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RESPONSE TO NORTHERN IRELAND ANTI-POVERTY STRATEGY

INTRODUCTION

It is essential that a meaningful, outcome-driven anti-poverty strategy comes on line as expeditiously as possible to address the deprivation which prevails within our communities. Eleven years into the ceasefires and the new political arena has yet to deliver the much talked about peace dividend. Poverty still blights communities. Young people turn to alcohol and drugs as an escape; suicide levels especially amongst our young people are at epidemic levels; teenage pregnancies and mental health issues continue to rise. If ever there was a time when devastated communities needed assistance the time is now; and we all have a role to play in ensuring social justice for all our people.

ANALYSIS OF STRATEGY

We do not accept that the current government proposals for an anti-poverty strategy are a basis for the way forward. The strategy document contains no targets, no outcomes, no commitment to a proper budget to combat poverty, no analysis of the causes of poverty and no action to tackle the unacceptable gap between the rich and the poor in our society. The goal has to be progress towards a more equal society since unequal societies have higher levels of poverty, crime, alienation and other negative social consequences. As it stands, the proposed strategy will do nothing to improve the lives of adults and children in Northern Ireland suffering from poverty and social exclusion. More far-reaching solutions are required.

Specifically

- The document fails to establish clear targets, timetables and outcomes, despite the stated need for such throughout the document.
- The past attempts at Targeting Social Need have been a resounding failure especially given the latest Noble Measures of deprivation that show that multiple deprivation in West Belfast has become even more compounded. 150,000 children in Northern Ireland live in poverty and government's own statistics show that half a million people live in poor households. A quarter of our adult population is functionally illiterate.
- There have been no consistencies in actions to date i.e. failure to provide long term funding in deprived areas.
- Interventions to date have all been 'window dressing' and have had no impact on poverty levels in the area especially child poverty.

- There is no mention of child poverty in the document which is surprising given government targets to eliminate child poverty. Concern that the single domain of child poverty has been removed from the new Noble measures of deprivation and subsumed within the income domain. There is a belief that this will only serve to further hide the extent of child poverty and its concentration in constituencies such as West Belfast.
- There is a failure to strategically direct finance into deprived areas and to people who suffer poverty.
- The failure to subject this 'strategy' to an Equality Impact Assessment is indicative of a pattern of behaviour within departments as an attempt to evade their legislative responsibilities. An anti-poverty strategy with clear targets and timetable should be easy to subject to EQIA.
- The proposed 'strategy' seems to believe that there is an acceptable level of poverty. There is not and we reject this approach outright.
- The document simply summarises what are already departmental actions and proffers nothing new to tackle poverty. Of particular note for Job Assist Centres West Belfast is the belief that the DEL New Deal programme tackles poverty. Our experience has been that New Deal is extremely ineffective and does not meaningfully impact on employability. We therefore question the reliance on this programme as an action to tackle poverty.
- Structural inequalities still exist in the distribution of wealth and poverty. One manifestation can be seen in the preferential treatment of particular geographical areas by government agencies. Recent analysis of Invest NI's investment practices demonstrably show a continuation of concentration of resources in specifically targeted areas to the detriment of others: South and East Belfast receive disproportional high investment in comparison while the rest of us are left to read nice reports about how government is committed to tackling poverty.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We believe that a strategy which attempts to solve the complex issues of poverty in Northern Ireland should contain the following:

- Clear targets, timetables and outcomes are vital, otherwise the strategy shall be meaningless.
- An assault on disparities in income between people on high incomes and the low paid.
- Rebalancing rates so that those who can, pay more and the poor pay less in order to claw back some of the huge gains by the well off in property price rises.
- Provision of comprehensive childcare which is free or highly subsidised for those who cannot afford it.

- A major reduction in educational inequality under which working class children perform much worse than more advantaged children and disadvantaged adults suffer from educational under-achievement (to include resources for community education).
- Concerted efforts to redirect resources to tackle inequalities in health — we know that the poor lead shorter, less healthy lives.
- Analysis of government expenditure, including spending on infrastructure, to ensure it is balanced towards, rather than against, the most disadvantaged.
- Increased provision of social housing in view of the difficulty low-income families have in finding a place to live in an inflated housing market.
- Resources for disadvantaged areas to develop their capacity to reach and involve disadvantaged people and to create strong, learning communities.
- A meaningful anti-poverty strategy, if it is to be focused and have a real impact upon those it is supposed to help, must be a partnership of equals between government and community/voluntary agencies. It must be resourced adequately to tackle the problems which are very real and a product of successive political failures and greed. This is not a call for "raised community expectations beyond a realistic level". We as a community have a right to demand parity of esteem and full access to the education, health and employment opportunities that exist for others.
- We would hope to see much needed confidence-building efforts designed to enhance the employability and quality of life of many of our people who to this day are victims of multi-generational unemployment.
- Examination of the high level of economic inactivity in Northern Ireland and a plan to reduce the numbers out of work by meaningfully enhancing employability and creating more well-paid jobs. This should include greatly increased resources for the social economy.
- Similarly, we would expect to see a greater resourcing of an education system which is seriously under resourced in working class communities and churns out undereducated and under qualified pupils after so many years of wasted schooling.

CONCLUSION

As an organisation committed to working in partnership with government to improve employability and ultimately reduce poverty, we want to work in partnership with all other agencies in a cooperative endeavour to leave the despair of the past consigned to history as we build new relationships and structures which focus on the development needs of people and communities. We want to see adequate resources ploughed into long term, sustainable programmes which can have a very real impact upon our communities, our environment and our hopes for the future.