



Our Ref

Your Ref

7th June 2023

By email only - rff.feedback@executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk

2023-2024 TEO Budget Consultation
Finance Branch
The Executive Office
Block B5
Castle Buildings
Stormont Estate
BELFAST
BT4 3SR

Dear Sirs,

I am writing on behalf of Belfast City Council ('the Council') in relation to The Executive Office ('TEO') Budget for 2023-24 and the associated Equality Impact Assessment ('EQIA') consultation.

The Council recognises that the TEO is facing significant budgetary pressures and it is right to explore areas in which savings can be achieved. Councils have just been through an exceptionally challenging rate setting process and understands the issues which TEO and other government departments face. However, the Council has significant concerns about the impact of the proposed cuts and about the lawfulness of the process to date.

Given the 4-week consultation period, and the fact that this was launched only days after an election and before the Council held its AGM, it has not been possible to take this response through the Council's formal decision-making structures. This response is therefore caveated by the fact that this is a draft officer response which will have to be subject to agreement and ratification by Council at its meeting on 2nd July 2023.

Misdirection in relation to the applicable law

As set out in the introduction to the EQIA, Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 requires all public authorities to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity between Section 75 groups and to also have regard to the desirability of promoting good relations between persons of different religious belief, political opinion or racial group.

It is concerning that the EQIA makes only scant reference to the 'good relations' aspect of this statutory obligation. In particular, by way of example, when explaining why Option 2 has been selected there is no reference to the importance of promoting good relations or Article 6(1) of the Human Rights Act which makes it unlawful for a public authority to act in a way which is incompatible with a Convention right.

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The EQIA is replete with references to the first limb of Section 75. However, beyond setting out the legislation, the EQIA makes no other reference to the desirability of promoting good relations as being a statutory obligation. See for example paragraph 38 which talks about areas “where there is a statutory requirement (e.g., meeting the TEO’s obligations on equality or health and safety)”. There is no reference to the fact that the TEO is also under an obligation to promote good relations. Nor is there any reference to the obligation to act in accordance with Convention rights.

This approach is at odds with the TEO’s Equality Scheme which clearly identifies all of these as being statutory obligations. This is particularly concerning given TEO’s responsibility for setting strategic policy and direction on those three issues as set out in the Equality Scheme.

The Council is of the view that the TEO has misdirected itself in relation to its statutory obligations and as such the EQIA and the whole process which underpins it is fundamentally flawed.

Failure to take into account relevant considerations and/or procedural unfairness

The EQIA talks about protecting the most vulnerable but does not set out which groups they are or how they arrived at that conclusion. For the avoidance of doubt, the Council is not doubting the vulnerability of some of the groups referred to within the EQIA. The concern is a general one about how the evidence and/or reasons which gave rise to identifying those who are the most vulnerable.

It is acknowledged that at paragraph 41, the EQIA advises that a summary of the impacts on Arms Length Bodies is provided in the EQIA and that more detailed information is available on request. It may be that that the detailed information referred to references the above considerations or other Arms Length Bodies which are not discussed in the EQIA at all, but it is the Council’s view that this information should have been made readily available and also that they should be addressed within the EQIA itself.

The EQIA has made no attempt to quantify the impact of the proposed cuts on councils and other organisations other than through what is in reality a 4-week consultation. Instead it has been left to councils to assess the impact of the proposal.

Failure to meaningfully consult

As set out above, the Council does not accept that this is a 12- week consultation.

Stakeholders have been asked to provide a response by 7th June 2023, less than 1 calendar month. It is clear that this is only a 4-week consultation period regarding the allocation of funds. Indeed, the Council has already been advised that it will receive 53% of its budget allocation and has been asked to provide a detailed breakdown of how it intends to allocate that funding to its programme of work. It is fundamentally unfair to ask council officers to essentially reallocate significant budgets and decide which parts of their Good Relations Programme should be cut during an open consultation in relation to same. Whilst council officers will of course provide those proposals rather than run the risk of letters of offer not being issued at all, the Council is of the view that this course of action has rendered the consultation process meaningless.

The consultation was issued a week before an election when councils were in period of heightened political sensitivity and during which most public authorities operate a form of Purdah as custom and

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practice. At this time council's formal decision-making structures cannot meet until it holds an AGM allocating positions of responsibility. To launch a consultation at this time only supports the proposition that the consultation has not been meaningful.

