



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

## **Response to: Review of Apprenticeships Interim Report and Consultation Document**

**Issued by: Department for Employment and Learning in Northern Ireland**

**April 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 in partnership with WSN at the Falls' Women's Centre on 11 and 25 February and at Women's TEC on 18 February; and, at a focus group event organised by FWIN at its offices on 8 March. 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 Department for Employment and Learning in Northern Ireland's *Review of Apprenticeships Interim Report and Consultation Document*.<sup>2</sup>

**2.2** In recent years, the convergence of exceptional socio-economic factors has contributed to egregious rises in poverty and vulnerability in Northern Ireland, resulting in an 'unprecedented erosion' of household living standards.<sup>3</sup> These factors include austerity measures and the related cumulative impact of tax and benefit reform, such as cuts to support for childcare; rises in the cost of living,<sup>4</sup> such as utility and food prices; and, stagnant and static incomes. Households in socially disadvantaged areas have been especially adversely affected by these trends given, for example, the cumulative impact of higher than average concentrations of economic inactivity and different kinds of poverty, including in-work and child poverty.

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<sup>2</sup> DELNI, *Review of Apprenticeships Interim Report and Consultation Document*, DELNI: Belfast, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> D. Hirsch, A minimum income standard for the UK in 2013, JRF, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> BBC News, Poor suffer as living costs rise by 25% - Rowntree report. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-23083218>

Research affirms that, in so far as it can help boost economic participation, *properly configured* apprenticeship provision holds some potential to remedially impact such poverty and vulnerability.<sup>5</sup> However, inherent flaws in the current model of provision in Northern Ireland innately restrict this potential. The Consortium is particularly concerned at the implications of gender-related flaws, which restrict the model's capacity to help enhance the economic participation of women.

From this perspective, we welcome this consultation exercise as affirmation of the Executive's commitment to 'increase economic participation'<sup>6</sup> by revising the current model, especially its commitment to address gender inequalities in apprenticeship recruitment, retention and progression, which cumulatively delimit the economic participation of women. The socio-economic and cultural factors underlying these gender inequalities are complex, mutually affecting and hybridised, cutting across both private and public sphere behaviours, reinforced and reproduced by skewed cultural-institutional processes, practices and norms. And, as research indicates, and the reported experiences of participants at our focus groups underlined, addressing this causal complexity in meaningful ways through enhanced apprenticeship engagement *is intrinsically dependent on the availability of effective support mechanisms to secure and sustain women's engagement, most notably in respect of childcare support.*

Of course, as a context of austerity, the Northern Ireland case is characterised by ongoing and further projected budgetary and expenditure cuts. And, the facilitation of such gendered support for apprenticeship participation would ultimately require the kind of political will to commit significant resources that is uncommon to such a context. For example, in respect of childcare support, government officials estimate that sustainably closing the 'huge gap' between childcare supply and demand in Northern Ireland could 'potentially [involve]

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, University of Warwick, Review of apprenticeships: update 1 March to May 2012, University of Warwick: Coventry, 2012.

<sup>6</sup> DELNI, op. cit., p.2.

hundreds of millions’, as opposed to the fifteen that the Executive has fiscally committed under its recent childcare framework programme.<sup>7</sup>

To compound matters, the effectiveness of efforts to boost women’s economic participation through apprenticeship provision is causally associated with apprentices’ ability to progress directly from training into the kinds of jobs that can tend to be undersupplied in Northern Ireland, i.e. sustainable opportunities that proffer a so-called living wage. The persistence of this undersupply is indicative of the nature and scale of the job creation challenge facing government in its efforts to better utilise apprenticeship provision as an economic participation tool addressing workplace gender inequality.

For these reasons, although we appreciate the Executive’s intent to remedially revise current apprenticeship provision in Northern Ireland, we have considerable doubts about the likely potential of such revision to enhance women’s economic participation in substantively meaningful and sustainable ways.

The remainder of this paper elaborates on these gender-specific concerns and associated issues, as articulated by participants at the engagement events.

