

A Response to

Local Government Reform

Establishment of Transition
Committees in Statute

By

Women's Support Network

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1. Introduction

- 1.1.** 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 list of members) including: community-based Women’s Centres, women’s projects and women’s infrastructure groups.
- 1.2.** 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.

2. General Comments

- 2.1.** The Women’s Support Network (WSN) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the consultation document on the Establishment of Transition Committees in Statute.
- 2.2.** WSN believes that the Transition Committees will carry out critical work as part of the RPA implementation programme; work that will have a significant impact on community based women’s centres, groups and networks throughout Northern Ireland.

- 2.3. Women make up 51% of Northern Ireland population. However, this is not reflected in our power structures. Women only make up 16.7% of the Northern Ireland Assembly, which is considerably less than the Scottish Parliament (33.3%), and which pales in comparison to the level of representation achieved by the National Assembly for Wales (46.7%).¹
- 2.4. In the present 26 council-system, women councillors are outnumbered 3:1. This means that there are only 125 (20%) women making important decisions at the local level of government.
- 2.5. WSN acknowledges that many MLAs and councillors – male and female –have a long history of being supportive to women’s groups in their constituencies. We are appreciative of this support, and see the active promotion of increased participation by women in government as a means of strengthening the support that already exists.
- 2.6. The UK Government Equalities Office (GEO) has found “evidence in the devolved institutions in Scotland and Wales that the relatively high number of women have had a discernable impact on shaping their policy agendas. In both bodies, women parliamentarians have championed issues such as childcare, the social economy and equal pay.”
- 2.7.** WSN therefore believes that the absence of any gender analysis within the current proposals is a missed opportunity, in terms of following the good practice examples coming from other devolved regions. We therefore urge the DOE to take action now to ensure that women have greater access to the political decision making process, to ensure that women in Northern Ireland receive the same benefits that women in Scotland and Wales enjoy from greater representation, on the issues that affect their lives.

¹ Women’s Representation in the UK (September 2008)

- 2.8.** The community based women’s sector provides a range of services for women in their communities, particularly in disadvantaged areas, which will become the responsibility of local government to support and resource under the Review of Public Administration. These services include: childcare, support and advice, education and training, advocacy and social economies. Our members are keen to see proactive commitments being made to promote gender equality within the new structures, to ensure that the services provided to women a local level are prioritised, valued, and resourced by the new local councils.
- 2.9. Representation and diversity is a founding principle of participative democracy. It is therefore paramount that positive measures are taken to ensure that the future system of local government reflects the diversity of the people it seeks to serve.
- 2.10. We believe that the proportionate representation of political parties is not enough to inspire the confidence of all citizens. Positive action MUST be taken prior to establishing Transition Committees in Statute, building on the examples of good practice developed in other devolved regions, to ensure that representation on each committee reflects the diversity of our society.**

3. Specific Comments

3.1. *Representation and Equality*

- 3.1.1.** Based on available information, we have determined that the 11 voluntary transition committees are constituted as follows:

COUNCIL	# Total Appointees	# Female Appointees	% Women’s Representation
Antrim & Newtownabbey	16	5	31%
Ards & North Down	15	3	20%
Armagh City and Bann	15	2	13%
Belfast City	20	2	10%
Causeway Coast	20	5	25%
Derry & Strabane	15	4	27%
Fermanagh & Omagh	14	0	0%
Lisburn City & Castlereagh	--	--	--
Mid Antrim	15	2	13%
Mid Ulster	13	1	8%
Newry City & Down	8	0	0%

TOTAL	151	24	16%
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- 3.1.2. We are concerned that there was no consultation with key stakeholders carried out prior to EQIA screening², particularly when under-representation of women is so clearly evident. We are equally concerned that no consideration has been made regarding the potential adverse impact that such under-representation will have on women as a section 75 group.
- 3.1.3. In 1998, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women made a general recommendation³ that "States Parties **make more use of temporary special measures such as positive action, preferential treatment or quota systems to advance women's integration** into education, the economy, politics and employment.
- 3.1.4. The United Nations made further recommendations in 2008 for the **UK government to take measures to increase the numbers of women in public life** as part of its examination under CEDAW.⁴
- 3.1.5. In 2000 the *United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security* "urge[d] Member States to **ensure increased representation of women making levels in national, regional and international institutions** mechanisms for the prevention, management, and resolution of conflict."
- 3.1.6. WSN believe that the appointment process used by DOE signifies a significant step away from its duty to promote gender equality, and reveals disregard or failure to effectively implement various positive action measures that could be taken to ensure gender representation in public decision making, under its commitment to implement the recommendations of CEDAW and the UN Resolution 1325.
- 3.1.7. WSN therefore calls on DOE to take all necessary steps to ensure compliance with section 75 by carrying out a full EQIA on current proposals, and that it further considers imposing positive action measures to redress the under-representation of women in the establishment of**

² DOE Section 75 Equality of Opportunity Screening Analysis Form.
http://www.doeni.gov.uk/eqia-local_govt_bill-tc_s.pdf

³ Recommendation No. 5 (seventh session, 1988).
<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/recommendations/recomm.htm>

⁴ Concluding Observations to the UK government's fifth and sixth periodic report under CEDAW: CEDAW/C/UK/CO/6

Transition Committees in Statute, in line with international commitments to promote gender equality.

3.2. *Budgets*

- 3.2.1.** According to the *United Nations Development Fund for Women*, “gender-responsive budgeting is a crucial tool for women’s empowerment.”
- 3.2.2.** We recommend the following publication for analysis: *Budgeting for Women’s Rights Monitoring Government Budgets for Compliance with CEDAW* (December 2008)⁵ and *Participatory budgeting from Brazil to Britain: What can you learn for your local authority?* (December 2008).⁶
- 3.2.3.** **We call on DOE to ensure that Transition Committees in Statute are fully aware of their obligations under Section 75 and international commitments to promote gender equality in all policy decisions, including setting budgets.**

4. **Conclusion**

- 4.1. WSN believes that the Review of Public Administration is a positive step towards developing a model of participative democracy that will give the citizens of Northern Ireland greater input into the decisions that affect them and their communities.
- 4.2. However, full equality will only be achieved if there is a commitment to positive action. We therefore ask DOE, and all other departments, to demonstrate how it plans to meet our international obligation to create a new system of governance that is reflective of our society. Given that this has not been achieved in the appointment of voluntary transition committees, we call on the DOE to specifically outline within its response to this consultation, the measures that will be put in place (e.g. positive action, preferential treatment or quota systems) to achieve a **fairer and more proportionate** number of men and women tasked with managing the transition from 26 to 11 councils.

⁵ Available from UNIFEM: <http://www.gender-budgets.org/>

⁶ <http://www.participatorybudgeting.org.uk/documents/CFE%20PB%20document.PDF>

5. WSN Member Groups

Full Members

All Ireland Mother's Union
Antrim & Ballymena Women's Aid
Ardmonagh Women's Group
Ardoyne Women's Group
ATLAS Women's Centre
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
Lenadoon Women's Group
Lesbian Advocacy Services Initiative
Lesbian Line
Ligoneil Family Centre
Markets Women's Group
NI Women's Aid Federation
NI Women's European Platform
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
Women's Resource Development Agency

Associate Members

Ballymena Community Forum
East Belfast Community Education Centre
HIV Centre
Newtownabbey Community Voice
Parents Advice Centre
Workers Education Alliance
Rasharkin Women's Group

Affiliated Members

National Women's Council of Ireland