

A Response to the DEL Strategy document -

**Further Education Means Business for
people, communities and the economy
in Northern Ireland**

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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 30 groups (see Appendix 1 for full 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.

Women's community based education is at the heart of life long learning

All WSN member groups directly provide, or access, training and education programmes for women in local communities and across communities. There are extensive Education and Training Programmes within Women's Centres and organisations. These specifically target women with little or no educational qualifications who have been out of the labour market for some time and women who have returned to the labour market and wish to progress from unskilled to skilled jobs.

These Women's Centres and organisations promote the value of education and training amongst women and encourage them back into education and training.

Their programmes provide a range of high quality courses including University Access courses, personal development courses, vocational programmes and GCSEs.

Women's community-based education has enabled thousands of women to create a learning path for themselves. A typical progression route might begin with a personal development programme, which while not accredited, builds confidence and interest. This can enable progression to an accredited vocational course or to the undertaking of further education with the Centre or with another provider and can ultimately lead to employment. Women's community based education also provides opportunities for women who work outside the home to enhance and develop their skills leading to career progression.

Women's Centres and women's organisations have been proactive in working together to address identified training needs at a city-wide level. One illustration of this is Citywide Women's Consortium (CWC). Citywide Women's Consortium is composed of specialized women's training providers and women's groups and organizations, which have come together with the common goal of working to encourage and enable women to empower and advance themselves personally and professionally.

CWC is an example of integrated delivery of education and training with clearly identified internal progression routes and clear sign-posting to external agencies. This consortium offers varied opportunities for learning from pre-accreditation programmes through to OCN (Open College Network) level three certificate courses. Their collaborative approach helps address educational needs and ensures provision happens at a local level. There are three key provisions that are central to the (continued) successful delivery of women's community based education:

Locally based training: The provision of training in local women's groups/centres has given women an opportunity to learn in safe, non-threatening, informal and supportive environments. ...

Childcare: On-site high-quality childcare is provided during each course. Women's community based education providers have recognised that childcare is one of the main barriers facing women who want to return to training/education....

Finance: Free courses help make training accessible to women on low incomes.

...

It is vital that this type and range of training be fully supported in any new FE strategy.

Some key points in response to the 'Further Education means business' strategy document

Women's Support Network welcome the beginning of the development of a Further Education strategy for people, communities and the economy in Northern Ireland, and the opportunity to elaborate on the role of women's community based education within any future development within the FE sector.

WSN are concerned about the dissemination of this strategy document. Many organisations that we spoke to within the community education sector had not received a copy of this document, or been informed of the possibility of responding to it. As a network organisation we would not have been informed, or had the opportunity to respond if we had not been enlightened about it through our existing networks with other organisations (in this instance West Belfast Economic Forum).

No resources were made available to engage in what is a critical debate given the proposals outlined. A full consultation exercise could be resourced and supported by DEL and included all groups involved in the delivery of Further Education in its broadest understanding

The Future Role of the Sector

Within the 'Further Education Means Business' strategy document, under Section Four - New Strategic Aim, it states that; 'Further Education should be at the heart of life long learning in order to strengthen economic development, enhance social cohesion and advance individual's skills and learning' (4.6 pg 23).

Women's Support Network would contend that these core principles, namely economic development, social cohesion and individual skills and learning, should be weighted equally. It is our experience that; beneficiaries of women's community based education have the opportunity to enhance and advance their individual skills and learning. This in turn leads to a growth in confidence, increased participation and a growth in active citizenship which, when considered in relation to the other benefits, and within the Social Economy model, also impacts on the workforce.

Section Four refers to the key stakeholders in the future of FE as; 'the colleges' (4.8 page 25). WSN would recommend an extension of 'stakeholder' to include women's community based education sector as an equivalent provider of education services (Partners for Change). WSN feel that this would acknowledge the pivotal role that community based, and women's community based education plays in the overall provision of adult education.

Women's community education provides vital education services to women at local accessible venues. These vital services are being provided through local women's groups, centres and organisations and are filling a gap that exists in mainstream provision. In recognition of this vital provision WSN would argue that these services be mainstreamed and monies within annual FE budgets be ring-fenced to support this provision.

Economic Development

Too great a focus upon the economy has the possibility to undermine choice within the further and higher education curriculum. It would be limiting and counter productive if funding were only allocated to learning programmes that can directly and immediately show an employment outcome. Learners start at different places and have different needs and considerations. Lack of confidence and prior negative experience of statutory education provision are two common

hurdles for women engaging in women's community based education. These learners have different needs than, for example, an eighteen-year-old male who would like to learn a skill. Education policy identifies as a priority the promotion of equality for all and encouraging people back into employment. There is significant evidence that community education; particularly women's community education, meets this priority, yet education policies, such as this strategy document, do not give any recognition to women's education or the education needs of women.

