



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

## **Response to: Our Plan: Doing What Matters Most Draft Programme for Government 2024-2027**

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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.<sup>1</sup> The seven groups are as follows:

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

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

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**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 Northern Ireland Executive's Draft Programme for Government 2024-2027. 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 listen to the voices of the people who live here and for whom issues such as the Programme for Government have such importance. We have included throughout this response some of what local women have said in relation to the issues which are important to them and which detail their lived experience.

**1.5** We very much welcome the fact that we have a draft Programme for Government which is the result of a functioning Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive. However, we believe that this draft lacks the specific detail, actions and measurable outcomes to determine whether it will actually 'do what matters most'. It misses some critical priority areas which must also be addressed in order to make progress on some of the identified priority areas. It is a missed opportunity to address some of the key issues having an impact on our people, our planet, our prosperity and our peace in a meaningful way.

**1.6** We wish to endorse the responses made by the Women’s Policy Group (WPG), the Cliff Edge Coalition, the Northern Ireland Women’s Budget Group (NIWBG) and the Equality Coalition all of which the Women’s Regional Consortium is represented on. We also endorse the responses made by Carers NI, Women’s Platform and Housing Rights. We hope to see the feedback, suggestions and recommendations from these responses as well as our own reflected in the final Programme for Government.

## **2. Structure and Format of the Consultation**

### *Format of the Questions*

We have concerns about the format of the consultation questions. The consultation asks a series of questions with a range of agree/disagree options followed by a space to provide any other comments. As WRDA guidance on public consultations<sup>2</sup> states: “*the binary ‘agree/disagree’ nature of many questions hides the complexity of how people feel about different issues.*” The answers to these ‘agree/disagree’ questions needs careful analysis alongside the accompanying text. Careful consideration must be given to the fact that respondents may select one of these options but provide further clarification in the text. They may have several qualifications to their answer and if these are not addressed their answer may be different. The results from the ‘agree/disagree’ questions **must not** be considered in isolation or presented in such a way that they paint a misleading picture of responses. **The Women’s Regional Consortium will therefore not engage with the agree/disagree options outlined in the consultation.**

### *Timescale to Respond*

The final date for responses to this important consultation is 4<sup>th</sup> November 2024. This leaves just eight weeks to respond to what is a hugely important consultation with impacts across our population. This goes against all existing good practice on

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<sup>2</sup> Women at the Heart of Public Consultation, A guide for Public Authorities and Women’s Organisations, WRDA, November 2017  
[https://wrda.net/wpcontent/uploads/2018/10/WRDA\\_WomenAtTheHeartOfPublicConsultation.pdf](https://wrda.net/wpcontent/uploads/2018/10/WRDA_WomenAtTheHeartOfPublicConsultation.pdf)

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consultations: “When government consults it must build a realistic timeframe for the consultation, allowing plenty of time for each stage of the process.”<sup>3</sup>

It undermines the ability of consultees to have influence over the content of the Programme for Government and the ability of the Executive Office to comply with its statutory equality obligation to take into account the views expressed by consultees under Schedule 9 paragraph 9(2) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. We suggest that given the nature and importance of this consultation the timeframe to respond should have been at least twelve weeks to enable genuine and meaningful consultation.

We refer the Department to the guidance on consulting with women produced by Women’s Regional Consortium members WRDA.<sup>4</sup> This guidance contains five top tips based on the many years of experience that women’s groups have in promoting women’s participation in public policy making. These include the need to work together with the women’s community and voluntary sector, making time for accessible face to face engagement, keeping language accessible and relevant, listening to the stories from women and making women visible in the product as well as the process.

### *Impact on the Community & Voluntary Sector*

The draft Programme for Government is a substantial document and it needs time to read, analyse and formulate a response. For those who feel the furthest from politics, Government and the policy language used in these documents it takes even more time to digest. As the Women’s Regional Consortium we want to ensure that women from the most disadvantaged and rural areas of Northern Ireland are given the chance to share their valuable experiences and opinions to help influence and shape the actions of Government.

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<sup>3</sup> nidirect <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/public-consultations>

<sup>4</sup> Women at the Heart of Public Consultation, A guide for Public Authorities and Women’s Organisations, WRDA, November 2017

[https://wrda.net/wpcontent/uploads/2018/10/WRDA\\_WomenAtTheHeartOfPublicConsultation.pdf](https://wrda.net/wpcontent/uploads/2018/10/WRDA_WomenAtTheHeartOfPublicConsultation.pdf)

A shorter consultation timeframe severely limits the opportunities to organise engagement with local groups to explain the contents of the draft Programme for Government, facilitate discussion and meaningfully collect the views of those impacted by its contents. It means that organisations like ourselves have insufficient time to properly consult with affected women so that their views/experiences which are so critical to this process remain outside the process. They should be given the time and space to discuss these issues in a format that they can understand and in ways where they feel comfortable and empowered to contribute.

This consultation was published alongside a number of other Government consultations which also require detailed responses by the Community and Voluntary sector. This has put huge pressure on an already overstretched and under-resourced sector who are facing significant challenges due to funding cuts, insecure contracts and increased demand for our services.

### *Actions*

We think that the plan is very vague and it is very difficult to find the actions that the Executive and Departments are going to take in order to achieve the immediate priorities detailed in the consultation. There are lots of phrases like “*we will seek to address, we will seek to achieve, we will act to help, we will introduce fresh thinking and new ideas, we will deliver upgrades, etc ....*” but there are few concrete, measurable actions in the plan. This makes it really difficult to figure out the exact plan of action for Government and how we can hold them to account for the success or failure to achieve it.

It should be clear, in any plan, what the actions are, who will carry them out, in what timeframe and with what budget. We would like to see clearly laid out actions throughout the plan with a summary table at the end of the plan for easy reference. This would help to ensure clarity on what actions Government are going to take, who is tasked with doing them, the date by which the actions will be completed and the budget allocation for each.

It is difficult to understand how a Programme for Government can be completed without this detail. Indeed, there is no circumstance in which any community or voluntary sector organisation who submitted a plan or a funding application or an outline of a programme of work with this lack of detail would have it accepted by Government.

*“If I submitted something like this to Government as a plan or for funding with no timeline, targets or outcomes I know what would happen to it, it would go in the bin!”*

Manager, Shankill Shared Women’s Centre

### *Context for the Plan*

We do not believe that the draft Programme for Government is set well enough in the current context acknowledging the hugely difficult circumstances that have arisen as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and the ongoing Cost-of-Living Crisis. While it makes passing mention to the pandemic, a global ‘permacrisis’ and that the Cost-of-Living Crisis has made people’s lives harder it does not give these massively significant events which have long-term consequences sufficient focus. The damaging impacts of the pandemic and the Cost-of-Living Crisis will be felt by our population for many years and there is a need to outline these impacts and provide some detailed actions on how they will be addressed. This must include an analysis of what groups have been most affected by these crises and seek to tailor actions to address those who have been most impacted. We point The Executive Office to the following documents which highlight the gendered impacts of both the pandemic and the Cost-of-Living Crisis on women in Northern Ireland:

- **NI Covid-19 Feminist Recovery Plan: Relaunch – One Year On**, July 2021 available here: <https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/WPG-COVID-19-Feminist-Recovery-Plan-Relaunch-One-Year-On.pdf>
- **Women’s Experiences of the Cost-of-Living Crisis in Northern Ireland**, July 2023 available here: <https://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Womens-Experiences-of-the-Cost-of-Living-Crisis-in-NI-2.pdf>

### 3. Other issues with the draft Plan

The Women's Regional Consortium believes that the current draft lacks ambition when ambition is what is needed to shape a better tomorrow. It is also not clear how the plan connects to the budget throughout. We agree with the Equality Coalition who have said that *"the final PfG must incorporate an agreed budget linked to policies and programmes. If it fails to do so, it will fall short of even minimum legal requirements on a PfG that the Executive is to consider."*

We also agree with the Equality Coalition around their concerns that many of the rights-based commitments outlined in the draft New Decade New Approach PfG are not explicitly included in the current draft PfG. We support the Equality Coalition who are advocating for *"a renewed focus on these commitments, emphasising the importance of returning to the principles and goals set forth in the NDNA draft outline PfG to ensure equality, accountability, and progress for all sections of society."*

There are a range of other important issues that are given passing or no mention within the draft Programme for Government and which we believe should have greater focus and, in some cases, dedicated actions and timelines:

- **Social Inclusion Strategies** - there is one vague reference to the Social Inclusion Strategies in the draft plan. There is no mention of the individual Strategies or any recognition that these Strategies are inter-connected and complement each other which means that they need to be taken forwards as a suite of Strategies. Furthermore, the Executive has a legal obligation to implement an Anti-Poverty Strategy and yet inexplicably it is not specifically named in the plan.
- **Cross-departmental working** - the draft plan mentions working across departments and across the Executive but often does not name specific Departments which means that it is unclear who has responsibility for what.
- **Measurement of Success** - the draft plan states that the Wellbeing Dashboard is being used to keep track of the missions in the plan. We are unclear exactly what this means and if this is to be used as a measurement of impact and success of the plan. It does not include any detail of how progress



on the key priority areas for action will be measured. This is further complicated by a lack of timelines within the plan against which to measure success or otherwise.

- **Legislation** – the draft plan says little about the legislation that will be needed to underpin what is contained in the plan.
- **Gender Equality** – there is only one mention of gender equality in the draft plan and this is in the Childcare section. While childcare has obvious implications for gender equality it goes far beyond this and a commitment to equality, including gender equality, should be central to the plan.
- **Section 75** – Section 75 is the basis of all our equality protections yet has not been mentioned once within the draft plan. While the Section 75 groups are mentioned here and there within the plan there is insufficient mention of equality which should reference the legislative underpinning.
- **International Obligations** – in developing a Programme for Government consideration should have been given to the international conventions, laws and frameworks that we are bound by as a devolved administration under the State Party. The UK Government has signed up to deliver on the Sustainable Development Goals and other United Nations conventions including the European Convention on Human Rights, the Convention on Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The Programme for Government should be aligned with the recommendations from these international obligations and this would provide a consistent approach to equality throughout the plan.
- **Co-design** – despite the importance of co-design and including lived experience especially when it comes to formulating a plan for Government action there is no evidence of this being part of the process of developing the draft plan. While we appreciate that there have been attempts by The Executive Office to include citizens and interested groups through their

participation events on the content of the draft plan we believe that the process would have been better if the plan had been co-designed from the very beginning. This would have helped to avoid many of the problems which have been highlighted in this response and others.

- **Departmental Reviews** – we are concerned that important independent Reviews which were commissioned by the Department for Communities have not been referred to. The Review of Discretionary Support and the Review of Welfare Mitigations both contained important recommendations to make progress in the area of poverty and financial hardship yet warrant no mention in the draft. We do not want to see important documents such as this which have been produced independently and commissioned and paid for by the Department left to gather dust. These must form part of our Government's future work programme.
- **Carers** – the pandemic put a spotlight on the value of unpaid care yet despite this unpaid carers continue to be undervalued in our society. The draft plan does not mention unpaid carers once in the entire document. This only serves to embed the lack of priority given to people providing unpaid care for sick or disabled family members who collectively save Northern Ireland's health service £5.8 billion in care costs each year.<sup>5</sup> Providing unpaid care is a gendered issue with women more likely to provide this care. Nearly 60% of unpaid carers are women and women have a 70% chance of providing care in their adult life and are more likely to care early in their life.<sup>6</sup>
- **Community Education** – there is no mention of the need for or value of community education in the draft plan. The community setting provides a trusted and safe environment that draws people in, particularly those who are the most marginalised, those who have poor experiences of formal education and those who have experienced trauma. Community education settings provide feelings of belonging as a foundation for learning, integrated childcare

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<sup>5</sup> Valuing Carers 2021, Northern Ireland, Carer's NI and Centre for Care, November 2023  
<https://www.carersuk.org/media/irkn5e00/valuing-carers-northern-ireland.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Career or Care, Women, unpaid caring and employment in Northern Ireland, Women's Regional Consortium & Carers NI, February 2024  
<https://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Career-or-care-Women-unpaid-caring-and-employment-in-Northern-Ireland.pdf>

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services, flexibility to work around any challenges that arise for learners, high quality education and tutors. There is a large body of international evidence which shows that person-centric educational programmes such as those at the core of community education can have a transformative impact on the lives of adult learners. The draft Programme for Government states that our levels of economic inactivity are too high yet fails to acknowledge that community education has a key role to play in addressing this especially for women. Community education provided by Women’s Centres provides wrap-a-round services that support not only the woman but the whole family. Improved educational attainment for mothers can also lead to benefits for their children. These important services delivered locally are vital to tackling disadvantage and promoting gender equality. Investing in community education is critical to **Shaping a Better Tomorrow** and to the missions of **People, Prosperity and Peace**.

