

Children in Northern Ireland



Response to the Draft Budget 2026-2029/30 Consultation

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Who we are

Children in Northern Ireland (CiNI) is the regional umbrella organisation for the Children's Sector in Northern Ireland. With over 130 members, CiNI is accountable for representing and giving voice to the experiences, views and aspirations of its members across NI to inform and influence those who make policy or plan and deliver services for children and young people. Our vision is to make Northern Ireland a society where all children are valued, treated fairly and are able to flourish. To deliver on this vision, CiNI has three strategic priorities:

- **Influencing:** through campaigning and engagement to ensure that children are at the centre of policymaking;
- **Learning:** capacity building across the sector and innovating best practice;
- **Collaboration:** working with others to increase impact.

We are the secretariat to the All Party Group on Children and Young People at the Northern Ireland Assembly and we are represented on the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership (CYPSP) - a multiagency partnership that includes the leadership of key statutory agencies and community and voluntary organisations, with responsibility for improving the lives of children and young people in Northern Ireland. CiNI is also a member of Safeguarding Board NI, a statutory body constituted to safeguard and protect children.

CiNI offers a wide range of training to both individuals and organisations working within the community and voluntary sector to develop their skills and knowledge through our high-quality and positively evaluated Children's Services Training Programme. We also offer bespoke training, tailored specially to the needs of organisations, both within the sector and beyond.

CiNI manages the regional parenting support helpline: Parentline NI. Funded by the Department of Health, this service offers free, confidential advice and guidance to parents and carers across Northern Ireland. Parentline also provides one-to-one support, practical workshops, online resources (including an award-winning podcast), and referrals to counselling services. CiNI also runs the Parent Participation Service and the Parents' Disability Forum, which are key platforms for parents/carers to have their voices heard and ensure that policymaking is informed by their lived experience.

At a community level, CiNI delivers the 'Gets Active Project', a range of healthy food and physical activity programmes aimed at addressing child food insecurity. Our Youth Advisory Group help shape these programmes and give young people a platform to influence policymaking. We also work with a range of partners on specific youth participation projects, such as amplifying youth voice on online safety in collaboration with the NSPCC.

More information is available on our website: <https://www.ci-ni.org.uk/>

Executive Summary

Northern Ireland has reached a point where incremental adjustments and short-term stabilisation are no longer sufficient. Structural pressures across education, health, social care, justice and community-based services have been managed for years through temporary settlements and crisis responses. The Draft Budget 2026-2029/30 represents a defining moment: it will determine whether the Executive confronts these weaknesses honestly and lawfully, or embeds further cumulative disadvantage.

CiNI recognises the significant fiscal pressures facing the Executive, including the legacy of short-term budgeting, rising demand, and structural deficits across key services. However, when funding decisions reduce capacity or constrain services, children do not experience them as abstract financial adjustments. They experience them as reduced access to support, longer waiting times, unmet need, widening inequality, and the erosion of protective systems around vulnerable families.

The Department of Finance's Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) acknowledges that the Draft Budget is being set within a constrained funding environment and identifies the potential for adverse impacts across Section 75 groups, including age, disability and dependants. Some departments anticipate significant adverse impacts across all nine Section 75 categories. Acknowledging harm, however, is not the same as mitigating harm.

Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 requires that due regard to equality of opportunity is exercised at the point decisions are made – including when setting overall budget envelopes. Where adverse impacts are anticipated at Executive level, mitigation cannot be deferred solely to downstream departmental processes.

If the overall settlement does not provide sufficient capacity to meet known statutory demand, demographic pressures and reform commitments, downstream departmental mitigation cannot compensate for structural underfunding. Equality risk embedded at envelope level must be addressed at envelope level.

The Draft Budget also sits alongside an unprecedented reform agenda: children's social care reform, Special Educational Needs (SEN) reform, childcare strategy delivery, anti-poverty and disability strategies, criminal justice reform, and emotional health and wellbeing frameworks. Many of these commitments lack clearly articulated, costed, multi-year investment pathways within the Draft Budget settlement.

