

ANTI-POVERTY

09 SEP 2005

RECEIVED

Citizens Advice
Regional Office
11 Upper Crescent
Belfast
BT7 1NT

9th September 2005

Liz McMeekin
Anti-Poverty Unit
Room E3.19,
Block E
Castle Buildings
Stormont Estate
Belfast
BT4 3SR

Dear Ms McMeekin

Response to consultation *Towards an Anti-Poverty Strategy new TSN – the way Forward: Phase Two*

Citizens Advice is the biggest single advice agency in Northern Ireland and the aims of the organisation are based on ensuring citizens do not suffer through lack of knowledge of their rights and a lack of knowledge of the services available to them. The organisation is committed to and actively involved in promoting and raising awareness of equality issues. Of the 220,495 enquiries dealt with by Citizens Advice in the year April 2004 to March 2005, 125,357 were benefit related enquiries. This represents 57% of total enquiries.

The CAB service is in a unique position to comment on poverty issues through access to detailed case evidence. The case evidence takes into account the multiple identities of many of those affected by policies. This system is underpinned by quality standards of information recording, comprehensive and accredited training for all advisers, IT infrastructures which allow the sharing of up to date information across Northern Ireland, and a recognised membership scheme which guarantees the quality of advice given.

Citizens Advice responded to **New TSN – The way Forward** In August 2004 and welcomed the continued commitment by the direct-rule administration to an anti-poverty strategy.

This letter reiterates a number of the key issues raised in our previous submission on this issue in August 2004, and details the key principles that Citizens Advice believes must underpin the development of an anti-poverty strategy for Northern Ireland.

We welcome the vision of the Anti poverty strategy **“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”**

We also welcome that the format will aim to be consistent with the National Action plans for Social Inclusion (NAPsincl) and the 4 objectives that make up NAPsincl:

- To facilitate participation in employment and access by all to resources, rights, goods and services
- To prevent the risk of exclusion
- To help the most vulnerable
- To mobilise all relevant bodies

However, there remain a number of issues which Citizens Advice considers to be major obstacles to the delivery of a coherent anti-poverty strategy.

Citizens Advice is of the opinion that there are still omissions in the proposals and would question the suggestion that TSN has been mainstreamed successfully into the planning and implementation of Government programmes in the budgeting process. Statistically Northern Ireland has a higher proportion of families suffering from poverty than the rest of the United Kingdom.

We would query whether the phase II consultation offers anything new as it makes no substantive changes as a result of the previous consultation. It appears to expand on the recommended framework in the first document and provides more background information.

We would therefore raise concern that the strategic aim of an Anti poverty strategy must be to eradicate poverty and social exclusion and promote social inclusion however there is no mechanism for involving people experiencing poverty particularly in the ministerial forum and there is no attempt to address child poverty within the document. The document refers to ‘Surestart’ however this scheme is not implemented in the same way in Northern Ireland as in England.

New TSN was characterised by a lack of consistency, communication and cross-departmental co-operation. There appears to be little evidence within the consultation document that the structures and processes that will underpin the new Strategy will lead to an increasingly holistic approach. The targets need to be quantifiable, measurable and timed based.

It is essential that Government Departments ensure effective links between themselves and with other partners. This could be achieved by building further partnerships and providing financial resources.

There is a need for clear evidence of how data on poverty is collected and evaluated.

We would seek further clarity on how the Ministerial Forum will operate, how it will be appointed or what actual power it will have.

‘Tackling inequality is therefore key to tackling poverty and social exclusion. It must be a strategic aim of anti-poverty policy.’ However, it is not mentioned among the aims, objectives or priorities proposed.

Although employment and employability are rightly seen as key issues for future policy, the emphasis within the consultation document on employment and employability as the primary route out of poverty ignores other key social policy issues and will again fail to address the realities of life in Northern Ireland for many individuals and groups.

The Strategy ignores the fact that poverty in Northern Ireland continues to increase for those who are already working on low pay. Employment is also not necessarily an option for the 25% of the NI population who have a disability, lone parents and carers. This could be attributed to lack of childcare or respite care. In addition, inequality in access to education, training and other services such as accessible transport are limiting factors with particular regard to rural communities.

The Strategy fails to address the potential role for the National Minimum Wage, pensions; redistributive tax rates; increased benefits and better public services as routes out of poverty.

Rather than focusing on these wider issues, the “dealing with financial hardship” strategic priority focuses on narrower issues of access to financial institutions, and on benefit uptake. Financial exclusion and hardship need to address benefit levels and low pay for those who are very far away from the average Gross weekly income of £400 per week¹.

The comments on the proposals are intended to be part of a process of dialogue between OFMDFM and Citizens Advice in this context. If there are any issues arising from the comments made, or the need for any further clarification on any points, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely

Lucy Cochrane
Information and Policy Officer

¹ NISRA 2001