

**DEPARTMENT FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT
AND DEPARTMENT FOR AGRICULTURE
AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT.**

**EVALUATION OF REGIONAL SUPPORT
ARRANGEMENTS FOR THE VOLUNTARY
AND COMMUNITY SECTOR**

FINAL REPORT

June 2015

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- Appendix III – Evaluation approaches agreed with the evaluation Steering Group for each strand
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Important Notice

This evaluation report has been prepared on the basis of the Terms of Reference set out in Appendix I and should be read in conjunction with this. This report is for the benefit of DSD and DARD only.

The report findings are based on consultation with and information provided by DSD, lead delivery organisations in relation to each strand of the Regional Infrastructure Support Programme and wider stakeholders relevant to the project. We have not verified the reliability or accuracy of information obtained in the course of our work and therefore this evaluation does not provide the same level of assurance as an audit.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Policy Context

The Voluntary and Community Unit (VCU) is part of the Urban Regeneration and Community Development Group within DSD, having lead responsibility for NI Executive policy in relation to the voluntary and community sector (VCS). Its mission is to strengthen relationships between government and the voluntary and community sector, creating the environment in which an enterprising, innovative and sustainable voluntary and community sector can thrive, contributing to government's purpose in tackling disadvantage.

This relationship is formally reflected in the Concordat between the VCS and the NI Executive, setting out the shared roles and responsibilities of each of these partners as they work together to build a participative, equitable and inclusive community. The Joint Government / Voluntary and Community Sector Forum, commonly known as the Joint Forum facilitates open discussion of key issues which impact on and shape the relationship between the voluntary and community sector and Northern Ireland Departments and their agencies.

The Programme for Government (PfG) 2011-2015 recognises the need for Government to work alongside the private, voluntary and community sectors to deliver tangible outcomes and improve people's lives. Indeed the VCS plays a key role in terms of a range of policy areas within the PfG including:-

- *Priority 1 – Growing a sustainable economy and investing in the future* – and specifically the action - social entrepreneurship/ enterprising actions – which commits to invest in social enterprise growth to increase sustainability in the VCS.
- *Sustainability* – sustainability policy is driven by intergenerational equity – securing a positive quality of life for present and future generations. This requires working together, across and beyond organisational and social boundaries to promote and encourage its recognition and acceptance;
- *Priority 2: Creating Opportunities, Tackling Disadvantage and Improving Health and Wellbeing* – The VCS delivers social change and extends social inclusion through providing services and support, to vulnerable and disadvantaged individuals and in helping to improve health and well-being more generally – in effect delivering outcomes that make a difference to people's lives; and
- *Priority 5: Delivering high quality efficient public services* – The VCS contributes to transforming public service delivery – not just by delivering services but also by shaping service design, and supporting user and volunteer involvement in services.
- Allied to the above there are also important linkages with DSD's Urban Regeneration and Community Development Framework, Supporting Action 4 – '*We will promote an effective and efficient VCS*'.

1.2 Current Support Arrangements – Regional Infrastructure Support Programme

In 2010, (informed by reports by the NI Audit Office and Public Accounts Committee) DSD VCU embarked on a substantial review of the previous Regional Infrastructure Support programme to ensure that support arrangements were clearly defined and fit for purpose. A key emphasis within this review, linked to the PAC recommendations, was to ensure that greater emphasis was given to evaluating and demonstrating outcomes being delivered by the VCS and the sustainability of sector organisations providing services. This was to assist funders and the VCS to assess the quality and value of the work being done and ensure that scarce resources were properly targeted and used effectively. The review involved extensive formal consultation and gave rise to a number of key recommendations to include:

- Support arrangements should reflect the PFG and link to key Departmental priorities, policies and strategies; and
- Support should be organised around key strands and encompass thematic/specialist expertise.

These five strands were generic, voluntary advice, volunteering, women in disadvantaged and rural areas and faith based engagement. Linked to this DSD VCU also supported the Women's Centre Childcare Fund (WCCF) on a temporary emergency basis pending the implementation of a co-ordinated childcare strategy for NI. The rationale for this was that whilst DSD has no policy responsibility to provide regional childcare in NI, the funding through the WCCF contributes to reducing child poverty, provides opportunities for parents to better themselves and contribute to their communities, thereby tackling disadvantage – and as such contributes to key DSD policy imperatives. There were all encompassed under the new umbrella/title of the Regional Infrastructure Support Programme (RISP).

1.3 Evaluation of the Regional Infrastructure Support Programme

In January 2015, DSD VCU engaged the Strategic Investment Board (SIB) to undertake two separate evaluations of the above RISP arrangements – a consolidated evaluation of 5 strands (generic, faith-based, voluntary advice, women in disadvantaged and rural areas and the WCCF) and an Interim Evaluation of the Volunteering Strategy and Action Plan for NI. This entailed the delivery of two separate reports, with this report relating to the first 5 strands referenced above.

These evaluations were completed in May 2015.

1.4 Evaluation Terms of Reference

The full Terms of Reference for the evaluation of RISP are included in Appendix I and summarised below. The requirements of the terms of reference are replicated in each of the 'strand' chapters in this evaluation report and in the overall conclusions on RISP in Section 7.

Strategic Context and Rationale

- a. Briefly review the strategic context under which the interventions operate and assess whether it represents an appropriate response to the position at its inception.
- b. Briefly review the original rationale for the strands outlining the precise nature and scale of the market failures and/or equity issues that the interventions were seeking to correct. Identify the scale of need and demand and conclude on the extent to which the rationale was valid.
- c. Examine the degree of complementarity with other DSD interventions. Identify the extent to which the individual strands overlapped with or duplicated other publicly funded support to VCS in Northern Ireland.

Operation and Delivery

- a. Assess the appropriateness of the interventions' delivery models adopted by strand delivery bodies, including marketing and promotion, the range of activities/support provided.
- b. Assess the operating procedures adopted by DSD to determine how effective the organisation has been in managing/delivering the strands.
- c. Identify the main risks that emerged during the operation of the Strands and any actions taken to reduce these risks. Assess whether the overall approach to risk management was robust and proportionate.
- d. Compare the costs actually incurred within the strands with those estimated at the outset, and clearly explain any reasons for variances.

Performance and Impact

- a. Review the outturn performance of the intervention against the original objectives and SMART targets, and if appropriate, identify reasons for any divergence. Provide recommendations for improvement in future interventions.
- b. Assess the quantified benefits generated to date, taking account of the aims, objectives and scope of the individual strands. The assessment should examine relevant outcome and impact indicators.
- c. Assess the extent to which the intervention has directly and indirectly generated other outcomes and impacts, including wider and regional benefits. These benefits should be quantified as fully as possible or, if quantification is not possible, a qualitative analysis should be presented of their scale and persistence.
- d. Determine the overall net impacts of the intervention. This should take account of deadweight/additionality, displacement, leakage and substitution effects based. Full consideration should be given to the outturn counterfactual position i.e. what would have happened in the absence of the strands.

Return on Investment and Value for Money

- a. Assess how the strands contribute to the strategic aims, objectives, targets and actions of the Concordat.

- b. Benchmark the management, performance and impact of the scheme against appropriate comparators. These comparators may be based in the UK, Republic of Ireland, Europe and/or internationally. Establish quantitative benchmarks where possible and identify if there are any lessons to be learned.
- c. Determine the extent to which value for money has been secured.

Equality Considerations

The evaluation should:

take into account the requirements of Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998

- a) In respect of any recommendations made consider whether there are any likely impacts on anti-poverty, social inclusion, equality of opportunity or good relations. In doing so, the service provider may recommend measures to mitigate against any adverse impacts;
- b) Consider the accessibility of the programme for all, in line with the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.

Overall Assessment and Lessons Learned

- a) The extent to which the Vision and aims of each regional support strand have been realised, making recommendations going forward.
- b) The extent to which the specified outcomes, in respect of each regional support strand, have been achieved, making recommendations going forward.
- c) The extent to which priority functions identified in each of the four regional support strands have been delivered across the region, to include both urban and rural areas, making recommendations going forward.
- d) An assessment of sector satisfaction with each of the regional support strands in terms of supporting front line VCS organisations, making key recommendations going forward.
- e) An assessment of the effectiveness of the delivery arrangements of each of the regional support strands, particularly in terms of effective collaboration when two or more delivery partners are involved, making recommendations going forward.
- f) An assessment of whether the investment in each of the four regional support strands represents good value for money in terms of the investment made.
- g) Consider and make recommendations as regards potential future funding models, for each of the strands, going forward. Set out evidence-based recommendations arising from the findings of the evaluation. Recommendations should be numbered and concisely worded and be Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-Bound (SMART). The recommendations will form the basis of an action plan to be implemented following completion of the evaluation.

1.5 Evaluation Approach

The approach to the evaluation was tailored to each RISP strand and agreed with the evaluation Steering Group in advance. Details of the agreed evaluation approaches for each strand are set out in Appendix III.

1.6 Structure of the Evaluation

The following table sets out the structure of this evaluation report.

Section	Description
Section 1	Introduction
Section 2	Evaluation findings in relation to Generic Infrastructure Support
Section 3	Evaluation findings in relation to Voluntary Advice
Section 4	Evaluation findings in relation to Women in Disadvantaged and Rural Areas
Section 5	Evaluation findings in relation to the Women's Centre Childcare Fund
Section 6	Evaluation findings in relation to Faith Based Engagement
Section 7	Conclusions and Recommendations

2 GENERIC REGIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE

3 VOLUNTARY ADVICE

4 REGIONAL SUPPORT FOR WOMEN IN RURAL AND DISADVANTAGED AREAS

4.1 Introduction

The aim of the Women's Regional Support strand of RISP is to provide specialist support to Women's Sector organisations across Northern Ireland, both urban and rural, which seek to serve the needs of marginalised and isolated women. It is a joint programme between DSD and DARD with an annual investment in the region of circa £350k per annum.

In identifying 'women in disadvantaged areas' as a theme for RISP DSD recognised the key role of women living and working in areas of greatest need. Specifically it was viewed that the traditional involvement of women and mothers as primary carers for children and for elderly relatives, running households and engaging with schools, teachers and medical professionals, places women in positions where they can be a major and strategic influence for change for good in families and communities that are struggling to overcome disadvantage and poverty. Therefore it was viewed that enabling and empowering local women to work for good in their community and to contribute positively could help improve the quality of life for their family, extended family and their local community. The rationale for the rural dimension of this strand was linked to DARD's Tackling Poverty and Social Isolation Framework (2011 – 2015) which recognises that '*rural women face barriers such as lack of access to childcare facilities, poor transport infrastructure and lack of access to employment possibilities*' which can result in them experiencing isolation and poverty. Given the uniqueness of rural it is the case that disadvantage is not always concentrated, resulting in a need for support mechanisms that recognise individual disadvantage in areas of relative prosperity.

The vision for the Women's Regional Support strand is as follows:-

The Vision

"That women living in disadvantage in both Urban and Rural will be provided with the specialist support they require to enable them to tackle disadvantage and fulfil their potential in overcoming the barriers that give rise to their marginalisation, experience of poverty and exclusion".

The main functions delivered by the contract and corresponding high level outcomes for the period 2012-15 are summarised in the Table 4.1 overleaf. A series of activity targets linked to each of the five functional areas were developed and these and form the basis of reporting against progress to DSD and DARD in the quarterly monitoring returns.

Table 4.1: Regional Support for Women in Rural and Disadvantaged Areas - Functions and Outcomes (2012-2015)

Functions	High level Policy Outcomes
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) <u>Advocacy and Leadership for Women in Disadvantaged and Rural Areas</u> – this encompasses taking the views of women on issues affecting their everyday lives and representing them to government, statutory agencies and representative bodies. 2) <u>Influencing Policy for Women in Disadvantaged and Rural Areas</u> – this encompasses advising women of ongoing policy which has an impact on them, seeking their views on proposals and collating findings through a formal consultation response to assist in influencing policy on behalf of women. 3) <u>Research for Women in Disadvantaged and Rural Areas</u> – this encompasses taking on board the needs of women through conducting appropriate new research and presenting findings to appropriate bodies. 4) <u>Service Support for Women in Disadvantaged and Rural Areas</u> – this encompasses providing information and advice, promoting good practice, shaping funding bids, providing networking opportunities and support for women specific issues. 5) <u>Engagement for Women in Disadvantaged and Rural Areas</u> – this encompasses engaging with women to identify on an ongoing basis their specific regional support needs, engage with neighbourhood renewal partnerships, local councils and other regional partners. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Organisations serving the needs of women living in disadvantaged areas and rural areas, have access to the specialist support they require to function effectively and efficiently; 2) The VCS, including women’s organisations, is supported in making a valued and effective contribution to policy development across Government specific to women living and working in disadvantaged areas and rural areas; 3) There is increased participation and improved community development/engagement amongst women from all disadvantaged communities and in rural areas; and 4) There are improved working relationships, better collaboration and more effective partnerships, pertaining to the specific interests and needs of women from disadvantaged areas and rural women’s needs, across the VCS and Government.

Source: Contract letter for the women’s regional support strand and joint policy statement www.dsdni.gov.uk/regional-support-for-woman-in-disadvantaged-areas.

The Women's Regional Support strand is led by the Training for Women Network (TWN) with other consortium members being:-

- Women's Tec (WT);
- NI Rural Women's Network (NIRWN);
- Foyle Women's Information Network (FWIN);
- Women's Support Network (WSN);
- Women's Centre Derry (WCD); and
- Women's Resource Development Agency (WRDA)

It is important to reference how the above consortium – hereinafter referred to as the Women's Regional Consortium (WRC) - came about. Initially there was a competitive expression of interest implemented to select a strategic partner for delivering this strand where three bidding consortia responded and one was selected through the assessment process to take the programme forward. However DSD VCU subsequently took stock of the situation and in the interests of securing a delivery vehicle that maximised co-operation and partnership working, right across the women's sector in NI, did not progress further. Subsequent to this the above seven organisations (who were in the three competing consortia in the original expression of interest process) come together into an NI wide/ regional partnership to deliver the programme and TWN was selected by a secret ballot process to be the lead partner. In effect therefore the WRC was an 'arranged partnership' to secure a delivery vehicle that operated right across the women's sector in NI - rather than collaboration borne initially out of a mutual desire to partner to deliver the programme.

