



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

Response to: 'Delivering social change through childcare: a ten year strategy for affordable and integrated childcare 2015-2025'

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**Prepared by:
Dr Caroline Walsh
Women's Support Network
policy@wsn.org.uk**



**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 (hereafter, DSD) 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.¹ 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 is 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 ensures that there is a continuous two way flow of information between government and the sector. It also ensures that organisations/centres and groups are made aware of

¹ 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 ascertains the views, needs and aspirations of women in disadvantaged and rural areas and takes these views forward to influence policy development and future government planning, which ultimately results 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 focus group and/or survey engagement organised during August and September 2015 at the following venues: Atlas Women's Centre, Lisburn; Footprints Women's Centre, Belfast; Falls Women's Centre, Belfast; the Star Neighbourhood Centre, Belfast; the Women's Support Network, Belfast; Greenway Women's Centre, Belfast; Women's Centre Derry; and, Strathfoyle Women's Centre, Derry.

Other women and community sector participants included Women's Tec, Shankill Women's Centre, Windsor Women's Centre, First Steps Women's Centre, the Community Relations Forum, FWIN, Waterside Women's Centre, Foyle Women's Aid and the Greater North Belfast Women's Network.

Appendix 1 provides further detail on this engagement, while appendix 2 provides a summary of the response.

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: 'Delivering social change through childcare: a ten year strategy for affordable and integrated childcare 2015-2025'.²

2.2 The draft strategy is explicitly framed in anti-poverty discourse associable with the government's 'delivering social change' policy agenda, as well as related narratives about the promotion of gender equality and developmental

² OFMDFM, 'Delivering social change through childcare: a ten year strategy for affordable and integrated childcare 2015-2025', OFMDFM: Belfast, 2015.

outcomes through childcare intervention, which references the wider relationship³ between gender, poverty, equality, childcare and well being at the level of the individual and beyond.⁴

As is widely accepted, a fundamental social justice dimension of this relationship concerns the cultural-structural emergence and adverse gender impact of the social division of labour. Broadly, the idea is that the ascription to women of the social role of unpaid primary carer and domestic labourer,⁵ placing on them a disproportionate unpaid work and time burden in the private sphere, can profoundly impact their well being, economic interests and life prospects, precisely by innately constraining their economic participation in the public sphere and thus reducing their financial independence,⁶ while therein increasing the likelihood of reliance on state and/or partner income and, in turn, the risk of gender poverty.⁷

³ Research affirms the complex cultural-structural-political-legal nature of this relationship. On different aspects of the relationship see, for example, F. Bennett and M. Daly, 'Poverty through a gender lens: evidence and policy review on gender and poverty', Joseph Rowntree Foundation/University of Oxford: London/Oxford, 2014; B. Hinds, 'The Northern Ireland economy: women on the edge? A comprehensive analysis of the impacts of the financial crisis', WRDA: Belfast, 2011; R. McQuaid, H. Graham and M. Shapira, 'Childcare: maximising the economic participation of women', Equality Commission for Northern Ireland: Belfast, 2013; Scottish Government, 'The gender impact of welfare reform', Scottish Government: Edinburgh: 2013; J. Portes and H. Reed, 'Austerity has hit women, ethnic minorities and the disabled most', *The Guardian*, 31 July 2014; Fawcett Society, 'The impact of austerity on women, policy briefing', Fawcett Society: London, 2012; and, L. James and J. Patiniotis, 'Women at the cutting edge: why public sector spending cuts in Liverpool are a gender equality issue', Liverpool John Moores University: Liverpool, 2013.

⁴ Denotes well being at the level of the family, the community and society at large.

⁵ According to 2011 research, there were over 207,000 carers in Northern Ireland, 64 per cent of whom were female. Carers' UK, 'Valuing carers: calculating the value of carers' support', CUK: London, 2011.

⁶ This picture of gendered financial disempowerment is, of course, further complicated by the cumulative impact of other interacting contextual factors on women's financial autonomy, such as the devaluing/undervaluing of care work in policy development; lone parent status; the effect of childcare costs on incomes; the unfair/unequal distribution of income within households; and, gender differentials in debt. This list of complicating factors is developed by Bennett and Daly, op. cit.

⁷ Clearly, the ultimate inherent danger of public sphere exclusion of this kind is that some women's agency might become totally restricted to the realm of the private sphere, wholly characterised in terms of assumed role of 'economically inactive', unpaid primary care giver/domestic labourer.

The point here is this: for obvious reasons, contextual conditions of inadequate childcare - including prohibitive costs⁸ - are associable with the exacerbation of this gendered controversy. And, accessible, affordable childcare therefore remains of paramount importance in facilitating women's participation in the economy⁹ and, thus, helping to disrupt this patterned gendered vulnerability and exclusion.¹⁰

From this perspective, we welcome the Executive's ambition to intervene in Northern Ireland's childcare sector to promote low cost childcare, in such a way as might potentially 'improve gender equality [precisely] by enabling mothers to join the workforce, return to work, remain in work, work the hours they want and progress in their careers'.¹¹ As research affirms, access to childcare can represent *a particular problem* for the economic participation in the public sphere of marginalised and vulnerable women, especially those from disadvantaged and rural areas of the jurisdiction.¹² Accordingly, we especially welcome the government's intent to focus its interventionist

⁸ It has been estimated that childcare costs in Northern Ireland amount to 44 per cent of an average income, as compared to 33 per cent in Great Britain and 12 per cent across the EU. McQuaid, Graham and Shapira, op. cit.

⁹ In turn, such provision is, of course, also required for reasons of child development and later life outcomes among affected cohorts. Research captures this correlation by indicating that development can be '*predicted* by early childcare experience', that the development dimension of early childcare can *fundamentally impact* later child outcomes and that '*higher quality care* is associated with *better* developmental outcomes'; NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 'Early child care and children's development prior to school entry: results from the NICHD study of early child care', *American Educational Research Journal*, March 20, 2002, vol. 39, no. 1, 133-164; and, D. Lowe Vandell and B. Wolfe, 'Child care quality: does it matter and does it need to be improved?' Institute for Research on Poverty, Special Report No. 78, Institute for Research on Poverty Madison, WI: 2000.

¹⁰ McQuaid, Graham and Shapira, op. cit. See also, H. McLaughlin, 'Women living in disadvantaged communities: barriers to participation', WCRP: Belfast, 2009; and, C. Lidell, 'The caring jigsaw: systems of childcare and education in Northern Ireland', Save the Children: Belfast, 2009.

¹¹ OFMDFM, op. cit.

¹² Affected parties include lone parent, rural and ethnic minority cohorts as well as those with 'atypical' working patterns. On this, see, for example, Hinds, op. cit; McLaughlin, op. cit; M.A. Webb, D. Kernaghan and M. Caffrey, 'Believe in childcare? The childcare needs of ethnic minority communities in Northern Ireland', Barnardos: Belfast, 2014; Lidell, op. cit.; and, McQuaid, Graham and Shapira, op. cit. Given concentrated levels of, inter alia, economic inactivity, benefit reliance and low earnings, vulnerable women in these areas can experience different kinds of marginalisation, exclusion and poverty, both in-work poverty and variants affecting workless households, including severe poverty 'rooted in intergenerational deprivation'. C. Lewis, 'Addressing Northern Ireland's inequality is the key to a better future', *The Guardian*, 26 November 2014. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/nov/26/northern-ireland-inequality-better-future>

ambitions in 'areas where there is currently little or no provision [particularly] disadvantaged ... and rural'.¹³

For reasons of social justice, it is imperative that the strategy framework is developed and implemented in such a way as to properly capture and remedially address the complexity of the interacting issues at stake in this debate, delivering substantive interventions to remedially address the childcare dilemma at hand affecting such marginalised and vulnerable cohorts.¹⁴ *Yet, in a context of wider (ongoing and extended) austerity, characterised by severe fiscal constraints and retrenchments,¹⁵ and associated with actual and further projected increases in different kinds of poverty and vulnerability, we remain concerned about the potential of the proposals to meaningfully realise this imperative in sustainable ways.*

Research affirms the disproportionate adverse impact that these retrenchments have had on *already* vulnerable cohorts across the United Kingdom, including vulnerable women.¹⁶ And, research indicators would also suggest that the introduction of welfare reform¹⁷ in the Northern Ireland case

¹³ OFMDFM, op. cit.

