



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

Response to: Delivering Social Change for Children and Young People – Consultation Document

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Foyle Women's
Information
Network



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

1. Introduction

1.1 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 in Northern Ireland.

1.2 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.¹

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)

1.3 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

¹ Sections 1.2-1.3 represent the official description of the Consortium's work, as agreed and authored by its seven partner organisations.

result in the empowerment of local women in disadvantaged and rurally isolated communities.

1.4 This response is informed by women's views and perspectives articulated at four consultation engagement events held at Women's Centre Derry, Greenway Women's Centre, Falls' Women's Centre and Strathfoyle Women's Centre on the 24, 26, 27 and 28 February 2014, respectively. Appendix 1 provides further detail on this engagement.

2. General comments

2.1 The Women's Regional Consortium appreciates the opportunity to respond to the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister's *Delivering Social Change for Children and Young People: Consultation Document*.

2.2 The Consortium welcomes this consultation exercise as affirmation of the Executive's intent to develop 'an integrated policy framework ... on children and young people, including child poverty and children's rights',² in fulfilment of key commitments under the child poverty strategy, the children and young people strategy and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.³

In a context of increasing levels of vulnerability in Northern Ireland and associated actual/projected increases in hardship and poverty, especially child poverty,⁴ it is imperative that policy makers should seek to achieve substantive, sustainable remedial outcomes for vulnerable children, young people and households through precisely targeted delivery.

² Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, *Delivering Social Change for Children and Young People: Consultation Document*, OFMDFM: Belfast, 2014, p.4.

³ Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, *Our Children and Young People – Our Pledge: a Ten Year Strategy for Children and Young People in Northern Ireland 2006-2016*, OFMDFM, 2006 and *Improving Children's Life Chances - the Child Poverty Strategy*, OFMDFM: Belfast, 2011. United Nations, United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, UN: Geneva, 1989.

⁴ See, for example, G. Horgan, *Welfare reform: implications and options for Northern Ireland*, University of Ulster: Belfast, 2013, p.2. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.socsci.ulster.ac.uk/irss/documents/KESS2-2.docx>

Yet, of course, the Northern Ireland case is also characterised by enduring austerity, which, in so far as it constrains both resource possibilities and the political will to commit resources, can have a fundamentally negative bearing on what might actually be achieved in terms of remedial delivery on poverty and exclusion.

The resultant dichotomy, between what government should do and is actually doing within its social policy agenda, is marked by an inherent inconsistency, as follows. On the one hand, the Executive is taking forward measures aimed at tackling child poverty and young people's diminished life prospects. But, on the other hand, it is simultaneously taking forward austerity-driven welfare reform measures, *which research forecasts will significantly increase levels of poverty and vulnerability within Northern Ireland.*⁵

We are seriously concerned that the document fails to directly address this policy inconsistency and its potentially egregious implications for the well-being and life prospects of children and young people. Focus group participants articulated this substantive concern and associated issues, as will be shown in the remainder of the paper.

3. Specific comments

Eradication of child poverty

3.1 With the promulgation in 2011 of the child poverty strategy, the Northern Ireland government set out a framework that outlined a substantive ambition to eradicate child poverty by 2020.⁶ The consultation document 'builds on' this strategy and yet, surprisingly, its only references to this important ambition are both fleeting and buried within the body of the text,⁷ as opposed to featuring prominently from the outset.

In short, the document fails to take this ambition seriously enough. For obvious reasons, this failure is strategically remiss. Patently, the realisation of the ambition to eliminate child poverty by 2020, were it to occur, would have a fundamentally transformative impact on child well-being, child development

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ OFMDFM, *Delivering Social Change*, op. cit., p. 43.

⁷ Ibid., p. 43 and p.78.

and later child outcomes, innately enhancing the life prospects of young people. It might therefore reasonably have been expected that this ambition would have been prominently integrated *across the entire draft strategy*. This failure is made all the more troubling in light of recent research from the Institute for Fiscal Studies, which predicts that by 2020 relative child poverty in Northern Ireland will rise by 8.3 percentage points to 29.7 per cent and absolute poverty will rise to 32.9 per cent.⁸

3.1.2 Recommendation

We recommend that within the final strategy the Executive should prominently re-affirm its prior ambition to eradicate child poverty by 2020.

Data collection and children's rights fulfilment

3.2 The consultation document asserts that 'the Executive is committed to ensuring that appropriate information, including statistical and research data, is collected in order to formulate and implement policies', including policies impacting the fulfilment of children's rights.⁹ Yet the Consortium is disappointed that the document fails to fully evidence this commitment.

