



Submission to

**'Consultation on NI Executive 2021 – 22 Draft
Budget'**

February 2021

1.0 INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

UNISON is the leading trade union in Northern Ireland representing over 45,000 members, and is the largest trade union in the UK with over 1.3 million members. Our membership includes public service workers in health and social care; the education and higher education services; the library service; local government; youth justice; private companies providing public services; and the community and voluntary sector. 84% of our membership in Northern Ireland are women.

UNISON endorses the view of the Nevin Economic Research Institute (NERI) that the state of public finances outlined in the Northern Ireland Draft Budget 2021-22 represents a challenging and deeply troubling prospect for the delivery of public services over the coming year. Excluding Covid supports, the core of day-to-day expenditure in Northern Ireland is expected to remain flat in the coming fiscal year. It is quite clear that the financial commitments made in New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) have not been realised, with increased funding allocations in the 2020 – 21 budget to meet NDNA commitments representing one-off expenditure. According to NERI's analysis, the Executive now finds itself in much the same financial situation it was in when the devolved institutions collapsed in 2017.¹

We are deeply concerned that across public services, budgets remain in severe difficulty and ultimately it is our members and the public that will bear the harshest impact of any return to austerity measures as a result of Covid-19.

¹ 'Northern Ireland Draft Budget 2021 – 22: Northern Ireland Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions reponse' Briefing for Assembly Finance Committee, February 2021.

It is increasingly clear that Covid-19 has disproportionately impacted the poorest and most deprived areas in our society.² This has occurred in the context of over a decade of austerity, where instead of prioritising investments in health, education and social protection, budgets have been cut and poverty has increased. UNISON, alongside the trade union movement and wider civic society, made repeated submissions over this period warning of the severe impacts that austerity policies towards public spending were having on the social and economic fabric of our society, including leaving hundreds of thousands in Northern Ireland in poverty before the impact of the pandemic was even felt.³ We have repeatedly called on Government to reject austerity and the need to do so is now more acute than ever.

As society moves to recover from the Covid-19 pandemic, a priority for UNISON and the entire trade union movement across both the UK and Ireland is to seek that there is no going back to the social and economic conditions that existed before Covid-19. A new deal for our society is required to improve the social and economic outcomes of all and avert a return to the damaging austerity policies of the past.

We would also like to highlight the role gender budgeting can play in addressing gender inequalities and would seek that gender budgeting methodology is

² The infection rate in the 10% most deprived areas has been almost two-thirds higher than the rate in the 10% least deprived areas. The infection rate among those aged over 65 was four-fifths higher in the 10% most deprived areas than in the 10% least deprived. The admission rate for COVID-19 (confirmed cases) in the 10% most deprived areas was more than double the rate in the 10% least deprived area. The COVID-19 death rate in the 10% most deprived areas was almost two-fifths higher than the rate in the 10% least deprived areas (Coronavirus related health inequalities – December 2020 (Department of Health) (<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/coronavirus-related-health-inequalities-december-2020>))

³ See for example UNISON 2017 Assembly Election Manifesto (https://www.unison-ni.org.uk/sites/default/files/UNISON%20FINAL%20NI%20Assembly%20Election%20Manifesto%202017_0.pdf); UNISON Submission to Northern Ireland Executive Consultation on a Programme for Government (December 2016); UNISON Submission to Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights (October 2018). The most recent Department for Communities figures for 2018/19 found that 20% of all individuals in Northern Ireland are living in relative poverty after housing costs, with 24% of children in relative poverty. 201,000 working-age adults were in relative poverty before housing costs were factored in, with 65% in working families.

incorporated into the budget development processes. Women across our society are disproportionately affected by precarious work, low pay and poverty, issues all directly related to how Government allocates and uses its resources. To increase the participation of women in civic and political life and addressing gender inequality, Northern Ireland needs to consider the specific impacts that spending and revenue raising measures have on the basis of gender.⁴

UNISON, alongside the Committee on the Administration of Justice (CAJ), co-convenes the Equality Coalition, a network of around 100 non-governmental organisations and trade unions that cumulatively work across all nine equality categories within Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 (as well as on other protected equality grounds). We have included the separate submission made by the Coalition as an attachment to this submission and endorse its contents. We further endorse the submissions made by the Northern Ireland Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (NIC-ICTU).

