

**Women's  
Policy Group NI**



**WHERE'S OUR  
DEMOCRACY?**

The Where's Our Democracy? Campaign's  
**COMMON SENSE BUDGET**  
for Northern Ireland

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## Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>2</b>
Invest to save	2
What is super-parity?	3
What is sub-parity?	3
<b>Budget Proposals</b>	<b>4</b>
Department for Economy	4
Department for Communities	4
Department of Education	5
Department of Justice	6
Department of Health	6
Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs	7
Department for Infrastructure	7
Department of Finance	8
The Executive Office	9
<b>Key Asks</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Concluding Remarks</b>	<b>14</b>

## Introduction

Northern Ireland is facing yet another financial crisis. While we are now more than 18 months without an Executive and more than 12 months without Ministers, the Secretary of State has imposed a punishing budget on the people of NI, with spending decisions overseen by Permanent Secretaries that we cannot hold to account. The budget for 2024 is expected to be similar, and now the Secretary of State has asked the Permanent Secretaries to find ways of raising revenue. This is unfair, undemocratic and financially unsustainable. We demand a common-sense budget that works for Northern Ireland, that respects the basic human rights of the people of Northern Ireland and that allows us to get back on our feet.

The 2023 budget cuts have had a devastating impact on organisations and communities in Northern Ireland. The Secretary of State has argued that the cuts had to be made in order to repay public debt, but the impact of the cuts will not save money. Instead, they will worsen people's quality of life and their health and, in turn, increase dependence on the public purse. Our Common Sense Budget puts forward the argument that supporting communities through a cost of living crisis is the right thing to do and it makes financial common sense.

## Invest to save

The concept is simple; spending money now will save money in the long run, and the proposals we have set out below propose ways to save that involve an initial outlay. We all understand this concept in the management of our household budgets, although of course many of us simply do not have the financial freedom to spend in order to save in the long term. This is famously well-illustrated by the author Terry Pratchett in his book *Men at Arms*, as the character Sam Vimes reflects on how expensive it is to be poor:

*"The reason that the rich were so rich, Vimes reasoned, was because they managed to spend less money. Take boots, for example. ... A man who could afford fifty dollars had a pair of boots that'd still be keeping his feet dry in ten years' time, while a poor man who could only afford cheap boots would have spent a hundred dollars on boots in the same time and would still have wet feet."*

We must always remember that the government budget is not the same as a household budget, and our domestic financial hard choices are not the same as the choices they face, armed with a significant pot of public money and the means to borrow without the same kind of restrictions that we face as individuals. If and when

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<sup>1</sup> Pratchett, Terry (1993). *Men at Arms*. London: Gollancz. p. 32

it is deemed necessary, money can be found for investment; in major infrastructure projects, for example, or in the case of emergencies like the Covid furlough scheme. The government is not forced, like Sam Vimes, to make choices that they know are a false economy due to a lack of options; when they choose to do so it is always a choice. Today we are calling on them to make a different, and better, choice.

Our argument is simple; the government ought to make common sense decisions and invest in Northern Ireland now, in order to save the economy money in the long run.

### **What is super-parity?**

Super-parity is the argument that the Secretary of State is using when seeking to raise revenue. The argument may seem simple; “why should Northern Ireland be better off than Great Britain in these ways?” but it’s not as simple as it first appears. Many of the differences are there because we recognise that NI is systematically disadvantaged in comparison with GB, and the Executive has made decisions as to where to direct the Block Grant in order to subsidise these areas. Areas where NI has super-parity include: domestic water charges, welfare reform mitigations, university tuition fees, concessionary transport fares and charges for domiciliary care.

### **What is sub-parity?**

Sub-parity is rarely, if ever mentioned in these discussions. This refers to areas where Northern Ireland receives comparatively less spending than GB. Areas where NI has sub-parity include: childcare, mental health spending, public sector pay.

