



The first Gender Budgeting Pilot in Northern Ireland: Summary Report

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This report was prepared by Aoife Mallon, Research and Engagement Associate, on behalf of the JRCT Gender Budgeting Research Team.



1. Introduction

1.1 The first Gender Budgeting Pilot in Northern Ireland

In February 2023, Derry City and Strabane District Council (DCSDC) unanimously passed a motion which instructed Council Officials to “to explore the feasibility of undertaking a pilot gender budget analysis project within Derry City and Strabane District Council¹.” Since 2023, Council Officials at DCSDC worked closely with the JRCT Gender Budgeting Project² to develop and implement the first gender budgeting pilot to be conducted in Northern Ireland. This report will provide a summary of the gender budgeting pilot and make recommendations for future work in this area.

1.2 Background to the JRCT Gender Budgeting Project

Between 2019 and 2026, researchers at Ulster University were funded by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust (JRCT) to conduct research and develop training materials to support the implementation of gender budgeting in Northern Ireland. The project involved conducting empirical research with a range of stakeholders, analysis of policy documents and research on international best practice to help determine the potential impact of gender budgeting in Northern Ireland.

This project was delivered in partnership with the Northern Ireland Women’s Budget Group³, which is civil society organisation that aims to scrutinise policy and budgetary matters to secure substantive gender equality. The Northern Ireland Women’s Budget Group have worked with the Ulster University⁴ research team to deliver training on gender budgeting and engage with a range of stakeholders.

The JRCT Gender Budgeting team includes:

Ulster University Research Team

- Professor Joan Ballantine (Department for Accounting, Finance & Economics)
- Professor Ann Marie Gray (School of Applied Social and Policy Sciences)
- Dr. Michelle Rouse (School of Applied Social and Policy Sciences)
- Aoife Mallon (Research and Engagement Associate)

Northern Ireland Women’s Budget Group

- Lynn Carvill (Director)
- Alexandra Brennan (Co-ordinator)
- Elizabeth Law (Member)

¹ Derry City and Strabane District Council (2023) Meeting Minutes: Agenda Number C117/23. Available at: <https://meetings.derrycityandstrabanedistrict.com/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=189&MID=1955#AI35083>

² ARK (2026) The JRCT Gender Budgeting Project [Website]. Available at: https://www.ark.ac.uk/ARK/projects/Gender_Budgeting/

³ Northern Ireland Women’s Budget Group (2026) [Website]. Available at: <https://www.niwbgroup.org/>

⁴ Ulster University (2026) [Website]. Available at: <https://www.ulster.ac.uk/>

1.3 What is Gender Budgeting?



Gender budgeting involves conducting equality analysis through a gender lens. It is an application of gender mainstreaming in the budget process which requires decisionmakers to consider how budgets and policies will impact people of different genders, taking into consideration any intersecting equality characteristics.

Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act (1998)⁵ places a statutory obligation on public authorities to systematically identify the equality impacts of policies and budgets. However, the implementation of Section 75 by public authorities since 1998 often sees the equality impacts of policies and budgets analysed in siloes with limited intersectional analysis across different equality groups. Gender budgeting provides an opportunity to improve the intersectionality of analysis across various equality groups when conducting equality screenings of budgets or policies.

As of 2023, gender budgeting tools have been used to close gender gaps in 61% of countries that are members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)⁶. Gender budgeting is not a 'one-size-fits-all' and different countries use different tools depending on what works best within their unique political and institutional arrangements. On average, countries practicing gender budgeting use approximately three tools, such as gender budgeting legislation, ex-ante gender-impact assessments and incorporating a gender perspective in performance frameworks.

OECD countries have evolved their approach to gender budgeting over the last three decades by adapting existing tools or adding new tools. For this reason, it is important to monitor and evaluate the use of gender budgeting tools over time to ensure they are being used as effectively as possible.

1.4 Why conduct a gender budgeting pilot?

Conducting a pilot can be a useful way to explore the feasibility of a new approach. In most countries where gender budgeting has been successful, gender budgeting began on a small scale and was developed into a larger project over several years, building on progress and learning from best practice on an ongoing basis⁷. As gender budgeting is still a relatively new concept in Northern Ireland, it was appropriate for DCSDC to trial it on a pilot basis to understand how it would work in practice before considering full implementation.

⁵ U.K. Government (1998) *Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act* [Legislation]. Available at: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/47/section/75>

⁶ OECD (2023) Gender Budgeting In OECD Countries. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/2023/07/gender-budgeting-in-oecd-countries-2023_d04134bb.html

⁷ (ibid.)