As research affirms, government failure to properly collect, disseminate, analyse and rely on pertinent data in its policy decision-making processes can act as a barrier to both the fulfilment of children's rights and the monitoring of the poverty impact of policy.¹⁰ This point was recently underscored by the findings of the advisory group established by the Executive in 2011 to consider hardship and poverty issues, including those associated with welfare reform.¹¹ The group's report noted how a lack of key data around the specific

⁸ J. Browne, A. Hood and R. Joyce, *Child and Working-Age Poverty in Northern Ireland from 2010 to 2020* IFS Report R78, Institute for Fiscal Studies: London, 2013.

⁹ OFMDFM, *Delivering Social Change*, op. cit, p.40.

¹⁰ B. Byrne and L. Lundy, *Reconciling Children's Policy and Children's Rights: Barriers to Effective Government Delivery*, *Children & Society*, 2013.

¹¹ The Advisory Group on Alleviating Hardship was established to fulfil a commitment in the Programme for Government, 2011-15.

costs of welfare reform and associated operational arrangements can frustrate efforts to accurately evaluate the actual poverty impact of policy.¹²

On this view, in order to enhance its efforts to tackle child poverty and fulfil children's rights in more meaningful ways, it is crucial that government develops and implements a comprehensive cross-cutting data collection strategy, i.e. one which can robustly track, monitor and evaluate the interacting impact of *all* pertinent policy strategies on child poverty levels and rights fulfilment.

The document does claim that it 'brings together *all* the policies and strategies dealing with child poverty and improving children's lives'.¹³ And yet, many interacting strategies that could conceivably impact in this area are in fact omitted from consideration. It would innately enhance policy planning to show the *aggregate* impact on child poverty and children's rights of these omitted strategies. For example, it would promote more effective policy development to show how the interaction between recent strategic developments on economic inactivity and financial capability, both omitted from consideration, might impact child poverty and rights fulfilment.

3.2.1 Recommendation

As the Executive takes forward this strategy, it should put in place sufficient measures, on a cross-departmental and properly integrated and coordinated basis, to facilitate the collection and analysis of all pertinent data on the *aggregate* and *interacting* impact on child poverty and rights fulfilment of all relevant policies and strategies.

Joblessness, in-work poverty and child poverty

3.3 The document outlines the Executive's vision of a future Northern Ireland in which 'families have adequate income and work that pays'.¹⁴ Achieving this outcome is rightly identified as integral to dealing with child poverty and improving the lives of children and young people. Accordingly, the Consortium

¹² Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, Report of the Advisory Group on Alleviating Hardship, OFMDFM: Belfast, 2012.

¹³ OFMDFM, Delivering Social Change, op. cit., p.10.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.11.

is disappointed that the document neglects to take due account of the relationship between child poverty, joblessness and in-work poverty, and that a skewed logic underpins its account of remedial job creation.

Economic inactivity¹⁵ and child poverty levels in Northern Ireland remain higher than the United Kingdom average, and research indicates the large extent to which both correlate. For example, the Executive's first report on the child poverty strategy cites joblessness as '*the most profound cause of poverty*' in Northern Ireland.¹⁶ The obvious, though crucial, point here is this: meaningful job creation remains a fundamental pre-requisite of effective efforts to remedially address the correlation between joblessness and child poverty.

For this reason, the innately restricted nature and scope of the document's account of job creation is worrying. For example, the only numerical illustration given of actual jobs created under 'progress to date' comprises a relatively low figure, as compared to the actual unemployment figure.¹⁷

Of course, at the same time, child poverty can also exist within working families: of the 13 million people living in poverty across the UK in 2011/12, over half were in a working family.¹⁸ In recent years, the convergence of exceptional socio-economic factors has contributed to rises in poverty and vulnerability in Northern Ireland, which has impacted the risk of in-work poverty. These factors include austerity measures and the related cumulative impact of tax and benefit reform, such as cuts to support for childcare; rises in the cost of living,¹⁹ such as utility and food prices; and, stagnant and static incomes.²⁰

¹⁵ Northern Ireland unemployment rate continues to fall, BBC News. [online]. Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-24045904>

¹⁶ Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, Improving Children's Life Chances – the First Year Report, OFMDFM: Belfast, 2012.

¹⁷ OFMDFM, Delivering Social Change, op. cit., p.57.

¹⁸ T. MacInnes, et al. Monitoring poverty and social exclusion, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2013.

¹⁹ BBC News, Poor suffer as living costs rise by 25% - Rowntree report. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-23083218>

²⁰ See, for example, D. Hirsch, A minimum income standard for the UK in 2013, Joseph Rowntree Foundation: London, 2013.