¹⁴ As we will shortly see, that dilemma may be broadly characterised in terms of continuing unmet demand for low cost/no cost pre-school and school age provision, such as might help address factors underlying these experiences of marginalisation and vulnerability (precisely by helping to enhance women's prospects of economic participation in the public sphere and, in turn, helping to enhance the life chances and outcomes of their families).

¹⁵ This includes retrenchments affecting not only the benefit system but also, inter alia, the tax system, public sector employment and public services.

¹⁶ This disproportionate impact of austerity on vulnerable individuals' everyday lives has been characterised, variously, in terms of increased poverty, anxiety, debt and health problems as well as subsequent increased demand for support services in areas such as advice, mental health and charitable donation. See, for example, A. Power et al., 'The impact of welfare reform on social landlords and tenants', JRF, London: 2014. See also, M. Aylott et al., 'An insight into the impact of the cuts on some of the most vulnerable in Camden', Young Foundation: London, 2012; and, Portes and Reed, op. cit.

¹⁷ Although they remain unaffected by the content of the Welfare Reform Bill (Northern Ireland) 2012, vulnerable women in Northern Ireland have still been impacted by other fully implemented aspects of wider austerity, including tax and benefit reconfigurations as well as cuts to public services. So, vulnerable women in the jurisdiction have already been affected by austerity that research associates with an adverse and disproportionate gendered impact, including a gendered poverty impact. Changes that fall into this category include the child benefit freeze from 2011 to 2014, and 1 per cent uprating from 2014 to 2016; the lowering of the proportion of childcare costs within working tax credit; removal of the baby element of child tax credits; the stipulation that lone parents on income support with a youngest child aged 5 or 6 should move to job seekers' allowance; and, the cessation of the health in pregnancy grant; Scottish Government, op. cit.

risks a further and more pronounced impact on poverty and vulnerability than in Britain.¹⁸ Given the gendered disproportionateness associated with that reform,¹⁹ a more pronounced impact on women's poverty and vulnerability is also suggested.²⁰ On this reading, the projected impact of extended austerity in the jurisdiction includes the aggravation of pre-existing austerity-associable poverty and vulnerability among women and their families, as well as a heightened risk of new poverty and vulnerability. And, crucially, research also evidences the adverse impact such austerity-aggravated financial vulnerability can potentially have on childcare access, affordability, demand and supply.²¹

Against this austerity backdrop, the Consortium is concerned that any remedial childcare impact of the government's anti-poverty interventionist agenda might ultimately prove insubstantial.

Particular concerns centre around the potential cumulative adverse impact, on childcare demand, supply and outcomes, of the following interacting austerity-associable or austerity-compounded factors: the apparent absence of a substantive budgetary commitment to underpin the strategy, such as might help to support low cost/no cost childcare at the level of the community in meaningfully sustainable and effective ways; actual and further projected austerity constraints (such as tax and benefit reform) on households' ability to pay for childcare, especially in disadvantaged areas; the impact on provider income and sustainability of actual/projected decreases in catchment area demand for fee-paying registered childcare (linked to austerity constraints on catchment area household income levels); the negative effects on childcare demand/supply of government failure to explicitly integrate meaningful

¹⁸ C. Beatty and S. Fothergill, 'The impact of welfare reform on Northern Ireland: a research paper', NICVA: Belfast: 2013. See also, G. Horgan, 'Welfare reform: implications and options for Northern Ireland', University of Ulster: Belfast, 2013. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.socsci.ulster.ac.uk/irss/documents/KESS2-2.docx>

¹⁹ It has been estimated that up to 2014-15, £14.9 billion worth of austerity cuts were made to benefits, tax credits, public sector pay and pensions in the United Kingdom, 75 per cent of which was taken from women. J. Ginn, 'Austerity and inequality: exploring the impact of cuts in the UK by gender and age', *Research on Ageing and Social Policy*, 1(1), 28-53.

²⁰ Ibid. See also, Portes and Reed; Fawcett Society; and, Scottish Government, op. cit

²¹ See, for example, S. Hall and C. Perry, 'Family matters: understanding families in an age of austerity', Family and Childcare Trust, London: 2013; and, C. Hannon (ed.), 'Living precariously: families in an age of austerity', Family and Childcare Trust, London: 2013.

gendered job creation policy into its 'delivering social change through childcare' anti-poverty agenda; the severely constrained - austerity-correlated - funding status quo impacting community based provider sustainability in disadvantaged and rural areas, as compounded by enduring uncertainty over the future of the Women's Centres' Childcare Fund (hereafter, WCCF); and, finally, the austerity-compounded relationship between the economic participation of disadvantaged women and the demise of integrated models of childcare and community education.

Participants in the focus group and survey engagement articulated these concerns and raised associated misgivings, as will be shown in the remainder of the paper. A compelling social justice case is subsequently set out for robust and effective remedial actions, underpinned by a properly sustained, resourced, integrated, accountable, transparent and coordinated cross-departmental evaluative and delivery childcare model.

3. Specific Comments

'Ability to pay' principle: requisite definitional clarity

3.1 This section considers potential adverse implications for measurability in the monitoring and review of the strategy, which may be associated with the document's failure to properly define the set of evaluative notions on which its underlying rationale fundamentally relies - namely, its appeal to the notions of 'low cost', 'affordability' and 'ability to pay'.

In large part, government interventionist intent under the strategy is articulated in terms of the stimulation of affordable, low cost provision based on the application of an ability to pay principle to supported fee structuring.²² Given the fundamental reliance of the document's rationale on these three notions and, it is argued, the relationship they potentially bear to any measurability of progress made under the lifetime of the strategy, it could reasonably have been expected that the Executive should have provided sufficient clarity *as to its own particular usage – i.e. interpretation/understanding - of these notions.*

²² OFMDFM, op. cit.

Worryingly, however, such clarity is conspicuously absent from the draft strategy. What this means, in effect, is that (i) there is no actual definition proffered anywhere in the entire document as to precisely how these notions are interpreted by the Executive; and, (ii) also absent is any kind of operational transparency as to precisely how the ability to pay principle will be either universally applied or contextually interpreted across all supported fee structuring.

All that is proffered instead on this front is represented by a broad commitment to pursue ‘childcare services that are affordable - *no longer taking a disproportionate share of average household incomes*’.²³ Yet without accompanying definitional transparency as to exactly what the Executive means by ‘disproportionality’, this commitment remains obscure. The document does note that a full week of childcare in Northern Ireland can cost ‘between a fifth and a third of household income, markedly more than in most other developed countries’.²⁴ However, there is no specificity given as to what particular alternative cost range the Executive intends to aim at achieving through application of an ability to pay principle to supported fee structuring. Rudimentary logic would demand that such crucial information should have been established in the early developmental stages of the strategy, and set out in the final strategy, since without it the document’s wider appeal to affordability emerges as insubstantial and, ultimately, beyond accurate measurement.²⁵

The bottom line here is this: without transparent, precise and quantifiable articulation of what the Executive means by affordable, low cost supported provision based on an ability to pay principle, it will be difficult for affected stakeholders to readily and accurately measure, monitor and review progress made on affordability under the lifetime of the proposed strategy.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ A further complicating factor, as cited by participants, is the absence from the document of clarity on the question of what constitutes a ‘childcare place’.

Recommendation

For the sake of more meaningful and effective monitoring and review possibilities for the strategy, the Consortium recommends that the Executive attend to the question of definitional clarity/transparency in respect of the key evaluative notions underlying its treatment of affordability, to include numerical specificity regarding its interpretation of low cost and ability to pay.

Austerity and the ability to pay principle: disadvantaged areas

3.2 The last section made a case for definitional transparency on the question of affordability. This section builds on that case by considering how the need for such transparency is made more urgent given the anticipated context of extended austerity that will prevail in the lifetime of the strategy, and the potential adverse impact of such austerity²⁶ on cohorts' ability to pay for childcare,²⁷ particularly in disadvantaged areas.

The relationship between ongoing austerity and diminishing childcare affordability is widely accepted. As research evidences, extant austerity 'is contributing to inequality that will make economic weakness longer-lived', exacerbating poverty among the already most vulnerable.²⁸ In times of austerity, childcare can particularly correlate to the risk of different kinds of poverty, whether as a barrier to parents accessing employment or a constraint on household income.²⁹ Accordingly, research on the United Kingdom case identifies childcare costs as constituting a 'key driver of [financial] fragility in family life in [extant] austerity',³⁰ where fragility is defined in terms of 'making ends meet in the day to day'.³¹ Research also forecasts further constraints on

²⁶ Factors cited by discussants included tax and benefit reform, most notably, tax credit reform.

