



August 2023

Budget Cuts Undermine Public Services

The consequences what has been referred to as the Secretary of State's "punishment budget" continues to unfold. The Departments affected launched public consultations on the Equality Impact Assessments (EQIAs) of the various cuts they intended to make to keep within the budget allocations handed to them by the Secretary of State. EQIAs are an assessment of how changes to policies, services or budgets may impact on Section 75 groups in Northern Ireland. Click [here](#) for more detail on the Equality Impact Assessment process.

This led to a rushed process in which Departments released EQIAs and asked for comments back, in several cases, within a month. This was to enable them to attempt to finalise their cuts so they could match spending plans with their budget allocation for 2023/24. The budget cuts imposed on Departments have been met with dismay across the community and voluntary sector and wider society. Significant cuts are being imposed on public services and inevitably the most disadvantaged people and households will bear the brunt. Coming on top of thirteen years of Government led austerity, the disruptions of Brexit and the Covid pandemic, the stop-start nature of devolution exacerbates the impact in Northern Ireland. We know the Assembly, if it were operating, would not be a panacea but it has shown in the past that it can, in a limited way, ameliorate some of the worst effects of Tory policy. An example being the Northern Ireland mitigations package to deal with some of the worst consequences of "welfare reform."

RCN facilitated online workshops with members and stakeholders to discuss the EQIAs of five Departments and to share views on how the cuts would impact on Section 75 groups in rural communities. Workshop participants said that they found it helpful to share views on the EQIAs. We thank everyone who attended and contributed to the discussions which informed our consultation responses. RCN's responses to the EQIA consultations can be found [here](#).

Department of Education U Turns on Some Proposed Cuts

The Department of Education attracted significant media coverage in the past few months because of the depth and potential impact of their proposed cuts on children and young people. On 1 June, Permanent Secretary Dr Mark Brown announced that some of the cuts initially flagged by the Department would not go ahead. Cuts to Youth Services and a range of Early Years programmes including the Pathway Fund, Sure Start, Bright Start and Toybox would no longer proceed because the Permanent Secretary judged that they needed to be signed off by a Minister.

The Department also confirmed that it would not be proceeding with the full scale of proposed cuts to Extended Schools. Dr Brown said:

“In considering the scale and cumulative impact of the proposed cuts, which represent a major change to long standing Ministerial programmes and policies, I am of the view that such a decision should be taken by a Minister, not a Permanent Secretary.”

You can read the Department of Education statement [here](#).

Despite that, cuts to many important DENI programmes such as the Holiday Hunger scheme, School Uniform Grant schemes, Healthy Happy Minds, and Digital Devices scheme are proceeding as officials aim to limit the level of departmental overspend. The concern remains that deeper cuts in other budget areas will be required if the Early Years schemes are to be retained.

RCN’s response to the DENI budget EQIA can be read [here](#).

Rapid Response Report on Department of Education Cuts

A team of academics from Ulster University, Queen’s University, Stranmillis University College, and Newcastle University has produced a “rapid response” report to highlight some of the damage that would be inflicted on children and young people by cuts in the education budget. [The Consequences of the Cuts to Education for Children and Young People in Northern Ireland](#) report points out that overall spending per pupil for school aged children in NI is falling behind the rest of the UK and the Republic of Ireland. It criticises proposed cuts by the Department of Education that the authors believe will entrench educational disadvantage. The report points out that any short-term savings generated are likely to be dwarfed by the costs of the long-term impact on children and young people.

The report also highlights the impact of the severe squeeze on most capital spending and how that impacts upon an existing maintenance backlog affecting educational institutions. This places additional pressure on school fundraising efforts to address these shortfalls, meaning that schools outside disadvantaged areas have much greater opportunity to bridge this gap.

Some of the recommendations made in the report include:

- Evaluation of the happy healthy minds programme should be expedited to ensure that the interventions delivered have an evidence-base of positive outcomes, and to preclude ineffective programmes and those with potentially negative outcomes.
- The holiday hunger scheme, free period products scheme and support for school uniform costs should be immediately reinstated or have full funding restored.
- Continue to prioritise and invest in early interventions, which the evidence shows have the biggest impact.
- In assessing the impact of funding reductions, the Department of Education NI should take account of the high levels of disadvantage among particular minority ethnic and migrant groups and the disproportionate effects that cuts to services are likely to have on these groups.
- The Department for Education NI should prioritise its End-to-End Review of Special Educational Needs (SEN) in NI. This would facilitate an urgent evidence-based root and branch reform of SEN policy and practice including the requisite funding to complete the Education Authority's Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Transformation Programme as soon as possible.

You can read the full report [here](#).

