



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Finance

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Draft Executive Budget 2024-25:
Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action

22 May 2024

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Matthew O'Toole (Chairperson)
Ms Diane Forsythe (Deputy Chairperson)
Dr Steve Aiken
Mr Phillip Brett
Miss Nicola Brogan
Mr Gerry Carroll
Mr Paul Frew
Mr Eóin Tennyson

Witnesses:

Ms Celine McStravick Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action

The Chairperson (Mr O'Toole): We welcome to the meeting Celine McStravick, chief executive of the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA). Celine, thank you very much for joining us. We would like you to make a brief opening statement, if you are able and willing.

Ms Celine McStravick (Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action): Many thanks, Chair. Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak to the Finance Committee today. I welcome the Finance Minister's announcement yesterday on the interim fiscal framework. The more money, the better, but let us spend it wisely.

I will start by describing what NICVA is and saying a bit about the voluntary and community sector. NICVA is the umbrella body for the voluntary and community sector and has over 1,400 members. Our members range from very small organisations run wholly by volunteers to large voluntary-sector employers, as we describe them. I would argue that the voluntary and community sector forms part and parcel of every bit of people's lives in Northern Ireland from health and social care to the environment, transport, employment, education etc. I often ask people to imagine Northern Ireland without our sector, and I dread to think about that.

Turning to the Budget, I will begin by making a strong argument for the need to protect the most vulnerable across our communities. I would say that they have, inevitably, borne the brunt of ever-reducing public finances and of cuts. Those impacts will be felt upstream, and they will create even greater reliance on many voluntary and community services, which are already significantly overstretched and often require costlier public-sector interventions in the long term; in short, it makes little sense.

Further decision-making regarding the current Budget must prioritise the most vulnerable. We must ensure that our most disadvantaged do not experience further hardship. As we have called for many

times, that requires a cross-departmental approach to ensure that the cumulative impacts of any budgetary decision are seen clearly and that we understand those impacts, including across all section 75 groups. Those impacts must be adequately captured and understood so that we can be proactive in mitigating the negative impacts. Obviously, we would prefer that equality impact assessments (EQIAs) were considered before proposals were published on how to allocate Executive and departmental budgets, but we understand that that may be about-face in this term.

When considering the Budget, it is important that you think of the role of the voluntary and community sector as delivering public services. We are not a "nice to have", nor are we a discretionary spend: we are absolutely core. In fact, a significant majority of our sector delivers vital services day and daily.

I want to tell you a bit more about the issues facing the sector, so that you understand them clearly. We recently conducted some research into our sector's workforce, and I am sorry to say that nearly 16% of groups told us that they are having to reduce their hours, make redundancies or leave posts vacant. I wonder what we would say were the private sector talking in terms of significant reductions to staff. I need to remind the Committee that more than 53,000 people are employed in the sector, so it is not insignificant.

Of the groups involved in our research, a further 26% told us that, in the next financial year, 2024-25, the future looks even more bleak. We asked them why things are so difficult at the moment, and 65% of them told us that it was because they were coping with increases in organisational costs. That means that their day-to-day running costs are increasing while their funding is decreasing. On top of that, they have to contend with rising demand for services. We are in an absolute perfect storm for damage to the voluntary and community sector.

The issue of the lack of multi-year Budgets has been well rehearsed. Not a single person to whom I have spoken disagrees that we need multi-year Budgets. What I struggle with is finding out why we cannot achieve them and what the problem is.

In our recent workforce survey, 49% of our members told us that they had difficulties in recruiting staff. They said that the most significant reason for that is salaries. We can no longer compete, and therefore we are creating huge inequalities between our sectors.

I want to draw the Committee's attention to two key areas where we really need your support in relation to the Budget. The first is to do with decisions that are being made by the Department of Health, which holds the largest part of the Budget at the moment. I am sure that you are aware of the decision that was made last year to cut core funding to over 60 organisations. I met the Health Minister recently to plead for a reconsideration of that decision. I hope, now that additional funding is coming in, that that core funding programme will be reinstated. We are talking here about organisations that work with people who have special needs or mental health needs or need counselling, for example. Those organisations deliver services for our population, and funding them is absolutely essential.

