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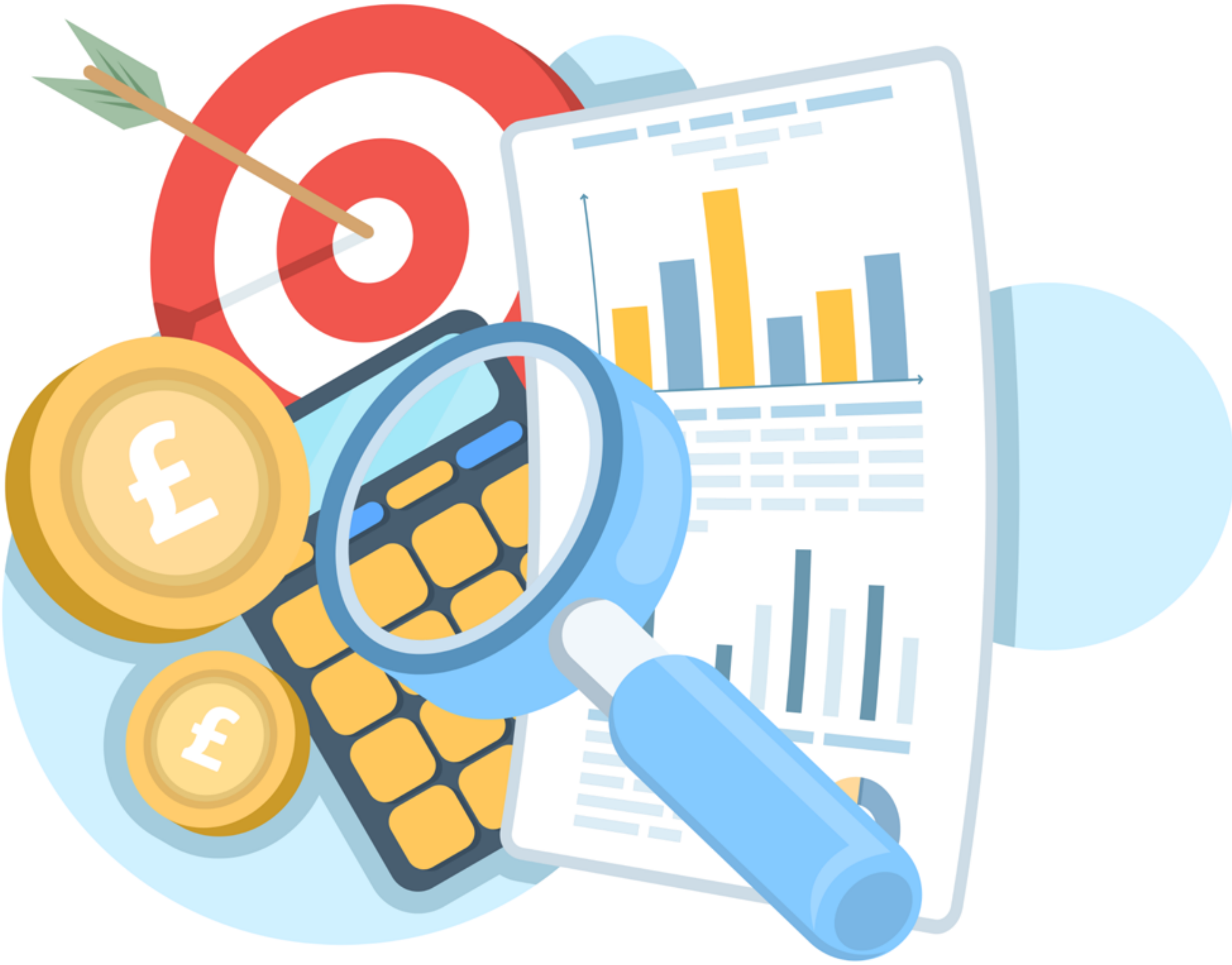

# Budget EQIA 2025-26

## Consultation Outcome Report

April 2026

Details of the organisations responding include:

- Advice NI
- Apex Housing
- Arts Matter NI
- Belfast Central Mission
- Belfast Exposed
- Chartered Institute of Housing Northern Ireland
- Committee Representing Independent Supporting People Providers (CRISPP)
- Community Arts Partnership (CAP)
- Dunluce Family Centre
- Equity
- First Housing Aid and Support Services
- Homeless Connect
- Housing Rights
- Law Centre NI
- MACS Supporting Children and Young People
- National Energy Action NI
- Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations
- Northern Ireland Housing Executive
- Northern Ireland Women's Budget Group (NIWBG)
- Positive Futures
- Simon Community
- Southcity Resource and Development Centre

- The Village Community Hub Ltd.
- UNISON
- Unite the Union Retired Members Branch (Belfast)
- Women’s Policy Group NI
- Women’s Regional Consortium

<table>
<tr><th colspan="3">SPECIFIC BUDGET ISSUES RAISED</th></tr>
<tr><th colspan="3">Category 1: Advice Sector</th></tr>
<tr><td>1.1</td><td>Given the impact of austerity/welfare reform, the complexity of the benefits system, the impact of Covid-19 and the Cost-of-Living Crisis as well as issues around poor financial literacy and capability there has never been a greater need for access to independent advice. The Women’s Regional Consortium has consistently recommended the need for increased funding for community level information, advice and advocacy work that reaches out to those who are the most vulnerable and marginalised to ensure they can access the advice they need and their rightful entitlements.</td><td rowspan="2">The Department recognises the importance of continued advice sector funding, and the impact reduced funding could have on all Section 75 groups.<br><br>The Department recognises the complexity of the benefit system and is fully supportive of continuing advice sector funding in 2025/26, especially given the need to support those impacted by the Move to Universal Credit.<br><br>The Department’s 2025-26 budget has been targeted to ensure continued support for the advice sector this financial year, with no cuts proposed.</td></tr>
<tr><td>1.2</td><td>We demand that funding for independent advice from within the voluntary/community sector is not just protected but significantly increased and guaranteed. These centres are not a luxury, they are an indispensable lifeline for older and vulnerable residents, providing critical access to information and support to the Department in relation to delivery.</td></tr>
<tr><th colspan="3">Category 2: Affordable Warmth Scheme</th></tr>
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| **2.1** | Fuel poverty ought to be specifically mentioned in Section 7.6viii as an adverse impact of the Department's constrained Capital allocation for Housing and Affordable Warmth. The provision of affordable good quality housing is vital for tackling fuel poverty. Social homes help reduce prevalence of homelessness, manage affordability for tenants, and in many cases new social homes are more energy efficient, hence reducing heating costs.<br>We are once again very concerned about the persistent underfunding of the Affordable Warmth Scheme. The allocation of £2.5m in 2025-26, is at least slightly more than the initial allocation of £2m in 2024/25, but it still falls significantly short of what is required to address energy inefficiency for low-income households. At this rate, we will never meet decarbonisation targets nor tackle the scourge of fuel poverty impacting so many households here. | The Department recognises the importance of Affordable Warmth funding to tackle fuel poverty and energy inefficiency in low-income households.<br><br>The Department recognises the impact reduced funding could have across Section 75 groups.<br><br>The Department's 2025-26 budget has been targeted to ensure continued support for the Affordable Warmth Scheme.<br><br>The Opening 2025-26 budget for Affordable Warmth was £7.5m. A further allocation of £1.5m was awarded in-year providing a final budget of £9m. |
| **2.2** | An allocation of £7.5m versus a £14m requirement means that only 480 'new' applicants will be offered support under the Affordable Warmth Scheme during 2025/26 (down from 2,118 last year). This will have significant adverse impact on Section 75 groups reliant on energy efficiency measures for wellbeing, including older people, disabled people, and low-income households. | |

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| **2.3** | The Affordable Warmth Scheme's reduced funding is noted, but there's no modelling of potential impact on older people, disabled people, or low-income households—groups with disproportionate heating needs. In spite of recent announcements on revisions to policy, the Affordable Warmth Scheme funding is set to drop from a projected £14 million to £7.5 million. This disproportionately affects older adults and individuals with disabilities, who often face higher heating needs and increased risk of fuel poverty. | |
| **2.4** | Older people, babies and young children, adults with disabilities or long-term health conditions, individuals who are socially isolated, carers and dependents, are among those most vulnerable to fuel poverty and its impacts. | |
| **2.5** | DfC should work with and support NICCY and COPNI to protect babies, children, young people and older people from fuel poverty. Living in a cold home creates health risks for people of all ages, but particularly younger and older people. It is associated with a significantly greater risk of health problems, both physical and mental health. | |

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| **2.6** | It is essential that the Department considers recent research on the scale of NI's fuel poverty crisis and its impacts, including the LucidTalk – 'NEA NI: Northern Ireland Attitudinal Poll' (September 2024), which estimated that 40% of NI households were spending at least 10% of their total household expenditure on energy costs and were therefore living in fuel poverty. The NI-wide representative survey also found, 27% of households told us they went without heating (oil/gas) or electricity on at least one occasion during the previous 24 months, and 1 in 10 households admitted to skipping meals to ensure they had enough money to pay for their energy. | |
| **2.7** | Investment to address fuel poverty is both urgent and cost-effective. In development of its Plan, the Department should maintain meaningful engagement with service delivery partners and organisational experts. | |
| **2.8** | To reduce or eliminate fuel poverty as an adverse impact, DfC should utilise Barnett Consequentials from the UK Government's Warm Homes Plan (£13.2 billion), to direct additional resources to delivery of the forthcoming Fuel Poverty Strategy and to increase capital for the current Affordable Warmth Scheme and future Warm, Healthy Homes Scheme. | |

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| **2.9** | DfC should deliver a new Fuel Poverty Strategy for Northern Ireland. There is a clear need for a strategic, cross-departmental, and cross-sectoral approach to tackle fuel poverty in NI. The strategy must include the introduction of a statutory fuel poverty target to be effective. It must also introduce minimum energy efficiency standards, especially for the private rented sector. We also urge that the finalised strategy be backed by comprehensive funding and a detailed action plan for effective implementation. | |
| **Category 3: Climate Change / Green Growth** | | |
| **3.1** | Energy efficiency improvements offer a tried and tested cost-effective approach to both alleviating the hardships on fuel poor households and reducing household carbon emissions. This constrained capital allocation for Affordable Warmth is counterproductive to achieving 2050 decarbonisation targets and addressing our fuel poverty crisis. | DfC is committed to achieving its low carbon ambitions by working collaboratively across Government and with our partners, sharing knowledge, expertise and resources and providing a clear vision on what the future will look like. |

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| **3.2** | Community Asset Transfer legislation should be used and a fund created to support communities to buy heritage buildings. Utilising existing buildings would help climate change - 'the greenest building already exists'. | In response to the Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022, the Department formed the Climate Change Division in February 2023, to develop policies to reduce residential carbon emissions, to help Northern Ireland to become climate adaptable and resilient, and to enable a just transition to a lower carbon future.<br><br>DfC also established a Climate Change Working Group and published Departmental Climate Change Action Plans in 2021/22, 2022/23 and 2024/25, setting out the key activities taken by the Department to address the challenges that climate change presents to our people, our communities and our places.<br><br>A long-term Climate Change Strategy is currently being developed for the Department, which will guide Action Plans going forward. The Department plans to publish another Action Plan next year, after the Strategy has been completed. |
| **Category 4: Culture, Arts, Heritage & Sport (incl. Libraries & Museums)** | | |
| **4.1** | The Department's EQIA rightly recognises that reductions in arts support may disproportionately affect older people, rural communities, and those with disabilities. Belfast Exposed works directly with these groups, often in partnership with health trusts and community organisations. We welcome this acknowledgment and urge that it be backed by targeted support to mitigate inequality and foster inclusion. | With DfC facing a Resource funding gap of £98.6m (12%) in 2025-26, the Department acknowledges that managing a Resource pressure of this magnitude will undoubtedly impact on the Department's ability to meet demand for public services in 2025-26. This includes services provided by all its ALBs and the Sectors they support. |

<table>
<tr><td>4.2</td><td>While we acknowledge the challenging financial context for all departments and recognise the modest uplift to the overall budget for Arms-Length Bodies (ALBs), this consultation response reflects serious and sustained concerns from across the sector about the long-term viability, policy coherence, and democratic accountability of government support for arts and culture in Northern Ireland.</td><td rowspan="3">The Department has allocated an additional £3.7m to its Arm's Length Bodies above their 2024-25 funding level. The Department continues to work with ALBs to seek to minimise any impact on the ALBs service delivery.<br><br>The Department recognises and appreciates the contribution of our arts, creative industries, museums and libraries to our communities, along with the economic, health and education benefits thriving sectors bring. The Department continues to support these sectors within the resources available in the 2025-26 Budget.<br><br>The Department recognises the value of the arts sector and the vital contribution it makes across Northern Ireland.<br><br>Despite the heavily constrained budget, Minister maintained funding for the sector and awarded a general allocation across all the Department's ALB's.</td></tr>
<tr><td>4.3</td><td>While the uplift to ALBs is welcome, it is unclear if any of this will meaningfully reach core arts organisations or mitigate inflationary erosion. Programmes working with vulnerable communities — including older people, youth, and marginalised groups — are being scaled back or suspended. Smaller organisations, particularly those outside major cities, face existential threats, and the sector’s ability to deliver on public health, education, community cohesion, and economic recovery is now deeply compromised.</td></tr>
<tr><td>4.4</td><td>Belfast Exposed welcomes the Department for Communities’ Draft Budget 2025/26 and welcomes the announcement of a £500,000 uplift to the Arms-Length Bodies (ALBs) budget line. In a challenging economic climate, this commitment signals a recognition of the vital role that culture and creativity play in the social, economic, and emotional fabric of Northern Ireland. However, the draft budget also raises concerns for us and the wider arts sector, particularly regarding sustainability, strategic clarity, and long-term viability.</td></tr>
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| **4.5** | The Department's stated priority to protect “statutory services” has left non-statutory areas such as the arts once again with no new strategic investment. This structural choice continues to leave the sector exposed, vulnerable to political prioritisation and short-term thinking. Northern Ireland’s arts sector has faced a cumulative 40% decline in real-terms funding since 2011. | |
| **4.6** | Access for disabled audiences to the arts continues to suffer: ACNI 2023-24 Annual Funding Survey: “The cost of delivery continues to supress the provision of disability access support to venues, although a third of organisations now provide an induction loop, some, most or all of the time.” Access to employment as well as the arts is of paramount importance. ACNI states: “Access to venues for D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent people is increasingly compromised, with many venues unable to meet minimum access.”. ACNI 2023-24 Annual Funding Survey: Changes in disability levels since 2020-21 show 2% fewer disabled artists working in NI; 2% fewer freelance workers from ethnic minority backgrounds working in arts. There are fewer organisations offering: wheelchair support, signage, maps, being dementia friendly, multi-sensory workshops, captioning, BSL and audio description. | |