Clearly, addressing in-work poverty and its relationship to child poverty in meaningful ways will require government to focus its job creation efforts on promoting *particular kinds of jobs*: sustainable opportunities that help guard against the risk of in-work poverty by proffering a living wage and some form of medium-to-long-termism, as opposed to low paid, low level, sporadic and precarious opportunities, typically concentrated in the service and retail sectors. Focus groups on the document emphasised this substantive point, calling for government to concentrate its efforts on creating opportunities for young people in (and not in) employment, training and education, which met these living wage/sustainability criteria.

Participants articulated an associated substantive misgiving about the particular emphasis that the document places on tackling child poverty through entrepreneurial job creation. This entrepreneurial thrust is evident in the Executive's commitment to 'provide funding to support communities to make it more appealing for business to start up in areas which suffer deprivation and improve access to jobs'.²¹ Research impugns the logic of relying on entrepreneurialism to stimulate 'decent' sustainable jobs with adequate incomes in areas of disadvantage and times of austerity. For instance, recent research for the United Kingdom shows that entrepreneurship *can in fact adversely impact individuals' earning potential and their long term labour market prospects*.²²

3.3.1 Recommendation

As it takes forward these proposals, the Executive should give further consideration to the relationship between child poverty, joblessness and in-work poverty by focusing its job creation efforts less on entrepreneurialism and more on sustainable employment opportunities, such as might proffer individuals of all ages, including young people, a living wage and some kind of security beyond short-termism.

²¹ OFMDFM, *Delivering Social Change*, op. cit., p.27.

²² P. Koellinger *et al.* *Self-Employed But Looking: A Labour Market Experiment* (December 6, 2012). *ERIM Report Series*.

Child poverty in ethnic minority families

3.4 The Consortium is disappointed that the document fails to directly address the relationship between child poverty and ethnic minority status in Northern Ireland. Research ‘strongly suggests’ an association affecting ethnic minority families between child poverty, in-work poverty and higher levels of both unemployment and low paid, precarious employment.²³ Yet there is not a single reference in the document to this correlation.

A dearth of available robust research and data on the experiences of ethnic minorities in Northern Ireland compounds this shortcoming, threatening to undermine policy planning in this area. The shortfall is such that there are ‘major knowledge gaps in our understanding of the lives of’ ethnic minorities,²⁴ and ‘little, if anything, is known’ about their outcomes in health, education, housing and benefit claim-making.²⁵ This lack of pertinent data can hamper effective policy planning in this area precisely because, as previously noted, government failure to properly collect, disseminate, analyse and rely on key data in its policy processes can act as a barrier to the fulfilment of children's rights.²⁶

In short, a scarcity of reliably robust data and qualitative research on ethnic minority poverty in Northern Ireland threatens to preclude effective remedial policy on ethnic minority child poverty. Obviously, if government wants to more effectively address child poverty across *all* families in Northern Ireland through meaningful policy planning and impactful, targeted intervention, then it must address this critical shortfall in understanding and explanation.

3.4.1 Recommendation

We would strongly urge the Executive to directly address the research gap on the relationship between child poverty and ethnic minority status in Northern Ireland, seeking to generate a fuller and more accurate understanding of, and explanation for, this correlation, such as might better inform and enhance its policy planning in this neglected area.

²³ A. Wallace, R. McAreavey and K. Atkin, *Poverty and Ethnicity in Northern Ireland: An Evidence Review*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation: York, 2013.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.* The exception here is research on the Traveller community.

²⁶ Byrne and Lundy, *op. cit.*

Child poverty, adult disability and the legacy of the conflict

3.5 The contextual particularities of the Northern Ireland case, as a post-conflict society still very much in the throes of peace-building, continue to impact child poverty and constrain the prospects of young people. And yet the document does not adequately address this impact. The Consortium is especially concerned at the document's failure to take seriously enough the unique association between welfare reform, severe child poverty, adult disability and the so-called legacy of the conflict.

Research affirms that 'the presence of disabled adults [in families]... is strongly associated with the experience of severe child poverty',²⁷ given the adverse impact of the former on household economic activity and income. To compound matters, cuts to disability benefits under welfare reform are likely to 'impact hardest' in Northern Ireland because the proportion of people claiming such benefits, especially for mental ill health, is particularly high in the region, as compared to the rest of the United Kingdom.²⁸

In large part, this mental health factor is best understood in the context of the legacy of the conflict. And, conflict-related mental ill health links to child poverty precisely because 'disadvantage [in Northern Ireland is] underlined by 'deep social distress' in the aftermath of conflict [and] child poverty is substantially concentrated in areas most affected by conflict'.²⁹

In combination, these interacting factors threaten to increase the risk of vulnerability and child poverty in families with an adult disability wholly reliant on state support. Consequently, it is disappointing that the document only contains one fleeting reference to the legacy of the conflict, which neither properly captures nor addresses the complex interconnections underlying this causal interaction.

