

A Response to ASA Working Group Reports

Quality

Training

IT

By

**Women's Support Network
& Falls Women's Centre Advice Working Group**

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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 this opportunity to respond to the ASA working group reports on Quality, Training and IT. This response has been produced in partnership with Falls Women's Centre, as part of a larger ongoing project that aims to define and develop a model of best practice for providing gender sensitive advice to women in disadvantaged areas, based on their experience and expertise as a specialist advice service. It has also been developed in consultation with other WSN members who provide advice to women.

Specific Comments

Quality

1. How do you think the ASA should carry forward work on quality standards? In particular:

a. Do you think a framework for the measurement of the quality of advice and casework should be developed and independent peer review introduced?

Yes. To achieve an efficient, effective and high quality service it is important for providers to be transparent and accountable in the delivery of advice services. The development of a standard framework, for the measurement of the quality of advice, would ensure there is a fair, equitable and consistent benchmark in place to which all providers must attain.

The introduction of an independent peer review would enable an independent and object review process to take place.

Appropriate resources need to be made available in order for specialist advice providers to access the necessary training which is required to achieve uniformity.

b. How should this work be funded and resources?

We propose that each advice centre has an Advice Session Supervisor on site for each drop in session and to be accessible by telephone/e-mail for appointment based sessions. In order to be cost effective, and provide standardised quality control we recommend that peripatetic Session Supervisors are employed by the Partnership Board and are trained to the same level.

Appropriate resources need to be made available in order for specialist advice providers to access the necessary training which is required to achieve uniformity.

c. What arrangements should be made for those who fail to meet agreed quality thresholds?

We recommend that an agreed and realistic time frame should set up. A performance review and a training needs analysis carried out to determine why the provider has failed to meet the quality threshold and then, dependent upon the findings, support provided to help the provider achieve the required standard. This support should be of a financial and mentoring nature.

d. Is the time frame suggested for this work sensible?

Yes. Dependent upon the appropriate resources, training and support being in place and all specialist providers have access to them.

2. Do you have any comments on the draft standards and guidelines? In particular:

a. Are there any standards and guidelines which you disagree with?

No, but we would like to note that women's specialist advice providers such as Falls Women's Centre provide gender specific and gender sensitive advice, while ensuring impartiality and in keeping with Section 75.

b. Are there any standards which are not addressed?

Yes. Equality and freedom of choice. All client groups should be treated equally within the advice service, which can mean that certain clients prefer to receive advice in an environment dedicated to women. There should therefore be a fair and equitable allocation of resources for providers to maintain this type of specialist service. Without this smaller advice agencies lose out and are sidelined. This limits the user's range of options and it fails to recognise the need for, and the outstanding work and expertises that, specialist advice provides.

Specialised agencies give a greater feeling of ownership among its users and therefore, whatever the training and expertise of the advice worker; there is a more equal relationship between advice seeker and advice giver.

c. What do you consider the resource and other implications for agencies having to meet these standards and guidelines?

We have concerns that the strong emphasis on generalist advice providers could create a monopoly on resources leading to implications for smaller groups. To create fair and equitable advice service clients need to be able access services that are specific to their need and resources need to be allocated accordingly. Specialist/small advice providers need to be supported and recognised for their distinctiveness.

3. Do you agree that advice agencies should have in place an external benchmark to provide independent verification of the quality of an advice agency?

Yes.

a. If so, what are the resource implications?

We recommend that advice agencies should have an external benchmark, which is agreed and achievable by all, in order to provide a standardised service. The resource implications would be to make available equitable budget allocations, training and support for all providers.

Appropriate resources need to be made available in order for specialist advice providers to access the necessary training which is required to achieve uniformity.

b. Is the time frame proposed sensible?

Yes.

4. Do you agree with indicative costing for a hub and satellite? In not please set out the basis for you disagreement

We believe that the training budget should be increased to take account of the amount it costs for general/ongoing/specialist training for advisors in order to reach and maintain the required level.

Appropriate resources need to be made available in order for specialist advice providers to access the necessary training which is required to achieve uniformity.

5. Are there any other issues for ASA, the DSD or other relevant bodies should be taking into account in developing the *Opening Door* strategy on quality?

