

TOPICAL DIGEST

DISABLED PEOPLE'S PARLIAMENT

Prepared by RalSe:
Research and
Information
Service



Northern Ireland
Assembly

2025



Introduction

This Topical Digest looks at key issues facing disabled people in Northern Ireland. It also suggests further reading for each topic. It has been prepared for the Disabled People's Parliament on Friday 21st November 2025.

It shows some of the issues that participants might want to discuss during the Parliament. These include:

- Equal access to healthcare and services
- Barriers in society faced by disabled people
- Participation in wider society

The further reading lists do not include everything you can read about each issue. The suggestions include key reports, policies, strategies and research about each key issue. They are intended to be a starting point if you are interested in an issue.

This digest will provide a brief overview of:

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Part 1: Access to Services and Infrastructure



Disabled people experience more physical and mental health inequalities than non-disabled people.

Disabled people also have poorer life expectancy. The [Office for Health Improvement and Disparities](#) has data on life expectancy. On average, women with learning disabilities die 23 years earlier than people without a learning disability. Men with learning disabilities die 20 years earlier.

Poorer health outcomes are linked to poorer social outcomes. These include employment opportunities and education.

A [report by the House of Lords](#) lists barriers that can prevent disabled people from accessing good quality healthcare.

Transportation, additional costs and long waiting lists are the main barriers.

Medical appointments can also be barriers to people with complex disabilities. These barriers included:

- Being rarely asked about how to make appointments more accessible
- Not receiving appointment letters in understandable formats

The Department of Health is developing the [Disability Action Plan 2025-2030](#). The Plan will show how the Department will promote positive attitudes towards disabled people. It will also support disabled people participate in public life.

Further reading

- Department of Health. [Audit of Inequalities 2025 – 2030](#). (2025).
- Department of Health. [Draft Disability Action Plan 2025-2030](#). (2025).
- Office for Health Improvement and Disparities. [Learning disability – applying All Our Health](#). (2025).
- House of Lords. [Challenges faced by people with disabilities](#). (2024).
- Sense. [Access to healthcare for people with complex disabilities](#). (2023).
- Mencap. [Treat me well: Equal access to healthcare for people with a learning disability](#). (2019).



Access to Affordable Housing

SECTION 2

The [Chartered Institute of Housing](#) has stated that Northern Ireland is currently in a housing crisis. The main issues include:

- Not enough social housing
- Increasing rates of homelessness
- Poor conditions of homes

The housing crisis means there are not enough accessible and affordable homes for disabled people. An accessible home is one that enables independent living for a disabled person.

The Department for Communities announced a new Housing Strategy in 2024. The aim of the Strategy is to deliver 100,000 homes between 2024 – 2039. Around 33,000 of these homes will be for social housing.

Further reading

- Chartered Institute of Housing. [An Agenda for Change: Tackling the Housing and Homelessness Crisis](#). (2024).
- Northern Ireland Executive. [Housing Supply Strategy: A Home for Everyone](#). (2024).
- Equality and Human Rights Commission. [Housing and Disabled People: Britain's Hidden Crisis](#). (2018).



Affordable and Accessible Transport

SECTION 3

A lack of affordable and accessible transport disproportionately impacts disabled people. It restricts their personal independence and limits opportunities.

Disabled people face added preparation time when planning journeys. [Research from Sense](#) shows the extra complexity of planning journeys means they are less likely to travel.

A [report by Belfast Healthy Cities](#), a non-profit organisation, found several issues that impact the affordability and accessibility of transport in Northern Ireland. These include:

- Public transport does not provide a reliable alternative to cars
- Rural areas do not have accessible transport options
- Rural households are often far away from the nearest train station
- Rural bus services can operate infrequently and in some rural locations, public transport is sparse
- Bus services in urban locations, outside of Belfast, don't have evening and weekend coverage
- There are no direct rail services to some larger urban areas, like Omagh and Enniskillen

There are services that provide accessible transport for disabled people. This includes the [Transport Programme for People with Disabilities](#). It is run by the Department for Infrastructure.

Services include Dial-a-Lift, the Disability Action Transport Scheme (DATS) and Shopmobility. However, the cost of these services is higher compared to public transport.

Further reading

- Belfast Healthy Cities. [Transport Poverty in NI: A Health Equity Perspective](#). (2025).
- House of Commons. [Access denied: rights versus reality in disabled people's access to transport](#). (2025).
- Sense. [Transport and Travel](#). (2024).
- Department for Infrastructure. [Transport Programme for People with Disabilities](#).



