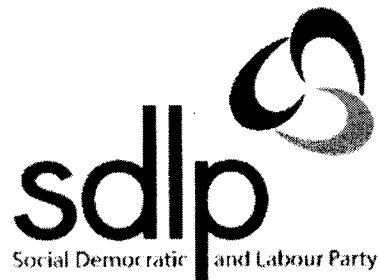


ANTI-POVERTY

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**SDLP Response to
New TSN – The Way Forward
Towards an Anti-Poverty Strategy
Phase 2**

October 2005

SDLP RESPONSE TO “NEW TSN – THE WAY FORWARD” TOWARDS AN ANTI-POVERTY STRATEGY PHASE 2

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The issues of social justice and social and economic rights are at the heart of the SDLP’s existence and the party has long championed the cause of creating a poverty free society in which all can flourish. The creation of a socially just society and prosperous economy requires equality of opportunity for all. Removing the barrier of poverty will go a long way to achieving equality of opportunity and maximising human potential. Poverty prevents children performing well at school, prevents adults from making the most of their talents. Poverty blights peoples lives, is a waste of potential resources and talents and should not be tolerated in our society. This inequality and injustice must be addressed. Total eradication of poverty must be a central Government goal if our society is to maximise its potential.
- 1.2 The SDLP welcomes the intention to develop an effective Anti-Poverty Strategy for Northern Ireland. We have been consistent in our vision of an anti-poverty strategy – we have sought, and worked for, a strategy that is comprehensive, targets individuals and groups in greatest need or vulnerable to poverty, and addresses child poverty. The SDLP has consistently campaigned for an anti-poverty strategy with dedicated finances, that can deliver outcomes related to specific objectives and targets, not vague aspirations, such that tackling poverty a central aim of government, coherently addressed through coordinated action.
- 1.3 We firmly believe that the benefits of tackling poverty go far wider than the individuals directly affected. Removing poverty will lead to better educational attainment, improved health and life chances, lower unemployment, reduced spending on policing, social work and health care and greater prosperity for the economy.
- 1.4 The SDLP submitted its response to Phase 1 of the consultation, “Towards an Anti-Poverty Strategy: New TSN – the way forward”. We are disappointed that many of our concerns raised in that submission remain valid in light of the Phase 2 document. Phase 2 still lacks agreed definitions of poverty, social exclusion and social inclusion. The proposed Anti-Poverty Strategy remains reliant on methods of resource direction that have failed in the past, still lacks a dedicated budget, focuses on financial exclusion at the expense of other inequalities contributing to poverty, fails to outline a coherent working relationship with other government strategies, and lacks specific, time-bound, measurable goals. Phase 2 of this consultation has done little to develop an Anti-Poverty Strategy that will be placed at the heart of all Government decision making, with the political will and economic commitment by all Departments to ensure that the Strategy makes a real, tangible difference to the lives of those in poverty.

2. Positive Measures

2.1 Strategic Aim

The general aim of the Anti-Poverty Strategy is positive if rather tentative- “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”. (Our emphasis.)

As stated in our earlier submission, we are of the view that the government should make clear that it is its strategic aim to eradicate poverty.

While participation relates to social inclusion, it would be desirable to see a commitment to promoting social inclusion included.

2.2 Ministerial Forum

The SDLP negotiated to have equality and targeting social need placed at the heart of government. The importance of addressing poverty is such that it must be a high priority of all Departments, centrally-led and directed. We welcome the proposed establishment of a Ministerial Forum to provide this necessary direction. We would, however, refer you to our criticisms below.

2.3 Outcome-Focused

The focus on outcomes and the use of a broad range of supporting indicators to monitor poverty and social exclusion is a positive development.

2.4 Coherency with EU National Action Plans

The aim for an overall coherent approach to the Government’s plans for poverty reduction should be assisted by the Anti-Poverty Strategy being consistent with the EU National Action Plans for Social Inclusion. We believe work remains to be done to achieve coherency with other Government strategies.

2.5 Lone Parents

We particularly welcome the initiative to target Lone Parents as a disadvantaged group.

3. Limitations of the Anti-Poverty Strategy

3.1 The SDLP is disappointed that the Phase 2 consultation does little to rectify our concerns expressed at the initial consultation. Many criticisms raised by ourselves and others at the Government’s proposed anti-poverty strategy remain unaddressed by Phase 2.

