

# POLICY UPDATE



ISSUE 4 SUMMER 2009

WELCOME.....Since our previous bulletin NIRWN have responded to a number of policies, as well as facilitated a number of consultation events. We also held our Rural Women's Policy Forum meeting in partnership with NICVA, which proved to be extremely beneficial. This Policy Bulletin is an opportunity to briefly update you on what we have been involved in over the last three months and to look at what we will be working towards in the coming months.

## RECENT RESPONSES AND ACTIVITIES

## DRAFT CODE OF PRACTICE FOR MINISTERIAL PUBLIC APPOINTMENTS OFFICE OF THE COMMISSIONER FOR PUBLIC APPOINTMENTS NI

The over-riding objective in responding to the consultation is to have a public appointments process that is fair, open and democratic; one which actively encourages participation from groups which are currently under-represented; women, people with disabilities, ethnic minorities, younger people and other under-represented groups. We believe that the role and remit of the Code of Practice should embrace these fundamental principles. We feel that the draft did not sufficiently address the importance of equality and diversity. Women currently hold 32% of public appointments in Northern Ireland. This is a gross under-representation considering they make up half the population. This figure has remained stagnant. In fact there has been a decrease in the number of women that hold Chairperson status on public appointments, with a decrease from 26% in March 2007 to 22% in March 2008. There was no specific reference to Section 75 in the draft CoP.

### Rural White Paper Stakeholder Group

Work continues on the Rural White Paper Stakeholder group. A number of sub groups have been established to look at specific areas: People, Services, Governance, Places and Vision.

Each sub group is tasked with developing a short report that will assist in the development of the Rural White Paper which is due to go out to consultation early next year. NIRWN has representation on all of the Sub Groups.

### Rural MEP Question Time

NIRWN in partnership with the Rural Community Network and South Tyrone Empowerment Programme (STEP) held a Rural Question Time event with the would-be MEP candidates in Loughry College in May 2009. The event gave rural dwellers a chance to place their questions and concerns to the panel, to gauge how they would provide a voice for rural at the European Parliament. Over 50 delegates attended and feedback from the event was extremely positive.

## THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORM ESTABLISHMENT OF TRANSITION COMMITTEES IN STATUTE

With this response we focused on the issues of gender parity within local government and how community organisations can be involved in community planning.

Currently there exists a low level of representation of women in local government and we expressed our disappointment that the consultation document on the Establishment of Transition Committee, in considering the composition of the Transition Committees, asks questions concerned solely with numbers on the committees and with proportionality in political representation.

At the present time there are 125 women out of a total of 582 councillors. Many councils have less than 20% representation of women and there are 6 councils which have 1 or 2 women only. No consultation has been carried out prior to EQIA screening and no consideration has been given to the potential adverse impact that such under-representation will have on women. We highlighted the international obligations that Northern Ireland has committed to. The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), to which the UK government is a signatory, that recommends more use of 'temporary special measures, such as positive action, preferential treatment or quota systems' in order to improve the representation of women. We also drew reference to United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 1325 'Women, Peace and Security', which urges Member States to increase the number of women at decision-making levels in national, regional and international institutions involved in preventing, managing, and resolving conflicts. Northern Ireland is a country still emerging from conflict and the recommendations contained in UNSCR 1325 should be implemented.

With regards to the Anti-Poverty & Social Inclusion response, we highlighted our concern that reference to the Gender Equality Strategy from Office of First and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) was not considered as important in terms of other Regional Policy that was referenced. The Gender Equality Strategy offers government departments a strategic vision to address inequalities between men and women including addressing poverty and social exclusion.

Overall NIRWN felt that the EQIA did not provide a strong focus on women. For instance it highlighted the need to engage with children and young people. However we felt that an important area had been overlooked; the well-being of children and young people cannot be singled out from that of their mothers. We feel it is important that DARD take cognisance of the need to tackle women's poverty as a critical issue in order to address the needs of children and young people. They cannot be done in isolation. Women are the main managers of family poverty. In acting as its shock-absorbers as they try to shield their children from poverty's worst effects, they themselves feel these effects more keenly.

**On the horizon.....** NIRWN will be forming responses to the following consultations in the coming months. If you would like to have a say, please contact our Policy Officer to discuss the many ways in which you can contribute to consultation responses.

### **Human Rights Commission – Draft Strategic Plan 2009-11**

The Human Rights Commission are currently out to consultation on their draft Corporate Plan. Our initial assessment of the Strategic Plan is that it does not have a strong focus on gender equality. Closing date for responses is 28 August 2009.

### **Department of Environment – 'Reform of the Planning System in Northern Ireland'**

The Department of the Environment has published a consultation paper entitled 'Reform of the Planning System in Northern Ireland: Your chance to influence change' which sets out the Department's proposals for the reform of the planning system in Northern Ireland in the medium to longer term. The Department has also produced a draft Equality Impact Assessment at a strategic level. Closing date is 3 October 2009.

### **Department of Environment - Community Planning Guidelines**

We anticipate that the Department of Environment will be consulting on its Community Planning proposals in September 2009. We will be providing a detailed response to the proposals, given the potential powers that will now be devolved to local government and the opportunities for the community and voluntary sector to be directly involved in the decision making process.

### **Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland**

Alas the Bill of Rights consultation has now been pushed back until October time. NIRWN will be meeting with the Human Rights Commissioners in August to discuss in more detail the consultation timetable. Watch this space.....

**The Rural Women's Policy Forum** will be holding its next meeting on Monday 14 September 2009 at Community Relations Council, Linen Green, Dungannon. Some of the issues for discussion include an update on the Rural White Paper, Rural Development Programme, Bills of Rights, report from AFBI on a piece of work relating to farming rural women, Review of Public Administration (RPA), and the Women's Sector Funding Review. Lunch is provided at the close of the meeting. If you have any items for inclusion on the agenda, or would like more information on the meeting, please contact our Policy Officer.

**Is this Policy Bulletin useful?** We welcome any comments that you have on this 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. If you would like to be included in our circulation list regarding policy consultations, please contact our Policy Officer Nora Smith on 028 86769191 or email [nora@nirwn.org.uk](mailto:nora@nirwn.org.uk)

NORTHERN IRELAND RURAL WOMEN'S NETWORK  
15 Molesworth Street, Cookstown, BT80 8NX  
T: 028 8676 9191 F: 028 8676 5644  
E: [info@nirwn.org.uk](mailto:info@nirwn.org.uk) W: [www.nirwn.org.uk](http://www.nirwn.org.uk)