The remainder of the purported consultation period is only going to inform in-year budget reallocation and any additional funding opportunities that may emerge over the course of the financial year. It is clear that TEO has already determined its course of action regardless of the outcome of this consultation process. It therefore follows that it has approached this consultation with a closed mind and no realistic intent to consider any other alternative policy.

The Council also has significant concerns about the closed nature of the questions which form part of the consultation which again goes to the failure to meaningfully consult. I have however set out the Council's draft responses below. As set out above, these comments are subject to agreement through our formal Committee processes.

1. Do you agree that TEO has gathered the necessary data to inform its decisions around the allocation of its budget? If not, what other sources of data should the TEO consider?

The Council does not agree that TEO has gathered the necessary data to inform its decisions around the allocation of its budget. While TEO has compiled a lot of data and relevant information to indicate that the delivery of Good Relations programmes and projects has a positive impact on people from different religious, political and racial backgrounds, there are real-life issues that have not been incorporated. The Council would agree with your impacts assessment that: -

- the information held by TEO indicates that a reduction in budget is likely to have a negative impact on good relations between people of different religious belief, political opinion or racial group as building relations between these groups is the key purpose of the funding programmes, T:BUC Strategy and District Councils Good Relations Programme. (Further detailed throughout the assessment)

While the outcomes and impact of projects and programmes are clear to be seen, our society is still plagued by increased sectarian, racist and hate crime incidents. This was portrayed in a recent PSNI report, which stated that the level of sectarian incidents reached its highest in 2022 since 2016.¹ There were 6 more racist incidents and 39 more racist crimes recorded in 21/22 compared with the previous year. There was an increase of 83 sectarian incidents, while the number of crimes rose by 54 over the same period. The level of sectarian incidents is the highest 12-month period recorded since summer 2016.

The Council believes that any reduction in programmes that tackle sectarianism and racism will only see these figures sadly increase further. This data is crucial and needs to be considered when any

¹ <https://www.psni.police.uk/about-us/our-publications-and-reports/official-statistics/hate-motivation-statistics>



decisions to reduce budgets for interventions such as the District Council's Good Relations Programme or the Central Good Relations Fund are being considered. The funding that is channelled through these programmes seeks to build better relationships between people from different religious, political and racial backgrounds at a neighbourhood level. This work is essential in reducing these statistics. Furthermore, it should be noted that a substantial amount of proactive preventative work is progressed confidentially which results in the detrimental activity not occurring.

The Council completed its Good Relations Audit for 2023-2026. This is the foundation of our DCGRP and has current data which supports the need for programme budget to address the core challenges facing good relations across Belfast. It was agreed at the Council's Shared City Partnership which oversees our Action Plan and was ratified by Council. It is worrying that no councils' Good Relations Audits have been included in TEO's datasets in relation to this EQIA. The Council would find this concerning, as the Audit is literally the only evidence-based material in any Council area that justifies Good Relations interventions.

The Council would also refer TEO to the NI Life & Times Survey results, which were published on 5th June 2023. All of the questions and responses can be found here: <https://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2022/>

Under the Community Relations section, there would appear to be an increased in issues around expressions of cultural identity such as flags and murals. By way of example:

- Increase in the numbers of people feeling annoyed/intimidated by Republican (40%) and Loyalist murals/kerb paintings and flags (55%);
- 49% disagree with the flying of flags from lamp posts;
- 45% opt for flying the Union flag from public buildings on designated days only. 19% for all of the time and 27% saying never;
- 47% of people agree that their cultural identity is respected by society – 20% don't. 30% neither agree or disagree;
- 40% agree that bonfires are a legitimate form of cultural expression. 43% think they are not;
- 66% of people want peacelines to come down now (21%), or sometime in the future (45%). Only 6% want things to stay the way they are;
- 84% of people think that a lack of positive, trusting and respectful relationships are a barrier to reconciliation in NI;
- 91% agree that long-term peace is dependent on reconciliation between individuals, communities and/or institutions.

On the attitudes to minority ethnic people, there is some positive, but also mixed reading:

- Only 69% would accept an Irish Traveller as a close friend – 31% saying no;
- 97% said that yes, they would accept an Eastern European person living and working in NI, with 93% saying the same for people from a Muslim background;
- 40% said that they had no friends from a minority ethnic background;
- 11% said that migrant workers take jobs from NI people, but 68% said that migrant workers take jobs that local people don't want;
- 82% said that migrant workers make NI open to new ideas and cultures. 3% said that they didn't;

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- 50% said that NI was welcoming to refugees escaping persecution. 19% disagreed. 26% neither agreed nor disagreed.

