

# Making Children Visible in Policy Making in Northern Ireland

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## Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998

Requires all Government Departments, in carrying out their functions, to have regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity between the following groups:

- persons of different religious belief, political opinion, racial group, **age**, marital status or sexual orientation;
- men and women generally;
- persons with a disability and persons without; and
- persons with dependants and persons without.
  - Thus, an Equality Impact Assessment must be carried out on all new policies.

# Steps in the EQIA Process\*

- Step 1 Defining the aims of the policy
- Step 2 Consideration of available data and research
- Step 3 Assessment of impacts
- Step 4 Consideration of measures which may mitigate any adverse impact and alternative policies which may better achieve the promotion of equality of opportunity
- Step 5 Formal consultation
- Step 6 Decision and publication of the EQIA results
- Step 7 Monitoring for adverse impact

\* As recommended in Guidance by the Equality Commission for NI (2001, 2005)

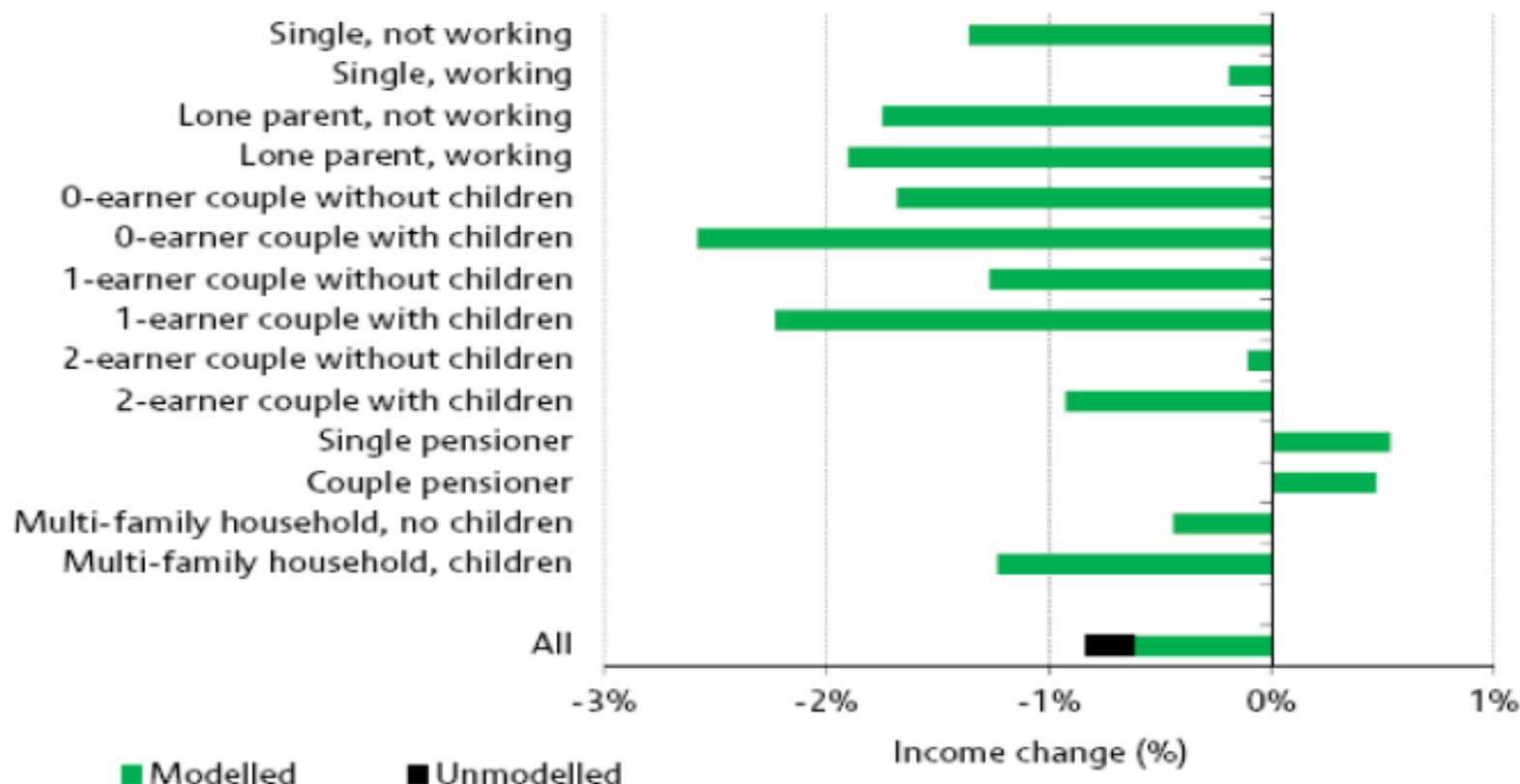
# Welfare Reform EQIA – 2011

In line with these duties, in 2011, the Department for Social Development carried out an Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) on proposals for the Northern Ireland Welfare Reform Bill 2011 which assessed as to their potential impact:

