



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

**Public Accounts Committee**

# Report on Child Poverty in Northern Ireland

Ordered by the Public Accounts Committee to be published 17 October 2024.

This report is embargoed until 00.01am on 7 November 2024

Report: NIA 54/22-27 Public Accounts Committee

# Contents

Powers and Membership .....	4
List of Abbreviations and Acronyms used in this Report .....	5
Executive Summary .....	6
The Child Poverty Strategy failed in many key areas.....	8
The Committee insists that lessons are learned for any new anti-poverty strategy .....	10
Urgent action is needed to tackle child poverty in Northern Ireland .....	11
Summary of Recommendations .....	12
Introduction .....	15
Background.....	15
The Child Poverty Strategy had no impact on child poverty levels.....	16
The Child Poverty Strategy was not sufficiently targeted and funded .....	17
Children were not at the heart of the Child Poverty Strategy .....	18
The Child Poverty Strategy did not focus on preventing child poverty .....	20
Overall responsibility and accountability arrangements were unacceptably poor .....	21
Annual reporting and monitoring was not meaningful .....	23
Much more progress is needed on joined up working across government and with the community and voluntary sector .....	25
Relationships with important community and voluntary partners have been damaged .....	26

There is an urgent need for an anti-poverty strategy, but the Committee has serious concerns about timescales and engagement .....	28
A new anti-poverty strategy must be fully costed .....	31
The Committee is concerned that lessons from the child poverty strategy have not been learned .....	32
Links to Appendices .....	33
Appendix 1: Minutes of Proceedings.....	33
Appendix 2: Minutes of Evidence.....	33
Appendix 3: Correspondence .....	33
Appendix 4: Other Documents .....	33
Appendix 5: List of Witnesses that gave evidence to the Committee.....	33

# Powers and Membership

## Powers

The Public Accounts Committee is a Standing Committee established in accordance with Standing Orders under Section 60(3) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. It is the statutory function of the Public Accounts Committee to consider the accounts, and reports on accounts laid before the Assembly.

The Public Accounts Committee is appointed under Assembly Standing Order No. 56 of the Standing Orders for the Northern Ireland Assembly. It has the power to send for persons, papers and records and to report from time to time. Neither the Chairperson nor Deputy Chairperson of the Committee shall be a member of the same political party as the Minister of Finance or of any junior minister appointed to the Department of Finance.

## Membership

The Committee has 9 members, including a Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson, and a quorum of five members. The membership of the Committee is as follows:

- Mr Daniel McCrossan MLA (Chairperson)
- Ms Cheryl Brownlee MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
- Mr Cathal Boylan MLA
- Mr Tom Buchanan MLA
- Mr Pádraig Delargy MLA
- Ms Diane Forsythe MLA
- Mr Colm Gildernew MLA
- Mr David Honeyford MLA
- Mr John Stewart MLA<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>With effect from 5 March 2024 Mr John Stewart replaced Mr Robbie Butler

# List of Abbreviations and Acronyms used in this Report

the Assembly:	the Northern Ireland Assembly
C&AG:	Comptroller and Auditor General
the Department:	Department for Communities
The Executive's Child Poverty Strategy:	the Strategy
NIAO:	The Northern Ireland Audit Office

# Executive Summary

1. The Public Accounts Committee (the Committee) met on on 13, 20 and 27 June 2024 to consider the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) report “Child Poverty in Northern Ireland”. The main witnesses were:
  - Mr Colum Boyle, Department for Communities
  - Ms Emer Morelli, Department for Communities
  - Mr George Sampson, Department for Communities
  - Mr Paddy Rooney, Department for Communities
  - Mr Chris Quinn, Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People
  - Ms Trása Canavan, Barnardo’s NI
  - Ms Goretti Horgan, Ulster University
  - Ms Dorinnia Carville, Northern Ireland Audit Office
  - Mr Stuart Stevenson, Department of Finance
2. Ensuring that children experience a good quality of life, with equal access to opportunities is a key priority for the Northern Ireland Assembly. Tackling child poverty and the serious challenges that exist for the most vulnerable in our society is therefore a vitally important topic for this Committee. It is simply unacceptable that almost one in four of our children now live in relative poverty, and around nine per cent of children live in low-income households that cannot afford basic goods and essential activities.
3. It is important to remember that behind each of these statistics are real families and real children. Committee members are keenly aware of the impact and stress felt by families in their constituencies who are struggling to heat their homes and put food on the table and that the effects of poverty can be devastating. We are hugely disappointed that families and children were not at

the heart of the Child Poverty Strategy and at times the Department appeared to be too far removed from children and families experiencing poverty

4. The Committee heard compelling evidence that growing up in poverty has a significant impact on a range of outcomes. Studies have shown that children in deprived areas are likely to live between 11 and 15 years less in good health than their more affluent peers, and children living in poverty are four times more likely to experience mental health problems by the age of 11. Childhood poverty does not exist in isolation and can lead to long-term disadvantage. Children growing up in poverty are more likely to experience poverty in adulthood, mainly due to lower levels of educational attainment meaning that finding well paid work is more difficult. The NIAO report also pointed to estimates of the significant costs to the public purse of dealing with child poverty, ranging from £825 million to £1 billion per year.
5. Tackling poverty is a cross-cutting issue and therefore an Executive-wide responsibility. The Executive's Child Poverty Strategy (the Strategy) was originally developed by the Office of the First and Deputy First Minister before being passed to the Department for Communities (the Department) for monitoring and reporting. The main aims of the Strategy were to reduce the number of children in poverty and to reduce the impact of poverty on children. It also contained four high level outcomes relating to economic wellbeing; learning and achievement; health; and safe, stable, secure environments. The Strategy ran from 2016-20 and was extended to May 2022, at which point it concluded. Since then, no strategies for child poverty or anti-poverty strategy have been in place.
6. A key aim of the Child Poverty Strategy was to "turn the curve" and reduce the number of children living in poverty, however there was little sustained improvement in poverty levels over its lifetime. Relative child poverty consistently hovered around 20 per cent, before rising to 24 per cent in 2022-23, while absolute child poverty fluctuated around 17 per cent before increasing to 19 per cent in 2022-23. Combined low income and material deprivation was 9 per cent in both 2015-16 and 2022-23.