- **Women’s Health Strategy** – Northern Ireland is the only region not to have a dedicated Women’s Health Strategy in the UK. There is a growing recognition of the need for a new approach towards addressing gender differences and positive health outcomes for women and girls. A failure to develop such a Strategy fails to recognise the unique needs of 51% of our population. The Nothing About Us Without Us campaign has recommended a funded and co-ordinated Women’s Health Strategy for Northern Ireland.<sup>7</sup> This was to be a priority for the newly reformed Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive but has not even been named in the draft plan.<sup>8</sup>

### **What women said about the draft Programme for Government:**

*“The layman out there’s never going to have an idea that this plan even exists! I don’t know where it’s been advertised. If I wasn’t in the community sector I wouldn’t have a baldy what it even is!”*

*“There’s nothing you can hold them to account for in it.”*

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<sup>7</sup> Women’s Health Strategy Survey Results, Nothing About Us Without Us, October 2024

<https://communityfoundationni.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Final-NAUWU-Report-for-Web-1.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/news/minister-swann-outlines-womens-health-action-plan>

*“It’s like putting a whole lot of words down, paying lip service, but not committing, not going that extra step that they can be held to for it. There’s nothing there that they can be held to, there’s no facts or figures or timelines or anything.”*

*“There’s no planning to it, there’s no targets set, there’s nothing to hold them accountable for like you said you would do this by this date and you haven’t. If they don’t do what they’re supposed to do is there any accountability?”*

*“They say we will create but they could create anything! Because there’s no detail in it they could create anything.”*

*“When we put in funding applications it’s who’s doing it, how many are doing it, where’s it happening, what’s the targets, how are we going to monitor the targets. But they can do this?”*

*“What happens is they don’t listen and then you feel like you’re wasting your time. How do you hold them to account for something that doesn’t reflect what the people have said. Obviously, it would be worse if they just decided what we wanted and didn’t give us our say but if they don’t listen what’s the point – do they just interpret what they want to hear?”*

*“They’re just paying lip service to the issues because the public are talking about these things at the minute.”*

*“Government departments all work in silos, which we know, because for example if we put in for further education and say we need childcare they’ll say that’s not our remit. The Transformation Unit is supposed to work across Government departments which I don’t believe they’ll ever be able to do however, if it did happen it would be brilliant then everybody would be taking responsibility across the board. I want to know who is going to be on the Transformation Unit, would there be any community people on it, where would the unit be based – would it be set within one of the Government departments?”*

*“When we put a funding application in they say we have to work in partnership and Government can’t!”*

*“The community could be doing a lot of this preventative work which would stop it getting to the stage where someone might be on a waiting list. We do soft skills courses that address social isolation and that’s preventative work it helps prevent loneliness and poor mental health. It’s trying to get that across to Ministers and help them to understand the value of this work.”*

*“It’s about some of that money being redirected to the community to do this preventative work as a cheaper way of dealing with these issues. We could do lots of these courses during the day and at night if the money was available to do it.”*

*“Wider education is not in there especially community education and recognising that it has a place within the education system not just universities and further education. Affordable education for those returning for those coming out of school with no qualifications. If they do go for a counselling course, for example, they’re having to pay over £1500 a year to do a counselling course. That’s unaffordable for many people.”*

*“Women in poverty should have been a really high priority, women are half the population.”*

*“I went in to look at that wellbeing dashboard and just closed it down because I can’t do numbers and graphs and stuff but women are more likely to be in poverty than men. So I think there should have been a priority around women and poverty there.”*

*“Even the bit about the health waiting times, yes that’s very important but it’s not enough what’s in there.”*

*“Mental health is missed out of this plan and there’s nothing about disability.”*

*“I had no idea what happened in the Women’s Centre then I went to my doctor and was in a crisis mentally and was referred here. And that’s why I got here, I’ve been here over a year and I don’t know whether I’d have made it through some of the things I’ve been through if it hadn’t been for the Women’s Centre.”*

*“I actually don’t think the pressures in society have been as bad as they’ve been in the last five years. The pressure people are under, it’s serious. Look at the mental health, it’s awful.”*

*“The MLAs need to come in to the Women’s Centres and sit down with groups of real people that are living their normal lives. Not people that find life easy but those who are finding life tough, those who are socially disadvantaged. Those in Government are not affected by it so they can’t see it in real life terms, they don’t see it every day. Like me saying I can’t buy certain things because they are too dear.”*

*“I work in the charity sector and it’s costing me £75/month to park to work. I’m working and helping to take a load off the Government and yet I’m having to pay £75/month to come to work.”*

*“They need to bring down the prices of everything, the price of everything is going up but wages are not going up.”*

*“I got backpay this month but I won’t get my Universal Credit because of it. I work as hard as everybody else and I really need it. They owe me this money and it’s pushing me further towards poverty. Every month it’s harder and harder and harder and now Christmas is coming up again too.”*

*“Even just listening to women. I went into the doctors with very bad pain and was totally dismissed. For things like endometriosis, they say it takes between 7 and 10 years to be diagnosed with it. In the meantime, you have flare ups and it’s painful but you’re just brushed aside to deal with it.”*

*“My friend was 27 and found a lump and went to her doctor and they didn’t check it out, they just assumed that at 27 she was too young for cancer. She went back a few months later and it turned out she had cancer and had to have a double mastectomy.”*

*“I’ve been waiting on rheumatology for an urgent appointment for 152 weeks. I have MS and it just takes forever to get an appointment. If I phone my MS nurse she can only get back to me one day in the week. There isn’t the money to train more specialist nurses.”*

*“Older people take up a lot of the NHS. I work in the NHS and most of the calls are from older people. You do get sicker when you’re older and there’s no help for them. They don’t know how to access occupational help, etc, then their children come in and they’re upset and they don’t know how to do it either.”*

*“I had been ringing my GP for days and days to get an appointment for my son and couldn’t get through. I had to go down in person and tell them he wasn’t well and they gave me an appointment later that day.”*

*“In health, the older women that come into the Women’s Centre to do courses on social isolation that also helps with waiting lists too. I’m just looking at some of the women going past the window there and if their course wasn’t on they’d just be sitting in their houses.”*

*“Even if our projects in the community show really good effective outcomes they’re still probably going to be in a funding arena which is competitive. The staff are all getting their protective notice from March. You’re hitting the targets they’re asking for and instead of saying great we’ll put money into this and it’s really working you still have to put a funding application in and be in competition with three or four others around you.”*

*“The wait for CAHMS is ridiculous, even the assessments for special needs kids. We all have children with additional needs. My son was referred in 2018 and it’s now 2024 and some of his issues are still up in the air five years later. I know Covid took a few years out of that but it’s crazy.”*

*“They’re putting money into infrastructure and that’s well and good but you’re not going to be using these services when all your people are dead. Because nobody can cope. Put the money into rehabilitating your population, make them better. There’s no logic.”*

*“You’re still paying an absolute fortune for childcare even with some help. Some places are charging £65 a day. How does it cost this? Most places don’t do the child discount, I’ve twins.”*

*“I’m on Universal Credit now and we get 85% of the childcare paid but you still have to find the rest to pay it. It’s so confusing. It’s trying to keep that money aside and you have to pay it upfront.”*

*“The young women we’re working with at the minute the things they’re faced with the most is the childcare, the cost of childcare and the lack of social housing so they are on there but it’s whether or not there’s the change that’s needed in the plan.”*

*“Right now my childcare bill is over £2000 a month on childcare for 3 kids. People can’t afford to have more kids. So, I’m left with £300 a month for all my food shopping.”*

*“I can only work part time because I’m disabled and my whole part time wage was going on childcare. I work in the NHS and you’re working trying to help people but my whole part time wage was going on childcare so there was nothing at the end of it.”*

*“I had to come out of work because of the cost of childcare.”*

*“There’s nothing about childcare in the community.”*

*“If your child is over 3 you’re supposed to be looking for work a minimum of 30 hours for Universal Credit, it doesn’t matter if you’re a single mother with no support at all.”*

*“Special needs is so prevalent. If we can see that Government can see that. Where are you going to put all these children because the schools can’t cope.”*

*“They need more schools, special needs schools and more units within mainstream schools for autistic/ADHD kids.”*

*“It took five years of my daughter struggling in the class on her own for them to admit she needed help and to get her statement. She now has a one to one 25 hours a week it took that long. The wait is really bad.”*

*“What are these kids going to do after school – if they need additional help, where do they go for help with careers, they may need additional support and guidance. There’s nothing for them when they grow up.”*

*“You know how every housing estate can have a head person (paramilitary). I had no clue when I moved in. There was drama after I moved in and I was worried that my partner’s car was going to get torched and that my house was being watched*

*constantly. It's OK now but you just don't know what's going on behind closed doors. Now it's better I know my house is safe."*

*"My family are not religious in any way and we lived in the suburbs and there were no issues and then I moved with my husband to an estate and there are flags everywhere and the head of our estate lives at the bottom of my street. He's involved in a paramilitary organisation."*

*"Information around healthy relationships is so needed. The figures are a hell of a lot higher as people don't report these things. You fear people won't take you seriously if you've suffered it."*

*"Domestic Abuse affects your life forever. They need to tackle why it happens, mental health is a big factor too."*

*"There's no priority for any type of sex education, this should be a priority so people know how to be safe."*

#### **4. Response to Consultation Questions**

##### **1. Are you responding on behalf of an organisation or individual**

Organisation

##### **2. Please provide your organisation's contact details below:**

Women's Regional Consortium ([policy@wsn.org.uk](mailto:policy@wsn.org.uk))

##### **3. Which of the following best describes the sector you work in?**

c. Organised interest Group e.g. Education, Health, Business, Community  
Voluntary, etc.

##### **4. Can we contact you to discuss your response to this consultation?**

Yes



**5. Can we contact you in future about the draft Programme for Government?**

Yes

**DOING WHAT MATTERS MOST TODAY: Grow a Globally Competitive and Sustainable Economy**

**How much do you agree that the priority 'Grow a Globally Competitive and Sustainable Economy' should be included in the Programme for Government?**

We are not engaging with this question format because, while we support this priority, we have concerns about how the results from the 'agree/disagree' questions will be presented given that they must be read in conjunction with the accompanying text.

**The draft Programme for Government has set out actions that we plan to take under the priority 'Grow a Globally Competitive and Sustainable Economy'.**

**How much do you agree that these are the right actions to take?**

We are not engaging with this question format because, while we support this priority, we have concerns about how the results from the 'agree/disagree' questions will be presented given that they must be read in conjunction with the accompanying text – see our answer below.

**Please provide any other comments you have in relation to the 'Grow a Globally Competitive and Sustainable Economy' priority:**

The draft Plan makes an important acknowledgement that not everyone is feeling the benefit of economic growth and we still have a long way to go to ensure that our people do feel these benefits.

Systemic and structural inequalities across the labour market mean that women are overrepresented in lower paid and precarious jobs and are more likely to work part-time. Existing gender inequalities mean that women are more likely to be in receipt of social security benefits, more likely to be providing care either for children or other

family members and more likely to have to make up for cuts to public services through unpaid work. This restricts women's ability to carry out paid work and contributes to keeping women's incomes generally lower over their lifetimes.

