



Response to:

Guidance on the Provision of Local Generalist Voluntary Advice

Issued by: Department for Social Development

February 2011

Policy Subgroup
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1.0 Introduction

1.1 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. (See Appendix 1)

1.2 Vision

WCRP's 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."

1.3 Mission

WCRP's mission is "To work in partnership to support and strengthen the voice of community based women's organizations."

1.4 Background

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 organisations 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:

- To build a strong, effective and inclusive partnership for the benefit of partners and stakeholders;

- To advocate for the sustainability of frontline services for WCRP partners and stakeholders;
- To promote best practice and quality standards training, education, advice and childcare services in the women's centres;
- To Influence policy relating to women's lives by identifying and publicising emerging issues facing women in disadvantaged areas.¹

2. Comments

General Comments

WCRP are disappointed that the document makes no reference to the funding of advice provided within the community based women's centres. The nature and scope of advice provision within the community based women's sector meets the particular needs of women in disadvantaged areas. This has a number of benefits to local women which include advice being provided in a safe space; safe emotionally and physically and secure and confidential surroundings given the extremely sensitive nature of issues. The women's centres deal sensitively with all issues in a supportive environment which gives the women confidence in the service provided. Furthermore, the women's centres provide a holistic wraparound approach to advice including the provision of childcare on site which is one of a number of barriers faced by women seeking advice.²

Falls Women's Centre and Windsor Women's Centre advisors make referrals where appropriate to other services within the centres such as complementary therapies, counselling, and personal development, such as education and training, volunteering and lobbying activities. Both also provide outreach advice services in client's homes which enable advisors to meet the needs of disabled clients, clients with serious mental health issues and older people. Windsor Women's Centre not only provide advice to local women, it has also developed a separate advice unit located outside the centre so that men can also seek

¹ <http://www.wcrp.org.uk/mission.php>

² O'Kane., E and Ayres., S: research into specialist advice for women, WSN 2009

advice. This is an example where a women's centre is providing support and key vital services to the community as a whole.

WCRP wish to highlight our disappointment that the advice in the consultation does not reflect the needs of women in areas of disadvantage. Women who access advice services within the community based women's centres do so because of a number of barriers, for example, gender specific issues, such as gender based violence. We believe it is vital that recognition is given to gender specific issues such as domestic violence and rape, given the disproportionate impact on women compared to men.³ In 2009, Falls Women's Centre's main areas of advice work were around family support, domestic/sexualised violence, rape, housing, personal development and networking with around 20% of cases related to benefits.⁴ WCRP believe that the lack of recognition of gender specific issues could have a detrimental impact on women seeking advice. We therefore recommend that gender specific issues are highlighted in the document to take account of the nature of advice offered to women within the community based women's sector.

Falls Women's Centre and Windsor Women's Centre receive referrals from a number of sources, such as health professionals including dentists and GPs, social services and other advice providers like Citizens Advice Bureau. They target local need and particular social issues and problems experienced by women. There is a continued need for advice targeted specifically to women in the community based women's sector. A report by Ruth Tallion⁵ stated that *'even where other agencies, such as CAB do provide an advice service, there is a preference on the part of many women to approach a women's centre. This is because there is a greater feeling of 'ownership' among users of the women's centre.'* The report goes on to suggest that while a woman may initially approach

³ PSNI Statistics for 2009/2010 have shown that 5929 domestic abuse incidents were recorded for women compared to 1,954 for men, http://www.psnipolice.uk/2_08_09_domestic_incidents_and_crimes.pdf

⁴ O'Kane., E and Ayres., S: research into specialist advice for women, WSN 2009

⁵ Taillon, R., Grant-aided or Taken for Granted? A study of women's voluntary organisations in NI, WSN 1992

a centre for help with a benefit-related problem, *'as the story unfolds it is a complicated case involving domestic violence or debt and it may be some time before a sufficient relationship of trust is built before she is ready to disclose a situation of abuse or other problem.'* WCRP would urge the department to recommend councils take account of the funding needs of advice specially targeted at women.

Further consideration of the definitions used in this guidance document is required. We recommend that the term 'targeted' is also used to take account of the advice work undertaken by the community based women's sector. A recent report by Advice NI⁶ referred to this term as a way of describing advice which is 'bespoke' and delivered to particular groups. As highlighted above this 'targeted' advice is very much needed.

We welcome the commitment of the Minister to ensure that services are 'planned and delivered in a way which matches resources to need.' However, there is no evidence to support this statement. For example, Windsor Women's Centre is dealing with over 3,000 queries a year with one advice worker, so further funding is very much needed. It would be useful to establish if need or demand projections are to be taken into account to ensure fairness in the distribution of funding on both a geographical and thematic basis. We would also argue for case length and complexity to be taken into account when allocating funds, especially given the complex nature of some cases undertaken by the community based women's sector. Resources for advice workers also requires further consideration as the skill sets required by advice workers within the community based women's sector is both complex and far-reaching. Therefore, training and skills enhancement is essential along with recognition in terms of remuneration.

⁶ Advice NI – What's special about 'specialist' advice? February 2010

Conclusion

WCRP welcome the opportunity to respond to this consultation. Whilst welcoming this document, we have offered some constructive recommendations as to how it could be improved. We are happy to discuss this response.

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 Junction
8 Bishop Street
Derry
BT48 6PW

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
