ANTI-POVERTY
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Gingerbread Northern Ireland
supporting lone parents and their children

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Response to Anti-Poverty Strategy Phase II

September 2005

Introduction

Gingerbread is Northern Ireland's only lone parent-led organisation working to secure and protect equality of rights and social inclusion for one parent families

- Gingerbread is an independent, not for profit membership organisation
- Gingerbread is an organisation promoting individual and collective empowerment
- Gingerbread operates on a Northern Ireland wide basis to represent and be accessible to all lone parents.
- Gingerbread respects and reflects the diversity of one parent families and recognises the need for their equality of treatment.

Gingerbread aims:

- to represent one parent families in Northern Ireland and enhance understanding of their needs and aspirations
- to identify the needs of one parent families and develop appropriate responses
- to influence policy makers and service providers to respond appropriately to the needs of one parent families

Gingerbread has a membership of over 700 lone parents who are raising 1,500 children and has over 50 networks and organisations as associate members.

In responding to this consultation, Gingerbread is seeking a robust and effective anti-poverty strategy for Northern Ireland that recognises the extent and depth of poverty, particularly family and child poverty, and puts in place a strategy and action plan that can end poverty.

Gingerbread has been actively involved in the Phase II consultation events organised by the Northern Ireland Anti-Poverty Network in partnership with Save the Children on behalf of OFMDFM's Anti-Poverty Unit, and concurs completely with the findings of those consultation events. Gingerbread, as a member of NICVA, has also been involved in their recently convened round table which endorsed NICVA's open letter to Minister of State, Lord Jeff Rooker.

Gingerbread also took part in the Phase I consultation events organised by the Northern Ireland Anti-Poverty Network on behalf of the Anti-Poverty Unit and is extremely concerned that the Phase II document states that 'there was broad support for the architecture of Phase I'. While there was indeed broad support for the development of an effective Anti-Poverty Strategy, the architecture outlined was not broadly supported. In fact it was felt that the Phase I documents lacked vision, definition, targets and was not outcome focused. Unfortunately, the Phase II document is deficient in many of the same areas.

Vision

While Gingerbread welcomes the introduction of a vision to the document, *'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' this is well concealed (pg. 90) and not the lead statement from which a strong, effective, outcome based anti-poverty strategy would flow.

Ministerial Forum

Gingerbread welcomes the establishment of a Ministerial Forum to oversee the implementation of the strategy and recommends that, to ensure its effectiveness, Departments and agencies be made fully accountable to the Ministerial Forum, whose role should be to monitor the implementation of Departmental and agency action plans for meeting anti-poverty targets. The Ministerial Forum should be informed by those experiencing poverty and should implement mechanisms to ensure they can participate meaningfully at this level.

PSI Group on Lone Parents

Gingerbread acknowledges and supports the proposal to establish a PSI Group on Lone Parents. We believe, however, that the establishment of this group should take account of the lessons learnt from previous PSI groups. Gingerbread recommends that the PSI Group on Lone Parents be lone parent-led and sufficiently resourced to enable grass roots input (e.g. through the provision of childcare support). The PSI Group must be multi-disciplinary and the work of the group should be widely disseminated and contribute to the establishment of effective, measurable outcome related targets for Departments and agencies. The PSI Group on Lone Parents should also have the power to ensure that their recommendations are acted upon and should be able to monitor and evaluate the impact of such measures on the target group. This process of involving the target group could, we would suggest, become a template for the framework of other PSI Groups.

Targets

Gingerbread is very concerned by the process being used to develop targets within the strategy. The document states that *'Departments and their agencies will be asked to identify targets for both the nine objective areas and for their supportive actions underpinning these objectives'*. Departments will *'guide'* ministers in their final agreement of targets. We believe that the process should be reversed. Ministers should set targets based on the already substantial body of research around poverty, its definition, cause and impact and should then set targets for Departments and their agencies which should, in turn, set in place action plans to meet these targets.