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| **4.7** | It is noted that The Department states that constrained Capital allocation and resulting Budget policy are likely to disproportionately impact on: people identifying as Roman Catholic, as well as disproportionately and adversely impacting people from other religions, people of different genders and people with disabilities. Also, that young people are more likely to suffer from underfunding of the arts and sports sector.<br>For female workers in the arts, statistics related to female carers include those caring for family members, regardless of age.<br>With the majority of caring responsibilities being undertaken by females – a lack of available opportunities or well-paid opportunities due to low funding would also disproportionately affect female artists. | |
| **4.8** | The lack of Data about how allocations to the arts affects those with different political opinions is problematic given the Minister's recent declaration as per ”To ensure maximum accessibility and inclusion, I expect the Council in the terms and conditions of its funding programmes to ensure that any activity disrespectful of any tradition, in locations or by groups receiving Council funding, results in specific and substantive action as regards funding.” It appears that there is no specific data to underpin the Minister’s apparent concerns about activities which may be disrespectful to any traditions – which can seen as being associated with political or religious beliefs, or identities. This highlights the lack of information available to the Executive on which they could base Departmental priorities - information which is necessary to substantiate and justify any particular spending decisions and service delivery. | |

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| **4.9** | The ACNI 2023–24 Annual Funding Survey highlights the impact of ongoing underfunding on S75 groups, with women making up 60% of the workforce, men 38%, and 1% identifying as non-binary. Cultural organisations broaden participation by supporting disadvantaged groups, promoting underrepresented and emerging artists, and advancing gender equality and cultural minorities. Through inclusive programming, accessibility measures and diverse hiring, they expand public access to cultural activity. Yet gaps persist, as limited opportunities for some groups to share their own narratives or access content in their own language continue to constrain cultural diversity, prompting organisations to advocate for greater cultural inclusion. | |

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| **4.10** | The Working and Living Conditions of Artists in NI April - 2024 report shows that most artists are of working age, with a gender split of 58% female, 39% male and 3% identifying as agender, genderfluid, non-binary or queer. Disability (23%) and neurodiversity (31%) are notably high, and artists' anxiety levels exceed the NI average by 2.2 points, underscoring significant mental-wellbeing pressures. Their main challenges are financial barriers, time constraints, job insecurity and feeling undervalued, and they identify a need for increased funding, fair-pay advocacy, improved funding models and affordable spaces and materials.<br><br>Evidence from Parents in Performing Arts highlights that parents and carers face particular disadvantage due to irregular hours, financial instability and lack of flexible care—issues that may worsen if arts funding declines, risking the loss of supports like the five-day rehearsal week and employer-funded caring costs. | |
| **4.11** | The Big Freelancer Survey 2025 (July 2025): "A key theme in this year's BFS (as in previous years) is that of the challenges associated with starting and raising a family, or with having other caring responsibilities, whilst working as a freelancer in the UK theatre and entertainment industry. When asked whether they considered themselves to have a long-term future in the industry, many participants said that they did not believe their current role was compatible with becoming a parent and/or carer. | |

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| **4.12** | Career or Care 2024 findings show that, in NI, 1 in 3 (34%) women with unpaid caring roles have given up employment to care, 1 in 4 (28%) have decreased their working hours because of caring, and 1 in 6 (17%) have taken on a less qualified job or turned down promotion to fit around their caring responsibilities. The financial impact of stopping or reducing employment to provide care is felt by women not only whilst providing the care but also throughout their life course. Carer's Allowance in terms of monetary value and the low earnings threshold is inadequate to support women to balance caring and employment. | |
| **4.13** | The State of the Arts 2024 reports significant reductions in core Government arts funding across the UK—18% in England, 22% in Scotland, 25% in Wales, and 66% in Northern Ireland—creating serious sustainability challenges, particularly for freelance workers and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Underinvestment threatens initiatives such as ACNI's Minority Ethnic Artists Mentoring Programme and impacts the wide range of community, inclusion, mental-health and regeneration activity that ACNI supports. Falling income (down 2.65%, with earned income down 6.32%) and a 22% drop in arts activities in 2023/24 have reduced access to local arts provision, disproportionately affecting groups who cannot travel further for cultural experiences. Reduced funding also risks marginalising smaller LGBTQI+ and disability-focused community projects. Over half of artists surveyed (53.3%) have considered relocating due to limited opportunities and the stark funding gap between NI and elsewhere, reducing the likelihood that people from all S75 backgrounds can build sustainable arts careers locally. | |

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| **4.14** | The absence of the term “arts” in 'Doing What Matters Most' (Programme for Government), and its subsumption into “creativity” in the HCC Framework suggests a dilution of commitment. The sector’s key strategic achievements — notably Delivering Creativity, a widely supported and well-evidenced report — are referenced in the HCC Framework, but its recommendations are not meaningfully reflected in current budgeting or forward strategy. | |
| **4.15** | We particularly wish to reassert the value and continued relevance of the Delivering Creativity report from the Ministerial Taskforce, which remains the most well-evidenced, cross-sectoral and forward-looking expression of cultural ambition recently produced in Northern Ireland. While its mention in the HCC Framework is welcome, its substantive recommendations have yet to be reflected in either budgetary decisions or strategic implementation plans. | |
| **4.16** | The Arts sector is at a critical inflection point. The fragility of the community and participatory arts landscape has deepened, and urgent strategic clarity and meaningful investment are required to prevent irreversible damage. The flat-cash nature of the DfC budget has left our sector exposed. Community arts organisations, in particular, are experiencing the cumulative pressure of inflation, funding stagnation, and rising community need across the region and within the voluntary and community sector. The modest uplift to Arms-Length Bodies (ALBs) is welcome in principle, but is neither targeted nor sufficient to address the structural underinvestment affecting our field. | |

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| **4.17** | With per capita arts investment in Northern Ireland still significantly lower than in Scotland, Wales, or the Republic of Ireland, we risk falling behind in creative development, innovation, and opportunity. Continued stagnation in funding undermines the creative and economic potential of our region. The arts should be seen not as a cost, but as a key contributor to recovery and progress. We are innovating within budget constraints, but the sustainability of this work depends on secure, long-term investment. | |
| **4.18** | On the ground:<br>-Programmes that support the most marginalised in our community are becoming unsustainable.<br>-Budgets to support fees for artists and freelancers cannot keep pace with inflation, making it harder to retain skilled practitioners.<br>-Small but vital organisations and collectives are operating at or beyond capacity, with little financial resilience.<br>-Community-led innovation is being stifled due to short-termism and lack of sufficient multi-year funding structures. | |
| **4.19** | Community arts are not a luxury. We provide routes to social inclusion, lifelong learning, trauma recovery, environmental awareness, and civic engagement. It is not sustainable to place the burden of social value delivery on a sector without sufficient strategic investment or policy coherence. Nor is it acceptable to see community and participatory arts potentially deprioritised further in favour of a more reductive, centralised or metrics-driven model that risks excluding precisely those voices we aim to uplift. | |

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| **4.20** | While we welcome any recognition of the importance of the arts in public investment decisions, we must express that the slight uplift in funding from the Department allocation to Arts Council NI in 2025 falls significantly short of what is required to address the cumulative impact of over a decade of underinvestment, including for those who fall under S75 definitions.<br>A lack of funding for the arts has an adverse impact to the NI GVA so we would advise the Department to invest more in this growth sector.  We add that a multi-year funding agreement would be beneficial to arts companies and artists to enable planning, and to positively impact upon mental health of the workers within the sector as their financial security would be more stable.<br>Reference Working and Living Conditions of Artists in NI April – 2024 above. | |
| **4.21** | The Department for Communities must reverse all proposed cuts to cultural funding. Libraries, community arts projects, and heritage sites are not mere amenities, they are vital public services offering essential engagement, education, and wellbeing opportunities. To dismiss them as luxuries is to fundamentally misunderstand their role in reducing loneliness, fostering social connection, facilitating integration and profoundly improving the quality of life for older people across Northern Ireland. These cuts are an attack on our collective well-being. | |

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| **4.22** | We urge DfC and the Executive to ensure that:<br>- The fair funding principles and “ways of working” outlined in the Executive's Partnership Agreement with the Voluntary & Community Sector are actively applied to the arts.<br>- Arts organisations are engaged in co-designing policy and delivery, not simply responding to short-term funding calls.<br>- The spirit of the Agreement is matched by strategic investment allowing the sector to meet its potential as a trusted partner in social and economic transformation. | |
| **4.23** | We urge DfC to:<br>- Build on the welcome £500,000 uplift with a trajectory toward inflation-adjusted funding for ACNI.<br>- Support multi-annual funding cycles to enable long-term planning and programme delivery.<br>- Embed ‘Delivering Creativity’ into the implementation strategy for the HCC Framework.<br>- Continue to champion the social and economic return on cultural investment as evidenced by organisations like ours. | |

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| **4.24** | We urge DfC and the Executive to deliver beyond this in-year budget and offer a stabilising reset to the arts:<br>-Restore arts funding to at least £22–23 million, in line with inflation-adjusted 2007–08 levels and closer to the ACNI recommended budget to the Communities Committee.<br>-Implement multi-annual funding, enabling planning, stability, and sector confidence.<br>-Avoid disruptive structural change to ALBs without sector-wide consultation and mitigation.<br>-Embed cultural rights and sustainability into the Programme for Government and the HCC strategic process. | |
| **4.25** | We call for:<br>-Reinstatement of real-terms funding parity, with at least £22–23m restored to the arts budget to match 2007–08 levels.<br>-Ring-fenced investment for participatory and community-led arts, recognising its distinctive value and reach.<br>-Multi-annual funding frameworks to ensure continuity and strategic development.<br>-Implementation of Delivering Creativity as the guiding strategic vision for future arts funding and cross-departmental support.<br>-Recognition of arts within the Programme for Government, not just as “creativity” but as an integral public good. | |
| **Category 5: Discretionary Support** | | |

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<tr>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>We note that the Department claims that monitoring data indicates that the Discretionary Support cuts made in July 2023 did not negatively impact women or lone parents more than any other Section 75 group. This would appear to contradict the position outlined in this EQIA, where it is noted that women, particularly unmarried/single mothers, rely more heavily on benefits as part of their income, rendering them vulnerable to cuts in benefits.</td>
<td rowspan="3">With DfC facing a Resource funding gap of £98.6m (12%) in 2025-26, the Department acknowledges that managing a Resource pressure of this magnitude will undoubtedly impact on the Department’s ability to meet demand for public services in 2025-26.<br><br>The Department received full funding for existing Welfare Mitigation in its 2025-26 Budget Settlement. This includes the funding for Universal Credit Contingency Fund and for the Advice Sector to support those impacted by the Move to Universal Credit. People applying for Discretionary Support help while awaiting their first Universal Credit payment, including those transitioning under Move to UC will therefore not be affected.<br><br>In considering allocation of the Department's constrained 2025-26 Budget, careful consideration has been given to balancing priorities, need and available funding to maximise the supports the Department provides to those who need it most.<br><br>The Department bid for funding in 2025-26 to implement New Mitigations (including recommendations from the DS Review). However, the Department received no funding for implementation of recommendations arising from the DS Review. In the absence of funding and pressures facing the Department in 2025-26, progressing this work is not affordable and will be a matter for the Executive.</td>
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<td>5.2</td>
<td>The WPG is alarmed at the claim here that the changes to the DS grant in 2023 had no disproportionate impact on women. The Department’s own statistics from its 2023 show that women are more likely to access the Discretionary Support Scheme. Due to the fact that women are more likely to be in receipt of social security benefits, more likely to be in low-paid, part-time work and more likely to have responsibility for managing household budgets and paying household/children’s bills they are more likely to need to access Discretionary Support if they are unable to make ends meet.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>Discretionary Support Grants play an invaluable role in homelessness prevention within the welfare system as it is currently constituted. The provision of a grant for a key household item can make the difference for a household on the edge of falling into homelessness. It is an excellent example of preventative spending which can save money in the longer term. In our view, it is the right decision on the part of the Department to maintain funding for this form of support. DfC needs to continuously seek to raise awareness that this vital support is available.</td>
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| **5.4** | Housing Rights would be concerned about the impact of any further restrictions or narrowing of the eligibility for access to Discretionary Support, as this may have the double impact of making people who are in need ineligible, as well as costing the Department elsewhere in homelessness spend. Housing Rights recommends that a full Equality Impact Assessment of any proposed reforms is carried out before implementation. | It is anticipated a reduction in the DS budget would impact people across the section 75 groups.<br><br>The Department has considered available data to better understand the likely impact and to identify any mitigating steps that may be taken.<br><br>The Department conducted a DS-specific EQIA in January 2024, to better understand the impact of the reductions. All EQIA responses received were reviewed by the Department, and the issues raised were used to inform the Department's decisions on Changes to the Discretionary Support Scheme. In making decisions, the Department has aimed to incorporate the outcomes of the consultation to mitigate impacts on the Section 75 groups and the most vulnerable in our society.<br><br>In considering allocation of the Department's constrained 2025-26 Budget careful consideration will be given to balancing priorities, need and available funding to maximise the support the Department provides to those who need it most. |
| **5.5** | LCNI welcomes that there is no regression from the previous Discretionary Support grant baseline. However, we remain concerned that maintaining this level is not enough to meet demand. LCNI continues to call on the Department to ensure that budget allocations to Discretionary Support respect the legislative integrity of the scheme and ensure decision makers retain the discretion necessary to ensure that claimants who are most in need can access this critical and necessary support. DfC should prioritise DS within the budget to ensure that fundamental human rights are upheld and that individuals receive financial support in times of crisis and emergency;<br><br>DfC should also increase communications relative to the Universal Credit New Claims Grant, in an accessible format to ensure eligible applicants are made aware of and can access this Scheme. | |

