

British Association of Social Workers Northern Ireland (BASW NI) response to Department for Communities Budget 2024-25 Equality Impact Assessment

The British Association of Social Workers (BASW) is the largest professional body for social workers in the UK. The Association has 22,000 members employed in frontline, management, academic and research positions in all care settings.

BASW's Code of Ethics¹, to which the Association's members sign up, details fundamental assertions regarding the role of the profession in relation to the alleviation of poverty and a specific commitment for social workers to help those living in poverty.

Poverty presents a challenge to social work's ethos to achieve effective social change—it is a fundamental social justice issue. The manner in which poverty interacts with other inequalities including gender, disability and race creates a complex picture for social work practice. As well as disadvantaging individuals in each of these categories, as outlined below, the impacts of the Department of Communities spending decisions will impact individuals with multiple Section 75 characteristics.

BASW NI recognises the important protection afforded to thousands of households since 2016 by the welfare reform mitigations, and the Association welcomed the work of the former Minister for Communities to extend the measures which protect against the impacts of the Bedroom Tax and Benefit Cap.

However, these measures alone will be insufficient to address the root causes of poverty. It is vital that an anti-poverty strategy is urgently delivered by the Minister for Communities and that it is informed by the recommendations of the Expert Advisory Panel² appointed by the Minister's predecessor and the recommendations published by members of the Anti-Poverty Strategy Co-Design Group³. The strategy should be appropriately funded and it is essential it receives the support of all Ministers in the NI Executive.

BASW NI is concerned that the Department for Communities (the Department) EQIA does not recognise the impacts of the failure to deliver an anti-poverty strategy. The impacts will be greatest for women, children, disabled people and people from an minoritised ethnic background.

The Association is also concerned that the decision not to mitigate the impacts of the Universal Credit two-child limit will serve to worsen rates of poverty in Northern Ireland and highlights that this issue has not been acknowledged in the EQIA. A failure to mitigate the

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

² Recommendations for an Anti-Poverty Strategy: Report of the Expert Advisory Panel, 2020 <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/system/files/publications/communities/dfc-social-inclusion-strategy-anti-poverty-expert-advisory-panel-recommendations.pdf>

³ Recommendations on the Development of an Anti-Poverty Strategy for Northern Ireland: A Position Paper from Members of the Anti-Poverty Strategy Co-Design Group (2022)

two-child limit will have impacts for children, women, people with dependents and people from a minoritised ethnic background.

The Department's *Northern Ireland Poverty and Income Inequality Report (2022-23)*⁴ published in March 2024, indicates rates of poverty have increased across Northern Ireland.

In 2021/22, 16% of the NI population were in relative poverty and 13% were in absolute poverty. In 2023/23 the figure for relative poverty had increased to 18% and 14% of the population were in absolute poverty.

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

Information published in December 2023 by the End Child Poverty Coalition⁵ indicates 10% of children in Northern Ireland are affected by the Universal Credit two-child limit. The Coalition also highlights larger families are much more likely to experience poverty.

The EQIA recognises that “the child poverty rate for children in families with three or more children is almost twice as high as the rate for children in one- or two-child families (47% compared with 24%)”. However, it doesn't recognise the impacts for children associated with the decision not to mitigate the Universal Credit two-child limit or the failure to publish and implement an anti-poverty strategy.

Social workers witness, first-hand, the impacts of poverty on many children, families, and individuals across our society—it is a major factor in contributing to problems which require intervention from social services.

The recent Independent Review of Children's Social Care Services⁶ noted that pressures of poverty impinging on stressed and sometimes overwhelmed parents are likely to make more prevalent the 'toxic trio' of poor mental health, drug and alcohol misuse, and domestic violence. Children and young people are often embarrassed and exhausted by their situations. Poverty destroys self-esteem and confidence with long-term impacts on the families and communities social workers serve.

Growing up in poverty increases the chances of a child coming into the care of social services. There is a clear social gradient whereby, for every level of deprivation, the rates of children on child protection registers and looked after children increase. Children living in the most deprived areas of Northern Ireland are six times more likely to be placed on the Child Protection Register and are four times more likely to become looked after by social services than those in the most affluent areas⁷.

