

Social Development

Homelessness and poverty whether fuel, food or financial, are consequences of an economy which does not provide for its people, of increasing welfare sanctions and a depleted social housing market. The Department for Social Development has a number of key strategic priorities, two of those priorities read as follows:

1. to provide access to decent, affordable, sustainable homes and housing support services
2. to meet the needs of the most vulnerable by tackling disadvantage through a transformed social welfare system.

With social housing waiting lists in excess of 39,000 and over 19,000 immoral benefit sanctions throughout 2014, these priorities have not been met and our politicians charged with responsibility in this department have failed miserably. In order to build a fair, just and equitable society the Progressive Unionist Party proposes the following amendments to Northern Ireland's social development policy:-

- (I)** To legislate that an inspection of cavity walls becomes a statutory obligation for Building Control on all new build properties.
- (II)** The Bi-annual House Condition Survey carried out on behalf of the government by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive should include a through wall and loft inspection. Government policy on decent homes and tackling fuel poverty is dependent on the accuracy of this information.
- (III)** Creation of fuel co-operatives for those with oil heating who cannot afford to fill their tank when it is empty. Weekly payment to the fuel co-operative and regular oil deliveries could allow these people to heat their homes and enjoy a basic standard of living which no person should be denied.
- (IV)** Housing policy should place emphasis on the re-purposing of derelict and or vacant buildings, transforming them from empty retail units and factories into much-needed homes, including one bedroom homes, which will not only begin to address the rising levels of those people deprived of shelter and homes but also reduce the number of under-occupied homes across the province. Private developers should be incentivised to undertake this work, which will be cheaper and more effective than building brand new properties.
- (V)** A review of the Social Security Benefit Sanction policy to ensure compliance with human rights legislation, in particular the right to food and right to welfare.
- (VI)** Protection of Northern Ireland Green Belts by opposing, where appropriate, the continued building of housing and commercial developments on rural land. There is a pressing need for a renewed focus on developing inner city brown-field sites. A cross-party working group should be formed in order to address the untapped spaces which mark the city. This waste ground can be put to use and turned into commercial and residential sites, protecting our valuable rural spaces and green heritage.