



## **Consortium for the Regional Support for Women in Disadvantaged and Rural Areas**

### **Response to: Development of a Sexual Orientation Strategy and Action Plan – Consultation Document**

**Issued by: Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister**

**June 2014**



Foyle Women's  
 Information  
 Network



# **Women's Regional Consortium: Working to Support Women in Rural Communities and Disadvantaged Urban Areas**

## **1. Introduction**

**1.1** This response has been undertaken collaboratively by the members of the Consortium for the Regional Support for Women in Disadvantaged and Rural Areas, which is funded by the Department for Social Development in Northern Ireland and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development in Northern Ireland.

**1.2** The Women's Regional Consortium consists of seven established women's sector organisations that are committed to working in partnership with each other, government, statutory organisations and women's organisations, centres and groups working in disadvantaged and rural areas, to ensure that organisations working for women are given the best possible support in the work they do in tackling disadvantage and social exclusion.<sup>1</sup>

The seven groups are as follows:

- Training for Women Network (TWN) – Project Lead
- Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA)
- Women's Support Network (WSN)
- Northern Ireland's Rural Women's Network (NIRWN)
- Women's TEC
- Women's Centre Derry (WCD)
- Foyle Women's Information Network (FWIN)

**1.3** The Consortium will be the established link and strategic partner between government and statutory agencies and women in disadvantaged and rural areas, including all groups, centres and organisations delivering essential frontline services, advice and support. The Consortium will ensure that there is a continuous two way flow of information between government and the sector. It will ensure that organisations/centres and groups are made aware of

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<sup>1</sup> Sections 1.2-1.3 represent the official description of the Consortium's work, as agreed and authored by its seven partner organisations.

consultations, government planning and policy implementation. In turn, the Consortium will ascertain the views, needs and aspirations of women in disadvantaged and rural areas and take these views forward to influence policy development and future government planning, which will ultimately result in the empowerment of local women in disadvantaged and rurally isolated communities.

**1.4** This response is informed by women's views and perspectives articulated at consultation engagement organised at FWIN and Greenway Women's Centre on 15 and 16 May 2014, respectively. Appendix 1 provides further detail on this engagement.

## **2. General comments**

**2.1** The Women's Regional Consortium appreciates the opportunity to respond to the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister's Development of a Sexual Orientation Strategy and Action Plan - Consultation Document.

**2.2** As research affirms, 'because of their sexual orientation',<sup>2</sup> lesbian, gay and bisexual (hereafter, LGB) individuals across Northern Ireland *continue to* experience different kinds of mistreatment in the public sphere, including discrimination, intolerance and harassment, which can fundamentally 'limit their choices and chances in life'.<sup>3</sup> So clearly, extant policies, practices and legislation have thus far proven insufficient to remedially address homophobic behaviour in the Northern Ireland case in effective and substantive ways.

From this perspective, the Consortium welcomes this consultation exercise as affirmation of the Executive's commitment to 'bring focus and priority to identifying and addressing the issues and disadvantages that undermine

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<sup>2</sup> E. Breitenbach, *Researching lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender issues in Northern Ireland*, OFMDM: Belfast, 2004, p.1.

<sup>3</sup> EHRC, *Beyond tolerance: making sexual orientation a public matter*, 2009, EHRC: London, p.4.

equality of opportunity for people who are LGB ... which adversely affect their everyday lives'.<sup>4</sup>

That said, we are concerned that the outline proposals contained within the consultation documentation might *potentially not go far enough* to properly capture and remedially address the actual nature and extent of this sexual orientation inequality and mistreatment. Of particular concern is the dearth of reliable data on the everyday experiences of LGB people in Northern Ireland, and the question of whether the documentation proposes enough remedial action to effectively tackle both this research deficit and its potentially adverse implications for policy planning, development and delivery in this area.

Participants at the focus group engagement articulated these concerns and raised associated misgivings, as will be shown in the remainder of the paper.

### **3. Specific comments**

#### *Workplace mistreatment*

**3.1** The consultation questionnaire acknowledges the need to address workplace homophobia in Northern Ireland. While this acknowledgement is, of course, to be welcomed, we would also emphasise the urgency of this need and the imperative for government to take full and proper account of it in developing the final draft strategy.

Research from the Rainbow Project underscores this urgency by evidencing the cross-sectoral scale and ongoing nature of workplace homophobia within Northern Ireland.<sup>5</sup> Incidents of both verbal abuse and direct/indirect 'negative comments' were reported across all employment sectors, while respondents also described a perceived lack of motivation from employers to address this behaviour. Indeed, 'most' respondents depicted workplace cultures within which it was perceived that a 'certain level' of verbal abuse and/or negative comments 'must be tolerated and accepted, for fear of being identified as the

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<sup>4</sup> OFMDFM, Development of a sexual orientation strategy and action plan - consultation document, OFMDFM: Belfast, 2014.

