



### Welfare Reform: Learning from Scotland

The Women's Sector Lobbyist gave a presentation at the Learning from Scotland event organised by NICVA. Jill Wood from Engender was also there to give an overview of the welfare changes in Scotland.

Ellen highlighted the women's sector Empty Purse campaign which was instrumental in getting the Executive to pull together a mitigation package. However, concerns were raised as follows: due to the political crisis we are now unsure of timetable for the introduction of welfare reform; budget decisions (particularly regarding education & training of women under ESF) are having a devastating impact which have put additional barriers in place for women looking to re-train or receive qualifications and four of the most significant strategies and action plans which would have a positive impact on women remain outstanding namely [Domestic Violence and Sexual Abuse Action Plan](#), [Gender Equality Strategy and Action Plan](#), [Sexual Orientation Strategy](#), [Childcare Strategy and Action Plan](#).

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### Review of Regional Infrastructure Support Programme

As many people will be aware, the Voluntary & Community Unit (VCU) within the Department for Social Development (DSD) have initiated a review of its arrangements for supporting the voluntary and community sector through the Regional Infrastructure Support Programme (RISP). As you know there is a strand for supporting the regional infrastructure of the women's sector, the Women's Regional Consortium is funded under this strand.

For detailed information on the review process and Terms of Reference please click here:

[http://www.nicva.org/article/review-regional-support-voluntary-and-community-organisations?utm\\_source=eNews+subscribers&utm\\_campaign=3752f92765-eNews+7+September+2015&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_3f6979e667-3752f92765-313463569](http://www.nicva.org/article/review-regional-support-voluntary-and-community-organisations?utm_source=eNews+subscribers&utm_campaign=3752f92765-eNews+7+September+2015&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_3f6979e667-3752f92765-313463569)

It is VCU's intention to design the new infrastructure arrangements in collaboration, partnership and co-design with all key stakeholders from across the country.

The process looks like this:

1. A number of co-design workshops will be held across Northern Ireland in late September/early October (see below for dates and venues).
2. An innovation lab is due to take place in early November. The innovation lab format is an internationally recognised methodology to developing solutions to complex policy, operational and social problems.
3. The work of the innovation lab will then be taken back out to a **further series of co-design workshops** to firm up proposals and to help inform consultation.

**I would encourage as many of you as possible to attend the 2 sets of co-design workshops.** The first set of workshops are as follows:

1. 28/9/15 – NICVA, Belfast
2. 30/9/15 – Holywell Trust, Derry~Londonderry
3. 1/10/15 – East Belfast Network Centre, Belfast

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4. 5/10/15 – The Braid, Ballymena
5. 7/10/15 – The Lakeland Forum, Enniskillen
6. 8/10/15 – Market Place Theatre, Armagh
7. 12/10/15 – Gortallowry House, Cookstown

All workshops will run from 10.00am to 12.30pm with registration/tea/coffee at 9.30am.

***Register your interest in attending one of the co-design workshops by e mailing***

[VCU@dndni.gov.uk](mailto:VCU@dndni.gov.uk) providing contact details and the name of the organisation you represent. In the event the workshops are oversubscribed VCU may have to limit attendance to one representative per organisation and will give preference to those who have registered first.

There are some key messages that I think you may wish to make, in addition to your own points:

- The women's sector is able to demonstrate a valuable contribution to the lives of women and families by achieving policy objectives and delivering a range of services.
- The women's community and voluntary sector as a whole is currently under-valued, under-resourced and under-threat from budget decisions, the RISP is necessary to continue supporting organisations and services within the sector.
- It is important to highlight the unique role that a Women's RISP would play.
- Women living in disadvantaged and rural areas face barriers to participation in work, education and training, and public and political life. The women's community and voluntary sector continues to work to overcome these persistent inequalities.
- The Women's RISP have played, and continue to play, a vital role in fostering community engagement and helping policy makers engage with women from disadvantaged and rural areas.
- Representing the views of the women in disadvantaged and rural areas in consultation responses, on policy development and informing government of issues affecting women is another key aspect of ensuring an effective Women's RISP.
- Having a well-established Women's RISP also ensures the involvement of the women's sector in the design, delivery and evaluation of services for women in disadvantaged and rural areas.
- The RISP is a partnership working between government, statutory sector and the women's community and voluntary sector thus bringing cost effective processes and added value to efforts to improve the lives of women in disadvantaged and rural areas.