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| **5.6** | Advice NI welcomes the efforts made to protect certain essential services in the midst of tight financial constraints. However, we remain concerned that there is a need to significantly strengthen the Discretionary Support Scheme in the midst of an ongoing Cost of Living Crisis which is hitting the poorest hardest. | The Department is committed to supporting those people facing the most difficult and challenging circumstances. As part of the implementation of a reduction in the DS budget the Department has sought to continue providing the same level of protection for people in specific circumstances, including those fleeing domestic violence.<br><br>The Department will continue to meet all statutory obligations on the delivery of social security benefits and other financial assistance to those people most in need.<br><br>Universal Credit Contingency Fund grants will continue as normal - assisting all those eligible while awaiting their first Universal Credit payment.<br><br>The 2025-26 Budget Settlement presents significant challenges for all NICS Departments to manage the forecasted level of pressures in 2025-26. The Department acknowledges the impacts that budget cuts will have on vulnerable people and Section 75 groups. |
| **Category 6: Employment Support, such as LMPs** | | |
| **6.1** | It is not at all clear what the department has concluded with regards to employment support and at the very least there is a need to improve and sharpen the language here. | The Department continues to support those with barriers to employment through a range of diverse labour market provision. In considering allocation of the Department's |

<table>
<tr><td>6.2</td><td>UNISON acknowledges that the Department has made some reference to the economic realities facing women, ethnic minorities, young people, single mothers, LGBT+ people, and disabled people. However, we are concerned that the analysis falls short by failing to fully consider the structural causes and consequences of economic inactivity for these groups. It is also deeply concerning that the Department has made no budgetary allocations to address the impacts of the recent welfare changes under the UK Government's Pathways to Work Green Paper and employability support proposals from the Get Britain Working White Paper.</td><td rowspan="3">constrained 2025-26 Budget, careful consideration has been given to balancing priorities, need and available funding to maximise the supports the Department provides to those who need it most, including any adverse impacts on Section 75 Groups.<br><br>The Department acknowledges that the failure to secure additional funding for Labour Market Partnerships will impact on vulnerable people and Section 75 groups.<br><br>The Department continues to support those with barriers to employment through a range of services delivered through our network of 35 local Jobs and Benefits Offices, and employability programmes such as Workable NI, Access to Work NI, Condition Management Programme, Advisor Discretionary Fund, and Work Experience Programme.<br><br>Additionally, across 2023-24 and 2024-25, the NIO provided a funding allocation to Northern Ireland of £15m for JobStart (which aimed to support approximately 1500 young people), and the UK Government provided Shared Prosperity Funding of £57m.<br><br>The Department recognises and values the importance of the Labour Market Partnerships with Councils and the</td></tr>
<tr><td>6.3</td><td>We believe that the proposals contained in the Pathways to Work Green Paper will have even greater impacts in Northern Ireland due to higher rates of disability, a higher proportion of people claiming disability benefits, higher levels of benefit dependency in Northern Ireland, worse levels of mental ill health and a consistently higher disability employment gap in Northern Ireland compared to the rest of the UK. Women are more likely to be adversely impacted by the Green Paper proposals than men.</td></tr>
<tr><td>6.4</td><td>LCNI is concerned that there is no increased or additional budget allocation to provide employment support in this financial year. This is of particular concern provided the proposed policy measures outlined in the UK Government's Green Paper proposals, which will have a substantial impact upon benefit claimants and disabled people across the UK, and a disproportionate impact upon claimants in NI.</td></tr>
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| **6.5** | The latest economic inactivity rate for Northern Ireland is 26.9% compared to the UK rate of 21.3% and is the second highest of the twelve UK regions. The female economic inactivity rate has also been consistently higher than the male economic inactivity rate – the most recent figures show the male rate is 22.3% and the female rate is higher at 31.4%. It is evident that some form of childcare support tied to schemes helping women back into work would be beneficial specifically to address this area of economic inactivity which has been so high for many years.<br><br>We are surprised that these statistics on economic inactivity have not been included in the assessment of impacts table in this section. These are very relevant statistics in relation to the need for employment support and should have been provided here. | positive outcomes which can be delivered. Since the Department launched its Budget 2025-26 EQIA, considerable work has been ongoing to consider and sustain LMP funding in 2025-26.<br><br>The Department recognises the hard work and commitment of LMP staff and partners in establishing and achieving success through local LMP structures. The Department continues to support those with barriers to employment through a range of diverse labour market provision. The Department acknowledges the impact a constrained Labour Market Partnerships budget will have on vulnerable people and Section 75 groups, as a result of this LMP funding will be sustained at 2024-25 levels (not reduced) in 2025-26. Given the high disability employment gap in Northern Ireland, the Department has continued work to explore funding options to sustain LMPs in 2025-26 and mitigate impacts to people with disabilities.<br><br>The Department's funding bids for 2025-26 were not met in full. Work is ongoing to maximise use of the Department's |
| **6.6** | The Northern Ireland Childcare Survey report for 2023 has found that childcare is the biggest monthly bill faced by 41% of families in Northern Ireland costing more than their mortgage or rent payments. It is clear from the research that the high cost of childcare in Northern Ireland affects the ability of parents to work and that childcare costs act as a significant barrier to parents entering and staying in the workforce. | |

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| **6.7** | Any progress on tackling poverty in Northern Ireland must recognise the need for low cost/no cost childcare for marginalised women in disadvantaged and rural areas. The Consortium also believes that Government should recognise the case for properly sustaining the Women's Centres Childcare Fund model on a ring-fenced, protected basis given the Fund's positive evaluation in terms of need, impact and value for money. | 2025-26 Budget in the provision of public services and supports.<br><br>The Department recognises the adverse impact unemployment can have on young people, men and woman, disabled people and people with dependants and people in other Section 75 groups. With high levels of unemployment both young and disabled people can be further from the labour market.<br><br>The Department has developed a range of labour market interventions to help people find work. These include a JobStart programme for 16–24-year-olds, an expansion of the Advisory Discretion Fund, including the payment of upfront Childcare costs to support parents' return to employment, and a Work Experience Programme (WEP) to offer 2 – 8 week work experience placement opportunities to job ready unemployed people.<br><br>The Department's Workable Programme has not been proposed for reduction as part of the 2025-26 budget allocations. |
| **Category 1: Advice Sector** | | |

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| **7.1** | Despite a slight shortfall of £750k against the required £37.75m, this is a much-improved funding allocation than the previous two years. However, the funding shortfall for the new build social housing programme will have consequences for the demand for temporary accommodation putting further upward pressure on this budget. There has been unprecedented growth in the number of households requiring temporary accommodation, soaring from 4,527 placements annually to 11,887 in just six years, an increase of over 160%. The lack of available temporary accommodation has increased the Housing Executive's use of hotel and B&B accommodation, which is approximately six times more expensive than standard temporary 'Single Let' accommodation.<br><br>The shortfall in new social housing will exacerbate homelessness pressures and lengthen stays in temporary accommodation. This will have adverse impacts on younger people, young people leaving care, children living in temporary accommodation, women impacted by domestic abuse, refugee families, households with mental health or addiction challenges and people with disabilities. | |
| **7.2** | While the document mentions general housing challenges, it lacks disaggregated insights on:<br>* Disability-specific housing need (e.g. wheelchair access, sensory impairments)<br>* Older people at risk of homelessness<br>* Care-experienced young people (critical to BCM's work) | |

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| **7.3** | We are deeply concerned with the proposed 2025/26 allocations to the Department for Communities which we believe are insufficient to tackle the deepening homelessness crisis and may in fact exacerbate the number of people in our society who find themselves without a safe place to call home. Around 60,000 people here (or 1 in every 32) are now officially homeless, with up to 25,000 more people experiencing 'hidden homelessness. The social housing waiting list has reached a record high, of nearly 90,000 people. | |
| **7.4** | Homeless Connect is deeply concerned about the budget allocations set out in the EQIA document. We believe that if this budget allocation is implemented, it is highly likely that the trend of rising numbers living in temporary accommodation and with homelessness status will continue in 2025/6. We do acknowledge that the Minister for Communities views homelessness as a high priority and that he has taken some positive steps which will be of benefit to the homelessness sector here. This is particularly the case when it comes to the homelessness prevention funding and the highly welcome decision to stabilise funding for the 19 projects funded through the homelessness services budget. | |
| **7.5** | The proposed budget does not adequately resource the ambitious goals set out in the current Homelessness Strategy 2022-2027 "Ending Homelessness Together", or the current Housing Supply Strategy. | |

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| **7.6** | The proposed DfC budget is likely to exacerbate ongoing homelessness challenges. The number of households with homelessness status has reached high levels, standing at 31,719 on 31 March 2025. Similarly, the number of children living in temporary accommodation has increased to 4,730 by 9 May 2025, from an increase of 116 per cent in households in temporary accommodation since January 2020. This indicates a system under pressure, and continued underinvestment in homelessness services will have far-reaching consequences. From May 2025, 1,438 households living in temporary accommodation have been there over two years, with 500 of them living in temporary accommodation for over five years (7.7 per cent). This reinforces the need for further funding. | |
| **7.7** | To effectively reduce adverse impacts, we urge the department to accelerate efforts to increase temporary accommodation supply: NIHE's focus on securing more single-let properties and repurposing existing stock is positive, as this helps reduce the reliance on more expensive hotel and B&B accommodation. Continued investment in this area is vital to manage the growing demand. | |

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| **7.8** | DfC should:<br>- Consider the reasons/trends relating to the increase in demand and costs of services.<br>- Consider the role of the housing association, and community and voluntary sectors in providing additional services and any barriers to delivery.<br>- Consider the investment in new social and affordable housing and the key role it plays in addressing homelessness.<br>- Consider the role of support services in early intervention and prevention of homelessness and ensure funding is targeted at Supporting People and Homelessness services that evidence positive outcomes. | |
| **7.9** | We strongly welcome the specific funding allocation for homelessness prevention, and we encourage the Department to maintain and build upon this allocation in future years. It is imperative that adequate resourcing is attached to homelessness prevention work to begin ‘turning the tide’ against homelessness | |

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| **7.10** | In terms of the level of funding providing for the homelessness services budget, the initial budget allocation brings some welcome news. While we welcome the specific allocation of funding towards homelessness prevention, we have two further comments to make on this matter. Firstly, we would welcome confirmation from the Department that the intention is for this funding to be recurrent for years to come. And secondly, we would urge the Housing Executive to carefully consider how to align this funding with implementation of the 2022-2027 Homelessness Strategy to ensure that it is spent most effectively. | |
| **7.11** | Simon Community strongly welcome the specific allocation for homelessness prevention. The recent Northern Ireland Audit Office report on homelessness highlighted that the NIHE spends less than 10% of its' homelessness expenditure on prevention and early intervention, despite this being a strategic priority of the Ending Homelessness strategy.vi We therefore believe that this ringfenced allocation has the potential to make a significant impact on preventing homelessness and look forward to working with the NIHE on this. We strongly urge DfC to ensure that this funding is recurrent and that this represents the first step in making the strategic shift to prevention. | |

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| **7.12** | While Housing Rights welcomes the suggestion as outlined in the EQIA that strategic prevention initiatives should support innovation and delivery through partners, including the community and voluntary sector, we would highlight that this type of partnership requires long term planning and support for the pressures facing community and voluntary partners with increases in minimum wage and employer National Insurance contributions. To provide for at least some long-term stability which would create the space for planning and resource allocation, Housing Rights would urge the Department to make the Homeless Prevention allocation a multi-annual, ring-fenced allocation. | |
| **7.13** | Comparative research from across the world shows that the cost of preventing and solving homelessness is much less than the cost of doing nothing. Ending homelessness benefits us all – it reduces costs for society, improves the lives of individuals and strengthens communities. | |
| **7.14** | We strongly advocated for an end to the month-to-month funding to Homelessness Providers, due to the damaging levels of uncertainty it led to for the nineteen projects impacted and welcome the fact that the Minister listened to our concerns and acted. Before the Minister's intervention, funding for Community Prevention and Support Initiatives were being pitted against funding for temporary accommodation provision. It is our hope that in 2025/6 it will be confirmed that this situation has indeed ended going forward. | |
| **Category 8: Housing** | | |

