

Draft Document

Vision In Action - A new economic strategy for West Belfast

A £110m investment to create 4,050 jobs

Sinn Féin December 1995

Economic Tools for underpinning the peace process

Investment and jobs are important economic tools for underpinning the peace process and creating economic justice. They provide the opportunity to tackle in an effective and practical way some of the debilitating social and economic effects of Partition and their associated injustices.

A crucial element of cementing the peace process with jobs is to move strategically from the war economy - with vast spendings on 'security' - towards a reconstructed peacetime economy which sees investment in public and private enterprises which can improve the quality of life of all our people. Such an economy would also exploit the obvious potential of cross-border economic co-operation.

As we seek to regenerate our economies, we are mindful of the fact that discrimination in employment remains a fact of life in the North of Ireland. Any economic strategy which hopes to draw jobs to the nationalist employment blackspots has little chance of succeeding without reversing this discrimination. Equality is an essential foundation for peace.

For inward investment to be effective it must seek to reverse the disproportionate level of discrimination suffered by nationalists. The creation of genuine equality of opportunity for all is therefore crucial. There must be an end to direct and indirect political vetting of the nationalist and republican communities by the British Government and the economic agencies.

One statistic alone shows the necessity of targeting the areas of greatest deprivation in any projects designed to regenerate communities which have suffered most over the past 25 years: While nationalist males make up 38 per cent of the economically active population, they make up 64 per cent of the long-term unemployed.

Jobs' crisis

In December 1995, greater West Belfast had almost 10,000 people on the official unemployment register. Indeed, according to the most recent unemployment statistics, there are more people out of work in West Belfast than in any other Westminster constituency. Thousands more unemployed haven't bothered to register as seeking work or are airbrushed off the official jobless tables through employment schemes and training programmes which rarely lead to real jobs.

The first thing which is necessary if we are to turn around the devastated economy of the west of the city is to agree upon a regeneration strategy. In this document, Sinn Féin points to some of the measures which could make up that new strategy;

job-creation measures which can only be advanced in a new partnership between the community, business, and the economic agencies.

PROPOSALS FOR A NEW APPROACH

There is an urgent need for a powerful jobs task force which would be charged with putting West Belfast to work by involving all the sectors of the community - voluntary, unemployed, political, cultural, business and statutory agencies - in a new economic regeneration partnership.

We support the establishment of a jobs forum which would bring new thinking to bear on the West Belfast unemployment crisis.

West Belfast must be granted 'most favoured region status', thus making it a key area for industrial growth and economic investment.

A seven point action plan

We have pinpointed seven main areas which should be targeted by the jobs task force if we are to begin to turn our vision of a West Belfast in full employment into reality.

We recommend proposals which could, over three years, create 4,050 jobs at a cost to the DED of £110m.

The seven sectors are:

- The manufacturing sector
- Employment generated by existing businesses, services and organisations.
- A cultural cluster
- The service sector
- RADIUS and Manufacturing Technology Partnership (IRTU)
- The EC peace fund
- The Dublin-Belfast economic corridor

The Manufacturing Sector

Decades of discrimination by the British Government and its economic agencies have combined with the effects of a quarter of a century of warfare and unfavourable economic climes to leave West Belfast - in comparison with East Belfast - all but bereft of a manufacturing sector.

Any serious attempt at economic regeneration requires the development of a sustainable manufacturing sector.

This will require both the attraction of foreign investment and the promotion of indigenous enterprise.

A concerted effort should be made to attract information technology projects thus building on Belfast's "already well-established reputation for the accuracy, low-cost production and high integrity of its software development industries" (Belfast City Council 'Embracing the New Age of Information'). A new cluster of businesses dealing in telecommunications, computer software, telematics, and teleservices could - with Fujitsu and BCO Technologies which already operate in West Belfast - become the cutting edge of the area's rejuvenated economy.

PROPOSALS

Given the DED's own Targeting Social Need criteria, it is essential that large established firms here already - for example, FG Wilson of Larne - in receipt of IDB assistance should be persuaded to expand not alone at their current locations but also into new locations such as Springvale and Poleglass. There needs to be specific and attractive compensation for firms which agree to split site arrangements.

