

Response to the consultation on the Budget 2021-22 Department of Finance

February 2021

Introduction

Northern Ireland Women's European Platform (NIWEP) welcomes the consultation on the 2021-22 Budget. NIWEP welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the consultation.

NIWEP is a membership organisation of women's NGOs in Northern Ireland. Established as the Northern Ireland link to the European Women's Lobby, the EU's expert body on women's rights and gender equality, NIWEP also has special consultative status with the UN. A key role for NIWEP is promoting gender responsive policy and decision making at local, regional and national level taking account of the state's international obligations, while also ensuring women and girls are engaged in policy and decision making. NIWEP also works to share information and good practice at international level with local members and stakeholders, and highlight local learning and good practice internationally.

NIWEP's core objectives involve raising awareness and promoting implementation of key international human rights treaties and initiatives, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). NIWEP views implementing the recommendations of CEDAW as a clear roadmap and mechanism to ensuring women's human rights are fully met and upheld in Northern Ireland. The comments in this submission are made within this context.

Endorsement

NIWEP endorses the responses of the Northern Ireland Women's Budget Group and Women's Policy Group to this consultation.

Summary

NIWEP shares the Department's concern over the 2021-22 Budget position and the reduction in cash terms it entails. The Northern Ireland economy was in a challenging position in 2020-21, and the COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically increased the challenges. In addition, the departure of the UK from the EU (EU Exit) is an added challenge with significant financial implications, including as yet unknown impacts as the economy adjusts to the new conditions. Therefore, the budget position is worrying for all sectors, and it is critical that allocations are prioritised on the basis of a robust needs assessment to ensure that no one is left behind and the outcome is equitable. Tools such as gender budgeting and equality impact assessment can effectively assist in ensuring resources are targeted in ways that create most impact.

NIWEP believes that the priority for the Budget should be to secure the wellbeing of people living in Northern Ireland, in line with the Outcomes Framework for the Programme for Government. This entails three specific priorities, including a focus on preventing a deepening of poverty and inequality, ensuring access to education, health and social care as core services and enabling sustainable recovery from the current crisis. A focus on these priorities would create the conditions in which people can engage in the labour market, while protecting and supporting vulnerable groups and also contributing to job creation and supporting economic development. This, in turn, would reduce demand on services, which would enable a renewed focus on developing systems, structures and services that support a prosperous Northern Ireland.

Priorities for the Budget

NIWEP believes that the priority for the Budget should be to secure the wellbeing of people living in Northern Ireland, in line with the Outcomes Framework for the Programme for Government. NIWEP would urge for a focus on this overall outcome through three overarching priorities, including preventing a deepening of poverty and inequality, ensuring access to education, health and social care as core services and enabling sustainable recovery from the current crisis. These priorities, in turn, are also in line with the Programme for Government and are furthermore in line with the UN Sustainable Development Goals, which set an international framework for development to 2030 and have been identified by the UN as the cornerstones of a roadmap to sustainable, equitable global recovery from the COVID-19 crisis¹. Aligning with this international roadmap would assist Northern Ireland in meeting its obligations under the Paris Agreement, while also providing a robust basis for policy and decision making.

There is a robust evidence base demonstrating the specific needs relevant to each of the priorities outlined above. With regard to issues and priorities for women and gender equality, NIWEP would like to highlight the Feminist Recovery Plan² developed by the women's sector, which sets out in detail the impacts of COVID-19 on women and girls, and also sets out key areas for action. It is important to note that the core priorities for women have been similarly highlighted in analyses of the disproportionate impact on women elsewhere; at UK level by civil society³ and an Inquiry into the gendered economic impact of COVID-19 by the Westminster Women and Equalities Committee⁴, and globally by many actors including the UN^{5,6} and the World Bank⁷.

NIWEP appreciates the legal and financial commitments made to flagship projects, as outlined in the consultation document. While each has merit in a given perspective, NIWEP would urge for careful assessment of the relative priority of each project in light of the current circumstances. For example mobility initiatives such as the A5 scheme and dualling of the A6 may have relatively lower priority in the context of reduced commuting, and this should be carefully evaluated as part of a final financial position.

