



# **NI WOMEN'S BUDGET GROUP**

## **NORTHERN IRELAND WOMEN'S BUDGET GROUP (NIWBG) RESPONSE TO DRAFT PROGRAMME FOR GOVERNMENT CONSULTATION 2024-2027**

**The Executive Office**

**Prepared by Alexandra Brennan (Coordinator) of NIWBG**

**November 2024**

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 Executive Office.

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](mailto:info@niwbq.org)).

## Introduction

We welcome the opportunity to respond to this consultation and we hope that this document guides decision-making across Departments for the remainder of this mandate. Northern Ireland has not had a Programme for Government (PfG) since the 2011-2015 mandate, and we firmly believe this absence has contributed to disjointed decision-making and spending issues. It is positive that there is a draft PfG to respond to, but it is crucial that this document is edited, published before the budget, and that it is monitored throughout the mandate. Below, we outline our comments and recommendations that we hope will strengthen this document. We welcome further engagement with TEO to discuss our response and see how we can help in strengthening it. Additionally, we endorse the responses of the Women's Policy Group (to which we contributed), Women's Regional Consortium, Women's TEC, and the Cliff Edge Coalition.

## General Comments

Before the PfG is published, we believe that there are significant changes that need to be made in order to ensure the success of this document. At the moment, it does not feel so much as an overarching, guiding policy but rather a wish list of priorities without much connectivity. While the missions seem to be conceptual, it is unclear why they would not all underpin the listed priorities, as opposed to being separate from the priorities. For the PfG to be impactful, clarity, accountability, and connectivity must anchor the continued development, implementation, and monitoring of this document.

By making the nine priorities listed in the PfG specific pieces of policy, there is a lot that is missing that should be included in the PfG:

- **Anti-poverty** and **equality** should have been included as missions that underpin each priority area, as none of the issues that the priority areas aim to resolve will improve if anti-poverty and equality measures are not embedded in their actions.
- The **social-inclusion strategies** (Gender Equality Strategy, Anti-Poverty Strategy, LGBTQ+ Strategy, Disability Strategy) are absent from the PfG, missing an opportunity to cement the implementation of cross-cutting strategies that would help deliver the priorities listed in the PfG.
- There is one mention of a commitment made in **New Decade New Approach (NDNA)**, despite several outstanding commitments more than 4 years on. We have mentioned the lack of movement on the social-inclusion strategies, but there are a number of other commitments made in NDNA that have not been accounted for within this document that would strengthen the listed priorities, such as Age Discrimination Law and extension of access to assisted conception, for example.
- A **commitment to a rights-based framework** is missing from the PfG, which is a significant absence as Northern Ireland, as part of the UK, has obligations that are and will continue to be measured on the international stage. A rights-based framework is key to ensuring that the guiding priorities are supported by recommendations from leading rights experts and serves as a strong foundation for progressive decision-making.

- We are concerned with the lack of acknowledgment of our **rapidly ageing population** and **adult social care**. By 2030, 1 in 5 people will be over the age of 65 and by 2040, 1 in 4 people will be over the age of 65 (currently, 1 in 6 people are over the age of 65)<sup>1</sup>. This is a particularly gendered issue, as women are more likely to be unpaid carers<sup>2</sup> and will likely need to leave work or lower hours<sup>3</sup> due to cuts to domiciliary care packages and wider strains on the healthcare system. The social care sector is also on its knees, with many considering leaving due to the precarious conditions of these roles<sup>4</sup>. Targeted efforts to improve working conditions, staff retention, and skills attainment in the social care sector are crucial to preparing for this crisis.