3.2 Definition

The starting point for any Anti-Poverty Strategy must be a clear definition of poverty. The Strategy proposed fails to provide a clear definition of poverty. This means that different departments will be working to different conceptions of poverty, social exclusion and social need, with subsequent implications for coherency and effectiveness in the implementation of the strategy. Departments with responsibility for meeting anti-poverty targets must be able

to understand what poverty is if they are to be able to tackle it effectively. The criticism of Departments working to various definitions of social need was highlighted by various responses to the first phase consultation. We are disappointed that it has not been addressed (Consultation, §6). As argued in our earlier submission, and in support of the position of the Northern Ireland Anti-Poverty Network, we believe that the European Union definitions of poverty, social exclusion and social inclusion should be adopted.

3.3 **Lack of detail on the proposed strategy and targets**

Whilst we welcome the outcome-focused approach to the proposed Anti-Poverty Strategy it lacks specific focus and a detailed plan of action. We are eager to see the broader consultation on targets and a plan of action. For objectives and targets to be effective they must be measurable, detailed and time bound. It is difficult to comment on proposals when most of the objectives and targets outlined lack detail on how they will be achieved and most have no dates as to when they will be achieved. The targets are broad and general. For example, the target of building employment capacity is stated as 'to increase the proportion of people earning more than £400 a week'; the target of building capacity in education is stated as 'to decrease the attainment differential between those on free school meals and the average of those not'. (Consultation, §9.9-9.13). These two examples are not time bound, are not adequately measurable or quantifiable, and have no specific action objectives. Furthermore there is little detail on the content of the proposed Northern Ireland Regional Action Plan. In the Equality Commission's words, this renders the strategy "little more than an aspirational set of objectives and targets" (consultation response, June 2005, p2). We take issue with the assertion that a "high level framework does not seek to identify specific initiatives or actions by individual departments, nor to set specific targets" (Consultation, §4.9). In this case, the Anti-Poverty Strategy cannot be outcome-focused without such targets and they should form a central component of the Strategy if it is to be at all effective and actually make a difference to people's lives.

3.4 **The Budget**

A successful anti-poverty strategy requires objectives, targets and financial resources. The proposed Anti-Poverty Strategy does not have a budget and relies only on the targeting of resources through skewing. In our response to the original consultation we rejected the notion that skewing alone was an adequate method of funding. This is the practice that has been used to date and has not been successful. The Northern Ireland Anti-Poverty Network highlight two serious concerns arising from the Deloitte & Touche evaluation. Firstly the evaluation stated it "did not ascertain whether or not NEW TSN has resulted in a reduction of poverty" and moreover warned that "mainstreaming could be an excuse to do nothing". The proposal seems to be to continue with a policy that may be failing. Skewing alone cannot target vulnerable groups or tailor support to their particular needs. Furthermore, the consultation makes the presumption that New TSN has been recognised as having been successfully mainstreamed into the budgeting process, but this is not demonstrated. In light of this we believe that an effective Anti-Poverty Strategy must have a dedicated, central budget to complement skewing resources.

3.5 **Failure to address child poverty**

The SDLP is committed to assisting those groups of greatest need in society. The SDLP wants to see an anti-poverty strategy that targets these groups, with a particular emphasis on children in poverty, people with a disability and lone parents. We are therefore highly disappointed that the Anti-Poverty Strategy does not set out how child poverty is to be tackled and what arrangements will be made to link it with the Children's Strategy. Given the high levels of children in poverty in Northern Ireland, (8% living in severe poverty and 38% identified as deprived of one or more necessities), especially compared to Great Britain, it is a serious failure that the proposed strategy does not address child poverty. That the Departments are working towards the UK Child Poverty targets to see poverty halved by 2010 and eradicated by 2020 (Consultation, p95/96) is not enough to make real change to the lives of children in poverty in Northern Ireland. Instead of addressing child poverty, the Anti-Poverty Strategy relies on other existing Government strategies to deal with this issue, in particular the Children and Young People's Unit's Children's Strategy (Consultation, p95). We would reiterate a serious concern raised by the Children's Law Centre about this delegation of responsibility. The Children's Strategy consultation states, "issues impacting on and associated with child poverty will be considered within the context of the Anti-Poverty Forum as proposed in the consultation document "New TSN – the way forward – towards an anti-poverty strategy"" (Children's Strategy Consultation, p71). The Anti-Poverty Unit and Children and Young People's Unit are each delegating the responsibility for child poverty to the other Unit with the worrying potential consequence that neither will address the issue. Both these Units should be working together to properly and comprehensively address the issue of child poverty, outlined perhaps by means of a common chapter in their respective strategies.

