



The
Executive Office

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***Report and Recommendations on
the EQIA for the Executive Office's
Spending Plans***

for 2023-2024

***(Phase 1 EQIA Consultation
Outcomes to 7 June 2023 then
Phase 2 as at 14 June 2023)***

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Conclusions and Mitigations from Stage 1 Consultation

This document has been prepared in line with The Executive Office's (TEO's) obligations under its Equality Scheme; specifically, to inform the allocation of an extremely challenging budget for 2023-24 and plan for any potential reallocations that may need to occur during the financial year. TEO is consulting for a 12-week period in two phases. In the initial four weeks of the consultation period, we encouraged submissions by 7 June 2023.

This paper follows the process set out in Section 6.10 of the ECNI's Practical Guidance on EQIAs which sets out best practice for publishing results of the EQIA and refers to the series of steps set out in Annex 1 of the 'Guide to the Statutory Duties'.

To date, responses to the consultation generally recognised that these decisions are difficult, as is balancing our obligations to Section 75 groups and the wide range of other stakeholders affected. Essentially, there are few options open to us in prioritising a tight budget, other than protecting as far as possible those areas of work focused on the needs of vulnerable people and communities. For example, some areas such as victims' redress payments are required to be paid under statutory obligation; other business areas within TEO have limited budget available to reallocate. This leaves TEO with limited options for delivering savings. (Standard percentage reductions across all business areas and Arm's Length Bodies, would potentially affect some Section 75 groups disproportionately.)

Overall, therefore, there does not appear to be a clear alternative to the proposed prioritisation of blocks of funding. In taking individual decisions within these blocks, however, we have asked business areas to take into account the vulnerability of groups and programmes highlighted in the responses. We have taken on board the comments received, and will continue to use them throughout the financial year to develop further mitigations where possible.

The broad themes emerging from Phase 1 of the consultation responses are set out below, together with the proposed mitigations (**bullet points in bold**):

Departmental Priorities

On TEO's assessment of available options, the consensus was an acknowledgement that TEO had few options available. Some did question, however, why Good Relations was most impacted by the reductions. The District Council Good Relations Programme (DCGRP) and the Central Good Relations Funding programme were highlighted as being key funds at the heart of the Together: Building a United Community strategy.

- **We need to issue programme money where possible, to avoid further uncertainty and to ensure that resources are deployed on the ground as soon as possible.**
- **While TEO does not have other options for reductions, the Department will keep this under review throughout the year and factor into decisions that may be required – particularly if additional resource becomes available.**
- **We fully acknowledge the points made on the impact on District Council Good Relations Programme (DCGRP) and Central Good Relations Fund (CGRF). We will seek to bid for additional funding should the opportunity arise and will further monitor the impact while continuing to work closely with councils.**

Data

Consultees highlighted the lack of a Rural Needs Impact Assessment (RNIA), gender budgeting and the lack, or weakness, of some ME and LBGT+ data. There was an argument for gender-based budgeting to be applied.

- **TEO has commissioned a Rural Needs Impact Assessment and is meeting with the Rural Needs Network to discuss its draft conclusions. TEO will also complete a Children's Rights Impact Assessment (CRIA). (Fundamental UNCRC rights are also embedded in TEO's programmes as a minimum).**
- **Full gender-based budgeting is not possible given the overall prioritisation challenge and the limited resource available. Gender is, however, a**

recognised Section 75 dimension and will continue to be considered within individual programmes as they are rolled out.

- **The Rural Needs Assessment and Child Rights Impact Assessment will also help to inform how we move ahead, how we use any additional resources that become available and how we plan for future years. In the meantime, both factors have been taken into account in our overall prioritisation.**

We would like to thank those who have contributed to the consultation to date and would encourage other stakeholders who have not yet provided input to do so prior to the end of the consultation period on 2 August 2023. We realise this is challenging environment in which all TEO's stakeholders have been forced to operate, so the decisions on which we have consulted will not be taken lightly.

Executive Summary

The consultation launched on 11 May 2023 and was published on the TEO website at: [TEO Spending Plans 2023-24 Consultation link](#).

All stakeholders and funded groups were contacted by TEO and invited to submit comments on the consultation document. The Department has needed to move forward at pace with allocating budget in order to provide clarity over likely funding to its Arms' Length Bodies (ALBs) with minimum delay. TEO has had to decide how it can best balance the challenges presented by the tight financial timescales, with its own desire to hold a meaningful consultation, by adopting a two-stage consultation approach.

This paper follows the process set out in [Section 6.10 of the ECNI's Practical Guidance on EQIAs](#) which sets out best practice for publishing results of the EQIA and refers to the series of steps set out in Annex 1 of the 'Guide to the Statutory Duties'.

TEO is currently at the **Consultation Step (Step 5)**, having considered alternative policies and potential mitigation measures. We will make a decision based on the outcome of the consultation, taking on board any potential viable alternative options or mitigation measures arising from public consultation.

Given the tight timeframe and having taken advice from ECNI, the Department is consulting for a 12-week period in **two phases**. Responses within the initial four weeks of the consultation period ended **7 June 2023** were particularly encouraged. Views received during **Phase 1** (as discussed in this document) are being used to inform the Department's initial allocation of funds to its business areas and ALBs as well as to implement any early mitigations that can be put in place.

