

# **Research for a Devon Women's Network: Mapping of Women's Groups**

**A project of the Devon Strategic Partnership**



**Sponsored by Devon County Council  
and the DEFRA Rural Social and Community Programme**

*Jenny Archard & Sue Murphy, August 2006*

## **Foreward**

The forthcoming Equality Bill will shortly place a duty upon statutory service providers and local authorities to promote equality for women in the same way as is currently expected for disability and race.

There remain many unresolved issues around gender equalities in Devon: work and pay, work/life balance, safety, rural isolation, transport, citizenship, and caring commitments are but a few of these.

Various networks have come together over the years to try to raise the profile of women's issues and high quality research has been undertaken to help policy-makers and providers to take action. However there is currently no place to advocate and debate areas of inequality for women, and facilitate the actioning of responses to address these, either from a grass roots perspective, or at a policy and planning level.

The Gender Issues Group, under the Common Ground Partnership – the Social Inclusion arm of the Devon Strategic Partnership, is attempting to address this absence.

This research sits alongside other research aimed at establishing a definitive data analysis of women's position in Devon, and an understanding of existing support structures and infrastructure for women across the county. It is hoped that the findings and recommendations of this research will enable the development of an appropriate Devon-wide model for the engagement of women as service users, and the promotion of gender equality, along the lines of the other communities of interest activities under the Devon Strategic Partnership.

This work is being funded through DEFRA's Rural Social and Community Programme.

**Charlotte Benson, Chair of Gender Issues Group, Community Council of Devon**

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# Research for a Devon Women's Network: Mapping of Women's Groups

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Aims

The overall aim with this work was to carry out a piece of qualitative research, which could stimulate the development of a county-wide women's forum or network; it was divided into two distinct parts.

The first part aimed to create a 'map' of organised women's groups in Devon. These are groups that are defined as places where women or girls are either being supported, or are advocating on behalf of others, or are in some way considering women's issues. The focus here was on 'grassroots' groups rather than public bodies, private sector or agencies, as it is likely that these other groups will be researched through other channels. The kinds of organisations are most likely to be voluntary or community based organisations.

The second part was to ask a person from each of these groups what they thought of the creation of a women's network or forum – how useful it could be, what issues it may address and whether they would want to be involved.

The end product is a broad picture of what groups exist, where they are, who their 'members' are and whether the people involved are likely to be interested in the formation of a Devon-wide network. At the outset, it was proposed by the Commissioners that any network or group arising from this work could potentially represent the views of women on services, bring forward issues and potentially carry out further research and information gathering. The research was driven partly by the new Equalities Bill which will require public authorities to promote gender equality in both service provision and employment.

### 1.2 Research Commissioners

The work was commissioned by the Gender Sub-group of Common Ground under the Devon Strategic Partnership, which is chaired by Charlotte Benson from the Community Council of Devon; it was funded through Defra. It was carried out by Jenny Archard together with Sue Murphy, between June and August 2006.

### 1.3 Methodology

We wanted to find groups who work with women, either supporting, advocating on behalf of, or are in some way considering women's issues. These are quite broad group functions and as such we wanted to include the more readily known groups and find those that may not usually be included. With the resources and time available, we set out to contact and carry out interviews with around 40 groups. The range of groups was to be as extensive as possible and was not specified at the outset, because we were not sure what kinds of groups we would find.

Groups were located by:

- Contacting umbrella and infrastructure organisations e.g. Federation of Women's Institutes, Councils for Voluntary Service
- Using existing databases, primarily the Community Council of Devon database and Devon county library services database. *See Appendix 1: Source Documents*
- Carrying out various web searches
- Asking all contacts to identify any further groups

Groups were asked a series of questions to find out what they do, who their members are and if they are interested in the formation of a network:

- What area do you cover? Who are your members? Roughly how many? How often do you meet? Do you talk with women about their issues? Do you support or advocate on behalf of women?
- What do you/the women you work with see as key issues for women in the next 5-10 years?
- Would a network or forum potentially be of value to your group?
- Would you like to be contacted about the formation of such a group?
- What issues do you think a network should deal with?

