



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

### **Response to: Children and Young People's Strategy 2017-2027 Consultation Document**

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Foyle Women's  
Information  
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# **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 (hereafter, either the Women's Regional Consortium or simply the Consortium), which is funded by the Department for Social Development in Northern Ireland and the Department of Agriculture 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 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

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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.

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 perspectives articulated in focus group engagement, reflecting the views of the regional membership bases of the Consortium partners.

## **2. General comments**

**2.1** The Women’s Regional Consortium appreciates the opportunity to respond to the Department of Education’s ‘Children and young people’s strategy 2017-2027 consultation document’.<sup>2</sup>

**2.2** The relationship between poverty, child wellbeing, life chances, life outcomes and intergenerational disadvantage has been well documented.<sup>3</sup>

That relationship has been broadly summarised thus:

[there is] widespread consensus [in the literature] that the implications of living in poverty are much more severe and lasting for children than for adults... children who grow up in poverty have poorer ...outcomes, both in the short-term and in the long-run ... growing up in poverty puts children at risk of permanent disadvantage, perpetuating an intergenerational cycle of disadvantage.<sup>4</sup>

While the more fundamental point is that ‘poverty however measured ... matter[s] for children’s wellbeing and life chances’, there is also mounting evidence that ‘persistence of poverty ... matters even more’.<sup>5</sup>

Research would as such suggest that in a Northern Ireland context characterised by actual and further projected increases in different kinds of

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<sup>2</sup> Department of Education, ‘Children and young people’s strategy 2017-2027 consultation document’, DE: Belfast, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> See, UNICEF, ‘Child poverty in perspective: an overview of child wellbeing in rich countries’, Innocenti Report Card 7, UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre: Florence, 2007; and, A. Dickerson and G. Popli, ‘The many dimensions of child poverty: evidence from the UK millennium cohort study,’ Working Papers, University of Sheffield: Sheffield, 2015. See also, P. Gregg, S. Harkness and S. Machin, ‘Child poverty and its consequences’, JRF: London, 1999; and, P. Gregg and S. Machin, ‘The relationship between childhood experiences, subsequent educational attainment and adult labour market performance’, LSE: London, 1999.

<sup>4</sup> Dickerson and Popli, op. cit., p.1.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p.2.

poverty, including child poverty,<sup>6</sup> and where persistent poverty stands at 21 per cent,<sup>7</sup> the wellbeing of affected children and young people remains profoundly at risk. We therefore note with particular interest that interventionist ambition under the proposed strategy is expressly framed in wellbeing discourse.

*Proposed wellbeing indicators/measures: too restrictive?*

Wellbeing is, of course, an essentially contested, multidimensional, complex notion open to divergent and competing interpretations dependent on theoretical perspective.<sup>8</sup> And, capturing and addressing this complexity in policymaking aimed at promoting wellbeing remains a distinct and fundamental challenge for government, whether at the level of the local, the national or beyond.<sup>9</sup> The important point here is this: as research affirms, meeting that challenge effectively and meaningfully *can intrinsically rely* on government integrating into such policymaking a suitably comprehensive set of wellbeing indicators, i.e. measures that expressly take account of the multidimensional nature of wellbeing by properly combining subjective and objective measures.<sup>10</sup> More obviously, meeting that challenge can also rely on measurement that encompasses data collation and disaggregation across demographic classifications that include age, ethnicity and gender.<sup>11</sup> In short, research affirms how measurement validity, reliability and rigour in policymaking on wellbeing can innately rely on proper attention to analytical multidimensionality.

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<sup>6</sup> See, J. Browne, A. Hood and R. Joyce, 'Child and working-age poverty in Northern Ireland from 2010 to 2020', IFS Report R78, Institute for Fiscal Studies: London, 2013; also, A. Tinson and T. MacInnes, 'Monitoring poverty and social exclusion in Northern Ireland 2016', JRF: London.

<sup>7</sup> According to Public Health Agency statistics, persistent poverty in Northern Ireland - at 21 per cent (before housing costs) – amounts to more than double the comparative figure for Great Britain. PHA, 'Poverty', PHA. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.publichealth.hscni.net/directorate-public-health/health-and-social-wellbeing-improvement/poverty>

<sup>8</sup> F. McAllister, 'Wellbeing concepts and challenges', Sustainable Development Research Network: London, 2005. See also, L. H. Lippman, K. Anderson Moore and H. McIntosh, 'Positive indicators of child wellbeing: a conceptual framework, measures and methodological issues,' Innocenti Working Papers, UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre: Florence, 2009.