<table>
<tr><td>8.1</td><td>We do not accept the Department’s assessment that the current proposed allocations will have no adverse impact on Section 75 groups. it will be some of the most vulnerable in our society who are most adversely impacted by the inadequate supply of social housing. Families, children and young people, care leavers, pensioners, single mothers, young single males, women escaping domestic abuse, families exiting the asylum system, people living with a disability, mental health issue or addiction – all of these people will continue to be trapped in expensive and unsuitable temporary accommodation which we know has negative impacts on health and wellbeing and widens social inequalities.</td><td rowspan="2">With DfC facing an opening Capital funding gap of £161.3m in 2025-26, managing a Capital pressure of this magnitude will undoubtedly have significant and adverse impacts on the Department’s ability to meet demand for capital programmes, which support public services in 2025-26.<br><br>The Department has sought to minimise the impacts of the insufficient Capital budget allocation by bidding for additional funding through the in-year monitoring round process. The Department successfully secured an additional £38.8m of Capital DEL in-year for the NI Housing Executive to progress New Build Social Housing, supporting delivery of up to 1,750 new starts this financial year against an initial target of 2,000. However, the Department was unable to meet the full target, due to a</td></tr>
<tr><td>8.2</td><td>Given the scale and depth of housing need across the country, data suggests that any shortfall in funding for, and availability of social housing will have an adverse impact across Section 75 groups including older people, disabled people, homeless people and on families who need social housing generally.</td></tr>
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| **8.3** | The EQIA acknowledges the negative impact of reduced capital funding on social housing waiting lists. We re-emphasise the potential for this impact to be disproportionate, particularly for:<br><br>•**Older people and persons with disabilities**: The proposed reduction in the Affordable Warmth Scheme funding (from a projected £14 million requirement to an allocated £7.5 million) will adversely impact these groups who are more likely to be affected by cold temperatures, have higher heating needs, and may be in fuel poverty.<br><br>•**Homeless households**: The funding shortfall for new social housing will impact the supply, leading to longer stays in temporary accommodation, which is more expensive for the public purse. The number of households requiring temporary accommodation has increased by over 160 per cent in six years (from 4,527 to 11,887 placements annually). This disproportionately affects younger people, young people leaving care, children living in temporary accommodation, women impacted by domestic abuse, refugee families and households with mental health or addiction challenges.<br><br>•**Racial groups** (including refugees and Irish Travellers): There has been an increase in refugee households granted 'leave to remain' entering the homelessness system. A reduction in housing supply could adversely impact equality of opportunity on the grounds of race. The lack of capital funding for Irish | lack of funding as well as delays in the receipt of in-year allocations.<br><br>The Department has considered the points raised when prioritising its Final Capital budget allocations for 2025-26, while working with the NIHE to ensure allocation will be made in the most effective way possible to support those most in need.<br><br>The Department recognises the impact reduced funding could have on Section 75 groups and is fully supportive of progressing NI Housing Executive Housing Transformation.<br><br>The Department's Capital budget allocation in 2025-26 will support investment in new social housing supply to the maximum extent possible. The majority of available capital is being used to build more social housing. The Department will consider ways to retain momentum in the Development Programme. |

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| | Traveller sites will limit access to quality transit and settled sites for this community. | |
| **8.4** | Adverse impacts have also been identified for people from minority ethnic backgrounds (who tend to experience significantly more overcrowding), single people (who experience poorer housing conditions), older women (who experience poorer housing conditions than men in rural areas), disabled people (who are more likely to live in poor housing conditions and in homes that are ill equipped for their needs) and households with dependents (who are more likely to live in overcrowded social homes). However, there is no evidence in the document that the allocation of existing resources will be targeted towards meeting the needs of applicants who are disproportionately impacted by housing inequality within section 75 groups. | |

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| **8.5** | The EQIA acknowledges the need for additional support in housing supply for specific groups. However, NIHE's response further highlights that a shortfall in funding for social housing will adversely impact many Section 75 categories. This includes older people, disabled people (especially those requiring wheelchair accommodation or ground floor access), and homeless people, many of whom have additional complex needs. The data as of 31 March 2025, shows 49,083 households on the social housing waiting list, with 37,635 in housing stress. Of the 6,054 allocations made in 2024/25, 171 required wheelchair accommodation, 1,970 needed ground floor accommodation, and 1,080 were over the age of 60. A sustained supply of social housing is required over the long term to meet new household formation and migration needs, and a shortfall could contribute to lengthening waiting lists and widening differentials between groups. | |
| **8.6** | Significant adverse consequences for individuals from several section 75 groups are likely to result if this budget allocation is confirmed. From a social housing perspective, the delivery of housing and support services by Housing Associations, this specifically impacts older people, disabled people (especially those requiring wheelchair accommodation or ground floor access), and homeless people, many of whom have additional complex needs. | |
| **8.7** | The unacceptable reality of older people trapped in unsuitable or unsafe housing must end now and this initiative will also free up houses for families. | |

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| **8.8** | Re: Shared Housing and Good Relations, Whilst other programmes may provide targeted progress for our user base (New Foundations) The absence of capital investment in shared housing is mentioned but not explored as a potential barrier to the promotion of good relations under Section 75 (especially religion and political opinion). | |
| **8.9** | Failure to progress the building of social housing in areas of greatest objective need will only exacerbate existing religious inequalities. Catholic households are allocated proportionately fewer homes, despite comprising a greater proportion of the waiting list and a greater proportion of applicants in housing stress. | |
| **8.10** | Insufficient social housing stock can have serious implications in domestic violence situations leaving victims (68% of victims are female) trapped in coercive and abusive situations as they have nowhere to go. The ability of survivors of domestic abuse to rebuild their lives can be severely limited by a lack of suitable housing which is appropriate for their particular needs including the needs of disabled women and children. The situation is even worse in rural areas where there is even less social housing available in the locality and victims are reluctant to move their children from local social networks and schools. | |
| **8.11** | There is an absurdly high shortfall of units for Domestic Abuse survivors. Housing is a feminist issue, and women are especially disadvantaged by their relatively low earnings and savings, their disproportionate responsibility for care work, and a world marked by gender inequality and especially economic inequality. | |

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| **8.12** | There is no capital funding allocation for scheduled improvements to Irish Travellers' sites, which impacts NIHE's ability to provide culturally sensitive accommodation and promote equality for this ethnic minority group. | |
| **8.13** | No capital funding has been provided for planned improvements to Traveller sites. Public authorities in Northern Ireland have a statutory obligation to promote equality of opportunity and good relations between people of different racial groups, including Irish Travellers. A lack of capital funding will limit NIHE's ability to enable access to quality transit and settled sites for Irish Travellers. | |

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| **8.14** | This response highlights critical concerns regarding the Department for Communities' (DfC) budget proposals for 2025/26 and the accompanying equality impact assessment (EQIA), particularly concerning social housing provision in Northern Ireland. We acknowledge the department's efforts in conducting the EQIA and the challenging financial context. However, the proposed capital and resource allocations remain insufficient to address the escalating housing crisis.<br><br>The capital departmental expenditure limit allocation for 2025/26 raises significant concerns. While initial indications from the former finance minister suggested that the £100 million reinvestment and reform initiative (RRI) funding would be additional to DfC's £270 million capital allocation for social housing, the EQIA confirms that this funding is included within the £270 million. Furthermore, this £100 million is earmarked for contractual new-build housing commitments from previous years, rather than funding new homes from 2025/26. This significantly reduces the capital available for new social homes. Consequently, we anticipate only around 1,000 new social home starts in the 2025/26 financial year, which is significantly below the identified annual need of more than 2,200. We acknowledge and welcome the recent £9 million allocation of additional capital for new social homes through the June monitoring round, nevertheless a substantial funding gap remains. The shortfall will severely impact vulnerable people and exacerbate the housing crisis. This level of new starts will also prevent delivery against | |

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| | development targets set out in the Programme for Government and the Housing Supply Strategy. | |

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| **8.15** | The lack of investment in social housing new builds contributes to a wider problem of insufficient housing supply. The growing gap between supply and demand inevitably drives up prices, making affordable housing difficult to access. A severe reduction in social housing options will likely increase reliance on more expensive, non-traditional temporary accommodation like hotels and bed and breakfasts, which not only negatively impacts well-being but also places a greater burden on public finances compared to the cost-effectiveness of social housing.<br><br>The reduction in social housing construction will also detrimentally affect the local construction sector, potentially impacting skilled workers and the supply chain. The reduction in output, estimated by the Housing Executive (NIHE) at 988 fewer homes than planned over a two-year period, represents a significant “shock” to the sector with economic consequences for Northern Ireland. Furthermore, these allocations are unlikely to provide the necessary funds to put Northern Ireland's housing stock on a meaningful path towards decarbonisation, hindering long-term environmental and energy efficiency goals.<br><br>We urge the Northern Ireland Executive to reconsider its budget allocation for social housing and prioritise allocating additional funding, especially from the additional £220 million of capital funding expected over the next four years from the UK government's Spending Review. The securing of multi-year budgets from the Spending Review is a positive step, enabling a long-term strategic approach to housing. Discussions on a full | |

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| | fiscal framework, including NIHE's borrowing powers, are also crucial for housing investment. | |
| **8.16** | The Housing Executive welcomes the clarity provided by 'whole of year' revenue funding, which will enable NIHE and its partners to plan more effectively, and ensure best use of public funds. The level of funding allocated for homelessness services, including temporary accommodation and assistance, is welcome and has met the requirement. Though indicative allocations to Strategic Housing Authority capital programmes, will have an adverse impact across those already experiencing housing need and housing inequality, particularly those who are homeless, those living in fuel poverty and energy inefficient housing. | |
| **8.17** | There is record demand for social housing. As of 31st March 2025, the number of households on the social housing waiting list stood at 49,083, with 37,635 households in housing stress, and 31,719 households with Full Duty Applicant status. Based on DfC's draft budget allocation, the Social Housing Development Programme will only be able to start circa 1,000 new social homes in 2025/26, significantly below a target of 2,000 starts. This risks widening housing inequalities and increasing waiting times for households in housing stress. Dramatically reduced social housing output will also have implications for economic growth and the construction sector. | |

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| **8.18** | The £63m allocation to new build social homes is welcomed; however, it is noted that this will only allow in the region of 1,000 new build social home starts in 2025-26. It is recognised that this falls well below the target of 2,000 and a further bid to address the shortfall is to be submitted.<br><br>Given the increasing waiting list, homelessness is likely to increase, and critical resources will inevitably have to be redirected to meet the statutory obligations relating to this. It is imperative that across the various departments the importance a good quality home plays in providing stability, improving health, improving educational attainment, etc, is recognised. | |
| **8.19** | The allocation of £63 million out of the £77.3 million available, once high priority and inescapable spending is taken into account, is illustrative of the fact that the Minister does view provision of social housing as a high priority. Yet it seems evident to us that yet again the same cannot be said of the Executive as a whole. The question has to be asked as to why the Executive agreed to a target being set for the end of the mandate and then failed to allocate anywhere near the funding level needed to meet it. | |

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| **8.20** | The decision to reduce the Social Housing Development Programme has serious knock-on effects for supported accommodation. People who are ready to move on remain ‘stuck’ in supported housing due to the lack of appropriate options, blocking others from accessing services they urgently need. The long-term solution to homelessness must include a fully resourced and ambitious Housing Supply Strategy, one capable of delivering at least 2,000 homes annually. | |
| **8.21** | It is disappointing that the budget allocation provided for DfC is insufficient to meet housing targets. This is especially frustrating given that the Northern Ireland Assembly also declared a housing crisis within the past financial year. Waiting lists are at record levels, supply is insufficient to cope with demand, and private rent prices continue to inflate at an alarming rate. The Assembly and the Executive recognise this, yet prioritisation continues not to be reflected in consecutive budget allocations. Budget allocations that are only sufficient to tread water will ultimately make the crisis more difficult and more costly to solve in the long run. | |
| **8.22** | Housing Rights would request clarification on how much of the £100 million RRI borrowing contained within this year’s allocation is being spent on inescapable commitments from previous years. | |

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| **8.23** | Housing Rights would urge the Department to closely engage with the Department of Finance and the Department for Infrastructure to put in place a concrete, costed and published action plan to address and overcome all obstacles to house building in Northern Ireland, including multi-year funding, water infrastructure, planning and construction. This must be carried out urgently, as without cooperative working and action, the Housing Supply Strategy and the Programme for Government will remain undeliverable wish lists for the entirety of their lifespans. | |
| **8.24** | The level of spending on non-standard accommodation must not continue its upward trend in the years ahead as it has in recent years. The Department needs to invest in programmes which will provide more affordable temporary accommodation in building more social homes and in homelessness prevention. Moving forward, the Executive must prioritise the delivery of preventative measures of homelessness and the construction of more social and affordable housing by housing associations who have been and continue to be, trusted and reliable partners in the delivery of social and affordable housing across all of Northern Ireland. | |
| **8.25** | The proposed funding for Social Housing is entirely insufficient to meet agreed government targets and identified need, resulting in increasing numbers of people becoming trapped in unsuitable and expensive temporary accommodation, which negatively impacts health and wellbeing and widens social inequalities. | |

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| **8.26** | The absence of a specific budget allocation towards practical measures to assist private tenants will impact across section 75 groups. The impact of the continued underfunding of the supply of new social homes and the use of private rented stock to meet the (increasing) temporary accommodation demand intensifies supply issues at the cheapest end of the private rented sector. This leads to increasing private rented sector rents, increased competition for stock and worsens the housing opportunity available to low-income households. | |
| **8.27** | Subjected to the fastest-growing rent inflation and the poorest quality of housing, private renters also lack numerous homeless prevention and security of tenure protections afforded to social renters. Housing Rights recommends that the Department move to ban no-fault evictions and establish indefinite tenancies with a prescribed list of exceptions. The policy underpinning which protects social tenants from shock and no-fault evictions does not exist within the private rented sector. Unfortunately, there is no government data to demonstrate the scale of this problem, and Housing Rights would recommend that government data collection is improved to monitor this, as is already the case in England. | |

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| **8.28** | Banning no-fault evictions would provide the security needed for tenants to challenge poor landlord practices and exercise their rights without fear of being made homeless at short notice. To tackle acute affordability issues in the Private Rented Sector, Housing Rights also recommends that a fund be set aside within a strengthened mitigation package for a specialist comprehensive Financial Inclusion Service to support low-income private renters impacted by LHA cuts to address the totality of affordability issues they face. This service would also include access to a grant to meet pressing need not met by existing support. It is anticipated that not only would the grant element help to mitigate the impact of LHA cuts, but it would encourage both tenants and landlords to engage with the financial inclusion service. | |
| **8.29** | To strengthen the safety net for private tenants, Housing Rights further recommends that the widening of access to Discretionary Housing Payments be explored in full through the reestablishment of the DHP Review Group. | |
| **8.30** | Housing Rights cannot stress the importance enough of maximum effort being made to lobby the Labour Government to take on board the recommendations of JRF, Housing Rights, and numerous similar organisations across the UK, and permanently re-link housing benefits to private rents. We urge the Minister to prioritise this in talks with Westminster colleagues and attempt to secure support from his equivalent colleagues in the other devolved administrations. | |

