

1. A brief overview of the history, legal status and aims of the organisation or body. Please explain whether the work of the organisation or body is UK wide, or is instead confined to Northern Ireland only.

Women's Resource & Development Agency (WRDA) is a company limited by guarantee and a registered charity based in Belfast and working regionally across Northern Ireland to advance women's equality and participation in society. Founded in 1983 and originally known as the Women's Education Project, our vision is of a fair and equal society where women are empowered and are a visible force for change and influence in all areas of life. WRDA carries out regular policy work and lobbies decision makers on behalf of women. We work to enhance how the women's sector and women on the ground are communicating with all levels of government, ensuring women have their rightful say in the policies affecting them. Providing training for women is a central pillar of our work. We believe education is a major factor in addressing the marginalisation of women. Our courses cover a wide range of areas with the overall aim to empower women and increase their knowledge and skills. We act as an information hub for the women's sector, while also striving to raise the profile of women's issues in the wider media. Through our communication channels, we publicise the latest news, funding opportunities, events and research of interest to women.

2. A brief description of the group(s) which the organisation or body supports or represents.

WRDA works on behalf of the women of Northern Ireland, and in particular on behalf of marginalised and disadvantaged women.

3. A brief overview of the work of the organisation or body in supporting or representing the relevant group(s) between January 2020 and May 2022 as it relates to the response to Covid-19 of (i) the UK Government; and/or (ii) the Government in Northern Ireland.

The focus of WRDA's lobbying work around Covid and the Government response was the work of the Northern Ireland Executive. Initially this was ad hoc, for instance responding to statements by Ministers, or raising concerns about how the pandemic impacted women – for instance, although abortion has been decriminalised in Northern Ireland, it had not been commissioned and many had to travel to England for abortion. In the context of the pandemic this involved overcoming immense logistical barriers, and we sought to highlight that. Over time, in addition to responding to Executive publications, it became clear that there was a need for an organised effort to respond to the ways that the NI Executive was failing to take women's experiences into consideration.

Through the Women's Policy Group, which is chaired by WRDA but is made up of dozens of organisations in the women's sector and beyond, we produced our own Feminist Recovery Plan in July 2020, a roadmap for how government could lead us out of a pandemic that highlighted existing inequalities, and towards a more equal future. In July 2021 we launched an updated and expanded Feminist Recovery Plan along with a research report focused on the experiences of women across Northern Ireland. Efforts were made to make the Plan, which was quite comprehensive and detailed, accessible to all the Government Departments; briefings were made on areas specific to each government departments and summary briefings were sent to those Departments directly.

In addition, WRDA sent both a summary report and a full-length report to the UK Government¹, focused on issues that are reserved and cannot be legislated for at devolved level. We also sent reports to the UN CEDAW Committee.

4. A list of any articles or reports the organisation or body has published or contributed² to, and/or evidence it has given (for example to UK Parliament or the Northern Ireland Executive) regarding the impact on the group(s) which the organisation or body supports or represents of the response to Covid-19 by (i) the UK Government; and/or (ii) the Government in Northern Ireland. Please include links to those documents where possible.

A full list of documentation sent to the NI Executive is:

Covid 19 Feminist Recovery Plan	July 2020
Covid 19 Feminist Recovery Plan Relaunch: One Year On ³	July 2021
Covid 19 FRP Supplementary Report: Putting Women's Voices At the Core ⁴	July 2021
Covid 19 Feminist Recovery Plan: Briefing for Committee for Communities ⁵	
Covid 19 Feminist Recovery Plan: Briefing on Disabled Women ⁶	
Covid 19 Feminist Recovery Plan: Briefing on Childcare for APG on Early Years and Childcare ⁷	
Summary for Department of Agriculture, the Environment and Rural Affairs ⁸	
Summary for Department for Communities ⁹	
Summary for Department of Infrastructure ¹⁰	
Summary for Department for the Economy ¹¹	
Summary for Department of Education ¹²	

¹ Covid 19 Feminist Recovery Plan: UK Government Report <https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/WPG-FRP-Westminster-Full-Report.pdf>

² Covid19 Feminist Recovery Plan (WRDA 2020) <https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/WPG-NI-Feminist-Recovery-Plan-2020-.pdf>

