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A Response to: A New Future for Childcare in Northern Ireland Pre-Consultation Paper

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Introduction

1.1 This response has been submitted by the **Women's Support Network** (WSN) in Northern Ireland. WSN welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the DUP's 'A New Future for Childcare in Northern Ireland Pre-Consultation Paper'.

1.2 Established in 1989 and based in Belfast, WSN is a regional organisation that works across all areas of Northern Ireland. It includes in its membership community-based women's centres, groups and projects, with a concentration in disadvantaged areas. WSN is a charitable and feminist organisation, which adopts a community development approach.

1.3 Our **vision** is of a just and peaceful society devoid of gender discrimination, gender-based violence and women's rights violations, in which women from all backgrounds and communities can experience full equality of opportunity and participation across all spheres of their everyday lives, including: employment, education and training, public and political life, health and the home.

1.4 Our **mission** is to advance women's equality and rights by working to influence policy, practice and provision while also regionally supporting and representing the interests, needs and perspectives of women, particularly those in disadvantaged areas.

1.5 This response is informed by women's perspectives gathered through focus group discussions and engagement questionnaires in women's centres and groups.

1.6 Women's centres and groups across Northern Ireland provide wrap-around services that support not only the woman but the whole family. They are trusted local organisations, mainly in disadvantaged areas, that women and families are more likely to turn to or accept being referred to for support and advice at times of stress and difficulty.

1.7 The Women’s Support Network is a member of the Childcare for All coalition and endorses the principles in the Childcare for All Charter which sets out a vision of a child-centre childcare infrastructure that is affordable, accessible, flexible, high quality, which supports children’s education and development, and that meets the needs of children, families, childcare workers and providers and benefits society.

2. General Comments

2.1 The ascription to women of the social role of unpaid primary carer and domestic labourer places a disproportionate unpaid work and time burden on women. This can impact on their wellbeing as well as their economic/life prospects. It constrains their economic participation and financial independence and increases the likelihood of women’s reliance on state and/or partner income which puts them at greater risk of gender poverty.

2.2 The gender gap in labour market participation rates between men and women increases drastically with the presence of dependent children. The gender gap is less than 5% between males and females for those with no dependent children. For those with dependent children, the employment rate gap between males and females triples to 16%.¹ The Northern Ireland Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions says that this employment rate gap between males and females “*is more accurately described as a motherhood employment gap.*”

2.3 Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (ECNI) research highlighted that the availability of affordable and appropriate childcare is a fundamental part of the process of mothers entering, remaining in, progressing in, or returning to work. If a significant portion of female-generated income,

¹ Childcare in Northern Ireland: Cost, Care and Gender Equality, Northern Ireland Committee Irish Congress of Trade Unions, June 2019
<https://www.betterworkbetterlives.org/sites/default/files/publications/ICTU%20Childcare%20Report%20June%202019.pdf>

especially in the short term, is being spent on childcare, then work may be financially unviable.² ECNI said: *“Childcare should be both affordable and geographically accessible to facilitate employment.”*

2.4 Research also confirms that access to childcare can represent a particular problem for the economic participation of marginalised and vulnerable women especially those from disadvantaged and rural areas.³ A combination of high childcare costs and poor financial gains from working is often the reason why many low-income mothers do not enter or remain in work.

“I can’t afford childcare as I don’t get any support with it. I am lucky I have family to look after my kids. Without them I would need to leave work. My salary is not enough to pay the mortgage and childcare without some help.”

- Questionnaire Respondent

“When I do return to work I am only going back part-time. This decision was made with the cost of childcare in mind.”

- Questionnaire Respondent

2.5 Inadequate childcare provision including prohibitive costs is associated with this gender inequality. Therefore the ability to access quality, affordable, accessible childcare is of paramount importance in helping women’s participation in the labour market and also has positive impacts for gender equality.

² Childcare: Maximising the Economic Participation of Women, Professor Ronald McQuaid, Dr Helen Graham, Dr Marina Shapira, Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, February 2013

[https://www.equalityni.org/ECNI/media/ECNI/Publications/Delivering%20Equality/Maximising ChildcareMainReport2013.pdf](https://www.equalityni.org/ECNI/media/ECNI/Publications/Delivering%20Equality/Maximising%20ChildcareMainReport2013.pdf)

³ Women’s Regional Consortium Response to ‘Delivering social change through childcare: a ten year strategy for affordable and integrated childcare 2015-2025’, November 2015
<http://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/sites/default/files/FINAL%20WRC%20response%20C'care%2012%2011%2015.pdf>

“Childcare is too expensive – not enough offered at a reasonable rate. I had to reduce my hours to part-time and this has affected my promotion opportunities and my pension.”

- Questionnaire Respondent

Childcare Costs in Northern Ireland

2.6 International and regional comparisons of the cost of formal childcare indicate that Northern Ireland has some of the highest childcare costs. Families are spending more on childcare in Northern Ireland than they are in other countries and in other regions of the UK. This has particular implications for women who continue to undertake the majority of childcare in the home.⁴

“I have two children under four. The cost of childcare is extortionate. It is our biggest outgoing. Despite help from grandparents we struggle to make these payments.”

- Questionnaire Respondent

“Both myself and my husband work. We have two children under four and I work part-time. Childcare is very expensive especially when you are paying for two children.”

