



NIWBG Response to Module 2 Questionnaire

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Questionnaire UK COVID-19 Inquiry: Module 2 - Rule 9 Request to Northern Ireland Women's Budget Group Reference: M2/R9R/NIWBG

Please provide the following information:

1. A brief overview of the history, legal status and aims of the organisation or body. Please explain whether the work of the organisation or body is UK wide, or is instead confined to Northern Ireland only.

The Northern Ireland Women's Budget Group (NIWBG) was formed on a voluntary basis in 2011 and contributed to civil society in varying ways until the formalisation of the group in 2020 through the creation of a Coordinator position. This change was funded by a four nations (NI, Scotland, Wales, England) project, led by the well-established UK Women's Budget Group (UKWBG) that included the established Scottish Women's Budget Group (SWBG), the formalisation of the NIWBG, and the creation of the Wales Women's Budget Group (WWBG). Currently, the NIWBG is a project within the Belfast-based charity Women'sTEC (Charity Reg No: NIC100185).

The aim of the NIWBG is to implement a gender equal economy. The members of the NIWBG scrutinise policy and budgetary matters with a gendered lens to bring attention to the different ways in which women and men are affected by government-level decision-making. It aims to provide policy- and budget-makers with policy analysis to secure substantive equality for women and men through the assessment of gender impact.

The NIWBG works with a range of organisations in Northern Ireland on devolved issues and with sister organisations in Wales, Scotland, England and the South of Ireland on East-West and North-South issues. While we work on a five nations basis, we focus on Northern Ireland.

2. A brief description of the group(s) which the organisation or body supports or represents.

The NIWBG is made up of organisations and individuals from the women's sector, trade union movement, academia, financial experts and economists, and wider civil society in Northern Ireland with the purpose of advocating for women and securing a gender equal economy. The NIWBG is also represented on the Women's Policy Group NI, the Equality Coalition, the All-Island Women's Forum (NWCI), the APG on Early Education and Childcare (Stormont), and the APG on UNSCR 1325, Women, Peace and Security (Stormont).

3. A brief overview of the work of the organisation or body in supporting or representing the relevant group(s) between January 2020 and May 2022 as it relates to the response to Covid-19 of (i) the UK Government; and/or (ii) the Government in Northern Ireland.

As the Coordinator position was only created in October 2020, we could only comment on the period from October 2020 to May 2022. During that time, however, we represented our groups as it relates to the response to Covid-19 of the UK Government or the NI Government through a number of different ways. Relating to the UK Government's response, we participated in a four nations data collection project with the UKWBG, the Fawcett Society, WEN Wales, Close the Gap, and Engender Scotland. The aim of the project was to highlight, in three rounds of data collection, the uneven impacts that the pandemic has had on women and other protected identities, the gaps in the UK Government's response to the pandemic that have left women feeling that their needs have been unmet, and the post-pandemic aspirations of young people and the support they'd like to see from the Government.

Specific to the NI Government's response to the pandemic, we contributed and supported the Women's Policy Group's updating and relaunch of the 'Feminist Recovery Plan: Relaunch – One Year On' which was relaunched in July 2021. This plan highlighted the many areas that need government action that would make serious improvements to the lives of women across NI. The plan included over 300 pages of research and recommendations that would put equality and human rights at the centre of NI's recovery from the pandemic. In addition, we have responded to a number of consultations during that time period that, while not directly published as a response to Covid-19, are written with recovery in mind. Therefore, many of our responses highlighted the disproportionate impact that the pandemic had on women and how, moving forward, policies need to take that into account and make up for the progress lost on gender equality.

4. A list of any articles or reports the organisation or body has published or contributed to, and/or evidence it has given (for example to UK Parliament or the Northern Ireland Executive) regarding the impact on the group(s) which the organisation or body supports or represents of the response to Covid-19 by (i) the UK Government; and/or (ii) the Government in Northern Ireland. Please include links to those documents where possible.

[The Feminist Recovery Plan: Relaunch – One Year On](#) (Women's Policy Group) is a comprehensive document of over 300 pages that was produced by a variety of women's sector and wider civil society organisations and individuals to demonstrate to decision-makers how NI's recovery from the pandemic could simultaneously tackle inequality issues. Myself and other Women's Policy Group members used and continue to use this document in our advocacy work to highlight the disproportionate impact that the pandemic has had on women and how this has led to further disproportionate impacts during the Cost of Living Crisis.

Many of our consultations responses, while not directly in response to the Covid recovery, addressed pre-existing issues that were exacerbated during the crisis. The following consultation responses mention the pandemic and the recovery process in the context of the policies that are being responded to: [Draft Budget 2021-22 \(February 2021\)](#), [Draft Skills Strategy \(August 2021\)](#), [Response to the Call for Evidence On Investment for NI](#) (January 2022 – followed, by an [oral evidence session in front of the NIAC in May 2022](#)), and [Draft Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland \(April 2022\)](#).

As mentioned previously, we participated in a data collection project with civil society groups across the four nations that focused on women's experiences during the pandemic: [Pushed to More Precarity: The uneven impact of lockdowns on mothers and lower-income parents](#), [One year on: Women are less likely than men to feel the Government's response to Covid-19 has met their needs](#), and [The impact of the coronavirus pandemic on young women on low incomes](#).

