



NICVA

**Response to Department of Health
Equality Impact Assessment:
Budget 2025-26**

09 April 2025

Background

Who We Are

- **NICVA**, the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action, is the **membership and representative umbrella body for the voluntary and community sector (VCS)** in Northern Ireland with over **1,400 members currently, who provide a wide range of services and activities for public benefit.**
- We **represent a diverse range of organisations and groups**, large and small, UK wide, regional, and local, all dedicated to making a positive impact on our communities, building a stronger, more resilient Northern Ireland.
- We **work to support and advance the interests of the people and communities that our sector supports.** We offer a wide range of practical services and support to our members to help them do what they do best - find innovative solutions for social challenges.
- We **believe that collaboration between government and the voluntary and community sector is essential** to achieving positive outcomes for all, and we regularly engage with political representatives, Government Ministers, and officials in support of this aim.

Context

- The **breadth of the services provided by the voluntary and community sector (VCS) in Northern Ireland is incredibly diverse** and cuts across all areas of public service provision - with the **sector employing over 50,000¹ people and mobilising over 200,000 volunteers across over 7,000 charities.**
- Independent [research](#) commissioned by NICVA showed over 90% of the NI population use the sectors services and 1 in 8 consider them 'essential to their lives'. More than 1 in 10 of those organisations providing these services, reached over 5000 people per year.
- **Not unsurprisingly the largest area of voluntary and community service delivery is in health, social care and well-being [services](#) .**

¹ [Workforce and Volunteers 2021 | NICVA](#)

- The **voluntary and community sector is an essential partner in health and social care delivery in Northern Ireland**, providing crucial services including across public health, social care reform, early years and parenting support, mental health support, substance misuse and addiction services, neurological conditions, disability services, specialist social work services and cancer care, and at all stages of people's lives from pre-birth through to our older population and end of life care.
- The **charities, community organisations and groups** that make up our sector **play a critical role in improving health and wellbeing across Northern Ireland, often supporting the most vulnerable in our society.**
- By targeting services to underserved and disadvantaged groups, **VCS organisations play a crucial role in reducing health inequalities.** They **provide tailored support that addresses specific needs**, helping to bridge the gap in health outcomes between different population groups.
- The **sector's strength lies in its responsiveness, its accessibility, and its holistic, community-embedded, and personalised approaches.** The diversity, flexibility, and level of innovation within the VCS sector **enables it to meet the needs of communities that statutory services may find more difficult to reach**, many of which are experiencing the greatest health inequalities.
- **VCS organisations also promote understanding of the specific and often intersectional needs of their communities**, bringing the voices decision makers most need to hear into systems and decision making.
- The **sectors contribution to health and social care therefore cannot be understated.** Studies routinely show that **every pound invested in voluntary and community sector led health and social care services generates significant social and financial returns** by reducing the pressures on hospitals, GP surgeries and emergency services.
- Services delivered by the voluntary and community sector **are the cornerstone of public sector delivery and an integral part of mainstream service pathways** and well-established referral routes to many areas of health and social care provision.
- These services often fill gaps left by statutory providers. The **sector continues to respond to and plug increasing gaps across our broken health and social**

care system, delivering support that may not be readily available or accessible within the public sector for a variety of factors not least budgetary pressures.

- However, the **sector is currently facing significant pressures that threaten its future sustainability** and effectiveness.
- A **continued cycle of chronic under-investment and funding cuts**, unstable government and the **consequent short-term, single year and last-minute public sector budgeting has been particularly detrimental** to the many VCS organisations that receive public funding through grants and contracts to deliver health and social care services. This has **resulted in continuous uncertainty for these groups and organisations, creating a workforce crisis** across the sector and **placing many services under unsustainable operational pressures**.
- **Recent years** have been **characterised by stagnation of funding, and limited prioritisation of critical policy issues or meaningful implementation of key strategies and broader transformation needed**, leading to general degradation of health and social care services across the board.
- The **long-term viability of the sector and the sustainability of many organisations has never been more at risk** due to growing financial and operational pressures. This is **set against rising need and demand for services**, placing additional strain on already stretched resources.
- However, while the demand for their services has increased, the **financial and strategic support from the Department and Government more broadly has in no way kept pace**.
- We accept that complex issues of transformation and longer-term investment require time to solve, but **immediate budgetary challenges facing our sector over this next financial year demand urgent attention: rising employer costs**, including increased national insurance costs **and diminishing access to essential core funding**, present ‘a perfect storm’ that threatens the very **sustainability of voluntary and community sector led delivery** in Northern Ireland, including to the most vulnerable.
- In light of these pressures **NICVA is currently calling on the NI Executive to implement a 12-month emergency support plan for our sector**, whilst we **press for a more long-term strategy and plan for investment by Departments**

