



## **Women's Resource and Development Agency Response to The Executive Office Call for Views on the 'Building Forward: Consolidated COVID-19 Recovery Plan'**

29<sup>th</sup> November 2021

Dear members of the Executive Office COVID Recovery Team,

The Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA) provide leadership, infrastructural support and advocacy within the women's sector as well as being an important online information and networking hub for everyone working on gender inequality. WRDA also manages and coordinates the work of the Women's Policy Group NI (WPG), a coalition of women experts working in policy and research roles across the voluntary and community sector that is endorsed as a voice that represents women of Northern Ireland on a policy level.

Thank you for your request on **24<sup>th</sup> November 2021** to provide views on the Equality Screening on the TEO Building Forward: Consolidated COVID-19 Recovery Plan. However, we are extremely disappointed to have been informed that views must be submitted by **Monday 29<sup>th</sup> November**. Therefore, WRDA are not in a position to be formally responding to this call for views/public consultation on the Equality Screening, despite being key stakeholders in relation to this plan. The TEO COVID Recovery Team also reached out to WRDA on **Friday 25<sup>th</sup> June 2021** to provide views on this Recovery Plan, with a deadline of **Friday 2<sup>nd</sup> July 2021**. At this time, we also expressed our grave concerns that this was an inadequate time frame to allow for meaningful engagement with the women's sector and are extremely disappointed that this has happened yet again.

The expectation by TEO that the women's sector, a sector already facing severe resource constraints, respond to a consultation with three days' notice is completely unacceptable. A period of three days does not provide the sector with the opportunity for meaningful engagement.

We are highly aware that this is not an isolated occurrence and that, in recent years, there has been an increasing tendency by TEO to rely on the willingness of the sector to respond to consultations within unreasonable periods of time. The WPG, Women's Budget Group, Women's Resource and Development Agency and the Committee on the Administration of

Justice have raised this issue with public authorities on previous occasions. We are raising this issue again at this date to re-emphasise the sector's discontent at this way of working and would like to remind TEO that the minimum amount of time for public consultations is 12 weeks, in accordance with best practice guidelines laid out by the NI Equality Commission<sup>1</sup>.

The WPG responded to the initial consultation by TEO on their COVID-19 Recovery Plan in summer 2021, with a copy of our relaunched NI **COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan**<sup>2</sup>, which outlines the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on women and provides a roadmap for how to address this disproportionate impact. Despite providing this response, the current TEO Recovery Plan continues to have significant gaps in terms of addressing the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on women. The WPG has also developed a summary of recommendations from our relaunched Feminist Recovery Plan for accessibility<sup>3</sup>.

The unreasonable time period provided by TEO for women's sector organisations to respond to this consultation is particularly concerning given that TEO recognises in its Equality Screening document that women have been one of the groups hardest hit by the pandemic, and that **'it will take 10 years to reverse the pandemic's economic impact on women.'** Women's sector organisations, collectively represented by the WPG, have significant expertise and experience in understanding the issues faced by women in Northern Ireland, as evidenced in the Women's Policy Group COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan. The WPG regularly offers its experience and expertise to public officials when asked to engage with them on policies or legislation that may impact women in Northern Ireland. However, as a sector that is highly resource-constrained, meaningful engagement in public consultations can only be achieved when reasonable amounts of time are provided for organisations to respond.

In the current political climate, there has been an unprecedented number of public consultations, surveys to support private members bills and calls for evidence submissions to a range of committees in relation to various forms of legislation. The women's sector has faced funding challenges for many years, alongside additional challenges in working to support women throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The Women's Resource and Development Agency has produced a guide for public authorities when engaging with women through public consultations titled **'Putting Women at the Heart of Public Consultations'**<sup>4</sup>. We would like to take this opportunity to share this resource again and ask TEO to consult

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<sup>1</sup> Equality Commission (2021) 'Consultation Principles' Available at: <https://www.equalityni.org/Employers-Service-Providers/Public-Authorities/Section75/Section-75/PublicConsultation/Consultation-principles>

<sup>2</sup> WPG (2021) 'WPG NI COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan: Relaunch – One Year On' Available at: <https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/WPG-COVID-19-Feminist-Recovery-Plan-Relaunch-One-Year-On.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> WPG (2021) 'WPG NI COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan: Relaunch – One Year On: Summary of Recommendations' Available at: <https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/WPG-Feminist-Recovery-Plan-2021-Summary-of-Recommendations.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> WRDA (2017) 'Putting Women at the Heart of Public Consultations' Available at: [https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/WRDA\\_WomenAtTheHeartOfPublicConsultation.pdf](https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/WRDA_WomenAtTheHeartOfPublicConsultation.pdf)

this document before opening public consultations. Some of the main points raised in this guide include:

- Design and plan engagement opportunities that are responsive to women's needs and the practical and social barriers they face.
- Provide a minimum period of 12 weeks for organisations to respond to consultations.
- Set the tone of the engagement in a way that deals with the legacy of women's lack of access to formal decision-making processes.
- Review how your sessions are advertised and think about how accessible they appear to women from disadvantaged communities.
- Keep your language accessible and relevant. It's vital that what is presented for consultation is easy for the public to understand.
- Whatever your policy is aiming to achieve, make it meaningful and relevant if you want to get women's views on how it might affect them.
- Make women visible in the product as well as the process. Highlight the gendered nature of an issue being addressed by public policy.
- Policies and strategies should take the inequalities and differences between men and women into account and make them visible.
- Plan and prepare to follow up any consultation exercise with feedback on how the consultees views had an impact.

Women in Northern Ireland have been disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic; financially, socially and in terms of health. It is crucial that legislative processes on issues relating to women are accessible and open, as women's lived experience is crucial to tackling the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on women.

Signed,

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