

Introduction

Welcome to the first edition of NIRWN's Policy Information Bulletin. It will be issued on a quarterly basis, providing you with updates on policy issues that are relevant to rural women. The Bulletin will provide a briefing on the types of policies that are pertinent to rural women and how you can have a say on Government Policies, Strategies and Programmes that may impact on you.

What is Policy and what does it have to do with me?

Policy in its simplest terms is an undertaking of a government department, political party or business to influence and determine decisions. It is a commitment as to how it proposes to deliver a particular course of action.

Policies, strategies and programmes issued by the various Government departments and public bodies have to be issued in draft form, seeking opinions and feedback over a consultation period. Through our policy remit at NIRWN we will seek to work in partnership with rural women to articulate the key issues and concerns that we would like to see included in various policies, procedures and programmes. We do have the opportunity to shape public policy and to ensure that the voice of rural women is included in policy responses.

How do I get involved in Policy Responses?

There are a number of ways in which you can get involved to ensure your views are included in policy responses:

◆ Focus Groups

If there is an issue that your community group would like us to discuss with you in more detail, NIRWN staff can arrange to visit your group and consider the key issues that you feel should be included in response to a particular policy.

◆ Email

As standard practice any policy response that we draft will be circulated to rural women's groups via email. If you would like to be included on this circulation list please contact us and we will add your details to the list.

◆ Website

You can access policy information on our website and can submit any queries or questions that you may have. You can also see the full policy responses NIRWN have made on the consultations summarised in this bulletin.

◆ Phone, write or fax

Alternatively you could write or fax through your points, or just pick up the phone and talk directly to our Policy Officer, Nora Smith.

Summary of Policy Responses Carried Out To Date

A full list of policy responses are available on the NIRWN website. Below is a brief summary of policy responses carried out since January 2008 and what NIRWN felt were the key issues relevant to rural women.

Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (ECNI) – Draft Code of Practice (CoP) on Equal Pay

The Draft Code of Practice on Equal Pay issued by ECNI provides guidance to key stakeholders on Equal Pay legislation and good practice relating to equal pay. NIRWN supported the introduction to Code of Practice (CoP). The issue of equal pay has seen considerable public debate.

The key points that we raised in the Code of Practice:

- We strongly advocate the need for Equal Pay Reviews in the workplace. Equal Pay Reviews are a proactive check to ensure that employers pay systems are fair and that they do not place a lower value on certain jobs simply because they are done by women
- Mobility is undoubtedly a crucial aspect of accessing and retaining employment for working rural dwellers. From a rural development policy perspective, measures designed to enhance the mobility of rural dwellers are therefore a priority

Rural women face dual discrimination for their gender and location. The gender pay gap is also about wider discrimination, including discrimination on grounds of pregnancy; occupational segregation – women being crowded into a narrow range of lower-paying occupations (mainly those available part time) that do not make the best use of their skills; and the unequal impact of caring responsibilities.

Anti Poverty Position Paper for Department of Agricultural and Rural Development (DARD)

In response to DARD's request through The Rural Community Network (RCN) to assist in the development of their three-year Anti Poverty Framework and Strategy, NIRWN provided a position paper highlighting the key issues relating to rural poverty, disadvantage and equality for rural women. The main barriers identified through research for rural women in the paper are:

- ◆ Lack of childcare facilities
- ◆ Education and development
- ◆ Transport infrastructure
- ◆ Lack of access to employment possibilities
- ◆ Health and social welfare
- ◆ Housing
- ◆ Under-representation of women in decision-making structures
- ◆ Attitudinal
- ◆ Domestic Violence.

Invest Northern Ireland Draft Corporate Plan 2008-2011

The main point that we raised in relation to the Corporate Plan is that it is a gender neutral document. In our response we expressed disappointment that Invest NI's Corporate Plan 2008- 2011 did not take the opportunity to make a specific reference to women. We recommended that a strategic objective should specifically detail the new and existing incentives to support the economic investment of women.

Department of Trade Enterprise and Investment (DETI) Draft Corporate Plan 2008-2011

Again the key issue that we raised with the document is that it is a gender neutral Corporate Plan and does not address key economic inequalities that currently exist. The objectives and target set do not demonstrate any awareness of gender inequality.

