



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

Response to: A Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland – Skills for a 10x Economy

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Women's Centre Derry
ACCESS & EMPOWERMENT



**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 (hereafter, either the Women's Regional Consortium or simply the Consortium), which is funded by the Department for Communities and the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.

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 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
- ♀ Foyle Women's Information Network (FWIN)

¹ Sections 1.2-1.3 represent the official description of the Consortium's work, as agreed and authored by its seven partner organisation

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 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 The Women's Regional Consortium appreciates the opportunity to respond to the Department for the Economy's Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland. This is a hugely important issue for women given the structural inequalities that exist within our economy which impact on women's employment and their ability to access training, education and good quality work. These barriers are significant issues which must be tackled in order to ensure that any resulting Skills Strategy is for the benefit of all. These barriers include unaffordable and/or inflexible childcare, gender stereotypes, segregated labour markets, sex discrimination, low pay and an unequal distribution of caring responsibilities.

1.5 Throughout this response the Consortium has sought to ensure the voices of women are represented. We believe that it is essential for policy makers and Government to understand the circumstances and experiences of women in Northern Ireland in the development of these important strategies which have such implications for their lives.

1.6 We wish to endorse the responses made by the Women's Policy Group (WPG) and the Northern Ireland Women's Budget Group (NIWBG) both of which groups the Women's Regional Consortium is represented on. We fully endorse their responses

and urge the Department for the Economy to take their evidence fully into consideration. We make particular reference to the comprehensive Feminist Recovery Plan² in the WPG's response and to the calls for a Caring Economy in the NIWBG response. Alongside our sisters in the WPG and NIWBG we strongly advocate for the need for gender budgeting in the Skills Strategy. This would help to ensure that the actions flowing from the Strategy do not further aggravate existing gender inequalities within the labour market which currently have such negative impacts for women. We want to see the Skills Strategy work to actively promote gender equality which will have real and meaningful benefits for women, men and the economy as a whole.

2.0 General Comments

As the consultation document acknowledges there is a real need to *“reverse the trend of declining investment in skills”* and to ensure that *“everyone has access to the education and training they need to reach their potential, delivering better jobs to more people”*. We would argue that these are particularly important considerations for women. For some of the most marginalised women (including lone parents and BAME women) the prospect of increased economic participation is reliant on access to education and training opportunities at community level alongside the availability of appropriate integrated childcare.

It is important that the Department recognises the contextual factors which impact on women's economic participation and increase their vulnerability to poverty. These include high rates of female economic inactivity, no childcare strategy, high numbers of women with adult care responsibilities, a weak labour market, high numbers of women working part-time and in precarious jobs and wages lower than the UK average.³

² Covid-19 Feminist Recovery Plan: Relaunch – One Year On, Women's Policy Group NI, July 2021 <https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/WPG-COVID-19-Feminist-Recovery-Plan-Relaunch-One-Year-On.pdf>

³ Shadow report for the examination of the UK by the Committee on the Convention to Eliminate Discrimination against Women, NIWEP, January 2019

Before addressing the specific questions asked in the Consultation we would like to expand on a number of the issues mentioned above and some additional issues which cannot and must not be seen in isolation from considerations around Skills. All these issues are inter-linked and have an impact on each other therefore due consideration must be given to them in developing a Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland.

2.1 Gender Inequality

A decade of welfare reform/austerity measures which have impacted more on women, the predicted worsening of existing inequalities as a result of the Covid19 pandemic and the likely adverse impacts of Brexit particularly in Northern Ireland gives rise for concern about a deterioration in gender equality for women.

Gendered social norms restrict and limit women's roles in the economy, thereby contributing to women's economic disadvantage relative to men.⁴ Women are more likely to be in receipt of social security benefits, more likely to be in low-paid, part-time and insecure work and also more likely to be providing care either for children or other family members which limits their ability to carry out paid work. This contributes to keeping women's incomes generally lower over their lifetimes and therefore means they are more likely to be dependent on men or the state through social security benefits.

Any decision-making, policies and budgets must recognise the different circumstances with which women and men experience systems and economies. In practice men and women are rarely in similar circumstances due to existing gender inequalities and gendered social norms.

A gender-neutral approach to policy and decision making has been the standard across Government and this has not served women well as it fails to take account of the different experiences of men and women as a result of existing gender inequalities. A failure to account for these gender dynamics means that the design

⁴ Violence against Women and Girls and women's economic inequality, Eva Neitzert , March 2020 <https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Violence-and-womens-economic-equality.pdf>

of policies and budgets can aggravate existing gender inequality and may not benefit women and men equally.

The CEDAW Committee has also cautioned on the dangers of gender neutrality. CEDAW calls for substantive equality⁵ to go beyond paying lip service to gender mainstreaming and demonstrate the meaningful integration of an equalities perspective into all systems and policies. It states that a purely formal approach is not sufficient to achieve women's equality with men and requires that women are given an equal start and empowered by an enabling environment to achieve equality of results. *"It is not enough to guarantee women treatment that is identical to that of men. Rather, biological as well as socially and culturally constructed differences between women and men must be taken into account."*⁶

The issue of gender neutrality is a significant barrier to women's equality and this issue must be recognised by the Department in developing an effective Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland.

"In the NI Assembly they are gender neutralising everything. They don't want to address women's issues, they don't want to open doors for women, they don't see across the different types of women. They want to remove women from things – if they do something for women then they have to do it for men. They don't see the impact of Universal Credit, Covid, etc on women."

(Participant at Consultation Event)

"Women, the elderly and disabled are consistently at the bottom of the pile in terms of their importance and value."

(Participant at Consultation Event)

"Women are the biggest percentage of people here but unfortunately we are not given priority."

(Participant at Consultation Event)

⁵ General Recommendations Adopted by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, Thirtieth session (2004), General Recommendation No 25
https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CEDAW/Shared%20Documents/1_Global/INT_CEDAW_GEC_3733_E.pdf

⁶ Ibid, paragraph 8

“We have to keep knocking on doors and fighting for our rights. Women bear the brunt of a lot of issues. In families it is women who are fighting for rights.”
(Participant at Consultation Event)

“We should all go on strike! We saw what happened with Covid in the emergency responses women were always sidelined. There is a need to value what women do. Women are always the add on at the end and it’s totally frustrating.”
(Participant at Consultation Event)

“Caring work is not valued in society and is the bedrock of everything. The value of care and all the stuff normally done within the home. This is at the root of everything and why women can’t participate properly. There is a circular relationship between not valuing care work and undervaluing women. It is undervalued because it is something that women do – there is underlying misogyny.”
(Participant at Consultation Event)

2.2 Women, Poverty, Austerity and Welfare Reform

Poverty is an issue which impacts on the lives of many women in Northern Ireland and is harmful not only to the women themselves but to their children, families and wider communities. Women are generally more likely than men to live in poverty across their lifetimes. Lone parents (in Northern Ireland 91% of lone parents are women⁷) are even more vulnerable to poverty. In Northern Ireland 37% of single parents are living in poverty.⁸

As previously stated, women are more likely to be in receipt of social security benefits, more likely to be in low-paid, part-time and insecure work and also more likely to be providing care which limits their ability to carry out paid work. This contributes to keeping women’s incomes generally lower over their lifetimes and therefore puts them at greater risk of poverty. These existing gender inequalities are also likely to be further worsened due to the Covid19 pandemic.

⁷ Census 2011 – Key Statistics for Gender, Research and Information Service Research Paper, Ronan Savage and Dr Raymond Russell, Northern Ireland Assembly, 5 September 2014
<http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/raise/publications/2015/general/3415.pdf>

⁸ Households Below Average Income: Northern Ireland 2018/19, DfC & NISRA
<https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/system/files/publications/communities/hbai-2018-19.pdf>

“At the end of the day women and mothers are left with the burden of these issues (referring to low-incomes and poverty). They worry about these things.”

(Quote taken from Women’s Regional Consortium Research on the Impact of Austerity/Welfare Reform on Women, March 2019)

A decade of austerity and welfare reform policies have disproportionately impacted on women. Research by the House of Commons Library shows that 86% of the savings to the Treasury through tax and benefit changes since 2010 will have come from women. It shows that, by 2020, men will have borne just 14% of the total burden of welfare cuts, compared with 86% for women.⁹

Locally, an analysis of the impact of the reforms by the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC)¹⁰ showed that across most income levels the overall cash impact of the reforms is more negative for women than for men. This is particularly the case for lone parents (who are mostly women) who lose £2,250 on average, equivalent to almost 10% of their net income. Research by the Women’s Regional Consortium on the impact of austerity¹¹ and on the impact of Universal Credit¹² on women shows how welfare reform changes have left women more vulnerable to financial hardship and poverty.

“I don’t know how anyone does it as a single parent. The cost of milk, nappies. There is a ripple effect on children.”

