



Women's Regional Consortium

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

Response to: Section 75 Equality Action Plan

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Women's Centre Derry
ACCESS & EMPOWERMENT

WOMEN'STEC
Enabling women into non-traditional employment

**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 (hereafter, either the Women's Regional Consortium or simply the Consortium), which is funded by the Department for Communities and the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.

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 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
- ♀ Foyle Women's Information Network (FWIN)

1.3 The Consortium is 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 ensures that there is a

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

continuous two-way flow of information between government and the sector. It also ensures that organisations/centres and groups are made aware of consultations, government planning and policy implementation. In turn, the Consortium ascertains the views, needs and aspirations of women in disadvantaged and rural areas and takes these views forward to influence policy development and future government planning, which ultimately results in the empowerment of local women in disadvantaged and rurally isolated communities.

1.4 The Consortium works to advance the interests and enhance the wellbeing of disadvantaged, marginalised women in some of the most deprived areas of Northern Ireland.

1.5 The Women's Regional Consortium appreciates the opportunity to respond to the Department for Communities (DfC) consultation on its 'Section 75 Equality Action Plan'. The contents of this Equality Action Plan are particularly important to the work of the Consortium given the Department's responsibility for social welfare, employment support, tackling disadvantage and promoting equality of opportunity including gender equality. Women's views were gathered through focus group discussions and individual interviews in women's centres.

2. General Comments

Gender Equality

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 In Northern Ireland the female employment rate stands at 68.7%² Northern Ireland has the second lowest employment rate for women across the UK Regions and countries.³

2.3 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%.⁴ 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.*”

“I think that in Northern Ireland there are still a lot of stereotypical attitudes around gender roles. Men often do not see childcare as their role and there is the assumption that it is the woman’s role – that women are the homemakers. I hope that this is changing and things will be different in the future.”

- Focus Group Respondent

2.4 Increasing labour market participation among underrepresented groups such as women, particularly mothers, supports economic growth and helps narrow the employment and gender pay gaps.⁵ Work in this area must remain a government priority given the impact on individual women, their families and communities and on the economy as a whole.

² Northern Ireland Labour Market Report, NISRA, August 2019

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

³ Labour market statistics: UK regions and countries, House of Commons Library, Briefing Paper 7950, August 2019

<https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-7950/CBP-7950.pdf>

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>

⁵ Closing the Gender Gap: Act Now, OECD, December 2012

“When you have been off work having kids you find that no one cares about you going back to work!”

- Focus Group Respondent

Gender Pay Gap

2.5 The Women and Equalities Committee said in 2016 about the causes of the gender pay gap: *“a large part of the gender pay gap is down to women’s concentration in part-time work. Many women are trapped in low paid, part-time work that doesn’t make use of their skills. This is partly due to women’s disproportionate responsibility for unpaid caring, but also because many of the sectors women work in, like retail and care, offer predominantly low-paid, part-time work.”*⁶

2.6 Government has an important role to play in highlighting the economic benefits of accessing and retaining the talent and experience of pregnant women and new parents. There is also a need to understand the scale and extent of pregnancy and maternity related discrimination which unfortunately still exists. Transparency measures within employment such as Gender Pay Gap reporting are an important tool in highlighting where discrimination is happening and identifying actions to tackle it.

2.7 The ECNI have called for prompt action to bring Section 19 of the Employment Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 into force⁷ so that employers must publish gender pay gap information. This should include timelines for compliance with the duties and responsibility for implementing the duties. The ECNI have also called for Government to promptly implement a gender pay

⁶ Gender Pay Gap, Second Report of Session 2015-16, House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee (HC 584), March 2016

<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201516/cmselect/cmwomeq/584/584.pdf>

⁷ Gender Pay Strategy and Pay Reporting, Policy Recommendations, Key Point Briefing, Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, August 2019

<https://www.equalityni.org/ECNI/media/ECNI/Publications/Delivering%20Equality/GenderPayPolicy-KeyPointBriefing.pdf?ext=.pdf>

strategy and action plan for Northern Ireland to address structural factors within society and the workplace without further delay.

Childcare

2.8 Childcare accessibility and affordability has an important impact on the choices that parents make about work particularly for women. 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, especially in the short term, is being spent on childcare then work may be financially unviable.⁸ ECNI said: *“Childcare should be both affordable and geographically accessible to facilitate employment.”*

2.9 OECD evidence⁹ suggests that affordable, quality childcare is one of the key factors in increasing female participation in the economy. *“The analysis suggests that policies to foster greater enrolment in formal childcare have a small but significant effect on full-time and part-time labour force participation – and these effects are much more robust than the effects of paid leave or other family benefits.”* This evidence also shows *“there is an unambiguous positive correlation between the provision of childcare services for the under-3s and full-time and part-time female participation in the labour market.”*

2.10 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

⁸ 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/MaximisingChildcareMainReport2013.pdf>

⁹ Drivers of Female Labour Force Participation in the OECD, Olivier Thévenon, OECD Social Employment and Migration Working Papers No 145, May 2013
<https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/5k46cvrgnms6-en.pdf?expires=1571830998&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=893CCB5545ED814C1D3A9B364B8ACB9A>

participation in the labour market and will have resulting positive impacts for gender equality.

“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

“Most childcare places are way too expensive.”

- Questionnaire Respondent

Childcare Costs in Northern Ireland

2.11 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.¹⁰

“I have three children and I’ve been at home taking care of the kids since they were born. I love that I have been able to do that. There was a big gap between my second and third child and I thought about going back to work when my second child started school. I found that I would have been lucky to get a job after being off for so long, never mind getting a part-time job to suit the children. A big reason for me making the decision not to go back to work was that it would cost so much to send my children to childcare.”

- Focus Group Respondent

¹⁰ 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>

“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

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

- Questionnaire Respondent

2.12 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.¹¹ This suggests that families in Northern Ireland are paying a greater proportion of their household income on childcare than families in England.

2.13 Research by Employers for Childcare¹² 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).

¹¹ Northern Ireland Childcare Survey 2019, Employers for Childcare, June 2019
<https://www.employersforchildcare.org/report/northern-ireland-childcare-survey-2019/>

¹² 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 formal 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.”

“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

2.14 The CEDAW Committee has 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.”*¹³ The Committee recommended that government should ensure

¹³ 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

the availability of affordable and accessible childcare particularly in Northern Ireland.¹⁴

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

- Questionnaire Respondent

Access to Support for Preschool Childcare

2.15 There is less government help for preschool childcare costs 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 which is not to be regarded as childcare, cannot be provided by childminders and is more restrictive than the system in England.