The Women's Regional Support Strand has been funded since October 2013 and was officially launched in February 2014. It was the last of the RISP strands to mobilise and therefore this evaluation is based on 18 months of programme activity only.

4.2 Research Programme

The programme of research agreed with DSD VCU and DARD to evaluate the Women's Regional Support strand entailed the following:-

- Review of the quarterly monitoring reports submitted to DSD and DARD by the TWN led consortium over the 2012-15 funded period (and related expenditure claims);
- Implementation of a beneficiary survey with women's groups/ women – active on the ground in community development across NI. Initially the intention was that this beneficiary survey would build upon the 2013 ASU Regional Women Baseline Survey to capture progression against baseline metrics linked to the various functions/ support areas in the programme. The 2013 baseline survey (which is profiled in more detail in Section 4.4) captured the views of 140 women's groups and did highlight the need for

¹ Led by WRDA and also involving NIRWN, FWIN and Women's Tech.

collaborative regional women's representation – endorsing the initial decision made by DSD VCU in relation to the breadth of the delivery mechanism detailed above. The evaluation team encountered difficulties in mobilising a beneficiary survey – initially the level of detail required to replicate the 2013 ASU survey proved to be too cumbersome to implement in aiming for a high response rate. Therefore a much simpler E-Survey had to be designed and this then encountered difficulties in securing sign-off within the WRC. For instance WRC members raised concerns that the survey design was too outcome focused (when the WRC might not have had sufficient time to realise progress against these and when external constraints might have impacted on the ability to evidence ²progress); concerns that it might be difficult for beneficiaries to differentiate between the work of the WRC and the work of the member organisations, in responding to survey questions, influenced in part by views that the WRC may not yet have a 'brand identity', over and above the constituent organisations; and finally there was an exercise to agree the target distribution list for the survey, in that the ³WRC did not have a comprehensive beneficiary list for the Consortium as a whole – with some of this residing more at the level of each organisation than centrally. In the end a fairly high level beneficiary survey (as per Appendix V) was designed around the five functional areas in the contract, with a view to capturing awareness, satisfaction and progress towards outcomes. This was designed in partnership with the five functional leads in the WRC and with the help of DSD ASU. It was distributed through the networks of the seven organisations over and above centralised lists (e.g. WRC membership directory and E-Zine distribution list). Women's groups and women were able to complete it on-line or in hard copy format (for those who did not have access to a computer). The survey achieved 239 responses – 28% from women's groups and 72% from individual women - and as such do represent a reasonable evidence base as to the views of women 'on the ground'. The headline findings of this beneficiary survey are detailed in Section 4.3 below;

- Attendance at two meetings of the WRC – one hosted by FWIN in Derry on the 6th March and a second hosted by Kilcooley Women's Centre in Bangor on the 10th April. The attendance was mainly geared to securing ongoing involvement in the evaluation process and updates around the same but also offered an opportunity for the evaluation team to sit in an observer capacity through some of the business proceedings of the WRC;
- Implementation of a programme of 1 to 1 semi-structured interviews – with beneficiary groups and stakeholders, linked to the constituent organisations. These were implemented to supplement the over-arching survey findings and to cater for those interests who maybe had not heard

² For instance the Consortium have conducted research, facilitated consultation input and lobbied on a Childcare Strategy for NI and a Gender Equality Strategy. Neither of these have been published in final form by the NI Executive yet and as such there was concerns that this position could influence.

³ There is a Membership directory maintained by WRDA but it is not evident that this is fully updated by WRC members so the networks of each member had to be used as well.

of the WRC *per se* but who had been engaged with/ serviced by one of the constituent organisations. As such it was important not to rely on the overarching survey exercise as the only definitive evidence for the evaluation, but to consult around this as well. In some cases members of the WRC (e.g. FWIN) used existing workshops and events with women's groups to gather input (broadly structured around the E-survey topics) for the evaluation, which was then tested through 1 to 1 interviews with attendees by the evaluation team post the event(s);

- One to one consultations/ meetings with each of the seven WRC partners. This was implemented to capture views on performance and impact across the functions and outcomes and also to capture views on the effectiveness of delivery arrangements/overall cohesion within the consortium. These were conducted twice with each, once at an early point in the evaluation and once at the end when the broad research findings were apparent and to discuss overall conclusions and future considerations;
- Desk-based review and analysis of all of the main deliverables – the WRC launch reports, various research reports/ responses to consultations, manifesto documents and toolkits – produced by the Consortium to date. In addition the evaluation team also reviewed relevant research on the women's sector including by way of example the Review of Government Funding for Women's Groups and Organisations in NI, completed by OFMDFM and DSD in August 2012;
- Interviews with DSD VCU Programme lead and team for the Women's Regional Support strand to gain a perspective on contract oversight, monitoring arrangements/procedures and risk management issues.

The evaluation commenced in early January 2015. However the evaluation team encountered difficulties in implementing the programme of work at the same pace as the work on the other RISP strands. This was linked to two issues. Firstly external distractions in early 2015 from issues/ fall-out with the application process for European Social Fund (ESF), when ESF was and continues to be a major source of funding in the women's sector and for several of WRC members, and was a threat to the existence of some. Secondly there were internal pressures from ongoing difficulties in terms of the working relationships/ partnership between the WRC members, which are referenced further at 4.3. In parallel with the evaluation DSD VCU was in discussion with the WRC (via the lead partner TWN) to discuss and encourage resolution of the latter. Linked to this DSD VCU, rather than issue a full contract/ letter of offer for the 15/16 year issued initially a one month letter of offer for April 2015 and then a second letter of offer/variation for May 2015. The evaluation team were also granted an initial month to complete the evaluation of this strand, relative to all other strands of RISP to allow for all of the above.

4.3 Summary of Primary Research Findings

This section sets out the primary research findings and is mainly structured around the five functional areas that the WRC is tasked to deliver against. It draws on the findings of the entire work programme (as above at 4.2) with the beneficiary survey being a component of this only. This is important in that in the view of the evaluation team, there is at least some risk of potential bias in the beneficiary survey in that it was implemented at a time, when the WRC was on a 'month to month' funding contract pending decisions by DSD VCU and DARD on the remainder of the 15/16 year. In addition whilst the headline response rate for the beneficiary survey at 239 respondents is reasonable, the substantive input in terms of the responses relates mainly to those who engaged regularly with the WRC / WRC members (circa 122 respondents). Respondents who had not heard of the WRC and did not engage regularly with the WRC were routed through the main body of questions on the functional areas and just completed one question at the end that captured views on future support needs for the women's sector. Another point to note in interpreting the findings of the beneficiary survey is that in each functional area respondents were asked to insert 'open ended' comments, linked to the rationale for their views on satisfaction/ performance with the WRC in each functional area. In some cases respondents reflected overall views on the WRC rather than views specifically linked to the functional areas in question. A selection of these 'open-ended' comments are included below in the context of where the responses were made in the survey – so that they are presented verbatim and exactly as provided in the survey returns. Finally given that there have been recent difficulties in terms of the working relationships/ partnership between the WRC members, some of the open-ended comments could have been influenced by this, if the respondent had links to the interests of one or more of the seven organisations. The findings should be read in this context.

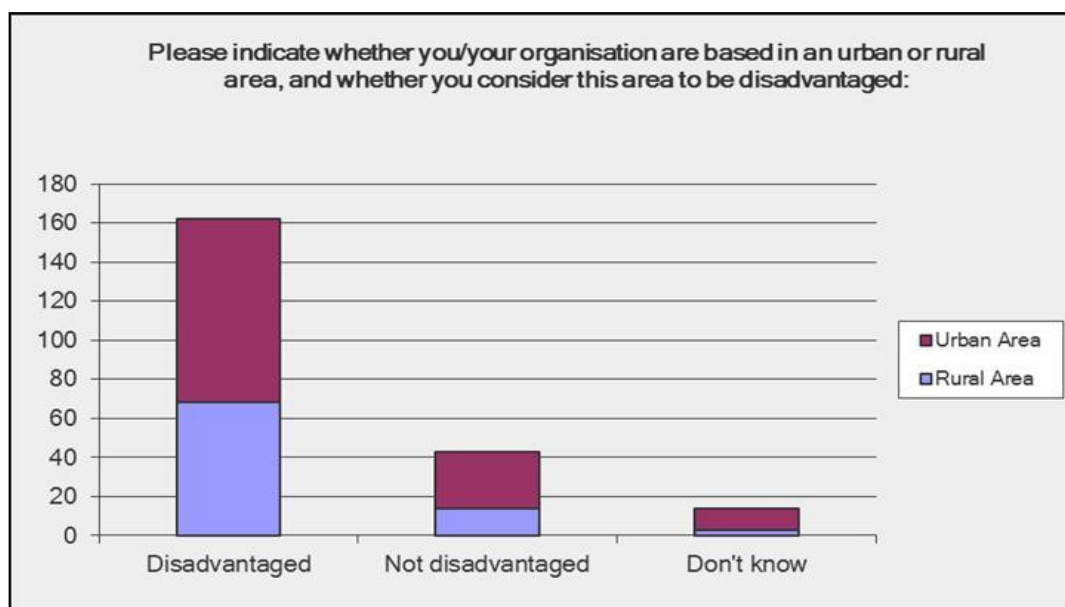
Overview of Survey Responses – Profile of Respondents Awareness and Engagement with the WRC

Of the 239 responses to the beneficiary survey, 72% were from individual women and 28% from women's groups – and as such there is a reasonable body of evidence from women 'on the ground'.



Base 239

All 7 organisations worked to ensure that the survey was circulated to their respective networks, over and above use of centralised lists (e.g. the WRC E-Zine mailing list). This reach is evident in the profile of respondents - 67% from disadvantaged areas and 35% rural (which is broadly consistent with percentage of the NI population living in rural areas).

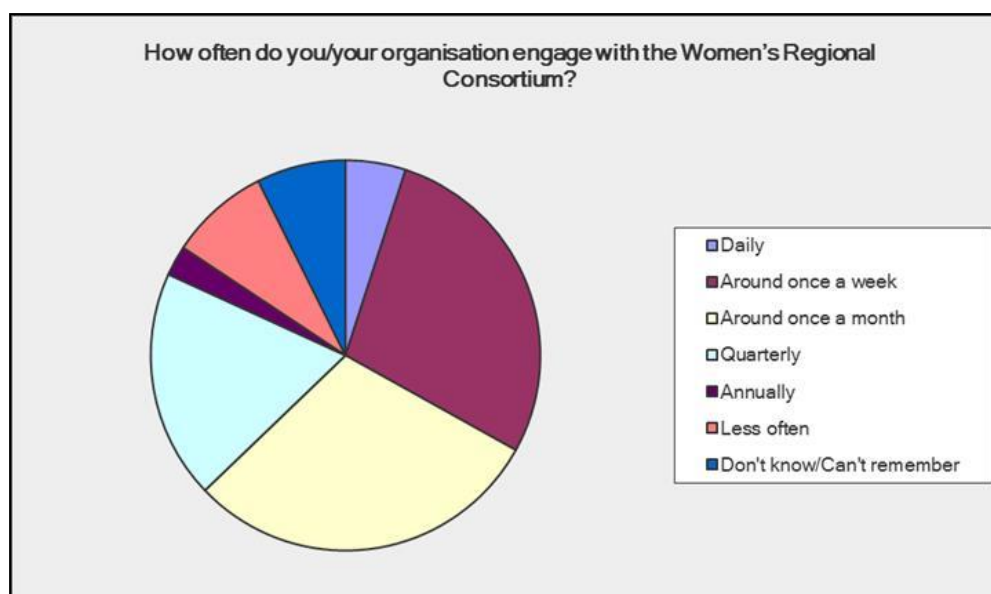


Base: 215

Almost three-quarters (74%) of survey respondents had heard of WRC and correspondingly 26% had not (base 214). Where they had heard of the WRC it was mainly through interaction with one of the seven organisations. Of those who had heard of the WRC (158 respondents), 78% (122 respondents) had engaged with the WRC and correspondingly 22% had not. As detailed above only the 122 who had engaged with WRC answered the bulk of the remaining survey questions.

Again the engagement was mainly linked to interaction with one organisation, rather than the WRC as a collective entity. The most common frequency of engagement was once a month followed closely by once a week – as per the chart overleaf.

⁴ There is minor drop off in responses i.e. of the 158 respondents who had heard of the consortium, only 157 answered the next question on whether they had engaged or not. Thus 122 responses is 78% of 157 not 158.



Base: 121

The above findings would suggest that the WRC itself as a collaborative identity does not as yet have a strong brand identity (e.g. at least relative to some of the other strands of RISP e.g. voluntary advice, which made a conscious effort to brand under the umbrella of the NI Advice Services Consortium). Development of the collective brand identity has been constrained by the fact that the website of the WRC only became live in March 2015, some 18 months post the start of the contract and circa one year post the WRC launch event (February 2014).

Advocacy and Leadership (Functional Area 1)

This functional area entails capturing the views of women on issues affecting their everyday lives and representing them to government, statutory agencies and representative bodies. As such it involves organising issue based focus groups with women's groups/ women across NI on a regular basis; ongoing support to sub-regional network organisations and women's centres to help them advance their work to support women living in disadvantaged areas and rural areas; advocacy and leadership through promotion of the consortium website and monthly E-zine; and policy advocacy⁵ linked to the outcomes of the issue based focus groups (as above).

