

## **Women's Regional Consortium Policy Briefing Paper, September 2014: OFMDFM's 'Gender Equality Strategy 2006-2016 Review'**

### **1. Purpose**

The purpose of this briefing paper is to outline the content of the recently released midterm review of the Northern Ireland Executive's current gender equality strategy: 'Gender Equality Strategy 2006-2016' (hereafter, GES).<sup>1</sup> The review sought to 'evaluate and monitor key areas of the strategy and its implementation',<sup>2</sup> focussing specifically on an evaluation of departmental progress made on implementation of the 2008-11 GES cross-departmental action plans (one for men, one for women).

### **2. Background**

GES is aimed at providing 'an overarching strategic policy framework under which departments, their agencies and other relevant statutory authorities can, through both existing and new actions, promote gender equality for the benefit of both women and men'.<sup>3</sup> Drafted and agreed in 2006, GES was subsequently revised in 2010. To inform the development of a successor strategy ahead of the expiration of GES in 2016, the Executive is currently in consultation with the GES stakeholder advisory group: the Gender Advisory Panel (hereafter, GAP).<sup>4</sup>

The Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (hereafter, OFMDFM) has lead policy responsibility on gender equality. In 2013, OFMDFM undertook a midterm review of GES, which, as noted, focussed specifically on progress made on implementation of the 2008-11 GES cross-departmental action plans for men and women. The action plans 'identify barriers to equality of opportunity and gender-

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<sup>1</sup> OFMDFM, 'Gender Equality Strategy 2006-2016 Review', OFMDFM/NISRA: Belfast, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p.7.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p.3.

<sup>4</sup> The original GAP terms of reference depict the group as: 'working in partnership with [OFMDFM's] Gender Equality Unit ... [to] advise and assist in the finalisation of the gender equality framework strategy and in the development and monitoring of the implementation of the action plans for women and men'; *ibid.*, p.82.

specific actions to tackle them',<sup>5</sup> mapping departmental actions and targets to address gender inequalities against GES objectives.<sup>6</sup>

While the findings of the midterm review document were presented to GAP in 2013, the document itself was not released into the public domain until recently. It is intended that these findings will 'set the direction' for any GES developments during the remaining period of the current strategy and beyond.<sup>7</sup>

### **3. GES review process**

The terms of reference for the GES review called for a 'process that involved several stages of research in order to evaluate and monitor key areas of the strategy and its implementation'.<sup>8</sup> In the end, the process encompassed three stages:

- (i) examination of cross-departmental progress made against the outcomes and targets contained within the 2008-2011 action plans for men and women: OFMDFM asked all departments to complete information returns showing progress made against each of their associated action plan commitments;<sup>9</sup>
- (ii) online survey engagement with members of GAP and departmental equality representatives in the cross-departmental Equality Practitioners Group (hereafter EPG);<sup>10</sup> and,
- (iii) analysis of OFMDFM produced gender statistics.<sup>11</sup>

## **4. GES review: main findings<sup>12</sup>**

### **4.1 Overview**

A general lack of specificity and measurability in outcomes and targets and an apparent absence of robust regular monitoring to date rendered it impossible to clearly establish progress made against the action plans: 'action plans were difficult

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<sup>5</sup> OFMDFM, 'Gender Equality Strategy 2006-2016', OFMDFM. [Online]. <http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/gender-equality-strategy-2006-2016>

<sup>6</sup> OFMDFM, 'Gender Equality Action Plans', OFMDFM. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/gender-equality-strategy-2006-2016>

<sup>7</sup> OFMDFM/NISRA, op. cit., p.4.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p.7.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., loc. cit.

<sup>10</sup> EPG is hosted and chaired by OFMDFM.