Reprieve for Community Transport Partnerships

As highlighted in the media and on RCN's blog [here](#) community transport partnerships were operating from April-June under the threat of the loss of all funding from the Department for Infrastructure. This was one of the cost-cutting measures proposed by the Department as a way of meeting the gap in its budget for 2023-24. Other cuts proposed, which were widely publicised, included turning off street lighting, ending of the winter road gritting service and stopping wastewater treatment.

Community Transport Association NI and the rural community transport partnerships led lobbying efforts to ensure funding for community transport was maintained. RCN fully supported the campaign as we know the vital service that community transport provides to its members across rural Northern Ireland. At

the start of July, the Department announced that it would continue to support Community Transport partnerships, albeit with a cut of 3.3% this financial year. This comes on top of a 35% cut in funding back in 2015 and at a time when running costs are soaring as demand for the service rises.

CTA NI Director Noeleen Lynch expressed her relief that funding would continue for community transport this year and said:

“CTA will be writing to DfI’s Permanent Secretary, Dr Julie Harrison, underlining the need for increased, ring-fenced, multi-year funding for our members.”

Read CTA NI Director Noeleen Lynch’s statement [here](#).

The Department for Infrastructure confirmed its final budget allocations at the start of July and indicated that a range of cost-cutting measures they had proposed required Ministerial approval and therefore would not proceed. These included:

- stopping wastewater treatment.
- reducing essential road maintenance to emergency response only.
- reducing winter service to snow clearance only.
- stopping the community transport programme.
- switching off streetlights (options are being assessed for 24/25).
- stopping flood prevention programmes.

The statement warned that DfI will inevitably overspend this year if current political arrangements are unchanged. You can read the Department’s statement on its final budget allocations [here](#).

Funding for GP Elective Service Halved

A further indication of how budget cuts are hitting public services was revealed recently with the news that funding for the General Practice Elective Care Service was to be halved. The GP Elective Care Service scheme allows doctors to receive enhanced training so they can undertake more clinical procedures in GP practices. This has taken some pressure off huge waiting lists in areas such as menopause and vasectomy treatments. The service is funded by the Health and Social Care Board and treated more than 50,000 patients since 2018 who would otherwise have been waiting for dermatology, gynaecology, and musculoskeletal procedures. Dr Alan Stout, chair of the Northern Ireland General Practitioners Committee, said that because of the proposed cuts, waiting lists would increase further.

This should be a service that is enhanced because it reduces waiting lists, offers procedures closer to home in a GP surgery and is an example of what health service transformation should look like.

For more information on this story click [here](#).

NI Departments reach “limit of cuts.”

In July, Head of the NI Civil Service Jayne Brady warned that Northern Ireland Departments had reached the limit of funding cuts. The BBC reported that they had seen correspondence from Ms. Brady to Secretary of State Chris Heaton-Harris stating that officials were implementing £1Billion worth of cuts. She went on to warn the Secretary of State that there remains an unfunded pay pressure of £571m, and a further £437m of pressures requiring decisions. The remaining gap was because any remaining decisions on cuts needed to be agreed by Ministers. She also warned that even if Ministers were to come back to an executive this year, Northern Ireland is past the point in the financial year where further cuts are feasible.

Her letter concluded that an overspend on this year's budget was "now unavoidable". Any overspend on this year's budget will be added to the overspend on the 2022-23 NI Executive budget and may impact on Departmental spending next year unless the UK government adds more money to the block grant as an incentive for the Executive to be reformed.

Read the full article [here](#).

DAERA Consultation on Climate Change Action Plan/Targets

DAERA has launched a consultation on climate change action plans and targets. The consultation covers a lot of issues; the proposed 2030 and 2040 emissions targets for Northern Ireland, and the proposed carbon budgets for the periods 2023-2027, 2028-2032 and 2033-2037. The Department is also using the consultation to seek views on the Climate Change Committee (CCC) Advice Report on the Path to a Net Zero Northern Ireland. The emissions reductions targets and carbon budgets are being introduced because the Assembly passed the Climate Change Act NI 2022. The Act imposes a duty on DAERA to prepare and publish a Climate Action Plan which sets out how the 2030, 2040 and 2050 emissions reduction targets will be met.

The consultation states that policies to reduce emissions across sectors will need significant new capital and resource funding, as well as appropriate staff resources, wide-spread behavioural change, and political acceptance. Some of the actions identified by the CCC in their advisory report include:

- Significant changes in livestock farming
- A rapid increase in reforestation and peatland restoration
- Moving from fossil-fuel to electric powered vehicles

- Significant increase in the proportion of journeys using public and active transport.
- New construction standards and retrofitting to transition from fossil fuels to renewable sources of heating for buildings.

