

4 July 2024

Financial Planning & Management Team

Department for Infrastructure

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BELFAST

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Reference: DfI Resource Budget 2024-25 Equality Impact Assessment Consultation

To whom it may concern:

Mid Ulster District Council would like to take this opportunity to provide comments on DfI Resource Budget 2023-24 Equality Impact Assessment. It's Mid Ulster District Council's understanding that the outcome of the implementation of this proposed budgets cut would lead to:

- limited level of services,
- reduction in funding for other essential services such as road safety,
- reduction on progress on actions for climate change
- limited emergency responses in relation to flooding, infrastructure collapse and major weather events
- reductions to both Translink and NI Water

These stark proposals have raised grave concerns across the District, particularly in relation to how some of the most vulnerable people in society will be negatively impacted. This negative impact is particularly clear in relation to the proposed withdrawal of service will impact on access to transport across the District.

However, the Council welcomes that funding will remain in place for the A29 Cookstown Bypass and the A5 upgrade. The Council would recommend that these budgets are protected in the strongest possible terms. The upgrade of the A5 should remain a priority given the sheer scale of the carnage and loss of life that the current road has seen in recent years.

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Transport

In relation to the Community Transport provision, the Council note that it will be difficult for services to be sustained on the same budget allocation as 23/24. However, the funding they have allocated to Shopmobility Mid Ulster and Go Mobility is clearly not sufficient to operate a scheme across Mid Ulster. These proposals will result in a reduction in service in Cookstown and Dungannon and the recently reopened scheme in Magherafelt will only be available one day per week.

Therefore it is clear that Shopmobility Mid Ulster is a key service that this budget will impact on negatively. Shopmobility Mid Ulster has long provided opportunities for local residents and visitors to the District, especially to the towns of Cookstown and Dungannon, where they provide equipment to allow people to have an enjoyable shopping and visitor experience which may be curtailed if not available. In recent times the need for the service within Mid Ulster has grown significantly and this has been demonstrated by additional equipment being purchased to meet demand for the service. In recent years, a larger premise for the service has recently been secured in Cookstown. The growth of the services is testament to the local service available and the need for equipment to improve the lives of people from all ages across the District while also tackling social isolation across the Section 75 groupings. The Council welcomes the Minister's attendance at a meeting in Cookstown on 3rd July 2024 with Shopmobility Mid Ulster representatives. The Council agree that there should be scope to explore for an integrated approach to transport across the District e.g. from home to town centres and attending specific events and facilities.

Shopmobility Mid Ulster is also an integral consultee and advisor in the design of the Public Realm Schemes across Mid Ulster; particularly in relation to the Cookstown, Magherafelt, Coalisland and Pomeroy schemes as well as the current roll out of Maghera Public Realm Scheme . Expertise in relation to public realm scheme colours, finishes, dropped kerb locations and disabled parking bays have proved invaluable to the design of access spaces across the District. Shopmobility Mid Ulster have also been involved in tourism attraction development, including Castledawson pathways and Seamus Heaney Trails. The completion of access and inclusion audit reports for Mid Ulster District Council sites including Leisure Centres, Tourist Information Centres and sites including Ballyronan Marina and Knockmany Forest park have also proved immensely beneficial for improvement of accessibility across the District.

In addition, Shopmobility Mid Ulster have also demonstrated the added value of Go Mobility by providing on the go access to equipment at Mid Ulster Council corporate events. Therefore, it is evident that the removal of this service as well will impact negatively upon elderly people, people with a disability (of all ages), men and women generally and people with dependents.

Mid Ulster District Council is a vastly rural area, consequently residents rely heavily on access to transport therefore, the additional costs in relation to applying for, renewing or replacing the SmartPass also causes concern. The anticipated £20 application fee to be introduced in autumn this year could act as a barrier to accessing public transport. However, it is welcomed that the Minister intends to waive the application fee completely for some groups, including disabled people. The Council is in agreement that Section 75 groupings more at risk to poverty should be able to access concessionary rates.

Mitigations

While the Council appreciate that it is difficult to make funding cuts across any area removal of which will have a significantly negative impact across Section 75 groupings. Any level of mitigation required will be significant. The EQIA outcomes would also need to be swift and substantial in order to be able to even mildly address the potential impact on the Section 75 groups negatively impacted upon by the service reductions proposed in this consultation.

