



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Communities

Report on Engagement with Local Government on the draft Anti-Poverty Strategy

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Contents

Powers and Membership.....	3
List of Abbreviations and Acronyms used in this Report	4
Executive Summary	6
Introduction	8
Context and Methodology	9
Analysis of Evidence: Key Themes	11
Committee Recommendations	18
Conclusion	21

Powers and Membership

Powers

The Committee for Communities is a Statutory Departmental Committee established in accordance with Paragraphs 8 and 9 of Strand One of the Belfast Agreement and under Assembly Standing Order No 48. The Committee has a scrutiny, policy development and consultation role with respect to the Department for Communities and has a role in the initiation of legislation.

The Committee has power to:

- consider and advise on Departmental budgets and Annual Plans in the context of the overall budget allocation;
- approve relevant secondary legislation and take the Committee Stage of relevant primary legislation;
- call for persons and papers;
- initiate enquiries and make reports; and
- consider and advise on matters brought to the Committee by the Minister of Communities.

Membership

The Committee has nine members, including a Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson, and a quorum of five members. The membership of the Committee is as follows:

- Colm Gildernew MLA (Chairperson)
- Cathy Mason MLA (Deputy Chairperson)^{1,2}
- Andy Allen MBE MLA
- Kellie Armstrong MLA
- Maurice Bradley MLA
- Pam Cameron MLA³
- Mark Durkan MLA⁴
- Sian Mulholland MLA
- Maolíosa McHugh MLA

¹ Cathy Mason replaced Nicola Brogan on 24 November 2025

² Nicola Brogan replaced Ciara Ferguson on 3 February 2025

³ Pam Cameron replaced Brian Kingston on 23 September 2025

⁴ Mark Durkan replaced Daniel McCrossan on 8 September 2025

List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

used in this Report

ABC	Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council
CPPs	Community Planning Partnerships
DfC	Department for Communities
LMP	Labour Market Partnership
NILGA	Northern Ireland Local Government Association
SOAs	Super Output Areas
JRF	Joseph Rowntree Foundation

Executive Summary

1. The Committee for Communities has maintained a stringent and continuous focus on the development of the Executive's Anti-Poverty Strategy since the commencement of the current mandate. Recognising the critical role that local councils play in mitigating economic deprivation on the ground, the Committee resolved to place comprehensive local government engagement at the centre of its scrutiny process.
2. This report summarises the Committee's extensive engagement with all 11 local councils across NI, culminating in a dedicated, in-depth evidence session on Thursday 5 March 2026. The written and oral evidence clearly demonstrates that councils are already leading highly significant, life-saving anti-poverty interventions, ranging from administering emergency hardship funds and supporting social supermarkets, to managing complex Labour Market Partnerships (LMPs).
3. However, the overwhelming and unified consensus from local government is that the draft Anti-Poverty Strategy currently lacks the necessary clarity, ambition, and structural integration to be fully transformative. Councils expressed disappointment that the draft strategy is largely blind to the role of local delivery partners and does not adequately define the statutory or strategic role of Community Planning Partnerships (CPPs).
4. Furthermore, the Committee heard stark warnings regarding the severe financial fragility of the community and voluntary sector, which delivers many of these essential frontline services. Witnesses reported that short-term, highly

competitive funding cycles are actively leading to staff redundancies and the potential collapse of vital advice and support networks.

5. The Committee also noted concerning statistical evidence presented by the councils. This included recent reports indicating that 22% of people in their last year of life in certain rural districts are dying in poverty, and that over 110,000 children across the region are living in poverty.
6. The Committee acknowledges that tackling poverty is not solely a matter of providing temporary relief, but requires dismantling systemic barriers that keep citizens trapped in deprivation.
7. Therefore, the Committee calls upon the Department for Communities (DfC) and the wider Executive to fully adopt the recommendations contained within this report. Chief among these must be the formal integration of local government into the strategy's delivery framework, the provision of multi-year ring-fenced funding, the implementation of mandatory "Anti-Poverty Impact Assessments" across all departments, and a renewed, aggressive focus on addressing the structural drivers of poverty, including housing, childcare, and rural transport.
8. The full recommendations may be found in the relevant section of this report.

Introduction

9. Poverty remains a pervasive, complex, and deepening crisis across NI, substantially exacerbated by recent spikes in the cost of living, particularly regarding fuel, food, and energy prices and the cost of a school day for families.
10. The backdrop to this report is a highly volatile geopolitical-environment where global conflict and sudden energy price spikes are severely hurting already hard-pressed families. The development of the Executive's Anti-Poverty Strategy (2025-2035) represents a generational, critical opportunity to address this crisis systematically and sustainably.
11. The Committee believes that addressing poverty cannot be the sole purview of central government departments operating in isolated silos. It requires a genuinely integrated, "whole of government" approach that actively harnesses the localised expertise, agility, and extensive community reach of local councils.
12. The core purpose of this report is to formalise the substantial evidence gathered from local government representatives and to provide the Department for Communities and the wider Executive with actionable, evidence-based recommendations to ensure that the final Anti-Poverty Strategy can achieve its stated aims.