There needs to be a range of approaches to tackling gender segregated labour markets which leave women particularly vulnerable to low-paid and insecure work. This must involve improving pay and working conditions in precarious sectors, tackling gender stereotypes that embed gender segregation, addressing the lack of affordable, accessible childcare and increasing investment in undervalued sectors such as care. There is insufficient mention of addressing these gendered issues within this section of the Plan given our high levels of economic inactivity especially for women.

We would have liked to have seen mention of the need for a Caring Economy in this section of the plan. The Commission on a Gender-Equal Economy have proposed the creation of a 'Caring Economy'<sup>9</sup> based on gender equality, wellbeing and sustainability. Women's Budget Group research<sup>10</sup> 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.

A Caring Economy<sup>11</sup> 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*

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<sup>9</sup> 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>

<sup>10</sup> 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/en/publications/investing-in-the-care-economy)

<sup>11</sup> 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>

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*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.*" Creating a Caring Economy would help meet some of the stated actions contained in this section in the areas of Productivity, Good Jobs, Regional Balance and Decarbonisation.

There is a great need to invest in care skills given the fact that we have an ageing population and there are staff and skill shortages in this sector. The draft Plan mentions a Skills Fund to help sectors struggling to recruit into vital roles and we welcome a new Skills Academy for the childcare sector. We believe that this should also include the social care sector which is also struggling with under-investment in skills and recruiting the workers it needs.

We are disappointed that investing in community education as a way of effectively building skills particularly for those who are the hardest to reach and the most marginalised is not specifically mentioned in this section. Community education is an effective way to tackle the persistent issues in the Northern Ireland labour market that mean so many people are unable to work and contribute to the economy including high levels of economic inactivity. This is particularly relevant for women who face so many barriers to education and work as a result of structural gender inequalities.

Community based education and training is vitally important to women in disadvantaged and rural areas reflecting their individual needs. It is 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. It is also important in helping women who are trapped in low-paid and poor-quality work access skills to enable them to get better quality and better paid work. 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 lack of confidence, education, course fees and the academic environment.

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. The Women's Regional Consortium believes that investing in community-based training and education and 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 and from poor quality work into good jobs. This must be an important consideration within the Programme for Government in that it helps deliver on a number of key areas including gender equality, employment support, tackling economic inactivity, addressing poverty including child poverty, increasing skills and leading to better quality jobs.

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

*(Participant at Consultation Event)*

We support the proposals in the plan to introduce new Employment Rights legislation and a Good Work Charter to ensure better quality jobs and promote a healthy work-life balance. The Women's Regional Consortium supported many of the proposals in the Department for the Economy's recent consultation on a Good Jobs Bill for Northern Ireland particularly around replacing Zero Hours contracts, proposals to introduce Carer's Leave, to make flexible working a day one right, to introduce Neonatal leave and pay, strengthening protections from redundancy for pregnancy and family leave and changes to paternity leave. We want to see these proposals brought into law.

The importance of parental leave and pay and flexible working policies in overcoming gender stereotypes and in the promotion of gender equality cannot be denied. These policies play a crucial role in getting women into employment and in helping to tackle gender inequality and disadvantage. They also enable employers and the wider economy to make the most of women's talents and experience. It is

vital therefore that these policies provide modern approaches to support women and families in the workplace so that they can truly promote gender equality and help to achieve work life balance.

We agree with our colleagues in Women’s Platform that a review of sick pay should have been included with the Employment Rights Legislation. Proposals to extend sick pay provisions have been highlighted by the Labour government, as part of a package of reforms to be introduced as the Employment Rights Bill. This Bill includes a new Day One right to sick pay, as well as extending parental leave and protection from unfair dismissal – which is missing from the current Bill in Northern Ireland. These provisions are also vital for women; the Women’s Budget Group estimates that the reforms will benefit 1.47 million women in Britain alone through extending sick pay provision, while research by the think tank highlights that improved protections can reduce economic inactivity and the £88.7bn lost to the UK economy each year through women’s lower labour market participation.<sup>12</sup>

### **DOING WHAT MATTERS MOST TODAY: Deliver More Affordable Childcare**

#### **How much do you agree that the priority ‘Deliver More Affordable Childcare’ should be included in the Programme for Government?**

We are not engaging with this question format because, while we support this priority, we have concerns about how the results from the ‘agree/disagree’ questions will be presented given that they must be read in conjunction with the accompanying text.

#### **The draft Programme for Government has set out actions that we plan to take under the priority ‘Deliver More Affordable Childcare’. How much do you agree that these are the right actions to take?**

We are not engaging with this question format because, while we support this priority, we have concerns about how the results from the ‘agree/disagree’ questions

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.wbg.org.uk/publication/the-feminist-future-of-work/>

will be presented given that they must be read in conjunction with the accompanying text – see our answer below.

**Please provide any other comments you have in relation to the ‘Deliver More Affordable Childcare’ priority.**

The Women’s Regional Consortium is pleased to see that delivering more affordable childcare is a priority within the draft Plan. Childcare was identified as a Day One priority for the new Executive with a number of Ministers highlighting its importance in their opening speeches yet we are now well into this current mandate the draft Plan still contains no timeline for the delivery of the long called for Early Learning and Childcare Strategy.

The draft Plan states that £25million will be invested this year but this is just 6% of the £400 million identified by the Education Minister as being needed to fund a new Early Learning and Childcare Strategy.<sup>13</sup> It is imperative that any Early Learning and Childcare Strategy has sufficient funding to deliver the best long-term outcomes for both children and parents.

We are concerned that the draft Plan talks about gathering “*administrative and survey data to help us better understand childcare usage, costs and the impact of childcare on parents’ labour market decisions.*” We suggest that this data already exists and has been produced on an annual basis through the Northern Ireland Childcare Survey published by Employers for Childcare. Employers for Childcare have published their 13<sup>th</sup> Childcare Survey this year which contains survey data on a full range of issues including the cost of a childcare place in Northern Ireland, what families are spending on childcare, the impact on work and career progression, if families are able to access the childcare they need, parental attitudes regarding childcare and the experiences of childcare providers. Government should value this comprehensive research and survey data instead of reinventing the wheel.

While we are pleased that the draft Plan mentions the long awaited 22.5 hours of pre-school education, we are disappointed that it has no timeline or funding linked to

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.employersforchildcare.org/news-item/what-has-100-days-of-devolved-government-delivered-for-childcare/>

it. The paragraph in the draft Plan uses phrases like “*we will invest in taking steps*” and “*this will lead to*” but contains no timeline of when this will happen or details of any funding attached to it.

We welcome the acknowledgement in the draft Plan that the sector needs support and that a new Skills Academy will be put in place for the childcare sector. However, the plan provides no detail on what the Skills Academy will do, the funding available for this and who will be involved. It should also be acknowledged that there is an issue around pay within the childcare sector and that many of the workforce do not feel valued or stay in the sector because it is so poorly paid.

A lack of affordable childcare disproportionately impacts on women. It is clear that the high cost of childcare in Northern Ireland acts as a significant barrier to women entering and staying in the workforce. The availability of accessible, affordable childcare is key to helping tackle this gender inequality as well as helping to tackle the gendered nature of economic inactivity and poverty. While the draft Plan does acknowledge the need for urgent support for parents, particularly mothers, to join or remain in the workforce it does not contain any information in relation to childcare to allow for education and training which is so vital in the lives of many women especially those who are furthest from the labour market. The Women’s Regional Consortium are disappointed that this valuable aspect of childcare provision has been ignored in the draft Plan despite its benefits for addressing disadvantage for both children and mothers.

For some of the most marginalised 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 currently provided by the Women’s Centres Childcare Fund (WCCF).

## **DOING WHAT MATTERS MOST TODAY: Cut Health Waiting Times**

**How much do you agree that the priority ‘Cut Health Waiting Times’ should be included in the Programme for Government?**

We are not engaging with this question format because, while we support this priority, we have concerns about how the results from the ‘agree/disagree’ questions will be presented given that they must be read in conjunction with the accompanying text.

**The draft Programme for Government has set out actions that we plan to take under the priority ‘Cut Health Waiting Times’. How much do you agree that these are the right actions to take?**

We are not engaging with this question format because, while we support this priority, we have concerns about how the results from the ‘agree/disagree’ questions will be presented given that they must be read in conjunction with the accompanying text – see our answer below.

**Please provide any other comments you have in relation to the ‘Cut Health Waiting Times’ priority.**

We do not disagree that cutting health waiting times should be a priority for Government given that we have the longest waiting times in the UK. However, we are concerned that this is the only priority area identified in relation to health. While the draft Plan recognises that Health and Social Care reform is necessary coupled with actions that help people remain healthy and tackle health inequalities we are disappointed not to see specific actions in these areas identified in the plan.

The Women’s Regional Consortium would like to see more detail and actions in the Programme for Government around preventative work to help relieve pressure on the health service long-term. This preventative work carried out in local communities is not being invested in enough yet is more cost effective than treating conditions which have been allowed to deteriorate and is ultimately effective in relieving pressure on



the health and social care system. We particularly point to the work of Women's Centres in relation to mental health.

Women's Centres provide trusted, local spaces where women can access help in relation to mental help. The services provided are holistic so that the full range of issues that are impacting on a person's mental health can be addressed. Early intervention is an important area of their work to ensure that mental health issues do not get the chance to take hold and cause even greater problems for those impacted. The fact that Women's Centres provide childcare to enable people to avail of courses and counselling is a major aspect of this work. It enables people to take advantage of help with their mental health without having to disclose to friends/family if they do not wish to do so and removes a significant barrier to access for these important services especially for women.

The Women's Regional Consortium would like to highlight the impact of the work of local Women's Centres in relation to mental health and its importance to local women, families and communities. We believe that this work often goes unseen in the wider mental health structures and its value is untold.

*"I have availed of the counselling service in Chrysalis Women's Centre on two different occasions, one of those being for bereavement. There was nowhere else in the area that I knew of that offered this service. I can honestly say that it was the best decision I ever made. From making my appointment to meeting my counsellor for the first time, I was made to feel comfortable and welcome from the very start. The centre is relaxed and not clinical in any way which made a massive difference to me, and my anxiety slowly but surely resided."*

*"I had really begun to feel I couldn't cope and had stopped taking care of myself. I started doing some courses at Atlas Women's Centre and benefitted from the mindfulness class especially. I feel more at ease with myself and this has put me back on track again for looking after myself. I now have a mental health toolbox that I can turn to when I need to and I am back exercising again in the mornings."*

*"I attended the Managing Stress class in First Steps Women's Centre and I absolutely loved it. It has improved my relationship with my 7-year-old and all*

*because of this class. I'm more patient and breathe more. I do not act in anger and I think. This class has really changed me and I'm so grateful."*

*"I entered counselling lost and broken and by the time I left I felt like a whole person again. I am still a work in progress but thanks to counselling and Chrysalis, I have the tools to cope with whatever life throws at me."*

*"I noticed the days I was doing something with Atlas Women's Centre I came away feeling positive and good. The Declutter Your Mind and 5 steps to wellbeing classes reinforced things I already knew about by keeping it in my mind to exercise, be in contact with people and eat healthy. That reinforcement reminded me to do these things to keep me positive."*

*"Through Falls Women's Centre I've learned resilience and to stand up for myself. I was very nervous and shy. The Women's Centre taught me confidence, to socialize and to meet people. I came from a really bad place following abusive relationships. I was nervous about meeting people. It helped bring out positive things – educating myself, wellbeing classes, etc."*

We believe that mental health should be added as a key priority area in the final Programme for Government given the scale of the issue and the significant problems that exist around mental health in Northern Ireland – we have outlined our reasons for this in the relevant section of this response.