Responses received during **Phase 2** (between week 5 and week 12) until the close of the consultation on **2 August 2023** will be used to consider further mitigation measures, to inform in-year budget reallocation processes, and to direct any additional funding (or further reductions) that emerge over the course of the financial year.

The number of responses received by 14 June 2023 was 41 via the Citizen Space platform and 34 via email respectively (total 75). A broad mixture of response

formats to the consultation questions was received on both Citizen Space and in the responses received by email. Many respondents chose not to address the consultation questions directly, or wrote expressing dissatisfaction with the potential impact of changes in budget allocations on Section 75 groups.

This paper focuses on the broad themes emerging from all responses received from Phase 1 of the consultation to 7 June 2023 and the beginning of Phase 2 as at 14 June 2023.

The consultation questions and the themes emerging from responses are:

Question 1: Do you agree that TEO has gathered the necessary data to inform its decisions around the allocation of its budget?

The broad theme emerging from this question is that a large proportion of respondents (specifically on the Citizen Space platform) did agree that the relevant data was gathered, or did not answer the question. A substantial proportion did not think that this was the case.

Points made included the importance of careful investigation of census data on race and ethnicity; the need for final data from 2022/23 Good Relations programmes to be factored in once available; the value that data on mental health would add; and breaking down data on LGBTQ+ people to show the particular impact on lesbian and bisexual women. Respondents also believed that information on the impact of programmes, including individual testimonials, was an important source.

The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (ECNI) noted that the onus was placed on the consultees to interpret the data provided in the consultation and determine any equality impacts. It expressed the view that it is for the public authority to evaluate the data it has relied on.

The lack of a Rural Needs Impact Assessment (RNIA) was noted in a number of returns. The Northern Ireland Women's Budget Group (NIWBG) noted the need for gender budgeting data to be considered.

Question 2: Do you agree with TEO's assessment of the options for budget reductions?

Many consultees did recognise and agree that unfortunately TEO had few options, given the current budget situation. Others questioned why the District Council Good Relations Fund (DCGRF) and Central Good Relations Fund (CGRF) had to bear the brunt of the budget cuts, given the positive impact that they were having on people's lives and on Good Relations (GR) in their local areas.

Councils were of the view that GR funding creates conditions that save money in other areas of public purse – eg around cultural identity, bonfires, racial equality etc.

Councils also noted that the DCGRF funding reductions would have a wider impact on council strategies and action plans such as their Corporate and Community Plans, as well as on Leisure, Arts and Culture etc. One council noted the impact of the loss of match funding.

Victims' groups and bodies welcomed the earmarked funding for their areas.

Question 3: Do you agree with TEO's assessment of equality impacts of the options considered for budget reductions?

In their letter dated 6 June 2023, the Equality Commission draws out the conclusion that the EQIA determines that a reduction in TEO's budget is likely to have a negative impact on good relations between people of different religious belief, political opinion or racial group. Some noted that the reductions disproportionately focused on the DCGRP and CGRF. Councils feel that the DCGRP is at the heart of T:BUC and GR generally, and that higher-level GR work is built on the foundations of the DCGRP, which was already underfunded in their opinion.

Other respondents made the point that in addition to Section 75 equality impacts, that the Department should consider the impact on low income households and rural communities who will disproportionately be impacted by budget reductions across all areas.

Question 4: Do you agree that TEO has correctly identified all relevant mitigations that could help reduce the adverse equality impacts of the budget reductions?

TEO has identified a range of potential mitigations to deal with the budget reductions in the EQIA. These are detailed in Para 43 of the published EQIA. They include seeking ways to obtain the best value from extremely constrained budget, for example, by seeking to mainstream implementation of the TEO's policy aims with other NICS Departments' strategies as part of good cross-Departmental working – so that the implementation of those strategies would incorporate TEO's principal outcomes.

Consultees noted that these could only ever mitigate impacts and that the fundamental issue remained substantial reductions in funding.

Returns by victims and survivors related stakeholders note that the payment of redress is an important means of demonstrating acknowledgement and accountability of such failures by both the state and institutions, particularly against the current backdrop of budgetary constraints and pressures across public services. This is paid from ringfenced funds and will continue.

Question 5: Do you agree with TEO's overall assessment of the business areas where budget reductions will need to be made?

Much of the input to this question was covered by the responses to Question 4 discussed above.

Some additional points worth noting are the impact on the Ending Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy, the overall impact of austerity on the loss of skills built up in VCOs, the requirement for public services to be adequately funded over the longer term, and the impact on Children and Young People in the most deprived communities.

Question 6: Do you have any other comments you would like to add about this consultation?

There is a general recognition that TEO has been impacted by budget reductions, which are not of their own making – and that the Department along with the other NI Departments have been placed in a position where they have little option but to reduce costs, while making their best efforts to protect the most vulnerable in society.

Background to the Executive Office

The Executive Office was established in May 2016 following the restructuring of Northern Ireland government departments. Although it replaced the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, a number of the responsibilities relating to specific aspects of equality transferred to other departments.

