

## A Response to: Consultation on Filling Casual Vacancies on District Councils

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## Introduction

- 1.1. The Women's Support Network (WSN) welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation issued by the Northern Ireland Office on Filling Casual Vacancies on District Councils.
- 1.2. The Women's Support Network (WSN), established in 1989, is an infrastructural umbrella organisation, which provides support services to, and represents, 59 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 opportunity to respond to Northern Ireland Office Consultation on Filling Casual Vacancies on District Councils. WSN is very concerned with low levels of female representation at all political levels in Northern Ireland. However we are particularly concerned with low levels of female representation at council level. A baseline study conducted by OFMDFMNI outlines that 21% of Councillors at Local Government level are women.<sup>1</sup>
- 1.8. WSN notes that the consultation document sets out options for reforming the current co-option method used for filling casual council vacancies in Northern Ireland. These options include: retaining the current co-option method; relax the need for unanimous agreement to co-option; replacement by party nomination; and the next preferred candidate.
- 1.9. The consultation document notes that "*only replacement by party nomination can guarantee that the party balance on councils can be maintained throughout the term, even if a member vacates.*"<sup>2</sup> WSN is disappointed that there is no reference to ensuring gender balance on councils in the document as well as party balance. Whilst replacement

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<sup>1</sup> OFMDFMNI(2008) *Gender Equality Strategy: A Baseline Picture*, Pg 127.

<sup>2</sup> Northern Ireland Office (2009) *Filling Casual Vacancies on District Councils*, Pg 9.

by party nomination may guarantee party balance on councils, WSN is concerned that this option may not guarantee increased women's representation in councils.

- 1.10. WSN notes the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002 which enables parties to adopt positive measures to reduce inequality between men and women on elected bodies which includes district councils in NI.
- 1.11. We also wish to highlight international human rights instruments that political parties should take into account when replacing vacating members on councils. These instruments include the Convention on Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), in particular Article 4 on Temporary Special Measures and Article 7, requiring States to eliminate discrimination against women in public and political life.<sup>3</sup>
- 1.12. The Committee for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (ComEDAW) monitors the observance of CEDAW and has issued a General Recommendation calling on States to ensure the equal right of women in "to participate in the formulation of Government Policy and the implementation thereof and to hold public office and perform all public functions at all levels of Government."<sup>4</sup> The ComEDAW has highlighted concerns regarding the under-representation of women in public office in Northern Ireland and has called on the State Party to introduce measures to ensure increased representation in political life.<sup>5</sup>
- 1.13. The issue of elimination of discrimination against women in political life has also been considered under other instruments and by other Treaty monitoring bodies. The Human Rights Committee (HRCee) which monitors the implementation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights has considered the issue of elimination of discrimination

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/text/econvention.htm#article4>

<sup>4</sup> General Recommendation No. 23 (Article 7, Public and Political Life)  
<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/recommendations/recomm.htm#recom23>

<sup>5</sup> Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, Concluding Observations of the ComEDAW: United Kingdom: Combined Fifth and Sixth Report, 41<sup>ST</sup> Session, CEDAW/C/UK/CO/6

against women in political activities in its General Comments.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, UN Resolution 1325 calls on States to ensure increased gender representation in “all decision making levels in national, regional and international institutions for the prevention, management and resolution of conflict.”<sup>7</sup>

- 1.14. WSN recommends that the approach for filling casual council vacancies should ensure gender balance as well as party balance. WSN recommends that the NIO taking into account its obligations in international human rights treaties, makes it clear that any method adopted to fill casual vacancies on district councils should reflect gender balance as well as party balance.
- 1.15. The NIO should urge parties in the document to adopt special measures to increase female representation on councils thus assisting the Government to meet its objectives under domestic and international human rights law.
- 1.16. The Consultation document notes that the proposals will not have an adverse impact on s75 groups and the NIO have decided not to conduct an Equality Impact Assessment. WSN disagrees with this approach in that s75 does not only disapprove of measures that harm equality but imposes a statutory duty on public authorities “to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity.” WSN urges the NIO to conduct an EQIA given the low levels of female representation at all levels of political life in NI.
- 1.17. WSN also recommends that the document makes reference to organisations working to promote increased female representation in political life. An example of such an organisation is Women into Politics

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<sup>6</sup> Human Rights Committee, General Comment No.28, *The Equality of Rights Between Men and Women*.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.peacewomen.org/un/sc/1325.html>

(WIP) which has a Mentoring and Shadowing Programme, run in partnership with NILGA and Business in the Community.<sup>8</sup>

## **Conclusion**

WSN welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation on the Filling of Casual Vacancies on District Councils. WSN has highlighted concerns about replacing the current co-option system with replacement by party nomination and we have made a number of recommendations which we hope the Northern Ireland Office will consider. We believe that political parties' selection processes must take into account gender balance, otherwise the problem of under-representation of women at local and national government level will continue to persist. We would be happy to discuss these issues further if required.

## **For further Information, contact:**

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<sup>8</sup>[http://www.womenintopolitics.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=34&Itemid=53](http://www.womenintopolitics.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=34&Itemid=53)

## Appendix 1

### MEMBERSHIP 2009

	Member Group
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)
	<b><u>Associate Members</u></b>
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