

A Response to: Programme for Government

Issued by: OFMDFM

January 2012

Introduction

- 1.1. The Women's Support Network (WSN) welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation issued by OFMDFM.
- 1.2. The Women's Support Network (WSN), established in 1989, is a regional organisation that works across all areas of Northern Ireland. It includes in its membership community based women's centres, groups and organisations, with a concentration in disadvantaged areas. WSN is a charitable and feminist organisation, which adopts a community development approach. We provide a range of support and services to 63 community based women's centres, projects and infrastructure groups and 26 associate members drawn from across the community and voluntary sector who support women, families and communities. (see Appendix 1).
- 1.2. Our members provide a wide range of women-centred front line services across Northern Ireland, including:
 - Specialist Advice
 - Childcare and Family Support
 - Counselling, Support and Advocacy
 - Complementary Therapies
 - Training & Education
 - Health & Wellbeing Programmes
 - Personal Development & Employment Support
 - Volunteering, Leadership & Empowerment
- 1.3. 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. 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.

- 1.4. Over the past 30+ years, the community based women's sector has developed a range of front-line services such as childcare, support, advice, and education & training services in response to the needs they identified at a grass roots level. Women's groups continue to meet the particular needs of women and their children living in areas considered to be some of most affected by the conflict, and recognised as some of the most disadvantaged areas across Northern Ireland today.

- 1.5. Network members are actively engaged with their local communities, cross-community initiatives and regional structures throughout Northern Ireland.

2.0 General Comments

- 2.1 As an Network organisation representing 85 community based women's centres, projects and infrastructure groups drawn from across the community and voluntary sector who support women, families and communities, WSN welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Programme for Government issued by OFMDFM.
- 2.2 We wish to raise the issue of time and sequencing of the Budget, Programme for Government and the EQIA. We have serious concerns this Programme for Government was presented sometime after the budget; not to mention the EQIA which did not appear for weeks after. The Women's Support Network would like to see the Northern Ireland Executive take this process seriously and make the necessary changes so that future decisions and processes are developed in a logical and coherent manner.
- 2.3 WSN very much welcomes the emphasis on 'Creating Opportunities, Tackling Disadvantage and Improving Health & Wellbeing.' We believe this priority will help in reducing inequalities, especially for women and their families in relation to poverty, income, work opportunities and education.
- 2.4 Although we agree in principle with all the priorities contained within the consultation, there is an urgent need for a robust action plan and delivery programmes to ensure the priorities are fit for purpose and that Departments are indeed meeting outputs.
- 2.5 WSN is disappointed that a gender perspective has not been mainstreamed in the Programme for Government or preceding budget. OFMDFM has highlighted in the Gender Equality Strategy that "the gender perspective will be taken into account during the whole process of policy development in all the Government functions."¹ The Council

¹ OFMDFMNI *Gender Equality Strategy: A Strategic framework to promote gender equality for women and men 2006-2016*, Pg 35.

of Europe has published a handbook on Gender Budgeting and defines gender budgeting as “an application of gender mainstreaming in the budgetary process.”² According to the Council of Europe, gender budgeting involves three stages including analysis involving gender disaggregated data, determining the differential impact of the budget between men and women; reformulation of policies and redistribution of resources to ensure gender equality outcomes; and embedding gender equality within all budgetary processes.

WSN believes the approach highlighted in the Council of Europe’s handbook is vital to ensure that equality of opportunity on the grounds of gender is embedded in the budgetary process. WSN recommends that OFMDFM and other government departments in future adopt the approach published by the Council of Europe in its guidance on gender budgeting thus ensuring gender equality in budgetary processes.

- 2.6 It is our strong belief that CEDAW (Committee on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women) should be unified across the whole of the UK, including devolved regions such as Northern Ireland. In paragraph 263 of the follow up concluding reports it states that ‘*the principal responsibility for implementation of the Convention lies with the Government of the United Kingdom*’.³ Without this, the unequal position of women within Northern Ireland will continue. We are therefore requesting that the Northern Ireland Executive incorporates the principles of CEDAW into domestic legislation to promote the rights of and equality of women within Northern Ireland.