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| **8.31** | Given that enhancing social and affordable housing is an agreed cross-government priority, we do not understand why the Executive chose not to meet this bid. The severe shortage of social homes is forcing many people and families into either an expensive and insecure private rental sector or emergency temporary accommodation. Increasing amounts of public money is being directed to the private sector rather than into enhancing the supply of social and affordable homes. | |
| **8.32** | The Housing for All (shared housing) programme, despite its proven positive impact on enabling communities to live together, has no specific funding earmarked within the Social Housing Development Programme for 2025/26, leaving this programme at risk. | |
| **8.33** | Northern Ireland is the only part of the UK that does not have a grant system in place for the energy retrofitting of social housing. A grant scheme is necessary for Northern Ireland to ensure Housing Associations and our tenants have parity with their counterparts in GB and Ireland. In lieu of a grant for now, NIFHA is currently in the final stage of submitting its Outline Business Case to the Department for the award of FTC funding to Housing Associations to carry out retrofit work and we will emphasise the need for this to aid the delivery of energy efficiency in social housing in the absence of a grant for now | |
| **8.34** | To effectively reduce adverse impacts, we urge the department to promote energy efficiency measures in existing social housing stock: This could help reduce fuel poverty and lower energy bills for tenants, particularly benefitting older people and those with disabilities. | |

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| **8.35** | The supply of social housing stock is also impacted by the House Sales Scheme continuing for Housing Executive properties – there has been 1,800 sold homes sold over the last five years. | |
| **8.36** | Given multiple and consecutive years of missed housing targets, Housing Rights is of the view that it is untenable for the NIHE's House Sales Scheme to continue. Maintaining the House Sales Scheme has the effect of selling off vital public assets and dampens the impact of any social housebuilding by taking stock out of the system. The Draft Housing Supply Strategy commits to specific actions to, 'focus on homeless prevention,' and 'protect our current social housing stock. | |
| **8.37** | Housing Associations can reduce the costs associated with building new homes however to enable this we would need the Department for Communities to work with our members in amending the design of social housing. This would mean reviewing the Housing Association Guide (HAG) and agreeing what specific design standards can be altered that would lower construction costs without impacting on the quality and safety of a house. The same could also be applied to Secured by Design whereby additional costs to social housing developments can be applied by the Police. | |

<table>
<tr><td>8.38</td><td>We are pleased to see the proposed allocation of £48.1m in Financial Transactions Capital, of which £10m will go to the Loan to Acquire Move on Accommodation (LAMA) scheme. Simon Community were proud to have successfully piloted this initiative through our Creating Homes scheme and look forward to working with the Department to further scale this to provide safe, secure and affordable long-term homes for people experiencing homelessness.</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">Category 9: Social Security Benefit Delivery</td></tr>
<tr><td>9.1</td><td>Budget cuts leading to inadequate staffing and the potential for delays in benefit payments/child maintenance payments will have serious impacts for many Section 75 groups, with women more likely to be impacted by insufficient staffing levels as they are more likely to claim social security benefits. There is a need for increased staff resources and support to ensure that claimants do not lose access to vital welfare support. It is also vitally important that funding is also provided to community and voluntary sector partners to provide help to people in the format they need to make the move to Universal Credit.</td><td rowspan="2">The Department bid for the funding required in 2025-26 to recruit additional staff required to deliver an increasing Universal Credit caseload; implement the Move to Universal Credit for tax credits and legacy customers; address increasing level of fraud in the welfare system and the IT infrastructure required to support benefit and pensions delivery.<br><br>The Department secured a £16.9m Executive Earmarked allocation for 2025-26, which would allow for 400 additional staff in 2025-26.<br><br>To mitigate the risk to benefits and pension service delivery (including the Move to Universal Credit), the Department aims to sustain services and implement the Move to</td></tr>
<tr><td>9.2</td><td>It is clear that women are disproportionately represented among benefit claimants due to gendered structural inequalities. Therefore, any changes to benefits policy or delivery will have a greater impact on women, and this must be properly acknowledged and addressed.</td></tr>
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<tr>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>Research found that almost all of the women reported negative impacts due to the five-week wait for Universal Credit. It is simply unconscionable to accept that the initial wait would be lengthened in any way as a result of staff shortages within the Department to process and pay Universal Credit.</td>
<td rowspan="3">Universal Credit. This position is not without risk and will greatly exacerbate the pressure already being felt in operational benefit delivery areas, with potential impact on service delivery.<br><br>The Department will closely monitor benefit and pension service delivery performance and clearance times during the year. Where possible, action will be taken to mitigate any impacts on benefits and pension service delivery.</td>
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<td>9.4</td>
<td>The Department must abandon its current failing approach and immediately implement automatic inclusion in Pension Credit for all eligible older people. This is the only acceptable solution to the shameful reality that so many older people entitled to this benefit, remain unaware of or unregistered for this crucial support. Until automatic inclusion is fully realised, the Department must launch a comprehensive, proactive outreach programme in partnership with social partners to dramatically increase Pension Credit uptake.</td>
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<tr>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>We believe that given the current circumstances that priority should be given to the payment of adequate social security benefits to provide a safety net for people in these difficult times. We also believe that it is vital that the current mitigations package is strengthened as a matter of priority. It makes economic sense to invest in the social security system. Reducing support to those on the lowest incomes through the benefits system would damage recovery efforts as it reduces the amount of money that people have to spend in local economies.<br><br>The mainstream political narrative that welfare spending is a drain and should be reduced is illogical. Appropriate funding in areas such as unemployment benefits can improve productivity and workforce capability.</td>
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| **9.6** | LCNI recommends:<br>- in DfC's staffing allocation, priority is directed to the frontline administration of benefits to safeguard people's entitlement to timely and accurate benefit payments;<br>- standards of decision making are carefully monitored both for UC and the move to UC process so DfC can monitor and respond to increases in official error decisions;<br>- the indefinite extension of all Welfare Mitigation Schemes and calls on DfC to prioritise this in future budget allocations. | |
| **Category 10: Social Strategies** | | |
| **10.1** | Deliver an Anti-Poverty Strategy for Northern Ireland. The Executive's draft strategy does not meet the criteria of a reasonable strategy and is not fit for purpose. We urge DfC to meaningfully engage with the huge volume of research that has been produced by the Independent Expert Advisory Panel (2020), the Anti-Poverty Strategy Co-Design Group (2022), the Welfare Reform Mitigation Review (2021), the Discretionary Support Review (2022) and the hundreds of pages of NI specific evidence produced by organisations and academics that provides clear evidence of the interventions that work to tackle poverty, to develop a meaningful strategy with properly defined and specific actions, targets and timelines. | The draft Anti-Poverty Strategy was developed through a Co-design process and informed by consideration of the extensive research and evidence base in this area. As the draft Strategy notes, the current fiscal climate may have placed limitations on how far the Executive has been able to go on a number of areas, particularly in the first years of the Strategy, however the research base has sought to ensure that the impact of every pound spent is maximised to address real, evidenced need.<br>The Action Plan which will accompany the final Strategy, once agreed by the Executive, will have clear delivery |

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| **10.2** | There is much current debate in relation to the urgent need to expedite and implement an anti-poverty strategy: but where are the resources going to come from to implement any meaningful anti-poverty measures? | milestones and targets on putting actions in place to ensure that the Executive is delivering.<br><br>The actions within the draft Strategy were all considered affordable and within budget at the time it was prepared. Departments will be required to ensure that any actions they contribute to the Strategy are adequately resourced. Officials will continue to work to make sure that the final content of the strategy is affordable, deliverable and makes a lasting difference. |
| **Category 11: Supporting People** | | |
| **11.1** | The allocation of £81.7m for Supporting People falls short of the £90.1m requirement. As a result, further strategy work will need to be paused and there is no provision for inflationary cost uplifts that will be incurred by providers (including employer National Insurance contribution increases). The impact of the increase in the minimum wage and employer national insurance costs may call into question the sustainability of SP providers.<br>Client groups likely to be affected include people with disabilities (approx. 50% of clients), women affected by domestic abuse, Irish Travellers, migrant workers, older people, and younger people. | The Department values the outcomes delivered through the NI Housing Executive's Supporting People Programme and providers and recognises the vital contribution of the providers during the Covid-19 pandemic and now Cost of Living crisis.<br><br>The Department bid for funding to support Supporting People Programme and its providers in 2025-26. This included bids for increased demand, inflationary pressures, and uplifts for pay. Despite these bids, the Department received no additional funding for Supporting |

<table>
<tr><td>11.2</td><td>The additional £3.7m allocation is welcomed. However, there is concern that the allocation is potentially focused on additional service provision and may not address the funding required to maintain existing Supporting People funded services.<br><br>Given the lack of funding uplifts applied to Supporting People services over a number of years from 2007/08, and the increased costs arising due to inescapable pressures including the National Living Wage, Pension contributions, increased inflation and the recent changes to National Insurance Contributions, a number of existing services are at risk.<br><br>The closure of services would potentially result in increased homelessness and place additional pressures on the health service. This would result in adverse impacts to a number of the Section 75 Groups, in particular the elderly and those with a disability.</td><td rowspan="2">People, in 2025-26, to address these pressures and the Department's overall Resource allocation left a funding gap of £98.6m.<br><br>The Department acknowledge Supporting People funding provides vital services and, as such, consideration has been given to this when determining final budget allocations.</td></tr>
<tr><td>11.3</td><td>Reductions in funding for preventative support services will have disproportionate impacts on vulnerable Section 75 groups—including children, older people, disabled individuals, and those in rural or socially excluded communities. These impacts must be fully considered in the final EQIA.</td></tr>
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| **11.4** | As the department is aware, Disability is a specifically identified S75 group. However, in Section 6 of the EQIA has not highlighted any cross departmental assessment of the current and future needs of this group to be met by the Supporting People Programme.<br><br>As the department knows, many Supporting People funded services in the Disability sector are co-commissioned and funded by HSCTs across Northern Ireland. Therefore, it clearly important that data held by and the policies of the Department of Health feed into the available data used to assess impacts on this group. | |

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| **11.5** | In relation to the Supporting People programme and Homelessness the Department's assessment has not identified any potential adverse or differential impacts. The Department points out that 19,500 people are supported by the Supporting people Programme (SP) while at the same time quoting a 2020 report identifying service shortfalls across different groups.<br><br>The suggestion that £3.7m will "ensure the continued viability of the programme and support homelessness interventions" has not been backed up by data in the EQIA. Firstly, it is unclear how the £3.7m additional funding will be utilised. This money is to cover Homelessness and SP. Without knowing how much is for SP we are surprised the Department has been able to determine there is no impact in the proposed allocation.<br>Secondly the Department has recognised wage increases and National Insurance impacts for both Arm's length bodies and Voluntary and Community Sector and provided funding to mitigate this but not for SP.<br><br>Therefore, as it is unlikely SP will receive all the £3.7 million allocated and no additional funding has been earmarked for inescapable payroll costs, it is clearly illogical to suggest that SP services can be maintained at even current levels. The only way SP providers will manage this real-terms reduction in funding will be to rationalise service delivery. This will clearly have an impact on those who receive services from SP. This will then have a further impact on other statutory services who people will turn to. As in previous responses the Department needs to recognise | |

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| | that SP funding needs year on year increase just to stand still, and additional funding will be required to meet future needs. | |
| **11.6** | The EQIA unhelpfully conflates the budget lines for Homelessness services and the SP. It is the case that around 40% of funding for SP goes towards homelessness services. However, this means that 60% of funding for SP services goes to the other three thematic areas. Eliding these two budget lines is unhelpfully confusing and should be avoided. | |

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| **11.7** | As a provider of Supporting People services to young people, the impact of no mitigations for minimum wage / NIC increases or uplifts in the 2025-26 budget will directly impact young people due to increased risk to the viability of services.<br><br>Young People's supported housing and housing support services will be at risk of closure or a reduction in the levels of service delivery due to insufficient funding levels to mitigate the rate of inflation and the increases in minimum wages and NICS.<br><br>Low wages resulting in high vacancies rates and poor retention of staff in the housing sector.<br><br>Skills drain from direct provision leaving organisations unable to deliver safe services.<br><br>MACS Supporting Children and Young People welcomes the opportunity to respond to the EQIA of the Department for Communities (DfC) Budget Allocation for 2025/2026. As a provider of Supporting People Services we are hugely concerned by the budget allocation and the future of housing support services. There has been no mitigation on the impact of the increase in minimum wage and NIC costs introduced by the UK - this will mean that all services are now in a deficit position and the ongoing viability of services is at risk. The cost to MACS alone for these changes is over £170,000 per year and this does not include inflationary cost increases. | |

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| **11.8** | We appreciate the overall challenges in the NI budget and that the bids from DFC have not been allocated in full. In relation to SP it is important there is recognition that the cost pressures on these services must be met year on year. While these bodies are independent from SP and the Department they need to be treated similar to Arms Length Bodies when it comes to core payroll costs. DFC should make a separate allocation for these costs before looking at service strategy/growth.<br><br>We also think the Department needs to recognise the services provided by SP are not discretionary services, where the reduction of these services has limited impact and financial cost. These services are in the Disability sector are a key part of the social care landscape and if these services are reduced or removed then they will have to replaced elsewhere either from Statutory services or from another Department's budget e.g. Health. | |
| **11.9** | There has been no inflationary uplift in budgets for the Supporting People Programme since 2008. In effect, this has led to a real terms cut of over 30%. UNISON has sought that not only adequate funding be put in place, but that funding for Supporting People providers translates into decent pay and terms and conditions for the workforce. Evidence from the Centre for Economic Empowerment shows that every £1 spent on the Supporting People Programme saves the public purse £1.90 elsewhere, across health, social care, benefits, criminal justice and housing. | |