- Questionnaire Respondent

“Most childcare places are way too expensive.”

- Questionnaire Respondent

“The cost of childcare is very expensive compared to local salaries.”

- Questionnaire Respondent

⁴ Childcare in Northern Ireland: Cost, Care and Gender Equality, Northern Ireland Committee Irish Congress of Trade Unions, June 2019
<https://www.betterworkbetterlives.org/sites/default/files/publications/ICTU%20Childcare%20Report%20June%202019.pdf>

2.7 Employers for Childcare found that a two parent household in Northern Ireland, with two children aged five or under, reported spending an average of £195 per week on childcare which equates to 41% of the average household income. In comparison to figures for England a similar couple could expect to pay 35.7% of their wage on childcare.⁵ This suggests that families in Northern Ireland are paying a greater proportion of their household income on childcare than families in England.

2.8 Research by Employers for Childcare⁶ shows that the average cost of a full-time childcare place is £166 per week, an increase of 11% since 2010. Families report spending an average of £137 per week on childcare rising to £178 where families use formal childcare only. This research also found that 50% of all families report spending more than 20% of their overall household income on childcare. This rises to 63% of lone parent households. Almost two thirds of families rank their childcare bill as their largest or second largest monthly outgoing (second only to their mortgage/rent).

2.7 The CEDAW Committee has recently expressed its concern about childcare costs specifically mentioning the situation in Northern Ireland. CEDAW said that it is *“concerned that childcare costs remain excessive, particularly in Northern Ireland, which constitutes an obstacle for women to enter and progress in the workplace.”*⁷ The Committee recommended that government should ensure the availability of affordable and accessible childcare particularly in Northern Ireland.⁸

“More help from government is needed to cover childcare expenses.”

- Questionnaire Respondent

⁵ Northern Ireland Childcare Survey 2019, Employers for Childcare, June 2019
<https://www.employersforchildcare.org/report/northern-ireland-childcare-survey-2019/>

⁶ Northern Ireland Childcare Survey 2019, Employers for Childcare, June 2019
<https://www.employersforchildcare.org/report/northern-ireland-childcare-survey-2019/>

⁷ Concluding Observations on the eighth periodic report of United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, CEDAW/C/GBR/CO/8, March 2019, para 45
https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW/C/GBR/CO/8&Lang=En

⁸ Ibid, para 46

Access to Support for Preschool Childcare

2.8 Government help for preschool childcare costs is different in Northern Ireland. Since September 2017 eligible working parents of three and four year olds in England have been able to avail of 30 hours per week of free childcare. However in Northern Ireland parents of three and four year olds can only avail of 12.5 hours per week of free preschool education. It can only be taken over 2.5 hours per day, 5 days a week and only during term time.

2.9 Employers for Childcare report that parents continue to be frustrated that access to childcare is considerably different in Northern Ireland than in other parts of the UK.⁹ Their research states that: *“a large number of parents referred to the availability of 30 hours free childcare for eligible children in England and expressed their anger that similar support is not available here.”*

Impact of Austerity/Welfare Reform

2.10 The austerity/welfare reform agenda has made the issue of access to flexible, affordable childcare all the more relevant for women and families. Increased conditionality in UC and cuts in the value of benefits through the benefit freeze have focused attention on the cost and availability of childcare. In addition, austerity has led to an increase in precarious working arrangements including zero-hours contracts. These patterns of working are often incompatible with childcare provision where parents are normally required to commit to a fixed number of hours per week/month.

2.11 For vulnerable women (including ethnic minorities and lone parents) the prospect of increased economic participation can depend on the availability of appropriate integrated childcare and access to education/training opportunities at community level. However this integrated provision is at risk and has significantly reduced due to austerity.

“I can only do a course if it has childcare available.”

- Questionnaire Respondent

⁹ Northern Ireland Childcare Survey 2019, Employers for Childcare, June 2019
<https://www.employersforchildcare.org/report/northern-ireland-childcare-survey-2019/>

2.12 In its response to ‘Delivering social change through childcare: a ten year strategy for affordable and integrated childcare 2015-2025’¹⁰ the Women’s Regional Consortium (of which WSN is a member) outlined research which evidences the adverse impact that financial vulnerability as a result of austerity can potentially have on childcare access, affordability, demand and supply. Access to quality, affordable, flexible childcare is therefore an issue which significantly impacts on the employment prospects of women and in helping women escape in-work poverty especially in times of austerity.

2.13 The Childcare For All campaign¹¹ has highlighted that as welfare reform begins to roll out fully many parents fear that childcare costs will leave them in debt or unable to work. The campaign is concerned that differing childcare support in Northern Ireland from GB will mean that welfare changes will have an even more adverse impact here.

2.14 The welfare reform mitigations package has helped to protect some of the most vulnerable in Northern Ireland from the impact of welfare reform. We are concerned that this vital help is due to end in March 2020 and we are also disappointed that some aspects of mitigations were not implemented at all particularly where it might have helped with childcare costs.