Legal Requirements

Section 75 of the NI Act 1998 requires the Department, in carrying out its functions, to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity between:

- people with different religious beliefs;
- people from different racial groups;
- people of different ages;
- people with different marital status;
- people with different sexual orientations;
- men and women generally;
- people with or without a disability;
- people with or without dependents; and
- people with different political opinions.

In addition, but without prejudice to the duty above, the Department is also required to have regard to the desirability of promoting good relations between people with different religious beliefs, different political opinions or from different racial groups.

The Disability Discrimination (NI) Order 2006, which came into effect on 1 January 2007, introduced new duties requiring all public authorities in carrying out their functions having due regard to the need to:

- promote positive attitudes towards disabled people; and
- encourage participation by disabled people in public life.

Equality scheme commitments require public authorities to determine if there are any impacts on equality of opportunity and if there are opportunities to better promote equality of opportunity between people within the Section 75 equality categories.

Where screening would not be an adequate means of gathering the information that is needed to assess the relevant equality impacts or opportunities, the public

authority should proceed to carry out an Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA). It is for each Government Department and other public body to reach its own conclusions on screening in light of its particular circumstances.

Data Collection and Consultation for Equality Impact Assessment Process

TEO submitted an Equality Impact Assessment screening document to DOF on 2 March 2023 for the purposes of a Budget Scenario Planning Exercise, in order to draw attention to the particular Section 75 groups where general funding reductions are likely to have an equality impact. This document examined budget scenario reductions of 10% and 15%, after allowances for ‘earmarked’ and EU Protocol related funding was protected. It attempted to outline mitigating actions where possible.

As a result of the EQIA screening, the budget allocation provided in the Written Ministerial Statement by Secretary of State on 27 April 2023 has been ‘screened in’ to undergo a full Equality Impact Assessment and public consultation process.

The Department has needed to move forward at pace with allocating budget in order to provide clarity over likely funding to its Arms’ Length Bodies (ALBs) with minimum delay. This has been necessary to allow the ALBs to make plans for the financial year, as well as to allocate funding to its programmes and in turn funded groups in the Voluntary Community Sector (VCS). TEO has had to decide how it can best balance the challenges presented by the tight financial timescales, with its own desire to hold a meaningful consultation, by adopting a two-stage consultation approach.

[Section 6.10 of the ECNI's Practical Guidance on EQIAs](#) sets out best practice for publishing results of the EQIA.

In the Procedure for Conduct of Equality Impact Assessments, outlined in Annex 1 of the ‘Guide to the Statutory Duties’, the seven separate elements/steps of an EQIA. These are as follows:

1. Defining the Aims of the Policy.
2. Consideration of Available Data and Research.
3. Assessment of Impacts.

4. Consideration of:

- measures which might mitigate any adverse impact; and
- alternative policies which might better achieve the promotion of equality of opportunity.

5. Consultation.

6. Decision by Public Authority and Publication of Report on Results of the EQIA.

7. Monitoring for Adverse Impact in the Future and Publication of the Results of Such Monitoring.

TEO is currently at the **Consultation Step (Step 5)**, having considered alternative policies and potential mitigation measures. We will make a decision based on the outcome of the consultation, taking on board any potential viable alternative options or mitigation measures arising from public consultation.

Given the tight timeframe, the Department is consulting for a 12-week period, in **two phases**. It particularly encouraged responses within the initial four weeks of the consultation period ending **7 June 2023**. Views received during **Phase 1** (as discussed in this document) are being used to inform the Department's initial allocation of funds to its business areas and ALBs as well as to implement any early mitigations that can be put in place. Responses received during **Phase 2** (between week 5 and week 12) until the close of the consultation on **2 August 2023** will be used to consider further mitigation measures, to inform in-year budget reallocation processes, and to direct any additional funding (or further reductions) that emerge over the course of the financial year.

Engagement Process

The consultation launched on 11 May 2023 and was published on the TEO website at: [TEO Spending Plans 2023-24 Consultation link](#)

All stakeholders on a public consultee list held by the TEO Equality Team were contacted and advised that the TEO's consultation had launched and they were

invited to consider the EQIA. All groups receiving Good Relations funding were also contacted by the TEO branch responsible.