The consultation document asks for views on whether the emissions reductions targets set should follow the advice of the CCC. It also provides a summary of the CCC Advice Report: *The Path to a Net Zero Northern Ireland* and asks for feedback to help inform future policies and proposals for inclusion in future Climate Action Plan consultation.

Three public consultation sessions are also planned at the end of August.

Information on the consultation including booking details for the public workshops is available [here](#).

Consultation on Ending Violence Against Women and Girls Strategic Framework

The Executive Office (TEO) is currently consulting on a Strategic Framework to End Violence Against Women and Girls. In 2021, the Executive directed that a Strategy to End Violence Against Women and Girls (EVAWG) be developed, and TEO is leading on this whole of government, whole of society approach.

Violence, abuse and harm against women and girls cuts across all generations, all communities, and all spheres of our society and there is a growing awareness and a sense of urgency that more needs to be done. Evidence shows that the majority of women and girls in our society have experienced at least one form of gender-based violence, abuse, and harm, ranging from everyday misogyny, sexual harassment in a public place or workspace, to more extreme physical violence.

The vision of the EVAGW strategic framework is:

“a changed society where women and girls are free from all forms of gender-based violence, abuse, and harm, including the attitudes, systems, and structural inequalities that cause them.”

The co-design process which developed the Strategy involved a wide range of organisations with representatives from the women’s sector, the wider community and voluntary sector, statutory agencies including the PSNI, and academic partners. The Strategic Framework comprises: four themes; six outcomes; and nineteen priority areas which inform a series of actions that will take place over the next seven years. The four themes identified in the co-

design process are: Prevention; Protection and Provision; The Justice System; and Working Better Together. The six outcomes include:

- Changed Attitudes, Behaviours & Social Norms
- Healthy, Respectful Relationships
- Women and girls are safe and feel safe everywhere
- Quality frontline services, protection, and provision for victims and survivors of violence against women and girls
- A justice system which has the confidence of victims, survivors, and the public in its ability to address violence against women and girls.
- All of government and society working better together to end violence against women and girls.

The consultation closes on 8th October. TEO is also running online consultation workshops in August and September.

Information relating to the consultation and booking details for consultation workshops can be accessed at this [link](#).

TEO Period products consultation

The Executive Office (TEO) has launched a consultation on the provision of free period products. The consultation follows the passing of the Period Products (Free Provision) Act (Northern Ireland) 2022. The Act aims to remove financial barriers to accessing period products and provides for the provision of free period products. It places a duty on TEO to ensure that period products are available free of charge, on a universal basis, in appropriate locations. The purpose of the consultation is to seek feedback from the public on:

- a) How they ought to be able to obtain period products free of charge.
- b) Where period products ought to be obtainable free of charge; and
- c) What types of period products ought to be obtainable free of charge.

For more information and details of how to share your views click [here](#).

The consultation closes on 18th September.

Trussell Trust Hunger in Northern Ireland Research

In June, Trussell Trust, the charity which co-ordinates twenty-two food banks across Northern Ireland and nearly 1200 in Britain, launched its research report on hunger in Northern Ireland. The report showed that food bank usage is rising across the UK, and it is no different in Northern Ireland. The Trussell Trust network here had its busiest year in 2022/23 with 81,084 parcels distributed,

including over 35,000 for children. This is more than double the number of parcels distributed five years ago.

The research acknowledges that the cost-of-living crisis and the Covid 19 pandemic have exacerbated the need for emergency food. However, the main cause is the long-term weakening of the social security system, which no longer protects people from hardship. The report also shows that food banks are increasingly used by working households and that paid work is no longer a guarantee against hunger. Families with children and disabled people are over-represented as users of food banks.

The research found that problems with the benefits system, especially the five weeks wait for an initial payment, contribute to destitution and indebtedness. Ill health and challenging life experiences such as eviction, losing a job or relationship breakdown were also leading people to need emergency food. Food bank users often had no informal support from family or friends or had exhausted formal and informal support networks.

The full report is available [here](#).

Guarantee Our Essentials Campaign

Trussel Trust and Joseph Rowntree Foundation have launched a campaign to jointly call on the UK Government to “Guarantee Our Essentials”. The campaign is aiming to legally require the UK Government to ensure that the standard allowance in Universal Credit at least covers people’s essentials, such as food, utility bills and basic household goods; and guarantee that reductions, such as debt repayments to Government, can never pull support below that level.

That would mean a rise in the level of Universal Credit for a single person over twenty-five from the current rate of £85 per week to £120 per week. For a couple over twenty-five this would mean an increase in the level of Universal Credit from the current rate of £106 per week to £200 per week.

