

British Association of Social Workers Northern Ireland (BASW NI) briefing to the NI Assembly Public Accounts Committee concerning the Inquiry into Child Poverty in Northern Ireland

1. The British Association of Social Workers (BASW) is the largest professional body for social workers in the UK. The Association has 22,000 members employed in frontline, management, academic and research positions in all care settings.
- 1.1. BASW's Code of Ethics¹, to which the Association's members sign up, details fundamental assertions regarding the role of the profession in relation to the alleviation of poverty and a specific commitment for social workers to help those living in poverty.
- 1.2. Poverty presents a challenge to social work's ethos to achieve effective social change—it is a fundamental social justice issue. The manner in which poverty interacts with other inequalities including gender, disability and race creates a complex picture for social work practice.

2. Overview of social work roles

- 2.1. Often, when people consider social work, they think primarily of the profession's statutory functions to safeguard children and young people from harm. While this is a vital aspect of social work, it's just one of a diverse range of roles social workers undertake to improve the life opportunities of vulnerable individuals across all sections of society.
- 2.2. Social workers support individuals, families and carers to overcome disadvantage rooted in social, economic, environmental and physical factors, including disability, physical and mental ill-health, poverty, abuse and neglect, immigration status, addiction and housing insecurity.

3. Poverty and Social Work

- 3.1. Social workers witness, first-hand, the impacts of poverty on many children, families, and individuals across our society—it is a major factor in contributing to problems which require intervention from social services.
- 3.2. BASW NI members frequently work with families and individuals who are experiencing food insecurity, homelessness and an inability to keep warm. Service users also experience stress associated with debt, including issues related to payday lenders, loan sharks and reliance on food banks. Members attest to lone parents, bigger families, families with children with disabilities, and the “working poor”, being particularly affected by the current cost-of-living crisis.
- 3.3. Effective social work with families who are living in poverty can present additional challenges. Practical issues faced by service users can include an inability to afford travel to access appointments, and emotional barriers arising from the stress and shame experienced by parents who face the financial strain of trying to meet their children's needs with insufficient financial resources.

¹ British Association of Social Workers , 2021 <https://new.basw.co.uk/policy-practice/standards/code-ethics#:~:text=Social%20workers%20should%20respect%2C%20uphold,and%20the%20avoidance%20of%20harm.>

- 3.4. BASW's Anti-Poverty Practice Guide for Social Work² and the Department of Health's *Anti-Poverty Practice Framework for Social Work in NI*³ aim to bring poverty into the foreground of social work practice to advocate for structural solutions as well as providing social work interventions through individualised casework.
- 3.5. To lift children out of poverty it is vital to address the factors that lead to families living in poverty, taking a holistic approach to addressing the issue. The recent *Independent Review of Children's Social Care Services*⁴ noted that pressures of poverty impinging on stressed and sometimes overwhelmed parents are likely to make more prevalent the 'toxic trio' of poor mental health, drug and alcohol misuse, and domestic violence. Children and young people are often embarrassed and exhausted by their situations. Poverty destroys self-esteem and confidence with long-term impacts on the families and communities social workers serve.
- 3.6. The Department of Health *Health Inequalities Annual Report 2024*⁵ highlights the disparity in mental health between the most and least deprived areas in Northern Ireland. Indicators of poor mental health in the most deprived areas are approximately two and a half times the rate of those in the least deprived areas.
- 3.7. The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency publication, *Suicide Statistics in Northern Ireland, 2002 – 2022* indicates that in 2022, the percentage of suicides in the most deprived areas of Northern Ireland was over three times that of the least deprived areas.
- 3.8. Growing up in poverty increases the chances of a child coming into the care of social services. There is a clear social gradient whereby, for every level of deprivation, the rates of children on child protection registers and looked after children increase. Children living in the most deprived areas of Northern Ireland are six times more likely to be placed on the Child Protection Register and are four times more likely to become looked after by social services than those in the most affluent areas⁶.
- 3.9. For families who cannot afford to provide adequate food, clothing or shelter, there is a danger that poverty is mistaken for neglect. Social workers committed to social justice and anti-oppressive practice understand the difference and work towards reducing inequality.
- 3.10. The costs to services associated with poverty are enormous. Staying with the example of looked after children, in 2021 the average annual cost of a foster care placement was £24,000 and the average cost of keeping a child in a residential children's home was £265,000 per year.