## 2. Findings: Mapping of Women's Groups

### 2.1 Groups contacted

Overall 28 groups were interviewed; one group with two contacts taking the number of comments analysed to 29. [The full listings with contact details are held by the Community Council of Devon and are protected by the Data Protection Act]

**Table 1: List of Groups Interviewed**

<i>Group / organisation</i>	<i>What do they do? Who are members?</i>
<b>Axminster Young People's Centre</b>	Part of Youth Service. Run confidence building sessions for young women recommended by specific school. [other youth services are likely to do similar]
<b>Against Domestic Violence &amp; Abuse (ADVA)</b>	Partnership of organisations dealing with domestic violence and abuse - to reduce DV in Devon. Have team of trainers working directly with women.
<b>Age Concern Exeter</b>	Range of projects and groups for older people; not just for women.
<b>Barnstaple Taw Townswomen's Guild</b>	Came out of suffragette movement. Meet monthly. 2 groups in Barnstaple; 70 members. Have speakers and get together. All getting older and no-one to carry on. [Another 6 groups listed on DCC database]
<b>Bideford Sure Start – Parent Forum Group</b>	Group for parents meets once a month, 10-15 people, with crèche.[other Sure Starts/Family Centres are likely to have similar groups]
<b>Devon Guiding</b>	Guiding across the county, with girls from 5-100ys! Senior section(14-26) may be most appropriate. Around 10,000 members across county
<b>Devon Federation of Women's Institutes</b>	Open to anyone over 16. Meet every month. Have speakers and events. Also choose issues to put forward to resolutions in London Around 290 active WIs in Devon.
<b>E.Devon Women's Safe House</b>	Provide safe house, project for vulnerable women and setting up project for young people.
<b>East Devon Carers</b>	Provide support for carers in the District - two thirds women (792 members). Very willing to send questionnaires out to women. [other groups in each district]
<b>Family Education Development Trust</b>	Based in Exeter with other groups across Devon. Run groups for young parents and training programmes. Do peer support work and work with Health Visitors across Devon. Mostly young mums who attend.
<b>Inner Wheel Club of Tavistock</b>	Mainly wives of Rotarians; raises money for charities through functions. 17 members Have conferences and conventions where they vote on issues. [another 7 listed in DCC Library database]
<b>Mothers' Union</b>	Church based group. Set up over 80 years ago for people who had

	small children to meet together. Whole organisation is very elderly - many over 80. Sponsor caravan in S Devon for families not able to afford a holiday. [15 others, including county 'umbrella']
<b>Margaret Jackson Centre</b>	Offer low cost counselling services and bookshop; 5 part-timers and 40 volunteers; approx 30 clients per week.
<b>N.Devon Women's Aid</b>	Support roughly 300 women each year
<b>NASUWT</b>	The National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers is the largest union representing teachers and head teachers throughout the UK. Large membership Devon wide.
<b>National Council of Women, Exeter &amp; District</b>	Very small group - started with suffragettes and concerned about equality of education. Only 7 members - most over 80.
<b>Positive Action SW</b>	Training and support around HIV and sexual health. Run women's groups but support is more 1:1.
<b>Royal British Legion women's section</b>	Meet once a month to support veterans and ex service widows. Most in their 80's. Have welfare section to advise women. [19 groups listed on DCC library database]
<b>Red Hat Society, Devon Dumplings Chapter</b>	Part of international network - very big in USA. Meet once/twice a month. Social club for women over 50 who wear red hats and purple clothes. Fun & frivolity is the aim. [another group listed at Yacombe on their website]
<b>Soroptomists International</b>	International organisation; work for non political current affairs - for business and professional women. Bit like Rotary but 'get their teeth into things' - like Fair Trade, slave labour, FGM, women survivors of war. Do work in the community too - domestic violence support and others. 19 clubs in SW region with over 20 members each.
<b>South West Fawcett Society</b>	New group, aim to provide a voice for women in the area. Have 25 on mailing, 6 active members. Meet once a month, second Thursday. Would be keen to be involved in any consultation and the development of a network.
<b>Teignbridge Rural Women's Network</b>	Pilot funded through Teignbridge regeneration money. Dealing with isolated rural women in communities. Set up 6 social groups (from road shows and forums to find out what was wanted). Creating safe space to meet others, support and empower women. Depends on needs on women in each area.
<b>Unison</b>	Have a self-organised women's group (also LGBT, disabled, young people, black members – people could be on any or many of these). Are organising meetings outside Exeter, raising awareness, trying to get women to use their voice. Are aware of Gender duty. 7000 members; 70% women.
<b>Women's rural Workshop</b>	Community group; run groups in five mile radius of Torrington. Monthly talks for 18-80 yo
<b>Women Working Together</b>	Encourage people to buy and cook local food. Hold 2 events each year - very successful. [26 sept at Clyst St Mary Village Hall.] Incorporates Women's' Food and Farming Union, Townswomen's Guilds and WI's.
<b>West Devon women's Aid Outreach</b>	Helpline and outreach work to support women affected by domestic violence
<b>Women's running Network</b>	Not for profit group. Around 800 members in Devon, 2000 nationwide. Makes running safe & accessible for women - develops confidence in other areas too. In Exeter there's a group nearly every day of the week. [Okehampton based group too]
<b>Women's Food &amp; Farming Union</b>	Promotes British and local products. Membership open to anyone interested in farming and food.