In activity terms consortium members have facilitated focus groups on a very wide range of topics. Several of these link back to priority areas of need identified in the January 2013 ASU baseline survey and the Launch Report of the WRC (February 2013) - including welfare reform; health & social care; childcare and education & training. Others relate to issues that have arisen

⁵ With government departments/Stormont/ arm's length institutions.

⁶ Including for instance - women's health & well-being; delivering social change for children & young people; gaps in education & training for women in rural and disadvantaged areas; domestic violence & sexual abuse strategies; Consumer Council; Welfare Reform; Women into Politics in the NI Assembly; Racial Equality Strategy; Zero Hour Contracts; Women-only Advice Services and the DOJ Abortion Consultation.

and that have particular relevance to the women's sector – such as abortion law reform⁷ and zero hours contracts (evidence from the ⁸Office of National Statistics suggests that women are around two-thirds more likely than men to be a zero-hours worker and therefore there was an evidenced equity issue to progress). However there have been issues progressed where there was no inequity to address – e.g. women only advice services, where the prevailing evidence⁹ indicates that the uptake of advice services is much higher by women than men in NI. This would suggest that this particular issue was not a good use of WRC time. As such there needs to be a mechanism in place to 'filter out' issues that should not be progressed and prioritise others that should be progressed.

Consortium members have also regularly engaged with various women's regional and sub-regional organisations (e.g. Women's Information NI¹⁰; Women's Ad-Hoc Policy Group to cite two examples from a long list) and in broad terms have met quarterly activity targets in this regard. The monthly E-Zine is generally well received in the sector (based on comments in the survey feedback). However the WRC only got the WRC website up and running in March 2015, over a year since their launch and 18 months into their contract. This has constrained the impact of the WRC and is linked to observations made later in this section in terms of the internal cohesion/ collective force of the WRC not being sufficiently effective. Finally in terms of policy advocacy on some of the issues that WRC members have gathered views on via focus groups, whilst the research and evidence gathering has in many cases been good, the follow through to a concerted and cohesive lobby campaign, bringing all the strengths of the collective force of the seven WRC members to bear has not fully materialised.

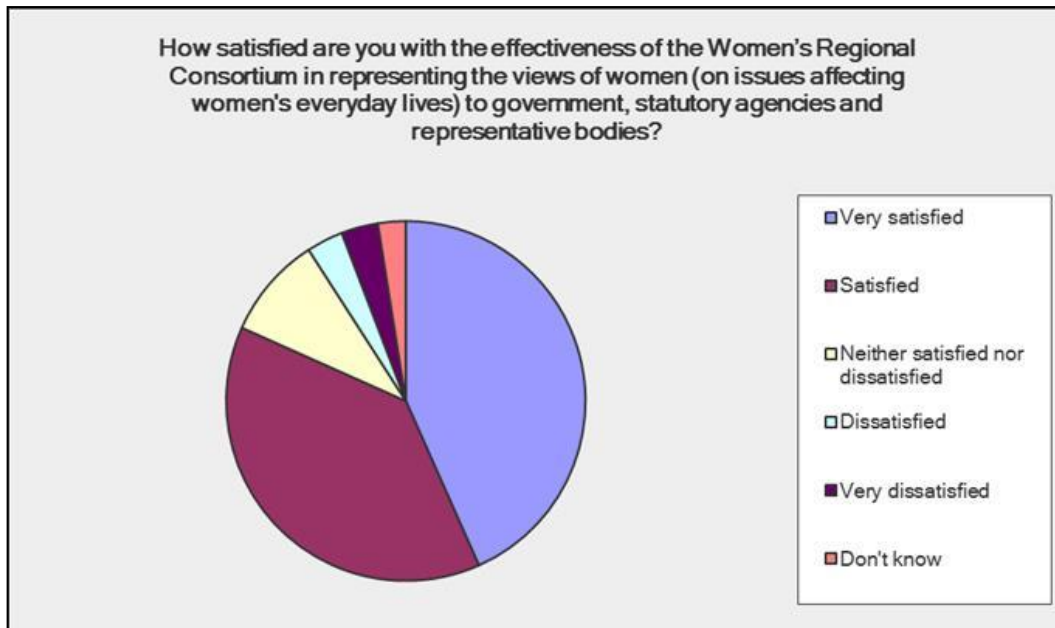
The pie chart overleaf summarises the satisfaction of respondents with respect to advocacy and leadership.

⁷ Department of Justice proposals to reform abortion law in cases of sexual crime and fatal foetal abnormalities

⁸ <http://www.nicva.org/article/future-zero-hours-contracts-northern-ireland>

⁹A Section 75 screening exercise undertaken to inform a new voluntary advice strategy - <http://www.dsdni.gov.uk/index/consultations/archived-consultations/archived-consultations-2014/advice-strategy-consultation.htm>

¹⁰ established by local women across the interface area of West Belfast



Base: 120

In broad terms this would indicate high levels of satisfaction in relation to the work in this functional area. The text box overleaf illustrates some of the views from verbatim 'open-ended' comments linked to this functional area in the survey – they do indicate the need for advocacy and representation, and satisfaction with work to date. However they do indicate that the support is mostly linked to the one organisation they interact with (rather than the Consortium) and related to this there are concerns about cohesion, overall strategy/ leadership and duplication.

"Women don't have much representation elsewhere so the work of the consortium is much appreciated"

"The worker with FWIN has engaged with women at grass roots level and has sent policy responses"

"The Consortium has been working hard to provide a voice for women supporting efforts to tackle disadvantage and social exclusion. It is important to have this representation and to work at a strategic level to ensure that the needs of women are heard and in particular as part of the policy making process. Members of the consortium are represented on a variety of local bodies that influence policy in NI and this is an important role for the Consortium to maintain"

"I am familiar with the organization particularly NIRWN as they keep me informed of events, programmes and grants which may be useful to my clients who are eligible - e.g. women working/living in a rural area"

"I am aware of the outcome of the engagement they have with government, the issues they raise and the on-going work with Departmental policymakers"

"The survey questions apply to the consortium as a whole and don't allow you to talk about individual members. The only group I engage with is WRDA who I feel do represent women and give women the chance to air their views and get involved so I go to their events etc. The others don't really come up to the mark I'm afraid.....I personally am fed up with groups who claim to represent me and don't"

"There have been issues raised on representation, communication and support, as it appears to concentrate on L'Derry, Belfast and Mid Ulster. There is little information which cascades to the woman on the street, as the website has just gone live, despite being in development for 18 months"

"Overall I feel that the organisation lacked direction, leadership and really did nothing for women".

"Too many chiefs, too many organisations particularly Belfast based and not enough strategic thinking. Merger of women's organisations TWN, WSN and WRDA should have happened years ago to have wider impact for women"

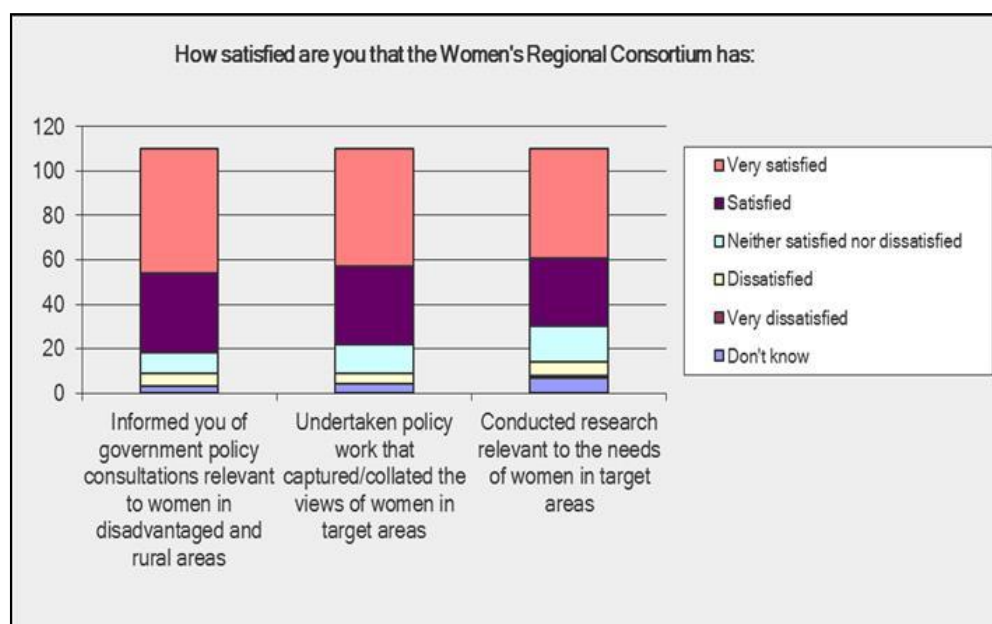
Influencing Policy (Functional Area 2)

As per the contract for the WRC and quarterly reporting framework this functional area encompasses advising women of ongoing policy which has an impact on them, seeking views on proposals and collating findings through a formal consultation response to assist in influencing policy on behalf of women in disadvantaged and rural areas. In practice there is overlap in the quarterly monitoring returns and the survey responses between this and the first functional area of advocacy and leadership – in that many of the areas that the WRC has advocated on has been with a view to influencing particular policy proposals. As such members of the WRC have been active in the range

of policy spheres¹¹ as already discussed under Functional Area 1. Recent examples of formal consultation responses include the following:-

- DHSSPS's Consultation on the future support of Independent Living Fund (ILF) Northern Ireland;
- Department of Justice Abortion Consultation; and
- OFMDFM's midterm review of the current gender equality strategy: *Gender Equality Strategy 2006-2016*.

WRC members make all consultations responses on policy areas affecting women available through meetings, the WRC website and the E-zine. It is evident from the survey responses that there is a high level of satisfaction that women/ women's groups feel that they have been informed of relevant policy consultations and that the WRC has undertaken policy work to progress the same – as per the chart below.



Base: 110

In addition to formal responses on policy consultations, WRC members have been pro-active in producing over-arching policy outputs and tools for the sector as a whole. In this context survey respondents mentioned in particular:-

- the ¹²Women's Manifesto for Northern Ireland launched in March 2015 (WRDA);

¹¹ Including for instance - women's health & well-being; delivering social change for children & young people; gaps in education & training for women in rural and disadvantaged areas; domestic violence & sexual abuse strategies; Consumer Council; Welfare Reform; Women into Politics in the NI Assembly; Racial Equality Strategy; Zero Hour Contracts; Women-only Advice Services and the DOJ Abortion Consultation.

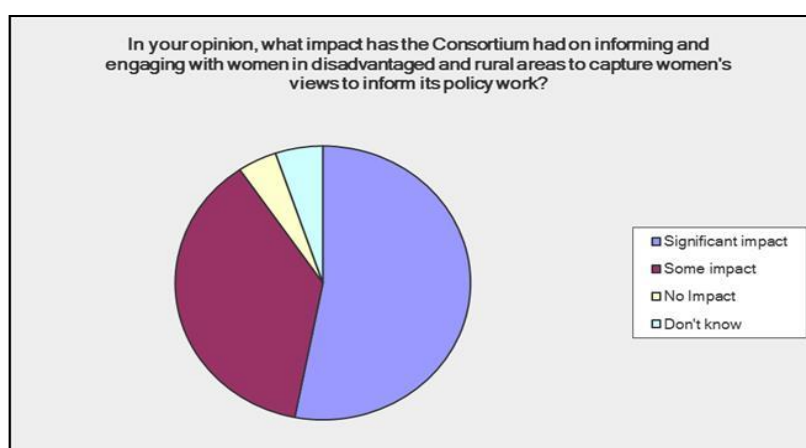
¹² <http://www.womensviewsonnews.org/2015/03/womens-manifesto-for-northern-ireland-launched/>

- ¹³Policy toolkit, designed to show policy makers here how to apply the principles of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security to their work, thereby ensuring women have a voice in local policy development and have their human rights protected (WRDA).

These outputs may only in part be attributable to the funding of the WRC by DSD and DARD, in that other funding (e.g. ¹⁴Peace III funds in the case of the toolkit) also contributed to the same. Nevertheless they demonstrate the value of having a wider network/ reach (in the form of the WRC) to disseminate such policy outputs.

Furthermore several of the WRC members (i.e. NIRWN, Women's Tech and WRDA) have been active in EU and UN policy forums – through the NI Women's European Platform (NIWEP) and at annual meetings of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in New York. In relation to the latter this is a structure that meets annually in New York to evaluate progress on gender equality, identify challenges, set global standards and formulate concrete policies to promote gender equality and women's empowerment worldwide. The input of WRC members has included by way of example economic empowerment of rural women and representation of women in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). Again some of this is funded outside the DSD contract (e.g. DEL supported Women's Tech expenses on the STEM input to the UN Commission in March 2014) – but DSD and DARD support core staff costs in all of these organisations and therefore the activity would not happen in the absence of the same. The involvement of WRC members in these international policy fora does demonstrate the value of the policy expertise within WRC members.

In the beneficiary survey respondents were asked to comment on the impact of WRC's work to capture views to inform policy work – as per the chart below – (where the base number of responses was 115).



¹³ <http://wrda.net/Policy-toolkit.aspx>

¹⁴ This was produced as part of the Women and Peace Building Project – a cross-border initiative, supported by the Special EU Programmes Body, which involves a partnership approach between the Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA), the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland (CFNI) and the National Women's Council of Ireland (NWCi).

Again this indicates broad satisfaction with the impact of WRC members in this functional area. The text box below illustrates some of the views from verbatim 'open-ended' comments linked to this functional area from the survey and related interviews conducted by the evaluation team.

