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Economic Inactivity Report 2: Qualitative insights into Economic Inactivity in Northern Ireland

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Understanding the Northern Ireland Post-COVID-19 labour market and
economic inactivity: identifying causes, consequences, and paths forward

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Introduction

The following Report builds on Report 1 by providing qualitative insights into the high economic inactivity rates in Northern Ireland. An additional objective of the paper is to build on Report 1's summary of descriptive statistics – used to describe the incidence of economic inactivity in Northern Ireland – by providing qualitative information on economic inactivity. The paper draws on the qualitative analysis of 18 semi-structured interviews and a focus group which took place between April and October 2023.

The analysis is arranged to convey insights into the core themes prioritised by the 10xDelivery Plan: **Disability**, **Gender**, and **Deprivation**¹. The analysis also considers the impact of Covid-19 (Devlin 2022), and temporal factors linked to this, on current rates of inactivity.

Methodology

Interviewees were drawn from across Northern Ireland, the sampling based on combinations of snowballing via initial gatekeeper contacts and the gradual recruitment of relevant participants through word of mouth (often labour market experts, campaigners and those with intermediary roles connecting jobseekers/inactive groups to the labour market). Early contacts were also made with the help of the DfE. The recruitment of participants was also based on responses to advertisements online (e.g. twitter, *Melted Parents'* Instagram page) for the project and word of mouth. Limited personal details were recorded (e.g. postcode, age) and all respondents were guaranteed anonymity. 18 interviews took place and one focus group (a group interview with stakeholders with an interest in labour market engagement for people with disabilities). All interviews took place between April-October 2023.

The remainder of the discussion is divided into themes looking at: disability; unpaid care; gender; and the temporal impacts of Covid-19.

Inactivity due to Disability and Care Giving

A core theme which emerged early in the research related to disability and its role in preventing people from engaging with formal, paid employment. In order to understand the scale of disability as a driver of inactivity, it is instructive to consider again the volume and numbers of those categorised as disabled and the policies in place to support these people (see DfC, 2022; Devlin et al. 2023).

The 2021 census revealed that one in five people are understood to have a disability in Northern Ireland, while 34.7% of people in NI had one or more long-term health conditions according to the 2021 Censusⁱ. The most prevalent conditions in this category were ‘Long-term pain or discomfort’ (11.6% of people), ‘Mobility or dexterity difficulty that limits basic physical activities’ (10.9% of people), and ‘Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing’ (10.3% of people).’ (ibid.). Furthermore, the 2021 census revealed that one out of 8 people aged five or older reported providing unpaid care to a relative or friend with a health condition or illnessⁱⁱ, with one in 25 people (68,700 people) providing 50+ hours per week of unpaid care. Within this context,

¹[DfE 10x Delivery Plan](#)

Main Disability supports (outlined by interviewees)

- Disability Living Allowance (DLA): Intended to cover the additional costs associated of living with a disability and to support people requiring mobility and/or care assistance (DLA has been replaced by PIP but some legacy claimants are still in receipt of DLA)
- Personal Independence Payment (PIP): Adults between 16 and pension age must now claim PIP, though DLA can still be claimed for children under 16. Entitlement is subject to medical assessment examining the claimant's condition. The condition is expected to last for at least 12 months.
- Disabled Person's Allowance: Adapted houses, householder may be entitled to 25% rates discount.

The disability benefit system has undergone substantial reform in Northern Ireland, marked by the phasing out of Incapacity Benefit, Severe Disablement Allowance and Income Support (paid because of illness or disability). Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) is intended to provide support/financial help for people with disabilities who are unable due to their illness/disability to work, providing access to services (e.g. employment training). Depending on the disability, claimants may also be entitled to other benefits and state supports (e.g. Limited Capacity for Work and Work-Related Activities (LCWRA) statusⁱⁱⁱ; the Blue Badge scheme improving parking access). One interviewee (Billy) in their early thirties (LCWRA status) reflected on their own struggles with mental and physical health. While Billy suggested the wider healthcare system was a key contributor to not working – in particular, failure to support and tackle mental health needs - the interviewee also suggested that employers more generally fail to provide supports for disabled workers:

“It’s difficult because the issue is (pauses). I don’t necessarily need to be outside the work system entirely. If I were able to access the kind of healthcare that I...need for my mental health, and then pretty basic physical disability stuff which we got in uni – you know like accessibility (supports) but also flexibility...then I would be able to re-enter the workforce.” (Interview, Billy, 32)

Notably, Billy argued that engagement with university life/study was more conducive to her health and lifestyle needs than paid employment, due in part to what she described as the ‘holistic’ approach from universities to student health and support needs (in particular staff support in relation to deadlines, general understandings of disabilities and encouragements in relation to assignment struggles). For Billy, these supports meant further study was more appealing than the prospect of entering the labour force as a disabled person.

Other interviewees observed that people – and also carers for people with disabilities - remained influenced by family members who may have myriad concerns over entering the workforce. This could include fears over loss of benefits, the practicality of performing roles, and also perceptions of sectarian areas which continue to influence job search/engagements with the formal economy. These latter fears represent a stubborn social feature of labour

market realities for some, twenty-five years after the Good Friday agreement. Outside of sectarian concerns one interviewee observed:

“There are parents that say, 'Oh no, well he couldn't work in that there,' or, 'No, that'll be too dangerous,' or, 'Well how he's going to get there?' You know, 'I do school runs and I do-', it's that almost that parents can hold people back. Likewise, you know, I've worked with families before where maybe a dad has had acquired a brain injury from a workplace accident and wanted to return to work, but then the wife (thinking of) childcare and things like that there, she was like, 'Well, if you go back to work, who's going to look after the kids?' And all of that had an impact that we have to consider. So, you're not only considering the person, you're considering, 'Right okay, well what other external, like, factors are feeding in here?’” (interview)

The above considerations reveal the difficulties labour market intermediary services face when trying to encourage and induce inactive people into considering paid employment. In many cases those not working perform particular roles at home which are socially important (e.g. child care, household duties, benefit income used by a collective), and family members hold a subtle yet pervasive role in influencing labour market engagements in many cases.

The interviews also showed how contrasting ideologies of disability were reflected in engagement with government. In particular, debates focus on challenges arising from the Social vs. Medical model approaches to understanding disability (Authors' interviews). Interviewees suggested that Northern Ireland had adopted a Medical Model approach to understanding disability, which is seen to understand disabilities as problems tied to the individual which require 'fixing'. The Social Model, by contrast, instead examines how society could/should shift to better accommodate disabled persons; i.e. an approach geared to tackling the barriers impacting the disabled person in the interests of stronger independence (e.g. providing a ramp for wheelchair users to access the workplace, ergonomic changes to the work environment). This is particularly concerning in a place where invisible conditions such as mental health problems are so prevalent and which also may go without a formal diagnosis.

Interview material conveyed understandings of stigma and lack of confidence among disabled people, particularly those in rural areas where options and availability of work was viewed as least promising (authors' interviews). Campaigners discussed options for a stronger business engagement with disabled groups, including promotion of the 'purple pound' concept wherein the economic as well as social value of the disabled community (and workers) is promoted. The observed perceptions of stigma and difficulties engaging with work echo historic survey work on attitudes of disabled people, e.g. by the Equality Commission (e.g. see the Do You Want Me? Report) and the Northern Ireland Survey of Activity Limitation and Disability (2007).

Legislative impacts

With reference to the wider UK, the UN Committee^{iv} has raised concerns that the Office for Disability Issues 'does not have the resources needed to coordinate the implementation of the Convention (Convention on the Rights of Person with Disabilities) across the UK', whilst

citing the lack of resources for independent monitoring framework to monitor the UK (pg 30)². Themes of austerity and outdated laws/legislation were prevalent in multiple interviews with reference to regulations impacting carers and people with disabilities in Northern Ireland. Criticism has included calls to reform disability discrimination law in NI, and criticism of the negative impact of recent social security reform (notably, the transition to Universal Credit), amid calls for enhanced funding to local authorities to meet the needs of disabled people (in particular, in the context of austerity). The UK-wide shift to Universal Credit drew particular criticism for incurring a 5-week delay despite the possibility of advance payment as a bridging solution (authors' interviews). Notably, Northern Ireland has not adopted Britain's Equality Act which covers the other nations of the UK (Equal opportunities and discrimination are considered "transferred matters" under the Northern Ireland Act 1998^v, leading to criticism from one interviewee; Women's Group Activist).