## 2.2 Areas covered by groups

To categorise the kinds of groups contacted, it is useful to describe their area or level of operation. At first glance, we can see that two are regional, one covers two counties, eight cover Devon, eight are District based, eight are town or locality based and two cover a town & district. See Table 2.

However, it is more difficult to separate out what level of a bigger organisation they are, if that is indeed the case. Some groups are organised through a national body (which may even be part of a bigger international body e.g. Guiding), some through a regional body, some through a county body and others are networks of local groups or simply a distinct group or organisation. This will be relevant when assessing who (and how) to invite people to a potential network / gathering, but it may not be so relevant to the individual women who are involved in any group.

In some cases, we interviewed a County wide body and in others we have interviewed a local group to get different views. There are varying perspectives and it would have been useful, but impossible, to interview all the local groups and all the higher levels of organisation.

**Table 2: Levels of Groups**

Group / organisation	Coverage	Location			
<b>Positive Action SW</b>	region	Exeter	<b>N.Devon Women's Aid</b>	District	Barnstaple
<b>Soroptomists International</b>	Region	Barnstaple based	<b>N.Devon Women's Aid</b>	District	Barnstaple
<b>South West Fawcett Society</b>	Devon & Cornwall	Devon & Cornwall	<b>Royal British Legion women's section</b>	District	North Devon
<b>Against Domestic Violence &amp; Abuse (ADVA)</b>	county	Devon forum	<b>Teignbridge Rural women's Network</b>	District	Teignbridge
<b>Devon Federation of Women's Institutes</b>	County	Devon	<b>West Devon women's Aid Outreach</b>	District	Okehampton based
<b>Devon Guiding</b>	County	Devon	<b>E.Devon Women's Safe House</b>	Town / District	Honiton
<b>Family Education Development Trust</b>	County	Devon	<b>National Council of Women, Exeter &amp; District</b>	Town/ District	Exeter & District
<b>NASUWT</b>	County	Exeter	<b>Age Concern Exeter</b>	Town	Exeter
<b>Unison</b>	County	Devon	<b>Barnstaple Taw Townswomen's Guild</b>	Town	Barnstaple
<b>Women Working Together</b>	County	Devon-wide	<b>Bideford Sure Start</b>	Town	Bideford
<b>Women's Food &amp; Farming Union</b>	County	Devon-wide	<b>Inner Wheel Club of Tavistock</b>	Town	Tavistock
<b>Axminster Young People's Centre</b>	District	East Devon	<b>Margaret Jackson Centre</b>	Town	Exeter
<b>East Devon Carers</b>	District	East Devon	<b>Red Hat Society, Devon Dumplings Chapter</b>	Town	Bideford
<b>Mothers' Union</b>	District	North Devon	<b>Women's running Network</b>	Town	Exeter
			<b>Women's rural Workshop</b>	Town	Torrington

## 2.3 Main 'themes' of groups

The groups interviewed all had some kind of organising principle or theme – the reason that women would come together. The categories used here are: age, domestic violence support, family (and children), health, rural issues, sport, union (work related), youth, and women's interests (from the WI to Soroptomists). These are fairly unsophisticated categories, used to make interpreting the data easier, and do not fully acknowledge the broad range of activities carried out by each group. (For example, the Mothers Union could be seen as a faith or family)

In summary, the numbers of groups within each theme were: age 1, domestic violence support 5, faith 1, family 2, health 2, rural issues 3, sport 1, union (work related) 2, youth 2, and women's interests 10. See Table 3, below.