3.6 **Coherence with other strategies**

As demonstrated with the issue of child poverty, there are no clear links between the Anti-Poverty Strategy and other Government Strategies. Without clearly identifiable roles and responsibilities for various strategies, issues that fall within the remit of two strategies may result in them being addressed by neither. The role of the Anti-Poverty Strategy and its relationship and impact with other strategies needs to be explained. The Government needs to be clear about the methods for bringing all related strategies together coherently. As good practice, each strategy should include a section setting out how it links to other related initiatives. Again, it may be appropriate for inter-connected strategies to include common chapters.

3.7 **Focus on economic capacity**

In our earlier submission, the SDLP called for acknowledgement that capacity-building must go beyond employability issues, addressing the needs of those who will not re-enter the work-force. We called for a re-defined approach to capacity-building to promote social inclusion and "*promote full and confident participation in the life of the community*". We therefore welcome the acknowledgement of the social aspect of poverty in §6.1 but want to see further detail in terms of how this might be taken forward as there is little to flesh out the commitment in the present text.

Building capacity in the labour market is an important element of any anti-poverty planning, but this must not be to the detriment of poverty groups that cannot participate in employment. Improving access to employment ignores the other contributing factors to poverty (as identified in the consultation, §2.23) and will not assist those with serious disability, certain lone parents that have no access to affordable childcare or older persons who have left the labour market. Northern Ireland has a disproportionately large population of recipients of disability allowance and people with caring responsibilities. For carers and the disabled employment does not always offer a route out of poverty so it is particularly important for the circumstances of Northern Ireland that the Anti-Poverty Strategy adopts a broader perspective to tackling poverty than economic capacity alone. The proposed Anti-Poverty Strategy still concentrates mainly on economic capacity building by tackling financial exclusion. Wider social capacity building is equally important and the Strategy should devote more attention to capacity building in terms of promoting social inclusion to assist those in poverty with participation.

3.8 Tackling Financial Exclusion

The SDLP welcomes the Government's commitment to address financial exclusion. This has been identified as a particular problem for Northern Ireland and its redress must obviously form a central aim of the Anti-Poverty Strategy. The Anti-Poverty Strategy refers to the need to improve access to bank accounts, low cost loans (Consultation, §7.14) and to increase the proportion of workers earning over £400 a week (Consultation, §9.10). We agree that these measures are all necessary to tackle financial hardship but are concerned that they are narrow in scope. If financial exclusion is to be tackled it needs to be seen in its wider context – inadequate levels of benefits, the high degree of low paid workers, the lack of local employment opportunities for 'quality jobs' (those that are unionised, well paid and with prospects for further development), pension levels, tax rates, access to credit, an adequate income and so on all contribute to financial exclusion. We acknowledge the challenge involved given that many of these matters are 'reserved' to be dealt with on a UK-wide basis, but if the government is serious about tackling financial exclusion, it must address all these contributory factors.

3.9 Lack of a North-South dimension

The proposed Anti-Poverty Strategy does not commit to any North-South liaison on poverty issues, where co-operation would be beneficial. Cross-border dimensions are vital for targeting poverty in the border area, which has some of the greatest deprivation across the island, while rural poverty is another aspect of the debate that could benefit from a co-operative approach. Given the similar statistical profiles and challenges faced North and South of the border, the issue of poverty should be addressed on an all-Ireland basis.

3.10 Legacy of conflict

The Anti-Poverty Strategy acknowledges the impact of the past conflict on poverty (Consultation, p97) but does not identify objectives or priorities that would make a commitment to addressing this impact and legacy.

3.11 **Ministerial Forum**

As noted earlier, the Ministerial Forum is a very positive proposal. We do however have concerns over the lack of detailed content regarding the exact functions, operation, composition and powers of the Forum. The Ministerial Forum has the potential to play a key role in providing directed, high-level leadership to drive the Anti-Poverty Strategy and ensure that all government departments are directing resources and policy towards poverty eradication, provided it is supported by appropriate political will and clearly defined functions and powers.

3.12 **Promoting Social Inclusion Group for lone parents**

The proposed promoting social inclusion group (PSI) for lone parents is a positive measure, targeting one of the greater at-risk poverty groups. Yet criticisms have been raised as to the effectiveness of these PSI working groups and PSI has not been achieved to date. PSI groups require effective leadership, achievable targets and proper resourcing to be successful. These criticisms will need to be taken on board if this proposed group is to have a measurable impact on reducing social exclusion.