2.16 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.¹⁵ 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.”*

Access to Childcare for Low Income and Deprived Families

2.17 Research 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.¹⁶ 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.

¹⁴ Ibid, para 46

¹⁵ Northern Ireland Childcare Survey 2019, Employers for Childcare, June 2019
<https://www.employersforchildcare.org/report/northern-ireland-childcare-survey-2019/>

¹⁶ 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>

2.18 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. A lack of appropriate integrated childcare and community education acts as a fundamental barrier to the engagement of socio-economically disadvantaged women in education and training and in employment. However, this integrated provision is at risk and has significantly reduced due to austerity.

2.19 The Women's Centres Childcare Fund (WCCF) was established in April 2008 following on from the Children and Young Peoples Fund as 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.

2.20 The WCCF enables affordable, accessible childcare support to be given to women who are jobseekers, in education and training or personal development/volunteering to improve their long term outcomes and employment options. The WCCF enables women's centres to provide childcare places that are 100% supported for the most disadvantaged children. These supported places not only allow the children to socialise, play, interact and learn but they give women the opportunity to undertake training, attend counselling, carry out job searches and attend interviews.

2.21 An independent evaluation of the WCCF was completed by the Strategic Investment Board in June 2015. It was very positive in terms of highlighting the need for the fund in terms of impact for children and families supported and the value for money per child place. The evaluation recommended: *"WCCF to become an established fund, 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."* Despite this positive evaluation the WCCF has been funded on an emergency basis since 2008.

2.22 The Women’s Regional Consortium raised a number of these concerns in its response¹⁷ to the OFMDFM consultation ‘Delivering social change through childcare: a ten year strategy for affordable and integrated childcare 2015-2025.’ 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.

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

- Questionnaire Respondent

2.23 In its response the Consortium also argued that any progress on childcare provision in Northern Ireland must 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.

2.24 We understand that the DfC has no policy responsibility to provide childcare in Northern Ireland. However the Department’s rationale for providing the funding, as detailed in the evaluation, was centred on the premise that the WCCF contributes to reducing child poverty, provides opportunities for parents to better themselves and contribute significantly to their communities, thereby tackling disadvantage. Indeed the provision of funding for the WCCF feeds into many of the DfC’s responsibilities including

¹⁷ 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>

gender equality, child poverty, social inclusion, finding employment and programmes that target social need and neighbourhood renewal.

2.25 The issue of access to flexible, affordable childcare is one which is raised time and time again in engagement sessions with groups of women. Childcare is central to the issue of female participation in the workforce and is one of the most important barriers to women's employment participation. However childcare has not been mentioned even once within the Department's Equality Action Plan. This is despite the fact that the DfC is the Department responsible for funding the WCCF.

2.26 The availability of accessible, affordable childcare, gender equality and increasing women's employment participation are undoubtedly linked. We would argue that it would be very difficult for the Department to make any real progress on tackling the barriers women may experience in employment participation without taking some actions around the issue of childcare and we stress the need for these to be reflected in this Equality Action Plan.

Economic Inactivity in Northern Ireland

2.27 In 2018 there were 318,000 economically inactive people of working age in NI.¹⁸ This accounts for over a quarter of the working age population (27.2%). Northern Ireland has consistently had the highest economic inactivity rate of all UK regions. Northern Ireland's economic inactivity rate is 27.2% compared to 21.7% for the UK as a whole. Within these levels there has consistently been a higher number of inactive females than males with approximately three-fifths of those inactive being female.

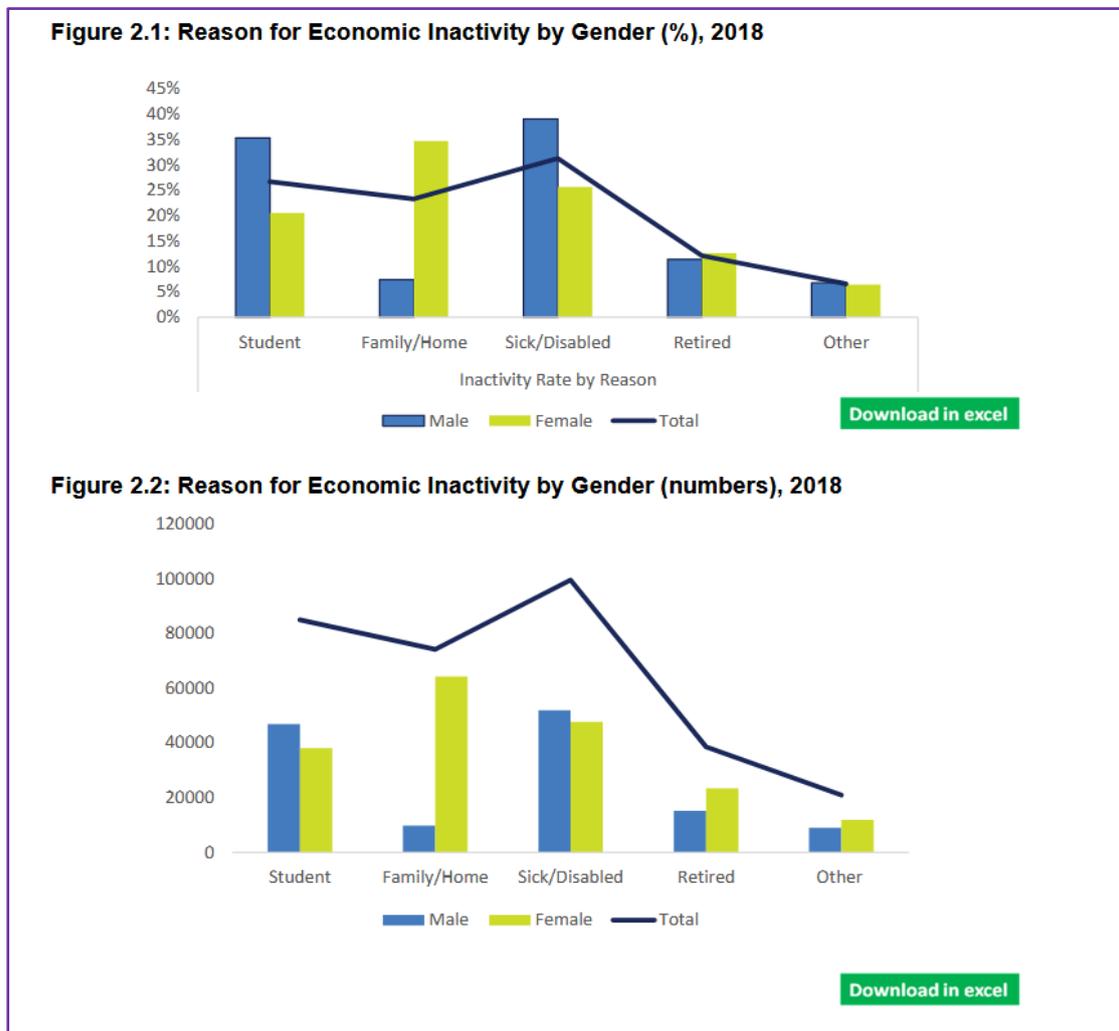
2.28 The graphs below (Figure 2.1 and 2.2)¹⁹ show the reasons for economic inactivity broken down by gender and these highlight an important gender divide. Inactivity due to caring for family or home was the most common

¹⁸ Economic Inactivity in Northern Ireland, NISRA, June 2019

<https://www.nisra.gov.uk/sites/nisra.gov.uk/files/publications/Economic%20Inactivity%20in%20Northern%20Ireland.pdf>

¹⁹ Ibid

reason given by women for their inactivity but it was the second least common reason given by men (34.7% of women and 7.4% of men).