2. Pilot Context

2.1 The Council Area

Derry City and Strabane District Council (DCSDC) is one of eleven local government districts in Northern Ireland. According to data from the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA)⁸, DCSDC serves a population of approximately 150,859 people and has seven district electoral areas, comprising 40 electoral wards. A large percentage of the council area is rural, with 1766 farms registered to addresses in the area in 2021 and a total agricultural labour force at that time of 3579 persons⁹.

The Council itself is made up of 40 elected Councillors, supported by approximately 260 employees¹⁰. In September 2024, DCSDC received £290m in funding through the City Deal and Inclusive Future Fund¹¹. This Deal marked the single largest investment by the U.K. Government and Northern Ireland Executive in the region. A core aim of the funding is to create more jobs, boost innovation and improve health outcomes for people living in the area.

In terms of demographics, 49% of people living in DCSDC are male and 51% are female. Approximately 24% of the population are aged 17 or under, 60% are aged 18-64 and 16% are aged over 65. The proportion of people from minority ethnic groups is lower than the average for Northern Ireland, with only 1.2% of the population being from a minority ethnic group compared to 1.5% of all people living in Northern Ireland.

2.2 Inequality in the Council area

DCSDC has some of the highest levels of deprivation in Northern Ireland, particularly in relation to economic inactivity, health inequalities and homelessness. Compared to Northern Ireland averages, DCSDC has the highest rates of child poverty, income deprivation, homelessness and free school meals. DCSDC is also below the Northern Ireland average for life expectancy, general health and personal wellbeing¹²¹³.



⁸ NISRA (2024) Northern Ireland Local Statistics Explorer: Derry City and Strabane/ Available at: <https://explore.nisra.gov.uk/local-stats/N09000005/>

⁹ Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (2021) Agricultural Census Northern Ireland. Available at: <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/publications/agricultural-census-northern-ireland-2021>

¹⁰ DCSDC (2026) Your Councillors [Website]. Available at: <https://www.derrystrabane.com/about-council/councillors>

¹¹ DCSDC (2026) City Deal and Inclusive Future Fund [Website] Available at: <https://www.derrystrabane.com/about-council/city-deal/city-deal-inclusive-future-fund>

¹² DCSDC (2026) Statistics: Deprivation [Website]. Available at: <https://www.derrystrabane.com/about-council/derry-and-strabane-statistics/deprivation>

¹³ Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2025) Poverty in Northern Ireland [Report]. Available at: <https://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/default/files/pdfs/poverty-in-northern-ireland-2025-19f5cdd2b4967c4fe2323d91510b5ef5.pdf>



The employment rate in DCSDC is 76%, with total employment levels increasing from 58,900 in 2001 to 67,900 in 2021 (a 15.3% increase)¹⁴. However, only 51% of the disabled population are employed and only 27% of registered blind and partially sighted individuals are employed. People in receipt of Universal Credit in DCSDC make up 12.4% of the population, compared to the Northern Ireland average of 8.9%. DCSDC also has 4.8% more people in receipt of Personal Independent Payments (PIP) than the Northern Ireland average and approximately 40% of those on the claimant count are in work and receiving benefits due to low pay¹⁵.

2.3 Focusing the Pilot

From the outset of this project, Council Officials agreed that the gender budgeting pilot should focus on one specific area of the Council's Budget, rather than the Council's Budget as a whole. At a meeting of the Senior Leadership Team in October 2024, it was agreed that the pilot would focus on leisure, as Council Officials were already anecdotally aware of inequalities that existed in terms of how different groups of people access services. It is also an area of the Council's work that strongly relates to health and wellbeing, which are key indicators for poverty.

The Council provides a wide range of leisure facilities across the district, catering to the needs of different groups and interests. There are ten leisure centres in the Council area, and these facilities are designed to promote active living, social engagement, and community wellbeing. Promoting physical activity and healthy lifestyles is a key strategic priority for the Council. This is demonstrated by the Council's work on integrating wellness into its leisure offerings, recognising that leisure can promote positive mental health and wellbeing¹⁶.

2.4 Leisure and Gender Inequality

In 2024, DCSDC conducted an Audit of Inequalities¹⁷ which found that:

"The main variable that impacted on the experiences of and attitudes to sport and physical activity was respondents' gender, and this was the case in both the Kids' Life and Times Survey and Young Persons' Life and Times Survey."