(Quote taken from Women’s Regional Consortium Research on the Impact of Austerity/Welfare Reform on Women, March 2019)

Concerns about austerity measures have been raised internationally by the CEDAW Committee. Following its recent examination of the UK, the CEDAW Committee

⁹ Estimating the gender impact of tax and benefit changes, Richard Cracknell, Richard Keen, Commons Briefing Papers SN06758, December 2017
<http://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN06758/SN06758.pdf>

¹⁰ Cumulative impact assessment of tax and social security reforms in Northern Ireland, NIHRC, November 2019

https://www.nihrc.org/uploads/publications/Final_CIA_report_Oct_2019.pdf

¹¹ Impact of Ongoing Austerity: Women’s Perspectives, Women’s Regional Consortium, March 2019
<http://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/sites/default/files/Impact%20of%20Ongoing%20Austerity%20Women%27s%20Perspectives.pdf>

¹² The Impact of Universal Credit on Women, Women’s Regional Consortium, September 2020
<http://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/sites/default/files/The%20Impact%20of%20Universal%20Credit%20on%20WomenRevised.pdf>

raised concerns about the impact of austerity measures on women stating its concern about the *“disproportionately negative impact of austerity measures on women, who constitute the vast majority of single parents and are more likely to be engaged in informal, temporary or precarious employment.”*¹³ The Committee recommended that the UK government *“undertake a comprehensive assessment on the impact of austerity measures on the rights of women and adopt measures to mitigate and remedy the negative consequences without delay.”*¹⁴

The cumulative effects of welfare reform and austerity have meant that women are facing many changes to their financial support and has this has reduced their ability to seek work/get better jobs and afford the necessary childcare to enable them to do so.

“The benefits system forces women with children to go out to work. But there is a lack of jobs available and the jobs that are available are often the lowest paid which means that women can’t afford childcare or you end up paying to work.”

(Participant at Consultation Event)

“The benefits system doesn’t help people to go out and seek work. The jobs women do are often the lowest paid. If they leave benefits for low paid work they just end up getting further into the poverty trap.”

(Participant at Consultation Event)

“There is a lack of jobs here, the only jobs available are in call centres. I can’t see many women being able to take those jobs as they are mostly shift work. What happens when the kids get out of school? It is not easy for women.”

(Quote taken from Women’s Regional Consortium Research on the Impact of Austerity/Welfare Reform on Women, March 2019)

“Where are all these jobs? There are no jobs that are flexible for women, they are often low paid and 40 hours a week.”

(Quote taken from Women’s Regional Consortium Research on the Impact of Austerity/Welfare Reform on Women, March 2019)

¹³ Concluding Observations on the eighth periodic report of United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, CEDAW/C/GBR/CO/8, March 2019 (para 17)
https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW/C/GBR/CO/8%20&Lang=En

¹⁴ Ibid, para 18

“Even before Covid there were lots of people reliant on foodbanks because of Universal Credit, the 5-week wait, 2 child limit, etc. These things only push people into poverty. UC is not fair to people it just penalizes people. I feel there are not the right benefits in place.”

(Participant at Consultation Event)

2.3 The Impact of the Covid19 pandemic on Women

The ongoing Covid19 pandemic has created unprecedented challenges across the world. The crisis affects men and women differently and in many cases deepens the inequalities that women already experience. Women are more likely to bear the brunt of this crisis for a number of reasons:

- Women are more likely to be low paid and in insecure employment. Women were the majority of low paid earners (69%) the majority of those in part-time employment (74%), involuntary part-time employment (57%), temporary employment (54%), zero-hours contracts (54%) and part-time self-employment (59%).¹⁵
- Female employees were more likely than male employees to be working in jobs paying the National Minimum Wage. Low paid women were more likely than low paid men to remain stuck in low paid jobs;¹⁶
- Women are twice as likely to be key workers as men, 65% of key workers are female compared to 47% of the whole working population;¹⁷
- In Northern Ireland women make up 79% of health and social care staff.¹⁸

¹⁵ Submission to the Women and Equalities Select Committee inquiry: Unequal impact? Coronavirus and the gendered economic impact, Women's Budget Group, June 2020

<https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/WBG-Gender-economic-impact-submission.pdf>

¹⁶ Unequal impact? Coronavirus and the gendered economic impact, Women & Equalities Committee, UK Parliament, February 2021

<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5801/cmselect/cmwomeq/385/38502.htm>

¹⁷ Risky business, Economic impacts of the coronavirus crisis on different groups of workers, Resolution Foundation Briefing, April 2020

<https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/app/uploads/2019/10/Risky-business.pdf>

¹⁸ Who Runs Northern Ireland? A Summary of Statistics Relating to Gender and Power in 2020, Northern Ireland Assembly Briefing Paper, January 2020

http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/raise/publications/2017-2022/2020/assembly_exec_review/0120.pdf

- Many of the workers in health and social care sectors are low paid. 98% of the 1 million high exposure key workers being paid less than 60% of median average wages are women.¹⁹
- Employed women were a third more likely than employed men to work in shutdown sectors over the first national lockdown with one in six (17%) of female employees in such sectors compared to one in seven (13%) of male employees²⁰ making them at particular risk of job loss.
- HMRC statistics show that across the UK more women than men were furloughed with 1.92 million females furloughed at 30 November 2020 compared with 1.79 million men.²¹
- On average, women carried out 60% more unpaid work than men reducing the time available for paid work meaning that they earn less, own less and are more likely to be living in poverty.²²
- Women are less likely to be eligible for Statutory Sick Pay (SSP) because they are overrepresented in low paid work and on zero hours contracts. Women's Budget Group calculations find that 15.5% of women and 10.6% of men do not earn enough to qualify for SSP.²³ This points to a disproportionate financial impact of self-isolation on women.

Recently published analysis by the Department for the Economy²⁴ suggests that females and lower paid workers tend to have been affected by the Covid19 restrictions more than men, as female employees tend to be in a majority in sectors

¹⁹ Low-paid women in UK at 'high risk of coronavirus exposure', The Guardian, March 2020
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/29/low-paid-women-in-uk-at-high-risk-of-coronavirus-exposure>

²⁰ Sector shutdowns during the coronavirus crisis: which workers are most exposed? Institute for Fiscal Studies Briefing Note BN278, April 2020
<https://www.ifs.org.uk/uploads/BN278-Sector-Shutdowns.pdf>

²¹ Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme statistics: January 2021, HMRC
<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/coronavirus-job-retention-scheme-statistics-january-2021/coronavirus-job-retention-scheme-statistics-january-2021>

²² Women shoulder the responsibility of 'unpaid work', Office for National Statistics, November 2016
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/articles/womenshouldtheresponsibilityofunpaidwork/2016-11-10>

²³ Submission to the Women and Equalities Select Committee inquiry: Unequal impact? Coronavirus and the gendered economic impact, Women's Budget Group, June 2020
<https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/WBG-Gender-economic-impact-submission.pdf>

²⁴ <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/economy/economic-recovery-from-covid-19-and-restrictions.pdf>

such as hairdressing, beauticians, clothing, retail, etc. Researchers from the universities of Oxford, Cambridge and Zurich during March and April 2020 showed that working women in the UK, Germany and the US undertook more childcare and home-schooling across all wage brackets, compared to men with similar earnings.²⁵ Analysis by the CEBR, has found that with respect to pension contributions, the gender divide worsened during lockdowns, with women now facing working years later to enjoy the same retirement.²⁶ A recent United Nations study warned that Covid19 could dilute decades of advancement on gender equality.²⁷

In July 2021 the Women's Policy Group Northern Ireland relaunched its comprehensive Feminist Recovery Plan²⁸ highlighting many of these issues and calling on decision-makers across the UK to take action to ensure a gender-sensitive response in the transition from crisis response to recovery. This plan provides clear evidence for how to prioritise actions coming out of the pandemic. Despite this and previous calls by the women's sector there has been little progress in alleviating the impact of the pandemic on women.

A Women and Equalities Committee report²⁹ into the gendered economic impact of the Covid19 crisis has highlighted how existing gendered inequalities in the economy have been ignored and sometimes exacerbated by the pandemic policy response. The Committee stated: *"We are concerned that the Government Equalities Office (GEO) did not anticipate how inequalities were likely to be exacerbated by the pandemic and ensure that it influenced the policy response, including in relation to employment, welfare, childcare and pregnancy and maternity. We have seen little*

²⁵ <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20200630-how-covid-19-is-changing-womens-lives>

²⁶ <https://cebr.com/reports/the-telegraph-women-face-27000-pension-black-hole-due-to-pandemic/>

²⁷ <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/policy-brief-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women-en.pdf>

²⁸ Covid-19 Feminist Recovery Plan: Relaunch – One Year On, Women's Policy Group NI, July 2021 <https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/WPG-COVID-19-Feminist-Recovery-Plan-Relaunch-One-Year-On.pdf>

²⁹ Unequal impact? Coronavirus and the gendered economic impact, Women & Equalities Committee, UK Parliament, February 2021 <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5801/cmselect/cmwomeq/385/38502.htm>

evidence that the Government has conducted any robust or meaningful analysis of the gendered impact of its economic policies during the Coronavirus crisis.”

