

# Progressing an anti-poverty strategy for Northern Ireland

*Report on a half day seminar held in Parliament Buildings, Stormont, on 28 June 2023*



*Published January 2024*

**Equality  
Coalition** 

**Believe in  
children**  
 **Barnardo's**  
Northern Ireland

 **NIAPN**  
Northern Ireland  
Anti-Poverty Network

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## Introduction - Robyn Scott, Communications and Equality Coalition Coordinator, CAJ



‘Progressing an anti-poverty strategy for Northern Ireland’ was a seminar held in Stormont on 28 June 2023 to push for an anti-poverty strategy based on objective need to be a **day one priority** for the next NI Executive. The half-day seminar was organised jointly by the Equality Coalition, Barnardo’s NI, and Northern Ireland Anti-Poverty Network (NIAPN); and sponsored by Emma Sheerin MLA, with co-sponsors Gerry Carroll MLA, Mike Nesbitt MLA, Sinéad McLaughlin MLA, and Kate Nicholl MLA.

Attendees included academics, NGO and trade union representatives, and officials from various NI Executive Departments, including the Department for Communities (DfC), which has overall responsibility for the development of an anti-poverty strategy.

Northern Ireland has been waiting for an anti-poverty strategy for almost twenty years. The 2006 St Andrews Agreement and subsequent Northern Ireland (St Andrews Agreement) Act 2006 contained a legal obligation for the NI Executive to develop a strategy to tackle poverty, social exclusion, and patterns of deprivation based on objective need. Following a judicial review taken by CAJ in 2015, the High Court found the Executive was acting unlawfully for not having yet adopted such a strategy. In 2020, the New Decade, New Approach agreement contained a renewed commitment to developing the strategy.

Progress was made during the last political mandate, DfC establishing an expert advisory panel and co-design group to take forward the development of an anti-poverty strategy. However, the NI Executive collapsed again (in February 2022) before the strategy could be shared or begin to be implemented.

The continued lack of an anti-poverty strategy has coincided with a cost-of-living crisis and a period of major social and economic uncertainty across NI society, including severe budget cuts to public services and to the community and voluntary sector. At the time the seminar took place, in June 2023, UK inflation remained very high (as of June 2023 it was 7.9% when measured using the Consumer Price Index). News of the budget cuts was also still fresh in people’s minds, helping to bring a renewed sense of urgency to the event.

During the seminar, a range of expert speakers examined what progress has been made to date in developing an anti-poverty strategy for NI, while also considering how to ensure the future strategy is as comprehensive and effective as possible [see the agenda on page 5 for a list of speakers].

The seminar centred on the following key asks:

- The adoption and implementation of an overarching, comprehensive anti-poverty strategy based on objective need as a day one priority for a new Executive. This strategy should have clear, timebound targets and build upon the detailed work that has been carried out to date in order to ensure expedient delivery and implementation of actions.
- In the interim, DfC and all government departments should progress the development of the draft strategy as much as is possible by in readiness for a new Executive.

The event was well-attended by both MLAs and civil servants. It received significant, prime time coverage in the media. However, at the time of writing this introduction, we are still waiting for further progress on the anti-poverty strategy. Power sharing has yet to be restored in Northern Ireland and no one outside of DfC has had sight of the draft strategy, despite requests. In the interim, we will continue to ensure this issue does not simply vanish off the political radar.

**The anti-poverty strategy must be taken forward at the earliest possible opportunity.**

## Seminar agenda



**10am** - Coffee and registration

**10.30am - Welcome and scene setting**

- a) Welcome – Patricia McKeown, Regional Secretary, UNISON
- b) Opening remarks from event sponsors - Emma Sheerin MLA, Gerry Carroll MLA, Mike Nesbitt MLA, Sinéad McLaughlin MLA, and Kate Nicholl MLA

**11am – Where is Northern Ireland’s anti-poverty strategy?**

- a) Introduction (inc. event asks) – Trása Canavan, Senior Policy and Public Affairs Lead, Barnardo’s NI
- b) The legal obligation for an anti-poverty strategy – Daniel Holder, Director, CAJ
- c) Update on the development of the anti-poverty strategy – George Sampson, Director of Central Policy, Department for Communities (DfC)

**11.30am - Panel 1: The view from the Anti-Poverty Strategy Expert Advisory Panel**

**Panellists:** Goretti Horgan, Lecturer in Social Policy, Ulster University; Pauline Leeson, Chief Executive, CiNI; and Bernadette McAliskey, Coordinator, STEP NI

**12pm - Comfort break**

**12.15pm - Panel 2: Ensuring the voices of people experiencing poverty are heard**

**Panellists:** Dr Ciara Fitzpatrick, Lecturer in Law, Ulster University; Dr Alexandra Chapman, Lecturer in Social Policy, Ulster University; Nuala Toman, Head of Policy, Disability Action; and John Patrick Clayton, UNISON /NIC ICTU

**12.45pm - Next steps**

**1pm - Event close & lunch**

*Titles and affiliations listed for identification purposes only. They were correct at the time the event took place. The views expressed during the conference were the speakers’ own.*

# Seminar briefing paper - Progressing an anti-poverty strategy for Northern Ireland

## Context:

Today's event, bringing together MLAs, civil servants, members of the Anti-Poverty Strategy Expert Advisory Panel, academics, and civic society groups, provides an opportunity to chart the progress of developing an Anti-Poverty Strategy for Northern Ireland and consider next steps.

## Background - Timeline of the Anti-Poverty Strategy:

The development of an Anti-Poverty Strategy for Northern Ireland, based on objective need, is a longstanding commitment. Section 28E of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 provides that the NI Executive, "shall adopt a strategy setting out how it proposes to tackle poverty, social exclusion and patterns of deprivation based on objective need."<sup>1</sup> In 2015, the High Court found the Executive had not adopted such a strategy, following a judicial review brought by the Committee on the Administration of Justice (CAJ).<sup>2</sup> As part of the 2020 New Decade, New Approach deal, it was agreed that a restored Executive would "develop and implement" an Anti-Poverty Strategy.<sup>3</sup>

## Process to develop the Anti-Poverty Strategy:

In 2020, the Department for Communities (DfC) established an Anti-Poverty Strategy Expert Advisory Panel to "advise DfC on the direction and development of a new Anti-Poverty Strategy which is evidence-based and targeted to address objective need."<sup>4</sup> The report and recommendations of this panel were published by DfC in March 2021.<sup>5</sup> The department subsequently established an Anti-Poverty Strategy Co-Design Group to advise on the development and drafting of the Anti-Poverty Strategy.<sup>6</sup> Following regular engagement with DfC, some members of the Anti-Poverty Strategy Co-Design Group, working independently from the department, took forward the development of a recommendations paper<sup>7</sup> to inform consideration of a draft strategy. This paper drew upon the Expert Advisory Panel's prior report.

Some of the areas<sup>8</sup> explored across these processes included:

- Creating an Anti-Poverty Act and Anti-Poverty Commission;
- Implementing a new child payment, delivering a childcare strategy, making participation in school cost-free, and restoring the value of social security benefits for children;
- Dealing with low pay and precarious work, through measures like a 'real Living Wage',<sup>9</sup> collective bargaining, and prohibiting the use of 'zero-hour' contracts;
- Strengthening the benefits and social security system to protect against poverty, including via reforming supports for persons with disabilities and removing the bedroom tax, benefit cap, two-child limit, and five-week wait for Universal Credit;
- Tackling poverty amongst pensioners and older people;
- Addressing cross-cutting issues impacting on poverty, such as housing, employment inclusion, and access to services.

<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/47/section/28E>

<sup>2</sup> *Committee on the Administration of Justice (CAJ) and Brian Gormally's Application* [2015] NIQB 59

<sup>3</sup> *New Decade, New Approach*, January 2020, p.9

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/articles/anti-poverty-strategy-expert-advisory-panel-terms-reference>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/report-anti-poverty-strategy-expert-advisory-panel>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/articles/anti-poverty-strategy-co-design-group-terms-reference>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.nicva.org/article/members-of-the-dfc-anti-poverty-strategy-co-design-group-produce-key-recommendations-paper>. Please note that not all members of the Co-Design Group contributed to/endorsed this paper.

<sup>8</sup> The full reports of both the Expert Advisory Panel and members of the Co-Design Group can be viewed via the links above.

<sup>9</sup> As set annually by the Living Wage Foundation, see <https://www.livingwage.org.uk/what-real-living-wage>

The work that has been done to date should provide a solid foundation for the development of a draft Anti-Poverty Strategy. However, in the continuing absence of a Minister for Communities and an Executive, a draft Anti-Poverty Strategy has not been released for public consultation and Northern Ireland remains without one.

**Progressing an Anti-Poverty Strategy – next steps:**

The lack of a strategy has coincided with an ongoing cost-of-living crisis and a period of major social and economic uncertainty across society, including proposed budget cuts to public services, and to the community and voluntary sector. This reinforces the need for a robust, rights-based Anti-Poverty Strategy based on objective need, with investment and clear actions that can lead to systemic change. The Anti-Poverty Strategy should provide targeted support for those disproportionately affected by poverty, in order to promote equality of opportunity.

We hope that today’s discussion will serve to highlight that the lived experiences of those in poverty, as well as the advocacy of civic society, must be at the heart of the strategy’s development and delivery. The event will aim to help to ensure that a prospective strategy is as effective and comprehensive as possible. However, ultimately progressing an Anti-Poverty Strategy will require the restoration of the NI Executive.

**Key asks:**

We call for the adoption and implementation of an overarching, comprehensive Anti-Poverty Strategy based on objective need to be a day one priority for a new Executive. The strategy should have clear, timebound targets and build upon the detailed work that has been carried out to date in order to ensure expedient delivery and implementation of actions.

In the interim, we call on DfC and all government departments to progress the development of the draft strategy as much as is possible in readiness for a new Executive.

For **further information** on this briefing note, please email [equalitycoalition@caj.org.uk](mailto:equalitycoalition@caj.org.uk).

*Published by the Equality Coalition, Barnardo’s NI, and the Northern Ireland Anti-Poverty Network (NIAPN) in June 2023 and given out to attendees at the seminar.*

## Welcome and scene setting

### Welcome – Patricia McKeown, Regional Secretary, UNISON

Thank you very much, everyone. You're all very welcome. My name is Patricia McKeown. I'm the Regional Secretary of the public service [trade] union, UNISON. I also Co-Convene the Equality Coalition alongside my colleague Daniel Holder of CAJ. You'll hear from Daniel later. Quite a few of the organisations present today are in fact members of the Equality Coalition. But today's event has been jointly organised between the Equality Coalition, the Northern Ireland Anti-Poverty Network (NIAPN) and Barnardo's NI. It has also, I'm very pleased to say, been co-sponsored by a range of MLAs across different political parties.



