



# **Consultation response**

## **'Unlocking the talent of our community'**

Submitted to the Department for Communities and Local Government

18 June 2008

Understanding and supporting women and their organisations

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## **About the Women's Resource Centre**

The Women's Resource Centre (WRC) is a charity which supports women's organisations to be more effective and sustainable. We provide training, information, resources and one-to-one support on a range of organisational development issues. We also lobby decision makers on behalf of the women's not-for-profit sector for improved representation and funding.

Our members work in a wide range of fields including violence against women, employment, education, rights and equality, the criminal justice system and the environment. They deliver services to and campaign on behalf of some of the most marginalised communities of women.

There are over ten thousand people working or volunteering for our members who support almost half a million individuals each year.

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## **About Women Acting in Today's Society**

WAITS works with women from diverse and disadvantaged backgrounds to build supportive networks, addresses personal and social issues, engages with policy makers and service providers to bring about change in women's lives and their communities.

## **Introduction**

We welcome the opportunity to input into the government's empowerment agenda. We are keen to ensure that its ambition to increase active citizenship, improve local services and deprived areas and strengthen local accountability is underpinned by a clear equalities framework and does not overlook the vital contribution of the women's voluntary sector.

This consultation response includes comments and recommendations from WAITS.

### **Question 1: How can the government at all levels work together to tackle worklessness and promote enterprise in the most deprived areas?**

### **Question 2: What are the best means of coordinating social, economic and physical regeneration?**

Along with NAVCA and Urban Forum, we think that tackling worklessness and promoting enterprise must include an explicit focus on social regeneration. In addition, gender and equalities must be integral to policies and plans for empowering communities. One of the best ways for the government to do this is to sustainably fund women's organisations.

Our members work with marginalised and often vulnerable women who benefit from the holistic support that women's organisations can provide. Women's organisations address social exclusion and community cohesion by supporting women who are on the margins of communities, enabling them to access opportunities such as developing new skills or building their confidence – essential stepping stones to (re)entering the job market or training.

Regeneration needs to be viewed through a gender lens to ensure that the different needs of women and men are taken into account. For example, women are more likely to have caring responsibilities or be lone parents and consequently may require a different approach from men e.g. flexible training courses. Support to help women develop business skills is also needed, particularly for women from black and minority ethnic communities.

WRC supports the points raised by Urban Forum in response to this consultation that volunteering is a vital route to employment. For example, one study into the social and economic impact of women's centres in Belfast found that not only did the centres provide effective support services covering issues like sexual and domestic violence, self harm and social security advice to some of the most vulnerable women in the community; they also played an important role in the local economy and in local community infrastructure. The centres provided childcare enabling women to take up training and employment opportunities, and

acted as a gateway to employment, with 40% of their employees having previously been volunteers or users at the centre.<sup>1</sup>

**Recommendation:**

- **The government acknowledges the value of women’s organisations and their role in supporting women, their families and the wider community.**

We are very concerned about the representation and participation of women and other under-represented groups on Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs). Given that they are the key mechanism for determining local priorities and allocating funds, it is vital that groups, such as women’s organisations have the opportunity to articulate the concerns of women and influence the local agenda.

Recent work we did on women’s participation in LSPs shows that women are appallingly represented on LSPs, especially in senior positions, and that women’s organisations are also severely under-represented, with just 1.8% of voluntary and community sector (VCS) representatives on LSPs being women’s groups, despite women’s groups making up 7% of the VCS.

**We have reiterated some of the recommendations from the LSP research which will help to ensure that women’s voices are included:**

- **the new ‘duty to involve’ for local authorities should include equalities targets, including increasing representation of women on LSPs.**
- **the new ‘duty to involve’ for local authorities should include targets for supporting the engagement of specialist equalities VCS, including women’s organisations.**
- **local grant funding should support women’s organisations and other specialist groups to engage with LSPs and other local forums.**

However, steps towards increasing representation should also take account of participation. In a study of local decision making in Manchester, Oxfam found that even when women were present in equal numbers to men, they tended to speak less often and for less time than men.<sup>2</sup>

Oxfam made a number of useful recommendations as to how this could be addressed, including:

- Try having female and male co-Chairs or rotating Chairs.
- Consider whether the issues on the table will motivate both women and men to attend.
- Consider holding single sex meetings, or creating single sex subgroups for certain activities.

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<sup>1</sup> Taillon, R. (2000), *The Social and Economic Impact of Women’s Centres in Greater Belfast: Summary Report*, Women’s Support Network: Belfast.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.oxfam.org.uk/resources/ukpoverty/downloads/notseennoheard.pdf>

With the input of women's groups, LSPs and local authorities will have access to huge amounts of gender expertise and intelligence on how best to meet the needs of local women (and therefore families) in their community.

