



25 August 2010

Alex Attwood MLA
Minister for Social Development
C/o Maeve Walls, Director
Department for Social Development
5th Floor
Lighthouse Building, 1 Cromac Place
Gasworks Business Park, Ormeau Road
BELFAST, BT7 2JB

Dear Mr Attwood

Re: Response / public spending pressures

Thank you for your letter dated 10 August 2010 and an opportunity to respond to DSD and government priorities. The Women's Centres Regional Partnership (WCRP) would like to put forth the following response after consultation with its stakeholder groups.

1. Question 1: What should be the priority areas within DSD to best protect those in need, stress or disadvantage? What works best and what should be reviewed?

WCRP Response:

- 1.1 The WCRP recognise that support and funding should be focused on services for those living in the most disadvantaged areas and the most vulnerable, with funding prioritised towards services and programmes that transform lives, particularly:
- ensuring women and children are free from violence and abuse;
 - ensuring women and families are helped to build their lives and get out of poverty through accessing appropriate services, education and training;
 - ensuring women have increased confidence and improved mental health;
 - ensuring women are empowered to become more active and engaged in their communities, including public and political arenas.
- 1.2 It has been recognised that lack of adequate childcare poses a significant barrier to women accessing education or entering the workforce, and that mothers are particularly restricted in this respect. The Partnership represents women's organisations providing services in some of the most socially and economically disadvantaged areas across NI. WCRP stakeholders see on a daily basis the importance of front line delivery of services to those who would otherwise be excluded from any form of training or education. For many women it would not be possible to access the services on offer if childcare was not also available to them. The support given by DSD to the Women's Centres Childcare Fund (WCCF) is absolutely crucial. It enables centres to provide over 4900 childcare places each week. The WCRP ask that ring-fenced funding is provided for the continuation of the Women's Centres Childcare Fund (WCCF).

- 1.3 The voluntary sector delivers high quality services that meet the needs of those living in the surrounding areas. Those who work in the sector share similar life experiences and respond quickly and flexibly to emerging needs. They are able to provide a voice for those most marginalised, for example, women's centres have brought neighbourhoods together on issues such as housing reform, sexual violence against women, and paramilitary control of local areas. Women's centres/organisations deal with long and short term complex issues that affect "hard to reach" women in Northern Ireland communities. The services provided by women's centres/organisations make a major contribution to assisting government in meeting their policy priorities, such as childcare strategies, education and training, gender equality, anti-poverty and family support services. The WCRP would like women's centres/organisations prioritised by DSD with ring-fenced funding.
- 1.4 The WCRP would welcome a social return on investment audit to help identify organisations that are most effective in delivering services to the most disadvantaged and how economies of scale could better be achieved.

2. Question 2: What could or should be done within the voluntary and community sector to work better to address overheads and deliver greater benefits to the community?

WCRP Response:

- 2.1 A further tranche of 'modernisation' funds with the explicit objective of enabling organisations to develop strategies for greater collaboration or organisational merger would be of benefit. Such funds would enable groups to access expert advice, initiate constructive dialogue and develop action plans.
- 2.2 The WCRP recognise that the most disadvantaged and hard to reach will suffer disproportionately from a reduction to essential services. We would urge government to exercise caution in terms of moving from grant-aid funding to payment for services. While this is appropriate in many circumstances, it can also be difficult for organisations to recoup full costs. In our experience many organisations are not in receipt of full costs and as a result are in fact subsidising their work from their own resources.
- 2.3 The WCRP recognise that services for the most disadvantaged / vulnerable are of the utmost priority. In order to determine where service provision is under resourced, where service providers are best placed to deliver frontline services to the most disadvantaged, and where services are over-resourced, an audit/mapping exercise would be beneficial.
- 2.4 There should be a commitment to continue funding of community and voluntary sector organisations that provide value for money services. To support organisations to become less reliant on government funding, DSD should provide support to the sector in developing social enterprises that involve collaborative working and cross community partnerships, and which achieve better efficiencies and economies of scale, whilst not adversely affecting the most disadvantaged/vulnerable.
- 2.5 The WCRP would encourage the introduction of a well structured and resourced internship programme aimed at providing graduates with meaningful work experience. It would be of benefit to local communities through generation of new ideas and new skills from those willing to work locally.
- 2.6 The historic funding of organisations should be reviewed with greater emphasis on value for money, cost effectiveness and outcomes achieved.
- 2.7 It would be useful and efficient for DSD to lead in streamlining funding administration, monitoring and audit requirements and to consider a central monitoring database accessible to all funders, which would reduce duplication and repetitive reporting to a

range of funding bodies. We would welcome low risk organisations having less audit requirements.

3. Question 3: Do you have any wider comments about how the Executive should address the budgetary situation?

WCRP Response:

- 3.1 The WCRP recognise that if government is committed to promoting an equitable, anti-poverty and anti-discriminatory agenda, then a funding model and priorities based on inter-departmental workings and clearly defined action plans and responsibilities must be delivered.
- 3.2 The WCRP would like to see childcare strategies co-ordinated by one lead department, with inter-departmental workings in the development of action plans and clarity of responsibilities. Until this is achieved, it is crucial that DSD continues funding the Women's Centres Childcare Fund (WCCF).
- 3.3 Northern Ireland is becoming an increasingly unequal society and the populist policies introduced by the Executive have not helped to deliver greater equality. Free prescription charges for those who can afford to pay deprives the Executive of a significant source of revenue. Most importantly, the cost of deferring domestic water charges is estimated to be £200 million in 2010-11. The introduction of water charges, with the safeguard of an affordability tariff, and means tested access to free prescriptions, would make an important contribution to raising funding that would offset cuts currently being imposed.
- 3.4 Public sector cuts, and cuts to benefits, hit women the hardest. It is estimated that women will suffer 72% of tax and benefit cuts. The Executive must be mindful of the equality implications in their actions and prioritise accordingly, with the view to carrying out meaningful Equality Impact Assessments. There should be no 'salami slicing' of budgets but instead there needs to be assessment of the importance of services delivered and the impact that cuts would make.
- 3.5 Whilst understanding that budgetary cuts need to be made, the WCRP ask that the Executive recognise the true value of the women's sector and the value for money it provides. In some cases the cost of core funding a women's centre is often less than the cost of state benefits for the number of staff unemployed.
- 3.6 We would like to see continued consultation within the women's and voluntary/community sector on proposed budget priorities and equality impact assessments carried out and widely available.

4. Background on the Women's Centres Regional Partnership (WCRP):

- 4.1 The Women's Centres Regional Partnership (WCRP) is a partnership of 4 lead women's organisations: the Women Resource Development Agency (WRDA), the Women's Support Network (WSN), the Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network (NIRWN) and The Women's Centre, Derry, and 14 women's centres/organisations across Northern Ireland.

Note:

Due to the relatively short timescale to respond to the Minister's consultation request, not all of WCRP's partner organisations were able to respond.

If you require any further information, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely
Kelli Boyles
WCRP Co-ordinator