



NORTHERN IRELAND WOMEN'S BUDGET GROUP (NIWBG) RESPONSE TO THE CONSULTATION ON THE DRAFT EXECUTIVE ELC STRATEGY

Department of Education

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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 Education.

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 for the opportunity to engage at in-person consultation events. In this response, we highlight:

- The structure of the Strategy;
- The gendered nature of childcare;
- The removal of prioritised places for socially disadvantaged children;
- The Women's Centre Childcare Fund;
- The Childcare for All campaign's checklist; and
- The benefit of gender budgeting for the Strategy

We hope the Department considers our response when finalising the Strategy, and we would welcome the opportunity to meet with the Department to further discuss our response. We would also like to endorse the responses of the Women's Policy Group and the Women's Regional Consortium.

Structure of the Strategy

As we have voiced at departmental consultation events, we are greatly concerned that this document is not a proper strategy. One of our key concerns is the lack of costings attached to identified actions. We raised this issue with the Department in November 2025, recommending that estimated costings for not only the Strategy as a whole but for specific actions should be included in the Strategy. We reiterated these concerns again in the new year when it became apparent that the costings would not be included. Also absent from this strategy are timelines aligned with the listed actions. Considering that this is a ten-year strategy with the potential for enormous improvements to the lives of children, parents/carers, and workers - a clear idea of how and when each action is going to be rolled out is crucial for planning purposes. The actions that the Department has included that do have some costing/timeline attached to them are things the Department is already doing or things the Department has already announced.

Gendered Nature of Childcare

It was disappointing that the gendered nature of childcare was not explored and explicitly targeted in this Strategy, as improved childcare provision is something the women's sector has campaigned for since the 1970s. Women are much more likely to be carers in their adult life than men, which greatly impacts earnings in the immediate and in the future. For example, women have a 70% chance of becoming unpaid carers as adults and begin their caring role 11 years before men¹. 68% of the 1.25 million 'sandwich carers' (those caring for children and adults at the same time) in the UK are women². Women who are economically inactive have also cited caring and home responsibilities as the second most common reason they are not looking for work (with long-term sick being the first)³. Without proper childcare provision, many women are not able to get into work or participate in skills attainment, upskilling, and/or reskilling schemes. The lack of unaffordable and inaccessible childcare in Northern Ireland means that women taking on the role of being an unpaid carer is not so much a question of if, but when; and the consequences create significant barriers to progressing gender equality.

The Strategy also failed to consider that people interact with childcare in different ways depending on their circumstances, and that a 'one-size fits all' approach will not suit a significant portion of parents and children. For example, rural women struggle both with the cost and the availability of childcare provisions, with one participant in a dialogue with the Commission on a Gender Equal Economy stating: "Rural childcare is almost non-existent...where there is provision it is often focused on older kids – after school

¹ WRC, CarersNI (2024). *Career or Care: Women, unpaid caring and employment in Northern Ireland* (<https://www.carersuk.org/media/ahxaiaaj/career-or-care-women-unpaid-caring-and-employment-in-northern-ireland.pdf>).

² AgeUK (2019). *Breaking Point: The social care burden on women* (<https://www.ageuk.org.uk/our-impact/campaigning/care-in-crisis/breaking-point-report/#:~:text=There%20are%201.25%20million%20sandwich,more%20at%20risk%20of%20it>).

³ NISRA (2023). *Women in Northern Ireland 2023* (<https://www.nisra.gov.uk/news/women-northern-ireland-2023>).

clubs and so on, but nothing for the younger ones.”⁴ For parents but particularly lone parents (of which 93%⁵ are women), 22.5 hours of early education without any plans for developing wrap-around care will greatly inhibit one’s ability to get into let alone maintain even part-time hours. This becomes even more difficult when parents are relying on public transportation to drop off their child before heading to work themselves. The proposed format also does not take into consideration the needs of parents who do shift work, as the model for people working 9-5 will not suit their working pattern.

The majority of people working in the sector are women, but they face low-pay, part-time and precarious work, with little opportunity for career progression. While the Strategy acknowledges this, the Department does not demonstrate how they plan to improve the conditions for workers.

Removal of Prioritised Places

There are few timelines in the Strategy, but one action with an assigned timeframe is the removal of the prioritisation of socially disadvantaged children. Under Objective 1.1, the Department writes that:

“In September 2026, consult on legislative changes to remove the current statutory admissions criteria prioritising children from socially disadvantaged circumstances when applying for funded pre-school education places”.

Within the same box, the Department lists the action:

⁴ Commission on a Gender Equal Economy (2020). *Creating a caring economy: a call to action*. (<https://wbq.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/WBG-Report-v10.pdf>)

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>).

“By September 2029, approve 75% funded pre-school places across Northern Ireland on a full-time (22.5 hours per week) basis”

Removing the prioritisation of places for socially disadvantaged children *before* achieving 100% funded full-time pre-school places, which is the ultimate goal of this Strategy, is extremely harmful to the wellbeing and future of socially disadvantaged children. There is no reason not to keep the prioritised places until the Department can offer 100% funded full-time pre-school, particularly as both relative and absolute child poverty is increasing⁶.