7. We consider that delivery of the Child Poverty Strategy has been characterised by failure – failure to turn the curve and reduce child poverty, failure to monitor outcomes effectively, failure of collective working and accountability, failure to engage with children and the community and voluntary sectors, and now a failure to produce a new anti-poverty strategy.

## **The Child Poverty Strategy failed in many key areas**

8. Despite the importance of tackling child poverty and the significant costs of dealing with its impacts, there was no ring-fenced budget attached to implement the Child Poverty Strategy. The Committee heard that the absence of ring-fenced budgets severely limited departments' ability to implement new schemes or interventions and so the Strategy was largely a list of interventions that were already in place prior to 2016. The Committee considers that a Strategy which does not have specific resources devoted to it is never going to be as effective as it could be.
9. The Strategy lacked targets to reduce child poverty levels and there was insufficient focus on specific actions which could have made the biggest difference. Despite the stated aim to reduce the number of children living in poverty, there were no specific poverty reduction targets in the Strategy. Instead, the goal was to “turn the curve” and change the data in the right direction. The Committee heard conflicting evidence on the need for targets. We were surprised to hear from Departmental Officials their view that having specific targets risked a focus on increasing the incomes of those nearest the poverty line which might lead to those who are deepest in poverty being left behind. In contrast, the Anti-Poverty Expert Panel and the Co-Design group, which were tasked with providing advice to the Department on a new anti-poverty strategy, both advocated for clear, timebound targets, supported by funding and monitored by an independent body such as an anti-poverty commission.
10. Monitoring arrangements for the Strategy, also lacked focus. The Department produced annual reports on the delivery of the Strategy. These reports were



typically hundreds of pages long, describing a vast array of interventions, schemes, and actions. The Committee did not always see clear links between some of these actions and the reduction of poverty and believes that this very broad focus clearly prevented the Department from identifying the actions that made the biggest impact and ultimately from properly assessing the effectiveness of the Strategy as a whole.

11. The Committee was concerned to hear evidence that preventative and early intervention measures were not prioritised. The impact of poverty is felt from a very early stage in a child's development and early intervention and prevention are key to reducing the long-term effects of childhood poverty. However, many of the strategic actions focused on improving the health and wellbeing of children living in poverty, rather than preventing them from falling into poverty in the first place. The Committee contends that there is a strong invest to save argument for prevention and early intervention measures, in addition to the impact on children's lives.
12. There was a lack of flexibility in the way the Strategy was implemented and monitored. Departmental officials told the Committee that they inherited the Strategy from another department and were unable to make changes to it once it was in place. The Committee does not accept this position. The Committee considers the overarching aims of the Strategy did not need to change, but there was scope throughout the lifetime of the Strategy to make changes to the underlying actions implemented in pursuit of its aims. The Committee is frustrated that the Department failed to implement effective monitoring arrangements to meaningfully assess the impact actions were having and identify the need for change on an ongoing basis. Opportunities were missed to make a difference as the Strategy progressed.
13. The Committee believes that accountability and oversight arrangements for the delivery of this important strategy were not strong enough. The Department repeatedly told the Committee that Child Poverty was not its strategy, and it was not responsible for the delivery of overall actions and outcomes. Instead, individual actions were a matter for each department and overall oversight and responsibility lay with the Executive as a whole. The Committee understands that Executive-led strategies have inherently complex governance and

accountability arrangements but it is concerning that no-one appeared to be willing to take overall responsibility for delivering the Strategy and that departments could not work together effectively to deliver a key priority of the Executive. In the Committee's view a lack of leadership by the Department, who has overall responsibility for developing, coordinating and driving the Executive's priorities for tackling poverty, contributed to the lack of progress.

## **The Committee insists that lessons are learned for any new anti-poverty strategy**

14. A new anti-poverty strategy presents an important opportunity to implement lessons learned from the Child Poverty Strategy and make improvements in key areas, such as accountability, joined-up working and effective outcomes monitoring. However, the Committee is very concerned that the shortcomings of the Child Poverty Strategy are being repeated in Anti-Poverty Strategy development and that a new anti-poverty strategy will be similarly ineffective.
15. The continuing lack of urgency in producing a draft anti-poverty strategy is not acceptable. The Child Poverty Strategy ended in May 2022, over two years ago. Since then, child poverty levels have risen so that almost a quarter of all children now live in relative poverty. The Department has a clear remit to bring forward an Anti-Poverty Strategy to the Communities Minister, and subsequently to the Executive. Evidence presented to the Committee was characterized by what the Department would and should do, but there was little in the way of tangible progress. It is particularly concerning that in the five months since the Assembly returned there had been no meetings of the cross departmental group and no attempts to meet with or update key stakeholders such as the Co-Design group. The Committee is left with the impression that producing an anti-poverty strategy is simply not a priority for the Department and is not convinced that it will be delivered in the timescales suggested.
16. The Committee recognizes the vital services provided by the community and voluntary sector to those in need, especially children. We were therefore alarmed to hear about the impact of the co-design process on relationships with

these organisations. In particular, that the Co-Design group has not been contacted since the return of the Assembly and does not know how its work has impacted the draft strategy reflects very poorly on the Department and raises questions as to the Department's approach to co-design. We urge the Department to re-establish regular and meaningful communication with the Co-Design Group and to ensure that any potential damage is repaired.