A study conducted by the Children's Sport Participation and Physical Activity (CSPPA)¹⁸ found that in 2022, only 17% of Northern Irish children and youth met the recommended physical activity guidelines of 60 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity (MVPA) per day. Fewer girls met the physical activity guidelines

¹⁴ DCSDC (2024) Audit of Inequalities. Available at: <https://www.derrystrobane.com/getmedia/306fa4d1-b871-48b0-85ce-5276622b133d/Audit-of-Inequalities-2024-Final.pdf>

¹⁵ (ibid. 14)

¹⁶ DCSDC (2024) Be Active: A Physical Activity, Wellbeing & Sport Strategy. Available at: <https://www.derrystrobane.com/getattachment/f75139ea-3472-46f9-af44-d96f17cefc0f/Be-Active-Physical-Activity-Wellbeing-and-Sport-Strategy-2024-2028.pdf?lang=en-GB>

¹⁷ (ibid. 14)

¹⁸ Children's Sport Participation and Physical Activity (CSPPA) (2022) CSPPA 2022 Report. Available at: <https://csppa.ie/csppa-2022-report/>

compared to boys, and this gender difference was evident in both primary school and post primary school levels.

In DCSDC’s 2024 Audit of Inequalities Report¹⁹, the following actions were identified by the Council as potential remedies for gender disparities in the provision and usage of leisure services:



- Engage with after-school clubs, youth clubs and students’ unions in university and colleges to encourage participation of children and young people in affordable sport and leisure initiatives – this will help develop interest which may carry through to adulthood
- Increased awareness of tailored programmes
- Increased awareness of the new concessionary pricing structure
- Availability of crèche facilities
- Review times of activities
- Review location of activities to get greatest participation levels

The following table provides a breakdown of leisure centre users by gender from the DCSDC 2024 Audit of Inequalities Report.

Table 1: Gender breakdown of users of Council leisure facilities

Centre	No. of Females	No. Of Males	Total	Group Bookings
Bishops Field	8	6	14	1
Brandywell	3	6	9	127
Brooke Park	772	967	1739	109
City Baths	215	179	394	27
Derg Valley	1972	1239	3211	30
Foyle Arena	13049	11094	24143	581
Melvin	1334	945	2279	103
Riversdale	5442	4030	9472	146
TSC	4112	3578	7690	241
	26907	22044	48951	1365

Gender	No.	%
Male	22044	45.03%
Female	26907	54.97%
TOTAL	48951	100%

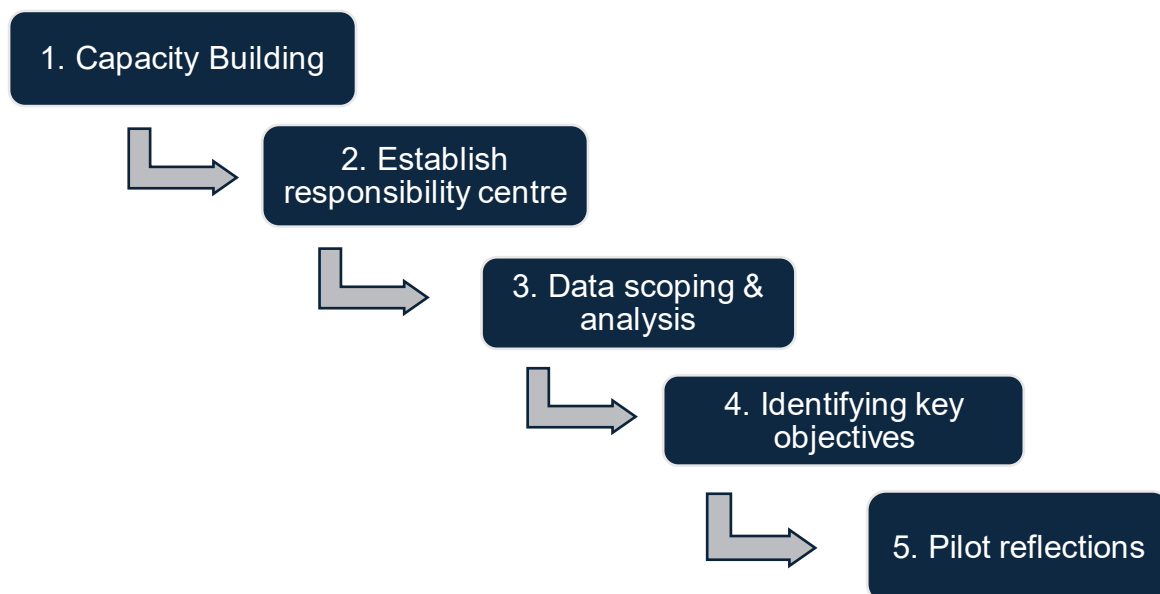
¹⁹ (ibid. 14)

3. Pilot Activity

3.1 Summary of Activity

This flow-chart illustrates the key stages of the DCSDC gender budgeting pilot that took place between 2023 and 2026. A list of key meetings that took place throughout the pilot has been included in the Appendix of this report.