Context and Methodology

13. The Committee's scrutiny of the Anti-Poverty Strategy has been iterative, thorough, and consultative. In May 2025, the Committee wrote to all 11 local councils to formally ascertain the extent of their localised anti-poverty strategies and interventions.
14. The responses received highlighted a wide array of ongoing critical work, prompting the Committee to invite representatives from all councils to brief Members directly in a dedicated session. Concurrently, the DfC launched its public consultation on the draft Anti-Poverty Strategy, which ran from June to September 2025.
15. At its meeting on Thursday 5 March 2026, the Committee held a comprehensive oral evidence session, receiving detailed information from senior officials across three dedicated panels representing all 11 councils.
16. Prior to this meeting, the councils provided the Committee with detailed written briefing papers outlining their consultation feedback, local interventions, and strategic recommendations for better regional integration.
17. The three panels were structured to ensure broad regional representation and to foster comparative discussion regarding urban and rural disparities.
18. Panel 1 included representatives from Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council; Ards and North Down Borough Council; Belfast City Council; and Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council. Panel 2 included representatives from Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council; Mid and East Antrim Borough Council; Mid Ulster Council; and Newry, Mourne and Down District

Council. Panel 3 included representatives from Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council; Derry City and Strabane District Council; and Fermanagh and Omagh District Council.

Analysis of Evidence: Key Themes

Theme 1: The Ambiguity of Local Government's Role and the Potential of CPPs

19. A consistent and central theme across all evidence provided was frustration that the draft strategy fails to define the role of local councils. Representatives noted that while councils are effectively the "glue" that holds community interventions together, anti-poverty work is not currently one of their statutory functions.
20. The representative from Ards and North Down Borough Council highlighted that this lack of statutory clarity means councils often inherit poverty leadership "by default" without the requisite authority, clear expectations, or resources.
21. Witnesses across the panels strongly advocated for Community Planning Partnerships (CPPs) to be designated as the primary delivery vehicles for the strategy at a local level. CPPs already successfully bring together statutory agencies, health trusts, the housing executive, and the community and voluntary sector.
22. However, the Committee was informed that without a formal mandate or shared outcomes framework embedded in the regional strategy, CPPs lack the necessary "teeth" and accountability mechanisms required to compel consistent participation from all regional partners.
23. The representative from Belfast City Council noted that while local government is highly willing, regional statutory bodies sometimes fail to engage fully at the CPP level, suggesting that formal shared outcome agreements, similar to those

utilised in Scotland, would provide vital accountability. The representative from Lisburn and Castlereagh also specifically referenced the Scottish outcome-focused systems as a superior model for ensuring that CPPs deliver effectively against regional outcomes.

Theme 2: Systemic Drivers, Structural Issues, and Prevention

24. The Committee heard robust, repeated evidence that the draft strategy focuses too heavily on merely mitigating the impacts of poverty rather than actively preventing it.
25. The representative from Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon (ABC) Council noted that mitigation efforts, such as providing emergency food parcels and energy vouchers, are necessary but represent a form of continuous "firefighting". The representative from Fermanagh and Omagh similarly stated that without getting "upstream" to address root causes, the crisis will persist indefinitely, forcing councils to continually address the symptoms.
26. Witnesses stressed that establishing true pathways out of poverty requires urgent, cross-departmental action on severe structural deficiencies. These include the lack of social housing, an under-regulated and increasingly unaffordable private rented sector, the lack of an affordable regional childcare strategy, and inadequate rural transport infrastructure.
27. The representative from Mid Ulster Council strongly advocated that every government policy, ranging from education to health, must undergo a rigorous "anti-poverty filter" to ensure it actively supports the most vulnerable. Furthermore, Mid Ulster suggested the Executive consider introducing an Anti-Poverty Act to enshrine these responsibilities in statute.

28. The data shared by witnesses regarding these systemic failures was sobering. The representative from Belfast City Council cited recent Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) research indicating that 110,000 children locally live in poverty, with concentrations reaching 33% in West Belfast.
29. The representative from Fermanagh and Omagh District Council cited a recent Marie Curie report stating that 22% of people in their last year of life in the district are dying in poverty, unable to afford to heat their homes or buy proper food in their final days.
30. Furthermore, councils universally highlighted the rapidly growing phenomenon of the "working poor," with Belfast noting that six in ten children living in poverty reside in households where at least one adult is currently in work.