Sinn Féin calls on the DED and IDB to set a target of 2,000 jobs in new investments at four main sites across West Belfast over the next three years. We estimate that this would require a commitment of around £34m.

Sinn Féin calls for urgent measures to introduce local labour clauses into new investment packages to ensure that the local, long-term unemployed benefit from at least a fixed percentage of the new jobs.

We outline below the potential for investment at a four West Belfast locations.

1. Poleglass-Twinbrook: 3 factories. 650 jobs. Cost £11m.

This is one of the few remaining locations in West Belfast where industrial development can proceed without infringing on neighbouring housing developments. It has therefore the potential to become an economic heartland of the new West Belfast.

There are already two existing factories on the Glenwood Industrial Park site but at least two more purpose-built advance factories are needed. The two existing factories - one built for CIS Data before that investment deal fell through - could attract substantial investments providing 250 jobs each in new foreign investment packages at a cost of £8.6m.

A new third factory could house a 150-job package by an indigenous firm at a cost of £2.4m

2. Springvale: 4 factories, 800 jobs. Cost £13.3m.

Springvale must be the epicentre in terms of location and scale of activity of any regenerated West-North Belfast. It retains the potential to transform the ravaged economy of neighbouring communities by becoming the hub of industrial production in the west of the city.

The first workers in the new Fujitsu Fulcrum plant (employment target 100, approximate cost £1.7m) are already on site. But there is clearly room for another three - perhaps even, with the much-needed purchase of the JP Corry land, four - major factories providing up to 500 jobs. If 300 of these jobs were in foreign-owned firms and 200 in indigenously-owned firms, the total cost of these jobs would be approximately £8.4m.

It is estimated that the industrial and commercial activity at the site would lead to 200 'back office' jobs at Springvale. The total cost of these jobs would be £3.2m.

3. Whiterock Industrial Estate: up to four factories, 400 jobs, cost £6.2m

The 13-acre Whiterock Industrial Estate, occupied since 1979 by the British Army could once, handed back to the community, be the base for 400 jobs.

100 of these jobs could come from a foreign investment, 250 in indigenously-owned firms and 50 in enterprises backed by LEDU, the total cost would be in the region of £6.2m.

4. Conway Mill and surrounding sites (FG Wilson, North Howard Street Mill): 200 jobs, cost £3.3m.

There is scope in this inner-city site - which lies in the most deprived ward in the North - for the creation of up to 200 IDB-assisted jobs. If 75 of these jobs were

created in inward investment projects, the remainder by indigenous firms, the total cost would be £3.3m.

This area is also targeted by Sinn Féin for major cultural/arts/heritage investment which - with the complex's current education, retail and small business elements, could create up to 100 additional jobs in the Lower Falls.

Estimates of the cost of the jobs are based on the IDB 1994-95 figures of £15,948 (gross) cost of an assisted job in indigenously-owned firms and £17,236 (gross) cost of an assisted job in a foreign-owned firm. The cost of a LEDU-assisted job is estimated to be £10,000.

Building on our centres of excellence

A key element of any regeneration strategy will be to build on the centres of manufacturing and industrial excellence which already exist in West Belfast. Equally important is the need to protect existing jobs in the public sector. No economic strategy to revitalise West Belfast can be successful if the traditional large employers such as the Royal Victoria Hospital are forced through cutbacks to make local workers redundant.

Firms which already receive IDB assistance and which have exciting plans for expansion must be encouraged to meet their employment targets over the next three years.

Some of these firms, for different and often understandable reasons, are operating below the predicted levels of employment which first captured the headlines.

The IDB has a crucial role to play in ensuring that the figures on paper become the figures on the shopfloor. A prerequisite of economic regeneration in the west of the city is that, as these firms expand, they remain located in the west of the city.

Montupet, BCO and Shorts could form the foundation stone of the area's economic recovery if they can meet the latest targets they agreed with the IDB.

Bass and Delta Print also have ambitious plans for expansion which have been backed by IDB finance.

LEDU also has a vital role to play in continuing to help existing small businesses to expand.

PROPOSAL

The IDB and LEDU should set a target of 1,000 additional jobs in existing manufacturing companies and small businesses over the next three years. This would be additional to the new jobs announced recently at Montupet and Shorts.

