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Advice on The Executive Office's Draft Budget EQIA 2023-24

2 October 2023

Introduction

The Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) was established in accordance with 'The Commissioner for Children and Young People (Northern Ireland) Order' (2003) to safeguard and promote the rights and best interests of children and young people in Northern Ireland (NI). Under Articles 7(2) and (3) of this legislation, NICCY has a mandate to keep under review the adequacy and effectiveness of law, practice and services relating to the rights and best interests of children and young people by relevant authorities. Under Article 7(4), NICCY has a statutory duty to advise any relevant authority on matters concerning the rights or best interests of children and young persons. The Commissioner's remit includes children and young people up to 18 years, or 21 years, if the young person has a disability or experience of being in the care of social services. In carrying out their functions, the Commissioner's paramount consideration is the rights of the child or young person, having particular regard to their wishes and feelings. The Commissioner is also to have regard to all relevant provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

NICCY is extremely concerned at the cuts to the Northern Ireland budget and how these may affect the services and provision for children and young people. We recognise the extremely difficult position of Permanent Secretaries having to administer these budget cuts, and have written to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee,¹ the Secretary of State and political parties to highlight a range of concerns.

It is important to note that these cuts come on the back of the worst cost of living crisis in 45 years, the absence of an Assembly and Executive Ministers, challenges associated with Brexit and the ongoing impact of Covid, all of which have had an extremely detrimental impact on, and delivery for, children and young people in Northern Ireland, and their families. We are therefore very mindful, as the statutory body providing advice to

¹ [NICCY-advice-paper-NIAC-Inquiry-21-April-2023.pdf](#)

government on children's rights and best interests, of our responsibility to advise on these budget decisions, and to monitor their impact on children and young people.

In the conclusion of our report on the statutory response to the Covid emergency, *A New and Better Normal*,² we wrote:

'It is the case that, when a public emergency occurs, the degree to which the processes in implementing children's rights are effective and embedded in government policies and service delivery processes, will determine the degree to which children's rights are prioritised during the emergency response. (...) We must learn the lesson that, alongside the vital actions required to support recovery, there must be a focus on embedding a child rights culture within the fundamental workings of government and its agencies.' (p151)

In recognition of this, NICCY has worked with colleagues across Europe to develop the ENOC statement on undertaking Child Rights Impact Assessments (CRIAs) recognising their vital role in ensuring children's rights are fully considered in government decision-making.³ NICCY have met with key staff from each government department to deliver introductory and capacity building workshops, has developed NI-specific CRIA templates and guidance, in addition to an online training module NICCY has developed to support government officials to undertake CRIAs.⁴

Given the potential impact of the cuts to the 2023-24 budget, NICCY has advised each government department of the importance of undertaking CRIAs, in addition to carrying out EQIAs, to ensure that they have given due consideration as to how they will affect children and young people. This was emphasised very recently at the UNCRC Committee's periodic examination of the UK State Party's implementation of the UNCRC on 19 May 2023, where concerns about the impact of budget cuts on vital children's services in Northern Ireland was raised more than once, and assurances sought from government representatives that CRIAs would be carried out on budget decisions. Subsequently the Committee issued its Concluding Observations and Recommendations on 2 June 2023

² <https://www.niccy.org/a-new-and-better-normal-children-and-young-peoples-experiences-of-the-covid-19-pandemic/>

³ <https://www.niccy.org/wp-content/uploads/media/3766/fv-enoc-position-statement-on-cria.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.niccy.org/what-we-do/training/cria/>

calling on the UK State Party to:

“Withdraw the 2023/24 budget for Northern Ireland and fully consider the equality and human rights implications of a new budget, taking all possible steps to mitigate any adverse impact on children’s rights before issuing a revised budget.”

UN Committee on the Rights of the Child
02 June 2023

Comments on CRIA on draft TEO budget

We warmly commend TEO for undertaking a CRIA on its draft budget and also the way in which it has considered children within its EQIA. Both reflect a clear commitment by the Department to carefully consider the impact of its budgetary decisions on children and young people, and reflect good practice of which other departments should take note.

We appreciate that the Department is facing a shortfall in its non-ringfenced budget allocation of £9.5m, representing 11.1% of its projected baseline non-ringfenced budget of £85.2 million. TEO’s EQIA, in contrast with the EQIAs undertaken by almost every other department, directly identified the impact that the budget cuts would have on children and young people. The CRIA has provided further detail on this and on the considerations taken in the decision-making process, including through feedback gained in the EQIA consultation. We would welcome the opportunity to meet with the relevant officials in TEO to review the process of completing the EQIA to understand the challenges and discuss changes we would suggest.