Digital inaccessibility means people can be excluded from everyday digital activities and services. [Research from the House of Lords](#) said basic digital skills is a large skills gap.

Cost of living challenges have also made internet access more difficult. People on lower incomes can struggle to access the internet.

A large number of disabled people don't use the internet. The [Office for National Statistics](#) found that 56% of non-internet users are disabled people.

Disabled people have lower levels of confidence when using digital products. They are twice as likely to lack the skills needed to navigate the internet.

Some online platforms have poor accessibility. This can lead to social isolation and limits economic opportunities. For example, when opening a bank account. Digital exclusion limits the independence of disabled people.

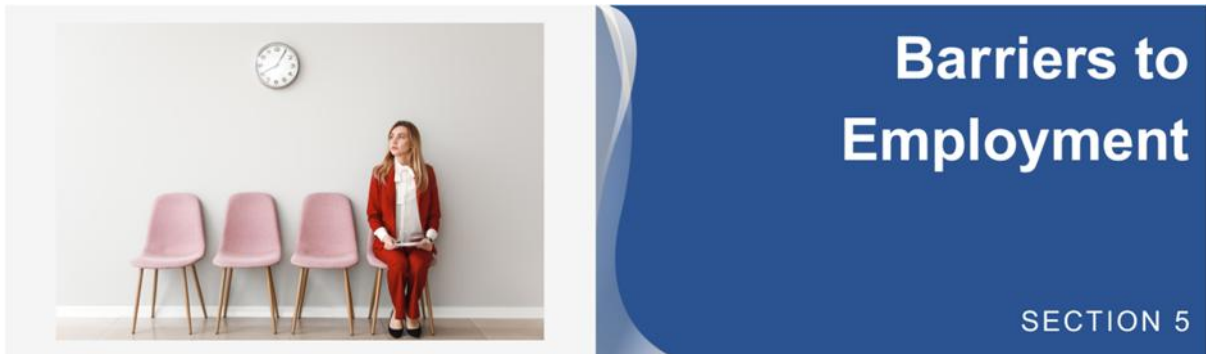
Northern Ireland does not have a strategy to close the digital exclusion gap. The Department for the Economy has [published a report](#) that highlights the need to enhance digital skills.

The European Union has introduced the [European Accessibility Act](#). The Act says that European digital services must follow accessibility standards. Digital services must guarantee accessibility for disabled people.

Further reading

- Office for Equality and Opportunity. [Accessibility of private sector products and services for disabled people in the UK](#). (2025).
- Department for the Economy. [10X Delivery Plan 2023/24](#). (2023).
- House of Lords. [Digital Exclusion](#). (2023).
- ForSight NI. [Northern Irish Digital Accessibility Index 2022](#). (2022).
- Office for National Statistics. [Exploring the UK's digital divide](#). (2019).
- European Commission. [European accessibility act](#).

Part 2: Employment, Education and Economic Security



Northern Ireland has a low rate of employment for disabled people. A [report by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency](#) said that in March 2025, 43% of disabled people were in employment. For people without a disability, it was 83%.

The Office for National Statistics shows that the disability employment rate across the UK was 53%.

Rates of economic inactivity among disabled people are also high. A [report by the Department for Work and Pensions](#) says 43% of disabled people are economically inactive in 2024. 15% of people without a disability are economically inactive.

Disabled people encounter barriers to employment. These barriers included:

- Negative stereotypes towards disabled people
- Inaccessible workplaces
- A lack of educational opportunities for disabled people

Other barriers are:

- Low confidence, where disabled people are less likely to apply for jobs
- Traditional recruitment processes can be restrictive for disabled people
- Employers can be unwilling to accommodate people with disabilities
- Inflexibility of the benefits system

A disability strategy was announced in September 2020. It was intended to address the barriers that limit opportunities. Progress on the Strategy has been delayed. The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland have called for a dedicated Disability Employment Strategy.

Further reading

- Office for Equality and Opportunity. [Disabled people's employment in the UK: A thematic review of the literature.](#) (2025).
- JMA HR & Legal. [Latest Statistics on the Employment of Disabled People.](#) (2024)
- Independent Mechanism for Northern Ireland. [United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.](#) (2023).
- NISRA. [Disability within the Northern Ireland Labour Market.](#) (2022).

- Office for National Statistics. [Disability and Employment, UK: 2019](#). (2019).



