

Women Speak Out on Community Planning

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Introduction

With the re-structuring of local government under the Local Government (NI) Act 2014, Councils now have the new statutory duty of Community Planning. Community Planning aims to improve the effectiveness of public services in meeting people's needs, to support the development of local communities and to improve the quality of life for all.

All over the world there is an increasing need for more local involvement in the planning and management of local areas. Community Planning is now seen as the best way of ensuring

that communities become safer, stronger and more sustainable. But how should it be done? How can local women – wherever they live – best involve themselves in design?

The Women's Resource & Development Agency hosted a series of events for women to help inform the local Community Planning process. For us it was imperative that women become involved to help define the consultative and engagement process and ensure that their voices are respectfully heard and reflected in the outcomes of each Council.



Ellen Finlay

Women's Sector Lobbyist, WRDA

Methodology



The following methods were used to research barriers to women's participation in the Community Planning process, what is presented within this report are their ideas for better, meaningful engagement and the priorities they wish for Councils to undertake.



Desk research

A literature review was carried out focusing on Community Planning processes and engagement which had already taken place by Councils. The findings of this were used to design the questionnaire and workshops.



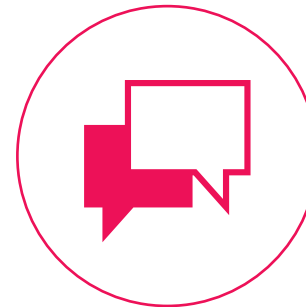
Online survey

An online survey was conducted to ensure as wide a variety of responses from women within all Council areas were obtained, particularly those women who could not participate in the workshops.



Engagement Events

We organised a variety of engagement sessions throughout Northern Ireland. Eighty women participated in these events.



Engaging with Women

Women in disadvantaged and rural areas face many barriers to participation from specific issues such as lack of appropriate childcare to their voices not being heard (McLaughlin, 2009). These obstacles are often caused by structural barriers within discriminatory laws and institutions. During the UN General Assembly in 2011 a resolution on women's participation noted, "Women in every part of the world continues to be largely marginalised, often as a result of discriminatory laws, practices, attitudes, gender stereotypes, lack of access to health care and the disproportionate effect of poverty on women." While many women have overcome these barriers, there are still some women who have not.

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW, 1981) upholds women's right to participate in public life, while the Beijing Platform for Action calls for removing barriers to equal participation. Towards

these ends, what follows are actions which we require all local Councils to take to play their part in empowering women and encouraging women to engage in the Community Planning process.

Emerging Themes

Three themes emerged as key factors to ensure engagement of women from disadvantaged and rural areas in the Community Planning process:

1 *Gender Matters*

Reaching Diverse Participants

2 *Gender Analysis*

How Does it Affect Women?

3 *Infrastructure*

*Design, Planning,
Commitment & Feedback*

Gender Matters

Reaching Diverse Participants

Women's interests are not homogenous, participants felt that their 'gendered roles' were socially constructed and that they often experience significant disadvantage which impacts upon their physical, mental and social health differently from that of men.

Participants wanted Councils to recognise that within all communities,

women and men have different needs, and that women don't often have access to power or resources.

Moreover, women felt that Councils did not take account of the variety of women's needs nor the plethora of women's organisations and groups within local areas, instead consulting with the same groups over and over.

Recommendations:

- » Councils have a critical role in creating and supporting women, this means putting in place the mechanisms to respond to the issues facing women across all aspects of Council activity. The presence of gender experts could make a difference to ensuring women's voices are heard, we therefore recommend that Councils put in place a Gender Champion who will drive policy and engagement mechanisms which are inclusive of women.
- » Councils should develop customised approaches to engaging women and ensure all women's organisations and groups are included in this process.
- » Councils should develop standards that ensure the involvement of women in meaningful and effective engagement, we recommend the development of a set of principles that will ASK WOMEN FIRST, they should contain standards and actions that all Councils will work towards and use as a measure of progress in developing increasingly effective engagement with women.

