

A Response to: Green Paper – Strengthening  
families, promoting parental responsibility: the  
future of child maintenance

Issued by: Department for Work and Pensions

March 2011

## **Introduction**

- 1.1. The Women's Support Network (WSN) welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation issued by the Department of the Environment.
- 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.

## **2. Comments**

- 2.1 WSN is extremely concerned with the proposals contained within this Green Paper, particularly the government's idea to place an application charge when applying to the Child Maintenance and Enforcement Commission. It is wrong to use charges which would discourage families and place a financial burden on those who are in low income households. At a time of widespread welfare cuts and an increased cost of living, a recent report by the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR)<sup>1</sup> suggests that the impact of the welfare reform on families with children will be a loss of £5 billion nationally. These changes, along with the spending cuts already in place, will have a disproportionate impact on women and lone parents (90% of whom are female). Pressure on low income families have already increased, many of whom are struggling to manage their household budgets at present. WSN call on the government to remit fees from this proposal as

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<sup>1</sup> IPPR *Universal Credit A White Paper A Response* 2010

charging for a system will only exclude children and parents from low income families.

- 2.1. The community based women's sector has a well established record of delivering services and courses that assist women with children by providing advice on welfare benefits and child maintenance. WSN is extremely concerned that the government's plans to charge for using the CMEC will mean more parents will be forced to rely on the community based women's sector. The sector is already facing funding cuts, without investment in the community based women's sector to deal with this increase in demand for services families will find it difficult to access any help. Although the green paper acknowledges the need to build the voluntary sector as part of a shared approach, we see little evidence of a joined up approach by government departments. WSN would urge the government to detail how much investment will be made to cope with the increase in advice provision and how it will work together across departments.
- 2.2. WSN are supportive of the continuing need for families to receive help and intervention with negotiation. However, we are concerned for those parents who are unable to form or maintain a private relationship agreement. There are risks and limitations to this approach, for example some parents may be able to establish their own financial arrangements while others need help. This move towards private arrangements may see a shift in the balance of power between parents. We have particular concerns for women in this as it is predominately women who are the carers for children while the non-resident parent is mostly men. WSN would like to know what safeguards will be established for women to ensure they receive a fair deal?
- 2.3. We note from Point 38 that people who experience 'violence or there is a risk to the child' will be fast-tracked. WSN seek clarification as to how domestic and sexual violence against women will be evidenced. We would also request further clarity on what is meant by 'fast-track'. The Green paper states that 'victims of domestic violence will be

exempt from the application charge', what about those women who suffer sexual violence or have experienced financial abuse from a partner? WSN seeks clarification on all these points.

- 2.4. There is a real fear that women could accept a lower monetary or even sporadic contribution for child maintenance for an easier relationship with an ex-partner. This has serious implications in relation to gender equality and the fact that less money would be going to the child. This will do little to reduce child poverty. WSN would like the government to set out how it will monitor and evaluate private agreements in order to safeguard women and to ensure they do not settle for less money than they are entitled to.

## **Conclusion**

WSN welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation document. We have serious concerns over the implementation of this new system. It will exclude those in society who need the most help and who are at a vulnerable time in their life. The previous problems with the child maintenance system are well documented, the system is running smoothly now, we fail to see why the Government wish to introduce yet another new system, considering we are in austere times. 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	Foyle Women's Aid
	<b><u>Associate Members</u></b>
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