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RE: Regeneration Bill

Response to Social Development Committee:

On behalf of the women's centres, groups and organisations currently in receipt of funding from the Department of Social Development (DSD) through various funding streams the Women's Support Network (WSN) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Regeneration Bill. The implications for the Women's Sector and indeed the wider independent Community and Voluntary Sector following confer of regeneration and community development powers to the new district councils are significant.

WSN on behalf of the Women's Sector asks that the Social Development Committee consider the following:

The lack of detail and transparency

There is a lack of detail in the Bill in terms of how resources from DSD will transfer to Council and the specifics of how this is to be used by councils, apart from a non prescriptive list of example activities; councils will have wide discretion about what they decide to fund.

Organisations have approached their councils in a bid to ascertain how they intend to address social need in their areas from 01 April 2016. Some councils were not ready to discuss their position, however and more worrying was the information obtained from more than 60% of the sector organisations who were told that in-house council delivery would be applied to meet social need in their areas. There would be some tenders or service level agreements (SLAs) for specific pieces of work. The funding that the sector organisations has to date received through DSD supports community development and provides resources for core staff and overheads that enables these organisations to meet the needs of those in the most disadvantaged areas of Northern Ireland. Without funding for these core activities the organisations will face closure and/or significant job losses. The resourcing of core staff and overheads enables these organisations to lever funding from other sources to provide additional services to meet local social need. Small tenders or SLAs will not provide the security needed to maintain these organisations.

Joined up thinking

There is an obvious lack of joined up thinking between DSD, DARD and the new councils. The very definition of 'rural' as currently defined by DSD and DARD will result in organisations 'falling' between the two, for example Cookstown is rural to one but not the other. Urban areas will be significantly disadvantaged. DARD will not confer any budgets until at least 2020, therefore there will be no uniformity for organisations until then nor will councils be able to implement robust community plans.

The Department of Social Development has the key lead responsibility for supporting community development by tackling disadvantage and building sustainable communities. We would ask the Committee to seek further information and clarity on the proposed council community plans for meeting social need. We would ask that the Committee act on behalf of the sector to scrutinise and examine the detail that has not been included in the Regeneration Bill.

The DSD Policy Framework outlines the meaning of regeneration as:

Regeneration addressing Economic decline means to strengthen the local economy and create wealth by tackling worklessness and promoting job creation. It also aims to change behaviour, encouraging and supporting people to become more entrepreneurial.

Regeneration addressing Social decline means improving conditions for communities and neighbourhoods through creating safer environments and better coordinating public services.

Regeneration addressing Physical decline means improving the physical fabric of buildings and the public realm to create attractive, safe and sustainable places in which to live, work and visit.

WSN asks that the Committee ensures that these principles continued to be adhered to by the councils in meeting social need.

We would also encourage the Social Development Committee to take a lead role in ensuring the Assembly and the Department of Social Development in particular honour the wording and the spirit of the Concordat between the Voluntary and Community Sector and the Government.

Yours sincerely,

Karen Sweeney

On behalf of:

Ballybeen Women's Centre
Chrysalis Women's Centre, Craigavon
First Steps Women's Centre, Dungannon
Footprints Women's Centre
Foyle Women's Information Network
Greenway Women's Centre, Belfast
Magherafelt Women's Group Ltd
Strathfoyle Women's Activity Group Ltd
The Women's Centre, Derry
Waterside Women's Centre
Windsor Women's Centre
Falls Women's Centre
Shankill Women's Centre
Women's TEC
Kilcooley Women's Centre
ATLAS Women's Centre, Lisburn