

A Response to: Credit Unions: Equality and Good Relations

Issued by: Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment

December 2009

Introduction

- 1.1. The Women's Support Network (WSN) welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation by DETI on Credit Unions: Equality and Good Relations.
- 1.2. The Women's Support Network (WSN), established in 1989, is an infrastructural umbrella organisation, which provides support services to, and represents, 58 community based Women's Centres, women's groups and projects, and women's infrastructure groups and 20 associated members across Northern Ireland (see Appendix 1).
- 1.3. Our members provide a wide range of women-centred front line services across Northern Ireland, including:
 - Specialist Advice
 - Childcare and Family Support
 - Counselling, Support and Advocacy
 - Complementary Therapies
 - Training & Education
 - Health & Wellbeing Programmes
 - Personal Development & Employment Support
 - Volunteering, Leadership & Empowerment
- 1.4. WSN aims to achieve social, political and economic justice through the promotion of the autonomous organisation of women. The Network aims to strengthen the collective voice of women's groups and to promote and develop networking opportunities, to enable collective action and to impact upon policy and decision making processes. WSN provides an accessible, feminist, relevant and high quality support service and resource for its member groups. The Network is also an important information resource on issues relevant to community based women's organisations and for other infrastructure groups, nationally and internationally.
- 1.5. Over the past 30+ years, the community based women's sector has developed a range of childcare, support, advice, and education &

training services in response to the needs they identified at a grass roots level. Women's groups continue to meet the particular needs of women and their children living in areas considered to be some of most affected by the conflict, and recognised as some of the most disadvantaged areas across Northern Ireland today.

- 1.6. Network members are actively engaged with their local communities, cross-community initiatives and regional structures throughout Northern Ireland.
- 1.7. WSN welcomes the Department's proposals to amend Northern Ireland Credit Union legislation. In particular WSN welcomes proposals to enable credit unions to expand their range of services to members and to allow credit unions to undertake re-investment of assets into community development and community enterprises. WSN believes that these amendments could potentially have a positive impact on section 75 groups and in particular disadvantaged communities.
- 1.8. Whilst welcoming amendments to Credit Union legislation, WSN believes that more measures could be taken to tackle financial exclusion, particularly in this difficult economic climate. Financial exclusion has been defined as not having access to a bank account, saving, affordable credit, money advice, assets, savings and insurance.¹ Research has shown that amongst the groups most likely to be financially excluded are female lone parents.²
- 1.9. A report by Barnardo's in 2007 highlighted the problem of doorstep lending in Northern Ireland and its impact on low income families. In

¹ HM Treasury (2004) Promoting Financial Inclusion, Pg 4.

² Sinclair (2001) Financial Exclusion: An Introductory Survey. Centre for Research and Social Inclusive Services (CRISIS), Edinburgh College of Art/Heriot Watt University.

particular the report demonstrated the high cost of doorstep credit which can range anywhere from 160- 800 per cent per year.³

1.10. Housing Rights Service has recently examined the problem of financial exclusion although in the context of housing debt. One of the recommendations made by Housing Rights Service in its recent policy paper was the introduction of a Financial Inclusion Strategy for Northern Ireland setting out how the devolved government could work with stakeholders including credit unions, mainstream lenders and advice providers to combat financial exclusion.⁴

1.11. Housing Rights Service examined other devolved administrations and noted that the Scottish Government developed a Financial Inclusion Action Plan setting out the Government would tackle the issue of financial exclusion. The paper also highlighted that the Welsh Assembly Government recently consulted on a Financial Inclusion Strategy, considering issues such as access to affordable credit savings and advice amongst other issues. In contrast it was noted that there was no single strategy in Northern Ireland considering the issue of financial exclusion and that Lifetime Opportunities does not consider issues of access to affordable credit or the role of mainstream lenders in tackling financial exclusion.⁵

1.12. WSN believes that credit unions play a vital role in tackling financial exclusion and welcomes some of the measures proposed, however we believe other measures could be adopted to tackle financial exclusion. WSN echoes Barnardo's and Housing Rights Service's calls for an overarching Governmental Financial Inclusion Strategy for Northern Ireland, which should focus on working in partnership with key

³ Barnardo's (2007) It doesn't happen here. Available at http://www.barnardos.org.uk/it_doesnt_happen_here_ni-2.pdf

⁴ Housing Rights Service (2009) Financial Inclusion and Housing Debt, available at: <http://www.housingrights.org.uk/policy/policy-library-3.html>

⁵ Ibid at Pg 2.

stakeholders, including credit unions, mainstream lenders and advice services, including those services provided by women's centres to combat financial exclusion, particularly targeting the most disadvantaged groups and areas

Conclusion

WSN welcomes the opportunity to comment on this consultation issued by DETI. We have offered some suggestions which we hope the Department will consider. We would be happy to discuss these issues if required.

For further Information, contact:

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Appendix 1

MEMBERSHIP 2009

	<u>Member Group</u>
1	All Ireland Mother's Union
2	An Munia Tober (Travellers)
3	Antrim & Ballymena Women's Aid
4	Ardmonagh Women's Group
5	Ardoyne Women's Group
6	ATLAS Women's Centre
7	Al Nisa Women's Group
8	Ballybeen Women's Centre
9	Ballymurphy Women's Group
10	Belfast & Lisburn Women's Aid
11	Belvoir Women's Improvement Group
12	Carrickfergus Women's Forum
13	Carew II
14	Causeway Women's Aid
15	Chrysalis Women's Centre
16	Clan Mor Women's Group (Sure Start)
17	Derry Well Woman
18	Derry Women's Centre
19	Falls Women's Centre
20	First Steps Women's Group
21	Footprints Women's Centre
22	Foyle Women's Aid
23	Foyle Women's Information Network
24	Granaghant District Women's Group
25	Greenway Women's Centre
26	Kilcooley Women's Centre
27	Lesbian Advocacy Services Initiative
28	Lesbian Line
29	Lenadoon Women's Group
30	Ligoneil Family Centre
31	Link Women's Group
32	Manor Women's Group
33	Markets Women's Group
34	NI Women's Aid Federation
35	NI Women's European Platform
36	Fermanagh Women's Network
37	Newry & Mourne Women
38	Newtownabbey Women's Group
39	Older Women's Network NI
40	Omagh Women's Aid
41	Rape Crisis Centre
42	Rasharkin Women's Group
43	Shankill Women's Centre
44	Strabane & Lifford Women's Centre
45	Strathfoyle Women's Centre
46	The Learning Lodge

47	Voices Women's Group
48	Walkway Women's Group
49	Waterside Women's Centre
50	Windsor Women's Centre
51	Women Connect Project
52	Women into Politics
53	Women's Information Group
54	Women's News
55	Women's TEC
56	Women 2 Gather
57	Women's Resource & Development Agency
58	WISPA (Women in Sport & Physical Activity)
	<u>Associate Members</u>
1.	Ballymena Community Forum
2.	CiNI
3.	Community Relations Forum
4.	East Belfast Community Partnership
5.	Employers for Childcare
6.	HIV Centre (Women's Support Group)
7.	Mencap
8.	National Women's Council of Ireland
9.	Playboard
10.	RNIB (Women's Group)
11.	Good Morning Newtownabbey
12.	Monkstown Community Association
13.	WAVE Trauma Centre
14.	WEA
15.	Parents Advice Centre
16.	Templemore Community Action Group
17.	Gingerbread
18.	Larne Community Development Project
19.	Community First Coaching
20.	Changing Faces

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