including the Department of Health reflective of the sectors vital contribution to health and social care policy and delivery across NI.

- NICVA is **advocating for a fair and sustainable operating environment for voluntary and community sector organisations**. This is inextricably linked to how government departments allocate and administrate budgets. We engage regularly with budget processes to call for meaningful progress to realise these ambitions.
- Whilst more sustainable funding models have been routinely promised, we **need to see more urgent and concrete action by all NI departments** and meaningful progress towards this regarding.
- We know that practically, final decision making on budget priorities for 2025/26 has already been progressed by the Department and its agencies.
- It is **vital** however that **the views and interests of the voluntary and community sector are more fairly and adequately considered and reflected within budget considerations** by the Department and its agencies, **even at this late stage**, reflective of the sectors unique role in the delivery and support of health and social care services.
- As has been demonstrated by the recent cuts to the Department of Health Core Grant Schem, too often **our sector and its organisations are disproportionately vulnerable to funding cuts**. We accept the realities of the current budgetary environment, are not asking for special treatment nor do we expect to be shielded from budget pressures. However given the importance of our sector to health and social care delivery we believe there is a need to ensure a more balanced and equal treatment of VCS delivered services in decision making on budgets by the Department.
- The **complexity of challenges facing our sector cannot be underestimated** and with funding and investment by the Department and its agencies already 'cut to the bone', the **stark reality is that there is no capacity to further reduce funding to the sector or to reduce organisational costs without significant negative consequences** for sector and those it serves – which **ultimately will result in much greater pressure on and cost to public sector budgets and services** more broadly.

Introduction

NICVA welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the Department of Health's Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) for the 2025-26 Budget.

In general we want to outline our significant concern about the budget for 2025/26 as presented by the Department, which offers yet another deeply challenging budgetary picture for health and social care delivery in Northern Ireland.

The department is projecting a funding gap of £400 million that may force HSC Trusts *“to propose measures with high and catastrophic impact on a range of services which would undoubtedly have direct patient consequences.”* These measures will be added to those that were taken in the Budget last year, after a funding gap of £412.2 million was reported for the 24-25 period.

When it comes to both resource and capital spending it is evident that the proposed budget for this next year is wholly insufficient to meet the current demands facing the Department and its agencies. As a key delivery partner in health and social care this will undoubtedly impact greatly on stability for our sector, which is already in the midst of a financial crisis and most significantly on the services and beneficiaries it both directly provides and advocates for. The Department of Health (DOH) has a budget of £8.4 billion along with capital spend of nearly £400 million (£391m), however VCS organisations have been increasingly sidelined in any funding allocations.

We recognise the complex decisions involved in allocating finite resources and understand how extremely challenging the budget position for 2025-26 is for the Department requiring difficult and unenviable decision making by its Minister. We fully recognise the scale of the funding gap facing all NI Departments and the difficult decisions they are being required to make as a result.

However now more than ever we must rethink how we make decisions on the funding and delivery of public services, in order to really understand the connection between funding and supporting the wellbeing of people across Northern Ireland. NICVA and its members are keen to work with government in support of this.

Clearly there is an urgency to agree how we stretch the current funding pot to best address short-term need whilst retaining ambition for health and social care transformation and for the long-term well-being of all.

Even in these times of unprecedented budgetary constraint, Government can still greatly improve people's lives by focusing on clear and consistent priorities and by listening to and working with key partners, including the voluntary and community sector to ensure best use of resources and to deliver most impact. This approach is important in the context of responding to both the immediate budgetary challenges faced in 2025/26 and in looking to the future fiscal picture beyond this.

