

A Response to Invest NI Consultation:

**'Invest NI Draft Corporate Plan 2008-
2011'**

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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.

We welcome this opportunity to comment on Invest NI's Draft Corporate Plan 2008-2011, which aims to "increase business productivity, the means by which wealth can be created for the benefit of the whole community."¹ .WSN believes that equality of opportunity between men and women is beneficial for business productivity, thus enabling all to contribute to economic activity.

¹ Invest NI Draft Corporate Plan 2008-2011, Pg 2.

General Comments

WSN welcomes the publication of this draft Corporate Plan, which is well structured and accessible. However, WSN notes that the document is gender neutral in its composition.

WSN welcomes the section on Equality of Opportunity, however notes that this is positioned at the end of the document; WSN believes there needs to be more systematic reference to promoting equality of opportunity between men and women throughout the plan.

Specific Comments

1. Planning Context

1.1 The draft Corporate Plan highlights structural weaknesses within the regional economy, for example highlighting that Northern Ireland has the highest rate of economic inactivity in the UK.² The plan however does not reflect the gender dimension of economic inactivity. Recent statistics have shown that there are 337,000 women of working age, who were economically inactive in NI, compared to 209,000 men.³ **WSN would request that Invest NI details in the Corporate Plan how they would reduce the levels of women who are economically inactive.**

1.2 The draft Plan refers to Programme for Government's emphasis on increasing productivity and well paid skilled jobs.⁴ **WSN would wish to refer Invest NI to Programme for Government's commitment to the inclusion of all people "...to deliver a peaceful, prosperous and fair society that we all want."⁵ This expresses well WSN's contention that the promotion of equality is important to increasing business productivity.**

² Invest NI Draft Corporate Plan 2008-2011, Pg 7.

³ These statistics were for the period of April to June 2007. See DETI. "Women in Northern Ireland", published September 2007, pg 15.

⁴ Invest NI Draft Corporate Plan 2008-2011, Pg 7.

⁵ NI Executive "Programme for Government :2008-2011, Pg 11.

1.3 WSN notes that the Corporate Plan focuses on internationally tradable services such as financial services, software development and ICT. Evidence suggests that such services are 'male dominated' whilst women enter employment areas perceived to be 'female'.⁶ WSN notes that Invest NI has an enhanced partnership with DEL with a commitment to "concentrate on the need to ensure there is a supply of requisite skills".⁷

WSN would ask Invest NI to set out in this Corporate plan how they will work with DEL to challenge gender stereotyping and promote equality of opportunity, thus enabling women to enter employment in internationally tradable services which would currently be perceived as male dominated.

1.4 WSN also notes that Invest NI will target "Dynamic Companies" as a source of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) that have the "potential to provide increasingly complex services to multinational companies..."⁸ WSN would contend that Invest NI should target 'Dynamic companies' which actively promote equality of opportunity between men and women. A briefing paper by DTI in 2003 has suggested that businesses that promote equality and diversity are more likely to do better than their competitors.⁹

WSN would therefore ask Invest NI to target companies that promote equality of opportunity between men and women as potential sources of FDI

2. Strategic Response

2.1 The strategic response of the draft Plan includes three priority actions including realising client potential, shifting the sectoral focus and frontier technologies. WSN comments relate mainly to the first two actions.

⁶ European Commission: "Social Agenda". Issue No 16. February 2008.

⁷ Invest NI Draft Corporate Plan 2008-2011, Pg 2.

⁸ Ibid, Pg 9.

⁹ Women and Equality Unit, DTI (2003) "Business Case for Diversity and Equality."

2.2 WSN welcomes Invest NI's proposals for realising client potential. Invest NI state that they will be offering targeted development programmes aimed at enhancing management and leadership skills and improving productivity and business performance.

WSN would ask Invest NI to detail in the plan what steps they will take to ensure women, especially those with caring/childcare responsibilities, can take advantage of such programmes.

2.3 WSN also welcomes Invest NI's proposals for shifting the sectoral focus, including a commitment with DEL to tackle skills needs.¹⁰ **WSN would ask Invest NI to include in their corporate plan how they will work with DEL to ensure women have the opportunities to develop skills, especially areas where women are under-represented for example non-traditional trades, necessary to participate in high level economic activity.**

3. Client definition

3.1 WSN notes that Invest NI's client definition has a number of qualifying criteria with an economic emphasis. **WSN contends that to qualify as an Invest NI client, a business should also have an explicit equality focus. WSN would ask Invest NI to consider including under client definition that a business must be able to demonstrate good practice as regards equality of opportunity between men and women.**

4. Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA)

4.1 WSN welcomes Invest NI's draft EQIA and particularly welcomes its references to Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. WSN also welcomes Invest NI's consideration of gender statistics in the EQIA.

4.2 WSN notes that the EQIA states that "While the labour market continues to be segregated in many ways and including those associated with s75

¹⁰ Ibid, Pg 13.

grounds , many of these economic inequalities lie outside the scope of Invest NI's work."¹¹ However WSN would contend that there are many ways in which the draft Corporate Plan can be amended to better pursue Invest NI's stated commitment of equality of opportunity.

4.3 WSN welcomes the measures set out in the EQIA to mitigate adverse impact such as the Pathways to Female Entrepreneurship project and awareness of childcare voucher schemes. **WSN notes however that these are not included in the draft Corporate Plan and would contend that it would be beneficial to make reference to these to support Invest NI's stated commitment of Equality of Opportunity.**

Conclusion

WSN reiterates its welcome for this Corporate Plan. WSN believes that equality of opportunity between men and women is beneficial to increasing business productivity. Whilst welcoming this Draft Corporate Plan, WSN has offered some constructive suggestions as to how it can be improved. We hope that Invest NI will take these into consideration.

¹¹ Invest NI "Draft Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) on Invest Northern Ireland's Draft Corporate Plan 2008-2011", Pg 15.

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