

A Response to: A Commissioner for Older People in Northern Ireland

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January 2010

Introduction

- 1.1. The Women's Support Network (WSN) welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation by OFMDFM on A Commissioner for Older People in Northern Ireland. We will not respond to every question set out in the document as they may be outside our remit.
- 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.

2.0 Comments

- 2.1 WSN is strongly in favour of a Commissioner for Older People in Northern Ireland generally due to the many challenges older people face. Some of those barriers have been highlighted by OFMDFM in the document including health care issues, poverty, social exclusion, fear of crime, violence, housing and transport.¹ We believe that a Commissioner for Older People is also particularly important given that research shows that in an ageing population, a higher percentage will be older women.²
- 2.2 WSN welcomes the commitment by Ministers to re-establish the Older People's Advisory Panel as we believe that this would be a very beneficial mechanism in ensuring participation of older people in the review of the Ageing in an Inclusive Society Strategy. WSN urges that steps are taken to ensure that there is representation from grassroots groups from disadvantaged areas, older people not involved in civil society organisations and that steps are taken to ensure that the panel is gender representative.

¹ OFMDFM (2009) A Commissioner for Older People in Northern Ireland: A Strong independent voice for Older People, pg21.

² OFMDFM (2005) Ageing in an Inclusive Society, Pg 34. Available at the following link:
<http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/ageing-strategy.pdf>

- 2.3 WSN believes that the Commissioner for Older People should take into account the UN Principles for Older Persons. However we wish to highlight that whilst these principles can be very beneficial, they are not legally binding. WSN would recommend that the Commissioner also takes into account other UN Human Rights instruments that the UK has ratified alongside the UN Principles for Older Persons.
- 2.4 WSN agrees that the age range that the Commissioner should mainly cover should be 60 and over as this would ensure a consistent approach with other international instruments. However we welcome the proposal that the Commissioner would be able to act on behalf of people aged 50 and over in particular cases. WSN also welcomes the proposal that following a specified period of time that the age range can be changed by legislation if required.
- 2.5 WSN believes that the principal aim of the Commissioner for Older People set out in the document could be enhanced and should state "to safeguard and promote the *rights* and *interests* of older people."
- 2.6 WSN however has concerns regarding the proposal that the Commissioner when dealing with a case should have as a paramount consideration the interests of that older person, as this could potentially have a detrimental impact on other older people. WSN would recommend that the Commissioner when dealing with a case should have as a paramount consideration all older people. Furthermore WSN would ask for clarity as to the rationale behind this proposal given that the Welsh Commissioner for Older People does not have such a function.
- 2.7 WSN agrees that the duties proposed are suitable for a Commissioner for Older People, however we would recommend that a duty to consult older people including forums, organisations and groups representing the interests of older people should be included.

- 2.8 WSN believes that the Commissioner for Older People should have a power to adopt memorandum of understanding or working protocols with other organisations, enabling collaborative working where appropriate to promote the rights and interests of older people, whilst preventing duplication of work.
- 2.9 WSN agrees that the Commissioner should have specific powers to review in general and individual cases, the advocacy, complaint, inspection and whistle blowing arrangements of relevant authorities. WSN recommends however that the Commissioner should have specific powers to review the policy making process of relevant authorities.
- 2.10 WSN agrees that the Commissioner should be able to publicise cases where an organisation is not following best practice. WSN recommends that in the cases of organisations who persistently fail to follow good practice that attention could be drawn to the attention of the Assembly Committee.
- 2.11 WSN agrees that the Commissioner should not act in cases where existing organisations already have a power to act, thus ensuring efficient use of public funds and preventing duplication of work.
- 2.12 WSN believes that the Commissioner for Older People should be able to use specific formal powers to assist older persons in nursing homes whether publicly or privately funded. The Regulation Quality and Improvement Authority is responsible for regulating nursing homes regardless, it would therefore seem inconsistent for the Commissioner to be able to use formal powers to assist only older persons whose care is publicly funded.
- 2.13 The consultation document sets out that it would be unlikely that the Assembly would be unable to give the Commissioner victim standing for Human Rights cases. WSN believes that the designation of victim

standing to a Commissioner would enhance their role as a strong independent voice for older people. WSN would urge OFMDFM to consider how the Commissioner could be given this status.

2.14 WSN believes that Code of Practice for Public Appointments should be adhered to in relation to the appointment of the Commissioner for Older People, thus ensuring a fair, open and transparent process. WSN believes that it is vital that older people participate in the appointments process thus meeting the objectives of the UN Principles for Older Persons. Setting this out as a legal requirement would guarantee the participation of older people in the appointments process.

Conclusion

WSN is very much in favour of the appointment of a Commissioner for Older People to provide a strong and independent voice and to promote the rights and interests of older people. WSN has made a number of recommendations which we hope the Department will consider. We would be happy to discuss further 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