I draw your attention to the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF) cliff edge, as it is now being called. I really welcome the Committee's work in that area and the briefing that you received on 8 May from the Department of Finance and Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) on the impact of the European social fund (ESF). The Finance Minister is on record noting the need to learn lessons from the delayed implementation of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund. I urge the Finance Committee to write directly to the Treasury and the Minister to seek clarification on how exactly those lessons are being learned, because I am afraid that I am looking at a repeat — a Groundhog Day — regarding that cliff edge.

To highlight some of those issues, NICVA will host a conference on 12 June on building an inclusive labour market. We will send invitations to all Committee members, and we would really welcome your attendance at that.

I will try to end on a positive note. Because our sector is values-based, we want to be part of the solution. The joint forum, which is the vehicle for our sector to work more closely with government, has been working for the past 12 months on new funding principles. Those funding principles have five key pillars. They talk about collaborative and trusting relationships, being outcomes-focused and impactful, being proportional — *[Interruption.]* Chair, do we need to stop, just in case we need medical intervention?

The Chairperson (Mr O'Toole): She is OK. You carry on.

Ms McStravick: They talk about fairness and being responsible, agile and flexible. What is most interesting is that those funding principles have been developed in partnership with the sector and Departments. They are in final draft form. I would really welcome another opportunity to come to the Finance Committee to talk about them in more detail. I see them as an opportunity, a way out of what I would describe as the vicious circle of short-termism, lack of focus and, really, a lack of respect for our sector.

The other opportunity is, of course, social value. We have noted that in our briefing paper. Social value is something that we can capitalise on. When we are looking at our budget allocations and we come through our equality impact assessments, we want to look at the opportunities that social value offers and how our sector could be around the table when decisions are made on our new approach to the social value issue.

The Chairperson (Mr O'Toole): Thank you. That was wide-ranging.

Ms Forsythe: *[Inaudible]* sorry.

The Chairperson (Mr O'Toole): The Deputy Chairperson is struggling with a cough. Water is available to resolve that.

Members, indicate if you wish to ask a question of Celine McStravick. We have some people indicating remotely.

Celine, in your written submission — you kind of touched on it in your opening statement — prioritisation and goal setting are really important, even in the context of a constrained budgetary picture. Do you think that it would have been better if the Budget had come after a Programme for Government (PFG)?

Ms McStravick: Absolutely. I think that, if any of you had a blank piece of paper, of course that is what you would do: you would start with your Programme for Government, and your Budget would follow. However, we are well aware that we are where we are. There is a sense that pace is needed. There is a sense of urgency. Our sector needs investment and decision-making now. We are ready to support the process as it stands, but, of course, in an ideal world, you would start with a Programme for Government.

The Chairperson (Mr O'Toole): As to why a Programme for Government or an agreed set of priorities is advantageous, how is that better for your members, for example, than simply a Budget that does not follow a Programme for Government?

Ms McStravick: A Programme for Government sets a new direction. A new Executive are in place. Our issues are different now. We have a changing environment. It is rapidly changing due to the cost-of-living crisis, Brexit etc, so the Programme for Government needs to create alignment with the direction of travel. The voluntary and community sector should be part and parcel of informing the Programme for Government. At the moment, we have not been legitimately informed of what is in the Programme for Government. We would love to be around those tables, having the discussion and informing those priorities. Our sector is right on the front line. We see daily where those tough decisions need to be made.

The Chairperson (Mr O'Toole): You represent organisations across the sector. Some are larger and are completely essential to the delivery of public services, and many are smaller groups that are entirely voluntary, in the sense that there are no salaried employees. Are you aware of any organisations that will have to cease performing statutory functions or close altogether because of the budgetary position that they are in?

Ms McStravick: You will have seen in the media over the past few months that many organisations are no longer applying for the statutory contract that they might have been delivering for years. That is often because the statutory contract stays at the same value, with no increase according to inflation or salary need. Our sector is therefore subsidising statutory services. That is absolutely unsustainable.