2.0 NO GOING BACK

In September 2020, UNISON launched the **No Going Back to Normal** campaign. The campaign recognises that during Covid-19, thousands of key workers across Northern Ireland and across the wider UK have paid a terrible price for protecting us all. In the public services, nurses, care workers, cleaners and more have made the ultimate sacrifice to help others. This was all the more heartbreaking because for years before Covid-19, these public service workers have been undervalued, underpaid and mainly invisible.

Years of neglect made the effect of the pandemic so much worse. One example of that neglect was the PPE shortage that emerged when the pandemic hit. Another is the

⁴ See ARK – Exploring the Potential of Gender Budgeting for Northern Ireland (https://www.ark.ac.uk/ARK/projects/Gender_Budgeting)

fragmented nature of care services for the elderly and vulnerable – where staff frequently experience low pay, insecure employment and impossible workloads to manage. Within the NHS a shortage of nurses and other key staff means there are fewer people to look after patients. This is the result of more than 10 years of spending cuts and austerity. The damage to all the vital services that make our communities strong and resilient, including schools and our community voluntary sector, is plain to see. Despite all this, key workers in our public services pulled through for all of us.

As government attempts to return to normal, it is crucial for all of us that the same mistakes are not made again and we do not return to undervaluing our public services and the people who provide them. UNISON wants to see politicians at both Westminster and Stormont prioritising measures to do the following:

Rebuild: Rebuild all our public services, by securing long term investment and making money available to employ and train the number of staff that are needed to ensure our services are there when you need them.

Pay: Give public sector workers a decent pay rise because the pandemic has shown how important they are. This would also help the lowest paid out of in-work poverty.

Create: Create fairer and safer workplaces with proper risk assessments. Everyone should be treated with dignity and respect. Disabled workers and other vulnerable groups need to have the right to work from home whilst the risk of Covid-19 persists.

Build: Build a fairer and greener post Covid-19 society, in which the inequalities that have become so evident during the crisis are addressed as a matter of urgency.

‘No Going Back – a New Deal Towards a Safe and Secure Future for all’: In May 2020, ICTU issued detailed proposals aimed at achieving a gradual and phased

economic recovery, alongside a parallel phasing out of economic supports. 'No Going Back – a New Deal Towards a Safe and Secure Future for all'⁵ highlighted how what would have been considered radical economic interventions that may have seemed unthinkable in the past have been made to mitigate against the shock of Covid-19. Congress is clear that there can be 'no going back' to the economic and social conditions that existed in Northern Ireland pre Covid-19 and have issued detailed proposals on the measures required in terms of health, social care, social protection, education, housing, poverty, the rights of workers and taxation and public spending that should be taken to ensure a new deal for our society as we emerge from the pandemic.

3.0 GENERAL COMMENTS

Despite the clear evidence that the impact of Covid-19 had been exacerbated by over a decade of austerity and a failure to combat poverty and inequality, the November 2020 Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) at Westminster again represented an austerity plan for public services. The CSR did not restore levels of public spending in Northern Ireland to pre-austerity levels, nor has it provided the investment needed to reform and improve services delivered within health and social care, education or the community and voluntary sector for the benefit of the public and workers alike.

The CSR has resulted in block grant funding for the day to day running of public services in Northern Ireland remaining flat. It has also resulted in an inability to present a multi-year Executive budget, which we understand had been the original intention of the Department of Finance (DoF) following the single year budget for 2020 – 21.