In the space available to us today, we have three very significant panels. The first panel will explore where we are at the moment with the anti-poverty strategy. We will then have a chance to hear from some of the experts who have been on the 'Anti-Poverty Expert Advisory Panel' involved in devising the strategy. And then, very importantly, we're going to hear from a panel that's going to talk about how we ensure that the voices of the people who are experiencing poverty are heard. I'm hoping that we will have an opportunity at the end of each of the three panels for some questions and feedback. We've only got 30 minutes per panel, and we will take a short break, as you can see from the agenda, just round about 12pm. So, I want to thank, and now invite to address us, our sponsor and co-sponsors.

### Opening remarks from event sponsors

#### Emma Sheerin MLA, Sinn Féin

I want to thank all the organisers for today's event, which I am delighted to co-sponsor on behalf of Sinn Féin. I suppose we're all, as MLAs, very aware of the issues that are facing the community right across the north at the minute in terms of the cost living crisis that we've been through and are still going through. And years of Tory austerity at this stage are being exacerbated by cruel and savage cuts. It seems that every week brings another announcement and all of those cuts to health and education, in particular, affect the most vulnerable in society significantly and drastically. And we could all tell tales.



Now, we are all dealing with constituents who are in dire straits, and it's very, very difficult given that we're not in the position of having an Executive and can't assist people in a lot of cases. And we're just trying to do our best, but know that there are no permanent solutions to the problems that people are facing. Obviously, my party colleague Deirdre Hargey was the Communities Minister during the last mandate and Deirdre did quite a bit of work on progressing an anti-poverty strategy, which was a commitment from the 1998 Good Friday Agreement (GFA), which hadn't been delivered upon.

And as I understand it, any reformed Executive could be seeing a final draft of that strategy and would be able to implement it within a couple of weeks. So obviously, the ask from today is to see

the introduction of the anti-poverty strategy, to allow people to be able to live in a way that is comfortable across the north, regardless of their background. And we want to see an Executive reform and we want to see progress made on that. So that's, at the outset, my key ask today. I'm looking forward to the panels and thanks to you all for taking part in this event.

### **Mike Nesbitt MLA, Ulster Unionist Party (UUP)**

You're all very welcome to Stormont. It's nice to see the room filled and the agenda covering something so important. I don't know what time I have left as an elected politician, but I have a sort of mental bucket list of things that I want to try to achieve, one of which would be seeing an end to the organised crime gangs that have arisen out of the terrorist/paramilitary groups that were born in our conflict. Another would be to end the 'brain drain', as we call it, so that our young people are leaving Northern Ireland because they want to leave and not because, as is the case today, they feel they have to.



And the third area would be addressing our shocking rates of economic inactivity - I think we're about five percentage points higher than our neighbouring regions and countries. And part of doing that, of course, would involve having an anti-poverty strategy. I know Daniel [Holder, CAJ] is going to tackle the rather shameful history of why we still haven't got there yet. But if you look at the last Programme for Government (PfG), which again, rather shamefully, never made it beyond draft stage, those high end outcomes included giving everybody the best start in life and letting everybody achieve their potential, living longer, healthier, and more active lives.

So, an anti-poverty strategy is clearly key to achieving many of those high end outcomes. And I don't think anything's going to change when we eventually get back to work, which I hope will be, well, I would hope it would be on Monday, but hope springs eternal, as they say.

I would just finish by saying, although everybody looks at MLAs and says, "Get back to work!", I'm afraid I've got three events on in the building this morning, so I'll be with you till about 11.30am. I look forward to the session up to then. Thank you very much.

### **Kate Nicholl MLA, Alliance Party**

Thank you so much. I'm really honoured to be co-sponsoring this very important event. And just at the outset, I'd like to say thank you to Patricia [McKeown, UNISON] and what your organisation is doing to support refugees and asylum seekers. There are many other groups here who are shouldering the weight of what we should be doing. You're all helping people in different ways within communities. I'm a migration spokesperson for my party, so I do a lot of work on asylum seekers and refugees. It's a key area of interest of mine and they're some of the most disadvantaged people in our society.



Every day I think about a couple of years ago when I was sitting in my kitchen, feeding my then one year old son some porridge. I heard Dr. Julie-Ann Maney come on the radio and she was talking about children coming into the hospital, who were squirrelling away bits of toast, eating three, four bowls of cereal in succession because they didn't know when they were going to eat again. And I just thought about how I would then scrape my porridge into the food waste and the difference, the disparity, that exists between so many children in our society, in their upbringing

and what was going to happen to them, in what opportunities they were going to have. And [I thought about] how every year the gap was going to grow further and further apart to the opportunities that my son was having.

And it's shameful. And what I'm really worried about is that when the Assembly does get back up and running, that we're not going to have the courage to prioritise what we need to. We need to prioritise an anti-poverty strategy, we need to prioritise serious investment in childcare, we need to prioritise the most vulnerable people in our society. So, thank you so much for the work that you're collectively doing. We're going to need you even more when this place is up and running to ensure that we do deliver on our commitments and we make the strategy a day one priority. Thank you.

### **Gerry Carroll MLA, People Before Profit (PBP)**

I'm very glad to sponsor the event as well. And I want to sincerely thank the organisers. I'll probably miss everybody's name if I start mentioning them by name, but thank you all for organising this important and timely meeting because I think the context in which we're having this discussion couldn't be any starker and the need for an anti-poverty strategy couldn't be any clear. We have a cost of living crisis, which is heaping untold misery on working class communities, devastated by years of austerity, stagnant wages, and a deepening housing crisis. We have a bloodbath Tory budget that has led to attacks on workers, the gutting of public services, and funding being withdrawn from hard-up community organisations, some of whom are here today. We've had a government in London which has overseen the worst drop in living standard since records began, all while helping their rich allies get richer through tax breaks and other handouts from the public purse. And here in the north, the impact of this Tory economic agenda can be felt everywhere. However, for me, the hardest stat to stomach is the fact that we have one in five children here living in poverty. Truly stark and, frankly, disgusting.



And in my view, a society where people must rely on food banks, kids go hungry in school, and people struggle to heat their homes is a society in desperate need of systemic change. But it's not just the Tories who are to blame for our hardships. The point has been repeatedly made in many quarters; the absence of an Executive is exacerbating the cost of living crisis. I'm sure we'll hear more of that today, particularly as the Tories punish the public for the actions of the DUP.

But a restored Executive in and of itself, frankly, isn't good enough. The consistent failure by any previous Executive to bring forward an anti-poverty strategy is proof of that. That's why I'm glad that the organisers of this meeting today are laying out a clear demand so that any incoming Executive will know exactly what's expected of them. And to say that previous Executives simply didn't implement an anti-poverty strategy would be an understatement. In fact, those at the head of these institutions have actively pursued a strategy of impoverishing people. If we take the proposals in front of us here today, you can find its antithesis in Stormont policy itself.

In the report in front of us [i.e. the briefing note produced for this event, included on pages 6 to 7], I see the rightful demand for an end to low pay. And in making that demand, we should know that we're up against parties at Stormont who voted to cut public sector pay time and time again. If we want to strengthen benefits, end the two child limit, and remove the bedroom tax, it's worth remembering and noting that parties in this room voted for welfare reform as well.

We want to strengthen collective bargaining, improve workers' rights, and ensure better wages. Then questions must be asked of the parties that voted against legislation to give trade unions

greater freedoms. The point being is that no party will say they're against an anti-poverty strategy or anti-poverty measures. In practice though, they haven't pushed a poverty strategy for 25 years. I think we need to say and recognise that, and recognise the shortcomings in Stormont policies. And it shouldn't, in my view, engender feelings of pessimism, rather should spur us on in the fight for more and the fight for better. The 25 years since the Belfast Agreement have been incredibly difficult for working class people. But we've also seen a glimmer of a better future.

We've seen, recently, workers take to the picket lines, communities marching against budget cuts, and ordinary people across our society coming out to demand and fight for better. Just recently, the Department of Education (DE) was forced to roll back on cuts to youth and early year services. This is an important victory for many different reasons. But it wasn't achieved through clever lobbying by MLAs, myself included. It wasn't due to the goodwill of top officials. And it certainly didn't come from the so-called magic money tree. It was through grassroots resistance and pressure, through communities mobilising on the streets to say enough is enough, and calling for the money we know that's been there all along to be implemented. It's those type of movements that can scrap welfare reform, get social homes built for all, and ensure nobody in our society has to rely on food banks. A radical trade union movement of workers can end zero hour contracts, deliver a £15 an hour minimum wage, and roll back the Thatcherite anti-union laws overseen by this Assembly.

And as for all the false starts, there's been too many to count when we've had a Stormont [government]. There is still no doubt in my mind that the end of poverty should be the first item in the Programme for Government (PfG) if a new Executive is formed. A clear anti-poverty strategy should be at the heart of that programme.

But that strategy shouldn't act as a benchmark for action; if those in power don't fulfil their obligations, they need to be held the account by people marching on the street. Whether Stormont returns or not, I believe we need to take up that fight for our anti-poverty demands now by building a mass people power movement that goes beyond the confines of our broken political system. And hopefully the aspirations in today's discussion can act as a catalyst for doing just that. So glad to sponsor [this event] and thank you for letting me say a few words.

←-----→

### **Paul Doherty, Spokesperson for Ending Poverty, Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), representing Sinéad McLaughlin MLA**

Good morning, everyone. Very grateful to join you all today for this very important event. As you've noticed, I'm not Sinéad McLaughlin [MLA]. Sorry Sinead couldn't make it today, but again, I'm very glad to be here today and speak to you all. My name is Paul Doherty. I'm a community activist first and foremost, and I'm a Councillor in West Belfast. I'm also the SDLP spokesperson on Ending Poverty. For context today, I also run a community and volunteer led organisation called 'Foodstock' in Belfast, which has shown solidarity with hundreds of people living in real crisis right across our city, seven days a week, by providing practical support that includes mutual food aid, pre-loved school uniform hubs, advice for families, and, I'm also sad to say, community breakfast clubs for children. What we do there is very much about community solidarity and not charity. And it's done with dignity at the forefront of every aspect of that. But in 2023, we really shouldn't have to be doing this and the onus shouldn't always be on communities to step up each and every time.



I'm beyond angry when I see every single day how poverty has been allowed to grow, how poverty has been allowed to develop, and how our government has continued to neglect people and hasn't stepped in to deal with a crisis and pull people out of the poverty trap that they find themselves in. It's getting increasingly difficult for people out there in our communities right now. And for us, it's become a stage where we're constantly having to step up as a community where a government has failed. I find it unforgivable that this government has not yet met its legal obligation to develop an anti-poverty strategy. And the cost of that failure has been absolutely devastating on the ground in those communities, for people and for families.

