



Women's
Policy Group NI

WOMEN'S MANIFESTO FOR LOCAL COUNCILS

NI Council Elections 2023

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Introduction

When the Executive collapsed in February 2022, the women's sector lost an important arena for influencing policy and lobbying on gender equality issues. In the absence of an Executive, local councils play an even more important role in helping us to advance gender equality in Northern Ireland. Local councils have the potential to be a key driver of positive change and to set an example for how elected officials can use their power to support disadvantaged groups.

This Women's Manifesto for the upcoming council elections lays out how local councils can support women in communities during a rapidly worsening cost of living crisis and help the women's sector make gender equality a reality in Northern Ireland. The WPG are keen to engage with local councils and support them in implementing these recommendations.

Who We Are

The Women's Policy Group (WPG) is a group of policy experts and practitioners who advocate collectively for women and girls by promoting gender equality through an intersectional feminist lens. We challenge systemic injustice and discrimination affecting women and girls by informing society and influencing policy and law. Our work is informed by women and girls' lived experiences and rooted in international human rights law.

The WPG is made up of women from trade unions, grassroots women's organisations, women's networks, feminist campaigning organisations, LGBTQ+ organisations, migrant groups, support service providers, NGOs, human rights and equality organisations and individuals. Over the years this important network has ensured there is good communication between politicians, policy makers and women's organisations on the ground. The WPG is endorsed as a coalition of expert voices that advocates for women in Northern Ireland on a policy level.

Please note that not all member organisations have specific policy positions on all the areas covered in this manifesto.

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Best Practice in Local Governance

Budgetary processes and government spending have social consequences and impact groups in society differently. As the Women's Policy Group, we are particularly concerned with the gendered impacts of budgets. Budgetary decisions are far from 'neutral' and have gendered consequences, intended or not. If these gendered consequences are not accounted for in the budgetary process, budgets are blind to the complexities between the experiences of women and men and reinforce systemic disadvantages faced by women and other groups.

Gender budgeting is a tool that can help decision-makers ensure that the budget process actively takes these considerations into account and use budgets to address the systemic disadvantages that women currently face and promote gender equality. Gender budgeting requires decision-makers to consider the gendered impacts of spending and revenue-raising decisions, and how to use these mechanisms to bring about gender equality. This analysis involves taking an intersectional approach by recognising that depending on race, religion, disability, age and other factors, women experience gender inequality in different ways and measures to tackle this inequality should account for these differences.

Gender budgeting is not about creating separate budgets for women, or only looking at parts of the budget which have social content, or that are explicitly gender-related. It is also not about demanding increased spending for women. Rather, gender budgeting is about embedding a gender perspective into budget planning and analysing the impact budgets have on women, girls, men and boys. It is also key to introduce a gender perspective into the entire budget, including seemingly 'gender-neutral' budget lines, as well as reprioritising and refocusing spend and restructuring taxation with a view to promote equality. Gender budgeting is transformative, assists in transparency and accountability, and is of value in delivering economic benefits, equality and rights, and securing sustainable peace.

Communication, transparency and accountability should be central pillars of local governance. This is in the interests of those working in Councils and the communities that they serve. There are several positive examples of initiatives led by Councils that have benefited communities, but if people are not aware of these initiatives, they can not benefit from them. It is important that the work of Councils is visible and accessible to the people it serves, to ensure that citizens can benefit from positive initiatives and Councillors can benefit from positive community engagement.

Please see our recommendations for best practice in local governance overleaf.

We call on Councils to:

- Embed gender mainstreaming, gender proofing and gender budgeting into all decision-making processes in Councils.
- Pass a motion in support of gender budgeting.
- Commit to participating in a gender budgeting pilot where methods of gender budgeting can be tested by Councils.
- Lead and support research initiatives aimed at better understanding the scope and scale of gender inequalities in our society.
- Support the roll-out of training for council officials on how to do gender budgeting.
- Promote good work being done to ensure maximum uptake. This includes, for example, schemes for free products, advice services and Government initiatives.
- Introduce improved information campaigns around recycling.
- Provide translation services for those whose first language isn't English and ensure that all information is made available in multiple languages online.
- Make efforts to ensure that the most vulnerable are aware of schemes to help out, especially women and people living in poverty. Councils should work with expert organisations when designing these schemes.
- Ensure Council-run schemes are run transparently and designed with relevant experts.
- Commit to full cost recovery on all funding offered to ensure that the organisations delivering them have adequate resources to deliver services. Providing project funding does not create stability or sustainability in the community and voluntary sector.
- Ensure transparency around funding and selection of groups who operate Council schemes.
- Introduce robust equality screening of policies and budgets.
- Use any budget surplus for better community services and schemes, ensuring that they are truly accessible and that most pressing need is prioritised.
- Work towards the development of a learning network to ensure replication of best practice and new ideas across all Council areas.

