



22 August 2024

Seanin Ferguson
Department of Finance

By email: FMBreturns@finance-ni.gov.uk

Dear Seanin,

Re: DoF Budget 2024-25 Equality Screening

I am writing to you regarding the Equality Screening of the Department's 2024-25 Budget. Firstly, I am greatly pleased with some of the initiatives that are described in the screening document, which are designed to improve the wellbeing, safety and social participation of older people. I am aware of the positive impact that some of these initiatives have, and I am happy to see that the majority of them seem to be carried forward into this year's Budget.

However, I am also aware that the Department is facing financial pressures, similar to other Departments (as they have stated in their own budget consultations).¹ Prior to the publication of this Equality Screening document, my office was made aware of the challenges that are faced by some of the agencies in your Department, many of which are caused by high financial pressures.

In the Equality Screening here discussed, the impact of these financial pressures is acknowledged, and it is said that this year's allocated Budget will be smaller (in real terms) than in the previous year.

Although, even excluding earmarked amounts, the Department's resource budget for 2024-25 is more than the 2023-24 allocation the Department still needs to make savings to meet rising costs such as pay and inflation e.g. pay increases from 2023-24 and including 2024-25 planning assumptions are approximately £10m with additional pension costs of £3.7m. The Department has carefully considered how it operates and most business areas within the Department have had to reduce or stop non-essential tasks and streamline other functions where possible.²

Considering these circumstances, this Equality Screening is disappointing, as it does not evaluate the impact of service reductions and projects that are being stopped. The Screening enumerates existing programmes that have a positive impact on the lives of people of section 75 groups. It is unquestionable that these programmes indeed make a valuable contribution to counter inequality in Northern Ireland and contribute to improve the lives of vulnerable people. However, the aim of the Equality Screening

¹ See for instance Department of Health (2024) [Equality Impact Assessment of the 2024-25 Budget Outcome](#); Department for Infrastructure (2024) [Dfi Budget 2024-25 Equality Impact Assessment](#); Department for Communities (2024) [Consultation on Department for Communities Budget 2024-25 allocations](#). In these documents, Departments acknowledge the need to cut services and curtail the funding of many projects.

² Department of Finance (2024) [Equality Screening DoF Budget 2024-25](#). Pages 6-7.

is not to list existing programmes, but to analyse how the changing circumstances and the decisions made in the Budget will affect the population of the different section 75 groups.

The Budget acknowledges the need to make savings in order to adjust to the increasing costs of running services (as shown in the above quote), and the Equality Screening should at least analyse the impact of the savings measures proposed.

Reducing service/stopping projects

Within the first and arguably most relevant screening question (“What is the likely impact on equality of opportunity for those affected by this policy, for each of the Section 75 equality categories?”) the Department is meant to provide evidence as to how the Budget is likely to impact on people’s lives in terms of equality of opportunity.

When considering the impact of the Budget on people of different ages, the Department claims that this Budget will have a minor impact. In the Department’s view, this is due to the relief provided by LPS (and LPS’s outreach programme to promote it and deliver it), the support provided by NI Direct citizen contact for those who do not have access to online services, the delivery of the Go ON NI by the Digital Inclusion team that helps people improve their digital skills, and the NICS commitment to being a diverse employer.³ These are all valuable and very positive contributions.

However, the Equality Screening also outlines areas in which savings measures are proposed, including £4.5m in “reducing service/stopping projects” which includes, among other services and projects, “Land and Property Services (LPS) £0.5m” and “NI Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) £0.4m”.⁴ As the projects and services that will be affected are not stated, it is at this stage not possible to know, for instance, how a reduction in the funding of LPS will affect their outreach programme and their ability to reach vulnerable consumers.

In this regard, my office has recently learned how the challenges faced by agencies within the Department may affect older people. For instance, my Advocacy team has engaged with LPS regarding the right of individuals to receive the lone pensioner allowance (LPA). In particular, I learned that some individuals that fulfilled the criteria of “severe mental impairment” (SMI) to receive LPA may have been receiving incorrect information. Further research by my Policy unit showed that the uptake of the LPA was high for individuals who lived alone but was extremely poor for those who lived with a person with a severe mental impairment.⁵

³ Department of Finance (2024) [Equality Screening DoF Budget 2024-25](#). Pages 23-24.

⁴ Department of Finance (2024) [Equality Screening DoF Budget 2024-25](#). Page 7.