WCCF Model

We direct the Department to the response of the WPG, who highlight the success of the Women’s Centre Childcare Fund (WCCF). This is an example of a Northern Ireland model of public and accessible childcare which improves the wellbeing of both children and mothers:

The Women’s Centre Childcare Fund (WCCF), established in April 2008 and funded by the Department for Communities, enables Women’s Centres to provide childcare places that are 100% supported for the most disadvantaged children in our communities. These childcare places ensure that disadvantaged children have an opportunity to experience a childcare setting, to socialise, interact, play and learn in a supported environment. These supported places also give women the opportunity to access a wide range of programmes available in their local Women’s Centre including training and education, back to work programmes, counselling, health and wellbeing programmes and a range of advice services.

For some women (including ethnic minorities and lone parents) the prospect of increased economic participation can depend on the availability of appropriate integrated childcare

⁶ Public Accounts Committee (2024). *Public Accounts Committee – Report on Child Poverty in Northern Ireland*. (<https://www.niassembly.gov.uk/assembly-business/committees/2022-2027/public-accounts/reports/report-on-child-poverty-in-northern-ireland/>)

and access to education/training opportunities at community level. A lack of appropriate integrated childcare and community education acts as a fundamental barrier to the engagement of socioeconomically disadvantaged women in education, training and in employment. This is the kind of integrated provision that is provided by WCCF and which is so vital to these women.

Despite the importance of this childcare model in tackling disadvantage and promoting equality WCCF continues to be administered on an annual basis and has been subject to Departmental cuts/austerity measures since 2012 which resulted in the overall original allocation being reduced by just over 20% up until 2022. Over the last three years the Department has increased this funding slightly to those Women's Centres in receipt of it to help them to meet 'Cost of Living' increases. While this is positive there is insufficient investment in WCCF to address existing levels of need.

The Women's Regional Consortium believes that this is a hugely important area of funding for women and children in disadvantaged areas. We argue that any progress on childcare provision in Northern Ireland must invest in low cost/no cost childcare provision for marginalised women in disadvantaged and rural areas.

Yet, the draft Early Learning and Childcare Strategy only mentions WCCF **once** and that singular mention is as part of a list of Existing Programmes in Appendix Two. The Women's Regional Consortium is disappointed that it has not been given greater focus within the draft Strategy as an important model for the delivery of childcare for children facing the most disadvantage.

WCCF should be specifically included in the final Early Learning and Childcare Strategy as a funding and delivery model, taken forward on a multi-year basis, to provide for a planned, longer-term response to the need for childcare provision for children facing disadvantage.

Childcare for All Campaign Checklist

Ahead of the publication of the draft Strategy, the Childcare for All campaign group, of which the NIWBG is a member, held an event at Stormont to highlight what we believe is essential for a successful childcare strategy. After the consultation opened, we found that only one of the nine listed in checklist was appropriately covered in the Strategy, but without timelines and costings attached, it was unclear how the Department planned to deliver change.

The nine items on the checklist are:

1. Will all children have access to high quality childcare that meets their educational and developmental needs in a safe, nurturing environment supporting them to achieve their full potential, including children with additional needs including SEN, language barriers, etc.?
2. Will no child live in poverty as a result of a parent's inability to access or stay in paid work or due to the high cost of childcare?
3. Will all types of childcare settings be enabled to deliver high quality, sustainable, accessible childcare across a range of settings through strategic investment by Government?
4. Will the childcare workforce be valued and supported through proper investment in skills development and career progression, and will workers be recognised as professionals and see that recognition reflected in fair pay and decent terms and conditions?
5. Will specific support for community-based childcare be increased and expanded such as that delivered through the Women's Centre Childcare Fund (WCCF) model as this model best meets the needs of low-income women and especially those who live in areas of increased deprivation?
6. Will all parents be able to access, stay in and progress in paid work, or education and training facilitated by affordable, accessible and flexible childcare?
7. Will all parents be supported to undertake the amount of paid work that suits the needs of their family with adequate financial support to live free from poverty?

8. Will there be a significant reduction in the gender pay gap and social inequality through ensuring that no-one's employment options are constrained by lack of access to affordable, flexible childcare?
9. Will economic growth be stimulated through employers having access to a wider pool of skilled, experienced potential employees for recruitment?

We strongly encourage the Department to incorporate the checklist into the Strategy as we firmly believe that, without them, no childcare strategy can be successful.

Gender Budgeting

Funding has already been identified as an issue, however we believe the application of gender budgeting tools will help the Department to prioritise and target spend with the intention of progressing equality. 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. 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 crisis⁷. We cannot afford to continue

⁷ MacDonald, E.M. (2018) The gendered impact of austerity: Cuts are widening the poverty gap between women and men. British Politics and Policy at LSE. (<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/gendered-impacts-of-austerity-cuts/>)

Charlton, E. (2023) This is Why Women are Bearing the Brunt of the Cost of Living Crisis According to Research. World Economic Forum. (<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2023/01/cost-of-living-crisis-women-gender-gap/>)

making decisions at the expense of women and risk further degradations to gender equality and additional intersecting equalities 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.

We recognise that the current equality screening and impact assessment duties under Section 75 provide policy infrastructure that could be used 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 these documents 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 assessment typically takes place at the very end of the budget planning process or after the budget has been finalised. The OECD⁸ 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.

⁸ OECD (2023), OECD Best Practices for Gender Budgeting, OECD Journal on Budgeting, vol. 23/1, (<https://doi.org/10.1787/9574ed6f-en>).

Conclusion

We encourage the Department to take on the recommendations of this response and the responses we have endorsed. It is crucial that this Strategy focuses on the most vulnerable with clear costings, timelines, and with a focus on progressing equality. Again, we would welcome the opportunity to meet with the Department to further discuss our response.