

# Department of Education Budget EQIA Consultation Response from Rural Community Network



Rural  
Community  
Network

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## Background to RCN

Rural Community Network (RCN) is a regional voluntary organisation established in 1991 by local community organisations to articulate the voice of rural communities on issues relating to poverty, disadvantage, equality, social exclusion, and community development. Our vision is of vibrant, articulate, inclusive and sustainable rural communities across Northern Ireland contributing to a prosperous, equitable, peaceful, and stable society. Our mission is to provide an effective voice for and support to rural communities, particularly those who are most disadvantaged.

RCN has over 200 member groups across rural Northern Ireland. Its Board is representative of its membership base with more than half (12) elected democratically from the community. The remaining representatives are from a mix of organisations that provide support or have a sectoral interest within rural communities. RCN's aims are:

- to empower the voice of rural communities
- to champion excellence in rural community development practice
- to develop civic leadership in rural communities
- to actively work towards an equitable and peaceful society
- to promote the sustainable development of rural communities

### **1. Are there any data needs or issues in relation to any of the Section 75 equality categories that have not been identified in Section 5 and 6 of the EQIA consultation document? If so, what are they? Please provide details.**

- The EQIA does not include a consolidated list of the Department's budget cuts. This is crucial information for respondents to be aware of. Instead, the EQIA details which budget cuts, the Department considers, may impact the various Section 75 categories. The Department should have clearly set out the full range of cuts across its various programmes and then set out its analysis of the impacts on Section 75 groups. The EQIA refers to cuts from some very specific programmes targeted at distinct needs, for example, the North Belfast Principals Support Programme and others that are much more generic such as the Aggregated Schools Budget, the Education Authority Block Grant, and the Entitlement Framework. We could not see any detail on the level of budget savings specific cuts were estimated to realise. The limited detail provided makes it difficult to analyse impact on Section 75 groups.
- We do not believe that DE has gathered all the necessary data required to inform its decisions on budget allocation. For the Section 75 categories of religious belief, political opinion, race, marital status, and gender the EQIA states that:

*"The Department has no specific data to determine the impact of the overall budget on this group".*

For the Section 75 category of sexual orientation the EQIA states that

*"The Department provides benefit to all children and young people across NI".*

But provides no data or evidence to underpin its assertion that this category will experience minor negative impacts from budget reductions.

- Many of the services provided by the Department are universal in nature and may be designed to be accessed by any children and young people should they require them. However, it is clearly established that not all children and young people have equal access to services hence the need for equality legislation and monitoring. It is concerning to read that, 25 years on from the introduction of the Northern Ireland Act, Departments are finding it difficult to determine the impact of budget cuts and service reductions on children and young people in Section 75 groups due to the absence of specific data.

## **2. Are there any adverse impacts in relation to any of the Section 75 equality groups that have not been identified in section 6 of the EQIA Consultation document? If so, what are they?**

- Whilst the EQIA is focused on the impact of proposed cuts in the Department's resource budget RCN was surprised that it contained no reference to DE capital budget. The media reported correspondence from the Department to school principals in April indicated that the capital budget would be cut by £7.5M to £180M. The letter went on to say that the combination of the budget cut and construction inflation would result in no new school starts this year. The school's estate maintenance backlog is growing and is estimated to be £500M. The cut in capital budget also means the end of scheme providing digital devices to low-income families. The Department had planned to provide about 16,000 devices to about 450 schools by 2026, but that timetable is now unlikely to be met.
- The absence of capital investment in our schools' estate for new build and critical maintenance will continue to detrimentally impact on the learning environment of children and young people across all section 75 categories. The conditions that children and young people learn in contribute significantly to the quality of their learning experience.
- Healthy Happy Minds and other service cuts that are targeting disadvantaged children are compounded for children and young people in Section 75 groups in rural communities as they must travel greater distances to access alternative provision.
- RCN is concerned that cuts to the Entitlement Framework will reduce the breadth of educational opportunity for children and young people in rural communities. The Entitlement Framework also supports school partnership across the controlled, maintained and integrated sectors. If T: BUC and Shared Education budgets are both being cut as well as the Entitlement Framework, then this will have an impact on shared education and inter-community relationships impacting children and young people of differing religious and political beliefs.

- As stated by the EQIA cuts to the Engage Programme, Happy Healthy Minds and Extended Schools have the potential to impact all groups but are specifically identified as impacting the Sexual Orientation category. LGBTQIA young people are at significantly increased risk of mental health challenges, bullying, family difficulties and isolation. These programmes provide much needed support and respite. If the Department expects that some of this support may be provided by the Community and Voluntary Sector, there are challenges in providing services to minors without parent/carer permission, which could be problematic for an LGBTQIA child or young person. We believe that this presents greater challenges for LGBTQIA children and young people in rural communities.
- 93% of lone parents in NI are women and most low-income parents are women. Cuts to the school holiday food grant will have a major negative impact on the mothers of children who will experience holiday hunger. This has not been identified in the EQIA.
- RCN welcomes the acknowledgment in the EQIA that there is a strong link between household income and school achievement. The multiple identities section points out the various funding programmes that are proposed for specific cuts that will impact children from multiple Section 75 groups. RCN believes a more detailed analysis is required of how more general cuts to DE budget streams such as, reduction in the Aggregate School budget, Entitlement Framework or reduction in Education Authority Block Grant may impact on Section 75 groups. There is no analysis of these impacts in the EQIA. The distance of rural children in Section 75 groups from alternative provision and the additional strain on household budgets should also have been considered in the multiple identities analysis.
- RCN is dismayed at the extent of cuts that will impact on children and young people with SEN. SEN children and young people in rural communities face additional barriers and costs due to the need to travel greater distances to access education and services.