"Previously we simply would not have had the time to engage our women in Policy consultation and/or research simply due to the complexities of the issues we have to deal with on a day to day basis. The fact that we are now working on a regular basis with the WSN on policy and research and able to engage individuals in focus groups is in itself significant - and empowering particularly to women many of whom would be classified as vulnerable adults and marginalised within society who for whatever reason have not been able to engage in broader debate on issues which affect not just them but their families lives."

"Excellent welfare reform information"....."Fighting for childcare issues"

"FWIN as part of the Consortium includes women from most areas of the city and informs and raises issues which are of concern in everyday lives. It offers a safe place to discuss topics and is excellent at bringing women together."

"The Women's Consortium is working in the communities to support, inform and engage with the disadvantaged, rural populations".

"The engagement with grassroots women and then the collation of their views sent to key decision makers has made a difference in those women's voices being heard"

"There is perhaps more that could be done on ongoing lobbying - post collation of views etc"

"They have held several focus groups to seek the views and opinions of women in relation to consultations that are of particular interest to the wider women's sector and they have made very detailed and informative responses to these consultations. Without the consortium to take the lead on these important issues it would be difficult for individual women's groups to have the time or resources to conduct such in depth work. Therefore it is essential for a collective voice to make an impact".

"I feel it is an overly ambitious expectation for the Consortium to have made a significant impact on the complexity of disadvantage, marginalization and exclusion, given the limited resources and time available to them. They have achieved some impact and this in itself is a significant achievement"

"Still a lot of work is needed. They need to engage more with other sectors and make links to areas of common concern".

"I have heard of them through a launch event and get an e bulletin but how the consortium has directly impacted me and my work is neither here nor there. I don't feel I have benefited from this consortium as a worker".

"I only know of the consortium through the women's centre. When we reach out to other women's group they are completely unaware as to what the consortium does".

"Due to cuts hard to see direct relevance at present"

Similar to the views under the first functional area this indicates a range of views, in the main reiterating the need for a collective structure to gather views and respond / input to policy consultations on behalf of women/ women's groups. That said, they do indicate issues in terms of the reality of what can be achieved against a backdrop of public spending cuts and the resources available to WRC. Also they indicate a sense that the WRC needs to do more in terms of awareness building and work across the Consortium on areas of common concern i.e. greater collaboration.

There has been challenges for the WRC in this area, in particular internal tensions about the extent to which the Consortium has represented the diversity of views within the women's sector or whether the Consortium has to come down on 'one side' of a particular policy debate i.e. present a consensus view. Linked to this, managing the risk of what was being responded in terms of policy consultations 'in the name of the Consortium' has been cited at WRC meetings attended by the evaluation team¹⁵ as an area of concern. This is detailed further in the context of internal cohesion/ governance later in this section.

Research – Functional Area 3

As per the contract for the WRC and quarterly reporting framework this functional area encompasses taking on board the needs of women through conducting appropriate new research and presenting findings to appropriate bodies. The main research targets in the quarterly reporting framework in this area are centred on research on childcare; education & training; advice; and welfare reform. As at April 2015 all four areas had been researched, with reports now available on the WRC website (as part of a wider E-library). The WRC is also tasked with ensuring that there is no duplication in the research progressed, with what already exists. As previously detailed this should have extended to ensuring that there was a case (i.e. gender/ inequity issue) for each research area to progress – there is in three out of the four areas above, the only exception being women only advice services. The WRC is also tasked with taking the recommendations from the various research reports into an action plan for review with relevant bodies.

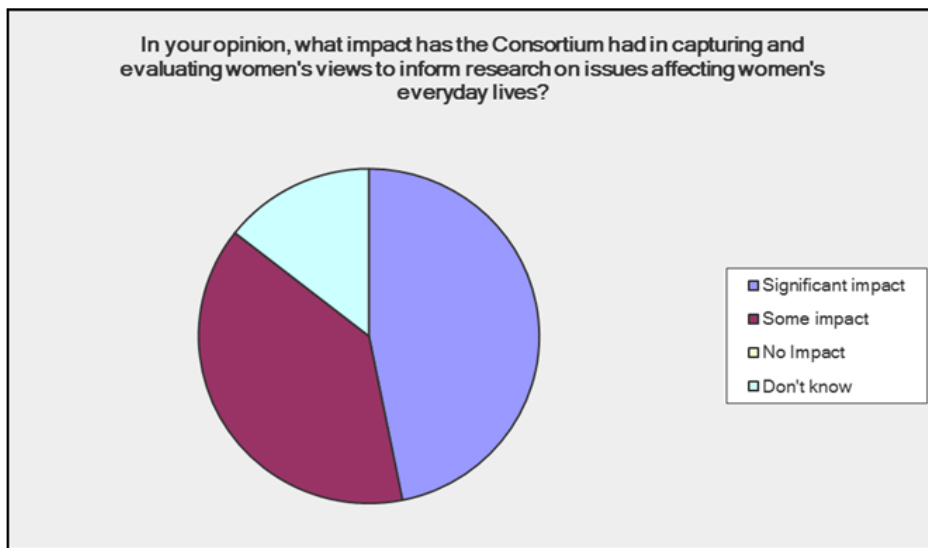
The evaluation team has reviewed some of the main research outputs of the WRC to date (e.g. on welfare reform and childcare) and are of the view that they are professionally researched¹⁶; presented in a readable format (i.e. accessible to women on the ground as well as policy makers) and written through the lens of women in rural and disadvantaged areas (rather than women generally). The childcare research paper in response to the ¹⁷*Bright Start* policy document is framed to be constructive to Government - in both welcoming some of the key interventions and in highlighting key omissions that should be picked up in a final Childcare Strategy for NI.

¹⁵ in Kilcooley Women's Centre on the 10th April

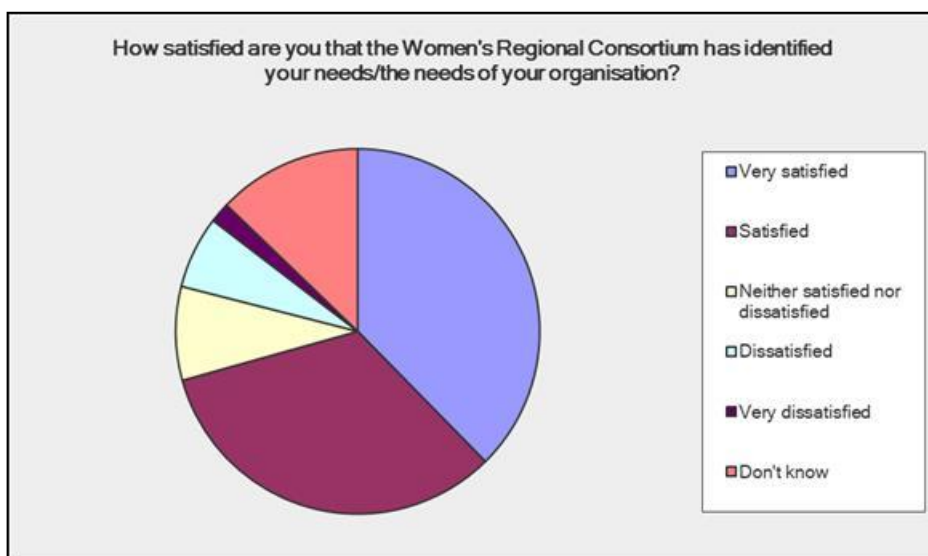
¹⁶ E.g. in terms of proposing key research questions and then progressing in a logical format to present

¹⁷ the Northern Ireland Executive's Programme for Affordable and Integrated Childcare: a Strategic Framework and Key First Actions

The above findings are also evident in the views of survey respondents – as below:-



Base: 111



Base: 109

The text box overleaf illustrates some of the views from verbatim 'open-ended' comments linked to this functional area from the survey and related interviews conducted by the evaluation team. Overall they reinforce the value of having a collective research resource for the constituency of women in disadvantaged and rural areas. The main area for improvement looking ahead is ensuring that there is sufficient focus on keeping a full and up-to-date action plan across all research areas (which is still work in progress within the WRC). This is necessary to achieve forward impact in realising/ working towards the key recommendations of each research report.

"I feel that the Consortium is very effective in eliciting and researching the views of women and putting in place action to deal with issues that impact generally on their everyday lives"

"The Consortium has to date been successful in capturing the views and opinions of women on the issues that are affecting them and have been researching important and relevant issues such as welfare reform and childcare".

"I feel that everything is explained to me in words that I can understand and I feel that when I give my response it is listened to and written up in a way that it answers the issue"

"The Women's Policy Manifesto and the Toolkit"

"We have been participating in, focus groups, all centres involved in choice of range of current consultations but do Government listen? May listen but in light of cuts can they do anything to help us?"

"Events such as the Welfare Reform information session are extremely beneficial to our members"

"Issues that are relevant to the women for whom we work are at the forefront of the work carried out by the Consortium e.g. childcare and education provision. These would not be otherwise available"

"The Consortium is still in its infancy as a new partnership - resources are limited".

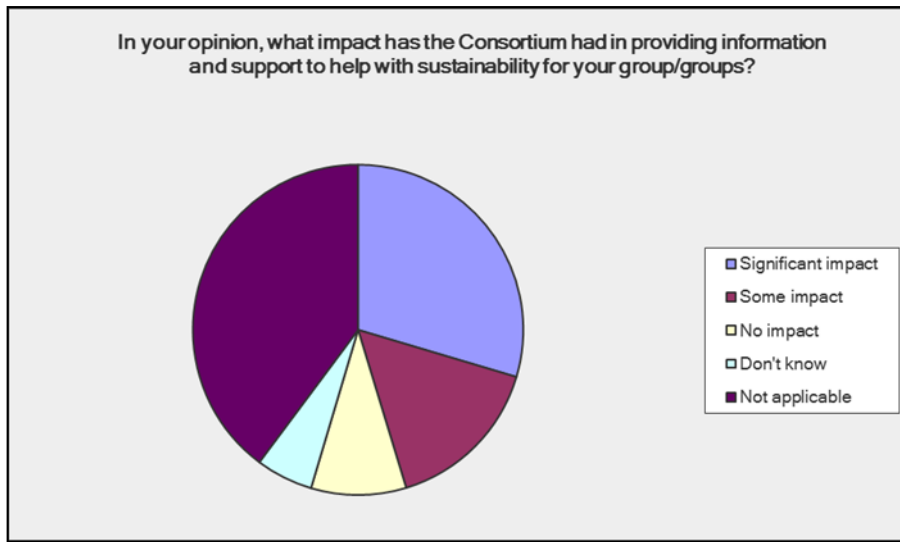
"They have gathered views on childcare, education/training and the impact of Welfare Reform"

"Rural women have more opportunities to provide their views and at these events the consortium captures the concerns / comments made as they are being said, and then uses this collected information to update policymakers and researchers and to publish reports etc".

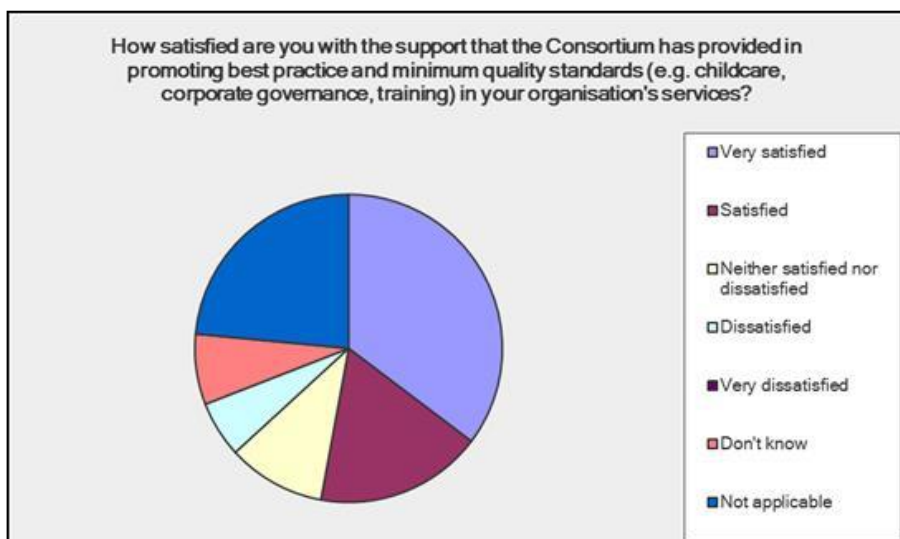
Service Support – Functional Area 4

As per the contract for the WRC and quarterly reporting framework this functional area encompasses providing information and advice, promoting good practice, shaping funding bids, providing networking opportunities and support for women specific issues.

The charts overleaf summarise the views of survey respondents on all of the above support areas (where the second question is only applicable to women's groups and as such has a much lower response rate).



Base: 108



Base: 68

The text box overleaf illustrates some of the views from verbatim 'open-ended' comments linked to this functional area from the survey and related interviews conducted by the evaluation team. These demonstrate the value of the hands-on practical support provided by WRC members albeit that this is being provided in a backdrop of austerity/ cuts that calls for different approaches to building sustainability. In addition it also suggests that in some instances the consortium has been more reactive to requests than pro-active in providing the support.

"I have never really had any dealings with them other than through the women's rural network, who themselves have been very supportive as an individual organisation with practical issues.....they have a whole range of policies and toolkits to keep us up with good practice in setting up and running services in rural areas and they provided these within 2 hours of my request"

"The consortium through FWIN has provided guidance / information / support for our group which is new and they have helped us in many different ways like providing meeting space and sending out information etc".

