



**NI Anti Poverty Network
Comments on the Opportunities for Life - NI Anti-Poverty Strategy
November 2006**

NIAPN welcomes the proposed general priorities of:

- Eliminating Poverty and Social Exclusion by 2020
- Tackling Area based Deprivation
- Eliminating Poverty from Rural Areas
- Tackling Health Inequalities and Cycles of Deprivation
- A commitment to promoting tolerance and acceptance through a Shared Future

We also welcome the proposal that the Anti-Poverty Strategy/Lifetime Opportunities will be one of four cross cutting themes alongside children, sustainability and a Shared Future. We particularly welcome the fact that such prioritisation will establish a requirement on government departments to clearly allocate resources to the key objective of Eliminating Poverty and Social Exclusion by 2020. We call for Office of the First Minister & Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) & Department of Finance & Personnel (DFP) to come together to establish a mechanism to ensure such delivery. (see below Making it Happen)

We welcome the fact that ongoing and existing actions have been described under the heading of progress rather than actions and appreciate the need for an action plan to arise as a result of the outcome of the Comprehensive Spending Review. We also welcome the involvement of our own local Executive in this process. We would however have some concerns over the timing of the Resumed Executive and their potential likelihood to impact on the Treasury's decisions regarding the Comprehensive Spending Review if such involvement does not occur until the proposed re-establishment of the NI Executive in March 2007.

We welcome the stated commitment to the process which surrounds the UK National Action Plan for Social Inclusion and the acknowledgment that such engagement is best achieved through a shared learning approach with key governments. NIAPN would emphasise the importance of people experiencing poverty being engaged directly with OFMDFM on this important policy which contains reference to all social and economic policies impacting on poverty within Northern Ireland. We also welcome the commitment that OFMDFM have made to ensure that those structures developed as a result of the Review of Public Administration will have to demonstrate 'the outworkings of the principles of Lifetime Opportunities in their business plans and programme delivery.'

GENERAL COMMENTS, CONCERNS & HOPES

It is our opinion that the report while very accessible would have been even more so if it had contained a contents page and a detailed index. We are concerned that there is such a continued emphasis on work as *the* route out of poverty particularly in the light of growing numbers of working poor across Northern Ireland. (JRF)

We remain concerned over the level of resources to be committed to Anti-Poverty Projects as demonstrated by the commitment to just 4 Children's Centres over the next two years, if the government was to deliver these Centres on the same proportionate scale as in England, it would – and should - be creating 70 Children's Centres here by 2012. (Concordia Childcare That Works Report, 2006)

We are concerned that there is little specific reference to the particular difficulties faced by lone parents within the proposed priorities and targets bar the establishment of a PSI group.

It is our hope that this particular emphasis will be reflected in the resulting action plan. We also look forward to hearing more on governments' commitment to the participation of people experiencing poverty in future policy debates particularly within the proposed Ministerial Forum.

We remain concerned over the continuing growing levels of inequality within NI's society. The document contains fine words and makes admirable promises but the basic challenge of making a real difference to the level of income NI people live on, in and out of benefits has not been grappled with. The Anti-Poverty Network would yet again call for the re-establishment of the connection between average wage levels and benefit levels, and a substantial increase to the National Minimum Wage so that people can enjoy an adequate income in work.

STRATEGIC CONNECTIONS

The Anti-Poverty Network acknowledges the references made within the strategy to other key strategies which have a key role in delivering on some of the specified targets identified within the NI Anti-Poverty Strategy. It is our opinion that these 'overlaps' should be clearly reflected in the forthcoming 'Action Plan' to be produced on completion of the CSR. The strong natural connections between the Anti-Poverty Strategy and the Investing For Health Strategy; Neighbourhood Renewal; Fuel Poverty Strategy; Shared Future and in the not too distant future, the Review of Public Administration and its proposed 'anti-poverty mechanisms' such as Community Planning would benefit significantly from a clear 'mapping' of their shared objectives and common targets.

GOALS

We welcome all 4 proposed goals and are of the opinion that the overall key goal relevant to all four life cycles, to eradicate Poverty and Social Exclusion in Northern Ireland by 2020 should have been clearly defined at the start. This key goal is found within the older citizens–beyond working age in the introductory section.

EARLY YEARS 0-4

GOAL: Ensure that every child should have a chance to develop their full potential in infancy regardless of social background.

For key targets for each life cycle to be truly effective they must be substantial and ambitious and encompassing, they must also be time based and measurable. NIAPN would have welcomed more wide ranging targets that would have broadened their applicability to more government departments; e.g. There should be increased investment of GDP in Northern Ireland in Children's Services to a minimum of 1.5% NIAPN would also propose that more ambitious targets be specified for disadvantaged rural and urban areas.

One of the key issues raised by people living in rural areas to NIAPN has always been that of transport. These two proposed targets are admirable but for people living in poverty it is not just the provision of a service such as a subsidised crèche or day care but being able to get to it in the first place via an affordable, accessible and reliable public transport system.

Again target six is highly admirable but it does not specify time frames or proposed target numbers/percentages. Access to affordable decent local social housing is a growing crisis within communities across Northern Ireland as house prices and public and private rents continue to rise and wages and benefits do not. A more achievable and beneficial target could be proposing that private developers would be compelled to commit a percentage (20%) of all private building toward subsidised social housing provision. This could be supported by a similar targeted commitment from the NI Housing Executive toward continued substantial social housing provision in areas of greatest need. Again this would need a time frame and a measurable outcome. In light of review of Public Administration the Anti-Poverty Network particularly welcomes the commitment to support every Local Authority to identify and address gaps in provision of services for early years in rural areas, and would call for this to be extended to urban areas.

CHILDREN 5-16

GOAL: To allow all children and young people to experience a happy and fulfilling childhood, while equipping them with the education, skills and experience to achieve their potential to be citizens tomorrow.

The key factors that impact on families experiencing poverty and their children are low income resulting in poor diet, ill health and poor educational outcomes for the children. To make a difference to the educational outcomes there must be substantial interventions that support their performance and concentration before and once they enter school. NIAPN generally welcome the targets outlined however we have provided some alternatives which families experiencing poverty have suggested would make a real difference to their lives and the lives of their children.

Some practical suggestions from families experiencing poverty are:

- Provide healthy and nutritious free school dinners by ... to all school children so the stigma of 'free school dinners' would no longer exist.

- Resource healthy eating educational 'breakfast clubs' in% of

disadvantaged schools by ... and to all schools in disadvantaged areas by ...

- Provide grants that cover the real costs of school uniforms by ... to all low income families.

- Provide free travel passes to all school age children on public transport between 7am and 10pm by

- Provide annual bursaries of £500-1000 for children of families in receipt of or entitled to Tax Credits within all schools so they can participate in school trips and sporting activities by

- Re-establish the connection between average wage levels and benefit levels by

- Raise the National Minimum Wage for young people in line with adult rates by

- Allow young people who have left school to receive benefits 16-18 by

- Provide access to alternative community based education programmes for school age 'dropouts' so they can gain non-academic qualifications or training in trades by

By ... to increase the mental & physical fitness of our young people to ... by promoting initiatives that will increase their awareness of the importance of healthy choices and by increasing opportunities for them to participate in making such choices through subsidised leisure centres, localised youth provision and increased access to physical activities in and out of school.

WORKING AGE

GOAL: To ensure that everyone has the opportunity to fully participate in economic, social and cultural life.

The majority of targets within this section emphasise employment as *the* route out of poverty, which does not acknowledge that for many Northern Ireland inhabitants this is just not an option (People with a disability (PWD), Carers of people with a disability, people caring for young children or older relatives.) It also fails to acknowledge the growing percentage of NI's population who are in full time employment and are still living with poverty and social exclusion. NIAPN would have welcomed a commitment to the provision of **good quality sustainable jobs** within target one. The DEL target specified in target one has a timescale that is outside the overall goal of the strategy, to eradicate poverty by 2020. Does the UK strategy not commit itself to an 80% employment rate aspiration by 2008?

Through the Skills Strategy by 2015 the Dept Education and Learning will ensure that the workforce is literate and numerate but, how many and to what level? There is a

similar lack of clarity on the provision of good Information and Communication Technology skills.

We particularly welcome the target re provision of and access to a decent fuel efficient home including social housing in a safe environment....by 2020. We look forward to the action plan detailing how many and by when?

We also particularly welcome the target for ‘75% of first time inward investment projects toward disadvantaged areas, to ensure that all areas can benefit from sustainable growth and high value added employment. This could be further qualified in terms of a time frame and NIAPN would again have welcomed an emphasis on **‘good quality jobs.’**

There is a serious gap within the targets for the Working Age section. A commitment to a localised benefits uptake strategy for all those who are unable to participate in employment and who are in receipt of benefits to ensure they have access to good quality advice in support of full benefit uptake through continuous benefit health checks.

There is a big gap in this section an absence of targets on health and well being in general; there is no reference to suicide or mental health issues. The only reference to health within the working age category refers to promoting road safety, while admirable in its own right this really needs to be much broader. If there is an assumption that the Investing for Health Strategy takes care of such commitments the relationship between these strategies should have been established at the outset of this document.

In light of the review of Public Administration the Anti-Poverty Network would particularly welcome a commitment to support every Local Authority to identify and address gaps in provision of services for working age in both urban and rural areas.

OLDER CITIZENS

To ensure older people are valued and respected, remain independent, participate as active citizens and enjoy a good quality of life in a safe and shared community.

The targets are all admirable but as with the majority of targets within the strategy they lack specific details on how they will be achieved, the time scales and percentages involved. NIAPN welcomes the specific references made to breaking down the isolation older people experience and increasing their social participation, to ensuring maximum eligibility to benefit and pension entitlements and to ensuring access to ‘the full range of support services.’ We also welcome the commitment to ensuring older people live in warm, decent and secure homes and to the commitment made to support every Local Authority to identify and address gaps in provision of services for older people in rural areas but we would call for this to also be extended to urban areas.

MAKING IT HAPPEN

NIAPN welcome the strategies stated commitment to action and with that in mind would like to know when we can expect the 'Action Plan' that will ensure this result.

Comprehensive Spending Review

We would encourage OFMDFM to proactively engage with the Department of Finance and Personnel particularly in the light of meetings currently being held to inform the Comprehensive Spending Review. This is a unique opportunity to assert a central poverty proofing mechanism on all proposed department spends. With this in mind we would call for the DFP in partnership with OFMDFM to insist that were proposals or bids do not positively impact with regards to tackling poverty, social exclusion and promoting social inclusion that such proposals should be returned to government departments so that amendments may be made to ensure that they do. We also would advise that bids that will impact positively on tackling poverty and social exclusion and promote social inclusion and that involve more than one government department should be given 'extra points'

Ministerial-led Poverty Forum

NIAPN particularly welcome the Poverty Forum and we look forward to discussing this in greater detail with OFMDFM to ensure the voices of people experiencing poverty and their representative organisations are able to inform and direct this mechanism.

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