According to The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), aligning the annual budget with strategic policy goals and priorities is key to good budgeting<sup>5</sup>. Due to the lack of any PfG over nearly the past decade, our annual budgets have been developed with no guiding strategy. It is essential that this PfG provides a strong basis for the development of the 2025/2026 Budget. However, the structure of the draft contributes to issues around clarity, accountability, and connectivity. Even though the PfG should be a guiding document outlining plans for what is and what should happen over the course of the mandate, it is unclear what the actual commitments are within the document. Throughout the draft, various words are bolded and one would assume that they are the actions for those priorities. However, there does not seem to be any rhyme or reason to this system, as there are clear actions that are not bolded and things that are bolded that are not actions. This makes it confusing to the reader to understand what TEO is committing to, which will be crucial in order to monitor the PfG for the remainder of the mandate. Additionally, language that is used within the draft makes it difficult to discern what is an action and what is not. For example, language such as, “...we are taking steps to introduce,” and “We will invest in taking steps to ensure...” does not provide any clear commitment to the proposed actions that follow. Aspirational sentiments contribute to painting the larger picture that the PfG works within, but the PfG must also be very direct in distinguishing what will be actioned over the next 3 years and what will not be.

Clearer actions, as mentioned above, will help in determining how resources are prioritised based on low/medium/high-cost and short/medium/long-term actions. However, the lack of timeframes around the actions also contributes to the difficulty in aligning the PfG with the Budget. Within the draft, there are but a few instances where potential actions are given some sort of timeframe of completion. In order to determine when commitments will be implemented

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<sup>1</sup>COPNI (2024). *The Commissioner for Older People and Age NI call for Northern Ireland's ageing population to be prioritised in Programme for Government*. (<https://copni.org/news/articles/the-commissioner-for-older-people-and-age-ni-call-for-northern-irelands-ageing-population-to-be-prioritised-in-programme-for-government#:~:text=One%20in%20six%20people%20in,one%20in%20four%20by%202040.>)

<sup>2</sup> RaiSe (2024). *Support for Unpaid Carers in Northern Ireland: a preliminary consideration*. (<https://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/raise/publications/2022-2027/2024/economy/0824.pdf>)

<sup>3</sup> CarersNI (2019). *Research: 70,000 people in Northern Ireland quit work to care unpaid for a loved one*. (<https://www.carersuk.org/news/research-70-000-people-in-northern-ireland-quit-work-to-care-unpaid-for-a-loved-one/>).

<sup>4</sup> Devereux, E. Nursing Times (2024). *Nurses in Northern Ireland consider quitting over poor pay* (<https://www.nursingtimes.net/workforce/nurses-in-northern-ireland-consider-quitting-over-poor-pay-17-01-2024/#:~:text=More%20than%20half%20of%20health,a%20new%20survey%20has%20revealed.>) and British Medical Association (2024). *Social care in Northern Ireland* (<https://www.bma.org.uk/advice-and-support/nhs-delivery-and-workforce/social-care/social-care-in-northern-ireland>)

<sup>5</sup> OECD (2019). *OECD Good Practices for Performance Budgeting* ([https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/oecd-good-practices-for-performance-budgeting\\_c90b0305-en.html](https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/oecd-good-practices-for-performance-budgeting_c90b0305-en.html))

over the course of the mandate, every action should be paired with some sort of timeframe of when stages/steps will be completed. This will make it easier for decision-makers to determine where spend should be directed and what indicators should be used to monitor each action. It is also a matter of accountability and transparency - with timeframes, decision-makers are aware of what is expected of them and the public are aware of what delivery to expect.

Clear actions and timeframes are important in outlining what the Executive are prepared to commit to over the course of the mandate. It is also important to know who is responsible for these priorities - another tool to increase clarity, accountability, and connectivity. There are a few instances where particular actions are assigned to a single Department. However, it should be noted under each priority which Departments have responsibility in ensuring that the commitments are met. Every priority will have multiple Departments responsible for it, some may have every Department responsible for it. Nevertheless, it is important to specify the Departments as a mode of accountability. It would also help in developing the annual budget by guiding departmental budget allocations.