<sup>9</sup> McAllister, op. cit.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. For example, subjective variants that entail data based on how participants themselves rate their own level of satisfaction versus objective measures that entail data on material circumstances

<sup>11</sup> UNICEF, op. cit.; also, Lippman, Anderson Moore and McIntosh, op. cit.

Lamentably, however, although the consultation document does indeed contain divergent wellbeing indicators, it is not entirely clear – it remains to be seen at this early developmental stage - whether these (i) will be sufficiently diverse and numerous to capture the multidimensionality at hand; and thus whether they (ii) might successfully negotiate the tension that can arise between the aforementioned subjective and objective measurement imperatives (a tension that, if not properly negotiated, can ultimately threaten effective policymaking on wellbeing).<sup>12</sup>

Against this background, while we certainly welcome the consultation exercise as affirmation of government intent to help ‘improve the wellbeing of children and young people living in Northern Ireland [by] delivering positive, long-lasting outcomes’,<sup>13</sup> we have reservations about the potential of government to actually evidence delivery on this intent in meaningful and substantive ways, whether under the proposed lifetime of the strategy or beyond. In consequence, this is very much a cautious welcome. To compound matters, for reasons set out below, we are additionally concerned about projected limitations on this potential correlated with a policymaking status quo dominated by, on the one hand, Brexit-associated socio-economic uncertainty and, on the other, enduring austerity.

*New strategy: what will make the difference?*

It is noteworthy that the proposed strategy’s predecessor outlined similar intent to help improve wellbeing, and yet the relationship at hand between poverty and threatened wellbeing in the jurisdiction was, as research suggests, significantly contributed to under the lifetime of the latter.<sup>14</sup> To compound matters, in the same period, anti-poverty policy development in the jurisdiction was, of course, dogged by controversy over government failure to fulfil a statutory duty to adopt a distinct anti-poverty strategy. This begs the

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<sup>12</sup> McAllister, op. cit.

<sup>13</sup> DE, op. cit.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, JRF, ‘Monitoring poverty and social exclusion in Northern Ireland 2014’, JRF: London; also, B. Hinds, ‘The Northern Ireland economy: women on the edge? A comprehensive analysis of the impacts of the financial crisis’, Women’s Resource and Development Agency: Belfast, 2011; and, P. Doran, J. Wallace and J. Woods ‘Measuring wellbeing in Northern Ireland a new conversation for new times’, Carnegie Trust UK: London, 2013.

question: precisely how is it envisaged that the proposed strategy might feasibly and meaningfully address this troubling status quo of poverty-associated at-risk wellbeing?

It is assumed that the prospect of meaningful delivery under the strategy will innately correlate to fulfilment of programme for government commitments to robust integrated policymaking and outcomes-based accountability across key mutually supportive strategies. Crucially, the latter is set to include investment and economic strategies as well as a social strategy with a distinctly anti-poverty dimension, all of which will reportedly be aimed, in part at least, at stimulating the kind of structural conditions that may prove conducive to addressing the kind of poverty-associated constrained wellbeing at hand.<sup>15</sup>

Yet the fundamental problem here is this: *in a Brexit dominated policymaking landscape complicated by enduring austerity - characterised by profound socio-economic and fiscal uncertainty and associated projections of, inter alia, slow economic growth, low productivity, lower earnings growth, higher inflation, higher income taxes, extended severe retrenchments and further financial hardship, deprivation and vulnerability*<sup>16</sup> - a substantive question mark clearly looms large over both (a) the potential realisation of any such anti-poverty conditions under the lifetime of the strategy; and, in consequence, (b) the potential realisation of the proposed wellbeing ambitions.