The Women's Regional Consortium agree with the Nothing About Us Without Us programme who have stated that they are disappointed that there is not a focus on women's health in the draft Programme for Government.<sup>14</sup> Women live longer than men and face more health issues throughout their lives. There is often a lack of understanding of the specific health issues experienced by women including but not limited to issues around the menopause, eating disorders, fertility treatment, endometriosis, perinatal mental health, etc. A Nothing About Us Without Us Women's Health Survey<sup>15</sup> found that 79.3% of survey respondent stated that there

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<sup>14</sup> Women's Health Strategy Survey Results, Nothing About Us Without Us, October 2024  
<https://communityfoundationni.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Final-NAUWU-Report-for-Web-1.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> Women's Health Strategy Survey Results, Nothing About Us Without Us, October 2024  
<https://communityfoundationni.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Final-NAUWU-Report-for-Web-1.pdf>

have been incidents where they have not been listened to by a health professional, felt dismissed, or felt that their symptoms were downplayed.

To date, Northern Ireland is the only place across these islands not to have a dedicated Women's Health Strategy or at the very least, a Women's Health Action Plan. Whilst the Minister has committed to develop an Action Plan for Women's Health the Nothing About Us Without Us programme wants to see a long-term, cross-departmental Women's Health Strategy put in place which is sufficiently funded and reflects the experiences and needs of women from grassroots communities.

We also wish to highlight the impact on carers, who are more likely to be women, of delays and waiting lists in the health and social care sector. Many women will provide unpaid care or increase their hours of unpaid care work as a result of cuts to public services, delays and waiting lists. Women's Regional Consortium research with Carers NI<sup>16</sup> shows that inadequacies in wider support services, including social services, healthcare, education and childcare, are stopping women with unpaid caring roles from staying in employment altogether or limiting the amount of work they can do. This research also showed that women "juggle" their caring role and employment often at the detriment of their own career, finances and health and wellbeing.

The ability to enjoy a long, healthy, active life is strongly linked to deprivation. There is substantial evidence on the damaging impacts of inequalities including in the Marmot Review.<sup>17</sup> This Review reported on how *"health is closely linked to the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age and inequities in power, money and resources – the social determinants of health."* It found stalling

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<sup>16</sup> Career or Care, Women, unpaid caring and employment in Northern Ireland, Women's Regional Consortium & Carers NI, February 2024

<https://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Career-or-care-Women-unpaid-caring-and-employment-in-Northern-Ireland.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> Health Equity in England: The Marmot Review 10 Years On, Executive Summary, Institute of Health Equity, February 2020

[https://www.health.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-03/Health%20Equity%20in%20England\\_The%20Marmot%20Review%2010%20Years%20On\\_executive%20summary\\_web.pdf](https://www.health.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-03/Health%20Equity%20in%20England_The%20Marmot%20Review%2010%20Years%20On_executive%20summary_web.pdf)

life expectancy since the last Review and found that *“Life expectancy follows the social gradient – the more deprived the area the shorter the life expectancy. This gradient has become steeper; inequalities in life expectancy have increased. Among women in the most deprived 10 percent of areas, life expectancy fell between 2010-12 and 2016-18.”* The Review also acknowledged that austerity and welfare reform cuts have been *“regressive and inequitable”* and that they *“have harmed health and contributed to widening health inequalities in the short term and are likely to continue to do so over the longer term.”*

We want to see Eradicating Poverty added as a key priority area in the final Programme for Government – we have outlined our reasons for this in the relevant section of this response. Research has shown that the impacts of welfare reform and austerity policies have hit women harder and this continues to have impacts on women’s health and wellbeing. The Women’s Regional Consortium believes that making eradicating poverty a priority within the final Programme for Government would help to address some of the long-standing issues in the health service including pressure on waiting lists.

### **DOING WHAT MATTERS MOST TODAY: Ending Violence Against Women and Girls**

#### **How much do you agree that the priority ‘Ending Violence Against Women and Girls’ should be included in the Programme for Government?**

We are not engaging with this question format because, while we support this priority, we have concerns about how the results from the ‘agree/disagree’ questions will be presented given that they must be read in conjunction with the accompanying text.

**The draft Programme for Government has set out actions that we plan to take under the priority ‘Ending Violence Against Women and Girls’. How much do you agree that these are the right actions to take?**

We are not engaging with this question format because, while we support this priority, we have concerns about how the results from the 'agree/disagree' questions will be presented given that they must be read in conjunction with the accompanying text – see our answer below.

**Please provide any other comments you have in relation to the 'Ending Violence Against Women and Girls' priority.**

The Women's Regional Consortium very much welcomes that Ending Violence Against Women and Girls is a priority in the Programme for Government. The case for making this a priority has never been greater and it is clear that Northern Ireland has significant problems in this area with 24 women violently killed in the last four years.<sup>18</sup>

The draft Plan talks about the Strategic Framework and this is an area where lots of good work has been done but the detail about the Strategic Framework in the draft Plan is too vague and at times confusing. The Strategic Framework is excellent work and should be explained properly in the draft Plan so that it clearly describes what it is doing for those who have not been involved in this work. The draft Plan mentions the action plans but provides no dates around these and it would have been helpful to include this information.

The majority of this section of the draft Plan seems to be about raising awareness about Violence Against Women and Girls. We support the need to raise awareness about this issue but there is very little detail in the draft Plan about how this will be done. We would have liked to see the names of the campaigns and partners that will be supported in this work and details of the available funding for it. We also think that the draft Plan should mention that they will engage with expert groups in this

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[https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cp8memlgdrgo?at\\_format=link&at\\_bbc\\_team=editorial&at\\_medium=social&at\\_link\\_id=1D46A14E-8B80-11EF-AEBD-A6C5A8858261&at\\_campaign=Social\\_Flow&at\\_ptr\\_name=twitter&at\\_campaign\\_type=owned&at\\_link\\_type=web\\_link&at\\_link\\_origin=BBCNewsNI](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cp8memlgdrgo?at_format=link&at_bbc_team=editorial&at_medium=social&at_link_id=1D46A14E-8B80-11EF-AEBD-A6C5A8858261&at_campaign=Social_Flow&at_ptr_name=twitter&at_campaign_type=owned&at_link_type=web_link&at_link_origin=BBCNewsNI)

area so that people understand that this work will be with people who understand the issues.

It is important that this section of the draft Plan recognises that this is more than simply raising awareness through education it is about changing the culture in all areas of life including in employment, transport, justice, etc.

We are disappointed that there is no mention of funding for the expert organisations who work in this area including Women's Aid and Rape Crisis Northern Ireland.

The draft Plan states that it is vital to tackle the root causes of Violence Against Women and Girls to help stop this violence before it starts yet it does not name or make links to the need for Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in schools. Education is key to awareness and prevention. We believe that comprehensive Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE) standardised across all schools which takes into account the full range of relationships is vital to aid prevention of violence and abuse. Young people need to be educated on what constitutes a healthy relationship and taught about consent with the aim of addressing behaviours that can lead to violence and abuse. RSE is a vital part of work to end Violence Against Women and Girls and yet it is not named within this section.

We also believe that raising awareness needs to link to work in the area of Hate Crime which has also not been mentioned in this section. Violence Against Women and Girls is driven by gender norms that normalise and justify gender inequality and violence. This bias and prejudice must be tackled in order to prevent and respond to gender-based violence. Recognising misogyny as a hate crime is an important step in making progress on the extent of this problem, in ensuring that it is taken more seriously and in providing victims with greater confidence in coming forward.

The draft Plan talks about investing in a Change Fund to support the work of communities and the sector in the delivery of the action plan. However, there is little

by the way of detail on the Change Fund. It is not specific about who is eligible for this, how it will operate and the funding available for this.

We find this section of the draft Plan confusing for someone who is not an expert on how things have developed with the Strategic Framework. While the draft Plan mentions a Joined-Up Approach and references working across departments it fails to name the Departments and link them to this work.

**DOING WHAT MATTERS MOST TODAY: Better support for Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs**

**How much do you agree that the priority ‘Better Support for Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs’ should be included in the Programme for Government?**

We are not engaging with this question format because, while we support this priority, we have concerns about how the results from the ‘agree/disagree’ questions will be presented given that they must be read in conjunction with the accompanying text.

**The Draft Programme for Government has set out actions that we plan to take under the priority ‘Better Support for Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs’. How much do you agree that these are the right actions to take?**

We are not engaging with this question format because, while we support this priority, we have concerns about how the results from the ‘agree/disagree’ questions will be presented given that they must be read in conjunction with the accompanying text – see our answer below.

**Please provide any other comments you have in relation to the ‘Better Support for Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs’ priority.**

We welcome the fact that Better Support for Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs has been given priority in the Programme for Government. We

hear from many women who struggle to access the services they need for their children with special educational needs and the negative impacts this has both for their children and themselves.

We believe that this section of the draft Plan should have acknowledged the role that unpaid carers have in relation to the care of children and young people with Special Educational Needs. Providing this unpaid care often means they are sacrificing their own career, finances and health and wellbeing. We know that women are more likely to provide this unpaid care. Census statistics show that nearly 60% of unpaid carers are women and nationally statistics show that by the time they are aged 46, half of women have been a carer.<sup>19</sup> This has clear implications for gender equality and the ability of women to reach their full potential.

We wish to point out that while a focus is needed on providing better support for Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs in the education system this is not the only area where actions are urgently needed. Providing better support is not just needed during the school day, it is much wider than this and services are also urgently needed outside of school which currently do not exist or are under severe pressure. This includes respite care, childcare, access to specialist healthcare services, etc.

### **DOING WHAT MATTERS MOST TODAY: Provide More Social, Affordable and Sustainable Housing**

#### **How much do you agree that the priority ‘Provide More Social, Affordable and Sustainable Housing’ should be included in the Programme for Government?**

We are not engaging with this question format because, while we support this priority, we have concerns about how the results from the ‘agree/disagree’ questions will be presented given that they must be read in conjunction with the accompanying text.

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<sup>19</sup> Will I care? The likelihood of being a carer in adult life, CarersUK, November 2019  
[http://www.carersuk.org/images/News\\_campaigns/CarersRightsDay\\_Nov19\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.carersuk.org/images/News_campaigns/CarersRightsDay_Nov19_FINAL.pdf)

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**The draft Programme for Government has set out actions that we plan to take under the priority ‘Provide More Social, Affordable and Sustainable Housing’.**

**How much do you agree that these are the right actions to take?**

We are not engaging with this question format because, while we support this priority, we have concerns about how the results from the ‘agree/disagree’ questions will be presented given that they must be read in conjunction with the accompanying text – see our answer below.

**Please provide any other comments you have in relation to the ‘Provide More Social, Affordable and Sustainable Housing’ priority.**

The Women’s Regional Consortium agree that good housing is essential to health and wellbeing and that everybody should have access to affordable, sustainable and quality housing that meets their needs. We defer to our colleagues at Housing Rights who have greater expertise in this area. However, we do wish to raise the gendered issues in relation to housing here and the importance of social housing for women.

Women are particularly vulnerable to issues around housing availability and affordability because women have lower incomes and lower levels of wealth than men making it more difficult for them to secure adequate housing on their own. Women’s ability to afford their own home or to rent privately is determined by their access to paid employment and to social security benefits. Women are more likely to be in low-paid, part-time and insecure work as well as being more likely to claim social security benefits. 59% of Housing Benefit claimants are women<sup>20</sup> reflecting women’s lower incomes.

In addition, gendered norms mean that women are more likely to be providing care than men both for children and for other family members. This causes them to face specific challenges in trying to secure suitable accommodation for them and their families. As the Women’s Budget Group states housing is a feminist issue: “*Women*

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<sup>20</sup> Information provided in an email to Women’s Support Network from the DfC in November 2020

*are doubly impacted by the housing crisis as a result of their disadvantaged economic position and their disproportionate responsibility for care work.”<sup>21</sup>*

Since 2010 there has been a reduction in overall government spending through welfare reform and austerity measures, reductions in housing benefit rates and eligibility and changes to the size and status of the social housing sector. All these changes have eroded the housing safety net provided by the social security system which will have greater impacts for low-income women who are more likely to claim social security benefits.