Proposals for Health and Social Care Reform produced by Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS)

We used the opportunity to highlight the rural dimension to the problems associated with accessing health and social care services for rural women in terms of having caring responsibilities, flexibility, cultural, low pay, disability and inaccessible transport. It is recognised that people living in rural areas experience difficulties with regard to the provision of services and accessing such services. For some services, patients are required to travel long distances to attend appointments or consultations.

CURRENT POLICIES

Post Office Closures Closing Date 12 May 2008

Post Office Ltd announced their Network Change Programme that will lead to the closure of 42 Post Offices and provide 54 outreach services in towns and villages across Northern Ireland.

Post Office Ltd are currently out to consultation on the outreach services. The consultation is due to close on 12 May 2008. NIRWN acknowledges the significant role that Post Offices play in local communities. We recognise that the vast majority of older people, especially rural women, consider their post office to be a lifeline, with many relying on the post office as a one-stop shop to access cash and benefits, pay bills, get advice and information, and socialise. We would like to know what you think of the Post Office plans.

- ◆ How important your local Post Office is to you?
- ◆ What role they play in your local community?
- ◆ Will the closures and proposed changes affect how you access key services?

Department of Regional Development (DRD) Free Travel for People aged 60 to 64 Closing Date 9 June 2008

DRD is currently out to consultation to extend free travel on public transport for those aged 60 and over. Providing free fares to persons aged 60-64 inclusive. This could potentially benefit about 87,000 people at a cost of about £4.1m per year. NIRWN's initial response to this consultation is favourable. However we would have liked the scheme to be extended to include concessionary travel arrangements on rural community transport. We would also advocate providing 12 months' free travel to persons returning to work from long-term unemployment. We will use our response to highlight that transport is inextricably linked to accessing other key services. Meeting rural transport needs would overcome access to vital services including, childcare, education, employment, as well helping to address the issue of social marginalisation that many rural women face.

Department of Environment (DOE) PPS 14 Planning Policy Closing Date August 2008

PPS 14 sparked a major debate over the future of planning in the countryside and the implications for rural dwellers. When devolution was restored the Minister for the Environment established a sub committee to review the planning policy. The key points raised were presented in an Emerging Findings paper in February 2008. The DOE consulted with a range of stakeholders on the key findings. The revised PPS 14 Planning Policy is due to be introduced at the end of April 2008, which will immediately be taken into account in deciding planning applications. There will also be four months of full public consultation before the policy is finalised. NIRWN will be forming its response to the planning policy.

If there are any specific points that you would like clarified on any of the policy responses formed, or indeed if you would like to contribute to the current policy responses, please contact our Policy Officer, Nora Smith.

Rural White Paper and Rural Champion Minister Announcement

Agriculture and Rural Development Minister Michelle Gildernew recently outlined her plans to develop a Rural White Paper and to define the roles of Rural Champion.

The Minister made reference to her proposals to define the role of 'rural champion' and enhancing the rural proofing process. She said:

'It will involve us looking at how we advocate and advise on rural issues, how we embed rural issues in the policy making process across Government, how we listen better to the needs of rural communities and initiate actions to help address them'.

NIRWN welcomes the Minister's statement and we anticipate that this Rural Champion role will be very much the catalyst that will help further rural proofing and assist to address the many inequalities that rural women face. NIRWN through its policy remit will be seeking your views to be included in the proposals for the role of the Rural Champion and for the development of a Rural White Paper.

The Minister concluded by saying:

"The next step is to further develop these initial principles and ideas and present proposals to both the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee and the wide range of rural interests. It is important that I have their input and commitment to the development of these proposals and I want to work closely with all interests to ensure that we have an agreed approach to achieving a sustainable future for rural communities."

Watch this space.....

Did you find this Policy Bulletin useful?

We welcome any comments that you have on the Policy Bulletin. Did you find it useful? Is there any other information that you would like to see included? Please contact us with your feedback.

Contact Nora Smith

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We're on the Web

To keep up to date with all our Policy News and Consultations check out our website:

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