



# WRDA Briefing on TEO Engagement with the Women's Sector and the TEO COVID-19 Recovery Plan

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## Introduction

The NI Women's Policy Group (WPG) published their original COVID-19 Feminist Recovery [Plan](#) in July 2020 and [relaunched](#) the Plan in July 2021 with updated evidence and recommendations. Both Plans outline the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on women and provide a roadmap for how to address this impact by making several policy and legislative recommendations.

In August 2021, The Executive Office (TEO) published its own COVID-19 Recovery Plan, with the aim to *“accelerate economic, health and societal recovery in the short term so we can emerge stronger and also to plan now for longer term transformative and innovative change.”* Despite being aware of the WPG Feminist Recovery Plan since July 2020 and the recommendations made in this document, significant gaps remain in TEO's Recovery Plan, in terms of addressing the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on women.

Minimal engagement has taken place between TEO and the women's sector in the development of TEO's Recovery Plan. This is despite the fact that the WPG have produced two Recovery Plans since the start of the pandemic and have conducted primary research on the impact of the pandemic on women in Northern Ireland. Furthermore, engagement requests from TEO have not been meaningful and, in several cases, have provided women's sector organisations with extremely short timeframes to submit responses.

This briefing will primarily focus on the limited and unsatisfactory nature of TEO engagement with the women's sector when developing the TEO COVID-19 Recovery Plan.

## Overview of FRP and TEO Engagement with FRP

As previously mentioned, the original WPG COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan (FRP) was published in July 2020 and provided evidence and recommendations relating to the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on women in Northern Ireland. The Plan received far-reaching media engagement and was widely disseminated to public officials, public agencies and the general public. The WPG sent the Plan to Government officials, including TEO Ministers, and received a co-ordinated [response](#)

from the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) by each of the Government Departments. TEO did not directly respond.

The response from the NICS to the WPG Feminist Recovery Plan was extremely disappointing. Responses by individual Departments within the NICS response varied significantly, with some Departments denying responsibility for issues related to gender and others denying the existence of issues raised in the WPG Feminist Recovery Plan. Of particular concern was the denial by the Department for the Economy that a gender pay gap exists in Northern Ireland.

[Bespoke](#) briefings, reports and presentations on the WPG Feminist Recovery Plan were also developed and disseminated to public officials, public agencies and the general public. Bespoke departmental reports were sent to each of the nine NI Government Departments in January 2021. These reports were sent along with requests by the WPG to meet with Government Ministers to discuss the WPG Feminist Recovery Plan. In most instances, these requests did not receive a response or were rejected. The only Government Minister to meet with the WPG to discuss the Feminist Recovery Plan, since July 2020, was the Minister for Justice in May 2021.

The WPG relaunched the WPG Feminist Recovery Plan in July 2021 with updated evidence and recommendations. This updated Plan was published alongside a Supplementary Research Report titled '[Putting Women's Voices at the Core.](#)' which compiled findings from Women's Policy Group primary research on the impact of the pandemic on women in Northern Ireland.

Since September 2020, women's sector representatives have continued to lobby political representatives to promote recommendations made in the WPG Feminist Recovery Plan. In particular, women's sector representatives have used the All-Party Group on UNSCR 1325 to get written and oral questions asked in the Northern Ireland Assembly. Through this APG, several written questions were submitted to the Executive by MLAs such as Paula Bradley, Mike Nesbitt, Emma Sheerin, Sinead McLaughlin and Rachel Woods. MLAs from this APG have repeatedly asked TEO to meet with the WPG to discuss the Feminist Recovery Plan.

The WPG has also made consistent efforts to highlight the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on women and promote the WPG Feminist Recovery Plan by attending meetings with elected officials, giving

presentations at public events, responding to consultations and providing evidence submissions to Assembly Committees.

## Consultation Deadlines

TEO began consulting on their COVID-19 Recovery Plan in June 2021. At this time, a limited number of organisations were invited to respond and were given an extremely short time period to do so. The Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA) was invited to provide views on the TEO COVID [Recovery Plan](#) on **Friday 25<sup>th</sup> June 2021**, with a deadline of **Friday 2<sup>nd</sup> July 2021**. This gave WRDA five working days to respond to the Consultation. The WPG responded to this initial consultation by sending TEO a copy of the relaunched WPG NI COVID-19 Feminist Recovery [Plan](#), outlining the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on women and recommendations for how to address this disproportionate impact.