The draft Plan outlines the challenge faced by the large social housing waiting list. This can have particularly negative impacts for women, LGBTQI+, BAME and disabled people leaving them unable to access suitable housing. We do not have access to recent local statistics on the gender breakdown of social housing tenants but wider research suggests that women are more likely to be social housing tenants. Changes to social housing therefore have a disproportionate impact on women who are overrepresented among those in housing need and among social renters.<sup>22</sup>

Insufficient social housing stock can have serious implications in domestic violence situations leaving victims trapped in coercive and abusive situations as they have nowhere to go. The situation is even worse in rural areas where there is even less social housing available in the locality and victims are reluctant to move their children from local social networks and schools. The social housing sector already understands how domestic abuse presents and the impact it has on victims the majority of whom are women. This model of housing provision is therefore important for victims and survivors of domestic abuse.

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<sup>21</sup> A home of her own, Housing and Women, Women’s Budget Group, July 2019  
<https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/WBG19-Housing-Report-full-digital.pdf>

<sup>22</sup> Housing and gender, Briefing from the UK Women’s Budget Group on the impact of changes in housing policy since 2010 on women, November 2017  
[Microsoft Word - housing pre-budget nov 2017 final.docx \(wbg.org.uk\)](#)

It is clear that women are more vulnerable to housing supply, affordability and suitability issues and this should form the basis on which decisions are made and priorities are developed by government in relation to these issues.

We welcome the commitment within the draft Programme for Government to launch a new Fuel Poverty Strategy by 2025. We are pleased to see this included but we believe that this action needs to be centred in the wider priority area of Eradicating Poverty as we have outlined elsewhere in this response. Women's Regional Consortium research with women on the impact of the Cost-of-Living Crisis on their lives<sup>23</sup> showed that 90% of the women surveyed for this research said the price increases which had the biggest impact on their household budget were energy bills. Many reported difficulties paying for their energy bills (73% said electricity, 52% gas, 30% home heating oil) and 78% said they felt cold or hungry or both as a result of cost-of-living increases.

We believe that given the considerable issues that exist within the private rented sector around availability, affordability and protections for tenants there is a need to provide more detail around actions to reform the sector in this section. We wish to reiterate our support for the Cliff Edge Coalition's strengthening ask for the mitigations package here namely to provide support to renters affected by the Local Housing Allowance (LHA). The Welfare Mitigations Review Report recommended the establishment of a Financial Inclusion Service, which would provide advice for low-income families who have been impacted by shortfalls in LHA. This would provide additional access to a grant to meet shortfalls between housing costs paid through benefit and contractual rent.

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<sup>23</sup> Women's Experiences of the Cost-of-Living Crisis in Northern Ireland, Women's Regional Consortium & Ulster Law Clinic, June 2023  
<https://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Womens-Experiences-of-the-Cost-of-Living-Crisis-in-NI-2.pdf>

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## **DOING WHAT MATTERS MOST TODAY: Safer Communities**

### **How much do you agree that the priority ‘Safer Communities’ should be included in the Programme for Government?**

We are not engaging with this question format because, while we support this priority, we have concerns about how the results from the ‘agree/disagree’ questions will be presented given that they must be read in conjunction with the accompanying text.

### **The draft Programme for Government has set out actions that we plan to take under the priority ‘Safer Communities’. How much do you agree that these are the right actions to take?**

We are not engaging with this question format because, while we support this priority, we have concerns about how the results from the ‘agree/disagree’ questions will be presented given that they must be read in conjunction with the accompanying text – see our answer below.

### **Please provide any other comments you have in relation to the ‘Safer Communities’ priority.**

We welcome the fact that the statistics on Domestic Abuse which account for 20% of recorded crime in Northern Ireland are included in this section. However, there is no detail on the actions, timeline or funding to address this significant problem.

We would have expected to see some mention of the need for partnership working with the Community and Voluntary sector who do so much valuable work in ensuring safer communities. The work of the Community and Voluntary sector must be valued as part of this process and not simply viewed as an add-on or completely ignored. Many of the organisations working in the sector have years of experience in working with victims and survivors of crime and also in working with perpetrators. They are skilled at reaching those who are the most marginalised within communities and provide trusted spaces and skilled people to do this work. It is valuable work that must be recognised and rewarded as such.

We would also have expected to see some reference to including the voices of victims in deciding on actions and plans to make safer communities. There is no mention within the draft Plan of any intention to engage with victims and survivors as part of this process. This is despite the fact that victims have vital and invaluable experience, knowledge and insight to contribute.

The draft Plan restates the Executive's commitment to tackling paramilitarism but provides no detail or priority around how this is going to be achieved. This is despite growing problems with criminal activity linked to paramilitaries and paramilitary harm being estimated to cost our economy a minimum of £750 million per year. The Northern Ireland Affairs Committee urged the next administration in Northern Ireland to ensure that the commitment set out in New Decade, New Approach to ending the harm done by paramilitarism is a strategic priority in an agreed Programme for Government.<sup>24</sup> The Women's Regional Consortium is particularly concerned about the potential for increases in paramilitary lending in local communities particularly for women who have been so impacted by the rising cost of living. This has caused many to struggle to afford the essentials, and with poor credit ratings due to low incomes and other debts, many feel like they have no option but to borrow this way. This leaves them vulnerable to exploitation, gender-based violence and control by paramilitaries.

## **DOING WHAT MATTERS MOST TODAY: Protecting Lough Neagh and the Environment**

### **How much do you agree that the priority 'Protecting Lough Neagh and the Environment' should be included in the Programme for Government?**

We are not engaging with this question format because, while we support this priority, we have concerns about how the results from the 'agree/disagree' questions will be presented given that they must be read in conjunction with the accompanying text.

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<sup>24</sup> <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5804/cmselect/cmniaf/43/report.html>

**The draft Programme for Government as set out actions that we plan to take under the priority ‘Protecting Lough Neagh and the Environment’. How much do you agree that these are the right actions to take?**

We are not engaging with this question format because, while we support this priority, we have concerns about how the results from the ‘agree/disagree’ questions will be presented given that they must be read in conjunction with the accompanying text – see our answer below.

**Please provide any other comments you have in relation to the ‘Protecting Lough Neagh and the Environment’ priority.**

We support the need to protect Lough Neagh but stress that this must not be the only action taken on the environment. While the draft Plan says that the problems at Lough Neagh cannot be seen in isolation from the natural environment more generally there is very little detail around the actions planned, the timetable for these and any associated budget.

We repeat The Commission on a Gender-Equal Economy’s call for the creation of a ‘Caring Economy’<sup>25</sup> based on gender equality, wellbeing and sustainability. This call to action highlights that central to feminist ecological economics is the principle that gender equality must not be achieved at the expense of ecological degradation, and at the same time, environmental sustainability must not be achieved by exploiting feminised labour, particularly unpaid care.

The Women’s Budget Group (WBG) highlights that the narrow definition of green jobs as those in construction and technology can obscure the fact that the care industry is already a low carbon and high recompense sector. WBG research<sup>26</sup> 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

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<sup>25</sup> 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>

<sup>26</sup> 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/investing-in-the-care-economy)

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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.<sup>27</sup> This makes investment in this type of social infrastructure economically, environmentally and equality sound.

## **DOING WHAT MATTERS MOST TODAY: Reform and Transformation of Public Services**

### **How much do you agree that the priority ‘Reform and Transformation of Public Services’ should be included in the Programme for Government?**

We are not engaging with this question format because, while we support this priority, we have concerns about how the results from the ‘agree/disagree’ questions will be presented given that they must be read in conjunction with the accompanying text.

### **The draft Programme for Government has set out actions that we plan to take under the priority ‘Reform and Transformation of Public Services’. How much do you agree that these are the right actions to take?**

We are not engaging with this question format because, while we support this priority, we have concerns about how the results from the ‘agree/disagree’ questions will be presented given that they must be read in conjunction with the accompanying text – see our answer below.

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<sup>27</sup> WBG calculations from Eurostat data  
<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data/database>

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**Please provide any other comments you have in relation to the ‘Reform and Transformation of Public Services’ priority.**

There is no doubt that services need to be transformed and as the draft Plan states the scale of the problem is enormous.

This section of the draft Plan includes statistics on health including increases in the number of children known to social services and in care. We suggest that adding Eradicating Poverty as a key priority area in the final Programme for Government would help to have an impact in the long-term in this area.

While this section of the draft Plan includes statistics on demography highlighting an ageing population there are no specific actions in the draft Plan to detail how this will be addressed. We suggest that adding an Ageing Population as key priority area in the final Programme for Government would help to focus actions to address this. In terms of Enabling Infrastructure we suggest that this should include the need for investment in public transport which is key to providing access to services, preventing isolation and boosting the economy particularly in rural areas.

This section of the plan contains the only substantive reference to the Community and Voluntary Sector as a key partner. We welcome the recognition that the sector has *“been significantly impacted by unpredictable funding arrangements along with increased demand. The problems are interconnected, so we will prioritise interconnected solutions and sustainable funding models.”* We want to see the work of the Community & Voluntary Sector which does so much in the areas of Doing What Matters Most and Shaping a Better Tomorrow properly valued and rewarded for this work. In many areas the sector is standing in the gap helping people including some of the most vulnerable and marginalised in our society from negative impacts in a range of areas. In addition, as previously referenced several times in this response the sector does considerable work in the area of prevention and early intervention which have been included as an objective of the Transformation Board.



NICVA research has found that 49% of organisations in the sector have reported recruitment difficulties due to uncompetitive salaries compared to other sectors, short-term funding, and staff burnout driven by increased service demand.<sup>28</sup> The Women's Regional Consortium agrees with NICVA who are calling for immediate structural reforms to address these challenges, including stable, long-term funding and the crucial need for greater awareness and promotion of the value of the sector. We believe that the value and contribution of the Community & Voluntary Sector should have been given greater focus in the draft plan including detailed commitments as to how the sector will be better supported in this mandate.

In relation to the Reform and Transformation Unit the draft Plan provides no detail of who will be involved in this. It is important to know how the membership of this Unit will be made up and where it will be based. We want to know if there will be any Community and Voluntary Sector representation on this Unit and will it have any input from the public as users of public services.

## **DOING WHAT MATTERS MOST TODAY: Priorities**

### **Are there any other priorities that should be included in the Programme for Government?**

The Women's Regional Consortium believes that there are a number of other priorities that should be included in the final Programme for Government:

#### *Poverty*

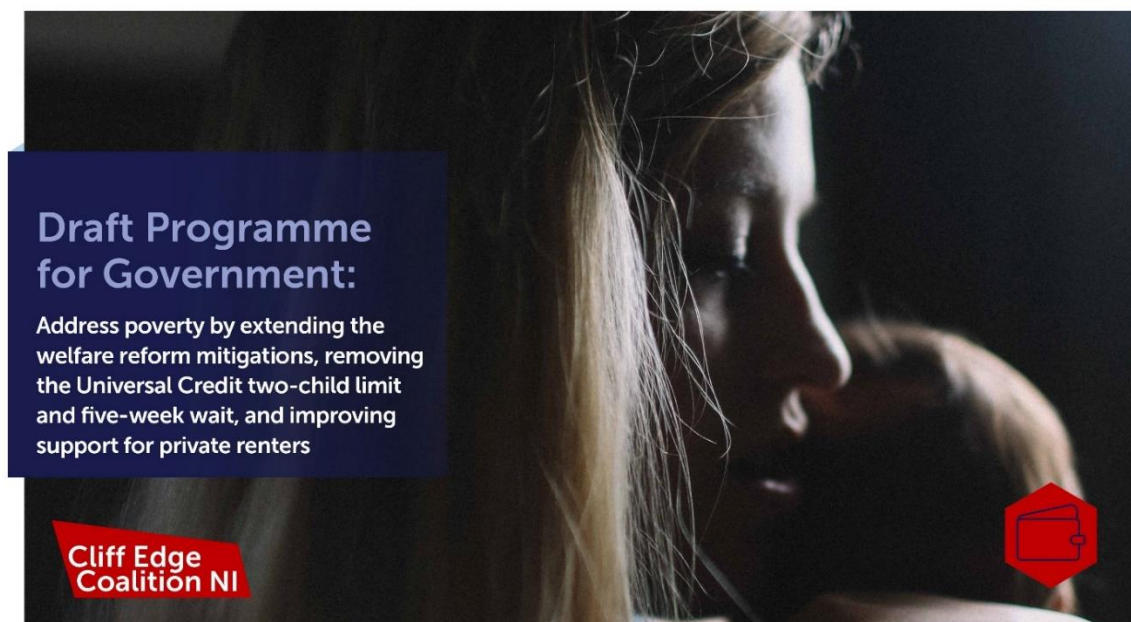
We believe that '**Eradicating Poverty**' must be added to the key priority areas within the final Programme for Government. We are shocked that addressing poverty is not given more attention within the draft plan given the statistics on poverty in Northern Ireland particularly child poverty, the impact of the ongoing Cost-of-Living Crisis and the difficulties many people experience in affording life's essentials. Living in poverty has long-term negative consequences not only for those affected but for our families, communities, the economy and Government. Without addressing poverty, we will

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<sup>28</sup> <https://www.nicva.org/article/nicva-launches-2024-voluntary-and-community-sector-workforce-report>

see negative impacts across a range of Government departments including education, health, justice and the economy.

