

# A Response to: Local government Reform Policy Proposals

Issued by the Department of the Environment

February 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 will comment exclusively on Community Planning and the Power of Well-being in responding to this consultation.
- 2.2. Equality must be paramount in the processes and structures involved within community planning. Belfast City is ranked number 25 out of 64 in the Economic Prosperity Index<sup>1</sup> yet the Social Deprivation Index<sup>2</sup> places Belfast City at 59, meaning it is also one of the most deprived places for residents. The only conclusion to be made is that those living in Belfast do not share the economic prosperity of the city. WSN calls for legislation in the local government reform document to ensure local councils comply with their legal obligations under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act.

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<sup>1</sup> Centre for Cities 2009

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

- 2.3. Section 3.3 of the Policy Proposals makes reference to the governance arrangements for district councils. With reference to point three 'proportionality in allocating key positions', WSN would urge the Department to ensure Councils strike a gender balance when allocating key positions. Considering women are underrepresented in many aspects of life. For example, the number of women in public appointment roles in Northern Ireland was only 449 compared with men at 880.<sup>3</sup> A recent report by Lord Davies showed that only 12.5% of members of corporate boards of FTSE 100 companies are women.<sup>4</sup>
- 2.4. We refer to point 6.3 which states 'councils would be expected to consult and co-operate with all bodies responsible for providing public services in the district.' Using the term 'expected' is too vague. WSN calls on the Department to put in place statutory legislation so that councils are **legally** required to engage with communities, individuals, the public and community service providers to ensure ownership and community engagement.
- 2.5. WSN seeks clarification as to how community planning will be embedded into the overarching plans of government departments such as DRD or DSD. Collaborative and partnership working between departments and local councils would be an important part of the community planning process, therefore WSN would like to see a clear statutory link established between community planning and spatial planning.
- 2.6. We would ask the Department to issue guidance for community planning which sets out the following: (i) quality standards for community engagement, (ii) provision for incorporating local and thematic community plans and (iii) steps to ensure that community planning structures are fully representative of all community bodies. WSN would particularly like to see the full engagement of local women's centres and groups in the community planning process, particularly since women's centres provide vital services within their communities.

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<sup>3</sup> Public Bodies and Public Appointments Annual Report 2009/2010

<sup>4</sup> Women on Boards, Lord Davies Review, February 2011

- 2.7. Monitoring will be an important factor to ensure progress and full local participation is achieved. It is also a way of indicating if community planning is meeting particular needs. WSN believe there is scope for a strategic approach to monitoring to ensure that any structures put in place are fit for purpose and meet the needs of local communities.
- 2.8. WSN welcome the proposed Power of Wellbeing, however further guidance would be needed to ensure councils understand the concept. We would advocate that this guidance takes into account possible uses of the Power of Wellbeing, how it will work in practice and any limits on the power. WSN would ask the Department to include a clause within the Power of Wellbeing that would ensure councils undertake an assessment of what is needed to advance the well-being of an area as identified through the community planning process. For example the following factors should be used in any assessment: (i) economic (ii) social and (iii) environmental factors. If these factors are embedded within community planning it would allow for councils to take forward actions to promote or improve the well-being of an area.

## **Conclusion**

WSN welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation document. Whilst welcoming this document, we have offered some constructive recommendations as to how it could be improved. We are happy to further discuss this response if required.

The Women's Support Network fully endorses the response made to this consultation by Community Places.

## **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