All of these choices are policy choices, like any other: they are not written in stone. There is, as the above shows us, room to deviate from practice in GB. And yet, the room to manoeuvre is limited while the block grant remains as it is. This is why, as we begin a process of public consultations on “revenue raising measures” that put every one of the areas of super-parity on the chopping block, we must fight to ensure that we do not end up in even more areas of sub-parity.

We must also fight to have the block grant increased to reflect the degree of need in Northern Ireland and its unique situation and circumstances. We note also that the areas of sub-parity are areas that especially impact the most vulnerable and, particularly in the case of childcare, women. Women are much more likely not to be in paid work in Northern Ireland specifically because of caring responsibilities, so failure to act on this contributes directly to the welfare of the NI economy.

We are calling for an approach to this exercise that recognises that restricting people’s choices not only harms them, but also harms the economy as a whole.

## Budget Proposals

The proposals below are not an exhaustive list of what each Department should be focusing on as they prepare for the next Budget. Instead, we highlight just one or two areas - out of many - where preventative measures can be resourced to save public money in the future.

### Department for Economy

#### 1. Keep third level education affordable

*It is common sense to:*

- Maintain student fees at their current rate to ensure students have access to affordable higher education.

*Why?*

- The Department for the Economy's proposal to increase student fees is extremely short-sighted, especially in light of the Department's efforts to support and foster a strong, diverse workforce. If fees are raised, there is a likelihood that students will choose to study in the Republic of Ireland or in Great Britain, where fees would be cheaper or the same price, and where there is more opportunity.
- In a 2019 study from Pivotal, they found that 88% of the students who were completing higher education outside of Northern Ireland had no intention to return following graduation<sup>2</sup>. Following the pattern highlighted in the Pivotal research, many students will leave Northern Ireland to study and will likely not return.

### Department for Communities

#### 1. Invest in the voluntary and community sector

*It is common sense to:*

- Ensure that organisations providing frontline services to vulnerable communities are adequately resourced to do so.

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<sup>2</sup> Pivotal. (2021). *Should I Stay or Should I Go? Reasons for Leaving Northern Ireland for Study or Work.* (<https://www.pivotalppf.org/cmsfiles/Stay-or-go-final.pdf>)

*Why?*

- The work of voluntary and community sector organisations reduces pressure on public services such as benefits, food banks, clothing banks, mental health services and addiction services.
2. Reverse the cuts to the Discretionary Support Scheme

*It is common sense to:*

- Ensure that those most vulnerable to the worst impacts of the cost-of-living crisis have access to help through schemes like Discretionary Support.

*Why?*

- Without schemes like Discretionary Support, many people, particularly women, will be forced to turn to high-cost credit lenders and/or illegal lenders - 6% of women utilising high cost credit borrowed from illegal lenders such as paramilitaries<sup>3</sup>. This will allow illegal loan sharks to trap people in endless cycles of debt and poverty, creating further costs that will need to be spent on tackling illegal lending, coercion, etc.

## Department of Education

1. Ring-sourced funding for special educational needs (SEN)

*It is common sense to:*

- Ensure that all children have equal access to quality education by prioritising the End-to-End Review of SEN in NI, ensuring children with SEN can avail of specialised support and access the same opportunities as children without SEN.

*Why?*

- The halving of the SEND Transformation Programme's resourcing in the 2023/24 Budget<sup>4</sup> creates deep educational inequalities for children with SEN and will have lasting impacts on their educational performance, skills attainment, and mental health.

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<sup>3</sup> Women's Regional Consortium. (2022). *Women Living with Debt*.

(<https://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Women-Living-with-Debt-1.pdf>)

<sup>4</sup> Dr. Fitzpatrick, C., Dr. Loader, R., Dr. McCartney, S., Dr. McConnell, B., Dr. McMullen, J., Prof. Murray, C., Dr. Orr, K., Prof. Purdy, N., Prof. Simms, V. (2023). *The Consequences of the Cuts to Education for Children and Young People in Northern Ireland*. (<https://www.stran.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/The-Consequences-of-the-Cuts-to-Education-for-Children-and-Young-People-in-Northern-Ireland-Final.pdf>)

- In an economy struggling to promote a stronger workforce, we are creating more barriers to labour market participation for these students, where future resources will need to be directed at mitigating this inevitable problem.