### **3. Specific comments**

#### *Gendered occupational segregation and the gender pay gap*

**3.1** We note with particular interest the Executive’s acknowledgment that a ‘proactive approach is needed to address the gender imbalance’ in apprenticeship provision across occupations in Northern Ireland.<sup>8</sup> However, we are disappointed at the restricted nature and scope of the approach set out in the document. More precisely, we are concerned that the document fails to properly address the full implications of this gender imbalance for

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<sup>7</sup> NIA, Official Report (Hansard), Committee for the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, Bright Start: Strategy for Affordable and Integrated Childcare, 2 October 2013, NIA: Belfast, 2013.

<sup>8</sup> DELNI, op. cit., p.44.

women's long term involvement in the labour market, by neglecting to take due account of the complex nature of the relationship between this imbalance and the perpetuation of the gender pay gap.

The potential dividends for apprentices include 'improved probability of employment, higher earnings over the lifetime, sustainable employment and occupational mobility'.<sup>9</sup> Yet despite recent increases in female participation in apprenticeships in Northern Ireland, women remain significantly over-represented in traditionally low-pay/low-level service and care sector occupations, and severely under-represented in craft, technical and engineering occupations.<sup>10</sup> Crucially, it is the latter that tends to lead to entry level qualifications required for higher education and pathways to professional status, and thus higher lifetime earnings.<sup>11</sup>

The substantive point here is this: in so far as it results in the over-representation of females in low paid/status sectors, gendered occupational segregation in apprenticeships severely constrains women's long term career prospects and lifetime earning potential, thereby helping to perpetuate and reproduce the gender pay gap within the wider labour market.<sup>12</sup>

The nature of the gender pay gap in Northern Ireland is such that women continue to earn less than men across a range of sectors. Figures for the period 2011-2012 indicate a widening of the gender pay gap of all employees.<sup>13</sup> The nature of participation of women in the labour market in Northern Ireland, in no small measure due to their constrained work choices as primary carers in families, is such that women, compared to men, continue to disproportionately participate in part-time, low paid and sporadic work. For example, research indicates that 92 per cent of female employees work in the

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<sup>9</sup> F. Sosenko and G. Netto, Part 1 Scotland-focused analysis of statistical data on participation in apprenticeships in four UK countries, Heriot-Watt University: Edinburgh, 2013.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> NISRA, Results from the Northern Ireland Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings 2012. [Online]. Available at: [http://www.detini.gov.uk/northern\\_ireland\\_ashe\\_2012\\_bulletin-revised\\_22-11-12.pdf](http://www.detini.gov.uk/northern_ireland_ashe_2012_bulletin-revised_22-11-12.pdf)

traditionally low paid service sector; that 80 per cent of part-time employees are female; and, that median female hourly earnings, excluding overtime, of part-time workers are 69 per cent of full-time workers.<sup>14</sup> The interplay between the gender pay gap, the nature of participation of women in the labour market and women's role as primary carers is affirmed by government research, which shows that 16 per cent of the gender pay gap is attributable to 'the negative effect on wages of having previously worked part-time or of having taken time out of the labour market to look after family'.<sup>15</sup>

Worryingly, there is not a single reference in the entire document to the complexity of the correlation between the perpetuation of the gender imbalance in apprenticeships and the perpetuation of the gender pay gap in the wider labour market. And yet, as commentators have rightly observed, the scale and nature of the current imbalance '*does not augur well* for narrowing the [gender] pay gap in the near future'.<sup>16</sup> Clearly, if government wants to meaningfully address the longer term and full implications of this gender imbalance for the economic participation of women, then it must seek to take due account of this correlation.

As a starting point, this imperative should have involved the integration into the document of a statistical/narrative account that fully captured this relationship in clear and unambiguous terms, accompanied by an express commitment from government to closely track its development going forward. Properly configured, such an account could have allowed for the future effective monitoring of the impact of the proposals on the gender pay gap in the wider labour market.

As things stand however, in the absence of such clarity, the nature of the gendered dilemma that the government seeks to address is

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<sup>14</sup> NISRA/DFP, Labour market statistics bulletin: women in Northern Ireland, September 2012. NISRA/DFP: Belfast, 2012.