We agree with the Cliff Edge Coalition (of which we are a member) that the draft plan: *“fails to address one of the most pressing needs in our society: the eradication of poverty. The almost complete omission of poverty is extremely worrying and morally wrong. Tackling poverty underpins all of the key priorities outlined in the draft PfG - but without mentioning, measuring and providing targets relating to poverty, there is no indication that it will be addressed. Without a commitment to eradicating poverty, many of the key priorities in the PfG will simply not be achieved.”*



### Draft Programme for Government:

Address poverty by extending the welfare reform mitigations, removing the Universal Credit two-child limit and five-week wait, and improving support for private renters

Cliff Edge Coalition NI

The context for including Eradicating Poverty as a key priority area within the final Programme for Government is clear:

- Nearly 1 in 5 people in Northern Ireland are living in poverty, as 18% (approximately 349,000) people are considered to be in relative poverty and 14% (approximately 271,000) are considered to be in absolute poverty. In relation to child poverty, 24% of children (approximately 109,000) live in relative poverty and 19% of children (approximately 86,000) live in absolute

poverty. The increase of relative child poverty from 18% in 2022 to 24% in 2023 indicates a worrying trend.<sup>29</sup>

- A Northern Ireland Audit Office report into Child Poverty in Northern Ireland<sup>30</sup> found there has been little sustained improvement in child poverty levels since 2016 and that this means that these children are more likely to have poorer health, educational and wellbeing outcomes than their more well-off peers. It also stated that child poverty brings a considerable cost to the public purse, with the estimated annual cost of child poverty between £825 million and £1 billion annually.
- Women are generally more likely than men to live in poverty across their lifetimes and lone parents are even more vulnerable to poverty (Census figures show that 93% of lone parents are women). In Northern Ireland the family type at the highest risk of being in relative poverty was 'single with children' at 38%.<sup>31</sup>
- Food banks in the Trussell Trust network in Northern Ireland distributed over 90,300 emergency food parcels in 2023/24. This is the highest number of parcels that the network in Northern Ireland has ever distributed and represents a 11% increase on 2022/23 levels. This percentage increase is higher than the respective figures for England (5%), Scotland (-0.1%), and Wales (1%). This is also the first time that food banks in the Trussell Trust network provided over 38,000 parcels for children in this period. These figures represent more than a doubling (143% increase) in the number of parcels distributed five years ago in 2018/19 and they are far above the levels seen before the rapid increases in the cost of living in 2021/22 (62,600 parcels). This growth in need is higher for children, with the number of parcels provided for them increasing by 151% over the five-year period between 2018/19 and 2023/24.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> [https://datavis.nisra.gov.uk/communities/PII\\_report\\_2223.html#Poverty\\_Measures](https://datavis.nisra.gov.uk/communities/PII_report_2223.html#Poverty_Measures)

<sup>30</sup> Child Poverty in Northern Ireland, NI Audit Office, March 2024  
<https://www.niauditoffice.gov.uk/files/niauditoffice/documents/2024-03/NI%20Audit%20Office%20Report%20-%20Child%20Poverty%20in%20Northern%20Ireland.pdf>

<sup>31</sup> [https://datavis.nisra.gov.uk/communities/PII\\_report\\_2223.html](https://datavis.nisra.gov.uk/communities/PII_report_2223.html)

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.trussell.org.uk/news-and-research/latest-stats/end-of-year-stats>

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- The Consumer Council for Northern Ireland Household Expenditure Tracker highlights those in the lowest earning households at the bottom 25% of the income distribution have just £41.73 of discretionary income per week after spending on the basics. It also shows that Northern Ireland's lowest earning households' gross household income per week is £277.61 per week, 7% lower than the rest of the UK and that income from social security benefits is at 71% in Northern Ireland compared to 61% in the UK.
- One in four unpaid carers in Northern Ireland (25%) are living in poverty – significantly more than Northern Ireland's non-carer population (16%) and higher than the carer poverty rate across the UK (23%). This means around 55,000 unpaid carers are living in poverty.<sup>33</sup>
- An ARK research paper<sup>34</sup> found that around 25% of households in Northern Ireland could not afford to pay an unexpected £500 bill and just over 24% of households reported having to turn the heating down or off due to costs (over half (52.1%) of respondents who described themselves as low income had turned the heating down or off because they could not afford it). Respondents who reported financial hardship were asked to identify how they have been coping and 44.6% reported borrowing from friends and family and 26.6% reported increasing credit card debt.
- The ARK research paper also found that almost half (49.3%) of respondents agreed that it was the responsibility of the government to reduce differences in income between people with high and low incomes. It found that 61.7% of respondents disagreed (24.4% strongly disagreed) that the Northern Ireland Executive is doing all that it can to reduce poverty.

The Women's Regional Consortium would also like to see the Programme for Government address the gendered impacts of poverty. As we have previously stated

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<sup>33</sup> The experiences of poverty among unpaid carers in Northern Ireland, Carer Poverty Commission, August 2023

<https://www.carersuk.org/media/jb0ah2xh/the-experiences-of-poverty-among-unpaid-carers-in-northern-ireland.pdf>

<sup>34</sup> The Other Division in Northern Ireland: public attitudes to poverty, economic hardship and social security, ARK Research Update, May 2022

<https://www.ark.ac.uk/ARK/sites/default/files/2022-05/update146.pdf>

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the gendered impacts of poverty are evident in the Wellbeing Dashboard with women more likely to live in poverty. Our research with local women on the impact of the Cost-of-Living Crisis on their lives<sup>35</sup> shows the stark impacts of poverty on women, children and families. The research found that:

- 91% of the women said they had difficulty paying their bills as a result of cost of living increases;
- 90% said the price increases which had the biggest impact on their household budget were energy bills and 89% said food bills;
- 62% said they had been unable to save recently and 31% said their savings had decreased with none of the women reporting that their savings had increased;
- 56% of the women were in debt and of these 82% said they had to borrow as a result of cost of living increases;
- 90% said they felt that the Cost-of-Living Crisis had impacted on their physical or mental health or both;
- Of those who had children, 78% felt that cost of living increases had negatively impacted on their children;
- 78% said that they felt cold or hungry or both as a result of cost of living increases.

We know that women often bear the brunt of poverty in the home managing household budgets to shield their children from its worst effects. This means that women end up acting as the ‘shock absorbers’ of poverty going without food, heat or clothes in order to meet the needs of children and/or other family members when money is tight.<sup>36</sup> Our research found many examples of this - many of the women reported skipping meals, living in cold homes and going without other necessities

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<sup>35</sup> Women’s experiences of the Cost-of-Living Crisis in Northern Ireland, Women’s Regional Consortium & Ulster University, June 2023  
<https://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Womens-Experiences-of-the-Cost-of-Living-Crisis-in-NI-2.pdf>

<sup>36</sup> A Female Face, Fabian Society Blog by Mary-Ann Stephenson, Women’s Budget Group, February 2019  
<https://fabians.org.uk/a-female-face/>

such as clothing to protect their children and families from financial hardship and poverty.

Despite these worrying statistics we know that poverty is preventable we just need the political will to make it happen. That is why it is of critical importance to see Eradicating Poverty included as a priority area within the Programme for Government. Investing in reducing it will have beneficial effects for our children's education, our population's overall health and wellbeing and other outcomes including benefiting our economy and reducing crime. A good start in addressing poverty would be the publication of a funded Anti-Poverty Strategy for Northern Ireland.

We share the concern highlighted by the Cliff Edge Coalition, the Women's Policy Group, the Equality Coalition and others that there is only one mention in the draft Programme for Government of the Social Inclusion Strategies and none were individually named. This is despite the fact that it is a legal obligation of the Executive to adopt an Anti-Poverty Strategy based on objective need.

The Women's Regional Consortium supports the concerns of the Equality Coalition in that the draft: *"fails to specify the individual strategies, nor does it clarify how or when the Executive intends to fulfil these commitments, leaving the extent of their implementation unclear, and potentially subject to approval by the Executive Committee if they are outside of the PfG, and deemed cross-cutting, significant or controversial. There are no references even to the Anti-Poverty and Irish Language strategies despite being legal obligations that the courts have held have been previously breached and remain outstanding."*

We believe that there is clear evidence of the need to address poverty in Northern Ireland and some good work has been carried out through the full suite of Social Inclusion Strategies to suggest how this can be done. Other important independent

reviews have also suggested ways of addressing poverty and financial hardship including the Welfare Mitigations Review<sup>37</sup> and the Discretionary Support Review.<sup>38</sup>

We support the Cliff Edge Coalition key asks for continuing the existing mitigations for the Bedroom Tax and the Benefit Cap. We want to see the final Programme for Government commit to extending the Benefit Cap mitigation which is due to end on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2025. Lone parents, who are mostly women, and larger families are most likely to be affected by the Benefit Cap. In Northern Ireland we have more larger families than other parts of the UK – 21% of families here have 3 or more children, compared to 15% of families in the UK. 86% of the Benefit Cap mitigation payments are paid to women and 14% to men.<sup>39</sup> Ending the Benefit Cap mitigation would therefore have the most severe impacts on women and children and would contribute to deepening poverty levels in Northern Ireland.

Within a new proposed priority of Eradicating Poverty, the final Programme for Government should also adopt the Cliff Edge Coalition's three key strengthening asks<sup>40</sup> as new actions:

- Resolve the five-week wait in Universal Credit;
- Remove the two-child limit;
- Provide support to private renters affected by the Local Housing Allowance.

We urge the Executive to include Eradicating Poverty as a key priority area within the final Programme for Government as it is critical to **Shaping a Better Tomorrow** and to the missions of **People, Prosperity and Peace**. It is only by adding Eradicating

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<sup>37</sup> <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/communities/dfc-welfare-mitigations-review-independent-advisory-panel-report-2022.pdf>

<sup>38</sup> <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/communities/dfc-independent-review-of-discretionary-support-22.pdf>

<sup>39</sup> Northern Ireland Welfare Supplementary Payment and Discretionary Support Schemes Section 75 statistics November 2017 to March 2023, Department for Communities, January 2024

<https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/communities/dfc-welfare-supplementary-payment-schemes-section-75-statistics-november-2017-to-march-2023.pdf>

<sup>40</sup> <https://www.lawcentreni.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Cliff-Edge-Member-Briefing-March-2024-1.pdf>

Poverty that our people will have *“the best possible opportunity to succeed in life and can feel at home in our society”*.