Education Opportunities

SECTION 6

Children with Special Educational Needs in Northern Ireland leave school with poorer educational outcomes. A [report by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland](#) highlights worse attendance, experience more bullying and have fewer further education opportunities.

The [Office for National Statistics](#) found that in 2021:

- 13% of disabled people have no qualifications
- 5% of non-disabled people have no qualifications

Disabled people face greater barriers when accessing higher education. 25% of disabled people aged 21 to 64 have a degree qualification or above. 43% of non-disabled people have a degree qualification or above.

Reduced education opportunities can negatively impact a disabled people's ability to live independently. [The Office for National Statistics said](#) that educational opportunities for disabled children and young people could be improved by:

- Supporting schools to be more responsive to student needs
- More training should be provided to help staff identify need

- Supporting better inclusion in schools (for example, providing more after school clubs)
- Reducing the difficulties parents encounter when they try to find the right support for their child

Northern Ireland does not have an inclusive higher education programme for students with intellectual disabilities. Stranmillis University College believe there is an opportunity to develop an inclusive [higher education pathway](#). This would help disabled people access educational opportunities in higher education.

Further reading

- Stranmillis University College. [Pathways to Inclusion: Exploring Higher Education Opportunities for People with Intellectual Disabilities in Northern Ireland](#). (2025).
- Equality Commission for Northern Ireland. [Advancing Equality for Children with Special Educational Needs](#). (2024).
- Education Authority. [Audit of Inequalities](#). (2022).
- Office for National Statistics. [Educational experiences of young people with special educational needs and disabilities in England: February to May 2022](#). (2022).
- Office for National Statistics. [Outcomes for disabled people in the UK: 2021](#). (2021).



Benefits Payments and Welfare Reforms

SECTION 7

In March 2025, the [UK government said](#) it wanted to change some benefits and welfare payments.

The initial proposals included:

- Personal Independence Payments, where this payment would have been given mainly to people with the highest needs
- Universal Credit, where the basic payment, also known as the Standard Allowance, would have gone up
- Work Capability Assessments would have stopped
- People who cannot work would not have had regular reassessments
- Tests for incapacity benefits would have been brought back

After public debate, the changes to Personal Independence Payment were dropped. But from 2026, new people applying for the health element of Universal Credit will get almost half the amount people get now. This amount will also be frozen, so it will not increase over time.

It is not yet known how these changes will affect people in Northern Ireland. More time is needed to understand the impact.

Further reading

- BBC News. [Government wins vote on watered-down welfare bill after concessions.](#) (2025).
- Benefits and Work. [What has changed after last night's UC and PIP bill vote?](#) (2025).
- Department for Work and Pensions. [Welfare bill will protect the most vulnerable and help households with income boost.](#) (2025).



Standards of Living and Social Protection

SECTION 8

Disability related costs are significant. They can have a large impact on disabled people's disposable income and standard of living.

Disabled people face higher levels of unemployment. Higher costs and unemployment put disabled people at greater risk of poverty. A [report by the Joseph Rountree Foundation](#) says that on average, disabled people are more likely to live below the poverty line.

Disabled people are more likely to face higher energy and fuel costs. A [report by the charity Scope](#), said the average UK household energy bill in 2018, was £1,214 per year. Costs for households with a disabled person were on average, between £1,500 - £2,500 per year.

Other factors that increase the risk of poverty for disabled people include:

- Education and lower levels of qualification
- Conditions that prevent people from working, including illness and disability

[Research from Queens University Belfast](#) shows that Northern Ireland has a higher rate of disability than the other UK nations. It is also the most deprived nation in the UK.

Further reading

- Queen's University Belfast. [Disability rates in Northern Ireland in a time of unprecedented budget cuts.](#) (2023).
- Office for Equality and Opportunity. [The lived experience of disabled people in the UK: a review of evidence.](#) (2021).
- Disability Rights UK. [Nearly half of everyone in poverty is either a disabled person or lives with a disabled person.](#) (2020).
- Scope. [Out in the Cold.](#) (2018).
- DEMOS. [Counting the Cost.](#) (2010).

Part 3: Independent Living and Social Inclusion



Northern Ireland is the only UK nation that does not have a strategy to support independent living. Many disabled people live in homes that do not meet their disability related needs.

There is a shortage of suitable housing for disabled people. A lack of accessible housing restricts disabled people's ability to live independently.

