



NORTHERN IRELAND WOMEN'S BUDGET GROUP (NIWBG) RESPONSE TO THE DRAFT BUDGET 2025-26 CONSULTATION

Department of Finance (DoF)

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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 will be considered by the Department when finalising the Budget 2025-26.

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

Introduction

The NIWBG welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation, and we thank the Department officials who attended our meeting in February and engaged with our members on the Draft Budget 2025-26 (Draft Budget). In this response, we highlight:

- The interconnectedness of the Draft Budget and the Programme for Government (PfG);
- The Minister's commitment to continue engagement with Treasury on key aspects of the Interim Fiscal Framework;
- The Department's efforts to improve transparency within the budget process;
- The impact of care, both childcare and adult social care, on labour market participation;
- Public Sector and Community/Voluntary (C/V) Sector delivery of services;
- The NIWBG's anti-poverty stance on service charges;
- The cumulative EQIA and Equality Commission guidance on mitigating impact;
- The role of gender budgeting in budget sustainability; and
- The NIWBG's hopes for the following budget process

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.

The NIWBG would also like to endorse the responses of the Women's Policy Group and the Women's Regional Consortium.

Budget 2025-26 and the Programme for Government

According to The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), aligning the annual budget with strategic policy goals and priorities is key to good budgeting¹. For the first time in many years, we've not only had a PfG but a draft version of the over-arching policy was published *ahead* of the Draft Budget. It is positive to see some reference to the PfG in the consultation document. However, the PfG and the Budget should be sister documents – completely intertwined, with the same priorities for the PfG and the Budget.

Unfortunately, some of the priorities of the PfG were footnotes in the Budget. For example, only £2 million of funding is attached to the Ending Violence Against Women and Girls (EVAWG) Strategy, and most of that money was already announced and allocated at the start of the year. It is noted in the draft Budget that, "General allocations

¹ OECD (2019). OECD Good Practices for Performance Budgeting (https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/oecd-good-practices-for-performance-budgeting_c90b0305-en.html)

to departments should also contribute to PfG and work is underway to ascertain how proposed departmental spending will align with PfG priorities, missions and wellbeing domains.”² While we can hope that there are clearer linkages between departmental budgets and the PfG priorities, it is frustrating that consultees are not able to feed into that part of the budgeting process.

Interim Fiscal Framework

It was noted in the draft Budget that there is £248 million of additional funding due to the needs-based funding floor that was agreed in the Interim Fiscal Framework. This is positive, especially considering that even with the additional funds, no department got the funding it had bid for.

The NIWBG welcomes news that work continues on improving budget sustainability and, “...a Budget Improvement Plan [that] will focus on developing long term plans for Departments and putting in place the building blocks for fiscal sustainability.”³ We also welcomed the mention of gender budgeting in the Budget Sustainability Plan last October⁴ and we encourage the Department to further engage with gender budgeting materials and experts to ensure that the budget process is made more sustainable *and* equal.

We note that the Minister pledged to, “...make the case to Treasury for increased levels of funding in public services and to advance the development of a fiscal framework.”⁵ We emphasise the importance of this to the Department, as we are concerned that Northern Ireland will continue to be underfunded if the conversation around the needs-based funding floor is not included in the development of a new fiscal framework. The 124% estimate of relative need is often debated; experts like the Fiscal Council say that differences in English Council Tax and Rates in Northern Ireland would increase the need to 127%⁶, others say the figure should be 130%⁷. Additionally, the Fiscal Council predicts that the 24% increase agreed in the Interim Fiscal Framework will not actually meet relative need until 2035-36⁸, leaving Northern Ireland continuously underfunded. We urge the Department to raise the issue of underfunding in Northern Ireland despite

² DoF (2025). 2025-26 Draft Budget. (<https://www.finance-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2025-02/Draft%20Budget%202025-26%20Document.pdf>).

³ Ibid.

⁴ DoF (2024). Budget Sustainability Plan. (<https://www.finance-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2024-10/Final%20Agreed%20Budget%20Sustainability%20Plan.pdf>).

⁵ DoF (2025). 2025-26 Draft Budget. (<https://www.finance-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2025-02/Draft%20Budget%202025-26%20Document.pdf>).

⁶ NI Fiscal Council (2023). Updated estimate of the relative need for public spending in Northern Ireland. (<https://www.nifiscalcouncil.org/files/nifiscalcouncil/documents/2023-04/NIFC%20Updated%20estimate%20of%20the%20relative%20need%20for%20public%20spending%20in%20NI%20-%2002.05.23.pdf>).