*“I am now scraping along to provide food and keep a roof over mine and my child’s heads. The cost to survive is atrocious.”*

*“Women are the ones who often give up/do without to absorb debt rather than let it impact on their children. I’ll do without spuds and put the spud on the child’s plate. Women are at the frontline of this.”*

*“I live off cereal and toast. My son is 17 months old and I’m starting to potty train him early to save money on nappies.”*

*“There are times I’ve went three or four days with very little to eat, maybe I’d grab an apple just so I have something in my stomach and I’m not going to bed with hunger pains and growling in my stomach.”*

*“I don’t think anyone recognises the impact of this Crisis on women especially. We have a high level of responsibility and it’s impacting really badly and Government are not taking enough notice. People are suicidal and feel like a failure. I’m lying in bed at night and getting really bad intrusive thoughts to the point where I look at my daughter and think if something happens to me who will look after her? I asked the person in charge in my hostel to ring me in the morning and check if I’m OK. It’s really, really impacting on people and Government need to be more aware of the impacts of this Crisis.”*

*“Sometimes you struggle between turning the heating on and feeding the children. As a mother you’d go without to make sure the kids have what they need. I’ve made dinner sometimes and there hasn’t been enough for everyone so I’ve lied and said it’s alright I’ve eaten so that I can try and make it stretch.”*

*“Last week I had no money for gas whatsoever, I had to choose between gas and food. We had no gas for a week and it was cold.”*

*(Quotes taken from Women’s Regional Consortium Research on Women’s Experiences of the Cost-of-Living Crisis in Northern Ireland, June 2023)*

### *Mental Health*

There are some general references to mental health in the draft plan but given the scale of the mental health crisis in Northern Ireland we believe that addressing **Mental Health** should be added to the key priority areas within the final Programme for Government. We note with concern the comments from the Mental Health



Champion for Northern Ireland who stated that there is no commitment in the draft plan to full funding for the Mental Health Strategy and nothing on suicide prevention.<sup>41</sup>

A report published by the Public Accounts Committee in June 2024<sup>42</sup> provides the context for including addressing mental health as a key priority area:

*“Mental health remains one of the greatest health issues affecting Northern Ireland, impacting many of the most vulnerable in society. Its cost is conservatively estimated at £3.4 billion annually, with the majority of costs associated with four main conditions - anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder and schizophrenia. Many mental health conditions are preventable, and therefore the financial cost to society can be reduced. We also have a moral imperative to reduce the suffering caused by poor mental health in our population. However, there are significant gaps in services and many of our most vulnerable people do not get the care that they deserve and need.*

*The number of people waiting to access mental health services continues to increase to unacceptable levels. Latest figures, for December 2023, record a total of just over 17,500 people awaiting a first appointment. Within this, psychological therapies represent a disproportionate share, with around 6,500 people waiting to access services. Alongside this, performance against waiting time targets has also continued to deteriorate. Worryingly, around three-quarters of those on psychological therapies waiting lists, as of December 2023, had been waiting longer than the 13-week target time. As a result, service users and their families feel that they cannot get the help that they need. Without timely treatment, however, peoples' conditions will deteriorate, becoming more difficult and costly to treat.”*

Research shows that women are often more vulnerable to suffering from poor mental health. The Northern Ireland Health Survey shows that around one in five adults (21%) showed indications of possible mental health problems, based on GHQ124

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<sup>41</sup> <https://x.com/profsiobhanon/status/1852297666492862564>

<sup>42</sup> Report on Mental Health Services in Northern Ireland, Public Accounts Committee, June 2024  
<https://www.niassembly.gov.uk/assembly-business/committees/2022-2027/public-accounts/reports/public-accounts-committee---report-on-mental-health-services-in-northern-ireland/>

data. Levels were higher among women (25%), compared with men (16%). In addition, levels in the most deprived areas were around one and a half times those in the least deprived areas (30% compared to 20%).<sup>43</sup>

The Community and Voluntary Sector do significant work in the area of mental health particularly in preventative work. As previously highlighted it is much more cost effective to address mental health issues early than to let them get worse and therefore this work should be prioritised. For example, the provision of access to training and education in local Women's Centres which addresses the mental health barriers that women face helps women to improve their sense of worth, regain confidence, reduce isolation, gain qualifications and move into employment. These are all positive outcomes for mental health and wellbeing. The Community and Voluntary Sector work closely with local communities and are responsive to need and we believe that the sector's role in this area must be reflected in any new key priority area around mental health.

*“We need to be looking at mental health. We don't have enough specialist mental help available. It's not just about the conflict it's about all mental health issues. There needs to be somewhere for sufferers to go.”*

*“I was 5 months pregnant and already had two children. I took severe pre-natal depression. My GP was my only port of call, I didn't feel I could talk to anyone else about it not even my family. I was told to get a Hello magazine and go home to bed. That is my experience of how my GP dealt with mental health. I used to wake my husband at night and ask him what was I going to do. It was the worst time of my life. I just had to suffer it myself I just didn't know what else to do.”*

*“A person centred approach is always best. Instead they seem to follow the same route with everyone. Help needs to be person centred. Currently the way help is given through GPs just feels like a flow chart they are following but is not specific to the person.”*

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<sup>43</sup> Mental Health Services in Northern Ireland, Northern Ireland Audit Office, May 2023 - GHQ 12 (General Health Questionnaire) is a screening tool which assesses the possibility of psychiatric morbidity in the general population. It is widely used, forming part of the Department of Health's Health Survey of Northern Ireland and similar surveys in England and Scotland. The questionnaire contains 12 questions about recent general levels of happiness, depression, anxiety and sleep disturbance, with scores of four or more (in a possible range from 0 to 12) indicating possible mental health problems – cited in NI Audit office report [00293490 - Mental Health Report WEB.pdf \(niauditoffice.gov.uk\)](https://niauditoffice.gov.uk/00293490-Mental-Health-Report-WEBSITE.pdf)

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*“If you have any other illness such as cancer they are not going to send you to a cardiologist to look after your cancer. It is the same principle with mental health. All other care is centred around what is wrong with the person except mental health”.*

*“When my baby was born I had post-natal depression. I spoke to my GP about it and they said they would phone me back. I’m still waiting on the call and my son is 9. I just had to deal with it by myself.”*

*“I think that if I had got support when I was young it would have made a real difference. If I had been taught how to cope with mental health issues. The only thing we got about this in school was maybe a powerpoint on mental health once every three years and told about the school counsellor.”*

*“You have counselling for 6 – 8 weeks and then that’s it you are just left there. The Women’s Centre has been my lifeline through the courses and counselling they provide. There is not enough funding there for people who are coming out of counselling – you are just thrown out into the street after it’s over.”*

*(Quotes taken from Women’s Regional Consortium Focus Group participants)*

### *Ageing Population*

The draft plan does acknowledge that *“by 2043, it is anticipated that the proportion of our population over the age of 85 will have more than doubled. This will result in further pressures on social care and a dramatically reduced working-age population.”* Given the urgency of this issue and the extent of the problems within the social care sector we believe that planning for an **Ageing Population** should be added to the key priority areas within the final Programme for Government.

We support the comments made by Age NI and The Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland who criticised the draft Programme for Government for its absence of policies and considerations for the ageing population.<sup>44</sup> This is likely to have greater impacts for women who are likely to live longer and make up a larger share of the older population than men. Statistics from NISRA show that males accounted for 36.7% of those aged 85 and over and females for 63.3%.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> <https://copni.org/news/articles/the-commissioner-for-older-people-and-age-ni-call-for-northern-irelands-ageing-population-to-be-prioritised-in-programme-for-government>

<sup>45</sup> [https://www.nisra.gov.uk/system/files/statistics/MYE23-bulletin\\_1.pdf](https://www.nisra.gov.uk/system/files/statistics/MYE23-bulletin_1.pdf)

Statistics show that one in six people in Northern Ireland are aged 65 plus and projections from NISRA indicate that this is likely to rise to one in five by 2030 and one in four by 2040. It is therefore imperative that Government includes planning for this demographic shift but it has not been given any priority within the draft Programme for Government. The Commissioner for Older People has warned that failure to prepare for this could have a devastating impact on already overstretched public services.<sup>46</sup>

We support the calls made by Age NI and the Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland for a strategic plan for an ageing society and transformation of and investment in health and social care to address growing demands resulting from an ageing population.

### *Integration and Racism*

We support the calls made by our colleagues in Advice NI and in the refugee and migrant sectors who have called for **Integration and Racism** to be included as one of the key priority areas within the final Programme for Government.

The draft Plan makes only passing mention to issues of integration and racism. This is despite a summer of anti-immigrant and racist violence and intimidation in Northern Ireland. It is clear that as a society we have significant problems in this area and there are considerable levels of misinformation which is contributing to the trauma and suffering being experienced by refugees, asylum seekers and migrants. There is much work to be done around better understanding their experiences and around integration and cohesion in local communities. It is disappointing to see that this warranted so little mention in the draft Programme for Government.

It is particularly concerning that the draft Plan did not mention the long-awaited Refugee Integration Strategy which must be a priority. The final Programme for

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<sup>46</sup> At the centre of government planning, The Programme for Government and preparing for an ageing population, Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland, June 2024  
<https://copni.org/assets/general/resources/At-the-Centre-of-Government-Planning-The-Programme-for-Government-and-preparing-for-an-ageing-population.pdf>

Government should also include the need for adequately resourced immigration advice provision, more resources and support for local communities to assist with the integration of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants and providing opportunities to give a voice and platform to those with lived experiences to influence change.

## **BUILDING NEW FOUNDATIONS**

**We are committed to investing in our public infrastructure and reshaping how our services are delivered. Together, we will work as hard as we can to continue taking care of your needs today while supporting your hopes and ambitions for tomorrow through the high-quality, sustainable public services you deserve. We will:**

- **Boost Housing Funds**
- **Improve the Planning System**
- **Deliver Better Public Services**
- **Support Our Net Zero Future**
- **Manage Our Water**
- **Upgrade Stadia and Support Local Sports**
- **Retrofit Homes**
- **Improve Our Transport Infrastructure for Safer Travel, Connected Communities and Sustainable Economic Growth**

**We are committed to investing £26 billion of public funding in the next decade. More detail on this will be provided in the upcoming Investment Strategy.**

**How much do you agree that these are the right commitments in relation to the plans for investment in infrastructure?**

We are not engaging with this question format because, while we support this priority, we have concerns about how the results from the ‘agree/disagree’ questions

will be presented given that they must be read in conjunction with the accompanying text – see our answer below.

**Please provide any other comments you have in relation to the plans for investment infrastructure.**

While we agree with these broad areas the draft Plan does not provide any detail around actions, timelines or how the funding will be allocated for this work to provide further comment. As previously raised, we would like to see throughout the final Programme for Government more clear details around the actions, timelines and ownership as well as details of how any progress towards the achievement of the actions will be measured.

**SHAPING A BETTER TOMORROW**

**While making things better today is important to us, we also need to look at long-term issues.**

**Our commitments are based on a recognition of our duty and drive to do better for you, your family, our communities and this place we all call home, now and for generations to come. Our focus will centre on three long-term Missions: People, Planet, and Prosperity, as well as a cross-cutting commitment to Peace.**

**The Executive have set out a long-term strategy to deliver three Missions, People, Planet and Prosperity as well as a cross-cutting commitment to Peace.**

**How much do you agree with a Mission-based approach?**

**Please enter additional comments:**

It is unclear how these relate to the priority areas outlined in the draft Plan. In general, we are unsure how these are linked to other parts of the plan, what the specific actions are within these missions, who is responsible for them, how progress towards them will be measured and the timelines for achieving them.

**How much do you agree that these are the right Missions to focus on?**

- a. **People**
- b. **Planet**
- c. **Prosperity**

We have no disagreement with the missions proposed in the document but to reiterate it is unclear how these relate to the rest of the plan.

**Are there any areas that are not captured under these missions?**

We suggest that **Equality** could be included as a standalone mission within the Programme for Government. This would help to ensure that Governments legal obligations to equality are actioned, measured and met. This should involve individually naming all of the Social Inclusion Strategies and include the Race Equality Strategy and Refugee Integration Strategy and actions around an ageing population. This mission should be set in the context of our equality legislation and international obligations both of which receive insufficient or no focus within the current draft Plan.

