A briefing for Members participating in the debate on child poverty
Tuesday 14th October 2025

1. Introduction

The Assembly needs no reminding that child poverty levels in Northern Ireland remain stubbornly high. NISRA statistics demonstrate that 1 in 4 children live in relative poverty and 1 in 5 are experiencing absolute poverty. Organisations working with children and families see the impact of this across their services every day. Children living in damp homes because there is no money for electricity, gas or heating oil; children sleeping on mattresses on the floor because there is no money for a bedframe; homes where there is no food in the cupboards; children missing out on extra-curricular activities or school trips; parents being pulled into debt or going without themselves; and young people struggling to find a home with ever rising rent costs and a lack of suitable social housing.

The NI Executive made a commitment to produce both an Anti-Poverty Strategy and a Child Poverty Strategy in the New Decade New Approach agreement of 2020. It was subsequently accepted by the NI Commissioner for Children and Young People and the children's sector that a separate strategy to tackle child poverty may not be required if the Anti-Poverty Strategy has a significant focus on child poverty with clear targets and measures directed towards the experiences of children. It is important to note however, that the Commissioner has been critical of the current draft Strategy and has advised that:

> [T]he fact that it no longer takes a lifecycle approach and has lost any focus on child poverty means that the advice provided by the previous Commissioner that a separate Child Poverty Strategy is not needed no longer stands. **We recommend that, either the Executive returns to a 'lifecycle' approach for the Anti-Poverty Strategy, with a specific focus on child poverty, or it produces a separate Child Poverty Strategy, in keeping with its NDNA commitment**.

Key reports that have made recommendations on child poverty in recent years should be taken into account. As anti-poverty campaigners and organisations that work with children and families, we are concerned that the recommendations from the following reports have not been reflected in the current draft Anti-Poverty Strategy and as such we consider the draft not fit for purpose.

The Jones Report (June 2023)

The Independent Review of Children's Social Care Services, published by Prof Ray Jones notes that 'poverty is a major driver of the need and demand for children's social care services. It is highly correlated with numbers of children with child protection plans and who are in care' and that 'reducing child poverty is therefore central and crucial in promoting the welfare of children, tackling stresses and strains experienced by parents and containing the need for help from social care services.' The report sets out a roadmap for the transformation of services for children in Northern Ireland, listing fifty-three recommendations that require urgent implementation. Of particular note, the review makes the following recommendations:

- Action should be taken to tackle, through welfare benefits changes, the increasing prevalence and intensity of child poverty.
- There is without doubt the need for increased funding and investment to respond to the increasing poverty creating difficulties for children and families and to allow them to receive the help and assistance they need.

Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) Report (March 2024)

The NIAO evaluated the effectiveness of the 2016-2022 Child Poverty Strategy and made numerous recommendations for future anti-poverty policies. Beginning with *Recommendation 1*, the report advises that:

> An integrated, cross-departmental anti-poverty strategy is urgently needed. As coordinating department in this area, when the Department presents a draft strategy to the Executive, it should include an action plan containing clearly defined indicators and targets aimed at quantifying and reducing poverty, including measures of persistent poverty and the poverty gap.

The current draft Strategy has not fulfilled this recommendation as no action plan has been produced. The NIAO report also notes the importance of:

- strategic outcomes that are clearly supported by specific actions and interventions
- clear and effective accountability mechanisms supported by joined-up working
- fully costed actions with ring-fenced budgets that support new actions, not just the coordination of existing programmes of work

The report also highlights best practice in Scotland, noting the effectiveness of having a legislative commitment to tackling child poverty underpinning the establishment of the Child Poverty Commission.

Public Accounts Committee Report (November 2024)

Following the publication of the NIAO report, the Assembly's Public Accounts Committee undertook an inquiry into child poverty to gather further evidence of what has gone wrong with previous and existing policy. The committee pointed to the lack of ring-fenced funding to implement the strategy, the absence of timebound targets, a lack of ownership and ineffective governance as key issues. The report also criticised the lack of attention on prevention or early intervention, with policies tending to focus on existing poverty rather than preventing families from falling into poverty.

Key recommendations include:

- New anti-poverty strategy WITH an action plan that is fully costed and time bound, specifying actions that could be done with existing resources and those which would require new funding streams
- Set quantitative, qualitative and time-bound targets and indicators to monitor progress and assess impact
- Prioritise early intervention and prevention- especially focusing on early childhood
- Ensure accountability- make clear the responsibility across departments- suggesting regular reporting back to PAC on progress and M&E mechanisms
- Improve collaboration with partners in the voluntary and community sector
- Ring-fence or clearly allocate funding so actions can be taken forward reliably
- Use of data to report on progress more transparently in relation to outcomes for children
- Learn from others and best practice in other jurisdictions- benchmark what works, apply the lessons learnt to this context.