Unpaid caring

The Carer Poverty Commission NI (led by Carers NI^{vi}) has commissioned recent research into issues concerning unpaid carers and poverty in Northern Ireland. The 2021 census revealed 220,000 in NI provide *unpaid* care for a loved one (around 1 in 8 of the population). According to The Carer Poverty Commission NI 38% of unpaid carers were found to be struggling to make ends meet, with 25% understood to live in poverty.

Table 1: Major drivers of poverty among unpaid carers relating to inactivity (adapted from Carer Poverty Commission NI 2023^{vii})

Difficulty	Impacts on activity
The struggle to combine paid work with unpaid care.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carers having to leave the labour market to perform their caring role at immense financial/personal cost. • Those who leave the labour market often struggle to re-enter; finding work flexible enough to allow for caring roles is seen as difficult.
Problems with the current social security system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disillusionment with low value of the Carer's Allowance and the inflexibility of the eligibility criteria • The social security system more generally appears undignified and hard to navigate. Difficulties may dissuade carers from experimenting with paid work due to fear of impact on the system. • Confusion over compatibility and access to different benefit streams e.g. accessing Carers Allowance alongside Universal Credits.

² [How is the UK performing on disability rights? The UN's recommendations for the UK](#)

Difficulty	Impacts on activity
Inescapable extra costs of providing care	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Carers are especially vulnerable to the cost-of-living crisis and squeezed budgets; this can lead to desperate decisions and the risk of debt traps.
Feelings of isolation and loneliness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Many carers have limited social networks and suffer strained family relationships due to financial/time pressures associated with caring. Routes into employment (e.g. via friends and family) may be stunted.
Limited learning opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Impact of providing care (especially at a young age) negatively impacts educational attainment, while opportunities for lifelong learning are also impacted.
Poor mental health (often linked to demands and financial pressures)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Many carers put the wellbeing of the cared-for person first; demands, financial pressures and feelings of stigma poorly prepare carers for a return to work mentally even if this is possible time-wise.
Precarious financial situations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of financial safety net means carers may be unwilling to take risks returning to paid employment, particularly in situations where unexpected extra payments are not possible (e.g. transport costs somewhere new). Many carers are 'resigned to a bleak financial future'.

In line with existing research findings, interviews revealed that many unpaid carers find it hard to juggle paid work and their caring role. This struggle exists for a variety of reasons, as outlined in Table 1. Importantly, the pool of unpaid carers reflects a *diverse range of people*, from young carers to those in middle age and older. Those who have adopted unpaid caring roles at a young age are especially vulnerable to inactivity traps, as young unpaid carers often struggle with their start in life. This can negatively impact access to education and first experiences of paid work. Equally, older respondents reflected difficulties in accessing lifelong learning opportunities which are seen as important in re-engaging with paid employment. There is considerable frustration on the part of many unpaid carers at being unable to gain a carer's allowance whilst in full time education, thus restricting future earning potential and career opportunities.

Perhaps most significantly, the 'mental side' of care giving was reflected upon by multiple interviewees and stakeholders. Roundtable discussions led by the Carer Poverty Commission NI (9th August 2023) suggested a range of concerns for people who are carers, in particular the lack of funding and adequate supports for this role. Interviewees also observed improved state support elsewhere in the UK, including the Young Carer Grant which was introduced in October 2019 in Scotland to support young people with caring responsibilities^{viii}. These challenges associated with care giving work specifically in Northern Ireland were seen to have exacerbated inactivity rates and negative experiences of life within these hidden spaces.

Trish, 50-54, West Belfast

Trish is 50-54 and has been formally inactive in economic terms for the last 16 years due to caring responsibilities. Trish previously worked in a call centre and last worked in 2002, performing a sales role on a full-time and then part-time basis after having children. Trish stopped working after her second child developed kidney problems aged 5 months which meant she was unable to carry on working:

‘My wee one was always sick, even when she did start school I needed to be within five minutes to get to the school, because she was down (ill) very quick if she took sick, I needed to be there within the next ten minutes...’