In making comment, we wish to draw attention to the 2024 NI Audit Office Report into Budgeting and Accountability², and the associated recommendations, particularly in relation to multiyear budgets, collaboration, and expenditure relating to measurable outcomes within an agreed Programme for Government.

We support the aspiration for multi-year budgets detailed in the EQIA and share the hope that this is the last single year budget.

Details of our Response

Our response to the draft budget consultation is informed by the current context for the voluntary and community sector (VCS) and the people and communities it serves.

With input from senior Department of Health officials we hosted a recent engagement session for sector representatives to facilitate dialogue and capture views on the draft Budget EQIA consultation from the perspective of the VCS. The views generated via this session have informed our response, which also reflects the insights, knowledge and perspectives gathered via our day-to-day work in supporting and representing the sector across Northern Ireland more broadly. We are aware that organisations in attendance at our engagement session and indeed many other sector organisations will also be providing their own responses to this consultation. We urge that these important contributions be meaningfully considered as part of the continued Budget

² NI Audit Office, 'Budgeting and Accountability' (2024) (Available at: NI Audit Office Report - Budgeting and Accountability.pdf., accessed on 22/8/24)

setting process and decision making by the Department, even at this late stage for 2025/26.

We have not provided responses to the questions as detailed in the consultation document opting to provide a summary of key messaging from our engagement session as detailed and to comment in general on the budgetary outlook and funding environment from our sectors perspective more broadly.

Feedback Via NICVA Sector Engagement Session

NICVA wants to strongly articulate the significant levels of concern with regard to the proposed budget expressed by those voluntary and community sector representatives in attendance via our engagement session. Representatives in attendance included those working in the areas of cancer care and support, disability, SEN, children and young people's services, adoption and fostering, support for those with neurological conditions, community health, health promotion, mental health, and addiction support. The level of concern articulated by sector representatives as to the bleak realities of the budget situation for both their organisations and those they serve via our engagement session cannot be overstressed. There was strong consensus that the pressures on the health and social care system and sector organisations as a result has never been more acute or unsustainable and the issues faced never more challenging. There was significant frustration at the apparent lack of progress to commit to or implement key pieces of strategy and transformation by the Department, due to lack of budget, which based on organisational insights and expertise was only serving to compound levels of need, increasing pressures and long-term cost to health and social care systems.

Key Issues/Comments raised via session:

- Transformation of our health and social care services is essential. We need to change how social care is organised, funded, and delivered. It is unacceptable to say that this needs to wait until funding is stabilised.

- There are legacy issues across the system which never seem to get resolved and increasingly cost more and more to the system and those impacted.
- Transformation cannot be delayed – is creating further layers of need, which places people and services at increasing levels of risk
- Critical areas of strategy development and review are being routinely paused or not fully implemented as a result, only compounding need and ultimately costing more to system and wider public purse.
- We are not seeing any evidence of the impact of streamlining measures such as Encompass reflected in the Budget picture– no sense of how any savings or efficiencies are going to be distributed across health and social care system more broadly.
- Sense is that are continually *'robbing Peter to pay Paul'* – proposing investment in one area whilst asking HSC Trusts or sector organisations to make cuts in others.
- What evidence will HSC Trusts utilise to make budget decisions, tackle the anomalies of investment in one area whilst implementing cuts in others. Will the HSCTs do health impact assessments on any proposed cuts?
- Impact on our sector and those it serves of continued underinvestment and cuts is in no way fully understood by the Department or HSC Trusts.
- Late timeline of funding decisions by the Department or HSC Trusts. – is hugely impactful on sector and those it serves. No timeline or communications about monies even on interim basis – letting sector carry cost, is simply unacceptable.
- Budget EQIAs as they are shaped currently are not helpful or meaningful in any way in understanding sector views in a way that is purposeful and constructive with regard to impact of budget decisions. Need for a strategic refocus on how consultation with our sector on budgets is undertaken.
- The Department must take cognisance of Fair Funding Principles/Partnership Agreement currently under development via the Govt and Voluntary Sector Joint Forum in all future funding decisions.
- Our unique value and expertise must be seen as an asset that can help Department more successfully deliver and improve outcomes in communities.

