



Response to the Draft Budget 2011-15: Budget Settlement and Proposals to Reduce Expenditure

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1.

The Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA) is a regional organisation whose mission is to 'advance women's equality and participation in society by working to bring about social, political and economic change'. The organisation was established in 1983 and continues to focus its efforts on working with women and community organisations located within disadvantaged and/or divided communities. WRDA is a membership organisation with over 400 members comprised of Women's Groups, Organisations, and individual members.

2.

Without a Programme for Government, it is extremely difficult to respond suitably to these Draft Budget consultations. As the document is based on a generalised high-level strategy, it is impossible to define what services and funding areas will actually be affected through these budget reductions. This Draft Budget is vague and does not indicate where its priorities lie.

3.

WRDA would like to express our concerns that much of the budget reductions will impact disproportionately upon women. The Equality Impact Assessments (EQIAs) are not complete therefore it is not easy to know if there are any measures in hand to alleviate the negative impact upon women. Due to the brevity of any gender assessment and the lack of proposals to deal with the disproportionate impact on women, Professor Tomlinson of Queen's University suggests that the Executive could be "open to legal challenge for failing to have due regard to equality of opportunity"¹. We note that this Department has carried out a high level equality impact assessment which notes the negative impact of some of the proposals but it does not demonstrate how these can be offset. Women, throughout the United Kingdom, have already been disproportionately affected with the social security cuts imposed by the Westminster government. Research undertaken by the House of Commons Library shows that of the £8 billion of cuts and changes to tax and welfare payments, 72 per cent will be shouldered by women, in comparison to 28 per cent by men².

4.

WRDA is concerned about the proposal to abolish the Return to Work Credit for lone parents and recipients of DLA. This will disproportionately impact upon women as 87% of lone parent families are headed by a mother³ and 53.1% of working-age recipients of

¹ Tomlinson, M. And Kelly, G. (2011) *Poverty and Social Exclusion UK: Response to Northern Ireland's Draft Budget*

² House of Commons Library (July 2010) *Gender Audit of Budget*

³ http://www.gingerbreadni.org/schools_information.asp

DLA are women⁴. We believe the abolition of these incentives will consolidate barriers facing many lone parents. It will increase the risk of in-work poverty as many lone parents will be in low paid, part-time jobs due to the necessity of having to work around childcare provision, which is already inadequate across the region.

5.

An increase to fees for higher education is likely to have a detrimental effect on the number of women entering higher education. Women are the largest users of higher and further education⁵. Research carried out on behalf of the Student Room shows that if tuition fees rise, women will be less likely to attend higher education⁶. For many families in Northern Ireland, this increase will place higher education outside of their reach especially if they have several children planning on entering higher education.

6.

Following the changes requiring lone parents to move onto Jobseeker's Allowance when their youngest child is seven, we are concerned that a lack of training resources and support along with the trigger point for intervention remaining at 18 months will result in little being done to support them into work. This is particularly worrying as childcare provision is very limited in Northern Ireland. Recent research by the Women's Centres Regional Partnership (WCRP) demonstrates that the lack of appropriate childcare is the single biggest barrier to women's participation in education, training and work⁷.

Recent changes to legislation will result in lone parents being pressured to enter the labour market or risk benefit sanctions. This is happening in the absence of necessary resources and support that is cognisant of their distinctive needs e.g. flexible working arrangements, childcare provision etc.

7. WRDA call upon the Executive and DEL in particular to undertake a full and comprehensive equality impact assessment to ascertain the real impact the spending proposals will have on women. This will enable the Department to put measures in place to minimise the disproportionate impact that Budget cuts are likely to have on this significant and potentially vulnerable group. WRDA urge the Department to work with other Departments to ensure that critical cross-cutting issues such as the Childcare Strategy and the Child Poverty Strategy are included in spending plans and are stipulated as a priority for our devolved government.

⁴ http://www.dsdni.gov.uk/dla_publication_may_10.xls

⁵ Women's Budget Group (2010) *The Impact on Women of the Coalition Spending Review 2010*

⁶ The Student Room (2010) *A Report into How the Higher Education Choices of UK Students Will Be Affected By the Significant Rise in Tuition Fees As Recommended By the Browne Review*

⁷ McLaughlin, H. (2009) *Women Living in Disadvantaged Communities: Barriers to Participation*, Report written on behalf of WCRP,