

'Gender Agenda'

26th June 2009

Note and Actions

A Regional Childcare Strategy

&

**Gender Composition on Voluntary
Transition Committees
(Review of Public Administration)**



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In attendance:

| | |
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| Dawn Purvis (Chair) | Progressive Unionist Party |
| Shannon O'Connell | Progressive Unionist Party |
| Seana Hume | Social Democratic and Labour Party |
| Roy Beggs | Ulster Unionist Party |
| Judith Cochrane | Alliance Party |
| Jennifer McCann | Sinn Fein |
| Robyn McCready | Children in Northern Ireland |
| Ann Moore | Save the Children |
| Tiziana O'Hara | Women's Centres Regional Partnership |
| Patricia Haren | Women's Support Network |
| Paddy Skates | Women's Forum Northern Ireland |
| Marie Cavanagh | Gingerbread NI |
| Ann Marie Gray | ARK and Northern Ireland Women's European Platform |
| Marie Marin | Employers for Childcare |
| Margaret Ward | Women's Resource and Development Agency |
| Shauna Crawley | Women's Resource and Development Agency |
| Lynn Carvill | Women's Resource and Development Agency |

Dawn Purvis welcomed everyone to the first 'Gender Agenda' Forum saying that 'Gender Agenda' will be a useful tool to enhance communication between political representatives and the women's sector to progress strategic policy issues of mutual concern in NI.

A Regional Childcare Strategy

Lynn Carvill provided a context for the childcare strategy discussion:

- The private members motion debated at plenary on the 20th April 2009 calling on the Executive 'to implement a coherent and properly resourced childcare strategy'
- Discussion and agreement at plenary to implement the new Social Security Regulations for Lone Parents (26th May 2009) in the absence of a childcare strategy or adequate childcare provision in the region.
- The childcare strategy options paper discussed at the ministerial sub-committee on children and young people on 18th June 2009

Ann Marie Gray and Marie Marin provided short presentations on the key childcare issues as they pertain to Northern Ireland.

Ann Marie Gray (ARK and Northern Ireland Women's European Platform)

- Progress on the issue of childcare has been a series of stops and starts over the last decade.
- The 'Extended Schools' programme is a useful model for accessible and age appropriate childcare provision. As this model provides childcare onsite for school age children, the need for parents and children to travel for 'pick ups' and 'drops offs' is minimised. Unfortunately, money has been cut from 'Extended Schools' programmes. It is essential that we press for flexible and age appropriate childcare provision.
- There have been some positive developments in terms of pre-school education. The almost universal uptake of high quality free nursery services offered to three and four year olds in Northern Ireland supports the argument that this universal element of childcare should be extended. However, part-time nursery school provision is not a substitute for childcare. Research shows that nursery services of only 2.5 or 3 hours per day is cited by many working mothers as problematic as children had to be picked up and placed with a childminder or nursery.
- The cost of childcare is still prohibitive. The childcare sector relies heavily on private providers. Financial assistance is capped at 80% of cost for professional childcare and this has negative implications for low earning families.
- There are serious concerns around issues of availability and geographical location of childcare provision. Where there is least childcare provision there is greatest deprivation.

- Recently the Lone Parent Regulations (welfare reform) were implemented in Northern Ireland. These regulations will require some lone parents with young children to actively seek work or risk having their benefits sanctioned. In England these regulations were premised on a statutory duty on local authorities to provide childcare. This essential support is missing in Northern Ireland. In England – comprehensive childcare provision has been planned and implemented over a long period of time. Childcare provision in GB is far ahead of what exists in Northern Ireland.

Marie Marin (Employers For Childcare)

