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Labour Party Response
to the consultation document 'New
TSN: the way forward – towards an
anti-poverty strategy'
Phase Two, June 2005

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**The Labour Party Response to the consultation document 'New TSN: the way forward – towards an anti-poverty strategy'
Phase Two, June 2005**

1. Introduction

- 1.1 This short response from the Labour Party to Phase Two of the consultation on a new anti-poverty strategy for Northern Ireland is supplementary to the more detailed document submitted during the first phase of consultation. The points made in that document continue to apply. Labour's response to the Phase One consultation document of April 2004 is available on the Northern Ireland Labour Forum web pages, at: <http://www.labour.ie/northernireland/newtsm.html>
- 1.2 Labour has concerns about the consultation process and also considers the Phase Two consultation document to be disappointing both in its quality and its contents.

2. The consultation process

- 2.1 Labour is concerned that all responses to the first phase of consultation have not yet been placed on the New TSN web site. The second phase document claims that first phase consultation resulted in 'broad support' for the strategy, but it is impossible to verify this statement independently by viewing the original documents. The tabular summaries of responses to the Phase One document that do appear on the web site are useful but should be supplementary to the original documents.
- 2.2 The fact that invited 'independent comments' appear on the web site gives the impression that there was a hierarchy of consultation: four invited responses that were taken seriously, and 103 others that were not. This impression is reinforced by the sketchy and inadequate response to issues raised in the Phase One consultation that appears as Annex 1 in the Phase Two document.
- 2.3 Labour also questions the usefulness of a further round of consultation. There are very few changes to the proposals set out in Phase One, and very little that can be said about the small amount of new material in the Phase Two document. A further round of consultation in such circumstances merely slows down the adoption of the strategy and the beginning of its implementation.

3. Quality

- 3.1 The document is poorly structured, without a clear distinction between key elements of the strategy and background information. The essence of the revised document is to be found in chapter 6 to 9. Most of the rest of the document contains factual information that should have been included in annexes, or repeats information from the Phase One document which could have been cross-referenced.
- 3.2 Labour wishes to raise this matter as part of the consultation process because it is an important aspect of the relationship between government departments and consultees. Government expects that organisations and individuals will give up their time to respond to consultation documents. It is reasonable for consultees to expect that these documents will be concise and coherent, as indeed was the Phase One document.

4. Contents

- 4.1 Labour notes that there is very little difference between the Phase One and Phase Two consultation documents. Many of the points made in Labour's first response have not been addressed and still stand, for example:
- The structural nature of poverty
 - The need for political commitment and leadership
 - The role of the trade unions in tackling low wages and bad working conditions
 - The need for people experiencing poverty to be able to influence the strategy, either directly or through advocates
 - The questions of benefit take-up and the adequacy of benefit levels.
- 4.2 However, the Phase Two document does do more to recognise:
- The problems of low-paid work
 - The complexity of the 'pull' and 'push' factors causing poverty
 - The cycle of poverty that can exist for individuals who alternate between unemployment and low-paid, insecure work
 - Pensioner poverty.
- 4.3 Labour welcomes the change to the three high level priorities, namely the inclusion of building capacity to 'benefit from greater participation in social and cultural life of the community' (p.53). However, the high level priorities are still not sufficiently open about addressing benefit take-up and the adequacy of benefit levels. Increased levels of social capital within communities should complement and assist benefits take-up as well as providing opportunities to lift some people out of poverty.

- 4.4 As yet, Labour remains unconvinced that 'skewing' of budgets is the best way to fund an anti-poverty strategy, as opposed to dedicated budgets. The evidence provided in Chapter 7 concerning the previous benefits of 'skewing' budgets is welcome, as is the recognition that 'skewing of efforts' (p.64) is also important. Labour looks forward to the further research on this matter to be carried out by the Anti-Poverty Unit, and proposes that this work should be linked to the proposed development of a poverty-proofing procedure (p.91).
- 4.5 The proposals for implementation are clear, but do not include information about the role of other organisations and sectors, nor information about how the strategy will be evaluated.
- 4.6 The timetable referred to in the text as an implementation timetable (p.73) at Annex 4 is labelled 'Timetable of events for 2005'. It is unrealistic (analysis, redrafting, obtain ministerial approval and launch/publication – all in September!), and incomplete, as it does not deal in any detail with events in 2006 and afterwards.
- 4.7 Chapter 9 was presented more clearly as Annex 2 of the Stage One consultation document, although the baseline figures given in Table Two (p.77) are useful. A major reason for a second stage of consultation would have been to include proposals for more definite high level targets, for example a certain percentage reduction of mixed measure, relative income and absolute income poverty measures relative to the baselines.
- 4.8 It may also be useful for the high level targets to be compared with the other UK jurisdictions, with the Republic of Ireland and with other EU countries.
- 4.9 The terms of reference for the Ministerial Forum (Annex 2) are too vague. In particular 'sectoral representatives' need to be clarified because there are so many 'sectors' with an interest in this area. It is not clear whether the Forum will meet in public and/ or be able to take representations from people who are experiencing poverty, either directly or through advocates.

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