⁵ There is a striking difference between the percentage of pensioners that claim LPA through different criteria. The uptake of pensioners who live alone is impressive. According to the [Department’s statistics](#), by March 2023, 35020 individuals received LPA, which amounts to around 47% of the total number of individuals older than 70 who live alone in Northern Ireland ([74,957, according to the NI Census](#)). In contrast, during the summer months of 2023, COPNI contacted LPS to confirm the number of people who were granted the discount under the SMI eligibility criteria. The numbers LPS provided looked oddly small (203 persons in Northern Ireland, including 25 people in Belfast, and 5 in the Derry City and Strabane District Council). It is hard to believe that only 203 persons in Northern

In my office's engagement with LPS, I received assurance that all steps would be taken to ensure that information provided through their services was accurate, and further training would be provided if deemed necessary. However, it is questionable that LPS would be able to expand their reach while receiving less funding.

On the other hand, my office has also identified shortfalls and limitations within the work of NISRA that can indeed affect the wellbeing of older people. My Policy Unit noticed that several of the local council Active Ageing strategies cite NISRA's Age Friendly profile, despite this resource currently being unavailable. NISRA's portal suggests that this resource is in development and will be available "later in the year".⁶ Following a discussion with NISRA colleagues, however, I was informed that "resource pressures and other priorities will affect the availability of this".

The value of collating metrics around our ageing population in a single platform cannot be overstated,⁷ as it could vastly contribute to the work of policymakers on the issue of demographic ageing. In a recently published report, my office highlighted the consequences that demographic ageing is already having in our society, and the greater challenges it will pose in the future to the labour market, health and social care services, pensions and public service costs, and social housing.⁸ These concerns were raised almost a decade ago by the Government Office for Science's Future of an Ageing Population project.⁹ These reports point at the risks that ill-preparation for an ageing population have, especially for older people.¹⁰ In that respect, the abandonment of NISRA's Age Friendly profile due to financial pressures is not irrelevant, and it will have real life and tangible effects on the ability of policymakers to plan for an ageing population, and will ultimately affect the lives of older people. These effects, however, were not considered in the Equality Screening.

These are only two examples of recently identified shortfalls within areas under the scope of this Budget. I believe that these shortfalls will negatively affect the wellbeing of older people and will presumably be worsened by the funding reduction of projects and services for LPS and NISRA. Although I am not stating that the reduction of these services and stopping these projects will have a major impact on age equality, I believe

Ireland are in a situation as the one described by the conditions of the allowance ("living with someone who has a severe mental impairment, including your spouse or partner"). A quick search in the 2021 Census shows that [21,008 individuals older than 66 provide unpaid domestic care in single family households in which all members are aged 66 or over](#). Also, [19,687 individuals older than 60 with "frequent periods of confusion or memory loss" live in households](#) (as opposed to communal establishments). It is hard to believe that less than 2% of these cases qualify for the LPA. The Commissioner is therefore concerned that LPS is not being successful in reaching people who would qualify under the SMI criteria, some of which will be extremely vulnerable.

⁶ See the information in NISRA's website [here](#).

⁷ It is no coincidence that the Republic of Ireland and England make a similar compilation of these statistics in a single Hub. See the [Older Persons Information Hub](#) of the Central Statistics Office and the [Productive Healthy Ageing Profile](#) of the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities.

⁸ See Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland (2024) [At the centre of government planning. The Programme for Government and preparing for an ageing population](#).

⁹ See Government Office for Science (2016) [Future of an ageing population](#).

¹⁰ Indeed, the findings from the COVID-19 Inquiry illustrate what can happen when the needs of our older demographic are not properly identified, understood, and addressed. See Connolly, M-L. (2024, May 18) [Covid Inquiry: What have we learned after three weeks in Belfast?](#), BBC News [Accessed 16th August, 2024].



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that this should have been taken into account and acknowledged in the screening questions.

Conclusion

The role of an Equality Screening is to analyse how changes in the Budget, rearrangements of resources and service cuts (or expansions) will affect section 75 groups. I commend the work and effort of the Department and its agencies, in particular, the agencies mentioned above (LPS and NISRA) with which my office has engaged regularly. These agencies are committed to provide the best possible service to citizens, and they can only do so if provided with sufficient resources.

I acknowledge that all Departments are facing increasing financial pressures and are struggling to cover raising costs. The Equality Assessments of all Departments that have been published so far this year have shown a tendency to implement savings that pervades them all. I am in no position to tell the Department that it should spend more money, or to suggest which savings measures should be implemented. However, as Commissioner, I believe that an Equality Screening should be taken as an opportunity to thoroughly analyse the consequences of the decisions being made, in order to minimise disproportionate impact on vulnerable groups.

I believe that, indeed, older people will be affected disproportionately by the savings measures proposed, and I regret that this was not examined thoroughly (or even superficially) in the Equality Screening.

I would welcome the opportunity to discuss this response further.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'E. Lynch', written in a cursive style.

Eddie Lynch
within the office of Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland