

Barnardo's Northern Ireland Written Evidence- Public Accounts Committee Update on Child Poverty

Key Statistics

- Child poverty remains stubbornly high, with around 1 in 4 (110,000) children growing up in poverty in Northern Ireland¹.
- In 2024, one in three (32%) children in Northern Ireland were growing up in food insecure households. Among households experiencing food insecurity, 14% have three or more children, compared with 6% of households in Northern Ireland overall².
- 23% of children are living in relative poverty³.

Reality of Child Poverty in Northern Ireland

The Cost of the School Day

As we heard from the Education Authority in January 2026, the price of school meals would increase for the first time since 2017. The Education Authority (EA) has said it is facing a funding gap of £300m and, unlike previous years, does not expect additional in-year money to address the shortfall. Under savings plans announced by the EA, the cost of a school dinner for primary and special school pupils will go up by 50p from £2.60 to £3.10. Post-primary pupils face price rises of 19% on food they buy from school canteens, while pre-school prices will also go up.

Families are already missing out on free school meals because of the eligibility barriers, and increasing the price of a school meal will only cause more hardship and hunger- *"I can't understand why you get free school meals, if you earn less than £16,000 and you have one child. But if I earn just over £16,000, and I have four kids, it doesn't matter. I've four mouths to feed but we were literally only over that*

¹ Joseph Rowntree Foundation, (2025)- [Poverty in Northern Ireland 2025](#)

² Trussell, (2025)- [Hunger in Northern Ireland](#)

³ Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, (2025)- [Poverty and Income Inequality Report](#)

and so I couldn't get the free school meals. I can't understand that." (Parents, Barnardo's, FG7)

In February 2025, NICCY commissioned analysis of NISRA data on Free School Meals, and found that four in ten (41%) of children in poverty are not eligible for FSM, and that not all children eligible for FSM are living in poverty according to the current methods for measuring income inequalities, highlighting the inadequacy of the current eligibility criteria to target children in poverty⁴.

Increasing the cost of school meals will not only put families into deeper hardship, but will also have consequences for children's educational, physical, and mental wellbeing. This is especially true for families with multiple children in school- in a family of 3 children, primary school meals will increase from £7.80 to £9.30, and for a family with 3 post-primary children, that will be an increase of 57%.

Barnardo's NI opened our Child Poverty Fund in 2025, providing grants to families that are already accessing Barnardo's services across Northern Ireland. Over a third (35%) of emergency payments made were to prevent hunger, while 22% were for clothing and 15% for heating. Many applications have come from families who are in work but still struggle to make ends meet.

School uniforms also pose a significant cost to families, particularly mandatory and branded items. The Children's Society's 2020 survey⁵ (of around 1,000 parents across the UK) found that parents with children in state-maintained schools spent on average £337 per year on school uniform for each secondary school child and £315 per year for each primary school child. The survey also found that nearly a quarter (23%) of parents said that the cost of school uniform had meant their child had worn ill-fitting, unclean or incorrect uniform, and 1 in 8 families reported they had cut back on food and other essentials because of uniform costs.

The Cost of Childcare

Unlike England and Wales, Northern Ireland does not provide 30 hours of free childcare for working parents of 3- and 4-year-olds.

Findings from the Northern Ireland Childcare Survey 2024⁶ show that:

⁴ Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People, (2025)- [Briefing on Free School Meals Eligibility in Northern Ireland](#)

⁵ The Children's Society, (2020)- [The Wrong Blazer 2020](#)

⁶ Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, (2024)- [Childcare in Northern Ireland](#)

- 48% said that their childcare costs were unaffordable, increasing to 55% for households with 3 or more children
- 69% of households said that costs were the most important factor affecting decisions about childcare
- 71% said provision could improve by becoming more affordable. Other common reasons by which provision could improve were extended opening hours for flexibility/shift patterns (46%) and more availability during school holidays (44%)
- Households were more likely (58%) to say parent(s) or guardian(s) work, education or training decisions had changed because of childcare needs
- The most common change to a household's work, education or training was a reduced hours working pattern (69%). Twenty percent changed jobs and 18% could not attend or delayed further or higher training
- The most common reasons for these changes were to look after children (82% of households) or due to the cost of childcare (60% of households)

WRDA and the Women's Policy Group relaunched their "Childcare for All" Campaign in September 2025 with a focus on what is needed from an Early Learning and Childcare Strategy⁷. This includes outcomes in 4 key areas: (1) for all children to have access to high quality childcare (2) investment, support, and fair pay for childcare providers and workers (3) all parents are able to access affordable, accessible, and flexible childcare (4) societal changes to reduce the gender pay gap.

The Cost of the Two-Child Limit

Since its introduction, the two-child limit has been one of the biggest drivers of child poverty, pushing families into hardship. By 2024, more than 48,000 or 1 in 10 children in Northern Ireland live in households affected by the two-child limit, a measure that has hurt families who were already struggling when it was introduced in April 2017⁸.

Scrapping the two-child limit is a step closer to lifting children out of poverty, but we also know that many children and families will continue to face

⁷ Women's Resource and Development Agency, (2025)- [Childcare for All](#)

⁸ End Child Poverty, (2025)- [At the Limit](#)

hardship from additional austerity policies, such as the separate benefits cap, which limits the total amount of benefits a household receives. In the absence of an ambitious budget that can truly lift children and young people out of poverty on an equal basis, the devolved Northern Ireland Assembly must show leadership by allocating additional funds where possible to mitigate against the adverse impacts of child poverty.

