

**A Response to the consultation document -**

**Five Education and Library Board Draft  
Financial Plans for the Period  
April 2005 – March 2006  
Equality Consultation Questionnaire**

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## **Introduction**

The Women's Support Network (WSN), established in 1989, is an umbrella organisation with charitable status providing support for more than 40 community-based women's centres, women's projects and women's infrastructure groups. The WSN aims to achieve social, political and economic justice through the promotion of the autonomous organisation of women. The Network also aims to strengthen the collective voice for women's groups, to promote and develop networking to enable collective action and to influence policy and decision making processes. The WSN is an important vehicle for taking forward the common agenda of community-based women's organisations, many of which are based in the most disadvantaged areas of the city and which have experienced the worst effects of the political conflict.

## **Overall comment**

As a women's organisation concerned with the unequal position of women within society and conscious of the wide discrepancies in resources and incomes within society, the WSN views with great concern the proposals of the five Education and Library Boards to cut costs over the next financial year. We believe that serious equality implications arise from these proposals and we are not convinced that the minimal information provided in the screening criteria is sufficient for us to accept these proposals. We would have expected detailed quantitative evidence and in-depth consultation to have been submitted alongside each proposal for cuts to enable informed comments to be given. Instead, we feel that we are being asked to rubber stamp decisions that have already been taken, regardless of the profound impact these might have on some of the most vulnerable and least advantaged children within our society.

## **Specific issues**

As we have stated above, we do not feel we have sufficient information to make informed decisions on the proposals. However, because of our specific remit as a women's organisation, we would like to flag up particular issues for which we would like further information:

**Increase/recover costs in the Music Service:** It would appear to us that the opportunity to learn to play an instrument will be available only to pupils whose parents will be able to afford the additional costs. Working class children in the main will be disproportionately affected, as the Boards acknowledge. We believe that this will have major repercussions for the future and we cannot endorse in any way this cut in resources.

**Cessation of Homework Centre provision:** how many pupils is this likely to affect? Are the schools concerned providing facilities for pupils after school hours?

**Closure of Family Literacy Centres:** we again view this decision with great concern. We would add that if the Boards wish to save on infrastructural costs while continuing to support these pupils through a community outreach programme, that the Women's Centres offer appropriate accommodation for programmes aimed at girls and young women.

**Early Years Learning Service (Toy and Book Library):** We note that this service serves 170 pupils in 16 schools in the Belfast area. While the comment regarding adverse impact states only that there is 100% capacity for children in terms of pre-school education, we would wish for a more detailed account existing users and the possible impact of this cut in services.

**Special Education:** The WSN wishes to register its profound disquiet at the proposed cuts in provision to children with special needs, who form the most vulnerable group within our society and who have limited resources from the outset. These cuts will create particular hardships for families who will struggle to meet the deficit from their resources. We believe that full impact assessments are required.

**School Catering:** The proposals regarding school meals are made in defiance of recent evidence concerning the importance of providing school children meals that are nutritionally appropriate, and made on the premises rather than being simply re-heated on the premises. We believe that the benefits to children and to society when children are given high quality food is far greater than any immediate efficiency savings. 'Spare capacity' within kitchens could be abolished by greater take up of school meals, but this can only be done if meals are attractive to pupils and of a reasonable price. We believe that these proposals will only further the decline in school catering, to the detriment of the most disadvantaged.

**English as an additional language:** The WSN shares the concerns expressed by NICE and EMBRACE regarding future provision of EAL. This is an extremely important issue, given the increasing numbers of children without English as a first language in our society, and the rise in racism that we have witnessed.

**Swimming programme:** We believe that the ability to swim is an essential life skill and note with concern the intention to withdraw funding for this provision, which again will impact most directly on children from disadvantaged areas.

**Conclusion:** We believe that further evidence of impact is necessary before decisions can be made. This will entail detailed consultation with all affected parties.

## 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 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  
Parenting Forum NI  
Shankill Women's Centre  
South Tyrone Empowerment Programme (STEP)  
Strabane & Lifford Women's Group  
Windsor Women's Centre  
Women's Information Group  
Women into Politics  
Women's News  
Women's Resource Development Agency  
Women's Tec