Theme 3: Funding, Resources, and Short-termism

31. The financial vulnerability of the sector was highlighted repeatedly and forcefully. Witnesses noted that vital interventions are almost entirely reliant on short-term, highly competitive funding pots that are frequently allocated late in the financial year.
32. The representative from Newry, Mourne and Down District Council explained that community partners are forced to spend an inordinate amount of their limited resources "chasing funding" only to receive letters of offer late in the year, requiring full delivery by the end of the financial cycle. This administrative burden is fundamentally unsustainable and distracts from core service delivery.
33. The human cost of this short-termism is severe and immediate. The representative from ABC Council noted that community advice services, which

successfully brought over £3.5 million in unclaimed benefits into the local economy last year alone, are currently being forced to place highly trained staff on redundancy notice due to funding insecurity.

34. In addition to these pressures, cuts to the Rates Support Grant have disproportionately impacted less wealthy and more rural councils. The representative from Derry City and Strabane District Council reported a reduction in its Rates Support Grant, falling from £20.5 million in 2008/09 to just over £3.1 million currently. This severe reduction critically limits the capacity to absorb the costs of anti-poverty interventions from its own rate base without placing a regressive burden on local ratepayers.

Theme 4: Data Sharing and Targeted Interventions

35. Effective poverty prevention requires highly accurate targeting, yet councils reported facing significant, systemic barriers to data sharing across statutory agencies.
36. The representative from Lisburn and Castlereagh highlighted that there are currently 14,000 economically inactive people in the council area, with a significantly higher proportion of women being affected. However, due to strict GDPR interpretations and a lack of integrated IT systems, the council cannot access granular, individual-level data to target these specific residents with tailored skills courses. Consequently, they are forced to rely on universal advertising and simply hope that those in the greatest need apply.
37. Without shared data, as the representative from Belfast pointed out, organisations simply “do not know what they do not know.”

38. Belfast City Council noted that it has invested significant time in developing a bespoke data-sharing agreement across departments and local partners to pull data together to inform decision-making, alongside investing in data analytics support.
39. A central recommendation from all witnesses was the immediate relaxation of data-sharing barriers to allow health, housing, policing, and benefits teams to work seamlessly with local government.

Theme 5: Rural Poverty and Regional Imbalance

40. Representatives from largely rural councils emphasised with concern that the draft strategy does not adequately acknowledge or address the unique, structural challenges of rural poverty.
41. The representative from Fermanagh and Omagh District Council noted that its relative poverty rate has increased to 22%, with child poverty at 28%, driven by severe rural isolation, digital exclusion, a lack of infrastructure, and a heavy, unavoidable reliance on expensive home heating oil.
42. Transport was repeatedly cited as a fundamental, cross-cutting anti-poverty issue. Poor transport infrastructure prevents access to employment, education, and health services, fundamentally undermining regional balance.
43. The representative from Newry, Mourne and Down provided a powerful, practical example where funding two simple community buses for the County Down Rural Community Network positively impacted thousands of residents, immediately reducing social isolation and physically linking people to vital services. The Committee agrees that community transport initiatives yield

substantial social and health dividends and should be one of the last areas to face budgetary cuts.

Theme 6: Lived Experience, Co-design, and Dignity

44. While the very early stages of the strategy's development engaged with individuals possessing lived experience, witnesses reported a disappointing disconnect in the latter stages of the drafting process.
45. The representative from Derry City and Strabane expressed disappointment that the extensive, highly detailed work previously done by the expert panel did not appear to be fully reflected, respected, or addressed in the draft strategy.
46. In contrast, local councils demonstrated best practice in this area. Derry City and Strabane detailed its policy evolution from providing basic food parcels to offering flexible voucher schemes and cash-first approaches. This deliberate shift was made specifically to preserve the dignity of families in crisis, acknowledging that families know best whether they need to prioritise food, electricity, or children's shoes in any given week.
47. The representative from ABC Council explained how its Tackling Poverty Sub-Committee works directly alongside lived-experience advocates and the Salvation Army; hearing the daily, brutal reality of how a minor £20 debt can rapidly spiral into total social isolation keeps policymakers sharply focused on the human cost of their decisions.
48. The Committee heard that this co-design approach should be permanently embedded not just in the strategy itself, but in the ongoing, rigorous monitoring and evaluation of its outcomes.