Consultation Timeline

The Council would like to seek clarity in relation to the consultation period put in place for this consultation. The guideline information states that any views received after the initial four week period will only be used to consider mitigations. This timeline is at odds with what is stated in DfI's Equality Scheme. If 'exceptional circumstances' are the Department's rationale for this approach it would be useful if that was stated within the consultation documentation.

The consultation timeline does not seem to offer the option of face-to-face consultations or any public meetings. It is the opinion of the Council that the extremely short time frame during which this consultation is being carried out would have benefited immensely from opportunities to fully discuss the budget proposals and their implications. These additional consultation opportunities would have also allowed impacted groupings to ask questions and seek clarifications.

Cumulative Negative Impact

It cannot be ignored that this consultation is not being held in isolation. NI Assembly Departments are currently consulting across short timeframes on drastically reduced budgets. It is clear that each of these budget focused EQIAs identify negative impacts across Section 75 groups. The overall result is a devastating cumulative impact on some of the most vulnerable people in society.

Overall, there is a lack of joined up thinking in relation to the proposals made across four Departments. Each Department seems to be viewing only their budgets in isolation without documenting the issues created by multi-sectoral cuts that will directly negatively impact upon some of the most vulnerable and most marginalised in society.

General Comments

While this EQIA fulfils the necessary seven step requirements of Department's Equality Scheme it could be more detailed, thorough and robust to reflect the substantial nature of the spending recommendations that it is linked to implementing.

DfI will also be aware that the Section 75 duties are continuing duties, and the Department is required to equality assess any changes to circumstances. It is important that the Department demonstrates that it has paid the appropriate level of regard to its promotion of equality and good relations in its budget decisions, as required by the duties.

Rural Needs

In relation to this consultation, Mid Ulster District Council believe that the Department has failed to demonstrate due regard to the Rural Needs Act 2016. The cuts can be clearly demonstrated to have a more significant impact on those in rural areas however a Rural Needs Impact did not accompany the consultation documentation.

Conclusion

Mid Ulster District Council strongly oppose the outlined budget and view it as neither workable nor practicable. Initiatives that have taken years to develop, implement and bring to fruition should not be cast aside in this crude manner, particularly when they are exactly what are needed to help to support vulnerable individuals during the current cost of living and climate crises.

Yours sincerely



Adrian McCreesh

Chief Executive



NIHE Community Involvement and Cohesion Strategy 2024-2029 Consultation July 2024

Mid Ulster District Council Response

Quality social and affordable housing provision in the district is a key objective within both the Council's Corporate Plan and the District's Community Plan. The quality of our social and affordable housing, not only speaks to the physical construction of the housing but also the support services available to develop and maintain inclusive, safe and thriving communities. Mid Ulster District Council welcomes this strategy and its strategic objective to "Enable and engage communities to interact and work together to co-design Housing Executive services and support a more cohesive society". In the whole, Council is supportive of the detail laid out in strategy under the 3 key aims. However, we would like to note the following points.

The council would like to see the interagency group and estate inspections strengthened, with increased participation from statutory partners. Local elected members have received a growing number of complaints from residents regarding the upkeep and appearance of local estates. Where issues of over-grown vegetation, glit on pathways etc. would have been dealt with in a timely manner by partners of the interagency group, lack of certain partner participation has meant that these issues have remained unresolved for a significant period, resulting in several estates becoming unsightly. Estates that look uncared for are more likely to be treated badly with fly tipping, littering, crime and antisocial behavior. The council would advocate for a renewed focus on this interagency partnership that takes account of the issues that the residents are highlighting and working with those residents to resolve them. The council are fully committed to fulfilling its role as partner of this interagency.

With regards to NIHE's community development work and Community Grants programmes, Council would like to highlight the work it has just recently undertaken to develop a new community development strategy and action plan for the district. The Strategy aims to review and align all of Council's key community funded programmes, as well as seeking to better align with partners delivering similar community development services and grants in the district, to improve efficiencies and maximize benefit to the community & voluntary sector and the delivering agencies. The council would welcome the participation of NIHE in this work.

There are several Shared Housing schemes within the district and the Council welcomes the opportunity to be involved in the advisory groups that have been set up at a local level. There are however strategic opportunities for better alignment

and co-ordination between NIHE, Housing Associations and Council to work together especially around good relations and community safety outcomes. Furthermore, Councils' knowledge and local access to services and facilities could also support 'bonding' and 'bridging' programmes being delivered.