

Scottish Women's Budget Group response to the Equality, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee Budget Scrutiny

The extent to which you believe that equalities considerations did inform decisions in this year's budget?

Scottish Women's Budget Group is concerned that equalities considerations still do not play the central role in decision making that we believe they should. Information published with the Budget does not clearly articulate how gender and equalities considerations have been used within decision making.

While the Scottish Government has outlined its response to recommendations made by the Equality and Human Rights Budget Advisory Group (of which SWBG is an external member) with actions being taken to improve equalities analysis, from the information published it remains difficult to see any step change in the use and quality of analysis.

The Equality and Fairer Scotland Budget Statement (EFSBS) acts as an important statement of intent on where Scottish Government places equality considerations in the budget process and should bring transparency and accountability to how equality data and analysis is used within decision making. The document has also been evolving over the years. This year the statement continues to use the case study approach adopted last year, however, the detailed information often available in the annex to the statement has changed. Disappointingly it no longer includes a detailed portfolio breakdown by protected characteristic. The information that is provided is higher level, does not provide links to equality impact assessments (where they might have taken place) and makes it harder to hold portfolio areas to account for how they have used equality information in their decision-making process. Some examples of this are provided in response to question 2.

In terms of transparency and accountability these changes to the EFSBS and related information make it harder to understand how equality issues have informed decision making. The case studies chosen all had increases in funding or funding maintained. While the case studies provide a summary of equality information related to the spend area the information provided fails to demonstrate how equality data had been used in the decision-making process.

The information that is provided in the EFSBS is high level and fails to take an intersectional analysis approach to protected characteristics and other categories outlined. This is a significant missed opportunity and demonstrates the limitations to the current analysis underway.

The way in which information is gathered for the budget papers and the EFSBS builds in a siloed approach to both portfolio areas and protected characteristics. There is very little intersectional analysis within the published documents. In the main EFSBS only one case study (Employability) highlights intersectional use of data but even this lacks depth of analysis to consider how the budget funds are working to

tackle challenges for particular groups, for example women from ethnic minority communities.

While SWBG recognizes that there is a need to keep documents to a manageable scale one concrete step that could improve access to information would be to link to related Equality Impact Assessments (EQIAs) that have been part of the decision making process.

To what extent did equalities considerations inform decisions across portfolio areas?

In the SWBG analysis of the budget information we have pulled out some examples to draw out where information on equalities considerations is lacking rather than a separate analysis of each portfolio area. The following examples are pulled from budget papers, particularly the EFSBS and the annexes published with it.

Scottish welfare fund

There is no information in the budget documentation about how gender and wider equalities information has been used to support the decision to maintain standstill funding to this form of assistance. Standstill funding is maintained despite the fund being oversubscribed and local authorities 'topping it up' from other budget sources. Further information about how this decision was reached and where funds may have been directed to reduce the need for the social welfare fund would have better outlined how equalities considerations were part of the decision making.

Maternal health funds

Annex 1 to the EFSBS provides evidence under the protected characteristic of pregnancy and maternity of the elevated risk of maternal death amongst women from Asian, black or mixed race backgrounds. The example budget measure responding to this is funding midwife led services. No detail is given as to how this measure addresses the specific elevated risks for women from these backgrounds and to considerations given to tackle the inequality these women are facing.

Carer Support Payments

The increase in threshold to Carers Support payment is highlighted as an important action to improve poverty experience by those who care. The increase in the threshold in Scotland matches that provided across the UK. However, it would have been interesting to know if there had been any consideration to increasing the threshold further. Particularly as the Scottish Government champions the Real Living Wage (RLW) it would make sense that the threshold followed RLW rates rather than the National Minimum Wage to increase further the money those receiving the payments can earn. So they can work 16hours at the RLW rather than the minimum wage.

Housing and Homelessness

Within the socio-economic breakdown on living standards, support for discretionary housing payments is highlighted as an important measure to tackle homelessness. In the evidence in Annex 1 it highlights that in 2023/24 homelessness reached its highest level in 12 years. There is no detail in the information provided on how the additional £7million to the discretionary housing payments is set to tackle this issue or if it is needed just to meet existing demand.

How transparent a process was the Scottish Government's development of its budget this year?

A document that SWBG is always keen to review is the Equality and Fairer Scotland Budget Statement (EFSBS). This document acts as an important statement of intent on where Scottish Government places equality considerations in the budget process and should bring transparency and accountability to how equality data and analysis is used within decision making. The document has also been evolving over the years. This year the statement continues to use the case study approach adopted last year, however, the detailed information often available in the annex to the statement have changed. Disappointingly it no longer includes a detailed portfolio breakdown by protected characteristic. The information that is provided is higher level, does not provide links to equality impact assessments (where they might have taken place) and makes it harder to hold portfolio areas to account for how they have used equality information in their decision-making process.

In terms of transparency and accountability these changes to the EFSBS and related information make it harder to understand how equality issues have informed budget decision making. The case studies chosen all had increases in funding or funding maintained. While the case studies provide a summary of equality information related to the spend, the information provided fails to demonstrate how equality data had been used in the decision-making process. For example, how did the areas of funding get chosen? Was there consideration of using the funds differently? How were intended outcomes used to drive decision making?