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| **11.10** | To effectively reduce adverse impacts, we urge the department to address inflationary pressures for Supporting People providers: Provide adequate funding uplifts to cover increasing costs and ensure the financial viability of schemes, preventing potential service reductions and ensuring continued support for vulnerable individuals. | |
| **11.11** | The vital Supporting People (SP) programme faces significant challenges. While a welcome uplift in funding has been provided, it does not adequately account for inflationary costs, nor for the financial pressures arising from changes to Employers National Insurance Contributions and the rising National Living Wage. The estimated costs of these changes for SP-funded organisations, particularly those delivering homelessness services, are substantial, and the allocated increase will not cover these increased operational expenses. This financial strain threatens the viability of essential support services, which are critical for many vulnerable individuals across Section 75 equality categories. | |

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| **11.12** | It appears that the 25/26 budget for the SP programme will be effectively frozen at 24/25 levels. Simon Community have estimated that we will need to source around an additional £300,000 to 'top-up' Supporting People funding and ensure our services remain sustainable this year. This means that charitable funds donated by the public will have to be used to essentially deliver a statutory duty. Current funding levels are contributing to unsafe staffing levels and higher risks for both staff and the people we support. Any risks to the sustainability of services or our ability to provide a wide range of support will mean adverse impacts for the people who need our services. | |
| **11.13** | There is a failure to deliver an inflationary uplift on Supporting People fund, and a lack of clarity around allocation of the proposed uplift. | |

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| **11.14** | The lack of investment in social housing new builds contributes to a wider problem of insufficient housing supply. The growing gap between supply and demand inevitably drives up prices, making affordable housing difficult to access. A severe reduction in social housing options will likely increase reliance on more expensive, non-traditional temporary accommodation like hotels and bed and breakfasts, which not only negatively impacts well-being but also places a greater burden on public finances compared to the cost-effectiveness of social housing.<br><br>The reduction in social housing construction will also detrimentally affect the local construction sector, potentially impacting skilled workers and the supply chain. The reduction in output, estimated by the Housing Executive (NIHE) at 988 fewer homes than planned over a two-year period, represents a significant "shock" to the sector with economic consequences for Northern Ireland. Furthermore, these allocations are unlikely to provide the necessary funds to put Northern Ireland's housing stock on a meaningful path towards decarbonisation, hindering long-term environmental and energy efficiency goals.<br><br>We urge the Northern Ireland Executive to reconsider its budget allocation for social housing and prioritise allocating additional funding, especially from the additional £220 million of capital funding expected over the next four years from the UK government's Spending Review. The securing of multi-year budgets from the Spending Review is a positive step, enabling a long-term strategic approach to housing. Discussions on a full | |

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| | fiscal framework, including NIHE's borrowing powers, are also crucial for housing investment. | |
| **11.15** | Housing Support Services are not being treated in an equitable manner to similar roles in the care sector. Salaries in statutory HSC roles have increased dramatically and the implementation of the Social Care Workforce Strategy 2025-2035 will mean further impact on the housing sectors ability to recruit and retain staff. Given the current housing crisis and the need to support young people to secure and maintain accommodation options we need skilled and dedicated frontline workers. The DfC budget allocation for 2025 2026 will not even fund services at the new minimum wage level. MACS would like to urge the Minister to do all he can to mitigate the impact on budgetary pressures on Supporting People providers. | |
| **11.16** | Supporting People funding should keep up with inflationary increases and funding should be provided for the changes to Employer's NIC and increase in the National Living Wage. If SP funded providers are forced to absorb these costs, it could deepen recruitment/retention difficulties in the sector, increase reliance on more expensive agency staff, reduce capacity to provide support, or lead to redundancies and service closures. We are at a loss to understand how the EQIA fails to recognise the potential negative impact to organisations funded by SP and the individuals from section 75 groups who they support from a failure to mitigate the costs of the changes arising from the budget and to account for inflation. | |

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| **11.17** | We believe any future budget must reflect the strategic value of early intervention and equitable support for all funded organisations—regardless of their funding pathway.<br>Key Considerations<br><br>Prevention as a Strategic Investment- BCM's services reduce future reliance on emergency interventions. Prevention is not just compassionate—it is cost-effective. Undervaluing preventative programmes increases long-term public spending and deepens disadvantage across Northern Ireland.<br><br>We are increasingly concerned that real-terms funding erosion, coupled with rising operational costs (e.g. wage increases, National Insurance contributions), places unsustainable pressure on services. We also wish to draw attention to the inequity of proposed allocations between funding streams.<br><br>The ongoing shortfall in social housing starts exacerbates housing insecurity. BCM urges the Department to prioritise preventative funding and capital investment in housing services that safeguard family stability and reduce reliance on temporary accommodation. | |
| **11.18** | The consequences of failing to mitigate the significant increase in costs for SP funded organisations include (1) a deepening of the ongoing recruitment and retention crisis, (2) potential for reduced service provision, (3) Inability in some cases to provide effective support to vulnerable groups and (4) Potential for redundancies and service closures. | |

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| **11.19** | The increase In Employers National Insurance and the Living Wage increase will cost us as a Provider £196,000 this year, a sum we simply do not have within our current budget. Without urgent support, this financial pressure will inevitably result in redundancies and the closure of vital projects, directly impacting the people and communities we serve. It is difficult to understand why Health Trusts are in a position to prioritise and fund increases to jointly funded Supporting People projects, while the Department for Communities (DfC) appears unable to do the same. | |
| **11.20** | The current budget allocation does not reflect the true cost of delivering SP services and will limit the NIHE's ability to fund its Supporting People Modernisation Programme. | |
| **11.21** | The current and growing shortfall in appropriate housing units for survivors of domestic abuse is deeply alarming, particularly in light of the Minister's public commitment earlier this year to ensuring that survivors are not disadvantaged under the revised housing points system. Without urgent and sustained investment in appropriate accommodation, the Department is failing to meet the needs of survivors. | |
| **11.22** | The allocation of an additional £1 million for new pipeline schemes through the SP programme seems illogical when currently funded schemes are struggling to remain viable. If this is all of the funding which is available, it is our view that the £1 million outlined should firstly go to currently funded schemes to mitigate against the rising costs caused by the UK budget. | |

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| **11.23** | An additional £1 million is being provided to the SP programme for new pipeline schemes. Adding new schemes when currently funded schemes are under such enormous financial pressure simply does not stack up. | |
| **11.24** | It has become a pattern in recent years for NIHE, or the Department, to distribute significant sums of money towards the end of the financial year with very short timescales for organisations to spend the money. This is surely not the most efficient way to distribute scarce public funds. We hope that the introduction of multi-year budgets in 2026/7 will provide a plausible long-term solution to this problem. | |
| **11.25** | SP organisations such as ours have already undertaken extensive measures to adapt, streamlining central costs, restructuring services, identifying efficiencies, and diversifying income where possible. After 13 years of such efforts, the sector is now operating on the bare minimum. Increasingly, it is apparent there is no further slack to absorb rising costs such as National Insurance contributions, the higher National Living Wage, and general inflation. | |
| **11.26** | One option SP providers may take to cover the budget shortfall is to seek to increase rents. However, an unfortunate consequence of this is people in temporary accommodation can be caught in a trap whereby they find themselves unable to work because if they did, they would be unable to afford the rent being charged to stay in hostel accommodation as they would lose their entitlement to housing benefit. | |

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| **11.27** | <u>Supporting People Programme</u><br>- Review the provision of Supporting People services and in particular those operating at a deficit and consider their strategic relevance.<br>- Review the allocation of funding to services consider to be strategically relevant.<br>- Work with the Department of Health to ensure strategically relevant services are maintained and adequately funded. | |

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| **11.28** | <u>Recommendations</u><br>1. Retain inflation-linked uplifts for Supporting People funding to protect sustainability in the third sector; Charities cannot sustain the existing workload on eroding budgets. Best case scenario is that the sector will employ fewer staff and work with fewer beneficiaries over our contractual term. Worst case is that the sector sees organisations walk away from services or cease to operate resulting in a cliff edge for delivery.<br>2. Transparent inclusion of Housing Executive–funded charities in any sector uplift.<br>3. Recognition of prevention's value in both resource and capital budget decisions.<br>4. Clarity and equity in the distribution of funding across all charitable providers. Specialist charities will benefit disproportionally vs generalist charities such as ourselves, who actually deliver a bulk of the low-level prevention work in NI.<br>Belfast Central Mission remains committed to supporting individuals and families at key moments in their lives. We urge the Department for Communities to recognise that funding prevention is both a moral and economic imperative—and to ensure that organisations like ours are supported to continue making a difference. | |
| **Category 12: Urban Regeneration** | | |

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| **12.1** | There should be better collaboration between parts of DfC - Regeneration and Neighbourhood Renewal and Voluntary and Community for example joining with built Heritage and Arts, using Community Asset Transfer legislation for example to allow this and creating a fund to support communities to buy heritage buildings. | With DfC facing a Capital funding gap of £161.3m in 2025-26, the Department acknowledges that managing a Capital pressure of this magnitude will undoubtedly have a significant and adverse impact on the Department's ability to meet demand for capital programmes which support public services in 2025-26.<br><br>The Department has considered the points raised when prioritising its Final Capital budget allocations for 2025-26, while working to ensure allocations will be made in the most effective way possible to support areas most in need. |
| **Category 13: Voluntary & Community Sector** | | |
| **13.1** | LCNI welcomes the small increase of funding to the Voluntary and Community Sector. | The Department recognises the vital services provided by the Voluntary and Community sector through a number or programmes (Supporting People Programme is dealt with separately), and on that basis, there were no cuts to these programmes as part of the 2025-26 budget allocations. In fact, Voluntary and Community Sector funding increased by £2.8m on the Department's 2024-25 funding level, to help deal with the pressures faced by the Sector.<br><br>The Department recognises the important role of our ALBs and their valuable work, particularly supporting all Section 75 groups, and has sought to mitigate the impact on ALBs by making a general Resource allocation of £3.7m across its Arm's Length Bodies in 2025-26. |
| **13.2** | While the recent funding uplift is welcome, it is not enough to address the long-term impact of sustained cuts to the community and voluntary sector. These cuts have contributed to a growing problem of insecure employment across the sector with many workers in precarious employment, on low pay and short-term contracts. | |
| **13.3** | We recognise the fact that DfC has yet again received a budget which is manifestly insufficient. In our view, the DfC has not received funding to mitigate the impact of the changes introduced by the UK budget of October 2024. The decision to make these changes but fail to ensure additional funding went to VCS organisations to cover the costs of them was a retrograde one on the part of the British Government. | |

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| **13.4** | If the current budget proposals are implemented, with no increase to resources, all section 75 groups would see a reduction in support provided, with a detrimental effect to all Section 75 beneficiaries. | Given the continued constrained financial position facing the Department in 2025-26, providing increased allocations to ALBs is not affordable at this time. The Department will continue to work with ALBs to minimise any impact on service delivery. |
| **13.5** | The department has acknowledged that there are a disproportionate number of women working in the Community and Voluntary sector, so it is clear that support that is given to (or taken from) the sector will have a disproportionate impact on women. We welcome the news of the increased investment in the sector; however, the equality impacts of that investment entirely depends on what purpose or funding stream the funding will be allocated. Without detail on the plans - including information on any forthcoming cuts or changes in priority focus with regards to certain funding streams - it is impossible to welcome this news unequivocally. | |
| **13.6** | It is not clear from this document that the Department has fully assessed what the impact of inflation, the ENICs changes and a rising National Living Wage (NLW) will be on voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations. If such an analysis had been conducted, we would contend that it would be likely to have identified potentially adverse consequences for a wide range of section 75 categories. The £2.8 allocation will not come close to covering the cost and the funding will not apply to organisations which are funded through the housing and homelessness division. | |

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| **13.7** | Support in the form of more resources just to maintain statutory obligations is a necessity to keep organisations in existence. Currently the Department supports 287 groups and organisations across the V&C Sector which is very welcome. Just to maintain the service level the same as last year there needs to be clarification on the actual amounts being provided.<br><br>The resources set aside in the budget for Employers NI contributions would not meet the overall need of the department commitments. Unless the sector is supported fully there will be a scenario of mass redundancies which will result in a drastic scaling back of support provided to all communities and individuals with a negative impact on all section 75 categories. | |
| **13.8** | Failure to increase funding will negatively impact on the ability of SP funded organisations to contribute to Executive goals. Unfortunately, the Department of Finance and the wider Executive ignored this point in agreeing on the budget. Different allocations could have been made to Departments.<br><br>Yet again the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) is being treated as a poor relation compared to statutory and public bodies despite also delivering public functions. Other sectors and Executive Departments have been regularly prioritised over and above DfC and the needs of SP funded providers. | |

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| **13.9** | There needs to be more investment in early intervention and prevention. The Community & Voluntary sector have been and still are working with limited resources. There needs to be more investment in community education. Residents are living in poverty and can't afford to lift themselves out of poverty, due to the high cost of educational courses. | |
| **13.10** | We urge robust funding for community development initiatives that actively combat social isolation, particularly in the most vulnerable rural and deprived areas where loneliness is a widespread and devastating issue. These are not optional extras, they are fundamental to the well-being and dignity of older people. | |
| **13.11** | Women's Centres receive funding under the Community Investment Fund (CIF) and/or Neighbourhood Renewal (People and Places) to support longer term community development via funding to support some of the key essential staff and some overhead costs. However, from 2012 to 2022, these funds have been subject to austerity cuts which resulted in little or no funding for overheads and in some cases a reduction in funded staff hours. | |
| **13.12** | There needs to be a review of equality between how Departments and Statutory Bodies prioritise their own spending compared to how they fund the voluntary sector to deliver services. For example, Pension contributions in the statutory sector are incredibly high and could be reviewed to create significant annual savings. | |

