



Our ref.: JH/SB

Being dealt with by: Mr. Jim Hanna

Your ref.:

Ext. 2220

Date: 5th September, 2005

Ms. L. McMeekin,
Anti-Poverty Unit,
Room E3-19,
Block E,
Castle Buildings,
BELFAST
BT4 3SR

ANTI-POVERTY

06 SEP 2005

RECEIVED

Dear Ms. McMeekin,

New Targeting Social Need – The Way Forward: Towards an Anti-Poverty Strategy

The Council's Policy and Resources Committee, at its meeting on 19th August, considered a response to the above-mentioned consultation document and agreed to reiterate its previous comments (as attached) and expressed dissatisfaction and concern at the lack of inclusion of specific actions and targets.

This decision was ratified by the Council at its meeting on 1st September.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Liam Steele", written over a horizontal line.

Senior Committee Administrator

Enc.

Liam Steele B.A.

HEAD OF COMMITTEE AND MEMBERS' SERVICES

BELFAST CITY COUNCIL

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Belfast City Council

Response to the New Targeting Social Need – The Way Forward Consultation Document

“NEW TSN and the Council

The Council welcomes the opportunity to comment on the consultation document and believes that the proposed changes should contribute positively to the alleviation of poverty and social exclusion in NI.

Government Departments were required to take account of New TSN. Although Councils in NI did not have a duty to comply, they were encouraged to have regard to its principles by skewing resources and considering ways of addressing the issue when drawing up annual budgets and determining spending priorities. Councils were urged to take social need into consideration where possible and were asked to incorporate and give due consideration to New TSN as part of economic appraisals undertaken for capital projects.

As the civic leader and in the spirit of commitment rather than compliance, we are working to improve the quality of life of everyone in Belfast and already give consideration to the needs of the most disadvantaged individuals, groups and areas in the City. As a Council we are committed to encouraging fair treatment, understanding and respect for all cultures and the delivery of New TSN should contribute to the erosion of community differentials.

Both the Client Services and Development Departments of the Council already give consideration to the principles which underpin New TSN and take socio-economic data into consideration in the planning, prioritisation and targeting of activities, e.g. in the allocation of grants in community development or the arts, or in neighbourhood renewal work.

Council’s corporate objectives

There are a number of parallels between the New TSN principles and the Council’s own corporate strategic objectives. The Council’s Corporate Plan specifically recognises the challenges set by the levels of disadvantage and social exclusion in wards across the city, as defined by the Noble indicators. Belfast has particular reasons for considering those in social need as it contains nine of the top ten most deprived wards in NI. Deprivation is no respecter of politics, religion or racial background and substantial numbers of both majority communities are locked into a cycle of deprivation where poverty is increasingly an inherited condition.

The Council’s commitment to equality and the promotion of good relations mirrors that running through the New TSN document. The Council is already actively examining initiatives to try to encourage applications from groups which are under-represented within our workforce e.g. people with disabilities, women and minority ethnic groups.

Inter-sectoral working

The Council is already committed to joined-up working, advocated in the New TSN approach. It has substantial experience of working in partnership with many other statutory organisations and agencies across the City, providing civic leadership and contributing positively in issues of social need to help deliver large scale, cross-cutting initiatives such as economic development initiatives, Healthy Cities, Community Safety and Neighbourhood Renewal. The New TSN proposals will simply represent an extension to our current work in this field.

The Good Relations Strategy contains a commitment to producing New TSN Guidelines for the development of new policies and procedures across all Departments to ensure not only that the Council approach is consistent but also that New TSN considerations are mainstreamed into all of our work. Work on this has been delayed pending the publication of this government report.

Specific questions in the Consultation paper

1. Do you think the proposed strategic aim is the right one?

The Council welcomes the introduction of a clear strategic aim to improve the income and living conditions of the most disadvantaged.

In the past there has been some confusion regarding NTSN and it was difficult to judge the success of the policy or attribute any positive socio-economic changes directly to it.

The shift in emphasis from process to outcomes is a positive step. The Council notes that NI research seems to indicate that the gap between rich and poor is increasing and more inter-agency joined-up work will be required to address the multi-faceted problems of deprivation and the underlying causes of poverty, inequality and exclusion.

An agreed definition of 'poverty' would be helpful.