This must be considered in the context of the growing number of children looked after by social services. The most recent figures published by the Department of Health indicate there are 3,941 children looked after by social services (October 2023). This represents a 17% increase since before Covid and a 35% increase since 2013/14.

⁴ https://datavis.nisra.gov.uk/communities/PII_report_2223.html

⁵ https://endchildpoverty.org.uk/2_child_limit_data/

⁶ Children's Social Care Services: An Independent Review (2023)

⁷ Bunting, L., McCartan, C., & Davidson, G. (2017). Identifying and Understanding Inequalities in Child Welfare Intervention Rates: Comparative studies in four UK countries. Single country quantitative study report: Northern Ireland. Nuffield Foundation

Growing up in poverty also heightens the prevalence of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). The *Youth and Wellbeing Prevalence Survey*⁸ found young people in the least deprived areas are more likely to have experienced no ACEs compared to those in the most deprived areas—59.9% vs 36.0%.

A failure to deliver an anti-poverty strategy will also disadvantage disabled people. The Department of Health, *Health Inequalities Annual Report 2024*⁹ highlights that rates of disability free life expectancy are significantly lower in the most deprived areas of Northern Ireland compared to the least deprived areas—52.4 years compared to 63.5 years for men and 50.9 compared to 61.9 years for women.

It must be recognised the decisions taken to deliver short term savings, will likely lead to significantly greater costs in the longer term. The Minister for Communities has explained to the NI Assembly that the cost of mitigating the two-child limit would be £56.4 million per year¹⁰. This represents a significant sum, particularly in light of the restrictions of the current NI Executive Budget. However, this figure must be evaluated in the context of the March 2024 report from the NI Audit Office, *Child Poverty in Northern Ireland*¹¹, which estimates the cost of child poverty in the region to be between £825m and £1bn per year. The Child Poverty Action group estimates that Child Poverty costs the UK economy at least £39 billion per year¹². Additionally, the Department of Health has estimated the costs associated with health inequalities to be £1.7 billion per year¹³.

The EQIA recognises that “intersectionality of gendered poverty compounds its impact on women with other marginalised identities. Black women, for instance, face higher odds of being single parents and working low-wage jobs. Additionally, households belonging to Black, Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities are more likely to have dependent children and larger families, making them more susceptible to reductions in Universal Credit.” However, the EQIA does not recognise the impacts on women from minoritised ethnic backgrounds associated with the failure to publish an anti-poverty strategy and the decision not to mitigate the Universal Credit two-child limit.

The consultation document states, “The Minister will commit to holding Homelessness funding at the 2023-24 Final EQIA Budget position”. However, it must be recognised that in the context of inflation, this amounts to a real terms cut to an area of service provision already under significant pressure. Supporting homeless people and people rough sleeping is a vital area of social work practice and it is essential additional funding is provided to meet need in this area.

In addition to the publication and implementation of an anti-poverty strategy, it is also vital the Department urgently progresses delivery of the other social inclusion strategies, i.e. those addressing disability, gender and sexual orientation. For the Northern Ireland Executive to comprehensively address disadvantages facing women, disabled people and LGBTQIA+ people in Northern Ireland, these strategies must be adequately resourced and supported across Executive departments.

⁸ Youth Wellbeing Prevalence Survey 2020 <https://online.hscni.net/our-work/social-care-and-children/children-and-young-people/youth-wellbeing-prevalence-survey-2020/#:~:text=Using%20a%20number%20of%20screening,a%20pattern%20of%20disordered%20eating.>

⁹ <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/hscims-report-2024.pdf>

¹⁰ <http://data.niassembly.gov.uk/HansardXml/plenary-16-04-2024.pdf>

¹¹ <https://www.niauditoffice.gov.uk/files/niauditoffice/documents/2024-03/NI%20Audit%20Office%20Report%20-%20Child%20Poverty%20in%20Northern%20Ireland.pdf>

¹² <https://cpag.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-08/The%20cost%20of%20child%20poverty%20in%202023.pdf>

¹³ <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/news/health-inequalities-challenge-us-all>

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