## Department of Justice

### 1. Resources to address backlog in the courts system

*It is common sense to:*

- Invest in the courts system so that the enormous backlog of cases can be cleared, prioritising cases of VAWG

*Why?*

- One of the key recommendations of the Gillen Review was to reduce the long wait between the reporting of a sexual offence and that offence reaching the courts. Due to a long term lack of investment in the courts system and into legal aid, and worsened by Covid, the delay is even longer.
- We have since passed new laws so that more VAWG offences, such as stalking and non-fatal strangulation, can be properly prosecuted, but investment in the courts system is vital to move cases along and to deliver meaningful justice for victims of all kinds of VAWG. Reminder: VAWG costs Northern Ireland £750 million per year.

## Department of Health

### 1. Save our crumbling NHS

*It is common sense to:*

- Sustainably resource our National Health Service so it can meet the needs of people in Northern Ireland.
- For example, deliver and fully resource the rest of the 18 primary care multi-disciplinary teams that were promised, with a focus on rural communities.

*Why?*

- Adequate health is essential for all aspects of life, including employment, family life, social activities and education.

- Since 2014, there has been a 9% decrease in active GPs yet a 17% increase in the number of registered patients per practice<sup>5</sup>. In rural communities, access to primary care can be particularly difficult due to distance, transport, and fewer options.
- The longer health issues go unseen and untreated, the worse these issues become and will likely require care at hospitals. To lessen the strain on hospitals, investment in primary care multi-disciplinary teams can help identify and address health issues at the earliest opportunity.

## Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

### 1. Establish an independent Environmental Protection Agency

*It is common sense to:*

- Establish an Independent Environmental Agency with responsibility for protecting our Environment and preventing further ecological destruction

*Why?*

- In the coming months and years, the effects of the climate crisis are expected to become increasingly felt across the world, including Northern Ireland. If we are not adequately prepared for increased flooding, wind destruction, heatwaves and big freezes, the impact will be felt by all families and businesses, but most acutely by the most vulnerable.
- We need an agency fully independent of Government that can hold them to account to meet these standards, as well as to ensure that environmental destruction, such as what we currently see unfolding at Lough Neagh, cannot recur.

## Department for Infrastructure

### 1. Urgent repair fund for NI Water

*It is common sense to:*

- Ensure that the body responsible for water and sewage services is adequately resourced to deliver safe, clean drinking water for the people of Northern Ireland and respond to increasingly regular incidents of flooding.

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<sup>5</sup> Department of Health. (2023). *Publication of FPS General Medical Services for Northern Ireland, Annual Statistics 2022/23*. (<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/news/publication-fps-general-medical-services-northern-ireland-annual-statistics-202223#:~:text=There%20were%20317%20active%20GP,in%20the%20same%20time%20period>)



Why?

- Clean drinking water is a basic human right, and to put that right at risk for the sake of saving £35 million - a small portion of the budget - is wholly irresponsible and poses a serious risk to public health. The proposals to cease wastewater treatment would see a decrease from 99.23% compliant with wastewater treatment works to just 25%<sup>6</sup>
- Recent widespread flooding in parts of Northern Ireland has had a significant impact on families and local businesses. Currently, 5% of properties in Northern Ireland are at risk of flooding, and this is set to increase by 33% by 2080<sup>7</sup>. If NI Water is not adequately resourced, they will not be able to effectively respond to emergencies such as flooding, which can be expected to occur more frequently in the coming years due to the climate crisis.

## Department of Finance

### 1. Improve the transparency of the NI budget process

*It is common sense to:*

- Have a budget process that is transparent and accessible.

Why?