The remainder of this paper will elaborate on this claim-making, setting out a plethora of associated concerns in respect of the following factors:

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<sup>15</sup> On this see, for example, E. P. Davis and M. Sanchez-Martinez, 'A review of the economic theories of poverty', NIESR: London, 2014.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, T. Helm and P. Inman, 'Theresa May's 'just managing' families set to be worse off', *The Observer*, 29 October 2016. [Online]. Available at:

<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/oct/29/theresa-may-just-managing-families-worse-off-brexit>  
Also, A. Sparrow, 'IFS says workers face 'dreadful' decade without real-terms increase in wages - politics live', *The Guardian* 24 November 2016. [Online]. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/blog/live/2016/nov/24/ministers-defend-obr-after-pro-brexit-tories-accuse-it-of-scaremongering-politics-live> And, K. Allen, 'Brexit uncertainty will hold UK GDP growth back, says OBR', *The Guardian* 23 November 2016. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/nov/23/brexit-uncertainty-will-hold-uk-gdp-growth-back-says-obr>

- (i) the correlation between extended austerity, mitigation and child poverty;
- (ii) the nexus between the economic participation of women, childcare and child wellbeing;
- (iii) the relationship between austerity cuts and the mental wellbeing of children and young people; and,
- (iv) the imperative of early and sustained interventionism and case for proper recognition of women sector provision in furthering that imperative.

Focus group participants articulated these substantive concerns and raised associated issues, as will be shown in the remainder of the paper.

### **3. Specific comments**

#### **3.1 Extended austerity, child poverty and welfare reform mitigation**

This section considers the question of the potential impact on child wellbeing and poverty of any cessation of extant time-limited welfare reform mitigation for the most vulnerable.

As previously noted, the relationship between household poverty, child poverty and constrained child wellbeing is well documented.<sup>17</sup> Responding to that relationship, the document sets out executive ambition to ‘assist parents and families to protect ... children from poverty’, seeking, ultimately, to ‘tackle’ such poverty.<sup>18</sup> Similar intent was, of course, set out in the child poverty strategy launched in 2011, in the form of a distinct ambition to eradicate child poverty by 2020.<sup>19</sup> Yet, in the period since that launch child poverty in the jurisdiction has in fact increased and, worst still, further substantive rises are projected by 2020.<sup>20</sup>

Research on the same period lends insight into how austerity may have impacted the relationship at hand between poverty and constrained

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<sup>17</sup> Supra note 3.

<sup>18</sup> DE, op. cit.

<sup>19</sup> OFMDFM, ‘Delivering social change for children and young people: consultation document,’ OFMDFM: Belfast, 2014, p. 43.

<sup>20</sup> Browne, Hood and Joyce, op. cit.

wellbeing<sup>21</sup> and, worryingly, further austerity is anticipated during the lifetime of the strategy. This picture is complicated by uncertainty over social protection for the most vulnerable in the jurisdiction following any cessation of extant time-limited welfare reform mitigation.

It has been evidenced that when such mitigation ceases, affected cohorts can tend to experience increased vulnerability.<sup>22</sup> For example, research in respect of mitigation to take account of recent changes in state assistance for private sector renters in Northern Ireland pointed to significant levels of post-mitigation vulnerability, comprising increases in rent arrears, evictions and homelessness.<sup>23</sup> To compound matters, studies forecast increased financial hardship for the vulnerable correlated to the United Kingdom's impending withdrawal from the European Union.<sup>24</sup>

It is against this particular background that the Consortium remains profoundly concerned about the question of the potential impact on child wellbeing and poverty of any cessation of extant time-limited welfare reform mitigation for the most vulnerable under the lifetime of the proposed strategy.

### **Recommendation**

We recommend that the executive take seriously the question of the potential impact on child wellbeing and poverty of any cessation of extant time-limited welfare reform mitigation for the vulnerable, endeavouring therein to take proper account of any correlated increases in vulnerability.

### **3.2 Economic participation of women, childcare and child wellbeing**

The document outlines an executive commitment to 'support high quality childcare', presumably, in large part, under the planned childcare strategy, acknowledging therein that 'an inability to access affordable, flexible,

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.. See also, Hinds, op. cit.; and, M. O'Hara, 'Communities worried that worst is still to come in Northern Ireland', JRF: London, 2012.

<sup>22</sup> S. Fitzpatrick et al., 'The homelessness monitor: Northern Ireland 2013', Crisis: London: 2013.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Helm and Inman, op. cit.; also, Sparrow, op. cit.

appropriate childcare can directly impact on poverty levels' and thus on the wellbeing of children and young people.<sup>25</sup>

While we welcome this acknowledgment and promise of support, as the Consortium response to the consultation on the draft childcare strategy indicated, we are concerned that the proposals outlined in the latter might not go anywhere near far enough to meaningfully address substantive issues of childcare-associated poverty impacting vulnerable and marginalised women and their children in disadvantaged and rural areas of Northern Ireland.