This strategy should cost the IDB an estimated £27m.

A Cultural Cluster for West Belfast

The failure of economic strategies to date to regenerate the economy of greater West Belfast points to the need for fresh thinking to be introduced to the jobs' debate.

PROPOSAL

Sinn Féin believes that a key part of a new approach to job creation in the area should be a £5m initial investment in the arts, culture, heritage and tourism infrastructure with the aim of creating 500 jobs in a new Cultural Cluster or Cnuasach Cultúrtha.

Such a strategy would for the first time acknowledge the rich cultural bedrock on which West Belfast rests and exploit the talents of the community to forge a new future for the district. This new approach would also recognise the arts, culture and heritage as economic activities.

Of course, the Cultural Cluster concept is only one strand in an overarching economic regeneration strategy which the west of the city desperately needs. It is not, and should not be viewed as, an alternative to industrial investment and other job-creation schemes.

Celebration

The creation of a Cultural Cluster would necessitate the unshackling of Irish culture and replace ongoing attempts to marginalise indigenous arts - the music, dance, language and song of West Belfast - with a celebration of the Irish identity. It would mean that West Belfast's status as a centre of excellence for Irish arts and culture would become a selling point and an asset for the community of West Belfast in their search for jobs.

Environmental Heritage

It is also time to tap the potential of our environmental heritage by developing the well-researched but still unfunded proposals for a visitor's centre at Bog Meadows and an outdoor activities centre at Black Mountain. Such centres - based on the successful model adopted by the Ulster Wildlife Centre in Crossgar and the Lakeside Centre in Dunlewey Co Donegal - would attract visitors to the district, provide employment, increase awareness about the need to conserve our environment and help West Belfast benefit from the tourism boom which is - in terms of jobs if not in visitor numbers - passing it by.

Cultural Tourism

There is clear scope for other cultural tourism projects - linking into already existing showcase schemes such as Colin Glen - which would be similar to other

interpretative centres such as the Tower Museum in Derry and the Navan Centre in Armagh. The Conway Mill is just one of many venues which would provide the perfect location for such an interpretative centre.

Féile

The expansion of the West Belfast Community Festival, which has performed a magnificent ambassadorial role for the area, would underpin any community arts expansion. The Festival has succeeded over many years in attracting high-profile arts' activities to the area and shown the true face of West Belfast. It could play a pioneering role in shifting the cultural-arts axis of Belfast from the south of the city to the west and north, ultimately providing a festival feel to the area from 1 January to 31 December.

Training and Resource

The Foundry Regeneration Trust has a well worked-up proposals for an arts' training and resource centre in the Lower Falls could firmly anchor the growth of community arts in West Belfast and provide a path into the job market for arts practitioners who have to date been forced to look elsewhere for exhibition and rehearsal space.

Flagship Irish Language Centre

The first steps in the creation of a flagship Irish language arts centre have already been taken by the Cultúrlann and it is clear that what our Irish language community achieved in terms of educational provision can be repeated in the field of Irish language arts. Arts Council and Making Belfast Work support for this grassroots' project has been crucial in its success but must be increased in coming years. While the British Government's attitude to Irish culture remains discriminatory and patronising - as seen by its treatment of that other Cultúrlann tenant, Meánscoil Feirste - young people in West Belfast can now see for themselves the creativity and verve of their native culture. Itself an unqualified success story, the Meánscoil will also have a central role to play in the burgeoning arts and culture network which can be put in place in West Belfast in coming years.

Music Mecca

For years, the McPeake's School of Music and famed musicians such as Sean Maguire, Francie McPeake and now Patrick Davey - the all-Ireland Fleá Cheoil uileann pipe champion from West Belfast - have ensured that the traditional music tradition remained deeply rooted in West Belfast. But they have done so against a background of official indifference. We regard them as much our Ulster orchestra as the Ulster Orchestra which receives - and is clearly entitled to - over £1m in grant-aid per annum but now we want to see our musicians properly resourced and their role in the repackaging of West Belfast as a Mecca for the traditional arts recognised.

Employment Through Irish

These developments in arts and culture will go hand in hand with efforts to boost employment for Irish speakers and to exploit the job potential of the language itself.