Employment

The target development process outlined fits the Ministerial Foreword, which states that *'Many actions which are currently in place are important and should continue'*, but Gingerbread believes that the strategy should go much further than just existing initiatives. For example, while the government's current initiative to move lone parents into work through New Deal for Lone Parents does have the potential to address some

poverty issues, we would argue that it needs to be further developed and augmented by a full range of complementary services. Gingerbread would also argue that identifying employment and employability as a sole route out of poverty will not always be a workable option for one parent families. Many obstacles exist for lone parents who want to enter the workplace. These include, lack of sustainable job opportunities, the availability and cost of childcare, inflexible working environments and lack of family friendly employment policy. Gingerbread would also argue the important principle of choice for lone parents in terms of work outside the home in line with *Article 7 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child says that children have a right to be cared for by their parents (UN 1989).*

Northern Ireland continues to have the lowest provision of childcare in Europe *(ECNI 2003).* Lone parents are particularly affected by lack of flexible and affordable childcare. Women (approx. 90% of lone parents are mothers) are much likeier than men to have atypical work patterns, such as part-time, short-term or casual employment and working outside normal office hours.

Working Poor

Gingerbread believes that by identifying employment and employability as the only route out of poverty, the document has adopted too narrow a focus to be a comprehensive Anti-poverty Strategy. This position is at odds with both OFMDFM's own research and a broad range of opinion. *'38% of manual workers and 20% of non-manual workers in Northern Ireland earn less that £250/wk, or £13,000/annum, and 10% of manual workers earn less that £180/wk, or £9,000/annum for an average 42.5hr/wk. (ONS 2003).*

A comparison of average hourly pay for manual workers in 2002 shows the lowest wages occurring in Northern Ireland (£6.99/hr), compared to an average of £7.72/hr in the North East of England and £7.57/hr in Wales. These figures do not include the poorest of the working poor. They only refer to full-time employees on adult rates. Part-time employees, 83% of who are women *(DETNI 2003)*, often lone parents, are not included, nor are young people under 18 who are not entitled to the minimum wage. Those aged 18 – 21 are also excluded, although Northern Ireland has a high rate of teenage parenthood.

In line with this Gingerbread recommends that levels of benefit for those who cannot work are reviewed in line with the real cost of living so that those who are unable to work do not experience poverty. We also recommend that, for those who can work, the minimum wage be increased, enabling those who work to become truly financially independent of benefits.

EQIA

Gingerbread is very concerned by the suggestion that the Anti-poverty Strategy is too 'high level' to have a full Equality Impact Assessment as we believe that this would constitute a breach of Statutory Duty under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act, 1998.

We also believe that it is inaccurate to state that New TSN has been successfully mainstreamed. In fact, the New TSN evaluation undertaken by Deloitte and Touche could *'not ascertain whether or not New TSN has resulted in a reduction in poverty'* and the same report warned *'mainstreaming could be an excuse to do nothing'*.

Omissions

Gingerbread is also concerned by the omissions of the Phase II documents, specifically, its lack of focus on child poverty; its lack of analysis of the impact of the 'conflict' on poverty; and its lack of resources. Gingerbread believes that the current Labour administrations commitment to eradicating child poverty by 2020 should be explicitly applied to Northern Ireland, be lead by the Anti-poverty Strategy and be replicated in the Children and Young People's Strategy. Gingerbread believes that cognisance must be taken of the impact and legacy of the 'conflict' on both the creation and eradication of poverty; and that the Strategy must be resourced if it is to be effective.

Resources

Gingerbread is aware that there has been much debate around resourcing the Anti-poverty Strategy including the argument of 'skewing' versus 'dedicated budget'. Gingerbread believes that the Anti-poverty Strategy must have a dedicated budget. While the approach of 'skewing' is being heavily promoted, the document itself acknowledges that *'key department'* have *'limited potential'* to skew resources and rather have focused on *'skewing of efforts'*. This does not inspire confidence that skewing is *'the most effective way of ensuring that measures to combat poverty and social exclusion continue to be mainstreamed into public expenditure, planning and resource allocation'*.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Gingerbread believes that the Northern Ireland Anti-Poverty Strategy should be the key strategy driving, informing, directing and holding to account all others strategies being currently developed. Investing for Health, Children and Young People, Gender, Fuel Poverty and Family Support Strategies are all interwoven and must be led by a clear anti-poverty strategy. The Anti-Poverty Strategy should be based on research to inform the strategy already carried out by OFMDFM. The Anti-poverty Strategy must involve government working with all 'stakeholders' on its delivery and on the development of its targets. The Anti-poverty Strategy must be resourced.

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