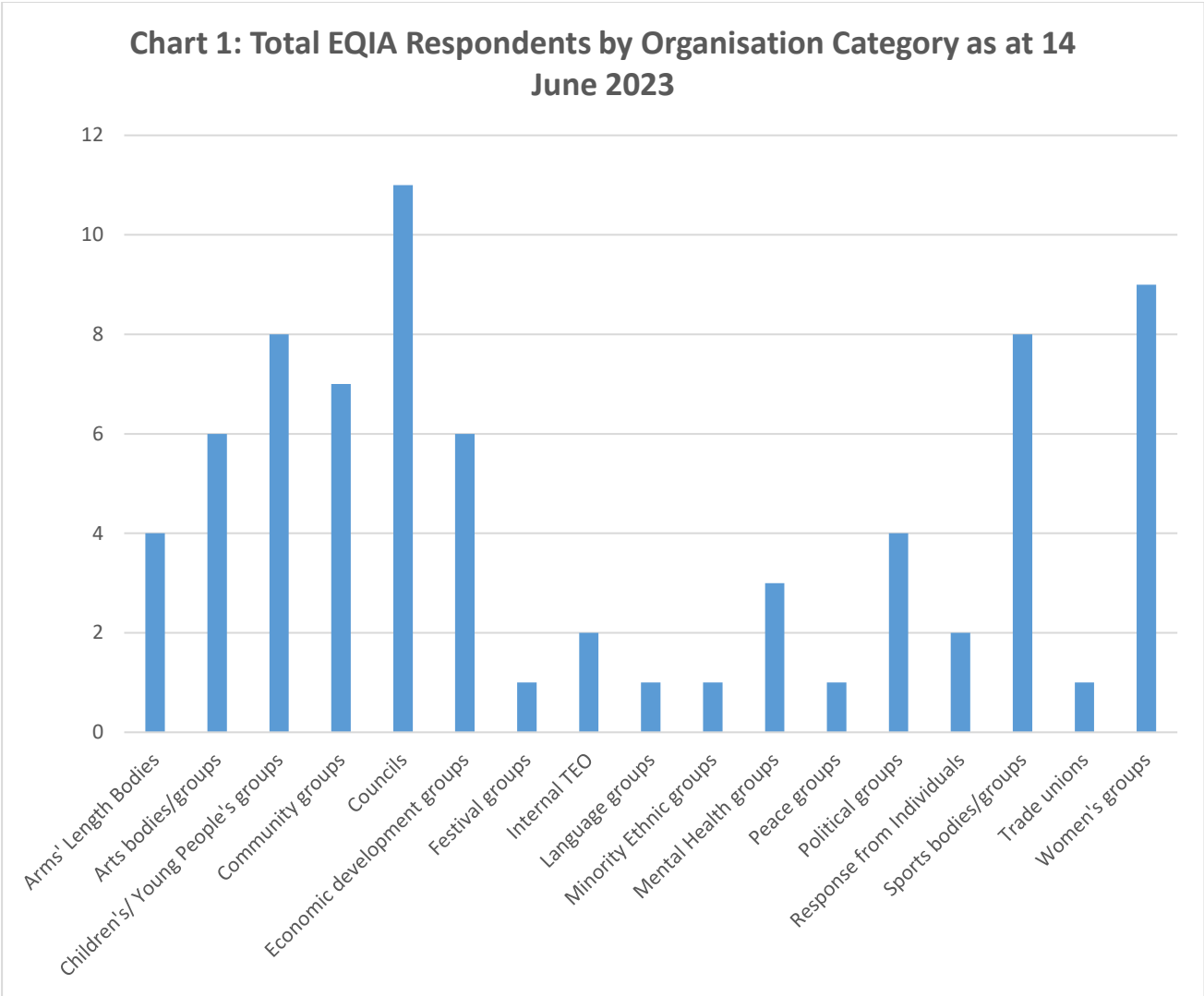
Phase 1 Consultation to 7 June 2023 and to date as at 14 June 2023

Phase 1 of the consultation closed on **7 June 2023**. 32 responses were received via email and 37 responses via the NI Executive's Citizen Space platform, a total of **69 responses**. All NI councils have submitted input, though some at the beginning of Phase 2. (The number of responses received by **14 June 2023** was 41 and 34 respectively= **75**.) These were along broadly similar themes as the Phase 1 responses. Responses received by 14 June 2023 are being incorporated in Phase 1 budget planning.

In totality, Phase 1 responses as at 14 June 2023 have been received from a wide cross section of councils, trade unions, sports bodies, Arms' Length Bodies, as well as a wide range of victims', economic development, community festival, arts, children's, women's and community groups and some political parties.

This is illustrated in Chart 1 below.

This paper focuses on the broad themes emerging from all responses received from Phase 1 of the consultation to 7 June 2023, and to the beginning of Phase 2 as at 14 June 2023.



Policy Aims and Objective of this Report

The objective of this report is to summarise the comments and suggestions provided in relation to the [‘Consultation on The Executive Office Budget Allocation for 2023-2024 - Equality Impact Assessment’](#). Observations and recommendations have been grouped by consultation question.

Public Interest Duties

Some of the decisions relating to budget allocation will fall to the Permanent Secretary of the Executive Office under the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act 2022. Other decisions are of a kind normally reserved for a Minister. The guidance says:

“Some decisions should not be taken by civil servants without the direction of elected Ministers. NI departments should therefore first consider the public interest of having elected Ministers taking and guiding decisions.”

At the same time, the Permanent Secretary, as Accounting Officer, is under a legal obligation to ensure the Department does not overspend and end up in an ‘Excess Vote’ position.

Unfortunately, this will mean that some difficult decisions will need to be taken by officials.

It is important to stress that the recommendations contained in the EQIA are not recommendations that would be made by officials under normal circumstances. Rather, they are actions required as a consequence of an extremely constrained budget allocation.

Rural Needs Impact Assessment

Section 1(1) of the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 requires public authorities to have ‘due regard’ to rural needs when developing, adopting, implementing or revising a policy, strategy or plan and when designing or delivering a public service.

Where a public authority chooses not to undertake a Rural Needs Impact Assessment it is required to have a sound rationale for departing from the guidance and ensure that when adopting the alternative approach it fulfils the ‘due regard of rural needs’ duty.