Following the publication of this report a coalition of organisations including the Trades Union Congress (TUC), Amnesty International, Save the Children and the Fawcett Society have signed a letter to the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) arguing that the government has failed in its duty to consider the impact of key policies on women and other groups protected under the Equality Act.³⁰ The letter states: *“This is a time of crisis for women. The coronavirus pandemic is having a significant and disproportionate impact on women’s health, jobs and livelihoods. The policy decisions taken by government and other key public bodies in response to coronavirus are worsening the impact of the pandemic and deepening inequalities faced by women. The consequences of these decisions will affect women for years to come.”*

It is clear that some groups are particularly affected by pandemic. The low paid, young and female workers stand out as the groups putting their lives at risk by continuing to work in close proximity to others, and most likely to be experiencing direct financial pain from the economic shut down.³¹ We believe that these areas must therefore be the focus of the actions coming from all government departments in Northern Ireland.

It is imperative that as society emerges from the Covid19 pandemic and resulting recession that women must not pay the price as they did for the previous financial crash. Women have already suffered immensely due to a decade of austerity policies and this must not be allowed to happen again. There is a real need in government recovery planning for targeted support to ensure that those who have been impacted the most by this pandemic are given the help they need to prevent and reduce poverty.

³⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/feb/15/ehrc-urged-to-investigate-ministers-for-equality-failures-in-covid-response>

³¹ Risky business, Economic impacts of the coronavirus crisis on different groups of workers, Resolution Foundation Briefing, April 2020
<https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/app/uploads/2019/10/Risky-business.pdf>

“Women don’t have equal rights and Covid has highlighted a lot of that. Women are struggling with homeworking, looking after children and working at the same time. Men’s jobs are seen as more important.”

(Participant at Consultation Event)

“It’s a real hard time for everyone especially women.”

(Participant at Consultation Event)

“Caring mostly falls to women, it’s a big issue for women.”

(Participant at Consultation Event)

“There is still the assumption that it is women who will provide care. If there is care needed it is assumed that women will provide it whether for parents, children or grandchildren. Women are expected to care yet there are not the services there to support them.”

(Participant at Consultation Event)

2.3.1. The impact of Covid19 on Youth Unemployment

The consultation document refers to rises in unemployment and highlights that the increase in the unemployment figures was driven by those under 35 years (page 14). The issue of youth unemployment is an area of major concern as research shows that more than one in 10 people aged 16 – 25 have lost their job and just under 6 in 10 have seen their earnings fall since the Covid19 pandemic began.³² This research found that young workers were twice as likely to have lost their jobs compared to older employees and that employment and earnings losses are more pronounced for women, the self-employed and those who grew up in a poor family.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies found that the lockdown hit young people the hardest.³³ This report also states that on the eve of the crisis the sectors that are shut down as a result of social distancing measures employed nearly a third (30%) of all employees under the age 25 (25% of young men and 36% of young women). So it is clear therefore that young women will be more impacted by youth unemployment as a result of the Covid19 pandemic than young men.

³² Generation COVID and Social Mobility: Evidence and Policy, Centre for Economic Performance, October 2020 <https://cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/cepcovid-19-011.pdf>

³³ Sector shutdowns during the coronavirus crisis: which workers are most exposed? Institute for Fiscal Studies Briefing Note BN278, April 2020 <https://www.ifs.org.uk/uploads/BN278-Sector-Shutdowns.pdf>

2.4 Employment Support

The Department for Communities EQIA acknowledged that increased numbers of people will now require employment support to help them enter employment and reduce their dependence on benefits.³⁴ This type of employment support will be needed now more than ever due to the increased numbers of people who are unemployed and claiming social security benefits as a result of Covid19.

As previously stated, women are more likely to be in receipt of social security benefits, more likely to be in part-time, insecure work, more likely to be economically inactive, more likely to have caring responsibilities limiting their time available for work and more likely to have lost their jobs as a result of the Covid19 pandemic. We stress therefore that the provision of employment support is particularly important for women. Employment support must include access to training and education at community level supported by childcare in order to reach those women who are the most marginalised and negatively impacted by welfare reform and austerity policies.

2.5 Women's Economic Inactivity

The Northern Ireland economic inactivity rate has increased to 27% and it is consistently above the UK average (now at 20.7%). The female economic inactivity rate is 30.9% compared to 23% for men.³⁵ In looking at the detail of economic inactivity it shows that more than a third of women who were unavailable for work gave the reason for inactivity as family/home commitments (61,000 or 34%) and this was the least likely reason for male inactivity (at 8,000 or 6%).³⁶ This is an important consideration in terms of education, training, childcare and employment support as women are clearly in need of increased support in order to be able to move into work.

While economic inactivity figures have been referenced within the consultation they do not address the gendered nature of this issue as outlined above. Once again, we

³⁴ Equality Impact Assessment Draft DfC Budget 2021-22, Department for Communities, Para 6.6

³⁵ Northern Ireland Labour Market Report, NISRA, January 2021

<https://www.nisra.gov.uk/system/files/statistics/labour-market-report-january-2021.pdf>

³⁶ Women in Northern Ireland 2020, NISRA, June 2020

https://www.nisra.gov.uk/sites/nisra.gov.uk/files/publications/Women%20in%20NI%202020_0.pdf

wish to draw attention to the necessity of analysing the gendered nature of these figures. It is only by acknowledging and addressing this that effective actions can be developed and implemented to make a real difference in this area. We again caution on taking a gender neutral approach to policy making in this regard as highlighted in Section 2.1.

2.6 Childcare

Research shows that 40% of families in Northern Ireland (around 350,000 workers) have dependent children.³⁷ Childcare is the biggest monthly bill faced by 33% of families in Northern Ireland costing more than their mortgage or rent payments and for 60% of parents their childcare bill is their largest or second largest monthly outgoing.³⁸ The World Economic Forum found that UK parents pay the highest childcare costs in Europe and the second highest in the world.³⁹

Differing childcare support in Northern Ireland from GB means that parents in Northern Ireland are under greater financial pressure with regards to childcare costs. Families in Northern Ireland do not have access to the 30-hours free childcare per week available to eligible families in England with a three or four-year old child.

Research by Employers for Childcare⁴⁰ in Northern Ireland shows that families in Northern Ireland can expect to pay a greater proportion of their household income on childcare than households across the UK as a whole with the average cost of a full-time childcare place equating to 35% of the median household income before housing costs. This is amongst the highest in the OECD countries.

The CEDAW Committee has also raised the issue of childcare costs specifically in Northern Ireland noting its concern *“that childcare costs remain excessive,*

³⁷ Employment and access to childcare during the Covid-19 crisis, Nevin Economic Research Institute, May 2020

<https://www.nerinstitute.net/research/employment-and-access-childcare-during-covid-19-crisis>

³⁸ Northern Ireland Childcare Survey 2020, Employers for Childcare, November 2020

<https://www.employersforchildcare.org/report/northern-ireland-childcare-survey-2020/>

³⁹ <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/04/these-countries-have-the-most-expensive-childcare/>

⁴⁰ Northern Ireland Childcare Survey 2020, Employers for Childcare, November 2020

<https://www.employersforchildcare.org/report/northern-ireland-childcare-survey-2020/>

*particularly in Northern Ireland, which constitutes an obstacle for women to enter and progress in the workplace.”*⁴¹ The Committee recommended that Government should ensure the availability of affordable and accessible childcare particularly in Northern Ireland.⁴²

The availability of accessible, affordable childcare is a key consideration for women’s participation in the economy and for women’s access to education and training. Despite the importance of childcare to women’s economic participation and the running of the economy it was extremely concerning to note that childcare was completely absent from the Northern Ireland Executive’s Coronavirus Recovery Plan published in May 2020.⁴³ Neither did childcare feature in the UK or Ireland’s recovery plans.

An update to the Recovery Plan – Building Forward: Consolidated Covid-19 Recovery Plan⁴⁴ published by the Northern Ireland Executive in July 2021 contains just one mention of childcare. The plan acknowledges that the pandemic has deepened some existing inequalities giving the example that *“those from disadvantaged backgrounds have been hardest hit while women have been disproportionately impacted with regards to remaining in employment”*. The plan states that *“affordable, accessible childcare would help remedy this”*.

