

TSN – The Way Forward Towards an anti-poverty strategy, Phase II consultation

NICVA Briefing Paper

1. Introduction

The latest instalment in the process of developing an anti-poverty strategy for Northern Ireland was quietly released by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) in June. The consultation will once again take place over the summer months, with a closing date of 26 August 2005. NICVA has already written to OFMDFM and asked for this to be extended. Entitled *Towards an anti-poverty strategy*, the document is a long way from the robust anti-poverty strategy that NICVA and its members called for in submissions to the last consultation in September 2004. In the Ministerial Foreword, Jeff Rooker MP states that the strategy “will not create an entirely new set of actions and initiatives. Many actions which are currently in place are important and should continue. Instead, the strategy sets the context and framework for the continuation of existing measures which are effective and the developing and resourcing of future measures to fight poverty and social exclusion.”

We are presented with a tidying up exercise which seems to be following the general trend of new strategies to repackage what already exists under new headings rather than taking the opportunity to examine what might work and develop innovative policy interventions. As a result the document really offers nothing new and makes no substantive changes as a result of consultation. It merely expands on the recommended framework in the first document and provides more background information.

Whilst the emphasis is on continuing with what is already being done, another part of the document appears to regard the anti-poverty strategy as a new initiative. We seem to be back where we started with TSN in 1991 in paragraph 8.4 (page 72). It says that important first steps include having a focal point within each Department to facilitate action on tackling poverty and social exclusion, informing staff of the issues, identifying appropriate actions and so on. If New TSN were as embedded as OFMDFM claims, we would have thought this preparatory work had long since been completed.

In general, the strategy does not bring any greater clarity to the concept of an anti-poverty strategy than the earlier draft did. It is not clear how the anti-poverty strategy relates to TSN, which will continue as a ‘cross-cutting issue’ (page 56), along with legislation and access to services.

One new element is a new focus on financial hardship, but this has always been implicit in TSN. The other elements of capacity building and increasing

employment and employability are carried over from old TSN without any proposals to make them better.

2. **Quick Points**

Skewing will stay and there will be no budget for the strategy. The document does make reference to a ‘poverty innovation fund’ designed to encourage Departments to develop new measures to tackle poverty, which was suggested during the initial review. This idea seems to have merit in that it will provide the budget needed to ‘kick-start’ anti-poverty measures with skewing still happening long-term. However the idea is not expanded on or mentioned again.

The Promoting Social Inclusion (PSI) model will stay with a new group on Lone Parents to be established.

The document claims that 103 formal responses were received and has ignored the fact that NICVA presented a response to the consultation containing recommendations endorsed by 180 voluntary and community organisations. It is impressive that 103 other organisations took the time to respond but it is extremely frustrating that the opinions of 180 other organisations appear to have been dismissed.

The Anti-Poverty Strategy will follow the format of the National Action Plans for Social Inclusion (NAPsinc) and will become the main focus for the Northern Ireland report on NAPsinc in place of the New TSN annual report.

3. **Proposed Framework**

The document aims to put forward a framework for the strategy which will then be followed by a Regional Action Plan containing action plans from each department. However the framework itself is not laid out in a clear and understandable way – there are elements of it buried throughout the document. The only new development is the proposed vision which is found in the annexes on page 90, the rest has remained largely unchanged from the first consultation.

Vision

“The development of a society which aims to enable its citizens to be fully participative, to realise their full potential and live free from poverty and social exclusion.” (page 90)

Strategic Aim

“To improve the income and living conditions of the most disadvantaged.” (page 52)

High level Priorities (also referred to as ‘objective areas’, see page 78)

- (i) Building capacity to:
 - Participate in the labour market and take advantage of the market economy
 - Benefit from greater participation in the social and cultural life of the community.
- (ii) Increasing employment opportunities and reducing barriers to employment.
- (iii) Dealing with financial hardship (page 53).

Four strategic targets are proposed (page 76):

(i) Mixed measures of poverty

Reduce the proportion of people/households below the mixed measure of poverty threshold.