Social Welfare and Housing

Women in Northern Ireland continue to suffer as a result of the oppressive five-week wait for accessing Universal Credit. This is despite the existence of a Contingency Fund, which many women are unaware of and therefore do not access. Furthermore, many women who accessed Advance Payments for Universal Credit as a result of the five-week wait are now struggling with debt repayments for this loan. Women are also suffering as a result of the up-front childcare fees while accessing Universal Credit because they are unaware of the Adviser Discretion Fund.

At the same time, we are in the midst of a housing crisis with insufficient social housing stock to meet need and the private rental market has become almost unaffordable for many people. Rather than allowing people to suffer while another housing bubble forms, we must do more to ensure that housing needs are met, via careful use of the planning process at Council level.

Airbnbs have a serious detrimental impact on communities, where houses are removed from the longer term rental market and transformed into short-term holiday lets or Airbnbs as a source of more profitable income for private landlords. This is set to increase as hotel beds in Belfast are drastically reduced due to the NIO's reliance on hotel beds for emergency accommodation.

We call on Councils to:

- Provide face-to-face advice (not just on websites) to help people access existing financial support.
- Raise awareness of support measures that are already in place.
- Introduce Cost of Living support measures for all of those who are struggling to make ends meet.
- Provide support to vulnerable people and families in a considerate, dignified and respectful way.
- Use official Council communications to raise awareness of Government schemes that can help alleviate financial hardship, for example, DfC guidance on repaying social security debt that allows people to reduce payments considerably if in financial distress.
- Adopt a 50:50 social:private quota for new housing developments, enshrining a commitment to the creation of more social housing.
- Improve and expand Council powers to reprimand landlords/estate agents for maintaining unsuitable accommodation (i.e. those where tenants are living in unsuitable conditions or the property is not well maintained).
- Lobby government to introduce rent controls across Northern Ireland, particularly in urban and rapidly urbanising areas where rent is steadily climbing.
- Seek to limit the use of Airbnbs to ensure valuable housing remains available and affordable for residents.
- Take account of the local built environment when planning new housing and regenerating existing neighbourhoods. New areas should be built around public transport and accessible services.
- Engage communities in planning, both in terms of land use planning and community planning.

Health and Wellbeing

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Councils spent a considerable amount of money introducing sanitisation stations to prevent spread of disease and virus. These should be regularly maintained as a measure to ensure public hygiene is upheld.

Period products should be regarded as a key aspect of public hygiene. Period poverty affects one in ten women, with 10% of girls and women aged between 14 and 21 saying that they couldn't afford sanitary products. Measures to tackle period poverty have already been implemented in Northern Ireland Councils such as Belfast City Council and Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council in partnership with 'Hey Girls.' After the partnership was initially announced in Belfast City Council, more than 2,750 orders were made in the first 24 hours. Rather than relying on individual councils to sign up to this initiative, Councils could set up a learning network to determine the effectiveness of the scheme and best practice in terms of roll-out.

Action should be taken where possible to address both the physical and mental aspects of health. Community gardens, alleyways and shared green spaces have a significant impact on the health and wellbeing of people in the community. Councils should encourage their development and provide funding pots that can be used in these efforts.

While legislative power to change the status of illegal drugs lies with Westminster, Councils and the Assembly can play their part in alleviating some of the risks that people are exposed to through their addictions.

We call on Councils to:

- Provide opportunities, spaces and funds where possible to encourage the development of community gardens, alleyways and green spaces
- Provide safe spaces for people to inject and exchange needles
- Replicate schemes where leisure facilities can be used for free by refugee and asylum seekers
- Offer free language classes for newcomers to the Council area who need ESL classes
- Ensure translation services are available for these and other schemes

Community Safety and Infrastructure

Recently some Councils have begun work focusing on the development of the night-time economy in Northern Ireland, particularly in cities and large urban areas. With the extension of opening hours, this is a growing area of the economy. This is not without its gendered impacts, and we are minded that Councils have responsibilities with regards to the safety of people, and particularly women and minoritised communities, who use those facilities. In addition, we need to re-imagine our idea of the night-time economy, moving away from a focus on venues that serve alcohol and encouraging a thriving night-life for all sections of the community.

Recent research by the Women's Policy Group found that 83% had experienced men's violence against women and girls. A high proportion of these experiences took place in public spaces, including parks, streets and transport. It is common for women to feel unsafe in public spaces where there is not adequate street-lighting, for example, public parks or walkways at night time. This forces women to make changes to their routines and activities. For example, it is well known that many women give up running and walking in the evenings during winter out of fear of men's violence.