We are in agreement with our Childcare for All Coalition partners Employers for Childcare who have stated that they are disappointed *“that the Executive plan has failed to address childcare as an economic issue and how this can support overall economic recovery”*.⁴⁵ They highlighted that the plan does not reference the need for

⁴¹ Concluding Observations on the eighth periodic report of United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, CEDAW/C/GBR/CO/8, March 2019, para 45
https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW/C/GBR/CO/8&Lang=En

⁴² Ibid, para 46

⁴³ Coronavirus recovery plan, NI Executive, May 2020
<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/publications/coronavirus-recovery-plan>

⁴⁴ Building Forward: Consolidated Covid-19 Recovery Plan, NI Executive, July 2021
<https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/execoffice/consolidated-covid-19-recovery-plan.pdf>

⁴⁵ Executive’s Covid-19 recovery plan fails to recognise vital role of childcare to the economy, Employers for Childcare, August 2021

urgent investment in the childcare sector supported by an updated Childcare Strategy.

Childcare is a vital part of our economic infrastructure and it is therefore essential that it is a key component in any pathway to recovery and properly supported both now and into the future. We support the Childcare for All statement that *“the childcare needs of everyone in the Northern Ireland workforce must be at the forefront of planning to ensure parents and providers are not facing unnecessary risks or barriers to work.”*⁴⁶

If the pandemic has taught us anything it is the importance of childcare to the running of the economy and this must become a higher priority for policymakers. Childcare plays a crucial role in getting people into employment and in helping to tackle disadvantage and gender inequality. The Women’s Regional Consortium believes that childcare must be recognised as an essential part of our infrastructure and therefore given a stronger focus within government at all levels. This will help to ensure a fairer and more equitable recovery from the pandemic and address many of the issues highlighted in this document.

“There are a lot of impacts for lone parents – it is no joke for them. There are no crèche facilities/childcare in this area. Women can’t afford the childcare that does exist.”

(Participant at Consultation Event)

“I am a lone parent, there is a lack of suitable jobs in the area, expensive childcare and I have mental health issues. I would struggle financially if working full-time with childcare costs, rent and regular expenses so it isn’t really a viable option.”

(Participant at Consultation Event)

<https://www.employersforchildcare.org/news-item/11630/>

⁴⁶ Childcare for All Campaign – COVID-19 Statement, May 2020

<https://www.childcareforallni.com/post/childcare-for-all-campaign-covid-19-statement>

“I can’t afford childcare as I don’t get any support with it. I am lucky I have family to look after my kids. Without them I would need to leave work. My salary is not enough to pay the mortgage and childcare without some help.”

(Participant at Consultation Event)

“I have two children under four. The cost of childcare is extortionate. It is our biggest outgoing. Despite help from grandparents we struggle to make these payments.”

(Participant at Consultation Event)

“Childcare is one of the key things for women. It is one of the biggest barriers women face to taking part socially, politically and economically.”

(Participant at Consultation Event)

“I am a single parent and I have two children. I live in a rural area and I used to have a good job in the city. I had to give up the job as I couldn’t get good quality, affordable childcare outside normal office hours to suit the job and the travel times to and from work. I had to leave home early to get to work and was home later because of the travel time involved. I took a job closer to home so that I could drop the children off and pick them up from school. The job suits my home situation but is about a third of the salary I used to have.”

(Participant at Consultation Event)

2.6.1 The Women’s Centres Childcare Fund (WCCF)

It was established in April 2008 and followed on from the Children and Young Peoples Fund (C&YPF) as part of an emergency Departmental response to ensure key childcare services provided in 14 women’s centres operating in disadvantaged communities were kept open pending an Executive decision about their future funding.

WCCF enables Women’s Centres to provide childcare places that are 100% supported for the most disadvantaged children and families. These sessional places (77,000 two-hour sessions) ensure that disadvantaged children have an opportunity to experience a childcare setting, to socialise, interact, play and learn in a supported environment.

Parents who avail of WCCF supported childcare also access a wide range of programmes available in their communities. Many of the services involve support to parents including: parenting skills, back to work programmes, advice services and health programmes. Therefore, WCCF enables the most excluded in disadvantaged communities to access support and engage in community development activities.

For some women (including ethnic minorities and lone parents) the prospect of increased economic participation can depend on the availability of appropriate integrated childcare and access to education/training opportunities at community level. A lack of appropriate integrated childcare and community education acts as a fundamental barrier to the engagement of socioeconomically disadvantaged women in education and training and in employment. This is the kind of integrated provision that is provided by WCCF and which is so vital to these women.

WCCF contributes to reducing child poverty, provides opportunities for parents to better themselves and contributes to their communities thereby tackling disadvantage. As such the WCCF strongly aligns with a number of government strategies including: the Child Poverty Strategy, the Anti-Poverty Strategy and the Gender Equality Strategy. It also aligns with one of the immediate priorities of the Executive: 'Delivering a fair and compassionate society that supports working families and the most vulnerable' as detailed in New Decade, New Approach.⁴⁷

Despite the importance of this childcare offering in tackling disadvantage and promoting equality WCCF continues to be administered on an annual basis and has been subject to Departmental cuts/austerity measures since 2012 which has seen the overall allocation reduced by just over 20% in that period. Any progress on childcare provision in Northern Ireland must recognise the need for low cost/no cost childcare provision for marginalised women in disadvantaged and rural areas. The Consortium also believe that government should recognise the case for properly sustaining childcare provision through the WCCF model on a ring-fenced, protected

⁴⁷ New Decade, New Approach, January 2020

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/856998/2020-01-08_a_new_decade_a_new_approach.pdf

basis given the Fund's positive evaluation⁴⁸ in terms of need, impact and value for money.

"I can only do a course if it has childcare available."

(Participant at Consultation Event)

2.7 Low Paid Work

The region with the highest proportion of jobs paid below the Living Wage in April 2020 was Northern Ireland (25.3%). Women are significantly more affected by low pay than men with more women earning less than the Living Wage in the UK (23.8% compared to 16.6%). Part-time jobs (35.9% or 2.8 million jobs) were much more likely to be paid below the Living Wage in April 2020 than full-time jobs (14%).⁴⁹

Women are significantly more likely to work part-time than men with 79% of part-time employees being women. This has a significant impact on women's income as women often struggle to increase their hours of work due to caring responsibilities. Providing care limits both the number of hours a person can work and the distance they travel for work and this can leave many women locked in poverty especially when jobs are low paid.

Women are also more likely to be employed on a zero-hours contract than men with 3.6% of women employed on these contracts compared to 2.8% of men across the UK.⁵⁰ Single parents are twice as likely to have a zero-hours contract as other family types.⁵¹ This puts them at greater risk of job insecurity particularly as a result of the Covid19 pandemic.

⁴⁸ Evaluation of Regional Support Arrangements for the Voluntary and Community Sector, Final Report, June 2015, DSD and DARD

⁴⁹ Employee jobs paid below the Living Wage: 2020, Living Wage Foundation, November 2020
<https://www.livingwage.org.uk/employee-jobs-paid-below-living-wage-2020>

⁵⁰ People in employment on zero hours contracts, Office for National Statistics, August 2020
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/datasets/emp17peopleinemploymentonzerohourscontracts>

⁵¹ Caring without sharing, Gingerbread, November 2020
<https://www.gingerbread.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Gingerbread-Caringwithoutsharing-v3.pdf>

2.8 Women's Sector contribution to the Skills System

We believe that the women's sector has an important contribution to make to skills accessibility and development in Northern Ireland particularly for the most marginalised and disadvantaged women. Women's centres are often best placed to address skills shortages and provide opportunities for lifelong learning because they operate within local communities and are trusted to do this work. They are able to reach and engage those who are the most marginalised and some of those most affected by the legacy of the Troubles, austerity/welfare reform and the impact of Covid19.

The consultation document acknowledges that there remain significant disparities in outcomes for those living in the most deprived communities. Figures quoted in the consultation show that in some of the most deprived communities up to 80% of school leavers are not achieving a level 2 qualification and over 60% of the working age population have low or no qualifications.

While the consultation makes reference to these issues it does not mention or acknowledge the importance of community-based education and training as a key part in tackling these issues in the most deprived communities. We wish to stress the critical importance of grassroots community organisations, such as Women's Centres, in improving educational outcomes for women living in the most deprived communities.

2.8.1 Community-based education and training

The right to education is an important means to achieve gender equality and in enabling people to achieve their full potential. It is important that education and training is provided over the course of a lifetime and adapts to changing life circumstances. Community-based education and training is vitally important in achieving these goals.

Women's exclusion from participation may be significantly impacted by educational disadvantage which can profoundly restrict their life prospects and wellbeing. Community-based women's education and training has emerged and evolved in

response to this educational disadvantage with the express aim of accommodating unmet learner need. Improved employment prospects for mothers through education and training can translate as improved outcomes for children and the reverse is also true restricting wellbeing for the mother and also the wider family.

Community based education and training is generally delivered based on local community needs and takes account of the complexity of women's lives and the barriers they face such as education, childcare, course fees and the academic environment. It provides a fundamental building block in supporting women to rebuild their confidence and their capability to enter the workplace and is a means to maintaining overall wellbeing.

Effective policy responses to addressing women's disadvantage can rely on the integrated availability at community level of appropriate childcare and learning pathways to potential employment such as that provided by the Women's Centre Childcare Fund (WCCF) – see section 2.6.1.