### **Question 3: What is the role of the government in encouraging and supporting citizens to be active?**

### **Question 4: What steps need to be taken to revive involvement in local civic and democratic roles?**

To ensure community involvement and real social cohesion, there must be an understanding and acknowledgement of the need for single-issue equality groups, such as women's rape crisis groups, Turkish and Kurdish women's groups, African women's groups, or lesbian groups. People who are oppressed and disadvantaged often need some form of separate space to share, learn and be empowered, before they can take this out into the wider world.

This is because some groups of women experience greater marginalisation and isolation and have particular experiences as a result of being both female and dealing with the impacts of racism, xenophobia, homophobia, disabilism, class, poverty, health status etc. (often referred to as intersectional discrimination).

Women's organisations develop to meet need, so those services which are led by and for specific communities of women, such as Black and Minority Ethnic, lesbian, bisexual, older and younger women, lone mothers, mental health survivors etc. are crucial - they empower women to develop a sense of autonomy and self-determination.

This consultation needs to take account of the wider policy agenda, for example the current proposals about so-called 'Single Group' funding.<sup>3</sup> The misguided notion that groups working on 'single issues' are in some way separatist and divisive is dangerous and will result in further marginalisation and isolation of the most vulnerable people in society.<sup>4</sup> If the draft Guidance is implemented, it will give many statutory funders, particularly local authorities, a 'green light' to reinforce and entrench already questionable and damaging funding practices. In our view the guidance should be scrapped.

Whilst women are often active at the grassroots level in their local communities, their participation at the decision making level (as discussed earlier) is less common. To increase women's civic engagement at the decision making level government should establish minimum standards for gender representation on LSPs and monitor the level of participation on them.

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<sup>3</sup> Communities and Local Government (2008) Cohesion Guidance for Funders. CLG

<sup>4</sup> Women's Resource Centre has submitted a separate response to the Cohesion Guidance for Funders.

**Recommendation:**

- **Government should establish minimum standards for gender representation on LSPs and monitor the level of participation on them.**

Government should also identify and address barriers to representation, for example, by identifying models of best practice in community engagement, providing resources for communities and VCS involvement, providing crèche facilities and reducing the level of jargon in public sector policies.

**Good practice on consultation:**

WRC has been running a policy forum for the women's sector for the last 4 years. Women's organisations from different equalities groups and areas of work are invited to join the forum. It is a space where WRC can learn about the key issues and priorities of women's organisations and a chance to find out what is happening 'on the ground'. Members can exchange information, share good practice and build networks. In acknowledgement of this vital expert input and time (as well as the practicalities of small organisations arranging cover to attend meetings) we offer a payment as well as travel and childcare expenses for participation in meetings. As a result women's organisations know that they are valued and have a genuine opportunity to engage and influence at a policy level.<sup>5</sup>

**Good practice on engagement:**

Women Acting in Today's Society (WAITS) have found that using a peer mentoring model has been successful in engaging women in decision making. The scheme puts into plain English the devolution structure and what it means in a local and city wide context through provision of jargon free written material. It involves a mentor from each District developing a supportive relationship with women that would like to engage and participate in local district partnerships more effectively.

**Recommendation:**

- **Identify and address barriers to representation, for example:**
  - **reducing level of jargon**
  - **review methods of community engagement and identify and publicise models of good practice**
  - **ensure engagement is adequately resourced**
  - **provide support for people with families e.g. on-site crèche facilities, meetings at convenient times etc.**

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<sup>5</sup> Together We Can & Involve (2005) *The True Costs of Public Participation*. Involve

## **Question 5: How can the power of consumers be better used to improve local services?**

## **Question 6: How can social housing tenants be given more choice and voice?**

The power of consumers can be better used to improve local services by ensuring that there are effective mechanisms for gathering service user feedback and by fully involving service users and stakeholders in the design and delivery of services.

The same recommendations as above apply in terms of identifying and addressing barriers to representation. Appropriate methods of community engagement should be employed, such as holding women-only events or contacting local women's networks or forums to hold events about particular issues with their members.

It is important that individuals and organisations which become involved in consultations or service delivery etc. receive clear feedback about how their input has been incorporated into policy and planning processes. Failure to do this leaves people feeling disenfranchised and disempowered.

Services users and other stakeholders should be informed about how to hold public services to account e.g. understanding how to make a complaint or use public law remedies to challenge unfair decisions.

In addition, they should be made aware of the range of the other legislative tools available such as the Race, Gender and Disability Equality Duties and the Human Rights Act which can be used to ensure public bodies integrate equalities into their work.

