



Review of TSN: an anti-poverty strategy for Northern Ireland

We welcome the commitment of the direct-rule administration to an ‘anti-poverty strategy’, a draft of which was launched for consultation by the Secretary of State, Paul Murphy, in April 2004.

The focus on an anti-poverty strategy and on income and living conditions is an improvement on the existing New TSN (targeting social need) policy. So too is the commitment in principle to measure progress through targets and a focus on financial inclusion.

However, the sketchy proposals contained in the consultation report do not provide an adequate basis for a strategy that will make a real, sustained assault on poverty. Consequently we refuse to accept them as a basis for consultation and make alternative proposals below.

Among the crucial omissions from the document are objectives for the strategy, targets for progress (like that on health) and an action plan to demonstrate how the aims and objectives will be pursued and how the targets will be met. There is no explicit aim of promoting social inclusion generally and no clear relationship between the anti-poverty strategy and the Section 75 equality duty. Nor is there a proposal for machinery to coordinate all government initiatives relevant to poverty.

The urgent need to give top priority to tackling poverty and inequality is evidenced by the appalling data contained in the Bare Necessities and Civic Forum reports and previous research by NICVA. This showed not only that a huge problem of poverty exists in Northern Ireland but that it is a highly unequal society. Poverty only makes sense if understood as a relative quality. It is inequality that is the problem at root — not a small number of ‘hard cases’ highlighted in the consultation document. This is the virtue of the modern term ‘social exclusion’: it points to the processes by which inequalities are generated and reproduced and by which the poor are marginalised from the wider society.

It will not be possible to eradicate poverty, as Mr Murphy wishes, if the incomes of the rich continue to soar ahead. The goal has to be progress towards a more equal society since unequal societies have higher levels of poverty, including child poverty, than more equal ones. In a broader sense, it should be to secure the vision of an ‘inclusive society’ set out in the first Programme for Government. Any anti-poverty and inequality strategy must acknowledge that Northern Ireland has experienced thirty years of conflict. Anti-poverty work cannot be detached from the ‘reconciliation, tolerance and mutual trust’ also set out in the Programme for Government, given that sectarianism bears most heavily on the most socially disadvantaged.

The consultation document sticks to the view that no resources are needed but rather a continued policy of ‘skewing’. A strategy with no programmes and no budget is no strategy at all. Expenditure patterns are only really significantly changed if the programmes to which they are attached in the budget are changed.

In summary, this document does not give confidence that the government is committed to the radical changes that are needed to tackle structural poverty or social inequality in Northern Ireland. Moreover, this issue is far too important to be the subject of a consultation over the summer months, especially in view of the government’s long delay in completing the review of TSN and publishing the consultation report. Indeed, the process by which TSN has been developed since 1991 is not satisfactory. We should now proceed in a genuine partnership under which government should negotiate an anti-poverty strategy over the coming months with the voluntary and community sector and other sectors of society.

There needs, above all, to be clearer political direction. It is the NIO ministerial team that currently governs Northern Ireland. It must take responsibility for this initiative and connect it with others, and thereby ensure that clear social-democratic political values drive a credible strategy to achieve an inclusive and tolerant society.

A Northern Ireland strategy should draw from that agreed in Britain and draw from good practice in the Republic of Ireland’s anti-poverty strategy and wider policies on poverty and social inclusion.

We believe the elements of a strategy to be negotiated include research, legislation, resources and action on several fronts, including:

- Northern Ireland’s role in influencing the key levers of social policy: taxation, benefits (eg child benefit to combat child poverty) and the national minimum wage. Action should recognise that a key weakness of Northern Ireland compared with Britain is the low level of wages in the private sector.
- An assault on disparities in income between people on high incomes and the low paid; the gap is already huge and getting worse.
- Rebalancing rates so that the rich pay more and the poor pay less in order to claw back some of the huge gains by the middle class in property price rises.
- Examination of the high level of economic inactivity in Northern Ireland and a plan to reduce the numbers out of work by enhancing employability and creating more well-paid jobs. This should include greatly increased resources for the social economy.
- Provision of comprehensive childcare which is free or highly subsidised for those who cannot afford it.

- An assault on educational inequality under which working class children perform much worse than more advantaged children and disadvantaged adults suffer from educational under-achievement (to include resources for community education).
- Concerted efforts to redirect resources to tackle inequalities in health on social class grounds.
- Analysis of government expenditure, including spending on infrastructure, to ensure it is balanced towards the most disadvantaged.
- Increased provision of social housing in view of the difficulty low-income families have in finding a place to live in an inflated housing market.
- Action to overcome rural poverty and disadvantage.
- Resources for disadvantaged areas to develop their capacity to reach and involve disadvantaged people and to create strong, learning communities.

Signed:

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The 174 Trust	Bill Shaw
The Home Mission Society	James Sands
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