Our Councils have a responsibility to promote the safety of people in our communities, particularly vulnerable groups such as women who are disproportionately impacted by the pandemic of men's violence.

We call on Councils to:

- Ensure access to public toilets for everyone, including Changing Places toilets.
- Explore the development of an app to locate public facilities.
- With regard to the Night Time Economy, prioritise public safety over profit.
- Work with Translink and other service providers to ensure sufficient night buses and later train times so that people can get home safely.
- Work with DfI to ensure that there are sufficient taxis to meet demand.
- Run Council-funded training for door and bar staff on spiking & bystander interventions.
- Ensure any changes to licensing laws and/or practices stagger closing times to avoid creating crowds and reduce pressure on transport.
- Encourage growth of night-time economy not centred on alcohol.
- Provide better street lighting on streets and in parks.
- Introduce safety measures for walking or running at night (particularly in winter).
- Explore the potential for Council-funded evening running/walking groups.
- All-ability playgrounds and Changing Places toilets to be included in all new playpark schemes, with efforts made to expand these to existing schemes.
- Show more flexibility on utilising derelict spaces for community use as in Community Gardens, creating spaces for social interaction that are family friendly.

Environment and Sustainability

We live in a time of climate and biodiversity crisis, and our dependence on fossil fuels and poorly-insulated homes only exacerbates the ongoing cost of living crisis. In recent years, many Councils have recognised the existential threat that climate breakdown poses. While much of the action needed to tackle this will be directed from central government and international cooperation, Councils should not underestimate the contribution that they can make to tackling this problem. Councils can influence 80% of local emissions and therefore have significant ability to positively contribute towards efforts to tackle the climate crisis.

Waste management is a central pillar of council services and yet public bins across NI are currently inadequate for the level of demand. Further, opportunities for recycling outside of the home are unclear and inconsistent. This is a key area which requires Council interventions.

We call on Councils to:

- Divest local government pensions from fossil fuels, which only fuels climate change and upholds failing energy systems.
- Align Local Development Plans with regional decarbonisation targets.
- Develop local plans for climate adaptation and mitigation.
- Take local approaches and seek funding for flood defence.
- Develop local strategies to expand electric vehicle charging points, allowing Councils to play a greater role in this process.
- Embed circular economy principles locally, by:
 - Providing community infrastructure for repair shops and tool libraries
 - Researching residents' attitudes and behaviours about resource use and recycling
 - Committing to better public recycling provision across the city
 - Standardise recycling facilities across Northern Ireland
 - Encouraging the standardisation of schemes like BCC's initiatives for reusable, environmentally-friendly period products and nappies, ensuring these are properly promoted to encourage uptake
- Develop or adopt sustainable procurement toolkits for use at Council level.
- Invest in a retrofit programme for all Council-owned buildings.
- Use Council land and buildings to generate wind and solar power, for the use of Council to run public services and also the wider community.
- Explore community wealth building approaches to promote local economic prosperity and ensure that more Council spending is kept in the local area.
- Develop community energy schemes focused on renewable energy.
- Develop or review local waste management strategies, with a view to reducing single use plastics and returning organic waste for composting.
- Work collaboratively with NI Water to reduce water wastage and limit emissions of raw sewage into waterways.
- Develop and communicate clear, user-friendly recycling policies for public spaces, including flagship buildings like St George's market.

Further Information

You can find out more about the work of the Women's Policy Group on the Women's Resource and Development Agency website or by contacting the Women's Sector Lobbyist, Elaine Crory.

Helpful links

- WRDA Website: <https://wrda.net/>
- WPG Information: <https://wrda.net/lobbying/womens-policy-group/>
- WPG Consultation Responses : <https://wrda.net/lobbying/policy/>
- WPG Research : <https://wrda.net/research-and-publications/>

Contact

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Questions to ask Canvassers

1. *Will your party commit to piloting gender budgeting in Council budgets?*
2. *Do you support the provision of free period products in all Council facility bathrooms?*
3. *Do you support LGBTQ+ Awareness week and safe spaces for the LGBTQI community?*
4. *Do you support a full ban on Conversion Therapy?*
5. *How will you ensure the night time economy is accessible and safe?*
6. *What will you do to ensure that there are community spaces available for all?*
7. *What is your party's position on expanding recycling facilities?*
8. *Do you support restrictions on amplified hate speech?*
9. *What will you do at Council to support those struggling with the cost of living?*
10. *What is your party's position on the provision of Council services to refugee and asylum seekers?*



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Supporting Women's Groups and Networks Across Northern Ireland



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