"At present the community sector is facing multiple cuts and groups are at risk. Whilst the consortium has been providing help and support around sustainability the current crisis within the women's sector is affecting all women's centres and groups"

"Helped us to get funding for project work"

"WSN brilliant for collating all our info for ESF crisis and then forwarding on to TWN as regional lead who then forwarded to NICVA"

"We are kept up to date on a regular basis with by the Consortium on funding streams that are becoming available to help sustain our organisation"

"Their ebulletins provide a lot of information particularly around funding"

"Useful at providing information on job descriptions etc and helpful with any specific requests and consortium re childcare"

"WSN as an umbrella group for women's centres has been closely involved in keeping other centres updated with information both through other women's centres and they disseminate that information to centres in order to ensure everyone is kept well informed about any changes in policy and legislation"

"Best practice training and good governance support has been beneficial to the group and its members"

"Women's groups have to go to the consortium rather than them coming to the group"

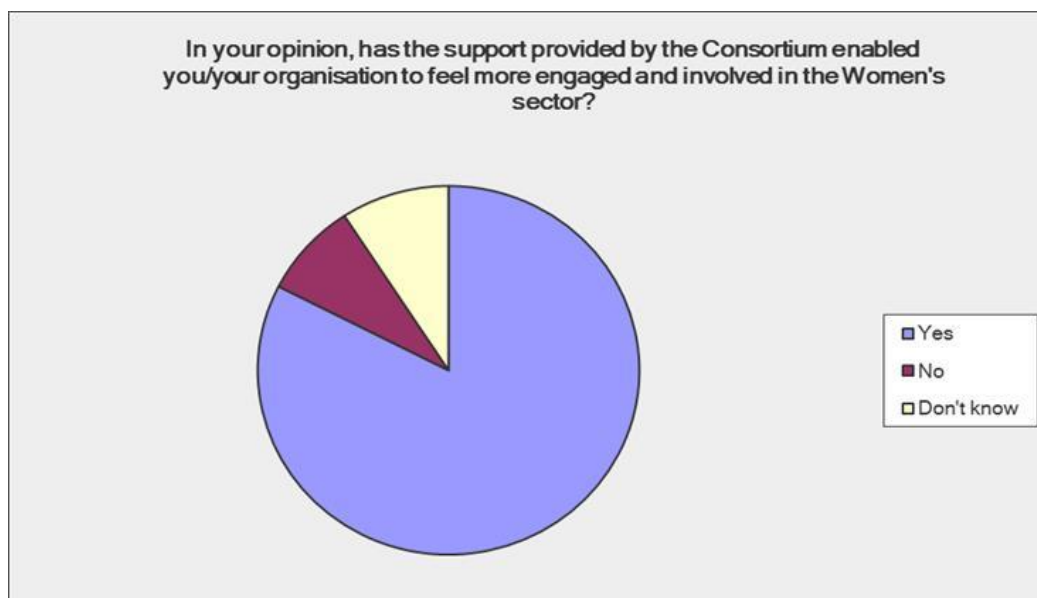
"Apart from information and support we get from Women's Centre Derry on childcare issues e.g. minimum standards, we have had no support as an organisation".

"They promote best practice and provide support if necessary".

Engagement – Functional Area 5

As per the contract for the WRC and quarterly reporting framework this functional area encompasses engaging with women to identify on an ongoing basis their specific regional support needs and engagement with neighbourhood renewal partnerships, local councils and other regional and thematic partners. The activity reporting to DSD in this area is merely a long

list of meetings and conferences attended by WRC members and does not allow for any interpretation of the value/ impact of this. Therefore it is important to draw on the primary research for the evaluation to assess the same. The chart below illustrates the headline impact as to whether respondents felt more engaged in the women's sector as a result of the WRC – which was endorsed strongly, although again this was often through links with one WRC member, rather than the Consortium on a wider basis.



Base: 109

The text box overleaf illustrates some of the views from verbatim 'open-ended' comments linked to this functional area from the survey and related interviews conducted by the evaluation team. These are broadly positive about the value of the engagement enabled through individual WRC members (more so than the WRC overall). However they do indicate lack of awareness about all members/ role of each member and gaps in coverage (e.g. too urban orientated) which is further explored later in this section.

"Engagement is one of their strong points"

"They do a good job of tackling isolation"

"We all need to be connected and stay connected, we need to know what barriers women in rural areas are facing just as much as we need to know what barriers women are facing in urban areas. There are many challenges for woman, poverty, childcare, isolation, domestic abuse, substance abuse etc"

"Definitely. Their newsletters are excellent and they hold lots of events which engage women from lots of different areas throughout the sector".....

"I feel more involved and engaged in the women's sector due to the presence of the consortium. Through their website I have access to much information, contacts, policies, procedures. I feel connected in a way that was not previously possible".

"There appears to be less assistance/support specifically targeted towards the women's sector outside Belfast and the NIRWN is one of the few organisations who actively promote the dissemination of information about this sector".

"Through the consortium our women's group have opportunities to network and meet with other similar groups throughout the city" (of Derry)

"It just hasn't. Other than the rural women support network, I have never had any dealings with any of the organisations really in the consortium, I honestly don't even know who half of them are or what they are supposed to do for my work and women's group as a consortium. I don't even know the services each group is supposed to offer to me".

"The consortium gives us a chance to meet regularly basis and share information/ideas. We all learn from each other and gain new ideas. We are able to support each other in times of need."

"The existence of support is essential in a system that is male dominated...casting no blame or criticism...just stating facts. Roles still traditional here. Women are often holding families and communities together and looking after the most vulnerable and needy. There has to be some way for our voices to be heard so that meaningful solutions can be considered...it is not all about money. There needs to be bolder action and this cannot be taken by individuals"

"It has certainly ensured that women feel more engaged with their own network and as women hear about the wider impact across the women's sector it does make groups feel more included and all working towards a common goal"

"It has enabled me to engage on a limited basis with some of its members through information events such as the one held in Londonderry with FWIN and also in Cookstown" last year with NIRWN

One of the targets in this functional area is to increase the membership of the WRC by 5% yearly from 1st October 2013 with a focus on the areas that are currently underrepresented. The quarterly activity reports highlight that *“membership continues to increase”* without any supporting quantifiable evidence, and this should be/ have been challenged by DSD as unacceptable. As detailed later under internal cohesion/ governance whilst there is a shared membership directory (of 467 women’s groups) there have been concerns expressed in WRC meetings that this is not always regularly updated. It is also not evident whether this represents growth from a baseline position or is more an aggregation of the membership lists of the seven organisations.

Furthermore there is not sufficient evidence of pro-active targeting of under-represented areas. The survey findings have highlighted a need for more focus on women from ethnic minority, traveller and LGBT communities, and there are geographic gaps in one-to-one support to groups (mainly rural) which are detailed later in this section under ‘rural representation’ – all of which suggests a need for pro-active targeting. Relative to the other strands of RISP (e.g. generic and voluntary advice) the WRC is further behind in terms of common/shared management information systems across the partners. Therefore it has been impossible for the evaluation team to robustly assess collective reach across the five functional areas – in that being listed on a shared membership directory does not correlate to active involvement in functional support areas.

Additional comments

The beneficiary survey asked respondents to provide any additional closing comments in respect of the WRC – examples of which are cited in the slide inserts below. Some of these provide a useful lead into the next aspects of the research findings i.e. internal cohesion / governance and rural representation.

<u>Any other comments ?</u>		
<p><i>“Organisations need long term commitment from government - they are for the most part the safety net - many providing early intervention working closely with social services, additional training to those who would not be in a position to access more formal routes to training yet are desperate to find employment and essential childcare support, crucial to those seeking further training or employment, advice and individual family support providing stability - These services support government policy by both their delivery and best practices. In the short term it may look on paper more expedient to cut funding, however in the long run it may be more costly”</i></p>	<p><i>“The Consortium has been very helpful so far in supporting women in our area”.</i></p> <p><i>“I am isolated with no support. I saw this consultation on Facebook and am responding as there are no services for me”</i></p> <p><i>“I want to see support improved”</i></p>	<p><i>“This funding is important, but not currently working. In this financial climate of cuts, there are worthwhile frontline services being axed, whilst this talking shop which is short on outcomes is funded. We feel it is dysfunctional, and should be reformed in terms of structure, accountability and made to operate on an outcomes based model - and funded on the meeting of set outcomes. At present it simply funds organisations to do what they do as individual organisations, not the DSD policy commitment of supporting women in rural and disadvantaged areas”.</i></p>

Any other comments

"Work that supports women in disadvantaged and rural areas has been threatened and undermined by cutbacks in funding. It has never been properly funded in the past and working at grassroots level and community seems to have very little REAL value placed upon it. It is very bad for morale and we are in danger of losing any infrastructure and skills developed in previous years, should key agencies close down".

"I cannot stress enough the perception of the consortium as a whole is not satisfactory. WRDA are the best organisation in there, not surprising though given the process in how DSD set this consortium up in the first place".

"Funded support programmes should be developed on a strategic and long term basis - these should be easily accessible for women as the current structures (RDP) are not helpful for communities and individuals coming from a lower capacity and infrastructure base".

"Feel rural is not adequately resourced"

"Support needs to be sustained and ongoing"

"Only ever worked with FWIN so not sure of other consortium staff members or services provided"

Internal cohesion / governance issues

As detailed at the outset there have been ongoing difficulties, acknowledged by the Consortium, in terms of the working relationships/ partnership between the Consortium members that to a degree impacted on the implementation of the evaluation work. Thus, in parallel with the evaluation DSD VCU representatives have been in discussion with the Consortium (via the lead partner TWN) to discuss and encourage resolution of the latter. And in turn the WRC have been 'soul searching' about their future/ a strategic way forward.

Based on the sum of the various components of the research programme implemented the evaluation team would make the following observations in this area:-

- The manner in which the Consortium came about was an 'arranged marriage' that brought together very diverse organisations – some of whom were competitors and some of whom had existing grantee relationships with the Lead Partner (TWN) in their capacity as a funding body. This history has inevitably created 'baggage' that members have had to try to learn to move beyond in order to effectively deliver a collaborative programme of work for the women's sector as a whole. Whilst the difficulties of the backdrop/ starting point are important to acknowledge, it should not have been insurmountable for effective co-operation to prevail. It is evident, for instance, in other strands of RISP that different and competing organisations have successfully co-operated to deliver a programme of work to support/service their beneficiary constituency;
- The work of the Consortium is a balancing act to deliver immediate results for front-line organisations servicing rural and disadvantaged women on the ground, and trying to effect longer term policy change. The Consortium encompasses seven diverse organisations – those that are

very active in practical ‘hand-holding’ to women/ women’s groups on the ground (e.g. such as FWIN in Derry) and those who have particular policy influencing and lobbying strengths regionally and internationally, such as WRDA. This diversity offered (and continues to offer) opportunities to ensure that grass roots work informs actions to influence policy. However these opportunities have not been fully realised to date, because the Consortium has not always operated in a culture of trust, openness and mutual respect (evident, for example, from a number of complaints and disagreements referenced in recent Consortium meeting minutes and WRC meetings attended by the evaluation team). As is evident from the evaluation of other RISP strands (e.g. generic, voluntary advice) organisations that at face-value were potentially competing/ at risk of being subsumed by larger interests, have been able to successfully collaborate towards common policy outcomes (though the journey in these other cases has not always been easy either);

- The work programme (and indeed the evaluation) of the Consortium has been implemented against a backdrop of reducing resources/ austerity. Competition for scarce resources can be divisive and counter-productive to co-operative relationships. For instance, the recent ESF crisis within the women’s sector was a good opportunity for the Consortium to take the lead in representing the women’s sector. However, as many of the Consortium members were themselves at risk in terms of the outcome of the ESF decisions, the collaboration that should have happened for the benefit of the sector ‘at large’ did not fully arise;
- This strand differs from all of other RISP strands in that the lead partner (TWN) is not active in delivery across any of the functional areas. Indeed TWN consciously decided that it was better to ensure that the bulk of the funding went to the other 6 partners to deliver the work across the 5 functional areas, so that they would not be competing for resources with these organisations. TWN accesses circa 11% of the resources within the contract to be the lead partner and in the view of the evaluation team this is reasonable and commensurate with management fees for lead partners active in similar programmes. However in other strands of RISP (e.g. generic) the lead partner represents the majority of delivery resources in functional areas and as such has a very high financial stake in delivery across all areas. The original decision-making by TWN (to maximise resources for the other partner’s active in functional delivery) was well intentioned but in the view of the evaluation team (as borne out from evaluation findings across other RISP strands) is not optimal in terms of an effective delivery model. The evidence from the other strands indicates that the lead partner having a more significant financial stake in delivery is the norm and has worked well in the same. This has perhaps been more feasible in other RISP strands because there have been a smaller number of partners in the same (i.e. a maximum of four).

The Consortium developed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in 2013 (which was effective until 31st March 2015) as a key reference framework in respect of the governance and operation of the Consortium. This set out a number of guiding principles in respect of collaboration between the parties. It

also set out in broad terms the roles and responsibilities of each consortium member, with their own attached work plan annexed. It encompassed amongst other provisions:-

- procedures for dispute resolution;
- confidentiality provisions;
- arrangements for steering group meetings;
- arrangements should any member decide to leave the Consortium;
- arrangements in the event of suspension or termination of funding; and
- arrangements to review the MoU;

The *Guiding Principles of Collaboration* included the following:-

- Openness and transparency;
- Sharing of good/ best practice;
- Commitment to high standards and continuous quality improvement;
- Operating sound business practice;
- Commitment to flexibility; and
- Commitment to co-operation and to act in good faith.

