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**Northern Ireland
Rural Women's Network**

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Rural Women's Network (NIRWN's)
Response To**

Draft Budget 2011-2015

Northern Ireland Executive

Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network (NIRWN)

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1.0 Introduction

1.1 Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network (NIRWN) is a regional network established to articulate the voices of women in rural areas. It is jointly funded by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) and the Department for Social Development (DSD).

1.2 NIRWN has six key objectives:

- Increasing the voice of rural women through giving them a voice at Policy level
- Playing an advocacy and lobbying role on behalf of rural women
- Capacity Building and Group Development for rural women
- Encouraging women in decision-making and providing representation for rural women
- Information and networking opportunities for rural women
- Working within the Women's Centres Regional Partnership to give a voice to rural women's centres

1.3 NIRWN welcomes the opportunity to comment on the: 'Draft Budget 2011-2015'. Our comments in relation to specific issues are set out below.

2.0 Response to Consultation

2.1 Consultation

NIRWN would like to express concern at the Executive's decision to allocate such a brief consultation period to a four year budget that will affect the lives of each and every citizen of Northern Ireland. There are international standards on the desirable length of public consultation on critical issues such as this Budget. For example, the International Monetary Fund prescribes a 2-4 month period for consultation on structural adjustment programmes (usually drastic cuts).

The draft Budget consultation is only 8 weeks, including Christmas and New Year. Some of the Departmental public consultations achieved only 4 weeks. Taking Executive and Departmental consultations together there has been no opportunity for engagement and participation by the people. Fundamental legal obligations on all issues including equality have not been met. This is compounded by a combination of: lack of detail in the budget and the absence of the Programme for Government making it difficult to respond effectively and coherently.

2.2 Programme for Government

NIRWN argues that a draft 4 year budget without a Programme for Government simply makes no sense. The 2008-2011 Programme set objectives and outcomes against which budget proposals could be assessed. In the current consultation, there is no Programme for Government. The Executive has failed to produce one. This means that there are no objectives, outcomes or targets against which the Budget could have been developed.

It appears that the headline objectives – including the prioritisation of the economy – have been carried forward from the 2008-2011 Programme for Government by the Department of Finance and Personnel without review or analysis. Therefore an essential element

of creating a budget that meets the needs of the people has been missed. The economic circumstances have radically changed since the 2008 Programme for Government was adopted.

NIRWN is clear: that a fully developed Programme for Government remains essential, and the current draft Budget is no substitute.

2.3 Cross Departmental Working

NIRWN is deeply concerned at the fragmented nature of this Budget process as it would appear that we are dealing with 13 budgets and not one. There is clearly evidence of limited negotiation between particular Departments on priorities, but there is no evidence of a collective agreement to the departmental figures. There is no sense of inter/cross departmental working or indeed, innovation of how the Northern Ireland Executive can make life better for its citizens. A genuinely inclusive and corporate approach would also have demonstrated impact on cross-departmental programmes and themes such as:

- Targeting objective need
- Improving the health and wellbeing of the people
- Addressing social, economic and cultural inequalities
- Promoting an effective anti-poverty strategy.

The compartmentalised nature of this budget and the departmental spending plans will prevent collaboration amongst and between departments. The absence of a Programme for Government makes this more difficult. The work of one department is not independent of the action of others. The Programme for Government, with associated Public Service Agreements and the delivery reports, is the framework for the integration and synergy of the work of the Northern Ireland Executive. Political leadership is needed to make this happen in the first instance. Furthermore a new revised Programme for Government

and subsequent Public Service Agreements, if used, must contain meaningful and measurable targets to reflect the balance¹ and multiplicity of our society and the cross departmental nature of demographic change. Subsequently any monitoring or evaluation framework must be robust to capture the true impact of these budget cuts. The lack of consistency in the nature of information produced and the insurmountable obstacle this has created for the people of NI is frustrating and inhibits our inability to respond in a truly meaningful way

2.4 EQIA

NIRWN is gravely concerned that the draft Strategy document does not recognise the Department's statutory obligation to promote equality of opportunity under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and in compliance with its own Equality Scheme. There is a lack of detail on the high level equality impact assessment and individual departmental plans currently lack detail as well.

There is an urgent need for a full and rigorous Equality Impact Assessment of the draft Strategy proposals in consultation with Section 75 groups, to allow for the consideration of the evidence which exists relating to the discrimination and marginalisation faced by these groups to ensure the Budget 2011-2015 does not further compound disadvantage and indeed sets out cross departmental measures to address disadvantage.