2.29 These figures have particular implications for the DfC in their actions to target the barriers women and people with dependents may experience in employment participation. It is clear from these figures that actions need to be taken to target inactivity levels among females. Taking actions around the availability of accessible, affordable childcare and the availability of integrated childcare and community education/training opportunities, which target socio-economically disadvantaged women, should form the basis of some of the work in this area.

Impact of Austerity/Welfare Reform

2.30 Research suggests that austerity and welfare reform has a greater impact on women than men. Research by the House of Commons Library shows that 86% of the savings to the Treasury through tax and benefit changes since 2010 will have come from women. The analysis estimates that the cuts will have cost women a total of £79bn since 2010, against £13bn for men.²⁰

2.31 Women experience greater impacts from welfare reform and austerity due to a range of societal factors that make women more vulnerable to these policies. Women are more likely to claim social security benefits, more likely to be in low-paid, part-time and insecure work, more likely to be caring for children/family members and more likely to have to make up for cuts to services through unpaid work. Regardless of the reason for this inequality the effect is the same - the cumulative effect of these reforms is felt by women and by the most vulnerable women - those on low incomes.

2.32. Social security has a vital role to play in easing the impact of poverty on families. However social security developments since 2010 have tended to reduce the ability of the system to protect against poverty.²¹

2.33. Despite the vulnerability of women to austerity policies, many post-2010 social security reforms have taken place without sufficient analysis of these measures on women's equality.²² In Northern Ireland they were implemented without regard to the contextual factors which increase women's vulnerability to poverty including: high rates of female economic inactivity, no childcare strategy, high number of women with adult care responsibilities, a weak labour

²⁰ Estimating the gender impact of tax and benefit changes, Richard Cracknell, Richard Keen, Commons Briefing Papers SN06758, December 2017

<http://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN06758/SN06758.pdf>

²¹ Protecting dignity, fighting poverty and promoting social inclusion in devolved social security, Dr Mark Simpson, Ulster University, June 2018

http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/raise/knowledge_exchange/briefing_papers/series7/simpson060618.pdf

²² The impact of austerity on women, D Sands, Fawcett Society, 2012

<https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=f61c3b7e-b0d9-4968-baf6-e3fa0ef7d17f>

market, high number of women working part-time and in precarious jobs and wages lower than the UK average.²³

2.34 Universal Credit was introduced as the central plank of the Government's welfare reform programme with the aim of simplifying the benefits system and helping people move into and progress in work. It has been argued that Universal Credit discriminates against women by design.²⁴ It has a number of key design features which are likely to have disproportionately negative impacts on women including the single payment, increased conditionality particularly for lone parents, the lack of a second earner work allowance and difficulties with the payment of childcare costs through Universal Credit.

2.35 A number of the other welfare reforms including the benefit cap, the bedroom tax, the two child limit and the benefit freeze are also likely to have greater impacts for women. All of the households impacted by the benefit cap are comprised of either lone parents or couples with children. At July 2019 85% of capped households were lone parents and 15% were couples with children.²⁵ The bedroom tax is likely to have greater impacts on women as women have greater reliance on social security benefits. Housing Benefit claim numbers show that 61% of claimants are female.²⁶ Both these reforms are currently mitigated in Northern Ireland however these mitigations are due to run out in March 2020. The two child limit and the benefit freeze both impact on benefits paid for children including tax credits and child benefit. The majority of these benefits are paid to women and therefore these policies will have significant impacts for women particularly for lone parents.

²³ Shadow report for the examination of the UK by the Committee on the Convention to Eliminate Discrimination against Women, NIWEP, January 2019

²⁴ Something needs saying about universal credit and women – it is discrimination by design, Alison Garnham, CPAG, 17 August 2018
<http://www.cpag.org.uk/content/something-needs-saying-about-universal-credit-and-women-%E2%80%93-it-discrimination-design>

²⁵ Benefit Cap: Northern Ireland, Data to July 2019, October 2019, DfC
<https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/system/files/publications/communities/benefit-cap-statistics-july-2019.pdf>

²⁶ Data provided by NIHE to WSN as a Freedom of Information request, 11/03/19

Childcare & Austerity

2.36 The austerity/welfare reform agenda has brought issues around female participation in employment into sharper focus. The government's drive to get more people into work 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. In addition, austerity has led to an increase in precarious working arrangements including zero-hours contracts. These patterns of working are often incompatible with family life and existing childcare provision.

2.37 In its response to 'Delivering social change through childcare: a ten year strategy for affordable and integrated childcare 2015-2025'²⁷ the Women's Regional Consortium 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 an issue which significantly impacts on the employment prospects of women and in helping women escape in-work poverty especially in times of austerity.

2.38 The Childcare For All campaign²⁸ 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.

²⁷ 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>

²⁸ The Women's Support Network (WSN) 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-centred 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
<https://www.childcareforallni.com/>

Local Research on the Impact of Austerity/Welfare Reform on Women in Northern Ireland

2.39 The Women’s Regional Consortium in Northern Ireland carried out research on the impact of austerity and welfare reform on women in disadvantaged and rural areas of Northern Ireland.²⁹ This local research showed the overwhelmingly negative impact of austerity/welfare reform on women’s everyday lives. 78% of the women who took part in the research had to make cutbacks in their everyday life or felt they had been impacted by austerity.

2.40 This research also showed some of the difficulties local women faced in getting work that fits with their childcare responsibilities. Women at focus group sessions discussed the lack of quality jobs available in their local areas (often low wage and unsuitable hours to fit in with their caring obligations) as well as the lack of flexible, affordable childcare to enable them to make the move into work or allow them to achieve better quality work.

“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.”

