

A Response to: Child Poverty Strategy for Northern Ireland

Issued by: Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister

January 2011

Introduction

- 1.1. The Women's Support Network (WSN) welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation issued by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister.
- 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 62 community based women's centres, projects and infrastructure groups and 22 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.
- 1.6. WSN welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Child Poverty Strategy issued by OFMDFM. WSN agrees with the Department that "there are many factors which can impact on the ability to lift children out of poverty." Poverty can have a profound impact on the lives of children, their family and society as a whole which is why we urge the Department to recognise the role of the community based women's sector in working with government departments to meet the objectives in tackling child poverty. For example, the women's centres provide front line services to women, children and families in disadvantaged areas including childcare provision, education and training, family support, health promotion and advice services.
- 1.7. We are encouraged by the Executive's renewed effort to advocate for the appropriate level of income resources on behalf of children and their families. Research by Martina Monteith et al¹ shows that living on benefits for even one year significantly increases the likelihood of families being in poverty. Save the Children research also highlighted

¹ Horgan, Goretti (UUJ) and Monteith, Marina (Save the Children) – Joseph Rowntree Foundation – *What can we do to tackle child poverty in Northern Ireland?* November 2009

the problem of 'low pay/no pay' cycle² where people move from benefits to low paid work and then back again.

2. Comments

- 2.1. WSN welcomes the strategic priorities as outlined in 2.12 but would stress the need to remove barriers for parents entering the labour market. A report by the Women's Centres Regional Partnership (WCRP) identified lack of appropriate childcare as the single biggest barrier to women's participation in education, training and work, as well as public and political life. The report made a number of recommendations including the development of an integrated childcare strategy for Northern Ireland and increased provision of local, high quality, affordable and flexible childcare.³ The Law Centre NI also cited childcare as a barrier to employment stating that "any child poverty strategy needs to make progress in this area if the route to work is to be a meaningful route out of poverty."⁴ The Law Centre NI also raised concerns during the Committee stages of the Welfare Reform Bill regarding obligations for lone parents with children aged seven or over to look for employment from 2010, given that there is no childcare strategy or childcare infrastructure in place in NI.⁵
- 2.2. WSN wishes to highlight the important role of community based childcare provision particularly in the community based women's sector which can make a major contribution in meeting the department's objectives in the eradication of child poverty by enabling women from disadvantaged backgrounds to enter education, training and employment. We call for the immediate implementation of a Childcare Strategy and the stabilisation of the Women's Centre's Childcare Fund, currently located within DSD.

²Save the Children: *Measuring Severe Child Poverty in NI*, January 2010

³H McLaughlin (2009) *Women Living in Disadvantaged Communities: Barriers to Participation*, Report written on behalf of WCRP, pg 37.

⁴ Ibid, pages 60-61

⁵Law Centre NI *Working Together To Reduce Child Poverty Seminar: The Child Poverty Act 2010*, May 2010

- 2.3. We also wish to further highlight the continued need for child maintenance as this can make a significant difference to a child's wellbeing. In Northern Ireland, women are more likely to be lone parents⁶ therefore it is important that resources are made available to continue to ensure financial responsibility is forthcoming from the parent who does not live with their child.
- 2.4. WSN welcomes the priority action areas identified in the consultation. However, we would highlight that even those in work can find it difficult to cope⁷. This can be a result of a miss match of job and skills, difficulty with balancing caring responsibilities as well as work not being a genuine route out of poverty. Workshops conducted by WSN⁸ with women from both Shankill and Falls pointed to a real increase of 'in-work' poverty; highlighting the increasing cost of living and lack of disposable income. We wish to highlight the need for continued financial support for those parents moving from benefits to work, especially if the work is low paid. Given that women are paid on average 10% less than men⁹, it is vitally important that this shortfall is reflected in any additional support offered.
- 2.5. WSN would wish to see further recognition placed on the importance of all skills, particularly those programmes that build self esteem and development for parents and children. Women's groups continue to meet these particular needs of women and their children which promote both health and wellbeing.

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<http://www.gingerbreadni.org/Pdf/Possibilities%20Project/Lone%20parents%20speak%20out%20final%20report%20June%202008.pdf>

⁷ JRCT: *Work, Poverty & Benefit Cycling*, February 2010

⁸ Workshops were conducted in Shankill Women's Centre and Falls Women's Centre in May 2010 to develop a response to Belfast City Council's development of a draft Anti-Poverty Strategy

⁹ Office for National Statistics - <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/hub/index.html>

- 2.6. WSN welcomes the Department's commitment to maximising access to and uptake of grants, benefits and advice services. Three of our member organisations, Falls Women's Centre, Causeway Women's Aid and Windsor Women's Centre provide advice to women and their families including family support, child protection, housing and repossession issues, debt and benefits issues.¹⁰ We urge the Department to ensure that adequate resources are made available to sustain and further enhance these front line services.
- 2.7. Physical and mental health problems, and disability can particularly place significant barriers to accessing and sustaining employment. WSN welcomes the Departments commitment to targeting those who need further financial assistance.
- 2.8. Tackling occupational segregation is another route to counteract poverty in work. We urge OFMDFM to encourage more women into non traditional occupations. WomensTEC, a member of WSN, has been successful in training women as electricians, plumbers and joiners. WSN would urge the Department of Employment and Learning to support organisations such as the WomensTEC.
- 2.9. WSN fully support the underpinning principles as outlined in 2.13. We would urge OFMDFM to consider using the community based women's sector as a model of good practice. For example, Footprints Women's Centre continues to inform government policy on diet and nutrition. They have won several awards for their health inequalities programmes delivered within the Colin area. They offer a diverse range of programmes to educate and promote skills that will improve parenting and health awareness.

