



**NORTHERN IRELAND WOMEN'S BUDGET GROUP (NIWBG)
RESPONSE TO THE CONSULTATION ON THE DRAFT BUDGET 2026-
2029/30**

Department of Finance

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The Northern Ireland Women's Budget Group (NIWBG) is made up of organisations and individuals from the women's sector, trade union movement, academia and wider civil society in Northern Ireland, with the aim of implementing a gender equal economy. The members of the NIWBG scrutinise policy and budgetary matters with a gendered lens to bring attention to the different ways in which women and men are affected by government-level decision-making. It aims to provide policy- and budget-makers with policy analysis to secure substantive equality for women and men through the assessment of gender impact.

The NIWBG works with a range of organisations in Northern Ireland on devolved issues and with sister organisations in Wales, Scotland, England and Ireland on East-West and North-South issues.

We hope that our response to the consultation will be considered by the Department of Finance.

If there are any questions or comments regarding the NIWBG's response, please direct them to the Coordinator for the NIWBG, Alexandra Brennan (info@niwbq.org).

Introduction

The NIWBG welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation, and we thank the Department official who attended our meeting in February and engaged with our members on the draft Budget 26-29/30. In this response, we highlight:

- The move to multi-year budgeting;
- The financial pressures facing Northern Ireland and how it will particularly impact women without intervention;
- Ways in which the Department can design and allocate spend differently;
- The interconnectedness of the draft Budget 26-29/30 and the Programme for Government (PfG);
- Proposed revenue raising measures and their potential impact on women;
- The siloed nature of the Transformation fund;
- Increases to Financial Transactions Capital (FTC); and
- The cumulative EQIA and Equality Commission guidance on mitigating impact

We hope the Department considers our response when finalising the Budget, and we would welcome the opportunity to meet with the Department to further discuss our response.

Multi-Year Budgeting

We welcome the Department's important step towards multi-year budgeting, as this is something the NIWBG has long called for in order to secure greater fiscal sustainability. Multi-year budgets allow for long-term planning, which facilitates a better understanding of how present spend aligns with future spend. This is key to enacting preventative policy measures that will combat the short-term, responsive spending cycle we are stuck in, which continues to contribute to the fiscal crisis. However, multi-year budgeting alone does not result in better budgets; it must be combined with innovative decision-making, in-depth analysis of potential positive and negative impacts, and enhanced cross-departmental collaboration.

Fiscal Pressures

The NIWBG recognises that the Department is working with an extremely challenging financial package. However, the NIWBG has acknowledged these constraints in our responses to [Budget 21-22](#), [Budget 25-26](#), as well our responses to the EQIAs in the [23-24](#) and [24-25](#) financial years in the absence of full budget consultations. This pattern of financial difficulty, while not absent in Britain, is particularly felt in Northern Ireland as,

“The region’s fiscal woes are not simply the result of recent political dysfunction or short-term budgetary shocks, but rather a reflection of persistent and widening misalignment between revenue capacity, expenditure demands, economic performance and inadequacies in the UK’s intergovernmental funding arrangements.”¹

This assessment from the Nevin Economic Research Institute (NERI) highlights impacts on Northern Ireland’s fiscal sustainability that are out of the control of the Department, yet the Department plays a key role in not only challenging the funding arrangements, but assessing and making the necessary changes to internal processes to move towards a more sustainable position in the face of continued funding constraints.

In the Ministerial Statement to the Assembly, Minister O’Dowd recognised that, “...*both the Resource and Capital DEL funding position remain extremely constrained*”;² this is evident as no Department got the funding that it had bid for. Despite the additional Barnett Consequentials announced in the Autumn Budget, the Minister acknowledged that, “...*when taken over a four-year period, it falls far short of what is needed*”³.

Impact on Women

¹ NERI Wilson, L., Mac Flynn, P. (2025). *Beyond Budget Balancing: Towards a Sustainable Fiscal Settlement for Northern Ireland*. (NERI Report Series No 41 - Beyond Budget Balancing - Towards a Sustainable Fiscal Settlement for NI.pdf)

² DoF (2026). *Draft Budget 2026-2029/30*. (<https://www.finance-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2026-01/Draft%20Budget%202026-29%2030%20Document%20-%202021-01-2026%20-%20PUBLICATION.pdf>)

³ Ibid.