Figure 1: Key Stages of the Gender Budgeting Pilot



3.2 Stage-by-stage Overview

Stage 1: Capacity Building

When the gender budgeting motion passed in 2023, gender budgeting was still a new concept within the Council, and in Northern Ireland more generally. This meant that significant capacity building work was necessary in the early stages to lay a strong foundation for the pilot. This capacity building work not only helped to increase understanding of gender budgeting within the Council but also allowed the JRCT Gender Budgeting Project to take stock of the unique structures and processes within the Council which would be relevant to the work of the pilot.

Between 2023 and 2024, several meetings took place between the JRCT Gender Budgeting Project and Council Officials to build capacity on gender budgeting within the Council. These meetings took the form of introductory conversations and presentations to various teams within the Council, both online and in-person.

The key aims of this stage of the pilot were to:

1. Increase understanding of gender budgeting within the Council
2. Identify key individuals to take part in a working group for the pilot
3. Develop working relationships between the JRCT Project and Council Officials

As a result of this capacity building work between 2023 and 2024, the team were able to increase understanding of gender budgeting within the Council, identify leisure as the key focus of the pilot, and establish a responsibility centre for the pilot based on the conversations with those who had engaged during the capacity building stage.

Stage 2: Establish a Responsibility Centre



For any pilot to be successful, it is crucial that a responsibility centre is established to guide and oversee this piece of work. This stage can be challenging if there are resource constraints within an organisation as it requires individuals to give up time and effort within their working hours. Strong leadership is required to ensure that individuals recruited to the responsibility centre remain motivated and supported throughout the pilot.

During the capacity building stage, key individuals were identified as potential Working Group members based on the relevance of their work to gender budgeting and leisure services within the Council. In early 2025, a Working Group for the pilot was established by Council Officials and a forward work plan was agreed. Between 2025 and 2026, the Working Group met quarterly to discuss ongoing developments with the pilot and evaluated its progress on an ongoing basis. Smaller group discussions were also had between the Pilot Working Group Chair, Data Officer, and JRCT project representatives throughout the pilot. The Working Group was facilitated by the JRCT Gender Budgeting Project and chaired by the Lead Democratic Services and Improvement Officer from DCSDC. Working Group members included:

- Management within Community Development and Leisure
- Accountant for Health and Community Department
- Data Officer for Health and Community Development
- Leisure Area Managers for specific Leisure centres in DCSDC

It was important that responsibility for the pilot was shared across the Working Group and mainstreamed across multiple levels of governance. This meant that the Group benefitted from knowledge and expertise at both the policy level and the delivery level, regarding how leisure services are designed and how users experience them. The Working Group proved to be a critical function in the successful implementation of the gender budgeting pilot in DCSDC.

Stage 3: Data Scoping and Analysis

The availability and accessibility of relevant equality data is crucial to understanding how budgets and policies impact different groups of people. Having access to the right information at the right stage of policymaking is also conducive to rational, evidence-based decision-making and can lead to more targeted policy approaches. When data is used effectively to tailor policies according to areas of greatest need, budgets can be spent more efficiently.

Throughout 2025, the Working Group undertook a data-scoping exercise to determine what data was available to the Council regarding how different groups of people engage with the Council's leisure services. This involved collecting data relating to leisure centre usage, Council pitch usage and budgetary information. Anonymous customer survey data and community wellbeing survey data was also used to provide qualitative context to the quantitative data. It was not feasible to collect primary data during the pilot; therefore, the data-scoping exercise focused on collating existing secondary data that was already accessible to the Council.

The table below provides a summary of data that was gathered by the Working Group and analysed as part of this exercise.