I saw it firsthand this morning as I left Foodstock, some 500 food parcels were going into the community. It's not right. I saw it firsthand in how the size of the breakfast clubs we are facilitating has increased as a result of more hungry children walking through those school gates and many, many parents, at the same time, going without. And I heard it firsthand, sadly, this week, when I talked to a teacher who broke down in front of me, worried and concerned about what is going to happen to many, many children this summer as she herself found herself [during termtime] hiding lunch packs in storerooms because children were coming into school hungry each and every day. And she's very fearful for children like that throughout the summer months.

This is just a snippet of the reality of what's going on in our communities right now. And in 2023, in a modern society, no one should be growing up in poverty. Yet this is happening in all our communities right across the north. We are beyond a crisis point and we have been for some time now. We're all here today because we agree that an anti-poverty strategy needs to be in place as soon as possible. What we also need is people working together to deliver it, and, with that, a collective political will to end the levels of poverty that we're seeing each and every day in our communities. This needs to move forward quickly and I'm very keen to get to work with many people in the room here on how we make this a reality going forward. If and when this government gets back up and running, we will hold it to account for an anti-poverty strategy to be put in place as a day one priority, and one that has a clear and time bound targets and, importantly, proper ambitious funding attached to it.

We're very clear that we should be ending poverty in this place to allow everyone to participate fully in society as members of the community. People deserve no less. I really look forward to talking to people today to listen to the contributions and I'm thankful to be part of this [event] today.

## Where is Northern Ireland's anti-poverty strategy? (Presentations)

### Introduction (including the key event asks) - Trása Canavan, Senior Policy and Public Affairs Lead, Barnardo's NI



I suppose why I'm here talking to you today is because, as well as working for Barnardo's Northern Ireland, I was the co-chair of the Anti-Poverty Strategy Co-Design Group, which was a really important process and I'll touch upon that a bit more in my remarks. So, where is Northern Ireland's anti-poverty strategy? In April this year, we celebrated 25 years since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement (GFA). A lot of people are patting themselves on the back saying how well we've done. But what was the promise of the Good Friday Agreement? It was peace; it was prosperity; it was a brighter future for our children, for our young people, for our communities. And have we delivered that? Where are we 25 years later?

The 1998 Northern Ireland Act establishes an obligation for an anti-poverty strategy [following an amendment arising from the Northern Ireland (St Andrews Agreement) Act 2006]. And Daniel [Holder, CAJ] will talk a bit more about the legal action that was taken in 2015 to prompt the delivery of that strategy through legal remedies. But we shouldn't have to use legal remedies to deliver on an anti-poverty strategy. And, even with that, we still don't have one.

In late 2020, there were signs of movement. An expert advisory panel was put together to develop a report, which was a really fantastic piece of work [available here: <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/report-anti-poverty-strategy-expert-advisory-panel>]. From that, a co-design group took on that piece of work and looked at developing that. And that co-design group was made up of about 30 different organisations from right across civil society, representing many different sectors and interests. It was a fantastic group. I'll say it wasn't a perfect process. It was a bumpy road. But ultimately that group and members of the group took on the challenge of developing recommendations that we felt really were key to delivering on anti-poverty in Northern Ireland. That work, combined with that of the expert panel, provided a really strong foundation to develop Northern Ireland's anti-poverty strategy.

So, what was in those recommendations from the co-design group? I won't go into that in too much detail because it was nearly 100 pages, so you can read that in your spare time [available here: <https://www.nicva.org/article/members-of-the-dfc-anti-poverty-strategy-co-design-group-produce-key-recommendations-paper>]. But I do want to touch upon some key aspects from those recommendations.

The first is the vision of the strategy, which was the eradication of poverty, and that is key. When we talk about poverty in Northern Ireland, we can't accept reducing it by this percentage or that percentage over there. We need to eradicate poverty in Northern Ireland in the day and age that we live in. It cannot be acceptable that one person lives in poverty, that one child grows up in poverty, so nothing less than the eradication of poverty will be accepted.

The second [key aspect] is a lifecycle approach. This was developed really well by the expert advisory panel. And this is something that the co-design group built upon - looking at that lifecycle and the different challenges that people face throughout their life, but then adding onto that place-based deprivation and also [considering] cross-cutting themes and services, which are really important to reaching people where they are when they need help.

Really importantly, an anti-poverty strategy that's going to achieve real and meaningful change needs to be truly cross-departmental. We don't just need buy-in from all our departments, we need delivery from all our departments. Poverty is absolutely woven into the fabric of our society and it touches upon the work that every single department does. And I'm really glad to see representatives from different departments here today because it's key that we work together and take responsibility for delivering on those actions.

And it's not just cross-departmental, it's cross-sectoral. This can't be done by the government alone. You absolutely need society along with you. You need the third sector, but you also need the voices and the experience of people who are living in poverty to inform what you do. You don't know best. You need to talk to the people on the ground and you need to understand what their needs are, and how best to meet them.

And, finally, we can't just keep mitigating the impact of poverty. Paul [Doherty, SDLP] touched upon food banks - our ever growing network of food banks. The Trussell Trust do amazing work, but their aim is that there should be no food banks at all. And that is absolutely right. We can't just keep setting up food banks and breakfast clubs for children. We need to make sure they don't need those food banks or breakfast clubs in the first place. We need to address the causes of poverty and not just the symptoms of poverty. And that's what this strategy and those recommendations would do.

In your event briefing [see pages 6 to 7], there's a really good overview of the key recommendations and outcomes developed by the co-design group in our paper. And, again, I won't go into those, but I do want to highlight two.

The first is outcome one, which asks for an anti-poverty act and an anti-poverty commission. And this is really important because we need to put frameworks in place to make sure that we absolutely deliver upon this. It can't just be a 'nice to have' commitment. It can't be something that we do when the going is good. It needs to be something that's fundamental to everything that we do. And a commission would also incorporate and weave in the lived experience of people in poverty, making sure their voices and their experience is central to what we deliver and to what we do.

Secondly, I want to mention introducing a child payment - the key new action that was identified by the co-design group. And the reason for that is because we have one in four of our children growing up in poverty in Northern Ireland and it's absolutely unacceptable. It's even more unacceptable when you think that we've been living with that number for 20 years and have done nothing about it. The child payment would be £20 per week per child, which would make a historic difference in the number of children living in poverty and would really reshape our society.

This will require a significant investment, and we shouldn't be scared of saying that. If poverty was cheap or easy to tackle, I'd like to think we'd have sorted it out already, especially if it was something that could be done on the back of a piece of paper. But it's intricate, it's complex, but we can absolutely do it. We need to invest in the anti-poverty strategy. We need to see this as investing in the future of our society and investing in the future of our children and young people because we will absolutely pay the price for inaction. In fact, we're already paying the price for inaction. Now we can see how, in times of crisis, those costs spiral and that whenever appropriate support structures aren't there, they crumble and families pay the price.

So where are we now with regards to an anti-poverty strategy? Since 1998, we still don't have an anti-poverty strategy. [Currently] we don't have any ministers, and we don't have an Assembly. So unfortunately, not an awful lot of change except for a lot of broken promises. Right now, we're also facing a cost of living crisis and layered on top of that is the impact of no Assembly. There are no

local politicians here in the Assembly delivering for the people of Northern Ireland, delivering for them what they need and what they want when they need it. And we have civil servants who are being forced to take decisions that they absolutely should not be having to make because our politicians aren't there to take those decisions and deliver for Northern Ireland.

So, what do we need? We need the return of an Assembly, first and foremost. And when that Assembly returns, we need the adoption and implementation of an overarching comprehensive anti-poverty strategy based on objective need as a day one priority. The work has been done. I've talked about the expert advisory panel, I've talked about the co-design group, and that's only the most recent iteration of this policy work that's been done. We do not need to start from scratch. We do not need to reinvent the wheel. We need to get going and we need to deliver. We need to produce specific, time bound actions that will address poverty, and we need to identify that investment in tackling poverty in Northern Ireland.

Now, we also need to recognise the reality of the world that we live in, which is that we don't have an Assembly right now. So, what do we need in the interim? We're asking our civil servants across all departments to work together to progress the development of this draft strategy. As I've said, this work has been done. You know what we need, you know what the problems are, and you know what we need to do to address those problems. So, we need a draft strategy that is ready to deliver to our Assembly, to an incoming Minister for Communities on day one so they can address it and implement it as soon as possible. We need quick action and delivery, and that's only possible with that support [from the civil servants].

I want to finish off by asking you, who is paying the price for this inaction and for the lack of delivery of an anti-poverty strategy? And you all know the answer. It's our children; it's our young people; it's our families; it's our women; it's our pensioners; it's our communities and our schools. What I really don't want is for me to be standing in front of you, one year or five years from now, asking you the same question, "Where is Northern Ireland's anti-poverty strategy?"

## The legal obligation for an anti-poverty strategy – Daniel Holder, Director, CAJ

Mike [Nesbitt, UUP] has teed this up nicely with the suggestion of the shameful history of what's happened to date. My first slide shows the extract from the St Andrews Agreement legislation from 2006. This amended the Northern Ireland Act 1998, which is the implementation legislation for the Good Friday Agreement (GFA), inserting Section 28E on 'Strategy relating to poverty, social exclusion etc'. It was therefore the St Andrews legislation that brought that in the requirement for an anti-poverty strategy.

This means having an anti-poverty strategy has been part of the law since 2006. It is a legal obligation, there is no discretion on the Executive. 'Shall' is legal speak for 'must'. The NI Executive *must* adopt a strategy setting out how it proposes to tackle poverty, social exclusion, and patterns of deprivation. As we know from the previous discussion, that's not happened in the last 17 years.

The strategy also must be based on objective need - what does that mean? Well, crudely, it means there can't be a sectarian divvy up of resources, i.e. it can't be pound for pound between,



say, mostly unionist and mostly nationalist areas if there are significant differences in levels of poverty. We've looked at some of the case precedents from over the water where, on 'good relations' grounds, money has been diverted away for areas of high need, with high levels of people from an ethnic minority background, to mostly 'white' areas. That's been found to be racial discrimination. That's the type of decision making the concept of 'objective need' is included to prevent. I mention it because I suspect, in part, that the inclusion of 'objective need' has held up getting the strategy politically over the line in the past.