3.0 Priorities

- 3.1 **Growing a sustainable Economy and Investing in the Future –** WSN is extremely disappointed that the ***Childcare Strategy*** has not been given consideration within this priority. Parents need access to

² Council of Europe (2009) *Gender Budgeting: Practical Implementation handbook*, Pg 5.

³ <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cedaw/followup.htm>

high quality, accessible and affordable childcare services in order to be able to reconcile their caring and work/education demands⁴.

It is well documented that there is a lack of childcare provision in Northern Ireland. Furthermore, the childcare settings which do exist are unevenly distributed across the region. Rural areas have the lowest level of childcare provision. 71% of all childcare settings in Northern Ireland exist in the east of the region (within the Northern, South Eastern and Belfast Health and Social Care Trust Areas). The remaining percentage of childcare settings are found within the, mostly rural, Southern and Western Health and Social Care Trust Areas.

Without adequate and affordable childcare provision, parents struggle to access work and stay in work. The second Childcare Costs Survey (2011) carried out for the region by Employers for Childcare revealed that for 46% of respondents the cost of childcare influenced the hours they work. In addition to this many families struggled with their childcare costs. 45% of the average net salary is allocated to childcare for one child⁵.

The 2005 review of the Northern Ireland Childcare Strategy (1999) also recognised the need for a strategy, stating that the *“availability of affordable childcare has been identified as a barrier to parents hoping to return to work”*⁶. More recently the First and Deputy First Minister outlined the need to empower parents back into employment through access to childcare in the Northern Ireland Child Poverty Strategy.⁷

Childcare policy in Northern Ireland has suffered neglect. This is evident given that the themes of the first Childcare Strategy for the region, *Children First (1999)* still remain relevant. Furthermore, childcare policy and development in the region lags behind the rest of

⁴ For the purposes of this section childcare denotes the care of children that is provided through registered formal daycare services.

⁵ Employers For Childcare Charitable Group (2011) Northern Ireland Childcare Costs Survey 2011, EFCG

⁶ DHSSPS (2005) Review of Children First Final Report, August 2005, p46, DHSSPS

⁷ NIE (2010) Improving Children’s Life Chances, The Child Poverty Strategy , p1, NIE

the UK where childcare services have been elevated to a statutory footing.

The Executive therefore must recognise the importance of a childcare strategy and place it at the heart of growing a sustainable economy and investing in the future of Northern Ireland. In 2009 there were 1364 individual children registered for childcare within Women's Centres⁸. This equates to 9828 hours of childcare provided weekly mainly for children age 0-4 years funded by the Department of Social Development through the Women's Centres Childcare Fund. Therefore we also call upon the Executive to support the Department for Social Development as it continues to fund childcare within Women's Centres.

3.1.1 Apart from the labour market indicators relating to the economic inactivity of women highlighted in the EQIA, there is no mention within the Programme for Government. It is not enough to recognise these issues but policy solutions must be brought forward to tackle the problems. Women are less well connected to the labour market⁹ and are concentrated in part-time jobs with the largest pay disparity being for female part time workers.¹⁰ Women are also more likely to experience interruptions to their careers to take on caring responsibilities and this has a negative impact on their future career and earnings.¹¹

It is not enough to rely solely on the Creative Industries Innovation Fund to assist women in to employment. WSN recommends that girls and women are encouraged to pursue the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths) subjects This is essential and must be written in to DEL's and DE's delivery plans and actions which will challenge gender stereotypes, particularly in STEM subjects and increased uptake of STEM subjects by girls.

⁸ Childcare Mapping and Research Report – Women's Centres Regional Partnership (2010)

⁹ DETI (2009) Women in Northern Ireland, DETI

¹⁰ Northern Ireland Assembly (2011) The Gender Pay Gap, OFMDFM

¹¹ Ibid.

WSN would like to see community education given more prominence within the Programme for government. It is often Women's Centres who provide that first step back into learning for women, and it is often these personal development courses which provide a strong foundation to move on to other skills based courses. Women's Centres often remove the many barriers women face with formal education systems. Research by the Women's Centres Regional Partnership (WCRP)¹² illustrated barriers faced by women from disadvantaged backgrounds which can lead to social and financial exclusion. These include lack of access to adequate and affordable childcare, limited skills, qualifications and experience and confidence which can impede women in entering/re-entering education, training and employment. It is therefore extremely important that the necessary investment is made to allow women's centres to continue providing training courses and skills courses to women living in areas of disadvantage to allow them to access training and employment opportunities.