Process change takes time, and securing fiscal sustainability will not happen overnight. However, the longer it takes to secure fiscal sustainability, the greater the impact of the financial constraints will be felt by the most vulnerable in our society. Much of the planned Resource DEL goes to day-to-day spending on things such as services, which will undoubtedly face further squeezes based on the current budget. This will have a particular impact on women, as women are more likely to rely on benefits and other services⁴.

Already, women are more likely to be in low-paid and precarious work, earn below the living wage compared with men, are more likely to be 'economically inactive' due to caring responsibilities and are more likely to be lone parents (93%)⁵. The combination of budget crises and the cost-of-living crisis have led to an increase in both relative and absolute child poverty in Northern Ireland (22-23), and children's poverty is women's poverty as women will bear the brunt of these impacts for as long as they can before they cannot prevent it from impacting their children⁶.

Women are deeply affected during times of financial difficulty, and Northern Ireland has faced nothing but financial difficulty over the past years. While we understand that the achievement of fiscal sustainability will take time and investment, we urge the Department to prioritise this. However without intervention from Government, women, particularly the most vulnerable women and other protected equality groups, will continue to face deepening inequalities. Therefore it is key that equality, particularly gender equality, is at the heart of this budget. In the Cumulative EQIA, every Department has noted that 'men and women generally' will be faced with either *major adverse impacts* or *minor adverse impacts*⁷. Every Executive Department, including this Department, must make significant efforts to mitigate against these negative impacts as the worsening of gender equality will not only hurt the most vulnerable in our society,

⁴ WRDA (2025). *Women will be most impacted by new domestic rating measures*. (<https://www.wrda.net/blog/women-will-be-most-impacted-by-new-domestic-rating-measures>)

⁵ WRDA (2025). *Women will be most impacted by new domestic rating measures* (<https://www.wrda.net/blog/women-will-be-most-impacted-by-new-domestic-rating-measures>)

⁶ Women's Policy Group (WPG) (2021). *NI COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan: Relaunch – One Year On* ([WPG-COVID-19-Feminist-Recovery-Plan-Relaunch-One-Year-On.pdf](https://www.wrda.net/WPG-COVID-19-Feminist-Recovery-Plan-Relaunch-One-Year-On.pdf) ([wrda.net](https://www.wrda.net)))

⁷ DoF (2026). *Draft Budget 2026-29/30 Equality Assessment*. (<https://www.finance-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2026-01/Budget%202026-29%2030%20Equality%20Impacts.pdf>).

but will increase cost and delivery pressures on health, education, housing, and other struggling services.

Different Ways of Delivering

In the Ministerial Statement, the Minister acknowledged the extremely difficult fiscal situation. He called for a change in process, saying, “*The need for transformation and consideration of different ways of delivering could not be clearer*”⁸. The NIWBG agrees with this statement, as we have been calling for changes to the budget process and wider decision-making processes since our inception. It is clear that the way that we develop the budget, implement it, and monitor it does not provide a sustainable foundation for fiscal sustainability year-on-year, and oftentimes leads to opaque decision-making and siloed patterns of working.

Below, the NIWBG identifies two avenues of direction that the Department could take to change the budget process for the better.. Both complement each other and would help foster more in-depth analysis of spend and its impacts, help target spend to address inequalities more acutely, and bring more transparency to the process. These changes alone cannot bring about the fiscal sustainability that is necessary, but they will move NI towards that goal while creating a budget that actively works towards equality aims.

Gender Budgeting

In January 2025, the NI Assembly passed a motion which stated, “*That this Assembly recognises the role of gender-responsive budgeting in addressing systemic gender inequalities, enhancing the effectiveness of public expenditure, and improving public scrutiny...and calls on the Minister of Finance to work with Executive colleagues to introduce comprehensive gender-responsive budgeting measures for the 2025-2026 Budget...*”. Since the passing of the motion, we have met with the Minister to discuss how we can support the Department in introducing gender budgeting measures. The

⁸ DoF (n 2)

NIWBG acknowledges that the Department has made small changes to bring greater transparency to the budget process such as the [Equality Budget Statement](#) produced by the Department for Budget 25-26, the Factsheets in [Budget 25-26](#) and [Budget 26-29/30](#) that accompanied this Budget that demonstrates how NI is funded, and the report produced by the Department analysing the connection between [Budget 25-26 and the Programme for Government](#). However, to achieve fiscal sustainability, the adoption of gender budgeting tools must expand with the Department and across all Executive Departments.

Gender budgeting requires Government Departments to analyse the different impact of the budget on people of different genders, starting as early in the policy-development and 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 policy-development and 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.

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.