## **Urgent action is needed to tackle child poverty in Northern Ireland**

17. The Committee is frustrated with the lack of progress made on an anti-poverty strategy in the two years since the Child Poverty Strategy ended. The Department seems to be waiting for everyone else, for other departments, for the NIAO report and even for the outcome of this inquiry, before it takes action and delivers a draft strategy. This is not acceptable, and the Committee calls on the Department to ensure that an anti-poverty strategy, including a clear action plan, is prioritised and provided to the Minister for presentation to the Executive as a matter of urgency. Even more importantly, the development of an anti-poverty strategy should be seen as only the starting point for the implementation and ongoing monitoring of targeted actions which reduce child poverty.

# Summary of Recommendations

## Recommendation 1

18. **The Committee is determined to hold the Department to its commitment of bringing forward an anti-poverty strategy in this financial year. The Department should therefore report back to the Committee by the end of January 2025 to confirm that timescales are on track and an anti-poverty strategy will be provided to the Minister for consideration and presentation to the Executive by 31 March 2025.**

## Recommendation 2

19. **There is a clear need for targets and outcomes that are quantitative, qualitative and timebound to properly measure performance and demonstrate the impact of strategic actions. The Committee recommends that an anti-poverty strategy to be presented includes an action plan with a range of clearly defined indicators, measures and targets aimed at quantifying and reducing poverty. As part of this process, the Department should learn from good practice and success in other jurisdictions.**

## Recommendation 3

20. **There is a strong argument for investing in long-term, preventative measures which would reduce the number of children falling into poverty and therefore save public money in the future. The Committee recommends that the action plan prepared with an anti-poverty strategy incorporates clear actions which address early intervention and prevention.**

## Recommendation 4

21. **Despite rising levels of child poverty in Northern Ireland and the clear impact this has on outcomes and opportunities, the Child Poverty strategy was not properly funded. To allow the Executive to make informed decisions about budget allocations, the Committee recommends that the action plan prepared with an anti-poverty strategy is properly**

costed, and outlines which specific actions can be delivered from existing budgets and those which require further dedicated funding to be made available.

## **Recommendation 5**

22. **Continuous review is an important part of accountability and monitoring processes. The Committee recommends an anti-poverty strategy should include accountability mechanisms to ensure ongoing review and impact assessment of underlying actions, including the direct involvement of those with lived experience, to identify aspects which are not working as intended and need to be amended.**

## **Recommendation 6**

23. **In preparing an anti-poverty strategy, the Committee recommends the Department should clearly outline and communicate the governance and accountability arrangements for delivering actions, including clarity over the lead department role and how it will work effectively with others in delivering the strategy and associated actions.**

## **Recommendation 7**

24. **The Committee recommends that the Department should explore options for independent monitoring to provide more robust scrutiny and monitoring of outcomes and bring a recommendation to the Minister for consideration no later than 6 months after an anti-poverty strategy is launched.**

## **Recommendation 8**

25. **The monitoring and reporting mechanisms for the Child Poverty Strategy were not effective and this means there has been no assessment of the cumulative impact of the Strategy. The Committee recommends that in developing an anti-poverty strategy, the Department should ensure that it designs monitoring mechanisms that are more streamlined and focused on achieving outcomes.**

## **Recommendation 9**

26. **The Committee considers that there is significant untapped potential in the Children’s Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 that would allow organisations to pool resources and share outcomes. However bureaucracy and administrative burdens, alongside a lack of detailed guidance, has limited its implementation and effectiveness. The Committee recommends that the Department of Finance works with other departments to review the barriers to the Children’s Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 and by December 2025 produces an agreed action plan to reduce and remove these barriers.**

## **Recommendation 10**

27. **The community and voluntary sector is a vital partner in delivering effective services for children and representing those with lived experience. The Committee therefore urges the Department to take a proactive role in effective engagement with the sector to improve relationships and ensure those with lived experience continue to be engaged through the life of an anti-poverty strategy and the ongoing achievement of real outcomes. The Committee recommends the Department puts in place such an engagement strategy with the community and voluntary sector no later than 6 months after an anti-poverty strategy is launched.**

## **Recommendation 11**

28. **The Department should ensure that it has a comprehensive list of those community and voluntary sector organisations currently delivering services for children in poverty and proactively engages with these organisations to inform new anti-poverty action plans in design and delivery phases.**

## Introduction

29. The Public Accounts Committee (the Committee) met on 13, 20 and 27 June 2024 to consider the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) report “Child Poverty in Northern Ireland”. The main witnesses were:
- Mr Colum Boyle, Department for Communities
  - Ms Emer Morelli, Department for Communities
  - Mr George Sampson, Department for Communities
  - Mr Paddy Rooney, Department for Communities
  - Mr Chris Quinn, Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People
  - Ms Trása Canavan, Barnardo’s NI
  - Ms Goretti Horgan, Ulster University
  - Ms Dorinnia Carville, Northern Ireland Audit Office
  - Mr Stuart Stevenson, Department of Finance

## Background

30. Almost one in four children live in relative poverty in Northern Ireland, and around nine per cent of children live in low-income households that cannot afford basic goods and essential activities. The long-term trend shows that children are at a higher risk of living in poverty than any other demographic in Northern Ireland, in both relative and absolute measures. There is compelling evidence that growing up in poverty has a significant impact on a range of outcomes. Studies have shown that children in deprived areas are likely to live between 11 and 15 years less in good health than their more affluent peers, and poor children are four times more likely to experience mental health problems by the age of 11.