I want to also draw attention to how Section 28D of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, following another amendment set out in the St Andrews Agreement, places a legal obligation on the Executive to adopt Irish language and Ulster Scots strategies. I mention this because there have been recent judicial reviews (JR) in relation to those language commitments, which are relevant to the anti-poverty strategy because there is a direct read across. This is particularly true in terms of how likely the courts would be to intervene, at this particular stage, if an anti-poverty strategy isn't quickly adopted by an incoming Executive.

Now let's move on to specifically discuss the judicial review (JR) already taken by CAJ in relation to the anti-poverty strategy. We ran a conference ten years ago, 15 years on from the Good Friday Agreement, to ask what had happened to all the equality and rights commitments in the Agreement that hadn't actually been implemented or delivered. We found plenty of examples, including a few that were legally enforceable. So, we thought, well, let's try to actually enforce them. Let's see if we can. If it's actually the law that the Executive has to develop an anti-poverty strategy and it's not being done, let's try to get it over the line using the courts. We had some engagement with The Executive Office (TEO), but, eventually, we had to take judicial review proceedings and the High Court reached its verdict in late 2015 that the Executive acted unlawfully by not adopting the anti-poverty strategy [the judgment is available here: <https://www.judiciaryni.uk/judicial-decisions/2015-niqb-59>].

Despite the lengthy and 'erudite' arguments, it was a very simple decision. Was there an anti-poverty strategy or was there not? And the answer was no, there wasn't a strategy. The court went on to say there has to be a strategy, it has to have a beginning and end, it has to have measures in it that actually do what it says on the tin of the legislation in terms of tackling poverty, deprivation, etc.

The judgment also specifically references the concept of objective need stating that:

"The concept of 'objective need' is obviously central to the statutory provision the intention of which is to remove or reduce the scope for discrimination by tying the allocation of resources to neutral criteria that measure deprivation irrespective of community background or other affiliation..."

That's where we got to in relation to the 2015 judicial review. What happened after that? Well, the ruling wasn't appealed, and it became final in 2016. We were then very quickly into an election period. There was an election in May 2016. The anti-poverty strategy then sat with the new Department for Communities (DfC). That was a rather short lived Executive and there was no apparent progress. There were a few Assembly questions that reiterated the commitment to adopting an anti-poverty strategy, but there was no public process around developing one. Then the Executive collapsed between 2017 and 2020. In the interim, we had Conradh Na Gaelige's application on the Irish language strategy, which was very, very similar to our JR. The High Court again made a finding the Executive acted unlawfully by failing to adopt the Irish language strategy [see <https://www.judiciaryni.uk/judicial-decisions/2017-niqb-27>].

In 2020, there was a pretty clear commitment to New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) deal to the development and delivery of an anti-poverty strategy. It was directly linked to the Programme for Government (PfG). A process was then taken forward, which means, as Trása [Canavan, Barnardo's] and others mentioned earlier on, we actually have a blueprint for what this strategy should look like. There was an expert advisory panel of four big hitters who hit big. They developed a fantastic report and a fantastic blueprint [available here: <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/report-anti-poverty-strategy-expert-advisory-panel>]. I wouldn't want to single out any of the members of the expert working group, but I feel I must single out Bernadette [McAliskey, STEP NI], given she will shortly be moving on from STEP NI. I worked at STEP NI on a migrant rights project at the time that the duty for the anti-poverty strategy was being set out in the 2006 St Andrews Agreement. I learned a lot from Bernadette, and you can rest assured I've put it to good use. Thank you for that.

We had the expert advisory panel report and then of course we had the co-design process that was also packed with big hitters, many of whom are in the room. And we've already heard from Trása. My point is that the Strategy is ready to go, but obviously, a strategy hasn't been adopted because there isn't an Executive. Things can be done in the interim. I think that's a very important point and I think I'd like to bank what Emma [Sheerin, Sinn Féin] said earlier about how you'd want it to take only a couple of weeks to be able to roll a strategy into place if the Executive is set up.

But let's also look at where the law's gone because Conradh Na Gaeilge took a second judicial review over the continued failure of the Executive to adopt the Irish language strategy, which is quite important and relevant to the length of time a new Executive would have before they are again acting unlawfully in relation to the anti-poverty strategy. It's also relevant to what the court might actually do to intervene and enforce the legal obligation in this instance. What this judgement concludes – and remember the duty for the Irish language strategy has pretty much the same formulation as the duty for the anti-poverty strategy - is that there was a blocking of the Irish language strategy from 'substantive consideration'. The judgment cites the DfC paper on the Irish language strategy as being obstructed from the Executive agenda on over 30 occasions [see <https://www.bailii.org/nie/cases/NIHC/QB/2022/56.html>].

The judgment looks at this issue of how, strictly speaking, there is a new Executive each time there's an election. So, when does the clock start ticking? The judgment says regardless of that the leeway for the lead in time that would be reasonable to develop and adopt an Irish language strategy had long passed by the time the judicial review was taken by Conradh na Gaeilge. The court goes on to say that the time available to a new Executive to adopt a strategy before it is in breach of its statutory obligation will have to be assessed against the prevailing circumstances.

Nonetheless, the fact the duty for the Irish language strategy had been unfulfilled for such a lengthy period, resulting in two High Court declarations to that effect, will be a powerful consideration tending towards the need for expedition. If you read that over to the anti-poverty strategy, clearly there's already been a relevant court ruling. The duty has been unfulfilled for a very long period, but also the preparatory work has been done. The preparatory work is sitting there. It is pretty much ready to roll. So, what happens, say, if most of the ministers around the Executive table want to progress this, but some do not and they hold it up and it leads to a default of the legal obligation? Well, the court is pretty clear from the Irish language strategy judgment that there would be scope for judicial intervention; that any future breaches of the court order (i.e. another finding that the Executive has acted unlawfully by not adapting a strategy) "could be directed in substance and/or form to each member of the Executive and, in the case of non-compliance, only those shown to be thwarting the order might be sanctioned, provided this could

be clearly determined". Further, "In appropriate cases, the courts may be required to use their coercive powers where ministers simply fail to comply with their legal obligations."

This is being finally given teeth. It's not just a question of, if the law has been broken, responding with a declaration of unlawfulness. There are actually some teeth here if there's a further default on this obligation. We also have some new duties brought in around the rule of law, which includes compliance with legal obligations, the pledge of office, and a degree of enforceability of the ministerial code. So, the teeth to enforce this are getting sharper is my conclusion.

## Update on the development of the anti-poverty strategy – George Sampson, Director of Central Policy, Department for Communities (DfC)

Thanks for the introduction. I'm George Sampson, Director of Central Policy and Chief Economist for the Department [for Communities, DfC]. I'm going to give you an update on the work of the department and the very dedicated people who work there on the development of the anti-poverty strategy. I'm going to give you an overview of the work to date and I'm going to set out some of the next steps, as we see it, in relation to the anti-poverty strategy and the child poverty strategy. And I'm going to speak very briefly about

the fairly challenging climate that we find ourselves in. I know quite a few of you here today have been involved in the development of the anti-poverty strategy, so please accept my apologies if you find me repeating what you already know and please also accept my gratitude for all your help and assistance as we've worked together to get [the strategy] to this point.

As you're already aware, across government there's been a great deal of activity focused on addressing the issues of poverty and child poverty. And this work is especially important taken against the current background of political uncertainty, elevated inflation, ongoing disputes over pay, the cost of living crisis that's affecting our households and communities across Northern Ireland. You'll also be aware that DfC is currently undertaking a consultation on the budget for 2022-2024. And this has been taken forward in a situation where Executive departments are collectively facing the most challenging budget in recent history. So, while DfC leads on poverty policy, and it's one of my teams that does that, we do so on behalf of the Executive. And that's for child poverty and the anti-poverty strategies. They're both Executive strategies and they cut across all departments, and those departments and Executive ministers have collective responsibility for their implementation and their delivery.

There's been two main drivers for the development of the Executive's anti-poverty strategy and previous speakers have touched upon it. The first is Section 28 E of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, which provides that the Executive Committee shall adopt a strategy setting out how it proposes to tackle poverty, social exclusion, and patterns of deprivation based on objective need. The second driver of the anti-poverty strategy is the New Decade, New Approach [NDNA] agreement. NDNA committed the Executive to the development of an anti-poverty strategy. There are three other social inclusion strategies, I'm sure you're all aware of them, and they're being developed in tandem, again, by teams within my directorate in the department, and those are the disability, the gender equality, and the LGBTQI+ strategies. Each of those strategies is going to focus on actions to address the issues, barriers, and disadvantages that undermine equality of opportunity. Subject



to the decisions of any incoming Executive, these strategies may underpin a new Programme for Government (PfG).

But it's worth highlighting that a contributor towards the development of the anti-poverty strategy was the Executive's Child Poverty Strategy, which ran initially from 2016 to 2019, and was, along with the Active Aging Strategy, extended until May 2022. And that was done to provide continued focus to ensure government works collectively to tackle the issues faced by children and families impacted by poverty. And I want to speak a bit more about that later.

I'm going to speak a bit now about the approach that we took to developing the strategy. So, the Executive granted approval for work to commence on the development of an anti-poverty strategy on 24 September 2020. And it was agreed that the strategy would be developed using a co-design approach, with involvement from stakeholders and their representative organisations throughout the process. This was in line with the NDNA commitment to engage with civic society; the principles of co-design and co-production must underpin the development of the PfG, the budget, and the strategies. Work on the strategy was taken forward using the co-design approach and involved a number of strategy development groups, including the expert advisory panel, an anti-poverty co-design group, a cross-departmental working group, and a lot of people besides. The work of these groups was overseen by a Ministerial Steering Group, and I'll speak briefly in a bit more detail now about each of those stages.

The expert advisory panel, as already mentioned, was comprised of four members and they were drawn from the voluntary and community sector, and from academia. The independent panel was tasked with making recommendations on themes and key actions to inform the development of the new strategy. The panel submitted its recommendations to our department and a report was published on our website [available at <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/report-anti-poverty-strategy-expert-advisory-panel>].

On 5 March 2021, a co-design group made up of relevant stakeholder organisations, around 25 in total, was chosen to give a range of views and perspectives on poverty and also to bring lived experience into the process. It was convened to provide advice and guidance on the development of the strategy and to assist with stakeholder engagement. The co-design group members supported a range of feedback sessions to facilitate direct engagement with people with lived experience of poverty in order to inform strategy development. The co-design group members were drawn from a wide range of stakeholder groups - there's too many to mention - and broad representation across society. Indeed, over the course of the period of co-design, the team back in DfC spoke many times with the co-design group members and facilitated numerous meetings with Minister [for Communities] Deirdre Hargey at the time to ensure their voices and views were being heard loud and clear.

