

This is the response from Bristol Fawcett to the West of England Local Enterprise Partnership draft Strategic Economic Plan:

<http://www.westofenglandlep.co.uk/about-us/strategicplan/strategic-plan-consultation>

Bristol Fawcett is the local group for members of the Fawcett Society. Our members work to bring an informed gender equality perspective to local decision making bodies.

In April 2013, The Fawcett Society published a report entitled “*The Changing Labour Market: Delivering for Women, Delivering for Growth*”.¹ This report began with the observation that female participation in the labour market has undergone seismic shifts in the last 50 years. Such seismic shifts require that attention be paid in any economic plan to the role of women in the workplace. The report also quoted Home Secretary Theresa May who said in 2011 that if the skills and qualifications of women who are currently out of work were fully utilised, the UK could deliver economic benefits of £15 to £21 billion pounds per year – more than double the value of all our annual exports to China.

Fawcett’s report identified the role of LEPs in providing a key mechanism through which to progress the government’s stated ambitions of both ensuring that the talents of women are fully utilised in the drive for economic growth and ensuring that new measures for growth go hand in hand with measures to promote equality². Fawcett recommends that LEPs, in their funding applications for strategic growth plans, clearly set out how they intend to ensure that women are able to benefit as fully as possible from the employment and business opportunities created by government investment.

It is therefore with heavy hearts that we observe that the role of women in the West’s labour market is completely absent from the West of England draft Economic Plan. Transport and housing feature throughout the Plan as enablers of growth. Yet childcare, provision of the Living Wage and flexible working protocols - the most critical factors in women’s employment - are absent from consideration either in the SWOT analysis or the wider document³. Caring and family responsibilities, and the challenges experienced when combining these responsibilities with paid work, were identified in a wide-ranging survey of Bristol women in 2011 as their most pressing concern⁴. (un-)Strategic absence of the role of childcare jobs and caring work more generally in the Plan puts the LEP at risk of looking very old-fashioned indeed and

¹ <http://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Fawcett-The-changing-labour-market.pdf>

² *ibid.*, see pp 38-40

³ “childcare etc” merits a cursory mention on p29.

⁴ *Enabling Women’s Voice and Influence in Bristol*, Gem Consulting for Bristol Women’s Voice, at http://www.bristol.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/community_and_safety/equality_and_diversity/BCC%20Women%20Voice%20Final%20report.pdf

can only shore up the perception that the very remarkable absence of women within the LEP structures has a direct impact on the ability of the LEP executive to consider women as over 50% of the population and almost 50% of the workforce in the West.⁵

Further, while the Health and Social Care sector is a rapidly expanding business sector that accounted in 2011 for 13% of all jobs and 7.9% of GVA in Bristol⁶, this female-dominated industry has not ‘made the cut’ as a priority focus for the area. It can not escape attention that the sectors which did ‘make the cut’ are represented on the LEP board while any form of Health & Social Care business is not. Fundamental questions about governance must arise and must be answered if the LEP is to avoid accusations of applying a conscious or unconscious “jobs for the boys” approach throughout its operation. Indeed in addition to the fact that most of the sectors identified for growth in the Plan are extremely male-dominated industries, there is no strategy to encourage the participation of women in these industries. Neither is there any regard to the role of women entrepreneurs and the specific targeted support that women-led SMEs identify as important.

Only concerted action to increase the availability of affordable childcare, and the availability and take-up of flexible working opportunities which do not equate to lower status, lower paid work, will ensure women’s successful participation in the local labour market. The economic case for such measures is well-rehearsed and compelling.

We recommend that the authors of the Plan review both the Plan, and their pool of advisors and contributors, to ensure that the untapped potential of women is harnessed effectively for the benefit of the region. We recommend that women in the workforce become a fundamental and visible consideration throughout the Plan.

Bristol Fawcett
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⁵ See also our report “*The Right Man for Bristol*” available at

<http://www.bristolfawcett.org.uk/Documents/CountingWomenIn/TheRightManForBristol.pdf>

⁶ “GVA” = Gross Value Added. *Bristol’s Local Economic Assessment 2011*:

http://www.bristol.gov.uk/sites/default/files/assets/documents/Bristol%20local%20economic%20assessment%20March%202011_0.pdf