31. By the time they reach primary school, children from low-income families are already up to a year behind middle-income children in terms of cognitive skills, and this gap widens to being about 19 months behind the most well-off children. By secondary school, children who receive Free School Meals are twice as likely to leave school with no GCSEs than their more affluent peers. Childhood poverty does not exist in isolation and can lead to long-term disadvantage. Poorer children are more likely to experience poverty in adulthood, mainly due to lower levels of educational attainment meaning that finding well paid work is more difficult.
32. There are also very significant costs to the public purse. The NIAO report sets out estimates made by a number of organisations that the wider societal costs of child poverty range from around £825 million to £1 billion per year. Around half of these costs are due to direct spend on public services such as greater intervention from social services and additional health service use to tackle poorer health. The remaining costs are because poor children are more likely to become poor adults and then they earn less, pay less tax, are at higher risk of unemployment and might need more public support like benefits across their lifetime.

## **The Child Poverty Strategy had no impact on child poverty levels**

33. The latest figures show that almost a quarter of children in Northern Ireland live in relative poverty, and this figure has scarcely changed since the implementation of the Strategy in 2016. Instead, from 2016-17 to 2021-22 relative and absolute poverty levels, and combined low income and material deprivation levels all fluctuated around a relative narrow band, before increasing significantly in 2022-23. The Strategy appears to have made no real difference to child poverty levels. In fact, levels are higher across all measures than when the Strategy began.
34. When the Committee asked officials why poverty rates had remained so high over the course of the Strategy, there was no convincing answer. Officials pointed to other regions which have struggled to reduce child poverty levels, for



example Scotland and New Zealand, despite having ambitious, well-funded strategies. The Permanent Secretary described the Strategy as a “useful starting point” which focused on a lot of things that were already being done. The Committee accepts that turning the curve on poverty is complex and is unlikely to be achieved in the lifetime of a single, short-term strategy. At the same time, we are discouraged by the evidence presented by officials, particularly the lack of ambition to reduce child poverty levels and that at times the Department appeared to be too far removed from children and families experiencing poverty

35. The Committee also heard that the statistics do not always tell full story. The NIAO report shows that there has also been little progress on health and education outcomes for children. Studies show that poor children are four times more likely to experience mental health problems by the age of eleven. Committee members are also concerned about the increases in foodbank use. The Trussell Trust reports that its foodbanks distributed over 90,000 emergency food parcels in 2023-24, the highest number that its network in Northern Ireland has ever distributed and an 11 per cent increase from the prior year. Over 38,000 food parcels with provided for children, an increase of over 150 per cent since 2018-19.

## **The Child Poverty Strategy was not sufficiently targeted and funded**

36. Despite the significant impact of childhood poverty on a range of outcomes, the Strategy was not supported by any ring-fenced funding. This meant that it was almost impossible to invest in new, targeted interventions aimed at reducing child poverty, and instead the Strategy was largely a list of actions and interventions that various departments were already delivering. Whilst the Committee commends much of the ongoing work, it is alarmed by the lack of investment in such an important strategy.
37. Whilst there was no new, direct investment in the Child Poverty Strategy, the economic costs of poverty are significant. Witnesses from the community and voluntary sector rightly pointed out that that we are already paying the price of

poverty as a society, when we deal with the consequences such as poorer health, educational and justice outcomes. They put forward compelling arguments in favour of investing in prevention and alleviation measures to save money in the longer term, as well as reducing future harms caused to children as a result of growing up in poverty.

38. The Permanent Secretary acknowledged that the Strategy focused on a lot of things that were already being done and told the Committee this was because the strategy did not receive additional funding at any stage, and this limited departments' capacity to do more. He also referred to the backdrop of Brexit, Covid-19, austerity, and political instability as making it difficult to deliver the Strategy. This is the second inquiry where the Committee has heard that a vital, cross-cutting strategy has not been properly funded. The Permanent Secretary also expressed his concerns that that a new anti-poverty strategy will not be possible without funding, telling the Committee "you will get what you have always got". We cannot continue to produce strategies with no means to deliver them.

## **Children were not at the heart of the Child Poverty Strategy**

39. The overarching aims of the Strategy were to reduce the number of children in poverty and reduce the impact of poverty on children. Despite these aims, no specific poverty reduction targets or timescales were included in the Strategy. Instead, the goal was to "turn the curve" and change the data in the right direction. Four high-level outcomes were included:
- Families experience economic wellbeing;
  - Children in poverty learn and achieve;
  - Children in poverty are healthy; and
  - Children in poverty live in safe, secure, and stable environments.

Each outcome was supported by three population level indicators to determine whether they had been achieved. The Committee notes that three of the four

outcomes focused on the wellbeing of children who remained in poverty, rather than lifting them out of it or indeed preventing it in the first place.

