

**Northern Ireland Anti-Poverty Network and Child Poverty Briefing Paper
In advance of motion on child food poverty and food bank usage, 27th January 2025**

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Northern Ireland Anti-Poverty Network's (NIAPN) works towards a poverty free society. NIAPN is an umbrella organisation, having a membership throughout NI of organisations in the voluntary and community sector, public and statutory bodies and trade unions who collaborate to address poverty.

Child Poverty Alliance is a consortium of stakeholders working to end child poverty.

“The extras are all gone now, going out is a luxury, we were hardly able to do it in the first place. Even the special occasion treats are gone now like for birthdays, etc. There’s no spare income for it now.” (Lived experience quote - WRDA 2023)

The Picture of Child Poverty

Child poverty manifests as cold houses and hungry stomachs, children missing school because of lack of transport or costly school uniforms, not being able to participate in extra-curricular activities, not receiving presents for holidays and birthdays. Finally its growing up around the palpable anxiety and stress caused by not having enough money to afford the essentials.

A recent NIAO report estimates the annual cost of dealing with child poverty is between £850 million and £1 billion. Therefore the cost of inaction is too high!

The Department for Communities reported that the percentage of children living in relative poverty in 2022/23 was 24% compared to 18% in 2021/2022. This represents a ‘statistically significant’ increase. 1 in 4 children in NI is in relative poverty, and almost 1 in 5 children is now struggling to have their most basic needs met, such as food, shelter, and housing, and in the last five years Trussell’s emergency food parcels for children have increased by 90%.

In order to meaningfully tackle the root causes of poverty, the Anti-Poverty Strategy should embed a life-cycle approach by investing heavily in children and their caregivers to help create conditions for better lifelong opportunities and outcomes.

Our recommendations:

- 1. Implement an evidence-based Anti-Poverty Strategy** based on objective need that specifically targets Child Poverty, and attend the upcoming event on 12th February in the Long Gallery.
- 2. Increase household income:**
 - a) Call on the NI Executive to endorse the **Essentials Guarantee** campaign ensuring Westminster guarantees, at a minimum, Universal Credit should protect people from going without essentials.
 - b) **Scrap the 2-child limit to the child element of Universal Credit.**
 - c) **Introduce a new weekly Child Payment to all children in poverty.**
- 3. Invest in the free school day** by reducing school uniform costs, increasing FSME’s and re-introducing holiday hunger payments.
- 4. Invest in accessible, good quality childcare** by increasing accessible, flexible and affordable high quality childcare and removing barriers to paid employment.

Child poverty is increasing in Northern Ireland.

The growing weight of evidence of the lifelong impact of adversity in childhood, including child poverty, and the cost of compensating for that impact, together with the ethical imperative on any civilised society to protect its young, are further reasons to prioritise the reduction of child poverty. (Expert Panel Report, p17)

Furthermore, the NI Audit Office Report on the Child Poverty Strategy estimated the monetary cost of child poverty to be between £825 million and £1 billion annually. This is due to the additional resources that are needed to mitigate the impacts of poverty through health, social services, education, justice, etc. (NIAO, 2024).

“Poverty cannot be reduced to negligible levels without addressing inequalities of income and wealth.’ (Expert Panel Report, p15) ***The only meaningful way to do this is for households with children to see an increase in household income and a decrease in household expenditure.***

“The extras are all gone now, going out is a luxury, we were hardly able to do it in the first place. Even the special occasion treats are gone now like for birthdays, etc. There’s no spare income for it now.” (Women’s Experience of Cost-of-Living Crisis, WRDA 2023)

The Picture of Child Poverty

Child poverty manifests as cold houses and hungry stomachs, but also children missing school because of lack of transport or costly school uniforms, not being able to participate in extra-curricular activities, not receiving presents for holidays and birthdays, and growing up around the palpable anxiety and stress caused by not having enough money to afford the essentials.

The Department for Communities reported that the percentage of children living in relative poverty in 2022/23 was 24% compared to 18% in 2021/2022. This represents a ‘statistically significant’ increase. In simple terms, 1 in 4 children in NI are in

relative poverty. And almost 1 in 5 children are now struggling to have their most basic needs met, such as food, shelter, and housing.

Action for Children [reported that its research](#) found nearly one in eight (12%) children in Northern Ireland – an estimated 50,000 – are materially deprived, meaning their families can't afford the basic items and activities the Government considers essential to a happy and healthy childhood. The research also showed that in NI approximately 100,000 children live in families unable to save at least £10 a month (31%).

The [DfC statistics](#) show that in November 2024, 5,378 children were living in temporary accommodation in NI. 3,385 of these children were aged nine and under. This is an increase of 121% since January 2019 when just over 2,433 children were living in temporary accommodation.

The Trussell Trust in NI reported that the organisation distributed over 90,300 emergency food parcels in 2023/24 of which over 38,000 parcels were provided for children. These figures represent more than a doubling (143% increase) in the number of parcels distributed five years ago in 2018/19. This growth in need is higher for children, with the number of parcels provided for them increasing by 151% over this five-year period.

In the [National Parent Survey 2024](#), Parentkind found that 41% of parents in Northern Ireland have rationed their heating in the past 12 months compared to a UK average of 35%. This means an estimated 136,800 children in Northern Ireland could be at risk of living in cold, damp homes as their parents struggle to afford to heat their homes.