- The overall picture for rural communities is that services are already cut to the bone, in areas where draft budget suggests HSC Trusts consider possible savings, such as access to domiciliary care packages and the query is if trusts will be required to consult with the public regarding any further planned cuts or changes.
- On the ground experience would suggest that some of the mitigation measures proposed in the Rural Needs Impact Assessment are not readily available in rural communities, so is important that budget considerations adequately reflect realities of provision and access to services across rural communities.
- Is vital that the limitations of the Rural Needs Impact Assessment are understood as part of the consultation process.
- What consideration is being given by the Department to making budget savings across departmental infrastructure (eg; via restructuring) rather than further cuts to frontline service delivery that will have an immediate and negative impact on those seeking access to same.
- Limited detail within budget as to Encompass, any costs savings anticipated and proposals as to how any savings might be utilised.
- Our sector is routinely low hanging fruit, when it comes to cuts - No further savings can be made across our sector, we are cut to the bone.
- Alarmed that the DOH EQIA indicates its bid for additional funding for social care was denied by the NI Executive. These reforms would have most benefitted older people, people with disabilities, carers and those supported by service delivery.
- Region wide services across NI are the way forward because health issues do not stop at HSCT boundaries.

NICVA General Comments

The Role of and Investment in the Voluntary and Community Sector

We believe that immediate action should be taken to find greater resources from within the budget to support community and voluntary sector led delivery. Without this action,

sector services will inevitably shrink this year putting more and more vulnerable people's health and wellbeing at risk and leading to greater pressure on acute and other statutory services.

Via the EQIA the Department has raised a number of concerns about the budget and its shortfall including that it may have to further cut or reduce community and voluntary sector funding and investment.

We cannot accept the Department of Health's position that, due to budgetary pressures, they are unable to protect appropriate levels of investment in the community and voluntary sector, which as we have detailed is pivotal to health and social care delivery and generates considerable value in terms of early intervention, prevention and reducing pressure on statutory health and social care services.

As we have detailed many sector organisations are already under acute and unsustainable pressures and realistically cannot be expected to subsume any further cuts or reductions in funding or investment without significant impact on service delivery and the needs of those they serve.

NICVA will continue to challenge any further proposed cuts or reductions in investment.

Voluntary and community sector organisations are not simply add-ons to public services; they are integral components of the health and social care support system in NI, alleviating the pressure on statutory services, tackling complex issues at their roots, and improving outcomes in crucial areas such as health and well-being.

It is imperative therefore that the Department and its agencies recognise and protect the vital work undertaken by voluntary and community sector organisations. This is an investment not just in the voluntary and community sector but in the wider public health and social care infrastructure as a whole and in the future health and wellbeing of many across our society.

The diverse range of voluntary and community sector organisations impacted by recent cuts to the *Department of Health's Core Grant funding scheme*, which includes volunteering, women's sector, disability, health and children's rights and advocacy organisations, reflects the breadth and range of the sectors contribution.

Department of Health's Core Grant funding scheme

The unprecedented demand seen for the Department of Health's Core Grant funding scheme, with nearly 260 organisations applying and 25 successful grants, demonstrates the critical role and urgent needs of Northern Ireland's voluntary and community sector in health and social care delivery and the challenges faced with regard to access to sustainable and adequate funding to deliver. The scale of applications to this scheme clearly demonstrates that the voluntary and community sector is now an integral part of Northern Ireland's health and social care system.

The decision to maintain the 50% cut to this vital funding stream, reducing it from £3.6m to £1.8m, undermines the sector's ability to support the health and social care system at a time of unprecedented budgetary and operational pressure. The current funding level of £1.8m is wholly inadequate to support this essential infrastructure. As we have highlighted the voluntary and community sector is an essential partner in healthcare delivery, providing crucial services including across public health, social care reform, children's services, mental health support, disability services, health, and cancer care. Without adequate core funding, this vital infrastructure is at risk.

It is NICVA's view that the Department of Health cannot deliver its strategic objectives without a strong, sustainable voluntary and community sector.

The current situation, with regard to the Core Grant is an example of the serious misalignment between the Department's reliance on our sector and its investment in our capacity to deliver.

