

# Children in Northern Ireland



## **Response to the Consultation on NI Executive Anti-Poverty Strategy**

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# Who we are

Children in Northern Ireland (CiNI) is the regional umbrella organisation for the Children's Sector in Northern Ireland. With over 130 members, CiNI is accountable for representing and giving voice to the experiences, views and aspirations of its members across NI to inform and influence those who make policy or plan and deliver services for children and young people. Our vision is to make Northern Ireland a society where all children are valued, treated fairly and are able to flourish. To deliver on this vision, CiNI has three strategic priorities:

- **Influencing:** through campaigning and engagement to ensure that children are at the centre of policymaking;
- **Learning:** capacity building across the sector and innovating best practice;
- **Collaboration:** working with others to increase impact.

We are the secretariat to the All Party Group on Children and Young People at the Northern Ireland Assembly and we are represented on the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership (CYPSP) - a multiagency partnership that includes the leadership of key statutory agencies and community and voluntary organisations, with responsibility for improving the lives of children and young people in Northern Ireland. CiNI is also a member of Safeguarding Board NI, a statutory body constituted to safeguard and protect children.

CiNI offers a wide range of training to both individuals and organisations working within the community and voluntary sector to develop their skills and knowledge through our high-quality and positively evaluated Children's Services Training Programme. We also offer bespoke training, tailored specially to the needs of organisations, both within the sector and beyond.

CiNI manages the regional parenting support helpline: Parentline NI. Funded by the Department of Health, this service offers free, confidential advice and guidance to Parents and Carers across Northern Ireland. Parentline also provides one-to-one support, practical workshops, online resources (including an award-winning podcast), and referrals to counselling services. CiNI also runs the Parent Participation Service and the Parents' Disability Forum, which are key platforms for parents/carers to have their voices heard and ensure that policymaking is informed by their lived experience.

At a community level, CiNI delivers the 'Gets Active Project', a range of healthy food and physical activity programmes aimed at addressing child food insecurity. In 2022, CiNI established a Youth Advisory Group to help shape these programmes and give young people a platform to influence policy making.

**More information is available on our website:** <https://www.ci-ni.org.uk/>

## A Clear Message from Civil Society

**The strategy is not fit for purpose.** That has been the resounding message from a wide range of civil society groups, including Members of Children in Northern Ireland (CiNI), that have largely rejected the Northern Ireland Executive's draft Anti-Poverty Strategy because, despite its long-awaited publication, it lacks core essential elements such as an action plan and measurable targets. [In our response to the Draft Programme for Government 2024-2027](#), 'Our Plan: Doing What Matters Most', CiNI urged the NI Executive to learn from the lessons outlined in the [Northern Ireland Audit Office \(NIAO\) Report on Child Poverty](#), which stated that a new integrated, cross-departmental anti-poverty strategy '[should include an action plan containing clearly defined indicators and targets aimed at quantifying and reducing poverty, including measures of persistent poverty and the poverty gap.](#)' We fully agree with the NIAO's assessment that the Executive's new action plan should focus on a number of properly defined and specific initiatives, and that departments must be able to demonstrate clear links between actions and reducing the scale and impact of poverty.

In August 2025, CiNI convened the Children's Policy Forum to discuss the draft strategy and key gaps. Our Members expressed a number of concerns, including the lack of emphasis on, and prioritisation of, children and young people. Previously, organisations in the children's sector had come together and agreed to support the principle of an overarching Anti-Poverty Strategy, as opposed to a new Child Poverty Strategy, because we recognise that supporting the whole family is the most effective way to lift children out of poverty. This collective understanding hinged upon the need to ensure that such an overarching strategy must adopt a lifecycle approach. In other words, recognising that needs change over time, and designing interventions that address poverty at every stage of life – from early childhood through adulthood and into older age. Instead of treating poverty as a single issue, a lifecycle approach tailors support to the realities that people face at different stages of their lives, such as ensuring that children have access to education and nutrition, supporting working-age adults with employment and income security, and protecting older people from isolation and financial hardship.