<sup>11</sup> OFMDFM/NISRA, op. cit., p.8.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p.5ff.

to assess given the existing format and wording ... not all outcomes and targets were measureable or possible to report against'.<sup>13</sup>

This situation was compounded by departmental behaviour in the first stage of the review process: researchers initially experienced 'difficulty' in obtaining departmental returns, while subsequently submitted responses 'varied in consistency and quality',<sup>14</sup> providing 'modest evidence and detail'<sup>15</sup> on monitoring and progress made and no detail whatsoever either on how progress was measured/reported or how often action plans had been assessed/reviewed.<sup>16</sup>

As a result, researchers were only able to provide an 'indicative measure'<sup>17</sup> of overall progress made, relying in part on judgment calls and estimates rather than unequivocal/robust evidence: 'rather than a clear measurement, achievement against the action plans required a judgment to be made in some instances'.<sup>18</sup> Accordingly, it was only 'judged', as opposed to definitively established, that, across all departments, 37 out of the 126 outcomes or 'action points' in the 2008-11 action plans had been achieved, equating to 29 per cent.<sup>19</sup>

The review consequently notes the requirement for substantive future improvements in progress made, implementation and monitoring. That said, participants in the review process described GES as a 'positive step': its core elements (strategic objectives, vision, key action areas and so on) were all held as 'still relevant in their current form'.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 5 and p.11.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p.33.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p.24.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p.11. For example, the review notes that in the return from the Department of Education Northern Ireland 'no specific mention was made of the action plan, despite a copy being sent with the update request... no obvious effort was made to tie any of the information provided directly to the action plans and the information that was ...detailed ...did not provide any indicators or measurements of progress over the action plan period'. Ibid., p.40.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p.11.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p.5.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p.11.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.,p.5.

## 4.2 Summary points

### *Progress made*

- Lack of specificity and measurability in outcomes and targets and an absence of robust regular monitoring to date rendered it impossible to clearly establish overall progress made against the 2008-11 action plans.<sup>21</sup>
- Working within the prevailing limitations of measurement described above, researchers were only able to provide an 'indicative' measurement of progress made, according to which departments had apparently achieved just 29 per cent of outcomes in the 2008-11 action plans.<sup>22</sup>
- The substance of the strategy (objectives, vision, key action areas and so on) was judged 'still relevant', although there was an acknowledged need to address transgender issues.<sup>23</sup>

### *Action plans*

- Action plans were considered 'too broad' and it was recommended that to better enable the tracking of progress, any revised or new action plans should be 'more focused, [objective-]specific and targeted', encompassing fewer departmental actions and readily measurable targets.<sup>24</sup>
- It was proposed that new action plans along these lines should be formulated for the remainder of the current GES period, with OFMDFM statisticians advising on target/outcome/indicator setting.<sup>25</sup>

### *Monitoring and reporting*

- There was a recognised need for a robust, formalised and agreed monitoring/reporting framework, to include the institution of substantive annual monitoring, which although required by GES has not as yet taken place.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p.11.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, loc. cit.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p.5.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, loc. cit.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, loc. cit.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p.6.

### *Role of EPG and GAP*

- It was proposed that the roles of EPG and GAP ‘should be more clearly defined’; and, that the size, format and purpose of the latter should be reviewed to ‘ensure value and focus’, to include the possible formulation of a GAP action plan.<sup>27</sup>

## **5. Conclusion**

The Executive’s apparent<sup>28</sup> failure to realise 71 per cent of outcomes in the 2008-11 GES action plans is indicative of the scale of unaddressed unfair gender inequality across the public sphere in the Northern Ireland case.<sup>29</sup> As we have seen, to take better account of this inequality, the review called for enhanced GES implementation and monitoring/reporting mechanisms, including robust annual monitoring, and rationalised action plans.

It, of course, remains to be seen what actual difference such apparent improvements could potentially make in promoting greater gender equality, whether in the remaining lifetime of the current strategy or within the context of its successor.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., loc. cit.

<sup>28</sup> I say ‘apparent’ since, as noted, measurement limitations rendered it impossible for researchers to be absolutely clear on the number of outcomes achieved: ‘taking the information from the returns, as an indicative measure it could be stated that 37 out of 126 action points attributed across all departments had been achieved... however, *this is not to say that the remainder had definitely not been achieved as, given the wording in the action plans, not all outcomes and targets were measureable or possible to report against*’. Ibid., p.11.

<sup>29</sup> On this, see M. Potter, ‘Review of gender issues in Northern Ireland’, NIA: Belfast, 2014.