The current equality screening and impact assessment duties under Section 75 provide policy infrastructure to progress gender budgeting. The EQIA process allows space to identify budget impacts on women and opportunities to promote more gender equal outcomes. However, too often the analysis included in the documents produced focuses only on equal treatment or stops at the point of acknowledging pre-existing inequalities.

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 assessment⁹ should take place early in the process and at successive stages where decisions are made. It appears that currently equality 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.

A gender budget statement is just one of a suite of tools that can be employed with the implementation of gender budgeting. Published alongside the annual budget, the statement is an opportunity for the Department to highlight where resources were allocated to promote gender and wider equality, as well as note equality gaps and address impacts. Using gender as the foundation for this equality analysis is key, as it helps to facilitate an intersectional approach to analysis as opposed to viewing each equality ground in a silo. Acknowledging the issues at hand and demonstrating how resources will be used to mitigate/eradicate inequalities is not only useful for the Department, it also brings greater transparency to the budgeting process, with clearer links to where public money goes and the positive impact it can have on society.

Undertaking a gender data audit to better understand what data is available to the Department, where there are gaps, and how data can support better fiscal decision-making is a key tool in the gender budgeting process. This exercise relies on involvement from across the Department and requires the responsibility of equality aims to be shared across *all* roles in the Department.

Incremental Budgeting vs. Zero-Based Budgeting

⁹ ECNI (2010). [Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998: A Guide for Public Authorities](#) p51

¹⁰ OECD (2023), *OECD Best Practices for Gender Budgeting*, *OECD Journal on Budgeting*, vol. 23/1, (<https://doi.org/10.1787/9574ed6f-en>).

In Budget 26-29/30, the Department uses incremental budgeting to develop the budget for Resource DEL yet uses zero-based budgeting to develop the budget for Capital DEL. The NIWBG strongly believes the Department should have applied zero-based budgeting to both Capital DEL and Resource DEL when developing this budget. The NIWBG is not opposed to incremental budgeting, but for incremental budgeting to be successful, the baseline budget must be a success. As highlighted before in this response, previous budgets have left adverse impacts unmitigated, have forced Departments to work with austerity budgets, and have led to overspending where there were no funds to overspend with.

Through our previous responses to annual budgets, we have called for greater scrutiny and analysis of past spend to better anticipate the needs and priorities of Budget 26-29/30. The application of zero-based budgeting for Resource DEL would have facilitated this in-depth analysis to ensure that planned spend for Budget 26-29/30 would not repeat inefficiencies and adverse impacts from previous budgets and build a budget based on short-, medium-, and long-term priorities identified in the PfG and by the DoF and other executive departments.

In 2020, the government of Wallonia, a region in Belgium, undertook a zero-based budgeting exercise as a part of the Belgian Federal Government's National Recovery and Resilience Plan. In the OECD's analysis of the programme, they noted that the government sought out the zero-based budgeting approach to,

"...systematically review all spending from the point of view of effectiveness, efficiency and coherence with government policy, combined with a detailed review of revenues, in order to identify the scope to manoeuvre that could be used to deploy new operating and social transfer expenditures, to strengthen service levels, and to improve equal distribution of resources".¹¹

While the report noted that this exercise does take significant resourcing, the multi-year budget was the perfect opportunity to develop the foundations of the Resource DEL

¹¹ OECD (2022). *Supporting the Walloon region to build capacity for spending reviews*. ([https://one.oecd.org/document/GOV/SBO\(2023\)4/en/pdf](https://one.oecd.org/document/GOV/SBO(2023)4/en/pdf)).

spend through a zero-based budgeting approach and use incremental budgeting to determine changes within the multi-year budget period.

The Corporate Finance Institute (CFI)¹² notes that the advantages of incremental budgeting are its simplicity, low-cost nature, and consistency. However, the listed disadvantages of incremental budgeting are that it:

1. Promotes unnecessary spending;
2. Discourages innovation;
3. Fails to account for changes and external factors; and
4. Lacks an incentive for a comprehensive review

In times of fiscal difficulty, the disadvantages of incremental budgeting are significantly greater and more damaging than the time and monetary requirements needed to conduct zero-based budgeting.

Budget 2026-29/30 and the Programme for Government (PfG)

According to The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), aligning the annual budget with strategic policy goals and priorities is key to good budgeting¹³. While it is clear that the Department has made efforts to make a stronger connection between Budget 26-29/30 and the PfG, the priorities identified in the PfG receive piecemeal funding when considering the size of the overall Budget, particularly the allocation for *Ending Violence Against Women and Girls* despite how significant the issue is.