Table 2: Summary of data collected during the data-scoping exercise

Type	Title
1. Leisure service usage data (1 st April 2024 – 31 st March 2025)	• Active Members disaggregated by centre, member status, age and gender • Active Paid Members disaggregated by centre, member status, age and gender • Active Paid Members by gender and membership type including advance payments, direct debits, DCSDC staff membership and corporate membership • Kids' Bookable Activities disaggregated by gender • Swimming data disaggregated by member status, age and gender • Teen Gym usage (age 12-16) disaggregated by gender • Health suite users disaggregated by member status and gender • Gym usage disaggregated by member status and gender and paid member/ casual status • Fitness class usage disaggregated by member status and gender • Pitch usage disaggregated by age (over/under 18) and gender • List of services for each leisure centre in DCSDC
2. Survey data	• 2022 Community Survey • 2023 Customer Survey

This data was analysed by the Ulster University Research Team and key findings were presented to the Pilot Working Group in October 2025. The Working Group discussed the findings and agreed that it would be useful to contextualise the findings with financial data to understand how Council spending impacted the experience of service users.



For the purposes of this pilot, it was not feasible to analyse all expenditure across leisure services in DCSDC, therefore, a budget snapshot exercise was undertaken which focused on the budget and expenditure of the largest leisure service provider in DCSDC which is Foyle Arena.

When analysing budgetary information, key questions that were asked included:

- How is the budget structured?
- How are the Council's policy objectives reflected in its spending?
- Were there any areas of overspend or underspend in the last financial year?
- How could funds be better targeted towards meeting policy objectives?

This information helped to provide additional context to previous findings relating to leisure service usage in DCSDC.

Stage 4: Identifying key objectives



After collecting and analysing data relating to leisure services in DCSDC, the Working Group discussed the findings at two key meetings in February 2026. The Working Group were keen to ensure that this analysis fed into decision-making and made a tangible difference to the work of the Council in improving equality outcomes for leisure service users.

After an initial online meeting, an in-person workshop was organised to have a more in-depth discussion about the findings and agree a forward work-plan. At these meetings, three high-level objectives were agreed for how the Working Group could use the analysis to guide decision-making going forward.

These objectives included (but were not limited to):

1. Address equality data gaps identified during the data-scoping exercise
2. Explore gender differences in service usage further
3. Embed findings into Council policies and strategies

Stage 5: Pilot reflections

A pilot 'wrap-up' workshop was held in-person at DCSDC at the end of February 2026 to reflect on the work of the gender budgeting pilot to date. This workshop provided an opportunity for the Working Group to share their experience of being involved in the pilot and reflect on the successes and challenges of this work. During this workshop, the Working Group were asked to reflect on several questions including:

- What value did the pilot bring to the Council?
- What were the strengths and weaknesses of this project?
- How can this learning be further embedded going forward?



Pilot Reflections

Some of the key reflections shared at this stage of the pilot included:

1. The pilot demonstrated the importance of ensuring that equality data is accessible to those with responsibility for delivering leisure services in the Council area.
2. The pilot took place at a useful time as the findings could feed into the ongoing development and implementation of policies, for example, the building of new leisure facilities.
3. Many of the issues highlighted by the data were already known anecdotally but the pilot provided an opportunity to stand back, look at the data and understand what actions were needed to support the Council in achieving its objectives relating to wellbeing and tackling inequality.
4. A key take-away of the pilot was that allocating the same resources to everyone equally will not lead to equal outcomes, as not everyone has the same needs.
5. As a result of the pilot, the Working Group gained a deeper understanding of how different groups of people use leisure services.
6. The Working Group agreed that the outcomes of the pilot would be positive for all equality groups protected under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act, not just gender.

These reflections were shared with a wider group of key stakeholders at the JRCT Gender Budgeting Project Conference which took place in Ulster University on 17th June 2026. You can watch a summary video of the conference [here](#).

4. The future of Gender Budgeting in DCSDC

4.1 Ongoing improvement work

Prior to the pilot taking place, DCSDC was already taking measures to improve equality outcomes for leisure service users. The pilot provided a useful opportunity for the Council to build on this work and refine its approach going forward. This ongoing improvement work in DCSDC is underpinned by several commitments across various Council strategies and policies, including:

- Strategic Growth Community Plan (2017-2032)²⁰
- Corporate Plan (2025/26) and Improvement Plan (2025/26)²¹
- City Deal and Inclusive Future Fund Financial Deal (2024)²²
- Physical Activity, Wellbeing & Sport Strategy (2024-2028)²³
- Equality Action Plan (2024-2027)²⁴
- Disability Action Plan (2024-2027)²⁵

During the pilot, the Council made several policy changes that related to the work of the gender budgeting pilot. These changes included:

- Asking clubs to supply gender data when booking Council pitches
- Exploring the introduction of bespoke fitness classes to address under-representation of certain equality groups
- Designating all leisure centres in DCSDC as breastfeeding sites
- Profiling budgets by activities to track spending on specific leisure activities
- Implementing a period poverty initiative across all leisure centres



²⁰DCSDC (2017) Strategic Growth Community Plan (2017-2032) Available at: https://www.derrystrabane.com/getmedia/089a13e6-2d2d-4f02-8642-9813e87b4b9f/SGP_2025_reviewed.pdf

²¹DCSDC (2025) Corporate Plan (2025/26) and Improvement Plan (2025/26). Available at: https://www.derrystrabane.com/getmedia/20894174-37d6-48fa-b35b-249671316e1f/2-1-App1_-Corporate-Improvement-Plan-2025-26e.pdf

²²DCSDC (2024) City Deal and Inclusive Future Fund Financial Deal. Available at: https://www.derrystrabane.com/getmedia/2eeb6361-040a-40e1-9596-96273ae3096f/DCSDC_CityDealFinancialDeal_Draft14.pdf

²³DCSDC (2024) Physical Activity, Wellbeing & Sport Strategy (2024-2028). Available at: <https://www.derrystrabane.com/getattachment/f75139ea-3472-46f9-af44-d96f17cefc0f/Be-Active-Physical-Activity-Wellbeing-and-Sport-Strategy-2024-2028.pdf?lang=en-GB>

²⁴DCSDC (2024) Equality Action Plan (2024-2027). Available at: <https://www.derrystrabane.com/getmedia/ff505e1c-e504-4fd9-b286-e92776f20873/Equality-action-plan-24-27-final.pdf>

²⁵DCSDC (2024) Disability Action Plan (2024-2027). Available at: <https://www.derrystrabane.com/getmedia/3ecc3458-da77-44ed-a5bc-1677d7e9a567/Disability-Action-Plan-2024-27-final.pdf>

In addition, the following actions were agreed for the Working Group to take forward after the pilot:

1. Continue to meet on a regular basis to discuss progress in relevant areas and identify further potential areas of work
2. Use the tools applied in the gender budgeting pilot to consider how additional Section 75 groups access leisure services
3. Conduct a performance measurement piece to track Council progress to date
4. Expand the reach of the Working Group to include the leads for programming
5. Explore the potential of a data engagement piece

4.2 Key Recommendations

Based on the work of this pilot, the JRCT Gender Budgeting Project team made the following key recommendations to support the Council in their ongoing work on gender budgeting.

1. Circulate an annual bulletin with centre-specific data on key gender statistics to track progress over time.
2. Engage directly with leisure service users to identify any further areas where disparities exist and work is needed.
3. Engage with new centre development teams to discuss what gender considerations have been made to date and what additional work could be done in this area.
4. Evaluate ongoing marketing and promotion activities to determine whether they are having the desired impact in addressing the representation issues identified by each centre.
5. Perform a regular gender-based analysis of existing leisure service usage data, incorporating any additional data available relating to other Section 75 groups.
6. Conduct a mapping exercise to understand what services are being provided across all leisure centres in DCSDC, what the health outcomes of these services are and identify any gaps.
7. Explore the feasibility of extending gender budgeting work into other areas within DCSDC, beyond leisure.



Appendix

The Table below includes a list of key meetings that took place during the Gender Budgeting Pilot in Derry City and Strabane District Council (DCSDC).

Table 3: Key Meetings of the Pilot (2023-2026)

Date	Meeting Title
20/09/23	Introductory meeting between DCSDC and JRCT Project team
21/11/23	Follow-up meeting between DCSDC and JRCT Project team
11/03/24	Catch-up call between DCSDC and NIWBG
03/05/24	Meeting between DCSDC and JRCT Project team
22/08/24	Meeting between DCSDC and JRCT Project team
01/10/24	Presentation by JRCT Project team to DCSDC Senior Leadership Team (SLT)
16/12/24	Meeting between JRCT Project team and Community and Leisure staff within DCSDC
17/12/25	Meeting between JRCT Project team and DCSDC Data Officer
12/02/25	First meeting of the Pilot Working Group
12/03/25	Second meeting of the Pilot Working Group
06/05/25	Presentation by JRCT Project team to DCSDC Governance and Strategic Planning Committee
11/08/25	Catch-up call regarding data-scoping exercise
06/10/25	Third meeting of the Pilot Working Group
09/02/26	Fourth meeting of the Pilot Working Group
27/02/26	Working group 'wrap-up' workshop
17/06/26	Gender Budgeting Conference in Ulster University