A [report by Mencap](#) identifies other barriers to disabled people living independently in Northern Ireland:

- The challenges around the quality and sustainability of the social care sector
- A lack of community-based supported housing options
- Under-investment in home adaptations
- A lack of forward planning and analysis of future population trends

The [Department for Communities Housing Supply Strategy](#) will continue the review of Disabled Facilities Grants. The grants support disabled people make adaptations to their home. The

review aims to provide greater flexibility to how the grants are awarded.

As of July 2025, there are also calls for the re-opening of the Independent Living Fund (ILF).

Further reading

- UK Government. [National Disability Strategy](#). (2021)
- House of Commons. [Disability strategies in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland](#). (2022)
- Disability Action. [Calls Grow to Reopen Northern Ireland's Independent Living Fund as Disabled People Denied Equal Right to Independent Living](#). (2025).
- Disability News Service. [Disabled people face 'hidden crisis' in accessible housing](#). (2018).
- MENCAP. [Ordinary houses in ordinary streets: Independent social care and housing solutions for people with a learning disability](#). (2018).



Social Isolation

SECTION 10

Sense, a charity, found that 61% of disabled people in the UK experience 'chronic loneliness'. This rises to 70% among young disabled people, aged 16 to 24. [The report is from 2021.](#)

Research suggests that social isolation of disabled people has continued to rise in recent years. Sense found that in 2015, 23% of disabled people felt lonely every day.

There are various causes behind loneliness and social isolation amongst disabled people. These include practical barriers like limited accessible transport, financial support or appropriate social care.

Negative public attitudes impact a disabled person's ability to make social connections. Bullying and hate crime also plays a significant role. One in three disabled people worry about being bullied when they leave their house.

[Research by the Anti-Bullying Alliance](#), a charity, found that disabled children experience more bullying than other school children.

In 2020, 73 organisations across Northern Ireland [called for a loneliness strategy](#). England, Scotland and Wales have all

introduced loneliness plans. Northern Ireland is the only home nation that has not developed a similar plan.

Further reading

- Age NI. [Action Group on Loneliness Policy](#). (2025).
- Office for Equality and Opportunity. [Disability, loneliness and relationships: a thematic report](#). (2025).
- Sense. [Fear of mental health crisis as loneliness rises dramatically amongst disabled people](#). (2021).
- Campaign to End Loneliness. [Loneliness in Northern Ireland: A call to action](#). (2020).
- Anti-bullying Alliance. [Do children with SEND experience more bullying?](#)



Unpaid Care and Support

SECTION 11

[Research from Carers NI](#), a charity, found that around 222,000 people provide some form of unpaid care. This includes 3,000 children aged under 15.

70,000 people provide 50 hours or more of unpaid care every week. People aged between 45-64 are more likely to have care responsibilities.

[Research](#) suggests unpaid carers save the NI Executive around £5.8 billion in care costs each year.

The poverty rate amongst unpaid carers is high, at 28%. This is higher than the poverty rate of adults who do not have care responsibilities (17%). Carers NI found that the cost of living crisis forced many carers to cut down on basic essentials.

Carers who want to get back into paid employment can struggle. Little support is available for carers to be in paid employment and manage their care responsibilities. These barriers to employment also affect women more than men.

There is no statutory carer's leave in Northern Ireland. In England, Scotland and Wales, carers are entitled to one week's unpaid leave.

Carers NI have called on the Northern Ireland Executive to;

- Introduce statutory paid leave for carers and flexible working
- Reform the social care system so replacement care is quickly available
- Enshrine unpaid caring as a protected characteristic

Further reading

- Carers NI. [Tackling poverty amongst unpaid carers](#). (2025).
- Carers NI. [Making the case for change: supporting unpaid carers in Northern Ireland](#). (2024).
- Northern Ireland Assembly. [Support for Unpaid Carers in Northern Ireland: a preliminary consideration](#). (2024).
- CarersUK. [The Carer's Leave Act](#).



Participation in Sport and Physical Activities

SECTION 12

Disabled people in Northern Ireland have the lowest participation rate in sport and physical activity in the UK. Across the whole UK, [research](#) found disabled people are twice as likely to be physically inactive, compared to non-disabled people.

In Northern Ireland, 28% of disabled people took part in sport or a physical activity in 2023. This is compared to 56% of non-disabled people. The number of disabled people participating in sport has fallen by 18% since 2020.

[Disability Sport NI](#) identified several reasons why disabled people are less likely to be involved in sport and physical activities.

