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Communities
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Daniel McCrossan

Chairperson, Public Accounts Committee

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Via email: Committee.publicaccounts@niassembly.gov.uk

Dear Daniel,

**REQUEST FROM PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMITTEE TO PROVIDE AN UPDATE ON
PROGRESS MADE ON THE EXECUTIVE'S ANTI-POVERTY STRATEGY**

Thank you for your letter dated 13 March 2026 and your request for an update on progress in relation to the Executive's Anti-Poverty Strategy following briefing from DfC Officials on the Memorandum of Reply on PAC's inquiry into 'Child Poverty in Northern Ireland'.

Responses to the consultation, including online survey responses, email submissions, and feedback received during face-to-face engagement sessions were reviewed and collated by DfC officials into a draft report titled "Consultation on the Executive's Anti-Poverty Strategy – Summary of Public Consultation" which was published on 8 April 2026 and a copy of which is enclosed with this response. This report provides substantial detail on the responses received from a range of stakeholders including the public, community and voluntary sector and local government. It is worth highlighting that a number of stakeholders in the sector have welcomed the report we produced as being honest and open.

The report is also available at the following link - <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/consultation-executives-anti-poverty-strategy-2025-2035-summary-public-consultation>.

With over 200 respondents and 1,300 pages of written responses you will appreciate a wide range of opinions were received. Some of the key areas highlighted in the responses included the following:



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- Alternative suggestions for the structure of the strategy including suggestions for a lifecycle approach, a rights-based approach and a trauma informed approach.
- The need for strong governance mechanisms.
- The importance of clear targets and indicators of progress.
- That the strategy, and its action plan must be informed by lived experience of poverty.
- The value of cross departmental and partnership working.
- Finally, many respondents highlighted the needs of specific groups and the importance of addressing issues of intersectionality.

The Minister shared an early version of this report with his Ministerial colleagues in December 2025, and all Departments were asked to consider in detail the summary report and new actions that could be included in the Anti-Poverty Strategy, including those which could be taken forward if additional funding was available. This was to allow Minister to collate a range of new actions for potential inclusion to inform a revised draft Strategy for consideration by the Executive, including actions which may require a bid for funding. Officials within the Department have been engaging with their counterparts on how best to reflect the consultation results, in light of departmental priorities and available budgets.

The Minister has stated that he takes seriously the views of everyone who has responded to the Strategy consultation and that the draft Strategy would be subject to change. He has asked me and my colleagues to look in detail at the draft Strategy and how it can be improved to strike a balance between our shared ambition to alleviate poverty in all its forms, and the practical reality of doing this in a highly constrained financial environment.

He has requested that this work is taken forward with urgency and ambition, alongside the development of an Action Plan to support timely delivery of the strategy's objectives.

The Minister has stated that the draft Strategy does not currently fully reflect the scale of our intent and ambition on fuel poverty reduction. As the Committee will be aware, officials in the Department have been working on the development of a new Warm Healthy Homes Programme, which will modernise and, it is hoped, expand on the work of the Affordable Warmth Programme. Given the exposure of the poorest households in Northern Ireland to a highly volatile energy market, and in particular their exposure to the cost of home heating oil, the Minister believes the final version of the Strategy can be more ambitious in setting out the interventions we can take in relation to fuel poverty.

The Minister has also instructed officials to explore opportunities to achieve greater value for public money from existing programmes funded through the Department, with a view to releasing capacity to fund anti-poverty initiatives.

With a view to making necessary substantial changes, the Minister has asked that we:

- Maximise all opportunities for collaboration and shared delivery across Government, Local Government and broader partnerships.
- Fully exploit effective measures to prevent entry into and support exit from poverty – in the Department for Communities this includes vital work on employability, on housing and on fuel poverty programmes.
- Set targets and indicators which are within our ability to deliver and which will measure progress and keep us accountable.

- Include a costed, detailed action plan in due course.

In relation to your query on the proposed governance and accountability arrangements to oversee implementation of the Strategy, the Department is committed to ensuring robust monitoring and scrutiny of the Strategy.

The draft Anti-Poverty Strategy includes a proposal for the establishment of an oversight Board chaired by the Head of the Civil Service and attended by senior Civil Service representatives from across all departments. This Board will drive delivery of the objectives, ensuring appropriate resource is attached, with clear milestones for indicating progress. As Minister Lyons has asked me to consider targets and milestones for the strategy, I am using this opportunity to consider the optimum approach to ensuring appropriate governance, and will provide you with further detail once this work has been completed in the coming weeks.

Consideration of the effectiveness of the Strategy over its lifespan, will be essential. A formal mid-point review of the Anti-Poverty Strategy will be carried out by the Department for Communities and other Executive departments during its fifth year of operation. The findings of this report will be approved by the Executive and published on the Department for Communities website. These arrangements are intended to allow the Strategy to be flexible and reactive to emerging issues and needs.

With reference to your query on the Department's proposed engagement strategy and



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the contribution of the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS), the Department recognises the essential role in tackling poverty of our delivery partners across society. To be effective, the final Strategy will require partnership work with the voluntary and community sector, local councils, churches/faith organisations and businesses. Indeed, the Department already works hand in hand with many of these areas and work has been undertaken with other key partners during and after the consultation. During the consultation officials involved a range of organisations such as Children in NI, the Rural Community Network, the Salvation Army, NI Community and Voluntary Association, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, the Trussell Trust, Disability Action, Age NI and the Woman's Support Network, amongst others. This ongoing engagement with the VCS will be built on, developed and where possible embedded throughout the lifespan of the Anti-Poverty Strategy including through an engagement strategy that identifies the best approaches to engaging those with lived experience of socio-economic disadvantage.

In March 2026, the Communities Committee shared a pre-publication copy of their "Report on Engagement with Local Government on the draft Anti-Poverty Strategy". The report was helpful and officials have committed to ensuring that the Report's recommendations are strongly considered for inclusion in the final Strategy, where possible. The Department has engaged with a broad range of input from local councils during the development of the Anti-Poverty Strategy, as part of the public consultation.

In terms of embedding the role of delivery partners, at this stage the finalised membership of the Anti-Poverty Strategy Board has not been agreed. Additional membership of the Board and how it will engage partners such as local councils will be considered by the Executive and by the Board itself, once established.



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I trust you find this reply helpful, and look forward to continuing to provide further information on progress.

Yours sincerely,

Grainia Long

Permanent Secretary



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