I have seen many cases in which organisations have done that in the first instance because they do not want to let down their service users, beneficiaries or people who use their programmes. That is often where we are left in the middle, whether we are dealing with family support or mental health

crises or working with young children or playgroups. It is difficult for my members to say that they will stop doing something, because they are looking into the eyes of the people who need them most. However, there have been several cases in which organisations have said, "Actually, we can no longer subsidise. We are using our reserves enough". We cannot continue to fill the gap between the commissioned service, particularly if it comes from a health and social care trust or education, and what it costs to run.

You will have noted from my introduction that our workforce survey revealed that 49% of organisations said clearly that they were having difficulty with recruiting staff. It feels as though the next financial year will be significant for our sector. We held things together in the absence of an Assembly and during COVID. We used all of our resources. We have tried to be as inventive and efficient as we can, but we have now come to the end of the line. I can absolutely see organisations having to close. I am fearful about waiting for a few years without significant investment or different decision-making. That will open our eyes to the realisation that we have lost huge staff expertise and community development. The problem then goes upstream.

The Chairperson (Mr O'Toole): Indeed. We are probably already seeing some of that, but it could get worse. I will bring in members.

Ms Forsythe: Apologies; I thought that I was over my cold, but it seems to be caused by this Committee in this room.

The Chairperson (Mr O'Toole): Was it something that we said, Diane?

Ms Forsythe: Sorry about that.

Thanks very much, Celine. When I asked Gareth Hetherington from Ulster University Economic Policy Centre about this issue in Committee, he said that the sector

"is undervalued because it is unvalued".

He also said that the sector

"is used by central government as a cheap way of delivering services rather than being valued for the high-quality service that it delivers."

That is something that I very much agree with. Do you have any details of how much is being funded across government through money in the voluntary and community sector organisations?

Ms McStravick: We do not have an aggregate amount, but, sometimes, those figures can be really misleading. That is particularly true when I talk to the Department of Health. Funding the sector is different from funding the services that the sector delivers. There are legitimate and large-scale contracts with our sector for our commissioned services. I would be most interested in the money that is going to our sector just to help it to exist. Take the core funding from the Department of Health as an example. The argument there is that some organisations were being funded to exist so that they could lever in additional funds from the lottery, philanthropic sources etc. That means that our sector can get really well involved in policy development. A good example is the 10-year mental health strategy, with our sector around every table, in every workshop and every consultation to make it the strategy that it is. We continue to be around those tables to support the implementation of that, but there is absolutely no core funding for those organisations to give up their time to do that. I would want to disaggregate that. The funding for legitimate commissioned services that are going out and procured is almost a completely different issue from funding the sector for it to exist by itself so that it can be involved in policy development. Policy development would be much richer if our sector was around the table.

Ms Forsythe: Do you agree that central government as a whole probably has no idea how much you put into the sector? It is not really assessing the return on investment. A few things come to mind. I was at an event with Community Foundation Northern Ireland. It had a modest funding pot over a number of years, but it was able to deliver bang for your buck. That is where it is. It is the voluntary and community sector.

You talked about mental health. We had a Public Accounts Committee (PAC) inquiry, and I asked the officials how many patients in the mental health system are being treated directly by the voluntary and

community sector, and they did not have a clue. In the Southern Trust, there are over 10,000, and it is completely panicked every time there is a risk to losing those organisations. Do you have any ideas how we should recommend measuring the return on investment to prove value for money in the Programme for Government?

Ms McStravick: A core part of the Programme for Government should be that investment should show a return. As individual organisations, we have to send back umpteen monitoring forms for every penny we get; in fact, we are probably the most evaluated sector ever. I am not sure that the private sector is asked the same questions. It would be really useful to have information about where that monitoring information goes, how it is aggregated and how it is shown centrally in respect of the return on investment. As NICVA is the umbrella body, we can gather information from our members, but you are asking them to replicate it. They are already giving the information to the funders, and you are asking them to do more work and create their own evidence base.

When you look at the role of our sector and, in particular, that quote about it being "undervalued", you will see that there is often a misrepresentation depending on whom you speak to in Departments. The CR sector is very small, and maybe they look at the community base as being less than excellent, whereas I would say that that is absolutely where the efficiency is. Once you start taking away that infrastructure on the ground and that work with people, we will see waiting lists increase for absolutely everything.