²⁷ M. Magadi and S. Middleton, *Severe Child Poverty in the UK*, Save the Children: London, 2007, p.10.

²⁸ J. McCormick, *A Review of Devolved Approaches to Child Poverty*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation: London, 2013, p.37.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.45.

3.5.1 Recommendation

As it progresses these proposals, the Executive should seek to take proper account of the complex interconnections outlined in this section by committing to comprehensively track, and remedially address, changes to child poverty levels and constrained life prospects for young people in families affected by disability benefit reform.

Community safety and the legacy of the conflict

3.6 The document states that the Executive envisions a Northern Ireland in which all ‘children and families live in a safe and secure environment’.³⁰ We note and, of course, welcome the proposals on community safety.

That said, we are concerned that the document neglects to properly capture and directly address the impact on community safety of the complex relationship between the legacy of the conflict, structural decline, poverty and crime, including anti-social behaviour and civil unrest in areas of disadvantage.³¹

To explain, as is widely acknowledged, poverty and unemployment are among the ‘prime motivators’ for offending/reoffending.³² And, residual conflict and violence particular to the Northern Ireland ethno-national context can also impact initial and repeat offending.³³ Levels of civil disturbance in Belfast and beyond in recent years illustrate this correlation. Yet, as research indicates, the Executive has typically struggled to take adequate account of this causal complexity.³⁴

From this perspective, while focus group participants appreciated the proposals for safer communities, they were of the view that ‘much more could still be done and indeed should be done’ to better address this relationship.

³⁰ OFMDFM, *Delivering Social Change*, op. cit., p.11.

³¹ L. Moore and P. Scraton, *Response to Review of the Northern Ireland Prison Service: Conditions, management and oversight of all prisons* Prison Review Team, *Interim Report*, Belfast, February 2011, Human Rights in Ireland: 2011. [Online]. Available at: <http://humanrights.ie/civil-liberties/response-to-review-of-the-northern-ireland-prison-service-conditions-management-and-oversight-of-all-prisons-prison-review-team-interim-report-belfast-february-2011/>

³² DOJNI, *Women’s Offending Behaviour in Northern Ireland: A Strategy to Manage Women Offenders and those Vulnerable to Offending Behaviour*, 2010-13, DOJNI: Belfast, 2010.

³³ Moore and Scraton, op. cit.

³⁴ Ibid.

To this end, the following was proposed: a more 'visible' police presence in communities; a wider commitment to improving local facilities for young people to 'get them off the streets'; and, further targeted intervention on anti-social behaviour through social media and schools.

3.6.1 Recommendation

The Consortium recommends that, as it progresses this strategy, the Executive should give fuller consideration to the wider impact on community safety of the relationship between the legacy of the conflict, structural decline, poverty and crime.

Economic participation of women, childcare and child poverty

3.7 The document outlines the Executive's commitment to address child poverty by 'support[ing] parents in low income families to gain education, training and job-ready skills to avail of paid employment [and] to grow the local economy to improve employment opportunities and the value of employment'.³⁵ Key aspects of various strategies and policies are cited in fulfilment of this ambition, including childcare provision under the Bright Start framework.³⁶ This section critically explores how the latter might potentially impact the gendered controversy at the heart of this debate.

Gendered controversy

3.7.1 While we, of course, welcome the proposals on stimulating employment to address child poverty, we are concerned that they will not 'go anywhere near far enough' to meaningfully address constrained work-life balance choices for women in disadvantaged and rural communities. The gender inequalities that constrain these choices are deeply entrenched in both public sphere *and* private sphere behaviour, and the causal factors underlying these constrained choices are consequently complex, overlapping and mutually affecting.³⁷ These constrained choices can adversely impact child outcomes

³⁵ OFMDFM, *Delivering Social Change*, op. cit., p.79.

³⁶ Northern Ireland Executive, *Bright Start, the Northern Ireland Executive's Strategy for Affordable and Integrated Childcare: a Strategic Framework and Key First Actions*, NIE: Belfast, 2013.