2.15 The Cost of Work Allowance, a supplementary payment recognising employment expenses, has not been implemented.¹² It was recommended that it would have a “*special weighting for lone parents taking account of the cost of childcare.*”¹³ This had the potential to help many women as the

¹⁰ Women’s Regional Consortium Response to ‘Delivering social change through childcare: a ten year strategy for affordable and integrated childcare 2015-2025’, November 2015
<http://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/sites/default/files/FINAL%20WRC%20response%20C%20care%2012%2011%2015.pdf>

¹¹ <https://www.facebook.com/childcare4allni>

¹² Welfare Reforms in Northern Ireland, Northern Ireland Audit Office, 17 January 2019
<https://www.niauditoffice.gov.uk/sites/niao/files/media-files/Welfare%20Reform%20Report%202019.pdf>

¹³ Review of Welfare Mitigation Schemes, Department for Communities, March 2019, Para 4.14
<https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/system/files/publications/communities/dfc-review-of-welfare-mitigation-schemes-2019.pdf>

majority of lone parents are women (91% of lone parent households are headed by a female).¹⁴

Universal Credit

2.16 Eligibility for UC has a more intensive conditionality regime. For the first time partners in jointly claiming couples will face mandatory work-related requirements. UC has introduced 'in-work conditionality' to claimants who are working and on a low income. As a result, claimants could face sanctions if they do not comply with work-related requirements including searching for and applying for additional work to meet an earnings threshold (based on working 35 hours a week at the National Minimum Wage).

2.17 UC has also introduced extended conditionality for lone parents, the vast majority of whom are women (91% of lone parent households in Northern Ireland). As soon as a lone parent's youngest child turns one they will be expected to attend work-focused interviews at a Jobcentre. When the child turns two they will be required to take active steps to prepare for work and once the child is three they will be expected to spend 16 hours per week in paid work or looking for work. Once the child reaches age five this will increase to 25 hours per week and from age thirteen to 35 hours per week.

2.18 This increased conditionality is likely to have greater impacts on women who are more likely to have caring responsibilities for children and be in part-time work. It also makes many assumptions about the availability of affordable, accessible, quality childcare which can have a major impact on a woman's ability to move into work.

2.19 It is positive that there is a greater level of support for childcare under Universal Credit (UC) allowing working parents to claim back up to 85% of eligible childcare costs compared to 70% under the tax credits legacy benefits.

¹⁴ Census 2011 – Key Statistics for Gender, Research and Information Service Research Paper, Ronan Savage and Dr Raymond Russell, Northern Ireland Assembly, 5 September 2014
<http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/raise/publications/2015/general/3415.pdf>

However, childcare costs are not paid through UC until the end of the assessment period despite the fact that most childcare providers require childcare costs to be paid up front. Many low-income families cannot afford to make these large payments up front.

2.20 The process of accessing childcare support through UC has been described to the Commons Work and Pensions Committee as “*stressful*” and “*complex*” by a group of mothers.¹⁵ Gaynor Rowles, hairdresser and single mum of three, spoke to the Work and Pensions Committee about her struggle to find upfront fees for childcare for her three-year old twins while waiting on her first UC payment:

*“When I first switched to Universal Credit, I was eight weeks without money, so I had to rely on my parents. Then, when I put the children into nursery, I think it was about six weeks. I had to fork out six weeks of nursery fees before then I got contributed. This is month in, month out. You never get it on time. You never, ever get your childcare on time.”*¹⁶

2.21 Frank Field, Chair of the Work and Pensions Select Committee said that the current childcare payment arrangements under UC were making it harder for parents to get into work: “*It’s not just driving parents into despair and debt and creating problems for childcare providers – it’s also actively working to prevent the government achieving its aim of getting more people into work.*”¹⁷

¹⁵ <http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/work-and-pensions-committee/universal-credit/oral/92072.html>

¹⁶ <http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/work-and-pensions-committee/universal-credit/oral/92072.html>

¹⁷ <https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/work-and-pensions-committee/news-parliament-2017/universal-credit-childcare-report-published-17-19/>

CASE STUDY – Women’s Centre Derry

“I am a 25 year old single mum with a baby boy. I was living with my parents but due to overcrowding I moved out into private rented accommodation and had to apply for UC.

I had been getting Tax Credits of £160/week which included some of my childcare costs. I was also getting £20 a week Child Benefit and wages of £120 a week from part-time work. I had to make up some of my childcare costs myself as Tax Credits didn’t cover it all. That left me with around £200 a week to live on once childcare was paid.

I had to wait 7 weeks on my first UC payment. I took an Advance Payment of UC during this time but I have to pay it back. This only covered my rent and some of my childcare leaving me with just my wages to survive on.

After 7 weeks I got my first UC payment of £560. Around £400 of that will go on rent plus they are deducting money for the advance payment. No one told me that I had to upload my childcare invoices to get my childcare paid and that meant that my childcare was not included. I had to pay it out of my wages leaving me with little or nothing to live on. I was so stressed about this with Christmas just around the corner.

I had to ask my mum for help with groceries and I go to her for dinner a couple of days a week. I try to make things last, I buy frozen food and I don’t spend any money on extras. I haven’t seen my friends or done anything since I’ve been on UC because I can’t afford to. I don’t turn the heat on very much and we don’t go anywhere or do anything because I have no money. I’m not sleeping and I’m constantly worried about money and what will happen next month. This Christmas is ruined for me, I’m not looking forward to it at all.

There are so many unanswered questions with UC. Sometimes it can take up to a week for a message on your UC journal to get a reply. It is not clear what you have to do – no one told me I had to upload invoices so I have missed that help with childcare. I’m lucky I have some family support but I don’t know how anyone does it if they have no one.