Ms Forsythe: Absolutely. Finally, in respect of the 2024-25 Budget, we have discussed the delivery against central government outcomes by the voluntary and community sector. That is critical, but, given that we face another cliff edge in respect of funding, with a lot of organisations looking at December 2024 and putting people on notice, do you think that there is a risk in the 2024-25 financial year that services will slacken due to the impact of that?

Ms McStravick: Absolutely. The UK Shared Prosperity Fund ends in March 2025. We need a decision on that by June, not December, because we are really concerned that we will be caught between a general election and some missing decision-making if we do not get something by June.

That fund represents over £50 million coming into Northern Ireland for economic inactivity projects, which is over 100 organisations. They deliver projects to women and young people, people with learning disabilities and those coming out of the prison system. They are the most vulnerable, and, in fact, we know that, if you prioritise the most vulnerable, the whole of society will benefit. You cannot just choose and say, "We will work with this part that is readily engaged, and everything will be OK". It is the complete opposite. We need to focus on those most disengaged and furthest from the labour market, as they need us the most. That is where our sector sits. That is the market failure. That is where our sector adds the most benefit.

Ms Forsythe: I declare an interest as the chair of the all-party group on the voluntary and community sector. I do not know whether that is a conflict or just a cause that I am passionate about, but —

The Chairperson (Mr O'Toole): It is not a conflict.

Ms Forsythe: — it is good to note it. Thank you very much.

Mr Brett: Celine, thank you for your presentation, and sorry I cannot be with you in person today. We are proud that NICVA is based in North Belfast, with all the important work that you do.

I will follow up on your responses to the Chair's questions. I understand your frustration with the Programme for Government, but I assume that of equal importance to NICVA and the sector is having a Budget agreed early so that the sector can plan for the remainder of the financial year rather than being in the difficult position that it has been in of having budget allocations come later in the year.

Ms McStravick: Yes, absolutely. In my response to the Chair, I tried to make it clear that we understand the need for pace and that it is an imperfect world. In a perfect world, we would have the PFG first and then the Budget. At this stage, we need certainty, stability and a way of planning ahead, but we also want to be around the table to help to prioritise. We do not want to get caught in the bureaucracy. We want to ensure that we do not lose any more staff and that we can address the rising demand for our services, no matter where we are.

Mr Brett: I am delighted that my party holds the Communities Ministry, because that Department is a vital one for your work. I am pleased that Minister Lyons was able to allocate additional funding in the previous Budget to each of the community organisations that it works with. That is important.

I just want to touch base on the Health core grant. I have raised that issue in the Assembly on a number of occasions. Integrated Services —

Ms McStravick: That is right.

Mr Brett: — has a centre on the Shankill Road in my constituency and also works in Gerry's constituency. It does vital work in tackling educational underattainment and in supporting young people who might otherwise end up going through the criminal justice system or under the care of the health service. Integrated Services is able to get out there and really help them and their families. Northern Ireland Hospice and Women's Aid are just a few of the other organisations that benefit from the grant funding. When I have raised it with the Health Minister, he has not given me a satisfactory response. Could you give us a read-out from your meeting with the Minister? Did he indicate whether he will restore the grant, which has been cut since September of last year? You might not be able to give it, but any feedback on that —

Ms McStravick: I have no problem, because the Minister is on record as having talked about this. I met him just after the Budget was announced. He was not content with his allocation and said that he therefore could not make any decision on core grants. I would argue strongly that the core grants to our sector account for 0.05% of his budget and that it is the term "discretionary" that lets some Departments off the hook. I am not saying that it was an easy decision for the Minister, but it may sometimes be made easier because a significant amount of his budget goes to salaries etc.

We all live in the real world. We understand the struggles and difficulties that Ministers face, but that core grant funding had significant tenure. It was not perfect, and there was room for improvement, but I would like to see that money ring-fenced for a core funding programme for the sector; otherwise, we cannot expect groups to get involved in change in the health and social care system. What I said to the Health Minister was this: if we want to transform our system, we need to look at the growth of area integrated partnership boards and other methods of improving services for citizens; you cannot do that without the voluntary and community sector, but you cannot expect it to exist if you do not fund it.

