



# **Consultation briefing**

## **'Strengthening Women's Voices in Government'**

Consultation by the Government Equalities Office

April 2011

Understanding and supporting  
women and their organisations

This document is available in other formats. Contact the Women's Resource Centre on 020 7324 3030 or [info@wrc.org.uk](mailto:info@wrc.org.uk)

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## Introduction

In 2010 the Women's National Commission (WNC) was abolished ending 40 years of democratic input into government on behalf of women and the women's sector. Through its membership, the WNC provided a connection to government and a platform for the voices of women and women's groups from across the UK working to end discrimination, and made a significant contribution to shaping government policy and practice on women's equality. (See WRC's response here <http://www.wrc.org.uk/news/default.aspx>). The Coalition Government's Equality Strategy, Building a Fairer Britain, was also published in December 2010 and forms the policy background to this consultation (see <http://www.equalities.gov.uk/pdf/Equality%20Strategy%20tagged%20version.pdf>)

The functions of the WNC have now been brought back into government through the Government Equalities Office (GEO) which sits in the Home Office. Ministers and the GEO have since met with women's sector organisations to discuss the alternative mechanisms the government intend to put into place to ensure women's voices are still heard by key policy and decision makers, and to outline a commitment to popular inclusivity and gender equality. The government have highlighted their continued commitment to the function of the WNC to enhance direct engagement by government and ministers with women, and also wish to increase transparency and accountability with a focus on using new communication channels. This consultation is the first step in outlining a new engagement strategy between women, the organisations that support them and government.

It is important that a variety of organisations respond to this consultation to demonstrate the need for an effective and accessible mechanism for women in the UK to have their voices heard at ministerial level. This is also to give a picture of the women's voluntary and community sector in terms of capacity and ability to engage and the current issues that urgently need addressing in the sector.

**The consultation is open until 10 June 2011** and can be responded to only through an online survey:

<http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/StrengtheningWomensVoicesConsultation>

See [http://www.equalities.gov.uk/news/launch\\_of\\_consultation\\_-\\_stren.aspx](http://www.equalities.gov.uk/news/launch_of_consultation_-_stren.aspx) for more information.

If you would like to feed into WRC's response please contact [charlotte@wrc.org.uk](mailto:charlotte@wrc.org.uk) or using the contact details below **by 23 May 2011** or see our website [http://www.wrc.org.uk/resources/briefings\\_and\\_consultations/current\\_consultations.aspx](http://www.wrc.org.uk/resources/briefings_and_consultations/current_consultations.aspx). If you submit your own response please also send us a copy.

WRC have prepared this briefing to summarise the proposals and highlight the aspects which may be the most relevant and will have the most impact on women's voluntary and community sector organisations (VCOs) in terms of engagement with government. This briefing aims to:

- Summarise the key points from Strengthening Women's Voices in Government
- Suggest key issues and ideas to include in your response.

The consultation is made up of 12 questions followed by equalities and demographic information about individual and organisational respondents. It is divided into sections which focus on key features of the engagement strategy that GEO are proposing and specific questions around these.

Overall we are pleased that the GEO have addressed the need to develop methods for women to engage with government to raise key issues of concern and to be able to feed into the policies and decisions that will affect their lives. The consultation document outlines how *“government has a role to act as a catalyst and advocate for change, working to create equal opportunities which enable women to play a full part in society”* and understands that *“to develop policies that challenge these barriers and make a real difference to women’s lives it is essential that women’s voices are brought into the heart of government”*.

However, the focus on fairness and individuality over equality and equalities groups is concerning as it must not be assumed that all women start off in the same position and have access to the same opportunities due to a variety of complex intersectional factors that make up their identities and lives. In Building a Fairer Britain<sup>1</sup> it says *“we acknowledge that, from time to time, we will need to develop targeted strategies to help particular kinds of people, recognising their individuality, where they face distinct barriers, or especially deep and persistent inequalities”* which means that it may be possible to make a case for specialist needs and engagement for certain groups of women but it is unclear what this would mean in practice.

In terms of engagement with the women’s sector – organisations, campaigns, projects and services – there seems to be a stronger focus in the consultation on individual women rather than the organisations that support them. This is indicated by the method of using a simple survey, the way the questions are framed and the demographic data asked for. The concern here is that this will mean that the needs of those who are able to respond to the survey will be used as evidence of general needs and opinions with no analysis of who these women are, why they were able to respond, which women’s voices have not been heard and why this is. The fact that the only way to respond is through an online survey just compounds this.