3.2 Creating Opportunities, Tackling Disadvantage and Improving Health and Wellbeing – WSN is pleased that the Executive is committed to addressing inequality and tackling disadvantage. However, we fail to see how 'introducing changes to the welfare system'¹³ will help. The effects of Welfare Reform are yet to be realised however it is accepted that Northern Ireland will be hit hardest. In a report commissioned by the Law Centre NI, the Institute of Fiscal Studies established that after London, the tax and benefits changes planned up to 2014-2015 will have a disproportionate impact on NI. This is for two reasons: the high numbers of those in receipt of Disability Living Allowance, especially for mental health disorders, and the high number of families with children who will be adversely affected by cuts to social security.¹⁴ Anticipated job losses within the public sector will hit women hardest since significantly more women are

¹² Women's Centres Regional Partnership "Women living in disadvantaged communities: barriers to participation" (2009) available at www.wcrp.org.uk/cms/data/upimages/Barriers_to_Participation_-_FINAL.pdf

¹³ Programme for Government (2011)

¹⁴ James Browne, The Impact of tax and benefit reforms to be introduced between 2010-11 and 2014-15 in Northern Ireland, IFS Briefing Note 114, December 2010

employed in low paid public sector jobs, they will therefore bear the brunt of these public spending cuts, with subsequent devastating impact on the life chances of their children. We believe many women and their families will struggle (women comprise 53% of benefit recipients in Northern Ireland) especially in relation to reduced benefit entitlement, childcare costs and the intended poor delivery arrangements with proposed monthly payments which could mean many families finding it difficult to budget over lengthy periods. A report by the Women's Resource & Development Agency¹⁵ provides an evidence base detailing women's position in the economy, employment, childcare, pensions, welfare, debt and credit as well as housing and fuel debt.

3.2.1 Child poverty figures are stark; with figures for 2009-10 showing a 14,000 increase in the number of children in poverty. Northern Ireland has 28% of children growing up in poverty, with the figure for the whole of the UK standing at 20%. The Child Poverty Act 2010 is meant to ensure that action to end child poverty will be a priority for the current administration. The legislation highlights education, childcare, health, family support, financial assistance, employment, skills and housing as crucial elements in the battle to end child poverty. The Northern Ireland Executive and other UK jurisdictions have signed up to the eradication of child poverty by 2020. WSN is disappointed at the lack of ambition, targets and progress on the Child Poverty Strategy. We therefore ask that the Child Poverty Strategy is given greater importance within the Programme for Government and that an outcomes model is developed as a matter of urgency. The statistics outlined above are truly indefensible. It reinforces the need for urgent action to prioritise them, with a focus on early intervention, prevention, early years and family support.

3.2.2 WSN is pleased that the Executive will work on closing the gap in educational underachievement. Northern Ireland has a higher

¹⁵ WRDA Report (2011) *The Northern Ireland Economy: Women on the Edge?*, Bronagh Hinds (p117) Available at <http://www.wrda.net/Documents/The%20NI%20Economy%20-%20Women%20on%20the%20Edge%20Report.pdf>

proportion of working age population with no qualifications (20.3%) compared with the UK average of 10.5%. Within areas of disadvantage, children in receipt of free school meals only 29.7% achieved 5 GCSEs A* to C, including English and Maths, compared to 63.6% students who did not receive free school meals.¹⁶ Statistics from some of the most disadvantaged wards in west Belfast show that more than 80% of the young people are leaving school with no or low qualifications – at a time when the EU has a 2020 target of 40% entering higher education.¹⁷ WSN therefore call for the Executive to focus on early intervention, prevention, early years and family support. We believe this is the only way to ensure that children living in areas of disadvantage are given a better start in life and ensure better socio-economic outcomes.