I think they need to get rid of UC. I had to wait 7 weeks for my first payment and during that time I was entitled to help but they would only give it to me as an advance payment which I have to pay back. It doesn’t make sense to me!

I think government need to help people, especially single mothers, with childcare costs – free childcare is needed.

I have a child’s birthday party tomorrow and I can’t afford to give a present. I have a staff do with work next week but I’ve no money to go. I rang my mum last night in tears because I was stressing out about money. No day goes by without thinking/stressing about money.”

Research on the Impact of Austerity on Women in Northern Ireland

2.22 In April of this year the Women’s Regional Consortium published a research paper on the Impact of Austerity and Welfare Reform on Women in Rural and Disadvantaged Areas of Northern Ireland.¹⁸ This research shows the impact of the Government’s austerity and welfare reform agenda on women and highlights the fact that women are disproportionately affected by these changes. Access to flexible, affordable childcare is an important element in considerations around austerity and welfare reform.

2.23 The Women’s Regional Consortium research found that the majority of respondents (78%) in the research reported that they had to make cutbacks in their everyday life or had been impacted by austerity/welfare reform in the last three years.¹⁹ When they were asked what they think needs to be done to help people who are severely impacted by ongoing austerity, access to affordable, flexible childcare was a common suggestion by the women. Many of the women felt that more needed to be done to provide childcare support particularly to low-income families.

“More help from government - working families should get help with childcare costs especially when both parents are out working trying to provide a good life/environment for their child.”

“There needs to be subsidised childcare. Also it is often taken for granted that women take on caring for elder relatives making working difficult. This invisible labour needs to be recognised and compensated for.”

“Wages need to be brought into line with the cost of living and cost of childcare reduced to ensure we as women work for purpose.”

“Working people on low incomes should receive support with childcare, dental and other bills and support during maternity as bills don't reduce and people are running up debts.”

- Questionnaire Respondents

¹⁸ Impact of Ongoing Austerity: Women’s Perspectives, Women’s Regional Consortium, April 2019 <http://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/node/150>

¹⁹ Ibid

Case Study – Atlas Women’s Centre

“I have two children aged 2 and 4. My husband works full time on a low wage. I had to give up work due to the cost of childcare it was just too expensive and it wasn’t worth my while working to pay for childcare. I have no family here so we have little family support and were reliant on childcare.

Apart from tax credits we get no help because my husband works. As a result we are always struggling to make ends meet.

I’m really struggling with the cost of my daughter’s school meals at nursery which are costing £15 a week.

Sometimes I’ve had to borrow from my in-laws or my friend to help pay the bills. I think the government needs to do more to help families who are on low incomes. I think there should be specific help for childcare to make it easier for people to work so that all their wages are not going on childcare.”

Working Poverty

2.24 There are 444,000 children in Northern Ireland, 103,400 of these children live in poverty. The majority (61%) live in households with at least one parent who is working.²⁰ *“The likelihood of being in working poverty has been rising for families with children, with a particularly sharp increase for lone parents.”*²¹ This is despite the government’s claim that work is the way out of poverty.

2.25 Unfortunately, paid work is not a guaranteed route out of poverty particularly for women for a number of reasons. Women form the majority of low-waged workers and are more likely to be on zero-hours contracts. In-work poverty is not just the result of low pay, working hours are also important.²² Women are more likely to work part-time and many struggle to increase their hours of work due to caring responsibilities. Caring for young children limits both the number of hours a person can work and the distance they can travel

²⁰ Child Poverty Briefing, NICCY, October 2017

<https://www.niccy.org/media/2904/niccy-child-poverty-briefing-october-2017.pdf>

²¹ Universal Credit needs reform to unlock families from in-work poverty, JRF Blog, Katie Schmuecker, September 2018

<https://www.jrf.org.uk/blog/universal-credit-needs-reform-unlock-families-work-poverty>

²² A Female Face, Fabian Society Blog, Mary-Ann Stephenson, February 2019

<https://fabians.org.uk/a-female-face/>

for work. This leaves many women locked in poverty especially when jobs are low paid.

2.26 Precarious employment²³ is pervasive throughout Northern Ireland and has been on the increase over recent years. In terms of gender, women are much more likely to work in temporary employment than men with approximately 27,700 women in temporary employment compared to approximately 18,000 men. This is particularly noticeable in part-time roles with the majority of part-time temporary employees being women (68%) compared to men (32%).²⁴

2.27 Women's Regional Consortium research with local women²⁵ raised the problems that they experience in getting suitable jobs. They discussed the lack of jobs in their local area and the quality of available work (often low wage and unsuitable hours to fit in with caring obligations) as well as the lack of affordable, flexible childcare to allow them to move into work and to make work pay.

“There is a lack of jobs here, the only jobs available are in call centres. I can't see many women being able to take those jobs as they are mostly shift work. What happens when the kids get out of school? It is not easy for women.”

“Where are all these jobs? No jobs that are flexible for women they are often low paid and 40 hours a week.”

There are a lot of impacts for lone parents – it is no joke for them. There are no crèche facilities/childcare in this area. Women can't afford the childcare that does exist.”

- Focus Group Attendees

²³ Employment which is insecure, uncertain or unpredictable from the point of view of the worker.

