

Westminster Education and Work & Pensions Committees

Inquiry: **Realising potential: Delivering the Child Poverty Strategy (March 2026)**

1.0 Introduction

1.1 This response has been provided by the Women's Regional Consortium in Northern Ireland (NI) which consists of seven established women's sector organisations as follows:

- Training for Women Network (TWN)
- Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA)
- Women's Support Network (WSN)
- Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network (NIRWN)
- Women's TEC
- Women's Centre Derry
- Foyle Women's Information Network (FWIN)

1.2 The Women's Regional Consortium and Ulster University carried out research with women in NI on the impact of the Cost-of-Living Crisis on their lives and families¹. The research was carried out with 250 women and shows the highly negative impacts of poverty and the Cost-of-Living Crisis on them.

1.3 Child poverty is fundamentally linked to women's poverty and the economic status of women. Women are disproportionately more likely to be single parents, more likely to be in receipt of benefits, in low-paid, part-time and insecure work, more likely to have caring responsibilities and more likely to have to make up for cuts to public services through unpaid work. All these factors contribute to keeping women's incomes generally lower over their lifetimes putting them at greater risk of living in poverty.

¹ Women's experiences of the Cost-of-Living Crisis in Northern Ireland, Women's Regional Consortium & Ulster University, June 2023
<https://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Womens-Experiences-of-the-Cost-of-Living-Crisis-in-NI-2.pdf>

- 1.4 It is therefore impossible to address child poverty without targeted actions to address the gendered inequalities which harm women and limit their opportunities and participation in life. Helping mothers to earn more and gain financial independence can contribute to significant reductions in child poverty particularly for those who are the most marginalised including single parents, disabled women, domestic abuse victims, ethnic minority women and women with no recourse to public funds.
- 1.5 We are focusing our response on NI and we ask the Committees to consider the worsening situation for children in NI and the divergence in the supports available to address child poverty in this region.

2.0 Free School Meal Provision in Northern Ireland

- 2.1 Governments in England, Scotland and Wales have taken steps to expand the provision of Free School Meals (FSM) and the Child Poverty Strategy has included the expansion of FSM provision as one of the ways to drive down the cost of essentials. However, no action has been taken to expand the provision of FSM in NI. An ARK paper² highlights that there has been *“a stark divergence in the prioritisation of FSM for children in NI compared to the other countries in the UK and across the border in the Republic of Ireland”* and it goes on to highlight that *“NI is a firm outlier, in that it does not provide any Universal entitlement to FSM.”*
- 2.2 School meal prices in NI increased in January 2026, with primary/special school meals rising by 50p to £3.10 and post-primary meals rising by nearly 20%. While the Education Authority have committed to increasing the FSM allowance for pupils in post-primary school this will directly impact the ability of some low-income families to afford a hot school meal.

² School Meals Funding Deficiencies, ARK Feature, Number 23, February 2026
<https://www.ark.ac.uk/ARK/sites/default/files/2026-02/Feature23.pdf>

- 2.3 In 2023, the Department for Education in NI announced that the Holiday Hunger Scheme would no longer provide support to families (approx. 96,300) entitled to FSMs during holiday periods (£27 per child, every two weeks). This scheme pioneered a cash-first approach providing extra support during holiday periods.

“The free school meals are stopping for everyone in my kids school. They were getting breakfast and lunch and it’s been great. It was saving me £45/week. I have three kids and now I’ve to give them £3 each every day and that’s only for a basic school meal.”

3.0 Education Cuts and the Cost of the School Day in Northern Ireland

- 3.1 A response by academics to a range of cuts to education outlines the consequences for children and young people.³ This included cuts to the Holiday Hunger Scheme, diminished support for the Extended Schools programme (to improve levels of educational achievement for disadvantaged children and young people by providing the additional support that they might need including breakfast clubs), cuts to support for Free Period Products, etc. The report concluded that the cuts would increase poverty, widen existing educational achievement gaps, further exacerbate NI’s mental health crisis and send Special Education Needs provision beyond the brink of collapse.
- 3.2 Since this report a number of other announcements have been made by the Education Authority in an attempt to address their funding shortfall of £300million. This includes increases to the prices of school dinners⁴, a fee rise for music tuition/instrument hire⁵ and potential cuts in fares for taxis who transport children to school⁶.