The Equality Strategy commits to women being *“supported by high-quality services offering support tailored to individual needs”* but there are few questions about women’s organisations in the consultation. The GEO acknowledges that *“women’s organisations have played a crucial role across the UK in bringing women’s voices to government, advocating on behalf of women, campaigning for change and delivering services”* and claims that a central part of the strategy involves working in partnership with women’s organisations. However, they also wish to reach out to *“wider organisations which are not specifically or exclusively concerned with women’s interests”* which brings with it a danger of generic services and private companies advocating on behalf of women or claiming that they can provide appropriate services at the expense of specialist women’s organisations. This also raises issues in terms of service delivery and competition between organisations.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.equalities.gov.uk/news/equality\\_strategy.aspx](http://www.equalities.gov.uk/news/equality_strategy.aspx)

The focus on individual women also fails to recognise that women's organisations are often best placed to raise the issues, needs and concerns of their members and service users and that they offer a direct way to contact large groups of women from a wide variety of communities and often those who are the most marginalised and do not access other services.

There is very little about how the strategy will actually be implemented and if it will also translate to local government engagement with women and women's organisations in terms of the localism agenda.

A summary of the feedback from the consultation will be published as well as a document outlining the GEO's plans informed by the information received, but it is unclear when this will be or what the process and time scale will be for implementation.

## Summary of key points

The aims of the new engagement strategy are to:

1. Prioritise the issues which are important to women in the UK
2. Ensure that the views of women on these issues are fed into policy-making process (domestically and internationally)
3. Encourage and facilitate organisations to network and share best practice (locally and nationally)
4. Be transparent about the views government have received and how they are using this information

The approaches of the new model are:

- 5. Direct engagement**
- 6. Bringing in expertise**
- 7. Looking ahead**
- 8. A new IT platform**

The consultation questions are based around these areas and are outlined below, with other initial comments and issues to highlight.

	Question	WRC comments
1.	Outline the three most important challenges or priorities for women in the UK today	There are obvious issues with only being able to choose three and this simplistic and hierarchical approach to women's rights is inappropriate and unfair. WRC suggest that rather than conform to this narrow categorisation of issues that affect women, respondents outline these issues with the question itself and highlight the variety and depth of the issues they work on and the women they work with.
2.	Rank the four distinct approaches in order of preference	It is inappropriate to create a hierarchy of these different methods as they should all be used in conjunction and to support each other to ensure a detailed and comprehensive strategy.
3.	Do you or your organisation consider there should be other means used to engage and listen to women than those outlined?	An accessible and tailored approach must be used to avoid this impacting on the essential core services that organisations provide.
4.	Are these approaches sufficient to ensure the following categories of women/organisations can take part? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Women entrepreneurs/women in business</i></li> <li>• <i>Women in management including corporate roles</i></li> <li>• <i>Women in non-traditional jobs</i></li> </ul>	Some of the diversity of women is recognised but the strategy must incorporate an intersectional equalities framework, to address the impact on all women.  By categorising women in this way the question ignores women's multiple identities and again creates a false competition and

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Women who work</i></li> <li>• <i>Women based at home (not home-workers)</i></li> <li>• <i>Women from black and minority ethnic communities</i></li> <li>• <i>Women migrants</i></li> <li>• <i>Women asylum-seekers/refugees</i></li> <li>• <i>Transgender people</i></li> <li>• <i>Lesbian/bisexual women</i></li> <li>• <i>Women with caring responsibilities (not children)</i></li> <li>• <i>Women with children/mums</i></li> <li>• <i>Women from faith communities</i></li> <li>• <i>Younger women (below 25)</i></li> <li>• <i>Older/retired women</i></li> <li>• <i>Women living in rural areas</i></li> <li>• <i>Gypsy and Traveller women</i></li> <li>• <i>Disabled women</i></li> <li>• <i>Women living in poverty</i></li> <li>• <i>Women offenders</i></li> <li>• <i>Marginalised women</i></li> <li>• <i>Grassroots/local organisations</i></li> <li>• <i>Membership organisations</i></li> <li>• <i>Frontline/service delivery organisations</i></li> <li>• <i>National organisations</i></li> <li>• <i>UK-based international organisations based</i></li> <li>• <i>Other, please specify</i></li> </ul>	<p>hierarchy between different groups.</p> <p>The question also fails to acknowledge that individual women answering may only be able to answer from their own perspective while organisations can only give a perspective for the women they work with; therefore many groups may not have anyone to provide an accurate answer for them.</p>
<p><b>4 (a)</b></p>	<p>Outline other actions or approaches which you or your organisation consider should be used to ensure we include the above categories of women/organisations so they can take part?</p>	<p>Funding, resources and capacity building support for women’s organisations will obviously mean that they are better placed to respond and engage.</p> <p>For individual women this will vary considerably but some immediate issues are around access. Women who do not have English as their first language, women who need accessible materials (e.g. in Braille, audio or easy-read formats), women who do not have literacy or ICT</p>

	skills, access to computers and the internet, especially with the closure of many libraries and community centres etc.
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## **DIRECT ENGAGEMENT**