The Women's Regional Consortium believes that investing in community-based training and education supported by integrated childcare is an important factor in enabling women in low income households to access the training and education they need to make the move into work. This must be an important consideration within the Skills Strategy, helping as it does to deliver on a number of key priorities including gender equality, employment support, lifelong learning, anti-poverty and child poverty work.

2.8.2 Funding for the Women's Sector

Funding for the wider women's sector in Northern Ireland has been continually diminishing over the past ten years. In the last five years alone, the women's sector has faced cuts of 2 – 5% per year from budgets. Women's organisations have seen a shift from core funding to short-term project funding. This limits their ability to respond to emerging issues, retain key staff and develop any long term planning to meet the needs of women.

There is no government funding allocated to the community-based education and training provided by the Women's Centres and broader Consortium. Instead the women's sector has had to rely on funding from the EU and from other charitable organisations/funders to provide this important work.

Historically training and education was acknowledged as key to economic growth. When the first European Union (EU) Programmes were secured for Northern Ireland including the PEACE I Programme, economic growth was a key driver. Within these programmes there was also special provision made for women and children in terms of services, training and development to ensure equality of access and provision to the labour market.

Training and education was seen as an integral pathway to empower women to make their own choices and increase opportunities to improve life chances for them and their children. This was and still is particularly important for women escaping poverty, domestic violence, isolation and poor mental health. Locally based training and education was accessible for women as it addressed the barriers to participation: childcare, travel, timing of classes as well as providing one to one study support, group study support and access to IT. These projects provided a pathway to empowerment and employment for women.

Women only measures were established in both the PEACE 1 and PEACE 2 Programmes and the forerunner to ESF, the Building Sustainable Prosperity Programme (BSP). These measures were delivered through both community and voluntary organisations and statutory agencies and proved to be highly successful in terms of the numbers of women trained, retrained and gaining employment. They also led to the establishment of high quality trusted childcare provision in disadvantaged communities for the first time.

To give some idea of the successes of the women only measures, the following statistics are taken from one regional organisation, TWN who at the time acted as an

Intermediary Funding Body for the delivery of PEACE funding to projects that supported training and development for women:

PEACE 1: 4271 women availed of training; 347 gained employment*

PEACE 2: 5723 women availed of training; 4020 gained accredited qualifications; 1718 gained employment*

PEACE 2: 6542 women availed of training; 3537 gained accredited qualifications; 896 (extension) gained employment*

*this was six months after the closure of the programme and does not account for those who progressed into employment after this period or as direct result of qualifications and training acquired through the programme.

PEACE 3 saw the removal of the women only measure and a change in the main aim of the programme which focussed on the peace and reconciliation outputs as opposed to economic outputs in terms of training and employment.

The work of the community sector must be valued as part of the Skills Strategy. The voluntary and community sector have years of experience of providing quality training and education as well as vital experience of tackling poverty, disadvantage and inequality. They are skilled at reaching the most marginalised within communities and provide trusted spaces and skilled people to do this work.

These education and training services delivered locally by community organisations such as Women's Centres are vital to tackling disadvantage and promoting gender equality. These services which support statutory provision are the most cost effective way of ensuring that local needs are effectively met and ensures the best outcomes for the communities they serve. Much greater value and investment must be placed on these unique and trusted services.

“Education for women has been cut in the last 10 years and reduced away to nearly nothing. Things need to be resourced.”

(Participant at Consultation Event)

“The work of the women’s sector and women’s centres is not valued. We are just fed crumbs of funding. Yet the sector is constantly firefighting doing the work on the ground but the funding always goes elsewhere.”

(Participant at Consultation Event)

“We are working in partnership with the local Council on a project but they have no sense of what is required on the ground to make it work. They just don’t understand how it works at community level.”

(Participant at Consultation Event)

“If they gave us the money we could spend the money in the best possible way for the women. Our focus is on the women and it has to be women driven. It is not for the Women’s Centre or the local Council but for the women. There needs to be a focus on the women not the organisations.”

(Participant at Consultation Event)

“The community needs to have a bigger role in this – there’s trust at community level.”

(Participant at Consultation Event)

“It needs people working at grass roots level. There needs to be a bottom-up approach so that everyone’s voices will be heard.”

(Participant at Consultation Event)

2.9 Rural Needs

In June 2017 the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 was introduced and placed a statutory duty on public authorities to have due regard to rural needs when developing, adopting, implementing or revising policies, strategies and plans, and when designing and delivering public services. The Act was introduced to ensure that consideration of the needs of people in rural areas becomes more firmly embedded within public authorities in Northern Ireland.

The Women’s Regional Consortium would have liked to have seen a Rural Needs Assessment carried out given the fact that Northern Ireland has a significant rural population with 36% of the population living in rural areas.⁵² We also note with

⁵² Mid-Year Population Estimates – Urban/Rural Change, NISRA
<https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/publications/mid-year-estimates-population-change>

disappointment that the consultation document makes very little reference to the specific needs of those living in rural areas throughout the document. Ignoring the needs of those living in rural areas and the issues they experience in accessing education and training can only be to the detriment of any resulting Skills Strategy and we urge the Department to remedy this urgently.

Research by NIRWN shows that rural women are under increasing pressure from the economic climate leaving them experiencing more poverty and social isolation than ever before.⁵³ Rural women are particularly vulnerable to access poverty meaning that they are unable to address their financial poverty if they lack access to affordable childcare and transport to allow them to access better paid, better quality jobs.

There is a focus on digital skills within the consultation. However, there is a need to consider the availability of the proper digital infrastructure to enable many of the proposals within the consultation. Without decent digital infrastructure allowing widespread access to reliable broadband then many of these proposals cannot be advanced. This is a particular issue in rural areas where broadband speeds and superfast broadband availability are lower. While services that deliver superfast speeds are available to 89% of residential premises across Northern Ireland, these services are available to just 66% of premises in rural areas.⁵⁴ Before improvements in basic digital literacy can be made in order to help address deepening social and economic inequalities there is a need to address digital accessibility particularly in rural areas of Northern Ireland.

Networking, collaboration and genuine partnership within and between organisations and different sectors are vital to support rural communities.⁵⁵ Multi-agency approaches such as Tackling Rural Poverty & Social Isolation (TRIPSI) have been

⁵³ Rural Women's Manifesto, NIRWN, September 2015

<https://www.nirwn.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/NIRWN-Rural-Womens-Manifesto.pdf>

⁵⁴ Connected Nations 2020, Northern Ireland report, Ofcom, December 2020

https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0022/209443/connected-nations-2020-ni.pdf

⁵⁵ Ibid

very effective in the past and are an excellent example of collaborative working between government departments, statutory agencies, local government and rural communities. This must be the approach taken by the Department in relation to the development and implementation of a Skills Strategy which effectively encompasses the needs and experiences of rural people.

2.10 Apprenticeships

Apprenticeships provide opportunities to grow talent and develop a skilled and qualified workforce and are therefore an important policy intervention. However, an ARK Working Paper on Apprenticeships in Northern Ireland⁵⁶ raises a number of concerning issues around the apprenticeship programmes and gender equality. As the paper states apprenticeships “*have formed the mainstay of UK government policy for vocational education and training*” and it is therefore an important consideration within the Skills Strategy.

ARK research⁵⁷ found that public expenditure on apprenticeships in Northern Ireland “*overwhelmingly benefits participants who are men*” and “*may actually serve to consolidate and reinforce gendered inequalities*”. The research found that:

- Men represent the majority of participants on ApprenticeshipsNI programmes with their representation increasing year on year while the number of women participants has fallen.
- Men dominate the Higher-Level Apprenticeships (HLAs) with the number of men participants almost double that of women. HLAs also privilege traditionally male sectors and are under-responsive to an identified skills shortage in the social care sector.
- ApprenticeshipsNI and HLAs exhibit significant occupational segregation perpetuating harmful stereotypes which lock women into economic and labour market disadvantage over the course of their lifetime.

⁵⁶ Gender Budgeting: Working Paper 2, Case Study: Apprenticeships in Northern Ireland, ARK Working Paper, February 2021

[Gender Budgeting-2.pdf \(ark.ac.uk\)](#)

⁵⁷ Ibid

- The Northern Ireland Skills Barometer (used as the primary evidence base to develop this draft strategy) may fail to afford requisite value to the economic value of social care. Women are more likely than men to provide care whether paid or unpaid and be in receipt of care in old age.
- Economic analysis of the apprenticeship data reveals that the estimated Gross Value Added (GVA) per participant for men is £78,400 while the GVA for women is estimated to be less than half at £35,900.