Over a third (35%) of parents in Northern Ireland are struggling financially with 19% of parents get into debt each month, almost a quarter (23%) are worrying about

paying their rent or mortgage and 19% of parents have reported skipping meals in the last 12 months to save money.

Additionally, parents across Northern Ireland are struggling to afford the cost of sending their children to school with two thirds of parents citing uniforms (66%), school trips (46%) and school meals and drinks (32%) as causing the biggest financial challenge. Northern Ireland has the highest number of parents concerned with the cost of regular voluntary donations to the school fund with almost 1 in 3 (28%) saying this was a concern compared to a UK average of 15%. (Parentkind, 2024)

Key Policy Recommendations to combat child poverty

1. Implement an evidence based Anti-Poverty Strategy is based on objective need, that specifically targets Child Poverty.

The Anti-Poverty Strategy should embed a life-cycle approach by investing heavily in children and their care givers to help create conditions for better lifelong opportunities and outcomes.

Per the NIAO report on the Child Poverty Strategy and the subsequent PAC report, the Anti-Poverty Strategy ‘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’.

2. Increase household income:

a. Endorse the Essentials Guarantee campaign

This campaigns call on Westminster to guarantee that, at a minimum, Universal Credit should protect people from going without essentials. The social security system is supposed to protect people from hunger and poverty, but the issues in the design and delivery of social security the biggest and most immediate drivers of need for food banks.

The [Essentials Guarantee](#) would enshrine in legislation a legal minimum in Universal Credit and an independent process to ensure the standard allowance rate is based on the cost of essentials including food, household, travel and childcare costs (Currently estimated at £120 per week for a single applicant and £200 for a couple).

b. Scrap the 2-child limit to the child element of Universal Credit

Across Northern Ireland 10% of children live in a family whose benefit payments are reduced by the two-child limit. We know this policy pushes families into poverty by reducing benefits by up to £3,455 for every third or subsequent child born to a family after April 2017. It is not surprising that the highest rates of child poverty are in the areas where the highest number of children are impacted by this unfair policy.

Children in larger families disproportionately experience poverty. 37% of children in poverty are in households with three or more children, compared to 17% in households with two children and 16% in households with one child.

Furthermore, the two-child limit to the child element in Universal Credit disproportionately impacts NI as the average family size in NI is larger than in Great Britain with 21.4% of families in NI having three or more children compared to 14.7% in the UK. (Cliff Edge Coalition, 2024)

c. Introduce a new weekly Child Payment to all children in poverty

“We recommend the introduction of a new non-taxable weekly Child Payment for all 0-4-year olds and for 5-15-year olds who are in receipt of free school meals. We propose that the Child Payment is set at between £12.50 and £15 per week initially.” (Expert Panel, 2020)

“The child payment will have a direct, immediate impact on the household income of families experiencing poverty and will lead to a measurable decrease in the child

poverty rate. The level of impact depends on the eligibility criteria, and the level of the child payment.” (Report by members of co-design group)

3. Decrease household expenditure:

a. Invest in the free school day

“The idea of a ‘free school day’ was first suggested by school children who were growing up in poverty and reported that they chose not to study particular subjects, like art or music, because they required a parental contribution; younger children said they worried a lot about where their mother would find the money for their school’s non-uniform day or school trip. At every age, they thought school should be free – with no danger of stigma, shame or self-exclusion because of inability to pay. A range of studies have found that children growing up in poverty have their education damaged by worry about their family’s financial situation and are keenly aware of their socio-economic position which is probably why some of them came up with the idea of the free school day.” (Expert Panel, pg 40)

1. Increase Free School Meal provision so that every student living in poverty is eligible for FSMs, with a look towards phasing in targeted universal free school meals.
2. Re-introduce holiday hunger payment, which provided £27 a fortnight to 96,300 children during school holidays as a direct payment.
3. Reduction of school uniform costs by legislation, not only guidance; and increase the school uniform grant.

4. Invest in accessible, affordable, good quality childcare

We welcome the focus on childcare in the Programme for Government, as the cost and the accessibility of childcare remains at crisis level for families and children.

According to the most recent [Employers for Childcare survey](#), the average cost of a full-time childcare place in Northern Ireland is £10,036 a year or £193 per week – this is an increase of 14% since 2021. 84% of childcare providers are making a loss or breaking even with 43% describing their financial situation as ‘struggling’ or

‘distressed’. 88% of parents have had to change their work arrangements due to the cost of childcare. For 41% of families, childcare is their largest monthly outgoing ahead of their mortgage or rent. 56% are using means other than their income to pay for childcare including savings, credit cards and loans.

Good quality, affordable, accessible childcare is central to NI’s economic, social and educational infrastructure. It is key to addressing child poverty and the gender pay gap - both for women trying to re-enter the workforce after having children, and for childcare providers themselves. Importantly, good quality childcare has been shown to lead to positive long-term outcomes for child language and educational development. (Expert Panel, 2020)

- a. **Develop new funding model, which directly funds childcare providers** to offer fully funded or subsidised early education and childcare to all families with children from ages 1 to 4.
- b. **The new funding model must invest in improving the quality of provision**, supporting childcare providers to be sustainable, and enhancing pay and conditions for the workforce, ensuring it is properly valued. This model should address the additional costs of childcare provision for disabled children.

NIAPN and the Child Poverty Alliance encourage all MLA’s to attend the Anti-Poverty Strategy Group’s event on 12th February, 3.30pm in the Long Gallery