



Department of Regional Development

Public Transport Reform

Consultation

February 2010

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Introduction

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.

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.

Transport and Gender

The WCRP welcomes the Department for Regional Development's proposals on reform of public transport in Northern Ireland. As a partnership organisation that includes women's groups from across Northern Ireland we understand the importance that good, affordable and accessible public transport can make to the lives of women from all communities. To date, the Department has not been engaged with gender-based issues in terms of developing policies on transport. We hope that this consultation will mark the start of a process of giving serious attention to the needs of female users of public transport.

Members of the WCRP sit on the Gender Advisory Panel, convened by OFMdFM to advise on the Gender Equality Strategy and its accompanying Departmental Action Plans. It has been noted that the Department for Regional Development is the only department yet to develop an action plan. This omission was raised by members of the Panel when giving evidence to the OFMdFM Committee on 23 September 2009.

The WCRP report *Women Living in Disadvantaged Communities: Barriers to Participation* (2009) identified access to transport as a key barrier for many women. The report recommended that the DRD consider the following:

- Better, more frequent and more affordable public transport, which takes account of women's need to do school drop-offs and pick-ups.
- Support for community and rural transport schemes such as those noted by the Northern Childcare Partnership and the Rural Childcare Stakeholders Group.
- Public and community transport services to take account of the needs of women with disabilities, and women who have children with disabilities.

Given that it is proposed that public transport should remain in public ownership, we hope that these gender-based issues will receive attention and the appropriate policies developed to address the issues identified.

We would also draw the attention of the DRD to commitments contained within the Convention on Elimination on all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which places an obligation on State Parties to eliminate discrimination against women in rural areas in ensuring rural women have access to transport. Furthermore, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (ComEDAW), responsible for monitoring the implementation of CEDAW highlights "the absence of convenient and affordable transport" as a barrier to accessing health services. There is therefore an onus on the Department to ensure that women have equal access to transport.

The disadvantage women face in accessing reliable transportation affects their livelihoods, access to social services and impairs their ability to undertake the role of caregiver to family members. Caring for dependants in the home requires access to services that can be obtained or delivered, all of which limits women's ability to take jobs outside the home. In addition to having difficulty accessing transportation; the

public transportation that is available is often ill equipped and inadequate for women who are accompanied by children¹ and pushchairs.

In order to achieve this, the Department will be required to take a pro-active approach to the provision of transport, for example, one that supplements the traditional arterial routes taken by buses with a more localised neighbourhood transport that crosses communities and neighbourhoods. This would also be an important means of enabling cross-community contact to develop.

Public Transport Agency

As an organisation representing a wide range of women's centres which are located across Northern Ireland, the WCRP welcomes the Department's proposal of a public transport agency within the department which would have a number of responsibilities including operation policy and co-ordination of regional and local planning, managing the public transport budget, funding concessionary schemes and community and rural transport amongst other responsibilities. We hope that this will enable much greater cohesion around transport, and will ensure that the needs of those from isolated communities are taken into consideration.

We would also draw attention of the importance of including women within all sections of employment within the new agency, so that women's experiences can be better incorporated into all areas. Currently, employment in the transport sector is male dominated and women are under-represented in professional and senior managerial positions in the sector. There should be a commitment to work towards gender parity in all areas involving key strategic decisions regarding planning.

As the Departmental Agency will be responsible for awarding contracts we would urge that equality of opportunity - in particular equality of opportunity on the grounds of

¹ Hamilton K et al (2005) *Promoting Gender Equality in Transport*, Equalities Opportunities Commission, pg iv also notes that bus design does not take into consideration difficulties faced by women who are accompanied by children when travelling or when shopping.

gender – is considered in all stages of the contracting process. This should be a requirement for all potential contractors or operators.

Affordability

Affordability is an important issue and we urge the Department for Regional Development to give consideration to this issue as a key barrier in preventing many from accessing public transport. Fare levels are on the whole much higher than in other parts of the UK, despite the lower levels of income experienced by many. In addition, the fare structure is impacting on young people, who are more likely to take taxis when in groups. This has potential future consequences, in that a generation is growing up who are not in the habit of accessing local public transport.

Developer contributions

We believe that securing developer contributions for public transport is an extremely important issue. This proposal, taken together with the new agency having statutory consultee status in land use planning decisions, might help to prevent future developments that fail to take into account the needs of those without access to private transport. The importance of community cohesion, community integration and the development of a shared future should be guiding principles.

Consumer Representation

We agree that the Consumer Council, as the publicly designated organisation representing consumer issues, should have an enhanced role in advising the Department on consumer interests. We note that the views of the Consumer Council regarding the increase of prices has in the past been disregarded. The proposals put forward will hopefully prevent such an occurrence and will help in establishing a transport system that is more responsive to the needs of the public

S 75 Status

Will the new Departmental Agency be a designated public authority for the purposes of section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The WCRP recommends that the

Departmental Agency is given section 75 status, which will impose an obligation to promote equality of opportunity on a number of grounds including gender.

Other languages

Northern Ireland is an increasingly multicultural and diverse society. In addition, many more visitors are now arriving, who do not necessarily have competency in English. We should emulate best practice in other countries and provide information in other languages, following research to ascertain which languages would be most in demand.

Impact Assessments

The WCRP welcomes the inclusion of gender profiles of public transport users and the public transport workforce in the draft Equality Impact Assessment. We note that women form the majority of users and that those aged between 16-24 are under-represented in the passenger user profile. This data should be used to inform future policies regarding public transport.

We note the extremely low levels of female employees (12%) and believe this should be an issue of concern to the Department. In addition, we are disappointed that there is not a breakdown in grades in NITHC/Translink, NICS. This information would be useful to helping to ascertain the representation of women particularly in senior decision making levels. WCRP recommends that the Department provides further data in gender profile on the percentages of women and men in all grades in NITHC/Translink and NICS, which will help in indicating if any adverse impact is likely to occur.

Conclusion

WCRP has welcomed the opportunity to make comments on the proposals that have a particular relevance to those who interests we represent. For any further information, please contact:

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