Mr Brett: Thank you for all that you continue to do.

Mr Tennyson: Thank you, Celine, for your answers. You have answered a number of the questions that I had. I will return to the role that the community and voluntary sector can play in transformation. The Chair touched on the Programme for Government. Another really important element is the sustainability plan proposed under the financial package for the Assembly's restoration. That sustainability plan will likely touch on transformation, revenue raising and our wider funding formula. Does NICVA have a perspective on those three elements, particularly on the role that the community and voluntary sector can play in transformation?

Ms McStravick: That is a really good point. When I look at our sector and talk to our members, I see a sector that has been trying its utmost to meet the needs that it sees. Those needs are across the full gamut — environment, education, health and infrastructure. They are everywhere. Our sector has not had the opportunity to change and transform. We have taken what we have got, tried to meet the needs and had almost no time to lift our heads and be involved in transformation. When I hear the words "transformation of public services", I include our sector in that. I wonder how our sector can be brought into that. Where is the investment in our sector for it to transform?

We are always being challenged to collaborate more, but collaboration takes time, effort and investment. It does not happen by virtue of saying, "Let us do that tomorrow". People do not have time to even think collaboratively or strategically, because they have money for only six months or nine months. A multi-year budget would help that but so would some investment in change, transformation and even digitisation. I look at the skills development programmes that NICVA supports. Last year alone, we worked with thousands of organisations and individuals, and we provided training on governance, HR, leadership, management etc, and that is just NICVA. Had we more investment in our sector, we could do a lot more and could help with transformation. We are absolutely key to it.

Mr Tennyson: I appreciate that my questions probably stray from matters that are your responsibility, but I am keen to hear NICVA's perspective. For example, revenue raising and our funding formula

have been debated a lot, given that the Budget has been so constrained. Does NICVA take a view on those issues?

Ms McStravick: Of course, NICVA comes at all of that from a rights-based perspective and from the perspective of protecting the most vulnerable. We are here with a strong anti-poverty agenda. We are really interested in convening our members and getting a grassroots perspective on those questions.

I will end with a clear statement. Our sector is well aware of the issues. The Health Minister talked about a money tree yesterday. We do not think that there is a money tree, but we see the issues out there. We really want to be part of the solution. If you talk to our members from across the sector, you will find a group of people who are hugely innovative, resilient and efficient. They make a point of going further. We talk to the private sector about a lot of those issues, but I argue that the voluntary and community sector absolutely should be the first port of call.

Mr Tennyson: I have a final few questions on the Shared Prosperity Fund and its potential replacement. Do you think that the Shared Prosperity Fund's criteria and priorities are right for the community and voluntary sector and for Northern Ireland more broadly? Do you think that the devolved Administration should have a more proactive role in shaping those?

Ms McStravick: We are all familiar with the fact that what we have at the minute is not perfect. It bypassed our Departments. That was a missed trick, and I want to see Departments being more involved in the next round. That being said, we do not want the programme to stop while we rethink and redesign. We need a transition fund to get us to 2025-26, and, if we have a new Westminster Government and the Assembly is sitting, we should use those extra 12 months to have a really good, strong, co-design process with the sector.

It is hard to believe that the evaluation of SPF probably will not be available until next February. We sit here with the evaluation not being available until February 2025, yet, officially, we will close the programme a month later without taking forward any of the learning. We need to be clear about using evidence to inform the next programme. I advocate looking at the lessons to be learned.

Miss Brogan: Celine, thank you for coming. I echo what other members said about the great work that the community and voluntary sector does in our society. It is really important to have you before the Committee to be a voice for the sector and to identify the huge challenges that you face because of historical underfunding.

I have two questions. The first is on multi-year budgets, which you touched on in your briefing. Can you outline the difficulties and challenges that your sector has faced as a result of one-year Budgets and the benefits that it would receive as a result of having multi-year Budgets?

Ms McStravick: I will start with the challenges of managing funding from a one-year Budget. Basically, you are constantly revolving temporary contracts for staff. You have to stay within the legislation. You cannot offer permanent contracts if you do not have permanent money coming in. That means that it is really hard to retain and recruit staff. You are making staff take difficult decisions: "Should I go for a one-year, fixed-term post, or should I go and work elsewhere?"