⁵ https://www.ictu.ie/download/pdf/no_going_back_final_document_may_2020.pdf

Single year budgets such as these do not allow for clear, multi-year plans for sustained investment in public services. It is also of serious concern that the Executive has not moved since the NDNA agreement to put in place an agreed Programme for Government (PfG) that adopts the commitments made in that agreement. We are concerned that the Outcomes Framework currently being consulted upon by the Executive does not represent such a PfG.

NERI analysis has shown that in real terms Northern Ireland's budget for day-to-day expenditure declined from 2010 – 11 on and off before reaching its lowest point in 2016. 2019/20 was the first year which saw a significant real increase in spending, but this only brought Northern Ireland slightly above the level of spending it had in 2010/11. In reality Northern Ireland is living with the same budgetary settlement that it started out with in the teeth of the global financial crisis over a decade ago.⁶

NERI further note that the UK as a whole has amongst the lowest levels of public spending and the lowest levels of government revenue in all of the high-income Western European countries (per person). An expansion of universal basic services, coupled with the additional public spending arising from the crisis, will necessitate a significant increase in government revenue over time, but public spending can be significantly increased without increasing taxes to levels in excess of Western European norms.

Northern Ireland does not currently have powers to set rates of taxation or social contributions, meaning UK-wide approaches would be needed in these areas to effect significant change.

⁶ 'Northern Ireland Draft Budget 2021 – 22: Northern Ireland Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions reponse' Briefing for Assembly Finance Committee, February 2021.

Given the context we face of dealing with the social and economic impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, we are disappointed and concerned to note the questions set out for consultees within Annex B of the consultation document. If the Executive is to do more than simply manage a decline in public spending that results in the further deterioration of public services then action beyond its current fiscal powers is urgently needed.

This must begin with the Executive as a whole collectively calling for a new deal for Northern Ireland that:

- allows Government to invest in our public services so they can be rebuilt and reformed;
- ensures public sector workers and all those in private sector providers delivering public services are recognised through decent pay and terms and conditions;
- addresses our sustained levels of poverty and deprivation through proper social security protections and investment on the basis of objective need;
- and which builds a fairer and more equal economy and society within a framework of equality and human rights.

UNISON believes that the Northern Ireland Executive must collectively seek that the UK Government move towards increasing Government revenue on a phased basis over time, through increasing taxation and social contributions, in line with the approach adopted in other industrialised Western European states. In particular there must be a focus on employers' social contributions, where significant differences exist between the UK and other Western European states.

Funding Streams: UNISON is concerned to note only some anticipated funding streams have to date been confirmed by the Secretary of State. This funding cannot be included in the draft budget until confirmed by the Secretary of State. These include

funding streams resulting from the DUP-Conservative Confidence and Supply Agreement and major funding streams further to NDNA anticipated by the Department of Finance to be as follows:

- *“£85 million for the Agenda for Change pay dispute;*
- *£49 million to support the transformation of public services;*
- *£15 million Resource and £15.0 million of Capital to help deliver a Graduate Entry Medical School in Derry;*
- *£25 million for Low Carbon Emission Public Transport”⁷*

Whilst we understand from meeting with DoF officials that they anticipate this funding will be confirmed by the Secretary of State in advance of a budget legally being required to be in place (31st March), it is concerning that a piecemeal approach appears to be being taken to the release of funding streams by the Secretary of State. We would echo the concerns raised by the Equality Coalition in its consultation response around the lack of transparency around how decisions to release or not release such funding are being made, and the lack of clarity as to whether the section 75 duties are being applied in relation to these processes.⁸

Troubles payments: A further issue that has arisen relates to the budget for what had originally been envisaged as the pension for seriously injured victims of the troubles. A commitment had been made to progressing a pension under the 2015 Stormont House Agreement. Westminster ultimately legislated for a scheme in 2019. This had changed to victims ‘payments’ rather than a pension, (pensions usually being paid through the separate ‘AME’ funding stream for pensions and social security benefits). Whilst the scheme is scheduled to commence in April of this year, with the potential

⁷ Consultation document, paras.3.47 – 3.50

⁸ See Equality Coalition submission, para.76 – 78.

for back payments to the time of the Stormont House Agreement, there has not been clarity over how it is to be funded. The NI Court of Appeal in February 2021 found that Westminster legislation made the NI Executive liable to ensure that the victims' payments are funded, and has given a four-week period for the NIO and NI Executive to reach a solution.