Due to ongoing caring responsibilities and the lack of alternative supports, Trish felt unable to adopt even part-time work. During this period, Trish’s mother and aunt also required support after her father passed away, meaning the bulk of her life she has been ‘on call’ in terms of caring responsibilities for others amid a lack of support for her ill daughter.

Socially, Trish has struggled to find time and opportunities to interact with others. Her partner owned a small business which shut during the pandemic and did not re-open. For mental and social support Trish engages with a crochet class ran by her local Tenants’ Association.

Gender and the labour market inactivity

Research into gender segmentation in the labour market has long examined the changing rates of female employment, with dramatic increases since 1980. In this respect, the second half of the 20th century witnessed a great shift in the numbers of women entering both full and part time jobs; women can no longer be seen as a reserve category of labour not formally included in the economy.

NISRA (2022) identifies the broad nature of women’s engagement with the labour market. In particular, women are more likely to perform flexible roles than men, meaning around 3 in 5 females work flexibly (compared to 2 in 5 men), experience lower levels of opportunities for career progression (9pps), and earn lower wages (e.g. a lower proportion report earning above the Real Living wage compared to men, 5pps in NISRA 2022). Women are more likely to occupy retail and caring roles in the labour market, and a variety of roles which were disproportionately impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. Differences between pay gaps are greatest for older working ages (the 50-59 age group), reflecting a gap of £2.50+ per hour on average (i.e. £15.33 compared to £12.87). This period in likelihood reflects a gap in pay at the career maturation stage of a working person’s life. Added to this, men are more likely to work full-time compared to women, and also to perform work as a self-employed person (more than twice as many men are self-employed compared to females).

Despite employment rates of men and women being comparable today, women are far more likely to withdraw from paid employment compared to men, whilst performing a greater

proportion of unpaid care roles in the home. Reflecting this trend, around one third of working age women are registered as economically inactive compared to around one quarter of men in Northern Ireland. The most common reason for economic inactivity among men (36%) and women (29%) in 2021 was long-term sickness (NISRA 2022), though for women 'the proportion looking after family and home in 2021 was almost identical at 28%' (NISRA 2022: 1). This latter reason for inactivity is markedly lower for men, with only 6% of males classed as inactive due to family and home caring responsibilities.

Research into women with dependent children also reveals a lower proportion are economically active compared to men (80% of females compared to 91% of males with dependent children). Moreover, economic activity rates for women with pre-school age children are consistently lower than for men with pre-school age children (NISRA 2022). Inactivity due to family/home commitments commonly translates as commitments to a dependent child (79.4% of women aged 16-64 who were inactive due to home commitments cited this responsibility). While the group with the lowest economic activity is women with very young children (pre-school age), women consistently have lower economic activity regardless of the age of the youngest dependent child.

A key reason for the above, cited in numerous interviews with stakeholders, is the exorbitant cost of childcare in Northern Ireland. *Employers for Childcare (2021)* denote an average cost of a full-time childcare place of £170 per week (£186 per week for a day nursery; £166 per week for a childminder, *ibid.*). High childcare costs have resulted in 41% of parents reporting the regular use of means other than their income to pay for childcare services, including the use of payday loans and credit facilities (this figure was as high as 55% for lone parents; *ibid.*). With respect to inactivity, 44% of parents surveyed reported difficulties accessing or affording childcare they needed, negatively impacting their ability to work. Tellingly, this impacted 58% of mothers compared to 27% of fathers. This skewed gendered impact is underlined by other statistics captured by NISRA and Report 1; the former found only 50.6% of women whose youngest child was of pre-school age worked full-time (NISRA 2022). This figure increased only marginally to 63% for women whose youngest child has reached secondary school age.

In the context of these costs, and the familial pressure to support loved ones at home, women are more likely to work part-time – often locally - thus earning lower incomes than males who are more likely to work full-time and in more financially rewarding industries. This trend is shown to continue after children are no longer dependent age. Reasons for this are likely to vary, with several interviewees taking a career break in order to look after their children, with little certainty over whether they intended to return to their career in future. This indicates that career path-dependence may be broken/new (potentially non-working) paths develop for different reasons as a result of acting as primary care roles (e.g. work having less centrality in life, the need to balance paid and unpaid work).