Without credible transformation and investment, reform risks becoming managed decline.

CiNI therefore urges the Executive to ensure that the Final Budget:

- Embeds equality of opportunity and children's rights at its core by setting out clear mitigation of cumulative impacts across Section 75 groups;
- Aligns transformation funding with children's reform priorities and statutory duties;
- Protects early intervention and prevention infrastructure delivered by the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS); and
- Provides multi-year clarity and stability to services supporting the most vulnerable children and families.

Now is the time to take the difficult but necessary decisions to rationalise services, reduce duplication, and redirect resources toward prevention and early intervention. Now is the time for Ministers to be brave – not simply to acknowledge structural pressure, but to address it in a way that protects children and upholds Northern Ireland's equality framework.

Social Return on Investment

Children in Northern Ireland (CiNI) is the regional umbrella organisation for the children's sector. Our membership spans a diverse range of statutory, independent, and VCS organisations delivering essential services including early years provision, family support, youth work, disability services, mental health and wellbeing support, advocacy, safeguarding, and poverty alleviation programmes. The VCS is not peripheral to children's outcomes. It forms a critical part of the infrastructure that enables early intervention, prevention, and community-based support. Weakening this infrastructure through short-term or unstable funding decisions has long-term consequences for statutory services, community cohesion and resilience, and, most importantly, for children's rights and wellbeing.

[In our response to the Draft Programme for Government 2024-2027](#), 'Our Plan: Doing What Matters Most', Children in Northern Ireland (CiNI) welcomed the recognition of the VCS as 'a key partner' and the acknowledgement that our Members have been 'significantly impacted by unpredictable funding arrangements along with increased demand'. We also noted the commitment to prioritise 'interconnected solutions' to the complex needs of our children, young people and families, and 'sustainable funding models' to support the sector.

CiNI's recent evidence highlights the fragility of the sector under current pressures. All Members surveyed during 2024-2025 reported increased demand for services, while over half reported being unable to meet that demand, and nearly two-thirds experienced reduced funding.¹ A multi-year budget must therefore provide not only departmental allocations, but sustainable foundations for the services that protect children and families.

Subsidising public services delivered by the VCS through charitable grants and fundraising is a perverse and misguided interpretation of the Social Return on Investment. Our Members, and the wider VCS, are so much more than cheap service providers. They are trusted community anchors, innovators in early intervention and prevention, and essential partners in delivering better outcomes for children, young people and families that statutory services alone cannot achieve. The value they generate lies not only in cost avoidance, but in improved wellbeing, reduced demand on statutory systems, strengthened communities, and better long-term outcomes for children. Expecting the sector to continually absorb funding shortfalls through goodwill, reserves, or fundraising is unsustainable and risks undermining the very infrastructure on which effective public service delivery depends.

¹ Children in Northern Ireland, March 2025, 'Response to the Draft Budget 2025-26 Consultation'.

Children at the Table

Northern Ireland must not replicate the trajectory seen in England, where sustained underinvestment in children's services has resulted in escalating need, deepening inequality, and significantly higher long-term costs to the public purse. The Executive's Draft Budget must therefore be approached as a defining opportunity to ensure that children are not treated as an afterthought in fiscal decision-making, but are placed at the centre of strategic investment and reform.

Evidence from England demonstrates the consequences of failing to prioritise children early. Alma Economics' analysis of UK public spending shows that total spending on babies, children and young people amounted to 8.57% of GDP in 2022–23. However, the majority of this investment is concentrated in education (4.33% of GDP), while children's social care and services represented only 0.78% of GDP, and health spending on children just 0.65%.² This imbalance highlights how preventative and protective systems for children remain structurally under-resourced, despite growing levels of need.