²⁴ 'Insecure and Uncertain': Precarious Work in the Republic of Ireland & Northern Ireland, Irish Congress of Trade Unions Briefing, Winter 2017
https://www.ictu.ie/download/pdf/precarious_work_final_dec_2017.pdf

²⁵ Impact of Ongoing Austerity: Women's Perspectives, Women's Regional Consortium, April 2019 <http://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/node/150>

Rural Context

2.28 Northern Ireland has a large rural population. Around 670,000 people live in rural areas amounting to 37% of the population.²⁶ The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs have stated that the cost of living is higher in rural than in urban areas, particularly in terms of fuel, transport and heating.²⁷ Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network (NIRWN) has observed that farming families in particular are often fairly asset rich (in terms of land, property and machinery) but extremely cash poor and struggle to provide for their families.²⁸

2.29 Research by NIRWN shows that rural women are under increasing pressure from the economic climate: *“Historic underfunding of rural women’s activities and underinvestment in rural areas; centralisation of service support; lack of infrastructure, and the burden of caring responsibilities is leaving rural women experiencing more poverty and social isolation than ever before.”*²⁹

2.30 Rural women face additional barriers in order to provide for themselves and their families. Many rural jobs are poorly paid and there is less availability of good quality, flexible jobs in rural areas. This situation leaves rural women more vulnerable to access poverty. They are unable to address their financial poverty if they lack access to suitable transport and childcare to allow them to get better paid, better quality jobs.

2.31 Women's Regional Consortium research with local women³⁰ showed the perspectives of rural women on austerity and welfare reform and how this had impacted on their lives. Women agreed that getting access to good quality,

²⁶ <http://www.rdc.org.uk/statistics>

²⁷ Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation – A New Framework, DARD, March 2016
<https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/dard/tackling-rural-poverty-and-social-isolation-2016-new-framework.pdf>

²⁸ Rural Voices, Louise Coyle, NIRWN, March 2018
<http://www.nirwn.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/NIRWN-Rural-Voices-Research-Report-March-2018.pdf>

²⁹ Rural Women's Manifesto, NIRWN, September 2015
<https://www.nirwn.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/NIRWN-Rural-Womens-Manifesto.pdf>

³⁰ Impact of Ongoing Austerity: Women's Perspectives, Women's Regional Consortium, April 2019
<http://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/node/150>

flexible jobs in rural areas was difficult and meant that it often became necessary to travel to larger towns/cities for work which had impacts for both childcare and transport. They talked about the difficulties accessing flexible, affordable childcare to allow them to work and discussed problems accessing public transport in rural areas, with many stating that they needed to have a car in order to allow them to work or access services. For some women these barriers meant that they were unable to work and therefore were reliant on their partner's income or on social security. Increased conditionality around working and claiming benefits will compound these issues faced by many rural women.

Case Study

"I am a single parent and I have two children. I live in a rural area and I used to have a good job in the city. I had to give up the job as I couldn't get good quality, affordable childcare outside normal office hours to suit the job and the travel times to and from work.

I had to leave home early to get to work and was home later because of the travel time involved.

I took a job closer to home so that I could drop the children off and pick them up from school. The job suits my home situation but is about a third of the salary I used to have."

Northern Ireland Context

2.32 Northern Ireland is one of the UK's most disadvantaged regions with some of the lowest wages and highest economic inactivity rates. Median full-time weekly earnings in Northern Ireland was £521 compared with £569 in the UK (8.4% lower) and was the fifth lowest out of the 12 UK regions.³¹

2.33 Over the last ten years economic inactivity in Northern Ireland has been consistently higher than the UK average currently 25.5% compared to 20.7% in the UK. Northern Ireland has the highest economic inactivity rate of the 12 UK regions. Of the economically inactive 42% were male and 58% were female.³²

³¹ Northern Ireland Labour Market Report, NISRA, February 2019

<https://www.nisra.gov.uk/system/files/statistics/labour-market-report-february-2019.PDF>

³² Northern Ireland Labour Market Report, NISRA, August 2019

Over the past ten years there has consistently been more economically inactive women than men.³³ The most common reason for inactivity among women was family and home commitments.³⁴

2.34 The average family size in Northern Ireland is the largest within the UK. Families with dependent children have on average 1.85 children in Northern Ireland compared with a UK average of 1.74. Interestingly 21.4% of families in Northern Ireland have 3 or more children compared to the UK average of 14.7%³⁵

2.35 These issues have clear implications for childcare in Northern Ireland and must be taken into account in the development of any future Childcare Strategy.

Women's Centre Childcare Fund (WCCF)

2.36 The WCCF was established in April 2008 following on from the Children and Young Peoples Fund (C&YPF). This was part of an emergency Departmental response to ensure key childcare services provided in 14 women's centres operating in disadvantaged communities were kept open pending an Executive decision about their future funding.

2.37 WCCF enables the women's centres to provide childcare places that are 100% supported for the most disadvantaged children in our communities. These supported places give parents the opportunity to undertake training, attend counselling, carry out job searches and attend interviews. Parents in low paid jobs, working less than 16 hours per week and therefore not entitled to childcare tax credits are also supported through this fund.

