



Social Investment Fund Consultation Response

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Women's Centres Regional Partnership (WCRP)

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1.0 Introduction WCRP

1.1 WCRP Vision

“Our vision is of communities where women are recognised and valued as equal partners working towards a future based upon shared values of equality, participation and inclusion.”

1.2 WCRP Mission Statement

“To work in partnership to support and strengthen the voice of community based women’s organisations”

1.3 Background

The Women's Centres' Regional Partnership (WCRP) is a partnership of four lead regional women's organisations linking with fourteen frontline women's organisations across Northern Ireland to provide support and services to women living in disadvantaged areas.

1.4 The four key lead partners of the Partnership are the Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA), Women's Support Network (WSN), Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network (NIRWN) and The Women's Centre, Derry. The fourteen Women's Centres are spread across Northern Ireland with seven from the Greater Belfast and Lisburn area, four in the North West (one of which does not provide childcare), and three in Dungannon, Magherafelt and Craigavon. Together the WCRP seeks to develop and strengthen a regional infrastructure which will support community based women's organisations across Northern Ireland.

1.5 There are four aims to the Partnership encouraging collaborative and strategic work on key areas such as influencing policy, identifying needs and gaps in relation to training, education and childcare services, improving communication on good practice and lessons learnt across the sector, sourcing potential sources of funding, etc.

- 1.6** The Women's sector has played a key role in building and promoting, social, economic and political change in Northern Ireland. A review carried out in 2001 highlighted that through its infrastructure, comprising regional support organisations, networks, women's centres and local groups engaged in a diverse range of activities, it has made a valuable contribution to promoting equality, social and economic inclusion, peace-building, and the development of the voluntary sector.
- 1.7** The WCRP tackles women's inequality and disadvantage and supports community development in the most marginalised and disadvantaged communities and works for policy change. The principles of interdependence, co-operation, participation, representation and good practice is at the heart of the partnership's work.
- 1.8** The WCRP welcomes the opportunity to comment on the *Social Investment Fund* consultation.

Comments

WCRP welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Social Investment Fund consultation issued by OFMDFM. We urge the Department to recognise the role the community based women's sector can play in working with government to meet the objectives of the Fund.

Women's Centres are grounded in a community development ethos; they provide front line services to women, children and families in disadvantaged areas including childcare provision, education and training, family support, health promotion, job skills and advice services. The idea behind a holistic service provision is one where a wraparound service is provided and based on the individual need and empowerment of the woman. This for example, might include looking at the health of the woman, or her caring and educational needs, women's centres therefore go beyond just looking at an initial problem and further utilize all the resources at the centre. By broadening the scope they can identify and tackle the root cause and not just the symptoms of any problems; this early intervention is crucial. Positive impacts of the work of women's centres has included improved mental and physical health, better job prospects through training, increased confidence and self esteem and better parenting skills. This clearly illustrates that a woman's centre not only improves the life of an individual woman but it also improves the life of her family, particularly children. In addition there are many examples of women becoming more active in their communities to make them a better place to live.

Strategic Objectives

While we are in agreement with the overall strategic objectives of the fund, the Department must take cognizance of the following:

Building Pathways to Employment

Barriers to Employment: Childcare

Accessible, quality and affordable childcare is a barrier to women's employment. There is a lack of childcare provision within Northern Ireland and we have yet to see the development of a Childcare Strategy. Where

there are childcare services, they are unevenly distributed with rural areas having the lowest level of provision.¹ Without childcare provision women struggle to access jobs which provide family friendly working hours or indeed they find it difficult to remain within the job market. The Childcare Costs Survey conducted by Employers for Childcare revealed that 46% of respondents said the cost of childcare influenced the hours they work.² The welfare reforms include childcare cuts - childcare subsidies for families on low-incomes have been an integral part of the tax and benefits system for many years. However, since April 2011, the government has cut the proportion of childcare costs that can be claimed through the childcare element of working tax credit from 80% to 70%. Moreover, under Universal Credit, funding for childcare will be maintained (at a fixed budget of £2 billion per annum by 2014/15) but eligibility will be extended to include parents working less than 16 hours per week. While the inclusion of those engaged in mini-jobs is welcome, more parents supported by the same funding pot will inevitably mean even less help for some of the poorest families.³

Significant research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation about children in poverty concluded that working patterns among mothers are very strongly linked to qualifications and hence the ability to command higher earnings. Over 80% of highly qualified couples and lone mothers are working (degree and NVQ level 4), falling to 55% of lone mothers at qualifications equivalent to NVQ level 2, and 27% of lone mother without qualifications.⁴ Professor Liddell used the developmental systems approach to gauge where reform would have the greatest impact on supporting the most disadvantaged mothers' participation in the labour force. The analysis found that the principal driver was the mother's education.⁵ These studies underscore the importance of affordable childcare to allow mothers to study and train for work. They further highlight the importance of providing sustainable funding to the community based women's sector to continue their vital and successful work.