The Children at the Table coalition of the UK's leading children's charities has highlighted that early intervention spending in children's social care has nearly halved since 2010/11, while the numbers of children entering care and associated costs have rocketed.³ This is a stark warning: disinvestment in prevention does not reduce demand, but drives escalation into crisis-driven and costly statutory intervention. The coalition's impact report also highlights overwhelming public support for a new approach. A YouGov poll commissioned following the general election found that 81% of the public would support policies providing more early intervention services for children's social care.⁴ This reinforces the case that investment in children is not only morally and legally necessary, but publicly supported and fiscally prudent.

In recent decades, Northern Ireland has diverged from policy and spending decisions in England when it was necessary to protect children. Sure Start and our Family Support Hub network are prime examples. Now we must learn from England's experience: failing to invest early stores up crisis, cost and harm. Children must have a seat at the budget table, with clear, protected, multi-year investment in prevention, wellbeing, social care reform and tackling disadvantage.

² Alma Economics, November 2023, 'UK public spending on babies, children, and young people' (prepared for Action for Children, Barnardo's, National Children's Bureau, NSPCC, and the Children's Society): <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-11/UK%20public%20spending%20on%20babies%2C%20children%2C%20and%20young%20people%20-%20Alma%20Economics%20-Nov%202023.pdf>

³ Action for Children, Barnardo's, National Children's Bureau, NSPCC, the Children's Society, December 2024, 'Children at the Table: Impact Report': https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/25342_CATT_Impact_Report_2024_Digital_AW_LR_144dpi.pdf

⁴ Ibid.

Reform, Transformation and the Delivery Gap

CiNI is deeply concerned that the Draft Budget risks repeating patterns of previous budget crises, in which children and families – particularly those already facing disadvantage – bear a disproportionate share of the impact.

Experience from the 2023/24 budget period demonstrated that savings decisions frequently fall on programmes targeted at the most vulnerable children, including supports for food insecurity, mental health and wellbeing, underachievement, and additional needs. These targeted interventions are often treated as less sustainable because they sit outside departmental baselines, despite their critical role in tackling inequality.

The Department of Education has already highlighted the scale of the financial challenge it faces, projecting an estimated shortfall of £0.8bn by 2026/27 and £1.15bn by 2028/29.⁵ Such pressures create significant risk that reforms and savings measures will again fall most heavily on targeted supports for children with special educational needs, children in poverty, and those requiring early help.

The Draft Budget is being consulted upon in the context of an unprecedented reform agenda: Children’s Social Care reform, SEN reform, childcare strategy delivery, criminal justice reform, anti-poverty and disability strategies, and emotional health and wellbeing frameworks across education and health. Each carries significant implications for statutory duties, service delivery, workforce capacity, and children’s rights. Collectively, they represent a major reform programme requiring sustained investment, careful sequencing, and credible delivery planning.

Reform without investment risks becoming an unfunded mandate. Transformation cannot be achieved through cuts. Departments themselves have acknowledged that reform carries unavoidable upfront costs.⁶ The Executive must therefore clearly set out:

- which strands of children’s reform will receive transformation funding;
- how delivery will be sequenced over the Budget period; and
- how cumulative equality and child rights impacts will be mitigated across departments.

Transformation is not only fiscally urgent – it is required to mitigate the adverse impacts anticipated within the Executive’s own Equality Assessment.

⁵ Paul Givan MLA, Written Ministerial Statement, 4 February 2026, ‘Five-Year Education Budget Strategy: Delivering a stable, sustainable and high-quality education system’. NI Assembly, Official Report (Hansard).

⁶ Department of Education, February 2026, ‘Five-year Education Budget Strategy: Delivering a Stable, Sustainable and High-Quality Education System’: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/consultations/consultation-five-year-education-budget-strategy-delivering-stable-sustainable-and-high-quality-education-system>

Cumulative Impact and Mitigation

Children do not experience departmental budgets in isolation. The same child may simultaneously rely on SEN support, mental health provision, early help services, disability support, poverty alleviation measures, and safeguarding interventions. When multiple systems withdraw support at the same time, the impact is multiplied and severely detrimental.