We have already highlighted the dangers of gender-neutral policy making in Section 2.1 of this document. The ARK research paper provides apprenticeship policy as an example of this type of policy making stating *“whilst ostensibly neutral, apprenticeship policy and expenditure in NI are, in fact, highly gendered in operation and perpetuate gender norms which inhibit women’s engagement with the labour market in Northern Ireland.”*⁵⁸

These are serious and concerning issues for the Department to consider in developing a Skills Strategy which will have benefits for *“all our people”*. If the Skills Strategy is to achieve its dual purposes of addressing inequality and driving economic growth then taking account of the policy recommendations made by the ARK research paper must be a priority.

In discussions with local women a number of other issues were raised on the subject of apprenticeships. Women felt that apprenticeships and employability programmes must not solely be for younger people but should be open to of all ages. This is particularly the case for women who may have been looking after children/families and may wish to return to work later in their lives but may need support and access to training/education in order to do so.

We also wish to highlight the urgent need for apprenticeships in the community sector not just in traditional areas which are often more likely to be available to men. Women in focus groups discussions talked about the crisis within the community

⁵⁸ Ibid

sector in terms of getting new people to take on community development, good relations and childcare roles. One woman who worked in a community development role talked about having to defer her pension for two years as there was no one to fill her role. These are critical roles within local communities yet funding for these roles is often short-term. This means that these jobs are not attractive and do not provide job security or the ability for these workers to be financially secure.

Low pay is also an issue for apprenticeships and affects everyone however it can present an additional barrier for single parents, the majority of whom are women. The current level of pay is often too low keeping many people out of these schemes as they simply do not provide a decent wage.

“It is really hard to get women into community development work. There is no future in it with the short term funding. If they are looking to get a mortgage and working in community work they won’t get one. It has to be more attractive but it is not at the minute with only one year’s funding for these posts.”

(Participant at Consultation Event)

“All the funding for apprenticeships is for young people. There are a lot of older women with a passion for peacebuilding who have built up trust and relationships with people who have lived through the Troubles who would benefit from an apprenticeship. Many of them are volunteering at this work but haven’t had the opportunity for employment in the community.”

(Participant at Consultation Event)

“Peace building work is at a crucial stage right now with grassroots communities. If you look at the Women’s Centres many of the staff are older women. They are coming to the end of their working life but there are few younger women to take over. There is not the same drive for grassroots community work yet it is crucial for peacebuilding.”

(Participant at Consultation Event)

2.11 Investment in a Caring Economy and Care Skills

The Commission on a Gender-Equal Economy have proposed the creation of a 'Caring Economy'⁵⁹ based on gender equality, wellbeing and sustainability as a way to build back better after the Covid19 pandemic. A Caring Economy would prioritise care for each other and for the environment in which we live. Women's Budget Group research⁶⁰ found that a 2% GDP investment in care (for example, social care, childcare, parental leave and care leave) creates double the number of jobs for women and almost as many for men than the same investment in construction. Investment in free, universal childcare especially returns almost all of its initial investment.

Eurostat data suggests that the care industry is 30% less polluting (in terms of Greenhouse Gas emissions) than the construction industry and that the education industry is 62% less polluting than the construction industry.⁶¹ This makes investment in this type of social infrastructure economically, environmentally and equality sound. We suggest that investment in a Caring Economy including care skills would help address the identified skills shortage in the social care sector, promote gender equality and have positive impacts on our economic, societal and environmental wellbeing.

⁵⁹ Creating a Caring Economy: A Call to Action, Commission on a Gender-Equal Economy, Women's Budget Group, October 2020

<https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/WBG-Report-v10.pdf>

⁶⁰ Investing in the Care Economy: A gender analysis of employment stimulus in seven OECD countries, International Trade Union Confederation, March 2016

[Investing in the Care Economy - International Trade Union Confederation \(ituc-csi.org\)](https://ituc-csi.org/investing-in-the-care-economy)

⁶¹ WBG calculations from Eurostat data

<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data/database>

3.0 Consultation Questions

We have not attempted to answer all the questions asked in the consultation exercise. Instead we have provided answers below to the questions where we believe we have the necessary information, knowledge and evidence to support our answers.

Chapter 2: Strategic Context

1. Are you content with the overarching strategic direction set out in the section The Programme for Government, our Economic Vision (a 10x Economy) and the Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland (see page 28):

“the Skills Strategy must be directly aligned to the PfG aim of improving wellbeing for all by supporting efforts to tackle inequalities, providing low skilled, low paid, or unemployed individuals with the opportunities they need to work in ‘better jobs’, whilst concurrently focusing on provision of the skills and qualifications needed to drive economic growth and competitiveness in the sectors where Northern Ireland has real global potential.”

We agree that the Skills Strategy must be aligned to the PfG aim of improving wellbeing **for all by supporting efforts to tackle inequalities**. We have already outlined in **Section 2.1** the dangers of gender neutrality and advocate strongly for the need for gender budgeting to ensure that existing inequalities are effectively addressed so that the actions flowing from this Strategy do not perpetuate these even further.

We want to ensure that those who are the most marginalised and who already experience inequality are effectively supported by this Strategy. This goes beyond a vision and must translate into effective actions to address the skills issues for these groups.

We suggest the need for a much stronger focus on the structural inequalities that exist within the labour market and crucially how many of these disproportionately impact on women. While the consultation document rightly mentions childcare as one the significant barriers to participation in adult learning it does not acknowledge

that this is mainly a barrier for women. We believe that unless this is explicitly addressed in the Skills Strategy no or very little progress will be made in furthering the vision of the Strategy.

As we have outlined in **Section 2.6** the availability of accessible, affordable childcare is a key consideration for women's participation in the economy and for women's access to education and training. The Women's Regional Consortium believes that childcare must be given a stronger focus within the Skills Strategy in order to help with many of the issues outlined in the consultation including economic growth, addressing skills imbalances, economic inactivity levels (see **Section 2.5**) and lifelong learning.

There is an urgent need to address childcare cost and availability issues as well as a lack of government funded provision in Northern Ireland. This is vitally important to the success of the Skills Strategy and must therefore be considered a key policy enabler for this Strategy – see Question 11.

Northern Ireland is the only UK jurisdiction without a Childcare Strategy. The Women's Regional Consortium would like to see a funded Childcare Strategy for Northern Ireland as a priority in line with commitments made in New Decade, New Approach. We suggest that the Skills Strategy is intrinsically linked to the Childcare Strategy and without cross-departmental commitments to addressing the childcare infrastructure in Northern Ireland the Skills Strategy will fail to deliver.

The Covid19 pandemic has served to highlight just how critical childcare is to the running of the economy. It has helped to shine a light on the fact that childcare must be treated as part of Northern Ireland's key economic infrastructure. As we emerge from the pandemic it will be crucial to make investment in childcare a key priority.

In addition to the need for childcare to be treated as part of Northern Ireland's key economic infrastructure we believe the care sector more generally should also form part of this essential infrastructure. The Covid19 pandemic also made clear the

urgent need for investment in the care sector and the value of care work which is vital to the operation of our economy. We wish to draw the Department's attention to the Commission on a Gender-Equal Economy proposals for a Caring Economy briefly outlined in **Section 2.11**.

The focus of the consultation document and the strategic direction of the Skills Strategy seems to be firmly based on investments in STEM and in enhancing digital skills. While these are clearly important areas the document does not mention other important sectors such as the care sector. The Women's Regional Consortium agrees with the Commission on a Gender-Equal Economy proposals for a Caring Economy⁶² and wish to see the Northern Ireland economy develop as a caring, green economy.

As the Commission states a Caring Economy would prioritise care for each other and for the environment in which we live. *"A caring economy simultaneously ensures achievement of gender equality, sustainability and wellbeing. While these three objectives can, to some extent, be achieved separately, a caring economy allows them to be achieved together. For example, investment in paid care services improves wellbeing through ensuring that people's care needs are met; it improves gender equality because it raises the overall employment rate and reduces the gender employment gap (which are particularly crucial as we seek to counter the looming jobs crisis), and it is sustainable because care jobs are green."*

Investing in the care sector provides a way for the Department to invest in green jobs as care jobs are green – see **Section 2.11** and also to tackle gender inequality at the same time as helping to address the crisis in the care sector with increasing demands due to an ageing population.

⁶² Creating a Caring Economy: A Call to Action, Commission on a Gender-Equal Economy, Women's Budget Group, October 2020
<https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/WBG-Report-v10.pdf>

The Department must also acknowledge the impact of the Covid19 pandemic on women and on young people – see **Section 2.3**. The crisis has had a greater impact on women as they are more likely to be in low-paid, part-time and insecure work and more likely to be providing care as well as more likely to be employed in the sectors impacted by the crisis. Young people, particularly young women, have been particularly badly hit by the lockdown measures as a result of the pandemic. These must be key areas of focus for the Skills Strategy and targeted support must be provided. The Strategy must recognise the differential impacts of the pandemic or it will simply help to ensure that women will continue to bear the brunt of the economic fallout as they did for the previous recession – see **Section 2.2**.

2. Do you agree with the need to rationalise the skills landscape by limiting the number of strategies governing separate parts of the skills system, instead focusing on a single, overarching, Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland (see page 40-41)?

