

POSITION PAPER
THE WOMEN'S SECTOR AND CHILDCARE
July 2005

INTRODUCTION

Childcare is a crucial issue for the women's sector. In NI society mothers retain the primary responsibility for caring for and nurturing their children – especially the youngest children. Consequently, the issues of women's development, children's development and childcare are inextricably linked. For women who are disadvantaged access to affordable childcare (which might mean free) is a prerequisite to social inclusion, not just for themselves but their whole family. This reality is well understood by the women's organisations that have been at the forefront of developing and delivering integrated services for women and children in some of the most disadvantaged communities in NI. In such communities (that may be urban or rural) both the private and statutory sectors do not appear to have an agenda for providing services that would meet local childcare needs and the voluntary sector have largely withdrawn from the provision of direct childcare services such as playgroups.

Community development organisations have seen the benefits for parents, children and communities in general exemplified through the integrated services developed by women's centres and are increasingly moving towards making childcare and family support key parts of their menu of services also. However, the major barrier for both women's and general community development organisations is that almost all of these services are predicated upon short-term, time-limited funding streams. In addition, there are still many areas of high socio-economic disadvantage that for numerous reasons have not been able to respond to local childcare challenges and as a result are virtual 'childcare free zones'.

Women's organisations wish to continue or indeed expand their involvement in childcare but at the same time recognise that childcare per se is not their primary or sole remit. What is required is a government led strategy with the purpose of addressing the deficits in childcare infrastructure in NI particularly for those communities, or communities of interest, where services are poor or non-existent. If an adequately resourced policy framework were put in place the women's sector would be well placed and enthusiastic about assisting government both through the direct delivery of childcare services and indirectly through providing support and expertise to other agencies.

CHILDCARE QUESTIONNAIRE

In order to assist the work of the Review Group questionnaires (see Appendix 1) were sent out 44 women's organisation across NI with 30 returned within the deadline. General data was also collated on the current costs of childcare within the sector and both these sets of information permit a reasonably accurate assessment of the situation in relation to the women's sector and childcare.

TYPES OF CHILDCARE

From the responses it is possible to divide the childcare provided by the women's sector into four different types or levels:

1. Organisations providing a range of services over a full week/days including elements of pre and after-school care and holiday schemes linked to women's development (education, training and capacity building) and family support (advice and advocacy services, young mothers groups, respite and parenting programmes). Providers of these integrated services are all centre based i.e. own their premises or have a secure lease) and there is normally a proportion of fee paying alongside the free (or minimal charges) places available. Almost all of these centres work with their local Social Services teams and offer respite or crisis care to families undergoing difficulties including children who have been placed on the Child Protection Register.
2. Women's centres or groups that offer part-time services, either a morning crèche or an afternoon out-of-school hours club. They either directly manage these services and employ the necessary staff or indirectly provide the services in conjunction with another agency such as Barnardos or Sure Start. Groups offering morning crèches normally do so to facilitate mothers taking up courses and programmes but few would have placements for Social Services specifically because of the part-time nature of the provision. The afternoon after-schools clubs are also usually targeted towards parents in programmes/courses but some are able to offer a limited number of places to employed parents.
3. Organisations providing temporary childcare for a specific reason such as to facilitate mothers coming onto a course or training programme over a set number of weeks. Most groups in this category would tend to offer a mixture of temporary crèches and childcare allowances in order to be as flexible as possible. The main difference between this type of provision and Level 2 is that childcare staff tend to be employed on a temporary or casual basis.
4. Organisations (mainly networks or regional organisations) that only provide childcare allowances for participants or mobile crèches for 'one-off' events.

While this breakdown adequately reflects the current types of provision within the women's sector the status quo is far from ideal. Women's Centres offering a full range of integrated services are facing major funding difficulties in keeping all their services operational, particularly the after schools work and childcare manager's salaries (essential for delivering high quality services and enhancing sustainability). Nor can they meet local demands on their services and some element of 'rationing' has to be used. The part-time services also have severe difficulties in meeting local needs and are also using waiting lists, curtailing their programmes for women or most disheartening, turning women and their children away. The Levels 3 and 4 organisations would, in the main, not wish to move towards providing more childcare services themselves but would want to see an improved infrastructure in relation to childcare generally. For example, organisations may provide childcare allowances for their participants but mothers might have no suitable childcare services in their locality to make use of this allowance. A second major concern for these women's organisations is that the added costs, time constraints and location difficulties involved in providing temporary childcare often puts them at a disadvantage in the competition for funding. This is also true when funding measures are capped because a significant part of the budget will have to be used for childcare and the programmes for women are therefore more limited than those who do not have childcare requirements to consider.

COSTS OF CHILDCARE

Given the proviso that the funding situation is particularly difficult at present and some women's organisations have already had to scale down or limit their services it is possible to give a current costing for the childcare services within the women's sector:

- North West - £217,000
- Greater Belfast - £1,100,000
- Rural Areas – £157,000

In addition, costings are not available for a small number of groups within the time frame of this position paper. However, it would be reasonable to state that the total annual budget for childcare within women's organisations is between 1.5 and 1.8 million pounds. What this breakdown starkly demonstrates is that when the urban conurbations of Belfast and Derry are taken out of the picture the capacity and infrastructure in the remainder of the region is extremely low.

UK POLICY CONTEXT

Since the Labour Party came into power there has been a whole raft of policies and initiatives developed in the UK relating to children, families and childcare. For the purposes of this paper those most relevant to the issues regarding the women's sector and childcare are the:

- Eradication of Child Poverty
- National Childcare Strategy

The Government has pledged to eradicate child poverty by 2020 and set 5 yearly targets to assess progress towards this goal. To support this policy it revised the taxation system and established Working Family Tax Credits and Childcare Tax Credits. The latter enables employed parents on low incomes to claim up to 70% of their childcare costs if they are using registered childcare facilities (i.e. childminders, day nurseries and out-of-school hours facilities). In 1998 the Government launched the National Childcare Strategy (NCS) which generally aimed to support parents (particularly those who were welfare dependant) into employment and was allocated £8 billion of resources for the first 3 years. The Sure Start programme was established as part of this strategy for the 0-4 age group (although later extended to the 0-16 age group). This programme was targeted to the most disadvantaged areas of the UK and was complimentary to the revised taxation structures in that it aimed to reduce the cycle of health, educational and social disadvantage that children living in poverty frequently experience. In 2002 the Comprehensive Spending Review resulted in an uplifted figure of £150 billion for the NCS (to 2008) and in December 2004 a further policy statement from the Chancellor, "Choices for parents, the best start for children: a ten year strategy for childcare", set out the next steps and targets for the NCS. The main features of the NCS are currently Children's Centres (for children aged 0-6years and incorporating full daycare, family support and health services with links into Job Centres) and Extended Schools. While capital resources are available for new facilities the roll-out of Children's Centres will also build on existing facilities such as Sure Start, Early Excellence Centres and Neighbourhood Nurseries. Originally the 20% most disadvantaged wards in England were targeted for Children's Centres although the policy has now been extended to include less disadvantaged wards.

NI POLICY CONTEXT

The read across (or unhypothecated consequentials) for NI through current UK funding for the National Childcare Strategy is likely to be in the region of £50 million. However, these resources are not ringfenced and it is the responsibility of the devolved regions to determine their own priorities and therefore how these additional monies will be expended. Wales has largely followed the English model of Children's Centres and Extended Schools while Scotland is not favourable to discrete Children's Centres and is looking towards other options, in particular 'Integrated Community Schools'.

In NI some elements of the NCS such as the early model of Sure Start (for 0-4 years only) and the guaranteed year of pre-school education for all 3 year olds have been adopted and the Department of Education is currently considering how it can support the development of 'Full Service Schools'. In September 1999 the government in NI published 'Children First – the Northern Ireland Childcare Strategy. This policy was to be implemented by three Departments (DHSS&PS, DEL and DE) through the Inter-Departmental Group on Early Years. The main principles of the policy were inclusion and social justice, quality, affordability, flexibility, accessibility and partnership. £61 million of funding was available to support the policy. The bulk of these resources were for the Pre-school Education Expansion Programme (£27.4 million) and Sure Start (£9.9million) with the remainder mainly coming from time-limited sources, that is, the New Opportunities Fund and the European Peace Funds. The NI Childcare Strategy was to last for 3 years and this has now expired as has the time-limited funding streams. Following a recent review of the Strategy it would appear likely that a new NI Childcare Strategy will be developed over the next few years. Currently the main programmes that continue to exist in NI are Sure Start (25 programmes across NI) and the Pre-school Education Expansion Programme (95% of children in their pre-school year are now attending a nursery or playgroup). From the questionnaire responses it appears that both of these programmes have brought minimal resources to childcare services within the women's sector that would have previously benefited to a much greater extent from the Peace Funds and the New Opportunity Funds.

In November 2004 a Draft Strategy for Children and Young People, 'Making It r wrld 2' was launched for consultation by the Children's Unit of the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister. While the Strategy is still in a consultation phase the Draft did include a variety of proposed Actions that if implemented could have a substantial impact on the provision of childcare services within women's organisations. There is clear complementarity between the services women's organisations provide and the principles and aims of the Draft Strategy, for example, in relation to the eradication of child poverty, the provision of childcare, family support, access to play, opportunities for children living in rural areas and the necessity to work in partnership with the community and voluntary sectors to deliver on these. However, the difficulty with both the overarching Strategy for Children and Young People and the NI Childcare Strategy is that they are at the very early stages in terms of actual delivery and in the interim period many of the excellent services provided by women's organisations are in a funding crisis.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From the analysis of current provision within the women's sector it is obvious that the funding required to sustain and develop this area of work will continue to need to come from a variety of sources including 'mainstream' funding from key Departments, resources 'in

kind' through partnership programmes, parental contributions, Service Level Agreements with government agencies and childcare costs attached to training and overhead budgets. However, there are gaps and difficulties in all these areas most of which require some level of immediate action. The following are suggestions as to how the current deficits could be addressed in a way that enhances sustainability while linking into the future development of regional strategies as envisaged in the Draft Strategy for Children and Young People.

Mainstream Funding

Currently, the DHSS&PS is distributing £1.5 million of 'gap funding' for direct childcare services/places to community and voluntary organisations that previously received funding through the Childhood Fund (Peace 2). This money is mainly for the pre-school age group (0-4 years) and will probably result over the next few weeks in a few of the Women's Centres receiving some, but reduced levels of, funding. It is vital that this deficit is addressed. However, not all the Centres providing pre-school services previously received Childhood Funds and therefore could not apply for this mainstream revenue and there is currently no mainstream allocation for the after-schools provision. The disparity in mainstream funding for different age groups is contrary to the 'whole family' approach to meeting needs taken by women's organisations.

Recommendation: That there is an immediate trawl conducted by DHSS&PS to establish which Women's Centre's pre-school services are in jeopardy because they could not access gap funding and additional resources (at similar levels) are identified to ensure that services are not lost in the incoming year.

That the government responds immediately to the crisis in after schools care by providing the £500,000 mainstream funding required this year to sustain existing out-of-schools hours clubs (that includes those provided by women's organisations).

Partnership Programmes

The integrated services that women's organisations provide are clearly complimentary to a number of overarching government programmes such as Sure Start and Investing for Health (DHSS&PS) and Neighbourhood Renewal (DSD). However, it is not clear that the benefits of close working partnerships between these programmes and the childcare/family support services provided by women's organisations are being maximised. For example, Women's Centres applying to the DHSS&PS gap funding measure were scored lower if they were located in a Sure Start area, whether or not they received any funding/services in kind from this programme. The relationship between Neighbourhood Renewal in NI and community based childcare also seems unclear as yet despite the emphasis in the rest of the UK between Neighbourhood Renewal and childcare/early years services.

Recommendation: That the Departments responsible for partnership programmes review how their implementation can result in a more 'joined up' approach that recognises both the value of the services women's organisations provide and the importance of childcare and early years services in reducing health, educational, economic and social inequalities and promoting social inclusion.

Parental Contributions

It should not be forgotten that there is major source of government funding already available in NI through the Childcare Tax Credit system. As discussed above there are many parents who could be recipients of financial support but cannot claim because of a lack of registered providers in their locality. Some Women's Centres (registered for full daycare or after-schools provision) have been able to facilitate parents in employment claiming Childcare Tax Credits. This social economy model of childcare is never 'stand alone' within the women's sector but accommodated alongside free, or heavily subsidised, childcare for women in training and education, respite purposes etc. There are also difficulties for some Centres in juggling the competing demands of income generation and social/needs led demands. However, at least one Women's Centre has made significant strides in developing a 'mixed economy' of childcare (see case study of Footprints Women's Centre, Appendix 2), that has resulted in making their whole package of childcare services more sustainable in the long term while providing much needed services to the local community. Although this would appear to be an ideal model it must be recognised that for some women's organisations it would not be feasible, for example, because of demography and transport issues in some rural communities, or be considered an option for others given their primary objectives and local priorities. There are also currently barriers to the social economy and 'charitable' mix of childcare, not least that government and other funders find it hard to make the distinction between those aspects that are eligible for financial assistance and those that are self-sustaining, and this is a major disincentive for organisations considering this model.

However, Children's Centres in England and Wales are examples of government promoting a mixed economy in terms of early years services with capital funding being made available to support their growth.

Recommendation: That the potential for developing a mixed economy of early years/family support services in disadvantaged communities/ communities of interest is further investigated by government with particular emphasis on identifying and addressing the barriers to this type of development including the issue of capital funding.

Service Level Agreements

Almost all the Level 1 and some Level 2 organisations provide services for families/children referred by Social Services and who are generally on the Child Protection Register. In addition, all of these Centres provide support to 'children in need' (as defined within the Children Services Plans of the Area Children and Young Peoples Committees). This is unsurprising as many women with complex family needs find it less stigmatising and therefore more acceptable to seek support from their local Women's Centre. The potential outcomes for families using a Women's Centre are also broader than, for example, the Social Services sponsored childminders scheme, as there are better opportunities for engaging and supporting the mother as well as the child. Interestingly, the level of funding for this type of work is extremely varied across the Health Trusts with some providing full funding (equivalent to what another provider would receive) and others only partial funding of places or no payment for referrals at all. The relationships between Trusts and Women's Centres also seems to be, on the whole, an informal one with little evidence of Service Level Agreements that would define the extent and costs of these services. Also with the increasing demands on Social Services right across NI and Departmental budgetary constraints the

threshold for deciding whether families need additional services (and monitoring) appears to be getting higher with the consequence that Women's Centres are working with more and more families where there are child protection concerns that are not yet considered to be grave enough to merit Social Services intervention or Social Services have ended active engagement with the family but there are still high levels of family support needs.

Recommendation: That there is recognition by government of the role the women's sector plays in relation to child protection and family support and that the DHSS&PS review the current situation so that Service Level Agreements and funding for Women's Centres engaged in this type of work becomes equivalent across the region.

Childcare Associated with Adult Training and Social Capital Programmes

Almost all the Levels 3 and 4 organisations fund the childcare costs for women in training and development programmes out of their programme budgets. While clearly all funders have a responsibility to ensure equal access to services by potential users (and most do consider childcare costs eligible expenditure) there are currently problems in terms of equality for women with childcare responsibilities.

Recommendation: That government equality proofs current systems and structures (including mainstream DEL programmes) with the objective of identifying and removing barriers for women and women's organisations. For example, capped programmes should provide additional budgets for childcare; childcare costs should be disaggregated from unit costs so that all projects are on an equally competitive playing field; in rural areas mobile crèches could be funded that are accessible to different organisations providing programmes in the locality and women's organisations should be supported to work with young teenage mothers including meeting their childcare needs.

Other Issues

That NI government needs to draw upon the experience of the women's sector in relation to the provision of successful integrated services in disadvantaged communities for women, children and families and fully involve the sector in planning for a new NI response to meet the high level targets and outcomes. The women's sector should be represented *in their own right* at all levels of policy and decision-making, which have a role in developing childcare services including Area Childcare Partnerships.

The proportion of the National Childcare Strategy resources that comes to NI through the Barnett Formula should not be available for priorities other than early years/childcare services until the NI Childcare Strategy has been updated. The NI government should follow the example of the UK government and seek to build on existing projects that can demonstrate their effectiveness in engaging marginalised families and communities (such as Women's Centres) in order to develop the 'one stop shop' menu of services that are encompassed within Children's Centres. In developing new services both rural issues (such as demographic spread and transport) and urban issues (community polarisation and land availability) must be considered.

**Childcare Provision in
Women's Centres/Organisations**

Centre Name _____

Childcare Worker _____

Address _____

Phone _____ **Fax** _____

Email _____

Q1 Do you have an on-site or attached-site crèche?

Yes No

If yes, how long have you been providing this service, if no in what other ways do you accommodate childcare needs

Q2 As many organisations offer a hybrid of provision we need you to indicate what percentage of your services are

To support education/training places _____%

To facilitate drop-in _____%

To provide respite care _____%

Working parents who pay for childcare _____%

For staff /volunteers/trainees _____%

Q3 When is care provided? How often and for what length of time? Tick all that apply

2 – 4 hours

Half day

Full day

Evening

Weekends

Q7 Funding - what percentage of the following makes up your current childcare funding? Also indicate when this funding will run out

		Duration
Peace funds	_____ %	_____
Sure Start	_____ %	_____
DEL	_____ %	_____
DHSSPS	_____ %	_____
Big Lottery	_____ %	_____
Children in Need	_____ %	_____
Health Board/Trust	_____ %	_____
Places generated by other paid places	_____ %	_____
Other (please specify)		

Q8 Do you take children referred through Social Services?
Yes No

If yes do you receive full payment for childcare places provided through/on behalf of social services?

Q9 Does your current capacity meet the needs in your local area? For example is demand higher than your current resources can accommodate, do you have waiting lists? Please explain

Q10 Do you feel you have scope to develop to meet the needs within your local area, and what would you need to be able to develop to meet the need?

Q11 How would you describe the provision of childcare services within the Women's sector – for example what are the benefits to the children, the broader family and community network?

Q12 The Labour government and childcare services in England are piloting a number of schemes, which may then be rolled out in Northern Ireland – how do you think they would impact on you and the services you provide?

Extended/Full service schools

Children's Centres

Q13 Do you feel your views/interests are fairly represented through current childcare policy development/lobbying?

Yes

No

If no why, If Yes who

Q14 Who do you feel is best placed to represent your organisation on a policy level in relation to childcare and childcare lobbying?

- NICVA
- NIPPA
- PlayBoard
- Community Rep (for e.g. on Childcare Partnerships)
- Women's Sector representative group (WSN)
- Other – please specify _____

Any other comments

Thank you for your time in completing this form

Return to

*Siobh ann McKeating
Women's Support Network
109 – 113 Royal Avenue
Belfast, BT1 1FF*

**CASE STUDY
FOOTPRINTS WOMEN'S CENTRE AND FOOTPRINTS TRADING LIMITED****Footprints Women's Centre**

Footprints Women's Group was established in the early 1989 by a small group of women living in the Poleglass estate on the suburbs of West Belfast. By 1991 the group had expanded and with Making Belfast Work funding refurbished a bungalow formerly used by Down and Lisburn for a baby clinic to open Footprints Women's Centre. Over the next few years the services and staff of the Centre expanded rapidly and in 1999 funding was received through the EU Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation to demolish the bungalow and erect a purpose built Women's Centre housing a drop-in area, kitchen and canteen facilities, a childcare facility for up to 50 children a day, an Adult Learning facility, an outdoor play area, a library and resource area and office space. The Centre currently offers a range of services apart from childcare including a varied range of training and education programmes (from essential skills to university access courses), women's support and personal development programmes, a healthy living initiative (including programmes for women with mental health problems), programmes for parents (including services through Colin Sure Start) counselling services and community development and cross community activities.

Footprints Trading Limited

In 1997 Footprints Women's Centre established its first social economy venture, Footprints Catering Limited, in the canteen of a local Further Education College outreach campus with the aim of generating income that would help sustain the work of the Women's Centre and create employment for local people. As the confidence of the women involved grew through the development of this community business and the new Centre was completed bringing opportunities for further social enterprise Footprints Trading Limited was established in April 2003. The Trading Company continues to generate income through catering but also through the provision of daycare as well as a smaller proportion through room hire. Currently, Footprints employs 33 staff of which 9 are employed under the auspices of Footprints Trading Limited.

Childcare Facilities

The childcare facilities are housed in 4 separate rooms, 2 rooms for daycare (8am-6pm), 1 room for sessional crèches and 1 room for the after-schools age group. In total there are currently 51 places available on a daily basis that includes 16 sessional crèche places for the children of women making use of the services and after school places for similar reasons. In June 2004 a Children's Services Manager was appointed who is currently negotiating the re-registration of the whole facility with Down and Lisburn Trust Early Years Team. Up to now each childcare room was registered separately but the proposal is to register the whole facility taking cognisance of the fact that the after-school children use non childcare rooms (IT suite, canteen for cookery classes etc.). This will potentially increase the maximum number of daily places to 80. In addition to increased income this will allow greater flexibility in that children will not be separated on the basis of how their place is paid for but on the room/environment most appropriate for their stage of development.

The Children's Services Manager also has the primary responsibility for ensuring high quality standards of care and stimulation for children and that there is an ethos of continuous improvement shared across the whole facility, staff and the management team. For example,

complaints are treated with equal attention whether they are from paying parents or non-paying parents using the crèche.

Financing of Childcare

Until this financial year 6 daycare places, 10 places on the summer scheme and 3 creche places were retained and funded by Down and Lisburn Trust for Social Services referrals. In the first 2 years of operation this meant that income was derived 50/50 from parental fees and Trust payments. Due to financial constraints the Trust has reduced places this year. While this will not cause financial difficulties for the Trading Company as the places can be quickly filled by parents on the waiting list (there has been a waiting list for places almost from the outset) this reduction of access for local families is disappointing in that cutbacks were not supposed to impact on frontline services.

Parents pay £100 for a full week of daycare (8am-6pm) and £55 for a part-time place (5 mornings or afternoons). These rates include children's food and are currently under review as they are now £20-40 a week lower than the average costs of childcare in day nurseries. To ensure optimum capacity Footprints Trading Company gives priority to parents waiting for full-time places.

The costs of sessional and after-schools childcare are mainly funded through the childcare element attached to different training and education programmes. One agency -Lisburn Partnership- currently funds 3 childcare posts to provide childcare for specific programmes. If there is no attached funding unwaged parents pay £1 per session and waged parents pay £1 per hour.

For an initial period Belfast Regeneration Office funded 2 Childcare Assistants to assist the start up of the business and more recently Lisburn Strategic Partnership provided a grant towards marketing, promotion and business development in the catering area. This included the salary of a cook for 1 year. Currently, however the whole childcare facility receives no mainstream or other funding (apart from that associated with education and training programmes and Social Services placements).

Footprints Women's Centre employs a Finance and Business Development Officer who is responsible for the financial management of both the Centre and the Trading Company. One of her tasks is to ensure that all payments are received in a timely fashion and her attention to this vital area has meant there have been limited problems with 'parents as debtors' (a key concern for community development organisations in regards to social enterprise).

With much hard work and effort the trading Company started to break even in its first year and over the last 2 financial years has been in the healthy position of being able to gift aid £100,000 of profit to the charitable part of the organisation, Footprints Women's Centre. This was only achievable because the business is housed in the women's centre and the running costs such as heat and light are funded. Key posts which are essential to ensure the success of the business are also funded. Apart from the huge boost to the self-confidence of all the women involved in social enterprise the autonomy that income generation gives has enabled the Women's Centre to decide its own priorities for the allocation of this money. Currently, the gift aid is being used for women's support and development activities (including salaries) that has been an area the Centre has historically found difficult to obtain other funding for.

Helping and Hindering Factors and Lessons to be Drawn

There have been a range of factors that have either posed difficulties that have had to be overcome or have been of significant support to the successful development of the social

economy/mixed economy of childcare in an area of high socio-economic deprivation. In no particular order these factors include:

- The building itself – receiving funding to plan and erect a building suitable to accommodate the different types of childcare with enough capacity to enable the social enterprise to be economically viable (it is calculated that normally daycare needs at least 50 places to be economically viable).
- Lack of competition – there are no other daycare providers in the Colin neighbourhood. Indeed Footprints Trading Limited could probably extend their services in other venues across the ward without damaging their core business.
- Funders lack of understanding of social enterprise – some funders and particularly one of the main funders of the Centre traditionally, had real difficulties with the mixed economy of income. Specifically, a major funder was concerned about the potential for ‘double funding’ even though there was sufficient information provided to make a clear distinction between grant aided and income generating activities. This resulted in considerable delays in the processing of grants that put the Women’s Centre into cash-flow crisis on a number of occasions and held back the development of areas of work not related to childcare. Potential income sources were also put in jeopardy because the delayed funding was to be used as match funding for European programmes. With much effort and through repeatedly supplying information Footprints Women’s Centre was ultimately able to demonstrate their financial transparency but in the interim a lot of time and resources were wasted in trying to ‘educate’ funders about the social economy.
- Staffing issues – on one hand the development of services has been greatly enhanced by having the right combination of skilled and visionary staff at senior levels (i.e. Centre manager, Finance and Business Development Manager and Children’s Services Manager) but there have also been difficulties in attracting suitable childcare staff at other levels in the right quantity. This could be because there are limited numbers of local people with childcare qualifications and experience or who are able to work the shift hours required for daycare. Because of its location it is also difficult to attract staff from other areas given that childcare is not a high waged occupation. Notwithstanding, Footprints is one of the largest employers of local people in the Colin vicinity.
- Uptake – over 90% of the parents using daycare are local people, the majority of whom are now in receipt of some element of Childcare Tax Credits. Many of these parents would not have been able to take up, or maintain, their employment if the daycare was not available. While a lack of other accessible providers is undoubtedly a factor the daycare charges are also competitive when measured against similar provision. The ability to handle non-payment or late payments with a little more flexibility than would be given by the private sector while at the same time keeping a firm control of the issue has also been important. A more difficult feature has been the business case to prioritise full over part-time places. Women with caring responsibilities entering employment for the first time or after a long break usually prefer part-time jobs (or this may be all that is available). It is exactly this type of woman a Woman’s Centre should be there to support but a balance has to be struck between providing vital and accessible services and running an efficient business. Attracting paying places for the after-school provision has also been more problematic, possibly because the Centre is not particularly convenient to local schools and the Centre has not been able to provide school pick ups as some private day nurseries do.

