



A submission to the consultation on -

‘Families Matter: Supporting Families in Northern Ireland’

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety’s Proposals on a Regional Family and Parenting Strategy

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The Women's Support Network (WSN), established in 1989, is an infrastructural umbrella organisation, which provides support and services to, and represents over 30 groups (mostly in the Greater Belfast area), including community-based women's centres, women's projects and women's infrastructure groups.

WSN aims to achieve social, political and economic justice through the promotion of the autonomous organisation of women. The Network aims to strengthen the collective voice of women's groups and to promote and develop networking opportunities, to enable collective action and to impact upon policy and decision making processes. We provide an accessible, relevant and high quality support service and resource for member groups. The Network is also an important information provider on issues relevant to community-based women's organisations and for other infrastructure groups, nationally and internationally.

The Women's Support Network welcomes the opportunity to respond to the DHSSPS proposals on a Regional Family and Parenting Strategy – 'Families Matter'. As a Network of women's centres and groups working with women living in very disadvantaged areas, particularly in the Greater Belfast area, we are aware of the great need for supports and services to parents, particularly those parents who experience socio-economic disadvantage.

1. We agree with the vision and principles as outlined in the document and are pleased to see that all stakeholders will be encouraged to work in partnership and that there will be participation and collaboration with children, young people and families. It is important that government policies and ensuing service and support provision is continually informed by those who are affected/the users. A framework to build partnership arrangements between government and the third sector already exists and where Voluntary and Community sector organisations will be delivery agents of Family Matters, we would urge government to ensure that the recommendations of 'Positive Steps' are considered and implemented.

2. It is stated that the focus of the strategy 'is primarily on preventative and early intervention to support parents at particular times of need and at particular stages of development of their child'. Preventative measures are important but for many families, traumatic events cannot be anticipated and it is crucial that services are appropriate for and can adapt to the sudden and often traumatic changes that occur in the lives of people eg. Parental separation, death etc. Therefore in order to ensure that supports and services can adapt to need, we believe that there must be continual consultation with relevant service providers and families affected and that service provision is flexible enough that it can adapt quickly to meet need.
3. The definition of families states 'A family consists of any child or young person under the age of 18 (21 for young people leaving care and disabled young people) and their primary caretakers.' WSN would argue that the age range is too prescriptive and we would again contend that there is a need for more flexibility. We fully acknowledge that many young people are quite capable of forging their own path post 18; however, there are many other vulnerable young people (including those who are disabled or leaving care) who will need further support eg. Young people with mental health problems etc. We would urge DHSSPS to incorporate an element of flexibility with regards to the age range and raise the age for **all** vulnerable young people to 25.
4. It is not clear from the document how it links with current social service provision. These services are vital and can be a lifeline to vulnerable children and families. It would have been useful to see where the links exist and the 'bigger picture' in relation to overall service provision to families and parents.
5. Regarding the priority theme of 'Parental Support', while WSN acknowledge the benefits of the services provided by Health Visitors and Sure Start, we would contend that wider support and service provision should be examined. Currently there is some anecdotal evidence that the services provided by Health Visitors have decreased over recent years i.e. they visit families less often than would have been the case in the past. This should be reviewed if government is serious in working

towards achieving 'optimum child health'. While Sure Start has provided vital supports to families in disadvantaged areas, it does not cover all areas of need. We therefore welcome the establishment of nine new Sure Start projects and hope that this provision will be further expanded enabling all vulnerable families across Northern Ireland to avail of the services. Moreover, it is important to note that not all Sure Start projects offer generic family support. It is important that gaps in provision are identified and addressed to ensure that these services are made available to the most vulnerable families.