²⁷ Recent research gives some insight into the nature of austerity-impacted ability to pay (i.e. financial capacity) in the jurisdiction: while 43 per cent of households in the jurisdiction reported an anticipated inability to pay for unexpected bills (of £500), the United Kingdom figure stood at 33 per cent. Poverty and Social Exclusion, 'Northern Ireland: faring badly'. [Online.] Available at: <http://www.poverty.ac.uk/pse-research/northern-ireland-faring-badly>
See also, Hall and Perry, op. cit.; and, Hannon, op. cit.

²⁸ J. Stiglitz, quoted in Oxfam, 'Oxfam briefing paper summary: a cautionary tale - the true cost of austerity and inequality in Europe', Oxfam: London, 2013, p.2.

²⁹ Child Poverty Alliance, 'Beneath the surface – child poverty in Northern Ireland', Child Poverty Alliance, Belfast: 2014.

³⁰ Hannon, op. cit., p.65.

³¹ Ibid., p.64.

household income associable with extended austerity, suggestive of further childcare affordability controversy. For example, according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, the average loss among those affected by summer 2015 budget changes is £750 a year, while cohorts in the second decile income category (i.e., just above the bottom) will lose £1,340.³²

Crucially, research indicators would further suggest that, as compared to households in other parts of the United Kingdom, households in Northern Ireland may remain more vulnerable to such austerity-associated constraints³³ on childcare affordability. These indicators include comparatively higher, inter alia, childcare costs, rates of child poverty,³⁴ economic inactivity³⁵ and benefit claimant levels³⁶ (complicated by post-conflict mental ill health) as well as comparatively lower average earnings levels.³⁷ The substantive point here is this: for obvious reasons, given concentrated levels of economic inactivity, benefit reliance and low earnings, households in disadvantaged areas may remain particularly adversely affected by these trends.³⁸ Focus group participants underscored this point, anecdotally evidencing identified correlations between austerity, in-work poverty and constrained ability to pay for childcare in deprived areas, while forecasting further manifestations under extended austerity given this pre-existing trajectory.

³² P. Wintour, 'Osborne: typical family to be £2,000 better off despite cuts to tax credits', *The Guardian*, 5 October 2015. [Online.] Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/money/2015/oct/05/osborne-typical-family-2000-better-off-despite-tax-credit-cuts-working>

³³ Beatty and Fothergill, op. cit. See also, Horgan, op. cit.;

³⁴ See, for example, Horgan, op. cit. Research from the Institute for Fiscal Studies predicts that by 2020 relative child poverty in Northern Ireland will rise by 8.3 percentage points to 29.7 per cent and absolute poverty will rise to 32.9 per cent. 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.

³⁵ In recent 2015 research, the working age economic activity rate for women stood at 66.3 per cent, as compared to 78.8 per cent for men. DETI, 'Women in Northern Ireland', DETI: Belfast: 2015.

³⁶ NISRA, 'Statistical press release – latest labour market figures', NISRA: Belfast, 2014. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.northernireland.gov.uk/news-deti-121114-statistical-press-release>

³⁷ J. Campbell, 'NI earnings fall as UK average rises', 19 November 2014, *BBC News*. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-30114530>

³⁸ Beatty and Fothergill, op. cit.

Worryingly, however, the document makes no mention of either the childcare impact of extant austerity or the projected childcare impact of extended austerity. In 2013, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) urged the United Kingdom government to take account of the childcare impact of austerity on disadvantaged cohorts by seeking to

provide affordable childcare and to mitigate the impact of the proposed reforms of the welfare system on the costs of childcare for low income families and the increased burden for care on women.³⁹

In other words, CEDAW was recommending that government take account of austerity associable changes in cohorts' ability to pay for childcare, of the kind described in this section. Turning to the Northern Ireland case, this rights-based intervention raises the social justice question of how the Executive itself might provide for such mitigation. A potential answer to that question might lie with how government configures the application of the ability to pay principle to supported fee structuring across the jurisdiction.

In sum, as discussion across this and the immediately preceding section suggests, unless suitably clarified and carefully configured, recourse to the ability to pay principle may, in practice, prove a difficult metric for realising and maintaining affordability under conditions of extended austerity in disadvantaged and rural areas. The Consortium would therefore appeal for transparency on this front, as a prerequisite of a more coherent and meaningful strategy, *especially one that is supposed to have affordability in such areas among its principal framing considerations.*

Recommendation

The Consortium recommends that, in configuring the application of its ability to pay principle to supported fee structuring, the Executive explicitly seek to provide for the projected relationship between extended austerity and childcare affordability at the level of community (by considering how it might more effectively use this intervention as a potential opportunity to mitigate the impact of that relationship on childcare access for low income households).

³⁹ CEDAW, 'Concluding observations on the seventh periodic report of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland', CEDAW Committee, 26 July 2013: New York.

Austerity and provider sustainability: community-based realities

3.3 In a context of actual and further projected austerity-associated constraints on household and provider financial capacity, the Consortium is concerned at the document's treatment of the question of provider sustainability, particularly in the case of supported delivery at the level of community in rural and disadvantaged districts.

The document outlines government expectation that '*all*' supported projects under the strategy - thus including all community based variants in disadvantaged and rural wards - 'will progress towards full sustainability... within the period of grant aid', in large part, by pursuing social enterprise ends.⁴⁰ At the same time, of course, it is also acknowledged that provider sustainability may, in some instances, such as in the case of delivery in the 'most disadvantaged' areas, 'take longer to achieve', and so necessitate extended government support.⁴¹ That said, it is made quite clear that any such extension will remain innately conditional on at least some progress toward sustainability being made:

those addressing the needs of our most disadvantaged communities may find it difficult to become fully sustainable before their grant funding ends. *Where settings have genuinely made progress towards sustainability ... we will aim to continue to support the services they provide.*⁴²

In light of funding realities at the level of community, this intent, to make 'longer' term support in disadvantaged and rural areas conditional upon progress toward sustainability, is inherently problematic.

Broadly, as provider participants anecdotally evidenced, the problematic funding status quo impacting community based provider sustainability in disadvantaged and rural wards may be characterised in terms of severely constrained - austerity-compounded - resourcing options, comprising heightened competition for increasingly scarce opportunities, as well as other

⁴⁰ OFMDFM, op. cit.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

context-specific enduring obstacles to sustainability.⁴³ Arguably most notably, the latter includes catchment area household income levels categorised as consistently insufficient to cover childcare costs, and associated shifting demand⁴⁴ for fee-paying registered childcare, correlated in recent decades to austerity-constrained household financial capacity and associable rises in in-work poverty.⁴⁵

Research provides compelling evidence to support these provider projections of disimproved sustainability associable with austerity-related reductions in household income levels. For example, as noted, it is forecast that cohorts in the second decile income category (i.e., just above the bottom) will lose a further £1,340 per annum following summer 2015 austerity retrenchments;⁴⁶ and, research associates such losses with falling demand for registered fee-paying childcare, as mothers become 'unconvinced that work is economically viable' once childcare costs are factored in.⁴⁷

These provider sustainability and household financial capacity realities are such that, in various instances, government subsidised childcare places in disadvantaged and rural areas, intended to recognise and accommodate the

⁴³ It was projected that the question of sustainability in such locales would become more urgent given further forecast austerity-associated constraints on both provider and household financial capacity. Commonly cited constraints included an anticipated additional provider salary burden attributed to the introduction of a 'national living wage' for employees over 25 years of age. Also commonly cited were further reductions in demand for fee-paying registered childcare linked to additional projected austerity-related reductions in catchment area household income levels, such as tax credit reductions. Lack of capital investment to appropriately expand premises was identified as an additional obstacle.

⁴⁴ A key dimension of this depicted picture of shifting demand concerned the reported disincentivisation of women entering or remaining in the labour market, prompted by the observation that 'work would not pay' when childcare costs were factored in. Research supports this claim-making, illustrating that austerity-associated tax, benefit and labour market change has 'placed further obstacles in the path of some mothers, who are unconvinced that work is economically viable', leading to reduced demand for registered fee-paying childcare. Hannon, *op. cit.*, p.95. Cited change includes the reduction in the childcare element of working tax credit and the increase in the number of hours (from 16 to 24) that a family has to work before eligible to claim (compounded by ineligibility around the growth of both zero and reduced hour contracts).