5. The view of the organisation or body as to whether the group(s) it supports or represents was adequately considered when decisions about the response to Covid-19 were made by (i) the UK Government; and/or (ii) the Government in Northern Ireland. Please also explain the reasons for the view expressed by the organisation or body in this respect.

Based off our research and the data collection project that we were a partner in, we believe that the decisions made by both UK Government and the NI Government did not take into account the experiences of women during the pandemic nor the pre-existing impacts of gender inequality that were exacerbated during the pandemic. We know from our own research and from research conducted around the world that women were disproportionately impacted during the pandemic, yet there were little to no targeted measures, from either government, to mitigate the specific issues impacting women. This was the reason for the relaunch of the initial Feminist Recovery Plan (July 2020), as all of the recommendations in the first edition were not addressed nor were acted upon, despite experts in the women's sector highlighting how the short-term and long-term recommendations would have made a difference in the lives of women in NI.

Additionally, [one of the rounds of the data collection](#) project focused on how women felt the UK Government's response and their respective devolved government's response has met their needs. The responses were significantly less positive than the men that were asked, with younger women, disabled women, low-income women and single women responding the least positively.

6. Whether the organisation or body raised any concerns about the consideration being given to the group(s) which it supports or represents with (i) the UK Government; and/or (ii) the Government in Northern Ireland, when those governments were making decisions about their response to Covid-19. Please provide a list of any such correspondence or meetings with (i) the UK Government; and/or (ii) the Government in Northern Ireland, including the dates on which the body or organisation wrote or such meetings were held, to whom the correspondence was addressed or with whom the meeting was held, and any response received from the UK Government or the Government in Northern Ireland addressing such concerns.

A direct concern we have raised with the Executive Office (TEO) and the Equality Commission Northern Ireland (ECNI) was related to the NI Executive Office's handling of the consultation process of the 'Building Forward: Consolidated Covid-19 Recovery Plan. Our joint (NIWBG, CAJ, RCN and WRDA) call for an investigation was due to the fact that there was no equality screening published with the consultation, the consultation was invitation only (should have been public), was only open for an extremely short time period (should be 8-12 weeks) and only invited a handful of civil society to respond (NIWBG and CAJ were not invited to respond, WRDA was invited but only with a couple of days to put together a response).

My colleague from CAJ and sent a document outlining our breach of equality scheme complaint regarding the equality screening on the Covid-19 Recovery Plan to TEO on the 14th September, 2021. We received a response from TEO on the 20th of September 2021 addressing the two main issues we raised (no equality screening and private/shortened consultation process). We were not satisfied with the response, so my CAJ colleague followed up with the TEO contact on the 23 September, 2021 with a few additional questions relating to our initial complaint. We received a response from TEO answering these questions on the 28th September, 2021. My colleague followed up with a request for further information as to when the equality screening would be published on the 30th of September 2021, and TEO responded later that day saying that the equality screening was with Ministers and would be published after that. On 1st October 2021, my colleague queried this, as we thought that equality screenings did not need ministerial sign-off for a draft of the equality screening to be published on the TEO website. We were told later that day from the TEO contact that ministerial sign-off was required to publish it on the TEO website.

My colleague from CAJ sent the request for a paragraph 10 investigation to the ECNI on Thursday, 31st of March 2022. We received a confirmation of receipt from the ECNI on the 31st of March, 2022. We received a response from the Executive Office on the 25th of April, 2022, outlining why there was a delay in the publication of the review of the equality screening associated with the Covid-19 Recovery Plan. On the 29th of April, 2022 and the 4th of May, 2022, we were asked for clarification around some of the information we provided the ECNI with in regards to our request for a paragraph 10 investigation. My colleague from CAJ responded on 16th of May, 2022 to the ECNI with the requested information. On the 20th June 2022, we received a response from the ECNI that they declined to investigate our complaint and on the 6th of July 2022, we submitted an additional request for a paragraph 10 investigation into TEO's failure to properly equality screen the Covid Recovery Plan, receiving confirmation of receipt from the ECNI on the 8th of July 2022. On the 28th of September 2022, our investigation request was denied by ECNI on the grounds that TEO had published a revised equality screening, even though the poor-quality initial screening had been linked with the Covid-19 Recovery Plan document for months. My colleague submitted a complaint on behalf of the 4 organisations to TEO regarding how we were impacted by their failure to comply with good practice relating to their equality screening on the 4th November 2022 and received confirmation of receipt from TEO on the 7th of November 2022. On the 28th November 2022, we received a thorough response from TEO on 23rd November 2022 addressing the issues we outlined in the previous complaint. However, we intend to continue our complaint with the ECNI.

7. A brief summary of the views of the organisation or body as to any lessons, if any, that can be learned from any consideration which was given to the group(s) that the organisation or body supports or represents by (i) the UK Government; and/or (ii) the Government in Northern Ireland when they were making decisions about their response to Covid-19.

The overarching lessons that can be learned from the UK Government and NI Government responses to the pandemic are that firstly, the needs of women and other protected groups need to be at the centre of decision-making whether that be long-term policies or crisis-response. Therefore, policy responses ensure that those impacted by inequalities are not further disadvantaged by the crisis, and that recovery efforts not only protect those groups from further disadvantage but promote greater equality.

Secondly, women need to be included in the conversations around response and recovery – the women's sector was left out of crucial conversations around actions relating to the pandemic that

ultimately did not address the needs of women. In order to address the needs of women, women need to be included in the development, implementation, and monitoring of any policy/response measure.