- Greater transparency means increased opportunities for citizen participation and engagement. Increased citizen participation in the budget process leads to a strengthening of democratic processes and the more effective use of public resources.
- Improve the equality screening process and ensure that equality impacts are properly anticipated and mitigated against in advance of spending. DoF should conduct a cumulative budget impact assessment.

### 2. Fix issues of sub-parity around public sector pay

*It is common sense to:*

- Keep parity with the rest of the UK when it comes to public sector pay increases.

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<sup>6</sup> Northern Ireland Freshwater Taskforce and Northern Ireland Marine Task Force. (2023). *A Joint Response from Northern Ireland Marine Task Force (NIMTF) and Northern Ireland Freshwater Taskforce (FWTF) on: DfI Equality Impact Assessment - Budget 2023/2024.* ([\\*nimtf-fwtf-joint-response-2023.pdf \(nienvironmentlink.org\)](https://www.nienvironmentlink.org/nimtf-fwtf-joint-response-2023.pdf))

<sup>7</sup> Department for Infrastructure. (2023). *Budget 2023-24 Equality Impact Assessment Public Consultation.* (<https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/consultations/infrastructure/eqia-consultation-document-budget-2023-24.pdf>)

*Why?*

- Real pay for full-time public sector workers has fallen 7% this year alone<sup>8</sup>, increasing the disparity between public sector workers in Northern Ireland and Great Britain. These are the jobs that are crucial to public service maintenance, yet many workers within the public sector are forced to work multiple jobs and/or struggle to pay for essentials<sup>9</sup>.

## The Executive Office

- Adequately resource the Ending Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy (EVAWG) Strategy

*It is common sense to:*

1. Resource and implement the EVAWG Strategy

*Why?*

- The consequences of not implementing this Strategy are immense. Currently, TEO estimates that Violence Against Women & Girls costs the NI Economy £750 million annually. Northern Ireland is one of the most dangerous places for women in Europe, and has some of the highest rates of femicide.
- Resourcing and implementing this Strategy would not only make this place more safe for women, but it would ultimately save the government money as the need to respond to instances of gender-based violence would decrease and prevent further revenue losses to the economy such as through wages.

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<sup>8</sup> BBC News. (2023). *Public sector pay falls by more than 7%, says survey.* (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-67285416>)

<sup>9</sup> UNISON. (2023). *Education workers across Northern Ireland take action for pay justice.* (<https://www.unison.org.uk/news/article/2023/11/education-workers-across-northern-ireland-take-action-for-pay-justice/>)

## Key Asks

1. Increase Northern Ireland’s Block Grant and introduce budget floor (similar to agreement reached for Wales)

Years of underfunding, short-term budgets, and ‘quick-fix’ responses to structural crises have left our public services vulnerable. The current punishing Budget, implemented by Secretary of State to Northern Ireland Chris Heaton-Harris, has only exacerbated this, putting our basic public services on the brink of collapse.

The introduction of the needs-based funding floor in Wales, proposed in the 2010 Holtham report that revealed possible underfunding of Welsh public services due to the Barnett Formula, was implemented in 2018/2019 to prevent a further gap in public service delivery comparative to England. This change secured a ‘funding floor’ for the Welsh Block Grant - a needs-based level that the Block Grant could not dip below - with the aim of correcting the underfunding of public services in Wales.

Northern Ireland’s needs are significant; while Northern Ireland is one lowest contributors to revenue per head in the UK<sup>10</sup>, it has the highest per capita spend<sup>11</sup> at £118 identifiable expenditure on services per head<sup>12</sup>. However, this spend used to be greater before the pandemic, at £121 per head. Northern Ireland is the only nation to have not returned to or increased its pre-pandemic services per head spend:

