

NEW TSN UNIT

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22nd July 2005

Ms Liz McMeekin
Anti-Poverty Unit
Room E3.19
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Stormont Estate
Belfast BT4 3SZ

Dear Liz

Re: Consultation on New TSN – The Way Forward

Please find enclosed an Officer's Response to the recent Phase 2 consultation on "New TSN – the Way Forward". We hope that the comments made will be helpful in the preparation of the final strategy document.

Yours sincerely

Gerry Devlin
Senior Education Officer

Enc

Registrar: Mr E McArdle



General Teaching Council
for Northern Ireland

NEW TSN – THE WAY FORWARD

Towards an Anti-Poverty Strategy

Officers' Response

August 2005

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

Introduction

The General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland (GTCNI) submitted a Committee response to Phase 1 of the consultation “New TSN – The Way Forward” in September 2004. In our Phase 1 response we highlighted the centrality of education policy in promoting social inclusion in Northern Ireland. We also reviewed some of the academic literature which highlights the relationship between educational achievement and poverty. Our response to Phase 1 of the consultation also highlighted the importance of education in a knowledge-based economy. It is worth emphasising that education policy also has a pre-eminent importance in promoting social inclusion and wider social stability as a counterbalance to the fissiparous tendencies associated with the knowledge economy. GTCNI will therefore review with interest the specific outworkings of the New TSN – The Way Forward strategy and its overall impact on educational policy in Northern Ireland.

Turning to the specifics of the Phase 2 consultation, a number of points are worth making.

1. The document, as presented, contains a significant amount of ‘noise’ or detailed background material which would be better presented in an Appendix or accompanying reference. At times the document reads like an academic textbook rather than the basis for policy development at a strategic level. This is particularly the case with Chapter 2, “Poverty and Social Exclusion in Northern Ireland”, although it is a problematic issue throughout the whole document as it is currently presented. Chapter 5, “Working in the UK and Wider EU Context”, although informative again could be presented as a summary Appendix. Council would therefore suggest that the presentation of the document is reviewed to ensure that it is fit-for-purpose as a high level strategic policy guide.
2. Chapter 6, “The Strategic Framework”, provides a sharper focus to the consultation. The new name of the strategy, The Northern Ireland Anti-Poverty Strategy, is particularly welcome as an unambiguous guide to policy development. Moreover, the three high level priorities identified in Chapter 6 (page 53) provide the basis for holistic policy development. However, in keeping with the comment made in our Phase 1 response, the strategic targets for poverty reduction will need to be sufficiently robust to address all forms of social exclusion.

The structures identified in Chapter 6, “The Strategic Framework”, the Promoting Social Inclusion Initiative (PSI), the Regional Poverty Action Plan and the creation of an Anti-Poverty Forum, should all bring a degree of cohesion to the overall strategy. The fact that this later group will be ministerially co-ordinated should

provide the necessary leadership to maximise the likely success of the strategy.

3. Council welcomes the emphasis throughout the consultation on the importance of cross-departmental co-ordination. The diagram (fig 3, The Northern Ireland Anti-Poverty Strategy-Vertical, Horizontal and Cross-cutting Components) on page 59 is particularly useful. Paragraph 6.8 recognises that building on existing policy and programmes is important and that the purpose of the Northern Ireland Anti-Poverty Strategy is not to change this approach but to promote a more joined-up approach focused on those most in need (page 60).
4. Council notes with interest that the Department of Education has set a target date of September 2006 to introduce financial awareness into the N.I. Schools curriculum. This is an important initiative and it will make an important contribution to the new Learning for Life and Work element of the curriculum. The Department of Education and the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment must ensure that the necessary teaching resources are available on time to ensure the success of this initiative.
5. The initiatives identified in Chapter 8, “Implementing the Strategy”, are particularly welcomed in that they should ensure both high level political and operational accountability for the strategy. The role of the OFMDFM central Anti-Poverty unit will be of strategic importance and it must be proactive to ensure that other government departments pursue their responsibilities with energy and commitment. Council, because of its remit, will be particularly mindful of the role of the Department of Education in the anti poverty strategy.
6. Resourcing the Anti-Poverty Strategy

Council is disappointed that this issue has not been dealt with in amore comprehensive manner. In our response to the Phase 1 consultation we noted that skewing or targeting is in many senses no more than an exercise in prioritisation. Paragraph 7.11 informs us that:

“Following careful consideration of all the issues, Ministers have endorsed the continuation of the skewing of resources by Departments.”

Council would, at this stage, ask that this methodology for allocating resources is kept under constant review to ensure that it is effective and doesn't have any wider negative unintended consequences.

7. Chapter 9, “Setting Targets Against the Strategy”, provides a useful guide and insight into how targets will be set and monitored. It is important that the targets at each of the three distinct levels are specifically outcome targets and that they are referenced back to the accountability processes. It is also important that some mechanism is identified to discern the qualitative impact of actions on the ground and in communities. This is particularly important given the strategic aim: to improve the income and living conditions of the most disadvantaged.

Conclusion: GTCNI welcomes the commitment from government to address the issue of poverty. The Council recognises that education has a major role to play in addressing the cycle of inter-generational poverty. Poverty has been an intractable problem and many policy initiatives have failed because of lack of political leadership and coordinated economic and social provision to tackle it. Council therefore hopes that the out working of the new TSN strategy will achieve its goal to improve the income and living conditions of the most disadvantaged. We look forward to working, in partnership with the Department of Education, to address the specific educational initiatives which will arise as a consequence of the overall strategy.