- Business support – the Centre has received support from the Social Economy Network (an organisation that is funded by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment) as well as several women with business and social enterprise experience who have given their time to sit on the Board of Directors of Footprints Trading Limited and Footprints Women’s Centre. In addition the BRO and LSP grants helped to grow the business.
- Social Services places – especially at the outset the agreed funding through Down and Lisburn Trust helped to consolidate daycare and because there was flexibility about how these places/sessions were used the Centre was able to offer times and times that suited their capacity over the course of a week. Despite the significant levels of payment achieved the Centre has not had a Service Level Agreement with the Trust but hopes that this will be resolved in the near future. The obvious benefits incurred by children and their families referred by Social Services are something that the Women’s Centre finds reaffirming to their overall objectives and purposes. There are numerous examples of women who initially slipped timidly in to leave their children off who have over time got involved in various activities or who have made friends with staff and users opening up new avenues of support for the whole family. Issues around confidentiality have been a priority and this is helped because a parent coming into the Centre or using the childcare facilities can be there for a whole host of different reasons. In addition many of the children referred by Social Services (as well as other users) have a range of special needs/developmental delays and disabilities. The childcare staff have developed strategies and expertise in supporting children with special needs and Social Services have confidence in placing such children in the setting.
- Legal and charitable issues – there were some tensions between ensuring the conditions of being registered as a charity while trading were complimentary. Centre staff believe that there should have been more guidance and support around these issues available although feel that there has been greater attention to these issues by government of late and increased assistance through the Social Economy Network.
- Registration – the concept of a mixed economy of childcare was also new to the Early Years Team of the local Trust and consequently problems arose and conditions set that might not have been strictly necessary. Some of these issues have only started to be addressed recently which implies that there may need to be a greater awareness amongst Early Years Social Workers generally about this type of provision and how to apply the Children’s Order in similar circumstances.
- Holistic services – the community/women’s development approach and the range of resources available for women and children make this type of provision unique and very effective in meeting the needs of families. Basically, there is something for everyone whatever their circumstances and Footprints Women’s Centre has been able to effectively balance family and community demands with the demands of operating a business.
- Providing a model – unlike normal businesses that tend to keep their success factors a secret from potential competitors, Footprints Women’s Centre has been ready to share their experiences and the lessons learnt with other women’s organisations, funders and government bodies. Recently, a DETI civil servant interviewed staff about their services and how they have been developed and the Centre is very open to supporting the growth of social economy based childcare in Northern Ireland and beyond.
- Sustainability – being able to turn a profit in a relatively short space of time that can be used to support other types of services that people in TSN areas are not likely to be able to pay for themselves directly is a clear example of a women’s organisation

playing their role in the thorny question of sustainability. However, Footprints Women's Centre would be clear that firstly, social enterprise would not be suitable for all groups and it does bring its own serious dilemmas and challenges and secondly it will never sustain all the work of women's and community organisations. Aspects of childcare alone will always require funding or major subsidisation but given the right circumstances, support and awareness of the issues there is definitely potential for replicating their experience in other communities.

