

A Response to the-

**'A Strategy for Supporting Delivery of
Voluntary Advice Services to the
Community' and the EQIA**

April 2006

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The 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 delivery of voluntary advice services. While the Network does not provide an advice service, two of our member organisations are involved in advice provision. Many organisations within the women's sector have recently experienced a protracted crisis with regards to resources and the continuation of service provision in the disadvantaged communities where they operate. Following a campaign to highlight the imminent threat to these services, a cross-departmental government review group was established under the auspices of the Department for Social Development, to consider some of the issues raised during the campaign. The review group produced a report entitled 'Report of The Review Group on Women's Organisations Providing Support and Services to Disadvantaged Areas'. There were five key areas of service delivery examined in the report and one of these was 'advice'. The conclusion reached with regard to this service was, 'The Review Group concludes that the future delivery of advice services by women's organisations can be taken forward by DSD through the Information and Advice Strategy. There are no immediate resource implications for women's organisations or government.'

Due to the intense campaigning of many women's organisations over the past year in terms of maintaining the crucial services they provide in disadvantaged areas e.g. childcare, education and training, we could be accused of 'taking our eye of the ball' in relation to the provision of specialist advice. However, it is now clear that the proposals outlined in this strategy will have a huge and negative impact in terms of the provision of specialist advice to women throughout Northern Ireland and this is of great concern to both the Women's Support Network and to the overall women's sector.

Although we are greatly concerned about the overall detrimental affect this proposal will have on women across the region, as a network of organisations based in the Greater Belfast area, this response will concentrate on the potential impact on this particular area of Northern Ireland.

To inform this response we have undertaken a brief mapping exercise of specialist advice provision delivered by WSN member organisations. There are a variety of projects run by WSN members that address women's health and well-being. Professional counselling is often on offer as an aspect of these projects. Simultaneously, some WSN members offer specialist (and generalist) advice to women as a core part of their overall work. In the past, four women's centres in the Greater Belfast area provided this service. However due to the less favourable funding environment over the last number of years, two of these advice units have closed. Today, Falls Women's Centre offers specialist advice to women and Windsor Women's Centre offers both specialist advice to women and generalist advice to the local community.

It is noted in the strategy document and the EQIA that this proposal will result in no specialist advice provision at a local level but rather that specialist advice would be available at a regional level. Our serious concerns regarding this proposal are outlined below.

1. In terms of specialist advice services provision to Section 75 categories of people, we would contend that the requirements and needs of women are different to those of other section 75 groups. Women who seek specialist advice only do so because their problems can be of an extremely sensitive nature. This is borne out by our discussions with both Falls and Windsor Women's Centres. Advice is sought on issues such as domestic violence, rape, sexual violence and abuse, trauma and health and well-being issues that are particular to women. It is common practice for many other organisations e.g. Advice centres, statutory agencies and other community and voluntary organisations, to refer women who are experiencing such problems to the advice units in either Falls or Windsor. Due to the closure of other specialist advice services to women in the Greater Belfast area, women's organisations throughout the area also refer women requiring specialist advice to one of these centres. In general structures have evolved where specialist advice is provided by Windsor to women in South and East Belfast and Falls provides specialist advice to women in West and North Belfast.¹
2. The reality is that currently there is no regional organisation providing specialist advice to women in Northern Ireland. The advice services provided to lone parents, minority ethnic groups and elderly people by voluntary organisations at a regional level are not mirrored in the Women's sector. Moreover, because of the sensitive issues involved in the area of specialist advice provision to women, the Women's Support Network believe that it is crucial that these services are provided locally and in the areas where there is greatest need. Both Falls and Windsor Women's centres are situated in areas that experience high levels of socio-economic deprivation.
3. Clearly, there is a need to ensure that high quality standards are embedded in the provision of advice services across Northern Ireland and WSN believe that this must be an integral aspect of the strategy.

¹ Due to the exclusive specialist nature of advice provided by Falls Women's Centre, women from across Northern Ireland have and continue to access their services.

Conclusion

We would reiterate our serious concerns regarding the negative impact that the proposals within this strategy will have on women in Northern Ireland. We believe that

- due to the sensitive nature of advice needs of many women, it is crucial that specialist advice services to women exist
- such services are more efficient and effective when provided locally
- there is currently no regional specialist advice provision to women and this therefore does not correspond with the proposals in the document
- the proposals outlined in this strategy regarding specialist advice provision to women must take account of other key government overarching strategies such as the impending Northern Ireland Anti-Poverty Strategy and the Gender Equality Strategy.

Having worked closely with Falls and Windsor Women's centre in preparing this response, we would ask if we could perhaps meet with you to discuss the concerns outlined above.