In terms of the Cross Departmental Working Group, it was established and comprised of senior officials from every NICS [Northern Ireland Civil Service] department, and they considered recommendations and input to the development of the strategy. Consideration was also given to the potential content of the strategy action plan. However, work on this will be ongoing, pending confirmation of the final strategy after we get an Executive. In terms of the Ministerial Steering Group, they oversaw the development not just of the anti-poverty strategy, but of the other social inclusion strategies as well. And that group met to receive updates and to oversee ongoing development of the strategies.

So, just in terms of child poverty, I'll speak very briefly about the Child Poverty Strategy. So NDNA also referenced the existing Child Poverty Strategy, and child poverty continues to be a focus. The Minister at the time said that helping vulnerable children and young people remains a priority and

announced the extension of the 2016-2019 Child Poverty Strategy up to May 2022. The extension allowed time for engagement on how we address child poverty in the longer term. It's proposed again, subject to Executive agreement, that actions to address child poverty will be contained within the new anti-poverty strategy. The stakeholder groups that have taken part in work on developing the anti-poverty strategy have shown broad support for this approach. The 2021/22 final annual report of the Child Poverty Strategy is currently under development and will be published in due course. And a strategy evaluation will also be carried out.

I just want to touch very briefly upon the challenging context that we're operating in at the moment. And we can do that any number of ways. I mean, I could speak as an economist at length about all of this, but I'll focus here on the economic backdrop and the world events that have contributed to the challenges that our households and communities are facing. I'm going to speak very briefly about the governance gap that we have at the moment and also the fiscal environment that we are operating in. In terms of the economic situation, we have very high inflation, it was well over 10%. It's now at 8.7%. Based on the latest figures, it's probably going to be higher than a lot of people thought it would be for a while yet. And of course, when we hear about reductions in inflation, I want to point out that that doesn't mean prices are coming down for households and communities. It just means that the rate in which prices are going up has slowed slightly. It doesn't mean there's any immediate end to the hardships that people are facing when we hear about inflation coming down.

What I would say, as well, is that obviously inflation has been higher than growth in wages. Households and communities are feeling poorer as a result of all of that. Add to that increased rental prices, increased loan rates, increased mortgage payments, and all of that, and you can see that households here are facing quite unprecedented financial pressures at the moment. When you look at some of the global events that have taken place in recent years, obviously the Covid-19 pandemic brought severe and immediate challenge to our households, to businesses, to wider society, and it's having lasting effects. The war in Ukraine exacerbated the situation. It drove inflation. It drove inflation in energy and food prices. They're the two areas that lower income households spend the biggest proportion of their budget on when compared to other households so they're finding it extra tough at the minute. Research suggests that in Northern Ireland, our households, after they pay for essentials, are left with about £100 a week, and that's less than half the UK average.

In the department, what we see is that we've had an increase in discretionary support claims. They're averaging around 10,000 now, as opposed to 6,000 pre-Covid. We also see statistics that allude to a big increase in food bank use. People are feeling it out there and we recognise that. In terms of the governance, then we have more challenge there. Obviously, in Northern Ireland, we're without an Executive, and that means [departmental] Permanent Secretaries are required to make decisions in accordance with the provisions of the Executive Formation Act. These principles are contained in the support and guidance issued by the Secretary of State. And this guidance recognises that some decisions should not be made by civil servants without the direction of ministers.

The focus in DfC, in terms of the current fiscal environment, has been about scaling back programmes rather than stopping work, and the emphasis is on doing the least harm possible. The Secretary of State has also made it clear that he has no authority to take these decisions, which means that, outside of an Executive and NI Ministers, decisions to balance the budget can't be taken. And this leaves a governance gap.

In terms of the budget allocation, the department does recognise that it's inadequate. It doesn't provide sufficient funding for delivery of all the services that are needed. We face an

unprecedented funding gap and recently the Permanent Secretary outlined the magnitude of that at around £111 million for the resource budget and about £59 million in capital. I know we're not here to talk about the DfC budget, but I do want to outline some of the things that are going on. Despite that budget allocation, the department has recently announced a number of measures that, directly and indirectly, do attempt to alleviate poverty. The Discretionary Support Grant baseline budget has been topped up from about £13.7 million to £20 million, and that's a 46% increase from pre-Covid baseline levels. That's not the £40 million that we had last year. Criteria for award of Discretionary Support Grants is going to be revised so that the budget available can be prioritised to the most vulnerable. Funding for homelessness interventions is increased by £2 million to supplement the 2022/23 baseline position. We're keeping the Affordable Warmth Scheme open. Funding will be sustained at last year's level for the Supporting People Programme, for 280 community and voluntary organisations and labour market partnerships.

Also, when we look to the benefit system, benefits have been uplifted by inflation at around 10%. And when you look across government, there is a lot of stuff going on that might not be badged as an anti-poverty measure, but, ultimately, taken in the round, would have the impact of alleviating poverty.

Finally, [let's look at] the next steps. Okay, so we do have a draft strategy there. We have something that's ready to present to an incoming minister. It's taken on board all of the input and the views that we have gathered through the co-design process, but the final content of it, ultimately, is for the Executive to agree. When we get a new Minister [for Communities], we will present that draft to them for consideration. There's then a whole series of actions that would need to be taken before the strategy can be published. Not least re-engaging with departments and engaging with ministers. For each of the departments, re-engaging with the ministerial steering group, making sure that the evidence base remains up to date. That will be taken forward at pace once we get direction from an incoming minister. And so we will keep updating our stakeholders in terms of what the future holds and what's happening in that regard. But that's really all I want to say on it. Thank you for inviting me here today.

**[George is asked when civil society will see the draft]:** That's something that we gave a lot of consideration to before Minister Hargey left office. And, really, because it's an Executive strategy, we really do need to get Executive agreement on the content before we share it more widely. And that's the line that we're adopting on that.

## Panel I: The view from the Anti-Poverty Strategy Expert Advisory Panel



Panel 1. Pictured, from left to right, is Patricia McKeown (UNISON), Bernadette McAliskey (STEP NI), Goretti Horgan (UU), and Pauline Leeson (CiNI). Bernadette, Goretti and Pauline all sat on the 'Anti-Poverty Strategy Expert Advisory Panel'.

The expert panel's report, which is referenced throughout this section, is available here: <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/report-anti-poverty-strategy-expert-advisory-panel>.

### Goretti Horgan, Senior Lecturer in Social Policy, Ulster University

The first thing to say is that all of the recommendations of the panel were evidence based, so there's nothing that we proposed that there's not a lot of evidence to support the fact that it would make a difference in terms of reducing poverty. And right at the beginning, we decided, as a panel, that our focus would be on reducing costs for households and increasing income, because we know that income makes a huge difference. And in particular, it would make a difference to child poverty - something all three of us here have a particular interest in ending.



We know, because there have been many studies done, like those brought together by the London School of Economics (LSE), which show that even a small increase in income in a household will make a huge difference to child development [see, for example, [Does money affect](#)

[children's outcomes?](#)]. I know this because in my own research with children and speaking to children as young as six and seven, they are very aware of what's going on at home. They know how anxious their mothers are, particularly their mothers. I mean, obviously it's their fathers as well sometimes, but how anxious their mothers are in trying to make ends meet, in trying to make sure that there's light, that there's heat and that there's food on the table. Worried children cannot learn as well as children who are not anxious. So, when there is that extra income coming into the house, which is why we proposed the child payment, the impact that has on every aspect of child outcomes is massive.

First of all, maternal mental health improves, and we all know that poor maternal mental health is a really dreadful indicator in terms of what the child's outcome is going to be. The child payment that we proposed isn't just about ensuring that children don't go hungry, although that is the first thing that we want to make sure of, but it produces a virtuous circle, improving everything for everybody in the household. Better maternal mental health means less anxious, less worried children who can enjoy their childhood and get more from their education. And it means mothers who are able to help their children with homework, etc.

As Trása [Canavan] said earlier about the importance of investing in the future, when we're talking about child poverty and trying to eradicate child poverty, this is what we're talking about. We're talking about investing in the future. And the importance of interdepartmental cooperation, which we try to make throughout the report, is really seen when we think about investing in the future.

Look at the cuts that are being proposed at the moment, in education in particular. If you want to know why the Republic is as wealthy as it is and Northern Ireland is struggling the way it is: it's investment in education. Education is at the heart of how the Celtic Tiger was built. It was built principally through educating young people and children and ensuring that they had the kind of qualifications that were needed to increase productivity. Increased productivity seems to be all everybody talks about when discussing the economy of the North. But you can't achieve that if children haven't got a good education. And they won't get a good education if they're sitting there hungry, unable to learn or sitting there worrying about what's going on at home because of poverty.

My last point was that when Eileen Evanson and her working group brought out the first report on mitigating welfare reform [see [www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/publications/welfare-reform-mitigations-working-group-report](http://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/publications/welfare-reform-mitigations-working-group-report)], one of the points that they made was the importance of the additional costs of working. And that is something that, again, we tried to address. When we look at what's happening today and the proposals that are being made, for example, to increase the cost of Translink fares, you wonder whether anybody has looked at the evidence that all these various reports: our report, Eileen Evanson's reports, all the different reports that come out, and thought about what are the vicious circles? Like making things more and more difficult, making it too expensive to get to work by increasing the cost of transport. We are supposed to be "making work pay" but our high childcare and transport costs means many people cannot afford to work. So, I finish by asking what are the virtuous circles that are going to improve everybody's lives?

I don't know if that's what you wanted in terms of the view of the panel, because really our collective view was all shown in the report, but I just thought that those points might be worth starting with.

## Pauline Leeson, Chief Executive, CiNI

It's lovely to be here among friends and colleagues this morning, because I've been in so many hostile environments lately talking about reversing cuts, that it's actually quite nice to feel solidarity in the room. And people here are very like-minded. I know that when we were first asked to sit in the panel, and this is more of a reflection on my experience, I think we had a little conversation among ourselves to say, is this going to be another review? Is it going to sit on the shelf? And we decided that the Department for Communities was serious about this. We had a minister who was actually serious about this. I had been at the conference with Daniel [Holder, CAJ] ten years ago. It's making me feel so old when we were talking about mapping the future. We were quite hopeful then, but it's sad that we needed a judicial review to make these things happen.



But I suppose on the positive side, the outcome is you have a really good report. Trása and her colleagues have made it an even better report. They fine-tuned all the recommendations in their co-design process. And thank you so much for that. I think that when we look at the report, I was very happy that we looked at the cycle. It wasn't my suggestion. I think it probably was Bernadette or Goretti's but I'm very happy that we looked there, because, of course, it does start with children and their families, and that's who is bearing the brunt of this at the minute.