- ‘Children First’ the NI childcare strategy was introduced in 1999 to deal with 3 key issues which were known at that time to be barriers, cost, quality and provision. A decade later little has changed. There is a substantial body of research to prove that the lack of affordable quality childcare is the single biggest barrier to women being able to access the labour market, or to retrain or take up education. There is no need to reinvent the wheel or spend time and money carrying out more research. The evidence exists.
- We have the longest school summer holidays in the UK. This is a particularly difficult for working parents who wish to access childcare.
- One persistent anomaly in the Northern Ireland Labour Market is the inflated levels of economic inactivity, people over 16 who are categorised as neither employed nor unemployed and are not actively seeking work. Economic inactivity levels in NI are the highest in the UK. In NI 371,000 women are economically active, compared to 452,000 men. This is not good news for the NI economy. NI is losing out on the skills and talents of a huge percentage of its resources by failing to provide adequate and affordable childcare. As the lack of childcare is often cited as the key barrier to women’s participation in the labour market, the development of a comprehensive childcare strategy for the region would have huge financial benefits both for women, parents and the Northern Ireland economy.
- The ‘Childcare Act’ (2006) was the first piece of legislation solely dedicated to early years and childcare. It has forced Local Authorities in England to implement systems to provide adequate childcare. Equally importantly the ‘Childcare Act’ has forced them to provide comprehensive information in an easy to access format to help parents find suitable childcare in their local area. Research here has shown that there is a fragmented and incoherent perception among parents of Childcare provision in NI. There is a lack of co-ordination in the supply of information to parents. (Millward Brown study 2006)
- An indication of how imbedded the Childcare Act is within Local Authorities in England is the move from a Childcare Information Service to a more comprehensive Family Information Service which looks at the needs of families with young people up to age 20.

- The Scottish Government have implemented a framework to tackle poverty and income inequality in Scotland. They have clearly stated that they accept those with caring responsibilities are at a disadvantage when it comes to accessing work and they have put in writing their intentions to address the issue by making work pay, in other words making it worthwhile to go out to work in the first place. They have drafted a raft of measures including making the tax credit scheme easier to understand and calling on all employers to put childcare voucher schemes in place.
- Devising and implementing an effective childcare strategy for NI must be more than just a document or a set of tick boxes. Government must have real and sincere dialogue with those that are already involved on the ground doing this work and have the information and knowledge which would help to shape it.

Other issues raised during the discussion on the need for a regional childcare strategy:

- The content of the childcare options paper discussed at the recent ministerial sub-committee on children and young people is not yet public. Having some insight into the content of the paper would have been useful to inform the discussion.
- Although much research has taken place and the need for and benefits of a regional childcare strategy have been clearly identified, little has happened in the past to progress the issue. Due to the cross cutting nature of childcare and the lack of centralised responsibility within a department, it has not been prioritised. In the past the cross cutting Executive Programme Funds were a very useful way to prioritise and address cross cutting issues. Childcare needs should be addressed centrally by one department. We need a pot of money set aside to encourage cross departmental working – a ring fenced fund for childcare. A cross departmental fund should be accompanied with a statutory duty to co-operate.
- We have a growing older population and in the absence of a comprehensive childcare strategy there is more and more reliance on older relatives to provide an informal caring network. There is an implicit assumption that 'grandmothers will care'. This is no longer a tenable assumption as pensions will decrease and people will have to work longer. The childcare element of the tax credit system does not apply to relatives who care for children. This is a further financial barrier for both 'caring' relatives and working parents.
- Childcare provision is an essential component of the overall package for women in disadvantaged communities accessing training and education. The maxim 'educate a woman and you educate a family' is very true. Community based education and training is often the first step on the ladder in the

transition into the mainstream labour market. Although government policy has resulted in prioritising community education in a formal setting ie. Further Education Colleges, childcare provision has not been prioritised in this context. Clearly this creates a huge barrier for women who want to participate in training and education.

- The 'Child Poverty Bill' is due its second reading in the House of Commons soon. The OFMdfM committee are also shortly due to take evidence on the Bill from department officials. Although there are clauses on housing and health, childcare is not mentioned in the Bill. This may be a useful opportunity to lobby to have the issue of childcare flagged up and perhaps included as an amendment. We should also link in with the NI MPs who will be speaking on the Child Poverty Bill.
- In the current economic climate it will be particularly important to couch our lobbying for a childcare strategy in terms of the economic benefits to individuals, families, communities and society. We need to have the evidence ready to back this up.
- Actions to consolidate and enhance provision must be costed and budgets need to be allocated. Money must be sourced and ringfenced to enhance childcare provision across the region. If there is a central fund the executive can then decide in which department the responsibility for childcare will lie. It is also important to link our lobbying in with budgetary planning. We need to influence about 6 months prior to the next Comprehensive Spending Review period.
- The tax credit system has been useful in lifting many families out of poverty. However as the childcare element of the tax credit system only applies to registered childminders and not to relatives, this impacts negatively on many potential working parents in NI. This is clearly exacerbated by the woeful lack of childcare provision. In the past it has been possible to negotiate with DEL to have childcare allowance paid to relatives of lone parents. We should pursue this issue.
- The increasing number of children with special needs must be acknowledged within any strategy. Many of these children cannot be looked after within a daycare setting. Childcare provided by a relative or family member may be the only possibility for these parents to access paid work.
- It is important to 'make work pay' for women. Women are often segregated in the labour market, working in low-paid and part-time jobs. In this situation they are often working to pay for childcare and the financial incentive is minimal. The tax credit system and the benefits system should be made more flexible to ease the transition into work both practically and financially. Accessible, affordable, flexible and age appropriate childcare provision is a crucial component of the transition into work.