One challenge we have identified, is in completing the CRIA on a full departmental budget, and it would have been helpful to identify, perhaps under Question 6, referring to the Children and Young People’s Strategy, the full range of actions for children funded by the TEO budget. We have identified the following from the CYPS Delivery Plan:

1. District Council Good Relations programme

The Good Relations Delivery Branch supports District Councils and voluntary & community groups to deliver good relations projects that meet the needs of communities in Northern Ireland. These support programmes to deliver projects that promote good relations among children and young people across Northern Ireland, including those in interface areas.

The CYPS Delivery Plan states that, in 2020/21 this included:

- District Council Good Relations Programme (DCGRP) awarded £375,863 across the 11 District Councils to support 27 Children & Young People programmes.
- Central Good Relations Fund (CGRF) - 54 projects, awarded a total of £1.763 million, are contributing to the delivery of the children & young people priority.

We note that one of the PEACE + programme objectives is children and young people, and that the match funding for this is within TEO's ringfenced budget, so should not be affected by the budget cuts.

2. The Urban Village Initiative

This is designed to improve good relations outcomes and to help develop thriving places where there has previously been a history of deprivation and community tension. Urban Villages funds a wide range of community led, cross cutting & capital projects which indirectly and directly positively impact children & young people. The schools programme supports the key programme aim of 'fostering positive community identities' and also builds the capacity of schools in Urban Village areas to strengthen good relations approaches and enhance community engagement.

Some specific examples provided in the CYPS Delivery Plan included:

- Schools of Sanctuary project to help schools to further develop as welcoming and inclusive places for newcomer pupils and their families;
- Buddy Up support to build the capacity of schools serving Urban Village areas to access additional opportunities to improve good relations outcomes;
- Creative School Partnerships project with the Arts Council of NI and the Education Authority delivered in post-primary schools focussing on access to quality arts experiences to benefit all aspects of learning; and
- Our Generation 'Growing Up Better, Together' supporting emotional resilience among children and young people, with a focus on Urban Village areas and Border Counties.
- Community Play parks such as New Park in Colin, Ballysillan Playing Fields, Marrowbone Millennium Park & Reverend Robert Bradford Park are further examples of a range of youth focused funded projects under the Urban Villages initiative

3. Central Good Relations Programme

Targeting young people to foster new friendships between young people from different communities and mitigate the risk of young people entering the youth justice system, engaging in risk taking behaviours and being recruited by paramilitary organisations.

Actions included in CYPS Delivery Plan included:

- Continued funding and delivery of the T:BUC Camps Programme, a headline action in the T:BUC Strategy.
- Continued delivery of the Planned Interventions Programme, aimed at diverting young people in interface areas from anti-social behaviour of a sectarian nature, and potentially criminal behaviour, at times of heightened tension and social unrest. TEO works in partnership with the Education Authority to deliver this Programme.

4. The Communities in Transition Project

This is one of 38 actions within the Tackling Paramilitary Activity, Criminality and Organised Crime Action Plan. It is designed to be delivered in 8 specific areas of focus: North Belfast, East Belfast, Shankill, West Belfast, Carrickfergus/Larne, North Down and Derry~Londonderry.

Addressing the needs of young people emerged as a key theme for the project, though to avoid duplication with Education Authority Youth Service projects through the Tackling Paramilitarism Programme commissioned CIT projects:

- Support development opportunities for those in communities who have a significant influence on young people, such as their families and social networks.
- Raising Aspirations projects have been established in a number of areas to facilitate engagement with employers, universities, etc.
- Young people have been included as a target demographic in other thematic projects to ensure young people are fully involved in other aspects of community life, such as community safety and cultural programmes.

5. Minority Ethnic Development Fund

The CYPS Delivery Plan outlined that this provides approx. £1.2m of support for voluntary and community organisations working with minority ethnic people and groups. The aim of the Fund is to assist minority ethnic and local community organisations to promote good relations between people of different ethnic backgrounds – some projects may include CYP. The CYPS Delivery Plan also included the Crisis Fund – crisis funding for minority ethnic individuals which can benefit CYP and families.

6. Racial Equality Actions

The CYPS Delivery Plan included a range of actions relating to racial equality, all of which should impact positively on children and young people, including:

- Review of Race Relations (NI) 1997;
- Ethnic Monitoring;
- Racial Equality Subgroup;
- Departmental Racial Equality Champions;
- The Thematic group for Travellers.