- Focus Group Attendee

CEDAW Concerns about Austerity

2.41 Following its recent examination of the UK, the CEDAW Committee raised concerns about the impact of austerity measures on women.³⁰ The CEDAW Committee stated its concern about the *“disproportionately negative impact of austerity measures on women, who constitute the vast majority of single parents and are more likely to be engaged in informal, temporary or precarious*

²⁹ Impact of Ongoing Austerity: Women’s Perspectives, Women’s Regional Consortium, April 2019

<http://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/node/150>

³⁰ Concluding Observations on the eighth periodic report of United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, CEDAW/C/GBR/CO/8, March 2019 (para 16)

https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW/C/GBR/CO/8&Lang=En

employment.” The Committee also reiterated its previous concern that austerity has meant “*cuts in funding to organisations that provide social services to women, including those that provide services for women only, as well as budget cuts in the public sector, where more women are employed than men.*” It also noted with concern that “*reductions in social care services increase the burden on primary caregivers, who are disproportionately women.*”

2.42 The CEDAW Committee has recommended that the UK government “*undertake a comprehensive assessment on the impact of austerity measures on the rights of women and adopt measures to mitigate and remedy the negative consequences without delay.*”³¹

Considerations for DfC

2.43 The DfC has responsibility for making social security payments and implementing the Government’s welfare reform programme in Northern Ireland. Given the gendered nature of many of these reforms it is important that the impacts of welfare reform/austerity are researched and assessed so that actions can be taken to mitigate any negative effects.

2.44 There are likely to be even greater impacts in Northern Ireland as it has a number of economic and social features which make it more vulnerable to austerity policies not least that it is more dependent on social security than the UK average. Northern Ireland tends to be disproportionately affected by any changes to social security due to its relatively high levels of economic inactivity and disability, lower average earnings and larger average family size compared to the rest of the UK.³²

³¹ Concluding Observations on the eighth periodic report of United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, CEDAW/C/GBR/CO/8, March 2019 (para 17)
https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW/C/GBR/CO/8&Lang=En

³² Protecting dignity, fighting poverty and promoting social inclusion in devolved social security, Dr Mark Simpson, University of Ulster, June 2018
http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/raise/knowledge_exchange/briefing_papers/series7/simpson060618.pdf

2.45 In Northern Ireland a package of mitigation measures is in place to mitigate against some of the worst impacts of welfare reform. However, there has been a significant understand and a key part of the mitigations package to help low-income families, the Cost of Work Allowance, has not been implemented at all. In addition concerns are growing about the looming ‘cliff edge’ many claimants will face when mitigations end in March 2020 and the resulting adverse impacts on the most vulnerable and disadvantaged. We are proud to be members of the CliffEdge NI Coalition³³ campaigning for the mitigations to be extended and to take account of new challenges such as Universal Credit.

2.46 Women’s Regional Consortium research on the impact of austerity/welfare reform on local women made a number of recommendations for government.³⁴ These included the extension of the mitigations package, the need for increased funding for independent advice services and proper recognition and support for the role of community-based women-only provision in addressing women’s vulnerability and poverty in rural and disadvantaged areas. The Consortium also agreed with the CEDAW Committee recommendations to undertake a comprehensive assessment on the impact of austerity measures on women and to mitigate and remedy the negative consequences without delay.

Funding for the Women’s Sector

2.47 Welfare Reform has helped to create a crisis situation where women need more help in the form of advice, support, education and training yet despite this funding for community-based women-only provision is being cut. Support services for women are under serious threat from funding cuts with many organisations being forced to reduce services, losing staff or closing

³³ The CliffEdgeNI Coalition is a group of over 100 organisations from across Northern Ireland who have come together to express concerns about the end of welfare reform mitigations in March 2020 and to campaign for their extension.

³⁴ Impact of Ongoing Austerity: Women’s Perspectives, Women’s Regional Consortium, April 2019
<http://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/node/150>

altogether. To compound this funding deficit it is feared that Brexit will also mean the loss of valuable EU funding.

2.48 DfC provides funding for the women's sector through a range of programmes. This essential funding allows women's organisations to provide invaluable frontline services for women. This funding also provides an opportunity for these organisations to lever in other funding to provide additional services for women and children in disadvantaged and rural areas.

2.49 Many community-based women's organisations provide a wide range of vital services to low-income and marginalised women including the provision of foodbank vouchers, help with clothing, baby essentials, furniture and other household items as well as emotional support and 'softer' support services. The value of this work cannot be under-estimated yet is often not reflected in the statistics required for reporting to funders and can be difficult to quantify.

“Every woman who walks into the centre wants to make some change in their life - we provide a supportive way for them to do this. Outcomes in women's centres are better - because of the range of services people in need are able to access. We provide holistic support to these families including one to one family support, socialising, social supermarket, access to childcare, etc.”

- Focus Group Attendee

“We are not recognised for the work we do. We are sidelined a lot. Government have undervalued the work of women's centres which have grown in areas where there is the most disadvantage/need in Northern Ireland.”

- Focus Group Attendee

“Every single women's centre is devalued and constantly sidelined in Government policy. We are constantly having to justify our reason for being despite the work we do and the results we produce. This is coming from Government because of the way the funding is set up.”

- Focus Group Attendee

“You can’t deny all the positive work that is happening in women’s centres. Women’s centres are driving this positive work. We have taken what’s been given to us from DfC - working within these constraints and delivering the best outcomes we can. If we had more supportive funding and reporting structures we would be able to operate so much better. We are doing what we do in spite of the way things are.”

- Focus Group Attendee

“Projects are now going outside the women’s sector with no consultation. We are up against large organisations that don’t provide the additional things that women’s centres do that are very important and valuable to local women. This work is vital but often unseen like emotional support, childcare, education, advice, etc.”

- Focus Group Attendee

“One woman who came into Footprints was receiving support through daycare for her children, she was able to avail of training classes, advice from the family support worker, she was able to access the social supermarket as well as the one stop shop for financial advice checks, Bryson Energy Fuel check plus intensive support. She is now in part-time employment and her children are off the At Risk register. With this intensive support she was able to gain part-time employment within a year. This was holistic support targeted to her needs.”

- Focus Group Attendee

2.50 Once again the CEDAW Committee expressed concern about this issue in its recent examination of the UK. The committee reiterated its previous concern that austerity has meant *“cuts in funding to organisations that provide social services to women, including those that provide services for women only.”*³⁵

³⁵ Concluding Observations on the eighth periodic report of United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, CEDAW/C/GBR/CO/8, March 2019, para 16
https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW/C/GBR/CO/8&Lang=En

2.51 We believe that it is important that DfC should continue to support the role of community-based women-only provision as it is central to addressing women’s vulnerability and poverty in rural and disadvantaged areas. This should include a commitment to longer-term funding to enable the continuation and development of these vital services.