³ Covid19 Feminist Recovery Plan Relaunch One Year On (WRDA 2021) <https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/WPG-COVID-19-Feminist-Recovery-Plan-Relaunch-One-Year-On.pdf>

⁴ Covid19 Feminist Recovery Plan Supplementary Report: Putting Women's Voices At the Core (WRDA 2021) <https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/WPG-Feminist-Recovery-Plan-Research-Report-Womens-Voices-at-the-Core.pdf>

⁵ Covid19 Feminist Recovery Plan: Briefing for Committee for Communities: <https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Communities-Committee-Briefing.pdf>

⁶ Covid 19 Feminist Recovery Plan: Briefing on Disabled Women <https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/WPG-Briefing-on-Disabled-Women-V2.pdf>

⁷ Covid 19 Feminist Recovery Plan: Briefing on Childcare for APG on Early Years and Childcare <https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/APG-Early-Years-and-Childcare-Key-Briefing-WPG-Feminist-Recovery-Plan-12.11.20.pdf>

⁸ Summary for DAERA <https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Department-for-Agriculture-Environment-and-Rural-Affairs-WPG-FRP-Summary.pdf>

⁹ Summary for DfC <https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Department-for-Communities-WPG-FRP-Summary.pdf>

¹⁰ Summary for DfI <https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Department-for-Infrastructure-WPG-FRP-Summary.pdf>

¹¹ Summary for DfE <https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Department-for-the-Economy-WPG-FRP-Summary.pdf>

¹² Summary for DE <https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Department-of-Education-WPG-FRP-Summary.pdf>

Summary for Department of Finance¹³

Summary for Department of Health¹⁴

Summary for Department of Justice¹⁵

Summary for the Executive Office¹⁶

5. The view of the organisation or body as to whether the group(s) it supports or represents was adequately considered when decisions about the response to Covid-19 were made by (i) the UK Government; and/or (ii) the Government in Northern Ireland. Please also explain the reasons for the view expressed by the organisation or body in this respect.

(ii) No, we do not believe that the Government in Northern Ireland adequately considered the needs and circumstances of women in their response to Covid-19.

Initial Government recovery plans did not refer to women in any way, assuming that any recovery would impact all parts of society equally – something that we know to be untrue. It also did not acknowledge the ways that the closure of schools and the advent of home-schooling impacted on women who disproportionately carried the burden of making this possible. At the same time, women were more likely to be front line workers, either in health and social care or in the educational settings that remained open to serve the children of key workers. When retail and hospitality shut down this had a significant impact on employees in this sector who, again, are disproportionately women and, where furlough applied, the reduced amount was often insufficient for minimum wage workers to survive on.

The handling of Statutory Maternity Pay in relation to Covid, which saw a furloughed worker in receipt of SMP initially receive 80% of their reduced salary, before this was amended, meant that many recipients of SMP saw their furloughed rate of pay dip below the minimum weekly amount and become Maternity Allowance. This meant that their income was treated as “unearned income” and reduced pound for pound from their Universal Credit. Overall, the way this was approached demonstrated that the impact of the furlough scheme on women was an afterthought, and while the situation was amended it should never have arisen.

Maternity services were curtailed during the pandemic, resulting in women labouring alone for long durations and often receiving devastating news about pregnancy loss or viability alone. These restrictions remained in place in many NHS Trusts after other restrictions were eased, including restrictions in hospitals. Abortion access moved fairly quickly to Telemedicine and allowed access for those who needed the services in all of Britain, but not in Northern Ireland, leading to situations where patients had to travel overnight on freight ferries, since most flights were grounded, to access clinics in England. The UK Government maintained and defended that state of affairs and made no effort to address it.

¹³ Summary for DF <https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Department-of-Finance-WPG-FRP-Summary.pdf>

¹⁴ Summary for DoH <https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Department-of-Health-WPG-FRP-Summary.pdf>

¹⁵ Summary for DoJ <https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Department-of-Justice-WPG-FRP-Summary.pdf>

¹⁶ Summary for TEO <https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/The-Executive-Office-WPG-FRP-Summary.pdf>

Domestic abuse rose almost immediately when Covid hit and restrictions came in. In all parts of the UK, refuge services were stretched. While there was a welcome investment of £22 million in June 2020, in Northern Ireland, where femicide is at its highest per capita in the UK and where Women's Aid shelters were at capacity before the first restrictions were announced, any money received via Barnett Consequentials did not make their way to these services.

