



Northern Ireland Children & Young People's Plan 2011-2014

Issued by: Children & Young People's Strategic Partnership

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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 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 and volunteering of funding, etc.

- 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 will be at the heart of the partnership's work.

- 1.8** The WCRP welcomes the opportunity to comment on the *Northern Ireland Children and Young People's Plan 2011-2014* consultation.

Response to Consultation

The WCRP welcomes the commitment of those involved in the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership to improving the lives of all our children and young people. The Strategy sets out an ambitious agenda which we welcome; as any progress to improving the lives of children and young people is extremely important. It has been well documented that the legacy of conflict on children and young people has had a major impact¹ and historically children and young people were not necessarily a major Government priority². The establishment of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People was welcomed as it signalled that children and young people were an established priority.

Chapter One: Representation on the Children & Young People's Strategic Partnership

We would seek clarification as to where the Women's Centres fit in to the sub group model as outlined on Page 14 of the consultation document. We note from Appendix 1 that there are no representatives from the Women's Sector on the Children and Young People's Partnership membership list. While Footprints Women's Centre sits on the Outcomes Board for the South Eastern Trust Area as a Colin Community representative and has participated in the first pilot of the early intervention model, we would very much welcome a representative on the CYPSP, representing and highlighting the needs of children within a Women's Centre setting.

We would draw your attention to the representation of the Community Sector it would appear that the community representatives are mostly from West Belfast. WCRP would welcome a more diverse range of representatives showing a more robust geographical spread. It is also imperative that women's groups within rural areas are listened to.

¹ "Children and Young People in Northern Ireland, have for too long, lived in a society under stress." Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (2006) Lifetime Opportunities – Government's Anti Poverty and Social Inclusion Strategy for Northern Ireland.

² McTernan and Godfrey (2006) *Children's Services Planning in Northern Ireland: Developing a Planning Model to Address Rights and Needs Child Care in Practice*, Volume 12, No. 3.

Women's Centres play a vital role in the lives of children; children who attend day care, after schools and crèche facilities within Women's Centres all experience a range of activities that contribute to their emotional, social, intellectual, language and creative environment. The Centres all strive to meet children's individual needs and promote their welfare. They plan and provide activities and play opportunities to develop children's emotional, physical and social capabilities. They recognize the unique needs of children and offer a full range of children's services. Research carried out by the Women's Centres Regional Partnership, *Childcare Mapping & Research Report 2010*³, highlighted there were 1364 individual children registered for childcare within women's centres, which equates to 4914 childcare places and 9828 hours of childcare weekly. The report goes on to provide a detailed picture of the childcare provision offered in a women's centre setting such as out of schools childcare, respite childcare, special needs childcare and Social Service referrals.

Strategic Context: Children's Rights

Women's Centres are grounded in a community development ethos; they are committed to providing vital services for the diverse needs of women, children and families within areas of major social and economic deprivation. The Centres ensure the needs of children are placed first in the design and delivery of child care services. Women's Centres very much welcome the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) being an integral part of any planning service.

UNCRC is an international human rights Treaty that sets out a comprehensive set of rights to which all children are entitled and will ensure that children's rights will become an integral part of any planning services. The rights of children and young people must be promoted and upheld so that in all actions no child is discriminated against (article 2); the best interests of the child are the primary consideration (article 3); respect for the child's view and the right to participate and for their view to be given due weight (article 12) and the

³ *Childcare Mapping & Research Report 2010* – Women's Centres Regional Partnership

child's right to life, survival and development is upheld in all circumstances (article 6).

The Whole Child Model

WCRP completely endorse the use of the 'whole child' model which fully recognises the various developmental stages of a child's experience and development and distinguishes that no 'one-size-fits-all'. It is by placing a child or young person at the centre of any planning of services that will ensure their needs are met. It is also an excellent method to integrate planning and to maximise the best outcomes for children and young people.

The Early Years Strategic Alliance (EYSA) is jointly chaired by the Women's Support Network (WSN) and Children in Northern Ireland, WSN's work within EYSA is to ensure that all children have equal opportunity to benefit from early years, childcare and family support services and that the interests of women, who are in the main the primary carers, are also taken into account. We strongly advocate for the CYPSP to work in partnership with the widest range of sectors and in particular the women's sector to progressively build on the supports that children and families require in areas of disadvantage.

Other Strategic Drivers

It should be noted that Government policies and strategies must link into local key strategies; it is at local level where the need has been established. In relation to rural areas; rural women and children are often further disadvantaged due to isolation and lack of access to service provision.

We are disappointed there is no reference to the Child Poverty Strategy in the list of key strategies. Tackling child poverty should be a central priority and a clear relationship should be established between reducing child poverty and the actions of the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership.

A number of Women's Centres are involved at a local level in Neighbourhood Renewal Strategies. They sit on the Partnerships to develop long term plans designed to improve the quality of life for women, children and families

suffering the highest levels of deprivation. WCRP would request clarification as to how the CYPSP will link in to the already established partnerships to ensure Women's Centres views are taken on board.