<sup>15</sup> Government Equalities Office, The gender pay gap in the UK: 1995 to 2007, Research Findings No. 2010/2. London: GEO, 2010.

<sup>16</sup> Sosenko and Netto, op. cit., p.3.

imprecisely/partially defined in the document, and its full implications for women's economic participation are consequently under-examined.

Against this background, participants appealed for a range of additional remedial measures to help address this gendered phenomena:

- provision of 'confidence-building courses' to prepare women and girls for participation in what was perceived/reported as 'alien and even hostile' male-dominated apprenticeship environments;
- improved access to comprehensive information on the nature of the labour market, including key differentials across occupational sectors in respect of projected lifetime earnings potential and career prospects (i.e. the 'risks and rewards' of different occupational choices); and,
- sustained recruitment of female role models across all male-dominated sectors.

### **Recommendation**

- As it takes forward these proposals, the Executive should seek to statistically track, through the collation of pertinent gendered disaggregated data, and take due account of, the relationship between the gender pay gap, the constrained nature of the participation of women in the labour market, women's role as primary carers and gendered occupational segregation in apprenticeship uptake.

#### *Barriers to participation: lack of financial and childcare support*

**3.2** As noted, the document aims at widening participation in apprenticeships. To that end, it enumerates a range of potentially remedial measures. Yet the Consortium is disappointed that the proposals do not contain adequate measures to take due account of the specific socio-economic barriers to participation faced by the least advantaged.

Research affirms that the least advantaged can face barriers to participation in apprenticeships related to the costs entailed in learning, including the direct costs of courses and associated financial considerations, such as transport



and childcare costs.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, research also affirms how socially disadvantaged young people, including individuals not in employment, education or training, can be more motivated to learn and engage with apprenticeships where financial assistance for learning is available.<sup>18</sup>

These research findings reflect the feedback from women in the engagement for this response. Participants, including young mothers, identified an acute lack of meaningful childcare and financial support as the 'principal barriers' to their consideration of apprenticeship participation as a feasible/practicable option, resulting in the perception that '*apprenticeships are not for us*'. Motivated thus, they proposed additional remedial measures to widen participation among the least advantaged, including:

- the rolling out of part-time, flexible apprenticeship options to fit around caring responsibilities;
- provision of adequate financial support; and
- the expansion of publicly supported childcare provision.

The Consortium recognises that this review is taking place within a financial environment severely impacted by such constraints on public expenditure as extended austerity measures and reductions in the block grant. Against this background, we are concerned that future apprenticeship provision will not be sufficiently resourced and supported to such an extent as to ensure the meaningful and sustained redress of these key barriers to participation among the least advantaged.

### **Recommendation**

- We recommend that, as it progresses this review, the Executive should give further consideration to maximising the economic participation of women from low income families, by provision of adequate measures to remedially address the principal barriers to their engagement with apprenticeships.

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<sup>17</sup> University of Warwick, Review of apprenticeships research final report: an updated review, University of Warwick: Coventry, 2013, p.13.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

### *Data collection*

**3.3** Government failure to properly collect, disseminate, analyse and rely on pertinent data in its policy decision-making processes can act as a substantial barrier to effective policy development and implementation. For this reason, the effectiveness of the ongoing policy planning on apprenticeship provision 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 data collection strategy on apprenticeships.

From this perspective, the Consortium is concerned at the findings of recent comparative research on the United Kingdom's four apprenticeship models, which identify significant gaps in DELNI's data collection strategy on apprenticeships, indicating that 'of all UK countries, *Northern Ireland has the weakest equality data on apprenticeships*'.<sup>19</sup> This conclusion is based on the department's own account of its data collection efforts in this area, which disclosed that various kinds of data are not available due to 'limitations as to what is available by way of management information'.<sup>20</sup> These limitations include data shortfalls in respect of total apprenticeships starts by programme level; programme level by age/gender/ethnicity/learning difficulties and disabilities; occupation sector framework by gender/ethnicity/learning difficulties and disabilities; and, spend by occupational sector framework.<sup>21</sup>

To promote more effective and inclusive delivery, the Executive needs to remedially address the gaps in understanding of apprenticeship participation/non-participation resulting from these data collection limitations. To that end, as has rightly been suggested, government should 'align' its data collection categories with those categories used within the 2011 census.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Sosenko and Netto, op. cit., p.60.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., loc. cit.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., loc. cit.