There is also the matter of planning ahead. How can you be strategic and have a three-, four- or five-year strategic plan when your only known income is for 12 months? NICVA's current contract with DFC ends at the end of June. We are working at risk. The voluntary and community sector is being asked to constantly work at risk, constantly hope for the best and constantly say to their staff, "It will be OK". At this stage, that is not good enough.

A multi-year Budget would offer the opportunity to stop wasting time having the constant fear and anxiety that comes with wondering where the money will come from. Having a three-year Budget, even if it is renewed annually with a three-year letter of comfort, is better than being told, "You've got three months," which is the situation that lots of organisations are in at the moment. That is no way to run an organisation. I talked about our sector being resilient, efficient and innovative. Can you imagine what it would be if we had long-term investment? We are making it even more difficult to put in place strategic thinking, collaboration, stabilisation and transformation. We are asking for one thing, but our actions are saying something else.

Miss Brogan: Thank you, Celine. I completely agree that moving to that would have a huge benefit for you.

The other thing I want to touch on is social value. You mentioned that at the end of your briefing. Do you want to elaborate on how you think incorporating social value policy could benefit your sector? How have recent changes to procurement enhanced opportunities for social value?

Ms McStravick: We have seen some really good opportunities being taken by members in our sector — mostly by the large voluntary organisations that have more staff, enabling them to make the most of those opportunities. There are really good examples of work with the private sector, particularly with building contractors who are able to come in and support organisations that really need that help. Opportunities are being missed by the smaller and mid-range organisations that do not have the staff needed to capitalise on that. They are really just running on empty, doing what they can. At NICVA, we run a series of workshops and training events on how to make the most of social value, but there really needs to be a bit more hand-holding and bespoke support for those organisations, working with the private sector to do a bit more match-making, so that it is not the same organisations that benefit all the time.

I recently met the Minister of Finance and raised the matter of how we capitalise on and aggregate the benefit of social value, exposing it a bit more so that we do not end up with the same old, same old. I have had a few meetings recently with public-sector procurement people who said that the people who are coming back for this contract have said, "We will do this for our social value, but is there something better that we could be doing?". Our sector should be part of the solution, rather than just having the private sector thinking and wondering. An opportunity is being missed as a result of lack of funding to take it. We have got so far with a very limited budget — a really small bit of money — with which we try to do bits around the edge of social value. We have been working with the Strategic Investment Board on that as well. With a bit more investment, we could see a bigger impact.

Miss Brogan: That is helpful, Celine. Thank you.

Mr Carroll: Apologies for missing your evidence, Celine. I was at a meeting of the all-party group on LGBTQIA+ equality. One of the issues raised at that meeting was the loss of core funding for those organisations. Some have lost 100% of core their funding, which is a huge blow to them but a small percentage of the Department of Health's budget. You mentioned vulnerable groups, and, in many ways, those communities are some of the most marginalised and vulnerable. I just wanted to mention that. I do not know if you have any comment on it, but I am just letting you know that it goes wider and it is prevalent.

Ms McStravick: I can offer reassurance that NICVA has been representing all those groups. In our recent meeting with the Health Minister, we were really strong on that one.

Mr Carroll: That is useful. Thanks. It is just that I heard that again this morning, and it is obviously connected.

You might have touched on this at the end your response to the Chair's questioning, but do you have any view on the lack of consultation? The Budget has no consultation process. It is a one-way street for you but also for the public. Basically, the Budget is set out, and people are told, "You have to accept it". What concerns do your members have? Do they feel excluded from the process? That is a concern that is generally expressed to me by individual members of the public who are not even in organisations. Do you have any concerns about that?

Ms McStravick: The equality impact assessment process is being used as a kind of proxy for consultation. Last year, when the budgets came out and we had no Assembly, what was stark for us was that the EQIAs, when they came out for consultation, had already identified the impact on vulnerable groups. However, the Budget decisions were still being made; there were no clear mitigating factors.