Funding cuts to Local Councils mean less sporting opportunities are available.

The cost of living crisis has impacted disabled people's ability to pay for travel and activities.

Disability Sport NI launched their Call to Action in 2025. It aims to reduce the underrepresentation of disabled people in sport. It calls for:

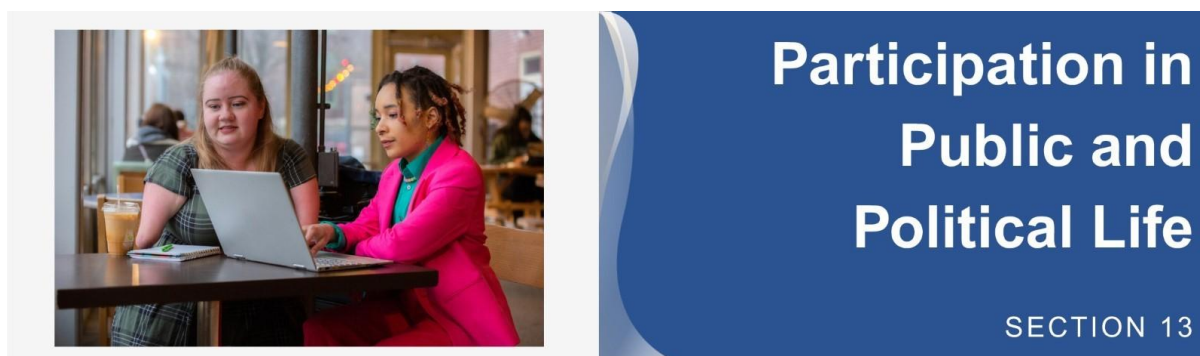
- More inclusive opportunities for disabled people
- More accessible spaces be made available

- Governing bodies to include more disabled people
- Equal access to physical education
- Better promotion of inclusive opportunities

Further reading

- Disability Sport NI. [All Equal, All Active: A Call to Action](#). (2025).
- Sport NI. [Disability in Sport, Engagement and Delivery Plan: 2024-2026](#). (2024).
- Sport England. [Disabled people](#).

Part 4: Rights, Participation and Representation



Participation in public life is the way that people are involved in public decision making. This includes being a political representative. Disabled people in Northern Ireland are underrepresented in both public and political life.

The [Equality Commission for Northern Ireland has recommended measures](#) to reduce the under-representation of disabled people.

These include:

- Public organisations should promote the inclusion of disabled people
- Developing supported work initiatives to develop experience, capacity and skills
- Address the physical, communication and other barriers to access public and political life

There are ongoing initiatives to improve disabled people's participation in public and political life. These include actions by government departments to promote positive attitudes towards disabled people.

The Northern Ireland Assembly has developed a [Disability Action Plan](#). It will support disabled people to engage with the Assembly's work.

Further reading

- Department for Culture, Media and Sport. [Northern Ireland Disability Action Plan 2023-2026](#). (2024).
- The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland. [Participation in Public Life](#). (2024).
- The Northern Ireland Assembly Commission. [Draft Disability Action Plan 2025-2030](#). (2024).
- The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland. [Equality in Participation in Public Life. Priorities for Action](#). (2019).
- Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission. [Disability rights in Northern Ireland](#). (2017).



Equal Discrimination Protections

SECTION 14

The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland has [reported on the weaknesses in equality law in Northern Ireland](#). The Equality Act 2010 does not apply to Northern Ireland. There are inconsistent protections compared to the rest of the UK.

Disability equality is one area of inconsistent protections. In Great Britain, the Equality Act 2010 protects against disability discrimination. Discrimination happens where a disabled person is treated unfavourably, compared to a non-disabled person.

Northern Ireland does not have protections against disability discrimination. Treating someone unfavourably because of their abilities may be lawful. Protections for people associated with a disabled person, are also less clear.

The Committee for the Executive Office is inquiring into the differences in equality legislation between Northern Ireland and other jurisdictions.

Further reading

- Equality Commission for Northern Ireland. [Submission to the Committee for the Executive Office Inquiry into Gaps in Equality Legislation](#). (2024).

- Equality Commission for Northern Ireland. [Gaps in equality law between Great Britain and Northern Ireland](#). (2014).



The [United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#) is an international treaty. All persons, with all types of disabilities, must enjoy all human rights and fundamental freedoms.