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

## Recommendation

- As it progresses these proposals, the Executive should seek to improve the data collection strategy informing its policy planning, development and review in this area, taking account the current gaps in knowledge identified in this section.

### *Ethnic minority status*

**3.4** The Consortium is concerned that the document fails to take proper account of the participation of ethnic minorities in apprenticeship training. Research indicates recent falling participation rates from this population cohort: 2011/12 figures were ‘much lower’ than those in 2008/09.<sup>23</sup> In light of relatively high levels of unemployment and economic inactivity among young people from ethnic minorities, their low representation in apprenticeships represents a particular cause for concern.

A more general dearth of available robust research and data on the experiences of ethnic minorities in Northern Ireland (i.e. ethnicity disaggregated data) compounds this shortcoming. The shortfall is such that there are ‘major knowledge gaps in our understanding’ of the lives of ethnic minorities,<sup>24</sup> and ‘little, if anything, is known’ about their outcomes in health, education, housing and benefit claim-making.<sup>25</sup>

In short, a scarcity of reliably robust ethnicity disaggregated data in Northern Ireland threatens to preclude effective remedial policy on ethnic minority participation in apprenticeships. Obviously, if government wants to more effectively identify and address gaps in participation across *all* population cohorts through meaningful policy planning and impactful, targeted intervention, then it must remedially address this critical shortfall in understanding and explanation of ethnic minority experience.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p.48.

<sup>24</sup> A. Wallace, R. McAreavey and K. Atkin, Poverty and ethnicity in Northern Ireland: an evidence review, Joseph Rowntree Foundation: York, 2013.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. The exception here is research on the Traveller community.

## Recommendation

- We would *strongly* urge the Executive to directly address the research gap on the experiences of ethnic minorities in Northern Ireland, seeking to generate a fuller and more accurate understanding of, and explanation for, wider societal factors underlying their participation/non-participation in apprenticeships, such as might better inform and enhance its policy planning in this neglected area.

### *Ensuring quality: apprenticeship pay and conditions*

**3.5** The document outlines the Executive's commitment to ensure the 'quality' of future apprenticeship provision. Given this commitment, we are both surprised and disappointed at the document's inattentiveness to improving suppressed pay and conditions across occupational sectors.

Participants at the engagement events reported negative experiences related to poor working conditions, low pay and even no pay, and a general lack of jobs at the end of apprenticeships. As one participant put it 'employers treat you like skivvies ...in most cases no job satisfaction, no pay, no appreciation, no job at the end ...no point'. Accordingly, participants called on government to focus the 'quality' dimension of this remedial debate more on improving pay and conditions, making employers' incentives to engage in apprenticeships *contingent on the quality of their terms and conditions of employment*. Motivated thus, they also called for 'quality' to be re-defined in terms of facilitating apprentices' access to a living wage and sustainable employment. Yet, as previously noted, in the Northern Ireland case, the persistent undersupply of sustainable job opportunities proffering a living wage is indicative of the nature and scale of the job creation challenge facing government, in its efforts to better utilise apprenticeship provision as an economic participation tool.

Research provides strong evidence to support this reported experience. For example, the 2011 Apprenticeship Pay Survey in England found that, 'contrary to the regulations for apprenticeships', around five per cent of

apprentices disclosed that they did not receive any pay from their employer;<sup>26</sup> around 54 per cent disclosed that they worked overtime; and, around 20 per cent disclosed that they had received neither off- nor on-the-job training.<sup>27</sup> There is a salient gendered dimension to this phenomenon. Perhaps most notably, and for reasons previously implied, female apprentices 'as a group' continue to earn 'significantly less' than their male counterparts'.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, research also indicates that apprenticeships can tend to 'offer far less [to] women in terms of length of training',<sup>29</sup> and yet, as the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee has duly noted, short programmes '*are of no proper benefit to either individuals or employers*'.<sup>30</sup>

### **Recommendation**

- We recommend that the Executive recalibrate the 'quality' dimension of this debate on apprenticeships, giving further consideration to how it might remedially address suppressed pay and conditions, particularly gender-specific variants, across different occupational sectors.