A 10-year-old child living in a low-income household, entitled to Free School Meals and requiring SEN support, may experience:

- reduced classroom assistance;
- increased waiting times for therapy;
- withdrawal of targeted wellbeing programmes;
- loss of holiday food support;
- reduced capacity within local voluntary services.

Her needs do not diminish. They escalate. By the time statutory intervention becomes necessary, the situation is more complex, more costly and more harmful than if early support had been sustained. This is what cumulative impact looks like.

The Department's Equality Assessment acknowledges cumulative pressures. The Final Budget must demonstrate how those pressures will be mitigated – not merely monitored.

Children with Disabilities, SEN and Additional Needs

Children with disabilities and special educational needs are among the most vulnerable to cumulative disadvantage. They rely on timely assessment, specialist therapies, classroom support, and community-based provision. CiNI is concerned that structural pressures within education and health risk further regression in access to support. Reductions in SEN-related funding and targeted interventions contribute to major negative impacts for children with disabilities and additional needs, and to regression in rights fulfilment. SEN reform cannot be delivered through cost containment alone. Transformation requires investment in frontline services and support if rights are to be realised in practice.

Child Poverty, Food Insecurity and Disadvantage

The Draft Budget does not yet demonstrate sufficient protection for children in poverty. The cessation of the School Holiday Food Grant in 2023 removed direct support from families at the point of greatest need and increased reliance on

voluntary provision. Anti-poverty interventions and targeted family support must not be treated as discretionary spending.

Emotional Health, Wellbeing and Safeguarding Risks

Mental health and wellbeing supports are often among the first areas to face reductions during fiscal constraint, despite their centrality to children's development and safety. Reductions in early intervention and youth support services increase exposure to contextual harm and exploitation. Investment in wellbeing and prevention is essential safeguarding infrastructure.

Children's Social Care Reform: Investment, Not Unfunded Reform

The Draft Budget does not yet provide sufficient clarity on how children's social care reform will be resourced over the Budget period. The Independent Review of Children's Social Care Services warned of destabilisation within the VCS, with experienced staff being made redundant and services closing as funding streams end.⁷ The Executive cannot credibly commit to children's social care reform while allowing erosion of the early intervention infrastructure that prevents escalation into statutory crisis.

⁷ Ray Jones, June 2023, 'The Northern Ireland Review of Children's Social Care Services': <https://www.cscsreviewni.net/publications/report-independent-review-childrens-social-care-services-northern-ireland>

Conclusion

CiNI recognises the severe fiscal pressures facing the Executive. However, children and young people – particularly those already experiencing poverty, disability, trauma, and marginalisation – must not bear a disproportionate share of the burden. The Draft Budget must be strengthened to ensure that it does not embed cumulative disadvantage, destabilise early intervention infrastructure, or store up deeper crises for the future.

The Draft Budget and its Equality Assessment confirm that significant adverse impacts are anticipated across Section 75 groups. The Final Budget must demonstrate how those impacts will be mitigated collectively at Executive level. Papering over the cracks is no longer viable. Transformation is beyond urgent.

The approach taken to finalising this Budget will demonstrate whether Northern Ireland's equality framework remains a meaningful safeguard against regressive decision-making, or whether equality considerations are reduced to retrospective commentary on decisions already taken.

This Budget will be remembered not for what it allocates on paper, but for what it protects in practice. For children, it will not be experienced as numbers on a spreadsheet, but as support received or withdrawn, as help available or delayed, as opportunity protected or lost.

The Executive must now demonstrate – in accordance with its statutory duties under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 – that equality mitigation is embedded within the Budget settlement itself, and that children, particularly the most vulnerable, are placed at the centre of transformation, investment and decision-making.