A radio station to complement the excellent work already being carried out by the Irish newspaper Lá would confirm Belfast's position as the Irish language capital of Ireland. But while fresh bids to relaunch Lá as Ireland's only daily Irish language paper need to be explored, there is no doubt that the city is well placed to benefit from the start next year of Teilifís na Gaeilge. As the biggest city in Ulster, Belfast should provide TnaG with a substantial proportion of its programming from the province. Its Irish-speaking community is also in the ideal position to build links with the Gaelic-speaking communities across the Sea of Moyle. Giving the Irish speaking community support and encouragement in this way - as opposed, as is present British policy, of harassing and harrying that community at every turn - could create scores of jobs.

Craftwork

First-class craftwork, much of it created by prisoners or former prisoners, has long been a hallmark of West Belfast. The task now is to co-ordinate the work of our potters, jewellers, woodworkers, leather designers, musical instrument manufacturers and dancing costumer makers - along with the work of our creative artists - so that we can ensure maximum employment from all their endeavours and provide a forum for their products. There is no reason why West Belfast can't have its own centre of excellence for crafts, providing workspace for our craftsmen and craftswomen and a shop for their wares.

Service Industry

The creation of a Cultural Cluster will provide vital spin-offs for our underdeveloped service industry. Employment would, of course, be generated in pubs and restaurants, for entertainers and for shopowners. But there would also be an increase in tourism and visitor numbers which would increase the number of black taxis and private taxis needed in the district. Most importantly, it would lead to the opening of the first bed and breakfast accommodation in West Belfast and hostels for back-packers.

Vision Into Action

In the South, it is estimated that over 40,000 are employed in arts' and cultural projects. In that light the Sinn Féin call for 500 jobs to be created from a West Belfast Cultural Cluster (which includes the 250 service sector posts detailed below) is a reasonable and eminently attainable objective.

The Service Sector

The development of the economy of West Belfast, coupled with concerted efforts to improve the quality of life in the area, to attract tourists and to create a cultural cluster will all have knock-on effects on the district's services' infrastructure - not least because local people in employment too will have more money to spend. Pubs, restaurants, shops and garages should all benefit from a service sector boom in an improved economic climate.

Two initiatives ripe for investment and development are transport and accommodation.

Transport: The West Belfast Taxi Association has commendable plans for a city-centre headquarters at King Street for its service, incorporating offices, cafe, restaurant, parking and retail outlets, creating 40 jobs.

The taxi association also envisages a significant increase in the number of passengers to be carried on its routes in coming years, enabling it to put more money back into the community both directly (by upping the number of taxi drivers on the road) and indirectly (through the spending power of its drivers).

Accommodation: Despite its ability to draw tourists, West Belfast is lacking in bed and breakfast, hostel and hotel accommodation.

PROPOSAL

LEDU and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board should take the lead in creating service sector employment in West Belfast, using the Cultural Cluster concept as the dynamo to drive their efforts and setting a target of 250 new jobs - costing around £3m - over the next three years.

LEDU should work closely with the Department of the Environment in developing the expansion of the black taxi service in West Belfast.

LEDU, the International Fund for Ireland and the Tourist Board should agree on a joint strategy to significantly increase the availability of bed spaces in West Belfast with a target of opening one new hotel and creating at least 60 new jobs.

Research and Development

The IFI-backed RADIUS (Research and Development between Ireland and the United States) programme is an ambitious plan to boost employment in the field of Research and Development.

The RADIUS programme is to be administered in the North by IRTU. While modest at the moment, it has the potential to grow into the type of BIRD (Binational Industrial Research and Development Foundation) initiative first suggested for Ireland and the US by John Cullinane and now in operation between the US and Israel.

The new Technological Cooperation Program of Activity between the US and economic agencies here, and in particular, the Manufacturing Technology Partnership, also offer new job creation and job promotional possibilities.

If located in West Belfast, these programmes would not only provide employment but would also send out the message that showcase technology developments can be located in an area of massive disadvantage.

PROPOSAL

There is an urgent need for IRTU, which like all DED departments has to TSN its activities, to make a commitment to West Belfast.