7. NI Strategic Migration Partnership

Leading coordination to reflect our regionally specific needs in the development and implementation of UK Immigration policy. TEO represents NI on the HO and Chief Executives' Strategic Asylum Group which includes unaccompanied children.

It is difficult to comment meaningfully on the EQIA and CRIA on the TEO budget when only limited information is provided on what the cuts will mean in practice to the allocation against the programmes that will affect children and young people. Both impact assessments should have included an indication of how the budgets for each of the areas above would be affected, along with outcomes data for each, to allow respondents to reflect on how this would affect children and to comment on which programmes should be protected.

We note that the EQIA proposed £3.5 million reductions in Good Relations work, affecting the Central Good Relations Fund and District Council Good Relations Programme this year, and explained that this would mean reductions in around 50% in both. Given children and young people are key beneficiaries of both these programmes, it seems inevitable that

they will be significantly detrimentally impacted. NICCY requests more detailed information on the other five TEO areas that impact on children, namely:

- Urban Villages
- Communities in Transition
- Minority Ethnic Development Fund
- Racial Equality
- NI Strategic Migration Partnership.

Coordination across government

We are aware that many programmes for which TEO holds responsibility are jointly delivered, and in some cases, jointly funded with other government departments. It would be helpful to outline how this joined-up working will be affected by the reductions in budget. For example, during the planning process, did departments liaise with each other in relation to programmes delivered in partnership, to discuss resourcing and how the programmes might be affected?

We note that DE has received some of the largest budget cuts, and these all impact on children and young people. NICCY would strongly argue that other Departments should take this into account when determining how to allocate their own budgets and should, therefore, as far as possible, protect children and young people from further budget cuts. Moreover, consideration should be given to 'spend to save', and maintaining resources for early intervention and prevention, even if the saving is to be found in the budgets of other departments. For example, cutting Good Relations programmes will impact on the budget of the Department of Justice, with more expensive interventions required.

Cuts to Voluntary and Community Sector budgets

TEO has a key role in funding the Voluntary and Community Sector to deliver critical services to communities, and generally these services are targeted at the most disadvantaged and vulnerable. These services are often delivered on very limited budgets, depending on the commitment of staff and organisations to obtain resources from charitable sources as well as government.

NICCY understands that many VCS organisations funded by government generally have been already informed that their funding will be ended, while others have been given letters of offer for only limited periods. The way that this sector has been treated undermines any sense of partnership working and does not demonstrate appropriate value

of the important role of the sector in providing a wide range of the most critical services to some of our most disadvantaged communities, families and children. Departments must understand that the uncertainty in funding is already having an impact on retention of staff and the delivery of services, and cutting funding will decimate the vital VCS infrastructure in some cases irreversibly or in such a way that it will not be able to be restored should funding be increased again in the future.

Conclusion

NICCY recognises the very difficult position departments are in, attempting to implement these severe budget cuts in the absence of Ministers. We commend TEO for undertaking a CRIA on its draft budget and also for generally indicating the potential impact on children and young people in the EQIA, which has not been the case in most other departmental EQIAs. However, the information presented on how the budget decisions might affect specific programmes for children and young people has been very limited. In this submission we identified seven delivery areas included in the Children and Young People's Strategy Delivery Plan that, if cut, would have a detrimental impact on children and young people.

The EQIA only identified cuts to two of these programmes, the two Good Relations programmes. A reduction of around 50% to each of these programmes will have a significant impact on some of the most disadvantaged groups of children and young people in Northern Ireland. We do not know whether the other five programmes have been ringfenced or if they will also be cut.

Given that children and young people are bearing the brunt of many cuts to the Northern Ireland budget, particularly through the severe reductions in the DE budget, it is essential that other Departments, including TEO, seek to mitigate this through protecting their allocations to children and young people.

We would welcome the opportunity to meet with the relevant TEO officials to discuss the process for completing the CRIAs, to get feedback on NICCY's guidance and to share our reflections on how it has been completed.

Recommendation

TEO should provide information on how budget has been allocated to programmes

delivered to children and young people, including the seven listed in the CYPs Delivery Plan. Given these are provided in particular for children and young people facing disadvantage, and the disproportionate cuts to children's services through the DE budget cuts, TEO should ringfence all allocation to children and young people's programmes. Where cuts have already been made, TEO should prioritise these programmes when reallocating budget through the financial year.