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**Question and Answers
Omagh Community House-18th August**

Barry McElduff Sinn Fein:

If it's not on the slides is it an issue? It is disappointing to see OFMDFM have no sense of communities like Strabane, Enniskillen and Omagh or their cross border equivalents and to have made no reference in the document to a cross border dimension for the strategy. In fact it seems to be actively and deliberately avoided. The border has a massive impact on causing and compounding poverty in these areas. Is there any preparedness to look at other development plans and their role within the Anti-Poverty Strategy? (ICBAN etc)

Tyrone, Fermanagh, Omagh and Donegal are all distant from services, transport, infrastructure but there's absolutely no reference to even an add on refer to cross border poverty.

James Falconer solicitor:

Reference was made to p53 of the document 'reaching out' re:TSN; not much of this in our area, there is no impact on Invest NI. It's easy to write a nice paragraph but there's no provision and no means of creating employment. There has to be accountability within the strategy and we need to know who will make the government departments accountable?

Michael Mulholland OFMDFM replies:

There is no reference to a cross border aspect within the proposed strategy, we don't believe this strategy is a driver for cross border initiatives there are other strategies and programmes such as Peace etc that look specifically at poverty in the border areas. We would welcome submissions telling us that we need to address this issue within the strategy.

Barry McElduff Sinn Fein:

I would think that North Down type of thinking is driving this strategy. If government departments don't work together or tie into the Western Health Service or North Western Health Service then we will continue to experience poverty in Omagh and other rural border areas especially in relation to access to services.

Michael Mulholland OFMDFM replies:

It will be the job of the Ministerial Forum to hold government departments to account.

Roger Sullivan Rural Community Network:

How will the strategy tackle rural poverty if it has no targets and no budget?

Gerry Mc Loughlann Mind the Gap:

The point that strikes me is that it's not the primary purpose of the strategy to drive cross border work. However there is a danger of the Anti-Poverty Strategy as it stands not recognising the effect the border has had on creating poverty. For example the highest levels of poverty outside of North and West Belfast are found in four border constituencies.

Michael Mulholland OFMDFM replies:

The need to address cross border poverty is something we would need to bring back to OFMDFM to consider how best to do this.

Jim Nolan Enniskillen Together:

It does take a number of years to deliver a strategy, to date we have lots of research and surveys etc, people living in poverty have been surveyed left right and centre, lots of questions but no delivery. Who will monitor and ensure there is delivery? What independent monitors will there be?

Michael Mulholland OFMDFM replies:

One criticism of the independent evaluation was that they could not assess where NEW TSN had or had not been successful. We will continue to carry out research on targets and any success against them.

Alan McClelland OFMDFM Research:

A word of caution for setting targets/indicators can often mask what's happening in these areas. We need to consider what evidence there is that change is happening but is not showing through.

Michael Mulholland OFMDFM:

OFMDFM are prepared to work for change in partnership with key organisations.

Barry McElduff Sinn Fein:

Communication at the centre is important. There are 10 statutory committees monitoring departments but OFMDFM managed to create 1 that was not statutory and so it has no powers, no teeth. There is also a gap in the absence of the Civic Forum. Investment for Health has a cross departmental Ministerial led Forum with no budgets and no teeth.

I would like to know if the Northern Ireland Anti-Poverty Network and Save the Children will be invited on to the Ministerial Forum as key partners not observers.

Michael Mulholland OFMDFM replies:

We can't say so now but we would welcome them as forum members. It was always the intention of the strategy to have specific targets on tackling child poverty but we need to say so clearly. In our opinion Jeff Rooker is a positive

Ministerial appointment for tackling poverty and social exclusion and child poverty.

As a point of information Michael informed attendees that submissions could be received up until 9th September and there was still flexibility for a few weeks after that date. He asked those who may make later submissions to please contact OFMDFM and let them know they would be doing so.

COMMUNITY HOUSE OMAGH EVENT – 18TH AUGUST 2005

1 WORKSHOP

FACILITATOR: FRANCES DOWDS – NIAPN

1. What are your initial reactions/ comments/ questions to what has been presented today?

Poverty is an urgent matter. As a welfare rights worker in 1979 one participant was very aware that the people he advised then were now older and living in relative poverty. Although some of their children may be upwardly mobile they had moved out of the poor estates where poverty was still prevalent. Within the estates there is also a lot of hidden poverty and marginalization and low income families with young children.

There is a strong sense of urgency within these communities to develop an anti-poverty strategy that delivers. There is also a recognition of failure as TSN dates from 1999 and it still hasn't delivered, as government still tries to get it to work.