Despite all of the above being in place, in practice the operation of the Consortium's businesses has not always been consistent with the procedures and principles set out in the MoU. Based on the sum of the various components of the research programme implemented (the beneficiary survey; the programme of 1 to 1 meetings; and attendance at Consortium meetings) the evaluation team would highlight the following concerns in this area:-

- There has not been sufficient transparency and accountability relative to other strands of RISP. Similar to the other strands of RISP, each partner should have an understanding of the resources linked to each partner and related commitments (e.g. in terms of work plan, job descriptions detailing resource and skill commitment from each partner) so that there is an environment conducive to openness, trust and transparency between the Consortium members. Furthermore where any cuts have to be absorbed across the Consortium again, these need to be discussed/negotiated on a collaborative basis¹⁸, with the outcome / impact on each partner visible to each and every partner. All of the above is necessary to ensuring that a transparent and equitable framework is in place – particularly important when the support from DSD/DARD is that of 'grant aid/core support to a

¹⁸ and with board members of each organisation to avoid a situation where staff funded by the Consortium have to discuss funding that might impact on their work/ their role.

collaborative partnership'¹⁹, rather than a 'contract for services' model with sub-contract partners;

- Individual WRC members consulted with during the evaluation relayed the view that the Consortium currently operates with a high degree of control from the Lead Partner and that when the Lead Partner is also the conduit for payment, it can create a situation where members do not feel that they are in a position to speak out to suggest different mechanisms of working collaboratively as they believe they could be at risk of losing their funding. This is particularly difficult when some of the organisation(s) are currently highly dependent²⁰ on this support. The MoU document indicates that each member in the Consortium agreed at the outset to indemnify the Lead Partner against any liabilities that could arise from non-performance/ failure to deliver on their element of the work programme – which is an important point in contributing to building a framework for collaboration and partnership. Not with-standing the fact that co-ordinating the work of seven diverse organisations is highly challenging, there are various mechanisms that could help to create a more effective partnership - that play to diversity of skills and reach that each WRC member can bring (examples are discussed further in Section 4.9)
- Despite there being procedures in place for dispute resolution these have not worked in practice to resolve situations that have arisen. Minutes of some of the WRC meetings highlight serious points of discussion around points of dispute, complaint/ grievance and acrimony between WRC partners. It is not appropriate for the evaluation team to provide any opinion on the 'rights and wrongs' of any of these situations and indeed the evaluation team would not have all of the facts at their disposal to do so in any event. However it is incumbent on the evaluation team to highlight that these situations have arisen and that the documented dispute resolution procedures have not yet been effective in resolving these. Indeed this is acknowledged and resulted in a need for the Lead Partner to consult with DSD on a strategic way forward for the WRC in April/May 2015. At one WRC meeting attended by the evaluation team, it was ²¹cited that the Consortium did not have procedures for dealing with complaints against individual WRC members, when the dispute resolution procedures in the MoU do appear to cover at least some aspects of this – which in turn may imply a lack of awareness of the same amongst the WRC members. In any event these situations have contributed in recent months to lack of internal cohesion/poor working relationships within the WRC, which has inevitably distracted from the delivery of support to women's groups/ women on the ground;
- There needs to be greater effectiveness in managing conflicts of interests. For instance review of the minutes of previous meetings of the WRC indicate a discussion about absorbing funding cuts/ reallocating budgets happened in the presence of staff whose work/ post might be affected by the same. Similarly as referenced previously and as discussed at a recent

19 with liaison through the Lead Partner

20 100% of their funding in some cases

21 Documented in the minutes of the meeting dated Friday 6th March 2015.

Consortium ²²meeting attended by the evaluation team, the approach to dealing with the ESF appeals process, evidenced a conflict of interest between promoting the interests of the sector as a whole via the WRC work, and the individual organisations - several of whom themselves were dependent on ESF funding and in effect competing for resources;

- In terms of the collective reach and collective promotion of the Consortium, it was cited by a Board member of one of the WRC partners at a recent ²³consortium meeting attended by the evaluation team, that this was limited. The fact that the ²⁴website for the Consortium was only launched in March 2015 (some 18 months into the contract and circa 1 year after the launch of Consortium) was referenced to illustrate this. It is the view of the evaluation team that the collective reach of the Consortium is actually unknown as it is not fully captured in a centralised way across the 7 members. It is clear from the beneficiary survey and 1 to 1 discussions with beneficiary groups linked to functional areas and/or WRC partners that the individual partners do in the main have established and widespread networks in terms of reach – and the fact that 76% of respondents were aware of the Consortium (albeit often through a link with one organisation) illustrates this. However concerns were raised at a ²⁵recent WRC meeting that the central Membership List & Directory were not being regularly updated and that it was incumbent on all partners to do so. For the beneficiary survey within the evaluation a combination of this list and the networks of individual member organisations had to be used to get sufficient coverage, which further illustrates the point. By contrast there has been more progress in other strands of RISP (e.g. shared CRM in the generic strand, common management information mechanisms within the voluntary advice strand) in being able to centralise and report on beneficiary data across the programme of work/ Consortium as a whole. This implies that the RISP funding within this strand is still more in the space of a ‘mechanism to fund organisations’ rather than funding the achievement of a collaborative outcomes;
- Finally, again based on evidence from attending ²⁶consortium meetings it was cited that the WRC needs effective procedures in place in relation to good practice with respect to consultation. At the heart of this issue is the extent to which the Consortium is representing the diversity of views within the women’s sector or whether the Consortium has to come down on ‘one side’ of a particular policy debate i.e. present a consensus view. More generally linked to the latter, the issue of managing the risk of what was being responded to ‘in the name of the Consortium’ was cited as an area of concern. In some areas it will easier to achieve some element of a ‘consensus view’ (e.g. in arguing for accessible and affordable childcare provision) than others (e.g. abortion law reform in NI, which has proved to be a case in point in the experience of the WRC to date). In the view of

²² Friday 10th April in Kilcooley Women’s Centre.

²³ Friday 10th April in Kilcooley Women’s Centre.

²⁴ www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk

²⁵ Friday 6th March 2015

²⁶ Friday 10th April in Kilcooley Women’s Centre.

the evaluation team it is unrealistic for the Consortium to assume that it can reach a consensus view on every area of policy debate. The women's sector similar to for instance the rural sector is not homogeneous. The role of the WRC is to ensure that it is a visible focal point for gathering views in an evidenced based way and then presenting the body of evidence accurately to Government, reflecting the diversity of views, where such diversity exists. Documented Consortium processes/ procedures drawing on good practice in terms of consultation would help to remove any ambiguity in this area.

Rural representation / coverage

A recurring point of debate during the course of the evaluation has been the effectiveness and coverage of the WRC to rural communities/ rural women therein. This has extended to debates within the WRC about the location of Consortium meetings – when the MoU involving all members had three named locations – Belfast, Derry and Mid-Ulster (the latter as the rural location).

In framing this element of the evaluation it should be noted that based on NISRA data circa one third of the current resident population living in rural areas – i.e. in the countryside or in villages/settlements up to a population of 5,000²⁷. In these rural areas the gender balance is ²⁸50.2% men/49.8% women, which varies slightly from the overall NI position (49% men/ 51% women). Considering the farming context (i.e. those who own farm holdings in NI) it is almost entirely ²⁹dominated by men (95%). This imbalance has led to successive efforts to try and increase female participation, not only in farming but in all matters that affect the communities and people in rural areas and industries. This is based on recognition of the vital role that women play in all aspects of rural life e.g. in tackling the challenges faced on a daily basis by women in rural communities (overcoming isolation/ access to basic services etc) and in terms of the valuable role they play in farm families, businesses and as entrepreneurs in rural economies. Linked to this having a strong voice for rural women and a rural community development infrastructure that is an effective platform for advancing rural women's issues is important. Evaluations of previous rural development programmes³⁰ have shown that women have previously been under-represented in the rural community development process. Issues such as inadequate provision of childcare, unequal representation of women within local government / existing Local Action Groups (LAGs) and the time-consuming RDP applications and the resulting technical regulations have remained very real barriers preventing greater participation from women across the programme. Indeed DARD carried out an audit of inequalities, finding that women tend to be under-

27 <http://www.nisra.gov.uk/archive/geography/review-of-the-statistical-classification-and-delineation-of-settlements-march-2015.pdf>

28 2011 census data

29 Department of Agriculture and Rural Development Project: Equality Impact Assessment on the Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme 2014 – 2020

30 The 2010 mid-term evaluation of the RDP 2007-13 highlighted gender inequality as a problem.

represented on public bodies and in the Rural Development Programme (RDP). The related action plan for 2011-16 aims at the following³¹:-

- Increase of 25% in expressions of interest by women in DARD related public appointments by 2013;
- Increase of 25% in the number of successful applications by women to public bodies by 2014;
- Increase of gender representation on Public bodies to 50% by 2016;
- 50:50 representation of women and men on all key DARD internal decision-making bodies by 2016.

As at ³²March 2012, the progress update reports indicated that just under 26% of appointees to DARD sponsored Non-Departmental Public Bodies were female and information on LAG composition indicates that women made up 34% of the members overall. More recent ³³monitoring data from December 2014 indicates that the LAG composition has not really moved in the two years and as at December 2014 was 35%. The LAGs - with their operating principles of inclusion and bottom-up governance – are particularly relevant to RISP/ developing rural community development infrastructure, in that their role is to take decisions on projects which are community driven and have a wide community benefit.

A further important point in contextualising considerations of rural representation / reach through the WRC is the proportion of women's groups in receipt of Government funding that are designated as rural. In August 2012 OFMDFM and DSD completed a ³⁴Review of Government Funding for Women's Groups and Organisations and volunteers from OFMDFM's Gender Advisory Panel acted as a reference group. The review team collated and mapped information on direct funding from Government and reported on the distribution and use of funding. Urban and rural⁸ settlement definition data was obtained from NISRA and ArcMap analysis tools were used to identify the amount of funding to women's groups in rural and urban areas. This revealed a stark and considerable difference between urban and rural, with c 1.3% of the direct allocation of funding going to rural women's groups versus urban groups who had the balancing 98.7%.

All of the above research reinforces the need for the rural element of the WRC to contribute ensuring that inequalities in terms of resources to women's groups and involvement of women in decision making structures in rural communities are reduced.

Turning to the performance of the WRC in terms of rural representation/ coverage - drawing on the survey findings (of which 84 out of 239 were from rural women/ rural women's groups) and 1 to 1 interviews with rural women's

31 DARD (2011), Audit of Inequalities and Action Plan 2011-2016, Belfast: <http://www.dardni.gov.uk/audit-of-inequalities-and-action-plan-combined.pdf>.

32 DARD - Annual Equality Progress Report to the Equality Commission for NI (2012/2013)

33 LAG Formation the Facts and Figures December 2014

34 Review of Government Funding for Women's Groups and Organisations, 2012

groups and stakeholders serviced by the Consortium the following points are noted:-

- The rural investment in proportional terms is not sufficient to animate and build critical mass versus urban interests (circa 20% of staff resources in the Consortium are linked to rural delivery i.e. two 25 hour posts in NIRWN) which is out of step with the proportion of rural dwellers in NI (c37% of the population³⁵). The original expression of interest led by WRDA that won the original competition to DSD had ³⁶three rural posts and was 35% of the staff resources within the bid, which is viewed by the evaluation to be commensurate in proportional terms with what should be in place within the current consortium;
- Linked to the above – whilst the service delivery from the rural element of the WRC is highly rated by the rural women's groups/ women they serve – the reach of it has not extended far enough. For instance there are gaps³⁷ in coverage in the west (e.g. Fermanagh), the Ards Peninsula and areas in the North East (e.g. Mid Antrim). Some of the responses to the beneficiary survey from rural women/women's groups indicate that the representation has mainly (but not exclusively) focused on Mid-Ulster and South Down – in effect the hinterland of the operating bases of NIRWN. NIRWN would concur, that whilst much of their work (e.g. policy influence on gender and rural development policy issues with central Government) has been positioned to benefit all rural women/ rural groups across NI, the one-to-support to women's groups has been mainly (but not exclusively) centred more on Mid Ulster and South Down. This has been mainly linked to what was feasible in the context of two part-time funded posts but also in part linked to pro-active demand from these areas. To take Fermanagh as a case in point. Historically there has been six regional rural women's networks³⁸ in NI – of which the Fermanagh network was a very active one of these. With changes in leadership/ staffing constraints in this network in recent years it has been less prominent and in turn has been less pro-active in seeking support and engaging in wider regional activity in the women's sector. Discussions with NIRWN indicate that they recognise these gaps – Fermanagh, Mid-Antrim and the Ards Peninsula – and concur with the reasons for the coverage cited above. They have also indicated their willingness to put pro-bono resources of a voluntary director(s) from NIRWN into a programme of already planned meetings with interests in these three areas to address the issue, in the short term, in that NI-wide rural coverage in terms of 1 to 1 support to groups is difficult with 2 part-time funded posts. The rationale for this is in part to help regain some of the influence/ reach in place circa 3 years ago, when NIRWN had a staff complement of 6 and a contract³⁹ to deliver rural community development services until March 2012. This is a short-term

35 <http://www.dardni.gov.uk/index/statistics/rural-statistics/statistics-did-you-know.htm>

36 A Policy Worker, a Finance & Engagement Worker and Co-ordinator - 100%, 80% and 80% funded posts representing 35% of annual salary costs.