## ***Gender Budgeting and Equality Responsibilities***

Gender budgeting requires government departments to analyse the different impact of the 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 policy 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 crisis<sup>6</sup>. 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 fiscal crisis, but the benefits would help to improve the allocation of departmental resources. 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

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<sup>6</sup> 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/>)

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 places at the very end of the budget planning process or after the budget has been finalised. The OECD<sup>7</sup> 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.

Please see **Annex 1** for more on gender budgeting.

## **Conclusion**

We want to reiterate the important role that the PfG plays in bringing clarity, accountability, and connectivity to decision-making over the course of this mandate. We believe that there is still much work to be done to ensure that this document can be a guideline for policy and budgetary matters, but it is possible and necessary ahead of the 2025/2026 Budget. The NIWBG is open to further engagement with TEO to discuss our response and provide any expert assistance.

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<sup>7</sup> OECD (2023), OECD Best Practices for Gender Budgeting, OECD Journal on Budgeting, vol. 23/1, (<https://doi.org/10.1787/9574ed6f-en>).

## ANNEX 1



### BRIEF ON GENDER BUDGETING

Budgetary processes and spend are far from 'neutral' – policies emanating from the Programme for Government and budgetary decisions have gendered consequences, whether they be intended or not. By taking a 'gender neutral' stance, decision-makers are oblivious to the complexities between the experiences of women and men and reinforce systemic disadvantages faced by women and other groups.

#### What is Gender Budgeting?

Gender budgeting is the tool that can help recognise systemic disadvantages and lead to budgets and policies that promote greater gender equality. If implemented, policy makers would consider the gendered impacts of spending and revenue raising decisions and how to use these mechanisms to bring about gender equality. Women's intersecting identities are also included in this analysis and policy makers are expected to promote these areas of equality as well.

In [Gender budgeting: Working paper 1](#), our partners Dr. Joan Ballantine, Dr. Michelle Rouse and Professor Ann Marie Gray highlight that, "*Northern Ireland lags significantly behind other devolved UK administrations and other OECD countries,*" where gender budgeting has "*made a significant contribution to addressing gender inequalities, the elimination of unequal outcomes and to increasing women's participation in civic and political life.*"<sup>8</sup>

It is important to note that gender budgeting is not about allocating more funds to women but about making sure the available resources have maximum impact. The [European Women's Lobby](#) breaks down the realities and misconceptions about gender budgeting as follows<sup>9</sup>:

#### ***Gender budgeting is about:***

- *Including a gender perspective into budget planning and analysing budgets taking into account their impact on women and men, girls and boys.*
- *Introducing a gender perspective into the entire budget, including seemingly "gender-neutral" budget lines.*
- *Reprioritising and refocusing of spending and restructuring of taxation with a view to promote equality.*

#### ***Gender budgeting is not about:***

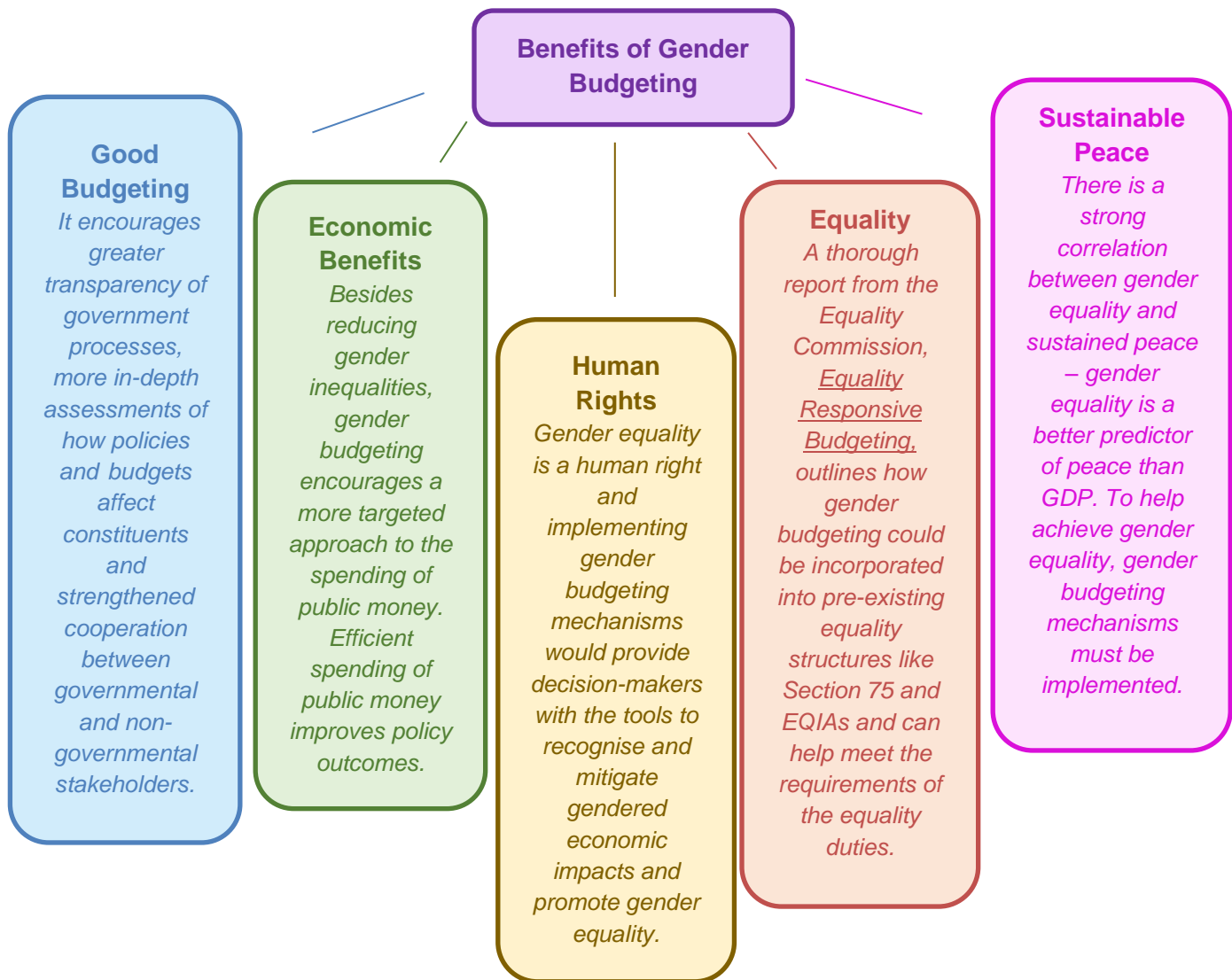
- *Creating separate budgets for women.*
- *Only looking at the parts of the budget which have a social content or that are explicitly gender-related.*
- *Demanding more spending.*

<sup>8</sup> Ballantine, J., Rouse, M. and Gray, A.M. (2021). *Gender Budgeting: Working Paper 1: What does the literature tell us? Lessons for Northern Ireland (NI)*. ([Gender Budgeting-1.pdf](#))

<sup>9</sup> European Women's Lobby. *What is Gender Budgeting?* ([What Is Gender Budgeting.pdf](#))

## Why implement Gender Budgeting?

Gender budgeting is transformative, enhances transparency and accountability, and is of value in delivering economic benefits<sup>10</sup>, rights and equality<sup>11</sup>, and securing sustainable peace<sup>12</sup>.



<sup>10</sup> Himmelweit, S. (2002). 'Making visible the hidden economy: the case for gender-impact analysis of economic policy,' *Feminist Economics*. 8 (1), 49-70.

<sup>11</sup> Quinn, S. (2013). *Equality responsive budgeting*. ([Equality Responsive Budgeting \(equalityni.org\)](https://equalityni.org/))

<sup>12</sup> Fernanda Espinosa, M. (2020). *Peace Is Synonymous With Women's Rights*. (<https://www.un.org/en/un-chronicle/peace-synonymous-women%E2%80%99s-rights>)