⁴⁵ T. MacInnes et al, 'Monitoring poverty and social exclusion 2014', JRF: London: 2014. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/monitoring-poverty-and-social-exclusion-2014>

⁴⁶ Wintour, *op. cit.*

⁴⁷ Hannon, *op. cit.*, p.95.

needs of some of the most vulnerable and excluded cohorts, remain profoundly at risk of cessation in the advent of subsidy withdrawal.⁴⁸

Against this backdrop, discussants emphasised that provider capacity to progress sustainability at the level of community was, and would remain during the lifetime of the strategy, inherently restricted, reinforcing the case for continued government support for subsidised childcare places for the most vulnerable *regardless of whether or not any actual progress is made*.⁴⁹

The document does set out government ambition to ‘help community based providers... continue to operate and ...expand their services’.⁵⁰ Yet, clearly, meaningful realisation of this ambition would innately depend on the Executive taking proper account of these enduring and projected issues of provider sustainability at the level community in disadvantaged and rural districts, recognising and remedially addressing any adverse implications for all affected parties.

Recommendation

We recommend that the Executive take proper account of the projected childcare impact of the relationship between (a) the realities of constrained provider sustainability potential at the level of community; and, (b) reduced provider and household financial capacity under extended austerity. Taking such account should explicitly involve government *adjusting its expectation of progress on sustainability as a condition of extended support*.

⁴⁸ Morrow Gilchrist Associates, ‘Evaluation of regional support arrangements for the voluntary and community sector’, Morrow Gilchrist Associates: Belfast, 2015. Provider focus group discussion anecdotally underlined this risk. We return to this important point in the next section, in discussion of the WCCF controversy.

⁴⁹ It was further held that imposition of the government’s sustainability demand could potentially threaten the anti-poverty operational ethos and integrated delivery model of community based provision, should it require providers to adjust/re-prioritise delivery in order to focus predominately on pursuing social economy income through maximising fee-paying childcare as their primary, and in some cases, only possible source of income generation.

⁵⁰ OFMDFM, op. cit.

Pre-school provision and WCCF

3.4 Section summary

This section outlines concerns about the, as yet to be determined, future of low cost/no cost sessional childcare provision for marginalised, excluded and vulnerable women in areas of chronic multiple disadvantage, currently supported by government under WCCF. As we will see, such funding remains under threat of cessation, and it is anticipated that the services it provides could ultimately be discontinued in the absence of alternative, equivalent government intervention. As we will further see, it is projected that such a scenario would fundamentally undermine realisation of the government's own childcare-framed anti-poverty ambitions, by adversely impacting well being and outcomes for these women, their families and wider communities. From this perspective, the government's mooted alternative of a 0-4 scheme is critically discussed, and a social justice case for protection of WCCF provision is consequently made.

WCCF and delivering social change: need for equivalence

We note with particular interest that the draft strategy seeks to advance government anti-poverty ambitions associable with its delivering social change agenda and that, against this policy background, the document outlines government intent to explore, in 2016, the option of a grant funding scheme to help support childcare for the 0-4s.⁵¹ This category of provision was, of course, overlooked in the first phase of the strategy and so this manoeuvre is critical. That said, we remain alarmed at the potential adverse implications of such a development for vulnerable families, *should it herald the withdrawal of extant support for this category under WCCF (without the institution of equivalent, alternative support or mitigation).*

Comprising an 'emergency package of funding' provided by DSD, WCCF represents a vital element of the overall picture of women's centres' childcare - and indeed wider - revenue.⁵² Yet, worryingly, this pre-school childcare fund is only scheduled to remain in place until March 2016. The provision of WCCF

⁵¹ OFMDFM, op. cit.

⁵² Morrow Gilchrist Associates, op. cit.

childcare in the centres is integrated with the delivery of other essential frontline women-only services, including education, advice, advocacy and family support. Such integrated delivery ultimately allows centres to adopt a holistic approach in accommodation of the often complex service needs of vulnerable, marginalised and excluded women in disadvantaged areas.

Recent DSD commissioned research lends insight into what is at stake in this debate, by illustrating the at-risk cumulative contribution of WCCF to the government's own prevailing anti-poverty agenda. 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.⁵³ More precisely, that differentiated contribution is presented as entailing the delivery of a plethora of positive developmental outcomes at the level of the individual, the wider family, the community and society at large, from enhanced individual well being, agency and life chances through to improved community cohesion and economic capability:

[WCCF] provides a range of support services tailored to the needs of individual children and their families that is about more than just childcare... the overall net impact of the WCCF support is concluded to be high and offers a wide range of benefits to the individual child, the child's family and the wider community ... [the fund] contributes to reducing child poverty, provides opportunities for parents to better themselves and contribute to their communities, thereby tackling disadvantage... The provision of such childcare places and associated support through the Women's Centres is likely to have long term positive benefits to the child, the parents of the child and wider society both in terms of avoiding costs associated with dealing with issues later in the child's life and also avoiding problems such as poorer health, educational, employment and criminal justice outcomes ...The WCCF also contributes to a wide range of other policy areas including contributing to social inclusion for people from disadvantaged areas and people from an ethnic minority background, for example. In supporting the development and health and well-being of the child and supporting parents, the WCCF also contributes to 'early intervention' with children and their parents which is likely to have short, medium and long term benefits in relation to better educational attainment and health and well-being outcomes, reducing the need for and cost of government intervening later in the child or parent's life.⁵⁴

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

On this view, WCCF delivery can and does play a crucial role in advancing the government's own anti-poverty policy agenda. Given this role, it might reasonably have been expected that the question of the fund's future would have been properly addressed in tandem with the development of the full strategy, since the latter is itself, as noted, distinctly framed in anti-poverty discourse. The evaluation lends credence to the reasonableness of this expectation, indicating that WCCF is '*designed to be incorporated within the childcare strategy*'.⁵⁵ But instead, the document's only actual mention of the fund comprises a broad aspirational statement capturing the Executive's '*wish to see [WCCF], and the childcare services it makes possible, continue*'.⁵⁶

The Consortium understands it has been departmentally mooted that the aforementioned exploration of a 0-4 grant scheme in 2016 could/should be configured in such a way as to take some account of any tabled cessation of WCCF. To date, however, there has been neither clarity nor confirmation from the Executive on this front. So, it still remains unclear whether and, if so, how, the development of such a scheme might potentially impact extant WCCF pre-school provision.⁵⁷

Affected parties project that (a) should the rolling out of the proposed scheme signal the end of WCCF, and should that scheme be financially modelled on the same basis as the current school age grant scheme,⁵⁸ then enduring issues of sustainability are such that, (b) some women centres may not

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ OFMDFM *op. cit.*

⁵⁷ A related troubling factor concerns the imbalance in the typology of targeted additionality in proposed interventions, i.e. the differential between school age and pre-school targets. Decision-making around this differential has apparently been informed by an Executive commissioned parental survey, which found that 'the availability ... of pre-school services tended not to be an issue'. Participants from both disadvantaged and rural districts impugned this finding, anecdotally setting out a case for significant targeting of increased pre-school places in their locales. Of course, elsewhere in the document it is acknowledged that 'there tends to be relatively less childcare provision of any kind in rural areas, disadvantaged areas'. The point, however, is this: despite this acknowledgement, it does remain the case that the greatest interventionist emphasis is on school age variants. Ibid.

⁵⁸ Discussion at this juncture included disquiet at government intent to extend childcare services based on the school estate. Some participants were concerned that such a manoeuvre might in some way threaten community sited provision and investment.

readily meet the scheme's qualifying criteria,⁵⁹ and implicated delivery would consequently cease; and, (c) others may even face the prospect of closure (Women's Centre Derry focus group). For reasons outlined in this section, clearly either of the last two scenarios would fundamentally restrict access to childcare for some of the most vulnerable and deprived cohorts across Northern Ireland,⁶⁰ with projected adverse implications for well being and outcomes at the level of the individual, the family, the community and society at large.

In short, as research affirms, withdrawal of WCCF by government, without the institution of alternative comparable support or mitigation, would profoundly risk realisation of the very anti-poverty agenda the childcare strategy supposedly seeks to advance.

And, against this backdrop, as participants observed, there is a formidable moral-political case to be made for changing the status of the funding from 'emergency' to 'protected', by properly sustaining the WCCF interventionist model in its current form, with commitment to secured long-termism through appropriate resource ringfencing.