The results demonstrate that there is still significant work to be done in relation to acceptance of our various cultural and political identities; that diverging political aspirations has an impact on how we view cultural identity and that attitudes towards migrant and minority ethnic communities have improved, but much more needs to be done to foster true integration.

2. Do you agree with TEO's assessment of the options for budget reductions? If not, what other areas of the TEO's spend should be considered?

The Council considers that using the EQIA to inform decisions on budget allocations is a sensible approach, to ensure that the potential adverse impact on certain categories of citizens is offset. However, Council would reiterate that TEO's research has shown clearly that it will have an adverse effect on good relations. The Council would suggest that one element that should be further reconsidered is Arm's Length Bodies' (ALB). The EQIA document between page 19 and 23 details the impacts of a 10% reduction in budget for ALBs, however there is no equivalent analysis of what a 47% budget reduction would look like in terms of the District Council Good Relations Programme such as loss of staff, lack of programme, increased sectarianism and racism, undoing the work that is evidenced by the Good Relations Indicators etc. ALBs may require a refresh in the context of how they work, their delivery and the geography where they work. This may be an opportunity to review these structures encouraging greater collaboration such as bringing them together under the one building/roof, potentially saving running costs and some staffing.

The Council also suggests that this budget reduction should not be viewed in isolation. Other Government Departments are potentially looking at budget cuts in the range of 5 to 15%; the proposed TEO reduction of 47% is over 3 times that of any other central government TEO. The Council would ask that TEO review the options presented and consider an approach in line with other TEOs. Furthermore, EA, PHA, DFC, DoJ, etc are some of Council's other funders in the context of supporting communities in Belfast. These organisations are also indicating potential budget cuts; the compounded or cumulative effect of all these cuts together present a serious challenge for delivering the Council's Good Relations Programme.

The Council believes that the report does not consider that councils contribute a minimum of 25% match funding to the DCGRP. In Belfast in the 22/23 year this was closer to 40% and budgets have already been agreed in February for the 23/24 year in keeping with the timetable for the rates setting exercise.

It should be noted at this juncture, the Council is currently facing unprecedented budget challenges in line with the cost of living and budget decisions. Therefore, the ability to in some way fill the void from Central Government cuts will not be possible and as such, this and the above will potentially lead to an adverse impact on Good Relations within the City. This is particularly relevant to the work supporting some of the most marginalised communities in the city such as Asylum Seekers, people living at interface areas or young people at risk of becoming involved in conflict and disorder, to name but a few.



3. Do you agree with TEO's assessment of equality impacts of the options considered for budget reductions? If not, what other equality impacts does the TEO need to take account of?

Following on from previous comments, the Council does not agree with the assessment of impacts due to the points already raised. In addition to these impacts, there should be a greater emphasis placed on Children & Young People, Older People, Interface Areas, Refugees and Asylum Seekers, and the most vulnerable, who are significant participant cohorts within good relations work.

The Council is of the view that any reduction of funding, particularly for the District Council's Good Relations Programme or the Central Good Relations Fund would have a disproportionate impact on these groups, and this has not been given the same priority within the context of the EQIA. Given that many of these groups in the Belfast area come from interface areas, where there is already a disproportionate level of poor health & well-being indices, poor economic and educational indices, the impact of any reduction in opportunities for participation in Good Relations activities would be dire, compounding the above indices.

4. Do you agree that the TEO has correctly identified all relevant mitigations that could help reduce the adverse equality impacts of the budget reductions? If not, what additional mitigation measures should the TEO consider?

The Council feels that TEO **has not** correctly identified all relevant mitigations that could help reduce the adverse equality impacts of the budget reductions. Fundamentally this stems from an EQIA which explores the impacts of a 10% reduction in ALB's budgets, however it does not in any way explore the impact of a 47% reduction in the DCGRP.

Supporting successful interventions and work that has a proven track record in the successful achievement of outcomes should be included in this area. For example, the District Council Good Relations Programme has proven its worth over the last number of years. The Council would add that significantly, unlike any other T:BUC Programme, the Council's programme bases its annual Action Plan on an independent Good Relations Audit. This fact has not been considered as part of the EQIA process. This comprehensive analysis of the local needs within each council area, is the only evidence-based resource for directing good relations work at a local level.

Unlike other funded programmes or some ALB's, council's Good Relations Action Plans are the only politically agreed series of actions at a local level. They are the only regular consultation and engagement mechanism between programme delivery agents and participants/recipients and crucially they also generate significant match funding from other sources. Any reduction in budget for this programme would not only lose the only key link between deliverer and recipient but would also risk losing match funding.