<sup>5</sup> M. McDermott, Through our eyes: experiences of lesbian, gay and bisexual people in the workplace, Rainbow Project: Belfast, 2011.

person who always complains'.<sup>6</sup> Quantitative data from the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (hereafter, ECNI) helps to contextualise this feedback: the majority of sexual orientation discrimination enquiries received by the organisation has tended to involve workplace mistreatment, while its associated caseload has included '*shocking incidents*' of harassment.<sup>7</sup>

Women at the focus group events related their own anecdotal accounts of cross-sectoral workplace homophobic behaviour, and concerns were subsequently expressed that LGB people might not always be cognisant that under existing sexual orientation equality law they have legal protection against such mistreatment. To take account of this apparent knowledge gap, it was proposed that government should devise and initiate a properly targeted awareness-raising strategy, and the consultation documentation's emphasis on 'raising awareness' was consequently well received.

Clearly, in order to more effectively and meaningfully identify and address workplace mistreatment on sexual orientation grounds, government and employers need to '*take the lead* in making workplaces more inclusive for all employees'.<sup>8</sup> At the level of government, this will require greater reliance on robust evidence-based, outcomes-oriented strategic approaches, properly supported by fully integrated policy monitoring, evaluation and review processes, as well as an appropriately responsive legislative framework. From this perspective, the Consortium would endorse ECNI's call for the strengthening of existing sexual orientation equality law in respect of workplace harassment.<sup>9</sup>

Focus group participants were similarly inclined, urging government to put in place sufficient measures to ensure that the eventual strategy will be properly managed cross-departmentally 'at the very highest level'. With specific regard

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

<sup>7</sup> See, <http://www.equalityni.org/Delivering-Equality/Addressing-inequality/Law-reform/Legal-cases/LGB-in-the-workplace#sthash.tfOUXcNI.dpuf>

<sup>8</sup> McDermott, op. cit., p.43.

<sup>9</sup> On this, see <http://www.equalityni.org/Delivering-Equality/Addressing-inequality/Law-reform/Legal-cases/LGB-in-the-workplace#sthash.tfOUXcNI.dpuf>

to remedial action by employers to promote inclusion, they also advocated the further promotion of workplace 'Diversity Champions'.

Worryingly, there is an acute lack of specificity in the consultation documentation on the question of precisely how workplace homophobia might best be holistically addressed. For example, although the consultation questionnaire does include 'employment' as a distinct policy theme, the category itself contains just two broad 'possible actions', neither of which is sufficiently detailed.<sup>10</sup> We do, of course, note the consultation document's promise that specificity will be addressed in the eventual strategy, in the form of 'specific issues and actions ... assigned to departments on the basis of policy competence'.<sup>11</sup> But, given the urgency of the need to tackle workplace homophobia in all its guises in the Northern Ireland case, this lack of specificity is clearly still concerning *even at this stage*.

## **Recommendation**

The Consortium recommends that, as the Executive takes forward its final draft strategy, it should commit to spelling out the precise nature of its intended approach to addressing workplace homophobia *in comprehensive, concrete and readily measurable outcome-oriented terms*.

### *Research evidence*

**3.2** As is widely acknowledged, government failure to properly collect, disseminate, analyse and rely on pertinent data in its strategic decision-making processes can act as a substantial barrier to effective policy development, implementation, monitoring and review. For this reason, the effectiveness of the ongoing policy planning behind this consultation document is intrinsically linked to the robustness of the evidence base informing that planning, which in turn is dependent on the quality of the Executive's sexual orientation data collection strategy.

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<sup>10</sup> OFMDFM, Sexual orientation strategy consultation questionnaire, OFMDFM: Belfast, 2014.

<sup>11</sup> OFMDFM, Consultation document, op. cit.

Research from the Equality and Human Rights Commission has identified a substantial gap in knowledge and understanding of LGB people's everyday experiences, including 'where [they] live, where they work [and] their experiences and needs of public services.'<sup>12</sup> This dearth of robust evidence is problematic for policy development, planning and implementation as well as service delivery, precisely because 'evidence is the key to making [policy development and] services reflect everyone's experiences and meet their needs'.<sup>13</sup> So addressing this research deficit is clearly key to the delivery of an effective final strategy.

From this perspective, the Consortium welcomes the consultation documentation's inclusion under 'possible actions' of a commitment to pursue different kinds of research into the everyday experiences of LGB people.<sup>14</sup> Lamentably however, the documentation subsumes the notion of 'research' under different policy 'themes' and is not wide-ranging enough to adequately address the research deficit under review.<sup>15</sup>

Addressing this knowledge deficit in meaningful ways will require an altogether different kind of evidence-gathering approach. Because as research indicates, if government wants to enhance how service planning and delivery takes account of sexual orientation inequality, then it should sponsor *sustained, comprehensive* sexual orientation data monitoring *across the entire public sphere*.<sup>16</sup>

In short, we are concerned that the proposed research approach might prove piecemeal, and so fall far short of what could actually be required to offset the potential policy implications of the knowledge deficit outlined in this section.