³ An updated perspective on the Cuts to Education and the Consequences for Children and Young People in Northern Ireland, Ulster University, November 2024
https://pure.ulster.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/214699254/A_response_to_the_Northern_Ireland_Programme_for_Government_Nov_2024.pdf

⁴ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c781v0w2q7do>

⁵ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c1lrqepjzejo>

⁶ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cp84je1n5kgo>

3.3 In terms of school uniform, research by Save the Children NI has shown that 6 in 10 families in NI were financially challenged by the cost of school uniforms and PE kits and for low-income families this rises to over 7 in 10 (73%). This research also showed that 1 in 3 families were having to borrow money to cover the cost.⁷

“I have 3 kids and I’m always going without to make sure they have what they need. The little one needs new school shoes and I’m trying to figure out how I’m going to pay for them. There is nowhere to take the money from. He needs them so this week I’ll cut back on gas and not do a full shop so that I can save some money for his shoes.”

3.4 The NI Assembly has recently introduced legislation on school uniforms⁸ which includes legally-binding guidelines to schools when deciding on school uniform policies. However, there have been criticisms of the new legislation which some argue is weak and does not include a price cap on school uniform costs.⁹

“My youngest is starting secondary school this year and I’m dreading it. It’s £65 for a blazer. The grant for a school uniform doesn’t even go anywhere near the actual costs.”

3.5 Women’s Regional Consortium research on the impact of the Cost-of-Living Crisis on Women highlighted issues with the cost of the school day.¹⁰ This research showed that school costs were frequently raised as a burden for parents with 27% of the women reporting they were finding it difficult to pay for

⁷ Uncapped Costs of School Uniforms are Causing Harm, Save the Children NI, November 2023 https://i.stci.uk/dam/Uncapped_Costs_of_School_Uniforms_are_Causing_Harm.pdf-ch11218126.pdf/garp1vo01vhk050a2y4bya61h2ov7o4r.pdf

⁸ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c3ewzdn178ko>

⁹ <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/education/mlas-voice-concerns-on-new-school-uniform-legislation-will-girls-have-the-right-to-wear-trousers/a/112241797.html>

¹⁰ Women’s Experiences of the Cost-of-Living Crisis in Northern Ireland: Costs of Education, Women’s Regional Consortium & Ulster University, June 2023 <https://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Cost-of-Education-Summary-from-Women-Cost-of-Living-Research.pdf>

school costs. This included everything from the cost of school uniforms to food and extra-curricular activities.

“My wee man’s football club through the school is very expensive. I just can’t do it now. You’re having to pay for all the after schools clubs – you never used to have to pay for them but they’re not free now.”

4.0 Childcare Support in Northern Ireland

4.1 Childcare support in NI has been woefully inadequate suffering from the absence of a Childcare Strategy and a lack of investment over many years. NI has consistently been behind other countries in government funding provision for childcare. A draft Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) Strategy is currently out for consultation but there are concerns that it will not address the issues of affordability and accessibility especially for those on the lowest incomes.

4.2 The Childcare for All Coalition have produced a guide which highlights some of the problems with the draft Strategy.¹¹ The main means of addressing affordability is the Northern Ireland Childcare Subsidy Scheme (NICSS). However, the NICSS is not available to all families specifically parents in receipt of Childcare Vouchers or Universal Credit do not benefit from this scheme. Those more likely to be in financial precarity - those with low incomes, working part time or in precarious roles and student parents are excluded from the scheme.

4.3 A lack of affordable, accessible childcare disproportionately impacts on women who because of gendered social norms carry out the majority of childcare work. As the Gender Equality Expert Panel report¹² highlights: *“it is*

¹¹ Guide to responding to the Early Learning and Childcare Strategy from the Childcare for All Coalition, February 2026

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/66c475c740e7194ba8ee6a81/t/6985f26454317331e4d38417/1770386020228/Draft+guide+to+responding+to+Early+Learning+Childcare+Strategy.docx.pdf>

¹² Gender Equality Strategy Expert Advisory Panel Report, December 2020

<https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/system/files/publications/communities/dfc-social-inclusion-strategy-gender-expert-advisory-panel-report.pdf>

clear that a Government funded childcare provision is fundamental to facilitating women's participation and ability to access paid work, education and training. It is also crucial to the success to achieving progress towards gender equality in Northern Ireland."

- 4.4 Research by the Women's Regional Consortium¹³ found that over half of women surveyed cited childcare as their main barrier to work – 45% stated they were out of work because they are looking after children and 17% said the cost/availability of childcare was the main barrier for them.

"If the Government were to put more money into childcare they would have more women out working. It absolutely would make a difference having cheaper childcare. I have twins and it just doesn't pay you to do it. You're working to pay your childcare costs and you've nothing left."

5.0 Draft Anti-Poverty Strategy for Northern Ireland

- 5.1 The Child Poverty Strategy mentions the NI Executive's commitment to bring forward an Anti-Poverty Strategy for NI. The draft Strategy has since been published and consulted on and we await the final Strategy.

- 5.2 However, engagement with women on the draft Anti-Poverty Strategy by a coalition of Community & Voluntary sector organisations and academia¹⁴ showed the following feedback on the draft¹⁵:

- 78% felt that the draft Anti-Poverty Strategy would make no difference to the financial hardship and poverty that people experience.

