

RESPONSE OF INNER CITY SOUTH BELFAST SURE START TO:

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

ANTI-POVERTY

15 SEP 2005

Introduction

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Inner City South Belfast Sure Start (ICSBSS) is one of 25 Sure Start programmes in N.I. funded through the DHSS&PS to work with families who have children under 4 years of age in order to improve health, the ability to learn, social and emotional development and to strengthen families and communities.

ICSBSS was set up 4 years ago and is targeted at the inner city communities of the Village, Sandy Row, Donegall Pass, Markets and Lower Ormeau along with Taughmonagh, Ballynafeigh and Chinese families in all of South Belfast.

We offer a range of services to local families including home visiting, crèches and group activities for parents. The programme has strong links with the South and East Belfast Trust as well as with a number of local nursery and primary schools both in relation to family support and generic health and education initiatives.

Most of the communities in the South Belfast Sure Start programme and consequently the families we work alongside experience high levels of social and economic disadvantage with certain families and groups of people living in severe poverty. Inner City South Belfast therefore welcomes this opportunity to respond to the draft Anti-Poverty Strategy for Northern Ireland.

General Comments

From the perspective of an organisation working with families with pre-school children there are a number of general points we would wish to make about the draft strategy:

Strategic Aim – the strategic aim contained within the document is stated as “to improve the income and living conditions of the most disadvantaged”. ICSBSS is strongly of the view that this is an entirely unsatisfactory aim for an effective regional anti-poverty strategy. Rather we would wish to see a commitment from government to eradicating poverty and social exclusion with a pro-active approach to promoting social inclusion.

Child Poverty – We are concerned that the document does not specifically commit to the eradication of child poverty in N.I. in line with UK policy but seems to point to the Children and Young People’s Strategy as the vehicle for addressing this issue. Having recently responded to the draft Children and Young People’s Strategy we are all very aware that the commitment to the elimination of child poverty is ambivalent within this strategy also. Child poverty is too prevalent and such a serious issue in N.I. society for it to be passed from ‘pillar to post’. There appears to be no logical reason why both strategies cannot contain a commitment to the eradication of child poverty with N.I. baseline information and performance indicators developed that could demonstrate how we are progressing in line with the 5 yearly targets set by the UK government for achieving this goal. Indeed if both strategies concurred on the issue of child poverty it could be a practical example of ‘joined up government’. The document does contain some high level priorities and supporting targets for adults that, if achieved, could impact upon levels of child poverty but as with economic prosperity, experience shows that there is not always a straightforward correlation between the general advancement of society and specific groups of people like children.

Priorities and Targets – While we could not object to any of the stated priorities and supporting targets ICSBSS would be concerned about what appears to be a concentration on employment and employability as the solution to poverty. For a significant number of families we work with who are living in poverty employment, or employment at a level of remuneration that will make any difference, is not an option in the short to medium term or perhaps ever. Many of the children living in these families would fall into the category of ‘severe poverty’ and are therefore at great risk of lifelong social exclusion and poverty themselves. The strategy does not seem to adequately respond to families and children at the extreme end of poverty and social exclusion. Despite falling unemployment figures and a decade of TSN/New TSN and European funding there continues to be a rise in the number of adults who are ‘economically inactive’. This would suggest that for certain groups there are major barriers to employment or employment with ‘a living wage’. For parents and especially mothers living in areas of disadvantage the lack of affordable, accessible childcare that would allow them to enter employment or further education and training to enhance their employability is one of the most critical issues. The importance of childcare in tackling poverty and social exclusion has been recognised in the rest of the UK but it appears that in N.I. efforts to address the deficit in childcare have been minimal and unco-ordinated. We therefore believe

that it is vital that the provision of affordable and accessible childcare is a key element of employment and employability targets.

Sure Start

Sure Start is cited in Annex 2 of the document as the sole policy response to tackling child poverty in N.I. This is concerning for two reasons. Firstly, Sure Start in the rest of the UK is a much better resourced and targets more children and at a wider age group than in N.I. More importantly, Sure Start in the UK is viewed as a key component of the eradication of child poverty and social exclusion policy framework. This policy driver is absent from the development and implementation of Sure Start in N.I. and indeed Sure Start programmes in N.I. are actually discouraged from developing services and activities specifically related to parental employment and employability (such as childcare and training) by the lead Department. Either the anti-poverty strategy cannot be considered as a relevant example of actions to end child poverty or the policy basis and future development of Sure Start in N.I. should be reviewed.

Resourcing the strategy

The draft document reasserts the TSN concept of skewing resources to tackle poverty. Both in terms of the available research evidence and our experience of this policy at grass roots level our view is that skewing has not, and will not, result in making sufficient impact on levels of poverty and social exclusion. ICSBSS would concur with many other organisations in the community and voluntary sector that top slicing of Departmental budgets is much more likely to be an effective driver for serious efforts to tackle poverty across the whole range of government responsibilities.

Monitoring and evaluation

One of the major difficulties with TSN/New TSN was evaluating if the policy was working and if not (or in part not) the flexibility to change direction or focus. Unfortunately, the draft anti-poverty strategy is also extremely short on S.M.A.R.T. objectives and targets. The bottom line is that if we do not say where we intend to go we will never know if we have reached there. Those delivering anti-poverty programmes and initiatives within the community and voluntary sector have been required by government for some time now to agree, monitor and report on objectives, progress against targets and timescales. It is both unreasonable and illogical that the policy that is the basis for such activities should not adopt the same stringent approach to monitoring and evaluating its effectiveness.