In light of the proposals with the draft budget to address some of the growing pressure on health services amidst increasing community needs, a more substantial and strategic approach to voluntary sector funding with regard to health and social care is urgently required.

NICVA is calling for an immediate review of the Core Grant scheme to ensure it reflects the sector's vital role in health service delivery. This review should examine both the purpose and scale of funding needed to support a sustainable voluntary sector that can effectively partner with statutory services. Following this review, we urge the Health Minister to commit to a properly resourced three-year funding programme that

recognises the sector's essential contribution to healthcare delivery in Northern Ireland.

The current grant scheme supports organisations contributing to key departmental strategic and policy initiatives. However, with the growing pressure on health services and increasing community needs, a more substantial and strategic approach to voluntary sector funding is urgently required.

In response to the funding challenges faced, NICVA calls for:

- An immediate increase in core funding to at least match previous levels.
- A comprehensive review of the scheme's purpose and scope.
- Development of a new three-year funding program that reflects the sector's essential role.
- Clear criteria for grant allocation that recognises organisational impact and sustainability.
- Long-term commitment to supporting voluntary sector infrastructure.

Parity of Support

It is unacceptable that VCS organisations are expected to shoulder the risks and the responsibilities of local health and social care systems but lack parity in terms of both protections from cuts or increased costs and investment.

The community and voluntary sector routinely feels the impact of budget cuts and pressures more disproportionately, than other sectors.

The work of our sector is not discretionary spend, it must be better valued, seen by Government as a core part of delivering better outcomes for all in NI and not routinely left vulnerable to last minute funding decisions, or funding cuts and freezes.

Given the importance of our sector to the delivery of health and social care, we believe there is a need to ensure a more balanced and equal treatment of VCS delivered services in decision making on budgets by the Department.

Fair Funding

In the face of the complex challenges faced and amidst rising demand, our sector needs fair, adequate and multi-year funding to keep service delivery viable, meet rising costs and attract and retain a suitable workforce.

NICVA continues to advocate for a fair and sustainable operating environment for voluntary and community sector organisations.

Whilst more sustainable funding models have been promised, as a sector we need to see more concrete action and meaningful progress from government to help realise this. This is vital as we face into this current budgetary picture and plan for service delivery in this next financial year and beyond.

We believe *the 'Fair Funding Principles and Ways of Working'* developed via the Joint Forum between Government and the Voluntary and Community Sector, supported by NICVA can play a key role here.

Need for Multi Year Funding and Budgets

We believe it is vitally important that the NI Executive moves towards multi-year budgets. Whilst we understand why in 2025/6 this has not been possible; this must change as departments look to the budget for 2026/27 and beyond.

As has been well evidenced, this continued cycle of short-term budgeting is damaging for our sector and those it serves.

We support the Departments aspiration for multi-year budgets within the EQIA document and share the hope that this is the last single year budget. As a sector we need to see more concrete action and meaningful progress in preparations towards this. We are almost midway through 2025 and are conscious that discussions on budget priorities post 2026 are already being taken forward by Departments. Given its unique role it is important that the sector is brought into and can contribute to strategic discussions on budget setting/priorities beyond 2026 at the earliest stage.

Impact of 2024 UK Budget

Increase in National Insurance contributions and National Living Wage

Following the UK Budget announcement last October, charities across the UK are now facing a substantial increase in their national insurance contributions from 6 April 2025. This arises from the decision to increase NICs by 1.2% to 15%.

NICVA continues to gather evidence of the impact of these proposed increases for VCS organisations across NI³, with a recent survey highlighting that 76% of organisations expected major financial impacts, with many facing additional costs between £5,000 and £200,000 annually from April 2025. One social care provider anticipated increased costs of £500,000.

As sector organisations' feedback to us continues to highlight, without adequate intervention by government the burden of these increases, with little time to prepare, means as a result there will be a need for many organisations to cut or reduce essential services and staffing, and the knock-on impact of this on the individuals and communities they serve will clearly be hugely significant. In addition, without adequate redress, the many contributions made by voluntary and community sector organisations to health and social delivery across Northern Ireland will also be greatly impacted, all undoubtedly placing further strain on already overstretched frontline public services as a result.