TEO has been working at pace to conduct the EQIA within a very limited timeframe in order to avoid delay in confirming grant allocations. Had this not been done, groups could have been forced to make redundancies. Further delays in decision making could also have resulted in even more severe reductions as the timescale for delivery within the 2023-24 year reduces.

A Rural Needs Impact Assessment on the implications of the Budget is being progressed and is to be discussed at a scheduled meeting with a representative body of the sector. From a review of consultation responses and data to date, initial indications are that there appears to be little differential between urban and rural areas in relation to the allocation of funding. The District Council Good Relations

Fund and the Central Good Relations Fund do not differentiate between urban and rural areas during the application process.

We are aware that while some TEO programmes and funding are specifically aimed at addressing need in urban areas (for example, the Urban Villages Initiative), other programmes (such as the Central Good Relations Fund Programme) are available to eligible applicants from all areas of Northern Ireland.

In assessing applicants to the CGRF programme, a key criterion is evidence of good relations need – groups applying must demonstrate through the use of, for example, key statistics, council GR audits and evaluations and evidence of need in the community where they plan to deliver good relations activity.

Note also that the potential for future development of the Urban Villages Programme is currently being explored by TEO, including the potential for a form of the programme suitable for rural areas.

Children’s Rights Impact Assessment (CRIA)

The CRIA is a non-statutory tool for assessing policy and other proposals. Given the need to move at pace, TEO incorporated an analysis of data on impact on children and young people into the EQIA, rather than delay decisions on funding groups. However, TEO programmes tend to be built upon the fundamental UNCRC rights which are embedded in TEO’s programmes as a minimum. A CRIA will be progressed prior to the end of the Phase 2 of the consultation period.

Potential Good Relations (GR) Impact

With respect to Good Relations, the EQIA process principally impacted on the delivery of two key programmes – the Central Good Relations Fund (CGRF) and the District Council Good Relations Programme (DCGRP). The scenario illustrated in the EQIA indicated an allocation for the CGRF of £1.4m (circa half the opening allocation of previous years) which would enable the delivery of 38 projects. For the DCGRP, the reduction would mean a TEO contribution of £1.6m, leveraging £0.5m of Council support. This would have the effect of reducing DCGRP funding by 50% compared with 2022/23.

A summary of the EQIA responses specifically relating to Good Relations has been provided at Annex 1. As expected, the response by stakeholders has been negative. Common feedback has been received highlighting the disproportional reductions facing CGRF and DCGRP; the positive track record of the programmes as demonstrated by project level outcomes; the negative impact on s75 groups; and the potential for a loss of infrastructure around Good Relations.

Good Relations staff have been liaising with impacted stakeholders throughout the process and additional concerns have been voiced around the impact this could have on trust between stakeholders and TEO and a view that TEO are not committed to Good Relations delivery.

However, officials have assessed that the information and evidence submitted through the EQIA consultation is not significantly different to that already considered when developing the EQIA. Therefore, in the absence of any additional funding being made available, it is recommended that the allocations set out in the EQIA to the CGRF and DCGRP are confirmed and that stakeholders are issued letters of offer as soon as possible.

TEO's Budget EQIA Commitment

The Department will carefully consider all responses received to date to the end of Phase 1 on 7 June 2023 and those received by the end of the 12 week period on 2 August 2023. Phase 1 responses will be used to inform the Department's initial allocation of funds to its business areas and Arms' Length Bodies, as well as any early mitigations that can be put in place.

Phase 2 responses received will be used to consider further mitigation measures, to inform in-year budget reallocation processes, and to direct any additional funding (or further reductions) that emerge over the course of the financial year.

Previous feedback from ECNI has stated the EQIA "should have clearly set out the priorities for allocating any additional budget spend in terms of which inequalities it would aim to mitigate". Should additional budget become available through the monitoring round process, it is likely to be allocated to Good Relations programmes as a first priority, given that it was this area that is to bear the brunt of the budget planning reductions.

The specific programmes and projects to benefit would be decided through discussions between Programme Managers, with high level direction from the TEO Board, taking into account spend projections for the year at that time. Any further funding would be prioritised after discussion at Board level and would consider the needs of specific Section 75 groups, in line with step 7: 'Monitoring for Adverse Impact in the Future and Publication of the Results of Such Monitoring'.

**Annex 1: Summary of Recommendations Received in Relation to the Equality
Impact Assessment (EQIA) Consultation for the Executive Office’s Spending
Plans
for 2023–2024**

Question: 1. Do you agree that TEO has gathered the necessary data to inform its decisions around the allocation of its budget?

A large proportion of respondents (specifically on the Citizen Space platform) did agree that the relevant data had been gathered. A large proportion of respondents did not answer the question. However, a substantial proportion did not think that this was the case.

The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (ECNI) noted that: “While data sources are referenced in the EQIA, the relevant data is not extracted. It is therefore unclear how the assessment of potential impacts has been determined, putting the onus on consultees to interpret data and determine equality impacts. It is for the public authority to evaluate the data it has relied on to determine potential equality impacts on people in the respective Section 75 groups of the proposed budget cuts.”