At the time, WRDA raised concerns with TEO that this was an inadequate timeframe to allow for meaningful engagement with the women's sector. For reference, the minimum amount of time for public consultations is 12 weeks, in accordance with best practice [guidelines](#) laid out by the NI Equality Commission. WRDA, along with the Committee on the Administration of Justice (CAJ) and the Women's Budget Group (WBG) also made a complaint to TEO about the lack of equality screening on their COVID Recovery Plan.

From the perspective of the women's sector, the TEO Recovery Plan resembled a de facto Programme for Government. As noted by TEO, the aim of their Recovery Plan was *"to inform our priorities to accelerate recovery over a 24-month period through focused, collaborative working."* This was concerning to the WPG as there was no budget attached to the Plan, there was no formal consultation or stakeholder engagement sessions, and it is unclear how the Plan will be progressed over the next two years.

As it is not an official Programme for Government, everything within the TEO Recovery Plan is subject to Executive veto, including the Social Inclusion Strategies that it makes reference to. Given the significance of this plan in terms of informing public policy over the next two years, civil society groups such as WRDA, CAJ and WBG argued that the Plan should be subject to a full Equality Impact Assessment.

TEO then published an [Equality Screening](#) of their Recovery Plan in November 2021 and invited WRDA to provide views on this document. This request was received on **24<sup>th</sup> November 2021** with a deadline for submitting views on **Monday 29<sup>th</sup> November**. WRDA has since sent a [letter](#) to the TEO COVID Recovery Team explaining that this short deadline of three working days meant that WRDA was not in a position to respond to the Consultation. This sentiment was shared among several women's sector groups who were also not in a position to respond to the Consultation due to the three-day deadline.

## Comparing the TEO and WPG COVID-19 Recovery Plans

The Women's Policy Group COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan provides a comprehensive evidence base which illuminates the impact of the pandemic on women in Northern Ireland and offers recommendations for addressing this impact. By comparing the WPG Feminist Recovery Plan with TEO's 'Building Forward: Consolidated COVID-19 Recovery Plan,' it is clear that significant gaps exist in TEO's Recovery Plan, in terms of recovery planning to address the impact of the pandemic on women.

Within the 38-page [document](#), TEO make seven references to 'women,' one reference to 'gender' and one reference to 'childcare.' TEO acknowledge that the pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on marginalised groups such as women, young people, older people and low-paid workers. TEO also recognise that women have been particularly impacted with regards to employment and continue to be disadvantaged by the gender pay gap. In TEO's Recovery Plan, there is also recognition given to the increased levels of domestic abuse against women during the pandemic.

TEO identify four 'recovery accelerators,' which are accompanied by three key areas of strategic intent, a set of priority activities and an action plan. One of these recovery accelerators is 'tackling inequalities,' and a number of commitments are made by TEO relating to reducing gender equality. TEO offer a number of strategies for addressing these inequalities. These include: increasing the availability of affordable and accessible childcare, implementing the Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy, delivering the Social Inclusion Strategies and "addressing vulnerabilities and promoting health and wellbeing along with supporting people in poverty."

Women's employment, domestic violence and childcare are a few of many significant areas of gender inequalities that exist in Northern Ireland, as identified in the WPG COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan. Other gender inequalities highlighted in the WPG Feminist Recovery Plan, which were not raised in the TEO Recovery Plan, include: gender segregated labour markets, the unequal distribution of unpaid care work, women's poverty, the impact of austerity on women, cuts social security benefits, rural women, women's mental health, climate justice, paramilitarism, waiting lists, abortion, hostile environments for ethnic minority women, trans healthcare, disabled women, women in prisons, misogynistic hate crime, honour-based abuse, rape culture, online abuse and the impact of Brexit on women's rights. These inequalities existed before the pandemic but, in many cases, have been exacerbated as a result of the pandemic.

The WPG provide extensive evidence and recommendations relating to each of these key areas in the WPG Feminist Recovery Plan, none of which have been incorporated into TEO's Recovery Plan or are recognised in TEO's Equality Screening of the TEO Recovery Plan. Despite submitting the WPG COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan to TEO in response to their call for views on the TEO Recovery Plan, this evidence was not taken into account in the published TEO Recovery Plan. This is demonstrated by the limited references made to women, the vague strategic commitments and the lack of equality screening done on the Plan.

## Equality Screening

The TEO Recovery Plan [Equality Screening](#) was approved by TEO on the **16<sup>th</sup> of September 2021**. However, women's sector organisations were not invited to provide their views on this screening until the **24<sup>th</sup> of November 2021**, with a deadline of **Monday 29<sup>th</sup> November** (three working days). In this document, TEO recognise that *"all aspects of our society have been affected, with elderly, women, young people and low-paid workers some of the hardest hit."* They also note that *"it is estimated that it will take 10 years to reverse the pandemic's economic impact on women."* Despite this, the rest of the document makes very little reference to women and where it does, the analysis of how women have been impacted by the pandemic and the steps to be taken to address this, through TEO's Recovery Plan, are unsatisfactory.