We do not feel that we have sufficient knowledge across these Strategies to make informed comment on this. However, we would stress the great need for cross-departmental and cross-cutting actions that address all the issues that people face in terms of accessing skills and participation in the labour market. We have already referenced the importance of childcare and care more broadly and we believe it is imperative that Strategies do not operate in isolation from each other. There are important linkages to be made in the development, implementation and monitoring of policy. We often see Government departments take a silo approach to issues with little cross-departmental working. We stress the need for Strategies and departments to work together in order to effect real change in these areas.

3. Have you any other comments on the Strategic Context Chapter?

We have no further comments to make on the Strategic Context Chapter.

However, we wish to add that the consultation document does not ask any specific questions about Chapter 3: Northern Ireland's Current Skills Landscape.

We would like to draw the Department's attention to our comments in **Section 2.5** which highlight the need for further analysis of the economic inactivity figures to draw out the gendered nature of this issue. There are many women who could access the labour market if adequate childcare provisions and other social supports were available.

We also disagree with the term "economic inactivity" relegating as it does those who manage home and family commitments to have no economic value. The Covid19 pandemic shone a light on the essential nature of this care work and the need for it to be valued as part of our economic systems. It is important to recognise the economic value of the unpaid care work, often provided by women, and challenge terms such as "economic inactivity" which perpetuates the undervaluing of this work.

Chapter 4: Strategic Goals and Policy Objectives

4. Acknowledging the need for the development of 'SMART' targets, do you agree that the skills supply gap identified under the Skills Barometer's high growth scenario should be placed at the centre of the proposed Strategy (see page 43)?

We have concerns about the use of the Skills Barometer as a means of informing the strategic skills landscape. The consultation refers to the Skills Barometer a number of times and states *"the Skills Barometer for Northern Ireland is adopted as a primary evidence source, guiding our proposed interventions."* However, research by the University of Ulster⁶³ previously referred to in **Section 2.10** highlights some problems with the Skills Barometer: *"the barometer has the potential to influence skills assessments that privilege those occupations and skills allied to manufacturing and production, where product can be seen and counted. As a direct consequence of its failure to conceptualise economic value beyond productivity measures, the skills barometer thus remains under responsive to an impending skills crisis in the social care sector."*

⁶³ Gender Budgeting: Working Paper 2, Case Study: Apprenticeships in Northern Ireland, ARK Working Paper, February 2021
[Gender_Budgeting-2.pdf \(ark.ac.uk\)](https://ark.ac.uk/Gender_Budgeting-2.pdf)

We are therefore concerned that the use of the Skills Barometer could further exacerbate existing gender inequalities favouring as research suggests skills more traditionally associated with males. It appears to largely ignore the very real and growing need for investing in the social care sector which is likely to see increasing demands due to an ageing population. Upskilling is also netted out of the Skills Barometer's forecast so that it does not look at the benefits of increasing the skills of those already in the workforce which contradicts one of the policy objectives of the Skills Strategy to create a culture of lifelong learning.

5. Are you content that the proposals contained in pages 43 - 56 provide an ambitious and comprehensive approach to 'Addressing Skills Imbalance, Driving Economic Growth'?

Once again the consultation document refers to economic inactivity but does not address the gendered nature of economic inactivity. We refer the Department to our comments in **Section 2.5** and to our answer to Question 3. Without addressing the gendered nature of economic inactivity the proposals will not provide a comprehensive approach to addressing the skills imbalance and driving economic growth.

We are disappointed to note that there is no reference to the role or importance of the community and voluntary sector within these proposals and refer the Department to our comments in **Section 2.8**. The community and voluntary sector, including the network of Women's Centres, in Northern Ireland provide important access to training and education for some of the most marginalised and hard to reach including many with no or low levels of qualifications. This is vitally important work providing access to training and education, often supported by childcare, allowing those who face multiple barriers to increasing their skills to access training and education within trusted, local spaces.

Barriers to education such as a lack of flexible, affordable and accessible childcare, poverty, travel and transport, health and wellbeing and digital exclusion must be addressed. Education and training provision through the network of local Women's

Centres effectively addresses these barriers and allows women to access the opportunities which are available.

We wish to remind the Department of the value of this work. The role and importance of community based education must be resourced and recognised particularly for how it seeks to address the barriers to participation and offer ongoing, holistic support. Access to training and education opportunities, supported by access to childcare, allows many women to address low skills and provide opportunities for employment helping them to alleviate poverty and deprivation. The work of Women's Centres in this regard should be reflected in the Skills Strategy, helping as it does, to increase skills levels, address gender inequality, increase economic participation and target areas of social deprivation.

It is a well-known fact that women are under-represented in STEM and we welcome the fact that the consultation plans to recognise this within the Skills Strategy and subsequent skills actions plans (Proposed Commitment 9).

Tackling gender segregation in STEM careers is particularly important given the urgent need to address the climate crisis. STEM jobs are crucial to the 'green economy' and the green economy has the potential to provide better, more decent jobs. However, there are concerns that women may not have the same access to these jobs as they are mostly located in male-dominated sectors and because women often lack the necessary training and experience to apply for them. In greening the economy there is a need to acknowledge existing gender inequalities to ensure that women and men can benefit equally from the opportunities provided by the green economy.

“Sometimes it is a confidence issue and sometimes men are keeping women away. There should be educational programmes for women and girls encouraged to be equal and to go for STEM subjects. Education is a big issue.”

(Participant at Consultation Event)

While we welcome the fact that the consultation outlines commitments to address the under-representation of women in STEM there are a number of further considerations linked to this which the consultation does not address. As previously outlined in **Section 2.10** there are clear gender equality issues within the current apprenticeships programmes in Northern Ireland. The proportion of apprenticeship options available in traditionally better paid career areas are those that favour male stereotyped careers and which currently do not attract female participation. There is clearly a need to address the apprenticeship options available to and marketed at young women. At the same time apprenticeships which are regarded as traditionally female such as care and beauty need to be valued.

We believe that the Skills Strategy must look into why STEM and the skills associated with STEM careers are considered better than other areas. There is a growing need to revalue careers in other sectors which traditionally attract lower rates of pay, are more precarious and are generally undervalued within the economy. We particularly refer to the care (including childcare) and hospitality sectors.

The pandemic has helped to shine a light on the essential nature of care and the value of key services such as childcare. This must not be forgotten as we take steps to recover from the pandemic and must form part of any new Skills Strategy. There is a real, and growing, need to revalue careers in these essential services which for many years have been taken for granted and therefore undervalued and overlooked for investment.

The Skills Strategy must therefore not focus solely on getting more women into traditional careers for men but work to equalise the existing gender imbalances within the labour market to ensure that careers in sectors like care are valued and invested in, attractive to new entrants and well paid. In order to be truly effective and properly tackle inequality the Skills Strategy must include plans to create career pathways and pay progression for lower paid and traditionally undervalued sectors such as care work.

6. Are there any additional proposals you believe should be considered under the ‘Addressing Skills Imbalances, Driving Economic Growth’ objective?

Once again we wish to point the Department to the proposals for a Caring Economy put forward by the Commission on a Caring Economy⁶⁴ as outlined in **Section 2.11**. As stated in these proposals “*a caring economy simultaneously ensures achievement of gender equality, sustainability and wellbeing.*” Investing in care is therefore a way to achieve many of the objectives set out in the consultation for a Skills Strategy.

The biggest population challenge many governments face is how to support an increasingly ageing population. The provision of care will be of increasing importance and must be invested in so that people will be able to access the care they need and those who work in the care sector have decent careers that are valued.

Care work is mainly provided by women. 79% of the health and social care workforce is female⁶⁵ and figures for the domiciliary care workforce show that it is 98% female.⁶⁶ While demand for care is growing the care workforce is chronically undervalued and has suffered from long-term under investment. Investing in care, care skills and care as a profession is a sound investment for many reasons. It helps to address the crisis in care, helps promote gender equality as more women are employed in care work and care jobs are green jobs. In addition it makes good economic sense as Women’s Budget Group research⁶⁷ found that a 2% GDP investment in care creates double the number of jobs for women and almost as many for men than the same investment in construction.

⁶⁴ Creating a Caring Economy: A Call to Action, Commission on a Gender-Equal Economy, Women’s Budget Group, October 2020

<https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/WBG-Report-v10.pdf>

⁶⁵ [NI Health and Social Care Workforce Census - March 2019 | Department of Health \(health-ni.gov.uk\)](https://www.health-ni.gov.uk)

⁶⁶ [Workforce Plan Domiciliary Care 2016 - 2021.pdf \(qub.ac.uk\)](https://www.qub.ac.uk)

⁶⁷ Investing in the Care Economy: A gender analysis of employment stimulus in seven OECD countries, International Trade Union Confederation, March 2016
[Investing in the Care Economy - International Trade Union Confederation \(ituc-csi.org\)](https://www.ituc-csi.org)

As members of the Childcare for All Coalition we want to see the value of childcare work recognised with decent pay, terms and conditions and opportunities for career progression. Childcare is a vital part of our economic infrastructure and the skills and talent required to work in the childcare sector must command the necessary investment as a critical enabler to the functioning of a successful economy. It is essential that childcare is properly and practically supported, both now and into the future. The need for a funded Childcare Strategy for Northern Ireland has never been more evident and the Skills Strategy must include linkages to this Strategy.