40. The Department produced annual reports on the Strategy, outlining measures taken by all departments and their effect. In the absence of specific targets, the Strategy lacked focus and annual reporting became a list of everything that departments were already doing. The NIAO report highlighted various issues with the strategy stemming from this approach, including interventions which were not clearly linked to outcomes, where participation levels were low and which predated the Strategy, therefore would have been delivered anyway.
41. The Committee heard conflicting evidence about the effectiveness of targets. The Department told us that setting targets based on income measures risks focusing activity and intervention on households that are closest to the poverty line – those that can be lifted out of poverty quickly, and could inadvertently lead to those who are in deeper poverty being left behind. By contrast, witnesses from the community and voluntary sector and the Children’s Commissioner told us that a strategy needs to have clear targets, with timelines. They highlighted the recommendations from both the Anti-Poverty Expert Panel and the Co-Design Group, which were appointed by the Department to advise on the new strategy, which called for clear, timebound targets, supported by funding and monitored independently to hold departments, and ultimately the Executive to account.
42. Whilst acknowledging the Department’s concerns about targets which focus on income-based measures, the Committee believes that a Strategy without defined targets and timescales for poverty reduction is unlikely to be successful. It is also very difficult to monitor and evaluate the impact of a strategy and determine whether value for money has been achieved in the absence of measurable objectives or targets. During its evidence session the Department acknowledged that there was “too much noise” in the old strategy and that the scattergun approach adopted meant it did not focus on the key levers that would turn the dial on child poverty. We are all in agreement that more focus on a smaller number of specific, evidenced actions is required in a future anti-poverty strategy.

43. We also heard concerns about single, narrow measures used to assess and monitor child poverty. The most commonly used measures – absolute and relative poverty – are income-based and do not reflect the reality of being poor. Persistence and depth of poverty are not routinely monitored and published, even though these are arguably much more damaging to children in the long term. We were pleased to hear about the work the Department is involved in developing a new poverty metric with the Department for Work and Pensions which will account for more inescapable costs and potentially reflect a broader measure of poverty. We urge the Department to review the measures it monitors and reports against to ensure they adequately reflect the breadth, depth and persistence of child poverty.

**There is a clear need for targets and outcomes that are quantitative, qualitative and timebound to properly measure performance and demonstrate the impact of strategic actions. The Committee recommends that an anti-poverty strategy to be presented includes an action plan with a range of clearly defined indicators, measures and targets aimed at quantifying and reducing poverty. As part of this process, the Department should learn from good practice and success in other jurisdictions.**

## **The Child Poverty Strategy did not focus on preventing child poverty**

44. The concept of investing to save is a focus of this Committee. There is clear evidence that investing at an early stage of a child's life has the potential to make a huge impact and to save public money further down the line, for example on health and justice interventions. The NIAO report highlights that most of the actions in the Strategy focused on improving the health and wellbeing of children already living in poverty, rather than attempting to prevent poverty in the first place. Witnesses presented clear arguments on the need to invest more resources at the outset, rather than paying for the consequences of poverty later down the line. This is supported by economic research which shows that short-term costs of early intervention are offset by long-term reductions in the need for special education and social services, better health outcomes, lower criminal justice costs and increased productivity.

45. Officials acknowledged that not enough was done to develop prevention strategies and that when resources are limited, the most discretionary work is the first to be cut. The Permanent Secretary assured the Committee that lessons have been learned in this regard and that prevention, particularly in the early years, will be a focus on the wider anti-poverty space in future. However, the Department was not able to give any commitment to the level or scope of investment in early intervention and prevention as it is up to ministers and the Executive to decide, and the funding available.

**There is a strong argument for investing in long-term, preventative measures which would reduce the number of children falling into poverty and therefore save public money in the future. The Committee recommends that the action plan prepared with an anti-poverty strategy incorporates clear actions which address early intervention and prevention.**

## **Overall responsibility and accountability arrangements were unacceptably poor**

46. Tackling poverty is a cross-cutting issue and therefore an Executive-wide responsibility. The Department consistently emphasized that its role was to monitor and report on activities within the Strategy, and that it was not responsible for actions or outcomes delivered by other departments. Furthermore, the Department told the Committee that it inherited the Child Poverty Strategy and its governance arrangements and was unable to change these. Instead, the Department told us that it “let it roll and take effect” and that its role was to be “responsible for ensuring that governance was maintained as far as it could be”. We are alarmed at the very narrow view the Department appears to have taken in terms of its role of as the lead department, telling the Committee “this was not our Strategy”. The Committee believes that a hands-off approach and lack of ownership was adopted from the outset, and this has contributed to the lack of progress on child poverty levels.
47. The limited governance structures that were in place were not maintained for the lifetime of the Strategy. Officials told us that the cross-departmental

outcome delivery group met over the course of 2016 to 2019, and departmental leads were present. After 2020, meetings ceased, partly because focus had shifted to developing an anti-poverty strategy. However, the Child Poverty Strategy continued until 2022, meaning that for almost half the lifetime of this strategy, this important governance mechanism was not operational. The Committee is hugely concerned that child poverty has fallen through the cracks.

48. The Department outlined a lack of flexibility was an issue as the Strategy was inherited from another department. The Department told the Committee this did not allow it the agility to respond to the economic shocks that emerged from the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent cost of living crisis, and adapt the Strategy accordingly. It appears that the actions within the Strategy therefore rolled on with little assessment as to whether they were making any tangible difference to children and families in poverty. Officials told us that they delivered what was in the Strategy at the time, but also raised a fundamental question as to whether the Strategy was the right approach to eradicating child poverty. It is striking that these questions were not considered and addressed over the lifetime of the Strategy. The Committee believes that there was sufficient flexibility to adapt actions implemented in pursuit of the Strategy aims and ultimately improve outcomes for children living in poverty. Unfortunately, this flexibility and opportunity to improve was not realised during the lifetime of the Strategy.