Discussions with research participants also included several observations on class-based impacts of the above. This was marked, for example, by reflections from relatively affluent, middle-class women who envisaged open-ended futures after child-rearing following career breaks, by contrast to reflections by working-class mothers. The latter point was conveyed by

a women's rights activist who noted the extreme loss of confidence of many women who attend support centres:

"... a lot of the women that we work with in the sector, like, it's just, it's such an uphill struggle for them, just to get a job. And sometimes you don't get second chances at this stuff, you know...I've seen women go to courses in the women's centre for 6 or 7 years before they get to a point where they have the confidence and they feel ready to actually put themselves out there into the labour market, to go, you know"

This latter interview reflected on the time taken by women to build confidence and skills to match with jobs after many years out of the labour market. The implication, then, is that women in socially-deprived areas in particular may struggle to return to work after being compelled to leave roles which had taken considerable effort to attain. Many such women are subsequently forced to engage with an increasingly punitive benefit system which has experienced swingeing cutbacks since the 2007 financial crisis.

The Benefit System, Social Policies and Activism

In light of these and other trends affecting women, Northern Ireland has seen the creation of a powerful network of activist groups geared to both drawing attention to negative work-life situations for women and also improving their material life conditions (notably, at the time of the research the women's childcare reform pressure group Melted Parents had arisen as a strong voice in the interests of more just childcare support following the expansion of support in the rest of the UK). Campaigning by women's groups has been bolstered by the creation of a network of policy experts in the voluntary sector, striving to influence policy making in the interests of women (especially important for residents in deprived communities), and also to create resources on the ground (e.g. women's centres). Several interviewees within this space raised the unfair treatment that women face in the NI labour market, reflecting on their concentration in low-end forms of work offering inflexible hours, particularly those in retail or caring services.

"Women are concentrated in low paid part-time work, and they're massively over-represented in that kind of employment. And the lower you go down that ladder, the less flexibility is available to people...So yes, there was this impossible situation created for a lot of women on low incomes, where all the flexibility was being demanded of them, but they actually worked in jobs and in sectors that had the least amount of flexibility available...it did obviously drive a lot of the women that support out of work (life) entirely...it created a really intense, emotional and mental, psychological kind...people just felt...trapped, people just felt like their backs were against the wall"
(Interview, Women's Rights activist)

Interviewees noted that many women had lost their jobs when working in retail or face-to-face service jobs during the pandemic, indicating that many had simply not returned to this way of living/working following the pandemic. Others noted a loss of confidence had occurred at losing work during the pandemic:

“a lot of the women that I would have talked to at the time, you know, would have worked in retail and that just lost their jobs. And I think there was a lot of panic going on, there was, like, all that very uncertain stuff in the first months of the pandemic, where some employers were panicking and just getting rid of swathes of people, and then, you know, a couple of months later they were trying to rehire. And a lot of women that I spoke to were victim to that, and then struggled to get back in.” (Author’s interview)

A more general theme for those not in work, however, was fear of losing benefits and frustration more generally with the welfare system for being cumbersome, inflexible and untrustworthy. A persistent criticism here was the 5-week delay in accessing Universal Credit (despite opportunities for a bridging loan). Women’s centres and other civil society resource initiatives were seen as key to educating women on their opportunities for work and benefits. A considerable number of interviewees noted the role of volunteering for inactive people which, combined with creative pursuits at home, suggests a strong potential for formally ‘inactive’ people to contribute to the economy if the labour market was better tailored to their needs:

“I mean, the women in women's centres are very aware of all of that stuff, like, they could school me in it, they know the system inside and out, they know exactly what the risks are they've been burned so many times. And most women's centres would have a full-time welfare advisor of some sort, yes, the women's centres would be doing a lot of welfare advice and training, awareness raising, definitely. Oh yes, I mean, that's the coalface of where that stuff is playing out. Another thing, I was talking to some women recently in one of our Belfast-based centres, I was talking about women and entrepreneurship and the fact that the data shows very low levels of entrepreneurship amongst women and they were saying to me, 'Yes, but that's because when women do it we know better than to do it through the books.' This sense that, like, women might not be engaging in work or engaging in entrepreneurship in the formal ways but they are finding ways to pay their bills.” (Author’s interview)