In general the *Opening Doors* strategy is based on limited out of date information which has failed to adequately recognise specialist groups and the level of expertise they provide. This is indicative of a lack of constructive engagement with specialist providers resulting in these groups possibly becoming sidelined in any allocation of resources or decisions taken. The inadequate recognition given to specialist groups, throughout the strategy, can ultimately remove a client's choice to access a provider that can suitably address their needs, which results in clients becoming undermined and disempowered by the advice sector.

The lack of a clear definition of 'specialist advice' leads to a subjective interpretation of what specialist advice has to offer. The narrow/ambiguous definition of specialist advice, used throughout the strategy, can only benefit the generalist advice organisations that can use any definition/interpretation to suit their own requirements.

Training

1. The training strategy has developed primarily to address the needs of front line generalist advice providers, many of the training needs outlined in the strategy may also be of benefit to specialist organisations.

a. Please identify training provision within the strategy of most relevance to your organisation?

Accredited Training Programme, provided by CAB, at foundation level: Specific training on gender specific issues e.g. equality legislation, family law, divorce/separation, domestic violence, social services/child protection, education: Tribunal representation, money advice, mortgage repossession, tax credits, immigration and advocacy.

b. What do you use as foundation level training for your employees and volunteers?

Law Centre accredited training and Cab – Accredited Training Programme. Falls Women’s Centre (FWC) currently has 3 staff with Law centre training and 1 with CAB training. FWC also has 2 CAB trained women at management level. We do not have any volunteer advisors within our advice and advocacy unit.

c. From your experience to date, have you identified specific gaps in current training provisions that would be beneficial to your organisation and, for each, approximately how many staff/volunteers would undertake this training on an annual basis?

From our experience we have identified a gap that exists in the current training provision. This is a session/s which would give an overview of the statutory, voluntary and community services available to clients. Advisors with a comprehensive working knowledge of all existing services, particularly specialist services, could give clients a more informed choice of which service would be most beneficial to their needs.

If this training was delivered by representatives from the organisations it would also help develop working relationships between advisors and organisations. We would envisage that 4-5 staff would undertake any additional training each year.

2. How important do you view accreditation and progression routes for training provision for the advice sector?

We believe that accreditation is crucial to make sure that high standards across the advice sector are adhered to. We also recognise that accreditation is valuable for professional development; it is recognised and is transferable within the sector and is a passport to post basic training. It is also beneficial for advisors personal development and can form part of a recognised academic qualification.

3. How can the barriers to participation be reduced to encourage individuals to avail of the training opportunities available?

We believe that barriers to participation can be reduced through representation on consortium/forum platforms. Membership of a forum/ consortium would encourage partnerships by, being inclusive, breaking down barriers, building relationships and trust and prevent specialist advice groups from being disadvantaged. Adequate resource provision would also enable individuals to access training opportunities.

4. What specific knowledge and skills would be of benefit to generalist advice providers in understanding the needs of your client group?

Generalist advisors would benefit from a knowledge and awareness of equality and gender issues and an understanding of community development. It would also be useful for generalist advisors to have an appreciation of the work done/services provided by Community Based Women's Centres. General advisors need to have an understanding of the woman-orientated approach adopted by the centres. Here advisors are able to provide a safe and secure environment where the woman takes control and is given time to discuss her situation.

In addition the Falls Women's Centre (FWC) Advice and Advocacy Unit offers a wide range of services, which have developed as a response to locally identified need over 25 years, including; drop-in and appointment based system, family related advice/support, accompaniment to appointments/courts and a home visitation service which seeks to ensure access to advice by women who may be housebound, work unsocial hours, have caring responsibilities or need support most suitably given in a home setting. There is also a referral process to other services and outside agencies where appropriate.

The services provided by the FWC and other specialist groups, differ from general advice providers who, due to various constraints, tend to have time limited appointments and focus on providing practical advice.

Clients should be aware of all advice services on offer, in order to make an informed choice about the kind of service they wish to use, so it is imperative that advisors have a knowledge and understanding of all services available.

It is therefore essential that all groups recognise and respect the diversity and expertise of advice providers, and for all resources to be distributed in a fair and equitable way.

a. What specialist training does your organisation offer that may be relevant to the needs of generalist advice providers?

Falls Women's Centre offers training in counselling skills and has provided training in suicide awareness and conflict resolution.

IT

- 1. The IT paper has been developed to meet the *Opening Doors* objective for a unified IT system, and addresses many generic issues such as data security and business continuity.**

(a) Please identify the component elements which you consider comprise a unified IT system.