WCRP wishes to highlight the important role of community based childcare provision within the community based women's sector which makes a major

contribution to the lives of women and families by enabling women from disadvantaged backgrounds to enter education, training and employment.

Therefore, we are asking that the Social Investment Fund is used to both stabilise existing childcare and to increase childcare provision within areas of disadvantage.

Barriers to Employment: Gender Pay Gap

Despite the Equal Pay Act, inequality still remains within the workplace. Figures from the Chartered Management Institute show that Northern Ireland has the worst gender pay gap within the UK⁶ highlighting that in management roles, this equates to women being on average £13,793 worse off than their male counterparts. Women are also more likely to experience interruptions to their careers to take on caring responsibilities and this has a negative impact on their future career and earnings.⁷

For women entering employment we would advocate for equal pay for work of equal value – regardless of gender. This will ensure that women can play a full and equal part within the workforce. However, we would highlight that even women in work can find it difficult to cope⁸. Considering women are concentrated in part-time jobs, the largest pay disparity is for female part time workers.⁹ This can be a result of a miss match of job and skills, difficulty with balancing caring responsibilities as well as work not being a genuine route out of poverty. Workshops conducted by the Women’s Support Network¹⁰ with women from both Shankill and Falls Women’s Centres also pointed to a real increase of ‘inwork’ poverty; highlighting the increasing cost of living and lack of disposable income.

Barriers to Employment: Skills and Education

Research shows that despite girls outperforming boys at school, fewer females are represented in science subjects. Research conducted by the Women and Work Commission notes that only 14% of engineering and technology students, 24% of computer science students, 22% of physics

students, and 32% of architecture students are female. This appears to reflect NI trends as DETI statistics¹¹ show that in Northern Ireland universities, 21% of graduates in engineering and technology and 33% of science and computing subjects are female. Further Education statistics show that in relation to the total enrolments on science courses, 30% are female. By not addressing this issue could mean many women end up in low-paid and low-skilled jobs.

WCRP would ask that funding for community education is a key component within the Social Investment Fund to ensure women can take part in courses that will help them acquire skills and enter the labour market.

Tackling the Systemic issues linked to deprivation

Poverty

Recent figures released by the Department of Social Development,¹² show that the number of children living in child poverty within Northern Ireland has increased and are higher than the UK average. The Child Poverty Act 2010 is meant to ensure that action to end child poverty will be a priority for future governments across the UK. The legislation highlights education, health, family support, childcare, financial assistance, employment, skills and housing as crucial elements in the battle to end child poverty. The NI Executive and other UK jurisdictions have signed up to the eradication of child poverty by 2020. These figures are a stark reminder that all Government departments must work in collaboration to eradicate poverty and to tackle the symptoms simultaneously.

The fact sheet 'Female Poverty'¹³ issued by The Fawcett Society highlighted that women's poverty was often hidden and that women often deny themselves the basic necessities such as food so they can protect their families. A further comprehensive report commissioned by The Joseph Rowntree Foundation and published by The New Policy Institute, Monitoring Poverty and Social Exclusion in Northern Ireland¹⁴ provides a clear picture of the extent of poverty in Northern Ireland. The findings suggest the number of

people living in low income households is around 20% or 350,000 and there is an identified increase of 10,000 in the number of children in these households from a previous 2006 report. The Women's Resource and Development Agency Report, The Northern Ireland Economy: Women on the Edge?¹⁵ echoed this view.

The recent Autumn Statement by the Chancellor is further bad news for women with caring responsibilities. Last year's promise to fund "significant above indexation increases to the Child Tax Credit" which he said would have provided help to poorer families has in fact meant a further £110 being taken from families. This can only lead to an exacerbated increase in women and their families living in poverty.

We would ask for the resources of the Social Investment Fund to contribute to funding further advice services targeted at women to ensure they can access benefits.