Total UK Identifiable Expenditure on Services , Per Head 2017-18 to 2021-22

UK Nation	2017-18 outturn	2018-19 outturn	2019-20 outturn	2020-21 outturn	2021-22 outturn
England	97	<b>97</b>	<b>97</b>	98	<b>97</b>
Scotland	116	<b>116</b>	<b>116</b>	111	<b>117</b>
Wales	111	<b>111</b>	<b>110</b>	106	<b>113</b>
Northern Ireland	120	<b>121</b>	<b>121</b>	115	<b>118</b>

<sup>10</sup> Office for National Statistics. (2022). *Country and regional public sector finances, UK: financial year ending 2021*. (<https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/governmentpublicsectorandtaxes/publicsectorfinance/articles/countryandregionpublicsectorfinances/financialyearending2021>)

<sup>11</sup> Pigeon, C. (2012). *Pros and Cons of the Barnett Formula for Northern Ireland*. ([http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/raise/publications/2012/finance\\_personnel/2912.pdf](http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/raise/publications/2012/finance_personnel/2912.pdf))

<sup>12</sup> HM Treasury. (2023). *Public Expenditure Statistical Analyses 2023*. ([https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1171658/E02929310\\_HMT\\_PESA\\_2023\\_Accessible.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1171658/E02929310_HMT_PESA_2023_Accessible.pdf))

Within the 2010 Holtham report that advocated for the funding floor for Wales, it also noted that the relative need for Northern Ireland would require £121 Departmental Expenditure Limit (DEL) spend per head<sup>13</sup>. This analysis did not include policing and justice, which were not devolved to Wales. The NI Fiscal Council estimated that the inclusion of this would increase the Holtham figure to £124 DEL per head<sup>14</sup>, suggesting that the funding that we currently receive does not meet our needs, comparative to England. The NI Fiscal Council predict that this 'Barnett Squeeze' will worsen if there are no interventions<sup>15</sup>.

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. While spend may seem quite high relative to England and the other devolved nations, it is because the need in Northern Ireland warrants it.

To prevent a future of chronic underfunding, we demand that the UK Government puts a needs-based funding floor in place in Northern Ireland. We understand that this will not protect us from financial constraint during times of economic crisis, but it will ensure that the funding needed to maintain public services is delivered through the Block Grant. The Barnett Formula was never meant to be a permanent fixture to determine devolved spending<sup>16</sup> and if reforms can be made to rightfully protect Wales from underfunding, those same reforms can be made for Northern Ireland.

2. Introduce a Programme for Government (or Governance) to guide budget decisions (this should go out for public consultation)

For the past two financial years, Departments in Northern Ireland have been making decisions without Ministers, an Executive, and a Programme for Government (PfG). The last PfG - a draft document that was taken on by the Senior Civil Service - provided Departments and the public with a framework for some overall policy direction during a time with no government. Without a PfG, we have seen departmental overspends and a general lack of direction of resources. Budgeting without a guiding document like a PfG is bad practice, as the Budget needs to be informed by policy objectives, not the other way around<sup>17</sup>. In the midst of multiple crises, we need a PfG to guide a cross-

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<sup>13</sup> Northern Ireland Fiscal Council. (2023). *Updated estimate of the relative need for public spending in Northern Ireland*. (<https://www.nifiscalcouncil.org/files/nifiscalcouncil/documents/2023-05/NIFC%20Updated%20estimate%20of%20the%20relative%20need%20for%20public%20spending%20in%20NI%20-%2002.05.23%20v2.pdf>)

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Simon Hoare MP, Northern Ireland Affairs Committee. (2023). *The funding and delivery of public services in Northern Ireland - Oral evidence*. (<https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/13777/pdf/>)

<sup>17</sup> OECD. (2002). *OECD Best Practices for Budget Transparency*. (<https://www.oecd.org/mena/governance/efficient-and-effective-budgeting.htm>)

departmental approach to budget decisions, specifically around maintaining public services.

A PfG also provides transparency for the public and allows for proper scrutiny. These crucial aspects of good budgeting have been absent in our budgeting process, especially in the most recent Budget set by the Secretary of State. Without a PfG, there is no mechanism for public engagement on the policies aligned to the Budget's resources. The only consultation that was given on this Budget was regarding the Equality Impact Assessments/equality screenings, which did not provide much scope for influencing policies so much as mitigating the worst of the impacts.