In the Department's report, *Aligning Spending with Priorities: A Comparison of Programme for Government with 2025-2026 Budget Allocations*, it is noted that, "*Linking the PfG directly to budget allocations, whilst being a long-time aspiration, presents significant challenges due to the complex nature of governance, fiscal constraints, and*

¹² CFI (2020). *Incremental Budgeting*. (<https://corporatefinanceinstitute.com/resources/fpa/incremental-budgeting/>).

¹³ OECD (2019). *OECD Good Practices for Performance Budgeting* (https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/oecd-good-practices-for-performance-budgeting_c90b0305-en.html)

the limitations of budget classification systems"¹⁴. Besides the move to a multi-year budget, there is not much that is different between the circumstances surrounding Budget 25-26 and Budget 26-29/30. Despite this, we encourage the Department to repeat this exercise to record the connection between the priorities of the PfG to the allocation of spend in Budget 26-29/30. This remains an important monitoring tool for the Department in terms of improving the connection between the PfG and spending decisions.

Revenue Raising

In the face of fiscal constraints, there have been many conversations around revenue raising options. The NIWBG has responded to a number of consultations in relation to revenue raising proposals from the Department. Our considerations towards particular revenue raising measures have not changed - revenue raising measures like service charges will not raise enough to cover the funds needed to deliver good public services. Additionally, projected revenue raised from charges will not happen within months of implementation but within years, while the impact of these charges on those struggling financially will be felt immediately. The implementation of revenue raising measures, such as prescription/water and sewerage charges, will also not be a cost-free policy decision. There will be administration costs associated with delivering the agreed revenue raising measure, which may be equal to or more than the revenue generated.

Ultimately, this is a short-termist approach to the current budget crisis. It will not solve the crisis, but it will cause further economic burden on those struggling the most.

Transformation Fund

The idea of the Transformation Fund is welcome, but we have concerns as to whether opportunities have been missed and around how transformative it is in reality. The

¹⁴ DoF (2025). *Aligning Spending with Priorities: A Comparison of Programme for Government with 2026-2026 Budget Allocations*. ([PfG Alignment to Final Budget 2025-26 Report - October 2025 - web version.pdf](#)).

nature of the fund - where Departments bid for 'transformative' projects that then must be endorsed by the Public Sector Transformation Board - does not lend itself to a change in delivery and process but acts more like one-off funding awards to temporarily deal with a pre-existing problem. The current projects funded are:

SPENDING PROFILE (subject to change)

Figures presented in £000's

Transformation Funding Requirement		24-25	25-26	26-27	27-28	28-29	Total
Transformation projects agreed for funding by the Executive							
Department of Health	Primary Care Multidisciplinary Team (MDT) Programme	1,000	6,800	11,200	16,700	25,300	61,000
Department of Education	Special Educational Needs (SEN) Transformation	600	7,560	11,000	6,965	1,375	27,500
Department of Justice*	Speeding up Justice and Transforming the Criminal Justice System	395	4,788	4,620	5,115	5,533	20,451
Department of Infrastructure	Natural Solutions – Urban Drainage	0	375	4,625	5,000	5,000	15,000
Department of Infrastructure	Transforming Planning	50	1,150	600	600	600	3,000
Department of Justice	Modernisation of Electronic Monitoring (Tagging)	0	656	559	501	474	2,190
Project Total		2,045	21,329	32,604	34,881	38,282	129,141
Additional transformation funding required							
Digital Maturity Assessment		300	0	0	0	0	300
Board support**		0	750	750	750	750	3,000
Additional Total		300	750	750	750	750	3,300
Grand Total		2,345	22,079	33,354	35,631	39,032	132,441

*'Speeding up Justice and Transforming the Criminal Justice System' is a joint bid between the Department of Justice (DoJ) and the Public Prosecution Service (PPS). For 2024/25, £178,000 will be allocated to PPS and £217,000 will be allocated to DoJ.

**This is an upper estimate and will depend on the scope of Board's work; administrative support, expert advice, and research required to ensure project delivery.

<https://www.finance-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2025-03/Annual%20Profiling%20of%20Transformation%20Projects.pdf>

The NIWBG is not arguing that these areas are not in need of transformation, but rather that the funding does not facilitate cross-departmental transformation - the fund is delivered through siloes. There is no description of these projects and how they plan to execute the transformation, so it cannot be determined whether or not this funding will truly be used to transform these systems or be used to plug funding gaps. Without minutes from the Public Sector Transformation Board meetings that determine the allocation of funds, we cannot see the justification for why these specific projects have been chosen and how they interact with the wider transformation of services and processes internal and external to government.