The scheme is scheduled to start in April 2021. The estimate from the government actuary department is that the overall cost of the scheme will run between £600 million and £1.2 billion.⁹ Costs will particularly be weighted to the initial period of the scheme given issues such as backdating. It is not clear why the NIO has decided not engage or release funding on this highly sensitive issue. How this issue is now determined by the NIO and NI Executive will have a significant bearing on the final budget and should be factored into final equalities impacts advice on same.

4.0 SECTION 75 OF THE NORTHERN IRELAND ACT 1998

UNISON notes and welcomes that the draft Budget 2021 – 22 contains a process for NI Executive Departments to input screening and EQIA information to the DoF, which will then collate these assessments and present them to the NI Executive when taking final decisions on the budget.¹⁰ **We would request that this be done via an updated overarching equality assessment of impacts.**

This follows previous years where Equality Coalition members (including UNISON as co-convener of the Coalition) were concerned that the duties and processes in Departmental Equality Schemes were being bypassed in relation to the budget. This led to a number of formal complaints and review requests from Coalition members (including UNISON) and a subsequent investigation launched by the Equality

⁹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-56158827>

¹⁰ Consultation document, paras.6.22 – 24.

Commission for Northern Ireland (ECNI) into the 2019 – 20 Budget which concluded that core procedural elements of the DoF Equality Scheme had been breached.¹¹

We are concerned to note that the DoF has breached its Equality Scheme in relation to the period of time that is being allowed for consultation on the draft Budget. Under the DoF Equality Scheme, consultation should last for a minimum of 12 weeks.¹²

The consultation period here has been for a little less than 6 weeks, with the rationale being offered for this constrained period being the fact that the CSR at Westminster did not occur until 25th November 2020, with the Executive required to have a Budget finalised by 31st March 2021. However we note the Finance Minister's statement that the draft Budget was originally tabled for the Executive meeting on 10th December 2020, only to not be included onto the agenda for an Executive meeting until 18th January, significantly reducing the time available for consultation, civic society scrutiny and examination of equality impacts.¹³

We note that most Executive Departments have subsequently moved to either produce Equality Impact Assessments or equality screenings on the impact of the draft budget. However we note that no assessments appear to have been published by the Departments of Economy, Infrastructure and the Executive Office and would call on them to do so without delay. We would like to make the following specific comments on the assessments that have been conducted below:

¹¹ 'Investigation under paragraph 11 of schedule 9 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 – Department of Finance – in its preparation of the Budget for 2019 – 20' September 2020 (<https://www.equalityni.org/ECNI/media/ECNI/Publications/Employers%20and%20Service%20Providers/S75%20P%2011%20investigation%20reports/DeptFinanceBudget-P11investigation.pdf>)

¹² DoF Equality Scheme, section 3.2.5

¹³ Minister of Finance statement to NI Assembly, 18th January 2021.

Department for Communities EQIA: The Department for Communities (DfC) EQIA focuses primarily on how the lack of anticipated funding for various projects will negatively impact Section 75 categories.¹⁴

The priority functions identified as being impacted by the flat Resource Draft Budget include: 1) Benefit delivery for working age customers given increased demand for working age benefits as a result of increased unemployment, and 2) employment support to help those impacted by Covid-19 related unemployment, including the £1.5m reduction in resource funding to the independent advice sector.

The removal of funding for the independent advice sector will have major adverse impacts across the section 75 groups, exacerbating levels of poverty and hardship that have deepened during the pandemic. The removal of this funding also raises the potential for redundancies and job losses across the advice sector, causing serious impacts across the workforce. The impact on wider public service resources must be considered here. To move to cut this funding for the advice sector at a time when demand for their services can only be increasing as record numbers of workers face redundancy across the economy will inevitably increase poverty, and subsequently demand for public services to mitigate these impacts.