That impact correlates to continuing unmet demand for community-based low cost/no cost pre-school and school age provision, such as might help remedially address gendered cultural-structural factors underlying these experiences of marginalisation and vulnerability (precisely by helping to enhance disadvantaged women's prospects of economic participation in the public sphere and, in turn, helping to enhance the life chances, wellbeing and outcomes of their families).<sup>26</sup>

Recent research lends insight into what is at stake in this debate by illustrating the at-risk cumulative contribution of such provision to the government's own anti-poverty agenda.<sup>27</sup> That contribution is characterised in terms of remedial outcomes across different kinds of disadvantage, including intergenerational variants and that experienced by ethnic minorities, as well as different kinds of poverty, including in-work, gender and child poverty.<sup>28</sup>

Of profound concern in this debate is the apparent absence of a substantive budgetary commitment to underpin the childcare strategy, such as might help to support low cost/no cost childcare at the level of the community in meaningfully sustainable ways. For obvious reasons, the prospect of an

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<sup>25</sup> DE, op. cit.

<sup>26</sup> See, Morrow Gilchrist Associates, 'Evaluation of regional support arrangements for the voluntary and community sector', Morrow Gilchrist Associates: Belfast, 2015; also, H. McLaughlin, 'Women living in disadvantaged communities: barriers to participation', Women's Centres' Regional Partnership, Belfast: 2009.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

effective childcare strategy and any potential relationship it might bear to positive wellbeing outcomes for children relies fundamentally on the emergence/actualisation of such a commitment.

### **Recommendation**

Government should take more seriously the question of the relationship between child poverty and wellbeing and the provision of community-based low cost/no cost childcare for marginalised and vulnerable women in disadvantaged areas. To that end, it should ensure that its pending childcare strategy is fit for purpose in being - first and foremostly - properly resourced.

### **3.3 Austerity cuts: risk to mental wellbeing of children and young people**

The consultation document sets out interventionist ambition in respect of children's and young people's mental wellbeing. This section outlines troubling complicating factors involving the potential fulfilment of this ambition.

In the Northern Ireland case, the likely cumulative mental health impact of the post-2008 recession on the population at large has been categorised by experts as 'significant', contributed to in no small part by austerity-associated 'systemic', 'long-term' and further projected underfunding of mental health provision.<sup>29</sup>

Commentators warn that such austerity measures are likely to have exacerbated pre-existing inadequacy of provision. Dismay over this deteriorating situation has been particularly pronounced in respect of the under-resourcing of children and adolescent mental health, which continues to receive only a small proportion of overall mental health spending in the jurisdiction. For example, in 2013–14, only 7.8 per cent of the overall planned mental health budget was dedicated to child and adolescent services.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> G. Wilson, et al., 'Regress? React? Resolve? An evaluation of mental health service provision in Northern Ireland', QUB: Belfast, 2015, p.v and p.2.

<sup>30</sup> NICCY et al., 'Report of the UK Children's Commissioners UN Committee on the Rights of the Child examination of the Fifth Periodic Report of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland', NICCY et al.: Belfast, 2015. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.niccy.org/about-us/news/latest-news/2015/july/01/fear-of-further-rises-in-child-poverty-in-northern-ireland/>

Yet, worryingly, there is a distinct dearth of research on the precise nature of the impact of ongoing fiscal cuts on child and adolescent mental health services and users in the Northern Ireland case, indicative of a wider research deficit on the relationship between austerity and mental health in general. As a recent study put it:

there has been little or no study of how the economic recession and the current strong emphasis on financial restraint in health and social care commissioning have impacted on the development of mental health services. In essence, we have little empirical knowledge of the impact of these factors on service users in Northern Ireland, or the ability of frontline staff to meet their needs. Indeed, it is evident ... that there has been a lack of ongoing, systematic mental health research in and for Northern Ireland.<sup>31</sup>

For obvious reasons, in an evidenced-based policymaking environment the persistence of this kind of research deficit may prove innately problematic for both policy development and service design in mental health at large.<sup>32</sup>

### **Recommendation**

In pursuit of substantively improved mental health outcomes for children and young people in the jurisdiction, it is recommended that government seek to properly identify and remedially address the cumulative mental health impact of ongoing austerity on child and adolescent mental health services and users, while also ring-fencing mental health from any further fiscal cuts under extended austerity.<sup>33</sup>

### **3.4 Early/sustained interventionism: recognition for women's sector**

This section considers the unique role played by the women's sector in improving outcomes for children and young people in Northern Ireland, and makes the case for proper recognition and enhancement of this role under the proposed strategy, embodied in a greater commitment to early and sustained interventionism in collaboration with the sector.