As discussed in the previous section, meaningful representation and *participation* of the local community, particularly those from communities which are marginalised or who experience discrimination, on relevant local forums such as Community Empowerment Networks (CENs) (where they exist) and LSPs is vital in terms of highlighting issues which might otherwise be hidden or overlooked e.g. sexual violence or domestic violence, female genital mutilation, forced marriage etc.

However, there is also the broader policy agenda to consider. There has been much rhetoric about services being tailored to meet the needs of individuals and attempts to involve stakeholders in the planning and development of services. But the government also wants to co-opt the VCS into delivering public services and is embedding a market based approach to this.

Far from leading to 'a more diverse supply of providers' we are finding that increasingly it is large, generic organisations that are taking over contracts which could arguably be better fulfilled by small, specialist organisations who have the expertise and experience of meeting the needs of specific groups of people – often the most marginalised and vulnerable.

A prime example of this is the current trend for refuge contracts to be awarded to large housing associations in spite of the fact that they often have no experience of providing support to women who have experienced violence.<sup>6</sup> Preference for economies of scale and ease of administration should not take precedence over need.

WRC research has found that not only are women's organisations wanted by women, but they also save the Government money. The WRC economic impact pilot study on the women's sector provides an effective methodology for calculating the economic gains brought about by the investment in women's organisations, and found that women's organisations provide value for money, representing an impressive return on funding/investment (up to 385% in the case studies).

They are saving the state potentially millions of pounds through their intervention and prevention work. Without women's organisations, more women would be turning to public services with problems that could have been prevented.<sup>7</sup>

**Recommendations:**

- **Engage with women and women's organisations by holding women-only events or consultations.**
- **Provide clear feedback about how input from individuals or organisations is fed into policy and planning processes.**
- **Ensure that individuals and the VCS are aware of how to hold public bodies to account e.g. using public law, the Equality Duties and Human Rights law.**
- **Issue guidance to local authorities to promote funding for women's organisations and for other marginalised minority groups as an effective way of promoting integration and cohesion.**

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<sup>6</sup> Women's Resource Centre (2007) *Funding of London Women's Refuges: Report for London Councils*. WRC.

<sup>7</sup> Matrix Consultancy/Women's Resource Centre (2006) *The economic and social impact of the women's voluntary and community sector: A pilot study*. WRC.

**Question 7: What more is needed to encourage consistently strong leadership?**

**Question 8: How best can we increase opportunities for communities to hold local public officials and representatives to account?**

See recommendations for questions 5 and 6.

Models such as peer-mentoring, as mentioned earlier, have been shown to help women develop the confidence and skills needed to be engaged in decision making. Making schemes such as this more widely available may provide opportunities for under-represented groups to develop their leadership skills.

We agree with NAVCA and Urban Forum that more support for the VCS, including resources, support for CENs and supporting community engagement in LSPs and Local Area Agreements is crucial to increase opportunities to hold local public officials to account.

In addition, there is a need for independent bodies in the VCS to support individuals or organisations who want to hold public bodies to account. Specialist equalities infrastructure organisations like WAITS and WRC are in a position as independent organisations to support this.

**Recommendations:**

- **Ensure that practical support for genuine engagement with the women's VCS is available including that it is properly resourced.**
- **Acknowledge the role of specialist equalities organisations who can provide support to individuals or organisations in holding public bodies to account.**

## Summary of recommendations

- The government acknowledges the value of women's organisations and their role in supporting women, their families and the wider community.
- The new 'duty to involve' for local authorities should include equalities targets, including increasing representation of women on LSPs.
- The new 'duty to involve' for local authorities should include targets for supporting the engagement of specialist equalities VCS, including women's organisations.
- Local grant funding should support women's organisations and other specialist groups to engage with LSPs and other local forums.
- Government should establish minimum standards for gender representation on LSPs and monitor the level of participation on them.
- Identify and address barriers to representation, for example:
  - reducing level of jargon
  - review methods of community engagement and identify and publicise models of good practice
  - ensure engagement is adequately resourced
  - provide support for people with families e.g. on-site crèche, meetings at convenient times etc.
- Engage with women and women's organisations by holding women-only events or consultations.
- Provide clear feedback about how input from individuals or organisations is fed into policy and planning processes.
- Ensure that individuals and the VCS are aware of how to hold public bodies to account e.g. using public law, the Equality Duties and Human Rights law.
- Issue guidance to local authorities to promote funding for women's organisations and for other marginalised minority groups as an effective way of promoting integration and cohesion.
- Ensure that practical support for genuine engagement with the women's VCS is available including that it is properly resourced.
- Acknowledge the role of specialist equalities organisations who can provide support to individuals or organisations in holding public bodies to account.