6. WSN wholeheartedly agree with the need to promote 'Positive Parenting' and acknowledge the steps already taken by government in this area. It would be the view of many practitioners working in the area of family support that 'Anger Management' programmes are very useful. However, there are too few people trained in this area and too few courses available. We therefore welcome that provision of these programmes will be increased.
7. Positive Parenting programmes are also an important aspect in providing support to parents. Again, however, it would be the view of many family support practitioners that these courses are attended by mostly middle-class families and therefore are less likely to be accessed by parents who are most in need of them. WSN are aware from recent qualitative research undertaken with women living in disadvantaged areas that low levels of confidence and self esteem can form a major barrier to women accessing services that exist locally. A proven way of addressing these barriers is through ensuring 'outreach' as an essential aspect of overall service provision in disadvantaged areas. This may involve meeting with parents in their own home. WSN would therefore urge government to ensure that 'outreach' is an integral and adequately resourced aspect of the programme.
8. WSN very much welcome the proposed awareness raising strategy on positive parenting – highlighting alternatives to physical punishment.

9. Parenting Programmes often face the same problem as mentioned above – do they reach the people who need them? Again, WSN would advocate the need to employ ‘outreach’ services to ensure that vulnerable families are reached.
10. We believe that Family Mediation and Relationship Support is a crucial service that can significantly alleviate the difficulties faced by families where parents are separating. These services can have a hugely beneficial impact on families. We would advocate that all Parent Support workers should be offered training in mediation. Wider availability of these services will result in limiting the damage experienced by children affected.
11. Child Contact centres are another crucial service available to families experiencing difficulties. It is important that these venues provide a safe and neutral environment for children and that there is no stigma attached to attending the venue. It is also important that the staff are well-trained and have a ‘child-centred’ approach. WSN welcomes the proposed expansion of Child Contact Centres by April 2008.
12. Access to up to date and accurate information is vital if the strategy is to be successful. When undertaking qualitative research with women living in disadvantaged areas ‘access to information’ on available services was invariably named as a major barrier to uptake and participation. We welcome the proposal for a regional helpline, but would add that it will be important that staff have knowledge and an overview of all services and supports available to families in Northern Ireland.
13. Regarding ‘Assessment’, there is a clear need to allocate more resources to the delivery of training to family workers. This is especially urgent to address the training needs of workers in the community and voluntary sector.
14. We note the proposal to establish 6 new childcare centres by April 2008. While we welcome the much needed expansion of service provision to families, it is not clear

how these centres will complement current Sure Start and other family support provision.

15. It is stated early in the document that there are other Government strategies that will impact on families and children eg. The Suicide Prevention Strategy, the Anti-Poverty Strategy etc. We believe it is important that 'Families Matter' takes cognisance of other strategies that have an impact on parents and families. Furthermore it would be very useful to draw attention to the links between the strategies, enabling government to take a holistic approach in the provision of supports and services to parents and families.

16. Finally and significantly we acknowledge that the aim of this strategy is to have a beneficial affect on all parents and families. However, in terms of equality implications, we would draw your attention to certain gender anomalies that persist within family structures. Firstly, the female 'carer' role has persisted as a societal norm. Secondly, the vast majority of lone parents are women (over 90%) and some lone parent families are vulnerable to poverty and other societal disadvantages. Thirdly, women are also much more likely to be the victim in domestic violence incidents. The proposed strategy has therefore an intrinsic gender equality dimension as 'Family Matters' will have a disproportionate affect on women. WSN believe it is important that government is aware of the societal differences and gender inequalities that exist within the family structure. We would therefore ask DHSSPS to ensure 'Family Matters' takes cognisance and links with the Gender Equality Strategy, recently published by OFMDFM.

WSN Members

Full Members

Ardoyne Women's Group
ATLAS
Al Nisa Women's Group
Ballybeen Women's Centre
Ballymurphy Women's Group
Belfast Travellers Support Group
Carrickfergus Women's Forum
Carew II & Newtownards Road Women's Group
Clan Mor Women's Group
Derry Women's Centre
Falls Women's Centre
First Steps Women's Group
Footprints Women's Centre
Greenway Women's Group
Lesbian Advocacy Services Initiative
Lenadoon Women's Group
Ligoneil Family Centre
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Associate members

Ballymena Community Forum
East Belfast Community Education Centre & Walkway Women's Group
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Parenting Forum NI
WEA (Worker's Educational Association)