**Continuous review is an important part of accountability and monitoring processes. The Committee recommends an anti-poverty strategy should include accountability mechanisms to ensure regular assessment of the effectiveness and impact of underlying actions, including the direct involvement of those with lived experience, to identify aspects which are not working as intended and need to be amended.**

49. Structures established to develop an anti-poverty strategy have also stalled. A cross-departmental working group was established in January 2021, led by the Department, with senior officials from each department. Its purpose was to support the Department to develop and draft an anti-poverty strategy and action plan. The Committee was alarmed to learn that this group has not met since February 2022. Officials told us that work is in place to bring the group back and referred to the need for the “right people, at the right grade, who are decision-

makers to be in the group so as to not fall back into ways of the past". We were concerned by the implication that previous groups have not always contained the right people to enable decision-making, yet no attempt seems to have been made to correct this at the time.

50. While the Child Poverty Strategy and future anti-poverty strategy are Executive strategies, with roles and responsibilities shared across departments, the Committee contends that a lead department role should be defined, established and assigned to champion and drive forward these strategies with NICS colleagues. The Permanent Secretary outlined the range of responsibilities and priorities within his Department and the Committee was concerned that child poverty and an anti-poverty strategy have not received sufficient focus.

**In preparing an anti-poverty strategy, the Committee recommends the Department should clearly outline and communicate the governance and accountability arrangements for delivering actions, including clarity over the lead department role and how it will work effectively with others in delivering the strategy and associated actions.**

**The Committee recommends that the Department should explore options for independent monitoring to provide more robust scrutiny and monitoring of outcomes, and bring a recommendation to the Minister for consideration no later than 6 months after an anti-poverty strategy is launched.**

## **Annual reporting and monitoring was not meaningful**

51. Outcomes-based accountability (OBA) seeks to place the wellbeing of the population at the centre of policy and decision-making. The Executive has committed to tracking progress for programmes and policies using performance accountability which considers: how much did we do, how well did we do it and is anyone better off? However, adopting this approach requires clear, measurable outcomes to report on. The lack of focus on key actions that were measurable and timebound meant that attempts at OBA and reporting on the Child Poverty Strategy were poor.

52. The Department produced annual reports on the Child Poverty Strategy which ran to hundreds of pages describing almost every action, initiative, or scheme that departments were doing that could reasonably be linked to poverty. In some cases, the links between actions and poverty reduction were tenuous at best. Whilst the question of “how much did we do?” was well covered, there were few attempts to assess how well programmes worked and how many people were better off meaning that the overall impact of the Strategy is not known. The Committee believes that the annual reporting process became a bureaucratic, box-ticking exercise, rather than a meaningful assessment of performance.
53. When asked about the Strategy and its limitations, witnesses from outside the Department pointed to a focus on outputs rather than outcomes as a specific shortcoming. They said that this stemmed from a failure to set targets, outcomes, and timelines from the outset. Without measurable outcomes, monitoring became a process of counting how much had been done, rather than the impact of the Strategy on children. Witnesses also told the Committee that people with lived experience should have been involved in setting outcomes and their ongoing measurement.
54. The Department accepted that measurement of the effectiveness and impact of actions in the Strategy was not done well enough, and that it could have been better at measuring cumulative impact, but repeated its argument that it did not have the mechanisms or powers to change monitoring arrangements as these were inherited from another department and agreed by the Executive. The Committee was not convinced by this explanation and considers that the fact that it took eight years to identify that the targets and monitoring arrangements were not effective, and that no attempts were made to change course, is not only disappointing but characteristic of the inaction surrounding this Strategy. We believe that if there was a robust argument for revising the approach to outcomes monitoring, this should at least have been explored by the Department, in consultation with other departments and the Executive. This is an important area for any new strategy and action plan to address.

**The monitoring and reporting mechanisms for the Child Poverty Strategy were not effective and this means there has been no assessment of the**



**cumulative impact of the Strategy. The Committee recommends that in developing an anti-poverty strategy, the Department should ensure that it designs monitoring mechanisms that are more streamlined and focused on achieving outcomes.**

## **Much more progress is needed on joined up working across government and with the community and voluntary sector**

55. Despite the cross-departmental nature of the Child Poverty Strategy, the Committee heard that actions within the Strategy were delivered by individual departments, within their specific areas of responsibility, rather than being delivered in partnership. Whilst there were some examples of joint working, these tended to be small scale and short-term, and the Committee heard evidence that such schemes are difficult to scale up due to administrative and bureaucratic constraints.
56. This Committee has heard consistent evidence about the lack of joined up working in the public sector, across several different inquiries. In this instance, we acknowledge that Executive-wide strategies often have complex governance arrangements which present challenges to joined up working. The Permanent Secretary told us that he has “no responsibility, role or scope to hold any other Department to account or to change gear” and so his department has no powers to compel other departments to work together to deliver services for children. However, we were disappointed to hear that departments have not formally met to discuss an anti-poverty strategy since the Assembly reconvened five months ago and consider that this demonstrates the inaction around joint working.
57. There is clearly much more progress to be made on cross departmental working, particularly sharing resources required to deliver Executive strategies. With the draft Programme for Government now agreed and public consultation underway, this Committee expects to see departments working together, rather than in parallel for the remainder of this mandate. Shared outcomes, including

specific targets, and shared funding would help with this. The Committee understands that the Children’s Services Co-operation Act 2015 (CSCA) provides an enabling power for statutory bodies and agencies to pool resources and work collaboratively. We heard that this is difficult in practice and it was suggested that bureaucracy and administrative barriers have prevented shared resourcing on any real scale. The Department of Education (DE) has responsibility for reviewing the implementation of the CSCA, however the first of these was not published until July 2024. The report highlights pooling of resources as an area for improvement, saying that examples have been limited so far. Witnesses told the Committee that there are some small-scale examples of pooled resources working well and suggested that there is a role for the Department of Finance to provide leadership and guidance to departments in how best to implement the CSCA.