Additionally our sector will be required to meet increases to the national minimum wage rate for employees, also announced via the UK Budget creating further financial pressures.

The UK Government has recognised the challenging impact of raising employer NICs in their decision to reimburse the cost of NICs to public sector organisations. As essential partners to government both through direct public service delivery, and in plugging the gaps where public sector services fall short, the voluntary and community sector requires parity of support and protections in order to meet these increased staffing costs.

³ [Northern Ireland's Voluntary Sector Faces Critical Financial Pressure from NICs Increase | NICVA](#)

However unlike public sector organisations, as a sector we currently have no protection against these rising costs, as we continue to press the UK Government on the need for this parity of support.

It is acknowledged that these budgetary decisions have been taken by the UK Government and were not by the NI Executive.

We recognise and welcome the fact that the Minister of Finance and the wider NI Executive continues to make representation to the UK Government regarding the impact of the increase in national insurance contributions and the need for urgent solutions and interventions including for sector.

However, the reality is that if the UK Government does not change its current position, the consequences of that decision must fall on the NI Executive to mitigate from April 2025 onwards, with increased costs reflected in all current and future public sector contracts and grants to the voluntary and community sector by departments or their agencies.

We appreciate the very real challenges that this brings for the NI Executive and in the absence of a resolution via UK Government we are asking that the proposed Budget allocations to Departments are further considered to ensure these additional costs can be met, without further and unsustainable financial burden on our already squeezed sector.

Transformation

Transformation of health and social care is essential. We can and must do things differently. We need to change how health and social care is organised, funded, and delivered. It is concerning not to see funding adequately prioritised in this next financial year for this and other key areas of strategy development, which as has been highlighted only compounds need across our population and adds to the complexities and pressures on health and social care delivery.

Equity and support for vulnerable groups

In the context of the difficult challenges faced any budgetary decisions must prioritise services that protect and uplift the most vulnerable in our society, ensuring that resources are allocated where they are most needed. Our sectors insight, reach and expertise in this area, should be considered critical by the Department in efforts to mitigate budget impacts and to target limited resources most impactfully/effectively

Section 75 Impacts

Our response does not aim to comment in any detail on the potential impact of the draft budget on specific section 75 groups. It is clear that the impact across these groups is likely to be high, and that many will not be sufficiently protected against the consequences of ever diminishing resources and cuts to provision.

At this point we do not believe it is helpful to restate the impacts that the present consultation document has already bleakly acknowledged. We believe that while there is value in highlighting the effect of budget cuts on those most acutely at risk of impact, it is equally important to highlight that these impacts are caused by long term structural issues that have identifiable roots, and which require strategic action. Short term fixes or investment will not adequately address equality impacts if the overall system for NI remains the same. NICVA are concerned about the disproportionate impact that the proposed budgetary proposals may have across a significant number of section 75 groupings, namely persons of different age (children and young people & older people); ethnic minority groups; women; those with a disability, and those with dependents (in particular lone parents). This is particularly concerning given these groups already face a raft of inequalities and challenges. As a result, their impact is likely to be acute and detrimental to the rights, needs and resulting quality of life of those impacted. They also create potential for lasting impact on not only affected individuals but for the VCS organisations who support them, for communities and wider society and on the demand for and pressures on other key public services and budgets as a whole.

Rural Needs Impact Assessment

As was highlighted via our sector engagement session, it is critically important to ensure the impact of budgetary decisions on those across our rural communities can

be adequately captured. We know there are distinct and unique challenges faced by those living in rural communities with regard to access to health and social care provision. In the context of an extremely challenging budgetary picture, it is critical that any such challenges are more fully recognised and understood at the earliest stage and meaningful mitigation against given fullest consideration by the Department.

Capturing Impact

A cross departmental approach is necessary to ensure the cumulative impacts of any budgetary decisions on our most vulnerable can be adequately captured and understood, in order to be proactive in mitigating against negative impacts. This is important too in understanding the cumulative impact of individual departmental decision making on budget on the voluntary and community sector.

Closing Comments

This draft Budget EQIA paints a worrying picture of reduced provision coupled with a continued lack of investment for our sector and those it supports and advocates for. The explicit admission within the EQIA of the need for cuts with anticipated significant consequences, and a list of possible service cuts that will disproportionately impact our sector and those it serves is extremely concerning.

