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## children's law centre

Children's Rights Change  
Children's Lives



**Rt Hon Chris Heaton-Harris MP**  
Secretary of State for Northern Ireland  
Erskine House  
20-32 Chichester Street  
Belfast  
BT1 4GF

2 May 2023

Sent by email: [sos.heaton-harris@nio.gov.uk](mailto:sos.heaton-harris@nio.gov.uk), [correspondence@nio.gov.uk](mailto:correspondence@nio.gov.uk)

Dear Secretary of State,

### **Implications of budgetary decisions for children and young people in Northern Ireland**

We are writing to you as a broad collective of organisations and individuals out of a profound sense of concern about the impact of the decisions you have made in relation to Northern Ireland's finances as outlined in your Written Ministerial Statements in November 2022 (for the 2022/23 financial year) and most recently in April 2023 for the financial year we are currently in.

The impact of these budgetary decisions has already and will continue to be felt across all communities in Northern Ireland, and will disproportionately adversely impact the most vulnerable children and young people.

As we approach the examination of the UK government by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child later this month, it is particularly concerning to us that you, on behalf of the UK government appear to be making decisions that will without question actively cause serious harm to children and young people in Northern Ireland.

While recent events reflecting on the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement rightly acknowledged the progress made in Northern Ireland, it is important to underscore that the Agreement contained commitments in relation to the *protection and vindication of the human rights of all*. Decisions made in recent



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months and the cuts they have produced represent a clear regression in how children and young people can have their rights fulfilled. As a co-guarantor of the Agreement, we ask that you reflect on how your actions are out of step with the Agreement and are undermining transformation towards the, fair, rights-respecting society that was envisioned in 1998.

Our most vulnerable children are already facing significant challenges, such as poverty, unprecedented levels of mental health needs, and growing educational disadvantage. Early intervention programmes and support initiatives are crucial for these children and young people by providing the support and opportunities they need to thrive, and in some cases, to survive.

Interventions such as the School Holiday Food Grant, Healthy Happy Minds and the Extended Schools programme have been crucial in mitigating the growing and increasingly complex level of need that exists and in addressing growing inequality. The seemingly endless announcements of cuts to such early intervention programmes and support initiatives risks depriving these children and young people of the support they desperately need pending transformation of failing services. This will in turn have a devastating impact on their future life chances, perpetuating cycles of disadvantage and stockpiling more complex needs that will need to be addressed at a later date, at greater financial and personal cost. Growing inequality and disadvantage are fertile ground for those who seek to undermine the peace process.

These are the consequences of the decisions you have made.

The impact of cuts as a consequence of your budgetary decisions which demonstrably failed to take account of your statutory equality and human rights duties, will be the active and wilful harming of our most vulnerable children. It will feed the system wide regression of children's rights in Northern Ireland. This neglect will lead ultimately to an even more overwhelmed, dysfunctional system of public service provision and increased financial cost incurred in the immediate and longer term with far reaching consequences.

The UK government, as a signatory of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child has committed to uphold the rights of children across the UK. The unconscionable scale of cuts being levelled upon children's services in Northern Ireland is an antithesis to the principles and pillars of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and to the vision of children's rights in this jurisdiction.

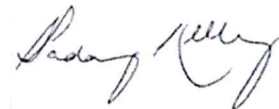
While respecting the devolution settlement and the Good Friday Agreement, the absence of functioning devolution cannot excuse the UK government of its responsibilities in ensuring the rights of children in the jurisdiction are upheld.

Disregarding those responsibilities would lead us to conclude that the UK government is enacting policy which does not reflect the values of the community it governs here.



We therefore call on you to reconsider the decisions that have been made in relation to the budget, taking into account the equality and human rights impacts that they will have on the most vulnerable children and young people in our society.

Yours sincerely,



**Paddy Kelly**

Director, Children's Law Centre

*Sent on behalf of the organisations and individuals listed below.*

**Endorsing organisations:**

Action Mental Health  
ARC Healthy Living Centre Ltd  
Ardoyne Youth Enterprise  
BAAT (British Association of Art Therapists)  
BADth (British Association of Dramatherapists)  
BAMT (British Association for Music Therapy)  
Barnardo's NI  
Beechmount Sure Start  
Belfast Interface Project  
Cara-Friend  
Children's Law Centre  
CiNI (Children in Northern Ireland)  
CO3 (Chief Officers 3rd Sector)  
Colin Neighbourhood Partnership  
Community Development & Health Network  
Contact  
Conway Education Centre  
Disability Action NI  
Dyslexia Awareness NI  
Early Years  
East Belfast Sure Start  
Ecojustice Ireland  
Employers for Childcare  
Family Mediation NI  
Focus The Identity Trust

Foodstock  
Forward South Partnership  
HERe NI  
Human Rights Consortium  
Include Youth  
Kids Together Belfast  
Lifestart Foundation  
LORAG (Lower Ormeau Residents Action Group)  
Mae Murray Foundation  
Mencap  
MindWise  
National Autistic Society NI  
National Children's Bureau  
National Energy Action NI  
NDCS (National Deaf Children's Society)  
NI Council for Racial Equality  
NI Rural Women's Network  
Niamh Louise Foundation  
NIAPN (NI Anti-Poverty Network)  
NIPSA (Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance)  
North West Community Network  
Northern Ireland Women's Budget Group  
NUS-USI (National Union of Students - Union of Students in Ireland)  
Parenting NI  
Phoenix Law  
Playboard  
Positive Futures  
Quaker Service  
Queen's Students' Union  
Reclaim the Agenda  
Relate NI  
Relatives for Justice  
RNIB NI (Royal National Institute of Blind People)  
Rural Community Network  
Save the Children NI  
SENAC (Special Educational Needs Advice Centre)  
Sense NI  
Sólás Special Needs Charity  
South Belfast Sure Start  
SSUNI (Secondary Students' Union NI)  
St. Peters Immaculata Youth Centre

Start360  
STEP (South Tyrone Empowerment Programme)  
Sure Start Edenballymore  
The Fostering Network  
The Rainbow Project  
Unite the Union  
UTU (Ulster Teachers' Union)  
VOYPIC (Voice of Young People in Care)  
Women's Regional Consortium  
Women's Support Network  
Women's Platform  
Youth Work Alliance

**Endorsing individuals:**

Professor Laura Lundy, Queen's University Belfast  
Dr Dominic McSherry, Ulster University  
Phil Scraton, Professor Emeritus, Queen's University Belfast  
Dr Siobhán McAlister, Queen's University Belfast  
Professor Anne-Marie McAlinden, Queen's University Belfast  
Professor Victoria Simms, Ulster University  
Sinead Kyle BL  
Madeleine Leonard, Professor Emeritus, Queen's University Belfast  
Dr Una Convery, Ulster University  
Professor Rory O'Connell, Ulster University  
Deirdre McAliskey, A Way With Words  
Dr Suzanne Mooney, Queen's University Belfast  
Dr Deena Haydon  
Professor Colin Harvey, Queen's University Belfast  
Goretti Horgan, Ulster University  
Dr Bronagh Byrne, Queen's University Belfast  
Dr Karen Orr, Stranmillis University College  
Alan Law, Chairperson – Education Trade Union Group - NIC-ICTU  
Dr Ciara Fitzpatrick, Ulster University  
Dr Gillian Kane, Ulster University  
Ciaran White BL  
Dr Lucy Royal-Dawson, Ulster University  
Dr Fiona Bloomer, Ulster University