**Table 3: 'Themes' of Groups Interviewed**

Group / organisation	main theme
<b>Age Concern Exeter</b>	age
<b>Against Domestic Violence &amp; Abuse (ADVA)</b>	domestic violence
<b>N.Devon Women's Aid</b>	domestic violence
<b>N.Devon Women's Aid</b>	domestic violence
<b>West Devon women's Aid Outreach</b>	domestic violence
<b>E.Devon Women's Safe House</b>	domestic violence
<b>Mothers' Union</b>	faith based
<b>Family Education Development Trust</b>	family
<b>Bideford Sure Start</b>	family
<b>East Devon Carers</b>	health
<b>Positive Action SW</b>	health
<b>Women's Food &amp; Farming Union</b>	rural
<b>Women's rural Workshop</b>	rural
<b>Teignbridge Rural women's Network</b>	rural

<b>Women's running Network</b>	sport
<b>NASUWT</b>	union
<b>Unison</b>	union
<b>Devon Federation of Women's Institutes</b>	women's interests
<b>Women Working Together</b>	women's interests
<b>South West Fawcett Society</b>	women's interests
<b>Royal British Legion women's section</b>	women's interests
<b>Soroptomists International</b>	women's interests
<b>Barnstaple Taw Townswomen's Guild</b>	women's interests
<b>Red Hat Society, Devon Dumplings Chapter</b>	women's interests
<b>Margaret Jackson Centre</b>	women's interests
<b>Inner Wheel Club of Tavistock</b>	women's interests
<b>National Council of Women, Exeter &amp; District</b>	women's interests
<b>Devon Guiding</b>	youth
<b>Axminster Young People's Centre</b>	youth

## 2.4 Groups not interviewed and other sources of information

We set out to find 40 groups to interview, and managed to speak with 28. However, there were other groups we tried to get hold of and failed or we ran out of time to follow them up. With some it took a long time following leads to get the right person to talk to and sometimes people were not available at the time of interview, despite repeated attempts.

For the purposes of further research and to aid the mapping, it is useful to list those 14 organisations & groups we didn't get hold of, and those leads who helped us. See *Appendix 2: Groups not contacted and leads.*; Further, the Devon County Council Library database has over 250 entries, although many of these are local groups of bigger organisations.

### 3. Findings: Creating a network

#### 3.1 Level of Interest

People were asked 'Would a network or forum potentially be of value to your group?', and asked to rate their answer from 1-5, with 5 being the highest amount of perceived value of a network or forum.

**Table 4: Value of a Network or Forum**

score	1(No)	1.5	2	2.5	3	3.5	4	5 (Yes)
Number of groups	4	1	0	1	6	1	8	8
Percentage	14%	3%	0	3%	21%	3%	28%	28%

Most groups thought a network/forum would be valuable: 16 groups (56%) thought it would be extremely valuable; 7 groups (24%) thought it could potentially be of benefit; 6 groups (20%) could see little benefit or were extremely elderly and saw difficulty being involved.

Interviewees were also asked if would like to be contacted about the formation of a network or forum.

- 23 said yes, 5 said they'd like to be kept informed of what happens.

Interviewees gave views that qualified their level of interest. All the comments are recorded here as they will be especially useful if the creation of a new network or forum is taken forward.