In addition the apparent acceptance of a continued lack of progress towards much needed transformation of health and social care services and the pausing of or further delays to key areas of strategy implementation or reform is deeply concerning.

Funding for health and social care delivery urgently needs to be put on a sustainable footing with adequate, multiyear budgets to allow the implementation of the transformation agenda.

The voluntary and community sector is currently propping up a health and social care system that is at the point of collapse, but this is not reflected in investment by government. Many sector organisations are already stretched to breaking point, operating on minimal resources while facing maximum demand. This has resulted in

unsustainable pressures, and in the short-term making their ability to sustain any further cuts unviable.

Our sector requires long term strategic investment and support reflective of the pivotal role it serves in health and social delivery and policy development more broadly. Without this we fear for the very survival of many voluntary and community sector led services that operate as crucial pillars within the health and social care infrastructure of NI.

Whilst not expecting to be immune from cuts or budget pressures, our sector must be treated fairly.

We need a pragmatic review of how our sector is invested in and we are calling on the Department to prioritise this issue, and deal with the immediate funding crises facing our sector whilst taking a strategic approach to how it can provide multiyear funding for the vital work of sector organisations in the future.

NICVA is extremely concerned about the detrimental effect this budget will have on those most vulnerable across our communities, including Section 75 groupings and for whom the VCS acts as a vital safety net in terms of access to services and support. We are acutely aware that the Department for Health is, in many ways, one the most pivotal of all Departments in Northern Ireland and accordingly it has the largest budget allocation. With that in mind, it is vital that the Department commit to protecting those most impacted by its choices, even in the difficult times that we currently face. We would ask that the Department reviews its proposals for the allocation of any additional funding from monitoring rounds and prioritises those most acutely in need.

A lack of support for disadvantaged groups will inevitably increase pressure on our health and social services, with the costs of not providing support to such groups likely acutely felt in the coming years. Our sector provides services which are often preventative in nature and prevention, along with early intervention is better – and more cost efficient – than cure

We are grateful to the Department of Health for the opportunity to provide this response and trust it will be helpful. There is concern across our sector that in many cases EQIAs are not meaningful and have become a ‘tick box’ process by Northern Ireland Departments, rather than a policy development and decision-making tool.

We look forward to the Department publishing their final decisions emanating from this EQIA process, setting out how responses have been considered, and outlining plans for monitoring adverse impact, as per Steps 6 and 7 of the recommended EQIA process. Given the implications of some of the proposed budgetary proposals for organisations across the voluntary and community sector and those they serve, we would urge that these findings are shared at the earliest opportunity and suggest that publication of a timetable that outlines the anticipated next steps in this process, would be most helpful.

As always we would strongly encourage early engagement, consultation, and collaboration with the sector with regard to ongoing budgetary decisions, wherever possible. As well as helping to delivering better outcomes, a stronger partnership approach with the sector can also explore alternative actions and solutions to mitigate some of the proposed cuts or reductions in spending proposed within the Departments EQIA.

Clearly there is an urgency to determine how the Department can best address short-term need, in the context of the current budgetary picture for 2025/26, whilst retaining the ambition and momentum needed for longer-term transformation and reform.

The Department must support the voluntary and community sector to make a meaningful contribution to these discussions and to be able to continue to sustainably deliver vital public services on its behalf. NICVA is happy to provide any coordination regarding sector engagement.

We trust the Department will listen to and consider the expert insight and feedback from across the sector in response to this public consultation and beyond and respond appropriately in determining final priorities and decision making on budgets.

We would urge the Department and its agencies to work with our sector during the challenging budget year ahead as we all aim to do the best for communities, including protecting the most vulnerable. Our sector stands ready as a critical friend to the Department to help ensure the voices and experiences of those most at risk of impact are heard and reflected.

NICVA are keen to support ongoing communication and engagement with the sector regarding the challenging budgetary decisions ahead and all efforts to reduce or mitigate their impact.

Finally NICVA and the sector would further welcome all opportunities to collaborate with the Department in planning for delivery beyond March 2026 including informing budget priorities for a hoped next 3-year budget for NI.