¹ UN (October 2020) [COVID-19, Inequalities and Building Back Better](#)

² Women's Policy Group (July 2020) [COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan](#)

³ See eg. Women's Budget Group (2021) [Lessons Learned: Where Women Stand at the Start of 2021](#)

⁴ Women and Equalities Committee (February 2021) [Unequal impact? Coronavirus and the gendered economic impact: Fifth Report of Session 2019–21](#)

⁵ See eg. UN Women (September 2020) [From insights to action: Gender equality in the wake of COVID-19](#)

⁶ UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (January 2021) [World Economic Situation and Prospects 2021](#)

⁷ World Bank (2020) [Supporting Women Throughout the Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) Emergency Response and Economic Recovery](#)

Equality implications

NIWEP is concerned that the Departmental response to COVID-19 to date has failed to take account of the specific needs of women as one of the S75 groups, despite statistics and evidence from NISRA that clearly demonstrate the disproportionate impact of the crisis on women with regard to job losses in particular. A response from Departments to the Feminist Recovery Plan, provided to the NI Assembly All Party Group on UNSCR 1325, Women, Peace and Security⁸, highlights this by demonstrating both a lack of action focused on the disproportionate impact on women, and a limited understanding of action relevant to strengthening gender equality. The response, with contributions from all but one Government Department, demonstrates the very poor policy framework and practice in respect of securing gender equality.

With regard to the Department of Finance, the Department states in the response to the Feminist Recovery Plan that it '*appreciates the call to gender budgeting*'. However, it appears that DFP, similar to most Departments are not clear on the equality responsibilities, stating that there is *a statutory basis for our approach to equality, and difficult to see how we could justify prioritising one area over another*. Some sections of the response to the FRP make no reference at all to gender, notably those on carers, racial justice, a green economy and housing⁹.

It is important to note that gender budgeting is a tool for evidence based decision making, rather than a mechanism for prioritising one group over others. Gender budgeting at its core identifies the impact of expenditure on different population groups, and therefore assists with ensuring resources are targeted in ways that create the greatest impact and benefit. Strengthened data collection, with appropriate breakdowns by gender as well as other protected characteristics, is a cornerstone for effective gender budgeting as well as budget analysis, and NIWEP would urge for improved data collection across policy areas to ensure the relevant data is available to underpin decision making.

Reducing demand for services

NIWEP would urge for evidence from the Feminist Recovery Plan to be utilised as part of identifying priorities for the budget, as the Plan demonstrates how investment in one area can contribute to benefits elsewhere, including reducing demand for public services.

From a women's perspective, the critical priorities in the Budget should focus on investment in care, education and training. An investment in care is essential above all to ensure the growing population of people in need of care can access the care and support they need to live with dignity and as independently as possible. It is also vital to reduce the burden of unpaid care, which falls disproportionately to women¹⁰ and creates a situation where many women are unable to participate in the labour market, thus reducing their personal life opportunities as well as reducing revenue and economic potential. Investment in care – adult social care as well as childcare - enables women to participate in the labour force and generates revenue as disposable income rises, while reliance on benefits reduces. This is the core recommendation from the UK wide Commission on a Gender Equal Economy, which stresses that a caring economy is a response to structural inequality, as well as a means to realign the economy to support the overall aim of wellbeing in a sustainable way.

⁸ Response to Feminist Recovery Plan by Northern Ireland Departments, unpublished

⁹ Response to Feminist Recovery Plan by Northern Ireland Departments, unpublished

¹⁰ See eg. Women's Budget Group (2020) [Spirals of Inequality: How unpaid care is at the heart of gender inequalities](#)

Importantly, polling for the Commission highlights that over two thirds of respondents are willing to pay more tax to support well paid and secure jobs.¹¹

A care economy will generate jobs, which are both green and sustainable jobs contributing to a resilient and sustainable economy¹². A care economy has been highlighted as a vital element of a resilient and sustainable future economy in a range of recent reports, which demonstrate that investment in care can generate significant numbers of jobs; at UK level, it has been estimated that investment bringing the care workforce to 10% of the population could create up to 2.5 million jobs, for men as well as women. This report by Women's Budget Group stresses that investing in care, rather than construction, would also allow for 50% more of investment to be recouped in direct and indirect tax revenue.¹³ Meanwhile, a new report by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) shows how the persistent view of caring as 'women's work penalises all women in the workplace, and in particular women with children; the report indicates 60% of women in EU countries have experienced some change to employment conditions as a result of childcare needs and highlights how unpaid work and caring responsibilities drive the gender pay gap. The report emphasises that revaluing care is a basis for transforming policies on care and achieving greater investment in high quality, adequately paid professional care services.¹⁴

Investment in education and childcare is essential as part of a caring economy to ensure all children can get the best start in life, as set out in the Outcomes Framework for the PfG. and is critical both in itself as an investment in children and in the long term as an investment in a healthy, highly skilled Northern Ireland with low levels of poverty. NIWEP notes the findings of the new Ulster University report on education in Northern Ireland, and would stress the importance of developing new funding models that focus on supporting achievement for all pupils, with strengthened support for those at risk of low attainment and those with special educational needs. This is critical to ensure equality for all children and young people, and support those from more disadvantaged backgrounds to fulfil their potential.