Recommendation

Government should take more seriously the compelling social justice question of low cost/no cost pre-school childcare for marginalised and vulnerable women in disadvantaged and rural areas. That undertaking should expressly incorporate proper consideration of the projected cumulative adverse impact of any cessation of WCCF (in the case of government failure to put in place either appropriate mitigation or comparable alternative support to address same). Given what is at stake in this debate, this question should be addressed with urgency in tandem with the development of the final strategy, *recognising the case for properly sustaining the WCCF model on a ringfenced*

⁵⁹ Includes revenue grants of up to 25 per cent of running costs per annum.

⁶⁰ For example, 92 per cent of parents surveyed as part of the WCCF evaluation indicated they would not be able to access alternative childcare in the absence of the fund. Morrow Gilchrist Associates, op. cit.

budgetary basis (thus changing its funding status from 'emergency' to 'protected').

Childcare and anti-poverty agenda: integrating gendered job creation

3.5 As noted, the proposals are presented as intended to advance government's anti-poverty agenda, in part by 'enabl[ing] parents to ... [and, in particular] mothers to join the workforce, return to work, remain in work, work the hours they want and progress in their careers'.⁶¹ Yet in a Northern Ireland context within which joblessness remains '*the most profound cause of poverty*',⁶² we have serious reservations about the Executive's potential to effectively realise such ambitions without also realising such gendered job creation as might meaningfully address different kinds of underemployment among women.⁶³

The relationship between gender poverty, childcare and maternal underemployment is well established in the literature. As we have seen, by ascribing to women the role of primary care giver and domestic labourer, thus placing on them a disproportionate unpaid work and time burden in the private sphere, the social division of labour can constrain and even preclude female economic participation in the public sphere, reducing women's financial independence while therein increasing the possibility of reliance on state and/or partner income and the risk of gender poverty.⁶⁴ Such reliance increases the likelihood of financially vulnerable women being adversely affected by austerity-rationalised reconfigurations of the financial relationship between the state and the household, including tax and benefit reform. Put simply, because certain benefits and tax credits are 'typically' paid to women

⁶¹ OFMDFM, *op. cit.*

⁶² OFMDFM, 'Improving children's life chances – the first year report', OFMDFM: Belfast, 2012.

⁶³ In 2015, 7 per cent of female workers were categorised as underemployed, as compared with 6 per cent of male workers. NISRA, 'Underemployment in Northern Ireland', NISRA: Belfast, 2015.

⁶⁴ See, Bennett and Daly, *op. cit.* Clearly, the ultimate inherent danger of public sphere exclusion of this kind is that some women's agency might become totally restricted to the realm of the private sphere, wholly characterised in terms of assumed role of 'economically inactive', unpaid primary care giver/domestic labourer.

given their ascribed roles as primary carers,⁶⁵ women have tended to ‘lose out in a direct financial sense’ from austerity changes in state support.⁶⁶

Gendered occupational segregation can add to this economic exclusion⁶⁷ by ‘crowd[ing] women in a relatively few job categories’,⁶⁸ thus keeping remuneration low and reinforcing the gender pay gap.⁶⁹ As noted, in combination, in the Northern Ireland case as beyond, these interacting structural-cultural factors underlying gendered poverty help explain the over-concentration of women in low paid, low status, part-time and sporadic/precarious employment.⁷⁰

In theory at least, the provision of appropriate childcare (affordable, accessible and flexible) can positively impact gender poverty by facilitating mothers’ entry into, and retention/progress within, the labour market. However, as research affirms, in practice, the potential for government anti-poverty policy to realise such positive change is innately dependent on the integration into that policy of substantive ambitions for significant gendered job creation.⁷¹ Broadly, the latter may be characterised in terms of labour market expansion that effectively addresses different kinds of maternal underemployment: not only unemployment per se, but also variants affecting

⁶⁵ For example, child benefit, child tax credits and the childcare element of working tax credit are all paid to the main carer of children ‘usually a woman’. Where benefit rises have not tracked inflation, some women’s income has ‘decreased in real terms’ and, in nominal terms, where benefit reductions or eligibility criteria reviews have resulted in a cessation of payment. Scottish Government, *op. cit.*, p.1.

⁶⁶ *Loc. cit.*

⁶⁷ As previously noted, this picture of gendered financial disempowerment is, of course, further complicated by the cumulative impact of other interacting contextual factors on women’s financial autonomy, such as the devaluing/undervaluing of care work in policy development; lone parent status; the effect of childcare costs on incomes; the unfair/unequal distribution of income within households; and, gender differentials in debt. This list of complicating factors is developed by Bennett and Daly, *op. cit.*

⁶⁸ I.M. Young, ‘Structural injustice and the politics of difference’, Intersectionality Workshop, 21/22 May 2005, Keele University: Keele, 2005, p.20.

⁶⁹ See, OFMDFM, ‘Gender equality statistics: 2015 update’, OFMDFM, Belfast, 2015.

⁷⁰ 2015 figures indicate that 38 per cent of women in Northern Ireland work part time, as compared with 10 per cent of men; while 79 per cent of part time workers in the jurisdiction are women. Since 2005, the figure for women working part time has increased by 7 per cent. DETI, *op. cit.*

⁷¹ S. Telfer, ‘Austerity in the UK - spotlight on income’, JRF. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.jrf.org.uk/austerity-uk-spotlight-income>

cohorts working part-time but seeking full-time work, and those categorised as economically inactive but seeking work.⁷²

Within this context, what would seem to be required at the level of policymaking, to effect meaningful change to the gendered childcare-labour market controversy at hand, is anti-poverty strategising that delivers not just more jobs for women, but also better jobs: so-called 'work that pays' when childcare costs are factored in. The latter may be captured in terms of sustainable opportunities that help guard against the risk of in-work poverty and underemployment by proffering an actual living wage⁷³ and some form of medium-to-long-termism, as opposed to low paid, low level, low skilled, part-time, sporadic and precarious opportunities typically concentrated in the service and retail sectors (of which the United Kingdom has 'a large number ...compared to other developed countries').⁷⁴

In sum, in a context of extended austerity and associated actual/projected rises in different kinds of poverty, including gendered and in-work variants, effectively addressing the complex relationship between poverty, childcare and the economic participation of women in the public sphere would require government to integrate substantive gendered job creation ambitions into its wider anti-poverty agenda.

⁷² On this, see T. Maclnnes et al, op. cit. In recent 2015 research, 36 per cent of working age economically inactive women in the jurisdiction were classified as unavailable for work due to family/home commitments. DETI, op. cit.

⁷³ I say 'actual' since commentators point out how the United Kingdom government's planned introduction of a 'national living wage' does not equate to the widely accepted definition of an actual living wage, as set out by the Living Wage Foundation. J Grierson, 'Living wage rises further above government's 'national living wage'', *The Guardian*, Monday 2 November 2015. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2015/nov/02/living-wage-rises-further-above-national-living-wage> Research also suggests that the planned introduction of a 'higher national minimum wage' will 'not compensate poorer working families for lost tax credits'. C. Giles, 'Higher wage will not compensate for tax credit cuts, IFS says', *Financial Times*, July 9, 2015. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/87b00b52-264e-11e5-9c4e-a775d2b173ca.html#axzz3rH2KnjZw> See also, W. Elming, et al., 'New analysis of the potential compensation provided by the new 'national living wage' for changes to the tax and benefit system', Institute for Fiscal Studies, London: 2015. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/7980>

⁷⁴ K. Schmuecker, 'Future of the UK labour market', JRF: London, 2014, p.1.

Worryingly, however, ‘there is not enough emphasis on job creation at the heart of [central government] anti-poverty policy’ in the United Kingdom case,⁷⁵ while the Executive’s own policy development framework in this area is similarly found wanting. So, for example, there is scant reference to job creation in those policy initiatives identified in the document as both impacted by the question of childcare and aligned to prevailing anti-poverty discourse. Cited initiatives that fall into this category include strategies in respect of child poverty and gender equality.

Recommendation

While the economic participation of women in the public sphere is fundamentally reliant on the availability of appropriate childcare, it is, of course, also very much dependent on the availability of meaningful employment (so-called ‘work that pays’ when childcare costs are factored in). In taking forward the strategy, government should seek to give due regard to this correlation, integrating meaningful gendered job creation ambitions into its wider anti-poverty policy framework.

Childcare, gender equality, austerity and community education

3.6 This section briefly considers the imperative of government action to address projected disimproved gender equality for vulnerable women under the lifetime of the strategy, specifically that which is associated with the relationship between austerity-impacted childcare affordability and the demise of community education.