Working Poverty

2.52 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.³⁶ *“The likelihood of being in working poverty has been rising for families with children, with a particularly sharp increase for lone parents.”*³⁷ This is despite the government’s claim that work is the way out of poverty.

2.53 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.³⁸ 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 for work. This leaves many women locked in poverty especially when jobs are low paid.

2.54 Precarious employment³⁹ 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

³⁶ Child Poverty Briefing, NICCY, October 2017

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

³⁷ 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>

³⁸ A Female Face, Fabian Society Blog, Mary-Ann Stephenson, February 2019

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

³⁹ Employment which is insecure, uncertain or unpredictable from the point of view of the worker.

the majority of part-time temporary employees being women (68%) compared to men (32%).⁴⁰

2.55 While improved flexible working and parental leave policies are to be welcomed this must be accompanied by the availability of good quality work that enables women to work for a purpose. The economic participation of women is fundamentally reliant on the availability of appropriate childcare but it is also very much dependent on the availability of meaningful employment or 'work that pays' when childcare costs are factored in. In its actions to improve gender equality government should give due regard to this by integrating meaningful gendered job creation ambitions into its wider policy agendas.

"Where are all these jobs? There are no jobs that are flexible for women they are often low paid and 40 hours a week."

- Focus Group Attendees

Rural Women

2.56 Northern Ireland has a large rural population. Around 670,000 people live in rural areas amounting to 37% of the population.⁴¹ 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."*⁴²

2.57 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

⁴⁰ '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

⁴¹ <http://www.rdc.org.uk/statistics>

⁴² Rural Women's Manifesto, NIRWN, September 2015

<https://www.nirwn.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/NIRWN-Rural-Womens-Manifesto.pdf>

vulnerable to a lack of infrastructure particularly in terms of childcare and access to suitable transport to allow them to access better quality jobs.

2.58 Women's Regional Consortium research⁴³ showed that rural women faced difficulties in getting access to good quality, flexible jobs and meant that it became necessary for them 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.

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."

2.59 It is clear that women's economic participation in the workforce is impacted by a range of factors including the availability of flexible working practices, parental leave and pay policies, access to flexible, affordable childcare, access to training/education opportunities, access to affordable transport, etc. However other government policies such as welfare reform and job creation can also impact on female participation rates. These issues cannot be looked at in isolation from each other and Government actions

⁴³ Impact of Ongoing Austerity: Women's Perspectives, Women's Regional Consortium, April 2019 <http://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/node/150>

across these areas are needed to help increase women's participation in the workforce and in the promotion of gender equality.

3. Specific Comments

5. Audit of Inequalities

3.1 In an examination of the Department's functions and how these relate to the promotion of equality and good relations we believe that there are some gaps in relation to gender.

3.2 One of the key findings of the Audit of Inequalities was that poverty and social exclusion can have a differential impact on some groups of people, both in terms of the prevalence and severity of impacts. It includes in this list that "*women may experience barriers to employment and economic participation*" and that "*those with dependents or caring responsibilities may be more likely to be economically inactive and unable to access the labour market.*"

3.3 There are a number of other gender issues which we believe should be included within this section:

- Women rely more on benefits and tax credits than men. On average benefits make up twice as much of women's incomes than men's.⁴⁴
- Women have been more impacted by the welfare reform/austerity agenda than men. Research shows that 86% of the savings to the Treasury through tax and benefit changes since 2010 will have come from women.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ The Impact of Austerity on Women, Fawcett Society Policy Briefing, March 2012
<https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=f61c3b7e-b0d9-4968-baf6-e3fa0ef7d17f>

⁴⁵ Estimating the gender impact of tax and benefit changes, Richard Cracknell, Richard Keen, Commons Briefing Papers SN06758, December 2017
<http://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN06758/SN06758.pdf>

3.4 In addition the issue of dependents and caring responsibilities is a gendered one. Women are much more likely than men to be economically inactive and more likely to be carers:

- The majority of lone parents are women (91%).⁴⁶
- The majority of Carer's Allowance claimants are women (64% of Carer's Allowance claimants are female).⁴⁷
- Women are much more likely to be economically inactive than men. There has consistently been a higher number of inactive females than males, with approximately three-fifths (58.2%) of those inactive identifying as female.⁴⁸

Annex A: Department for Communities' Section 75 Action Plan 2019-2022

3.5. We have begun by suggesting a number of additional actions we would like to see added to the Action Plan. This is followed by specific comments on some of the actions included in the Action Plan consultation document.

Suggested Additional Actions

Childcare

3.6. As previously discussed it is impossible to make any real progress on women's participation in the workforce without taking specific actions on the issue of childcare including integrated childcare for training and education. This is particularly important for those who live in the most deprived communities. The lack of availability of accessible, affordable childcare is a

⁴⁶ 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>

⁴⁷ Benefit Statistics Summary Publication, Carer's Allowance, May 2019
<https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/benefits-statistics-summary-publication-national-statistics-may-2019>

⁴⁸ Economic Inactivity in Northern Ireland, NISRA, June 2019
<https://www.nisra.gov.uk/sites/nisra.gov.uk/files/publications/Economic%20Inactivity%20in%20Northern%20Ireland.pdf>

substantive and longstanding impediment to improved gender equality and economic growth in Northern Ireland.

3.7 While we understand that DfC has no policy responsibility to provide childcare in Northern Ireland the provision of funding by DfC to women's centres for the Women's Centre Childcare Fund (WCCF) must be acknowledged and developed. This funding makes vital contributions to reducing child poverty, tackling disadvantage in local communities and improving gender equality which are all central to the work of DfC.

3.8 We suggest the addition of a specific action on childcare to recognise the importance of the WCCF as a 'core childcare costs' programme helping children from disadvantaged communities to engage in learning and in helping women from disadvantaged communities engage in education, training and employment.

"WCCF is one of the few things that the Department do to remove the barriers that women face in moving forward in Northern Ireland."

- Focus Group Attendee

"Support and Childcare are the key to women moving on. Training and education to support the women wherever they are at in their lives. Childcare is essential to moving women into work."

- Focus Group Attendee

"Women are trying to move forward in terms of education and employment but they need access to childcare. The way things are set up at the minute especially with Universal Credit means they sometimes have no money to pay for childcare for 3 months. This is impacting on childcare providers too many of whom are having to close. Childcare is so necessary to women looking to get into employment."