<https://www.nisra.gov.uk/system/files/statistics/labour-market-report-august-2019.PDF>

³³ Women in Northern Ireland 2018, NISRA, December 2018

<https://www.nisra.gov.uk/news/women-northern-ireland-2018>

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/families/adhocs/005211familieswithdependentchildrenbynumberofdependentchildrenbyukcountriesandenglishregions2015>

2.38 Women’s Centres ability to provide childcare for disadvantaged children supported through WCCF has been core to their continued community development in disadvantaged areas.

2.39 The WCCF continued to be supported by DSD (now DfC) on an annual basis in the absence of an Executive decision on the future of the funding and the development of a Childcare Strategy. WCCF is still regarded as an ‘emergency initiative’ designed to be incorporated within the Childcare Strategy for Northern Ireland.

2.40 An evaluation of the WCCF was completed in June 2015. It was very positive in terms of highlighting the need for the fund, the impact for children and families supported and the value for money per child place supported. The evaluation states: “Looking ahead there is a need for the WCCF to be taken forward on a planned, multi-year basis to provide for a planned longer term response to the need for childcare provision for low income families and deprived backgrounds. The finalisation of a Childcare Strategy for NI provides an opportunity to incorporate the WCCF into the wider Childcare Strategy and to take forward the provision of affordable childcare on a more stable, longer term basis for this particular constituency of need.”

2.41 However when the draft Childcare Strategy was released for public consultation in July 2015 it disappointingly only mentioned WCCF once in the whole document. It suggested only a ‘wish’ for the funding to continue: *“We also know that some current provision is dependent on funding schemes such as DSD’s Women’s Centre Childcare Fund (WCCF), which provides low cost childcare focusing on unemployed parents in personal, vocational or educational training, and the childcare support provided by DEL to parents training for employment and via DSD’s Neighbourhood Renewal funding. We wish to see this funding, and the childcare services it makes possible, continue.”*³⁶

³⁶ Evaluation of Regional Support Arrangements for the Voluntary and Community Sector, Final Report, June 2015, DSD and DARD

2.42 On meeting with the Childcare Strategy Team following release of the draft Childcare Strategy it transpired that there was an assumption that WCCF would cease and the current Bright Start School Age Childcare Grant Scheme (which aims to create or sustain school age childcare provision) would be extended to 0-4 year olds and that Women's Centres would have to apply through this scheme. Current policy supporting this grant initiative only allows for support up to a maximum of 25% towards the cost of a child's place. The support is for a limited time only and is currently only available to schools, new start-ups (social economy businesses) and new provision (new places within existing providers).

2.43 If support through the Strategy is extended to 0-4 year olds but based on current policy then Women's Centres will not be able to offer fully supported places for disadvantaged children. They may not even be able to apply for any of this support as they are existing organisations, not new start-ups and may not have the capacity to expand in order to provide new places (new provision).

Importance of Women's Centres

2.44 Focus group research with local women's centres highlighted the absolute importance of these centres to the lives of the women who used them. Women's centres provide valuable free childcare enabling women to have the opportunity to undertake training and education and carry out a range of job search activities. The centres also provide important opportunities for friendship and social interaction for these women. The supported childcare through the centres also ensures that disadvantaged children have an opportunity to experience a childcare setting, to socialise, interact, play and learn in a supported environment.

“We need more funding on the ground for women’s centres and groups in these difficult times.”

“That’s why the Women’s Centre is so special. They provide excellent, free childcare.”

“A couple came to the Women’s Centre to get foodbank vouchers, both were working and paying for childcare. They just didn’t have enough money to live on.”

- Focus Group Attendees

3. Consultation Questions

1. What is your view of the three core aims of the policy?

That all parents have access to good quality and affordable childcare for their children.

3.1 It is important that one of the core aims of any policy on childcare should be to ensure that all parents have access to good quality and affordable childcare for their children. However we would suggest that there should be a particular focus/targeting on those who live in disadvantaged and rural communities in Northern Ireland who are likely to be even more adversely affected by a lack of access to affordable childcare.

3.2 We would also suggest that the word “flexible” should also be used within this core aim. There is a need for flexible childcare provision to provide help for those who do not work traditional employment patterns or outside office hours.

Parents can access, stay and progress in paid work and in turn contribute to our economy in Northern Ireland.

3.3 The focus of the Government’s Welfare Reform agenda, in particular the introduction of Universal Credit has been to simplify the benefits system and help people move into and progress in work. Increased conditionality within

Universal Credit means that more and more women, particularly lone parents, will be required to look for work while their children are young. This makes the assumption that there are structures in place to support them to make this move including affordable childcare, transport and training/education.

3.4 Some women, particularly those in disadvantaged and rural communities, may need access to training/education supported by childcare to enable them to successfully make the move into work.

3.5 For many women, particularly those in disadvantaged and rural areas, access to flexible, affordable childcare, is often not available. In order that **all** parents can access, stay and progress in paid work and contribute to the economy there is a need for support structures to be in place in order to achieve this aim.

That all types of childcare providers are enabled to provide high quality and accessible childcare, and that the childcare workforce is valued.

3.6 It is of great importance that the childcare workforce is valued given how critical their role is in laying the foundations for and supporting lifelong learning in children.

3.7 The vast majority of the childcare workforce is female and this perpetuates the notion that childcare is a woman's role. A greater representation of men in this sector would help to shift this culture and ensure that childcare is shared more equally.