Accordingly, threats to benefits or their restriction were seen as a major barrier to inactive people in either seeking out formal employment, or else taking a plunge with the creation of new businesses and entrepreneurial activities^{ix}:

“The biggest thing I see, like, the biggest reason for women doing that is that issue that you mentioned which is about the risk. Once you get your benefits all set up, I mean, the system is so horrendous that you're not going to disrupt that and risk-, and the women that I know that are doing this, I don't see it as, like, nobody's being greedy here, nobody's on their way to making their first million or whatever, they're literally going, 'Well, if I can make this amount then me and the kids can go away for a weekend

somewhere.' That's literally just, 'This is the holiday money,' and women have been doing that forever, for generations." (Author's interview)

A further theme that emerged from the research is one of spatial scale, and the highly localised lens through which people in deprived areas, in particular, viewed labour market options and resources at their disposal (e.g. women's centres, tenants' associations). Alongside the strong role played by family in the household and local friends/networks, local resource centres were seen to play a key role in helping to navigate higher-scaled systems such as the national-level social security system, whilst providing opportunities for voluntary work and self-skills such as debt management:

"it might be that, you know, she needs an essential skills course to get her English and Maths, and get her, you know, what employers are looking for. But it might be that she needs just personal development, goal setting, self-esteem. They would do debt management, they would do parenting stuff because, you know, getting child care is one thing but a lot of the women we work with would have, you know, children with complex needs and they're just-, you might get a couple of hours respite every couple of days" (Author's interview)

The local level at which many inactive people operate thus requires greater connectivity to urban centres if the goal is, for example, connecting long-time inactive people with jobs on the other side of the city or another urban/rural area which is not local. This will likely require engagements with the local resources people use to navigate and understand survival options.

The temporal impacts of Covid-19

Several key impacts from Covid-19 were also raised by interviewees in relation to work-life balance, new life priorities and the desire for genuinely flexible work arrangements including work at home. In line with Marks (2022; Kalleberg 2012; Taper 2022), the qualitative materials did not identify much evidence of 'quiet quitting' or a 'Great Resignation' movement based on a refusal of work. Rather, there appeared to be a sentiment that many women in particular faced continued (old) challenges engaging with low paying, non-flexible forms of work such as those presented by retail and low-paying service roles.

One interviewee in a fortunate affluent position noted that the pandemic had created a crossroad position in his life, allowing himself/his family to weigh up priorities resulting in a career break and more time spent with the family. Other interviewees in relatively stable positions noted that a new appreciation and personal pride in taking care of their children personally had emerged as part of new work-life routines established during Covid-19 lockdowns (Adams-Prassl et al. 2020), and a respect for providing love and care for their children over and above paying for childcare 'services' which were now deemed inferior in nature. Also, on the theme of class, interviewees noted that more middle-class professions were likely to maintain an option of flexible home-working, or else faced pressure to deliver this. By contrast, working-class professions involving face-to-face or physical labour were less

likely to offer the benefits of flexible home working, thus making these roles ever less appealing to candidates (Smith 2005).

With respect to childcare arrangements there remains a strong urge among campaigners to reform childcare provisions more generally, with several participants highly critical of a system which is costing the public exorbitant fees. Several female respondents who had engaged with the protest/campaigning group Melted Parents noted their (relatively) fortunate position in the labour market, wherein they had taken stock from the pandemic and decided to stay at home as 'house parents'. There remains considerable anger on the part of most women interviewed at a system which impoverishes working families who need to engage with paid childcare in exchange for maintaining careers in both pre- and post-pandemic labour market realities.

Conclusion

Following on from the quantitative study (Economic Inactivity Report 1), this report has considered the qualitative questions of 'how' and 'why' particular groups of people face inactivity challenges in Northern Ireland. In particular, the research has focussed on challenges facing women, people with disabilities and care givers. These groups face marked structural challenges in engaging with the labour market. The criticisms they made included failure of the NI state to provide adequate childcare support, resulting in many women leaving the labour market to raise children at home. A further theme within the research is that of the localised nature of people's lives. Here, testimonies suggest that labour market strategies are forged both within the home and the local neighbourhood area (e.g. inputs from family members in the house, the role of localised service centres in fostering survival strategies). These institutions play an important role in supporting the resilience of inactive groups, safeguarding people from situations of risk, and potentially in forging labour market engagement strategies. In terms of the latter, state policies need to reward transitions into work and remove barriers (e.g. inflexibility of benefits).