- Focus Group Attendee

3.9 The CEDAW Committee pointed to the issue of childcare in Northern Ireland specifically in its recent examination of the UK and 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.”*⁴⁹ The Committee recommended that government should ensure the availability of affordable and accessible childcare particularly in Northern Ireland.⁵⁰

Suggested Action: To establish the Women’s Centre Childcare Fund (WCCF) on a planned, multi-year basis to provide for a longer-term response to address the needs of children and families from disadvantaged areas.

Impact of Austerity/Welfare Reform

3.10 As previously discussed women are more likely to claim social security benefits and have suffered greater impacts from the welfare reform/austerity agenda. This makes women more susceptible to poverty and disadvantage and should be specifically acknowledged within this Action Plan. The extent of this gendered disadvantage needs further research alongside the development of targeted actions to help the most disadvantaged women with these negative impacts.

3.11 It is important to note that the CEDAW Committee raised concerns about the impact of austerity measures on women stating that it was concerned about the *“disproportionately negative impact of austerity measures on women, who constitute the vast majority of single parents and are more likely to be engaged in informal, temporary or precarious employment.”*⁵¹ The Committee has recommended that the Government

⁴⁹ 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

⁵⁰ Ibid, para 46

⁵¹ Concluding Observations on the eighth periodic report of United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, CEDAW/C/GBR/CO/8, March 2019, para 16
https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW/C/GBR/CO/8&Lang=En

*“undertake a comprehensive assessment on the impact of austerity measures on the rights of women and adopt measures to mitigate and remedy the negative consequences without delay.”*⁵²

Suggested Action: To research the extent of the gendered impact of welfare reform/austerity measures on women in Northern Ireland and to develop actions to mitigate and remedy any negative impacts.

Welfare Reform Mitigations

3.12 A package of mitigation measures⁵³ was proposed by the Welfare Reform Mitigations Working Group⁵⁴ and agreed by the Northern Ireland Executive. These welcome mitigations mean that some claimants in Northern Ireland, including many women, are protected from some of the harshest impacts of welfare reform.

3.13 However, these mitigations are due to end in March 2020. This has led to concerns about a ‘cliff edge’ for many vulnerable people and the establishment of the CliffEdgeNI Coalition.⁵⁵ The Women’s Regional Consortium and many individual women’s sector organisations are proud members of this Coalition. The Coalition is concerned that Northern Ireland is approaching a mitigations ‘cliff edge’ and that it is important that people impacted by welfare reform in Northern Ireland continue to be able to access support beyond March 2020. This support should take account of the new challenges people are facing, particularly Universal Credit.

3.14 It is worrying to note that a large amount of the funding allocated for the mitigation package has not been spent. The most significant single reason for the underspend was the unspent £37 million per year in both 2017/18 and

⁵² Ibid, para 17

⁵³ Welfare Reform Mitigations Working Group Report, January 2016
<https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/ofmdfm/welfare-reform-mitigations-working-group-report.pdf>

⁵⁴ Established by the ‘A Fresh Start Agreement’ to provide recommendations to mitigate the impacts of welfare reform in Northern Ireland

⁵⁵ The CliffEdgeNI Coalition is a group of over 100 organisations in Northern Ireland who have joined together to express concern about the upcoming end of the welfare reform mitigations in March 2020.

2018/19 as a result of the non-implementation of the Cost of Work Allowance.⁵⁶ The Welfare Reform Mitigations Working Group described the Cost of Work Allowance as “*supplementary payments in recognition of the expenses those in employment incur with a special weighting for lone parents taking account of the cost of childcare.*”⁵⁷

3.15 There is no doubt that the full and efficient distribution of this mitigation package including the implementation of the Cost of Work Allowance could have extended the impact of mitigations and further eased the impact of welfare reform on the most vulnerable including many women.

“Women are more impacted in this area – there are high numbers of lone parents, high levels of deprivation, women impacted by the cuts and welfare reform changes.”

- Focus Group Attendee

3.16 The underspend from the mitigations package was returned to the Department of Finance for reallocation to other public services in Northern Ireland.⁵⁸ We believe that any underspend in mitigations should not be lost to the groups identified as needing protection from the worst impacts of welfare reform. This money should be ring-fenced and used specifically for the purpose of helping those who need this support.

Suggested Action: To provide welfare reform mitigations to those most negatively impacted by welfare reform and work to ensure maximum uptake of these to protect the most vulnerable. To protect any mitigations underspend so that it is ring-fenced to be used for those identified as needing this support.

⁵⁶ Review of Welfare Mitigation Schemes, Department for Communities, March 2019
<https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/system/files/publications/communities/dfc-review-of-welfare-mitigation-schemes-2019.pdf>

⁵⁷ Welfare Reform Mitigations Working Group Report, January 2016
<https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/ofmdfm/welfare-reform-mitigations-working-group-report.pdf>

⁵⁸ Review of Welfare Mitigation Schemes, Department for Communities, March 2019
<https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/system/files/publications/communities/dfc-review-of-welfare-mitigation-schemes-2019.pdf>

Comments on Actions

Action 1

3.17 We agree that women and people with dependents have been identified as inequalities within this action. We would suggest that any actions around employability programmes must be supported by access to childcare to ensure that these inequalities are properly tackled. This must include supported childcare to enable people to undertake education and training.

“Women need to be supported to achieve progression. They need to have access to childcare on site, access to homework clubs, build up peer networks of support, they need access to help with travel, subsidised/no cost education. All this works.”

- Focus Group Attendee

“Women mostly need confidence building, resilience training, self esteem, etc. There is a hierarchy of need in terms of development starting with these first steps. It doesn't matter what you have, if you have a degree, many still need to have the first steps done so they can develop.”

- Focus Group Attendee

Action 2

3.18 We agree that women and people with dependents have been identified as inequalities within this action. We would again suggest that any actions around matching local supply and demand must be supported by access to childcare to ensure that these inequalities are properly tackled. This must include supported childcare to enable people to undertake education and training.

Action 3

3.19 We agree that women and people with dependents have been identified as inequalities within this action. Not only should they have been identified because they may experience barriers to employment participation and are

more likely to be economically inactive but also because they are more impacted by austerity/welfare reform than men.

3.20 Once again we would suggest that any actions around employment programmes must be supported by access to childcare to ensure that these inequalities are properly tackled. This must include supported childcare to enable people to undertake education and training.

3.21 We would also like to see more detail on the success rates of the Steps 2 Success Employment programme particularly in terms of getting people into longer-term employment and broken down by gender. Without this detail it is hard to determine whether the investment in this action will produce any significant improvement in providing long-term employment opportunities for women and those with dependents and indeed for any of the equality groups identified.

Action 5

3.22 We suggest that women and people with dependents should be included in the inequalities identified under this action. This learning is provided in the public libraries network which does not address the barriers that many women/people with dependents face in participating in learning namely childcare.