While a PfG will not be possible to sign off on without an Executive in place, a draft governance document to guide the direction of next financial year's spend, with the input of public consultation, is necessary to follow good budgeting practices.

### **3. Gender Budgeting**

Gender Budgeting requires government departments to analyse the different impact of a budget on people of different genders, starting as early in the budget cycle as possible. The aim of gender budgeting is to ensure that the distribution of resources creates more gender equal outcomes. Over time, gender analysis should become embedded at all stages of the budget process. Women's intersecting identities are also included in this analysis and policy-makers are expected to promote these areas of equality as well.

There is widespread political support for gender budgeting in Northern Ireland and a growing evidence base that it can help create a more equal society. In the current budget crisis women will experience particular disadvantages due to the pre-existing socio-economic conditions. For example, there is strong evidence that women have suffered disproportionately from over a decade of Westminster austerity measures, the pandemic, and the cost-of-living crisis.

We cannot afford to continue making decisions at the expense of women and risk further degradations to gender equality and additional intersecting equalities as well. Not only is there an immediate need for gender budgeting in our current crisis, but the benefits would help to improve the budgetary process. Gender budgeting is good budgeting; it encourages greater transparency of government processes, more in-depth assessments of how policies and budgets affect constituents and closer cooperation between governmental and non-governmental stakeholders.

It encourages a more targeted approach to the spending of public money, which will improve policy outcomes. Implementing gender budgeting mechanisms would provide decision-makers with the tools to recognise and mitigate gendered economic impacts and promote gender equality. Whilst political crises that affect budget

processes are outside the control of departmental officials, strategically embedding gender budgeting measures will create a firewall to prevent such disproportionate disadvantages in future.

For gender budgeting to be fully implemented, the next stage must be to reformulate budgets and budgetary policy with targeted measures to improve outcomes for women and girls. Additionally, Section 75 screening and impact assessment typically takes place at the very end of the budget planning process or after the budget has been finalised. The OECD10 highlights that best practice for gender budgeting is to embed it at all levels of policy- and budget-making: planning, formulation, approval, implementation, monitoring and reformulation. It is crucial that gender equality obligations are not a 'tick-box exercise,' but rather that gender equality is mainstreamed in every area of the budgetary process through gender analysis of data supported by experts from civil society.

## Concluding Remarks

Cutting government spend during a financial crisis will not save the government money, it will cost the government more in the long term. Asking Northern Ireland to generate additional revenue at a time when our public services are on their knees will not lead to economic prosperity, it will simply plunge the most vulnerable communities further into poverty. Savings to the public purse should not be made on the backs of people in Northern Ireland who are already struggling to make ends meet.

We have been told several times by the Secretary of State that the solution to this challenging budget is for the Executive to return to Stormont. We have been told that without an Executive, there is nothing the Secretary of State can do to support people through the cost of living crisis. We do not believe this to be true. Community organisations do not have the power to force parties into returning to government, and yet it is these organisations and the communities they serve that are being directly punished as a result of the continued governance vacuum.

Northern Ireland is experiencing both a cost of living crisis and a crisis of democracy at a time when having a government in place has never been more important. We are calling on the Secretary of State to apply financial common sense in Northern Ireland and reconsider the cuts and requests for additional revenue. We are also calling on all parties to do everything in their power to get back to government and start delivering for the people of Northern Ireland.

We plan to follow up with each of the Departments, Secretary of State and Shadow Secretary of State, as well as with the Treasury to further raise these points and advocate for a Common Sense Budget for Northern Ireland. Sign up to our mailing list to keep up to date with what we're working on in this campaign [here](#).

*The 'Where's Our Democracy?' Campaign is a campaign led by the Women's Policy Group NI. This document was prepared by the following WPG members:*

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