

Progressing an anti-poverty strategy for Northern Ireland

10am to 1pm, Wednesday 28 June 2023, Room 115, Parliament Buildings, Stormont

Sponsored by Emma Sheerin MLA, with co-sponsors Gerry Carroll MLA, Mike Nesbitt MLA, Sinéad McLaughlin MLA, and Kate Nicholl MLA

#NIAntiPovertyStrategy

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."¹ 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).² 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.³

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."⁴ The report and recommendations of this panel were published by DfC in March 2021.⁵ The department subsequently established an Anti-Poverty Strategy Co-Design Group to advise on the development and drafting of the Anti-Poverty Strategy.⁶ 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 paper⁷ to inform consideration of a draft strategy. This paper drew upon the Expert Advisory Panel's prior report.

Some of the areas⁸ 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;

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

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

³ *New Decade, New Approach*, January 2020, p.9

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

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

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

⁷ <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.

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

- Dealing with low pay and precarious work, through measures like a ‘real Living Wage’,⁹ 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.

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.

Published by the Equality Coalition, Barnardo’s NI, and the Northern Ireland Anti-Poverty Network (NIAPN), June 2023

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