37 Cited in the beneficiary survey

38 Fermanagh, Mid-ulster, Newry and Mourne, Omagh, Roe Valley and South Armagh

39 As part of a consortium for DARD

measure only and not a longer term solution to addressing the adequacy of rural representation/ coverage;

- In terms of central government policy influence, NIRWN participated in and promoted the DARD consultation events for the Rural Development Programme (RDP) 2014-2020 and the 6 priorities for rural development therein, with a particular lens on women's issues within the same. The new RDP 2014-2020 will through Priority 6 measures enable rural women to build on Axis 3 successes. Similarly they also facilitated consultations and policy input on DARD CAP reform Pillar 1 direct payments, again through the lens of women's issues. They are active on the Equality & Good Relations Sub Group of the RDP Monitoring Committee. The influence and contribution in this arena is viewed to be both insightful and needed – the latter particularly in the context of the ongoing under-representation of women on the Local Action Groups (LAGS). Indeed the interview process for this evaluation captured women active in groups in rural areas, who were also involved in their local LAG, where one had experienced prejudiced views in terms of the contribution that women (particularly young women) could make to the local community development efforts in the LAG. All of this remains important going forward given the policy commitments made by DARD in the Audit of Inequalities and Action Plan 2011-2016 (referenced previously);
- Similarly in terms of central government policy influence the contribution that NIRWN is making in OFMDFM's Gender Advisory Panel and to ensure that the new Gender Equality Strategy is rural proofed is viewed to be of key importance to the rural constituency – underlined by the ⁴⁰statistics highlighted previously that circa 1.3% of the direct allocation of Government funding going to women's groups is rural versus urban groups who had the balancing 98.7%; and
- The beneficiary survey also highlights the views that urban versus rural interests have prevailed more within the work of the Consortium to date (or at least been more visible) and that there are gaps in terms of relevance/ coverage for the rural constituency. The verbatim quotations overleaf illustrate some of the views from rural women/ rural groups.

⁴⁰ Review of Government Funding for Women's Groups and Organisations, 2012

"NIRWN needs to take a pro-active role in capacity building of smaller groups in relation to income generation/ sustainability" (NIRWN is currently not resourced through the consortium for training and capacity development).

"I have had minimal contact (with the Consortium) – and I observe that many of their issues are not relevant to our rural area".

"Rural isolation is shocking. NIRWN is working well to combat this. The work they are doing – they do well, but not sufficient breadth"

"More organisations such as NIRWN are needed to support the needs rural women where there is very little support"

"The Rural Women's Policy Forum, run by NIRWN has widened its membership, is well attended and receives excellent feedback"

"They are well connected locally and externally – e.g. Northern Ireland Women's European Platform /UN Committee on the Status of Women (CSW)"

"When they –NIRWN – no longer had the community development monies- that was a big loss on the ground"

"I have taken part in their events and engaged with their initiatives. However, they are mostly in Belfast or Londonderry. I'm unaware of anything in either Co Fermanagh or North Antrim"

"Due to rural isolation women are experiencing mental health problems and have little or no support mechanisms".

"We work on our own in the community. We are older women and not interested in travelling to Belfast to attend meetings. I read their Newsletter and respond to items that would relate to us in a rural area".

4.4 Strategic Context and Rationale

Section 1 of this report set out the overarching policy context and policy drivers for the RISP, which are derived in the first instance from the *Programme for Government 2011-2015 (PFG)* which recognises the need for Government to work alongside the private, voluntary and community sectors to deliver tangible outcomes and improve people's lives. This relationship between Government and the voluntary and community sector is governed by the Concordat, which sets out shared values and principles governing the relationship. These are founded on mutual trust and respect to open up opportunities for more active participation by the VCS in developing public policy in NI. Whilst WRC members individually in working with respective constituencies have demonstrated this, it is not possible to conclude that the WRC overall has operated on the basis of mutual trust and respect in advancing the collaborative programme of work.

It is also important to comment on the contribution of the WRC to other DSD policy imperatives – as below:-

- **Supporting Action 4 of DSD's URCDF** – 'We will promote an effective and efficient VCS' – WRC members have through work in the functional areas have supported individual women's groups to be effective and

efficient in their individual operations – but the WRC as a whole has not yet tackled the challenge that exists in terms of supporting the women's sector (and specifically the element focused on disadvantaged and rural areas) to become more 'joined-up' and effective as a whole. The sector is clearly operating in a difficult backdrop of austerity/ cuts and needs facilitated transformation / change management support to progress through the same. The beneficiary survey and related research for this evaluation highlight concerns in terms of duplication between some of the WRC members and this is also part of the considerations of contributing to a '*an effective and effective VCS*'. Thus similar to other strands of RISP looking ahead there is a need for consideration of options in terms of greater strategic collaboration – e.g. along a spectrum from shared training and back office functions to potential mergers. These discussions have not happened either on the ground (with women's groups) or indeed within the WRC, because the cohesion and trust have been insufficient;

- **Building sustainability in the VCS** (a PfG priority) through support for fund-raising/ incoming generation, through promotion of a social enterprise approach and support for collaboration. As above, this has been limited to one-to-one work with individual women's groups and mainly on grant / funding applications – as per the targets under Functional Area 4 (Service Support). There is still a significant body of work that WRC could be contributing to in terms of sustainability options/ new models of working for their constituency of women's groups, or at least linking with the generic strand of RISP who are tasked to lead on this issue within RISP. It is acknowledged that the current work plan for WRC does not have explicit targets for this, but some element of focus on it, even via involvement / linkage with the generic strand would be helpful; *and*
- **Promoting outcomes based measurement** consistent with the emphasis in the PfG to deliver and measure the delivery of outcomes that make a difference to people's lives. The quarterly reporting to DSD/ DARD is entirely structured around activity targets linked to the five functional areas, with no reference to the four outcomes included previously in Table 4.1. Whilst this is similar to other strands of RISP, the WRC in their reporting have not sought to supplement this with additional evidence of outcomes/ value delivered to their constituency, alongside activity reporting. In other strands of RISP (e.g. generic and the rural element of the faith strand) delivery agents have been pro-active in recognising the short-comings of the quarterly reporting format in evidencing outcomes, through undertaking regular surveys in functional areas or in the case of the rural faith-based activity, adding a 'so-what' column that evidences impact and value of activity delivered. Whilst the Lead Partner has more recently expressed an interest in reporting in an outcomes based format, this has not happened to date.

In facilitating the effective contribution of the VCS to policy development in NI, individual WRC members have contributed positively to advancing policy debates, through the lens of women in disadvantaged and rural areas – including, by way of examples gender equality, rural development, welfare reform, childcare and education/ training provision. As previously detailed the

work by WRC members has extended to input in EU and UN policy fora on women's issues.

Turning to need, the baseline survey conducted in 2013 by ASU highlighted the need for greater support, provision of information and input to consultation in areas of policy, leadership and service provision. Particular concern was raised over support on childcare issues, availability of training and general representation. More co-ordinated communication and the need for a collective voice - to tackle exclusion, marginalisation, disadvantage and poverty – for women from rural and disadvantaged areas, were also highlighted as key priorities. With respect to servicing women in rural areas the main needs/ issues highlighted related to a fair allocation of funding; retaining services and transport; dedicated regional support and provision of opportunities for networking. Overall the research demonstrated that the needs and requirements of women's organisations are quite diverse and complex i.e. no 'one size fits all'.

The beneficiary survey implemented for this evaluation re-ran the same questions to capture the views of women's groups/ women on the needs for women in rural and disadvantaged areas – and in broad terms the 'open ended' responses to this reiterate all of the needs highlighted above in the 2013 ASU baseline survey. The survey also explored gaps in relation to support currently provided. Circa 46% of respondents (base: 109) were of the view that there were gaps – as illustrated in the text box below which include perceived geographic as well as thematic gaps.

"I'd like to see more rural events"

"Not sure, we need a women's minister for this"

"Support to sustain women's work, help with promoting capacity and confidence in women, role of women in democracy and civic life, training that is on offer for women"

"Ongoing support with sustainability"

"Many gaps for women outside Belfast. Most of the support is Belfast and Derry based"

"We need more funding to broaden and deepen the work. The women's sector is being devastated by cuts. The Consortium cannot make up for the drastic underfunding of critical work at the local level. They are partners not substitutes"

"No funding to help traveller led groups. Or more help to show and train them to get funding"

"WRC should be identifying and advising on European funding which is an untapped resource in NI. WRC too busy sorting out the organisations who are funded by the programme, and the actual support to women on the ground appears to be incidental or an inconvenience to them going about their normal business of their own organisations"

"More education for groups and organisations on the needs of LGBT women and more visibility for LGBT women within the groups. Opportunities for more partnership working with the multiple minority groups, integrative working between different sexual orientations, ages, races, abilities, etc"

The ongoing market failure underpinning the support to women in rural and disadvantaged areas relates to rationale for funding of this strand in this first instance i.e. that women can be a major and strategic influence for change for good in families and communities that are struggling to overcome disadvantage and poverty. Thus enabling and empowering local women to work for good in their community and to contribute positively should help improve the quality of life for their family, extended family and their local community. There is no material private sector commercial market in respect of support and representation for this constituency, underling the need for Government intervention. In turn the support and representation under the five functional areas, contributes to equity objectives, through ensuring that policy and service development is 'gender proofed' for this constituency of women in rural and disadvantaged areas. To be consistent with this it is important that WRC ensures that each and every issue that they progress has evidenced inequity to explore – this would be the case with the majority to date, with the exception of women only advice services, for the reasons previously outlined.

4.5 Operation and Delivery

The funding from DSD (and DARD) provides for a core team of delivery staff from the six delivery organisations plus support for the Lead Partner role. The delivery organisations have allocated responsibilities to lead/joint-lead functional areas of work.

To date the contract has effectively been more of a mechanism to fund delivery organisations to do work that they likely would progress anyway and the importance/ value of the work of individual WRC members in various functional areas of work to women's groups/ women on the ground is evident. However the delivery model has not yet sufficiently demonstrated the additionality of a Consortium/ collaborative approach, over and above each organisation working separately. This is despite all of the documented values, principles and operating arrangements in the MoU – which in the view of the evaluation team were comprehensive and fit for purpose. The issue is that the out-workings of the WRC in operational terms have not always been consistent with the ethos and content of the MoU.

The contract has provided modest support for collaborative marketing, PR and IT revenue expenditure, outside funded posts. It has not been possible for the evaluation team to robustly assess the collective reach of the WRC in this context. There is a shared membership directory in place, but listing in this does not necessarily correlate to active involvement in functional areas of work, and as such there is not an easy 'read-across' between it and activity listed in quarterly monitoring reports. The networks and marketing reach of individual WRC members have played an important reinforcing role alongside the collective resources developed to date.

The WRC website (<http://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk>) as a collective marketing and promotional tool, is of high quality and is an excellent resource/ reference point for all of the work of WRC members across the functional areas. However given that it has only been up and running since March 2015 – circa 8 weeks at the time of the evaluation – it is difficult to assess the extent to which it has been successful in building a strong and

engaged constituency of demand for the activities of the WRC. Early impressions from some of the stakeholders / beneficiaries interviewed for this evaluation are positive about the website itself and the contribution it should make to building awareness of the collective partnership.

Turning to the contract oversight procedures by DSD and DARD during the operating period, the main mechanism has been completion of the quarterly monitoring template. As in all other strands of RISP the format of this is more geared to capturing activity – and therefore outputs – rather than outcomes. In other strands of RISP (generic, rural element of faith based engagement) delivery agents have recognised the shortcomings of this format in demonstrating the value/ outcome of their work to VCS groups on the ground and have sought to bring supplementary evidence to bear in collective reporting, which the WRC have not done. In addition the WRC have not had the benefit of participating in the *Inspiring Impact* pilot programme (unlike the faith and voluntary advice strands) and as such could learn from some of the emerging learning in terms of building a ‘theory of change’ model around all their work.

From a risk management perspective the funding award to the WRC was administered through the DSD Financial Systems and Controls Assessment risk management process, which involves DSD making an assessment of the risk of awarding public funding to an organisation based on the organisations management structure/capacity, general governance arrangements and financial capability. In addition DSD VCU subsequently carried out a number of monitoring visits and checks throughout the 2012-15 funding period to ensure that the terms and conditions of the LOO, relating to financial management and governance were fully adhered to. TWN as Lead Partner of the WRC was categorised initially as adequate (standard for all new grants) and then moved to robust, based on the outcome of the monitoring visits. In effect, and linked to their strong track record as Funding Body, TWN were deemed to have all of the necessary financial procedures and controls in place to administer the grant.

There is an important point to note about the scope of these monitoring visits, in that in the main they are designed to assess the extent to which the lead partner is fit to handle and disburse public money/ grant expenditure – all of which was deemed to be fully in order with respect to TWN. They do not however extend to broader assessment of governance issues within and across the Consortium as a whole e.g. adherence to the ethos and content of the MoU, this being deemed by DSD VCU to be a matter internal to the partnership. DSD VCU’s mode of oversight is to work through the Lead Partner at all times, which has worked well in the other strands of RISP, because of greater trust and openness between all partners – meaning that the Lead Partner could more effectively represent all the views of individual partners. This has not been possible to the same degree with respect to WRC and therefore the inference cannot be taken that because the monitoring visits reported satisfactorily on financial and governance issues with respect to the Lead Partner, that governance right across the partnership has worked well e.g. in line with the ethos and content of the MoU.

DSD VCU has sought to be constructive in working with the WRC in relation to the risks and issues that have emerged. These have all centred on internal cohesion/ working relationships within the partnership, and on many of the issues previously outlined at 4.3 above. As previously detailed these discussions remain current with the Lead Partner.

In terms of expenditure drawn down by WRC, versus the LOO, the total claimed to date for each year of the contract are broadly in line with the agreed budgets per the LOO.

4.6 Performance and Impact

Table 4.2 below draws the detailed research findings discussed already at 4.3 above to summarise the conclusions of the evaluation team in respect of performance against the four contractual outcomes.

