

## A Response to: Success Through Skills 2: The Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland

Issued by: Department for Employment and Learning

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## Introduction

- 1.1. The Women's Support Network (WSN) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Department of Employment and Learning's Success Through Skills Strategy 2.
- 1.2. The Women's Support Network (WSN), established in 1989, is an infrastructural umbrella organisation, which provides support services to, and represents 63 community based Women's Centres, women's groups and projects, and women's infrastructure groups and 21 associated members across Northern Ireland (see Appendix 1).
- 1.3. 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
- 1.4. 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.

- 1.5. Over the past 30+ years, the community based women's sector has developed a range of 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. Many of these groups are situated in areas which experience high levels of economic inactivity.
- 1.6. Network members are actively engaged with their local communities, cross-community initiatives and regional structures throughout Northern Ireland.

## **2.0 General Comments**

- 2.1 WSN agrees with the general thrust of this strategy which aims to raise the levels of productivity and social inclusion. However WSN is disappointed to note that data contained within the document is not gender disaggregated. We are aware that the Department have benchmarking gender disaggregated statistics on their programmes however it is unfortunate that these have not been included in this strategy. WSN recommends the use of gender disaggregated data to ascertain whether women are under-represented in any of the department's programmes.
- 2.2 WSN notes that the strategy uses qualifications as a measure of skills. We agree, however we believe there is a need to recognise 'soft skills' as a precursor to get people on the path to a recognised qualification. WSN wishes to see greater emphasis on these softer skills in the strategy along with qualifications as a measure of success and how the department can work in partnership with the voluntary and community sector to develop and support pre-vocational skills. The community based

women's education sector has been very successful in progressing women from soft skills to nationally recognised qualifications and has made a major contribution in assisting DEL meet their objectives

### 3.0 Specific Comments

3.1 WSN notes the emphasis on skills as having a role to play in social inclusion. WSN wishes to bring to the Department's attention research by WCRP which illustrated barriers faced by women from disadvantaged backgrounds which can lead to social and financial exclusion. These include lack of access to adequate and affordable childcare, limited skills, qualifications and experience and confidence which can impede women in entering/re-entering education, training and employment.<sup>1</sup> WSN recommends the department sets out in the strategy how it will address these barriers to ensure women's full participation in economic, social and public life.

3.2 The strategy sets out the Programme for Government goal of halving the private sector productivity gap by 2015. WSN wishes to highlight that the private sector which includes the financial services sector, construction, engineering and ICT are often male dominated whilst women enter employment areas which tend to be 'female dominated.'<sup>2</sup> Figures from DETI showed that in 2007/2008, 1000 females enrolled in engineering and technology subjects in FE colleges, compared to 9000 males.<sup>3</sup> WSN recommends that DEL provides measurable objectives in the strategy as to how it will encourage women to work in these industries, especially women from disadvantaged communities.

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<sup>1</sup> WCRP (2009) *Women Living in Disadvantaged Communities: Barriers to Participation*

<sup>2</sup> European Commission: "Social Agenda". Issue No 16. February 2008.

<sup>3</sup> DETI (2009) *Women in the Labour Market*, pg 21

[http://www.detini.gov.uk/women\\_in\\_ni\\_september\\_09\\_stats.pdf](http://www.detini.gov.uk/women_in_ni_september_09_stats.pdf)

- 3.3 The draft strategy quotes figures for working age economic inactivity however there is not a gender breakdown for economic inactivity. Statistics from DETI show that between April and June 2009, 185,000 women of working age were economically inactive in Northern Ireland with a resulting inactivity rate of 34.8%. <sup>4</sup> WSN urges DEL to include gender disaggregated data on economic inactivity where appropriate in its policies, and provides detail on what support mechanisms the department will support to reverse this trend.
- 3.4 The document states on page 20 that the Varney Review recommended providing students with appropriate careers advice. The document also states on page 59 that the Department will “set in place a framework to ensure people of all ages have access to good quality careers information.” WSN welcomes this but recommends that students are provided non gendered careers advice. This would be consistent with the recommendations of the Women and Work Commissions report which calls on Department’s responsible for Education and Skills in the devolved regions to ‘ensure that teacher training emphasises the need to challenge gender stereotypes in the delivery of careers education and in subject teaching.’ WSN recommends that DEL collaborates with DE to work towards this aim and that the importance of non gendered careers advice is included in the strategy.
- 3.5 WSN also recommends that DEL encourages women to pursue the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths) subjects. This is essential given DEL’s and DE’s actions and targets in the Cross Departmental Action Plan for Women 2008-2011 which has planned outcomes of challenging gender stereotypes, particularly in STEM subjects and increased uptake