- Childcare as a profession is 'feminised' and 'caring' jobs generally, although of huge societal benefit, are terribly undervalued. The childcare workforce is predominantly female (in the private sector often very young females) and attracts low remuneration. A comprehensive and integrated childcare strategy must include measures that will improve the status of the workforce. Childcare workers should have access to qualifications, training, defined career paths and enhanced levels of pay. A 'Transformation Fund' similar to that available in England should be implemented in Northern Ireland. A better balanced childcare workforce is also desirable and we need to find ways of attracting men into the profession.
- Responsibility for childcare in GB is devolved to local authorities. We need to ascertain if the childcare issue will fit into the community planning process being devised as part of the Review of Public Administration.
- Easily accessible information on childcare provision and location must be an integral component of any childcare strategy.
- It is vitally important that we get it right from the outset. Proper investment in 'early years development' will save government money in the long term.
- It is vital that we influence the two main parties in OFMDFM (SF and DUP) in terms of what we want to see in a childcare strategy.

Actions:

- Ascertain what is in the childcare options paper tabled at the Ministerial sub-committee on children and young people
- Link our lobbying with the passage of the Child Poverty Bill in Westminster and the read across legislation for Northern Ireland.
- Establish and maintain links with the all party Assembly group on Children and Young People
- Pull together some of the key issues as outlined in the minutes and prepare letters to be sent to the First and Deputy First Minister, the OFMDFM committee and the All Party Assembly group on Children and Young People.

Gender Composition on Voluntary Transitions Committees (Review of Public Administration)

Margaret Ward provided the context for this brief discussion

- The key issue is that of the imbalance in relation to gender composition on the voluntary transition committees tasked with managing the transition from the existing 26 councils to the new 11 district councils. The transition committees will have significant responsibility in terms of ensuring that the new councils will be in a position to take full executive responsibility for services from the outset.
- Inclusivity in terms of balanced political representation (proportionate to the representation already in councils) has been ensured. However, inclusivity in terms of gender balance (even proportionately) has been completely ignored.
- Women form 23% of local councillors and more than 50% of Northern Ireland society. Yet, the breakdown of overall membership on the voluntary transition committees is 15% female and 85% male.
- The concern is that a very significant proportion of society ie. women, are not represented on these committees. This omission could have far reaching results in terms of community planning, recruitment to senior positions in councils, budget setting etc.

Issues raised during the discussion on the gender composition of the voluntary transition committees

- The 'Local Government Provisions Bill' is due to be discussed at plenary before the summer recess. This will be going to committee stage in the Autumn and should provide the opportunity to influence the final bill including gender composition on the transition committees.
- Politically it is difficult to 'require' gender balance – but it could maybe succeed by including an amendment to 'have due regard to gender equality'.

Actions:

- Map current gender composition on the voluntary transition committees and to maintain contact with Roy Beggs MLA (Environment Committee) about this issue.

Voluntary Transition Committees (RPA) Gender Composition of membership

| Council area | Total number of members | Number of males on TC | Number of females on TC | Percentage of females on TC |
|---|--------------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Antrim Newtownabbey | 16 | 11 | 5 | (31%) |
| Armagh City Banbridge Craigavon | 15 | 13 | 2 | (14%) |
| Derry City Strabane | 16 | 10 | 6 | (38%) |
| Lisburn City Castlereagh | 16 | 15 | 1 | (6%) |
| Fermanagh Omagh | 16 | 16 | 0 | 0 |
| Newtownards North Down | 16 | 13 | 3 | (19%) |
| Ballymoney Coleraine Limavady Moyle | 20 | 15 | 5 | (25%) |
| Newry and Mourne Down | 16 | 15 | 1 | (6%) |
| Ballymena Carrickfergus Larne | 15 | 13 | 2 | (14%) |
| Dungannon & South Tyrone Cookstown Magherafelt | 15 | 14 | 1 | (7%) |
| Belfast City | 20 | 18 | 2 | (10) |
| TOTAL | 181 | 153 (85%) | 28 (15%) | |