Theme 7: The Value of Local Interventions

49. Despite the lack of a finalised regional strategy to date, councils have proactively invested heavily in localised interventions.
50. Fermanagh and Omagh District Council proactively allocated over £370,000 from its own resources this year to cost-of-living support, including an intensive "RAP" programme that comprehensively "handholds" 300 highly vulnerable families through multi-agency crisis interventions.
51. Derry City and Strabane highlighted an emergency £100 discretionary fuel scheme that opened at 10.00 am and was forced to close by 5.00 pm the same day after receiving 5,500 referrals for only 2,400 available spots, illustrating the scale of local desperation.
52. Belfast City Council also noted that it delivered a hardship programme worth over £1 million, including providing £250,000 directly to schools for breakfast clubs and warm meals. Furthermore, Belfast produced a cost-of-living guidebook, with over 55,000 copies downloaded or distributed in a single year.
53. Success stories were also shared regarding Labour Market Partnerships (LMPs) and Social Supermarkets, which provide wraparound support, such as debt advice and skills training, rather than just emergency food provision.
54. The representative from Antrim and Newtownabbey highlighted successes in leveraging LMPs to prepare the local workforce for major inward investments like Global Point. Councils universally called for these successful, locally-led pilot programs to be mainstreamed and sustainably funded through the new Executive Strategy.

Committee Recommendations

55. Based on the extensive oral and written evidence received, the Committee for Communities makes the following comprehensive recommendations to the Minister for Communities and the wider Executive.

Recommendation 1: Formalise the Role of Local Government and CPPs

56. The Department for Communities should explicitly, legally define the strategic and operational role of local councils within the final Anti-Poverty Strategy. Furthermore, the Strategy should formally designate Community Planning Partnerships (CPPs) as the primary localised delivery vehicles. The Executive should strongly consider introducing formal shared outcome agreements, akin to the Scottish model, to establish a robust accountability framework that legally obliges all statutory regional partners to actively participate and coordinate resources at the CPP level.

Recommendation 2: Sustainable Multi-Year Funding

57. To end the cycle of "firefighting" and ensure the survival of the community and voluntary sector, the Executive should align the Anti-Poverty Strategy with a ring-fenced, multi-year funding settlement. This must decisively move away from short-term, competitive, late-year grant applications and toward sustained, reliable investment in preventative, wraparound services, social supermarkets, and vital community advice provision.

Recommendation 3: Implementation of Anti-Poverty Impact Assessments

58. The Executive should introduce mandatory "Poverty-Proofing" or Anti-Poverty Impact Assessments across all government departments. Similar to existing rural-proofing mechanisms, all new public policies, structural investments, and budgetary decisions across all departments should be rigorously assessed for their direct impact on poverty reduction before gaining Executive approval.

Recommendation 4: Cross-Departmental Data Sharing Framework

59. The Executive should commission a high-priority project to overcome existing data-sharing barriers between central departments (Health, Education, Justice, DfC, NIHE) and local government. Creating secure, GDPR-compliant data-sharing agreements will allow CPPs to accurately map need, understand intersecting vulnerabilities, and target interventions proactively at the granular, household level.

Recommendation 5: Prioritise Structural Drivers and Prevention

60. The final strategy should shift its balance from short-term mitigation to long-term prevention. This requires the inclusion of measurable, time-bound targets addressing structural drivers, specifically: a coordinated, cross-departmental plan to radically increase social and affordable housing supply; robust interventions to regulate and support the private rented sector; the immediate progression of a fully-funded, regional Childcare Strategy; and dedicated actions addressing rural poverty, with a specific, funded focus on protecting and expanding rural and community transport networks.

Recommendation 6: Embed Lived Experience in Monitoring

61. The DfC should establish a permanent standing structure to ensure that individuals with lived experience of poverty, alongside the community and

voluntary sector, are fully embedded in the governance, monitoring, and iterative evaluation of the Anti-Poverty Strategy's action plans. Co-design must be viewed as a continuous, respectful process, not a singular consultation event.

Conclusion

62. The evidence provided to the Committee across the three panels illustrates a local government sector that is highly capable, deeply committed, and intimately aware of the harsh realities of poverty on the ground.

63. However, the councils and their community partners are currently operating with severely constrained resources and without the necessary strategic integration or data-sharing support from central government.

64. The draft Anti-Poverty Strategy is a vital first step, but the consensus from local government is that it currently lacks the structural mechanisms, funding commitments, and precise targets required to enact systemic, generational change. By formally partnering with local councils, empowering Community Planning Partnerships, and aggressively addressing the root structural causes of poverty, such as housing, transport, and childcare, the Executive can ensure that the strategy actually delivers on its ambitious vision.

65. The Committee strongly urges the Minister for Communities and Executive colleagues to carefully consider and implement these recommendations, and looks forward to reviewing a robust, fully-costed, and genuinely integrated final Anti-Poverty Strategy that truly delivers for the most vulnerable citizens in our society.

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