

A Response to the-

**‘New Strategic Direction
for Alcohol and Drugs
(2006-2011)’**

April 2006

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Women's Support Network (WSN), established in 1989, is an infrastructural umbrella organisation, which provides support and services to, and represents over 30 groups (mostly in the Greater Belfast area), including community-based women's centres, women's projects and women's infrastructure groups.

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. We provide an accessible, feminist, relevant and high quality support service and resource for member groups. The Network is also an important information provider on issues relevant to community-based women's organisations and for other infrastructure groups, nationally and internationally.

The Women's Support Network welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation on the new strategic direction for alcohol and drugs. The majority of WSN members are based in areas of Greater Belfast that suffer from severe socio-economic disadvantage. In many of these communities abuse and misuse of alcohol and drugs both legal and illegal is apparent and prevalent. This can have a huge detrimental impact on individuals, families and communities.

A number of salient points in relation to the document are outlined below:

1. Firstly we wholeheartedly agree with the need to base the strategy on a robust evidential basis (p.29). It is vitally important that relevant data is available to convey the true extent and nature of the problem of alcohol and drug misuse/abuse. Having an adequate baseline also allows progress on outcomes of the strategy to be measured.
2. The proposed strategy appears to place an emphasis on illegal drug abuse. While this is important WSN believe that the issue of substance misuse in terms of 'prescription drugs' should be examined. While this may not be

illegal, use and/or dependence on 'prescription drugs' would appear to be prevalent, particularly amongst women living in disadvantaged areas. This problem is often 'invisible' and therefore ignored in these communities. That women are disproportionately affected regarding this is evidenced in 'Prevalence Table 1 – Lifetime Prevalence (%)' which shows that 28.5% of women have taken anti-depressants compared with 16.2% of men (p.16)

3. Dependence on prescription drugs may be as a result of traumatic and stressful experiences that have occurred during the period of the conflict; it can also be as a result of poverty and the stresses that living with poverty incurs. The reality is, however, that such dependence blights the lives of far too many women and we would ask that greater emphasis be placed on investigating and addressing this particular issue. This must involve mapping the extent of the problem and putting into place education programmes that inform people of the problems relating to prescription drug use and dependency. Local GPs should also be involved in this process. Furthermore the provision of properly resourced counselling services that can be easily accessed locally should be a crucial element in addressing this issue.
4. WSN also welcome that 'people living with domestic violence' are identified as a vulnerable group in respect of alcohol and drug misuse. It is important to acknowledge that gender based violence is often fuelled and/or exacerbated by alcohol and drug abuse.
5. Overall, we welcome the proposed New Strategic Direction for Alcohol and Drugs. However, we would urge that DHSSPS give greater recognition to the problems associated with misuse/dependency of/on prescription drugs, particularly by women living in disadvantaged areas.