



Women's Centres Regional Partnership

Response to the Local Government Reform Establishment of Transition Committees in Statute May 2009

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Local Government Reform

Establishment of Transition Committees in Statute

Introduction

The Women's Centres Regional Partnership (WCRP) is a partnership of four lead regional women's organisations linking with fourteen frontline women's organisations across Northern Ireland providing support and services to disadvantaged areas.

The four key lead partners of the WCRP are the Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA), Women's Support Network (WSN), Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network (NIRWN) and The Women's Centre, Derry. The fourteen Women's Centres are spread across Northern Ireland with seven from the Greater Belfast and Lisburn area, four in the North West and three in Dungannon, Magherafelt and Craigavon. Together the WCRP seeks to develop and strengthen a regional infrastructure which will support community based women's organisations across Northern Ireland.

The WCRP welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Consultation Document on *Local Government Reform: Establishment of Transition Committees in Statute*. We have however, only been made aware of the consultation, and given the limited time scale we are confining our response to the issues of gender parity within local government and how community organizations can be involved in community planning. We would ask the Department to ensure that the WCRP is included within its consultation list regarding future stages of RPA reform.

Composition of Transition Committees

As representatives of women's groups operating throughout Northern Ireland we are extremely conscious of the low level of representation of women in local government and disappointed 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 six councils which have one or two women only.

This gender imbalance has been compounded by the overwhelmingly male composition of the Transition Committees. The consultation document regarding arrangements for the establishment of these committees completely ignores issues regarding some parity of representation at a period when vital decisions will be made that will have a long-lasting impact on the future of our public administration.

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 are aware that the Women in Local Councils initiative of the Local Government Staff Commission made recommendations designed to ensure greater gender parity amongst political representatives and council staff. Political parties have not considered mechanisms to ensure that women councillors are fairly represented on Transition Committees and this is regrettable. This will have implications for how the women's sector is able to engage in relationship building with the new committees and it will impact on how women's issues are represented when community planning begins.

International Obligations to Improve the Representation of Women

The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), to which the UK government is a signatory, recommends more use of 'temporary special measures, such as positive action, preferential treatment or quota systems' in order to improve the representation of women. In July 2008, following the Periodic Review of the UK government, the Concluding Observations of the CEDAW Committee recommended that the UK government 'accelerate the realisation of

women's de facto equality with men in all areas' (para 22) by instigating positive action measures, including the use of time-bound goals and quotas.

In 2000 the 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.

Achieving a more proportionate system of representation

Given the arguments we have presented and the necessity to comply with international standards, we believe it is incumbent on the Department of the Environment to take every step necessary to ensure compliance with Section 75 by carrying out a full EQIA on the Transition Committees and on the likely impact of the work they are tasked to carry out if they remain unrepresentative of women, who constitute over 50% of the population but who currently form only 16% of the Transition Committees.

In addition, we call on the Minister for the Environment to take a pro-active approach and request each existing council area to nominate at least one female representative to its Transition Committee.

Appointment of staff for the new councils

We agree that the Northern Ireland Code of Local Government Conduct should extend to members of Transition Committees and that where practicable meetings should be open to the public.

In terms of the appointment of the Chief Executive and Senior Team Designate of the new councils, we would again draw attention to the gender deficit within senior levels of local government staff and urge that recruitment procedures are proactive, including positive action measures and the adoption of the principles of proportionality and fair

representation. We would advocate that any selection panel has an appropriate gender representation. We would also welcome a commitment to Section 75 training for selection panels.

Community Planning

We welcome the proposal that the Transition Committees be empowered to undertake 'trailing of initial Community Planning arrangements' . At present the community and voluntary sector have no voice at the decision making table in the proposed structures, and we would look for assurances that the sector will be an integral part of the community planning process. We therefore recommend the following:

- A firm date by which trialling will begin.
- The inclusion of representatives of community and voluntary groups in Community Planning partnership structures and a commitment that the interests of women will be represented within these structures.
- Consultation by the Transition Committees with the community and voluntary groups in their area on structures and processes for Community Planning.
- Resources to be made available in order to enable community involvement in the trialling of Community Planning.

The Rural Challenge

Any successful reform of public services would need to be aware of specific rural challenges. Given the larger boundary structures, concerns have been raised regarding the need for spatial equity. The ethos of community planning is to provide a 'collective voice' for local communities and empowering people to become more involved in local decision making in partnership with statutory stakeholders. There are genuine concerns that the larger boundary structures may weaken the voice of more disadvantaged minorities. There already exist considerable barriers to effective participation within local decision-making processes, particularly for disadvantaged people living in rural

areas. Rural women are under-represented on decision making bodies at community, local and regional levels. It is important that the membership of the Transition Committees is geographically representative. Also a key role of the Transition Committees should be one of real engagement with rural stakeholders who work to provide key services for disadvantaged rural communities.

Communication

Voluntary and community groups need to be informed of the processes involved in the transition period before there can be any meaningful engagement. For this to happen we recommend that the Transition Committees work with community development networks and infrastructural support organisations to organise events that will bring together members of the Transition Committees and community and voluntary groups.

Transparency

We welcome the proposal that meetings of Transition Committees be open to the public. For this to be meaningful there needs to be a communications strategy that will inform communities when meetings are taking place and will provide regular information on progress being made. Community stakeholders should be involved in the development of proposals regarding the transfer of functions to local government.

Conclusion

WCRP believes that the Review of Public Administration has the potential to provide the citizens of Northern Ireland with governance that more fully reflects the diversity of our society. However, this can only be achieved if there is a commitment to positive action. Evidence from Scotland and Wales shows us that where women form 40% - 50% of the political forum, policy priorities change, new perspectives are added, patterns of outreach and involvement are more inclusive and the culture of the body is transformed.

The arrangements proposed by this consultation are insufficient and constitute a missed opportunity. We strongly urge consideration of the issues raised in this response so that

there can be greater equality of representation in terms of women's interests and we call on the Department of the Environment to respond to the issues raised in this response to its consultation, explaining the measures it will take to ensure a more proportionate representation of women in this important stage in the reform of our local government.