Children & Young People

The Early Years Strategic Alliance, jointly chaired by the Women's Support Network and Children in Northern Ireland, recently launched its Manifesto¹⁶. This presents a roadmap for the development of early years, childcare and family support services.

Improving outcomes for children and young people, including health, social services and education, to name but a few, is extremely important. Therefore we ask that any strategy or action plans emanating from this fund places at its foundation the principles of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child with particular emphasis on Article 18. 2: for the purpose of guaranteeing and promoting the rights set forth in the present Convention, States Parties shall render appropriate assistance to parents and legal guardians in the performance of their child-rearing responsibilities and shall ensure the development of institutions, facilities and services for the care of children. Article 18.3: parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure

that children of working parents have the right to benefit from child-care services and facilities for which they are eligible. Article 27.1: parties recognise the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development.

A report by the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children & Young People¹⁷ highlights there has been significant delays between the recognition of the need for a policy and strategy and its final approval. A specific example is the Early Years Strategy which is 5+ years from initial conception to where we are now. The report highlights further problems of co-ordination and joined up working, and that the silo mentality has been the main barrier to effective government delivery for children.

WCRP would therefore seek guidance from OFMDFM how the fund will link with the Ten Year Strategy for Children and Young People and the Children and Young People's Plan recently out for consultation from the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership.

Investment Zones & Area Plans

Firstly, we would caution OFMDFM adopting an approach solely based on areas. It is our view that in order to tackle social and economic deprivation the Department must include and address the needs of those experiencing disadvantage which is not defined by area. For example the needs of women in rural areas are dispersed widely and as a result women have additional barriers such as transport, isolation, accessing education and training.

Furthermore, in a recent consultation response by the Rural Community Network¹⁸ they raised issues relating to the misuse of the Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure 2009 (MDM). Using this measure results in rural communities hardly featuring in the top 20% of Super Output Areas and as a result communities in rural areas have seen very little benefit in the allocation of resources. Another example is that while most women's centres are located in areas defined as disadvantaged, others may not be but the

women and children who use their services are likely to experience poverty, lack of skills or health problems. An area based approach to deprivation should therefore not be the only criteria used in an effort to reach and address the needs of those most disadvantaged or marginalised. We again reiterate that if equality of opportunity is taken seriously within this document, then it would go some way to addressing the inherent inequalities that exist for women and children.

Rural areas have been largely omitted from the investment zones: Mid Ulster has been left out entirely, there is nothing for the Omagh area and the Border Zone is huge and unwieldy; running across seven different council areas in comparison to greater North Belfast. The zones are unequal. Rurality presents additional problems such as; distance, isolation, lack of services, and smaller populations. This has an impact on equity and delivery of support in rural areas. In times of difficulty, and reduced funding, it is easy to make a case for addressing the needs of the greatest number in a community or society and having them receive greatest attention. This focus has the potential to leave the needs of the marginalised and disadvantaged further excluded and isolated.

Why are there zones and how were they selected? Would a NI wide fund not provide more equity ensuring any area/project etc has equal opportunity to apply to and access the Fund?

What will happen to the areas not included in Neighbourhood Renewal and Areas at Risk? There is a possibility that money will be going to the same areas and the same projects and organisations will simply receive additional monies.

The document makes no reference to community planning. There are lot of Groups and areas progressing with local planning and coordinated work; particularly in relation to health and children's services that SIF could link into;

it is concerning that there will potentially be a whole new set of structures set up for SIF.

WCRP would like the issue of rural communities addressed and for there to be a cross cutting theme of women included when drafting up the guidelines for the Steering Groups. It is important that the needs of women living in areas of disadvantage are addressed.

Management Structures

WCRP does not advocate for structures that are unnecessary and somewhat counterproductive given the crucial and limited resources of this fund. We would like to see an effort made to identify a structure already in operation, with a proven track record of delivering this type of work.

We would urge OFMDFM to ensure that within any structure a gender balance is maintained, 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 880.¹⁹ The Northern Ireland Assembly Election results showed 20 women were elected out of a possible 108 seats and at local government level women hold only 23.7% of 582 seats. This rather disappointing low representation of women at government level is a matter of great concern for the WCRP considering women comprise 51%²⁰ of Northern Ireland's population therefore any organising structures should reflect this.