¹³ Women, Skills & Barriers to Work, Women's Regional Consortium, December 2024
<https://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Women-Skills-Barriers-to-Work-1.pdf>

¹⁴ The Women's Support Network, NI Anti-Poverty Network, Save the Children NI and Dr Ciara Fitzpatrick from Ulster University developed a Toolkit to help women engage with the draft Anti-Poverty Strategy. This resulted in feedback from 145 women who took part in engagement sessions on the draft Strategy.

¹⁵ <https://niapn.org/it-all-makes-me-very-sad-i-dont-see-any-change-for-me-in-my-situation/>

- 82% rated the draft Anti-Poverty Strategy as ‘Poor’ and 15% as ‘Average’.
- Respondents provided many ideas of what could have been included that would really help to make a difference to poverty levels in Northern Ireland: free school meals for all pupils, bringing back the Holiday Hunger Scheme, introducing a price cap on school uniform costs, increasing the school uniform grant, increasing the threshold for help with school uniform grants, and ending the five-week wait in Universal Credit.

5.3 There was collective agreement that the draft Strategy was not fit for purpose and failed to fulfil what oversight bodies, including the NI Audit Office and Public Accounts Committee, outline as the basic elements of any Strategy. Over 95 community organisations, faith leaders, trade unions, and academics signed an open letter¹⁶ asking the NI Executive to withdraw their support for this draft and revisit the recommendations they have already received from the Anti-Poverty Strategy Group.¹⁷

5.4 In our response to the draft Anti-Poverty Strategy¹⁸, the Women’s Regional Consortium raised the fact that the draft Strategy contained very little in the way of new commitments that would be effective in addressing poverty. Therefore, unless there is substantial change to the draft Strategy it will do little to improve child poverty levels.

“The draft Anti-Poverty Strategy will make very little or no difference for those of us in financial hardship. The draft that has been released is quite frankly a slap in the face. What I can see in this draft is a continuation of what already exists no big changes, no big plans ... no money! How any government could listen to the lived experience and then publish a document as cold, heartless and meaningless as this, is a real shame for Northern Ireland.”

¹⁶ <https://niapn.org/open-letter-to-the-executive-the-draft-anti-poverty-strategy-is-not-fit-for-purpose/>

¹⁷ <https://www.nicva.org/sites/default/files/2025-09/Final%20Anti-Poverty%20Strategy%20Recommendations%20Paper%20-%20Updated%20August%202025.pdf>

¹⁸ <https://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/Womens-Regional-Consortium-response-to-draft-Anti-Poverty-Strategy.pdf>

6.0 The Two-Child Limit in Northern Ireland

6.1 The Women's Regional Consortium wholeheartedly welcomes the scrapping of the two-child limit. It is a highly gendered and poverty-inducing policy and its removal marks an important step in helping to address child poverty levels.

6.2 Across Northern Ireland, 1 in 10 children live in a family impacted by the two-child limit.¹⁹ The policy is likely to have had greater impacts in NI due to larger family sizes – 21.4% of families in NI have three or more children compared to 14.7% in the UK.²⁰

6.3 The Women's Regional Consortium share the concerns of the Cliff Edge Coalition²¹ (of which we are a member) about the interaction between the removal of the two-child limit and transitional protection payments.²² Communities Minister, Gordon Lyons has stated that *“Following the change, households that are currently affected by the two-child policy will see an increase in their underlying UC entitlement. That is expected to reduce any UC transitional element that may be in payment.”*²³ We are concerned that this will mean that some families and children will not receive the full benefit of the scrapping of the two-child limit.

“The scrapping of the two-child limit would allow me to afford more heat in the house, more healthy food and a wee bit of freedom to do things with my children, including letting them do activities. At the minute, we cannot go out

¹⁹ End Child Poverty, 2025

<https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fendchildpoverty.org.uk%2Fwp-content%2Fuploads%2F2025%2F04%2FNew-Two-child-limit-data-April-2025.xlsx&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK>

²⁰

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/families/adhocs/006258familieswithdependentchildrenbynumberofdependentchildrenbyukcountriesandenglishregions2015>

²¹ The Cliff Edge Coalition NI is a group of over 100 organisations from across Northern Ireland who came together to express concerns about the end of welfare reform mitigations in March 2020. Cliff Edge continues to campaign for the retention and strengthening of the welfare reform mitigations in NI

²²

<https://aims.niassembly.gov.uk/officialreport/minutesofevidencereport.aspx?AgendaId=38450&evidID=18846>

²³ <https://www.theyworkforyou.com/ni/?id=2026-02-17.4.62>

and do things as a family. I cannot let them go to birthday parties. I just cannot afford it.”