The government continued to publish a range of materials alongside the draft Budget this year. These provide a variety of information, including the 'Your Scotland, Your Budget' page which aims to break down budget information for the public.

What has been challenging this year is a change in how the budgets are compared year on year. This is a response to calls to better allow comparison of new spending commitments to figure which reflect in year changes rather than previous year commitments. However, the Scottish Government used reviewed figures that did not take into account additional funds coming from the UK Government following the Autumn Statement. This means that the change in budget compared to last year can often look artificially high.

Social care funding is an area that is notoriously difficult to unravel and this year's budget is no exception. The comparison data in level 4 tables is misleading due to

transfers to the local authority settlement not being included. It leads to the suggestion of an over 1000 per cent positive change between 2024-25 and 2025-26, without highlighting this is due to in-year transfers. Alongside this in the 2024-25 budget social care support funding and National Care Service development funding were combined on one line. With no money now allocated to the NCS development this year it is hard to tell the net change in position on funding for social care support. What will continue to be difficult for transparency on social care funding is clarity on how this money is allocated at local authority level. A significant amount of the Scottish Government budget is transferred to delivery partners for spend. The SWBG review of Local Authority Budgets found transparency lacking in this space. With social care funding further transferred to Integrated Joint Board budgets there is a serious lack of transparency and accountability in this funding line, that deteriorates at each level it passes to. As it is now clear that there will not be significant structural change in social care, it is imperative that mechanisms for greater transparency and accountability are built into the existing systems.

Despite this lack of transparency the Scottish Government made a headline announcement in the budget that it was meeting its 2021 commitment to increase social care spending by 25 per cent over the course of this parliament. This announcement fails to outline if the current funding is meeting needs, how the spend is working to tackle inequalities that are perpetuated by lack of quality social care and how rising costs have impacted on what can be delivered from this budget. The announcement also sits at odds of the experience at local level where decisions are being taken to limit care provision and increase thresholds to accessing funded support.

Finally, on transparency, significant spend is given to delivery partners, for example local authorities. Yet there is no public feedback loop to give transparency to this spend. SWBG recently undertook a review of local authority budget information from 2024-25 budget process. This review demonstrated that policy makers at the local level are consistently not seeing women as a group who are adversely impacted by policy decisions. This collective failure to see women was often linked to the invisibility of unpaid care work which women tend to be responsible for. The failure to see this when making decisions to cut local services will likely entrench inequalities. Within the review only one local authority in Scotland recognised the potential gendered impact of their cost-saving measures. All remaining authorities reflected no impact on women despite reduced funding affecting early years, additional support for learning, school transport and social care, all areas that are crucial from a gender equality perspective.

Within this review we also saw examples of funds earmarked by Scottish Government not being spent on the set purpose. For example, of funding earmarked for support to the Carers Act at local authority level more than a quarter was not spent on its intended purpose. This type of funding has a direct relationship to equality issues for women and other groups and it would be vital for local authorities to clearly show how equality data had driven decisions and for them to be held to account on why funds had not reached their intended purpose. Or funds moving to

general reserves when the ringfencing timeframe ran out, for example on period poverty funds.

To what extent does this year's budget reflect a cross-cutting approach to equalities, reflecting consideration of issues such as rurality?

As highlighted in previous years SWBG is concerned about the lack of intersectionality in the use of data. This applies to data and evidence on protected characteristics as well as other issues including socio-economic background and rurality.

Are there any other issues you would like to suggest the Committee should raise about the development of this year's budget from an equalities perspective?

A significant amount of work goes into producing the EFSBS. It is an important document and has the opportunity to demonstrate leadership in how equalities are forming part of the budget decision making process. However, it is currently a missed opportunity.

SWBG recommends that the Committee promotes the use of the EFSBS as part of the decision making process to centre gender and equalities considerations within decision making.

The Committee has laid out a clear focus of work for three years. Moving into year three and the focus on accountability SWBG recommends that the Committee includes consideration for how spending by delivery partners is accountable back to the Scottish Parliament and public.

Alongside the Budget documentation, the Scottish Government published a report on the OECD Gender Budgeting Pilot undertaken in 2024. As advocates of gender budgeting SWBG welcomes the government's work on the pilot exploring how it can deliver gender budgeting.

Within this pilot, in report annex A the OECD has made important recommendations including the need for clear gender equality goals, improving the quality of EQIAs and gender analysis within them, to establish the Scottish Exchequer as a lead for gender budgeting, to increase the use of information from EQIAs in budget decisions and to improve the EFSBS. This reflects the analysis above from this year's budget about the need for quality gender and equality analysis to drive decision making.

Findings from the pilot areas flagged challenges in delivering gender goals under the current portfolio approach to the Budget. There is opportunity to focus on the remaining recommendations from the OECD to make substantial improvements to gender and equality analysis within the budget process and inclusion of this in budget documentation to demonstrate how gender analysis is informing budget decisions. However, there is also a need to reflect on the challenges raised by the pilot teams and to consider to what extent significant improvements can be made



across all equalities analysis without willingness to review the siloed way of working that is a currently part of the portfolio approach.

SWBG recommends further work to develop and deepen the use of gender budget analysis as part of the process to improve equalities analysis across the Scottish Budget.