

A Response to the consultation document -

**New Quality Standards for Children's
Services for Under 12's**
**Department of Health, Social Services
and Public Safety**

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Introduction

The Women's Support Network (WSN), established in 1989, is an umbrella organisation for more than 40 community-based women's centres, women's projects and women's infrastructure groups. The WSN aims to achieve social, political and economic justice through the promotion of the autonomous organisation of women. The Network also aims to strengthen the collective voice for women's groups, to promote and develop networking to enable collective action and to influence policy and decision making processes. The WSN is an important vehicle for taking forward the common agenda of community-based women's organisations, many of which are based in the most disadvantaged areas of the city and which have experienced the worst effects of the political conflict.

We have stated in the past our disappointment that government fails to give due recognition to the work of women's centres and women's groups in providing an holistic service for women and their children, providing integrated childcare and education, early learning, childcare, including education for children with special educational needs, and other family support services.¹ As an umbrella organisation representing the interests of community-based women, we now welcome this opportunity to respond to the consultation on new quality standards for children's services for under 12's. Our response is based on consultation with the centres and groups that provide childcare and is intended to reflect their concerns in terms of the current funding climate.

The Women's Sector and Childcare Provision

¹ Ruth Taillon, *The Social and Economic Impact of Women's Centres in Greater Belfast*, Research Report for the Women's Support Network, Belfast, 2000, p.88.

Services provided by the women's sector are diverse, including advice and support; community development; health and well being services; education and training provision; cultural programmes; work with children and young people; child care. Child care provided by women's centres affiliated to WSN includes some or all of the following:

Full and sessional day care

Respite places referred from Social Services

Parent and toddler groups for the under 3's

Child care for those attending classes within centres

A crèche service for those accessing advice provision within centres

After-school provision

Holiday schemes

Funding

Funding for the women's sector has become increasingly difficult. A study commissioned by WSN in 2000 showed that in the years 1997-2000, more than half of all funding to Belfast Women's Centres came from EU programmes or the National Lottery. All other statutory sources combined, including local government, accounted for less than 30%.² Funding for childcare within the Women's Centres remains piecemeal and short-term. Some day care is paid for from family tax credit; after-school provision from funding provided from the Eastern Board and distributed through the WSN to all women's centres. The centres themselves raise funding through a wide variety of sources: South and East Belfast Boards, Childhood Fund, Children in Need, NIPPA, NOF, etc. All the centres stress the difficulty in meeting the costs of childcare without any core funding provision. This leads to job insecurity, inadequate pay scales and pension provision, lack of training budgets for staff, and stress for staff in maintaining a

² WSN, *An Assessment of the Impact of Loss of Services Provided by Women's Support Network Organisations*, Report for OFMDFM: Women's Sector Services and Funding Survey, August, 2002.

quality service on inadequate budgets. At the present time, December 2004, there is an urgent need for an injection of substantial funding into the women's sector so that childcare provision can be maintained.

Compounding the funding difficulty is the news that the extension of the Peace II Programme will no longer have a distinct measure covering childcare provision, as Measure 2.5 Investing in Childcare has been deleted.

The scrapping of the Children's Fund from the Programme for Government will also have worrying consequences for women as parents at community level.

All 7 centres in the Greater Belfast area are facing the prospect of closing their childcare services by March 2005. This will have serious repercussions for both staff and for users of the centres. For example, one centre alone will lose 10 workers, each currently employed for 30 hours per week.

In order to comply with the Children's Order, childcare places have been registered as full day-care centres, placing additional financial and administrative burdens on the Women's Centres as they attempt to comply with standards that are often unnecessary in view of the sessional type activities that are most common in the majority of centres.

In responding to the consultation regarding standards for childcare provision, the crucial need for government to provide adequate funding for those currently providing this care cannot be stressed sufficiently. Without forthcoming funding, those who have no opportunity to access any other form of child care will be unable to use the women's centres for their children or for their own educational and social needs.

Pre-school provision

The policy of the Pre-School Expansion Programme in providing a full year of pre-school education for every child whose parent's wish has had considerable impact within the voluntary sector, which has provided a number of the assisted places. The WSN has previously pointed out difficulties in terms of payments to providers in the voluntary sector, where the differential between community sector providers and statutory nurseries has resulted in the community sector not receiving funding that meets the actual cost of the care provided.³ The administrative burden on women's centres is also considerable in meeting the requirements of funding schemes such as the tax credit system, in addition to meeting quality standards with insufficient resources. In addition, for many centre users, the Working Families Tax Credit does not apply and those accessing childcare have their places subsidised through funding raised directly by the centre.

