

A Response to: Consultation Document on the Number and Location of Area Advice Centres

Issued by: Department for Social Development

November 2009

Introduction

- 1.1. The Women's Support Network (WSN) welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation issued by the Department for Social Development (DSD) on the number and location of area advice centres.
- 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 does not provide advice services, however two of our member organisations, Falls Women's Centre and Causeway Womens Aid provide advice to women in a women only space with experienced and specialised women advisors. Another of our member organisations, Windsor Women's Centre currently offers generalist advice to the local community; however the majority of those that have sought advice from Windsor Women's Centre are women.
- 1.8. The advice provision at Falls Women's Centre is a wraparound service and covers a wide range of issues, particularly sensitive gender based violence issues such as domestic violence, rape and sexual violence as well as suicide prevention, family support, child protection, addiction issues, housing and repossession issues, debt and benefits issues.¹ The advisors have been involved in the provision of advice to women for over 25 years and have therefore developed extensive knowledge and expertise in these highly sensitive specialised areas. Falls Women's Centre receives referrals from a number of sources including GP's, community psychiatric nurses, health trusts, social services and other community organisations. Falls Women's Centre provides advice to

¹ The Centre Manager at Falls Women's Centre states the service provided is a wraparound service because in addition to the advice service provided, the service is inclusive and based on the needs of women. Provision includes training, education, childcare, personal development and holistic therapy.

women wider than the Falls Road area and on a cross community basis.

1.9. Causeway Women's Aid advisors provide generalist advice however to a targeted client group. The highest percentage of queries dealt with by Causeway Women's Aid, are around the issue of social security benefits and the second highest percentage of queries are around housing. It should be noted that these queries are as a result of women seeking assistance due to domestic violence. The third highest percentage of queries received by Causeway Women's Aid concern domestic violence. Advisors are involved in tribunal representation, court support and advocacy work. Causeway Women's Aid receives referrals from other advice providers on domestic violence issues such as non molestation orders.

1.10. The advisor at Windsor Women's Centre is employed as a generalist advisor, but also undertakes tribunal representation work for Disability Living Allowance, Incapacity Benefit and Income Support appeals. Whilst Windsor Women's Centre provides generalist advice to the local community, the majority of those seeking advice are women. The advice provision covers a wide range of issues for example health/mental health problems, addiction issues, domestic violence, sexual abuse, housing and benefits issues. Windsor Women's Centre receives referrals from a number of different sources including Sure Start, Social Services, Health Boards and other community organisations. The advisor also makes referrals in house to Windsor Women's Centre's mental health project for counselling and complementary therapies.

1.11. The provision of advice to women in a "women's only environment" has a number of benefits. These benefits include the safe, secure and confidential surroundings that these organisations provide, given the extremely sensitive nature of the issues. The organisations also provide advice on sensitive and complex issues in one venue. Furthermore,

the organisations provide a holistic wraparound approach to advice including the provision of childcare on site. In the case of Falls Women's Centre, advisors also make referrals in house where appropriate to other services onsite such as complementary therapies, counselling, and personal development, such as education and training, volunteering and lobbying activities. Falls Women's Centre also provides outreach advice services in client's homes which enables advisors to meet the needs of disabled clients or clients with serious mental health issues.

2 General Comments

- 2.1 WSN welcomes the publication of this consultation on the number and location of area advice centres. The document has identified 34 suitable locations for area advice centres and this appears to have a wide geographical coverage, thus ensuring most areas will have generalist advice provision. We wish to highlight that the consultation is limited in nature for example issues such as outreach and referrals to specialist advice are not being considered. WSN believes that the issues of area advice centres should not be considered in isolation from outreach and we would recommend that these are considered together to ensure no gaps in service provision.

- 2.2 We would like to highlight our disappointment that the document is gender neutral and does not reflect gender specific issues dealt with by advice providers in the women's sector. We believe that in failing to recognise this unique area of work, there is a potential for gaps in future advice provision particularly in referrals on gender specific issues from generalist advice providers.

3 Specific Comments

- 3.1 The consultation document states that councils will be best placed to determine the levels of service required in each location and that it is

anticipated that new councils will have arrangements for equality and rural proofing in commissioning services in their local areas. WSN recommends that the Department of Social Development in any future guidance states that to ensure equality of opportunity in commissioning services, councils should adhere to guidance on equality of opportunity in procurement which has been issued jointly by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland and the Central Procurement Directorate at Department of Finance and Personnel.²

3.2 WSN welcomes the proposal on Page 15 that area advice centres in Belfast should be networked on a North, South, East and West basis. Due to funding cuts constraints, some organisations in the womens sector were unable to continue providing advice services. In the absence of a regional organisation providing advice for women, DSD should consider how area advice centres would signpost women to suitable organisations. There is already an infrastructure of womens centres in place in many of these areas identified. WSN is currently exploring how the advice model provided by Falls Women's Centre could be replicated taking into account the existing infrastructure of women's centres.

3.3 The consultation document provides definitions of generalist advice providers and specialist advice case providers. Generalist advice providers are those described as those organisations which provide "basic information, advice, advocacy and on a wide range of issues including welfare, housing, consumer, health education, money and debt."³

3.4 Specialist advice providers in the document are described as having "specialist expertise in a particular area and can offer a high level of

² Equality Commission Northern Ireland and Department of Finance and Personnel (2008) Equality of Opportunity and Sustainable Development in Public Sector Procurement.