Chapter Two - Outcomes Based Planning

We are concerned that a more onerous obligation will be placed on those involved in the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership to produce plans without the buy-in from Government. If a robust outcomes based model is to work, then Government must also engage and take cognisance of any planning process. We would welcome clarification as to how outcomes based planning will fit in with the community planning model currently being developed by the Department of Environment.

Page 14 of the consultation makes reference to Outcomes Groups and Locality Groups. We welcome further information on how these groups will be established and the process involved on being elected to sit on the groups. Ensuring a gender balance is struck will be imperative, as women are underrepresented in many aspects of life. For example women sitting on public appointment roles in Northern Ireland are only 449 compared with men at 880.⁴ And a recent report by Lord Davies showed that only 12.5% of members of corporate boards of FTSE 100 companies are women.⁵

Page 19 of the consultation document makes reference to outcomes in 'Northern Ireland wide, geographical area and District Council' areas. WCRP would welcome further information in relation to where the experience and expertise of Women's Centres would sit in gathering evidence. Perhaps a thematic group could be established which would be the ideal vehicle for ensuring the experience, expertise and evidence that Women's Centres can provide is utilized in this process.

Further information would be welcomed on where Childcare Partnerships will sit along with the Outcomes Groups. For example, will the Childcare

⁴ Public Bodies and Public Appointments Annual Report 2009/2010

⁵ *Women on Boards*, Lord Davies Review, February 2011

Partnerships work alongside the Outcomes Groups, will the plans merge or how will they fit together? WCRP would welcome clarification around this issue.

Integration of Planning and Resource Optimisation

Women's Centres receive the majority of funding for childcare from the Women's Centres Childcare Fund (WCCF) distributed by the Department of Social Development. In 2009/2010 an amount totalling £889,000 was made available for childcare costs. This funding has allowed Women's Centres to provide childcare to children who live in areas of sustained social and economic deprivation.

It is imperative that Women's Centres are included in any planning processes and representation on any sub group which is 'set up to explore models of joint commissioning.'

Advising Government

We agree with point 1.8 that 'all departments of Government and all agencies must contribute towards improvement of the 6 high level outcomes set out in the strategy.' With health and social care resting with DHSSPS and education with DE, it is extremely important that the Executive establish processes and set standards that guarantee to protect the best interests of the child and that a cross-departmental approach is forthcoming. It is also important that the highest standards are agreed to be binding to all, and not just those within the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership.

Further information would be welcomed on how the Advising Government Sub Group will be established, and if representation will be from the CYPSP, Outcomes Groups or the Locality Groups. We would like to see a broad representation from all sectors, including the women's centres.

Chapter 3 - Early Intervention

The Council of the European Union highlights that supporting parents in their role as the main educators of their children during the early years is important. Early Childhood Education and Care Services (ECEC) encourages the working in close partnership with parents, families and communities, in order to increase awareness of the opportunities offered by ECEC and of the importance of learning from an early age.⁶

We fully support any early intervention measures in respect of children and young people, as these can often reduce the need for further or even more intrusive interventions later in life. Early intervention can transform the lives of many children, young people and families. And early intervention programmes are also known to be effective in the fight against child poverty. It also makes sound economic sense in terms of practice.

WCRP seeks clarification as to where Women's Centres will sit in any Early Intervention Regional Strategy or Zone. Women's Centres place a high priority on early intervention as they believe the first years of a child's life are critical in developing relationships and laying the foundations for physical, cognitive and emotional development. The WCRP report, *Childcare Mapping*⁷ provided evidence to show the important role women's centres play in early intervention and demonstrated the following positive outcomes children experience as a result of the care they receive in a Women's Centre:

- Enhanced children's development & learning
- Addressing child poverty
- Improving social confidence
- Improving physical and mental health
- Increased social integration

⁶ Council of the European Union Council Conclusions on ECEC – *providing all our children with the best start for the world of tomorrow*. Official Journal of the European Union (2011/C 175/03)

⁷ *Childcare Mapping & Research Report 2010* – Women's Centres Regional Partnership

Women's Centres also encourage a child's sense of self – which is a crucial part of development to encourage coping skills; they enable children to foster a sense of empathy with others which is the beginnings of good citizenship; they provide a safe environment for the individual development of each child and they help children develop self confidence and a sense of achievement from babyhood to preparation for attending nursery.

We note that Footprints Women's Centre has participated in the first pilot of the early intervention model. Women's Centres make a valuable contribution to early intervention and provide high quality childcare for women and children living in disadvantaged communities. Women's Centres actively use early intervention measures on a day to day basis, therefore their expertise, experience and ingenuity should be utilized. It is therefore extremely important that any Early Intervention Zone incorporates Women's Centres.

Family Support Hubs

WCRP agree that at local level, 'children and young people and families do not find their way quickly enough to existing early intervention supports and services.' We wish to highlight that Women's Centres already offer Advice, Advocacy and ongoing Family Support to women in disadvantaged areas on issues such as housing, benefits, counselling and domestic violence. It would be important that the experience of women's centres is utilised and included in the process for establishing family support hubs.

