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Budget Cuts and Inequality in Northern Ireland

This is a critical moment for equality in Northern Ireland. The precarious financial situation and resulting budget cuts will have a devastating impact on equality in Northern Ireland, and on equality of opportunity for some of our most vulnerable people.

We should be able to rely on our politicians to take up the reins and steer us through this difficult and stormy period. But while Stormont lies empty, the consequences of budget decisions will be all too real for many people, their families and their communities, and these cuts have the potential to create and compound generations of enduring disadvantage and inequality.

It is difficult to get a comprehensive overall picture of what cuts have been made, what is coming and when. The Commission's equality analysis of budget proposals makes it clear that older people, women, people with disabilities and children face multiple impacts. Layer on poverty and socio-economic disadvantage and it's very much worse.

That is the view of the Equality Commission and Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action.

Geraldine McGahey, Chief Commissioner of the Equality Commission, in a joint statement with Celine McStravick, Chief Executive of the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action, said: "We need to heed the repeated calls from Stormont's Public Accounts Committee, which has called for a more joined-up approach to budgeting and making the case for stronger central control when setting priorities and allocating funding. This collaborative approach would go a long way towards identifying and mitigating the combined impact of cuts from different departments on vulnerable people and their families.

"Northern Ireland's voluntary and community sector helps keep Northern Ireland running on a day-to-day basis. From health and education to social enterprises and the arts, our sector is making a difference in every community, every single day. Funding cuts to our sector bleed through into everybody's life – not just the people who use the many, many services we offer.

"The Fiscal Council believes there would be value in closer monitoring of the relationship between funding and need. For the future, we believe needs-based budgeting for Northern Ireland would be a major step in preventing further inequality and improving equality of opportunity for people here. We need budgeting based on data and actual evidence, particularly of the equality impacts. There is also a

responsibility on the decision makers to monitor the outworkings of their decisions and transparency is important in all of this.

“Finally, we need a functioning Executive – it is the job of ministers to make major policy decisions such as some of those emerging from the budgetary cuts proposals. We remain hopeful that a new Executive could provide the missing link and ensure that the next round of budgeting – which is being planned now - will be needs and evidence-based, and make sure that we do not leave our most vulnerable people behind.”