⁷ Wilson, L. (2024). Northern Ireland's public finances: Fiscal floors and funding adequacy.

(<https://www.nerstitute.net/blog/northern-irelands-public-finances-fiscal-floors-and-funding-adequacy>).

⁸ Ibid.

the Interim Fiscal Framework, as this directly impacts on departments' abilities, including the ability of DoF, to deliver on key services and the priorities of the PfG.

Budget Transparency

We commend the Department for the efforts made to increase public awareness of the budget process with the Draft Budget Factsheet⁹. This is a first and important step in bringing transparency to an exercise that is too often inaccessible. Publishing an informative document like the Factsheet alongside the Draft Budget is good budgeting and will contribute to the overall efforts of the Department to increase budget sustainability. We encourage the Department to continue bringing transparency to future budget processes via the Factsheet and beyond.

Care & Economic Inactivity

One of the key issues identified in the draft Budget 2025-26 was the labour market. Currently, we face the problem of the lowest unemployment rate of the 12 UK regions paired with the fourth lowest employment rate¹⁰ and the highest economic inactivity rate at 28.5%¹¹. This issue was referenced a number of times at the outset of the consultation, setting the context for further problems around productivity, economic prosperity, and how this impacts on the wider financial situation in Northern Ireland.

The Department acknowledged that the increasing level of long-term sickness amongst 16-64 year-olds contributes to higher rates of economic inactivity. However, the Department failed to acknowledge the role that unpaid caring plays in keeping people, particularly women, out of work. While long-term sickness was the most popular reason women gave for being economically inactive, one in four (25%) of women said that family/home responsibilities was the reason for their economic inactivity – family/home responsibilities was the least common reason given by men¹².

The gendered nature of unpaid care is clear and it is facilitated by unaffordable, inaccessible childcare and crises within the social care system. According to the *Employers for Childcare Northern Ireland Childcare Survey 2023*, 88% of parents said

⁹ DoF (2025). *Draft Budget 2025-26 Factsheet*. (https://www.finance-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2024-12/Draft%20Budget%202025-26%20factsheet_0.pdf).

¹⁰ DoF (2025). *2025-26 Draft Budget*. (<https://www.finance-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2025-02/Draft%20Budget%202025-26%20Document.pdf>).

¹¹ ONS (2024). *Labour market in the regions of the UK: October 2024*. ([https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/bulletins/regionallabourmarket/october2024#:~:text=In%20June%20to%20August%202024,Ireland%20\(28.5%25\)%20and%20the](https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/bulletins/regionallabourmarket/october2024#:~:text=In%20June%20to%20August%202024,Ireland%20(28.5%25)%20and%20the)).

¹² NISRA (2024). *Women in Northern Ireland 2023*. (<https://dataavis.nisra.gov.uk/economy-and-labour-market/women-in-northern-ireland-2023.html>).

they had to change their working arrangements due to the cost of childcare¹³. Additionally, 95% of parents cited ‘childcare stress’ as impacting on their work productivity¹⁴. While childcare provision impacts on women’s ability to get into work, the majority of people who work in childcare, a sector that is low-paid and precarious, are women¹⁵. The £50 million funding commitment to the Childcare Strategy is a positive change from past investment or lack thereof. However, it is unclear how these funds will be utilised to benefit those working in the childcare sector and those relying on childcare provision to work.

A similar crisis is unfolding in the area of adult social care. Providing unpaid care for sick or disabled adults typically falls on women – women are more likely to be an unpaid carer 11 years before men¹⁶. Research from CarersNI shows that unpaid carers save the government £5.8 billion in care costs every year¹⁷, yet 75% of carers in employment said they are struggling to juggle paid work and care¹⁸. Furthermore, 27% of carers said they had to reduce their hours, 14% said they had to take on lower paid and/or more junior roles to balance care, and 29% said they had to leave work altogether¹⁹. The economic contribution of unpaid carers is immense, yet the undervaluing of this contribution and the lack of action to improve work-care-life balance for unpaid carers directly adds to Northern Ireland’s high rate of economic inactivity. The crisis in adult social care is predicted to get worse. At the moment, one in six people in Northern Ireland are over the age of 65 – this is meant to increase to one in five by 2030 and to one in four by 2040²⁰. The NHS is already under an extreme amount of pressure and relies on unpaid carers as the system alone could not manage the amount of people that require care. An imbalance of those who need care to those who provide care would add significant pressures to the health system, creating a dangerous environment for those working in and using the health and social care system.

Like the childcare sector, the social care workers are predominantly women, and the sector is low-paid and precarious. The crises in both care systems, which will likely get worse with inaction, massively contributes to high economic inactivity and low employment despite low unemployment. Therefore, it is greatly disappointing that this

¹³ Employers for Childcare (2023). *Northern Ireland Childcare Survey 2023*.

(<https://www.employersforchildcare.org/report/northern-ireland-childcare-survey-2023/>).

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ DE (2023). *Review of Childcare Services in Northern Ireland – Final Report*. (<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/RSM%20%282023%29%20DE%20Review%20of%20Childcare%20Services%20in%20NI%20-%20Final%20Report.PDF>).

¹⁶ Women’s Regional Consortium & CarersNI (2024). *Women, unpaid caring and employment in Northern Ireland*. (*Career or Care*).

¹⁷ Carers UK (2023). *The economic value of unpaid care in Northern Ireland*. (<https://www.carersuk.org/reports/the-economic-value-of-unpaid-care-in-northern-ireland/#:~:text=People%20providing%20unpaid%20care%20for,%C2%A30.7%20million%20per%20hour>).

¹⁸ Carers NI (2025). *State of Caring 2024: The impact of caring on finances and employment*.

(<https://www.carersuk.org/media/fr5fixqo/state-of-caring-ni-2024-finances-employment.pdf>).

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ 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>).

was not recognised by the Department as a funding priority. Even £50 million for the Childcare Strategy won't go far without ring-fenced funding aimed at increasing development and investment in skills associated with care. The NIWBG recommends that career pathways and pay progression are put in place for low-paid, precarious work like care, and that funding is increased for apprenticeships that are considered highly skilled yet require low-level qualifications, such as social care apprenticeships. Additionally, women's centres and community centres must be included in funding arrangements aimed at reducing economic inactivity, as they are supportive lifelong learning environments, based in and trusted by local communities, offer childcare, and reach the most marginalised women²¹.

Service Delivery

One of the questions in the consultation document asks for a response to this statement: *Public sector pay should be prioritised*²². While there are issues with the question itself – the Department does not outline that public sector pay is directly linked to the services that the public sector is able to deliver – the Likert Scale-format of the question risks the accuracy of data collected from this question²³. Therefore, decisions taken around pay cannot rely on responses provided to this question. Public sector pay is a gendered issue as significantly more women work in the public sector (63.2% women, 36.8% men) compared to the private sector (41.6% women, 58.4% men)²⁴. An assessment of the gendered impacts of meeting or not meeting pay increases must be undertaken by the Department and factored into decisions taken on the issue.

It should be noted that funding for services, and particularly specialised services, delivered by the C/V Sector should also be recognised and factored into relevant funding conversations. While the C/V Sector is outside of the public sector, the issue is the same for both – key services cannot be delivered without properly investing the workers that deliver those services. The work done by the sector is often undervalued and underfunded, despite the essential role these organisations play in vulnerable communities. While funding for C/V Sector was identified in the Budget, organisations frequently take on more work than they are funded for due to pressures within the communities they operate in, preventing further degradation of equality. Additionally, government contracts to the C/V Sector can be insecure and precarious at times. To ensure that the Sector is valued and properly funded, contracts should be multi-year,

²¹ Women's Regional Consortium (2024). *Women, Skills & Barriers to Work*. (<https://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Women-Skills-Barriers-to-Work-1.pdf>).

²² DoF (2025). *2025-26 Draft Budget*. (<https://www.finance-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2025-02/Draft%20Budget%202025-26%20Document.pdf>).

²³ Survey Monkey. *What are the Advantages and Limitations of a Likert Scale?* (<https://uk.surveymonkey.com/mp/likert-scale-pros-cons/>).

²⁴ NISRA (2024). *Gender pay gaps in Northern Ireland*. (https://www.nisra.gov.uk/files/nisra/publications/Summary%20report_8.pdf).

pay the Living Wage, and should be treated as an investment in service delivery as opposed to piecemeal funding.

Service Charges

The NIWBG would like to highlight the consultation question which asked about service charges, as there was no previous mention of charges throughout the consultation. Taking an anti-poverty stance, we are opposed to the introduction of service charges.

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 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.

Cumulative EQIA and Mitigating Impact

We welcome the publication of a cumulative EQIA alongside the Budget in December, 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.