3.23 We support the need to provide additional basic level IT learning opportunities given that Government policy has assumed the majority of consumer interactions with government services will be carried out online. A prime example of this has been the introduction of Universal Credit which is primarily a digital service.

3.24 Marginalised citizens are least able to make effective use of e-Government services. They are least likely to be connected, to be aware of services, or have the necessary digital literacy to make meaningful use of such services. As government services become “digital by default” there is growing

evidence that the most marginalised are being left behind.⁵⁹ This will be problematic for many women including refugee and migrant women, for whom language and IT literacy are often major barriers, rural women, who rely more on public transport to access public services than men, older women and low-income women with limited access.

3.25 Focus group discussions with local women showed that some of the women were confident using IT but some were not and some of these women were concerned about this acting as a barrier to them accessing government services including social security benefits.

“When I ring up about anything they always say go to www dot, I’m sick of it!”

- Focus Group Attendee

“You have to prove you are looking for work but not everyone has access to computers or the internet or the skills to use it.”

- Focus Group Attendee

“Some people don’t know how to do it. Computers are the first barrier to putting a claim in.”

- Focus Group Attendee

Action 6

3.26 We think that women and people with dependents should be included in the inequalities identified under this action. Poverty is gendered. The position of women in the labour market, the design of social security and women’s roles within the family all contribute to women’s vulnerability to poverty.⁶⁰ It is often

⁵⁹ Leaving No One Behind in a Digital World, Hernandez and Roberts, K4D Emerging Issues Report, Institute of Development Studies, November 2018
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5c178371ed915d0b8a31a404/Emerging_Issues_LNOBDW_final.pdf#page16

⁶⁰ The Female Face of Poverty, Women’s Budget Group, July 2018
<http://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/FINAL-Female-Face-of-Poverty.pdf>

said that women are the ‘shock absorbers’ of poverty going without food, clothes or warmth in order to meet the needs of other family members when money is tight.⁶¹

3.27 Recent research by Heriot-Watt University for the Trussell Trust ⁶² found evidence that women living in a couple with children tend to be more food insecure, on average, than men living in such couples. This is consistent with suggestions from research participants that mothers are particularly likely to skip meals or cut down portion sizes so that children have enough to eat. The research also found that lone parents were significantly over-represented at food banks compared with the general working age population (22% versus 5%). Worryingly this research found that just under 40% of those using services that refer to food banks have experienced domestic abuse.

Social Supermarkets

3.28 Footprints Women’s Centre was provided funding by the DfC to pilot a Social Supermarket. The Social Supermarket at Footprints is called **The FEED Project** to reflect the wraparound support provided (Food, Education, Empowerment, Debt Support). The FEED Project promotes food as a vehicle to engage with the most marginalised and vulnerable in the Colin Community. FEED Project users are mostly residents of the Colin neighbourhood experiencing food poverty with a focus on senior citizens, lone parents, the unemployed and the working poor.

3.29 FEED Project users can access healthy, low cost food for a period of six months from the Food Store. Users pay a £5 members fee and can use the store for one shop per week. During the six months users can access the Food Store they will be offered a range of programmes and services to address debt issues and educate and empower residents to transition out of poverty. A

⁶¹ A Female Face, Fabian Society Blog by Mary-Ann Stephenson, Women’s Budget Group, February 2019

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

⁶² State of Hunger, A study of poverty and food insecurity in the UK, Heriot-Watt University, November 2019

<https://www.stateofhunger.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/State-of-Hunger-Report-November2019-Digital.pdf>

weekly one-stop shop provides an advice clinic, benefit checks, energy savings advice, a financial capability programme, a life skills empowerment programme, employability skills and training and cookery skills programmes. Project users can also access existing services at Footprints Women's Centre.

“Footprints have been a good source of support for me while I was sick and on benefits. The Food Store has been a lifeline especially for fresh food.”

- Focus Group Attendee

“Outcomes in the women's centre are better - because of the range of services people in need were able to access.”

- Focus Group Attendee

“The social supermarket provides immediate support in terms of food but other things like advice, benefits advice and other intensive support through the women's centre services.”

- Focus Group Attendee

3.30 Since the opening of the refurbished Social Supermarket in Footprints in May 2019, 240 women have become members. All have completed a needs assessment and are engaged in other services offered by Footprints including childcare, crisis support and training programmes. Of these 240 women 75 have registered on the FEED Enhancement Programme and Take the Next Step Project funded by the DfC providing a programme tailored for each woman. The programme includes a progression plan with targets and objectives to progress into volunteering, placements and employment. The programme provides personal development, skills building, accredited courses and support during placements. Testimonials from the Take the Next Step Project show its positive impact on the lives of women:

“When I began this course I felt lost and unsure what I wanted to do with myself. Take the Next Step has given me the confidence to look at what I can do in the future. I am taking the steps to better myself and now realise my worth through classes and workshops getting certificates I never thought I’d get but do need. Thanks to Footprints I now see the sky is the limit and I’ve realised my goal in life is to work with special educational needs children in schools.”

“I had no direction and no value for a good job as I have been out of work for 8 years due to being a carer for my son. This course has offered me some personal development to help me centre myself and find out where I want to go from here. I am being offered support to get training, confidence in myself and teach me self-care. I have goals now and targets to help me reach my goals. I have a ways to go to get where I want to be but with the support from Footprints and the other women in the group I will get there.”

“This project has helped me to think of my future and how to move on with my life. It is also helping me to gain more confidence, gaining certificates and moving forward with my life.”

“I suffer from mental health issues. This group offers a massive support system that a lot of us would suffer without. They have offered me many opportunities that I wouldn’t have got anywhere else.”

“Through this course I now have the confidence to put my name forward for some volunteer work.”

3.31 Kilcooley Women’s Centre have always provided help to women on low incomes that use their services. This started with the provision of free sanitary products, Winter packs and personal hygiene items. A local foodbank approached the women’s centre as they felt they were not reaching those who really needed them in Kilcooley. Kilcooley Women’s Centre in partnership with the foodbank started to keep a supply of non-perishable items in bags to give

to people that needed them and were able to make referrals to the foodbank. The social supermarket developed from there and after getting food through Fareshare, Kilcooley set up a social supermarket pilot. A woman can buy a voucher for £5 for the social supermarket and get £25 worth of food. The pilot has been very successful and Kilcooley Women's Centre are now in the process of renovating a new shop with a lease provided by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive.

“Most people who use the women's centre are on benefits. There is a lot of fear about welfare reform and food poverty is increasing.”