This should involve, in the first instance, the location from Day One of the Manufacturing Technology Partnership at Springvale. RADIUS could be headquartered at the same premises which accommodates the MTP team.

We propose an IRTU commitment of at least £5m to West Belfast over the next three years with the aim of creating up to 40 jobs.

The EC programme for peace and reconciliation

With a budget of £240m, the EC peace fund can make a significant difference to the quality of life and, indeed, to the employment levels, in the most marginalised communities in the North and the Border counties.

Nowhere is the Programme's assistance needed more than in West Belfast.

It is essential therefore that an equitable proportion of the new fund - based on criteria of need and disadvantage - is targeted on the area.

It is equally essential that the monies from the Fund are truly additional to spending by the Exchequer.

Partnership bodies must be democratic, accountable and inclusive to ensure not only that the funds reach the grassroots' communities in need but also so that those who are expected to benefit from the change are involved in the process of change. Unionist attempts to hijack the Belfast City Council Partnership do not augur well for the plan of action which that Partnership will be obliged to draw up for the expenditure of its £10.1m allocation from the EC Fund.

The intermediary bodies charged with the distribution of much of the Fund must not only be totally equitable in the distribution of funds but must also ensure that those bodies and projects overlooked in the past - projects not yet at the starting gates - are given the initial assistance to enable them to compete with the longer-established groups.

PROPOSAL

A target of £40m in EC peace programme aid should be set for the disadvantaged wards of West Belfast with the aim of creating 500 jobs through the projects funded under the programme.

The Belfast-Dublin Economic Corridor

The Belfast-Dublin Economic Corridor opens up exciting new possibilities for building cross-border economic bridges which could bring real benefits from the all-island economy to communities both North and South.

Strategically placed to exploit the Belfast-Dublin corridor, West Belfast could become the site for a new programme aimed specifically at encouraging productive cross-border links.

These links would primarily be those which directly boost business but could also cover training, education, community and cultural projects, and research and development.

The Irish Business and Employers Confederation and the Confederation of British Industry have both endorsed efforts to build a Belfast-Dublin Corridor. But to date, however, no one body within the DED is charged with this responsibility.

PROPOSAL

A Belfast-Dublin Corridor Development Centre dedicated to developing the Belfast-Dublin Corridor - in close liaison with the Corridor Task Force set up by the Joint Business Council - should be located at West Belfast. It has the potential within three years to employ at least 10 people. Initial funding of just £1m could enable the Centre to be established so that a strategy and action plan can be drawn up. The funding of that action plan could then be shared by the economic agencies North and South and the IFI. This Development Centre would also consider the wider issues of cross-border economic co-operation and the demilitarisation of the economy in the North.

The DED to set up a task force to examine and exploit the benefits of cross-border economic co-operation and harmonisation.

Rising to the challenge

The challenge of creating thousands of jobs in West Belfast is indeed great but the scale, intensity and duration of the joblessness crisis insists that this challenge must be met and met now.

For its part, Sinn Féin has placed on record its belief that there is an urgent need for a partnership between the economic agencies and the entire community in order to effect meaningful and lasting regeneration. That partnership must be one of equals and the constituency we represent must have the right not only to place its concerns on the record with the economic agencies but to also be involved in the delivery of change - for example, through membership of the Industrial Development Board board. We are committed to playing a full and positive part, not only in the new West Belfast Jobs' Task Force we have called for, but also in any genuine partnership efforts to implement new economic strategies.

The adoption of an regeneration strategy of the scale proposed by Sinn Féin - £110m or under one tenth of the DED budget over the next three years - makes social and economic sense. It also makes good fiscal sense. Annually, the British Government pays out £85 in social security benefits in West Belfast. Over the three years of the action plan outlined here, that amounts to a total allocation of £255m. Our Vision In Action strategy could actually result in a net saving to the British Exchequer of £150m.

No-one is underestimating the scale of the resources needed to put into effect a comprehensive, strategic economic recovery programme for West Belfast but let there be no doubt but that the entire area - be it the Falls or Shankill - is long overdue this type of attention and expenditure. £1.3bn was spent by the British Government in the privatisation of Shorts and Harland and Wolff.

There is no reason to expect any less to be spent on West Belfast's economic future.