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<sup>31</sup> Wilson, et al., op. cit., p.28.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> This notion of ring-fencing is explored in the literature; *ibid.*, p.2.

As research affirms, the women's sector continues to play a significant role in addressing the complex needs of vulnerable women and families in disadvantaged communities through provision of vital frontline services, ranging from specialist advice and support through to education, childcare, health/wellbeing and parenting programmes.<sup>34</sup> Crucially, such provision can help marginalised and excluded women gain access to educational, training and support programmes, developing skills, confidence and self-esteem, which can ultimately enhance their prospects of economic participation in the public sphere and which, in turn, can potentially help enhance the life chances, outcomes and wellbeing of their children.<sup>35</sup> For example, research shows that where such education and training of mothers results in higher levels of employment and wages, it can in turn result in higher educational attainment levels for their children.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, research also affirms the cost/benefit efficiency of this nexus in helping alleviate child poverty.<sup>37</sup>

As is well established, early intervention is key to effective remedial delivery in the disadvantaged areas within which the Consortium works,<sup>38</sup> and research<sup>39</sup> would suggest that such areas may be among the worst affected by projected rises in vulnerability, deprivation and child poverty.<sup>40</sup> From this perspective, there is a compelling case to be made for the securing and augmentation of frontline service provision in the community-based women's sector under the proposed strategy.

Motivated thus, participants called for further community-based early interventionism at the level of the individual and the family. It was proposed that such additional provision should comprise sustainable and robust support programmes for vulnerable and at-risk parents, children and young people,

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<sup>34</sup> Women's Centres' Regional Partnership, 'Childcare mapping and research report 2010', WCRP: Belfast, 2010.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> C. Lidell, *The caring jigsaw: systems of childcare and education in Northern Ireland*, Save the Children: Belfast, 2009.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> See, Morrow Gilchrist Associates, *op. cit.*; also, McLaughlin, *op. cit.*

<sup>39</sup> See C. Beatty and S. Fothergill, 'The impact of welfare reform on Northern Ireland a research paper', Sheffield Hallam University: Sheffield, 2013; it should be noted that this paper entails welfare reform impact analysis that does not take account of extant mitigation.

<sup>40</sup> On child poverty, see Browne, Hood and Joyce, *op. cit.*

aimed at enhancing health, welfare and wellbeing. The following issues were identified as deserving of particular and additional interventionist attention: domestic violence; educational disadvantage and the implications of educational segregation; social exclusion; offending; emotional, physical and mental health; substance addiction; relationship breakdown; shortfalls in disabled cohort provision; underprovision of recreational facilities for young people; early years development; and, multi-dimensional counselling, to include debt counselling and one-to-one therapeutic support for children and adolescents.

The point was also expressly made that in all of this endeavour there prevailed a distinct social inclusion imperative on government and its delivery partners to ensure that the 'voices' of affected children, young people and carers are expressly heard and, in consequence, that their particular perspectives, interests and needs are properly recognised and accommodated in service planning, design, delivery and review.

### **Recommendation**

To more effectively address the complex challenges of chronic child poverty and social exclusion in disadvantaged communities, the executive should recognise, and undertake to properly sustain, community-based women sector service provision, therein enabling the further enhancement of crucial early interventionism on poverty.

### **4. Conclusion**

This paper has set out substantive Consortium concerns about the constrained and at-risk wellbeing of children and young people in the Northern Ireland case, correlated to a socio-economic context characterised by actual and further projected increases in different kinds of poverty and associated actual/projected rises in vulnerability and exclusion.

These concerns invite attention to compelling social justice questions of, inter alia, equality, respect, inclusion, recognition and accommodation. It is precisely from a social justice perspective, therefore, that we exhort

government to take due account of these substantive concerns as it progresses this strategy.