3.2.3 WSN is pleased that one of the building blocks to priority two is the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. However, we would like to see the Programme for Government place at its foundation the principles of the UNCRC with particular emphasis on Article 18. 2: for the purpose of guaranteeing and promoting the rights set forth in the present Convention, States Parties shall render appropriate assistance to parents and legal guardians in the performance of their child-rearing responsibilities and shall ensure the development of institutions, facilities and services for the care of children. Article 18.3: parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that children of working parents have the right to benefit from child-care services and facilities for which they are eligible. Article 27.1: parties recognise the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development. In order to achieve this, WSN would like to see greater co-operation and collaborative working in across all departments a link with the Ten Year Strategy for Children and Young People and the Children and Young People's Plan through the Health & Social Care Boards, which will be key drivers for meeting the needs of children.

¹⁶ DE STATISTICAL PRESS RELEASE Qualifications and Destinations of Northern Ireland School Leavers 2008/09, quoted in Save the Children briefing, Better Odds at School, 2010

¹⁷ Save the Children briefing, Better Odds at School 2010 p2

3.2.4 To ensure the health and wellbeing of women are kept at the forefront of this Programme for Government, WSN would also urge the Executive to consider the existing investments made in early years through other Departments e.g. DE (Sure Start) and DSD (Neighbourhood Renewal) to build on and maximise outcomes around the objective of reducing maternal inequalities for mothers.

3.2.5 Research suggests there is a connection between the conflict in Northern Ireland and the risk of mental health.¹⁸ The greater the extent to which someone's area or life is affected by it, the greater the likelihood that they have poorer mental health. A History of Falls Women's Centre (1982-2008) also noted that due to the political situation during the 'Troubles' women in West Belfast were under tremendous pressure, with "many women having sole responsibility for their families as men were in gaol."¹⁹ WSN would therefore urge for mental health issues affecting women to be given consideration within the Programme for Government.

3.3.1 WSN welcomes the Executive's aim to set to **build a strong and shared community**. WSN is disappointed that no reference has been made of the role women and women's community based organisations in promoting good relations particularly those organisations situated in areas of high levels of socio-economic disadvantage or situated within interface areas and areas experiencing the most demographic change due to inward migration in recent years, and these are the areas which have been most affected by the conflict. For example, women's community based organisations and women's centres offer childcare, education and training classes which have been accessed by women from different religious backgrounds, race and sexual orientation.²⁰ WSN urges the Executive to ensure women are fully recognised in this

¹⁸ O'Reilly, D. and Stevenson, M., 2003. *Mental health in Northern Ireland: have 'The Troubles' made it worse?* Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health Vol. 57, pp. 488-492

¹⁹ Herstory: The History of Falls Women's Centre 1982-2008

²⁰ WRDA (2007) *Is Gender Part of Good Relations?: Report of a Conference on a Shared Future*, pgs 24-26

priority and to recognise the role of women's community based organisations in promoting good relations through their services provided to women with multiple identities such as race, political opinion, religion and sexual orientation.

3.3.2 WSN calls for the full implantation of UN Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, which recognises the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and in peace building.²¹ Most women's groups and organisations' grassroots work is crucial to the elimination of sectarianism. Those groups work in disadvantaged and marginalised areas, the same areas that suffer most from the blight of sectarianism. Given that the plethora of community organisations' leadership and decision-makers are mostly male, the lack of women's influence and input into strategies and models for tackling issues such as sectarianism can only set its elimination back. Our members work is vital to encouraging and enabling women to go forward in their community as leaders and sit on boards and committees that draw up community strategies for dealing with community relations issues. The necessity of women's equal representation at all levels of society is recognised internationally as a prerequisite to a fair, equal and peaceful society, the value of the women's sector's work is integral to this. WSN calls on the Executive to work with the UK government to implement this UN Resolution in Northern Ireland and to recognise the role of women in peacebuilding in good relations strategies.

4.0 Conclusion

4.1 Some of the key goals outlined in the Programme for Government document dovetail with the key priorities within the community based women's sector. WSN have been working with our members to improve pathways to employment, tackle systemic issues linked to deprivation and increase community services for women and their families. We are fully committed to reducing child poverty and tackling

²¹ http://www.un.org/events/res_1325e.pdf

rural poverty and isolation. The community based women's sector will continue to deliver practical outcomes through targeted community education initiatives, childcare provision and a range of services which seek to reach out and include marginalised and 'hard to reach' women.