The screening references a few specific issues faced by women to be addressed through the Recovery Plan such as: domestic abuse, the impact of the pandemic on women's employment and the disproportionate number of women single parents. When asked about intersectionality, TEO explain that "it is intended that all those within the S75 equality categories, including those who fall into more than one S75 equality category will be positively impacted by the Consolidated Covid-19 Recovery Plan. For example, young, single mothers."

Despite this reference, there is a lack of intersectional understanding of how people who fall into multiple Section 75 groups have been impacted. For example, TEO recognise that BAME communities have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19, but offer no recognition that BAME women are among the worst impacted from this group as they are disadvantaged by multiple intersectional harms such as racism and sexism. Further, TEO recognise the disproportionate impact on disabled people but do not consider the unique and compounding inequalities faced by disabled women on account of systemic discrimination towards their gender and disability.

There are multiple sections of the screening document that discuss issues predominantly faced by women, without recognising that they are gendered issues. For example, it is recognised that "*the Pandemic has required people with children to provide home-schooling in addition to balancing their regular work and domestic commitments*" and that "*people with caring responsibilities for elderly or disabled relatives have received less help during the pandemic and will need additional assistance to re-establish a work/life balance.*" However, there is no recognition that women provide the majority of this care work (which is mostly unpaid) and have been most impacted by increased caring responsibilities during the pandemic.

The Social Inclusion Strategies are referenced in the document as a solution to the adverse impacts of the pandemic on Section 75 groups. It notes that these "can bring meaningful change in tackling the inequalities and obstacles that directly affect the everyday lives of many people in our community." However, there is no timeline provided for when these Strategies will be in place. As we near the end of the electoral mandate and approach the Christmas holidays, it is unlikely that the strategies will be approved before March 2022. This means that progress on addressing these inequalities through the implementation of these strategies will be delayed.

## Rural Impact Assessment

The rural impact assessment for TEO's Recovery Plan makes no reference to rural women or the need to take targeted action to address the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on this group. The two main interventions suggested by TEO, aimed at rural areas, include:

- *Accelerate Rural Development plans to stimulate rural communities.*
- *Invest in sustainable schools for all including a focus on education provision in rural communities. Progress/implement area planning to create sustainable schools that increase the curricular offer for pupils and improve learning outcomes.*

TEO notes that no steps were taken to identify the social and economic needs of people in rural areas. They justify this on the basis that *“each department has been focusing on recovery plans as part of the transition from crisis mode to short term recovery considerations. The consolidated Covid Recovery Plan brings this work together into an integrated Recovery Plan. Departments have engaged directly with stakeholders and gathered evidence relevant to the interventions they are responsible for to identify the social and economic needs of people in rural areas.”*

Other interventions noted by TEO include:

- Recreational use of Forests e.g., strengthening tourism offering
- Accelerate Digital Inclusion
- Reinvigorate local tourism sector through targeted stimulus interventions amongst others will have a positive impact on the social and economic needs of those in rural areas.

## Putting Women at the Heart of Public Consultations

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.



The women's sector has faced funding challenges for many years, alongside additional challenges in working to support women throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. 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. This has put increased pressure on the sector to respond to consultations and provide evidence submissions.

WRDA, the WPG and other women's sector organisations have repeatedly made calls for TEO to *meaningfully* engage with women on policies and legislation that will have an impact on them. The TEO's two-year COVID Recovery Plan will undoubtedly impact women in Northern Ireland, and it is crucial that their voices are heard in the drafting and development of this. WRDA has produced a [guide](#) for public authorities when engaging with women through public consultations titled 'Putting Women at the Heart of Public Consultations'. WRDA ask that TEO consult 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.

## Conclusion

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 expectation by TEO that the women's sector, a sector already facing severe resource constraints, respond to consultations within the space of a few days is completely unacceptable. This short timeframe does not provide the sector with the opportunity for meaningful engagement.

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. Public officials have much to gain from utilising this expertise and experience when drafting public policy and legislation, and can do so by providing adequate timeframes for women's sector organisations to meaningfully respond.

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.

*This briefing was prepared by Aoife Mallon who is an Independent Contractor for WRDA. For questions or queries relating to this briefing, please contact Rachel Powell, Women's Sector Lobbyist, Women's Resource and Development Agency – [rachel.powell@wrda.net](mailto:rachel.powell@wrda.net).*