³ DSD (2009) Consultation document on the Number and Location of Area Advice Centres, Pg 30

advice, advocacy and representation on complex issues for example housing, legal issues, children's law etc."⁴

- 3.5 WSN believes that there is a gap in the definition of specialist advice contained within the document. The definition of specialist advice is predicated on expertise in a particular area and on complexity of issues. There is no recognition or focus within the definition on advice provided to particular client groups, for example women and other groups falling under s75. This distinction has been highlighted recently in a research report commissioned by Advice NI.⁵
- 3.6 The report highlighted that currently there are two types of specialist advice provision, case based and client based. In case based advice, the case based respondents in the study felt that advice subject or field is the factor which makes the advice special.⁶ Whereas in relation to client based advice, the client based respondents felt that the audience or group to whom the advice was given was special, rather than the type of advice given.⁷ The report also highlighted the holistic, wraparound nature of client based advice.
- 3.7 The report recommended on the basis of its findings that the term specialist is used to describe case based advice to recognise expertise in a particular complex subject area. Furthermore the report also recommended the term 'targeted' advice to describe client based advice, recognising expertise in addressing problems experienced by particular client groups.⁸
- 3.8 WSN recommends that DSD includes the definition of targeted advice as recommended by the draft Advice NI report. This definition should include women amongst the range of client groups. DSD should

⁴ DSD (2009) Consultation document on the Number and Location of Area Advice Centres, Pg 31

⁵ It should be noted that this report is a work in progress and is in draft form at present.

⁶ Advice NI (2009) What is special about 'specialist' advice? A summary of key findings from an indepth study of provision. Jan Wright Consulting. Draft text at Nov 4th 2009, Pg 3

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid at Pg 6.

consider where targeted advice providers fit into the overall advice model.

- 3.9 The document proposes that within the network, advisors will be responsible for one or more specialist area. The document also recognises that advisors will not necessarily be experts but will have sufficient understanding to make referrals to specialist organisations. WSN recommends the network of area advice centres liaise closely with organisations in the women's sector providing advice for women to ensure advisors are provided with appropriate training. This would ensure that advisors within the network of area advice centres have an understanding of the complexity of gender based issues and would ensure appropriate referrals are made.
- 3.10 The consultation document on pg 33 lists a range of issues on which network area advice centres are expected to deliver advice. The document states that "more complex enquiries relating to employment, housing, education, health and disability, immigration and social security will be referred to suitable specialist organisations."⁹
- 3.11 WSN notes with disappointment that the document is gender neutral, i.e there is no reference to gender specific issues for example gender based violence amongst the range of issues which will be referred to suitable organisations. WSN believes that it is vital that recognition is given to gender specific issues such as domestic violence and rape, given the disproportionate impact on women compared to men.¹⁰ WSN believes that the lack of recognition of gender specific issues could potentially have a detrimental impact on women seeking advice. WSN therefore recommends that gender specific issues are

⁹ DSD (2009) Consultation Document on the number and location of Area Advice Centres, Pg 33.

¹⁰PSNI Statistics for 2008/2009 have shown that 5436 domestic abuse incidents were recorded for women compared to 1,834 for men, see PSNI Annual Statistical Report, Report No.2 Domestic Abuse Incidents and Crime, 1st April-March 2009. Statistics have shown that 23% of women and 3% of men experience sexual assault as an adult and 5% of women and 0.4% of men experience rape, see NIO and DHSSPS (2008) Tackling Sexual Violence and Abuse: A Regional Strategy 2008-2013, Pg 5, available at http://www.nio.gov.uk/tackling_sexual_violence_and_abuse_a_regional_strategy_2008-2013.pdf

acknowledged amongst the range of issues that should be referred from generalist advice organisations and again reiterates that DSD should consider where targeted advice providers fit into the overall advice model.

Conclusion

WSN welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation on the number and location of area advice centres and has offered some suggestions for the Department to consider. We would be happy to discuss these issues further if required.

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Recommendations

- 1. DSD should consider the number and location of area advice centres along with outreach to ensure there are no gaps in service provision.**
- 2. DSD should ensure that new councils are aware of guidance issued by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland and the Central Procurement Directorate on promoting equality of opportunity in the commissioning of services, in this case advice services.**
- 3. DSD should consider how the network of area advice centres will signpost women to organisations that provide targeted gender specific advice, taking into account the existing infrastructure of women's centres.**
- 4. It must be ensured that advisors are trained to understand the complexity and to make appropriate referrals on gender specific issues, area advice networks should liaise with women's organisations providing such advice.**
- 5. DSD to include amongst the definitions of advice providers, 'targeted' advice provider as recommended by Advice NI in its draft report. The definition should include women as one of the groups. Furthermore DSD should consider where targeted advice providers fits into the overall advice model and how area advice centres will make referrals to targeted advice providers.**
- 6. DSD to acknowledge gender specific issues such as gender based violence amongst the range of issues which will be referred to suitable organisations.**

Appendix 1

	<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