- depends on how it's run – good for young mums to have say
- depends on quality of network – if dynamic and progressive
- depends on how it's run, what format
- good idea but difficult to get to
- if enough to attend and well sponsored and kept going
- yes but if making a difference need to include men
- not into politics – just do fun things, but would like to be involved - like to bring fun to proceedings
- would need to be of value – good in theory, but getting it into practice might be different – it may not be used (time pressures)
- especially if it's promoting women's issues
- it's ripe for it and there's a need – exciting
- I know from experience working with women, that without men around they talk differently, more personally
- definitely –even if only from information sharing point of view
- need a carrot like we did - assertiveness, massage etc, to get women to come
- Needs to be funded and co-ordinated or won't be maintained
- Needs to be informal but organised – flexible, progressive ad organically developed, also pro-active i.e not having to have number / members in order to have a meeting
- needs to accommodate everyone

Those who commented that it wouldn't be useful gave more information about why they wouldn't want to be involved. Again, all these comments are recorded, as it is useful to know the barriers to setting up a new network or forum.

- not sure how they [members] could contribute [would have to talk to members to see if they want to be involved]
- personally yes, but for group [young girls], not really
- probably not for us , since we are not just for women
- would not really be relevant and don't see how we could contribute of even get there (elderly group)

- not really – irrelevant and we couldn't do anything useful
- too old and too few to partake

### **3.2 Issues a network should deal with**

Interviewees were asked 'What issues do you think a network [or other group] should deal with?' The range of answers is summarised below:

- Pensions, welfare and carrying on working
- The difficulties of motherhood, including isolation -for young mums and older mums
- Teenage pregnancy
- Benefits and working families tax credits
- Equal opportunities, equal pay and the glass ceiling
- Domestic violence and the broader issues that surround it
- Lack of transport and how that impacts on life opportunities in rural areas
- Campaigning for gender equality and advancing the status of women
- Dealing with diversity
- Green issues
- Women as peacemakers and negotiators
- Celebration – a day for celebrating women

### **3.3 How a network should be**

Whilst answering the question about issues, many answers came back that pointed to the functions and roles of a possible network. The things that people said they wanted to include:

- Space to raise issues, to talk safely – tackle things in a different way to men's organisations
- Be a place for raising awareness and so that people can become aware of the issues around Devon
- Liaising with similar minded women
- To find out issues we can help with and see what's missing
- Get to hear about other services that we know nothing about
- Opportunities to network (as we have no time to meet people)
- A place to feed issues upwards

## **4. Conclusions and Recommended Action**

### **4.1 Mapping of groups**

The picture from the interviews is of a very active scene, with a range of women's groups across all ages, areas and many kinds of interests. There were some areas that are difficult to make contact with e.g. faith groups (such as the Olive Tree Project), any lesbian or transgender groups and specific women and disability groups. There are numerous groups known about that have not been contacted, particularly the local branches of bigger organisation, and it would take a considerable time and resources to make contact with them and to find out their views on the creation of network.

This research starts to give a flavour of the kinds of groups that exist and the ways in which women organise themselves, rather than creating an exhaustive picture. It does not seem possible to find and therefore contact all women's groups in the county before trying to set up a network.

### **4.2 Further mapping?**

Any further mapping would need to have a clear purpose. Would it be for the use of individual women, so that they could find groups that may appeal to them, or services they want or need? (If this is the case, then also finding out how women currently get information about groups would need to be researched). Or would it be for the use of agencies and others, to know what groups exists so that consultation (or other processes) can be carried out? Or is it simply to extend the picture of activity in the county and so that gaps can be defined?

Any listing of groups would not be exhaustive, as we were reminded by several groups that their membership is ever-changing. This makes it particularly hard to keep track of the less formal groups and those working with young people which may change as people get older and move on. Groups may emerge as there is a need and then stop after a short time. It is also important to understand how women's groups are structured, so that people at different levels within a larger organisation or federation can be involved in any network. It is often difficult for information to pass from a central point to smaller groups.

The Devon County Council Library database already has a good listing of the community based groups, and has processes for updating entries annually. However, the coverage is currently better in North Devon, Exeter and East Devon, where there are more staff resources to maintain them. It can also be very out of date, although a date is given for when an entry was last updated.

If more data is to be gathered and held, it would make good sense to use an existing and accessible database which is already updated, and out in further resources so that it can be maintained and publicised. The DCC Libraries database would seem like a good candidate.

