse created by a series of political decisions that are beyond our sphere of influence. We are requesting an urgent meeting with you as Secretary of State so that we can put these concerns to you in person.

Kind regards

Elaine Crory, Women's Sector Lobbyist, Women's Resource & Development Agency

Danielle Roberts, Senior Policy and Development Officer, Here NI

Louise Coyle, NI Rural Women's Network

Alexandra Brennan, Coordinator, Northern Ireland Women's Budget Group

Nuala Toman, Disability Action

Karen Sweeney, Women's Support Network

Aisling Playford, Policy and Advocacy Manager, The Rainbow Project

Kendall Bousquet, Team Leader for Advocacy and Development, Migrant Centre NI