**3. Please state what action you think could be taken to reduce or eliminate any adverse impacts in seeking to manage the Department's resource budget?**

- RCN welcomes the Department's reversal of the decision to cut funding to Youth services and a range of Early Years programmes including, the Pathway Fund, Sure Start, Bright Start and Toybox. We believe that the Department should reinstate the full budget for the Extended Schools programme.
- RCN accepts that DE officials are in a very difficult situation forced on them by the absence of an elected Minister and the unprecedented level of budget cuts imposed by the UK Treasury on NI Departments.

- RCN does not accept the Department’s analysis that the ending of the school holiday food grant can be mitigated by the availability of Free School Meals in term time through a child’s school. The suffering caused to thousands of children across Northern Ireland by eight weeks of holiday hunger cannot be mitigated by the availability of free school meals again in September.
- We do not accept that:  
*“Age-appropriate resilience building to help children and young people recognise issues relating to mental health and adopt coping mechanisms to manage their mental health.”*  
 can be a mitigation for the cut to Healthy Happy Minds which enabled access to counselling. Schools do access a range of other emotional health and well-being support through the voluntary and community sector, but cuts are also being imposed on Community & Voluntary Sector groups by the Department for Communities, the PHA and Department of Health – this will result in a cumulative reduction on service provision due to loss of investment from a range of funders.
- We do not accept that support for emotional health & well-being available through GPs, CAMHS and Family Hubs can be considered a mitigation for the loss of Healthy Happy Minds due to the difficulty of accessing GP appointments and the long waiting list for CAMHS. This was highlighted in a statement by Professor Siobhan O’Neill, Northern Ireland’s Mental Health Champion in February 2023.<sup>1</sup> As far as we are aware twenty-nine family support hubs operate in Northern Ireland and some of the services and support, they offer relies on wider community & voluntary sector organisations they refer onto. As noted at the point above many community and voluntary sector organisations find themselves under pressure due to budget cuts affecting their funding in both the Department for Communities and Department of Health.

**Are there any other comments you would like to make in regard to the consultation process generally?**

- RCN is concerned that DE has not undertaken a Rural Needs Impact Assessment of the potential funding cuts. Under the terms of the Rural Needs Act NI 2016 a public authority must have due regard to rural needs when:
  - (a) developing, adopting, implementing, or revising policies, strategies, and plans, and
  - (b) designing and delivering public services.
 RCN would like DE to clarify how the Department proposes to meet the duty as it is setting a budget for 2023/24. There is not a single reference to rural communities, or

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-64643344>

the additional challenges faced by Section 75 groups in rural areas anywhere in the EQIA which is deeply disappointing.

- Budget cuts by the Department for Communities will compound the impact of DE cuts to schemes which benefit children and young people from households who rely on social security benefits for all or part of their income.
- RCN is concerned about the lack of detail in the EQIA, and the analysis provided of potential impact on Section 75 groups. We acknowledge the difficult position officials have been placed in the absence of a Minister and the delay in the Secretary of State setting 2023/24 budget, nevertheless it is difficult for stakeholders to offer detailed and meaningful comment and to make recommendations for mitigations without the detail of which programmes and funding schemes are impacted. For example, it would have been helpful for DE to include more detail on the proposed cut to the Aggregated Schools budget and what this might mean for schools at local level. The EQIA does not offer any detail on the scale of cuts to the Aggregated Schools Budget.
- We welcome the Department's decision to reconsider cuts to Youth Services and a range of Early Years programmes and the decisions not to proceed with the full scale of proposed cuts to Extended Schools on the basis that:

*"...the scale of the proposed cuts to these programmes would create greater budgetary pressures for the next financial year and beyond across a range of areas, including special educational needs. Furthermore, the reductions would cause significant detriment to the provision of services for our most vulnerable children, young people, and families, and run counter to all the Department's efforts to tackle educational disadvantage."*

However, RCN would argue that many of the cuts that the Department is proposing to impose would also run counter to all the Department's efforts to tackle educational disadvantage. This is fundamentally undemocratic as cross party agreement exists on action to tackle educational disadvantage and support all young people to succeed in education as a crucial pillar of previous Programmes for Government.

- RCN is also concerned about the compounding nature of cuts across government departments on Section 75 groups. So, for example, a disabled child living in a rural community will be adversely affected by cuts to budgets in Health and social care which will be compounded by cuts to services provided by community and voluntary sector organisations funded by TEO as well as cuts in the Education budget. DE officials should work with colleagues across other Departments in the absence of Ministers and the Executive to try and identify and mitigate these compounded impacts on some of the most vulnerable people in our community.

- RCN would also question how the Department has sought to engage the voices of children and young people through the consultation process.