



Women's Regional Consortium

Consortium for the Regional Support for Women in
Disadvantaged and Rural Areas

Response to: Zero Hour Contracts Public Consultation

Issued by: Department for Employment and Learning



The Women's Centre
ACCESS EMPOWERMENT ENABLEMENT



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Women's Regional Consortium: Working to Support Women in Rural Communities and Disadvantaged Urban Areas

This response has been undertaken collaboratively by the members of the Consortium for the Regional Support for Women in Disadvantaged and Rural Areas, which is funded by the Department for Social Development in Northern Ireland and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development in Northern Ireland.

The Women's Regional Consortium consists of seven established women's sector organisations that are committed to working in partnership with each other, government, statutory organisations and women's organisations, centres and groups working in disadvantaged and rural areas, to ensure that organisations working for women are given the best possible support in the work they do in tackling disadvantage and social exclusion.

The seven groups are as follows:

- Training for Women Network (TWN) – Project Lead
- Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA)
- Women's Support Network (WSN)
- Northern Ireland's Rural Women's Network (NIRWN)
- Women's TEC
- Women's Centre Derry (WCD)
- Foyle Women's Information Network (FWIN)

The Consortium will be the established link and strategic partner between government and statutory agencies and women in disadvantaged and rural areas, including all groups, centres and organisations delivering essential frontline services, advice and support. The Consortium will ensure that there is a continuous two way flow of information between government and the sector. It will ensure that organisations/centres and groups are made aware of consultations, government planning and policy implementation.

In turn, the Consortium will ascertain the views, needs and aspirations of women in disadvantaged and rural areas and take these views forward to influence policy development and future government planning, which will ultimately result in the empowerment of local women in disadvantaged and rurally isolated communities.

This response is informed by women's views and perspectives articulated at consultation engagement/focus groups organised at FWIN and WRDA on July 31st and August 20th respectively. Also included is information from a piece of work the Rural Community Network recently conducted for DEL into economic inactivity in Northern Ireland. They undertook a series of face to

face interviews and focus groups in community centres across NI looking at barriers to employment for those who are deemed to be economically inactive.

In general there were quite a number of concerns raised regarding zero hours contracts and the difficulties they can create for workers. However the point was made that not all zero hour contracts are negative as they can provide employment opportunities for people to take on small pieces of work e.g. running training sessions which can be arranged around other responsibilities.

A number of issues were raised about these contracts at the various discussions.

- **Impact on benefit payments**
- **Childcare**
- **Poor working practices**
- **Improved information**
- **Exclusivity clauses**

Impact on benefit payments

One of the biggest issue of these contracts was how they impacted on benefit payments – if a claimant gets over 16 hours work for one week, they have to change their benefit claim and their entitlements change, however they might not get over 16 hours again for a few weeks, meaning further changes to payments. The benefit system doesn't match the flexibility of the Zero Contract hours and so people can be left waiting for payments for extended periods. This in turn can put people at risk of falling into debt or arrears. Consequently some people opt to come out of work as changing benefits repeatedly can be confusing and costly.

Childcare

This is of particular concern to women who are often carers in the family. Childcare must be booked in advance which is difficult with zero hour contracts. In some cases childcare may be organised and no work arises, however the childcare still has to be paid for, which can leave families/parents/carers significantly out of pocket.

Poor working practices

Some respondents felt that a code of practice for Zero Hours Contracts was vital. There was concern that people need plenty of notice if they are going to be called in to work. There was also concern that if an employee on a zero hours contract was unable to attend work when asked at short notice, they may lose out on work offers in the future. There was concern that Zero hour contracts might mean more people working without the benefits of paid holidays or sick pay. There was encouragement for a code of practice which covers the fair use of zero hours contracts generally. It was felt that there is not enough onus on employers to observe good practice, and that the onus should be on employers to prove that zero hour contracts are needed, as opposed to a contract for part time hours. In the areas of work where these contracts are used there are many women who are often 'unskilled' and don't know their rights. In the "care" industry workers can also worry about "letting their service users/clients down".

Improved information

Most respondents felt that there was a lack of information about zero hour contracts and a lack of clarity as to where employees/potential employees could get information and advice on such contracts. People were unsure of their rights when it came to these contracts and would like to see more information easily available about zero hour contracts. It is not clear as to whether there are there rights such as sick pay and paid holidays. There was also a feeling that there is a lack of a clear knowledge of the terms and conditions of zero hour contracts. Suggestions were made that that information should be provided on billboards, newsletters and social media - for example a Facebook page. There were also question on entitlement to maternity pay – again there is a lack of information around this.

Exclusivity clauses

There was a lot of concern around exclusivity clauses which respondents tended to feel were unfair and gave employees very few options. It was felt that these clauses should be scrapped as they are unfair and unnecessary if an employee is getting regular reliable work.

There were some positive comments about the contracts such as:

- They can provide flexibility enabling workers to manage work and family commitments and some people find working on a sessional basis suits them.
- Small companies may use zero hours contracts where they are not sure of what work will be coming up.
- Zero hours contract can be a step into employment

Conclusion

There was a lot of concern around Zero Hour Contracts and the effect they have on the lives of employees who rely upon them. It was generally felt that while they may be beneficial to employers they had very little benefit for employees.

There are high levels of uncertainty about income levels and no assurances from week to week about what an employee on a zero hours contract might earn. Many respondents said it was impossible to plan or hold childcare places with these contracts

It was felt that Zero hours contracts are extremely unclear and employees are unsure of their rights under such contracts.

It was also felt that the flexibility of zero hour contracts is not matched in the benefits system, leading to confusion and delayed payments – which are often vital to those working on zero hour contracts.

There was a strong feeling expressed that there was a need for more transparency in the whole area of zero contracts and there was a view that some form of overarching body was needed to regulate this area.

There is a belief that zero hours contracts are “a dangerous road to go down with minimal rights and opportunities and increased stress.”

For the reasons outlined in this paper the Women’s Regional Consortium recommend that if zero hour contracts must be used then they need to be:

- **extremely tightly regulated to protect workers rights.**
- **there must be clear information on what exactly these contracts mean and what rights employees and employers have.**
- **this information must be easily accessed by everyone.**
- **special attention must be paid to the need to provide flexible and affordable childcare for people on zero hours contracts.**
- **there should be improved flexibility in the benefits system to allow for the use of zero hour contracts.**