Paramilitary activity in Northern Ireland is reported to have used certain support systems that existed during Covid as a way to increase its reach, with former Justice Minister Naomi Long telling BBC Spotlight in January 2023 that paramilitary loansharks used local Council administered schemes designed to deliver food parcels to identify vulnerable people in need of cash, offering them illegal loans. While this is not necessarily directly tied to Government action, it points to unique circumstances that exist in Northern Ireland and that were not considered by either the UK Government or by the Northern Ireland Executive in the operation of the various schemes here. This activity thrives when poverty is rife, and in many parts of Northern Ireland poverty is rife, even more so at times of crisis.

6. Whether the organisation or body raised any concerns about the consideration being given to the group(s) which it supports or represents with (i) the UK Government; and/or (ii) the Government in Northern Ireland, when those governments were making decisions about their response to Covid-19. Please provide a list of any such correspondence or meetings with (i) the UK Government; and/or (ii) the Government in Northern Ireland, including the dates on which the body or organisation wrote or such meetings were held, to whom the correspondence was addressed or with whom the meeting was held, and any response received from the UK Government or the Government in Northern Ireland addressing such concerns.

In addition to the Feminist Recovery Plan, its update and supplementary report, summaries sent to Assembly Committees and All Party Groups and the individual briefings sent to each Government Department in Northern Ireland, each of which are listed above, WRDA engaged with The Executive Office and with some Government Departments specifically on issues related to the Covid recovery efforts and the rollout of specific schemes, or on the Feminist Recovery Plan itself.

This includes:

- A meeting with then Justice Minister Naomi Long on 18th May 2021 to discuss the FRP and its applications to her Department. This meeting was attended by Minister Naomi Long and two DoJ staff members [NR] and [NR] as well as the following members of the Women's Policy Group: Rachel Powell, Jonna Monaghan, Kendall Bousquet, Alexandra Brennan, Alexa Moore, Elaine Crory, Coumilah Manjoo, Aoife Mallon and Naomi Green.
- A meeting was set up with then Economy Minister Gordon Lyons for 7th December 2021, also to discuss the Feminist Recovery Plan with the Women's Policy Group. This meeting was cancelled by his team and never rescheduled.
- The then Minister for Health Robin Swann declined to meet with the Women's Policy Group in letter dated 16th August 2021
- The then Minister for Infrastructure Nichola Mallon declined to attend the launch of the Feminist Recovery Plan in a letter dated 20th July 2020

The Executive Office, who co-ordinated the Covid Recovery efforts, were at times reluctant to engage with the WPG or the Lobbyist. A full detailed report on this engagement is linked below¹⁷, and a summary of this engagement is as follows, from the above report:

TEO began consulting on their COVID-19 Recovery Plan in June 2021. At this time, a limited number of organisations were invited to respond and were given an extremely short time period to do so.

The Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA) was invited to provide views on the TEO COVID Recovery Plan on Friday 25th June 2021, with a deadline of Friday 2nd July 2021. This gave WRDA five working days to respond to the Consultation. The WPG responded to this initial consultation by sending TEO a copy of the relaunched WPG NI COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan, outlining the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on women and recommendations for how to address this disproportionate impact.

At the time, WRDA raised concerns with TEO that this was an inadequate timeframe to allow for meaningful engagement with the women's sector. For reference, the minimum amount of time for public consultations is 12 weeks, in accordance with best practice guidelines laid out by the NI Equality Commission. WRDA, along with the Committee on the Administration of Justice (CAJ) and the Women's Budget Group (WBG) also made a complaint to TEO about the lack of equality screening on their COVID Recovery Plan. From the perspective of the women's sector, the TEO Recovery Plan resembled a de facto Programme for Government. As noted by TEO, the aim of their Recovery Plan was "to inform our priorities to accelerate recovery over a 24-month period through focused, collaborative working." This was concerning to the WPG as there was no budget attached to the Plan, there was no formal consultation or stakeholder engagement sessions, and it is unclear how the Plan will be progressed over the next two years. As it is not an official Programme for Government, everything within the TEO Recovery Plan is subject to Executive veto, including the Social Inclusion Strategies that it makes reference to. Given the significance of this plan in terms of informing public policy over the next two years, civil society groups such as WRDA, CAJ and WBG argued that the Plan should be subject to a full Equality Impact Assessment.