*Direct engagement between ministers, women and organisations that represent women, to ensure government understands the views of a range of women in the UK and providing the opportunity for a genuine two-way dialogue on policies that affect women.*

The approach to this includes a programme of outreach, meetings and events. However there is little information on how women and women’s organisations will be supported to attend these and a lack of understanding of the capacity issues that events entail.

The document outlines the kind of engagement that has already taken place e.g. a workshop for Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) to support the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). However, this meeting has a closed guest list which was unrepresentative of women’s organisations in the UK with many organisations having to contact the GEO directly and lobby to be invited. Other activities have not been well advertised or involved a range of women.

	<b>Question</b>	<b>WRC comments</b>
5.	Rank which of the following is the most effective: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Conferences</i></li> <li>• <i>Discussion groups</i></li> <li>• <i>Networking events</i></li> <li>• <i>Training events (e.g. events to learn about UN gender policy and what the UK is doing to implement it)</i></li> <li>• <i>Visits by ministers or policy officials</i></li> <li>• <i>What else would you like to see?</i></li> </ul>	<p>Again it is inappropriate to create a hierarchy of these different methods as they should all be used in conjunction and to support each other to ensure a detailed and comprehensive strategy.</p> <p>There are important issues about the capacity of women’s organisations to engage in these processes and they must be appropriately supported and resourced to participate. Also with the closure of many services it may only be the larger or generic organisations who can be involved and it may fall to a few organisations to be involved in a variety of different events and forums as representative voices which will have a huge impact on their capacity and work.</p> <p>It is also vital for women’s organisations to be able to see the value in engagement and to understand and see the impact that their participation will have. It must be worth their while to use the precious time, energy and resources that they have to be involved in these mechanisms and attend events etc.</p>

	especially as many organisations will have few full-time staff let alone any dedicated policy staff who can work on this. In order to fully engage without this impacting on their core work, organisations would need a paid Policy Officer and resources to participate.
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## **BRINGING IN EXPERTISE**

*Bringing in expertise from the women's sector and beyond to support the new model, and support independence from government where this is critical, particularly in the international arena.*

The approach acknowledges the insight and knowledge of the women's sector but also aims to work with community groups and business leaders who may have different priorities and not the same kind of understanding and expertise in terms of women's rights.

	<b>Question</b>	<b>WRC comments</b>
6.	<p>Rank which of the following is the most effective:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Time-limited 'expert' groups</i></li> <li>• <i>One-off policy forums</i></li> <li>• <i>Consortiums to provide expertise on specific issues</i></li> <li>• <i>Commissioning organisations or business</i></li> <li>• <i>What else would you like to see?</i></li> </ul>	<p>Again it is inappropriate to create a hierarchy of these different methods as they should all be used in conjunction and to support each other to ensure a detailed and comprehensive strategy.</p> <p>There may be concern about who would be invited to be included in policy forums and how these groups would be chosen. There are also issues with the capacity, funding and resources for women's organisations and individual women/service users to engage in these ways.</p> <p>There are some good examples of existing consortiums e.g. the Women's Health and Equality Consortium (WHEC) and the WNC Domestic Violence sub-group who have continued to meet.</p> <p>It may be inappropriate for businesses to be commissioned to gather women's views on particular topics or for specific purposes. This also takes the opportunities away from women's organisations who may be best placed to do this work in terms of expertise and understanding.</p> <p>Women's organisations are able to work with and access particularly</p>

