
Creating a fairer Britain

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The EHRC has been a member of Equality Budget Advisory Group since its inception.

The way in which equality is considered in the budget process is one of the most sophisticated considerations in Europe, although it is not perfect.

Recent discussions at the Budget Review Group (BRG) determined that BRG has clearly supported the principle that equalities assessment must remain a core consideration of the budgetary process. However they were also clear that this should be an expanded and continuous role covering both a forward look at the impact of new policies as well as an assessment of past budgetary decisions. BRG have asked EBAG to lead on establishing what this expanded process might look like and within that have specifically recommended that Scottish Government should:

• Continue to publish a product alongside the annual budget document
• Publish additional equalities information prior to summer recess to inform medium term financial strategy and annual budget decisions
• Explore the feasibility of providing a distributional analysis by equality characteristics on the taxation, expenditure and social security proposals contained in the budget.

I would be happy to discuss my reflections on being a member of EBAG with the Committee during the forthcoming session.
QUESTION 1

Do you consider that the Scottish Government’s Budget for 2017-18 reflected its stated priorities (as set out in the National Performance Framework),

- If not, how could the budget be adjusted to better reflect priorities?

One of the difficulties that EBAG has encountered is being able to identify the link between spending intent and equalities impact. In early years this identification was quite crude with a more universalist approach being taken by officials in stating the beneficial outcomes for people who share protected characteristics – for example the completion of a new hospital would benefit older people as was set out in one early Equality Budget Statement (EBS), but this benefit to older people was not the purpose of the constriction of the hospital but more of a tangential gain. In recent years EBAG has pushed the Government to make the link between equality evidence, policy intention and expenditure more explicit, so that EBAG members and others can see a clearer link between the Scottish Governments analysis, the Public Sector Equality Duties and the intended outcomes of the budgetary process.

One of the problems that hampers EBAGs ability to analyse and attribute positive or negative outcomes to policy is lack of data and the looseness of Governments National Performance Framework. For example as it stands the Government outcome on education – “our young people are successful learners, confident individuals, effective contributors and responsible citizens” is measured by the indicator “improve levels of educational attainment”. However as we know disabled children have far lower levels of educational attainment but any increase or decreases in their attainment could be masked by a general; improvement or regression in national attainment.

In short the indicator and its supporting data are not granular enough to be able to isolate the specific outcomes for groups who share protected characteristics. This is a problem that cuts across almost all areas of budgetary planning and restricts the ability of the Government to be able to assure itself that the positive progress envisaged is being achieved.
Question 2

If additional resources become available for the 2018-19 budget, how could these be most effectively deployed?

- What evidence supports your views?

If further savings are required to be identified in the 2018-19 budget, where should these be found?

- What evidence supports your views?

The EHRC has not used EBAG to lobby for any specific spend other than to urge the Government to be clearer about how their proposed spend benefits groups who share protected characteristics. Rather we are concerned with how the Government reaches its decisions and particularly the evidence it uses to profile need and design interventions.

As above we have indicated that data on outcomes for people sharing protected characteristics is often poor (especially when considering LGBTI issues, religion and belief, gender reassignment). Additional capacity to improve equalities data, and specifically the commissioning of research when formulating budgetary projects would be welcome.

Question 3

Is sufficient information available to support scrutiny of the Scottish Government’s budget on the protection and advancement of equalities and human rights?

- If not, what additional information would help support budget scrutiny?

As discussed above the predominant problem is the availability of data for people who share protected characteristics. This is apparent from initial scoping and analysis through to output monitoring and reporting.
Question 4
What impact has the 2017-18 budget had on supporting the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED)

This is a very difficult question to answer due to the data limitations discussed above. Our own impression of the use of the duty across the public sector is that budgetary issues are rarely examined in detail through the lens of the duties – rather is the policies that the budget enables that deliver the equality gains rather than the budget itself.

The EHRC as an EBAG member has consistently pushed for greater linkage between the evidence, the duties and the budget, and would like to see greater consideration in the EBS and in the Budget itself of how evidence has been used to arrive at the stated priorities. We would also encourage the Government to be more confident in stating when budgetary decisions may not promote equality, or indeed may restrict it. Similarly an open analysis of budgetary proposals against the known needs of groups who share protected characteristics would enable a “bottom up analysis” which could illustrate how need has been overlooked over time.

The EHRC has commissioned research which examines the impact of the PSED four years after its implementation. We anticipate that this research will be available in the Spring.