Questions were asked on how wide these consultations were targeted and criticism leveled at the summer timescale chosen. It was stated that no consultation will get a good attendance over the summer time. 1 cynical participant suggested maybe it should have been held on 25th December at 3 o'clock.

The level of interest and promotion of the strategy to political parties was also raised. It was felt that there should have been massive interest in this across the political spectrum.

It was also suggested that OFMDFM should offer to make presentations to local councils.

Suggestions were made that the strategy should include a definition of poverty. It was stated that unless you are very clued in you could think that poverty was not relevant to you. That it was an issue only for particular groups like homeless people. A clear definition would help drive home the importance of the strategy to people.

Poverty can also depend on a person's state of mind and how they feel about their environment. Living on a farm and getting an income of £70. per week can mean more hardship than living on an inner city estate. There are other issues associated with poverty such as environmental quality and quality of life. Having read Phase 1 and Phase II the only difference seems to be the size of the document. There is no greater definition or statement on how they propose to tackle poverty, especially rural poverty. The document just does not say how it will tackle poverty or what will change because of this strategy. How life should improve for people is what the document should be about. Questions were asked on whether this was the right vision for the Way Forward.

Delivery mechanisms were seen as extremely important and the strategy has to have practical delivery mechanisms clearly outlined. It is essential to see departments deliver on the strategy in practical ways. Reference was made to Invest Northern Ireland stating how they took potential investors to visit New TSN areas but this is not good enough, there areas need real investment and real jobs not just 'visits' on the ground. Invest NI is all talk and no delivery. It is obvious that government departments haven't taken poverty on board yet, they need to start thinking how what they do at government level needs to be made to have a positive impact at a local level.

2. What are the gaps/ weakness with the current Phase II document?

There is no mention of a cross border dimension and this is crucial particularly in the Omagh area. There is a need to recognise in an Anti-Poverty Strategy that the border areas have been peripheralised by two governments, (the UK and the Irish). Omagh, Tyrone, Fermanagh are an after thought for government departments. Although there is reference to rural proofing, government departments, health and education trusts etc always use the issue of population against local provision of services. There is no rural aspect to this anti-poverty strategy. There are significant numbers of people living in rural areas who have no running water in their homes, who are not connected to the water mains, this is a significant poverty issue for the APS especially in this day and age.

Participants stated they were aware that there was only one pool of money available for Northern Ireland. One participant asked whether there were

measures that could be supported through the Credit Union system which could support low income/no income families rather than them having to go to the state; e.g. No interest Credit Union loans for these groups rather than Social Fund loans based on a realistic pay back scheme.

It was stated again that child poverty was missing from the document. It was stated that reference to addressing child poverty should have a strong community dimension especially a neighbourhood level. Poverty and social exclusion in Omagh was seen as negatively impacting on people's health. It was stated that more linkages were needed between the Anti-Poverty Strategy and other government departments, especially that of the Department of Health and Social Services and Public Safety. The need for jobs and a strong economy were appreciated but in their absence health is a massive factor. Participants stated that the provision of jobs as a way out of poverty for some was to be welcomed and to be encouraged but there is a serious need for a strong and supportive community infrastructure as a practical mechanism to deal with and help alleviate poverty.

The strategy has to have a budget and this must be made accessible to communities for the essential anti-poverty work they do. Tackling poverty is not just about government departments, it can only really be tackled effectively if it is done in partnership with communities.

People stated that the budget for Neighbourhood Renewal, a key policy for delivering on tackling poverty and social exclusion across NI had had its budget cut in Omagh and it's not even off the ground yet.

There was a call for funding to be made available at a local community level to enable groups to tackle local aspects of poverty but even within the building where the seminar was held, Omagh Community House, it was stated that most of the groups are in a state of constant funding crisis.

The one pool of money issue came up again and participants asked whether there was any way we would look at the Barnett Formulae for a review of the total budget received for NI and whether there was any peace dividend to support such proposals.

It was stated that the British Government had introduced legislation to substitute EU money for UK budget provision and that NI had not benefited as it should have under the EU Peace Monies.

Reference was made to the Sure Start programme which was available within 3 local wards in the Omagh area. Sure Start does not work on 'estates' but on a ward level. It would have been possible to earmark other wards but it was a top down decision. Sure Start was not aimed at tackling poverty; it was aimed at

tackling children's problem. It was not an anti-poverty focus because of the geographic criteria used. It was just area and age group based. It was commented that if this approach led to social integration it could be good but that was just not happening.

Poverty in Omagh is particularly high in the public owned housing sector; because this is being sold off you can have poor families living beside middle class families. However social integration is just not happening, there is a growing gap between the rich and the poor. Sure Start is not *the* way to deliver on child poverty but it should focus on tackling poverty and supporting poor families.