**The Committee considers that there is significant untapped potential in the Children’s Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 that would allow organisations to pool resources and share outcomes. However bureaucracy and administrative burdens, alongside a lack of detailed guidance, has limited its implementation and effectiveness. The Committee recommends that the Department of Finance works with other departments to review the barriers to the Children’s Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 and by December 2025 produces an agreed action plan to reduce and remove these barriers.**

## **Relationships with important community and voluntary partners have been damaged**

58. The Committee believes that there is also more progress to be made on partnership working with the community and voluntary sector (CVS). The cumulative response during the early stages and throughout the Covid-19 pandemic is often cited as an example of the public sector’s ability to work effectively with CVS organisations in times of crisis. The Committee heard that since the pandemic, CVS organisations have been disappointed that red-tape, bureaucracy, and a risk-averse attitude have returned. It should not take a crisis

to force joined up working and the Committee is concerned that statutory bodies have retreated to entrenched positions since the height of the crisis and that lessons from this time have not been carried forward.

59. The Committee continues to recognise the essential role that the community and voluntary sector plays in providing services to those most in need in their communities. Often it is CVS organisations that have strong links to families and communities who need support and can identify need and ensure that public sector support goes where it is most needed. Given the important role of the sector, the continuation of short-term funding models and cuts to discretionary funding represent serious challenges to CVS organisations. The Committee heard that depending on these organisations to provide services is risky, as the sector is in such a precarious position. The Children's Commissioner argued that the best outcomes in CVS models happen when funding is long-term, and the experts are trusted to deliver outcomes. The Committee heard similar evidence about the cuts to resources, the impact of the loss of staff and expertise in the sector in its recent enquiry into mental health and continues to have deep concerns about the impact of this on those who rely on these services.
60. The Committee was surprised to learn that the Department has not engaged directly with people living in poverty as part of its anti-poverty strategy design work to date. Instead, a limited amount of engagement has been facilitated through the Co-Design Group, who held sessions with lived experience groups, including 31 children and young people, and fed back information to the Department. Witnesses told the Committee that there has been insufficient focus on involving experts by experience in strategy development generally, and that a more meaningful form of engagement, involving children and their parents, should be adopted. While this "hands-off" approach has not been unique to anti-poverty strategy development, it cannot continue. Engagement with the people most affected by policy decisions should not be left to third parties. The Department told us that the full public consultation of the new strategy will seek the view of children and young people. The Committee urges policymakers across the public sector to listen and respond to the voices of those experiencing the issues and who will be most affected by any strategy.

**The community and voluntary sector is a vital partner in delivering effective services for children and representing those with lived experience. The Committee therefore urges the Department to take a proactive role in effective engagement with the sector to improve relationships and ensure those with lived experience continue to be engaged through the life of an anti-poverty strategy and the ongoing achievement of real outcomes. The Committee recommends the Department puts in place such an engagement strategy with the community and voluntary sector no later than 6 months after an anti-poverty strategy is launched.**

**The Department should ensure that it has a comprehensive list of those community and voluntary sector organisations currently delivering services for children in poverty and proactively engages with these organization to inform new anti-poverty action plans.**

## **There is an urgent need for an anti-poverty strategy, but the Committee has serious concerns about timescales and engagement**

61. The Child Poverty Strategy ended in May 2022 and actions to address child poverty will be included in a new, overarching anti-poverty strategy. The Committee understands that preparation of an anti-poverty strategy has been ongoing since late 2020. A number of groups were established to facilitate a co-design approach and advise on the themes, contents and actions of a new strategy. A draft anti-poverty strategy was presented to the then Communities Minister before she left office in October 2022.
62. Despite the significant amount of preparatory work undertaken to date, the Department told us that it is putting in the “foundations” for the Strategy right now. It is deeply troubling that an anti-poverty strategy development still appears to be in its infancy, rather than nearing completion more than two years after the Child Poverty Strategy ended. During its evidence session, the Department gave a firm commitment to bring forward an anti-poverty strategy

for Executive consideration and endorsement in this financial year, however the Department also referred to the need for clarity, both from the NIAO report and this PAC inquiry, before it can decide how to progress the strategy. At several points, the Department referred to uncertainties around how the strategy would be developed. The Committee is concerned that the Department seems to be waiting on others to tell it how to proceed, and that an anti-poverty strategy is nowhere near completion despite several years of work on it.

63. One of the groups appointed by the Department to assist with strategy development was the Anti-Poverty Co-Design Group. This group included representatives of the community and voluntary sector, faith-based organisations, the Children's Commissioner, Trade Unions and the Equality Commission, and its role was to identify key themes and actions that an anti-poverty strategy should include and gaps in provision it should seek to address. The Committee heard evidence from the Co-Chair of the Co-Design Group who expressed serious concerns with the process. We heard that the process did not lend itself to a truly collaborative approach and engagement with departments outside the Department for Communities was extremely limited. The Co-Chair concluded that ultimately, the process should not have been called co-design. We also heard that the Co-Design group does not know how its work has fed into strategy development and described the new strategy as being "locked behind closed doors".
64. Even co-design appears to have happened in silos with limited engagement between departments and other groups. It is understandable that the Co-Design group is frustrated by the lack of communication and tangible outcomes from its work with the Department. The Department told the Committee that the group's work had been fed into the strategy document but that it does not have the authority to share this more widely, including with the Co-Design Group.
65. Officials talked about lessons learned including the need to provide a clearer expectation and understanding of the co-design process from the outset. We accept that calling something "co-design" sets an expectation that is perhaps not possible in the confines of public sector policy design. However, the Committee was shocked to learn that formal engagement with other departments and the Co-Design group has not recommenced in the five months

since the Assembly returned. The last meeting with the Co-Design Group was in autumn 2022, despite the co-design members actively seeking to engage in recent months. There was no credible explanation offered by the Department for this lack of communication and engagement since the return of the Assembly. There is a clear need to reconnect with the Co-Design Group, both to rebuild relationships and to ensure that members are bought into the new strategy.