- marital status
- men and women generally;
- persons with a disability and persons without; and
- persons with dependants and persons without.
  - Age not included at all (pensioners not impacted by welfare reform) despite children being mentioned again and again in relation to both disability benefits and changes to conditionality for lone parents AND despite several published studies reporting that families with children would lose most income as a result of the proposed changes

# Modelling by Institute for Fiscal Studies (2010)

**Figure 4: Distributional impact of tax and benefit reforms to be introduced in 2012-13, by household type and work status<sup>3</sup>**



Note: Assumes full take-up of means-tested benefits and tax credits.

## NI to be hit harder than other regions because

Higher proportion of households with children than any other region of the UK (34%); the UK average is 28%

As well as having more families with children, NI has more children within families, an average of 2.4 children per family compared to an average 1.8 in GB.

Around 23% of working age people claim a key benefit, compared to 13% in GB; (Wales 19%)

NI has twice the proportion of DLA awards than the average for GB and a considerably higher proportion than the next highest regions of Wales and Scotland

## Findings of CRIA commissioned by NICCY

All families with children will lose income because child benefit has been frozen for three years from April 2011. The loss to two child families in real terms will be around £208pa by the years 2012/3.

N. Ireland has more families claiming Working Tax Credit (WTC) than any other region of the UK (due to low wages). While always high, the number of working families in receipt of WTC has grown over the last decade. In 2011, over one fifth (21%) of our households received WTC, most of these low-income families are families with children.

## Findings of CRIA commissioned by NICCY 2

- Families living in rented accommodation, whether social housing or private rented sector would be forced to spend on rent money meant for food and heat. The alternative is to move to a cheaper area (though no clarity about where these areas are) with all the disruption that implies for children's education and friendships and reduced family or community support for parents.
- Families raising disabled children would be hit by reductions in benefits while young people with severe disabilities would lose a non-means tested benefit which helps them meet additional costs of disability and some to access higher education

## Findings of CRIA commissioned by NICCY 3

Thousands of children will see their families lose income because of the benefit cap – this is because there are 4 or more children in their family.

Children in lone parent families at particular risk of increased material deprivation due to abolition of Social Fund

New sanctions regime threatens well-being of children and young people unless regulations around conditionality and sanctions take into account Northern Ireland's history of conflict, its high levels of mental ill-health and its lack of accessible and affordable childcare.

# Impact of the CRIA

Little positive response from the Minister at DSD but widely welcomed by politicians, NGOs, children's organisations and others who used the information to campaign to protect the living standards of children and young people.

Revised EQIA which was subsequently published confirmed the concerns in the CRIA about the impact of welfare reform on children but did not include children as a category which would require impact assessment

As a result of use of CRIA as a campaigning tool, some concessions have been made in relation to fortnightly payment of benefit; who receives benefits and expected in relation to "under-occupancy" of social housing and conditionality for parents, especially lone parents

## Concerns relating to CRIA (from Discussion Paper)

Fear of complicating the policy process/decision-making and creating delay; lack of knowledge about children's rights; insufficient human resources and concern about adding to workload of officials; Challenges of conducting consultation with limited time and resources.

EQIAs being carried out anyway – a separate new tool for CRIA may not be necessary; a screening tool that includes all the assessments that may be needed can be enough to flag up when a full CRIA is needed; simply add another small step to the process. We need to think about what is there already that we can use and what do we need to add?

Consultations often happening anyway, children's organisations can be contracted to carry out consultations with children and young people while officials are training

## Concerns relating to CRIA (from Discussion Paper) 2

Limited support, advice or training for those responsible for conducting CRIA. Difficulty in establishing definitive criteria for the fulfilment of children's rights. Children's issues cross different government jurisdictions.

NGOs and Universities can provide training and support to reduce concerns among officials both about children's rights and about the use of administrative data to carry out CRIAs

Criteria don't have to be definitive; any steps towards recognition of children's rights would be a start for most government departments; regional and national governments need to promote an integrated approach with all relevant agencies promoting similar guidelines on how CRIAs can work.

## Concerns relating to CRIA (from Discussion Paper) 3

Growing critique of effectiveness of impact assessment processes in general.

Effectiveness of impact assessments *on their own* has to be questioned given how austerity has ignored women's and children's rights even where GIAs and CRIAs are the norm and hard-fought-for poverty-proofing has been ignored.

However, GIAs and CRIAs can be powerful tools for campaigners who are trying to mitigate the worst impacts of austerity – as seen in already announced changes to NI's welfare reform proposals and in expected major changes that are still under negotiation.