

A Response to: Draft Community Development Strategy

Issued by: Belfast City Council

November 2011

Introduction

- 1.1. The Women's Support Network (WSN) welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation issued by the Belfast City Council.
- 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. Comments

The Women's Support Network welcomes the commitment of Belfast City Council in this draft Community Development Strategy. We believe a comprehensive approach to Community Development is needed to tackle poverty, inequality and deprivation. It is our belief that strengths already exist within communities in the form of Women's Centres. Women's Centres continue to make a vital contribution to the community development process. They work with grass roots women, children and families by providing a holistic wraparound approach to meet their needs.

Building Block 1 - Core community development

Community development is a long term process that not only allows people to become active in their community but to overcome barriers. Women's Centres have been established for many years in areas of disadvantage. They have contributed to addressing the increasing levels of lack of confidence and mental well-being of women within their area. They continue to help remove barriers to women's participation, such as childcare, training and education, advice, counselling and family support. 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. Women's Centres have also created job opportunities in social economy enterprises running successful businesses to support their work.

The Women's Support Network believes that it is fundamentally important for the voice of women to be heard, especially those women from areas of disadvantage where Women's Centres are based such as Falls, Windsor and Shankill. It is imperative that any policy, engagement or service provided by Belfast City Council is founded upon user involvement and based on real need. WSN would want actions developed from the Council strategy to be informed by the reality of experience and not just statistics and that engagement in community development is continuous, resourced and sustainable.

Building Block 2 & 3 - Engagement that works / Effective partnership working

It has been WSN's experience that sometimes the most disadvantaged groups are not automatically involved in community development. We believe that Women's Centres are ideally placed and have extensive experience of working with grass roots marginalised women, and we recognise that involvement in the community development process can be challenging and complex, but we would highlight the successful work the Women's Centres have carried out over the years and we believe they have an important role to play in any future community development strategy.

Women's Centres continuously work creatively and co-operative with each other and across sectors and the community. They have developed strong creative partnerships. However, it must be noted that as well as being creative and rewarding, partnerships can sometimes be difficult and time-consuming. This is especially true in issues effecting women - where women's needs are not always addressed. WSN would like the Council to raise awareness of issues affecting women and ensure that partnerships strike a gender balance, considering women are underrepresented in many aspects of life. For example, only 22% of women were recently elected to councils during the 2011 elections held in May, while women in public

appointment roles in Northern Ireland was only 449 compared with men at 880.¹ A recent report by Lord Davies showed that only 12.5% of members of corporate boards of FTSE 100 companies are women.²

Statutory agencies for example, also have a key role in community development. We would wish to see Belfast City Council encouraging these partnerships to identify key concerns and opportunities. We believe the statutory agencies will be valuable in supporting the community development strategy going forward.

Conclusion

WSN welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation document. We believe that community development must start with people in communities as they can define the issues affecting them and how they wish to move forward.

Women's Centres face many challenges; the most acute being funding which can sometimes be piecemeal or erratic. If Belfast City Council wishes to ensure communities are strong and move forward in a positive way then resources must be seamless and based on need. The uniqueness of the contribution of Women's Centres to community development must also be valued and recognised as a local contribution which makes genuine change. For example, Windsor Women's Centre through its educational and training programmes, offers women opportunities to gain vital skills and qualifications in increasing their prospects for meaningful employment as well as boosting self confidence. Falls Women's Centre offers an extensive programme of activities aimed at providing a holistic service for local women including a befriending and listening ear service aimed at breaking down isolation and exclusion. Shankill Women's Centre's capacity building work with young people has also contributed to community development through information sessions so young people can make positive choices.

¹ Public Bodies and Public Appointments Annual Report 2009/2010

² Women on Boards, Lord Davies Review, February 2011

This will ensure that Women's Centres impact on community development is lasting and continues to meet the needs of disadvantaged women and families.

We would welcome the addition of Sustainable Communities within one of the building blocks. It is by empowering communities that will ensure all sections of society are fully involved and have a shared identity and self confidence. Women's Centres wish to play a key role in community planning and would like to be consulted and have a strong voice in decisions which affect local women.

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 2011

	<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