This time, we expect to see EQIAs coming out for consultation, but, in an ideal world, those would have come out for consultation before the budgetary decisions were made. Our sector just wants good decision-making; that is all we ask for. Good decision-making looks at the impact on the most vulnerable and how to use money most efficiently. This is public money; it is money belonging to all of us. We want to see it used most efficiently and make sure that we look at how the most vulnerable can be least affected, but also at how decisions can be more long-term and strategic, as opposed to year-on-year. Multi-year Budgets is a really important factor in that.

Mr Carroll: As a final point, we often get procedures or Bills and are told that Budgets are equality proofed, but then there is a decision to not pay the likes of the education staff who are out on strike this week. They are mostly women and they are underpaid, but that is deemed to be OK in the Budget process. Those two things do not add up. You do not have to say anything about that if you do not want to. I just want to put it on the record. Thanks, Celine.

Dr Aiken: Thanks for your presentation, Celine. I have a couple of questions on issues that have been touched on. You will have heard that we have a Vote on Account of up to 65%, which will enable budgetary decisions and payments to be made up until mid October. One of the ideas behind that was to give us time to talk about the impact of the Budget and put in place a Programme for Government and a consultation process. Can I have your thoughts on where we are now? You have talked about the challenges that we have. How will we get to being able to, over that period, look at Budget issues that come through, bearing in mind that everything seems to be time-compressed?

Secondly, I noted your comments about talking to Robin Swann. Robin would really like to be in a position to provide those moneys, but, as you rightly pointed out, only a small percentage of the Health budget is likely to go to your sector. Bear in mind that the extra money that Robin is looking for in the Health budget is a small part of an overall Budget of £15 billion and that the Health budget has been cut by 2.3%. How can we square that circle? The corollary to that is this: are you lobbying other Ministers as well as Robin? Actually, it is not Robin who is holding us back; it is coming from Finance and the Executive as a whole.

The Chairperson (Mr O'Toole): It is worth clarifying that there are two questions there. One is on the specific position that the Health Department is in on core funding, and asking Celine whether similar lobbying is happening. There was then a separate question around multi-year budgeting. Is that fair, Steve?

Dr Aiken: Yes.

Phillip has stepped out. He is giving a presentation and will be back in 30 or 40 minutes.

The Chairperson (Mr O'Toole): That is OK. I just wanted to distil those two questions.

Ms McStravick: I will take the core funding one first. Are we lobbying other Ministers? Yes, we never miss an opportunity. I have met several Ministers recently. Core funding, the UK Shared Prosperity Fund and everything else come up at every opportunity. I am well aware that it is a difficult position for our Health Minister to be in, but I still argue that our health and social care services cannot be delivered without some core funding to our sector. I am hopeful that the Minister may be minded, with support from his Executive colleagues, to review that decision. I will stay ever hopeful. Yes, I lobby all Northern Ireland Executive members to look at that. In fact, I will write to all of the Executive after yesterday's announcement to say that, if there is additional money coming into Northern Ireland, the needs of the voluntary and community sector have to be the priority, because we have been left wanting for far too long. Hopefully, that answers that question.

I hope that I have picked you up right on your first question being about multi-year Budgets and getting involved. Our sector is waiting with bated breath on what is happening with the PFG and on some kind of formal notice of that process, and the relationship between that and EQIAs coming out on the Budget. I am not sure whether the PFG consultation will happen at the same time as EQIAs or how that process will be run. There is uncertainty, so I would welcome any certainty on how that will look over the next few months.

We are aware that the next few months bring us to the summer — July and August — but our sector does not go away for the summer. That is one of our busiest times, because children are out of school, so we are there. We are ready and able. NICVA is eager to get involved in any process, convene any groups, be involved in any co-design consultation, etc. At the same time, that has to have a purpose. We do not want to get together for the sake of it and without any way for what we say or what we prioritise to be reflected in the final output — that is the non-cynical part of me.

Dr Aiken: Thank you.

The Chairperson (Mr O'Toole): Thank you, Celine. That was extremely useful. It is really important that we get the views of NICVA. You are able to give the views of a wide range of community and voluntary sector organisations in Northern Ireland, and it is very much appreciated. We will, no doubt,

have further engagement with you as this process continues, and on a range of other things. Thank you very much for your time, Celine.