² BASW and CWIP. (2023). *Anti-Poverty Practice Guide for Social Work. Second Edition*. Birmingham: British Association of Social Workers <https://new.basw.co.uk/sites/default/files/2024-04/181319%20The%20Anti-Poverty%20Practice%20Guide%20for%20Social%20Work%202nd%20Edition.pdf>

³ <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/doh-anti-poverty-framework>

⁴ Children's Social Care Services: An Independent Review (2023)

⁵ <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/hscims-report-2024.pdf>

⁶ Bunting, L., McCartan, C., & Davidson, G. (2017). Identifying and Understanding Inequalities in Child Welfare Intervention Rates: Comparative studies in four UK countries. Single country quantitative study report: Northern Ireland. Nuffield Foundation

https://pureadmin.qub.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/126821013/NI_Country_Report_Final_Feb_2017.pdf

- 3.11. These costs must be considered in the context of the growing number of children looked after by social services. The most recent figures published by the Department of Health indicate there are 3,941 children looked after by social services (October 2023). This represents a 17% increase since before Covid and a 35% increase since 2013/14.
- 3.12. Growing up in poverty also heightens the prevalence of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). The *Youth and Wellbeing Prevalence Survey*⁷ found young people in the least deprived areas are more likely to have experienced no ACEs compared to those in the most deprived areas—59.9% vs 36.0%. This has associated increased long-term costs not only for social work services but also for the health service. It has impacts in terms of educational under achievement, with associated costs to the education system, social security, and economic development. It also leads to more young people becoming involved in antisocial behaviour and crime, resulting in additional costs for the criminal justice system
- 3.13. Social workers utilise a life course perspective for understanding how the social determinants of health shape and influence an individual's health from birth to old age. The Department of Health *Health Inequalities Annual Report 2024*⁸ indicates the significant disparities in life expectancy and healthy life expectancy for people living in the most and least deprived areas of NI. In 2020–22 male life expectancy at birth in the most deprived areas was 74 years compared to 81.2 years in the least deprived areas. For women, life expectancy at birth in the most deprived areas was 79.3 years compared to 84.1 years in the least deprived areas.
- 3.14. It should also be recognised that the rate of premature deaths as a consequence of preventable causes—those that can be mainly avoided through effective public health and primary prevention interventions—is three times higher in the most deprived areas compared to the least deprived areas (312 deaths per 100,000 compared to 103 deaths per 100,000).

4. Rates of poverty

- 4.1. The Department for Communities (DfC) Northern Ireland Poverty and Income Inequality Report (2022-23)⁹ published in March 2024, indicates rates of poverty have increased across Northern Ireland.
- 4.2. In 2021/22, 16% of the NI population were in relative poverty and 13% were in absolute poverty. In 2023/23 the figure for relative poverty had increased to 18% and 14% of the population were in absolute poverty.

⁷ Youth Wellbeing Prevalence Survey 2020 <https://online.hscni.net/our-work/social-care-and-children/children-and-young-people/youth-wellbeing-prevalence-survey-2020/#:~:text=Using%20a%20number%20of%20screening,a%20pattern%20of%20disordered%20eating>.

⁸ <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/hscims-report-2024.pdf>

⁹ https://datavis.nisra.gov.uk/communities/PII_report_2223.html

- 4.3. The impact is greatest on children. The DfC statistics indicate that the percentage of children living in relative poverty in NI in 2022/23 was 24%, up from 18% in 2021/22. The percentage of Children living in absolute poverty rose from 15% to 19% over the same period.

5. Costs to public finances

- 5.1. The March 2024 report from the NI Audit Office, *Child Poverty in Northern Ireland*¹⁰, estimates the cost of child poverty in the region to be between £825m and £1bn per year. The Child Poverty Action group estimates that Child Poverty costs the UK economy at least £39 billion per year¹¹.
- 5.2. Research recently published in the journal *Social Policy and Society*¹² indicates the annual public service cost of poverty to the Republic of Ireland is almost €4.5 billion per annum. Findings published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation¹³ in 2016 estimated that in the UK, the public service costs of poverty amount to around £78 billion per year. The charity estimates that approximately £1 in every £5 spent on public services is making up for the way that poverty damages people's lives.
- 5.3. According to the Northern Ireland Comptroller and Auditor General, "an investment in reducing child poverty has the potential to result in significant long-term savings for the public purse as well as mitigating future harms caused to children as a result of growing up in poverty."¹⁴

6. The need for an anti-poverty strategy, removal of the Universal Credit two-child limit and an audit of the costs of poverty

- 6.1. BASW NI recognises the important protection afforded to thousands of households since 2016 by the welfare reform mitigations, and the Association welcomed the work of the former Minister for Communities to extend the measures which protect against the impacts of the Bedroom Tax and Benefit Cap.
- 6.2. However, these measures alone will be insufficient to address the root causes of poverty. It is vital that an anti-poverty strategy is urgently delivered by the Minister for Communities and that it is informed by the recommendations of the Expert Advisory Panel appointed by the Minister's predecessor and the recommendations published by

¹⁰ <https://www.niauditoffice.gov.uk/files/niauditoffice/documents/2024-03/NI%20Audit%20Office%20Report%20-%20Child%20Poverty%20in%20Northern%20Ireland.pdf>

