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New TSN Unit
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Castle Buildings
Belfast BT4 3SR

ANTI-POVERTY

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RECEIVED

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Dear Ms McMeekin

YouthNet welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Phase II consultation on New TSN. YouthNet is the voluntary youth network for Northern Ireland. It is an independent agency which represents the interests and aspirations of voluntary youth organisations.

As you are aware, YouthNet submitted a response to Phase I of the consultation on New TSN last year. We do not feel that the Phase II document has addressed these comments or made substantive changes, and that our response to Phase I remains relevant to this stage of consultation.

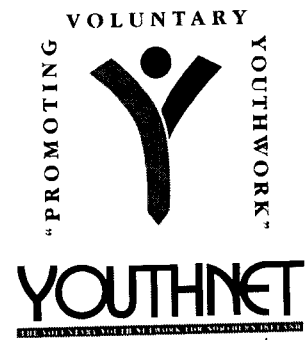
YouthNet also endorses the view taken by the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action and has signed up to the Enough is Enough Campaign.

I include our response to the Phase I document for your reference.

Yours sincerely



Elaine Campbell
Development Officer - Policy



New TSN – the way forward Towards an anti-poverty strategy

YouthNet Response

1.0 Introduction

YouthNet is the voluntary youth network for Northern Ireland. It is an independent agency which represents the interests and aspirations of voluntary youth organisations. Our 75 member organisations cover a broad range of activity for young people across Northern Ireland. YouthNet also serves as a Sectoral Partner in an Intermediary Funding Body through the PEACE II Programme. Our response is based on consultation with YouthNet's member groups and with other groups working in the area of poverty and social exclusion.

Question 1 – Do you think the proposed strategic aim is the right one?

YouthNet welcomes the commitment to an anti-poverty strategy for Northern Ireland. However, we are concerned that the strategic aim is too weak. Improving income and living conditions is important to ending poverty, but the strategic aim should be more forceful. Policy should focus on the eradication of poverty as an outcome and the strategic aim should reflect this goal. Gordon Brown has set targets to halve child poverty by 2010 and eliminate it completely by 2020. The UK Government has been lauded for this ambitious aim, but criticised for having an inaccurate definition of poverty. New TSN

can learn from both of these experiences by showing more purpose in its aim and by using one, clear definition of poverty. As Regional Action Plans are proposed for New TSN which will relate to the National Action Plans on Social Inclusion, it is logical to tie in Northern Ireland's aims closely with those of the UK Government.

Question 2 – do you agree there should be a priority focus on financial exclusion and are there any other areas you feel require closer attention?

It is important to focus on financial exclusion, particularly in terms of increasing benefit uptake. In addition to increasing uptake among those eligible, will the strategy examine whether the current benefit allowances are sufficient? Some people will continue to be unable to take up employment, due to illness, disability or caring responsibilities so benefits will continue to determine their income. YouthNet believes there are other areas which also need attention. Access to education and information on financial services is vital to ensuring that people have the non-financial resources to stay out of poverty. Establishing programmes which are targeted at a group of 'the poor' may miss the bigger issue of creating a framework of services and opportunities that will help everyone achieve. Cultural needs, educational opportunities and health issues all have direct, evidential impact upon social and financial exclusion. In studying why financial exclusion persists, it will be necessary to take cognisance of these issues in full before setting up programmes under the new high level priorities. The ever-widening gap between rich and poor clearly shows that this is an urgent need that is currently unmet.

Question 3 – Do you think that these high level priorities are appropriate for inclusion in the strategic framework – are there other priorities that you feel should be included?

YouthNet agrees that capacity building is one of the most important aspects of assisting people to escape poverty permanently. It is essential that people have the necessary skills not only to work but also to deal with financial hardship and to engage fully in civil society.

The wording for the first priority could be changed to reflect that the employment should be suited the needs of people as far as practicable. Our suggested change is 'building capacity to *benefit from* the labour market and take advantage of the market economy.'