3.8 There is a need for the childcare profession to be more highly valued and better paid and to maintain a highly skilled workforce. This would ensure that childcare workers, who hold such an important role in the development of children, can provide for themselves and their families and that childcare is viewed as an attractive profession.

3.9 Problems with the payment structure within Universal Credit have caused issues for both parents and the childcare profession. At the launch of the

Northern Ireland Childcare Survey 2019³⁷ Maria McDonagh owner of Adventures Day Nursery in Belfast spoke about the difficulties they were experiencing with Universal Credit. She said: *“paying childcare in arrears is having a major impact on parent’s ability to keep up with payments. It can be three months before parents get their money.”* Maria believes that full migration to Universal Credit will inevitably mean that some day nurseries will have to close as they will be unable to wait on their payments.

2. Are the four themes sufficiently comprehensive?

Theme 1 – Current Childcare provision in Northern Ireland

3.10 Please see section on the Women’s Centre Childcare Fund (WCCF). We recommend that the evaluation of the WCCF carried out by the Strategic Investment Board (SIB) in June 2015 should be part of the analysis of current childcare provision in Northern Ireland. The WCCF has played an important part in providing childcare for disadvantaged children and has been core to women’s centres’ ability to provide continued community development in disadvantaged areas. We advocate for the WCCF to become a permanent fund under the DfC to support low-income, disadvantaged families.

Theme 2 – Flexible childcare for school aged children

3.11 We welcome the focus on the need for flexible childcare for school aged children. Modern working practices have meant increases in the numbers of people working in atypical forms of work and many of these jobs do not fall within traditional office hours. This creates the need for flexible, affordable childcare to support these workers.

3.12 The first intervention delivered through the draft Childcare Strategy was the Bright Start School Age Childcare Grant Scheme which funded 25% of each place, however uptake of the scheme was very low in disadvantaged and rural areas. Low income families could not afford the fee needed to make

³⁷ Northern Ireland Childcare Survey 2019, Employers for Childcare, June 2019
<https://www.employersforchildcare.org/report/northern-ireland-childcare-survey-2019/>

up the other 75% cost to deliver each place. Community based childcare providers including the women's centres could not absorb the shortfall between income and delivery cost. This was also the case in many rural areas where transport costs further increase the cost of delivery by providers. We advocate the need for a greater level of support for school age childcare in disadvantaged and rural areas.

"Having a breakfast club would mean that I don't need a childminder for 45 minutes in the mornings which I would have to pay a whole morning session for."

- Questionnaire Respondent

"Breakfast and afterschool clubs are essential as a lot of parents start at 8am or earlier and some do not finish to 5pm or after."

- Questionnaire Respondent

"I need breakfast clubs as they are essential to be able to drop my kids off to be able to get to work and get a parking space."

- Questionnaire Respondent

"Breakfast and afterschool clubs are a good way to help parents so they are not paying full childcare costs."

- Questionnaire Respondent

"Costs of childcare are extremely high especially in non-social hours which I need as a nurse."

- Questionnaire Respondent

3.13 The cost of accessing summer childcare is prohibitive for many low income families and their children. In addition many of these families find it difficult to meet the costs of feeding their children during the summer holidays.

It is vitally important that any future childcare provision addresses these needs.

3.14 The majority of women’s centres operate a three-week summer scheme supported through a variety of funding including their local council, health trusts and other charitable funds. For example, Kilcooley Women’s Centre provide a 3-week summer scheme for 5-11 year olds. This summer over 100 children were supported with a breakfast and lunch club through this scheme.



“In the summer I rely on family a lot. It is very expensive to use registered childcare for all my four children. I would not be able to work if I had to pay for childcare for all my children.”

- Questionnaire Respondent

“Summer childcare is extremely beneficial, almost critical for me to allow me to work full time.”

- Questionnaire Respondent

“I am a single parent with three children. I would find it impossible to pay for childcare over the summer as it’s too much pressure on my family to look after three children.”

- Questionnaire Respondent

Theme 3 – Quality childcare for all children

3.15 Please see section on the Women’s Centre Childcare Fund (WCCF). Once again we recommend that the evaluation of the WCCF carried out by the Strategic Investment Board (SIB) in June 2015 should be part of the analysis of quality childcare for all children. We believe there must be a focus on the need to provide childcare for those living in disadvantaged and rural areas of Northern Ireland and this must be an integral part of any childcare provision.

3.16 Given the Government’s ongoing welfare reform agenda we believe there is a need for additional considerations within this Theme. We would suggest:

Impact of Welfare Reform – looking at how to mitigate the impact of welfare reform on childcare access for low income households.

Access to community-based training and education – looking at how the provision of no cost/low cost childcare can enable low income households to access training and education to enable them to make the move into work.

Working Poverty – looking at how low income working families can be better supported through the provision of flexible, affordable childcare to ensure that work pays.

Theme 4 – National framework for childcare

3.17 As outlined at the start of this response it has been a long held societal view that childcare is a predominantly female role. While attitudes are changing it remains the prevailing view. There is therefore a need for

frameworks to be put in place to ensure that this role can be more equally shared and that the infrastructure exists so that families have genuine choices when it comes to childcare.

3.18 There is a strong business case for flexible working practices and the benefits are well known for both employers, employees and their families. Flexible working depends on genuinely supportive employers so that these policies go beyond words and are committed to in practice. It can be more difficult for smaller businesses to give a range of flexible working options. Given that Northern Ireland is a small business economy this should be given special consideration so that smaller businesses have access to the help and support they need to provide greater opportunities for flexible working to their workers.