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<sup>4</sup> DETI *Women in Northern Ireland* (September 2009,2) available at [http://www.detini.gov.uk/women\\_in\\_ni\\_september\\_09\\_stats.pdf](http://www.detini.gov.uk/women_in_ni_september_09_stats.pdf)

of STEM subjects by girls.<sup>5</sup> WSN agrees with imperative 3 in the document which states that there is a need to have increased flexibility in the provision of STEM education.

3.6 WSN notes the strategy states that the skills of people joining the workforce from education and in-migration will only meet half the needs of the demand for skills. WSN also wishes to highlight that many women are trapped in low paid, unskilled work for many reasons such as caring responsibilities. WSN reiterates the need to remove the barriers for women entering education and training, entering and re-entering employment the labour market and upskilling in employment.

3.7 We welcome the department's key goal stated on page 45 of the document to widen participation by students from groups which are currently under-represented. WSN urges the department to set out in the strategy how it will ensure access to women who have taken career breaks to raise children and wish to return to employment with better prospects through returning to higher education. Higher and Further Education need to offer childcare provision for women returners.

3.8 WSN welcomes the department's commitment to tackling skills barriers on page 47 through the Essential Skills and Bridge to Employment programmes and on page 73 the Steps to Work Programme. However WSN notes that there is no reference to other barriers faced by women to employment and employability such as access to affordable childcare provision. WSN reiterates its recommendation that the Department sets out in its strategy how it will address this barrier for women and how it will work with OFMDFM to look at its role in the development of a

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<sup>5</sup> OFMDFM 'Cross Departmental Gender Action Plans 2008-2011' Objective 9.9, see [http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/implementation\\_of\\_the\\_ges\\_progress\\_report\\_2006-09\\_-\\_action\\_plan-3.pdf](http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/implementation_of_the_ges_progress_report_2006-09_-_action_plan-3.pdf)

forthcoming childcare strategy. WSN recommends the gender proofing of all employability programmes.

3.9 WSN welcomes the Department's commitment to introduce a new policy for management and leadership training and development on page 46 of the document. WSN recommends that this policy sets out measures to ensure that women are afforded opportunities to access this training on leadership management, given the under-representation of women in these roles.

3.10 WSN recommends the Department's commitment to introduce the Qualifications and Credit Framework. WSN believe that this will provide a flexible approach to support women obtain qualifications. This will be particularly beneficial to women whose studies are interrupted for various reasons such as family commitments or to enable those with lower educational attainment to obtain credits towards nationally recognised qualifications.

3.11 In relation to Essential Skills, WSN notes that there is no reference to the role of the voluntary and community sector in the delivery of this programme. WSN wishes to highlight the role of community based education particularly developed and provided in the women's community based education sector. A report by WCRP in 2008 highlights the vital role this sector plays in addressing the barriers women experience in participating in all spheres of life. The report demonstrated that the women's community based education sector enabled women to access further education and training "through building confidence, qualifications and skills." <sup>6</sup> WSN recommends the department

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<sup>6</sup> WCRP (2008) *Women's Centres Community Based Education: Report Compiled by Women's Support Network*, 103

supports and involves the role of the community based women's education sector in the delivery of essential skills.

- 3.12 WSN welcomes the department commitment to providing a first free level 2 qualification for all. WSN seeks clarification whether this commitment extends to education provision in both the statutory and voluntary/community sector.

## **Conclusion**

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

### **For further Information, contact:**

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## Appendix 1

### MEMBERSHIP 2010

	<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'STEC
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