The lack of a Rural Needs Impact Assessment (RNIA) (and by implication, the data used to support one) was noted in a number of returns. TEO has since commissioned a Rural Needs Impact Assessment and is meeting with the Rural Needs Network to discuss its draft conclusions. One response noted that many of the proposed decisions, including the reduction of Good Relations programmes and the potential reduction of activities from the Ending Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy will have additional impacts on residents of rural communities.

The Northern Ireland Women's Budget Group (NIWBG) noted the need for ‘gender budgeting’ data:

“The abnormality of this budget cycle also means that planning procedures that occur during a typical budget process have not taken place. Without the fulfilment of these procedures, the equality screening and impact assessment consultation comes too late in the process and is inadequate for full consideration of the impact of these spending decisions on women. Gender Budgeting requires government departments to analyse the different impact of a budget on people of different genders, starting as

early in the budget cycle as possible. The aim of gender budgeting is to ensure that the distribution of resources creates more gender equal outcomes....In the current budget crisis women will experience particular disadvantages due to the pre-existing socio-economic conditions....However, too often the analysis included in these documents focuses only on equal treatment or stops at the point of acknowledging pre-existing inequalities... Additionally, Section 75 screening and impact assessment typically takes places at the very end of the budget planning process or after the budget has been finalised....The lack of gender-disaggregated data hinders our ability to effectively advocate on behalf of women and leaves decision-makers with data that presents a false narrative....TEO needs to request that it is recorded.”

The lack of data presented on the District Council Good Relations Programme that would have demonstrated its success was noted in one response. A council noted: “The individual testimonials of individuals who have benefited from the Central Good Relations fund are a powerful tool in recognising the value of this programme and its real impacts, which we have found to be life changing for many of our participants.”

No reference was made in the data to hate crime or newcomer statistics. One respondent made the comment that the EQIA statistics section may need to include minority ethnic groups that are white, and therefore the impact may be even greater.

Question 2. Do you agree with TEO’s assessment of the options for budget reductions?

Many consultees did recognise and agree that unfortunately TEO had few options apart from funding reductions, given the current budget situation. Others questioned why the District Council Good Relations Fund (DCGRF) and Central Good Relations Fund (CGRF) had to bear the brunt of the budget cuts given the positive impact that they were having on people’s lives and on Good Relations (GR) in their local areas.

Councils are of the view that GR funding creates conditions that save money in other areas of public purse – eg around cultural identity, bonfires, race equality etc.

Councils also noted that DCGRF funding reductions would have a wider impact on council strategies and action plans such as their Corporate and Community Plans, as well as on Leisure, Arts and Culture etc. One council noted the impact of the loss of match funding.

Victims' groups and bodies welcomed the earmarked funding for their areas. For example, the Commissioner for Survivors of Childhood Institutional Abuse (COSICA) stated that:

"We acknowledge the current significant budgetary challenges faced across government and, in this context, welcome the commitment by TEO to 'ringfence':

- resources for the Victims and Survivors Service (VSS) who provide dedicated services for victims and survivors;
- the financial compensation redress scheme which is administered by the Historical Institutional Abuse Redress Board.

We note that this is an important reflection of TEO's commitment to victims and survivors of non-recent institutional childhood abuse."

Consultees representing women's groups responded generally that reductions in Community Relations Council funding and TEO GR funding would have a serious impact particularly on women living in disadvantaged communities and those most affected by the Conflict/Troubles.

Fermanagh & Omagh District Council (FODC) made the comment that "Council would dispute that a reduction in funding would be more easily sustained by large organisations simply because of their size....Similarly, the Department suggest 'working with other organisations in the public, private, and voluntary sectors to identify alternative sources of support for groups impacted by the budget allocations. However, given, the widespread budgetary restrictions across the Departments and within the private and voluntary sectors, Council would question if there are other organisations that will be able to absorb this significant cost. Indeed, the Council itself would not be able to deliver these programmes if funding is not made available as Council itself is facing significant budgetary constraints which will impact upon service delivery."

Question 3. Do you agree with TEO's assessment of equality impacts of the options considered for budget reductions?

A number of councils noted that the timing of the budget presented difficulties, given that it immediately followed council elections, with insufficient timing being left to brief incoming councillors etc.

Fermanagh & Omagh District Council noted that the additional 'in kind' work that councils perform such as GR delivery, Ukrainian Refugee response; Central Good Relations (roll out/assessment); Planned Interventions Fund (assistance with applications/roll out); T:BUC Camps (roll out/assessment), and T:BUC Trees (roll out/delivery) has not been acknowledged in the EQIA.

The lack of analysis on the equality impact of the disparity of cuts on delivery relationships with other agencies / ALBs was noted by Mid and East Antrim BC, as well as the equality impact on the District Council GR Programme.

Advice NI acknowledge that the EQIA does identify relevant sub-groups of Section 75 individuals, "such to be a disabled, migrant woman, and therefore vulnerable in more than one area, through no fault of their own but unfortunate circumstance. Budget reductions in these areas could therefore have a devastating impact on such individuals who need to access services."

In their letter dated 6 June 2023, the Equality Commission draws out the conclusion that the EQIA determines that a reduction in TEO's budget is likely to have a negative impact on good relations between people of different religious belief, political opinion or racial group.

