



Response to the Draft Budget 2010

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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.

2.

At the outset we want to express our concern that government departments are consulting on departmental draft budgets and spending plans for the next four years in the absence of a comprehensive Programme for Government. While DSD have specified three proposed strategic objectives for the period of proposed spend, it remains difficult to respond to such generalised and high-level spending plans in the absence of detailed information on the strategic priorities for the Department for Social Development.

3.

Notwithstanding the above, we agree that the budget plans must be cognisant of protecting those in need and the funding of frontline functions. The Department for Social Development provides critical services to marginalised and disadvantaged individuals, families and communities and this must be recognised across government. We also welcome the proposed strategic objectives

4.

Over the last number of months, WRDA, at various fora, has been raising concerns that the cuts and alterations to welfare payments and tax credits will have a significant and disproportionate impact on women throughout the UK and Northern Ireland. Research undertaken by the House of Commons library subsequent to welfare cuts announced by the Coalition Government in the June Emergency Budget shows that of the £8 billion worth of cuts to tax and welfare, 72 per cent will be borne by women, compared with 28 per cent by men. The abolition of the Health in Pregnancy Grant (non means-tested £190 payment to all pregnant women); the removal of the Sure Start Maternity grant for second and subsequent children (£500 paid to assist women on low incomes with the cost of a new baby); the raft of reductions in tax credits; and the freezing of Child Benefit (announced in the October CSR) will all have a greater impact on women and children.

5.

WRDA would also like to flag our concern in relation to the Coalition Government's plans to change Housing Benefit. A particular group of women who are likely to feel the brunt of the housing benefits cuts are lone parents who rely on social security - 90% of lone parents households are headed by women.

Also women who have experienced domestic violence rely heavily on Housing Benefit to access refuge and an adequate level of Housing Benefit is essential to sustaining these services. We are therefore extremely worried about the proposal to reduce housing benefit by 10% for individuals in receipt of JSA for longer than 12 months. Women who extricate themselves from violent situations are often terrified, going through protracted legal proceedings and trying to rebuild their lives. Reducing levels of social protection to (mainly women) at such a critical time is appalling. We would ask that these areas of concern are considered in DSD's spending plans, particularly in relation to protecting those who are most vulnerable in society.

6.

At a recent conference on the economy in NICVA, Professor Eileen Evason said that changes to the welfare system will undoubtedly and negatively impact most on women and children, low income/low paid families and people who are sick or disabled.

Furthermore, in a recent response to the NI draft budget, from Professor Mike Tomlinson and Grace Kelly of the Poverty and Social Exclusion in the UK Project, they found that *"the most serious impact on living standards in the foreseeable future stems from changes in taxation and welfare benefits. According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, except for London, households in NI are worst off as a result of the changes for two reasons. Northern Ireland has a relatively higher proportion of households with children and a higher proportion of income is sourced from welfare benefits."*¹ This is not surprising; women are more likely to be in receipt of the main welfare benefits in NI (55.3%)²

We understand that social security is not a devolved matter but nevertheless, welcome the Minister's ongoing efforts to mitigate the worst affects of welfare reform on the most vulnerable. We urge that the disproportionate impact on women and children is taken into account.

7.

In light of the above WRDA urge the department to undertake a full Equality Impact Assessments on spending plans prior to final decisions being taken. We note that the

¹ Tomlinson, M. And Kelly, G. (January 2011) Poverty and Social Exclusion UK: Response to Northern Ireland's Draft Budget, pg 2

² NINIS NISRA, (2010), Client Group Analysis Claimants

department acknowledges that if certain funding cuts were to be implemented e.g. on child maintenance services – women would be disproportionately affected. However, because women are more likely to be in receipt of means-tested social security payments, to be lone parents and to experience poverty throughout their lifetime and especially when they reach pensionable age, it is important that these anomalies are factored in when deciding on spending reductions and proposals.

8.

WRDA, while acknowledging that 'Childcare' is a cross-cutting issue, is very worried that it is not mentioned in any of the draft departmental spending plans, including DSD. This is a hugely important issue for parents but as women still carry the majority of caring responsibility in our society, it particularly impacts on women. At a time when the Coalition Government is placing an emphasis on getting more people into work, including lone parents (compulsory when the youngest child is seven), the lack of emphasis placed on childcare provision is alarming. In recent research undertaken by the Women's Centres Regional Partnership (WCRP)³ a lack of appropriate childcare was identified as the single biggest barrier to women's participation in education, training and work, as well as public and political life.

9.

In conclusion, WRDA while welcoming this opportunity to respond to the DSD draft spending plans, urges the department to strive to protect those who are most vulnerable and marginalised. To ensure that spending cuts don't disproportionately impact on women, we call on the Department to undertake a full and comprehensive equality impact assessment on the spending plans. We would recommend that DSD consider the use of gender budgeting tools to assist in their deliberations.

³ H McLaughlin (2009) *Women Living in Disadvantaged Communities: Barriers to Participation*, Report written on behalf of WCRP, pg 37.