- Focus Group Attendee

3.32 We believe that the social supermarket model, particularly the model based in women's centres, is particularly effective. This is because of the range of holistic services which are provided to social supermarket users in addition to the provision of food. This all round support helps to address the barriers that many women in disadvantaged areas face in trying to better their lives. This model is important in helping to tackle food poverty, child poverty, disadvantage within local communities, women's personal development, education, training and employability.

3.33 We would encourage the DfC to support the establishment of a social supermarket network across a number of local women's centres in Northern Ireland on a planned, long-term basis given the holistic nature of the support provided.

Action 7

3.34 We consider it a serious omission if women and people with dependents are not included in the inequalities identified under this action. The payment of social security benefits is a major DfC activity and impacts on some of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged members of our society. Women are particularly impacted by this action for a number of reasons:

- women are disproportionately affected by welfare reform/austerity;

- women are more likely to claim social security benefits;
- women are more likely to be economically inactive;
- women are more likely to be in part-time, low-paid, insecure work;
- women are more likely to be caring for children/other family members;
- women are more likely to have to make up for cuts to services through unpaid work.

Action 8

3.35 In local focus group sessions with groups of women the issue of complexity within the benefits system and confusion about benefit entitlements was discussed. Many of the women talked about not understanding correspondence in relation to benefits and generally being confused about the help that is available through the benefits system. Often they did not understand the welfare reform changes or how mitigations worked or indeed if they were in receipt of these.

3.36 This confusion led to discussions about how women find out about changes to benefits and the help they are entitled to through the benefits system. The women talked about the fact that they often find out information relevant to them through informal discussions with other women rather than through official channels. There were several examples of women finding out what they could be claiming or about changes to benefits from chatting to other women at their local women's centre/group.

“It's good to get together with women, we all help each other. This is talk therapy and women need to share with each other. We need to talk to each other, to support each other and share information. We share information and useful advice.”

- Focus Group Attendee

3.37 These discussions showed an undeniable need for advice and information around benefit entitlements, welfare reform and mitigations.

However there is more work to be done on identifying the best way of providing this information so that it reaches and is accessible by those who need it most.

3.38 Focus group discussions also revealed the importance of the full range of services delivered by local women’s centres. Not only were women able to avail of advice and information but a range of other holistic services including access to support, education, training, childcare and other services. Independent advice agencies can also provide a holistic service to clients not only providing advice on benefits and social security issues but help with debt, employment, housing and many other issues. The importance of holistic advice provided through trusted partners and in trusted spaces like women’s centres and independent advice agencies cannot be underestimated. While we acknowledge the help provided through the Make the Call service we suggest that more independent, holistic advice and support is needed for many people particularly those who are the most vulnerable and marginalised.

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

- Focus Group Attendee

“They keep me sane. If it wasn’t for the women’s group I don’t know where I’d be.”

- Focus Group Attendee

3.39 Women’s Regional Consortium research ⁶³ on the impact of austerity/welfare reform on women recommended that: *“government increases funding for independent advice services and that this funding should be provided on a longer-term basis. This should include specific funding for community level information, advice and advocacy work that*

⁶³ Impact of Ongoing Austerity: Women’s Perspectives, Women’s Regional Consortium, April 2019 <http://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/node/150>

reaches out to those who are the most vulnerable and marginalised to ensure they can access their rightful entitlements.”

3.40 As previously discussed and reflected in Women’s Regional Consortium research ⁶⁴ women are more impacted by welfare reform/austerity than men. In addition women are more likely to be social security claimants. We believe that women should therefore be included as one of the inequalities identified within this action.

“Need someone with knowledge to help people with the system. It is so complex, the language used confuses people.”

- Focus Group Attendee

“I get PIP but I don’t understand it and what way it works. A lot of the letters are confusing, it’s the way they word things and I don’t understand them. I panic and worry about what they mean. My daughter has to sort it out for me.”

- Focus Group Attendee

“People need advice and they are cutting funding for advice when people need it. People need to get independent advice from someone that understands the system.”

- Focus Group Attendee

“They need to explain things easier and have better communication and paperwork.”

- Focus Group Attendee

“It doesn’t make sense to me – it’s so confusing. People don’t understand the system they just want to get their money.”

- Focus Group Attendee

⁶⁴ Ibid

“I don’t understand! All these words are designed to confuse people – austerity, Universal Credit, mitigations, Brexit.”

- Focus Group Attendee

Action 9

3.41 We agree that women and people with dependents have been identified as inequalities within this action. The majority of lone parent households are female (91% in Northern Ireland) and female lone parents are considerably more likely to be in part-time employment (33%) than their male counterparts (13%).⁶⁵

Action 17

3.42 We agree that women have been identified as an inequality within this action. We would suggest that any actions around increasing women’s participation rates in sport and physical recreation must be supported by access to childcare to ensure that these inequalities are properly tackled.

Action 24

3.43 We agree that women have been identified as an inequality within this action and we are pleased to note that the action includes the provision of an offer of reasonable support to help public appointees carry out their duties, as well as being offered support for interviews.

3.44 We hope that this action would include the provision of childcare to support women to participate in the boards of Arms Length Bodies. We believe that the provision of childcare, including childcare to support education/training, to enable women to participate in these boards is an essential element in tackling this inequality. For rural women support around access to transport should also be a

⁶⁵ 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>

consideration so that no woman regardless of her geographic location should be deterred from participation in these boards.

“Women’s centres are one of the few places where you can see women progress into positions of leadership - where they can have an input into consultations, community development, etc. This is nowhere at the moment. In the struggle to keep the doors open we have lost this completely – we have lost leadership development - funders don’t want to know. This work is not valued.”

- Focus Group Attendee

Action 25

3.45 We acknowledge the support provided by the DfC to women through the Women Involved in Community Transformation (WICT) programme. This programme, as part of the Executive’s ‘Action Plan for Tackling Paramilitarism, Criminality and Organised Crime’ aims to develop women’s participation and influence in community development. It aims to address the under representation of women in positive community activity in order to build a better society where everyone can feel safe and confident.

3.46 There is much work to be done to increase the participation and influence of women in community development. There is a need for research into the reasons why women are under-represented in leadership roles and in public decision-making so that actions can be properly targeted in these areas to effect lasting change.

4. Conclusion

4.1 The actions of the Department for Communities are of central importance in the promotion of gender equality and in the protection and development of those who live in the most deprived and marginalised communities in Northern Ireland.

4.2 Comprehensive and adequately resourced actions in this plan have the potential to make a real difference in the lives of women enabling them to overcome disadvantage and inequality and to have a real opportunity to participate fully in their communities, the economy and in public life. It is therefore imperative to get the actions contained within this plan right.