A section of the ECNI letter warrants reproduction here:

"Across the equality groups, the Commission has highlighted the need to tackle prejudicial attitudes, behaviour and hate crime to ensure that workplaces, services, public spaces and communities are free from harassment and/or discrimination across the equality grounds."

"The EQIA determines that proposed cuts to the Central Good Relations Fund (CGRF) may have a particularly adverse impact on people with a disability, who may benefit from participation in CGRF projects that promote respect, tolerance, and

inclusion. The Commission has consistently called for effective actions to raise awareness of rights, promote positive attitudes towards people with disabilities, and tackle hate crime.”

“On gender, the EQIA assesses that a reduction of funding to the Ending Violence Against Women and Girls (EVAWG) programme will result in negative impacts on women and girls. The Commission has consistently highlighted that action is required to tackle gender-based violence and domestic violence and has previously raised the need to tackle the nature and specific impact of gender-based violence on women and men, as well as gender-based violence due to a person’s gender identity. Tackling stereotypical attitudes through education should remain a priority.”

“Regarding proposed cuts to programmes supporting minority ethnic groups, the Commission has consistently recommended actions to tackle prejudicial attitudes; to tackle racist violence and improve reporting; to promote values of acceptance and respect so as to improve good relations; and to increase representation in public life. This includes prioritising the reduction and elimination of racist violence through a range of actions including; addressing issues of under reporting; early intervention; improved operational response to hate crime and support for victims of racist hate crime.”

“The Commission has welcomed TEO’s launch of a consultation on racial equality law, and, in the absence of progress on single equality legislation, has recommended urgent reform of the legislation.”

“The Commission has set out actions to address the key gaps in equality data, including on the grounds of gender identity, sexual orientation, and race; and to rectify the lack of data disaggregation in relation to ethnicity, disability and gender”

“There is also a need for the TEO to ensure a focus on identifying and addressing any equalities, emerging or exacerbated, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic or the policy responses to it.”

A community association stated that equality impacts can only be comprehensively understood by linking with deprivation data, and that the EQIA suffers from suffers from a siloed departmental approach, in that cuts in one department will have equality impacts in others.

One council notes the equality impact of funding reductions in both the CGRF and DCGRP on the legacy of work already done with the disabled and young people.

A community group notes the equality impact on young people in rurally isolated single identity villages or isolated farm properties, the ability to meet and develop positive relationships with people from other community backgrounds is limited with most local schooling being religiously segregated and there already being very limited youth work provision in rural areas.

Another group makes the point that in addition to Section 75 equality impacts, that the department should consider the impact on low income households who will disproportionately be impacted by cuts across the board.

Good Relations & T:BUC (Together: Building a United Community) Division analysed the responses to Phase 1 in detail and summarised the responses in relation to the equality impacts on funding delivered by their division. In summary the main impacts identified by the Division are:

- Cuts are disproportionately focused on the DCGRP and CGRF.
- Councils feel that the DCGRP is at the heart of T:BUC and GR generally, and that higher-level GR work is built on the foundations of the DCGRP.
- Councils feel that DCGRP was already underfunded, before cuts.
- Councils feel that they are the lynchpin between TEO/ higher level GR strategy and on the ground GR delivery.
- Councils feel DCGRP work has been undervalued and unappreciated by the EQIA process, which lacks detail about the programme.
- Councils feel that they have been encouraged to plug the holes caused by cuts but are unable to do so in the current financial climate. No prior notice or expectation of the level of cut compared to other funding streams.
- Councils note that the DCGRP exists in all 11 council areas – the only GR funding programme with this sustained level of reach.
- Councils recognise that the DCGRP is the only GR work taking place in many areas, particularly in rural settings. The unique model of delivery was not considered by the EQIA.

- Councils feel the timing of announcement of budget cuts was regrettable – immediately before local elections, stymieing meaningful engagement with local representatives.
- Concerns around the level of Equality Screening and Rural Needs Impact Assessments, and issue around the Audit of Inequalities not being used as a base to inform decisions as with other Departments
- Councils feel they are best placed to make use of the £500k emergency contingency in TEO budget.
- EQIA is not comprehensive, with only very limited reference to some Section 75 groups. The EQIA does not explain why DCGRP does not benefit from listed considerations of mitigations.
- Cuts to the DCGRP and CGRF will lead to a reduction in GR delivery and capacity.
- Cuts to the DCGRP and CGRF will lead to a loss of opportunity, especially for the young.
- Cuts to the DCGRP and CGRF will lead to a loss of GR knowledge, skill, and experience.
- Cuts to the DCGRP and CGRF will lead to a dissolution of trust and goodwill between GR stakeholders, and poorer community relationships.
- Cuts to the DCGRP and CGRF will lead to increased risk to the vulnerable in society.
- Cuts to the DCGRP and CGRF may lead to an increase in civil unrest & sectarian tension.
- Cuts may lead to the disbandment of some community and voluntary groups.
- Cuts are counterproductive in the longer-term, with poorer outcomes necessitating investment elsewhere.