Table 4.2 Performance Against Contractual Outcomes		
(√√ = fully met √ = partially met X = not met)		
Outcome	Met	Commentary
(1) Organisations serving the needs of women living in disadvantaged areas and rural areas have access to the specialist support they require to function effectively and efficiently.	√	It is evident from the research findings that women's groups/ women on the ground have benefited from the work of WRC members across the five functional areas – and that this has in the main enabled them to function more efficiently and effectively. That said, there are gaps in geographic and thematic coverage across NI and the collective force of Consortium expertise has not been sufficiently brought to bear to effectively support the constituency as a whole. For these reasons this is categorised as partially met.
(2) The VCS, including women's organisations, is supported in making a valued and effective contribution to policy development across Government specific to women living and working in disadvantaged areas and rural areas;	√	The constituency of women in rural and disadvantaged areas has been supported through the work of WRC members in functional areas to make a valued contribution to policy development in NI, and in EU and UN fora. However the synergies across WRC members have not been fully realised to effect cohesive lobby campaigns for the constituency as a whole. In addition there have been challenges for the WRC in this area, in particular internal tensions about the extent to which the WRC has represented the diversity of views within the women's sector and managing the risk of what was being responded in terms of policy consultations 'in the name of the Consortium'. For these reasons

		this is categorised as partially met.
(3) There is increased participation and improved community development/engagement amongst women from all disadvantaged communities and in rural areas.	N/A Not possible to evidence	It is the view of the evaluation team that the collective reach of the WRC is actually unknown as it is not fully captured in a centralised way across the 7 members. It is clear from the beneficiary survey and 1 to 1 discussions with beneficiary groups linked to functional areas and/or WRC partners that the individual partners do in the main have established and widespread networks in terms of reach – and the fact that 76% of respondents were aware of the Consortium (albeit often through a link with one organisation) illustrates this. However WRC are further behind relative to other strands of RISP in having common management information systems, to capture and record ongoing and repeat engagements with women's groups. The shared Membership List & Directory is not a substitute for this and it is not clear if this evidences growth from a baseline position. The quarterly reports highlight that ' <i>membership continues to increase</i> ' without supporting quantified evidence. There are also constraints in terms of data capture and sharing of information about individual women supported – which again adds to the uncertainty of the collective reach of the WRC.
(4) There are improved working relationships, better collaboration and more effective partnerships, pertaining to the specific interests and needs of women from disadvantaged areas and rural women's needs, across the VCS and Government.	X	This outcome area relates to partnership and collaboration across the VCS i.e. in this strand of RISP, representing the constituency of women in rural and disadvantaged areas in a cohesive and collaborative manner. There is not sufficient evidence of this to date, given the issues that have prevailed in terms of working relationships and effective partnerships within the WRC to date.

It is not feasible to quantify net impacts (after adjusting for deadweight/ additionality and displacement effects). This is because of the nature of the targets in the first place set in the contract/ LOO to the WRC (which were more activity than impact/ outcome focused) and because with the need to keep the beneficiary survey as simple and short as possible (and for it to work for both women's groups and individual women respondents) it did not test what would have happened in the absence of the support from the WRC.

Based on the cumulative research for this evaluation, whilst the value of work in the functional areas linked to individual WRC partners active in delivery has been noted, there is not sufficient evidence yet of the additionality of a Consortium/ collaborative approach, over and above each organisation working separately. Furthermore the research findings evidence greater scope for more efficient working across the partnership, in part to address concerns about duplication (more urban than rural) – which is also relevant to considerations of the additionality of a Consortium/ collaborative approach.

4.7 Return on Investment and Value for Money

The investment in the WRC entails circa £350k of investment per annum inclusive of both the DSD and DARD support. Given the position that it has not been possible for the evaluation team to robustly assess the collective reach/ market penetration of WRC activities over and above a baseline position, for the reasons cited in Table 4.2 (under Outcome 3) the return on investment/ VFM judgement for this strand is more of a value judgement, than a quantified assessment.

Overall it is the view of the evaluation team that the support to the WRC has not to date represented VFM. This conclusion has been reached based on the performance against outcomes (2 partially met, one unknown and one not met) and in light of the observations and concerns highlighted in respect of internal cohesion/ governance.

In reaching this conclusion that the support to the WRC overall has not to date represented VFM, it is important not to lose sight of the satisfaction and value attributed to the work in the five functional areas, linked to individual WRC members. Indeed it is likely that DSD VCU and DARD could have achieved the same results by funding the seven organisations individually – or indeed arguably better results - in that there would have been less time tied up in trying to sort out internal cohesion issues and more time to service women's groups/ women on the ground. The fundamental challenge has been in creating a culture of openness, trust and collaboration between partners - given how the Consortium came about and the history/ 'baggage' between the partners – which has proved to be very difficult to 'draw a line under' and move forward.

4.8 Equality Considerations

There are no definitive records that profile those who have engaged with the WRC from the perspective of the Section 75 categories (or the Disability Discrimination Act). This is because the WRC in the main directly services VCS / women's groups. This is more relevant to the strands of RISP that service individuals (e.g. voluntary advice and the WCCF). The impact on women as individuals linked to the work of WRC members is more indirect, linked for instance to policy influence/ lobbying work that improves access to services and quality of life for women living in disadvantaged and rural areas.

There were a number of anecdotal comments in the survey responses about the need for greater reach to groups / interests representing LGBT, ethnic minority and traveller women – which is relevant to equality considerations

and linked to the observations made previously about more need for the WRC to pro-actively target gaps in reach.

4.9 Overall Assessment and Lessons Learned

The WRC was the last of the RISP strands to mobilise, with only 18 months of activity in functional areas to evaluate at this point in time. The origins of the WRC as an ‘arranged marriage’ with the ‘baggage’ of history that came with this, has proved to date to be difficult for WRC members to move past to deliver on a cohesive basis for the constituency of women in disadvantaged and rural areas. There is evidence however of satisfaction and value attributed to work in the five functional areas linked to individual WRC members.

As detailed at the outset the Lead Partner has been in discussions with DSD VCU in parallel with this evaluation on some of the recent challenges that have prevailed in respect of internal cohesion and to see if a strategic way forward for the WRC can be arrived at. Linked to this DSD VCU took the step of issuing monthly letters of offer (for April and May 2015) rather than issue a full contract/ letter of offer for the 15/16 year (as per other RISP strands) to manage the risks of appropriate use of public monies. Ultimately the decision in relation to support for the remainder of 15/16 is a matter for DSD VCU and DARD and the findings of this evaluation plus the strategic discussions referred to above should both inform the decision on potential funding for the remainder of 15/16 and what form this could take.

In terms of lessons learned, the following points should be noted – these are relevant to any potential future support within 15/16 year that DSD VCU and DARD may decide to award. They are also relevant as part of the process to reshape RISP for 16/17 and beyond:-

Table 4.2: Lessons learned/ Recommendations in relation to support for women in rural and disadvantaged areas
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The functions and high level policy outcomes that have framed the support contract for women in rural and disadvantaged areas have been appropriate and in being smaller in number than other strands of RISP are easier to track, with less overlap. The monitoring and reporting against the same however has (by virtue of the quarterly monitoring template) been too activity focused, and therefore not sufficiently valuable to assess ongoing impact for women’s groups/ women on the ground. As per the other strands of RISP and learning from <i>Inspiring Impact</i> pilot work in other strands, a shift towards a more outcome based model of measurement – linked to a theory of change model would be valuable. This would take time to put in place however in that there is not at this point in time a quantified baseline position of need against which future change would be measured. In addition it would also necessitate collaboration to agree a shared set of outcomes involving all partners on an equitable basis. The experience in other strands is that partners (lead and delivery) have been involved on an equitable basis in this and that it has taken a number of months to build consensus amongst partners around a theory of change model. Such a process would also help to address the concern that RISP has been in this context (as in other strands) more in the space of a ‘mechanism to fund organisations’ rather than funding the achievement of a collaborative outcomes.

2.	There is an immediate need for DSD VCU and DARD to consider the proportional investment for the rural constituency. As detailed circa 20% of salaried resources, is out-of-step with 37% of the population living in rural areas in NI. There are also stark inequities between Government funding for service delivery to women's groups between rural and urban (1.3% v 98.7%) and key policy imperatives that DARD wish to achieve in respect of 50/50 representation of women/men in decision-making structures for rural development, where there is a shortfall currently to address. The beneficiary survey also references concerns about duplication with respect to the WRC that are more urban than rural.
3.	There needs to be a mechanism in place for prioritising and 'filtering' out issues that should be progressed in terms of activity to influence policy for the benefit of women in rural and disadvantaged areas. This should include whether there is an evidenced in gender inequity/ issue to address.
4.	Pro-active targeting of perceived under-represented areas – geographically (mainly rural) and thematically (women from ethnic minority, traveller and LGBT communities) has not happened sufficiently to date. Shared/ common management information systems that are regularly updated are central to having the 'market intelligence' to do this.
5.	Having a Lead Partner that has a more significant financial stake in delivery is the norm and has worked well in the other strands of RISP. Whilst the original decision-making by TWN (to maximise resources for the other partner's active in functional delivery and to be the management/ administrative lead) was well intentioned it is not optimal in terms of an effective delivery model. This has perhaps been more feasible in other RISP strands because there have been a smaller number of partners in the same (i.e. a maximum of four). Accommodating seven organisations within the constraints of the overall budget has been challenging and points to the need (as is also the case in the other strands of RISP) to consider what efficiency gains could be made through greater strategic collaboration – e.g. along a spectrum from shared training and back office functions to potential mergers. These discussions have not happened either on the ground (with women's groups) or indeed within the WRC, because the cohesion and trust have been insufficient. All of this is important in relation to the ongoing PFG imperative of sustainability of the VCS.
6.	Support from DSD/DARD through this contract is that of 'grant aid/core support to a collaborative partnership', rather than a 'contract for services' model with sub-contract partners. As such a transparent and equitable framework needs to be in place to underpin effective collaboration, where each partner has an understanding of the resources linked to each partner and related commitments (e.g. in terms of work plan, job descriptions detailing resource and skill commitments). The MoU in place for WRC to March 2015 was, in the view of the evaluation team, both comprehensive and fit for purpose in setting a framework for this. It has simply not been adhered to on a consistent basis in the day-to-day operations of the WRC. From the perspective of DSD VCU, whilst it is clearly more expedient to deal only through the Lead Partner, in the case of this strand many of the other partners have more of a financial stake in WRC than the Lead Partner. The oversight from DSD VCU in dealing through the Lead Partner only, does not allow them a sufficient voice to contribute. Also based on discussions with WRC partners it runs the risk that they feel constrained in suggesting mechanisms to work collaboratively in case they are at risk of losing their funding. Given all of this the oversight from DSD VCU and DARD needs to extend beyond interaction/ monitoring visits to the Lead Partner – and to ensure on an ongoing basis that

all partners (lead and delivery) are content that the ethos and content of any MoU is being adhered to. There are also a range of operational mechanisms that the WRC could consider (and indeed are considering) to create more of a collaborative partnership ethos (e.g. rotating /shared Chair at Consortium meetings, rotating resource for minute-taking etc)

7. The role of the WRC is to ensure that it is a visible focal point for gathering views in an evidenced based way and then presenting the body of evidence accurately to Government, reflecting the diversity of views, where such diversity exists. Documented processes/ procedures for this drawing on good practice in terms of consultation would help to remove any ambiguity in this area and are needed.

5 WOMENS CENTRE CHILDCARE FUND

6 FAITH BASED ENGAGEMENT

7 OVERALL CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 Introduction

7.2 Summary of Conclusions and Recommendations by Strand

7.3 Concluding Remarks/ Overall Conclusions Across the 5 Strands

This consolidated evaluation of the five thematic strands has indicated broad effectiveness in most areas – but has highlighted scope for greater efficiency and economy – that could in part be achieved through more intensive collaboration. This, plus various ⁴¹change drivers in the wider operating environment will mean that the ‘status quo’ for 16/17 and beyond is not sustainable.

The consortium model of delivery for thematic strands has been a positive progression from the support arrangements in place prior to 2010. However, this evaluation has highlighted that RISP from 2012 to date has still been more in the space of ‘funding organisations to deliver activities in their own functional areas’ – rather than funding collaborative outcomes, with a sense of shared ownership underpinning the same. As detailed in Section 2 the benchmarking of support arrangements to the VCS in England, where synergies have recently been realised in servicing the VCS better through the sharing of resources and expertise – offer valuable lessons for the future in NI.

The early lessons from *Inspiring Impact*, based on a theory of change model (which maps out a process to capture outputs, outcomes and contribution to policy aims), within two strands of RISP (faith based engagement and voluntary advice) is offering positive insights in building consensus/ shared ownership around collaborative outcomes.

In addition, another key point is the need to reduce the number of outcomes (and functions contributing to the same) in any new support arrangements to a prioritised short-list. This is to reduce the ‘oversight’/ monitoring burden and enable greater prioritisation and focus.

Planning for 16/17 and beyond, needs to start within 15/16 – involving change management/ transformation joint work with VCS. In doing so there is a need to distinguish between:

- Service delivery to individuals (e.g. voluntary advice), which could potentially move away from grant-aiding core costs to a ‘contract for services’ type model to reduce bureaucracy and help stimulate further innovation; and
- Support to VCS Groups to develop a sustainable, innovative and effective VCS – which is a public good and which improves the

⁴¹ Budget challenges and efficiencies; Reform of Local Government/ Creation of new 11-Council Structure in April 2015; New PfG; Delivering Social Change Policy Framework; Innovate NI and Social Innovation; An enterprising approach/ sustainability; Outcomes focus (linked to Inspiring Impact); Reducing Bureaucracy and creation of new Department for Communities.

functioning of society and the effectiveness of government. Within this a key issue to consider looking forward is if there is distinctiveness in terms of sectoral needs (e.g. faith, women, rural) what this looks like and how best it is accommodated.

Furthermore in respect of the Volunteering Strategy, volunteers are a key resource that should continue to be leveraged across all areas.

Overall arrangements for the future must accommodate transformation support to build sustainability, innovation and replication of good practice and simultaneously drive participation through inclusion. The form of any new delivery arrangements should follow the priority support functions that are identified.