3.19 Paternity leave and shared parental leave are important parts of efforts to promote gender equality. Current paternity leave provision and pay is not enough to facilitate true gender equality and while shared parental leave is on the statute book take up levels are low and it is far from a reality for many working families. The reasons for this low take up must be analysed so that improvements can be made to ensure that shared parental leave is a realistic option for working families.

“Fathers should be allowed more time off. Two weeks just isn’t enough as some mother need more help especially to prevent maternal mental health problems.”

- Questionnaire Respondent

“Fathers should get more involved at the early stages of raising their child and this could be possible if paternity leave is paid for longer.”

- Questionnaire Respondent

“Paternity leave is not long enough and should be paid for longer. It should not be for one or the other parent. The option should be for both parents for the first month especially for mothers who have had C-sections who may have other young children at home to look after.”

- Questionnaire Respondent

“Paternity Leave should be offered to all dads for longer than the current two weeks.”

- Questionnaire Respondent

“It is important for the father to help with the care of the baby and the mother. I think paternity leave should be three months and a minimum of six weeks.”

- Questionnaire Respondent

“I feel paternity leave should be longer. I think fathers often feel they can only take two weeks, although maternity/paternity care can be shared, based on the employers cultural opinions.”

- Questionnaire Respondent

3.20 There is some confusion among parents about the existing help available with childcare costs. Employers for Childcare raised this issue in their latest Childcare Survey with almost 1 in 5 parents having little or no confidence that they are accessing all of the financial support for their childcare costs that they are entitled to.³⁸ It is therefore vital that parents have access to information both on childcare options and financial support available. The provision of advice and information around these issues should therefore form a consideration within this theme.

³⁸ Northern Ireland Childcare Survey 2019, Employers for Childcare, June 2019
<https://www.employersforchildcare.org/report/northern-ireland-childcare-survey-2019/>

3.21 We would like to see the 30 hours free childcare available in England extended to Northern Ireland (see paragraphs 2.8 and 2.9). This should include any lessons which have been learned from the operation of this scheme in England in order to make it more effective.

3. What additional themes would you suggest?

3.22 Please see suggestions in answer to question 2.

4. Are there any specific proposals you wish to submit under any of the themes for our consideration?

3.23 Please see suggestions in answer to question 2.

5. What are your views on the childcare strategy consultation and in your view how could this be improved?

3.24 We remain disappointed that despite a Government consultation on a Childcare Strategy for Northern Ireland in 2015 we are still the only part of the UK without a Childcare Strategy.

3.25 The Women's Regional Consortium raised a number of concerns in its response³⁹ to the OFMDFM consultation 'Delivering social change through childcare: a ten year strategy for affordable and integrated childcare 2015-2025'. The Consortium argued that current Government austerity/welfare reform policies mean that the proposals contained within the draft Childcare Strategy may not be able to be meaningfully realised and that any impact may prove insubstantial given the more pronounced impact on poverty in Northern Ireland.

³⁹ Response to: 'Delivering social change through childcare: a ten year strategy for affordable and integrated childcare 2015-2025', Women's Regional Consortium, November 2015
<http://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/sites/default/files/FINAL%20WRC%20response%20C'care%2012%2011%2015.pdf>

3.26 The Consortium's response also raised concerns about the lack of appropriate integrated childcare and community education which acts as a barrier to the engagement of socio-economically disadvantaged women in education/training and in the economy. The Consortium recommended that Government should take proper account of the likelihood of a worsening of gender equality over the lifetime of the strategy. This is due to the relationship between women's economic participation, austerity and the restricted nature of integrated childcare/education provision for vulnerable women in the community.

3.27 In its response the Consortium also argued that any progress on childcare provision in Northern Ireland must also recognise the need for low cost/no cost childcare provision for marginalised and vulnerable women in disadvantaged and rural areas. The Consortium stated that Government should recognise the case for properly sustaining childcare provision through the Women's Centre Childcare Fund (WCCF) model on a ring-fenced, protected basis given the Fund's positive evaluation in terms of need, impact and value for money.

3.28 The Consortium noted its profound concern about the absence of any budgetary commitment to underpin the strategy. The prospect of an effective strategy relies on a funded Childcare Strategy which recognises childcare as an important part of our infrastructure and in the promotion of gender equality.

3.29 Northern Ireland has now been without a local government for over 900 days. This lack of local government has led to stalled progress on many women's rights issues including the implementation of a Childcare Strategy for Northern Ireland to name but one.

6. Do you agree with the four themes of the paper?

3.30 Please see suggestions in answer to question 2.

7. What additional themes or sub themes would you suggest should be taken into consideration?

3.31 Please see suggestions in answer to question 2.

4. Conclusion

4.1 While we welcome the increased focus on childcare availability and affordability in Northern Ireland we are concerned about how this will be progressed given the collapse of the Northern Ireland Assembly. The collapse of the Assembly has stalled much-needed progress on a range of women's rights issues in Northern Ireland and we do not wish to see the vitally important issue of childcare sitting on the shelf any longer.

4.2 Childcare must become a higher priority for policymakers. It plays a crucial role in getting people into employment and in helping to tackle disadvantage and gender inequality.