The document aims at ‘improv[ing] gender equality’, precisely by helping to stimulate women’s economic participation in the public sphere through supporting low cost childcare at the level of community and beyond.⁷⁶ However, it is projected that, given the gendered impact of austerity,⁷⁷ the rolling out of the strategy in a context of extended austerity will actually

⁷⁵ Telfer, op. cit.

⁷⁶ OFMDFM, op. cit.

⁷⁷ Fawcett Society, op. cit. See also James and Patiniotis, op. cit.

coincide with the *disimprovement* of gender equality (correlated to regression in women's economic participation):

austerity undermines women's progress towards equality in paid work and economic independence and may provoke an ideological backlash favouring a return to traditional gender roles and backward-looking gender contracts.⁷⁸

As we have seen, the actual and projected impact of austerity in the Northern Ireland case and beyond is depicted as including the aggravation of pre-existing poverty and vulnerability among women, as well as a heightened risk of new poverty and vulnerability. And, as we have also seen, it is suggested that this impact can correlate significantly to constrained household financial capacity to access childcare.⁷⁹

The important point here is this: as DSD's own commissioned research suggests, for affected vulnerable women in the jurisdiction, such as ethnic minorities and lone parents,⁸⁰ the prospect of enhanced economic participation *can depend intrinsically*⁸¹ *on the integrated availability of appropriate childcare and learning pathways to potential employment at the level of community.*⁸² And yet, as the same research also affirms, such

⁷⁸ M. Karamessini and J. Rubery (eds), 'Women and austerity, the economic crisis and the future for gender equality', Routledge; London, 2013, p.14.

⁷⁹ Hannon, op. cit.

⁸⁰ Of the 63,900 lone parent households with dependent children recorded in the 2011 Census, 91 per cent were female-headed. R. Russell, 'Northern Ireland Assembly, Research and Information Service research paper - census 2011: key statistics at Northern Ireland and LGD level', NIA: Belfast, 2013. See, Lidell, op. cit.; also, McLaughlin, op. cit.

⁸¹ Morrow Gilchrist Associates, op. cit. The correlation between educational under-attainment and economic participation/independence can contribute to educationally disadvantaged women becoming 'trapped in a cycle of welfare dependency and isolation', L. Patterson and K. Dowd, 'Using the women's community education approach to deliver community employment training: a case study from Longford women's link', Aontas: Dublin, 2010, p.121.

⁸² For example, 66 per cent of women participants in the Strathfoyle Women's Centre rural survey indicated that they would be unable to undertake learning pathways to potential employment in the absence of such integrated provision. Research suggests that opportunities for education/training comprise the '*principal catalyst*' for women's increased economic participation; Lidell, op. cit., p.28. On this view, women in Northern Ireland who lack economic independence due to educational disadvantage - correlated to lack of appropriate childcare - can be prevented from contributing not only to civil society at the level of community, but also to wider society. The former denotes the exclusion of women from key associational sites such as community development/engagement processes. The latter denotes their exclusion and under-representation in public life 'across all major positions of political, economic, social and judicial power', constituting a 'gender-related systemic impediment to... access[ing]... decision-making' sites, such as peace-building processes. M.

integrated provision remains profoundly at risk and significantly diminished, as characterised by ‘a lack of affordable childcare services for those from disadvantaged communities’ compounded by ‘a lack of opportunity for parents to engage in community education, gain skills and knowledge’.⁸³ This diminution encompasses both service withdrawal and a general reduction in the level of available learning opportunities, including, crucially, a reduction in vocational offerings.⁸⁴

Increased economic participation/independence for women associated with access to education/training opportunities at the level of community may be viewed as ‘key factors in ensuring women’s full participation *at all levels of society*’.⁸⁵ So lack of appropriate integrated childcare and community education in the jurisdiction endures as a fundamental barrier to the engagement of socio-economically disadvantaged women *in education/training, in the economy and, beyond, in the wider public sphere*.⁸⁶

There is one final important observation to make at this juncture. In setting out its aim of improving gender equality, the Executive relies fundamentally on a posited positive correlation between such equality, access to childcare support entitlement and increases in such participation.⁸⁷ And yet, as discussants noted, given the gendered controversy at hand, the validity of that correlation may be impugned. It was observed that, in a context of wider austerity, even where full entitlement to support is accessed, childcare costs may still prove burdensome⁸⁸ to the extent that women may be disincentivised

Potter, ‘Review of gender issues in Northern Ireland’, 2014, OFMDFM: Belfast, p.2. See also, Hinds, op. cit.

⁸³ Morrow Gilchrist Associates, op. cit.

⁸⁴ That diminution is exemplified in changes to women centre provision.

⁸⁵ Patterson and Dowd, op. cit., p.121.

⁸⁶ McQuaid, Graham and Shapira, op. cit. See also, McLaughlin, op. cit. From this perspective, discussants appealed for more integrated provision at the level of community, combining substantive learning opportunities with appropriate subsidised childcare (whether free or affordable) to enable marginalised women to avail of same.

⁸⁷ It is noteworthy that the document places considerable emphasis on a posited relationship between the new tax free childcare scheme and the stimulation of additional childcare places, comprising the uptake of extant spare capacity. This situation is complicated by the postponed introduction of that scheme until 2017. The implications of that postponement for the realisation of interventionist ambitions remain unclear.

⁸⁸ See, McQuaid, Graham and Shapira, op. cit.

from entering, or remaining within, the labour market.⁸⁹ Research evidences this correlation.⁹⁰ For instance, as noted, it has been shown that austerity-associated tax, benefit and labour market change has ‘placed further obstacles in the path of some mothers, who are unconvinced that work is economically viable’, leading to reduced demand for registered fee-paying childcare.⁹¹ Discussants subsequently projected that childcare costs in the Northern Ireland case, remaining higher than in other parts of the United Kingdom,⁹² would continue to augment the risk of such disincentivisation.⁹³

Recommendation

The Consortium recommends that government take proper account of the projected disimprovement of gender equality under the lifetime of the strategy associable with the relationship between women’s economic participation in the public sphere, austerity and the restricted nature of integrated childcare/education provision for vulnerable cohorts at the level of community, seeking to map and mitigate any actual disimprovement.

Rural-specific interventions

3.7 So far, we have critically reviewed the document from the perspective of both the rural *and* the disadvantaged. By contrast, this section will concentrate on the former, examining the document’s two rural-specific interventions (on transport and childminding), while drawing principally on anecdotal evidence from participant engagement.

As the document rightly observes, rural childcare needs in Northern Ireland ‘are often challenging ... particularly for communities in relatively remote or

⁸⁹ On this, see, Hannon, op. cit. Discussants expressly underlined this point. See supra note 44.

⁹⁰ See, for example, Hannon, op. cit. and, McQuaid, Graham and Shapira.

⁹¹ Hannon, op. cit., p.95.

⁹² See, McQuaid, Graham and Shapira, op. cit.

⁹³ The reported cumulative childcare impact of this trend was captured in terms of women remaining ‘stuck’ in low status, low status, low paid, part time employment. The most egregious reported cases involved the experiences of severely disadvantaged and excluded cohorts, including lone parents and ethnic minorities and those working atypical hours, without access to familial support networks of informal childcare. See, OFMDFM, ‘Childcare research final report’, OFMDFM: Belfast, 2014; also, Webb, Kernaghan and Caffrey, op. cit.; and, Lidell, op, cit.

sparsely populated areas'.⁹⁴ And, as research suggests, in large part, this rural dilemma can connote social isolation⁹⁵ associable with enduring infrastructural shortfalls in areas such as transport and service delivery, which can tend to reflect historic patterned underinvestment in same.⁹⁶

Against this backdrop, the document projects that 'where possible, [supported childcare] settings will be accessible by foot [and] where necessary ... in rural areas... appropriate transport services will be available'.⁹⁷ However, given the depleted nature of the prevailing rural transport infrastructure, realisation of this ambition would appear to rely intrinsically on substantive remedial regional measures underpinned by considerable and sustainable resourcing.

By contrast, the rural transport intervention set out in the document, inherited from the first stage of the strategy, is expressly delimited to 'supporting locally based transport schemes ... servicing networks of childminders'.⁹⁸ On this view, discussants judged the proposed intervention inherently inadequate,⁹⁹ and consequently called for alternative (i.e. more meaningful) remedial action. The absence of specificity in respect of this commitment was also noted and subsequently critiqued.