TEO then published an Equality Screening of their Recovery Plan in November 2021 and invited WRDA to provide views on this document. This request was received on 24th November 2021 with a deadline for submitting views on Monday 29th November. WRDA has since sent a letter¹⁸ to the TEO COVID Recovery Team explaining that this short deadline of three working days meant that WRDA was not in a position to respond to the Consultation. This sentiment was shared among several women's sector groups who were also not in a position to respond to the Consultation due to the three-day deadline.

With all of this said, many individual MLAs, occasionally including Ministers, did attend the launch of the Feminist Recovery Plan, and some engaged with the WPG on an ad hoc basis to work towards the goals of the FRP. In particular, women's sector representatives have used the All-Party Group on UNSCR 1325 to get written and oral questions asked in the Northern Ireland Assembly. Through this APG, several written questions were submitted to the Executive by MLAs such as Paula Bradley, Mike Nesbitt, Emma Sheerin, Sinead McLaughlin and Rachel Woods. MLAs from this APG have repeatedly asked TEO to meet with the WPG to discuss the Feminist Recovery Plan.

¹⁷ WRDA briefing on TEO Engagement with the Women's Sector <https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/WRDA-Briefing-on-TEO-Engagement-with-Womens-Sector.pdf>

¹⁸ WRDA letter to TEO Covid Recovery Team <https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/WRDA-Letter-to-TEO-COVID-Recovery-Team-Nov-21.pdf>

In addition, on 4th March 2022, Speaker Alex Maskey hosted the WPG and women across Northern Ireland for the first ever Women's Parliament event¹⁹. On this occasion a motion was discussed around supporting the Feminist Recovery Plan and Minister for Communities Deirdre Hargey MLA responded to the speakers. The motion heard was as follows: *"That this Women's Parliament recognises that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a disproportionate economic and social impact on women, as highlighted in the Women's Policy Group's COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan; and calls on the Minister for Communities, together with her Ministerial colleagues, to co-ordinate a response across all departments and public bodies, and to work with experts in gender policy to formulate an action plan to address this imbalance."*

7. A brief summary of the views of the organisation or body as to any lessons, if any, that can be learned from any consideration which was given to the group(s) that the organisation or body supports or represents by (i) the UK Government; and/or (ii) the Government in Northern Ireland when they were making decisions about their response to Covid-19.

WRDA's view is that women were not sufficiently considered in the emergency response to Covid 19, especially not by the Government in Northern Ireland, which lagged behind the standards of the response from the UK Government. Two examples illustrate this; emergency funds for women fleeing domestic abuse was allocated to service providers across the UK, these funds reached NI in the form of Barnett Consequential, but none of it was allocated to the local service providers such as Women's Aid. A further example is the move made by UKG to allow Telemedicine for abortion services to minimise the need for attending doctors. Not only did this not apply to Northern Ireland, but at that time no services were commissioned in Northern Ireland at all, and many people who needed abortions had to travel much further than to their own GP, but on freight ferries to an unfamiliar, locked down city, where they had nowhere to go either side of their medical appointment as all hospitality services were shut. The then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland defended this situation early in the pandemic, underlining with unmistakable clarity the fact that women in Northern Ireland are to expect and receive less support than their sisters in Britain.

In terms of lessons learned, high on the list is the fact that any kind of emergency planning must include women, more specifically stakeholders representing issues that impact women disproportionately, such as childcare and domestic abuse. In the longer term, adopting and mainstreaming the practice of gender budgeting would alleviate some of this, as it would apply in all circumstances and be extended to emergency circumstances. Overall, a more gender-equal society will result in a more equitable approach to emergency situations and to any support that comes from this, from schemes like furlough to policy decisions such as Telemedicine. Northern Ireland, in particular, has a long way to go to achieve circumstances where gender equality is achieved.

¹⁹ Northern Ireland Assembly: Women's Parliament <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/womens-parliament>