2. Do you agree there should be a priority focus on financial exclusion and are there any other areas you feel require closer attention?

The Council does not agree that the emphasis should be solely on financial exclusion and is of the opinion that other liveability issues are important in reducing need and exclusion. It is important that a balanced approach is taken and that communities have access to appropriate social and recreational facilities to enjoy a better quality of life.

Although unemployment has fallen in NI over recent years, this is probably as a result of general economic growth, as there is little evidence that government initiatives have made any notable difference in disadvantaged areas.

The new proposals rightly focus on employability as employment is a clear route out of poverty and the Council's own economic development programme will continue to play a key role here. Poverty is not restricted to those out of work but is common in groups at the lowest end of the wage scale. There are many other contributory factors, e.g. tax thresholds, rates of pay, rates of child and other benefits etc. which are centrally determined and not subject to local control. Demographic changes mean that with an ageing population and greater numbers of retired and elderly people, the influence of pensions and other state support is also important. The Council would be keen to see more attention paid to the issue of vulnerable elderly persons in our community and welcomes the publication of a separate consultation document on this².

We note that measures to increase the uptake of financial entitlements and reduce hardship will be reinforced. The shift towards targeting specific hardship groups such as lone parents and disabled people is to be applauded.

3. Do you think that these high level priorities are appropriate for inclusion in the strategic framework – are there other priorities that you feel should be included?

The Council agrees that the three high level priorities – building capacity, creating employment opportunities and tackling financial exclusion - are appropriate; we also welcome the fact that the framework is aimed at various levels – individuals, areas and communities and vulnerable groups.

The shift in focus from predominantly geographical targeting to one that emphasises the needs of a variety of disadvantaged groups within areas may require the Council and its partner agencies to develop more specialised and inclusive mechanisms for consulting with more vulnerable groups.

4. What are your views on the inclusion of a Regional Poverty Action Plan and the proposed format of the plan?

The development of a Regional Poverty Action Plan is welcomed and the Council would contribute to this Plan. As there is a plethora of bodies within Belfast, it is important that their proposals and existing strategies are co-ordinated at a local level so that local issues are taken into account and ensure an effective approach. The Council could build on its experience of inter-sectoral working and lead the development of a local Poverty Action Plan in the City.

An Anti-Poverty Action Plan needs to have ownership from the local level and the Council, as a democratically elected body, is uniquely placed to demonstrate accountability and afford direct access to the marginalised and socially excluded populations in the City.

² 'Ageing in an Inclusive Society: Promoting the Social Inclusion of Older People'
OFM/DFM July 2004

The consultation document recommends the setting of high level targets and these should help reduce the criticisms levelled at the previous policy by making it more focused and measurable. However, apart from the statement that 'Government is committed to tackling poverty and disadvantage and in particular to eliminating child poverty by the year 2020' most of the statements in the report are really aspirations and not targets as they do not have dates or figures.

5. Do you think that the 'skewing' approach to resources should be continued? If not, what approach do you feel should be adopted?

Although the report states that skewing has been effective and this is the most effective way to continue, it has proved difficult to measure just how much has been skewed. It is difficult to gauge whether the skew will become more transparent when measured against the more tangible outcomes envisaged in the revised version of the scheme.

In some ways skewing has become mainstreamed and there is an expectation that certain areas/groups will receive certain levels of funding owing to their location or circumstances. Directing resources where they are most needed is important but the continuation of skewing can be justified only where it can be clearly demonstrated that it has been effective.

Most previous research has indicated that progress on anti-poverty initiatives and social exclusion needs to be supported by specific funds and it is regrettable that ring-fenced funding is not envisaged.

6. What are your views on the proposal for a Ministerially led forum? Do you agree with the composition and remit of the forum?

The Council welcomes the high profile to be awarded to the proposed forum and is pleased to see that the composition of the forum is to be expanded beyond the standard NI Departments to include local government representation.

The Council anticipates that the forum will take account of the enhanced role for local government and potential transfer of functions envisaged in the current review of public administration in Northern Ireland.

We note that the consultation document states that TSN action plans 'lacked visibility on the ground' and would suggest that District Councils could provide local support and buy-in. As Belfast has a high proportion of disadvantaged wards in its area and wide experience of partnership working, the City Council would be happy to participate in the forum and assist in the future development and direction of the policy."

2nd September, 2004