(ii) Relative income poverty measures

Reduce the proportion of people/households living below 60/70% of contemporary equivalised median household income.

(iii) Absolute income poverty measures

Reduce the proportion of people/households living below an income threshold adjusting year-on-year for inflation.

(iv) Indicators of social need

Broader indicators of social need.

Of course they are not really targets and this is recognised in the document when it says that “the strategic targets are not targets as such but rather represent a broader perspective on poverty and social exclusion” (page 77).

Eight supporting targets are proposed alongside the strategic targets and each one relates to one of the high level priorities (page 78).

(i) Priority 1 Building Capacity (Employability, key skills and capabilities)

“To increase the proportion of employees earning more than £400 per week and increase the proportion of employees in higher skilled jobs.”

(ii) Priority 1 Building Capacity (Health)

“To reduce the gap by a fifth between 2000 and 2010 in the proportion of people with a long-standing illness between those in the lowest and highest socio-economic groups.”

(iii) Priority 1 Building Capacity (Education)

“To reduce the difference in educational attainment between those on free school meals and the Northern Ireland average.”

(iv) Priority 2 Creating Employment Opportunities

“To reduce the proportion of working age people living in workless households.”

(v) Priority 2 Creating Employment Opportunities

“To improve the labour market position of the most disadvantaged wards.”

(vi) Priority 2 Creating Employment Opportunities

“To reduce differences in economic inactivity rates and employment rates between Catholics and Protestants, men and women, and between people with and without a disability, and reduce the absolute difference in Protestant and Catholic unemployment rates.”

(vii) Priority 3 Tackling Financial Hardship

“To increase the uptake of financial entitlements including benefits, tax credits, reliefs and discounts.”

(viii) Priority 3 Tackling Financial Hardship

“To reduce high levels of debt among low income groups.”

Words like reduce, improve and increase are not targets unless they are quantifiable and measurable. All of these targets are not really targets as they are not measurable. This means that even though we have so far been presented with a vision, strategic aim, three high level priorities, four strategic targets and eight supporting targets, we still do not have anything definite and measurable that will contribute to an assault on poverty.

4. **Regional Action Plan**

The document proposes that the rest of the strategy will be presented in a Regional Action Plan which will contain actions plans from each Department. This is the real meat of the anti-poverty strategy but there are no details of proposed actions. Instead we are given a round-up of existing policies likely to impact on poverty such as Neighbourhood Renewal and SureStart. In many cases the policies referred to as having an impact on poverty in general are much more robust in the rest of the UK. SureStart for example has not seen the same investment here as in England.

The document is confusing in its recommendations as to how the action plans will be drawn up but it does say that “*ultimately it will be for Ministers to agree the final targets in relation to the strategy’s aims and objectives*” (page 81) and this is entirely right. However it is proposed that the targets will be set after an assessment of what Departments will do. Surely this is the wrong way round? Ministers should set targets, such as eliminating child poverty by 2020, based on research and ask Departments what can they do to meet them rather than ask Departments what they can do and then draw targets from that. In terms of the content of the Regional Action Plans it appears that the proposed Anti-Poverty Forum will be the focus for the consultation.

5. **Ministerial Forum**

The proposed Ministerial Forum will go ahead as planned and terms of reference are provided. The Forum will be tasked with, amongst other things, monitoring and reviewing the success of the strategy and facilitating a participative approach to tackling poverty and social exclusion. However there is very little detail on who will actually sit on the Forum and how they will be selected. This begs the question about the role people experiencing poverty will have in relation to the strategy. This is an important element in the National Action Plan for Inclusion and should be given much more attention.

6. **Conclusion**

Towards an anti-poverty strategy provides background information, outlines existing policies and reinforces what was said in the last document. It also attempts to answer some of the questions raised in the last consultation, which is welcome. However it reads and feels like a tidying up, administrative exercise and is bound to disappoint those who were waiting for a more robust document with real actions and proposals. In assessing the document we need to ask if it brings us closer to an anti-poverty strategy for Northern Ireland which will deal with the root causes of poverty as well as its manifestations. It would seem at this stage the answer has to be no.