Question 4. Do you agree that TEO has correctly identified all relevant mitigations that could help reduce the adverse equality impacts of the budget reductions?

TEO has identified a range of potential mitigations to deal with the budget reductions in the EQIA. These are detailed in Para 43 of the published EQIA. They include seeking ways to obtain the best value from extremely constrained budget, for example, by seeking to mainstream implementation of the TEO's policy aims with other NICS Departments' strategies as part of good cross-Departmental working – so that the implementation of those strategies would incorporate TEO's principal outcomes.

They also include working with other organisations in the public, private, and voluntary sectors to identify alternative sources of support for groups impacted by the budget allocations, as well as protecting work, including through the Urban Villages Programme, which has the potential to lead to more effective ways of supporting TEO's aims in the future and protecting where possible funding that is matched or releases further resources (such as EU Peace funding).

Consultees noted that these could only ever mitigate impacts and that the fundamental issue remained substantial reductions in funding.

Advice NI noted: "Consulting with stakeholders and the 3rd sector could help somewhat ease the impact of budget cuts. However, 'alternative sources of support' does echo the government's recent over-reliance on foodbanks, to mitigate the real-world impacts of, for example, inflation and the inadequate financial provisions from Universal Credit. While TEO states that 'living within budget will mean making very difficult decisions', it is crucial that these decisions are not simple and sweeping slashing of funds to the advice sector, which will inevitably have a direct, negative impact on the most vulnerable, i.e. advice service users. TEO must bear in mind, when considering budget cuts:

At a grassroots level, members continue to provide essential advice services to local communities of need / particular social groups and it is essential that this provision be supported in an inclusive fashion. This provision must not be alienated or marginalised by prohibitive standards which reflect bureaucratic need rather than practical need."

ECNI noted that the “main mitigations identified in the TEO EQIA, apart from staff moratoriums, relate to the allocation of money, if further budget becomes available during the year. The mitigations are aimed at mitigating the impact of the budget more generally rather than mitigating specific impacts on people in the Section 75 groups. The EQIA should have clearly set out the priorities for allocating any additional budget spend in terms of which inequalities it would aim to mitigate. It is unclear from the EQIA whether there has been consideration of redistribution of internal budgets across functions, in light of considering the equality impacts. Allocation of any in-year money, while welcome, is likely still to present very real difficulties for service users and the service providers in reinstating services, which may not be easily and readily re-instated.”

Returns by victims and survivors related stakeholders note that the payment of redress is an important means of demonstrating acknowledgement and accountability of such failures by both the state and institutions, particularly against the current backdrop of budgetary constraints and pressures across public services.

Co-operation Ireland stated that the mitigations which carry the most weight for us are protecting the most vulnerable, protecting the funding where the safety of a group is at risk, protecting the funding to peace programmes, and identifying alternative sources of support for groups impacted by the budget allocations.

Another respondent noted that the recent audit of Good Relations need in their council area “suggested that DCGPR is best placed at a local level to engage the hard to reach, marginalised and isolated members of the community and those involved in tackling difficult issues. Local groups do not respond well to arms’ length bodies being “parachuted” in to offer short term projects that have less meaningful long-term impact.”

The disparity between the reductions in GR funding and those in other areas, including protected/’earmarked areas was noted by a number of consultees. The comment was made that GR groups provide a lot of local knowledge and expertise to these and other programmes and the proposed cuts could mean a reduction in the numbers of GR groups. The view was expressed that a reduction will mean loss of local GR knowledge and expertise and that this will have a knock-on effect on the support groups can offer in future.

Question 5. Do you agree with TEO's overall assessment of the business areas where budget reductions will need to be made?

Much of the input to this question was covered by the responses to Question 4 discussed above.

Some additional points worth noting is the impact on the Ending Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy. A consultee notes the risk that implementation could be delayed. "Gender inequality and Violence Against Women and Girls perpetuate and buffer each other, worsening each other continually."

The Unite union makes the point that: "the Trade Union movement rejects the austerity logic driving the current cuts. There is no point in identifying where cuts should fall - but of opposing the logic of cuts itself. Public services need to be adequately funded and unfortunately this is not the case in Northern Ireland and has not been the case for many years now."

Some respondents urged that the 'Children and Young People' area should not be cut or the most deprived in communities eg, Sure Start Programmes, Neighbourhood Renewal Programmes also need to be protected further. Another urges for the continued funding of the Multi Ethnic Development Fund (MEDF).

Question 6. Do you have any other comments you would like to add about this consultation?

Netball NI noted the potential loss of a skilled workforce eg a trained Child Protection officer, the loss of legacy from previous years and damage to the relationship built up with schools.

A community group noted the risk and impact of leaving refugees without support.

The following point was raised more than once: "This is a very tough time for all and working in community we can see that more than anyone else. Seems to be that we are paying heavily for the amount Covid response there was in 2019-22, when community workers were taking the biggest chances to help their communities, and left the safety of their own homes to help, are now crucified financially for it. Realise it's a hard decision but please try to protect the most vulnerable."

Finally, there is general recognition that TEO has been impacted by budget reductions not of their own making and that the Department, along with the other NI Departments, have been placed in a position where they have little option but to reduce costs, while making their best efforts to protect the most vulnerable in society.