My worry is that when we [government] come back, things have gotten so bad that we're coming back from a huge negative deficit. My organisation [CiNI] not only sat on the expert panel for anti-poverty, but we were very keen to sit on the disability strategy's co-design group. I know that Nuala [Toman] is here and she's going to talk about that later, because there was a particular concern for us around children with disabilities and their families. They're always at the end of the list, they're always so extremely vulnerable. And I have to be absolutely honest, I see very few champions for them in the Departments and I see very few champions in this Assembly.

This has gone back about 20 years, so we had a very good intervention there. From Queens University, Professor Bernie Kelly has done a blueprint for what needs to happen for children with disabilities and their families. Gerry [Carroll, MLA] did touch on the point that the Department of Education came back in and reversed those cuts. I would love to know the reason why. I would love to know. I think it was the right thing to do, but the very next week they cut the SENCO Coordinators by 50%. That sector, those families, are in absolute chaos. No nursery places for a lot of them. I never give off a lot about these things, but I think it's been an absolute act of vandalism what's happened in the Department of Education. We actually had a minister and a SPAD who was totally committed to school holiday payments. I get calls now from organisations, we fund some of these organisations. They were holiday hunger organisations, but they run all year out now. I get calls from them every other day saying, 'we can't do the educational programmes, we can't do the development', 'that's okay, just feed the children'.

That's what we're back to. And I think it's an absolute disgrace what's going on. But the great thing is we've got two good pillars, good legislation proposed, the Anti Poverty Commission. I think something that we learned from Scotland is it is so important that we have people with lived experience on that panel, who can really monitor the government, and of course we'll be there to support them. All the recommendations: Child payment, welfare mitigations, reducing the cost of education, and other food provision, affordable and accessible childcare. My goodness, how long have we been talking about that? It's absolutely incredible.

I asked them why they picked us [to be on the expert panel], and they said, you've been working on this and you'll say the right things. And [we] were fairly uncompromising, I think, it's a gift to them. It is all there. As soon as the Executive gets back, they need to start and implement it and we'll be watching them, making sure that they do it.

Are there things they could be doing now? Who knows when the government is going to come back. They need to help children and families. I have to say the Department for Communities is the only one that is protecting the community and voluntary sector. The [Department of] Health and Education are not. They went there first. The greatest impact [of their cuts] is in children and their families, and in our organisations. That does make me fearful for the future because what they're doing is they're targeting the organisations who kick up about this sort of thing, those who are in this room and are constantly holding them to account. So I don't know what the future will look like, but we'll certainly be there anyway. Thank you.

### **Bernadette McAliskey, Coordinator, STEP NI**

The core question for us is, where are we today? An important thing we did as a panel when we came together was to not one minute allow ourselves to be flattered. We thought we'd been hung out to dry, and we wondered, in fact, if we had been specifically chosen to silence us forever. So, we had a collective and very critical look at the terms of reference to see if there was anything in the invisible ink, never mind in the small print, that would mean we would be selling our souls before we even got started.

I'd like to acknowledge the work of our colleague who's not here, Mike Tomlinson, who, when we all sat around and did all the talking and thinking, he did the laborious work of drafting and redrafting the nuances and semantics that were important for the three women round the table in finally getting a draft that we could all agree with.

We sent [our understanding of the terms of reference] to [the Department for Communities]. I did steal this from the private sector. I once saw it being done. And, I thought, that's a smart move. We set out and sent back to the department what was clearly our understanding of the terms of reference, and what it permitted us to do, and invited them to accept that or clarify it.

The department came back very quickly to say, "No, that's fine". I think that it hadn't been done before and that they hadn't read it very carefully. Personally, I was counting on that. But they did come back and clarify for us that our collective understanding of the terms of reference was correct. And one of the key things in the terms of reference was that we were not required to self-censor or inhibit our thinking and recommendations around what was practical at this time, affordable at this time. That we were setting out recommendations on what was needed to effectively challenge and eradicate poverty. So, we weren't starting off from a position of saying, "Oh, this is how much money a department has got, what can we do?". We were setting out what actually was needed to effectively resolve the problem. We were an expert panel on what was needed [to eradicate poverty].

We weren't a government, we don't have the power to raise money, dispense money. Where they got the money from was their problem. It wasn't for our expert panel to set out what could be done within the narrow confines of the way the government currently worked.



Those recommendations were set out and we had a very, very tight timescale, which was my other frustration, that we burnt a lot of midnight oil. We met within the timescale, within the budget, and worked very hard. And we delivered on 22 December 2020 a report that was published three months later [in March 2021]. And it's that kind of bureaucratic delay that matters.

We recognised we were always up against a timescale to get this into the Assembly and over the line before the Assembly would come apart for elections. And a key recommendation, apart from everything else we did, was we framed this in terms of the Programme for Government (PfG). We set this out in the centrality of lived experience, and around the outcome based discipline in which this strategy should then begin to implement actions.

A key weakness in departments is that there is not a clear understanding in the civil service that you do not arrive at outcomes instead of outputs by using 'find and replace' in word processing. You can't simply find and replace 'output' with 'outcome'. That's not how it works. And I know that there are people within the wider voluntary sector that are also not sold on outcomes. But I put it to you very simply, if you are going on Google to find directions, you have to be able to put in the box where the hell you think you're going. If you don't know where your destination is, how are you ever going to know where to start or how to get there or if you've arrived? I have never known any other way to work other than to be very clear of where you want to end up and then start to work your way back through all the things that you need to put in place in order to get there.

I see Padraic Quirk here from the Social Change Initiative (SCI), and when we worked with Atlantic Philanthropies as a funder, I'm indebted that [they] knew if you want to know where you're going, you have to start in your head at the end and figure out how to get there.

So, we now have a strategy in the making. We now have very clear, robust recommendations. I think when we say, "where are we now?", we are in a significantly worse place than we were in when we wrote it. But the evidence base is, as a result, only stronger. The objective need is only greater, and the delay [in implementing the strategy] has resulted in requiring even more financial investment.

An anti-poverty strategy is very important for the social inclusion, as equals, of those who are currently poor, but it is not in and of itself a social inclusion strategy. If you think of it that way, you're already going in the wrong direction. You're already going in the wrong direction because, it's a dependent model, it's still Victorian thinking. The poor will always be with us. How little do we have to do to include them?

An anti-poverty strategy is a fundamental economic strategy as to how you organise the economics of your society. And if we don't think of it like that, then we will not make the case for the core economic investment to eradicate poverty. The eradication of poverty is not a budget that should be confined to the Department for Communities (DfC). It should be core, central budgeting of the Assembly. Every single department - the Department for the Economy (DfE), the Department for Infrastructure (DfI), the Department of Education (DE) - should have to identify their departmental budget contribution to a central Executive budget for the eradication of poverty. That's how you solve that problem. The pilot of how you might do that is there around Children's Services Partnership at departmental level. That would mean, ultimately, we would not simply have a Programme for Government (PfG) that makes an anti-poverty strategy central, we also have a central Executive budget that ensures this.

Now then, where would you start to make the cuts? It's not for me to say, but your head would be in a different place. Your head might be looking at, say, cutting Invest NI – not that I have anything against them - and letting the private sector, which is so entrepreneurial, innovative, and profit making, look after itself. There's an innovation since they're always telling us they're the biz. And

then if you make large [as a business], like Mr. Kipling, exceedingly large amounts of profit, we'll tax them, and we'll give you bonuses and everything else for social responsibility clauses. But it would turn our thinking about how we eradicate poverty into an economic strategy. It then allows us to think of who, within the existing bands of people, are most vulnerable to that long term lived experience of poverty because we can all be short a bob or two, but that's not what we're talking about here. We're talking about people who, over three consecutive years, don't have enough money to have decent human existences.

And then there's another context that's changing. The shape, size, colour profile of those with lived experience [of poverty] has diversified in this community beyond where the Catholics and Protestants live. And we've got to get our heads out of that.

That just reminds me, before I go any further, is we are all bunged out with consultations. There's a very interesting consultation, and I would ask you to go online and respond to it. It's a very simple one. It's about concessionary bus fares and train travel. There is a recommendation in it that asylum seekers should have free bus travel and if you do nothing else when you go home, would you please email and social media your mates? Because if we get enough people to do that, it would be a very simple act of solidarity with the poorest and most deprived population that we have, [and one] that is expanding more rapidly than any other.

But if we turn that around, we begin to look at, apart from the broad economic anti-poverty strategy, what else we need to do in kind, apart from putting income into families and ensuring economic sustainability in households. The number of people at the minute who are in personal household negative equity. I don't mean about their property, I mean their income every week. We see it in STEP. The number of people who, when you sit and do a financial statement, whose weekly or monthly income at this point is insufficient to meet their basic weekly or monthly expenditure, is frightening. And it's moving beyond those on social security, those on low incomes, those on part time. It's moving on to two-earning families. The rise of childcare costs, the rise of fuel costs, the rise of mortgage costs, it's tipping people over the edge. People do not earn enough money to keep themselves out of debt every week. That's where we are.

And then, within that, we have the isolation of the elderly, we have people with disability of all ages being pushed further and further away. And that's where there are universal measures that are about social inclusion. I remember arguing this when the PEACE monies were falling out of the sky, and we went to every factory in the Dungannon area and asked them would they work with the local council if they were going to get 50% of the costs to set up a creche in the place of work. It would make sense. If people have to go to work, the best place to leave your children is in a creche where if you have to leave work for any reason, they're not far away. And factory after factory, because the nature of the factories we have, said, "But hardly any women work here. Daddies work here, but daddies don't like taking children." That's where we were. Daddies don't want to take children to work.

There are things we can do. It's not about simply saying, oh, it would cost too much. We don't have the money. There are ways to centralise that budget from every single department, and then there are ways to do things that you're doing anyway, and, within them, ensure that the people who don't currently have access to them do.

And then there's another thing that we have to make sure our Executive does. The United Nations has called for the withdrawal of the Northern Ireland budget. The committee to whom we all reported very recently on poverty has called for the immediate withdrawal of the Northern Ireland budget on the basis of the harm that it will do to children in poverty through education, through their health. We have to campaign around that.

Because I am retiring, somebody said to my daughter, Deirdre, “Oh, please don't tell me she's going to take your job because we're more afraid of her.” Which I thought was very complimentary; she was quite upset. But, as she pointed out, if Northern Ireland was actually a state - which it's not - it would fulfill all of the criteria of bankruptcy, except that it hasn't owned up and called in the International Monitoring Fund (IMF). Thank you.