¹⁰ The Centre Manager at Falls Women's Centre states the service provided is a wraparound service because in addition to the advice service provided, the service is inclusive and based on the needs of women. Provision includes training, education, childcare, personal development and holistic therapy.

- 2.10. Statistics from DETI show that between April and June 2009, 185,000 women of working age were economically inactive in Northern Ireland with a resulting inactivity rate of 34.8%¹¹. WSN would ask OFMDFM what support will be available to reverse this trend.
- 2.11. WSN wishes to highlight the continued need for the Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA) for those families on low incomes. One of the routes out of poverty highlighted in the Child Poverty Strategy (Page 12) is 'increased participation in formal and non-formal education'. The abolishment of the EMA could mean families losing £30 per week as well as the welfare reforms of the reduction in housing benefit, working tax credits, childcare tax credits. These multiple losses could lead to severe difficulties for families with children.
- 2.12. The role of parents and carers is vital in the early education of children. Women are often the primary caregivers. A recent research briefing published by the Department of Education¹² highlights that lower maternal education is associated with children's lower attainment levels in subjects such as English and Maths and that these effects continue across primary school years. This research contrasts with lower paternal education which is also associated with lower attainment in English and Maths but the effects of these fade over primary school years.¹³ In Northern Ireland 24%¹⁴ of adults are in the low skills category of literacy and numeracy. Continued resources to support parents will greatly assist in helping them further their education, this will greatly enhance how they interact with their children. WSN urges the department to emphasize the important role of women as carers in supporting early education of the child and the important effects of maternal educational attainment in the strategy.

¹¹ DETI *Women in Northern Ireland* (September 2009,2) available at http://www.detini.gov.uk/women_in_ni_september_09_stats.pdf

¹² Department of Education "*Effective Pre- School Provision in Northern Ireland (EPPNI) Pre School Experience and Key Stage 2 Performance in English and Mathematics*", Pg 2, available on www.deni.gov.uk

¹³ Department of Education "*Effective Pre- School Provision in Northern Ireland (EPPNI) Pre School Experience and Key Stage 2 Performance in English and Mathematics*", Pg 2, available on www.deni.gov.uk

¹⁴ <http://www.nationalliteracytrust.net/Database/stats/adultstats.html#NI>

- 2.13. The Child Poverty Strategy acknowledges that data available on minority ethnic communities in Northern Ireland is not substantial. We would call on OFMDFM to address additional barriers faced by minority ethnic women; especially those further marginalised e.g. refugees, asylum seekers and lone parents. A number of our members work with women from minority ethnic communities, for example, Windsor Women’s Centre provide a range of counselling services such as advice, guidance, counselling, education, training and child care. The Centre has found that many of these women are isolated from both society and from being able to access the job market due to both language and child care issues. This can affect their mental and physical wellbeing, which in turn has a knock on effect on their children.
- 2.14. Research conducted by Sullivan, Cara et al¹⁵ further highlights that ‘poverty on the foundation stage [of children under 3] remains significant.’ WSN wishes to further highlight the excellent quality of childcare located in the community based women’s centres. Community-based women’s centres are not for profit and the quality of childcare is placed above all other factors. Whereas if profit margins entered the equation, certain decisions made may detract from providing quality childcare.
- 2.15. Furthermore, WSN urges the department to set out how it will ensure that adequate resources are made available to sustain existing childcare provision and how it will seek resources for additional childcare places which may be required to enable parents to enter/re-enter the labour market, considering current budget constraints and priorities.

Conclusion

WSN welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation document. Whilst welcoming this document, we have offered some constructive recommendations as to how it could be improved. We

¹⁵ Office of the First and Deputy First Minister “*The Consequences of childhood disadvantage in Northern Ireland at age 5*” June 2010

particularly wish to highlight the excellent work of the community based women's sector and the positive role they already play in meeting the needs of children and families within disadvantaged areas. We are very disappointed that there is a lack of targets, timescales and specific action plans outlined in the strategy. We also have seen little evidence as to how the departments are going to work together and how OFMDFM intend to track progress. Without including any of these issues within the document, it would therefore not be fit for purpose. We are happy to further discuss this response if required.

For further information, contact:

Ellen Finlay - Policy and Research Co-ordinator

Tel: 028 90236923

Email: policy@wsn.org.uk

MEMBERSHIP 2010

	<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	Foyle Women's Aid
	<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