### **4.3 Actions to Create a Women's Network or Forum**

With more than half the women interviewed expressing the view that a network or forum would be valuable, it makes sense to get something going and involve the groups contacted in this research. One way to do this would be to invite these groups, and others, to an event which addressed a question like 'Do women and women's organisations in Devon want a Women's Network?' However, there are questions to tease out before that can happen.

#### **• Network or Forum?**

Throughout this report, we have referred to both kinds of group. It is now worth making a distinction between them. These definitions are taken from 'Networking or Not-working' training

by Lynn Wetenhall Associates for creating excellence and regeneration southwest network June 2006.

A **network** is typically 'formed around communication, learning and information sharing goals. Usually non-hierarchical, with light-touch co-ordination, sometimes provided from network members, sometimes a paid co-ordinator. Minimal rules and structures. From highly formal, widely inclusive, to more formal with tightly agreed membership.'

A **Forum** is more 'a grouping of people or organisations, with something in common, brought together by an agency which wishes to cultivate an ongoing relationship with them. Often consultation and dialogue between all players are a feature for such fora. '

A decision needs to be made somewhere about what a new group exists for – a network is quite different to a forum. From the comments made by interviewees, it looks like women want a network more than a forum. Comments included 'dynamic', 'has a clear purpose while remaining flexible', 'to raise awareness' and 'feed upwards'.

- **Holding an Event**

We suggest that a large meeting gets under way, with the purpose of finding out what way the women themselves want this to go. Start with what has been identified here, the issues already on the table, and ask more questions about what a potential network or forum would need to address. People have already made good points about the difficulties of getting to an event and making the work / life balance. An event needs to be attractive, have elements that are really useful and informative alongside elements that are fun and enjoyable. Within those already contacted there is a good enough mix to structure an event that could be appealing e.g. to inform on gender duty and services (perhaps through Unison); to share information about activities & services that are interesting and useful to women from all the groups present; to inject some fun and light heartedness (perhaps from the Red Hat Society); have great local food (perhaps via the Women Working Together and /or the WIs)

- **Other decisions to be made**

The women interviewed suggest that any body should be funded and co-ordinated, informal and organised – a tall order. The eventual form would need to include:  
Clear aims, who to include and exclude, what kind of structure, what kinds of activities need to be carried out to match the aims, minimum and maximum number, how people are invited to join and who will support or organise.

## 5. Appendices

### Appendix 1: List of Source Documents

- a. Community Council of Devon Rural Women's Research project database [RWU db]
- b. Devon County Council Library Advice and Information Services (thanks to Frances Lemmer at Honiton Library for paper version)  
[www.devon.gov.uk/eal/comminfo/asp/homepage/homepage.asp]
- c. Single Parents Action Network (SPAN) - Devon Information from their database (thanks to Lucy)
- d. Women's' National Commission: Women's Organisations in the UK 2005  
[www.thewnc.org.uk]
- e. Torbay Council: Leaflet mental health women's services [www.torbay.gov.uk/mental-health-womens-services.pdf]

### Appendix 2: Groups not contacted and leads

Group / organisation	area	main theme
Independent Women of Milton Abbot	W.Devon	women's interests
National Childbirth Trust		family
Women's Aid	Exeter	domestic violence
Mid-Devon Dom Violence Forum	Mid Devon	domestic violence
Women's Challenge Club	Devon	women's interests
YWCA	Plymouth	young people
La Leche	Okehampton	family
Olive Tree Project	Exeter	BME / faith
Sure Start	Ilfracombe & Berryarbour	family
Sure Start	Combe Martin	family
Barnstaple Longbridge Townswomen's Guild	Barnstaple	women's interests
Exeter Federation of Townswomen Guilds	Exeter	women's interests
N.Devon College	N. Devon	education
MIND Exeter and East Devon	Exeter and East Devon	health

Leads		
Intercom Trust	Devon	LGBT
Voluntary Youth Services	Devon	youth
Okehampton CVS	Okehampton & District	voluntary sector
ECI /Ujima	Exeter	BME

As the research ended, we were contacted by the *Women's Network (Exeter & area ) c/o Joan of Ark room, 59 Magdalen Street, Exeter, EX2 4HY.*; a facilitated group for women using mental health services, working with women's role in society and "women today".