## Panel 2: Ensuring the voices of people experiencing poverty are heard

### Dr Ciara Fitzpatrick, Lecturer in Law, Ulster University

Hello everybody and thank you for being here. In terms of lived experience, I think we would all agree, has been a core piece of the puzzle that has been missing in the current anti-poverty strategy. I know that the current co-design group goes some way to reflecting the voices of those people who have been impacted by poverty, but we don't actually have people in that group who have or are currently going through those experiences of poverty. It is a concern that if there is an anti-poverty strategy that is ready to be published that there hasn't been active consultation with people with lived experience in the same way as, for example, Scotland, where they had a series of lived experience panels around the different Social Security measures that have been introduced there. And those lived experience panels are consulted again and again around any new measures that are being made. So, if there's any representation from Department for Communities still here, I would ask you to really consider that as this strategy does progress. Though I'm just not sure whether it is paused, whether it is continued, or what the actual situation is there.



In terms of my own work with people who have lived experience of poverty, I want to take a moment to highlight UC:Us, which is a group of Universal Credit recipients who have been working really hard to highlight the issues with Universal Credit and make recommendations for change. That experience of working alongside people with lived experience around Universal Credit has been so important even in developing my perspective as a researcher and as a lecturer. It's challenged some of my assumptions around policy making and how we should do it. At the very heart of Universal Credit is a system that has been created by a group of elite politicians that have absolutely no experience of living on a low income. For example, the five-week wait apparently to reflect the world of work. But statistics show us that most low-income people are paid on a weekly or a fortnightly basis.

Or the two child limit [supposedly] to reflect that people should only have as many children as they can afford. There's two things there: The two-child limit has been showed not to impact people's fertility decisions. And second of all, 59% of those people impacted have somebody in the household who are in work.

This is why it is so important to work with people with lived experience. So unfortunately, UC:Us weren't able to influence the process of the development of Universal Credit. It is with us, and there's going to be more and more people moving to Universal Credit. What UC:Us have sought to do is to produce a Universal Credit guide to really help people through the process, to make it less frightening, less intimidating. It's a colourful guide. It includes videos. It includes people talking about their own experiences backed up with welfare rights advisors, underscoring how other people can avoid some of the pitfalls that they fell into. So, all being well, I'm just going to play you

this little short two-minute video which was created in collaboration with UC:Us to highlight what the guide is intended to do.

We relaunched it last week and I know Samantha's in the room and she was part of the launch, which was great because there's a massive challenge ahead. We've got about 70,000 odd people who have to now move on to this new benefit. We've got some people that will be worse off by moving, and some people who will be involved with the Social Security system that hadn't previously been, like those on working tax credits. They're now going to be expected to engage with employment support to get more hours of work and better paid hours of work and so on and so forth. So, it's really vital that we collectively support people to do that because we've heard about the sub-optimal budget in the Department for Communities, and we know that there is 600 posts that won't be filled. We know that this is going to impact the delivery of Universal Credit and people's movement onto it. Thank you very much.

## Dr Alexandra Chapman, Lecturer in Social Policy, Ulster University

Hi everyone. Let's just wait until the slides go up. Thanks for having me. Today I'm going to discuss a recent research project which was started as part of the Women's Consortium regional network, but it was Siobhán Harding who was part of the project and was the lead researcher. And then myself and Dr. Ciara Fitzpatrick also helped with the write up of the report. We launched it last week and we were delighted to have a packed launch event at Ulster University, which was great. And 250 women took part in this research. It's extremely timely and I'm really pleased to have the opportunity to present the findings today.



As we know, we are in a state of despair. All the speakers this morning have just hit home how dire the picture is for families in Northern Ireland, and in particular women and children. And this has all been compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic and then now the Cost of Living crisis. And we're in this midst of an absent functioning government, which has just compounded the situation even further for families.

Women are left to become the shock absorbers of poverty. So just quickly moving on to the methodology, Siobhán Harding carried out 20 focus groups with 250 women across women's centres in Northern Ireland. Which was a phenomenal, absolutely amazing achievement to carry out so much of that research and include so many people in it. Then 247 of the women completed questionnaires, which was fantastic. We have a really, really strong evidence base and it's so important for us to share the findings as far and wide as we can.

No surprise the biggest bills that women and children were facing in households was food. Food shopping and electricity and gas. The research was carried out between February and March this year. I know it's hard to remember when things are warm the minute, but this was a very, very cold period. And women experienced being cold, hungry, having to put on extra layers in the house, using hot water bottles to keep themselves warm, their children warm, rationing in the amount of hours that they were putting their heat on just in order to survive.

These are just some of the quotes that I wanted just to share of the women's experiences. And we have a whole report which is available on the Women's Regional Consortium's website, if you would like to read the whole report. But women told us that they were essentially rationing their food portions, cutting down on the meals that they were eating. This woman was living on energy drinks just to ensure that her children were being fed. And to what Goretti [Horgan] was saying earlier, children are aware of this. Children were asking their mummies, where's your dinner? Why are you not having dinner with me? And it was because they were the ones who were cutting back in their portions and going without.

One of the participants from the research who spoke at the research launch last week openly discussed how she struggled to afford formula for her baby. And at the end of the tin, she just was in sheer, sheer panic of how she was going to be able to afford to buy a new tin and the stress that this caused her. She had severe mental health problems as a result of this.

90% of the women who took part in the research said that the cost living crisis had a significant impact on their physical and mental health. As a result, they weren't able to go out and enjoy small things such as going to meet a friend for coffee. The ability to socialize was really, really impacted. And of those who had children, 78% said that the cost of living had negatively impacted on their children. This was a reoccurring theme throughout the research, children really being at the core of this.

The women talked about how they were able to cope with the cost of living increases. Essentially what they were doing were buying cheaper produce, buying more branded items, reducing the amount that they were spending on food, buying more food that was for the freezer because it was cheaper and cutting back on fresh fruit and vegetables. 78% said they felt cold or hungry as a result of the cost of living increases that they were experiencing and 41% had to use a food bank.

There was a lot of discussion around the lack of awareness in terms of financial support. For example, discretionary support, the upfront childcare scheme for families and this had a massive impact on them if they were unaware of this financial support.

One real safe haven that came through the research so strongly was the importance of the women's centres. I know Rayna [Downey] is here this morning as well. They really would have been completely lost if they did not have their local women's centre to go to and it provided a safe haven for them and offered them a place where they could go, have a bit of company, socialization, and also food and a hot tea.

We asked them how they would be able to cope better with the cost of living increases. The main factor here was help with energy bills, and also better paid work in general, help with housing costs and help with childcare costs. Some of the women explained how they'd been going through different bargain shops to find the cheapest deals, but essentially that is now impossible because they're cutting back on their everyday stuff, petrol for the car, using heat, those luxuries which are just completely gone now.

Another factor which came across strongly in the research launch last week was how the women felt. They felt so embarrassed and so ashamed and they felt that they were letting their children down. It was really hard to hear that, whenever they know they're doing the best that they can for their families.

Based on the report, we've outlined five key priorities, such as ensuring that women's centres have sustainable long term funding. The holiday hunger scheme needs to be urgently reinstated. I know this is a significant policy decision which so many are going to be hurt by, and we know that so many children this summer will be going hungry. We need to invest in our long-term services

for mental health to ensure that mental health provision is available for those who need it. The School Uniform Grant should be increased and we want to see investment in discretionary support as well.

Touching on the lived experiences and what we want to do with the research that we have. This is such a strong evidence base and we want to build on the momentum, ensuring that those who have been at the heart of this research can continue to participate, share their experiences, share their voices in policy development. And similar to what Ciara [Fitzpatrick] had done with the UC:Us project, we are hoping to do something further with the women and the Women's Centres. That's our vision, hopefully to ensuring these policy developments and women can be heard.

## **Nuala Toman, Head of Policy, Disability Action**

Thank you. Just reflecting on many of the things said today. It is important to point out that at the minute we don't have a framework for disabled people, or indeed, people [in general] to participate in decision making because of the current political crisis. Even when the administrations are up and running, they aren't participatory. The voices of everyday people and disabled people are seldom heard in policy making. Quite often, processes that involve co-design or lived experience aren't resourced and disabled people talk quite openly about having to contribute to long detailed processes, but with no return. Many feel that their expertise and experience is devalued because it's expected to be given for free.



Obviously, I'm in a different position because I work for an organisation, but it is important to point out that when we ask people to contribute to strategies, it is not accompanied by mechanisms through which to recognise their expertise.

I'm just thinking of some of the challenges that disabled people are facing at the minute. So disabled people are 50% more likely to live in poverty than non-disabled people. Houses with a disabled adult are 33% more likely to live in poverty, and houses with a disabled child experience poverty rates more than twice the rate of families who do not have a disabled child.

Research that we conducted with the Equality Commission demonstrated that eight out of ten disabled people don't have enough money for a decent life, and that predated the current cost of living crisis. We know that energy costs were always high for disabled people and that pre-crisis the extra costs of disability were estimated at £600 per month and those costs will have increased.

We have said it before in rooms like this, and we'll say it again throughout this cost of living emergency and this political crisis, disabled people are dying as a result of the cost of living crisis. Disabled people have told us that they are making dangerous decisions on a daily basis by switching off life saving machinery in their homes because they can't afford their energy bills and that's without intervention. We asked for intervention from government and the Westminster government. The allocation that was directed to disabled people was £150 pounds, which really isn't going to make a difference. Added to that, disabled people could not access the energy relief payment that was given before the institutions collapsed because they were on non-means-tested benefits. And all of this just leaves a population of people completely outside of any kind of relief.

So we have done some more research at present and we conducted a survey with 119 disabled people. We haven't yet published it, but the early results of that are showing that seven out of ten disabled people have reported that their financial situation has worsened since last year. Seven out of ten have reported that their financial situation has resulted in declining mental and physical

health, and seven out of ten have linked the lack of access to resources to high levels of stress and anxiety.

Disabled people are struggling with bills. Many people in our survey have shared experiences of paramilitary exploitation. Of being targeted at food banks, being given money and then having people called to recover that money back and believing that they were being helped initially. There are incidences whereby people are being exploited for access to their medication. In these situations, people feel very vulnerable and don't know who to turn to for protection because they know what they have been doing is illegal and they don't have anyone to turn to in their community.

And we know as well from research that we've done previously, that disabled children have faced sexual exploitation at the hands of organised or paramilitary crime and all of this is deepening and in the context of the current political and economic situation.

So in spite of all the evidence that we have shared, disabled people are effectively locked out of policy making processes, sidelined, and silo-ed because of the structures of our departmental decision-making. In fact, if you reflect back to the case that was taken by the Human Rights Commission around abortion, it noted the significant barriers to cross departmental working and that cross departmental working effectively muffles disabled people, disabled people's input into policy making, and organisations like ourselves and others that we work with.