The provision of independent advice and tribunal representation is paramount to ensuring current and future claimants (such as those who will turn to Universal Credit for support at the end of the current Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme) can have access to their rights and entitlements. We note the Minister for Communities has

¹⁴ DfC states that with the current budget, efficiencies are necessary, but that these will be individually subject to a screening/EQIA process as agreed "7.3...In the context of delivering public services with constrained allocations, the Department is urgently considering options to live within its 2021-22 allocation whilst continuing to maintain effective public service delivery. These options include not filling staff vacancies and considering how efficiencies can be realised across the Department, its ALBs and programmes of work. This will be challenging given over 92% of the Department's Resource budget is required to meet procedural, contractual, inescapable and statutory obligations."

publicly committed to ensure that advice sector funding continues and we would urge that this particular issue be resolved without delay.

We are very concerned to note that the DfC cannot identify funding for labour market interventions, including a JobStart programme, at a time when there are record levels of redundancies occurring as a result of the economic fallout caused by Covid-19. Given these programmes are in line with wider UK Government priorities, ringfenced funding for them should be made available from Westminster to allow them to commence without delay.

We note the allocation of funding to extend existing welfare mitigations in relation to the bedroom tax and benefit cap. However it is very concerning that the DfC EQIA cites no resources being made available in the draft budget to fund a range of recommended new welfare mitigations, including mitigations against the universal credit five week wait, or to offset the two child limit.

UNISON has long advocated for the elimination of the two-child policy which significantly and detrimental impacts on low paid women, their children and persons with dependents. In addition, we fear that the extended waits that new claimants will experience due to the inability of the DfC to recruit the additional staff required to meet rising demands as outlined within the EQIA will only exacerbate these problems further.

In addition to the adverse impacts identified, we also consider that there will be adverse equality impacts on ethnicity (including community background)¹⁵ as a result of the draft budget proposals and would seek that DfC reflect this in the final EQIA.

¹⁵ I.e. the section 75 categories of political opinion, racial group and religious belief.

We have long had concerns that analysis of impact on such grounds has been officially evaded, including in relation to housing inequality but also in the original DSD EQIA on welfare reform. The Equality Coalition '*Sectarianism: Key Facts*'¹⁶ report noted that a Cumulative Impact Assessment commissioned by the NI Human Rights Commission on welfare reform had also omitted data on sectarian inequality, due to DfC holding but declining to release data that had been gathered on same under the Family Resources Survey (FRS) and the Living Costs and Food Survey (LCF). The NIHRC consequently recommended that these datasets be released to ensure equality assessments could be made on such grounds.¹⁷ We therefore urge DfC to use data from these sources (which will be available to DfC regardless) to inform its EQIA on the currently missing grounds.

We concur that the current flat rate budget, without a commitment from the Secretary of State to approve the NDNA funding and with very limited Covid-19 relief funding, institutes major adverse impacts on the most vulnerable people living here. We urge the NIO and NI Executive to consider alternative policies, in the form of additional funding to address the adverse impacts under the current policy. If these resources are forthcoming, we urge DfC to examine mitigating measures.

UNISON is finally particularly concerned as to how the 'constrained' budget allocated to DfC will impact the potential for much needed reforms of the Supporting People programme that UNISON has been actively campaigning for.

As the largest union representing workers across the community and voluntary sector, a major focus of our concern in recent years has been the repeated cuts to funding that have been experienced by organisations delivering Supporting People services. According to the NI Housing Executive (NIHE), the programme supports nearly 20,000

¹⁶ Dr Robbie McVeigh "*Sectarianism: Key Facts*" (Equality Coalition: 2020), page 11.