While it is positive that the Department has put out a cumulative EQIA, we are disappointed at the content provided. We note the use of NIRWN's research in the section, *Men and Women Generally*, and it is encouraging to see the use of civil society-produced research in the document. However, the analysis provided is more of a snapshot of impacts as opposed to an in-depth assessment of the impacts on each equality area. We understand that this is a cumulative EQIA and therefore cannot go into detail about resourcing decisions taken by Departments. However, Table 1 and Table 2 in the EQIA demonstrate that there will be significant impacts felt across Section 75 groups (red and orange) and where there are many 'neutral' impacts (green), there are minimal opportunities for positive impact (blue)²⁵. Section 75 calls for the mitigation of impacts where possible, but also calls on Departments to seek out opportunities to

²⁵ DoF (2025). *Draft Budget 2025-26 Cumulative Equality Impact Assessment*. (https://www.finance-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2024-12/Draft%20Budget%202025-26%20cumulative%20equality%20impact%20assessment_1.pdf).

promote equality. The infrequency of blue squares within the Tables shows very little promotion of equality, yet this is not reflected in the narrative of the equality assessments for each Section 75 group. 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.

We direct the Department to guidance from the Equality Commission²⁶ 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?*
- *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

²⁶Equality 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))

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.

Gender Budgeting

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 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 crisis²⁷. 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.

We have had positive engagement with the Department on exploring the place of gender budgeting within the Budget Sustainability Plan, as 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.

²⁷ 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/>)

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 OECD²⁸ 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. In Victoria, a state in southeastern Australia, an annual [*Gender Equality Budget Statement*](#) is published alongside the budget. They provide an overall snapshot of how they allocated spend to promote gender equality, and then breakdown the spend – giving the context of the issue, what they are spending, and why they are spending the funds in that way. In the 2024-25 Statement²⁹, the following was highlighted:

- More than 130 Budget initiatives were assessed as having a positive impact on gender equality. Nine initiatives were identified as having a significantly positive impact, with a total investment of \$352 million.
- \$657 million for services including addressing the ‘pain gap’ in women’s health.
- \$1.8 billion to increase women’s economic security by supporting workers in women-dominated sectors and helping women to reskill and retrain.
- \$292 million to assist with cost of living pressures that disproportionately affect women.

²⁸ OECD (2023), OECD Best Practices for Gender Budgeting, OECD Journal on Budgeting, vol. 23/1, (<https://doi.org/10.1787/9574ed6f-en>).

²⁹ Victoria State Government (2024). *Helping Families: Gender Equality Budget Statement*. (<https://s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/budgetfiles202425.budget.vic.gov.au/2024-25+State+Budget+-+Gender+Equality+Budget+Statement.pdf>).

- \$216 million to support Victorians experiencing homelessness into housing, including women.
- \$269 million to prevent family violence and support women's safety.

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.

Looking to the Future

This is a response to the 2025-26 Draft Budget, yet it would be remiss of us to not include our hopes and aspirations for the Budget beginning in 2026. The Budget is a massive document that impacts on every area of policymaking in Northern Ireland. Therefore, only allowing 12 weeks for the consultation (2 weeks of which were over the Christmas period) and not publishing the actual Budget document until the start of February limits meaningful engagement with and responses of respondents. The relatively tight consultation period, however, seems generous compared to the even tighter turnaround for the Department officials that have to digest what consultees have said, make the relevant changes, produce a finalised document, get Executive approval, and allow time for politicians to debate the Budget in the Assembly before the start of the financial year.

We understand that the late October Spending Review contributes to the rushed nature of budget development. However, we are aware that the next Spending Review will be in June 2025, which would allow DoF and other departments ample time to produce a draft budget and detailed equality assessments ready to be published in autumn 2025. This would give time to consult on both the draft budget and departmental EQIAs and provide DoF officials with the space to collate responses and feed them back into a final budget. Shifting the start of the budget process earlier into the year is essential to the sustainability and effectiveness of the budget itself. Without it, we will continue to rush a budget through key procedural steps to try and get something in place by the start of the financial year.

It is also our understanding that Treasury will announce plans for a multi-year budget at the upcoming Spending Review. It is crucial that the Department uses this opportunity to deliver a multi-year budget in Northern Ireland. Multi-year budgets allow for long-term planning, which facilitates a better perception 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.

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 and delivers the priorities set out by the PfG. Looking to the upcoming Spending Review in June, we reiterate that this is an opportunity for multi-year budgets, with ample time for the Department to develop a strong Budget that utilises spend to promote equality aims. 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.