### *Early interventionism*

**3.6** As noted, the document aims at redressing gendered occupational segregation. Research affirms the association between this gendered phenomenon and inadequate career guidance. We therefore welcome the Executive's commitment to address this problem through an enhanced careers service, which '*will intervene at key transition points for young people to provide impartial advice and guidance*'.<sup>31</sup> However, we are disappointed that this enhanced provision concentrates on intervention at secondary level and beyond, overlooking the merit and urgency of earlier strategic interventionism at primary level.

As research affirms, prior differences in educational choices between girls and boys, and gender stereotyping in school work placements, are amongst the

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<sup>26</sup> University of Warwick, An updated review, op. cit., p.35.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p.36.

<sup>28</sup> Sosenko and Netto, op. cit., p.9.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., loc.cit.

<sup>30</sup> University of Warwick, Update 1 March to May 2012, op. cit., p.22.

<sup>31</sup> DELNI, op. cit., p.64.

most significant causal factors underlying this problem.<sup>32</sup> For example, research evidence suggests that even in cases where girls and boys are comparably interested in taking non-traditional placements, they might not be comparably supported and informed by careers service to further that interest.<sup>33</sup> Participants at the focus group engagement underscored this point, reporting low-to-no awareness of what apprenticeships entail despite (or rather, because of) the experience of secondary level careers guidance.

Yet, crucially, as research affirms, these patterned choices at secondary level are also innately impacted by gender stereotyping in vocational preferences *that takes place at primary and even pre-primary levels*, reinforced and reproduced by skewed processes, practices and norms across both the public sphere *and* the private sphere.<sup>34</sup> The substantive point here is this: the trajectory of skewed (gender stereotypical) choices at secondary level *can be set in motion well before entry into this level, in the home and at primary/pre-primary school age*. For this reason, it is imperative that the Executive prioritise early interventionism at primary (and, where feasible, pre-primary) levels, to arrest gendered stereotyping that can eventually result in the reinforcement and reproduction of patterned gendered occupational segregation.

### **Recommendation**

- We recommend that the Executive sponsor widespread early interventionism at primary level, in order to arrest stereotypical behaviour associated with later skewed career choices, which reinforce and reproduce gendered patterns of occupational segregation both in apprenticeship provision and the wider labour market.

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<sup>32</sup> M. Rudd, R. Henderson, D. Usher and M. Hawtin, Rapid review of research on apprenticeships, Learning and Skills Council: Coventry, 2008, p.40.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., loc.cit.

<sup>34</sup> See, for example, Ofsted, Girls' career aspirations, Ofsted London, 2011.

#### **4. Conclusion**

As we have seen, apprenticeship participation can fundamentally impact economic participation across different population cohorts, either adversely or positively. And, this review affords the Executive an important opportunity to potentially achieve more positive outcomes for different cohorts than current provision allows for.

Yet, as we have further seen, for different interacting reasons, the proposals in the document *do not go far enough* to meaningfully and effectively stimulate participation in apprenticeships across currently under-represented and excluded groups, and *so much more remains to be done*.

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**Appendix 1 – Women’s Regional Consortium Focus Group Events:  
DELNI’s *Review of Apprenticeships Interim Report and Consultation Document***

**Focus group locations and dates:**

- Falls’ Women’s Centre, 11 and 25 February 2014
- Women’s TEC, 18 February 2014
- Foyle Women’s Information Network, 8 March 2014

**Participants profile:**

- Staff
- Parents
- Young people

**Event facilitation details:**

- The engagement at Falls’ Women’s Centre and Women’s TEC was organised in partnership with the Women’s Support Network
- The event at FWIN was facilitated by FWIN