One theme that is not made explicit in the report is the role of labour demand (the quantity and quality of available and accessible work). This interacts with individual and household circumstances to influence decisions about economic activity / inactivity and thus labour supply. With the increase in home working in some occupations (attractive, perhaps, to people with health conditions and care givers), many entry-level jobs (for instance in retailing and services) require workers to be present physically^x. This means that whilst there may be job vacancies, there are barriers to some economically inactive people in obtaining this work, which could mean that these vacancies remain unfilled. As well as reforms to welfare and active labour market policies which work on the supply side of the labour market, economic policies are therefore also required on the demand side which factor in the life circumstances of those inactive people who require entry-level positions. As ever, there is the need to promote an adequate number of accessible jobs as well as policies which help people who want work to get them.

A final observation from the research relates to the term 'economic inactivity', which many participants found inaccurate and unhelpful. As Billy remarked: 'I just think it's kind of funny (the term 'economic inactivity'), it just doesn't make any sense. The economy doesn't exist solely on the backs of people who are working (formally) and everyone else is at their cost...I don't really think that's how it works' (Authors' interview, Billy, aged 30-34). In particular, critics of the term pointed to its failure to account for the contributions so many non-employed people make in the home and to the lives of others, and the obvious importance for this for the economy and wider society (i.e. educating and sustaining people through non-paid domestic work). Subsequently, the research uncovered strong encouragement for a change in the language used by government when discussing people not engaged in paid employment.

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ⁱ [Second phase of Northern Ireland census data released](#).

ⁱⁱ [Second phase of Northern Ireland census data released](#).

ⁱⁱⁱ Those with this status can get additional money to support their needs, and are not required to demonstrate work-related activity to receive benefits.

^{iv} UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) was the first human rights treaty of the 21st century, created to help tackle discrimination against people with disabilities. Linking to the treaty, key bodies in Northern Ireland include the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC) and the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland. The NIHRC monitors the activities of public bodies, lawmakers and employers with a view to ensuring the rights of disabled people are realised in the workplace. In inactivity terms, these bodies are thus seen as key in discouraging higher rates of inactivity due to disability. For example, alongside providing a 'stick' to hit employers found guilty of discrimination against disabled people, the NIHRC encourages

employers to create disability friendly work environments and services (e.g. adjust services and communications for workers in ways sensitive to those with disabilities; consideration of remote working and flexible working hours).

^v Subsequently, ‘with a few exceptions the Act does not form part of the law of Northern Ireland. As a result, the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (as amended), which extends throughout the United Kingdom, will remain in force for Northern Ireland as the repeal of that Act only forms part of the law of England and Wales and Scotland.’

See [The Equality Act 2010](#).

^{vi} Carers NI is Northern Ireland’s membership body for unpaid carers. They represent Northern Ireland’s 220,000 carers and strive to encourage new ways of supporting carers at home, work and in the community.

^{vii} [The Experiences of Poverty Among Unpaid Carers in Northern Ireland: A report from the Carer Poverty Commission NI \(August 2023\)](#)

^{viii} The Young Carer Grant is a yearly payment of £359.65 for young carers in Scotland aged 16, 17 or 18 years old. Carers must have been caring for 1,2 or 3 people for an average of 16 hours a week for at least the last 3 months. The allowance is not designated for particular purchases.

^{ix} One interviewee noted that some informal businesses which are popular in socially deprived areas included lines of work within clothing and cosmetics industries. Individuals were understood to take part informally in work:

‘like selling clothes, you know, buying in clothes from wholesalers and then selling them on, same with cosmetics, stuff like that. Or your hair and beauty from home sort of businesses’ (Author’s interviews)

^x On the same theme, it is also notable that Northern Ireland has a higher proportion of jobs in manufacturing relative to the rest of the UK (10.2% compared the UK average of 7.2%), and these jobs too are unlikely to feature high degrees of remote working (Ward and Harari 2023).