

**A Response to the Department for Regional
Development's Consultation:**

"Free Travel for People aged 60-64"

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Introduction

Women's Support Network

The Women's Support Network (WSN), established in 1989, is an infrastructural umbrella organisation, which provides support services to, and represents over 40 groups (see Appendix 1 for full member and associate member listing) 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. The 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.

WSN welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation document which sets out the Department of Regional Development's proposals to extend the concessionary fares scheme to free travel in Northern Ireland for persons aged 60-64.

General Comments

WSN welcomes the opportunity to response to this public consultation on free transport for people aged 60-64. The document is accessible and well structured. Whilst WSN welcomes these proposals, we believe that the there are some missed opportunities in the policy proposals to further promote equality of opportunity between men and women.

Specific Comments

1.0 Proposals for extending concessionary fares scheme

1.1 WSN notes in figure 4.0 of the draft proposals options set out for extending the concessionary fares including: free travel for persons aged 60-64, people with disabilities, carers and people returning from long term unemployment; and half fares for persons aged 16/17, people in full time education and those on low incomes.

1.2 WSN welcomes the Executive's proposals to introduce free public transport for people aged 60-64. The current scheme which allows free transport for people aged 65 and over has an adverse impact on women who are regarded as pensioners at the age of 60 and yet are not entitled to free public transport, in comparison to men who are regarded as pensioners at the age of 65.¹ WSN believes that these proposals will further promote equality between men and women and improve the quality of life for many women aged 60-64 who are disadvantaged under the current scheme.

1.3 WSN notes with disappointment that the Department does not propose to extend the concessionary fares scheme further due to scarcity of resources. WSN has concerns that the decision not to extend the scheme to those in education and returning to work from unemployment will potentially have an

¹ See Age Concern Policy Position Paper on Transport, Pg 5 at the following link <http://www.ageconcernmi.org/pdf/polpospapers-transport-05.pdf>

adverse impact on 'hard to reach' women or women from disadvantaged backgrounds and will continue to act as a barrier for these women returning to education, training and employment. WSN also believe that the proposals not to extend the scheme to carers will have an adverse impact on women who primarily have childcare/caring responsibilities². WSN would ask the Department to reconsider their decision in relation to extending the concessionary fares scheme to carers and those returning to work from long term unemployment and education or training.

1.4 WSN welcomes the Department's commitment to seek further resources in future budgets to extend the Concessionary fares scheme and we look forward to further discussions with the Department on this issue.

2.0 Cross-Border Travel

2.1 WSN notes that there are no plans to reduce the qualifying age for free cross border travel for Northern Ireland residents, which is currently 65 years. The Department's rationale for this decision is that there are no plans to reduce the qualifying age for free cross border travel in the South. WSN would like to highlight however that both men and women are regarded as senior citizens from the age of 65 in the Republic of Ireland.³ WSN therefore believes women in Northern Ireland over the age of 60 will continue to be disadvantaged by the decision not to extend the concessionary fares scheme to cross border travel and we would recommend the Department would revisit this issue in order to promote equality of opportunity between men and women.

3.0 Implementation

3.1 The Department anticipates that the first journeys under the extended scheme will be made on 1st October 2008. This is welcomed by WSN,

² Barlow A (2007) "Configuration(s) of Unpaid Caregiving within Current Legal Discourse in an around the Family" in Northern Ireland Legal Quarterly, Vol 58, No3, Pg251.

³ http://www.citizensinformation.ie/categories/social-welfare/social-welfare-payments/older-and-retired-people/retirement_pension

however we note a new system is required to deal with new applications. The document states the Department expects 70,000 people to apply for the new 60-64 SmartPass. WSN would ask the Department to detail how it will ensure that the new systems will be in place by October and we would seek reassurances that the applications process would be dealt with as efficiently and quickly as possible to ensure that this target group will not be affected by delays under the new systems.

4.0 Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA)

4.1 WSN welcomes the publication of a draft EQIA and notes its conclusion that the scheme will positively impact on all section 75 categories within the target group. WSN welcomes this, however we note that the data only considers data relating to the target group age 60-64 in each of the section 75 groups. WSN contends that an EQIA should consider a policy more generally rather than a target age group in order to ascertain if there are other opportunities for promoting equality.

4.2 WSN notes that the EQIA concludes that the policy results in positive impacts and therefore mitigation is considered unnecessary. WSN would contend that this is not the case as the only target group considered were those in the age group of 60-64 under the section 75 groups. WSN would therefore recommend that the Department revisits the EQIA to consider the policy more generally, rather than conduct an EQIA based on data centred on a target age group.

Conclusion

WSN welcomes this opportunity to respond to this Consultation and has offered some constructive suggestions as to how the scheme can be improved. We hope that DRD will take these into consideration.

Appendix 1

WSN Member groups

Ardoyne Women's Group
ATLAS
Al Nisa Women's Group
Ballybeen Women's Centre
Ballymurphy Women's Group
Belfast Travelers' Support Group
Carrickfergus Women's Forum
Carew II Newtownards Road Women's Group
Causeway Women's Aid
Clan Mor Women's Group
Derry Women's Centre
Falls Women's Centre
First Steps Women's Group
Footprints Women's Centre
Foyle Women's Information Network
Greenway Women's Centre
Lesbian Advocacy Services Initiative
Lesbian Line
Lenadoon Women's Group
Ligoneil Family Centre
Markets Women's Group
Northern Ireland Women's Aid Federation
NIWEP (NI Women's European Platform)
Newry & Mourne Women
Older Women's Network
Shankill Women's Centre
Strabane & Lifford Women's Centre
Windsor Women's Centre
Women's Aid
Women's Aid Federation
Women into Politics
Women's Information Group
Women's News
Women's TEC
WRDA

ASSOCIATE MEMBERS

Ballymena Community Forum
EBCEC
Newtownabbey Community Voice
Parents Advice Centre
WEA

Rasharkin Women's Group