We are in agreement with the proposed component elements described in the ASA Consultation document.

(b) Any element of the paper which your organisation currently has in place

AIMS, as this was the system adopted by Advice NI (of which we are a member).

(c) The minimum common IT requirements for the sector to satisfy recording, reporting, data security and referral arrangements for a unified IT system.

We would follow the expert guidance outlined in the paper.

- 2. If a unified IT System is adopted by the advice sector how do you think that this should be funded? Would you be prepared to switch existing expenditure on IT to the new system?**

As our organisation delivers an advice/advocacy service, and not IT, we would expect funding to be made available for IT systems.

We would be prepared to switch our current system to the new system, preferably CARMA, along with the necessary funding for hardware, software licenses, installation, broadband, maintenance and training. We would also be keen to install the information system used by CAB.

- 3. What support framework do you envisage is necessary to ensure that the technical, operational and business needs of an emerging unified IT System are adequately and effectively met?**

Installation, training and maintenance.

- 4. Do you consider it essential and desirable that any IT framework that supports the provision of advice and information across Northern Ireland seeks and achieves external accreditation?**

We believe that we should follow professional and other standards but will take advisement on the appropriate standards that apply.

- BS7799/ISO27001 'Code of Practice for Information Security Management'
- Web Accessibility Standards W3C & PAS Guidelines

5. How should client related data and associated electronic documentation to be hosted, administered and maintained?

We have no position at this stage.

General Comments

Quality

The Department's intention is that only those who meet the required standards will actual receive funding. (page 3-6)

How will organisations be supported to meet standards if they fall below?

- 1. An advice service should normally be able to provide a service covering core subjects including social security, housing, debt, unemployment, consumer, mental health and immigration....**

Organisations providing specialist advice in a specific area of law will not provide advice across the areas outlined above. Such agencies should provide advice, casework and representation in their particular area, and have appropriate referral mechanisms in place to deal with other issues. (page 9)

We reject the definition of specialist advice as being particular to a specific area of law. Specialist advice must be valued and recognised as specialised expertise in working with specific target groups.

- 2. A local advice agency should have a minimum of four staff (or full time equivalent) who are trained advisors, and sufficient additional staff to provide appropriate administrative support and management arrangements. (page 9)**

How is "local advice agency" defined?

- 3. The location of an advice agency should be carefully chosen to best meet the needs of the population it serves. Where possible it should become a focal point of a local community and be accompanied by other community services. (page 11)**

Community based Community Based Women's Centres have achieved this, and developed best practice over many years in order to meet the needs of the particular communities in which they work, which is of added value to women in disadvantaged areas, and their families, which is distinct from generalist advice practice.

- 4. Premises should be "welcoming", "accessible", big enough for staff and users and to accommodate other appropriate organisations and open up possibility of providing a 'one stop shop' for users. (page 11-12)**

Community based Community Based Women's Centres provide welcoming, accessible and 'one stop shop' services, having developed a great wealth of experience, expertise and best practice in providing advice to women.

5. Policy and lobbying work: Sufficient resources should be allocated for policy and lobbying work to be carried out in the advice agency; the advice agency should also ensure such work is linked to wider policy/lobbying being done by regional advice organisations and other relevant bodies. (page 15-16)

Community based Community Based Women's Centres achieve this through their active and close participation in wider networks such as the Women's Support Network and Community Based Women's Centres Regional Infrastructure Partnership (WRCP).

6. Existing arrangements for CAB, Advice NI and the Law Centre (page 24-28)

Does women's advice meet the criteria set out by CAB (PQASSA) and Advice NI?

Training

1. The Northern Ireland advice sector is compromised of 63 generalist advice providers and approximately 105 specialist advice organisations (ASA members) providing advice and/or advocacy services. (page7)

Who are the 105 and how are they defined as specialist? To what extent has women's advice staff received recognised training?

2. Training needs may also be influenced by the socio demographic profile of different social groups presenting for advice. For example, the NI Legal Needs Survey 2005 (Legal Services Commission NI, Legal Needs Survey 2005. Tony Dignan) highlighted the vulnerability of different social groups to legal related problems. The socio-demographic profile of different social groups presenting for advice was reported as follows: (page 14/15)

Lone parents 59%

Divorced persons 58%

Caring responsibilities 46%

It is likely that a large proportion of these groups are women – is data available? Are the percentages comparable to those being gathered by women's specialist advice providers?