66. The Department told us about the valuable work done by the Co-Design group, and that it was in the process of understanding what both the Co-Design and Anti-Poverty Expert Panel reports meant for the new strategy. These reports were delivered over two years ago and so it is worrying that more substantial progress has not been made in assessing their findings. The Department told us that in the last two years it has also been “keeping an eye on the evidence base and any new or emerging research”. The Committee considers that the Department has been very much keeping a watching brief, rather than taking a proactive lead role in strategy development.
67. We heard evidence from the Children’s Commissioner about his concerns over delays in implementing an anti-poverty strategy and the devastating impacts that this is having on the most vulnerable in society. The Committee shares these concerns and was not reassured by the evidence provided by the Department. When departmental officials were questioned about the timetable for an anti-poverty strategy the Committee heard nothing about timescales and very little about action. The Committee therefore perceives a lack of urgency on strategy development, let alone implementation, and is not convinced that producing a strategy to address poverty is a priority for the Department.

**The Committee is determined to hold the Department to its commitment of bringing forward an anti-poverty strategy in this financial year. The Department should therefore report back to the Committee by the end of January 2025 to confirm that timescales are on track and an anti-poverty strategy will be provided to the Minister for consideration and presentation to the Executive by 31 March 2025.**

## **A new anti-poverty strategy must be fully costed**

68. Delivering an action plan based on an anti-poverty strategy will require additional funding and the Department told us that delivering a strategy that is as ambitious as the sectors want will be exceptionally challenging to resource, particularly considering the current fiscal environment. Despite the need for significant additional resources, the Department's current timetable to deliver the strategy by March 2025 means that the opportunity to bid for budget in 2025-26 will have passed and so funding for a new strategy is extremely uncertain.
69. Compounding this uncertainty, in the absence of a fully drafted strategy and subsequent action plan, it is unclear how the Department could know what level of resources is required for delivery. Officials told the Committee that more resources will be needed to develop an action plan and that they do not currently expect to get those resources. In this case, the Committee can only conclude that an action plan is not feasible. The Committee is concerned that the Strategy itself has become the end goal, rather than a starting point for designing targeted actions to reduce poverty. We are clear that there is little point in having a strategy with no means to deliver it.

**Despite rising levels of child poverty in Northern Ireland and the clear impact this has on outcomes and opportunities, the Child Poverty strategy was not properly funded. To allow the Executive to make informed decisions about budget allocations, the Committee recommends that the action plan prepared with an anti-poverty strategy is properly costed, and outlines which specific actions can be delivered from existing budgets and those which require further dedicated funding to be made available.**

## **The Committee is concerned that lessons from the child poverty strategy have not been learned**

70. In its evidence, the Department spoke repeatedly about the lessons learned from the Child Poverty Strategy and provided assurances that these would be taken forward into an anti-poverty strategy, however we were struck by the lack of tangible action taken by the Department to date, particularly that there have been no meetings of the cross departmental group and no meetings with key stakeholders such as the Co-Design Group. The Department told us that it was waiting to ensure that it had the “right people” in the room to ensure that decisions can be made, however we do not understand why it is taking so long to identify these key participants. We are concerned by the lack of urgency and that with the passage of time key lessons, as well as the goodwill of key stakeholders, will be lost.



# Links to Appendices

## Appendix 1: Minutes of Proceedings

[View Minutes of Proceedings of Committee meetings related to the report](#)

## Appendix 2: Minutes of Evidence

[View Minutes of Evidence from evidence sessions related to the report](#)

## Appendix 3: Correspondence

[View correspondence issued and received related to the report](#)

## Appendix 4: Other Documents

[View other documents related to the report](#)

## Appendix 5: List of Witnesses that gave evidence to the Committee

- **Mr Colum Boyle**, Department for Communities
- **Ms Emer Morelli**, Department for Communities
- **Mr George Sampson**, Department for Communities
- **Mr Paddy Rooney**, Department for Communities
- **Mr Chris Quinn**, Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People
- **Ms Trása Canavan**, Barnardo's NI
- **Ms Goretti Horgan**, Ulster University
- **Ms Dorinnia Carville**, Northern Ireland Audit Office
- **Mr Stuart Stevenson**, Department of Finance



You may re-use this publication (not including images or logos) free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the Open Northern Ireland Assembly Licence.

[Find out more about the Open Northern Ireland Assembly Licence.](#)

This Report can be made available in a range of formats including large print, Braille etc. For more information please contact:

Public Accounts Committee  
Northern Ireland Assembly  
Parliament Buildings  
Ballymiscaw  
Stormont  
Belfast BT4 3XX

Telephone: 028 9021208

Email: [pac.committee@niassembly.gov.uk](mailto:pac.committee@niassembly.gov.uk)

Twitter: @NIA\_PAC

---