The second rural-specific intervention - on childminding - was also critiqued. This intervention is premised on government research findings that apparently identify 'affordability of childminding services in rural areas as a bigger

⁹⁴ OFMDFM, op. cit.

⁹⁵ On the subject of rural isolation, see, for example, M. Allen, 'Rural isolation, poverty and rural community/farmer wellbeing - scoping paper', Research and Information Service Briefing Paper, NIA: Belfast, 2014.

⁹⁶ For instance, urban/rural imbalance in government departmental funding of the wider women's sector; as the Executive's own research puts it: 'compared with levels of government funding to women's groups in urban areas, there was a relatively low level of government funding to rural women's groups'. DSD/OFMDFM, 'Review of government funding for women's groups and organisations', DSD/OFMDFM: Belfast, 2012, p.13.

⁹⁷ OFMDFM, op. cit.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ To compound matters, it was anecdotally reported that pre-existing community transport initiatives, which may have been of use in access to childcare, have been adversely impacted by austerity-associable public expenditure retrenchments. As one discussant put it: 'community transport [has been] greatly reduced due to budget cuts or funding withdrawal' (WSN focus group).

problem than availability'.¹⁰⁰ Rural participants disputed the validity of this claim-making, anecdotally evidencing that affordability and availability of overall childcare in rural areas - across all typology categories – can, more usually, tend to remain comparably sized problems for vulnerable cohorts. For example, 76 per cent of respondents in the rural women centre childcare survey reported that 'there [was generally] not enough childcare services' in their particular wards, while, at the same time, 92 per cent reported that 'there [was generally] not adequate financial support available to help parents/carers cover the costs of childcare'.

Participants also cautioned that the emphasis on childminding should not be allowed to deflect from the social justice case for continued support of low cost/no cost centre-based rural childcare provision at the level of community, specifically in women centre delivery models.¹⁰¹ That case was captured in terms of fulfilment of compelling anti-poverty and social inclusion imperatives associable with the integration of childcare and other services within such models, as previously described.

We note with particular interest that the document outlines government intent to 'mainstream' rural childcare needs across all actions in the strategy.¹⁰² While this commitment is to be generally welcomed, for reasons already outlined, also called for is comprehensive 'rural proofing', not only of the strategy itself, but also of all other implicated regional policy development and service planning/delivery initiatives, under extended austerity and beyond.

The overall aim of such cross-cutting endeavour should be specifically posited in terms of intent to address the interacting structural (and other) barriers to accessing services, and to economic participation, which can profoundly

¹⁰⁰ OFMDFM, op. cit.

¹⁰¹ The impact of that provision on rural familial well being was captured by one respondent thus:

my local women's centre ... is my lifeline. Without it I would have nowhere for me or my child as we live in a rural community with no other services. I do not drive and public transport is expensive. I can walk to my local women's centre, without it I would be in a dark place (Strathfoyle Women's Centre).

¹⁰² OFMDFM, op. cit.

impact women in rural poverty and isolation. Clearly, for the sake of inclusive accountability mechanisms, substantive rural stakeholder engagement in all stages of such processes would also be required. Moreover, it is vital that the monitoring of progress made under all associated policy frameworks should be properly informed by the coordinated cross-departmental collation of accurate rural-disaggregated data, across all groups of affected cohorts and all affected geographical areas.

Recommendation

The Consortium recommends that, in addition to ensuring that rural childcare needs are properly mainstreamed across the strategy, the Executive should adapt a wider remedial approach to addressing the interacting structural (and other) factors underlying the rural childcare dilemma at hand. The latter should be underpinned by an express commitment to comprehensively ‘rural proof’, not only of the strategy itself, but also all other implicated regional policy development and service planning/delivery initiatives under extended austerity and beyond.

Services for additional needs and wider diversity

3.8 This section considers the question of childcare for children and parents with additional needs.

As research affirms, there is significant unmet demand in Northern Ireland for childcare services in respect of households comprising children with disabilities and special needs.¹⁰³ Participants underscored this point. For example, 79 per cent of participants in the rural women centre survey¹⁰⁴ reported that ‘there was not enough childcare services’ for individuals with additional and complex needs. Discussants also anecdotally evidenced the adverse impact of such unmet demand at the level of the individual and wider family. That impact was largely captured in terms of negative mental health effects, most notably stress, as well as additional constraints on carers’

¹⁰³ Child Poverty Alliance, *op. cit.*, p. viii.

¹⁰⁴ As carried out by Women’s Centre Derry at Strathfoyle Women’s Centre, Derry, September 2015.

capacity to economically participate in the public sphere. As research further affirms, there is also a dearth of provision in respect of the particular and diverse childcare needs of other minority cohorts, such as ethnic minority and single-headed households.¹⁰⁵

The proposed interventions were critically reviewed from this perspective, and government intent was found wanting. It was subsequently concluded that much more would need to be done to meaningfully and effectively address this dilemma through proper recognition and accommodation of differentiated unmet demand, *across all constituencies of need in line with section 75 and applicable rights requirements, to include provision for multiple identities.*

Worryingly, however, there is no actual reference in the document to such a notion of diversity accommodation. Instead, the latter is essentially interpreted as the promotion of so-called good relations across section 75 categories, captured as the 'foster[ing of] lifelong respect for difference and diversity'.¹⁰⁶ A broader interpretation of diversity accommodation in childcare is clearly required, to be reflected in the nature and scope of proposed interventions.

Recommendation

The Consortium recommends that the Executive give further consideration to the question of provision for cohorts with additional childcare needs, taking seriously the differentiated nature of that needs base and associated unmet demand, as well as the implications of the latter for well being at the level of the individual, the wider family, community and society at large. To that end, government should reframe (i.e. broaden) the interpretation of diversity accommodation on which its arguments rely, to expressly signify a rights-based commitment to the proper recognition and accommodation of *all* constituencies of need across all section 75 categories.

¹⁰⁵ See Webb, Kernaghan and Caffrey, op. cit.; also, Lidell, op. cit.

¹⁰⁶ OFMDFM, op. cit.

4. Conclusion

This paper has briefly explored the actual/projected nature of the relationship between the interventionist content of the draft strategy, extended austerity, gender equality, anti-poverty delivery and outcomes for vulnerable cohorts in disadvantaged and rural areas, as informed by insight from both the literature and discussant engagement.

As we have seen, the nature and scale of the childcare dilemma impacting such cohorts may be broadly characterised in terms of considerable, continuing and differentiated unmet demand for low cost/no cost pre-school and school age provision, such as might potentially help address factors underlying the experience of marginalisation and vulnerability (precisely by helping to enhance women's prospects of economic participation in the public sphere and, in turn, helping to enhance the life chances and outcomes of their families).

Within this context, the actual/projected nature and scale of the *austerity-compounded* childcare dilemma affecting such cohorts has been examined, as has the nature and scale of likely interventionist requirements to remedially address same. Worryingly, as we have also seen, when juxtaposed with the latter, the document's own interventionist ambitions in respect of disadvantaged and rural constituencies appear *distinctly modest*.

Building on that insight, a compelling social justice case has been made for more meaningful and effective policy and intervention in this field, calling on the Executive to take due account of the relationship under review by properly mapping, and seeking to mitigate, its actual and further projected impact on differentiated well being and outcomes.

Taking such account will clearly require a childcare framework characterised by accountable leadership¹⁰⁷ as well as holistic, rights-based driven and

¹⁰⁷ Lamentably, the document fails to provide clarity on the question of lead department in respect of childcare. Some discussants critiqued the intention to give the Department of Education lead responsibility, suggesting instead that the proposed 'Department of

properly integrated, coordinated and sustained cross-departmental working at the level of policy development, planning, implementation, monitoring and review, to include (i) provision for meaningful stakeholder representation across all affected constituencies of need; and, (ii) suitably robust and measurable action plans informed by the collation of pertinent disaggregated data.

Of profound concern in this debate is the apparent absence of a substantive budgetary commitment to underpin the strategy, such as might help to support low cost/no cost childcare at the level of the community in meaningfully sustainable and effective ways. For obvious reasons, the prospect of an effective strategy relies fundamentally - first and foremostly - on the emergence/actualisation of such a commitment, and as such should be attended to with due moral-political urgency.

Communities' represented a 'better fit' given its likely expertise, knowledge and relationship-building profile.