It is not clear from the three priorities how other issues, such as access to services, will be identified and dealt with in the strategic framework. Poverty due to low wages will need to be tackled. Better childcare allowances and transport infrastructure would allow more people to come off benefits and take up employment, for example, particularly for those people with low wages who may find that working leaves them worse off financially than not working. Unemployment levels in Northern Ireland are currently quite low, yet the gap between the highest and lowest wage earners continues to grow at an alarming rate. The rate of consensual poverty remains high. In addition to looking at benefit levels, it may also be necessary to examine whether the minimum wage is sufficient to lift, and keep, people out of poverty. Anecdotally, YouthNet would argue that it is not. Another concern is the continuing disparity between the minimum wage for those workers between the ages of 18-21 and those over 21. This unfair and discriminatory practice should be ended as soon as possible, to increase financial inclusion and to show clearly that young workers are valued just as much as older ones.

Clearly, employment and education measures and benefits are not enough to eradicate poverty in Northern Ireland. The structural causes of poverty must be analysed in full to examine what needs to be added to the strategic framework.

Question 4 – What are your views on the inclusion of a Regional Poverty Action Plan and the proposed format of the plan?

YouthNet fully supports the inclusion of a Regional Poverty Action Plan which is consistent with the National Action Plan on Social Inclusion. Clearly defined targets are essential to ensuring that the Regional Poverty Action Plan is

measurable over time. It will also be helpful to be able to compare Northern Ireland with other regions and nations.

However, YouthNet is concerned that the proposed framework of strategic targets is inadequate. For example, instead of calling for the reduction in the proportion of Northern Ireland households below the consensual poverty threshold, why not call for a reduction by 25%? A lack of specific targets will make it difficult to gauge how well the strategy is achieving outcomes. Furthermore, specifying targets will help determine resource allocation and provide a focus for how to implement the strategy. It is our belief that the Anti-Poverty Strategy framework should present a coherent strategy to tackle and prevent poverty and social exclusion.

Question 5 – Do you think the skewing approach to resources should be continued? If not, what approach do you feel should be adopted?

YouthNet is surprised that, despite the fact that skewing was considered a weakness in the independent external evaluation, it is still being considered a viable option for carrying out TSN. The skewing approach has not worked – it creates a lack of transparency and is not applied in a systematic fashion. In these new proposals there is no proposal to analyse budget allocation within Departments.

A dedicated budget for new TSN is absolutely critical to the success of the strategy. Because skewing has not worked to date, it is time to consider making a change rather than continue with a flawed manner to allocate funds. YouthNet understands that a specific budget would limit the amount of money available, however; only a certain level of funding is available through the skewing approach at present so this does not seem to be a sound objection.

Question 6 – What are your views on the proposal for a Ministerially led forum? Do you agree with the composition and remit of the forum?

YouthNet agrees that such a forum would provide an excellent opportunity to provide local political ownership and a way to ensure that the strategy is implemented across government. In addition to the representatives

mentioned, it will also be important to ensure that people who have or who currently experience poverty serve on the forum and that their expenses are covered to ensure they can participate. This forum should also include children and young people.

Equality Issues

Without targets, it is impossible to determine the equality impact, although TSN theoretically should impact positively upon Section 75 groups. YouthNet agrees that programmes such as Targeting Social Need offer a “zero sum game”; in fact, positive measures which benefit one group is likely to offer examples of good practice which will further impact positively on other groups. YouthNet does believe that minimising inequality is key to eradicating poverty. Equality considerations also provide a strong rationale for creating a specific, targeted budget for TSN. Skewing resources is not conducive to carrying out impact assessments.

Conclusion

While YouthNet agrees with the broad aims of new TSN, this strategy is not sufficient as a policy initiative and will need further work, with the inclusion of targets and indicators before we can endorse it. There is simply not enough data included. In light of the external evaluation and the amount of work undertaken to analyse TSN, it is surprising how basic this framework is. However, it is a useful starting point for producing a strategy which can clearly show how TSN can eliminate poverty and social exclusion. YouthNet would be interested in responding to a consultation document which presents how the strategy will work in practice and would like to be kept informed of the progress on the strategy.