4.1.1 However, the community based women's sector cannot achieve these goals in isolation. WSN is disappointed there has been no recognition of the work carried out by the community based women's sector in delivering programmes that assist women in to employment and help tackle poverty and social exclusion. The work of the community based women's sector must be recognised within the Programme for Government. Without this recognition, WSN is concerned the community based women's sector will not be able to continue this valuable work without infrastructure support. We appreciate that while funding such as ESF continues to assist the community based women's sector, the funding has many hurdles such as match funding. WSN would therefore welcome the stability of funding for education programmes that help women in disadvantaged areas. We would also like to see a decision taken on Learner Access and Engagement which would also allow more women to avail of education and training within a community based setting.

4.1.2 WSN welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation document. Whilst welcoming the Programme for Government, we have offered some constructive recommendations as to how it could be improved. We are happy to further discuss this response if required.

For further information, contact:

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MEMBERSHIP 2012

	<u>Member Group</u>
1	All Ireland Mother's Union
2	An Munia Tober (Travellers)
3	Antrim & Ballymena Women's Aid
4	Ardmonagh Women's Group
5	Ardoyne Women's Group
6	ATLAS Women's Centre
7	Al Nisa Women's Group
8	Ballybeen Women's Centre
9	Ballymurphy Women's Group
10	Belfast & Lisburn Women's Aid
11	Belvoir Women's Improvement Group
12	Carrickfergus Women's Forum
13	Carew II
14	Causeway Women's Aid
15	Chrysalis Women's Centre
16	Clan Mor Women's Group (Sure Start)
17	Derry Well Woman
18	Derry Women's Centre
19	Falls Women's Centre
20	First Steps Women's Group
21	Footprints Women's Centre
22	Foyle Women's Aid
23	Foyle Women's Information Network
24	Granaghant District Women's Group
25	Greenway Women's Centre
26	Kilcooley Women's Centre
27	Lesbian Advocacy Services Initiative
28	Lesbian Line
29	Lenadoon Women's Group
30	Ligoneil Family Centre
31	Link Women's Group
32	Manor Women's Group
33	Markets Women's Group
34	NI Women's Aid Federation
35	NI Women's European Platform
36	Fermanagh Women's Network
37	Newry & Mourne Women
38	Newtownabbey Women's Group
39	Older Women's Network NI
40	Omagh Women's Aid
41	Rape Crisis Centre
42	Rasharkin Women's Group
43	Shankill Women's Centre
44	Strabane & Lifford Women's Centre
45	Strathfoyle Women's Centre
46	The Learning Lodge

47	Voices Women's Group
48	Waterside Women's Centre
49	Windsor Women's Centre
50	Women Connect Project
51	Women into Politics
52	Women's Information Group
53	Women's News
54	Women's TEC
55	Women 2 Gather
56	Women's Resource & Development Agency
57	WISPA (Women in Sport & Physical Activity)
58	Ardcarn Women's Group
59	OIYIN Women's Group
60	Mossley Women's Institute
61	Mount Vernon Women's Group
62	Coole New Opportunities
63	North Belfast Womens Initiative & Support Project
	<u>Associate Members</u>
1.	Ballymena Community Forum
2.	CiNI
3.	Community Relations Forum
4.	East Belfast Community Partnership
5.	Employers for Childcare
6.	HIV Centre (Women's Support Group)
7.	Mencap
8.	National Women's Council of Ireland
9.	Playboard
10.	RNIB (Women's Group)
11.	Good Morning Newtownabbey
12.	Monkstown Community Association
13.	WAVE Trauma Centre
14.	WEA
15.	Parents Advice Centre
16.	Templemore Community Action Group
17.	Gingerbread
18.	Larne Community Development Project
19.	Community First Coaching
20.	Changing Faces
21.	Sands NI
22.	Women's Project Ashton Centre
23.	Women on Track
24.	Matt Talbot Women's Group
25.	Ulster People's College
26.	Council for the Homeless NI