2. Proposed interventions in the motion

<u>Proposal 1: Child Payment</u>

Support for a child payment is clear across civil society organisations and is backed by the following recommendation in the report of the Expert Advisory Panel commissioned by the Department for Communities to inform the development of the Anti-Poverty Strategy:

> Much of the focus of our recommendations is aimed at increasing income in families with children. There is considerable evidence that income matters to child outcomes. Two major systematic reviews of literature have examined the relationship between household financial resources and children's outcomes, focusing on OECD countries. [...] A large majority of the studies reviewed found significant positive effects of income across the range of children's outcomes, including cognitive development and school achievement, social and behavioural development and children's health.

Evidence from Scotland

The Scottish Child Payment (SCP) is one of the 'Five Family Payments' targeting low income families including the Child Payment, Best Start Grant (which includes three separate payments) and Best Start Foods. It has been in operation since February 2021.

An interim evaluation of the Scottish payment published in 2022 when the benefit amount was £10 a week per child under 6 years old on means tested benefits, found that even the small amount of additional support made a difference in parental and child mental health and wellbeing.[1]

The research shows that the child payment led to a wide range of positive health and wellbeing impacts for parents and their children. It was found to have increased child spend while helping to alleviate parents' financial worries and providing general peace of mind. Participants also said it helped their wellbeing due to:

- Increased happiness as a result of seeing benefits for their children
- A decreased sense of guilt or embarrassment at not being able to afford things for their children
- Supported children's health through better quality food and access to physical activities
- Boosts to their own health and wellbeing as a result of being able to use the payment towards better food for the whole family or for family trips out, helping reduce parental isolation
- A sense of recognition and care from the Scottish Government

A recent evaluation of all Five Family Payments was published by the Scottish Government in September 2025, with the child payment amount now standing at **£27.15 per week and being available to children up to the age of 15**. The report notes the success of these payments with evidence of 'reduced incidence of debt, reduced material deprivation, and reduced financial pressure on recipients' households.' It went on to outline that 'most people who receive Scottish Child Payment use the money for child-related expenses.'

The majority of respondents to the research said that the payments help them to buy essentials for their child (e.g. food and clothes), school-related items (e.g. pencils and bags) and 'the majority of people who receive Scottish Child Payment and Best Start Grant say the payments help their child take part in social and educational activities…such as sports, drama and music, which some parents say they could not afford otherwise.' Parents of children with additional support needs, 'spent SCP on sensory educational items which they said could be expensive.

In terms of data modelling to predict the long-term trend in child poverty rates, **the Scottish Government's analysis found that the child poverty rate in 2023-4 would have been 'four percentage points higher if SCP had not been in place' and a similar impact is modelled for 2025-6**, with the relative child poverty rate in that year estimated to be four percentage points lower that it would be without SCP in place.[2]

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has also analysed the success of the Scottish Child Payment and gives the following overview:

> The SCP, introduced in February 2021, has helped reduce child poverty in Scotland (End Child Poverty, 2025). At a local level, SCP may be contributing

[1] Executive Summary - Scottish Child Payment: interim evaluation - gov.scot

[2] 4. Results - Child poverty cumulative impact assessment: update - gov.scot

to the reduction in child poverty, with 27 out of 32 local authorities having lower rates in 2023/24 compared to levels before its introduction in 2019/20. However, progress has not been uniform. City of Edinburgh, Angus, Midlothian, Falkirk, Clackmannanshire and Glasgow City have all seen increases in child poverty over that same period.

Whilst there are indications that child poverty has not improved uniformly in some parts of Scotland it is important to acknowledge the impact of high levels of in-work poverty and the deepening of poverty for larger families. The Child Payment in isolation cannot offset the impact of other damaging policies like the two-child limit, which penalises low-income families with three or more children, nor can it offset the impact of in-work poverty. In a low wage economy that disproportionately impacts women in part-time work, the Child Payment is playing an important part in increasing household income as a key intervention that both reduces poverty and increases household wellbeing. It should be accompanied however by a muti-faceted policy framework. It is also clear that the benefit of full roll out of the Scottish Child Payment across all children up to age 15 may not yet be seen within the existing data.

In light of this evidence, anti-poverty groups, child rights organisations and charities here in Northern Ireland recommend this option is meaningfully considered by the Executive as a first step to enhance and protect the economic security of families at risk of poverty.