It's incredibly difficult to be across every single aspect of decision making that has that negatively impacts on the lives of disabled people and to argue for positive interventions. We have constantly raised challenges around the health emergency and yet we remain in a situation where there's no action has been taken as a result of anything that we have raised. One example of good practice, I guess, is the Social Security Commission that has been developed on a UK wide basis that has been driven forward by people with lived experience.

I really don't like the term 'lived experience' or 'experts by experience'. I don't know what the right term is, but I don't think it really reflects what people are trying to achieve.

What I think we need is a completely radical reform of politics here. We need a participatory framework for political decision making where we are equal partners in the decisions that are made. But to do this it means we require extensive political reform, we need the anti-poverty strategy, but we also need to realise the decision making processes that section 75 and 28A offer in terms of allocating resources.

Just noting that Justice Tracy's judgement does specifically refer to targeting resources on the basis of objective need and we have yet to fully explore how that can be done. And just to point out that since 2008, the welfare benefits system has been collapsing in terms of the support that is offered to disabled people. And benefits is only part of the story. What we need is a Social Security system that is co-designed and co-produced with disabled people. And we also need to address, like everyone else has said, the underlying causes of poverty and to tackle things like the disability employment gap, like the disability pay gap, and to discuss all of this openly.

At the minute we're stuck in a situation, like many organisations. There are 62 organisations which have had their core funding removed from the 30 September. So all of this human rights based participatory work that we undertake as an organisation will cease as a result of that because we won't have any funding or mechanisms through which we can engage people in policy development. So thanks for the opportunity to speak.

## John Patrick Clayton, UNISON /NIC ICTU

I'm speaking with two hats on because I represented the Northern Ireland Committee of [Irish] Congress [of Trade Unions] in the co-design process that was discussed earlier. I'd like to begin by thanking everyone who's organised today's event. I think it's been a hugely important event and very, very timely because I think we all now agree that the need for an anti-poverty strategy, the need for a comprehensive approach to dealing with poverty, is more acute than it's ever been. Ending poverty has to be the priority for all the reasons that have been articulated and I won't repeat them.



Mindful of the theme of this panel, I suppose what I'd like to touch on is how we actually ensure the voices of people experiencing poverty are heard, but I'd also like to just refer to a couple of the key priority actions that Congress would like to see taken in an anti-poverty strategy because ultimately that is representative of the 200,000 odd people that ICTU represents in Northern Ireland. I think other speakers are entirely right. We need to have the voices of lived experience front and centre in relation to each and every action that's taken to end poverty.

As you'll all be very aware, workers have been taking industrial action over this last period in almost unprecedented numbers and widespread numbers across all parts of the public and private sectors. They've been doing that fundamentally to secure decent pay. The impacts of the cost living crisis on them have been stark, as Patricia will know, in terms of our own membership, we have members who are still in industrial action in health and social care.

And it is almost incredible to think that after the pandemic we've been through, after everything that has gone on over this last number of years, that our health workers would have to be taking sustained industrial action to secure decent pay for themselves and for their families. For many of our members that we would represent in UNISON, these are some of the lower paid health workers and they're continuing to take industrial action. And indeed, a number of them are outside the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) today, making the point that their colleagues in the NHS in England from this week have received a pay increase as a consequence of a pay offer that was made. But their fear is that they're going to be left behind again and that should be unacceptable to us all.

And I think that's worth reflecting on in this discussion because workers have been making their voices heard. They've been making them heard loud and clear. They now need to be listened to. And I think that's a key message we should all take away. ICTU has been leading a campaign 'Workers Demand Better' that's been designed to amplify those calls about the need for urgent action to tackle poverty in the context of the cost living crisis, but also to highlight some of the structural changes we need to see in our society to end poverty and, particularly, for those who are in work. I'll just refer to some of them now, because they were the priorities that I and others have articulated throughout the co-design process, building on the really incredible work that was done by the expert advisory panel.

We know that employment reduces the likelihood of working age adults being in poverty, but the majority of those in relative poverty belong to households where someone works. That is really important to reflect on when we think about poverty and how we actually deal with the huge problem of poverty we have in our society. The most recent statistic from 21-22, of the 155,000 working age adults in relative poverty before housing costs, 53% are in working households.

We have to think about the structural interventions we need to see in our economy and our society, that Bernadette [McAliskey] already alluded to, and how we effectively tackle that. We have to deal with issues of low pay, we have to deal with issues of precarious work, and we have to look at issues of collective bargaining, and genuine worker voice and representation in the workplace in order to deal with those issues. It's really important that we look at that as a package. And childcare is something that, if I get the time, Bernadette, I will get to it as well, because it is a huge economic issue. It is not just an issue for children and families and the outcomes that they experience. It's a huge economic barrier in our society as well. If Patricia doesn't guillotine my time, I'll try and touch on that as well.

In terms of low pay, the Executive did move during the last mandate to introduce the Scoring Social Value policy. The Executive got accredited as a real living wage employer. There is an Executive policy there. That policy needs to be implemented. It needs to be mainstreamed, it needs to be resourced. And I would really emphasise here that it is the real living wage, not the minimum wage, and not the national living wage. The real living wage is calculated based on the cost of living and it changes yearly. And we need to see that being reflected across procurement because procurement is a huge lever that could be used by government to try and improve rates of pay.

The other priority area has got to be increasing collective bargaining coverage. We've got to give more workers the opportunity to have their voice in the workplace to collectively bargain with their employers in order to improve their rates of pay. And our colleague Paul Mac Flynn of the Nevin Economic Research Institute, who alongside Dr Lisa Wilson, has done incredible work in this area, has done work around collective bargaining that shows that a real premium exists. Where workers have the benefit of collective bargaining, their pay increases. About 80% of the public sector is covered by collective bargaining, but it's much, much lower in the private sector. It's only about 32%. There's a new EU directive on collective bargaining that is going to require EU member states to increase collective bargaining coverage. The Executive could and should move to put similar legislation in place here. When we talk about worker voice and representation, collective bargaining is the articulation of that. It should be a priority for an [incoming] Executive.

And we also have to deal with precarious work. There's a commitment in NDNA to prohibit zero-hour contracts. We saw in the last Assembly mandate, Jemma Dolan MLA brought forward a bill on banded hours. So a step in the right direction, that needs to be built upon by the Executive because, as Dr Lisa Wilson has very clearly highlighted, low pay is about more than just a low hourly rate of pay. It's about issues to do with the number of hours people work. It's about them having certainty in the number of hours that they work. And so we have to see these measures as a package that should be brought through together to try and deal with poverty.

And finally, childcare is a huge barrier to participation in work. It's a huge barrier to women's participation in work and we have to acknowledge that. And ICTU have done work around that over the last number of years. We need affordable, accessible childcare delivered by a well paid unionised childcare workforce. The value of what people who work in childcare do has to be recognised by our society as well, because, again, it should not be right that if you have one or more children, it reduces the likelihood of being in a permanent full time post by almost one third. We are putting a huge barrier to women's participation in work and we're putting a huge break on our economic development as well. And that shouldn't be right.

Ultimately, we need an Executive restored. We need to see progress made on this and it should be a day one priority for the Executive. I'll leave it there. Thank you.

## Next steps

### **Daniel Holder, Director, CAJ**

I'm going to sum up. Pauline [Leeson, Children in NI] spoke about the solidarity in the room and I think that's been very powerful. It's also been very comforting, as she said, and that's what the Equality Coalition is all about. We are a forum for solidarity and indeed comfort. We organised this event jointly with Barnardo's NI, as well as with the Northern Ireland Anti-Poverty Network (NIAPN), with Becca [Bor], and it's important to see that network back up and running. I should do the thank yous as well. I'd like to thank our sponsor Emma Sherin MLA who's still with us. I'd like to thank all the people who organised the event and put it together. There were quite a few people who did that, but one person led it and that's Robyn [Scott, CAJ]. So, well done Robyn, for organising the event.

In terms of summing up, I think there are three broad things. The first one is that this event has put the anti-poverty strategy firmly on the agenda and we all need to mobilise around it. It's pretty clear we need an anti-poverty strategy and a good one ready to run if Stormont is reestablished, so it can be adopted quickly. That strategy needs to have numerous macro elements in it. It can't just be micro projects. It needs to build on the excellent work done by the expert working group and indeed by the co-design group.

It needs to tackle things like gaps in the benefit system, in Universal Credit. It also needs to rollback hostile environment measures that exclude groups of people from the welfare safety net. It needs to deal with childcare and childcare release and care release. It needs to deal with the fact that we live in a very wealthy place and there is lots of money around. The Invest NI point has been made. Priorities are drawn and resources need to be targeted on the basis of objective need. The strategy really needs to be ready for day one of an Executive being set up.

There is no reason for this [draft] strategy not to be released. Nuala [Toman] has given some good examples of other cross-departmental strategies that have been released. This one, is a legal obligation that is long, long overdue in implementation and therefore it shouldn't be sitting, waiting for something else to happen and no process should be paused. We need to get this ready to roll, so it's there sitting for an incoming Executive.

The second point is that if the Executive gets set up and someone obstructs the strategy that is already sitting there, we need the law to be enforced. I think it's as simple as that. It has to have teeth.

In terms of a third summing up point, I think it's pretty clear from what everyone has said in the room that there's plenty of battles to fight in the interim. Some big, some small, but a lot will be involved. One of them, of course, is the battle around funding for the sector.

You can count on the forum of the Equality Coalition to continue to bring people together for collective action, and I'm sure we can count on the trade union movement for the much broader mobilisation that will be needed on all of those fronts.



### **Patricia McKeown, Regional Secretary, UNISON**

Okay, thank you very much. It just remains for me to close. I want to thank all of the activists, organisations, the representatives from the departments, the politicians who've all taken part in this today. Obviously, working together in that tripartite manner might just be something that produces the end result we're looking for. So thank you all very much.

## Photo gallery



*The event was at full capacity on the day.*





*The main event organisers, from left to right, John Patrick Clayton (UNISON), Becca Bor (NIAPN), Trása Canavan (Barnardo's NI), and Robyn Scott (CAJ).*



*Some of the expert speakers, heard from throughout the seminar. From left to right, Dr Ciara Fitzpatrick (UU), Dr Alexandra Chapman (UU); Nuala Toman (Disability Action NI), John Patrick Clayton (UNISON), Patricia McKeown (UNISON), Daniel Holder (CAJ), and Emma Sheerin MLA.*

If you have any comments or questions about this report, please contact **Robyn Scott**, Communications and Equality Coalition Coordinator, on [equalitycoalition@caj.org.uk](mailto:equalitycoalition@caj.org.uk).

**Accessible versions are available upon request.**

Thanks for reading!

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