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| **13.13** | <u>Suggested Reforms for the 3rd Sector:</u><br><br>**Proactively Invest in the sector's ability to self-generate revenue through commercial counterpart services** - to deliver business on an equal footing with the private sector, and in so doing making them more financially sustainable in footing the increasing level of service delivery across NI.<br><br>**Reducing central overheads** - reliance on 3rd sector has grown significantly to deliver prevention and social welfare functions, but associated costs in the NICS have not shrunk proportionally to match the shift in statutory responsibility. There needs to be a shift in where larger funding streams go, away from a reduced Civil Service involvement/removal of unwarranted bureaucracy.<br><br>**Shift to Long-Term, Flexible Funding** - Get us away from short-term, project-based grants toward multi-year core funding that supports organisational resilience and innovation. Recognise the third sector's role in prevention, not just crisis response. | |

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| **13.14** | <u>Suggested Reforms for the 3rd Sector:</u><br><br>**Unlock Philanthropy & Corporate Partnerships**<br>Create incentives for businesses to invest in social outcomes (e.g. matched funding schemes, social procurement clauses). Strengthen relationships between charities and local employers to share skills, volunteers, and resources.<br><br>**Develop a Northern Ireland Civil Society Strategy and a viable Anti-Poverty Strategy**<br>Establish a cross-departmental strategy that recognises the third sector as a strategic partner in public service delivery. Include commitments to data transparency, workforce development, and inclusive governance. The response to the recent proposed Anti-Poverty Strategy indicates that it is not considered fit for purpose, and in conjunction with a relatively austere budget does not enable progress towards our sectoral aims to remove poverty from our communities. | |

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| **13.15** | <u>Suggested Reforms for the 3rd Sector:</u><br><br>**Explore new models for Personal Income -** Trial a Universal Basic Income scheme to simplify welfare delivery and reduce administrative costs. UBI could be funded through a mix of devolved revenue, philanthropic partnerships, and redirected benefit spending.<br><br>**Social Impact Bonds & Outcome-Based Funding -**<br>Attract private investment into preventative services (e.g. family support, mental health) with returns tied to measurable outcomes. This model has been used successfully in other UK regions to fund early intervention without upfront public spending.<br><br>**Public-Private Partnerships for Social Infrastructure -**<br>Encourage co-investment in housing, childcare, and community hubs through joint ventures with ethical developers and social enterprises. Use long-term leaseback or shared equity models to retain public benefit.<br><br>**Invest in Productivity & Digital Capacity -**<br>Support charities to adopt digital tools, improve data use, and streamline service delivery. Funders should allow investment in back-office functions, leadership development, and tech infrastructure. | |

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| **13.16** | <u>Income-Generation (re. the excuse of limited resources):</u><br><br>**Fiscal Devolution & Local Revenue Powers -**<br>Work to enable the Northern Ireland Executive to raise revenue through devolved taxation (e.g. tourism levies, vacant property taxes, or environmental charges). This reduces reliance on the Block Grant and allows for targeted investment in welfare and prevention services. | |
| **13.17** | We strongly advocate for an immediate transition to a multi-year budgeting framework. The current short-term allocations stifle the ability of our voluntary/community sector partners to plan sustainably, leading to chronic service discontinuity and the loss of skilled staff. Furthermore, we demand expanded budget transparency and rigorous in-year monitoring. This will empower stakeholders to swiftly identify and challenge underspends and questionable reallocations, ensuring public money genuinely serves public need. | |
| **13.18** | The potential outworking of the budget in relation to direct support provided to the voluntary and community sector, support to provide assistance would be reduced to all across the board. We believe moving to multi-year budgets where possible with the necessary increases built into the forecasts would be beneficial. In year monitoring bids by the Department should be based on a co-design element with the identification of emerging needs with the sector. | |
| **Category 14: Advice Sector** | | |

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| **14.1** | While we welcome the Department's commitment to continue existing mitigations, it is disappointing that we are facing another year in which the Department is not proposing to fund any new welfare mitigations, such as those proposed by the Independent Review of Welfare Mitigations. | The Department's bid for funding to support New Welfare Mitigations was not met in 2025-26.<br><br>In the absence of funding and pressures facing the Department in 2025-26, progressing this work is not affordable and will be a matter for the Executive to agree and support financially. |
| **14.2** | Women are generally more likely than men to live in poverty across their lifetimes. Lone parents are even more vulnerable to poverty. Women often bear the brunt of poverty in the home managing household budgets to shield their children from its worst effects. A decade of austerity and welfare reform policies have disproportionately impacted on women. Research by the House of Commons Library shows that 86% of the savings to the Treasury through tax and benefit changes since 2010 will have come from women. | |
| **14.3** | We demand the Department immediately ring-fence and legislate for the permanent protection of the Winter Fuel Payment for all eligible older people in Northern Ireland. The temporary reinstatement, only delivered after intense public protest, cannot be merely a stopgap. Older people deserve absolute certainty, not a constant fight for survival. The Department must outrightly reject any eligibility restrictions or income-linked clawbacks that penalise those most in need. Furthermore, it is incumbent upon the Department to launch a widespread awareness campaign to maximise the uptake of all available fuel and warmth schemes to ensure that no older person will be left sitting in their home freezing due to lack of information. | |

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| **14.4** | We are firmly of the belief that strengthening the mitigations package is essential to provide protection from financial hardship and poverty and also to help with economic recovery. Money provided through benefits is spent in local economies, therefore strengthening the mitigations package increases the amount of money available to spend, increasing demand at a time when action is needed to create jobs and revive local businesses. | |

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| **GENERAL ISSUES RAISED** | | |
| **Category 1: Overall Concerns About the Executive Budget and Wider Context** | | |
| **1.1** | **The Executive Budget allocation to DfC is insufficient and risks harming those most vulnerable**, particularly women, children, disabled people and low-income households. Respondents emphasise that Section 75 and Section 28E duties require targeting resources based on objective need, which they believe is not met under the current budget. | DfC recognises the concern about the disproportionate impacts of the Draft Budget on already disadvantaged groups. The forecast NI 2025–26 overspend reflects the gap between growing need and the limited Executive budget, particularly following the end of restoration funding. While the recent increase to NI's baseline, based on relative need, is welcome, it still falls short of what is required, and Fiscal Framework discussions with HM Treasury will continue. Within these constraints, DfC continues to target funding toward those most in need, in line with our Section 75 and Section 28E duties. |
| **1.2** | **Repeated annual cuts and the absence of multi-year budgeting undermine service stability**, especially in areas such as housing, homelessness, anti-poverty interventions and childcare. Respondents argue that long-term planning is impossible under the current funding model. | We agree that single-year budgets undermine service stability and limits our ability — and that of our delivery partners — to plan for the long term. Recent political and economic volatility — including changes in the UK Government, periods without an Executive, Brexit, and the Covid-19 pandemic — has limited the ability to set multi-year budgets. However, the Minister for Communities has been clear that longer-term planning is essential, particularly for areas such as housing, homelessness and community support. DfC will continue to develop its |

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| | | financial planning approach and are working towards a multi-year budget for 2026–2030, alongside a longer-term, transformation-focused approach to budget sustainability. |
| **1.3** | **A holistic, cross-government EQIA is required.** Department-level assessments are insufficient to capture cumulative impacts across departments. Respondents note that ECNI guidance calls for system-wide equality analysis. | We share the view that cumulative impacts are best understood through a holistic, Executive-wide approach rather than isolated departmental assessments. The Programme for Government, Executive strategies, and budget sustainability plans provide important mechanisms to strengthen cross-departmental working, particularly for issues such as poverty, homelessness, employability and cost-of-living pressures which cut across several policy areas. DfC will continue to engage with DoF and colleagues across government to explore opportunities to improve the consistency and quality of collective EQIA processes over time. |
| **1.4** | **The wider socio-economic context magnifies the impact of budget reductions** — including long-term austerity, welfare reform, Brexit, Covid-19 effects and the ongoing cost-of-living crisis. Cuts introduced against this backdrop risk deepening structural inequalities. | We fully recognise that the budget has been developed against a challenging backdrop, including cost-of-living pressures, ongoing effects of welfare reform, and broader economic uncertainty. These factors heighten the pressures on the communities we serve. In response, DfC continues to prioritise services that protect vulnerable groups — including Discretionary Support, employment programmes and direct payments such as winter-fuel-related payments — while seeking to reduce adverse impacts as far as possible within the limited budget available. |

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| 1.5 | **Additional investment is needed rather than further reductions** to address systemic issues such as poverty, social security adequacy, childcare, housing and gender inequality. Many respondents caution that the proposed budget cannot be effectively mitigated because baseline funding is already too low. | We agree that many of the areas highlighted — from housing and poverty reduction to social security and childcare — require sustained investment. The Executive continues to make the case to HM Treasury for increased funding and a fairer settlement, and DfC continues to explore opportunities for additional funding such as the Local Growth Fund, FTC funding and other investment initiatives. While we cannot eliminate all adverse impacts within the current budget envelope, we remain committed to protecting key services and targeting spending towards objective need. |
| **Category 2: Department-Level Budget Issues** | | |
| 2.1 | **Consultees cannot meaningfully propose mitigations or alternatives because the Department has not provided detailed, fully costed budgets.** Respondents argue that impact assessments must reflect the level of funding actually required to meet current and historic needs, and that it is not the role of stakeholders to identify mitigations without such information. | We understand consultees' concerns about the difficulty of proposing mitigations or alternatives without full, costed budget information. Single-year funding cycles and late budget confirmations have constrained our ability to provide earlier financial detail. However, we recognise the importance of transparency for meaningful engagement, and we will consider options to enhance the clarity and timing of information in future cycles, recognising that improvements are likely to be incremental and dependent on wider budget processes. Our aim is to enable stakeholders to contribute effectively to discussions on options to minimise adverse impacts. |

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| 2.2 | **The Department's budget calculations do not fully account for real financial pressures**, including required workforce costs such as employer NIC increases. Respondents state that failing to reflect genuine cost drivers results in underestimation of resource needs. | We acknowledge consultees' concerns that departmental pressures — including employer NIC increases and rising workforce, contractual and statutory costs — must be properly reflected in budget planning. These pressures are real and contribute significantly to the Department's resource challenges. We continue to present these cost pressures clearly in our submissions to the Executive and work to ensure our budget allocations are aligned as closely as possible to the level of need, even within an extremely constrained financial environment. |
| 2.3 | **Funding shortfalls pose risks to statutory and contractual service delivery**, particularly within the Housing Executive, where reductions will limit service provision, slow housing supply, and affect compliance with legal obligations. Reduced capital budgets will also have knock-on effects across other public services, including health. | We fully recognise the concerns regarding the impact of budget shortfalls on statutory and essential services, including the Housing Executive's ability to meet legal obligations and maintain programmes that support vulnerable households. Decisions in this budget cycle have been exceptionally difficult, and reductions risk affecting the scale and pace of service delivery. While we cannot eliminate all adverse impacts, we continue to focus on prioritising statutory duties and protecting essential services as far as possible within the budget available, and to make strong bids through in-year monitoring and future budget processes to address funding gaps. |
| **Category 3: Structural Problems with the EQIA** | | |
| 3.1 | **Analytical rigour and transparency are insufficient to support a lawful, meaningful EQIA.** The document lacks a sufficiently | We acknowledge the concerns raised about the level of analytical detail in the EQIA and the challenges this can |

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| | detailed structure of resource allocation and does not enable robust assessment of impacts on Section 75 groups.<br>Respondents stress the need for granular budget visibility (e.g., line-by-line breakdowns) so stakeholders can identify viable mitigations or alternative savings. | create for assessing impacts and identifying mitigations.<br>The compressed budget timetable significantly limited the scope for more detailed analysis in this cycle. While we agree that clarity and transparency are important, it is not always feasible or proportionate for the Department to provide highly granular breakdowns across the breadth of our functions.<br>We will seek opportunities to strengthen the presentation of evidence in future EQIAs, proportionate to the scale of the decision and the information available, and we will look for opportunities to enhance how material is presented, to support stakeholder understanding and engagement. |
| **3.2** | **Intersectional analysis is missing or weak, leading to under-identification of impacts.** While some adverse impacts are acknowledged, the absence of an intersectional lens means important combined/compounded impacts are not fully captured. | We accept that intersectional impacts could have been more fully explored in this EQIA. Understanding how impacts combine across protected characteristics is essential, particularly for groups facing multiple disadvantages. We acknowledge this is an area for further development and will look to build our approach to intersectionality progressively over time, through better use of available data and closer collaboration with policy areas. This will help to better capture the complexity of impacts experienced by different groups. |
| **3.3** | **Mitigations and alternative policies are not adequately developed, contrary to Section 75's proactive duty.**<br>Respondents expect practical mitigations and genuine alternatives to be considered and recorded. Several offer to meet | We recognise the frustration expressed regarding the limited set of mitigations outlined. The financial context for 2025–26 has significantly constrained the range of feasible alternatives, given the need to prioritise statutory functions |