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Appendix 1

Stakeholder engagement detail

Focus group locations and dates

WSN-facilitated events

- Women's Support Network, 26 August 2015
- Atlas Women's Centre, 27 August 2015
- Footprints Women's Centre, 9 September 2015
- Falls Women's Centre, 14 September 2015
- Greater North Belfast Women's Network, Star Neighbourhood Centre, 16 September 2015

Others

- Women's Centre Derry, 8 September 2015
- Greenway Women's Centre, 24 September 2015

Survey

Rural survey conducted by Women's Centre Derry at Strathfoyle Women's Centre, September 2015.

Participating organisations, other than event partners mentioned above

- Women's Tec
- FWIN
- Windsor Women's Centre
- First Steps Women's Centre
- Shankill Women's Centre
- Community Relations Forum
- Waterside Women's Centre
- Foyle Women's Aid
- Sinn Fein

Participants' profile summary

Overall composition: included some venue staff, board members, volunteers, service users and, more generally, women living and working in different rural, urban and town sites and sectors, including parents, young and older people as well as ethnic minority members. In addition, the Women's Centre Derry focus group included a local government elected representative.

Appendix 2 Summary of response

Overview

In critically engaging with the draft strategy, the Consortium has specifically articulated the needs, interests and perspectives of marginalised and vulnerable women in disadvantaged and rural areas. It has been argued that, for reasons of social justice, it is imperative that the strategy framework is developed and implemented in such a way as to properly capture and remedially address the complexity of the interacting issues at stake in this debate, delivering substantive interventions to remedially address the childcare dilemma at hand affecting such cohorts.

As illustrated, that dilemma may be broadly characterised in terms of continuing and differentiated unmet demand for low cost/no cost pre-school and school age provision, such as might potentially help address factors underlying the experience of marginalisation and vulnerability (precisely by helping to enhance women's prospects of economic participation in the public sphere and, in turn, helping to enhance the life chances and outcomes of their families).

Yet, as noted, in a context of wider (ongoing and extended) austerity, characterised by severe fiscal constraints and retrenchments, and associated with actual and further projected increases in different kinds of poverty and vulnerability, we remain concerned about the potential of the proposals to meaningfully realise this imperative in sustainable ways. In short, against this backdrop, the Consortium is generally concerned that any remedial childcare impact of the government's anti-poverty interventionist agenda might ultimately prove insubstantial.

As we have seen, particular concerns centre around the potential cumulative adverse impact, on childcare demand, supply and outcomes, of the following interacting austerity-associable and/or austerity-compounded factors, as suggested by both the literature and anecdotal evidence from the qualitative research dimension of the response:

- the apparent absence of a substantive budgetary commitment to underpin the strategy, such as might help to support low cost/no cost childcare at the level of the community in meaningfully sustainable and effective ways;
- actual and further projected austerity constraints (such as tax and benefit reform) on households' ability to pay for childcare, especially in disadvantaged areas;
- the impact on provider income and sustainability of actual/projected decreases in catchment area demand for fee-paying registered childcare (linked to austerity constraints on catchment area household income levels);
- the severely constrained - austerity-correlated - funding status quo impacting community based provider sustainability in disadvantaged

areas, as compounded by enduring uncertainty over the future of the Women's Centres' Childcare Fund (hereafter, WCCF);

- the negative effects on childcare demand/supply of government failure to explicitly integrate meaningful gendered job creation policy into its 'delivering social change through childcare' anti-poverty agenda; and, finally,
- the austerity-compounded relationship between the economic participation of disadvantaged women and the demise of integrated models of childcare and community education.

From this perspective, the following recommendations have been advanced.

Recommendations

'Ability to pay' principle: requisite definitional clarity

For the sake of more meaningful and effective monitoring and review possibilities for the strategy, the Consortium recommends that the Executive attend to the question of definitional clarity/transparency in respect of the key evaluative notions underlying its treatment of affordability, to include numerical specificity regarding its interpretation of 'low cost' and 'ability to pay'.

Austerity and the ability to pay principle: disadvantaged areas

The Consortium recommends that, in configuring the application of its ability to pay principle to supported fee structuring, the Executive explicitly seek to provide for the projected relationship between extended austerity and childcare affordability at the level of community (by considering how it might more effectively use this intervention as a potential opportunity to mitigate the impact of that relationship on childcare access for low income households).

Austerity and provider sustainability: community-based realities

We recommend that the Executive take proper account of the projected childcare impact of the relationship between (a) the realities of constrained provider sustainability potential at the level of community; and, (b) reduced provider and household financial capacity under extended austerity. Taking such account should explicitly involve government *adjusting its expectation of progress on sustainability as a condition of extended (i.e. longer term) support.*

Pre-school provision and WCCF

Government should take more seriously the compelling social justice question of low cost/no cost pre-school childcare for marginalised and vulnerable women in disadvantaged and rural areas. That undertaking should expressly incorporate proper consideration of the projected cumulative adverse impact of any cessation of WCCF (in the case of government failure to put in place either appropriate mitigation or comparable alternative support to address same).

Given what is at stake in this debate, this question should be addressed with

urgency in tandem with the development of the final strategy, recognising the case for properly sustaining the WCCF model on a ringfenced budgetary basis (thus changing its funding status from 'emergency' to 'protected').

Childcare and anti-poverty agenda: integrating gendered job creation

While the economic participation of women in the public sphere is fundamentally reliant on the availability of appropriate childcare, it is, of course, also very much dependent on the availability of meaningful employment (so-called 'work that pays' when childcare costs are factored in). In taking forward the strategy, government should seek to give due regard to this correlation, integrating meaningful gendered job creation ambitions into its wider anti-poverty policy framework.

Childcare, gender equality, austerity and community education

The Consortium recommends that government take proper account of the projected disimprovement of gender equality under the lifetime of the strategy associable with the relationship between women's economic participation in the public sphere, austerity and the restricted nature of integrated childcare/education provision for vulnerable cohorts at the level of community, seeking to map and mitigate any actual disimprovement.

Rural-specific interventions

We recommend that, in addition to ensuring that rural childcare needs are properly mainstreamed across the strategy, the Executive should adapt a wider remedial approach to addressing the interacting structural (and other) factors underlying the rural childcare dilemma at hand. The latter should be underpinned by an express commitment to comprehensively 'rural proof', not only of the strategy itself, but also all other implicated regional policy development and service planning/delivery initiatives under extended austerity and beyond.

Services for additional needs and wider diversity

The Consortium recommends that the Executive give further consideration to the question of provision for cohorts with additional childcare needs, taking seriously the differentiated nature of that needs base and associated unmet demand, as well as the implications of the latter for well being at the level of the individual, the wider family, community and society at large. To that end, government should reframe (i.e. broaden) the interpretation of diversity accommodation on which its arguments rely, to expressly signify a rights-based commitment to the proper recognition and accommodation of *all* constituencies of need across all section 75 categories.

Conclusion

This paper has briefly explored the actual/projected nature of the relationship between the interventionist content of the draft strategy, extended austerity, gender equality, anti-poverty delivery and outcomes for vulnerable cohorts in disadvantaged and rural areas, as informed by insight from both the literature

and discussant engagement.

Within this context, the actual/projected nature and scale of the *austerity-compounded* childcare dilemma affecting such cohorts has been examined, as has the nature and scale of likely interventionist requirements to remedially address same. Worryingly, as we have also seen, when juxtaposed with the latter, the document's own interventionist ambitions in respect of disadvantaged and rural constituencies appear *distinctly modest*.

Building on that insight, a compelling social justice case has been made for more meaningful and effective policy and intervention in this field, calling on the Executive to take due account of the relationship under review by properly mapping, and seeking to mitigate, its actual and further projected impact on differentiated well being and outcomes.

Taking such account will clearly require a childcare framework characterised by accountable leadership as well as holistic, rights-based driven and properly integrated, coordinated and sustained cross-departmental working at the level of policy development, planning, implementation, monitoring and review, to include (i) provision for meaningful stakeholder representation across all affected constituencies of need; and, (ii) suitably robust and measurable action plans informed by the collation of pertinent disaggregated data.

Of profound concern in this debate is the apparent absence of a substantive budgetary commitment to underpin the strategy, such as might help to support low cost/no cost childcare at the level of the community in meaningfully sustainable and effective ways. For obvious reasons, the prospect of an effective strategy relies fundamentally - first and foremostly - on the emergence/actualisation of such a commitment, and as such should be attended to with due moral-political urgency.