Proposal 2: Childcare

Accessible, affordable childcare is essential for families. Currently costs are unsustainable for families and accessibility is a significant issue in rural areas. A comprehensive childcare strategy is required for Northern Ireland, aligned with the checklist published by **Childcare For All** that sets out the essentials elements that should be included for under four pillars**: affordable care for parents, quality provision for children, fair pay for workers, and investment that treats childcare as vital public service.**

According to Trussell, over **one in five (22%) people referred to food banks in Northern Ireland are living with a child aged 0-5**, compared to one in seven (14%) of the general population. **A lack of affordable or available childcare was a key reason for not being in work for one in six (18%)** working-age adults referred to food banks who were living with children.

Despite being central to the Education Minister's existing interventions on childcare, the childcare subsidy scheme is clearly not set up to target families on low incomes who are in or at risk of poverty. Eligibility is restricted to those who qualify for tax free childcare and therefore parents in receipt of Universal Credit are excluded. **Lack of affordable childcare continues to disproportionately impact low-income families, exacerbated by welfare system barriers** such as the in arrears payments associated with the childcare element of UC and complex rules and procedures for accessing financial support.

Proposal 3: Expand Free School Meals

There is clear evidence that the provision of a free, nutritious meal in school has significant positive impacts on children's health and educational outcomes and plays a part in lifting children out of poverty.[3] A campaign for universal free school meals convened by the trade union UNISON in recent years has garnered widespread support and led the Department of Education to conduct a public consultation on the issue of free school meals and uniform grant policies in 2024-25. Unfortunately, the Department wrote to all stakeholders in the campaign in July 2025 confirming that, **'despite the Minister stating that he would have welcomed the opportunity to introduce universal free school meal provision, the current budgetary constraints facing both the Department and the wider Executive mean that this is not achievable at this point.'**

As the UK government rolls out an expansion of free school meals provision to all families in receipt of Universal Credit, in addition to universal provision for all children in the first three years of school, children in Northern Ireland are falling further behind. The recent investment in expansion in England has been costed at £410m per year, raising the question of potential new resource for Northern Ireland due to the Barnett Consequential.

Free school meals policies should be understood in terms of the wider contexts of both *food insecurity* and the *cost of the school day*.

Food insecurity

Recent statistics from Trussell highlighted in 2024, 520,000 people across Northern Ireland, **130,000 of whom were children**, lived in food insecure households. This was 20,000 more children than in 2022.

One in five households have run out of food and were unable to afford more, reduced the size of their meals or ate less because they couldn't afford food, or went hungry or lost weight due to a lack of money. Almost **one in three (32%) children** in Northern Ireland were growing up in food insecure households in 2024. Among households experiencing food insecurity, **14% have three or more children**, compared with 6% of households in Northern Ireland overall.

We are at risk of seeing severe hardship becoming normalised in communities across Northern Ireland as the majority (60%) of people who experienced food insecurity did not turn to any form of charitable food provision in the last year.

[3] Universal free school meals in primary schools reduce obesity and improve Reading scores - Institute for Social and Economic Research (ISER); https://www.niccy.org/media/2909/niccy-costs-of-education-key-findings-report-and-recommendations-18-oct-17.pdf

The cost of the school day

The cost of the school day has not been sufficiently understood by policy makers who need to engage more fully with those who have lived experience of poverty.

Action for Children spoke to parents about the additional costs they encounter. Parents highlighted:

- school uniforms and PE kits, especially branded items and items which could only be purchased from one supplier
- school meals
- extracurricular activities and school trips
- contribution towards snacks and classroom materials
- transport

These costs are difficult for families to budget for and are often incurred concurrently at the start of the school year.

During the public consultation on the draft Anti-Poverty Strategy NIAPN, Save the Children NI, Women's Support Network and Dr. Ciara Fitzpatrick, Ulster University gathered recommendations on the cost of the school day from women with lived experience. These included:

- *"If they would actually fund schools then they wouldn't have to ask parents to provide additional costly items. Cost of school uniforms is extortionate."*
- *"More help with school uniforms £42.50 hardly covers a thing. Also some more stepping stones to help get mothers back to work. We also need more available grants than loans in Discretionary Support."*
- *"Working people have to pay for school uniform and dinners and this takes a big chunk of money from their wages and leaves them struggling."*
- *"Current caps reviewed to support working families. Increase the thresholds for being able to get help. Warm meals for all school children not just the ones whose families are on benefits."*
- *"Free meals for all children at school would be a start. Parents are stressed out trying to make their money last and of course the bills get higher and higher."*
- *"Universal extended school programmes - more funding for the cost-free school day. There should be a cap on school uniform costs and they should be unbranded. Prevention is possible, we don't have to wait until people are in crisis."*
- *"Put more money into school programmes, like breakfast clubs and after schools. Every child should get a free bus pass and money for school uniforms. All kids need a hot meal and should have free milk."*
- *"Providing all children with free school meals. Capping school uniform costs especially in secondary schools. Providing schools with more funding specifically to provide free or reduced wraparound services so that it can help working parents with childcare costs. Working with supermarkets to promote free fruit/veg boxes for all."*

