

29th January 2021

Dear Sir / Madam,

Re Department for Communities Equality Impact Assessment Draft DfC Budget 2021-2022

I am writing to express the deep shock and concern felt across the independent advice network about this proposed £1.5m reduction in funding to the independent advice sector. First and foremost, our main concern is for the thousands of vulnerable people who will suffer as a result. The Welfare Reform Support Project deals with some of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged people and last year dealt with 126,616 enquires both via the Helpline and via local advice services which included:

- Providing benefit entitlement checks and income maximisation for clients
- Identifying, prioritising and explaining to clients their options
- Providing evidence-based support to decision making
- Providing quality-assured, jargon-free advice and support
- Facilitating form completion on behalf of vulnerable clients
- Advocating on behalf of our clients
- Providing relevant onward referrals (including crisis intervention)
- Providing a holistic approach to clients' needs
- Positively impacting clients and their families' overall health and financial well-being

This proposed cut will mean 45 job losses in the independent advice network – these are skilled trained and experienced advisers with the knowledge to deliver successful client outcomes.

The independent advice network is already working at maximum capacity and has stepped up to the plate to help DfC with its Covid19 response, including running the Covid19 Community Helpline and local frontline providers are working closely with Councils and local representatives to support those most in need. Advisers have worked tirelessly throughout the pandemic and are already exhausted and stressed out and now feel like they have been completely devalued; especially as there was no prior consultation and they had to learn about this proposal from an EQIA released late Wednesday afternoon (27th January) by DfC.

It is the clear view of Advice NI that the proposal not to prioritise this funding is very short-sighted and will undoubtedly differentially impact on the most vulnerable at a time when they need all the independent advice they can get. Indeed the EQIA itself states that advisers “help and support some of the most vulnerable in our society, including young people, older people and people with disabilities. Lack of funding for the advice sector is also likely to impact on a number of Section 75 categories.”

And in terms of the year ahead, the demand is likely to increase further:

- Increased job loss (The number of people on the NI claimant count was 58,400 in December 2020, almost double the number recorded in March 2020);
- Furlough ending at the end of April 2021 (98,499 on furlough in NI in December 2020);
- Increase in Universal Credit applications (114,000 households on Universal Credit in August 2020);
- Future migration of benefit claimants on to Universal Credit & Planned cuts to the UC £20 per week 'Covid19 uplift';
- Social security benefit appeals (5,958 PIP appeals pending);

All in all, we believe this proposal to cut independent advice funding must be reversed.

We would welcome the opportunity to meet to discuss these concerns and would ask for your support in terms of responding to this consultation in the strongest possible terms,

Best regards,



Bob Stronge
(Chief Executive, Advice NI)