7.0 Other Northern Ireland Considerations

7.1 NI’s economic inactivity figures are consistently above the UK average and is currently the highest of the 12 UK regions. The female economic inactivity rate is 31% compared to 22.5% for men.²⁴ Nearly a third of women who were unavailable for work gave the reason for inactivity as family and home care and this was the least likely reason for male inactivity.

7.2 Women’s Regional Consortium research²⁵ highlighted issues with the rising cost of essentials particularly food. 75% of the women reported that food shopping was one of the bills they were finding most difficult to pay. They were concerned about increasing prices for healthier, fresh food which often meant they were forced to buy cheaper, unhealthier food.

“I spent £30 on one bag of shopping which had about six items in it. It’s shocking. We’re all eating chicken strips and chips, that’s all we eat for days is chicken strips because I can’t afford anything else.”

7.3 The Child Poverty Strategy includes Healthy Start as one of the measures to make it easier to access healthy, affordable food. Uptake of the scheme in NI is lower than other parts of the UK. A research paper into the Healthy Start Scheme in NI²⁶ highlights that there are roughly 21,000 people eligible to receive Healthy Start with statistics showing that uptake is only 52.7%.

²⁴ Northern Ireland Labour Market Report, NISRA, November 2025

<https://www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/labour-market-report-november-2025>

²⁵ Women’s experiences of the Cost-of-Living Crisis in Northern Ireland, Women’s Regional Consortium & Ulster University, June 2023

<https://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Womens-Experiences-of-the-Cost-of-Living-Crisis-in-NI-2.pdf>

²⁶ Healthy Start Scheme in Northern Ireland, ARK Policy Brief, June 2024

<https://www.ark.ac.uk/ARK/sites/default/files/2024-06/policybrief28.pdf>

“I didn’t realise about Healthy Start and I really struggled. I was entitled from early in my pregnancy but I can’t get it backdated now. No one told me I could have been getting extra money.”

- 7.4 The Child Poverty Strategy also recognises the benefits of breastfeeding and is investing in breastfeeding services and support. It should be noted that NI has lower breastfeeding rates than in Great Britain and some of the lowest breastfeeding rates in Europe.²⁷
- 7.5 In NI a package of mitigation measures was agreed by the NI Executive to protect some claimants from the harshest impacts of welfare reform.²⁸ These are important payments which protect people from the Bedroom Tax (indefinitely) and the Benefit Cap (until 2028). The Cliff Edge Coalition continues to campaign for the extension of the Benefit Cap mitigation after 2028 which would allow families and children to continue to see the full benefit of the removal of the two-child limit. The Coalition also wants to see the mitigations package further strengthened to protect people in NI from poverty.²⁹

8.0 Additional Comments

- 8.1 We welcome the emphasis in the Child Poverty Strategy on hearing directly from children and families to inform the delivery and evaluation of the Strategy and the involvement of Changing Realities in the development of the Strategy. Involving, listening and acting on the voices of lived experience is absolutely essential in the success of the Strategy. We are disappointed that this was not part of the development of the draft NI Anti-Poverty Strategy and that the draft contains no mechanism to engage meaningfully with people with lived experience of poverty throughout its implementation and duration.

²⁷ <https://factcheckni.org/articles/health-in-ni-are-northern-irelands-breastfeeding-rates-among-the-lowest-in-europe/>

²⁸ Welfare Reform Mitigations Working Group Report, Professor Eileen Evason, January 2016 <https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/ofmdfm/welfare-reform-mitigations-working-group-report.pdf>

²⁹ <https://www.lawcentreni.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Cliff-Edge-Coalition-Opposition-Day-Briefing-October-2025.pdf>

- 8.2 We welcome the commitment in the Child Poverty Strategy to investing in community projects and to strengthen partnerships with a broad range of organisations. The Community and Voluntary sector have become crucial in helping people cope with rising poverty levels yet many operate with short-term and precarious funding and ever-increasing workloads.
- 8.3 Women’s Centres provide a range of services to low-income women including childcare, access to advice and information, food and foodbank vouchers and help with clothing, furniture and other household goods. The value and centrality of Women’s Centre’s in the lives of women and families impacted by poverty is vividly articulated in the findings of Women’s Regional Consortium research.³⁰

“Without Atlas Women’s Centre I don’t know where I’d be. It’s literally a godsend. At Christmas they helped me with food and toy parcels. They were able to give me vouchers for heating and electric too.”

³⁰ Women’s experiences of the Cost-of-Living Crisis in Northern Ireland, Women’s Regional Consortium & Ulster University, June 2023
<https://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Womens-Experiences-of-the-Cost-of-Living-Crisis-in-NI-2.pdf>
