

A Response to: Strengthening Women's Voices in Government

Issued by: Government Equalities Office

May 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

The Women's Support Network fully supported the work of the Women's National Commission. We take the view that there is no need to fix something that doesn't require fixed. The WNC was the central hub where women's organisations and groups could engage and any issues that needed to be addressed were fed through them. With the abolition of the WNC the critical voice for women has been lost.

Direct Engagement

We note from section 2.2 Direct Engagement that you will ensure 'ministers have direct engagement with individuals and organisations that are affected by their policies.' We would like to know how often this will take place, what structures will be put in place for the 'direct' engagement and what money will be made available for those in Northern Ireland to contribute to this process.

WSN is concerned that any structures put in place will be London-based and the diversity of the other regions (N.Ireland, Scotland and Wales) will not be reflected. Indeed equality legislation differs in Northern Ireland, while some powers still remained a reserved matter. How will these legislative

differences impact on women voicing their concerns at a Westminster level? Does the Government Equalities Office understand the uniqueness of devolved government and the regional variance of policy and legislation?

Bringing in Expertise

We welcome GEO recognising the expertise the community based women's sector has to offer. However, with many organisations facing a crisis in funding, we would like further information on how you will commission organisations to gather the views of women. For example, will these be going through a tendering process? Will they be widely publicised? If a private business wins the contract will there be a social clause in the contract? WSN would very much welcome further information on these processes.

Looking Ahead/IT Platform

WSN have serious concerns over the use of an IT platform for engaging women. A digital divide still exists in Northern Ireland, research commissioned by the Digital Inclusion Unit within the Department of Finance & Personnel¹ highlighted that 43% of the population do not make use of the internet. The paper also highlighted that specific groupings within society felt particularly disconnected from the 'information society'. This included 91% of those aged 65 and over, 70% of people with disabilities and 64% of those in the lower socio-economic groups. We would particularly draw your attention to the fact that in some rural areas in Northern Ireland there is no infrastructure in place for accessing broadband.²

Social media sites, while a good form of social interaction, WSN fail to see how any serious discussion or feedback can be obtained from 30 characters - which is the limit on Twitter. WSN would prefer meaningful discussions such as face to face interaction, the use of email and newsletters. We would ask GEO to refrain from using sites such as Twitter.

¹Digital Inclusion Strategy - http://www.dfpni.gov.uk/digital_inclusion_strategy_2003-2.pdf - 2003

² <http://www.northernireland.gov.uk/news/news-deti-130109-high-speed-broadband>

Geographical Scope

We note from Section 3 your comments on separate equality legislation in Northern Ireland. WSN would like to know how issues which effect Northern Ireland women will be feed in to the cross-departmental working group based in Whitehall. We are concerned that there is a danger that the differences in legislation across the UK could lead to a disparity of equality and rights for women.

Conclusion

WSN welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation document. 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
	<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