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| | officials to assist; some signal that failure to reflect ECNI guidance could result in a complaint. | and essential services. Nonetheless, we agree that EQIAs should clearly set out potential mitigations and consider alternative options wherever possible. We welcome the willingness of stakeholders to engage constructively, and we will explore ways to enhance how external input is gathered and reflected in future EQIAs. |
| **3.4** | **Process concerns persist: Previous approaches have been repeated and ECNI guidance insufficiently applied.** Respondents are concerned that the process appears recycled from earlier EQIAs without improvement. They recommend using the **Department for Infrastructure** as an exemplar of better practice and engaging more fully with ECNI guidance | We note the concerns raised about the consistency and quality of previous EQIAs and understand the importance of strengthening our approach. The Department is giving greater consideration to its equality obligations throughout the entire budget process and has actively taken on board ECNI guidance and stakeholder feedback in refining this year's EQIA. We expect this to be a gradual process, and we are committed to continuing to learn from previous versions, building internal capability and understanding over time, and enhancing the way equality considerations inform decision-making over successive budget cycles. |
| **Category 4: Data Limitations and Omissions** | | |
| **4.1** | Respondents noted that the EQIA does not reflect the breadth of evidence they expected to see included. They highlighted the absence of several key departmental Reviews, Expert Panel reports, internal datasets and external evidence that they believe are directly relevant to understanding equality impacts. They also raised concerns about the EQIA's reliance on a narrow set of quantitative sources, with less emphasis on qualitative or | We acknowledge the concerns raised about the range and depth of evidence referenced in the EQIA. While it is not possible to list every dataset, Review, Expert Panel report or operational insight used across the Department, consultees should note that a wide range of quantitative data, qualitative evidence and lived-experience information is routinely considered across our business areas when |

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| | lived-experience evidence and felt that intersectional and group-specific analysis — particularly for women, people with learning disabilities, non-English speakers and young parents — should have been stronger. Respondents stated that omitting this material limits the completeness and depth of the assessment. Respondents specifically referenced the following evidence as missing from the EQIA:<br><br>• Welfare Mitigations Review<br>• Discretionary Support Review<br>• Gender Equality Strategy Expert Advisory Panel Report<br>• Anti-Poverty Strategy Expert Advisory Panel Report<br>• Disability Strategy Expert Advisory Panel Report<br>• Sexual Orientation Strategy Expert Advisory Panel Report<br>• DfC claimant statistics (across various support programmes)<br>• External research relating to gender inequality, labour-market barriers, unpaid care, debt and cost-of-living impacts | shaping services and assessing impacts. This includes evidence from departmental Reviews, Expert Panel reports, claimant statistics, operational intelligence, engagement with delivery partners, and relevant external research.<br><br>We recognise, however, that the EQIA could have more clearly demonstrated the breadth of material informing our understanding of equality impacts. We will aim to improve how evidence is referenced, presented and incorporated in future EQIAs. |
| **4.2** | **Important Section 75-related datasets are not regularly published or included in the EQIA,** including:<br>• Discretionary Support claimant and award data<br>• New Claims Grant / Contingency Fund claimant and award data<br>• Benefit Cap mitigation payments<br>• Bedroom Tax mitigation payments<br>• Universal Credit five-week wait statistics | We understand the concerns regarding datasets that are not published regularly — including Discretionary Support, New Claims Grants, mitigation payments and UC five-week wait data. These datasets are important for effective equality analysis. The Department will consider whether any adjustments to current data arrangements may be feasible, recognising operational and system constraints. |

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| | Respondents view these datasets as essential to support meaningful equality analysis. | |
| **4.3** | **Recent external evidence on gender inequality, labour market barriers, care responsibilities, debt and cost-of-living impacts has not been incorporated.** Respondents argue this information is directly relevant to assessing differential impacts across Section 75 groups. | We acknowledge that a number of external reports relating to gender inequality, labour-market barriers, debt and cost-of-living pressures were not included in this EQIA. These sources provide valuable insight into the lived experience of many Section 75 groups. We will explore opportunities to reflect external evidence more fully in future EQIAs, where this is practical and proportionate, particularly where it can help us understand the disproportionate impacts of budget decisions and improve targeting of support. |
| **Category 5: Adverse Impacts on Section 75 Groups** | | |
| **5.1** | **Certain Section 75 groups are likely to experience disproportionate adverse impacts**, particularly lone parents, women, children, older people and disabled people. Respondents highlight that these groups are already at greater risk of poverty and exclusion, and the proposed budget will intensify these vulnerabilities. | We acknowledge the concerns about the disproportionate impacts on women, children, older people, disabled people, and lone parents. These groups do experience greater vulnerability to poverty and economic pressures, and we recognise that the budget constraints for 2025–26 limit our ability to fully shield them from adverse effects. Within these limitations, the Department continues to prioritise services that support those most at risk and remains committed to targeting resources on the basis of objective need, in line with our statutory duties. |

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| **5.2** | **A lack of current and robust data limits the Department's ability to accurately assess these impacts**, undermining the effectiveness of the EQIA and preventing a full understanding of differential effects across Section 75 groups. | We understand the concerns raised regarding gaps in the data needed to assess impacts on Section 75 groups. While we draw on a range of internal and external evidence as part of our ongoing service delivery and policy development, we accept that limitations in published and up-to-date datasets affect the depth of analysis presented in the EQIA. We recognise the value of improved data availability and will consider how this can be developed over the longer term, so that impacts can be more accurately understood and mitigated. |
| **5.3** | **Proposed cuts may undermine compliance with international equality obligations**, particularly CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women), by threatening women's economic independence and safety from violence. Respondents warn that this could widen regional inequalities within the UK and create long-term social and financial costs. | We recognise the concerns that budget reductions could affect women's economic independence and safety from violence and may have implications for wider commitments under CEDAW. The Department is acutely aware of the gendered impacts of financial pressures and continues to prioritise programmes that support women and families where possible. Although we cannot eliminate all adverse impacts within the current budget, we will continue to have regard to gender equality considerations within the limits of available resources, working with partners to identify mitigations, and strengthening how gender considerations inform future planning and EQIA processes. |
| **Category 6: Suggestions for Improving EQIAs and Future Budgets** | | |

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| **6.1** | **Gender budgeting and early equality analysis should be embedded throughout the budget process.** Respondents highlight that EQIAs must go beyond equal-treatment assessments and integrate gender and wider equality considerations from the outset. Tools such as Gender Budget Statements should be used to improve transparency and monitor equality-related spending. | We welcome the feedback on strengthening gender budgeting and integrating equality considerations more fully throughout the budget process. The Department recognises the importance of earlier equality screening and improved transparency. We also note that the Executive, led by the Department of Finance, is advancing work on a Gender Budget Statement to help improve gender-responsive budgeting across the NICS. While development is at an early stage, DfC intends to engage with this work as it progresses, to enhance how gender and wider equality considerations inform future policy, planning and EQIA processes. |
| **6.2** | **Long-term financial planning is essential, including multi-year budgets and extended consultation periods.** Respondents argue that multi-year settlements, five-year departmental plans, and early engagement would improve stability, support preventative work, and enable clearer alignment with the Programme for Government and long-term outcomes. They note that single-year budgets undermine service delivery, particularly in areas requiring long-term planning such as housing, homelessness prevention, and community support | We agree that long-term planning is essential for service stability and effective investment, particularly in areas such as housing, poverty reduction and community support. Political and economic uncertainty in recent years has limited the Executive's ability to set multi-year budgets. However, significant work has been undertaken within DfC and across the wider Executive to move towards agreeing a multi-year budget for 2026–2030, as part of a more strategic approach to transformation and sustainability. While progress on a multi-year settlement remains subject to wider financial and political factors, we will continue to advocate for long-term financial certainty across the Executive. |
| **6.3** | **Budget transparency must be improved, with departments publishing detailed spending plans earlier in the process.** This | We understand the importance of publishing spending plans earlier to support scrutiny and strengthen cumulative |

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| | would enable better scrutiny, support cumulative equality analysis across government and strengthen the quality of EQIAs. | equality analysis across government. While the Department is often constrained by late budget confirmations at Executive level, we will explore how transparency can be enhanced over time, recognising the constraints created by late budget confirmation. We will also continue to support Executive-wide work on Budget Sustainability and Equality Budget Statements. |
| **6.4** | **Cross-departmental working and preventative approaches should be prioritised.**<br>Respondents emphasise the value of joint initiatives, shared resources, and aligning programmes across government to maximise impact. They argue for prioritising statutory and high-need services, enabling **NIHE borrowing powers**, and investing in preventative work (such as homelessness prevention and community-based support), which can reduce long-term costs. | We agree that preventative, cross-departmental working is key to improving outcomes for citizens and ensuring resources are used effectively. The Department is already working with partners on shared objectives, including housing and homelessness programmes, employability initiatives and community-based interventions. We will continue to explore opportunities to strengthen collaboration, improve joint working and focus investment where it can have the greatest long-term impact, within the limits of available funding. |
| **6.5** | **Stronger mitigation measures and protection of frontline services are required.** Respondents call for safeguarding essential community support and ensuring any reductions are needs-based and transparent. Housing and homelessness needs should remain a priority in monitoring round bids. Ring-fenced funding may be necessary to avoid disproportionate impacts on vulnerable groups. | We recognise the concerns raised about the impact of reductions on frontline and community-based services. The Department has sought to protect key frontline programmes, by maintaining or increasing budgets where possible, despite the severe financial pressures facing the Department and the wider Executive. We also continue to pursue feasible funding opportunities, including through the Local Growth Fund and other investment routes, to support essential services and minimise adverse impacts on |

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| | | vulnerable groups. While it is not possible to prevent all impacts within the available budget, we remain committed to prioritising critical services and seeking out opportunities to strengthen support wherever feasible. |
| **6.6** | **Greater organisational flexibility and capacity is needed to support sustainable service delivery.** Respondents highlight the importance of enabling organisations to adapt and invest in long-term sustainability. Several respondents argue that councils are often better placed to understand local needs and coordinate delivery. Delegating programme budgets would allow resources to be directed more effectively at community-level priorities, supported by additional staffing and local partnerships. | We note the suggestion that local authorities may be better placed to target certain programme budgets according to local needs. DfC recognises the strengths of local delivery and continues to work closely with councils across a range of programmes. Any further delegation of budgets would require careful consideration of statutory responsibilities, consistency of provision and available resources, but we remain open to considering opportunities that could improve outcomes and responsiveness, reflecting statutory responsibilities and available capacity. |
| **6.7** | **A range of low- and no-cost improvements could enhance support for vulnerable people and improve administrative efficiency.** Suggested measures include:<br>• **Improved passporting and auto-enrolment arrangements** (e.g. automatic Free School Meals eligibility for UC claimants).<br>• **Universal Credit 'red flag' indicators** to identify vulnerable claimants (such as care leavers or those with mental health challenges) and trigger safeguarding.<br>• **Ensuring all income-based ESA claimants are successfully migrated to UC**, reducing risk of hardship. | We welcome the practical suggestions for strengthening support through improved processes and safeguarding measures. Many of these ideas — such as better passporting and auto-enrolment, clearer UC easement guidance, enhanced safeguarding for vulnerable claimants, improved referral pathways, and streamlining bereavement support — align with ongoing work across DfC and our delivery partners. While not all proposals can be implemented immediately and would require further development, we will explore feasible opportunities for improvement and continue to prioritise changes that |

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| | • **Enhanced safeguarding processes**, including home visits for households at risk of sanctions, particularly where children are present.<br>• **Improved awareness of UC easements** among both decision-makers and claimants.<br>• **Flexibility for families with children** within UC requirements and processes.<br>• **Secure referral pathways** (with consent) to the independent advice sector.<br>• **Reorganising Discretionary Housing Payments** to sit within UC to improve coherence.<br>• **Strengthening the bereavement service**, moving towards a "Tell Us Once" model.<br>• **Exploring a Universal Basic Income pilot in NI**, viewed by some respondents as a potential long-term mechanism for stabilising income and reducing poverty. | improve outcomes for vulnerable individuals within existing resources. |
| **Category 7: Revenue-Raising & Alternative Funding Approaches** | | |
| **7.1** | **The Department should proactively consider modest, targeted revenue-generation options** where appropriate. Respondents suggest measures such as small charges for JobFinder advertisements, reducing duplication through consortium delivery, and allowing programmes to introduce low-level participant contributions (e.g. maintaining 80% subsidy). These approaches are viewed as ways to increase value for money while preserving high overall support levels. | We appreciate the suggestions made regarding small-scale, targeted revenue-generation options, such as modest fees for JobFinder advertisements, reducing duplication through consortium delivery, or introducing low-level participant contributions for certain programmes. While the Department must balance revenue-raising against the need to maintain accessibility for vulnerable groups, we remain open to exploring proportionate measures that can help support service delivery without creating additional barriers. Such options would be considered over the longer |

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| | | term and would require Executive-level agreement before any change could be taken forward. |
| **7.2** | **Any revenue-raising must be designed to avoid regressive impacts, particularly on women and low-income households.** Respondents caution that charges applied broadly across the public may have unequal consequences and note that progressive reforms — such as domestic rates modernisation — are preferable to approaches that place a heavier burden on those least able to pay. | We understand the concerns that any new charges could disproportionately affect women, low-income households, or others already facing hardship. The Department agrees that any revenue-raising must be designed carefully and in line with equality duties, avoiding regressive impacts and protecting those least able to pay. We also note stakeholder support for more progressive approaches, which will be considered as part of any future Executive-level discussions. |
| **7.3** | **Some respondents oppose revenue-raising altogether**, arguing that the need for public-service reform has been wrongly conflated with cuts and charges. They believe that investment — rather than new fees — is required to sustain services and avoid higher long-term costs. | We acknowledge that some respondents do not support revenue-raising in principle and believe that the need for additional investment has been conflated with the introduction of charges. We fully recognise the importance of sustained investment in public services and continue to make the case at Executive level for a fairer and more sustainable funding settlement. However, within the current financial constraints, all departments must consider a range of options to protect essential services. |
| **7.4** | **Responsibility for revenue-raising should sit at Executive level**, not solely with DfC. Respondents highlight that decisions about new revenue streams must reflect Northern Ireland Executive-wide priorities and impacts. They also note that | We agree that decisions on revenue-raising sit primarily with the Northern Ireland Executive rather than individual departments. DfC will contribute constructively to any Executive-wide consideration of new revenue options and will ensure that equality impacts are fully assessed. We also |

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| | diverting departmental funds to mitigate welfare changes reduces the budget available for other essential service | recognise the point raised that funding used for welfare mitigation reduces resources available for other services, and we continue to work across government to manage these pressures as effectively as possible. |

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