	<p>marginalised women. However, if these specialist services have closed, the ways to reach these women may also have disappeared as they may not access other services. Therefore their voices and needs will not be acknowledged.</p> <p>It is encouraging to see that there is an understanding of how these processes must be independent of government but this may be compromised if businesses are involved as they may have other interests and relationships with government.</p> <p>There are important issues about the capacity of women’s organisations to engage in these processes and they must be appropriately supported and resourced to participate. Also with the closure of many services it may only be the larger or generic organisations who can be involved and it may fall to a few organisations to be involved in a variety of different events and forums as representative voices which will have a huge impact on their capacity and work.</p> <p>It is also vital for women’s organisations to be able to see the value in engagement and to understand and see the impact that their participation will have. It must be worth their while to use the precious time, energy and resources that they have to be involved in these mechanisms and attend events etc. especially as many organisations will have few full-time staff let alone any dedicated policy staff who can work on this. In order to fully engage without this impacting on their core work, organisations would need a paid Policy Officer and resources to participate.</p>
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**LOOKING AHEAD**

*Looking ahead to enable us to anticipate emerging and future issues, such as the impact of the changing demography of the UK, which will be important for women.*

There is an understanding that the government must “*anticipate new problems arising as society changes, or external and environmental factors affect women’s experience*” but there is no acknowledgement that the government’s own decisions may do this and the impact this

has on women's rights. For example the impact on women's services and organisations following the local authority cuts, the closure of Sure Start centres and libraries, and the changes to legal aid which mean that many women will not be able to access this service.

	<b>Question</b>	<b>WRC comments</b>
7.	<p>Rank which of the following is the most effective:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Direct engagement – meetings and events</i></li> <li>• <i>Online engagement</i></li> <li>• <i>Conferences</i></li> <li>• <i>Specially commissioned research</i></li> <li>• <i>Official data and statistics</i></li> <li>• <i>What else would you like to see?</i></li> </ul>	<p>Again it is inappropriate to create a hierarchy of these different methods as they should all be used in conjunction and to support each other to ensure a detailed and comprehensive strategy.</p> <p>There is concern at the practicality of directly engaging with individual women and how this will actually happen and again whose voices will end up being heard and prioritized.</p> <p>Online engagement is particularly limiting as webchats or online surveys are not accessible to all women. For individual women this will vary considerably but some immediate issues are around access. Women who do not have English as their first language, women who need accessible materials (e.g. in Braille, audio or easy-read formats), women who do not have literacy or ICT skills, access to computers and the internet, especially with the closure of many libraries and community centres etc.</p> <p>There are also problems with relying on Census data and the issues around how this is collected and its reliability. There must be a range of ways to collect demographic data on women in the UK and to monitor this effectively to show trends and areas of need.</p> <p>Again if work is to be commissioned it may be inappropriate for businesses to be commissioned to gather information/evidence on particular topics or for specific purposes. This takes the opportunities away from women's organisations who may be best placed to do this work in terms of expertise and understanding. These projects must also be properly resourced and financed to ensure they are robust.</p>

## **A NEW IT PLATFORM**

*A new IT platform, making the most of modern communication techniques to get the informed voice of women to government when they need to be heard.*

One of the main ideas coming out of the consultation is to use IT and online tools as a way to engage a large number of women at minimal cost. This aims to provide *“a platform for women and women’s organisations to share views and opinions on the issues which are important to them, and providing another avenue for government to listen, consult and respond”* but is unclear about how government will respond to the various ways women can interact e.g. blogging tools.

The GEO have already started to set up this online platform with a regular Women’s Engagement newsletter which individual woman and organisations can sign up to receive as well as becoming a ‘partner’ in the Women’s Engagement Forum. This is very impractical as it is unclear who else has ‘partner’ status and if there are allocated seats or roles to ensure a diverse group covering all equalities groups. It is also unclear how this forum will work if it is made up of individual women as well as organisations whose priorities, needs and ways of working may be very different.

