

## **Where's Our Democracy? Campaign - Media Statement**

*"The Secretary of State is failing the people of Northern Ireland"*

The 2023/ 2024 budget represents an act of fiscal violence enforced by Westminster onto the most vulnerable in our communities. In the absence of a functioning Executive and democratic processes in Northern Ireland, unelected civil servants have been pushed to deliver a suite of budget cuts, in line with the Secretary of State's 23/24 budget, that will have detrimental impacts on everyone in Northern Ireland, but particularly the most marginalised. The people of Northern Ireland deserve to have a functioning democratic government that sets a context-specific budget, tailored to the needs of its people. This is essential to securing an equal society; one capable of responding to current and future crises around the cost-of-living, mental health, climate change, and healthcare, for example.

Ciara Fitzpatrick, an Academic at Ulster University, said: "The people of Northern Ireland cannot continue to suffer due to the lack of governance from the NI Executive and the targeted fiscal violence, which has been actioned by Chris Heaton-Harris MP, who is not representing the interests and needs of those who are feeling the impact of the Cost-of-Living Crisis most intensely. The widespread cuts to Departments, such as the end of the 'Holiday Hunger' scheme, the huge cut to the Discretionary Support budget and the removal of core funding from Community and Voluntary sector organisations will impact the most disadvantaged people in our communities."

One of the stipulations of the Budget, announced by the Secretary of State in April, was that any additional monies added in-year to the block grant would instead be diverted towards paying down the overspend. The UK Government has now announced a scheme amounting to £76 million, which will be spent in England on community sector organisations that support the most vulnerable, and given proportionally to devolved administrations via the Barnett Formula to spend as they choose.

In Northern Ireland, however, we have no functioning administration and therefore no decision-making power in how this money should be spent, leaving the decision to fall to the Secretary of State. The Secretary of State's Budget statement made it clear that he intends for this money to go towards paying off the overspend by Northern Ireland departments from the previous financial year. The people of Northern Ireland cannot afford to pay for others' choices while our institutions lie dormant. We need this additional money at the coalface.

Ciara Fitzpatrick said: "The NI Secretary of State and his counterparts in the Cabinet have continued to absolve themselves from responsibility from the socio-economic implications of his budget. At the same time, the Government of Ireland have maintained relative silence on the current and dire outlook for the North of the island. As co-guarantors of the Good Friday Agreement, both Governments have an integral role to play in progressing peace and prosperity for all in Northern Ireland. Strand 3 of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement cannot be ignored any longer. We must see the commencement of the Intergovernmental Conference which was intended to operate during breakdowns of power. This will provide some measure of accountability for the current austerity agenda, which has been implemented without consultation with our own elected representatives."

We call for urgent action to be taken to address the crisis of democratic deficit in Northern Ireland. Every day, this crisis continues to have real financial impacts for people in Northern Ireland who are struggling through a Cost-of-Living Crisis. We also call for interventions from the British and Irish governments to ensure that Strand 3 of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement is implemented. We have written to the Secretary of State today calling for an intervention to ensure that the Community Organisations Cost of Living Fund is not directed towards paying down the overspend, and we are calling on all elected representatives to co-sign our letter.

Signed,

The *Where's Our Democracy?* Campaign

*'Where's Our Democracy?' is a cross-sector campaign led by the Women's Policy Group NI. You can find out more about the campaign [here](#). Media queries to Elaine Crory, Women's Sector Lobbyist, 07548954710*