Gender Analysis

How Does it Affect Women?

When it comes to health and wellbeing, the World Health Organisation recognises that gender does matter (2002). Participants reported that as a diverse group of women they often felt that policies, programmes and services from Councils failed to assess the impact on their lives.

Recommendations:

- » Councils should develop tools to conduct gender analysis of all policies, programmes and services offered including ways to answer a number of key questions: *How does this policy affect women? How will Council ensure the specific needs of women are considered? How will disadvantaged and rural women be included? How does this policy, programme or service rectify gender inequality?*
- » Supporting locally driven women's groups and organisations is essential in the Community Planning process, we recommend that Councils should provide technical support.

Infrastructure

Design, Planning, Commitment & Feedback

Design and Planning

The design and planning of engagement processes has a significant impact on the way women interact with Councils. Planning and design must be responsive to and respectful of the needs of women, this involves engagement sessions which are characterised by a relaxed atmosphere that allows women to engage in the process in a non-judgemental

environment. The process must also allow for mothers of children to participate in the processes by for example, providing crèche facilities or conducting meetings at times suitable to mothers.

Recommendations:

- » Women's lived experience is different to that of men, processes must take cognisance of this, Councils must therefore ensure women feel safe and are encouraged to participate by allowing for women-only and family friendly sessions.
- » Councils should ensure all engagement sessions are participatory, taking account of any literacy or disability issues, faced by women.
- » The timing of sessions also matters, as does early engagement as this often increases the chances of women's voices being visible, Councils must address these issues.

Commitment and Feedback

The clear message from participants in relation to their current engagement with Council was the lack of feedback at regular intervals, including an honest assessment of the scope for change as well as feedback on views/ideas expressed. Some women talked about 'being turned off if nothing appears to happen'.

Recommendations:

- » At regular intervals Councils should provide accurate and timely information to women on the issues they have raised during engagement sessions.
- » There is a need for Councils to plan ahead to ensure there is time to bring women from disadvantaged and rural areas to a point where they are involved effectively and are kept informed at all times. This may involve supporting capacity building programmes for women's groups and organisations.

Conclusion



Engagement is at the heart of Community Planning and can be a complex and challenging process. Women from disadvantaged and rural areas must be a part of that process. While many of the same challenges and principles apply in working with all citizens, there are

important additional considerations to ensure meaningful involvement of women from disadvantaged and rural areas. There are significant benefits to involving women in the Community Planning process but to do so requires commitment, resources and imagination to do so effectively.

Issues Important to Women



Social events



Childcare



Isolation



Road safety



Dog fouling



Litter



*Health Centre/
Services*



Public transport



Personal safety



Housing



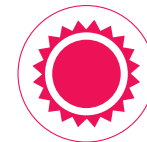
Derelict spaces



Job opportunities



Parks



Summer schemes



Young people



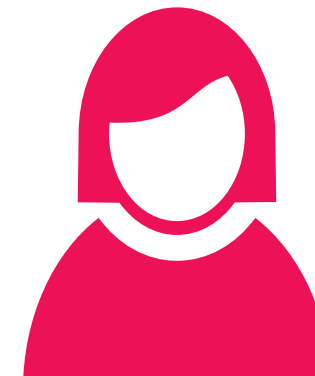
*Training
opportunities*



Poverty



*Community
safety*



The Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA) has been working with women and providing support to women's groups and networks across Northern Ireland since 1983. WRDA's vision is of a fair and equal society where women are empowered and are a visible force for change and influence in all areas of life. Our mission, as a regional organisation, is to advance women's equality and participation in society.

We work with women to achieve social, economic, political and cultural transformation. We engage across all traditions with women based in the most disadvantaged urban and rural areas of Northern Ireland. Our work covers a wide scope and

keeps us right at the heart of local communities.

We are a membership organisation, existing for the benefit of our members, representing their interests and informing them of the latest issues affecting the women's sector. Our membership includes a wide range of local and international women's groups and organisations, as well as many individuals.

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