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26 August 2005

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ANTI-POVERTY

30 AUG 2005

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COUNCIL FOR CATHOLIC MAINTAINED SCHOOLS

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Dear Dr Mulligan

RE: *New TSN – The Way Forward – Towards an Anti-Poverty Strategy*

Please find enclosed the response of the Council to this consultation.

If you have any questions or queries please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely

JIM CLARKE
DEPUTY CHIEF EXECUTIVE

Encs

CC: Ms Helen Leith, Policy Development Officer

CHIEF EXECUTIVE

MR. D.J. FLANAGAN
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CONSULTATION PHASE 2

NEW TSN – THE WAY FORWARD – TOWARDS AN ANTI-POVERTY STRATEGY

RESPONSE BY THE COUNCIL FOR CATHOLIC MAINTAINED SCHOOLS

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 This paper is a response by the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) to the Phase 2 Consultation Document “New TSN – The Way Forward –Towards an Anti-Poverty Strategy” published by OFMDFM in June 2005. The Council is a strong advocate of all measures that aim to challenge and ameliorate social, economic or educational disadvantage in our society. Council therefore welcomes the opportunity to submit a response to the second phase of consultation on the proposed New TSN Anti-poverty Strategy that has incorporated some of the concerns and issues raised during the first consultation.
- 1.1 The consultation document at phase 2 provides a fuller explanation of the strategy structure and how it will operate in the wider UK and European contexts. Particularly welcome is section 2 where the causes and extent of poverty in Northern Ireland are examined. Since the phase 1 consultation, OFMDFM has also published the results of research into poverty and social exclusion in Northern Ireland and indicators of social need. These will be invaluable in developing targets and indicators for inclusion in Departmental Action Plans.
- 1.2 Council continues to support the underlying principle of “targeting” as a means of confronting and changing inequalities that exist in society. It further accepts that capacity building is an acceptable approach to dealing with the major issues of poverty and social exclusion but maintains that a balance must be struck with remedial action. The Council again would express the view that the proposed strategy must encompass a greater emphasis on the social aspects of exclusion and deprivation to balance the continuing focus on financial and labour market outcomes. To some extent this has been addressed in the consultation document by the inclusion of a focus on building capacity to benefit from greater participation in social and cultural life. However, the major priority focus remains on financial hardship and this is further reflected in the high level targets (Table 1, page 76). In this sense the strategy does not take account of the full range of elements that lead to deprivation and exclusion. It would remain the Council’s contention that the strategy must do more to target those who might be termed an “under class”. There must also be a greater imagination in recognising and supporting more extremes of exclusion and poverty if a real impact is to be made in some areas of Northern Ireland. There remains, for example, a paramilitary and/or criminal influence on some individuals and some communities which does not accept the tenets of society that the majority accept. This issue is neither fully acknowledged nor addressed by the new proposals.

2.0 Targets

- 2.1 It is the Council's view that, while the high level strategic aims of the new strategy present a change in emphasis towards a stronger focus on capacity building to enhance an individual's capacity to participate in economic and social life, this change in emphasis is not reflected sufficiently in the high level targets presented in the consultation document. These are still identified primarily as relating to poverty in consensual, relative and absolute terms. These targets are more easily measured than targets that reflect the broader aspects of social exclusion but it is precisely these aspects that should be specified and built into the strategy at a high level.
- 2.2 Council would therefore re-iterate in the following sections points made in its original response to phase1 of the consultation:

3.0 Supporting Targets

- 3.1 There is concern that only one supporting target is specified in relation to education – that of reducing the difference in educational attainment between those on free school meals (FSM) and the NI average (Para. 9.12). While Council accepts FSM as a proxy, this does not fully reflect the extent of exclusion or poverty experienced by some children and their families. The multi-faceted nature of the problem requires working partners which transcend traditional approached in both accountability and outcome foci.
- 3.2 While there is ample evidence that educational attainment is strongly related to employment status and income across the developed world, account should be taken of other educational outcomes such as “soft” skills, for example the ability to interact with others, spoken communication and the ability to work in a team. It is also known, for example that truancy is a predictor of employment problems and that educational attainment is not only the result of school experience. The Council's view, therefore, is that the strategy should include the setting of targets for reducing levels of truancy and exclusion. Targets might also be identified for some of the ‘soft’ skills.
- 3.3 The Council considers that negative attitudes to education and the absence of some basic parenting elements are based on poor educational and social experience by parents. This cycle needs to be broken.

4.0 Mid-level targets – objectives

- 4.1 While it is accepted that it may not be possible at this stage to be explicit about targets set at mid-level, Council is of the view that any targets and associated indicators identified by Departments, as they clarify actions and activities in support, should be clearly mapped into the strategy framework.
- 4.2 It is important to ensure that any data collecting systems relating to the chosen indicators are capable of capturing information on the full range of Section 75 categories.

5.0 Resources

- 5.1 The Council is disappointed to find that there is no change to “skewing” as the principal mechanism for ensuring that resources are targeted at the most vulnerable individuals, groups and communities. Council would still prefer to see a top slicing of relevant Departmental and related budgets in a Strategic Fund. If “skewing” is to continue, there must be an improved means of identifying the level of resources allocated to the strategy within Departments and clear links to outcomes and evaluation. There must also be clear linkages across Departments with common or shared objectives and ring fenced or targeted finances agreed.

In addition, the following points are made specifically in response to the phase 2 document:

6.0 Equality Issues

- 6.1 The Council would take issue with the statement in para. 11.5 that high level strategies cannot be assessed but that equality impact assessments will be conducted on specific programmes where screening indicates that this is necessary. Council is of the view that this position is not consistent with the statutory duty of all public authorities to promote equality of opportunity and the requirement to screen all policies and conduct equality impact assessments where necessary. Furthermore, this is not consistent with the setting of strategic targets (see para 9.6) where some Section 75 groups are identified as being particularly at risk. Council does not necessarily accept the view that assessment of equality impacts can be accurately identified only at an operational level, nor that these will be reflected accurately at a strategic level. Equality considerations should be mainstreamed in the entire process and can be meaningfully addressed at both strategic and operational level.

7.0 Anti-Poverty Forum

- 7.1 The Council welcomes the inclusion of terms of reference for the proposed forum. It is noted that these include a commitment to monitor and review the success of the strategy, particularly in relation to PSI and the Working group on Lone Parents. The council would contend that this function should be broadened to include the monitoring of Section 75 impacts at a strategic level.