

Let's get *Real*...
Because Everybody Matters



BUILDING A FAIR SOCIETY
Towards a real Anti-Poverty Strategy

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Introduction

In April 2004 the Direct Rule Administration published proposals for a Northern Ireland anti-poverty strategy¹. After an initial round of consultation, the Direct Rule Ministers initiated further consultation in 2005 to continue into 2006. The community and voluntary sector in Northern Ireland has criticised the proposed anti-poverty strategy for failing to offer any meaningful framework that would promote social inclusion and a fair society.

“To say that we are angered and dismayed at the contents of the current document would be an understatement. It is not an anti-poverty strategy and it contains no clear mechanisms for tackling poverty in the region.

An effective anti-poverty strategy must have the strategic aim to eradicate poverty and social exclusion and to end inequality; this one does not. It must have a definition of poverty, social exclusion and social inclusion; this one does not.

In the current NI reality of budget cuts and ‘efficiency savings’, anti-poverty work must have a specified budget. The document makes no attempt to tackle child poverty and it has no real content or targets.”

(Frances Dowds, Northern Ireland Anti-Poverty Network
in SCOPE September 2005)

The Ulster Unionist Party contrasts the Direct Rule Administration’s inaction and lack of direction with the efforts of the Devolved Administrations in Scotland and Wales and their commitment to social inclusion. In stark contrast to the Direct Rule Administration, the local administrations in these regions have provided coherent strategic direction and vision to combat poverty.

Our Party is committed to working with the community and voluntary sectors to propose policies that will offer hope and opportunity to those in our society who experience poverty.

This Policy Paper highlights the gap in anti-poverty policy between Northern Ireland and the Scottish and Welsh experiences - and the need for a local administration to provide direction and vision.

Child Poverty

According to the Government's own figures, 108,100 children in Northern Ireland live in poverty - over 1/3rd of our children².

The Direct Rule Administration has not produced a child poverty strategy.

Scotland's *Social Justice Strategy* pledges to defeat child poverty within this generation³. Milestones have been set to measure performance - reduce the proportion of children living in workless households; reduce the proportion of children living in low-income households; increase the proportions of children reaching appropriate levels of educational attainment in primary school; all children to have access to quality care and early learning before entering school; improve the well-being of young children through reducing smoking during pregnancy, low-birth weights, dental decay among 5 year olds and increasing breast-feeding; reducing the number of families with children in temporary accommodation.

Wales has produced a child poverty strategy, *A Fair Future for Our Children*, based on the work of the Child Poverty Task Group created by the Assembly Government in 2003⁴. The strategy sets a target of eradicating child poverty in Wales by 2020. Highlighting the importance of the early years of disadvantaged children, the Strategy allocated an extra £50m from 2005-08 for better provision.



Pensioner Poverty

According to the Government's own figures, the number of pensioners living in poverty in Northern Ireland has increased from 42,400 in 2002/03 to 47,100 in 2003/04⁵.

Despite this increase, the Direct Rule Administration's proposals for an anti-poverty strategy fail to mention older people in its description of the patterns of social need.



Scotland's *Social Justice Strategy* aims to make older people financially secure and increase the numbers of older people who enjoy active, independent and healthy lives. Milestones have been set to measure performance - reducing the proportion of older people with low incomes; increasing the proportion of working age people contributing to a non-state pension; doubling the proportion of older people receiving respite care at home and increasing home care opportunities; increasing the number of older people taking exercise and reducing the rates of mortality from coronary heart disease and the prevalence of respiratory disease; reducing the fear of crime among older people⁶.

The 2005 Welsh Assembly budget provided £2.3million for pensioner households affected by the council tax revaluation and £10million over the next two years for pensioners' home energy schemes and improved home security⁷.

Fuel Poverty

33% of Northern Ireland households (including 114,000 children) experience fuel poverty - compared to 9% in England and 13% in Scotland⁸.

While the Direct Rule Administration introduced a fuel poverty strategy in 2004, the strategy's target of lifting 20,000 households p.a. out of fuel poverty has already been reduced to 14,000 p.a.



It is now very unlikely that the strategy's original targets will be reached.

The Scottish Fuel Poverty Strategy aims to end fuel poverty by 2016, with a 30% reduction to be achieved by 2006⁹.

The Welsh Assembly Government published a Fuel Poverty Commitment in 2003, aimed at eradicating fuel poverty amongst the most vulnerable by 2010 and completely by 2018¹⁰.

Homelessness

The number of homeless households in Northern Ireland increased by 4% in 2003/04¹¹. With the demand for public housing now at its highest since the early 1980s - and new builds in the public housing sector at historic lows - further increases in the number of homeless households can only be expected¹².



The Direct Rule Administration's proposed anti-poverty strategy made little comment on poor housing and no comment on homelessness.

The Scottish Executive created a Homelessness Taskforce in 1999¹³. All 59 recommendations of the Taskforce were endorsed by the Executive and resulted in Homelessness Bills in the Scottish Parliament in 2001 and 2003.

The Welsh Assembly Government established a Homelessness Commission in 2001. The proposals of the Commission were incorporated into the Welsh National Housing Strategy.

Towards a real Anti-Poverty Strategy

The stark reality for too many in Northern Ireland today is a lack of opportunity and the daily grind of poverty. This is what is faced by increasing numbers of our older people, who have given much over a lifetime to their communities and our society. Too many of our children have early years blighted by exclusion, instead of lives full of promise. Too many families have below standard housing, or no house at all, when they should have the security of a decent home.

A fair and decent society should provide fair and decent opportunities to all its members. Those who work hard, who have worked hard or who want to work – those who play by the rules and respect their neighbour – those who want to raise their children to have opportunities they themselves never had. Amongst these are those living on the edge, in despair, and with little hope.

The Ulster Unionist Party will ensure that any future local Administration combats child and pensioner poverty, fuel poverty and homelessness – and helps to build fair and decent communities for all of us.

Endnotes

¹ See www.newtsni.gov.uk/consultation.pdf

² Answer to Parliamentary Question, 28th November 2005

³ See “Every Child Matters” in *Social Justice ... A Scotland where everyone matters*
www.scotland.gov.uk/library2/doc07/sjmd-08.htm

⁴ See www.wales.gov.uk/subchildren/content/child-pov-strategy-e.pdf

⁵ Answer to Parliamentary Question, 28th November 2005

⁶ See “Every Older Person Matters” in *Social Justice ... A Scotland where everyone matters*
www.scotland.gov.uk/library2/doc07/sjmd-11.htm

⁷ See www.news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/wales/4488788.stm

⁸ Figure provided by DSD at launch of the NI Fuel Poverty Strategy, November 2004

⁹ See chapter 7 of the Scottish Fuel Poverty Strategy

www.scotland.gov.uk/library5/environment/sfps-08.asp

¹⁰ See www.wales.gov.uk/assemblydata/N000000000000000000000000020491.htm

¹¹ Figures provided by the Simon Community. See

www.simoncommunity.org/being_homeless/how_many/

¹² Figures provided in Shelter’s *The Unfolding of a Housing Crisis* December 2004

¹³ The Taskforce’s report can be read at www.scotland.gov.uk/library3/society/htff-00.asp

¹⁴ See www.wales.gov.uk/keypubstatisticsforwales/housing/methods/methods-homelessness.htm

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