	<b>Question</b>	<b>WRC comments</b>
8.	<p>Identify the top five from the list below which you or your organisation consider should be available on the new site:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Regular updates on policy relevant to women in the UK</i></li> <li>• <i>Signposting to other government departments’ policy relevant to women in the UK</i></li> <li>• <i>Copies of newsletters and updates emailed out to subscribers</i></li> <li>• <i>Photographs of events, conferences and visits</i></li> <li>• <i>Updates from ministers</i></li> <li>• <i>Updates from officials</i></li> <li>• <i>Videos – interviews with ministers and videos of events</i></li> </ul>	<p>Again it is inappropriate to create a hierarchy of these different methods as they should all be used in conjunction and to support each other to ensure a detailed and comprehensive strategy. Only being able to choose five of the options is also limiting.</p> <p>The options themselves are too limited and do not give enough detail on what this would actually look like. The idea of voting buttons on aspects of government policy seems particularly worrying as will the only options be ‘yes’ or ‘no’? This does not allow any critical analysis or further information to be given on the merits or not of a policy and seems a very simplistic way of answering what may be very complex questions.</p> <p>Again it is vital for women’s organisations to be able to see the value in engagement and to understand and see the impact that their participation will have. It must be worth their while to use the precious time, energy and resources that they have to be involved in these mechanisms as even online</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Presentations and other documents used at events and conferences</i></li> <li>• <i>Surveys to gather views on specific topics or policy areas</i></li> <li>• <i>Feedback on what has happened as a result of what you have told us</i></li> <li>• <i>Discussion groups on themed topics like work-life balance or violence against women and girls</i></li> <li>• <i>Voting buttons seeking views on aspects of government policy</i></li> <li>• <i>Space where you can leave feedback or comment</i></li> <li>• <i>Information about international policy and initiatives</i></li> <li>• <i>Links to relevant international forums, e.g. UN Women</i></li> </ul>	<p>engagement is very time consuming. Many organisations will have few full-time staff let alone any dedicated policy staff who can work on this and may not have up-to-date computer equipment or fast internet access. Staff may also need training on using online tools and support with this. In order to fully engage without this impacting on their core work, organisations would need a paid Policy Officer, resources and support to participate.</p>
9.	<p>What other information would you like to see on the site?</p>	<p>The strategy includes providing “<i>access to information, help and advice, including signposting to specialist organisations</i>” which would be useful to have on the site. However, this must be updated information to ensure that it remains useful and should involve a thorough audit of the women’s sector and other relevant organisations. There also may be issues if these specialist projects and services have closed.</p>
10.	<p>What other kinds of functions would you like to see on the site?</p>	<p>WRC already exists as a way for women’s organisations to network and support each other and the Women’s Café is one way of providing this function (see <a href="http://thewomenscafe.ning.com">http://thewomenscafe.ning.com</a>). Replication of work and providing too many forums or groups to join and which provide information can mean that people are overloaded and that these forums are not used effectively.</p>
11.	<p>Which of the following IT and social media tools you or your organisation use:</p> <p>- How often do you use the following to network or keep in touch, e.g. with friends or family (for membership organisations this means with your</p>	<p>The obvious problem with relying on these online tools is that many women will not have access to computers or the internet, especially with the closure of libraries and community centres.</p> <p>Even online engagement is very time consuming and many women’s organisations will have few full-time staff let alone any dedicated policy staff</p>

<p>members)? 1 everyday; 2 once a week; 3 once a month; 4 occasionally; 5 hardly ever; 6 prefer not to use; 7 have not come across before.</p> <p>- What would be the most effective for you or your organisation? Please identify the top 5 most effective in your/your organisation's view, ranking from 1 to 5 with 1 being the most effective.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Newsletters</i></li> <li>• <i>Blogs</i></li> <li>• <i>Twitter</i></li> <li>• <i>Discussion groups</i></li> <li>• <i>Flickr</i></li> <li>• <i>Facebook</i></li> <li>• <i>LinkedIn</i></li> <li>• <i>YouTube</i></li> <li>• <i>Regular email updates</i></li> <li>• <i>Web-based surveys</i></li> <li>• <i>Other, please describe</i></li> </ul>	<p>who can work on this and may not have up-to-date computer equipment or fast internet access. Staff may also need training on using online tools and support with this. In order to fully engage without this impacting on their core work, organisations would need a paid Policy Officer, resources and support to participate.</p> <p>There is also an issue with there being such a variety of social media tools and the capacity issues for organisations in keeping these updated and being able to use them regularly. Replication of work and providing too many forums or groups to join and which provide information can mean that people are overloaded and that these forums are not used effectively.</p> <p>Although online tools can be very useful for women who are particularly isolated and for contacting a large group at once, they should never be seen as a replacement for face-to-face interaction and meetings and events.</p>
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## **Monitoring and evaluation**

There is little on how the strategy will be evaluated and how any targets will be monitored to ensure that they are effective. How will the progress of the strategy be measured? We would like to see the GEO working with other agencies to undertake an audit of the women's sector and continue to collect data on women and encourage commitment to funding ongoing research.

We would also like to see an evaluation of the different engagement methods to ensure that this is being considered and any appropriate changes are made.

All statutory agencies and government departments should be encouraged to evaluate and review their performance on engaging and responding to women and women's organisations.

## **About 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 health, 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.

For more information about this briefing, contact:

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