

A Response to the consultation document -

**Draft Investment Strategy for Northern
Ireland 2005-2015**

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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.

The WSN welcomes the development of an Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland (ISNI) and supports the commitment to address the infrastructure deficit that exists in Northern Ireland. We must emphasise from the outset that it is our philosophy that the cornerstone of any strategy must be an acceptance that the economy exists as a vehicle to improve the lives of citizens, and for this to be a reality there must be a commitment to social justice and a targeted move away from a reliance on a low-wage economy. We have a number of concerns related to the strategy as it currently stands, which we will itemise. However, we have some difficulty as much of the strategy is at a high level of generalisation, which makes it difficult to conclude who will benefit from some aspects of the strategy.

Private Finance and a Public Private Partnership Approach

We are concerned that the adoption of PPPs, while addressing the short-term need for capital, will have adverse consequences for the next generation, who

will have the responsibility for paying back the interest to private partners. We have no reassurance that a PPP approach will be more advantageous to society than continued government borrowing. If there is less economic growth than predicted, what will be the repayment burden? We note that difficulties in relation to public sector employment in the context of PPPs were raised by the former Executive (p.89) but other than noting such difficulties in terms of employment and procurement; we have no sense that the ISNI has developed any plan to alleviate these difficulties. We ask, will those bidding for contracts be under an obligation to show how they meet important criteria in terms of New TSN, or with regards to environmental considerations?

Education

We welcome the proposal to contribute £3.3bn to up-grade the NI schools estate. However, in light of the recent draconian cuts being imposed on the education and library boards, we would urge that there is some consideration of the overall needs of the education sector, including children with special educational needs.

Primary and community care infrastructure

The WSN welcomes the commitment to invest resources to improve access to community-based health and social care services, which will be of great benefit to working class communities. We would appreciate some indication of a commitment that capital investment will be directed to provide such services in areas of greatest need. However, half of the health budget still appears to be directed at the acute hospital sector and while we accept the need for a new hospital west of the Bann and a regional cancer centre, we would argue that

better standards of housing and more investment in health education and community care would do more to reduce the need for hospital admissions.

Transportation

Although the ISNI acknowledges that enhancing public transport is the means of extending travel choices for all sections of the community, we note that the emphasis remains on extending the road service, rather than improving the rail network. It is not enough to promise an 'element' of the renewal of lesser-used lines (p.61). The WSN believes that this approach is fundamentally flawed, on both environmental and equality grounds. An extension and improvement of the rail network would be a positive contribution to social inclusion, enabling greater numbers of people throughout Northern Ireland to access work and other opportunities without causing further environmental deterioration. At the same time, we would welcome more detailed plans for improving cross-border roads, particularly from Enniskillen to Sligo and the Newry area.

Social Housing

The WSN, as an organisation with member groups throughout the Greater Belfast area, is well aware of the extent of the need for more investment in social housing. The promise that everyone will be given 'the opportunity to access decent, affordable housing' (p.64) needs clarification. As recent figures show that in the year 2002-03 there was an 'under-allocation' gap of 16% in relation to allocations to Catholics and an 'over-allocation' gap of 21% to Protestants, contributing to the long waiting lists in parts of North and West Belfast, we would argue that there is a real need to set targets to reduce the levels of inequality between Catholics and Protestants in relation to housing.

Investment in Water

Our greatest concern is that the need to invest in improvements to the water and waste-water infrastructure will produce a socially just outcome. We are of the belief that the water services should remain in social ownership as a not-for-profit concern. The proposal that a 'GoCo' will achieve full self-financing by 2008/9 raises questions about the extent of consumer charges, returns to possible shareholders, etc, all of which have serious equality implications which must be addressed.

Planning

While we note that Planning Service is to be consulted on how to 'streamline' the approval process, we regret that there is still no commitment to introduce any Third Party right of appeal. We believe that this is a vital measure that should be introduced and we see no logical reason why legislation similar to that existing in GB could not be introduced to afford the ordinary citizen some say, particularly in a period when huge, irreversible changes are taking place in our built environment.

Plans for a Shared Future?

The WSN wonders to what extent the ISNI consists of a fully integrated strategy on which each government department has contributed an element designed to ensure a coherent final product? There is no sense that an overall vision has shaped the ISNI, so that a definite order of priorities has been agreed. Most importantly, have departments considered how they will operationalise plans so

that a strategy of developing a 'shared future' can be most effectively implemented? Has the issue of Northern Ireland as a divided society been at the forefront of the development of the ISNI and is there a commitment to invest in shared spaces?

General Comments on Departmental Plans

As an umbrella organisation for the women's voluntary and community sector, the WSN notes with concern that there is little acknowledgement of the important role that has been played by the sector, nor is there any suggestion that this role could be enhanced by the development of social partnerships as the ISNI rolls out through the work of the various government departments.

The Department of Employment and Learning proposes investment in the FE and HE sectors, while acknowledging statutory and non-statutory education providers. We hope that the women's sector will be able to build on recent contact with DEL in order to ensure that the sector will also be resourced as an education provider, in partnership with DEL, and we would urge that the spending plans of DEL be revised to reflect this.

The DHSSPS has foregrounded community development programmes as a vehicle for improving the health and well being of the people of Northern Ireland. While we appreciate that departmental plans included within ISNI are indicative only, and that the DHSSPS document 'A Healthier Future' acknowledges the importance of the voluntary and community sector in helping to deliver key sections of the strategy, the WSN would like to take this opportunity to emphasise the future contribution of the women's sector in achieving the goals of this strategy.

While we welcome the commitment by the Department of Social Development to work on urban and community renewal, we would again ask the question, is this strategy accompanied by a commitment to tackle the problems of a divided society and encourage the development of shared spaces and a shared, more egalitarian future? We believe that the achievement of this will require substantial resources being directed to the voluntary and community sector to enable organisations to work in partnership with government.

Equality Impact Assessment

We are concerned that the ISNI has been deemed to be a 'high-level' strategy that lies outside the equality requirements of the Northern Ireland Act. Without an Equality Impact Assessment there is no way of knowing which groups will most benefit from the strategy and who will be most adversely affected. These are crucial questions for a long-term strategy intended to improve Northern Ireland's economic competitiveness and delivery of public services. The WSN believes strongly that the ISNI should be subject to an EIA so that the economic, social and environmental benefits of the strategy can be evaluated and any adverse impacts minimised as far as possible. Without that transparency in procedures, it is difficult to come to any meaningful conclusion about the future potential of the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland.

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