Childcare also enables parents, in particular mothers, to participate in the labour market, as outlined above in relating to investing in care. Enabling all parents to have a genuine choice regarding participation in the labour force is important for wellbeing at individual level, and for maximising access to the widest talent pool available. Maternal employment is also a key factor in reducing and preventing child poverty, while maternal education is directly linked to improved outcomes both in educational attainment and health¹⁵. The Childcare for All campaign coordinated by Employers for Childcare highlights core elements of a high quality childcare system, which should have universality and accessibility at its heart.¹⁶

Further education and professional training, in turn, will be critical to enable and support the growing cohort of unemployed people to build new skills and identify new job opportunities. This will be particularly important to respond to the structural changes the Northern Ireland economy is likely to experience as a result of the pandemic and EU exit, including a contraction of the retail and hospitality sectors, potential changes in the agri food and associated sectors and growth in knowledge and skills intensive sectors. Women and young

¹¹ See further information on the Commission for a Gender Equal Economy and the Commission report at [WBG Commission on a Gender-Equal Economy - Womens Budget Group](#)

¹² Cohen, M & McGregor, S (May 2020). [Towards a Feminist Green New Deal for the UK](#). London: Women's Budget Group

¹³ de Henau J & Himmelweit, S (June 2020) [A care led recovery from coronavirus](#). London: Women's Budget Group

¹⁴ EIGE (2021) [Gender inequalities in care and consequences for the labour market](#)

¹⁵ See eg. Harkness, S (2018) [Briefing on Female Employment and Child Inequality](#) for the [All Party Parliamentary Group on Social Science and Policy](#)

¹⁶ For further detail, see [Childcare campaign | Childcare For All | Northern Ireland \(childcareforallni.com\)](#)

people are overrepresented in the sectors hardest hit by the pandemic, and it is therefore critical that this is considered when designing and funding further education, including appropriate targeting and support for women and young people to engage with traditionally male dominated sectors.

With regard to pay, NIWEP believes that a liveable income for all workers is a basic element of a sustainable economy. This has also been highlighted by the Commission for a Gender Equal Economy as a cornerstone of a caring economy, and as noted above the proposal has public support, which has been evident in the context of the focus on care and essential workers during the ongoing pandemic. NIWEP is concerned that the lowest paid sectors, including adult social care work, are also heavily female dominated, which is a key factor in the gender pay gap, and would urge for a focus on a liveable income in all job creation initiatives. It is not sustainable that in work poverty is the most significant type of poverty, as this increases demand for benefits and public services in a context where employers gain the benefit and workers remain highly vulnerable. NIWEP would therefore urge for public sector pay to be assessed against this wider context, while NIWEP believes that the public sector has responsibilities towards its workforce, which should be honoured in line with commitments.

NIWEP would emphasise that the living wage principle should be extended to cover posts funded through public sector grants. This should include all relevant costs, including legally mandated pension contributions.

Consultation

Finally, NIWEP would have welcomed an opportunity to engage with the Budget process at an earlier stage. While the challenging circumstances are clear, as is the timescale taken at Westminster, it would have been possible to engage with stakeholders regarding strategic priorities and subpriorities at the level of principle, throughout the Budget preparation process. This would have contributed additional, concrete evidence to support the Budget process, and would have highlighted both specific areas to target as well as interlinkages between issues, which can inform decision making by showing how investment in one area can generate benefits in other areas, resulting in overall improved impact and potential savings. This, in turn, would have helped ensure resources are targeted effectively.

The current short timescale for consultation does not enable stakeholders to effectively engage with the process. As the Budget Bill is also already proceeding through the Assembly, it appears that the potential impact of consultation responses will be limited, which is likely to raise concern and contribute to consultation fatigue among stakeholders. NIWEP would urge for a review of the process that led to this short timescale, which can inform more comprehensive future approaches to consultation. Such a process is essential in order to ensure the widest and most robust evidence is available to decision makers preparing and agreeing the Budget, which will lead to a comprehensive, well targeted Budget. It will also help ensure confidence in the process, as stakeholders will be able to see how the final position is arrived at. This in itself is likely to support engagement in good faith, based on an understanding that resources will be allocated as fairly as possible using a strong evidence base and transparent process.