Standards

While we welcome the recognition that all children have the right to quality care that meets the highest standards of excellence, providing a positive experience for each child, we are concerned that unless sufficient funding is made available, community-based child care will fall behind the standards achieved in the private day-care sector which can afford to charge parents fees to cover costs incurred. There is not sufficient recognition that childcare covers a wide spectrum in terms of resources, staff and users. There is a huge difference between affluent two income families in a middle class area and a single parent living in a severely disadvantaged neighbourhood. These differences have a particular impact on the

³ Ruth Taillon, *The Social and Economic Impact of Women's Centres in Greater Belfast*, Research Report for the Women's Support Network, Belfast, 2000, p.89.

needs of children, and put greater strain on staff. If these standards are to be meaningful, then they must be accompanied by an audit of present provision so that additional resources can be allocated to areas of need.

Many of the children in the women's centres have additional needs, particularly emotionally, relating to the legacy of the conflict and material deprivation. This means that they require more staff contact than other children. Centres do not receive additional resources, based on such an understanding of the realities of providing childcare in communities with high levels of social and economic disadvantage. More recognition is needed for their work, which is much more than simply childcare.

Staff training

All staff would welcome greater resources and time for training. The current situation is unsatisfactory, with most centres finding it difficult to raise funding for a specific training budget. A limited budget has been in place for special needs workers, but most centres have either met the direct costs of training or have looked for free training or bursaries. Those who have had a training budget are currently re-directing resources to meet the on-going running costs of their childcare department.

Section 75

While we welcome the recognition that different groups of people have different needs, we do not feel that the needs of different groups can be met adequately without greater resources targeted at areas of need. For example, single parents are the group most likely to exist in poverty and to be most in need of training

and support. However, the task of building up confidence before training might be avoided of can be a lengthy one. It is here that the work of the women's centres is so vital, and where their holistic approach is most clearly seen, as women who might first attend advice sessions or one-off events are gradually encouraged to attend education and training sessions, with their childcare needs met by the centre. The WSN would maintain that core funding is essential for a realistic promotion of equality of opportunity.

The WSN fully supports a strategy aimed at enabling children and young people to lead full and purposeful lives and realise their ability and potential, but we are conscious that socio-economic circumstances often serve to limit that potential. At the very least, Sure Start must be extended and given additional resources as a strategy to limit the differences in the individual fulfilment of children.

Women's Centres engage in many activities aimed at promoting good relations between persons of different religious belief, political opinion and racial group. In a 2002 survey of the Women's Sector, thirty groups (59%) said that they work with ethnic minority or Traveller women.⁴ Some centres are located in areas where people from minority ethnic groups have come to live and are responding positively, for example, by offering classes in English. Childcare workers who are caring for diverse groups of children would welcome support for training in cultural diversity issues.

Human Rights

⁴ WSN, *An Assessment of the Impact of Loss of Services Provided by Women's Support Network Organisations*, Report for OFMDFM: Women's Sector Services and Funding Survey, August, 2002.

While the principles of care underpinning the standards for all childcare are admirable, WSN believes that a more pro-active approach is necessary to ensure that all children are able to realise their ability and potential. In considering the individual and human rights of each child, not only must they be safeguarded, there must be positive efforts to promote cultural understanding, based on awareness of different political beliefs, political opinion, and racial group. While children and young people should be treated equally, there must be recognition that to secure such equal treatment it will be necessary to challenge stereotypes based on gender and ability, to ensure that girls are not limited in activities offered, that boys are comfortable with play activities more usually associated with girls and children with disabilities are supported to realise their full potential.

Appendix 1

WSN Member groups

Al-Nisa Women's Group
Ardoyne Women's Group
Ashton Centre
ATLAS (Lisburn)
Ballybeen Women's Centre
Ballymurphy Women's Centre
Belfast Travellers Education & Development Group
Brook (Belfast)
Citywide Women's Consortium
Derry Women's Centre
East Belfast Community Education Centre & Walkway Women's Group
Falls Women's Centre
Footprints Women's Centre
Greenway Women's Centre
Lenadoon Women's Group
Lesbian Advocacy Service Initiative
Northern Ireland Women's European Platform
Parenting Forum NI
Shankill Women's Centre
South Tyrone Empowerment Programme (STEP)
Strabane & Lifford Women's Group
Windsor Women's Centre
Women's Information Group
Women into Politics
Women's News
Women's Resource Development Agency
Women's Tec