2.5 Equality of Opportunity

The current economic circumstances make equality considerations more relevant than ever as there is a risk that existing inequalities may be aggravated or that some groups may be disproportionately affected by decisions. Indeed, an opportunity is provided by the Draft Budget to target public expenditure in ways that could address specific inequalities.

¹ Census 2001 (women represent 51% of NI Population)

Much of the Budget focuses on recovery from the recession and improving the economy. Equality should not be dependent on prosperity; in fact, it should perhaps become even more of a focus at a time when services are at risk, in order to minimise the impact upon the most vulnerable. There is little evidence to suggest that economic growth will benefit the poorest in society without targeted, dedicated programmes to ensure that the brunt of spending cuts is mitigated as far as possible.

Some groups, including rural women, will not necessarily be able to contribute directly to economic growth by working, but may contribute in other ways. Women are often carers, child-minders, volunteers, workers and their contribution to society is immense. Women's responsibility for caring for others is often particularly strong in rural areas². Caring for dependants in the home requires access to services that can be obtained or delivered, all of which limits women's ability to take jobs outside the home. Rebalancing the economy towards the private sector is an important step, but it must not be at the expense of those working for, or in receipt of services provided by the public sector. Economic considerations should not be used to override equality considerations.

2.6 Rural Proofing

There is a lack of information or evidence to suggest the Executive or, any of the Department's have rural proofed their draft budgets. This should be carried out as a matter of urgency. The draft Budgets illustrate that there remains the erroneous assumption that DARD is the only Department with responsibility for rural service delivery and provision.

² Braithwaite 1994 The Economic Role and Striation of Women in Rural Areas

2.7 Women

The persistence of weak economic growth is likely to affect women and men in different ways, reflecting the continuing differences between men and women in terms of their representation in specific sectors of the economy and concentration in particular occupations and positions in the labour market³. Weak economic growth and the impending public spending cuts are likely to continue the downward pressure on employment and this may begin to disproportionately impact on women. Research⁴ shows that, women's employment in Northern Ireland during the recession may have been protected by their strong representation in the public sector workforce where they account for 63.3% of the total workforce and over 75% of part time employees in the Northern Ireland public sector⁵.

The Coalition Government has indicated its intention to re-balance the local economy towards the private sector but the risk is that women's current and future living standards will deteriorate. Independent analysis of the budget⁶ has shown that it is women who will bear the brunt of the cuts unveiled so far. Research by the House of Commons Library found that 72 per cent of the savings identified in the budget will come from women's pockets. This is because many of the benefits to be cut or frozen - including the Health in Pregnancy Grant, the Sure Start Maternity Grant and Child Benefit - are benefits that more women than men rely on⁷. An analysis of the financial plans showed that of nearly £8bn to be raised by 2014-15 from direct tax and benefit

³ DETI (2010) *Comparison of work age rates* - table 2.12, the figures provided are for working age rates of females aged 16-59 and males aged 16- 64,

<http://www.detini.gov.uk/deti-stats-index/stats-surveys.htm>

⁴ Kelly, G. & Tomlinson, M. (2010) *What do we know about older women? Poverty and Social Exclusion in Northern Ireland – a briefing*, p. 6.

⁵ Equality Commission Northern Ireland (2008) *Monitoring Report no. 19*, p. 53

http://www.equalityni.org/archive/pdf/MonitoringReportNo19_FINAL_081209.pdf

⁶ UK Coalition 2010 Budget http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/2010_june_budget.htm

⁷ The Budget, the Comprehensive Spending Review and Women, The Fawcett Society <http://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk>

changes, nearly £6bn will come from women and just over £2bn from men.

Further, this analysis doesn't take into account the impact of the public sector pay freeze which will also hit women disproportionately as 65 per cent of public sector workers are women. Cuts in employment within the public sector will reduce women's employment opportunities and their capacity to save for retirement.⁸ It is not clear that the generation of jobs in the private sector will be able to replace those lost in the public sector.

Reducing expenditure on, for example: community safety programmes; transport; and domiciliary care is short sighted, as this will prevent rural women from being active and productive members of society.

2.8 Gender Equality Strategy

NIRWN would like to draw the NI Executive's attention to the fact that; the draft budget ignores the requirements of the government's own Gender Equality Strategy⁹ and it fails to properly address the requirements of Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998¹⁰. This is fundamentally wrong: in law, in policy and in practice. This is a clear breach of government's own stated policy (as well as equality duty). All government departments are required to "*take the gender perspective into account during the whole process of policy development in all of the government functions and in the subsequent implementation, review and evaluation of that policy.*" In addition the GES requires:

- the recognition by policy formers that multiple identities impact significantly upon equality and to take that into account when shaping government policy;
- that the GES integrate with other equality strategies, including those addressing "good relations, poverty [and] social exclusion".