Reference was also made to the negative impact of the introduction of tuition and top up fees within universities. Children of lower income and lower middle class families will not be able to go into professions. This will result in increasing numbers of professional 'elites'. Education is still seen as the main route to a decent job and income but such policies have caused a major problem for low income families.

It was also stated that there were unclear linkages to the EU Action Plans and no clarity at all on cross border linkages.

It was also stated that there was the potential for synergy to be generated through a North South Consultative Forum. Questions were also asked about how the strategy would link and work with the Regional Action Plans to be developed by cross border bodies such as ICBAN. It was stated that they should be involved in any consultation on an ASP for NI.

3. What are the strengths within the current Phase II document?

The proposed Ministerial led forum is a strength that needs to be further strengthened.

5. What should a strong Anti-Poverty Strategy do and how?

Targeting child poverty should be central to an Anti-Poverty Strategy. This needs to be prioritized and made a central concern for the Forum.

It should acknowledge the failure of NEW TSN. Those children living in poverty in 1999 are now young adults living in poverty.

An anti-poverty strategy should focus on ethnic minorities our new citizens and develop measures to support them.

It was stated that Jeff Rooker has Ministerial responsibility for Children, Ethnic Minorities, Equality and Fair Employment so he should 'talk to himself' and look closely at what he can do for these groups.

An anti-poverty strategy must look at providing and securing employment rights for migrant workers.

It was stated that there were lots of vulnerable Polish people (and others) here as migrant workers who are open to exploitation and who may not be able to access benefits. An Anti-Poverty Strategy should support relief work from Network aiming to support or help ethnic minorities and migrant workers to lift them out of poverty immediately. It was stated that this is not a job for charities. It was also commented that there were people wondering about NI unable to speak the language experiencing severe isolation and lack of representation by 'Networks' who would support their rights.

An Anti-Poverty Strategy should also be authoritative and directive.

Targets should not be set by departments but should be clearly outlined by the Minister within the strategy. They should also be monitored by the Ministerial Forum.

Targets need to be clearly set out within the Regional Action Plan.

It was stated that the document as it stands is not an Anti-Poverty Strategy and that it must be rewritten.

An APS needs financial commitment. It needs mechanisms to allow charities and others (NGO's) to carry out a quarterly review and to comment on the strategy. There needs to be a mechanism that allows for objective criticism and commendation of the work of the strategy.

There should also be resourced strategies to tackle fuel poverty and debt. The issues of transport and rural isolation need to be considered, for people on low/no incomes a £3.50 minimum cost journey is inaccessible.

The Anti-Poverty Strategy should also be a monitor of the Social Fund, this should be central to tackling poverty in NI.

There is a need for extra subsidies for heating; the Dept of Environment through the Housing Executive is investing in properties through the provision of double glazing and oil based central heating. For those who can't afford to fill or top up a tank they will be forced to go for the cheapest fuel heating option which currently is Calor gas. This will result in health problems and a greater cost to the public purse long term. Extra subsidies for heating would help reduce this outcome.

EU Investment money and New Opportunities Funding are running out.

Development workers across the sector are being lost. An Anti-Poverty Strategy needs to look at how to sustain these especially such essential provision as After Schools Clubs etc.

5. Are there any other comments you would like to make in general or on the proposed measurements to be used within the Strategy?

Participants stated that they were not aware that the indicators to be used by the Anti-Poverty Strategy were 'being worked up' (50-60) and that those in the report were no longer relevant. It was stated that developing indicators for the Anti-Poverty Strategy needs to be done in partnership and consultation with NGO's and other experts.

Questions were asked about when draft 3 would be ready. It was stated by representatives of OFMDFM Anti-Poverty Unit that there would be no consultation on Phase 3.

There would be consultation on the Regional Action Plan which will contain departmental targets and this should be available in the Spring of 2006.

Unless requested all submissions received on Phase II will be available on the OFMDFM website.

Priorities

- 1 Need to address Rural Poverty through a specific section and to bring it to the fore, including:
 - Access to services
 - Housing
 - Social Isolation
 - Transport
- 2 It is extremely important that practical delivery mechanisms are developed.
- 3 Child poverty must be prioritised.
- 4 The provision of a budget is essential and it must support new actions and these must be time tabled.
- 5 Monitoring and evaluation and who does this is extremely important plus targets must be set by Ministers and they must aim to reduce levels of poverty and social exclusion.
- 6 There must be a cross border aspect to the Anti-Poverty Strategy
- 7 Essentially the document as it stands is not an Anti-Poverty Strategy and it must be rewritten.