¹¹ <https://cpag.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-08/The%20cost%20of%20child%20poverty%20in%202023.pdf>

¹² A Hidden Cost: Estimating the Public Service Cost of Poverty in Ireland, Micheál L. Collins, Social Policy and Society (2023) <https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/211F445CA10D82465222A25E823A9586/S147474642300043Xa.pdf/a-hidden-cost-estimating-the-public-service-cost-of-poverty-in-ireland.pdf>

¹³ Counting the cost of UK poverty, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2016, <https://www.jrf.org.uk/counting-the-cost-of-uk-poverty>

¹⁴ <https://www.niauditoffice.gov.uk/files/niauditoffice/documents/2024-03/NI%20Audit%20Office%20Report%20-%20Child%20Poverty%20in%20Northern%20Ireland.pdf>

- 6.3. A key focus of the anti-poverty strategy must be the removal of the Universal Credit two-child limit. The limit restricts the child element of Universal Credit to the first two children in a family, with exceptions in a small number of cases, for example, instances of multiple birth. The result is that families in receipt of Universal Credit affected by the limit lose out on £3,455 per child per year for third, or subsequent children born after 1 April 2017.
- 6.4. Information published in December 2023 by the End Child Poverty Coalition¹⁵ indicates 10% of children in Northern Ireland are affected by the two-child limit. The Coalition also highlights larger families are much more likely to experience poverty. In 2021/22, across the UK the poverty rate for children in families with three or more children was 42%, compared with 23% and 22% among children in families with one or two children respectively¹⁶.
- 6.5. The strong preference of the British Association of Social Workers is for the removal of the Universal Credit two-child limit by the UK Government. Removal of the limit is a central priority in our 2024 General Election Manifesto¹⁷. However, in the face of inaction by the UK Government, the Association, supports the call for the Northern Ireland Executive to offset the two-child limit. This can be done through introducing a *better start larger families payment* as recommended in the Welfare mitigations Review Independent Advisory Panel Report¹⁸.
- 6.6. During the debate on the Opposition Day motion calling on the Minister for Communities to present a plan to the Assembly to remove the two-child limit before the end of 2024, the Minister for Communities explained the cost of mitigating the two-child limit would be £56.4 million per year¹⁹. This represents a significant sum, particularly in light of the restrictions of the current NI Executive Budget.
- 6.7. However, what often fails to be discussed is the cost of inaction. For example, section 5.1. of this paper outlines the Comptroller and Auditor General's assessment that the costs of child poverty to NI are between £825 million and £1 billion pounds. It is essential that long term strategic decision making concerning how best to reduce poverty is based on a clear understanding of the costs to the NI Executive associated with the impacts of poverty across society. While there are immediate implications for DfC in terms of social security provision this only begins to scratch the surface of the impacts of poverty. The majority of NI Executive departments will be affected, with direct impacts for:

¹⁵ https://endchildpoverty.org.uk/2_child_limit_data/

¹⁶ https://endchildpoverty.org.uk/two_child_limit/

¹⁷ <https://new.basw.co.uk/sites/default/files/2024-03/181325%20General%20Election%202024%20Manifesto%20UK%20%282%29.pdf>

¹⁸ <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/communities/dfc-welfare-mitigations-review-independent-advisory-panel-report-2022.pdf>

¹⁹ <http://data.niassembly.gov.uk/HansardXml/plenary-16-04-2024.pdf>

- The Department of Health—costs associated with services to address increased prevalence of long-term health conditions and involvement with social services.
- The Department of Justice—cost associated with increased likelihood of anti-social behaviour and involvement in the youth justice and criminal justice systems.
- The Department of Education—impacts in terms of educational under achievement.
- The Department of the Economy—impacts in terms of reduction in skills and loss of earning potential.

6.8. While responsibility for the anti-poverty strategy lies with DfC, it is vital each NI Executive Department is fully invested in its delivery given the wide-ranging impacts of poverty. The Comptroller and Auditor General's report into child poverty highlights the child-poverty strategy delivered siloed working which led to siloed interventions and ultimately to poor outcomes.

6.9. It is vital the Minister for Communities acts on the recommendation of the Expert Advisory Panel²⁰ appointed by his predecessor and ensures the anti-poverty strategy contains provisions for an audit of the public service costs of poverty. Provision of this information is urgently needed to guarantee the actions of the anti-poverty strategy are appropriately targeted and adequately resourced, with additional funding provided by the Department of Finance to ensure effective and measurable interventions.

²⁰ Recommendations for an Anti-Poverty Strategy: Report of the Expert Advisory Panel, 2020 <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/system/files/publications/communities/dfc-social-inclusion-strategy-anti-poverty-expert-advisory-panel-recommendations.pdf>