3. **Other policy priorities: Scrap the two-child limit**

We call on all MLAs to consolidate the Assembly's opposition to the two-child limit on Universal Credit. Having previously been debated by the Assembly, it is clear there is widespread understanding of how damaging this welfare cut has been to families in Northern Ireland.

Since its introduction, **the two-child limit has been one of the biggest drivers of child poverty, pushing families into hardship**. Campaigners such as the Cliff Edge Coalition have long been calling for this policy to be scrapped.[4]

With on average larger family sizes than elsewhere in the UK, the two-child limit has a disproportionate impact in Northern Ireland. **1 in every 10 children in Northern Ireland lives in a home which has had its benefit payments reduced by this policy.** Rates in some parliamentary constituencies are much higher. In West Belfast 19%; North Belfast 15.5% and in Foyle 13% of children live in households impacted by the two-child limit.[5]

The higher percentage of families living in **rural settings** also means that the two-child cap has a disproportionate impact with the constituencies of Newry Armagh, West Tyrone, Upper Bann, Mid Ulster, East Londonderry, South Down, Fermanagh and South Tyrone, and North Antrim all having more than 1 in 10 children living in families impacted by the two-child limit.

By April 2024, nearly **50,000 children in Northern Ireland were living in a family who were not receiving support for at least one child due to the policy**.

Trussell research predicts that **scrapping the two-child limit would lift 18,500 people out of severe hardship** in Northern Ireland by 2026/27. Action for Children's recent research demonstrates that removing the two-child limit and the benefit cap is the **single most cost-effective option to decrease child poverty** across the UK.[6]

Whilst we welcome the suggestion that the UK government is considering lifting the two-child cap in the next budget, **we call on the NI Executive to lobby Westminster for this outcome and to immediately progress mitigation of the two-child limit in Northern Ireland**.

[4] Remove the two-child limit | Law Centre Northern Ireland
[5] Two Child Limit Data 2025 - End Child Poverty
[6] Paying the price of child poverty | Action For Children

4. The voice of children, young people, and their families

Whilst the draft Anti-Poverty Strategy made reference to the input and participation of people with lived experience of poverty, there were no details on the mechanism for this, nor have people with lived experience been included systematically in the development of the strategy to this point. **It is crucial that the experience and expertise of people, including children, is used to understand the challenges and provide solutions to the myriad of issues relating to poverty.**

People with lived experience of poverty have a right to be heard. They must be engaged with meaningfully throughout the development, implementation and duration of the strategy and, as of yet, they have been excluded from this process.

5. Conclusion

As organisations working with children and families in poverty and campaigning for public policy that can eradicate child poverty in Northern Ireland, we welcome this Assembly debate. The recent publication of a draft Anti-Poverty Strategy that is not fit for purpose and will not provide the policy framework or interventions necessary to lift families and children out of poverty, gave great cause for concern. **It is vital that the NI Assembly and Executive pursues a more ambitious, evidence-based strategy with lived experience experts directly involved in the process and adequate resources to make a material difference in people's lives.**

This briefing provides comment and evidence to aid the discussion of the key proposals in the motion. It demonstrates clearly that actions like these are urgently needed and supported by evidence and expert opinion. **It also demonstrates that no single policy intervention can solve poverty alone**. It will need a whole Executive approach and is not the remit of a single Department. The Anti-Poverty Strategy should represent the vehicle by which to achieve this.

The situation facing tens of thousands of families and children in Northern Ireland requires a multi-faceted approach that prioritises cash-first interventions, while also seeking reform of the social security system to provide genuine support and dignity, as well as investment in structural support such as childcare to remove barriers to work and make progress on in-work poverty. The Executive's Anti-Poverty Strategy and welfare policies should also be integrated with employment rights legislation to ensure that everyone can have access to a job that pays well enough to provide the essentials their family needs.

We will continue to work with all political stakeholders to inform the work of the Assembly and the Executive to bring forward an Anti-Poverty Strategy based on the report of the Expert Panel and the recommendations of the Anti-Poverty Strategy Group, that is fit for purpose and has the potential to make real progress in reducing child poverty in Northern Ireland.