More information on the Guarantee Our Essentials campaign and ways to get involved can be found [here](#).

Ulster University Publishes Research on Remote Working

Ulster University Economic Policy Centre (UUEPC) has published new research analysing the adoption of remote and hybrid working, pre- and post-pandemic, in Northern Ireland. Their analysis shows that despite a move back to the office, levels of homeworking across the UK in 2023 have more than doubled compared to pre-pandemic: 31.3% compared to 14.4% in 2019. The uptake of remote working in NI is the lowest of all 12 UK regions at 17.3% but this is a significant increase from approximately 10% of the workforce pre-pandemic.

In April 2020, during the most aggressive lockdown restrictions, remote working increased dramatically to 41%. Global trends illustrate a similar picture of reduced remote working levels since the pandemic, although nearly 30% of employees still work remotely in 2023. Research findings have estimated that 40% of NI jobs can be efficiently completed remotely, compared to 43% in the UK, resulting from a higher concentration within sectors such as Professional & Scientific, Finance, and ICT in other parts of the UK.

Forty-five employers participated in the research. Their view was that productivity remained the same or had improved slightly compared to pre-pandemic levels. Employers said that managers had adapted very quickly to new remote working but struggled in some respects. In UUEPC's view, this could be because of lower levels of management training in NI. Employers expressed concerns about reduced innovation generated by team working and the challenges of integrating new employees remotely.

As part of the research, UUEPC conducted an online survey for employees with a total of 865 responses. Seventeen percent stated they would prefer to work fully remotely and 80% were satisfied with their current working arrangements. Eighty-seven percent worked at least one day per week outside of the office, 55% worked hybrid 2-3 days per week and 9% worked fully remotely. About a quarter of respondents reported problems trying to switch off from work but believe productivity is higher and that they can get more work done at home. Costs associated with working from home such as electricity, heating and broadband were expressed but many respondents reported saving expenses on fuel and car parking. Six in ten employees reported better mental health resulting from improved work life balance, reduced time commuting and more flexibility.

Ana Desmond, economist at UUEPC said:

“Where remote working is possible, it appears from this research the best way to strike a balance between management and employees at present is a hybrid environment where workplace days are coordinated; bringing teams together to

facilitate innovation and creativity, alongside fostering corporate culture, whilst at home days allow specific tasks to be completed with more focus and attention."

RCN welcomes this research which complements the report we launched in April on the [Policy Landscape for Remote Working](#). Although the UU research shows that Northern Ireland has the lowest percentage of remote working of all UK regions, it has expanded significantly since the pandemic. Remote and hybrid working will continue to develop; and particularly striking is the finding that nearly 60% of employees report better mental health as a result of improved work life balance. Remote and hybrid working has potential to distribute better paid jobs to rural communities. Policies to further support and encourage remote working, if implemented, may contribute to the decentralisation of public sector employment, which was recommended as far back as 2008 in the [Bain Review](#) of the location of public sector jobs. Remote and hybrid working also has the potential to contribute to net zero targets by reducing commuting.

The full report can be read [here](#).

Western Trust response to Emergency General Surgery consultation

The Western Health and Social Care Trust has published its consultation findings on the temporary suspension of Emergency General Surgery at the South West Acute Hospital (SWAH). The Trust “temporarily suspended” the Emergency General Surgery service at SWAH from 5th December 2022 because it could no longer be staffed by consultants on a 24/7 rota. The Trust has found it difficult to recruit and retain consultant surgeons in the past number of years. Patients requiring Emergency General Surgery are now sent to Altnagelvin or Craigavon hospitals, requiring significant additional travel. This, in effect, was a collapse of an important surgical service at the hospital rather than planned transformation.

The Trust launched a full public consultation even though the service had already been temporarily suspended. Department of Health guidance states that although a Trust may need to consult, it may decide, in the interests of patient safety, to implement a service change or withdrawal immediately. The Trust states that, in their view, they were justified in withdrawing the service in advance of consultation on grounds of patient safety.

The report details the consultation process, the number of responses received and responds to issues raised by consultees such as:

- Recruitment and retention of staff at SWAH
- Travel times for service users and patient safety issues for rural service users

- Department of Health's Review of General Surgery in NI
- Concerns over the retention of a type 1 Emergency Department at the hospital
- Patient pathways

The report acknowledges the significant objections to the temporary change but states that up to 30 April 2023 there is no evidence the temporary change has negatively impacted on patient clinical outcomes. Most patients who previously would have used the service are now being referred to Altnagelvin with a small number being sent to Craigavon.

You can access the full report [here](#)