Increases to FTC

Noted in Budget 26-29/30 is the increase in Financial Transactions Capital (FTC), which can only be used to provide investment in the private sector. The NIWBG is concerned that, in a fiscally constrained environment, increased funding/loans for the private sector further restricts investment in the public sector. RalSe collated the projects funded through FTC from 2012-2013 until 2022-2023, highlighting that the majority of allocations went to InvestNI funds and affordable housing schemes¹⁵. While investment in housing is needed, what remains crucially important is that private sector loans do not take the place of or take away from investment in public sector delivery of these services.

Cumulative EQIA and Mitigating Impact

We welcome the publication of a cumulative EQIA alongside Budget 26-29/30, and we hope that other departmental EQIAs are put out for consultation in the near future. Without them, it is hard to get a clear understanding of what the overall impacts of this budget will be on equality characteristics, particularly gender.

It is positive that the Department has put out a cumulative EQIA and there is more information for this cumulative EQIA than for previous budgets; certain departments have noted that they will try to mitigate against the identified impacts. However, analysis of impacts on not only gender but other equality grounds remains siloed, and the analysis provided is more of a snapshot of impacts as opposed to an in-depth assessment of the impacts on each equality area. It is unclear what exactly the impacts are outside of the snapshot provided under each characteristic, which is crucial to understanding the overall impact of the Budget. Annex B is a helpful addition to the cumulative EQIA, but the variety in responses provided by Departments - how detailed they were, if they referred to impacts on specific equality groups, the organisational structure of the response - does not lend to efficient cross-departmental analysis.

¹⁵ RalSe (2025). *Financial Transaction Capital: Usage and Challenges*
(<https://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/raise/publications/2022-2027/2025/finance/3125.pdf>).

Section 75 calls for the mitigation of impacts where possible, but also calls on Departments to seek out opportunities to promote equality.

We direct the Department to guidance from the Equality Commission¹⁶ on “Consideration of measures which might mitigate any adverse impact; and alternative policies which might better achieve the promotion of equality of opportunity”:

The consideration of mitigating measures and alternative policies is at the heart of the EQIA process. Different options must be developed which reflect different ways of delivering the policy aims. The consideration of mitigation of adverse impacts is intertwined with the consideration of alternative policies. Mitigation can take the form of lessening the severity of the adverse impact. Annex 1, para. 4.1.

Ways of delivering policy aims which have a less adverse effect on the relevant equality category, or which better promote equality of opportunity for the relevant equality category, must in particular be considered. Consideration must be given to whether separate implementation strategies are necessary for the policy to be effective for the relevant group. The following must be considered:

- *How does each option further or hinder equality of opportunity?*
- *How does each option reinforce or challenge stereotypes which constitute or influence equality of opportunity?*
- *What are the consequences for the group concerned and for the public authority of not adopting an option more favourable to equality of opportunity?*
- *How will the relevant representative groups be advised of the new or changed policy or service?*
- *If an economic appraisal is necessary - What are the costs of implementing each option? Will the social and economic benefits to the relevant group of implementing the option outweigh the costs to the public authority or other groups?*

¹⁶Equality Commission for Northern Ireland. (2005). *Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998: Practical Guidance on Equality Impact Assessment*. ([https://www.equalityni.org/ECNI/media/ECNI/Publications/Employers%20and%20Service%20Providers/Public%20Authorities/EQIA-PracticalGuidance\(2005\).pdf](https://www.equalityni.org/ECNI/media/ECNI/Publications/Employers%20and%20Service%20Providers/Public%20Authorities/EQIA-PracticalGuidance(2005).pdf))

- *Does the public authority have international obligations which would be breached by, or could be furthered by, each of the options? Annex 1, para. 4.2*

Clear evidence of the consideration of the impacts of alternatives must be apparent in the relevant consultation documentation. Annex 1, para. 4.3

We encourage the Department to incorporate this guidance within their analysis and development processes of the draft Budget and the cumulative EQIA. Considering the scope and potential impacts of the Budget, analysis and mitigation of impact must be thorough and clear.

Conclusion

We encourage the Department to take on the recommendations of this response and the responses we have endorsed. It is crucial that this Budget focuses on the needs of those most vulnerable to impacts of the current fiscal crisis. Again, we hope our response is considered by the Department and we would welcome the opportunity to meet with the Department to further discuss our response.