³⁷ R. McQuaid, H. Graham and M. Shapira, *Child Care: Maximising the Economic Participation of Women*. Equality Commission Northern Ireland: Belfast, 2013.

precisely because, as research indicates, improved prospects for mothers through employment, education and training can translate as improved prospects for children.³⁸

As is widely acknowledged, accessible, affordable childcare is of *fundamental* importance in facilitating women's participation in the economy.³⁹ Recent research indicates the scale and nature of the problem: childcare costs in Northern Ireland comprise 44 per cent of average income, compared to the United Kingdom figure of 33 per cent; around two-thirds of mothers in Northern Ireland have identified the cost of childcare as an influence on the hours they work; and, more than a third of working age women unavailable for work explain their unavailability in terms of domestic care commitments.⁴⁰

The nature of participation of women in the labour market in Northern Ireland, in no small measure due to their constrained work choices as primary carers in families, is such that women, compared to men, continue to disproportionately participate in part-time, low paid and sporadic work. For example, 2012 labour market figures for Northern Ireland indicated that 92 per cent of female employees worked in the traditionally low paid service sector; that 80 per cent of part-time employees were female; and, that median female hourly earnings of part-time workers, excluding overtime, were 69.9 per cent of full-time workers.⁴¹

The nature of the gender pay gap in Northern Ireland is a further significant factor in this debate. Figures for the period 2011-2012 indicate a widening of the gender pay gap for all employees.⁴² The interaction between the gender pay gap, the nature of participation of women in the labour market and women's roles as primary carers is affirmed by research from the Government Equalities Office, which shows that 16 per cent of the gender pay gap is

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid. See also, B. Hinds, *The Northern Ireland economy: Women on the edge? A comprehensive analysis of the impacts of the financial crisis*, Women's Resource and Development Agency: Belfast, 2011.

⁴⁰ ECNI, *op. cit.*

⁴¹ NISRA/DFP, *Labour market statistics bulletin: women in Northern Ireland*, September 2012. NISRA/DFP: Belfast, 2012.

⁴² NISRA, *Northern Ireland statistics & research agency results from the Northern Ireland annual survey of hours and earnings 2012*. NISRA: Belfast.

attributable to ‘the negative effect on wages of having previously worked part-time or of having taken time out of the labour market to look after family’.⁴³

The important point here is this: the gendered controversy embodied in the relationship between the economic participation of women, women’s roles as primary carers and child poverty comprises a complex dilemma requiring complex remedial action.

As noted, the document cites childcare provision proposals under the Bright Start framework in support of its ambition to help parents from low income families into education, training and employment. This begs the question, to which we now briefly turn: to what extent might this provision help to remedially address the gendered controversy outlined above?

Bright Start and beyond

3.7.2 While Bright Start provision certainly has the potential to go some way to address the gendered dilemma at hand, *clearly much more remains to be done to effectively and meaningfully address its causal complexity*. Reportage from OFMDFM hints at the scale of the required, additional remedial childcare provision. Delivery proposed under the framework’s pilot schemes aims at potentially providing for ‘up to’ 7,000 new childcare places at a cost of ‘up to’ £15m.⁴⁴ Yet following the launch of Bright Start, OFMDFM officials acknowledged that they did ‘not know how many places would be enough’ to address the ‘huge gap’ between childcare supply and demand in Northern Ireland, and that it could ‘potentially [involve] hundreds of millions’, as opposed to just fifteen.⁴⁵

Within this context, focus group participants were of the view that, as it progresses toward a full childcare strategy, the Executive should give additional consideration to maximising the economic participation of women through the further expansion of publicly supported childcare provision, *well*

⁴³ Government Equalities Office, The gender pay gap in the UK: 1995 to 2007, Research Findings No. 2010/2, GEO: London, 2010.

⁴⁴ NIA, Official Report (Hansard), Committee for the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, Bright Start: Strategy for Affordable and Integrated Childcare, 2 October 2013, NIA: Belfast, 2013.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

beyond that which is already contained in Bright Start. Various suggestions were proffered as to precisely what form such expanded support should take. It was suggested that the Executive should (a) incentivise more employers to proffer on-site crèche facilities and greater flexibility to accommodate women's roles as primary carers;⁴⁶ (b) enhance 0-3 provision; (c) sustain and supplement the funding of women centres' childcare provision; (d) recognise domestic childcare by remunerating carers; and, (e) expand the provision of quality, affordable and accessible childcare provision in the north west and rural areas, by responding more meaningfully to context-specific infrastructural constraints, such as transport inadequacies.

The substantive point underlying these suggestions is this: to better address child poverty by enhancing the economic participation of women, the Executive should take the requisite steps to close the 'huge gap' between childcare supply and demand in Northern Ireland *in ways that will result in comprehensive and sustainable results, as opposed to partial, inconsistent and short-term variants.*

3.7.3 Recommendation

If government wants to more effectively and meaningfully address the gendered factors underlying child poverty by giving working women 'real' and 'genuine' choices in work and care,⁴⁷ then it must seriously commit to developing an integrated, holistic and properly coordinated cross-departmental policy approach to this issue, which seeks to accurately identify and remedy these factors in impactful and sustainable ways.