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- In establishing a Women's RISP, Government must take account of issues affecting women from disadvantaged areas regardless of location and ensure investment not just in urban but also rural areas.



### Early Years Strategic Alliance - Childcare Strategy

After a meeting of the Early Years Strategic Alliance the group agreed six key asks that they would encourage everyone to include in their responses to the Childcare Strategy. These are:

1. Lead Department

The Minister for the new Communities Department should take lead ministerial responsibility for a fully integrated Childcare Strategy, this must be underpinned by a commitment from all Executive Ministers to co-operate and work in partnership.

2. Funding

Childcare services must be adequately resourced. Any strategy must contain a robust mechanism for tracking spend on childcare services including where funding streams originate and when they are coming to an end. This will ensure continued availability and accessibility of childcare services, particularly for those in disadvantaged areas. See the Women's Centre Childcare Fund which is due to end March 2016.

3. Current budget context

While a large volume of evidence illustrates the positive outcomes for children when investment is targeted during the very early years, it also has to be recognised that some children and families will need additional supports and interventions at different points in a child's life. It is essential that parents and families are informed and supported to provide the best possible care for their children. This must go hand in hand with measures to redress inequalities and barriers for women and families such as poverty, domestic violence, poor

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mental health, inadequate housing and welfare reform. The Childcare Strategy must acknowledge the current context of welfare reform being imposed by Westminster and seek to mitigate any negative impacts upon childcare particularly for women and families in disadvantaged areas.

### 4. Sustainability

Recent evidence suggests that childcare providers in disadvantaged areas face challenges in terms of remaining sustainable. Childcare provision in disadvantaged areas needs to be publicly funded in one form or another. The extent to which a childcare provider in a disadvantaged area remains able to provide a service depends largely on the amount of grants or subsidies it is able to attract. Without childcare providers in areas of disadvantage the lack of affordable childcare will continue to be the single biggest barrier to women's participation in work, education and training and public and political life. The Childcare Strategy must recognise this and include funding streams where sustainability is not a pre-requisite.

### 5. Rebalancing of resources

The evidence demonstrating the high return on investment in the early years is increasingly accepted and acknowledged. However, research evidence highlights the ongoing chronic under investment in childcare and early years provision in Northern Ireland. Even before the welfare and budget cuts, Northern Ireland suffered from historic under-investment in children. Any childcare strategy must deliver a re-balancing of resources including sufficient sustained capital investment in areas of social need where there is an identified gap in childcare.

### 6. Cost of childcare

Childcare provision is one of the main barriers to entering the labour market for parents, particularly so for women. The cost of childcare being arguably one of the biggest problems associated with childcare. In 2014, the cost of a full-time average childcare place was £162 per week (Employers for Childcare, 2014). This equates to 44% of the median net weekly earning, a figure which is higher than the OECD average. The high cost of childcare acts as a barrier to parents being able to access provision, to the disadvantage of children. In 2014, 51% of parents reduced their working hours or left work altogether because of the cost of

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childcare. High childcare bills place families under significant financial pressure, impacting on overall wellbeing and financial stability. The draft strategy must ensure that it puts in place measures to make childcare affordable, including the urgent promotion of the financial assistance which is available with the cost of childcare.

### **Meeting, Listening and Hearing**

A key role of the Women's Sector lobbyist is to ensure that women's issues and views are effectively positioned and communicated to politicians and policy makers. With this in mind, Ellen has been meeting with women's sector groups and organisations to identify emerging needs. This collaborative approach will continue as it is a very important part of working to ensure more effective decision-making at policy level, by ensuring bottom-up rather than top-down policies and programmes. Meetings have also been held with Ministers and MLAs to disseminate the views of women, including the issues raised in the women's manifesto. Such meetings will continue as they are important to ensure they lead to the development of good, robust policies which have a positive impact on the lives of women and families living in disadvantaged and rural areas.