¹⁷ "The religious affiliation variable in the FRS and LCF data should be made part of the End User Licence datasets available to researchers. This would be make it possible to analyse the distributional impact of tax and social security reforms by religious community, which is particularly important in the socio-economic and policy context of Northern Ireland." ([Reed and Portes 2019: 143](#))

people every year.¹⁸ Whilst the NIHE has statutory responsibility to deliver the Supporting People Programme, it does so on behalf of the DfC using a budget set by the Department. UNISON believes that the Supporting People Programme is vital, but has suffered from chronic underfunding, which is negatively impacting on the standard of service delivery and which has significant adverse impact on our members.

We have been calling for urgent action to be taken to reverse the funding cuts that have occurred within the Supporting People programme and to improve the pay, terms and conditions for our members in the sector.

Since the NI Executive reformed in January 2020 we have been raising our concerns regarding the Supporting People programme and the proposed introduction of a standardised regional rate directly with the Minister. We understand the Minister has now sought that NIHE develop alternative proposals to be re-submitted for her consideration, having taken on board our concerns as to how the introduction of a regional rate could negatively impact on the workforce.

We understand from our engagement with the NIHE that they have developed new proposals for the Minister's consideration that take into account workforce pay and pensions similar to the rates used for Health and Social Care workers. We are immediately concerned that the constrained budget described by the DfC will jeopardise the potential for progress for workers and service users in this area.

This would represent a significant blow to these workers who have been at the frontline delivering services to vulnerable people throughout the pandemic. UNISON requires assurances that the Department intends to prioritise funding in relation to

¹⁸ NI Housing Executive Annual Report, 2019-20, p.5.

Supporting People and to continue its engagement with us to ensure additional funding translates in better pay and terms and conditions for the workforce.

Department of Health: The Department of Health has published an equality screening on the budget and a document titled "Department of Health 2021/22 Draft Budget Outcome" (Outcome). However we note the lack of a screening decision by the Department, and we urge the Department to rectify this, and to proceed quickly to an EQIA based on finding major impacts in the screening. **We are concerned that the screening that has been carried out contains no data in relation to the HSC workforce or any assessment of the impact that the budget allocation will have on them. This must be rectified through a full EQIA.**

It is estimated that the cost of providing health and social care increases by around 6% to 6.5% annually, due to factors such as internal NHS inflation, an increasing ageing population with greater and more complex needs, increasing costs for goods/services, and costs linked to innovation in service provision.

As we understand it, the initial allocation within the 2021 – 22 draft Budget represents an increase of 5.7% from the 2020 – 21 baseline for health. This effectively represents a 'stand-still' budget for health and social care, providing barely enough resource to allow the system to continue to operate as is, without providing the resources required to facilitate the development of new services or programmes. In addition, it is very concerning that we understand from Department of Health officials that less than 1% of the proposed increase to the DoH budget is intended to be recurrent, which will inevitably place further pressures onto the system moving into the 2022 - 23 budget.

In launching 'Health and Wellbeing 2026 – Delivering Together', the former Health Minister Michelle O'Neill MLA was clear that reform of the system requires investment

to maintain existing services whilst the necessary actions are being taken to reform them. A period of “*double running*” will be necessary in health and social care, to deliver existing services whilst developing and implementing change.¹⁹ The funding announced for 2021 - 22 will not allow this “double running” to take place and we are concerned that this will seriously inhibit efforts to support transformation of services.

A particular concern arising from this budget relates to what resources will be available for workforce development, recruitment and retention. As both the industrial action undertaken by HSC workers towards the end of 2019 and the pandemic have shown, staffing and workforce planning across the entire HSC remain a core issue. A ‘stand-still’ budget for one year does not encourage confidence that significant progress can be made on this front in the absence of dedicated, ringfenced resources. In particular we note with some concern that the Department does not anticipate receiving the £20 million pounds already committed to for Safe Staffing priorities until the June monitoring round. Recurrent funding for safe staffing and workforce planning must be a priority.

We are also mindful that the Minister will need to balance the equally important priorities of responding to the Covid-19 pandemic; maintaining and rebuilding services; and enabling transformation without sufficient budget to achieve all these aims.