Local councils have also been successful at generating additional funding for Good Relations work from private sector organisations as well. Cuts to these programmes may result in an eradication of such private sector collaboration and as such, compounding an already challenging funding environment. Potentially this will have a negative impact on Community Planning, as budget cuts are compounded in the public and community and voluntary sector this will stifle their ability to partake and collaborate in such processes.

5. Do you agree with TEO's overall assessment of the business areas where budget reductions will need to be made? If not, which areas of the TEO's business would be better able to withstand reductions?

The Council does not agree with TEO's overall assessment of the business areas where budget reductions will need to be made. The overall focus on reducing budget by 47% in the DCGRP programmes is extremely short-sighted and is a false economy as the costs of failure to deliver some of these programmes will likely result in issues such as damage to public property, potential disorder etc. Belfast as a City is still dealing with the effects of conflict, where segregation is still very prevalent and where division and separation over sharing is still a dominant force. The need to build good relations has never been more important. With increases in recorded sectarian and hate crime, community tensions because of micro political issues continuing to dominate our society.

Promoting Good Relations is a central element of what our city's communities currently need. One of the reasons Belfast has a segregated community is because of the under-investment in good relations over the years. Segregation remains a major challenge for Belfast City, and in many cases as a collective of public bodies, resources have been shared out, rather than shared. Council's Good Relations Strategy outlines how we will create a shared city. It was developed following extensive consultation and identifies five key outcomes. Therefore, there can be higher levels of spend on public services e.g., housing, education, transport, policing, leisure, where the costs of the provision of these services far outweighs comparable costs in other parts of Ireland or Britain. Dismantling segregation will save money. Delivering sustained and effective good relations interventions along with community regeneration will dismantle segregation. The paradox of this approach is that investing in Good Relations will save money in other areas in the longer term.

6. Do you have any other comments you would like to add about this consultation – yes or no?

Yes. Prima facie, the decision to implement a policy, and then subject it to an EQIA is counter-intuitive. The purpose of the EQIA is to assist in developing policy positions and actions and should not be used to retrospectively provide some level of cover for a policy that has already been decided. It appears that the budget allocations that we have been advised of will negatively impact on services for all 9 equality grounds and seriously impede the ability of council to actively promote good relations in the city.



The Council has major concerns regarding the lack of evidence to support the reduction of 47% of the District Council's Good Relations Programmes (detailed earlier in the EQIA). In addition to this, there is virtually no reference to the statutory duties placed on all public sector organisations to promote good relations. Being a post-conflict society is what distinguishes Northern Ireland from other parts of the UK and Ireland. The impact of the conflict places our communities at a distinct disadvantage compared to the rest of Ireland and Britain the work of good relations is a critical example of where investment has been made into an area of strategic importance for the present and future of our communities. Developing a cohesive society, where cultural expression is respected and respectful, where young people and older people can build cohesive relationships after decades of separation and division, as well as working to reduce and eliminate segregation, is the key added extra to what our society needs.

Over the past two years there has been a significant increase in the number of people coming to Belfast to seek asylum. Without a good relations intervention programme, which provides ongoing opportunities to promote contact between new and host communities and to support the inclusion of these communities. There is the potential that we could shore up further problems for the future in terms of good relations and inclusion.

Ongoing investment in good relations and the promotion of contact between communities is critical to wider agendas, to economic development, to tourism, to foreign and direct investment and to people's sense of wellbeing. Building better relations and building confidence in issues surrounding culture and identity will contribute to reducing separation and division and ultimately save public money.

In the current climate when the Assembly is not in place, Central Government look to Belfast City Council as the largest Council to provide a lead on some of the most challenging issues within Northern Ireland, many of which are good relations related. A 47% reduction in budget will severely impact on the Council's ability to provide that lead which central government TEOs have requested previously.

The work of Good Relations is all about building relationships, based on trust and understanding of differences. It is clear from the survey results set out in response to Q.1 above, that Good Relations needs investment, rather than budget reductions.

The Council continues to develop good relations initiatives which are designed to reduce the cost to the public purse in maintaining a divided society. In the year which marks the 25th anniversary of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, and at a time when Belfast is on the cusp of real change in terms of jobs and investment, the proposal to cut interventions for good relations programmes is incomprehensible.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Nora Largey', written over a white background.

Nora Largey

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