Footprints Women's Centre is actively engaged in the family support panels. Their experience has been invaluable in the design and implementation of the family support panel. While WCRP welcome the concept of Family Support Hubs, it must be recognized they need to fit in with local need. One size does not fit all, which is why we would like the CYPSP to assure us there will not be a standardization of family support hubs. Each area will have specific needs and priorities and standardization may not work.

We would also seek clarification as to how Women's Centres engage in the process set up for family support hubs. Women's Centres offer high quality

services yet access through some family support areas has yet to be established.

Communication and taking account of views from children and young people

The involvement of children and young people in all aspects of development, delivery and evaluation is key and we are delighted that communicating with children has been included within the document. It has been well documented⁸ that the involvement and meaningful participation of children- babies, toddlers and young children- needs to be highlighted, and in order to respect children's competencies, it is essential to hear and see what children are saying and doing without subjecting them to the filtering process that often diminishes their contribution simply because they are young. Specially designed resources should be made available to women's centres, teachers, youth workers, care workers and for children themselves to raise awareness of this process and also their rights under UNCRC. Communications should involve all sectors working with children and young people and encompass all methods of engagement including social media.

Conclusion

The squeeze on budgets undoubtedly will have a detrimental impact on services as they try and respond to the increasing levels of need. We are concerned that resources are likely to become even tighter over the coming year, therefore putting a real risk to the quality of services currently being delivered to children and young people. We are also concerned that women with children aged seven are being forced to move to jobseekers allowance without necessary childcare infrastructure being in place. This will have a disproportionate negative impact on lone parents, who are mostly women.

The full impact of the welfare cuts is yet unknown. Northern Ireland has suffered from historic under-investment in children for many years. Research into public spending on key children's services in 2009 confirmed the under-

⁸ Landsdown, G., *Can You Hear Me?*, 2005

investment - overall spending in 2007/08 on Early Years amounted to £630 per child in Northern Ireland compared with around £2000 per child in GB. Spending on Sure Start was much lower in Northern Ireland - expenditure per child was £80, compared to nearly £600 per child in England.⁹

A report by the Women's Resource and Development Agency, *The NI Economy: Women on the Edge*¹⁰ suggested that NI will be hardest hit by the impact of welfare and budget cuts, job losses and rising prices. The June 2010 budget and October Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) reduced the block grant by almost £4billion, with anticipated job losses in the public sector. Since significantly more women are employed in low paid public sector jobs, they will bear the brunt of these public spending cuts, with subsequent devastating impact on the life chances of their children.

The June 2010 budget and the October CSR also made a number of changes to welfare benefits, adding to those already announced by the previous Government. By 2014-15, spending on benefits across the UK will be £18 billion less than it is now (in cash terms). The loss to NI's benefit recipients will be more than £600 million per year by 2014-15.¹¹

In a report commissioned by the Law Centre NI, the Institute of Fiscal Studies established that after London, the tax and benefits changes planned up to 2014-2015 will have a disproportionate impact on NI. This is for two reasons: the high numbers of those in receipt of Disability Living Allowance, especially for mental health disorders, and the high number of women with children who will be adversely affected by cuts to social security.¹²

WCRP would like to see a commitment from the Executive to ensuring sustainability in the medium to long term of services to children and young

⁹ A Child's Portion, *An analysis of public spending on children in the UK*, NI Briefing, Save the Children Oct 2009

¹⁰ Hinds, B., *NI Economy: Women on the Edge*, WRDA, July 2011

¹¹ *Response to Northern Ireland's draft budget*, Mike Tomlinson and Grace Kelly, Poverty and Social Exclusion in the UK Project, 2011 p 1

¹² James Browne, *The Impact of tax and benefit reforms to be introduced between 2010-11 and 2014-15 in Northern Ireland*, IFS Briefing Note 114, December 2010

people and to see a duty to cooperate at ministerial and departmental levels which would provide the necessary political leadership.

The Programme for Government has just been released. It is disappointing that the £12 million allocated for childcare has not been ring fenced in fact during a Question and Answer session the First Minister alluded that departments put in bids below this amount.¹³ These issues, alongside the Early Years Strategy and Childcare Strategy are strategic drivers which we would welcome CYPSP taking forward. We need this fully integrated approach to ensure provision of high quality, accessible, affordable and appropriate childcare services.

We urge CYPSP to ensure Government make children a priority and ensure that those Ministers with responsibility for children are given the necessary powers to take forward policy.

We support the Regional Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership as it offers a model for integrated planning, commissioning and provision of information, but we would welcome the active involvement of Women's Centres.

We are delighted that the Partnership has included education in the consultation. According to Save the Children's 2007 Child Poverty Report¹⁴ educational disadvantage begins at an early age in Northern Ireland. With evidence showing how socio-economic background affects early learning and development. Links therefore need to be made between early childhood education and care.

We look forward to receiving further plans which we hope will provide more detail, concrete activities and timelines on a locality basis.

¹³ <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/record/reports2011/111114.htm#5>

¹⁴ http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/en/docs/Northern_Ireland_CB_07.pdf

We have offered some constructive recommendations as to how this document could be improved. We are happy to further discuss this response if required.

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

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