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<sup>12</sup> EHRC, op. cit., p.3

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., loc.cit.

<sup>14</sup> OFMDFM, Consultation questionnaire, op. cit.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, EHRC, op. cit.

## Recommendation

The Consortium recommends that the Executive commit to *comprehensively* addressing the existing knowledge deficit on LGB people's everyday experiences, with a view to ensuring that future policy development in this area is *properly informed by a robust, continuously maintained and ultimately clear evidence base*. To strategically prioritise this objective, we urge government to develop 'research' as a separate substantive theme within the final draft strategy.

### *Health*

**3.3** The Consortium appreciates the inclusion of 'health' as a distinct policy 'theme' within the consultation documentation. However, we are concerned at the government's failure to include any specific commitment under this theme to recognising and accommodating the particular health and social care needs/interests of those LGB population cohorts which research suggests are at particular risk of healthcare abuse/injustice, including older and young LGB groupings.

Research indicates that, for a range of interacting reasons, and as compared to their heterosexual peers, older LGB people 'are likely to have a *greater need of formal care and support*'.<sup>17</sup> Research also suggests that failure to properly recognise and accommodate this 'greater need' in the public sphere could potentially hold human rights implications. For example, an investigation by the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (hereafter, NIHRC) into the treatment of older people in Northern Ireland nursing homes concluded that residents faced the 'risk of multiple forms of human rights abuse' given their dependence on care staff for 'fulfilment of their everyday needs'.<sup>18</sup> The pertinent question here is therefore this: potentially how much more at risk of such abuse could older LGB individuals be in this context, given their 'greater need' of formal care? To compound matters, other NIHRC research has also

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<sup>17</sup> R. Ward, S. Pugh & E. Price, Don't look back? Improving health and social care service delivery for older LGB users. EHRC: London, 2010, p.9.

<sup>18</sup> NIHRC, In defence of dignity: the human rights of older people in nursing homes, NIHRC: Belfast, 2012.

evidenced the potential for young LGB people to experience different kinds of healthcare-associated human rights abuse.<sup>19</sup> Focus group participants highlighted a further healthcare injustice affecting the LGB community, calling for the lifting of the current ban on blood donations by gay men resident in Northern Ireland.

### **Recommendation**

The Consortium recommends that, in taking forward the final draft strategy, the Executive should give proper consideration to developing remedial actions specifically aimed at recognising and accommodating the health and social care needs/interests of those LGB population cohorts at particular risk of abuse in the wider health and social care system.

#### *Education*

**3.4** The Consortium welcomes the inclusion of ‘education’ as a distinct policy ‘theme’ within the consultation documentation and the outline actions that fall under this category. However, we are disappointed that these actions do not include an express commitment by government to comprehensively address LGB equality at the level of statutory curriculum within Northern Ireland schools.

Research from the Rainbow Project has highlighted the prevalence of homophobic bullying and harassment of young people in the Northern Ireland school system.<sup>20</sup> The same report also expressed concern that whilst the statutory curriculum makes reference to educating pupils in human rights, equality and respect for diversity it also *ignores* sexual orientation.<sup>21</sup>

Research from the NIHRC indicates that without adequate remedial curricular realignment to address this worrying omission, ‘there is a danger that the rights of [LGB individuals as a] Section 75 group will not be represented

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<sup>19</sup> Breitenbach, op. cit., p.12.

<sup>20</sup> G. Boyd, Left out of the equation, Rainbow Project: Belfast, 2011.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p.6.

adequately' in the classroom.<sup>22</sup> Focus group participants related their own anecdotal accounts of homophobic school bullying, expressing concern that individual schools are not *directly* subject to Section 75 provision, even though education authorities are themselves explicitly subject to it.

More research is evidently required to provide a fuller understanding of the precise nature and extent of homophobic school bullying in the Northern Ireland case, as well as its impact on educational attainment and relationship to the curricular omission reviewed in this section.

### **Recommendation**

The Consortium recommends that, as the Executive takes forward these proposals, it should take due account of the social justice imperative to address LGB equality within Northern Ireland schools *at the level of the statutory curriculum*.

#### *Multiple identities*

**3.5** The Consortium appreciates that the consultation documentation outlines the Executive's commitment to recognise the multiple identities of LGB people. However, we are disappointed that this recognition is delimited to two brief references.