Progress on Report Recommendations

The Public Accounts Committee Report on Child Poverty was clear- lessons from the previous Child Poverty Strategy must be learnt from and implemented to urgently tackle child poverty and inform any new anti-poverty strategy. The reports 11 Recommendations outlined the need for a robust anti-poverty strategy, with defined measurements and targets, robust monitoring processes, a fully costed action plan, and clear accountability from government departments, as well as recommending exploring the barriers to implementing the Children's Services Co-Operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 and strengthening engagement with the community and voluntary sector.

Since the report was published, we have seen a draft anti-poverty strategy released for public consultation. Barnardo's NI has been clear that the strategy in its current form is not fit for purpose and lacks the key principles laid out in the Anti-Poverty Strategy Group's Recommendations Paper, including clear and time-bound targets, a lifecycle approach, new actions and clear funding commitments⁹. Over 75 organisations and individuals, including Barnardo's NI, signed an open letter to the Executive regarding the draft strategy, expressing serious concerns with the strategy's failure to fulfil what oversight bodies, including the NI Audit Office and Public Accounts Committee, outline as the basic elements of any strategy¹⁰. Specifically, the draft anti-poverty strategy does not meet the following recommendations from the Public Accounts Committee Report:

An anti-poverty strategy should include: an action plan with clearly defined indicators, measures, and targets; actions which address early intervention and prevention; a fully costed action plan; accountability mechanisms for ongoing review; clear governance and accountability; robust scrutiny and independent monitoring; engagement with people with lived experience; engagement with community and voluntary organisations (Recommendations 2-9, 10 and 11)

⁹ Anti-Poverty Strategy Group, (2025)- [Anti-Poverty Strategy Group Recommendations Paper](#)

¹⁰ Northern Ireland Anti-Poverty Network, (2025)- [Open Letter to the Executive](#)

The Committee also recommended reviewing the untapped potential of the Children's Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015. The Co-op Act is a key mechanism for engagement and collaboration between organisations and departments; in 2025, we saw this Act reach its 10th Anniversary, and we can see from sector feedback and the first report on the operation of the act that we are not maximising its potential. The Children's Law Centre, in partnership with the Centre for Children's Rights at Queen's, hosted an event to mark the 10th Anniversary of the Act¹¹-

"This Act was born from a recognition that children's lives do not sit neatly within departmental silos. A decade later, that truth remains unchanged. This is an important moment to reflect on how far we have come, to consider those most affected and to identify what more must be done to ensure meaningful, joined-up action that genuinely improves children's lives" -Professor Bronagh Byrne, Director of the Centre for Children's Rights at Queen's

"For ten years, the Children's Services Co-operation Act has represented a clear legislative commitment to prioritising children's wellbeing through co-operation. Yet too many children and young people are still experiencing the consequences of fragmented systems and missed opportunities for collaboration.

"Children have been failed because the systems meant to protect them did not work together. Ten years on, children are still falling through the same gaps. We can't keep saying things will change. We need to see it happen." -Fergal McFerran, Policy and Public Affairs Manager at the Children's Law Centre

We believe that the Northern Ireland Executive, the Assembly, and all its committees have the opportunity to produce a robust and effective anti-poverty strategy, one that is informed by lived experience, fully costed and actioned, with timelines and clear accountability and co-production with the community and voluntary sector. We are committed to working together constructively to take bold action to eradicate poverty in Northern Ireland.

Engagement with the Community and Voluntary Sector

Barnardo's NI participated in the Co-Design Group process over the course of 2021 and 2022; As members of the Co-Design Group, we became increasingly concerned at progress on the development of a draft strategy. Most significantly, group members were concerned with the co-design process, including a lack of clarity as to how the Co-Design Group's contribution was to be considered and

¹¹ Queen's University Belfast, (2025)- [Marking 10 years of Children's Services Co-operation Act](#)

reflected in any recommendations to the Northern Ireland Executive on the Anti-Poverty Strategy's direction and content. The Co-Design Group, with agreement from the Communities Minister, developed a recommendations paper independently from the Department to inform the consideration of the draft strategy. The paper, updated in 2025, can be found [here](#).

When the draft anti-poverty strategy was released, Barnardo's Senior Policy and Public Affairs Lead Trása Canavan was clear that *"We haven't had any engagement with, either as individual organisations or as the anti-poverty strategy group, the minister or his officials on the development of the draft strategy, ... We really hoped that would have informed the draft but I can't tell you what's in it because we haven't been engaged in the process of the development of this paper"*.¹²

Since the release of the draft strategy, Barnardo's NI has had some engagement with the Communities Minister and Department officials as part of the Anti-Poverty Strategy Group to discuss the key proposals for an anti-poverty strategy already set out by the Group in our recommendations paper. The community and voluntary sector has been clear in its united voice that the draft anti-poverty strategy does not deliver for the people of Northern Ireland. We continue to work with sector colleagues to share resources, platform lived experience, and collaborate on making the evidence-based case for a robust anti-poverty strategy that presents a vital opportunity to address societal challenges through intentional and productive co-design and co-production.

Our Key Asks

- Full implementation of the recommendations of the Anti-Poverty Strategy Group
- The expansion of free school meals provision
- We call on the NI Executive to progress on scrapping the two-child limit, and in the meantime immediately progress mitigation of the two-child limit
- To deliver a reduction in the number of children living in poverty, a new weekly Child Payment should be introduced, similar to that in place in Scotland.

¹² BBC News, (2025)- [Anti-poverty strategy could 'go further' says first minister](#)



We look forward to continuing engagement with the Committee and the wider Assembly.

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