Note: This case study reflects a model that is very akin, or indeed supercedes the Children's Centre model being developed in the UK as it includes all the features of a Children's Centre except for a childminders network. As there are currently very few or no registered childminders in the Colin ward (or indeed most TSN communities in NI) this is not a particular issue at present. The added value that a Children's Centre located within a Women's Centre could bring is the access to the wide range of other services that Women's Centres provide in the context of a women's and community development ethos that fosters a sense of local ownership and is by its very nature parent led.

Appendix 3

SOME COMMENTS MADE BY WOMEN'S ORGANISATIONS IN CHILDCARE QUESTIONNAIRES

“Demand is higher than the current resources can accommodate...we find that a lot of women are unable to avail of conferences, seminars and training opportunities owing to lack of childcare facilities and finances” (rural)

“At the time of submitting this childcare services are deplorable, particularly in rural areas especially if one does not have extended family support. If there was consistent affordable provision the benefits to both children, the broader family and the community network would have a tremendous knock on effect for all women involved in relation to social, economic and health issues” (rural)

“I think more could be done to highlight the important and valuable contribution made by the community and voluntary sector to childcare” (North West)

“We would need to be able to extend the size of the crèche. There are plans to extend all of our building and this will include the crèche” (North West)

“The Women's Sector's holistic approach promotes equality and creates long-term benefits for women, children, families and communities and is a proven successful model for addressing poverty and disadvantage” (North West)

“Early intervention strategies through investment in childcare and women's development will make a significant difference to the future health and well-being of our community” (North West)

“The Women's Sector has succeeded in creating play spaces for children from across the Protestant/Catholic community divide in NI. Spaces where young children can play and learn together in their earliest years. If these choices are removed and places are only provided within our segregated school structure this development (*extended schools*) will exacerbate sectarian divisions” (North West)

“We would need to expand to meet the needs – this would require capital and revenue investment. Presently there are no funding sources available to support expansion” (Greater Belfast)

“The lead bodies (*in childcare*) are not consulting with their members or keeping them informed” (Greater Belfast)

“Without access to childcare facilities here most women wouldn't be able to avail of counselling, personal development, respite, drop-in, education and training support services. Children are being supervised and all round the quality of life for the family and local community is being enhanced” (Greater Belfast)

“ In our ward there is a pre-school nursery, 1 registered childminder and ourselves. When you consider there are over 1000 households in the immediate area you can see provision is clearly not enough to meet demand” (Greater Belfast)

“I feel strongly that community childcare is just that – a community issue. I believe that it is in everyone’s interest to fight the case for local, accessible and at a reasonable cost childcare provision. However, when looking at childcare provision for those who have little support, money or opportunity I believe childcare should be of the highest quality and free. The future of our community and society requires this issue to be taken seriously with genuine commitment to address it” (Greater Belfast)

“At present we are running to full capacity. We also have a waiting list” (Greater Belfast)

“As we do not have a childcare facility we are reliant on women’s centres’ crèches when delivering training within these settings” (Greater Belfast)

“Benefits to families include: access to support services and other training programmes e.g. story sacks – learning how to interact and read to children, parenting programmes, essential skills training for parents and basic ICT. Such programmes support parents to increase their skills, knowledge and confidence thus positively impacting on them and their children” (Greater Belfast)

“Policy comes from civil servants who fulfil their own aims and do not really listen to or accommodate the ground up approach” (Greater Belfast)

“Need more childcare facilities in rural areas. People can’t take what we can offer – can’t claim for childcare allowances because they’ve no-one to leave their child with ...through a lot of funding children must be left with a registered childminder in order to claim. In rural areas there isn’t a lot of registered childminders” (rural)

“Don’t have funding for workers, but if we did there would be a room available for a crèche. New young mothers asking for childcare, so if there was a crèche they could do courses” (rural)

“Provision in sector (*women’s*) is critical as it supports adult education and training, confidence and ability to participate. Helps child develop social skills, preparation for nursery, managing physical things. Received feedback from schools and they’ve told us that children who were in our crèche have settled down very quickly in schools” (rural)

“Social Services legislation can be thwarting (*for development*) whilst we appreciate the necessity for this at times it can be overpowering. Very high staff ratios required and building provision overstated. We do have a very good relationship with Social Services and are reputable in their eyes and wouldn’t like to interfere with this. However we are inspected out” (rural)

“Can only claim money to pay registered childminders. But there’s not enough registered childminders, waiting list to be registered is approx. 18 months. People can’t claim for grandparents etc.” (Rural)