



Women's Experiences of the Cost-of-Living Crisis in Northern Ireland: *What Politicians Should Do*



Context

The Northern Ireland Assembly collapsed in February 2022 and has failed to elect a Speaker following Assembly elections in May 2022 despite attempts at negotiations. Without a functioning Assembly or Executive no new legislation can be passed to provide help to those struggling in the Cost-of-Living Crisis. This leaves the only help being provided in Northern Ireland coming from Westminster and much of this help is already finished or due to end and not be renewed.

Stormont has significant policy-making powers – particularly in regard to social security – that could be used to protect local households from the impacts of the Cost-of-Living Crisis. Failure to return to Government does not just have a human cost but an economic one too. Increased ill-health, poorer educational outcomes and less spending in local businesses are all by-products of poverty and harmful to the Northern Ireland economy. There is an urgent need to see the institutions return, set a multi-year budget and deliver the policy solutions that people in Northern Ireland so desperately need.

The Budget laid by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland in April 2023 has exacerbated the situation resulting in a range of punitive cuts to public services including important areas of help including Discretionary Support, the Holiday Hunger Scheme and Discretionary Housing Payments to name but a few.

These cuts will have significant impacts particularly within deprived communities which are already suffering as a result of the Cost-of-Living Crisis. Research has shown that women have been and continue to be most intensely affected by these circumstances. The ongoing absence of governance, means that there is no accountability for problems that could be mitigated now, and in the future, and the burden of this political vacuum is falling most heavily on women who can bear it the least.

You can read the full research paper “Women’s Experiences of the Cost-of-Living Crisis in Northern Ireland” here: <https://bit.ly/44UPleX>

Findings

Discussions with women at focus group sessions focused on the need for action to be taken on Cost-of-Living issues that were impacting on their lives:

- Women were frustrated at the lack of local Government and annoyed that politicians were getting paid despite the fact the NI Assembly wasn't working.
- 87% of the women stated that increased help with their energy bills would help them to cope better with rises in the cost of living.
- 53% felt that cheaper public transport/help with fuel costs would help them cope.
- 46% of the women reported that increases in the value of social security benefits would help them and 36% said better paid work would help them.
- Help with children's costs was raised by many of the women who had children - 38% felt that increased help with school costs would help and 22% felt that increased help with childcare costs would help them.
- 36% reported that increased help with housing costs would help them.
- 31% stated that access to cheaper borrowing for essentials would help them.

Recommendations

- We want to see the urgent return of the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive and for action to mitigate the Cost-of-Living Crisis a day one priority to take the necessary longer-term steps needed to protect those on the lowest incomes.
- We support National Energy Action NI's recommendations to ensure price protections for home heating oil consumers and for the introduction of a new social tariff to help make energy more affordable (targeted at those most in need).
- We support the Essentials Guarantee campaign from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Trussell Trust to ensure the basic rate of benefits at least covers life's essentials and can never be pulled below that level including through deductions from benefits to repay Government debts.
- We support the recommendations from the Independent Review of Welfare Mitigations and the Cliff Edge Coalition's key asks around mitigating the two-child limit, resolving the five-week wait in UC and increased support for private renters.
- We want to see the urgent development and implementation of a fully funded Anti-Poverty Strategy for Northern Ireland taking into consideration the recommendations from the Anti-Poverty Strategy Co-Design Group.

Quotes from Participants

Government need to realise if they give people more money they will spend it in the economy. They are not hiding it under the floorboards, they're spending it as quick as they get it. Spending on the things we all need.

Our Government need to get back up on the hill [Stormont] to do more for people. Their people are struggling, they're on their knees, their people are starving, they're cold, why are they not up there fighting our corner? Why are they drawing their salary for sitting at home, why are they putting in expenses?

Stormont is a disgrace! They're collecting these wages and we can hardly get a pot of stew on.

I can't understand why they're giving out £600 to everyone. Why don't they sort out the energy companies instead of having to give us this money – it's stupid!

I only recently heard about social tariffs for broadband. If they brought in a social tariff into gas and electric that would be great. It's not that you don't want to pay for it you just struggle to afford it.

The Government should be doing something to stop the price rises. Are the supermarkets putting prices up more than they should be? I think they're just taking advantage of this Crisis with some of the price rises.

Lower gas and electricity prices. Lower public transport and food prices. More help for families on benefits and single parents especially with the two-child limit.

Free school meals for all kids. Fully cover the cost of school uniforms. Increase benefits to cover the cost of food, gas and electric.

They need to get back into Government and take their seats at Stormont. Why should they be getting paid when they're not even doing their job?

Cap the energy companies that are ripping the country off and making billions. No one can understand it. The Government should step in and cap their profits.

Government need to increase benefits. There needs to be an increase in income whether people are working through a Living Wage and if you can't work on a benefits system that gives you enough of an income that you're living you're not struggling. At the minute anyone on any benefits are just existing they're not living.

The best thing the Government can do is to give people vouchers for oil/electricity.

Keep interest rates low, cap energy and fuel costs. Reduce food costs and big companies making millions. Free school meals for all children and free public transport. There needs to be support for working families with no benefits entitlement.

You should get more help if you're a carer. When you think of how much care homes cost and how much you're saving the Government. I get Carer's Allowance for my wee boy who has Downs Syndrome but it's nothing!

Universal Basic Income happens in other parts of the world and I think we should pilot it here.

Free public transport including trains. It's £4 for an all-day ticket here, that doesn't sound like much but it all adds up.

They need to bring in free school dinners for all children. You should see what they're getting for £2.60 it's not enough. I can't keep up to £2.60 for my 2 kids all week.

One off help is not the answer, it's stupid. The money they're giving, as much as it was a great help, there's more that could be done in the long term than trying to buy us off – stop the price rises instead of saying there's a wee treat for you!

They need to help working families. They need to look at Universal Credit and double the work allowance – so that you have double the amount before they start taking it off you. Dropping it from 63p to 55p didn't make much difference.

The Government should be investing in strategies to help people not leaving it to community groups to put things in place. Community groups are giving people soup and sandwiches and providing warm spaces. Why are Government not stepping in and putting money into Breakfast Clubs and free school meals for every child as working parents are also struggling?

The £20 uplift to Universal Credit came in and it really helped but it was only in place for a short time then they took it away. £80/month is a big amount to lose. There's been nothing to replace it and then everything doubled in price so people got hit twice as hard.