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Written evidence for the Communities and Local Government Committee Inquiry regarding the audit and inspection of local authorities.

Submission from the Women's Resource Centre

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Please note the Women's Resource Centre would like to provide oral evidence about how changes to local audit and inspection will impact upon women.

Executive Summary

- The Women's Resource Centre (WRC) believes that the introduction of a decentralised audit regime will negatively impact on gender equality and service provision to vulnerable women at a local level.
- WRC believes that centralised audit and inspection is vital to address inefficiencies featured in local decision making and promote equality to ensure that women receive the services they need.
- The Women's Resource Centre wishes to provide oral evidence to the Select Committee and hopes that the Committee will consider the impact of changes to auditing and inspection from an equalities perspective.

Background information

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.

Consultation response

1. As central government devolves greater power to local authorities the transfer of responsibility must be paired with accountability. It is essential that an independent centralised regulatory body inspects the performance of local authorities and holds them to account.
2. The Women's Resource Centre (WRC) is extremely concerned about the government's decision to disband the Audit Commission. We believe that the introduction of a decentralised audit regime will negatively impact on gender equality and service provision to vulnerable women at a local level.
3. The WRC's key area of concern regards the abolition of Comprehensive Area Assessments. Under the Comprehensive Area Assessment, local authorities were evaluated on their efforts to tackle inequality and focus on the needs of disadvantaged groups, including women. Partners would be assessed on how well they understood the nature and extent of inequality within their communities and how effectively they were working to reduce or eliminate discrimination.

4. By abolishing Comprehensive Area Assessments a crucial interagency focus on tackling inequality has been lost. The joined-up approach of the Comprehensive Area Assessment offered enhanced intelligence on how well local services worked together to achieve improvement and progress towards long-term goals. This loss has occurred at a time when comprehensive inspection of local authorities in relation to inequality is ever more crucial.
5. As funding contracts in the economic downturn local councils are less likely to fund specialist services which meet the diverse needs of their communities. Many local authorities do not understand the importance of gender inequality and cannot be relied upon to fund key women's services. Already in the infancy of public sector spending cuts, some local authorities have cut Domestic Coordinator posts due to the need to create efficiency savings.
6. Comprehensive Area Assessments encouraged authorities to adopt a broader view of 'value for money' and commission services that meet local needs. The assessments focused on both effective community engagement and understanding of the needs of vulnerable and marginalised groups. Most importantly; the assessment framework offered a means for enforcing the Duty to Involve and provided the sole mechanism through which local women's organisations could hold local authorities to account. The assessment's measurement of the representation of marginalised groups in local decision making, empowered women's organisations to challenge the representation of women and women's issues in local leadership.
7. Without comprehensive centralised audit and inspection, it is less likely that local authorities will actively address gender inequality in their local communities. WRC research shows that many local authorities do not deem gender equality to be a priority and fail to meet their legal obligations under the Gender Equality Duty and Duty to Involve.
8. Under the Government's decentralisation programme local government will be given greater responsibility for promoting community involvement in decisions; however it lacks a strong reputation on its engagement of diverse groups in local decision making. Women's organisations represent just 2% of VCS representatives on Local Strategic Partnerships¹ and repeatedly report experiencing difficulties with public bodies in participating and influencing locally².
9. Due to a myth of gender equality authorities often pursue gender neutral policies or misinterpret gender equality to mean treating men and women the same. These problems contribute to the under valuation of the importance of women-only services and increases authorities reluctance to engage with women's voluntary and community organisations. This in turn limits local authorities' capacity to ensure that the needs of the women within their communities are effectively met.

¹ Urban Forum, Oxfam, Women's Resource Centre, 2007, Where are the women in LSPs?

http://www.wrc.org.uk/includes/documents/cm_docs/2008/w/womenlsp.pdf

² WRC, 2010, Power & Prejudice: Combating gender inequality through women's organisations

http://www.wrc.org.uk/includes/documents/cm_docs/2010/w/wrc_power_and_prejudice_final.pdf

10. Women's organisations are often excluded from commissioning processes as they wish to enlist a generic provider to save money. A reduction of public funding may increase cost consciousness and encourage councils to disregard the social value of services. There is an active risk that equalities will be marginalised in the recession as councils seek to focus on financial 'priorities'. It may be misinterpreted as an issue that is 'frivolous' at a time when councils are seeking financial survival, rather than viewed as a vital way to effectively meet the diverse needs of communities.
11. Centralised audit and inspection provides an essential opportunity to address inefficiencies featured in local decision making and promote equality to ensure that women receive the services they need. It provides a safeguard for the protection of services that benefit the majority of the population and transcends the politics of local decision making. Failure to have a comprehensive approach to audit and inspection may mean that the needs of minority groups, such as disabled women, may be overlooked. It was planned that Comprehensive Area Assessments were to include monitoring of Equalities Duties, however without that mechanism national government will not have that monitoring data.
12. National regulation of local authority performance is ever more important due to proposed changes to the Public Sector Duties contained within the Equality Act 2010. Under the proposed measures public bodies will no longer have to produce a Gender Equality Scheme outlining the actions they have taken to promote gender equality. Local authorities will be permitted to set a minimum of one equality objective focusing on the protected characteristic of their choice, for example race. Under this new system it is less likely that gender will be prioritised; therefore Government will have limited evidence of how local authorities are meeting local women's needs.
13. The Government's plan to refocus the audit of councils on helping local people hold local bodies to account is an insufficient mechanism to ensure good public authority performance. Greater transparency and local democratic accountability should compliment rather than replace a centralised regulatory system. Plans to empower local communities may in practice perpetuate existing local power structures and replicate the under-representation of women in local decision making. For example, women predominantly assume caring responsibilities within families and therefore often have limited ability to engage in local politics.
14. Increased local democratic accountability could lead to inconsistency in regulatory oversight, as public challenges depend on the capacity, inclination and education of local people. Whilst authorities may publish data, citizens may not be interested in accessing information or fully aware of the context or implications of the information made available. For example, civil servants acquire expertise in policy areas over the course of their careers, the general public may lack the background and experience required to comprehend the implications of local government actions.
15. Where women seek to mount legal challenges against local authority decisions; their access to justice may now be restricted due to planned reductions to

legal aid. Under government proposals women's eligibility and access to funding will be dramatically reduced.