**People Mission: A series of actions have been proposed under this Mission.**

**How much do you agree that these are the right actions?**

We have no objection to what has been included as actions under the People Mission however we are unclear about the specific actions, timeline, ownership and funding for any of these. This section contains very general references to proposed action which makes it very difficult to determine what is going to be done and how any success or otherwise will be measured.

**Is there anything else that should be included under the People Mission?**

We are disappointed that in relation to asylum and refugee policy that the Refugee Integration Strategy and Race Equality Strategy are not specifically named including timelines around their production.

As we have previously outlined growing levels of poverty particularly child poverty and the damaging impacts of poverty on people, families, communities and society at large have only warranted passing mention in this section. That is why we have suggested that Eradicating Poverty should be added as a key priority area in the final Programme for Government.

The Cost-of-Living Crisis which has had such a significant impact on the lives of many people in Northern Ireland has again only warranted passing mention including the one mention in the whole document of the Social Inclusion Strategies. This section should at the very least name the Anti-Poverty Strategy which is key to addressing poverty and is a legal requirement.

We once again suggest that making Eradicating Poverty a key priority area within the final Programme for Government would help to ensure that many of the proposed actions discussed in the People section could be progressed/achieved.

**Planet Mission: A series of actions have been proposed under this Mission.  
How much do you agree that these are the right actions?**

We have no objection to what has been included as actions under the Planet Mission however we are unclear about the specific actions, timeline, ownership and funding for any of these. This section contains very general references to proposed action which makes it very difficult to determine what is going to be done and how any success or otherwise will be measured.

**Is there anything else that should be included under the Planet Mission?**

The International Labour Organization (ILO)<sup>47</sup> has argued that without consistent gender mainstreaming, sustainability in a green economy is inconceivable arguing that *“gender equality must be at the core of promoting green economies that are low-carbon, resilient and sustainable.”*

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<sup>47</sup> Gender Equality and Green Jobs, International Labour Organization Policy Brief, 2015  
[wcms\\_360572.pdf \(ilo.org\)](https://www.ilo.org/wcms_360572.pdf)



The green economy and the creation of 'green jobs' offers the potential to pay higher wages and offers career paths to workers with the necessary skills and education. However, due to pre-existing gender inequalities there is concern that the green economy may not necessarily guarantee equal access to these green and decent jobs for women. Many of these jobs are expected to be concentrated in parts of the economy which are traditionally male dominated and women's access may be further limited due to a lack of the necessary training and experience.

There is therefore a need to acknowledge existing gender imbalances to ensure that women and men can equally benefit from the opportunities the green economy can provide. A failure to do so will result in the continuation of existing gender inequalities and prevent the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.<sup>48</sup>

The ILO recommends that *“all measures must be taken to ensure that pre-existing gender inequalities are not transferred to the emerging green economy and the opportunities for women in the changing labour market must be identified and grasped. Women and men must be encouraged and given the necessary support to enable equal access and benefit from green jobs.”*<sup>49</sup>

**Prosperity Mission: A series of actions have been proposed under this Mission. How much do you agree that these are the right actions?**

We have no objection to what has been included as actions under the Prosperity Mission however we are unclear about the specific actions, timeline, ownership and funding for any of these. This section contains very general commitments around proposed action which makes it very difficult to determine what is going to be done and how any success or otherwise will be measured. The actions in this section are also very focused on business rather than individuals. It is important to acknowledge that a strong economy can increase wages and employment but will not in itself

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<sup>48</sup> <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal5>

<sup>49</sup> Gender Equality and Green Jobs, International Labour Organization Policy Brief, 2015 [wcms\\_360572.pdf \(ilo.org\)](https://www.ilo.org/wcms_360572.pdf)

reduce poverty. JRF analysis<sup>50</sup> suggests that without policy changes, poverty is likely to remain largely unaffected by economic growth.

**Is there anything else that should be included under the Prosperity Mission?**

The plan mentions that economic inactivity levels are too high but the proposed action makes no attempt to address this. There are no proposed actions around the gendered nature of economic inactivity and the barriers that women face accessing skills and good quality work. There is no mention of community education which is vital in addressing economic inactivity particularly for those who are the most marginalised and furthest from the labour market. We have already referenced this several times within our response.

**A commitment to Peace will underpin the three missions. A series of actions have been proposed under this commitment. How much do you agree that these are the right actions?**

We have no objection to what has been mentioned under the commitment to Peace. However, we are unclear about the specific actions, timeline, ownership and funding for any of these. This section contains very general references to proposed action which makes it very difficult to determine what is going to be done and how any success or otherwise will be measured.

**Is there anything else that should be included under the commitment to Peace?**

Tackling Paramilitarism, Criminality and Organised Crime is listed in this section but that is it. Once again there is no detail around the proposed actions, timeline, ownership or budget for this work. Paramilitary activity and control has far reaching impacts on local communities and is particularly harmful for women in these communities who are vulnerable to gender-based violence.

We have already raised our concerns about issues like paramilitary lending in the Safer Communities section. However, we wish to raise a specific issue in relation to

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<sup>50</sup> <https://www.jrf.org.uk/work/economic-growth-and-poverty>

paramilitary and other illegal forms of lending and Universal Credit which the Executive could take action on. Research by Ulster University<sup>51</sup> has found that Universal Credit was repeatedly described as a ‘driver’ for illegal lending particularly around the harm caused by the five-week wait and government debt deductions. The Welfare Mitigations Review and the Cliff Edge Coalition have called for actions to be taken to mitigate the Universal Credit five-week wait in Northern Ireland.<sup>52</sup>

The Women’s Regional Consortium wish to raise our concerns about the paramilitary-related gendered coercive control experienced by some women in relationships with men involved in paramilitarism which has been described as an ‘unseen’ aspect of paramilitarism. Research on this issue found that women had experienced violence in their relationships including rape, strangulation, physical assault and emotional and financial abuse.<sup>53</sup> This research states that “*it is only when women’s lives are free of coercive control that a comprehensive lived experience of peace in Northern Ireland can be achieved.*” This is an important consideration for this cross-cutting commitment to **Peace** yet there is no detail around the actions in this area.

We are concerned that within the commitment to Peace section there is no acknowledgement of the role of women in peace and the critical importance of involving women in peacebuilding work to ensure a lasting peace. “*Sustainable and durable peace requires the participation of women and girls, as well as the integration of gender perspectives in all reconstruction processes.*”<sup>54</sup> Research across the world has shown the importance of women’s involvement in peace and reconciliation work. Women’s perspectives must be reflected in the establishment and governance of all the legacy institutions. “*All key peacebuilding and*

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<sup>51</sup> [https://www.consumerCouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-07/Illegal\\_Money\\_Lending\\_Report.PDF](https://www.consumerCouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-07/Illegal_Money_Lending_Report.PDF)

<sup>52</sup> <https://www.lawcentreni.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Cliff-Edge-Member-Briefing-March-2024-1.pdf>

<sup>53</sup> “When you know what they are capable of”: Paramilitary-related Gendered Coercive Control, Professor Aisling Swaine, September 2024  
<https://foylewomensaid.org/when-you-know-what-they-are-capable-of-paramilitary-related-gendered-coercive-control/>

<sup>54</sup> Women, Peace and Security, Study submitted by the Secretary-General pursuant to Security Council resolution 1325 (2000), p111, United Nations, 2002,  
<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/public/eWPS.pdf>

*reconstruction strategies – including shared learning with other societies in conflict – should be informed by women’s perspectives.”<sup>55</sup>*

Research by Dr Claire Pierson highlights the importance of making gender more central to the analysis of conflict and peacebuilding.<sup>56</sup> *“Women continue to be left at the margins of processes to discuss and resolve ongoing contentious and conflict-related issues. Such silencing of gendered experience leaves out integral issues and perspectives on both the future of Northern Ireland and legacies of the past.”<sup>57</sup>*

Women in Northern Ireland have not been given the opportunity to participate equally in the peacebuilding process which impacts negatively on their social and economic development particularly for those already experiencing disadvantage. It is vitally important that women are at the decision-making tables and actively involved in peacebuilding processes if a sustainable peace is to be achieved.

**Peace is framed as a cross-cutting commitment, rather than a mission. How much do you agree that this is the right structure?**

We have no objection to this as peace is fundamental to people, planet and prosperity.

**Please enter any further comments:**

No further comments.

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<sup>55</sup> Peacebuilding in Northern Ireland and the Women’s Sector, Claire Pierson and Katy Radford, Institute for Conflict Research, July 2016

<https://www.community-relations.org.uk/sites/crc/files/media-files/9999%20ICR%20Peacebuilding.pdf>

<sup>56</sup> One Step Forwards, Two Steps Back: Women’s Rights 20 Years after the Good Friday Agreement, *Parliamentary Affairs*, Volume 71, Issue 2, Claire Pierson, April 2018

<https://academic.oup.com/pa/article-abstract/71/2/461/4100565>

<sup>57</sup> <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/the-marginalisation-of-womens-rights-in-northern-ireland-20-years-after-the-good-friday-agreement/>

## UNDERSTANDING MISSIONS BY TRACKING WELLBEING

**The draft Programme for Government outlines how it will measure progress through a Wellbeing Framework. How much do you agree with the proposed approach?**

### **Please provide any further comments:**

We understand that the Wellbeing Dashboard is there to help keep track of progress on the missions but its links to the contents of the plan are often not clear. We did find having access to the statistics contained in the Wellbeing Dashboard useful and particularly where data can be broken down by sex which helps to give a gender perspective. However, we do not find that what is contained in the Wellbeing Dashboard is properly linked to the contents in the plan. While we realise that these were developed by different people there should be better links between them.

For example, under **Equal Society** we selected **Income Deprivation** to see a graph on the **Percentage of people living in relative poverty (before housing costs)**. It is then possible to select an indicator trend of **Sex** to see those living in relative poverty broken down in to men and women. What is clear from this graph is that across all the years displayed women are more likely to live in relative poverty than men. Yet this is not reflected anywhere within the draft Programme for Government. We see very few mentions of poverty in the plan and where it is mentioned there is no acknowledgement of the gendered impacts. We ask the question how this graph is likely to improve without specific actions to address this detailed within the plan. Why can't what's in the Wellbeing Dashboard inform the content of the draft Programme for Government?

The plan makes only passing mention to the Wellbeing Dashboard and if it is to be used to measure progress then it should be better integrated into the plan throughout the document.

## **Conclusion:**

In the final Programme for Government the Women's Regional Consortium would like to see:

- A summary table of clear, agreed actions contained within the plan which details the actions, names the Departments/agencies responsible, provides a timeline for completion and includes the funding allocated to it.
- A measurement framework for the actions outlined in the plan so there is a clear way to measure progress and highlight areas where insufficient progress is being made so that action can be taken to address this.
- Work on the structure of the plan to better connect its contents and link the different sections including how the Missions and the Wellbeing Dashboard is connected to the rest of the plan.
- Expansion of the key priority areas to include Eradicating Poverty, Mental Health, an Ageing Population and Integration and Racism.
- Specific mention of a funded Anti-Poverty Strategy as it is a legal requirement for the Executive.
- Specific naming of the Gender Equality, Disability, LGBTQIA+ and Refugee Integration Strategies and timelines for their implementation.
- Specific naming of the Reviews into Discretionary Support and Welfare Mitigations which contain important actions to address poverty.
- The inclusion of Equality as a new Mission to ensure it is central to the work of Government and set in the context of our equality legislation and international obligations.
- In general, we would like to see more focused actions in the final Programme for Government in the areas of: gender equality, unpaid care, community-based education and training, women's health, investing in care jobs and care skills, childcare for skills development, education and training, Relationship & Sexuality Education (RSE), Hate Crime legislation, investment in prevention work and partnership working with the Community & Voluntary Sector.