3.13 **NI Departmental Action Plan (Consultation, Annex 3)**

The stated central priorities of the Anti-Poverty Strategy / Departmental Action Plan are to build capacity, to create employment and to tackle financial hardship. Again, the dangers of over reliance on economic capacity should be reiterated. The consultation itself recognises that "...work was not found always to be a route out of poverty" (consultation, §2.37). Economic growth and an increase in prosperity does not offer a remedy for all those living in poverty.

3.14 **Equality Impact Assessment**

The SDLP is concerned by the suggestion I in the document that high level strategies such as the Anti-Poverty Strategy cannot be subject to equality considerations. The Equality Commission have serious reservations about this position, and it may be in breach of Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act, 1998. The Strategy must have a full Equality Impact Assessment.

3.15 **Equality & the Unemployment Differential**

The SDLP is extremely disappointed to note that the Anti-Poverty Strategy offers no detailed plan of action for addressing the unemployment differential that still exists between the two main communities in Northern Ireland. Reduction of this differential was a commitment of both the Good Friday Agreement and the Joint Declaration yet, while some progress has been made, this inequality persists. The Anti-Poverty Strategy gives brief reference to this matter in chapter 9 where it is listed as one of the 'supporting targets': "to reduce differences in economic inactivity rates and employment rates between Catholic and Protestants, men and women, and between people with and without a disability, and reduce the absolute difference in Protestant and Catholic unemployment rates". (Consultation, §9.15). As with many of the other targets in the proposed anti-poverty strategy, this is little more than an aspiration without any measurable actions or specified time period. Northern Ireland still has an unacceptably high differential between the two communities

that is reducing at a very slow rate. Eliminating this differential should be a central plank of the proposed anti-poverty strategy.

We would also state our wider concern about rising income differentials. Equality cannot be divorced from poverty, but is directly linked since poverty must be assessed in relative as well as absolute terms. The widening gap between the highest and lowest incomes does not serve our society well nor help promote social inclusion and cohesion. The SDLP believes that the creation of a more equal society will in turn lead to a more cohesive, inclusive and democratic society.

The importance of the section 75 equality duty in the development of an anti-poverty strategy cannot be over-stated. Its focus on ensuring that vulnerable groups achieve equality of opportunity is critical to combating and preventing poverty.

3.16 Regional Action Plan

The SDLP welcomes a Regional Action Plan for Northern Ireland in line with the EU National Plans for a coherent approach to action planning. However the Anti-Poverty Strategy lacks any detail on the content of the proposed Northern Ireland Regional Action Plan. Objectives and targets mostly have no dates for achievement or details on how the government intends to realise their achievement. Such a detailed Regional Action Plan should have formed a substantial part of the Anti-Poverty Strategy.

Summary & Conclusion

The SDLP remains disappointed with the Anti-Poverty Strategy. While some progress has been made, we are of the view that many of the recommendations suggested in response to the first consultation remain valid. In summary, we would prioritise the following requirements:

- Much more work is required to flesh out the strategy, including quantifiable, measurable, time-bound targets for both the Strategy and the Northern Ireland Regional Action Plan. This detail is imperative if either the Strategy or the Regional Action plan is to effectively contribute to a measurable reduction in poverty or contribute to greater social inclusion.
- Provision of additional resources and a dedicated budget to complement the practice of skewing resources.
- Detailed mechanisms for the involvement of, and direct engagement with, those experiencing poverty to inform and direct the Anti-Poverty Strategy.
- A comprehensive definition of poverty, social inclusion and social exclusion. Our preference would be for the Government to adopt the same definitions as those used by the European Union.
- Develop further proposals to address the 'social' aspect of poverty, widening emphasis beyond employability issues. Tackle the many other inequalities and barriers borne by those in poverty and address the needs of those who will not enter or re-enter the work-force.
- Address inequality in its broadest conception and develop specific measures should be proposed to address the Catholic / Protestant unemployment differential.
- Further government consideration of, and proposals to address, the impact of the conflict on poverty in Northern Ireland.
- The Anti-Poverty Strategy should be developed on a North-South basis given the similar statistical profile and challenges faced on each side of the border.

The SDLP has long campaigned for a more equal society in which all can flourish and achieve their full potential. We believe that it is a moral imperative that society end the suffering of poverty that blights so many lives and wastes valuable human potential. Removing such injustice is at the heart of the SDLP's existence. We successfully championed equality and social and economic rights and secured their inclusion in the Good Friday Agreement. We will continue to work for an Anti-Poverty Strategy that is effective, has proposed targets, timetables and measures for achieving the end of eradication of poverty and can unleash the potential for all in society to contribute to building a prosperous economy and fair, equal and inclusive society.