In relation to the establishment of steering groups, WCRP would suggest that Option 1 is the best alternative – “OFMDFM will identify community and stakeholder groups to form ‘conventions’.” This option would enable our membership to form a convention to ensure representation from the community based women's sector within the steering group structure.

WCRP would urge OFMDFM to ensure there is a gender balance obtained within the management structures. This could be done within the guidelines

which are currently being drafted up. By following Section 75, this would ensure women are represented at all levels of the decision making process.

Delivery of Funding

WCRP note that the resources allocated to the Social Investment Fund are additional and to be complementary to existing services and resources, therefore we are concerned that the mechanisms envisaged to deliver the fund will lead to much greater duplication and will be increasingly overburdening to groups who can deliver the strategic outcomes.

With this in mind we believe the best approach is the community model outlined in Option 2, where the Steering Group can ensure the money is targeted at those in greatest need. However, we believe the final decision on proposals should be made by the Office of the First & Deputy First Minister rather than the steering group.

A positive example of funding reaching those in need quickly is that of the Big Lottery Live and Learn funding distributed by the Women's Centres Regional Partnership through the Regional Women's Centres Learning Partnership. The project is distributing a grant of £994,671 over a 5 year period to 14 women's organizations across Northern Ireland to deliver a wide range of courses and programmes that offer women, families and communities the opportunity to develop skills and improve their lifestyle.

Equality of Opportunity

While we very much welcome this commitment from the Executive, however we are anxious that issues of importance to women are increasingly no longer a priority for government. This is reflected in our disappointment that the Equality Impact Assessment has not made reference to the impact the current economic crisis is having on women. It is widely accepted that Northern Ireland will be hardest hit by the impact of welfare and budget cuts, job losses and rising prices. Significantly more women are employed in low paid public sector jobs. They will therefore bear the brunt of any public spending cuts.

Research commissioned by the Women's Resource & Development Agency²¹ also provides evidence that the economic downturn will impact significantly on women – especially lone parents, migrant women, young women and older women.

If this fund is to tackle poverty, unemployment and physical deterioration there must be a very clear and visible commitment to the promotion of equality of opportunity. Section 75 of the NI Act (1998) places a statutory duty on Government Departments to robustly analyse the extent of inequality and reflect the outcome to ensure the targeting of efforts and resources to those most in need. The Department must recognize the stark inequalities that exist for women in communities who are experiencing multiple disadvantages.

Conclusion

WCRP has welcomed the opportunity to respond to this consultation document. We very much welcome the commitment from the Executive and the resources allocated to the Social Investment Fund. If you have any queries please get in touch.

Appendix 1:

Lead Organisations:

NI Rural Women's Network (NIRWN)

15 Molesworth Street
Cookstown
BT80 8NX

The Women's Centre, Derry

Beibhinn House
5 Guildhall Street
Derry
BT48 6BB

Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA)

6 Mount Charles
Belfast
BT7 1NZ

Women's Support Network (WSN)

109-113 Royal Avenue
Belfast
BT1 1FF

Partners:

Waterside Women's Centre

170 Spencer Road
Waterside
Derry
BT47 6AH

Foyle Women's Information Network

The Walled City Community Partnership
12-14 The Diamond
Derry~Londonderry
BT48 6HW

The Women's Centre

Beibhinn House
5 Guildhall Street
Derry
BT48 6BB

Strathfoyle Women's Centre

12 Bawnmore Place
Strathfoyle
BT47 6XP

Atlas Women's Centre

81 Sloan Street
Lisburn,
BT27 5AG

Ballybeen Women's Centre

34 Ballybeen Square
Belfast

BT16 2QE

Falls Women's Centre

256 - 258 Falls Road

BELFAST

BT12 6AL

Footprints Women's Centre

84a Colinmill

Poleglass

Dunmurray

BT17 0AR

Greenway Women's Centre

19 Greenway

Cregagh Road

Belfast

BT6 0DT

Windsor Women's Centre

136-144 Broadway

Belfast

BT12 6HY

Shankill Women's Centre

151-157 Shankill Road

Belfast

BT13 1FD

First Steps Women's Centre

21a William Street

Dungannon

Co Tyrone

BT70 1DX

Magherafelt Women's Centre

The Learning Lodge

27-29 Moneymore Road

Magherafelt

BT45 5JE

Chrysalis Women's Centre

520 Burnside

Brownlow, Craigavon

BT65 5DE