We share the concerns of the Health Minister that this is a single year budget, rather than a multi-year budget. When it was launched, it was agreed that ‘Delivering Together’ would be a 10-year plan for the transformation of the health service. The lack of a clear, multi-year plan for sustained investment in health and social care makes it very challenging to deliver a multi-year plan for transformation of the health service.

¹⁹ Northern Ireland Assembly, 25th October 2016.

The equality screening has started the process of analysing the impact of the budget on service provision, and the resulting impact on s.75 groups. Ideally, there should be much more detail in this screening, particularly considering most of the budget revolves around existing service provision, which should be continually monitored for equality impacts. In other words, DoH should have a breakdown of the equality impacts of their service provision, and should be constantly measuring this against existing needs of s.75 groups. The budget should essentially be an annual reporting mechanism to evaluate progress, determine priority areas of increased funding based on need, and to evaluate the impact of any cuts to services on s.75 groups.

The Department assesses that the draft budget will have major adverse impacts on people with a disability, gender, age, and race and a minor adverse impact on sexual orientation and dependents. **Under the terms of the Department's equality scheme, the Department should now proceed to a full EQIA on the draft budget as a whole, or on the budget once agreed, as opposed to waiting to proceed to an EQIA on individual initiatives once decisions have already been made regarding budget cuts. The "considerations to options to address pressures" referenced by the DoH in paragraph 25 of the screening should be explored in an EQIA prior to the final decisions being made.**

Department of Education: On 16 February 2021, the Department of Education published two documents related to the budget, the "Department of Education (DE) 2021-22 Draft Budget" and the "proposed 2021-22 Resource Budget Equality and Human Rights Budget Screening" (screening). The Budget document states that in 2021-22 DE is facing a resource funding gap of £321.3m and a Capital funding gap of £59.8m (assessed prior to the January Monitoring round).

The budget screening contains minimal details of evidence or information relating to Section 75 groups. The details of needs, experiences and priorities of each category are not examined in relation to the draft budget and the services and programmes previously provided, proposed services and potentially cut services, but rather are seemingly random phrases and statements of general need disconnected from the policy in question. It appears that the information may have simply been cut and pasted from a prior screening.²⁰

The screening does not examine the impact of the budget on individual s.75 categories, but rather has merged all of the boxes and put in a general and vague statement and based on this identifies a 'minor' impact on all Section 75 groups.

DE has determined that because budget decisions have not been finalised, the impact of the proposed budget is impossible to determine. In fact, the purpose of screening is to examine policies that are likely to have an impact on equality of opportunity, at the earliest stage of policy formation. Therefore, it is not too early to provide details on the plans and related impacts of potential budget cuts to service provision. **Other Departments have been able to provide this information.** Only by screening these plans will the Department be able to adequately identify potential adverse impacts and present a case for mitigation in relation to the final budget. Rather than being separate from policy making, screening should be an embedded, integral part of the process.

We would therefore request a formal review of the screening decision (under the process in the DE equality scheme) and seek a revised exercise that follows the prescribed methodology for screening in the DE Equality Scheme.

²⁰ For example, under "Racial Group" the Department has put the phrase: "Children from the Traveller community and Roma children have some of the lowest levels of attainment of all equality groups." This single phrase is the only piece of evidence that the Department has been able to gather on the diverse needs, experiences, and priorities of children of different ethnic backgrounds living in NI and there is no link between it and the implications of the draft budget proposals.

CONCLUSION

Given the issues highlighted within this submission UNISON would welcome a clear commitment on the part of the DoF to further engage with us and other relevant stakeholders. We anticipate a detailed response to our comments which demonstrates that they have been given proper consideration. We believe that direct engagement is the most valuable form of engagement in relation to these proposals.

For further information, please contact:

John Patrick Clayton – j.clayton@unison.co.uk

Telephone – 028 90270190

UNISON, Galway House, 165 York St, Belfast, BT15 1AL