

Scottish Women's Budget Group Response to Draft Budget 2012-13, and Spending Review 2011



Introduction

Authoritative economics and political commentators have recognised the disproportionate impact of both the scale and the nature of public spending cuts on women as workers, as service users, as mothers and carers. SWBG has contributed to that awareness and analysis, alongside the data provided by the UK Women's Budget Group. SWBG is aware of the difficult economic circumstances and appreciate the Scottish Government's endeavour to create jobs.

SWBG acknowledge progress achieved by the Scottish Government, in particular the work of the Equality and Budgets Advisory Group, and the commitment of the Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth, and of officials within the Scottish Government. Nevertheless, there is significant progress to be made.

Key Areas of Challenge and Concern

Preventative spending

SWBG welcome the Scottish Government's prioritisation of preventative spending in accordance with our response to the Finance Committee Inquiry, 2 September 2011, which highlighted the importance of preventing gender-based violence, combating gender-based segregation in education, skills and employment opportunities. These are all detrimental to individuals' health and wellbeing, to their levels of attainment and to national economic prosperity.

Reform and Reconfiguration of Public Services

SWBG seeks assurances that "partnership working" and "community empowerment" will not weaken the statutory requirements in the Equality Act 2010 and that the public sector duties will be robustly applied.

Council Tax

SWBG would like to see house valuation banding changed so that council tax becomes progressive rather than regressive, as at present. The Scottish Government's endeavour to maintain households' disposable income by freezing council tax is offset by job losses and withdrawal of services affecting disadvantaged groups, including women and particularly single mothers. Additional and more robust data for a more precise evaluation of the effects is essential.

Welfare Reform and Housing

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The Scottish Government's Equality Statement recognises that the UK government's plans for "welfare reform" will hit poorer and other disadvantaged groups, exacerbating existing inequalities (p15). Women, especially single mothers, and disabled people are the groups who stand to suffer the greatest losses. The Scottish Government's own analysis of the plan to reduce housing benefit payable to working age tenants considered to be under-occupying their homes underlines that there is "no feasible way for the majority of those under-occupying social housing to find social housing of the right size".¹ This conclusion must shape plans for building new homes to take account of the different profile of need that will emerge.

Capital Investment, Infrastructure, Labour Market Dynamics

The UK Women's Budget Group have presented clear analysis of the impact on women of changes in taxation and benefits.² It has been proposed that in Scotland, these cuts to family and women's income will be offset by £42 million for capital expenditure. Tax and benefit changes, as well as projected job losses in the public sector, will adversely affect women more than men, therefore, these unequal effects in current income and expenditure need to be counterbalanced in the capital account which is to be boosted by cuts to income. SWBG urges the Scottish Government and its partners to ensure that women benefit from employment created in construction and from skills development funded by the additional £14 million per year over the next three years. Capital investment is often assumed to have gender neutral implications when in effect it is generally men who are employed in construction and are the beneficiaries of related skills programmes. It is imperative that this economic stimulus, which is funded from tax and benefit changes, addresses women's current and worsening disadvantage in the labour market and enduring occupational segregation. This additional resourcing is a unique opportunity to prevent women's employment and skills development being reversed.

Furthermore, SWBG wish to see investment less concentrated on big projects and more widely spread and more likely to employ women, for example, in a programme of insulating the housing stock and building energy efficient homes.

Finally, SWBG, and others³, have repeatedly criticised the unequal outcomes and levels of spending on women and men in the multi-million pound Modern Apprenticeship scheme. In meeting its priorities for apprenticeships and youth training and employment opportunities, the Scottish Government must ensure effective gender analysis underpins this programme, and that unequal outcomes and poor monitoring and evaluation are eliminated.

Concluding Comments

Within the current parliamentary term, there will be a referendum on Scotland's constitutional status. To achieve a more equal and prosperous Scotland, the SWBG

¹ Scottish Government (2011) Modelling Impact of Benefit Changes on those of Working Age Under Occupying a Socially Rented Property. Available at: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Built-Environment/Housing/supply-demand/chma/Benefitchangesunderoccu>

² <http://www.wbg.org.uk/index.htm>

³ http://www.scotsman.com/lifestyle/arts-blog/lesley_riddoch_gender_blinkers_are_stifling_scotland_1_2004234

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seeks the Scottish Government's commitment to equality and human rights as touchstones for public policy and allocation of resources.

SWBG urge the Government to go beyond statements of intent, routinely given in the draft budget and other documents. Spending departments must review existing practices and formulate and implement new policies keeping in mind the obligation to assess all of these for their equality implications.