

Executive Summary for the Anti-Poverty Strategy

December 2020

Summary

1. The Northern Ireland Act 1998 obliges the Executive to develop a strategy ‘to tackle poverty, social exclusion and patterns of deprivation based on objective need’. In 2015, the Northern Ireland High Court ruled that there was no such strategy in existence, and this remains the case.
2. The political and economic contexts for the anti-poverty strategy (APS) are very unpredictable, globally and locally. The COVID-19 pandemic, the UK’s exit from the European Union, the climate emergency and a decade of austerity and antipathy to income redistribution, all present profound economic and political pressures. ‘Building back fairer’ must be the guiding principle.
3. The Panel’s key assumption is that the purpose of an APS is to raise living standards and reduce living costs for those below an agreed, objectively-defined poverty line. Our recommendations focus on enabling people to undertake paid work and on improving social security for those who cannot work, or for whom work is unavailable.
4. Most of those living in poverty are families with children and the majority of these families have someone in work, mainly part-time. Addressing the constraints on hours worked and pay received are key to the APS.
5. The majority of households in poverty live outside of the Belfast area and in the West of NI. One challenge is to ensure that opportunities for work are available in areas of economic underdevelopment.
6. Pensioners are the only group for which poverty rates have declined steadily over the last twenty years. Child poverty rates are getting worse since the mid-2010s and the average amount that children are below the poverty line is high. Two-thirds of child poverty is made up of children who have lived in poverty for three of the past four years.
7. Destitution is a growing problem and a better understanding of the scale and nature of this issue in NI is urgently required.
8. An effective APS must be built on principles of inclusion and consultation, both at design-stage and as part of an on-going process of review and revision. The lived experience of poverty should be incorporated into the co-design process and in ‘poverty truth’ projects and other mechanisms thereafter. Listening to people in poverty, including children, is essential.

9. The APS should be based on the social and economic rights set out in the relevant UN conventions and the Sustainable Development Goal commitment to ‘end poverty in all its forms everywhere’.
 10. It is recommended that the Assembly passes an Anti-Poverty Act which includes a duty to reduce child poverty, setting targets and timetables for 2030 and beyond, and including four objective measures of poverty. It will include a duty to review plans and progress against targets every five years, using 2015/16 as the baseline.
 11. The Anti-Poverty Act should make discrimination in the provision of goods and services on grounds of socio-economic status unlawful, and include a ‘socio-economic duty’ requiring public bodies to take account of socio-economic disadvantage when making strategic decisions. Age discrimination should also be made unlawful.
 12. The Act should contain provisions for an Anti-Poverty Commission with responsibilities to a) monitor progress on reducing poverty and income inequality; b) promote the reduction of poverty and income inequality; and c) advise the Executive on any matters relating to poverty.
 13. The strategy should regularly quantify total objective need by auditing the ‘costs of poverty’ and by estimating the expenditure required to end household poverty based on the recommendations in this report.
 14. As agreed in New Decade New Approach, the Executive should take the lead on addressing low pay by declaring NI Government as a Real Living Wage and a ‘Living Hours’ employer.
 15. We recommend the introduction of a new non-taxable weekly Child Payment for all 0-4-year olds and for 5-15-year olds who are in receipt of free school meals. We propose that the Child Payment is set at between £12.50 and £15 per week initially.
 16. We make a number of recommendations on benefit cuts, welfare reform mitigations and Universal Credit on the grounds that the benefit system itself has become a driver of poverty and destitution. These include permanently ending the ‘bedroom tax’, the two-child limit, the benefit cap and the five-week wait.
 17. More can be done to encourage the take-up of Pension Credit, housing benefit, disability benefits and National Insurance credits among older people.
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18. Family outgoings can be reduced by ensuring that participation in school is cost-free, by extending free school meals provision to include school holidays, by expanding funding for the provision of breakfast and homework clubs, and by expanding Sure Start provision.
19. Childcare is an essential part of the infrastructure required for a successful APS. The Childcare Strategy must provide childcare that is affordable, accessible and high quality, and that caters for the diversity of needs of families currently below the poverty line.
20. There are a number of cross-cutting issues for the APS. Housing is one of them and we recommend reversing the trend of the growing numbers of families in poverty in the private rented sector. This requires long-term investment in social housing and an end to the 'right-to-buy' Housing Executive properties, as well as greater regulation of the private rented sector.
21. We recommend a range of interventions that are required to increase the employment of disabled people, young people and older workers.
22. As the cliché goes, 'what is counted is what counts'. We recommend more than a dozen changes to the measurement of poverty and the use of indicators in monitoring progress.

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