Consequently, we recommend that the Executive commit, through the cross-departmental collation and provision of pertinent gendered disaggregated data, to robustly tracking the relationship between the proposals, the changing nature of the economic participation of women, childcare provision under Bright Start and child poverty.

⁴⁶ We recognise that proposals have already been outlined on this front as part of the Department for Employment and Learning's launch in 2013 of the *Sharing Parental Rights, Extending Flexibility at Work - Public Consultation*.

⁴⁷ McQuaid, Graham and Shapira, op. cit.

Welfare reform, child poverty and policy inconsistency

3.8 Specific concerns over the potential impact of welfare reform on families with an adult disability were previously noted. More generally, however, the Consortium is concerned at the potential wider and adverse cumulative impact of welfare reform on child poverty. Accordingly, we are disappointed that the document contains just a few brief references to this reform, none of which adequately address this potentiality.

It is especially worrying that the document does not address the inherent inconsistency that characterises government action and policy in this area. Recall that, on the one hand, government is taking forward policy measures aimed at tackling child poverty and constrained opportunities for young people but, on the other hand, it is simultaneously taking forward welfare reform measures, which research forecasts will *significantly increase levels of child poverty and vulnerability*. This section considers the potential implications for child poverty of this inconsistency.

3.8.1 As things stand, 21 per cent of children in Northern Ireland experience persistent child poverty, more than double the Great Britain equivalent, while 12 per cent live in severe poverty.⁴⁸ It is projected that cuts in benefits under welfare reform will have a ‘severe impact’ on child poverty in Northern Ireland, compared to other regions in the United Kingdom, in large part due to higher benefit dependency.⁴⁹ For example, University of Ulster research suggests that the cumulative effect of multidimensional tax and benefit reform in Northern Ireland could be deepening poverty for children or, worse still, severe poverty.⁵⁰

Estimates indicate that £750m a year will be removed from the Northern Ireland economy following welfare reform, equivalent to £650 a year for every adult of working age.⁵¹ Furthermore, research from the Institute for Fiscal Studies suggests that concurrent tax and benefit reform will

⁴⁸ Save the Children, Local Government Bill: Submission to the environment committee, STC: Belfast, 2013.

⁴⁹ McCormick, op. cit., p.16.

⁵⁰ Horgan, op. cit.

⁵¹ C. Beatty and S. Fothergill, The impact of welfare reform on Northern Ireland: a research paper. NICVA: Belfast: 2013.

'disproportionately affect' households at the bottom of the Northern Irish income distribution scale, as compared to their counterparts in the rest of the United Kingdom.⁵² It is forecast that these households will lose almost 10 per cent of their income.⁵³ This is alarming for a host of reasons, not least of which is the suggestion from the Executive's own research that 'many households [in Northern Ireland] appear vulnerable to poverty *if their incomes were to fall even by small amounts*'.⁵⁴

To compound matters, rises in the cost of living,⁵⁵ such as utility and food prices, and stagnant/static incomes, have created conditions likely to further exacerbate the impact of welfare reform on poverty and vulnerability levels. Recent research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation⁵⁶ affirms this likelihood by showing that rising childcare and energy costs, in tandem with stagnant incomes and benefit cuts, have extended the poverty gap in the United Kingdom by 'creating [an] unprecedented erosion of household living standards'.⁵⁷ As compared to other regions in the United Kingdom, Northern Ireland has the highest rate of working-age people claiming an out-of-work benefit, and so is disproportionately affected in terms of poverty among this working-age unemployment cohort.⁵⁸ The number of people in low-paid jobs across the United Kingdom has also increased, while average incomes have decreased: some 5 million people earn below the living wage.⁵⁹

Moreover, as is widely acknowledged, women in Northern Ireland could be disproportionately affected by welfare reform given the aggregate impact of a range of gender imbalances and other factors, which can contribute to gendered benefit dependency.⁶⁰ For example, the lack of available and

⁵² J. Browne, The impact of tax and benefit reforms to be introduced between 2010-11 and 2014-15 in Northern Ireland, IFS Briefing Note 114, Institute for Fiscal Studies: London, 2012.

⁵³ Horgan, op. cit., p.2.

⁵⁴ Cited in McCormick, op. cit., p.18.

⁵⁵ BBC News, op. cit.