7. Are you content that the proposals contained in pages 57 - 75 provide an ambitious and comprehensive approach to ‘Creating a Culture of Lifelong Learning’?

We reiterate our previous comments on the lack of acknowledgement of the work of the community and voluntary sector who do so much important work in the area of lifelong learning. We refer the Department to our previous answer to Question 5 and to **Section 2.8**.

This section of the consultation talks about the “*need to address social deprivation*” and that is what the holistic work provided by Women’s Centres does. We stress that without the involvement, acknowledgement and investment in the education and training provided through the community and voluntary sector those who are the most marginalised will be excluded from lifelong learning. The training and education provided through the community and voluntary sector addresses the significant barriers to participation in adult learning including childcare, cost and poverty.

We are pleased to see Proposed Commitment 16 – “*We will develop proposals for the expansion of childcare support to enable all individuals with parental responsibilities to participate in lifelong learning.*” As has already been stated numerous times throughout our response childcare is vital to the operation of the economy and vital to increasing women’s participation in the economy and in education and training. Please refer to our comments about childcare in our answer

to Question 1 and in **Section 2.6** and in particular the need for a funded Childcare Strategy for Northern Ireland which should link to the Skills Strategy.

8. Are there any additional proposals you believe should be considered under the ‘Creating a Culture of Lifelong Learning’ objective?

We have previously highlighted the lack of acknowledgement of the work of the community and voluntary sector in relation to skills and the ability of the sector to reach out to those who are the most marginalised. We have also raised the difficulties faced by the sector in terms of securing funding for this work – see **Section 2.8**. We wish to agree with the following statements from the Forum for Adult Learning Northern Ireland (FALNI) and recommend the Department takes this into consideration in developing the final Skills Strategy:

“We would contend that best practice in engaging the ‘hard to reach’ has already been developed time and again through short-term projects, many based in VCSE organisations, and often with funding from non-governmental sources. However, the fruits of this investment are too often lost as few groups are able to mainstream the developments. Furthermore, there is no central resource to bank this learning and resources so that others might benefit.”⁶⁸

“....on removing barriers for learners, we suggest that consideration needs to be given to mechanisms that would allow easier access by those currently most removed from learning and those with limited digital skills or resources. Partnership with community organisations co-designing such mechanisms would be extremely effective.”

“Support for increasing participation in adult learning and creating a culture of lifelong learning must be long-term: effecting cultural change takes years of sustained effort from a broad range of stakeholders.”

⁶⁸ [Responding to the Skills Strategy Consultation – Forum for Adult Learning Northern Ireland \(falni.org\)](https://falni.org)

We agree with our colleagues in the NIWBG that Proposed Commitment 21 should include small businesses – *“We will introduce a business pledge to recognise and promote employers who actively engage with principles of the work quality indicators. Businesses with 50+ employees must subscribe and actively promote the principles of the ‘Better Jobs Pledge’ prior to engagement with publicly funded support programmes.”* Northern Ireland is a small business economy. Small businesses account for 99.9% of all businesses in Northern Ireland and employ more people than all the larger businesses and the entire public sector combined.⁶⁹ Therefore, in order to make any significant change in this area small businesses must be included in the subscription to the ‘Better Jobs Pledge.’

9. Under ‘Enhancing Digital Skills, Creating Our Digital Spine’ we include only one recommendation, that an expert panel is appointed to develop a specific Digital Skills Action Plan for Northern Ireland (see pages 76 - 81). Do you agree with this approach?

While we acknowledge that digital skills are important and are a necessary skill in the modern economy but we do not agree that they should be made the principal focus of the Skills Strategy. As previously stated there are other sectors of the economy which could be seen as equally important and which also require investment due to growing demand, for example, the care sector.

The consultation states that it is *“incumbent upon Government to empower individuals to take the social, and labour market opportunities that digital skills afford”* but it is also incumbent upon Government to provide for the care needs (including the skills necessary to provide this care) for an increasingly ageing population. We also strongly believe that it is incumbent on Government to provide the necessary childcare infrastructure to ensure that those with children are able to take the social, and labour market opportunities that access to flexible, affordable childcare can afford. We refer the Department to our comments about the need for a Caring Economy under **Section 2.11** and our comments on Childcare in **Section 2.6**.

⁶⁹ <https://www.fsb.org.uk/standing-up-for-you/national-offices/northern-ireland>

We fail to see why digital skills are prioritised to the exclusion of other areas which the pandemic has also highlighted are critical to the operation of the economy such as care and childcare. We stress that investment in care skills is every bit as critical as investment in digital skills. There is, and will continue to be, a growing demand for care and for the skills necessary to provide care. Yet these sectors have been chronically under-valued and have suffered from systemic under investment. It is vital to ensure that these skills are invested in and valued now and into the future and we would urge the Department to ensure that this is reflected in the final Skills Strategy.

We also caution about the extent to which the consultation focuses on digital skills in the context of gender equality. The consultation talks about enhancing digital skills for everyone with a focus on digital skills in primary schools and that is positive. However, there is a danger that a focus on digital skills in secondary education, third level education and in adult education could mean that the beneficiaries tend to be heavily focused on males rather than females. Despite being equal users of technology, women do not participate equally in its development and the IT and technology industries are male-centric and women remain severely underrepresented. There will be a need to ensure that any investment in digital skills does not exacerbate existing gender inequalities and result in increased skills, investment and participation for men at the expense of women.

We refer the Department to our comments in **Section 2.9** about the need for a proper digital infrastructure particularly in rural areas in order to be able to improve basic digital literacy. This must be reflected within Digital Skills Action Plans.

Any expert panel to consider this area must be truly representative across all the issues which have an impact on digital skills and include representation from equality groups, Trade Unions, rural groups, etc.

Chapter 5: Policy Enablers

11. The first two ‘policy enablers’: ‘Enhancing Policy Cohesion’ and ‘Building Stronger Relationships’ focus on a refreshed approach to the governance of the skills system (pages 84 - 90). Do you agree that these structures are a useful and appropriate approach to improving the development and implementation of skills policy in Northern Ireland?

This section of the consultation refers to Gender Diversity (page 88) and we welcome Proposed Commitment 31 - *The Northern Ireland Skills Council should appoint a sub-committee to consider how gender, and other diversity issues, can be better addressed across education, skills and employment policies and practices.*

There is a need to ensure that women are represented both on the Skills Council and in any sub-committees so that women’s voices, views and experiences can be heard and taken into account in policy formation at the highest levels. This representation must be inter-sectional reflecting the diverse needs of women and the impact of inter-sectional discrimination and disadvantage on the basis of multiple and intersecting identities. Women who represent those who are the most marginalised in our society must also be represented on these groups so that their unique insights and experience can be brought to bear on how effective policy can be developed to engage and increase skills among these groups. Membership of these structures must be representative and should include equality organisations, Trade Unions as well as community and voluntary sector representatives.

We also strongly suggest the need for a Childcare policy enabler to be added to the Skills Strategy. The need for flexible, accessible and affordable childcare supported by a funded Childcare Strategy for Northern Ireland has been stated time and time again throughout our response. We believe the need for childcare to be seen as an essential part of our economic infrastructure has never been clearer. Childcare is essential to women’s participation in the economy and in accessing training and education and this must be strongly reflected in the Skills Strategy. We refer to our comments in **Section 2.6**.

12. The third policy enabler focuses on ‘Investment in the Skills System’. The programme of change proposed in this consultation document is likely to require substantial investment. Do you agree that this should be prioritised?

The consultation notes that investment in the skills system has fallen and has been impacted by the austerity agenda. We suggest that this has been detrimental to the skills landscape as it has been to individuals, particularly women, as we have outlined in **Section 2.2**.

In order to effect real change there must be increased investment in skills. This should be focused investment to ensure that funding is allocated where it is needed most and where it can make a real difference in terms of tackling inequalities, meeting skills needs, creating a culture of lifelong learning and ensuring that no one is left behind. Without this investment there will continue to be unmet need, sectors will continue to be undervalued and suffer from under investment leading to persistent inequalities. Cuts to investment in skills will ensure that the most marginalised are left behind, existing inequalities will continue to worsen and Northern Ireland’s economy will suffer as a result. There is a need to take a long-term approach making the necessary investments in skills now to ensure greater participation, economic prosperity, wellbeing and fairness for all our citizens now and into the future. We therefore believe agree that substantial investment in the Skills System should be prioritised.