⁸ Kelly, G. & Tomlinson, M. (2010) *What do we know about older women? Poverty and Social Exclusion*

⁹ <http://www.ofmdfni.gov.uk/index/equality/gender-equality.htm>

¹⁰ www.equalityni.org/archive/pdf/PracticalGuidanceEQIA0205.pdf

- that government departments are committed to ensuring that gender stereotypes and sexism do not influence policy formation;
- drafting “specific operational objectives with outcome focussed targets to meet these strategic objectives”.

All these are missing from the Draft Budget 2011-15. The GES also specifically rejects the idea of a ‘gender neutral’ approach, which the Draft Budget 2011-15 has clearly adopted.

2.9 Age

An analysis of ageing can explore the impact of these policy decisions on older people and in this instance we know that women single pensioner households are at higher risk of poverty than pensioner couples. There has been an increase in the proportion of single female pensioners over 75 years of age with incomes below the 60% of median household income. The figure now stands at 30% (after housing costs) for 2008-09¹¹, a 7% increase on the previous year.

It is this type of policy analysis that is needed to ensure that we are not storing up costly problems for a later date through the development of unsustainable policies.

2.10 Community Voluntary Sector

NIRWN believes the current draft Budget does not recognise the value of the community voluntary sector and its contribution to current and future Programmes for Government. The added value of the voluntary and community sectors must be a core component of this budget and it is noticeable by its absence. The voluntary and community sector is a key sector supporting the NI Executive to deliver the targets contained within the Programme for Government. Government funding to the voluntary and community sector is £260 million, 45% of the sector’s

¹¹ Kelly, G. & Tomlinson, M. (2010) *What do we know about older women? Poverty and Social Exclusion in Northern Ireland – a briefing*, p. 6.

income. Most of this goes to pay for services which the sector delivers so efficiently that it saves public money¹².

A recent report from the Northern Ireland Audit Office¹³ highlighted that a number of principles contained in the compact¹⁴ were not being applied as widely or as systematically as they might be. Specifically, the report said:

‘The principles requiring wider application include:

- *Maximising the sector’s contribution to the policy process from the development phase through to implementation, monitoring and evaluation;*
- *Developing the ability of all government funders to manage the funding relationship effectively, and Sector organisations’ ability to deliver their full potential*
- *Fully and consistently applying the ‘good practice’ resourcing and funding mechanisms, including, for example full cost recovery, timeliness of payments and proportionate monitoring and audit;*

This has been borne out in an Audit Commission report¹⁵ which highlighted that in order to strengthen the voluntary sector’s ability to deliver public services, there needs to be improvement in the use of good partnership working; appropriate funding and that capacity building should complement good commissioning practice by public sector bodies.

The reality is that the sector currently does deliver a large range of public services across Northern Ireland and in the context of the current fiscal situation, is well placed to continue this role in working with and supporting communities and individuals. The sector also adds

¹²Information sourced from Community NI website (<http://www.nicva.org/projects/smartsolutions-tough-times>) , February 2011

¹³ Creating Effective Partnerships between Government and the Community and Voluntary Sector, NIAO, September 2010

¹⁴ Building Real Partnership – Compact – Between Government and the Voluntary and Community Sector in Northern Ireland, NIO, Dec 1998

¹⁵ Hearts and Minds: commissioning from the voluntary sector, Audit Commission, July 2007

value in working to collate the experience gathered in providing services and translating this into credible policy analysis to feed into the policy development process within government.

NIRWN would like to highlight the need for a properly supported programme on regeneration, the development of women's services and cross-community and interface work delivered largely by local community organisations. From the budget it would appear that funding for these programmes is steady for this year and will rise next year. However by year 4 there appears to be a dramatic cut in provision.

Other Departmental plans, taken together, constitute a massive hit on jobs and services across the community and voluntary sector. The interests of the community and voluntary sector as a whole are prejudiced by the absence of a cross-Departmental budget approach and strategy. This is underscored by the proposed reduction in grants to the community and voluntary sector from the Department of Health, Department of Culture Arts and Leisure and the Department of Justice. Although it expresses the desire to support community based programmes addressing rural economic and social well-being we are concerned at the absence of information from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development.

3.0 Conclusion

The lack of: EQIA, rural proofing, cogniscance of the GES, consultation time and information provided makes analysis of how the Draft Budget 2011-15 is likely to impact on rural women almost impossible. It is evident however that there is a very real potential that women, and in particular rural women are likely to be further marginalised and worse off as a result of this Budget.