⁵⁶ Hirsch, op. cit.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ T. MacInnes, et al., op. cit.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ See, Hinds, op. cit.

affordable childcare, combined with women's roles as primary care givers⁶¹ and the fact over 90 per cent of lone parent households in Northern Ireland are female-headed,⁶² can have the aggregate effect of further restricting women's participation in the labour market⁶³ and increasing benefit reliance.

In sum, the projected cumulative impact of the trends outlined in this section entails increased hardship and deprivation in Northern Ireland such as serves to highlight the potentially egregious implications of the inherent policy inconsistency under review. Focus group participants expressed alarm at these projected implications.

3.8.2 Recommendation

The Consortium urges the Executive to develop and implement sufficient cross-departmental measures to properly track, evaluate and address the complex relationship between welfare reform and child poverty, particular to the Northern Ireland case, linked to the glaring inconsistency at the heart of its social policy agenda.

Constraints and welfare reform

3.9 The Consortium is cognisant of the constraints within which the Executive is currently working, including factors associated with austerity measures, reductions in the block grant, the parity principle and the absence of devolved fiscal powers.

Research affirms that, to date, the aggregate adverse impact of these constraints on child poverty is such that government policy has proven 'stronger on improving prospects [i.e. early years, education, skills, health inequalities] ... than on boosting net incomes'.⁶⁴ And yet, disappointingly, as research also indicates, the latter, in combination with reduced living costs,

⁶¹ For example, according to research published by Carers' UK, in 2011 there were over 207,000 carers in Northern Ireland, 64 per cent of whom were women. Carers' UK, *Valuing Carers: Calculating the Value of Carers' Support*, CUK: London, 2011.

⁶² Of the 63,900 lone parent households with dependent children recorded in the 2011 Census, 91 per cent were female-headed. R. Russell, Northern Ireland Assembly, Research and Information Service Research Paper - Census 2011: Key Statistics at Northern Ireland and LGD level, NIA: Belfast, 2013.

⁶³ See Department of Finance and Personnel for NI, *Women in Northern Ireland*, (September 2012). [Online]. Available at,

http://www.detini.gov.uk/women_in_northern_ireland_september_2012_final_version.pdf

⁶⁴ J. McCormick, op. cit.

can have a much more pronounced and immediate remedial impact on child poverty than the former.⁶⁵

In other words, the Executive's policy on child poverty has hitherto been associated more with longer term remedial impact than immediate impact.⁶⁶ While these longer term remedial outcomes are, of course, important, child poverty in Northern Ireland is clearly an immediate controversy requiring immediate remedies, which should mean a significant concomitant focus on boosting incomes and reducing living costs.

The proposals outlined in the document, as first key actions, do of course have an inherent element of immediacy. But, at the same time, as initial steps in targeted delivery, these proposals are also intrinsically delimited in what they can achieve remedially. So it remains to be seen the exact extent to which the proposals might positively impact living costs and income levels, and yet it is precisely such impact that is *first and foremost* required to remedially address child poverty in the 'here and now'.⁶⁷

Resisting welfare reform: Scope to act

3.9.1 It has been suggested that the aforementioned constraints on the Executive's capacity to manoeuvre on social policy fundamentally restrict what it can achieve in terms of delivery and impact on poverty. So, for example, were the Executive to depart from Westminster policy in welfare reform by refraining from replicating cuts in incomes for certain categories of benefit claimants, such variation 'would have to be met from the block grant'.⁶⁸ Therefore a refusal to impose welfare cuts in one area to address child poverty would ultimately require expenditure cuts and 'doing less' in another area.⁶⁹

That said, the Executive is not entirely impotent in the face of welfare reform: it still does have some '*power to vary some welfare rules*'.⁷⁰ Recent examples

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p.15.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p.16.

of the exercise of this power include the reported concession on restricting the bedroom tax to new claimants, and some variation on the design of universal credit.⁷¹

The important point here is this: *some* devolved scope for variation does exist for the Executive to take better account of the relationship between welfare reform and projected rises in child poverty, despite the constraints outlined in this section. This observation was reinforced during the focus group engagement, articulated in the perception that the Executive ‘could and should do more’ to resist welfare reform and its projected adverse implications for vulnerable families. So although participants certainly welcomed the document’s early interventionist measures to tackle child poverty, it was concluded that progress made under such measures could potentially be jeopardised by welfare reform, and that additional measures would consequently be required.

Accordingly, the groups called for further early interventionism in families and schools. It was proposed that such additional provision should comprise sustainable and robust support programmes for vulnerable and at risk parents, children and young people, aimed at enhancing health, welfare and well-being. The following issues were identified as deserved of particular and additional interventionist attention: domestic violence, emotional and mental health, substance addiction, literacy and numeracy shortfalls, early years development and nutritional deficits.