Social Cohesion

Within this document it would appear that there is an assumption that Social cohesion will 'happen' if we concentrate on economic regeneration and employability. There is no structure indicating how building social capital and hence social cohesion can be developed within the framework of the proposals.

Social exclusion militates against social cohesion. Social exclusion, whether it is of people with disabilities, people from ethnic minorities, young people, the elderly and people living in economically disadvantaged areas *always* has a gender dimension. Government policies should therefore explicitly recognise that women in general are, by virtue of their gender, at a relative social and economic disadvantage to men in general. Some groups of women and individual women are particularly disadvantaged as members of other socially excluded or marginalized groups, e.g. young parents, women from ethnic minorities, lesbian and bisexual women, women with disabilities. Women's community based education functions to proactively address issues of social exclusion, thereby contributing to social cohesion.

Community education & training organisations and women's centres/organisations provide key access points to further and higher education opportunities. It is vital that those centres that provide a range of accredited and

non-accredited courses are maintained. Many of the existing courses have been developed in response to community need and provide people with an access point to return to more formal education. They are, in many respects, a first step in the achievement of equality of outcome.

The range and diversity of community based education in Northern Ireland corresponds to the range and diversity of community development in Northern Ireland. The document (in total) does not take enough account of the specificity of Northern Ireland as a 'post conflict' or 'transitional society' and the long term impact which this has had on local communities, e.g. sectarianism and trauma, and hence, community development work.

There is uniqueness about community development work and the work of the sector in NI, which requires recognition, and not just as a transitional phase. The richness and diversity of the sector, irrespective of how that came to be, is something to be valued, nurtured and supported as a model of good practise in the area of genuinely active citizenship and participative democracy. At the heart of community development work in Northern Ireland is community development education and community based education provision – this needs to be sustained.

Community based Education

Creating a culture of lifelong learning is one of the key principles of Government policy (UK White Paper 1998). Central to this policy is the promotion of access in the FE sector, particularly in TSN areas. The 'FE sector' should NOT simply be thought of as education that occurs within Further Education Colleges. Community based education accounts for the large number of people in Northern Ireland whose initial positive experience of education is post 16.

In terms of the voluntary and community sector the strategy document notes a 'fresh partnership approach' where the department will work to develop 'a partnership arrangement with appropriate voluntary and community sector organisations in certain specific areas of provision' (Section 1.2 page 7). While WSN welcome the acknowledgment of the need for the Department to work at developing partnerships with the voluntary and community sector, we feel that the terms ('appropriate' and 'certain specific areas') in this statement are limiting. There is also no clear indication of how this would be done; there is no implementation strategy.

The crucial question is, what is envisaged to be the role of the community sector in the proposed changes to the further and Higher Education? And how far are they (voluntary and community sector) involved in articulating that role?

WSN would recommend:

The acknowledgement of the role of community education within Further Education

A strategy for mainstreaming community education

The development of structures and processes to facilitate equal and effective partnerships between all education providers

We hope that you will take note of all the issues raised in our response and follow-up our concerns about the process of consultation and the range of consultees. WSN would view this as the beginning of a discussion and look forward to hearing from DEL.

Bibliography

Taillon, Ruth The Social and Economic Impact of Women's Centres in Greater Belfast, Research Report for the Women's Support Network, 2000

Taillon Ruth and May McCann An Assessment of the Impact of Loss of Services provided by WSN and other Women's Organisations in NI, Report for OFMDFM, August 2002

West Belfast Economic Forum A response to FE means business, June 2004

Women's Support Network Pathways for Change Consultation response, March 2004

Appendix 1

WSN Member groups

Al-Nisa Women's Group
Ardoyne Women's Group
Ashton Centre
ATLAS (Lisburn)
Ballybeen Women's Centre
Ballymurphy Women's Centre
Belfast Women's Training Services
Belfast Travellers Education & Development Group
Brook (Belfast)
Citywide Women's Consortium
Derry Women's Centre
East Belfast Community Education Centre & Walkway Women's Group
Falls Women's Centre
Footprints Women's Centre
Greenway Women's Centre
Lenadoon Women's Group
Lesbian Advocacy Service Initiative
Northern Ireland Women's European Platform
Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities
Parenting Forum NI
Shankill Women's Centre
South Tyrone Empowerment Programme (STEP)
Strabane & Lifford Women's Group
WEA
WEFT
Windsor Women's Centre
Women's Aid
Women's Information Group
Women into Politics
Women's News
Women's Resource Development Agency
Women's Tec