Research provides some insight into the nature and scale of unjust equalities impacting LGB individuals with multiple identities resident in Northern Ireland. For example, research has identified barriers to accessing services faced by some disabled lesbian women<sup>23</sup> and young LGB people.<sup>24</sup> And, as research further affirms, LGB individuals with multiple identities can also face barriers to accessing their equality rights.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Quoted here: <http://www.equalityni.org/Delivering-Equality/Addressing-inequality/Law-reform/Legal-cases/Embed-LGB-equality-in-education#sthash.VmdlU184.dpuf%E2%80%99>

<sup>23</sup> M. Quiery, *A mighty silence: a report on the needs of lesbians and bisexual women in Northern Ireland*, LASI: Belfast, 2002.

<sup>24</sup> Breitenbach, *op. cit.*, p.12-13.

<sup>25</sup> J. Walsh et al., *Enabling lesbian, gay and bisexual individuals to access their rights under equality law*, ECNI: Belfast; and, Equality Authority: Dublin, 2007.

These barriers can often tend to be attributable to complex, interacting, mutually-affecting factors. Addressing this complexity in meaningful ways will require sustained, collaborative, cross-departmental interventions, including interventions to deal with the under-representation and invisibility of LGB people in public life. Participants at the focus group engagement reinforced this substantive point, urging that government fund support programmes aimed at providing LGB people with ‘the confidence to get involved [in public life]’.

Yet, worryingly, there remains a significant knowledge gap on this subject.<sup>26</sup> In terms of policy development and service delivery, this deficit is problematic precisely because, as previously noted, ‘evidence is the key to making [public] services reflect everyone’s experiences and meet their needs’.<sup>27</sup>

### **Recommendation**

If the Executive is serious in its intent to protect and promote the equality rights of LGB individuals with multiple identities, then it should commit to properly addressing the associated research deficit, with the ultimate aim of providing a much clearer evidence-base with which to better inform and enhance future policy formulation in this area.

#### *Rural perspective*

**3.6** Research affirms that, in terms of accessing their equality rights, LGB people living in rural areas can be ‘especially vulnerable’.<sup>28</sup> Research also suggests vulnerability in respect of LGB individuals accessing services in rural areas. For example, it has been shown that health provision for LGB people in rural regions can be ‘far from adequate’.<sup>29</sup> The factors underlying this vulnerability are complex, including the cumulative impact of both social and

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<sup>26</sup> EHRC, op. cit.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p.3.

<sup>28</sup> Walsh et al., op. cit., p.135.

<sup>29</sup> J. Donaghy Consulting, Breaking the silence in rural areas: rural mental health, stigma, services and supports with the SWARD region, Niamh Louise Foundation, 2012.

geographic isolation, stigmatisation, LGB invisibility and infrastructural inadequacies.

Participants at the focus group engagement anecdotally underscored this point, capturing the exclusion, marginalisation and stigmatisation of rurally-resident LGB individuals. Particular concern was also expressed at the relationship between rural residency and the incidence of mental ill-health among LGB people, including suicidal tendencies, and it was consequently suggested that government should commission further research into this area. From this perspective, the consultation proposal in respect of mental health promotion was particularly welcomed, and the imperative of simultaneously 'LGB *and* rural proofing' all policy and legislation was underscored.

We appreciate that the Rainbow Project and the Department for Agriculture and Rural Development are currently conducting quantitative (i.e. survey-based) research on the experiences of LGBT people living in rural Northern Ireland. However, to provide a fuller understanding of the differentiated *and* shared nature of these experiences, we would propose that government sponsor the supplementation of this work through undertaking further comprehensive qualitative research.

### **Recommendation**

The Consortium recommends that the Executive commits to sponsoring further qualitative research into the experiences of LGB people in rural communities, to ensure that future policy development and service delivery in this area will be properly informed by an appositely robust, 'thick' evidence base.

### **4. Conclusion**

For the reasons outlined in this paper, although the Women's Regional Consortium certainly welcomes the consultation proposals, we are concerned that *much more will remain to be done at the level of policy, practice and legislation* to effectively and sustainably promote and protect the rights of LGB

individuals in the Northern Ireland case. We therefore urge the Executive to take proper account of these substantive concerns, both in the development of the final draft strategy *and beyond*.

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**Appendix 1 – Women’s Regional Consortium Focus Group Events:  
OFMDFM’s Development of a Sexual Orientation Strategy and Action  
Plan - Consultation Document**

Focus group locations and dates:

- FWIN, Derry, 15 May 2014
- Greenway Women’s Centre, Belfast, 16 May 2014

Participants’ profile:

- Staff
- Parents
- Young and older people

Event facilitation details:

- The event at FWIN was facilitated by FWIN
- The engagement at Greenway Women’s Centre was facilitated by GWC, in partnership with the Women’s Support Network