3. Advisors require the level of knowledge and skill necessary to advise effectively on complex queries comprised of multiple issues. (page 15)

As illustrated above Community Based Women's Centres have been engaging and excelling in this type of complex work for many years. Account needs to be taken that this level of experience and reputation is gained through 'on the job experience' and is difficult to earn through training alone.

4. Refine skills and knowledge in specialist areas. (page 16)

Is this defined as legal area or target group? Will training address gender sensitivity in areas such as domestic and sexual violence?

5. Barriers to employment may include lack of childcare. (page 17)

Community Based Women's Centres address this barrier, which is core to their ethos and practice.

6. Appendix 1 (page 21)

To what extent do advisors who specialise in providing advice to women in disadvantaged communities have access to this training?

Conclusion

WSN agrees with many of the proposals being made in the Quality, Training and IT working group reports, and supports the development of a standard framework that ensures efficient, effective and high quality service provision across the voluntary advice sector. We support the development and resourcing of training in generalist and specialist areas so that they are of equal value and quality across the sector. We also believe that generalist advice providers could benefit from training in gender specific and gender sensitive advice, as well as community development. Finally, we welcome the use of CARMA, along with the necessary funding for hardware, software licenses, installation, broadband, maintenance and training.

The question of what constitutes specialist advice has been running from the first draft of the Opening Doors Strategy, and has never been satisfactorily resolved. WSN holds the opinion that there are two types of specialist advice: that which specialises in a specific area of law (i.e. Housing Rights Service) and that which specialises in working with and/or meeting the particular needs of a specific client group (e.g. Age Concern, Disability Action, Women's Centres, Women's Aid, etc.).

WSN remains concerned that the lack of clarity around the definition of generalist and specialist advice, and with the inadequate engagement with specialist advice providers that lead to inaccurate and/or outdated data informing the strategy. While the strategy has clearly addressed the needs of generalist service providers, it still runs the risk of effectively sidelining many specialist groups who specialise in working with particular groups, and in particular women in disadvantaged areas, if these organisations cannot access the same resources, training and IT that are required to meet the best possible quality standards.

Opening Doors suggests that specialists should provide regional support to generalist advisers. This model would work for provision such as the Housing Rights Service, but not for groups such as Falls Women's Centre or Women's Aid. We therefore urge the ASA to address the issue of a lack of definition (or definitions) of specialist advice as a matter of urgency.

WSN Member groups

All Ireland Mother's Union
Antrim & Ballymena Women's Aid
Ardmonagh Women's Group
Ardoyne Women's Group
ATLAS
Al Nisa Women's Group
Ballybeen Women's Centre
Ballymurphy Women's Group
Belfast & Lisburn Women's Aid
An Munia Tober (Travellers)
Carrickfergus Women's Forum
Carew II
Causeway Women's Aid
Clan Mor Women's Group
Derry Well Woman
Derry Women's Centre
Falls Women's Centre
First Steps Women's Group
Footprints Women's Centre
Foyle Women's Aid
Foyle Women's Information Network
Granaghant District Women's Group
Greenway Women's Centre
Kilcooley Women's Centre
Lesbian Advocacy Services Initiative
Lesbian Line

Lenadoon Women's Group
Ligoneil Family Centre
Markets Women's Group
NI Women's Aid Federation
NIWEP
Newry & Mourne Women
Older Women's Network
Omagh Women's Aid
Rape Crisis Centre
Shankill Women's Centre
Strabane & Lifford Women's Centre
Windsor Women's Centre
Women into Politics
Women's Information Group
Women's News
Women's TEC
WRDA

Associate Members

Ballymena Community Forum
EBCEC
HIV Centre
Newtownabbey Community Voice
Parents Advice Centre
WEA
Rasharkin Women's Group

Affiliated Members

National Women's Council of Ireland

Contact Information:

Etain O'Kane

Policy & Research Coordinator

Womens Support Network

109-113 Royal Avenue

Belfast

BT1 1FF

Tel: (+44) 028 9023 6923

Fax: (+44) 028 9031 0307

Email: policy@wsn.org.uk

Website: www.wsn.org.uk

Women's Support Network is a limited company registered in Northern Ireland. Registered number: NI057580. Registered office: 109 Royal Avenue, Belfast, BT1 1FF.