

13 July 2010

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Dear Deputy First Minister

Economic Renewal

I was pleased to attend the launch of “Economic Renewal: a new direction” last week and to hear the points raised by yourself and your colleagues. Chwarae Teg welcomes the plan and its aim to develop infrastructure and an environment within which business can flourish and grow.

For a progressive and successful economy women’s participation and contribution to the economy is key, and manifests itself in many ways. The Economic Renewal Programme recognises that different geographic areas and communities have different needs and that plans and programmes need to be adapted for these differences. In the same way the different genders very often have different needs. Given that traditionally, programmes have been developed to support a largely male workplace environment with largely male decision making bodies, it’s not surprising that we need to take a step back to establish whether these work equally well for women, and that adaptations will often be needed.

Identifying and addressing these differences will be a critical success factor for delivering the primary objectives of Economic Renewal, as well as addressing the objectives of market failure and equity described on page 7 of the document. The Programme’s identification of childcare as an important factor is an excellent example and we were delighted to see this highlighted.

In this letter I aim to highlight where these are most important. Our expertise in working with government, employers, managers and individual women has provided us with a depth of experience in these areas and we are keen to use that expertise to assist Government in devising its implementation plans.

The following paragraphs set out the key areas where particular attention needs to be paid to ensuring plans and programmes are designed and delivered to make the maximum impact among women.

Young people motivated and ready for work

We welcome the focus on ensuring that young people develop skills to support Wales' economic growth, in particular science, technology, engineering and mathematics. While girls on average are performing well in school, evidence shows that this performance is not translating into economic performance at the same level, especially in respect of careers in STEM subjects. A significant factor (but not the only factor) is subject choice and career choice decisions made while at school, where stereotypical assumptions come into play. Programmes to develop skills in young people will therefore need to be designed with these issues in mind.

This also feeds into initiatives to build Wales' capacity for Research and Development in the priority areas identified, which I cover below.

Skills that open up rewarding routes back into work

We agree that the drive to release new potential into the Welsh economy will have dual benefits around increasing the active workforce and combating child poverty. There is potential resting in women on career breaks for maternity or other caring purposes, and in those who for the same reason have never engaged in the workforce at all.

For example, we need to maintain professional contact and provide support to women taking career breaks or maternity leave to ensure their skills are maintained whilst they are out of the labour market, so that when they are ready to re-engage, they return with confidence and the ability to resume their careers.

For those women who are furthest from the labour market, the aspiration or opportunity to embark on meaningful careers is often limited by multiple barriers.

We know these women have different experiences from their male counterparts, in respect of the expectations placed upon them, their aspirations, and the networks and social capital on which they can draw. The implementation plans must be sensitive to the particular needs of these groups, if we are to maximise the potential of all our people and be fully inclusive in our future vision of a prosperous nation.

Encouraging Innovation

Implementation plans to develop Wales' Research and Development activity, including encouraging STEM activity in Wales' universities, will require a gender focused approach. Statistics show that women's performance in science and technology at school, further education and higher education is stronger than ever before. In spite of this, women's representation in both employment and self employment in the science, engineering and technology sectors is very low.

In preparing programmes to develop Wales' skill base in these areas, the Chief Science Adviser and the related teams must ensure that they are designed to attract, develop and retain women, recognising that this will often need a different approach from traditional activities. This will be crucial in ensuring that Wales has the skill set to drive forward research in the four R&D priority areas identified.

Targeting business support – the six priority sectors

We recognise the need to focus business support in the six sectors identified. Gender impacts on each sector in different ways. In some cases, for example "Advanced materials and manufacturing", attracting and retaining women in the first place is the challenge. In others, such as "Finance and professional services, the focus needs to be on retention and progression of women in the workplace. Programmes to support such businesses, especially in respect of skills, clearly need to consider the gender perspective.

Targeting business support – encouraging entrepreneurship

We welcome the changes to direct business support and note the proposals around identifying where gaps exist in market provision. We also fully agree with the need for Government to retain a role in encouraging entrepreneurship.

One key area where market provision falls short is women's entrepreneurship. Women enter self employment often from a position of economic inactivity and as a result require a different set of support initiatives from their male counterparts, who are more likely to enter from either employment or recent employment.

Access to finance, and the ability to ensure that they are, as the Economic renewal Plan says "proposition ready" is a key issue for women entrepreneurs, both from the perspective of their own development and also the stereotypes which often influence the decision making of the banks and other providers of finance. Again a tailored approach is needed.

Where Chwarae Teg can assist

Over the last 18 years, Chwarae Teg has worked with government, employers, managers and individuals, providing the expertise to assist with the design and adaptation of programmes to address many of the priorities outlined above. We also have successfully designed projects (funded by European Structural Funds and the Welsh Assembly Government) to address precisely these areas, including, for example:

- Ready SET Go: challenging occupational segregation through working with women, employers and educators.
- Women's Enterprise Wales: encouraging female entrepreneurship
- Lone Parents Venture (part of Potentia)
- Work Life Balance and Flexible working projects
 - Work Life Balance Pilot Project with Large Public sector organisations (2002-2005)
 - Work Life Balance in Schools (2005-2007)
 - Work Life Balance Challenge Fund (2000-2006)

Our role in leading the Work Life Balance in Wales Strategy (2005-2008) Getting the Balance Right, promoting and implementing Flexible Working practices across Wales, has particular relevance, contributing to the effective use of the planned ICT infrastructure, the low carbon agenda and the wellbeing of workers in Wales.

Our current Agile Nation project, supported by Welsh Assembly Government and European Social Fund, is addressing gender equality in the workplace through work with women, employers and educators to enable women to progress in their careers.

While these projects are important on equality grounds, they are also examples of where effective actions can be taken to ensure that the economy can benefit from the talents and skills of women. We would welcome the opportunity to use our accumulated expertise to assist with the implementation plans for the Economic Renewal Programme, through our work with both DE&T and DCELLS under our Core Funding Agreement and through further projects under European or other funding programmes.

We would be happy to discuss with you where our actions can be best targeted to support the Assembly Government's implementation plans.

Yours sincerely

Katy Chamberlain

cc. Lesley Griffiths AM, Deputy Minister for Science Innovation and Skills
Jane Davidson AM, Minister for the Environment, Sustainability and Housing