Participants concluded that, as the Executive progresses this strategy and addresses these issues, it should take sufficient steps to ensure that the perspectives and experiences of all affected parties, including young people and children, are properly heard and actively listened to.

3.9.2 Recommendation

We would urge to Executive to give further consideration as to how it could more effectively address the relationship between welfare reform and associated projected rises in child poverty, *by exercising the full*

⁷¹ Ibid.

scope of the flexibility that exists under its devolved powers in more meaningful ways.

Early interventionism: Recognition for women's sector provision

3.10 This section considers the unique role played by the women's sector in improving outcomes for children and young people in Northern Ireland, and makes the case for the proper recognition and enhancement of this role under the Delivering Social Change framework, embodied in a greater commitment to early interventionism.

The document's *only* mention of the remedial impact on poverty and exclusion of community based, women sector service provision is retrospective, i.e. it occurs under 'progress to date'.⁷² We are consequently disappointed at the document's failure to project forward, properly recognising and relying on the full potential of such provision to improve outcomes for children and young people in disadvantaged communities.

This potential is partly attributable to the unique positioning of women's centres and organisations as 'trusted, safe women-only spaces' with a significant reach into disadvantaged communities, encompassing dynamic and well-established local and regional infrastructural networks. It is also partly attributable to the diversity of service provision in the community based women's sector. As research affirms, the sector continues to play a significant role in addressing the complex needs of vulnerable women and families in disadvantaged communities through provision of vital frontline services, ranging from specialist advice and support through to education, childcare, health/wellbeing and parenting programmes.⁷³

Crucially, such provision helps marginalised and excluded women gain access to educational, training and support programmes, developing skills, confidence and self-esteem, which can ultimately enhance their prospects of economic participation in the public sphere and which, in turn, can help

⁷² OFMDFM, *Delivering Social Change*, op. cit., p.83.

⁷³ Women's Centres' Regional Partnership, *Childcare mapping and research report 2010*, WCRP: Belfast, 2010.

enhance the life chances of their children.⁷⁴ For example, research shows that where such education and training of mothers results in higher levels of employment and wages, it can in turn result in higher attainment levels for their children.⁷⁵ Furthermore, research also affirms the cost/benefit efficiency of this causal nexus in helping alleviate child poverty.⁷⁶

As noted, early intervention is key to effective remedial delivery in the disadvantaged areas within which the Consortium works, and research forecasts that such areas will be among the worst affected by projected rises in vulnerability, deprivation and child poverty. From this perspective, there is a compelling case to be made for the securing and augmentation of frontline service provision in the community based women's sector under this Delivering Social Change strategy.

3.10.1 Recommendation

To more effectively address the complex challenges of chronic child poverty and social exclusion in disadvantaged communities, the Executive should recognise and undertake to properly resource and sustain women-only community based service provision, enabling the further enhancement of crucial early interventionist provision.

4. Conclusion

In policy development terms, the Executive's intent to combine its key commitments on child poverty, young people and children's rights into a single strategic document is innately ambitious. Part of the implied rationale underlying this intent involves the notion that its fulfilment should ultimately enhance delivery and monitoring in this policy area. But, such ambitiousness carries with it risk.

The inherent danger of migrating and integrating substantive content from different strategic and statutory sources into one document is that the

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ C. Lidell, *The caring jigsaw: systems of childcare and education in Northern Ireland*, Save the Children: Belfast, 2009.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

importance of some other related content from those original sources might become obscured and overshadowed within the new document. As we have seen, this danger is evident in the low profile given within the document to the Executive's prior commitment to eradicate child poverty by 2020.

In light of what is at stake in this debate for vulnerable families, we would strongly urge the government to take sufficient measures to effectively address this substantive issue as it progresses its draft strategy. For the same reason, we would further urge it to take proper account of the other major concerns outlined in this paper, including the projected implications of the inherent inconsistency in its social policy agenda.

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**Appendix 1 – Women’s Regional Consortium Focus Group Events on
OFMDFM’s *Delivering Social Change for Children and Young People:*
*Consultation Document***

Focus group locations and dates:

- Women’s Centre Derry, 24 February 2014
- Greenway Women’s Centre, 26 February 2014
- Falls’ Women’s Centre, 27 February 2014
- Strathfoyle Women’s Centre, 28 February 2014

Participants profile:

- Women centre staff
- Parents
- Young people

Event facilitation details:

- The event at Strathfoyle Women’s Centre was facilitated in partnership with Women’s Centre Derry
- The events at Falls’ Women’s Centre and Greenway Women’s Centre were facilitated in partnership with the Women’s Support Network