The UK ratified the treaty in 2009. This committed the UK to promote and protect the human rights of disabled people. The UK government must ensure they have equality under the law.

Reports from the United Nations have raised concerns. The reports found that since 2009, the UK has made no significant progress improving the situation of disabled people. Standards have actually regressed across the UK and in Northern Ireland.

The treaty has not been made law in Northern Ireland. There is an absence of measures to incorporate the treaty. There are also no indicators to track progress in implementing the treaty.

Implementing means putting an agreement into effect.

A [Private Members Bill](#) was proposed by Danny Donnelly MLA, in June 2025. It looks at the incorporation of the treaty into Northern Ireland's law.

Further reading

- Committee for Communities. [Minutes of proceedings 19th June 2025](#). (2025). Link to Committee recording: [Committee for Communities - Thursday 19 June 2025](#)
- United Nations. [Report on follow-up to the inquiry concerning the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland conducted under article 6 of the Optional Protocol to the Convention](#). (2024).
- Equality Commission for Northern Ireland / Disability Action. [Progress Towards the Implementation of the UNCRPD in Northern Ireland](#). (2022).



The Need for a Disability Strategy

SECTION 16

Northern Ireland has no disability national action plan or strategy. There has been no Executive wide strategy on the rights of disabled people since 2018.

The lack of an Executive between February 2022 and February 2024 delayed the delivery of a Disability Strategy. The delay means little progress has been made on issues impacting disabled people. This is according to a [report](#) by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland.

As of April 2025, the Department for Communities has progressed the development of a [Disability Action Plan](#). The Plan references the ongoing development of a new Disability Strategy.

The Strategy is being developed using a co-design approach. Once the Strategy has been drafted, it will go out to public consultation.

Further reading

- Department for Communities. [Draft Disability Action Plan 2025-2030 Consultation Document](#). (2025).
- Equality Commission for Northern Ireland. [Little progress tackling issues affecting persons with disabilities](#). (2023).

- Independent Mechanism for Northern Ireland. [United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#). (2023).

Glossary of Terms

Barriers. Barriers are obstacles that prevent individuals from participating in society. This includes access to resources, opportunities and social interactions.

Cost of Living Crisis. This refers to the significant increase in the price of goods and services since 2021. This has led to a decline in disposable incomes, as costs outpace wage growth.

Digital Inaccessibility. These are the barriers that prevent people from using digital technologies, websites or other electronic content.

Disproportionately. This means in a way that is too large or too small in relation to something else. For example, the burden of food price increases are disproportionately borne by poor people.

Economic Inactivity. This refers to people who are not working and are not actively seeking a job. This could be because they are studying, retired, caring for someone or unable to work due to illness or disability.

Economic Security. This is the ability of individuals and households to meet their basic needs, such as food and housing.

The Equality Act 2010. The Act aims to protect people from discrimination, harassment and victimisation. It introduced protected characteristics including age, gender, race and disability.

Equality Commission for Northern Ireland. An independent organisation overseeing equality and discrimination law in Northern Ireland.

Infrastructure. Basic systems services such as transport and power lines, that a country uses to work effectively.

Northern Ireland Executive. The Northern Ireland Executive is the devolved government of Northern Ireland. It is made up of the

First and deputy First Ministers. There are also eight departmental ministers.

Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency. An organisation responsible for the collection and publication of statistics relevant to Northern Ireland.

The Office for National Statistics. It is the United Kingdom's largest independent producer of national statistics. It is the statistical institute of the United Kingdom. It produces information on several topics, including employment and the economy.

Personal Independence Payment. This is a benefit for people with long-term health conditions. It is for people who need extra help with daily living.

Physically Inactive. This refers to a lack of moderate to vigorous physical activity in a person's lifestyle.

Poverty Line. This is the minimum level of income needed to meet basic needs in the UK.

Private Members Bill. These are bills introduced by an MLA, not government ministers.

Representation. This means having a person or organisation that speaks, acts or represents someone else.

Stranmillis University College. Part of Queens University Belfast. The College offers non-denominational teacher training courses.

Social Inclusion. This means being a part of your community. Being socially inclusive means participating in social and economic life.

Social Protection. These include public and private policies and programmes that protect people from poverty and vulnerability. This includes things like pensions and benefits.

Universal Credit. This is a payment from the UK government. It is designed to help people with their living costs if they are on a low income.

Work Capability Assessments. These are evaluations used to determine an individual's eligibility for benefits.

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