While we recognise that children are mentioned frequently throughout the draft strategy, much more work is required to prioritise their needs and fully adopt a lifecycle approach. We also believe that the strategy should take an intersectional perspective, as poverty is not experienced in the same way by all children. It is shaped by a range of factors such as age, gender, disability, ethnicity, and family circumstances. For example, a child living in poverty may face multiple barriers to the enjoyment of equal opportunity if they also have a disability, are from an ethnic minority background, and/or live in a single-parent household. Recognising these intersecting disadvantages ensures that policies and

interventions do not adopt a 'one-size-fits-all' model, but instead respond to the complex realities of people's lives, targeting support where it is most needed through taking proactive measures to address and prevent the deepening of inequalities. In our view, adopting an intersectional approach would also contribute to evidence-based prioritisation of actions on the basis of objective need and improve the strategic allocation of resources by highlighting the needs of the most vulnerable and marginalised groups of children and young people.

The draft strategy is seen as weak because it often refers to existing programmes and policies, rather than setting out new, targeted actions. As one Member put it, it reads as, "continue, continue, continue...which is just not good enough." Members criticised the lack of urgency, ambition, and measurable outcomes, questioning the real impact or tangible benefit for families. Equally, there are calls for a proper acknowledgement of the structural causes of poverty (e.g. economic inequalities) to shift the focus away from blaming individuals. There is also widespread frustration that the work of the Expert Advisory Panel and Co-Design Group appears to have been largely ignored, and in particular, the broad range of evidence-based policy recommendations and new actions that these experts suggested for inclusion in the strategy. It is clear that without new interventions specifically designed to address poverty, the strategy risks becoming a framework for 'business as usual' that fails to deliver meaningful change for children and their families.

It is disappointing and frustrating that the draft strategy does not reflect many of the recommendations of either the Expert Advisory Panel or the Co-Design Group. We would stress that the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) plays a vital role in tackling poverty, yet this is not adequately reflected in the framework, which appears to underplay the strong partnerships that exist between government and civil society. Again, we repeat our calls from the consultation on the Programme for Government, that departments must strengthen these partnerships, support their sustainability, and invest in the infrastructure and workforce that underpins these services and support.

The Anti-Poverty Strategy, above all cross-departmental and cross-sectoral initiatives, must properly harness the potential of these partnerships and maximise impact through secure, long-term funding and more effective collaboration. At the most basic level, as pointed out by many of our Members, government contracts must include sufficient funding for living wage salaries. There is also a strong case for VCS representation on relevant strategy governance structures. We understand that developing and implementing a cross-departmental strategy can be challenging within our current political system, often limiting commitments and creating tension over resources. Governance arrangements could help mitigate those challenges, and lessons could be drawn from elsewhere – such as Scotland – where a strong collective voice from outside government helped focus minds on the implementation of flagship policies such as the [expansion of Free School](#)

[Meals](#) and the [Five Family Payments](#). Without strong coordination, departmental actions could remain siloed and unaligned, thus reducing impact.

## **An Alternative Approach**

CiNI echoes the concerns of others, who have highlighted the under-utilisation of relevant data to measure and evaluate the effectiveness of the strategy. It is vitally important that the strategy takes cognisance of robust disaggregated data across Section 75 groups and adequately considers linked administrative datasets and the emerging evidence being developed through Administrative Data Research Northern Ireland (ADR NI), such as recent projects [testing the reliability and validity of the Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure 2017](#). Given the clear and unequivocal link between living in poverty and a lack of enjoyment of equality of opportunity, it is imperative that the strategy is fully compliant with the statutory equality duties contained in Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. It is our belief that the Equality Impact Assessment of the strategy should be undertaken again, using detailed, robust disaggregated data across all Section 75 categories. It is also our view that the strategy currently lacks detail on tailored actions for these specific population groups and fails entirely to mitigate against adverse impact as is required under section 75, despite clear evidence of disproportionate adverse impacts and perpetuating inequalities.

As Members of the Anti-Poverty Strategy Group (formerly the Co-Design Group), and a former Member of the Expert Advisory Panel,<sup>1</sup> CiNI has helped to develop a number of evidence-based, tailored recommendations to support children and families impacted by poverty. We fully endorse the recommendations of the [Expert Panel](#) and the [Anti-Poverty Strategy Group](#), and would argue that these provide a clear, evidence-based alternative to the current draft strategy. Unlike the draft framework for consultation, these proposals set out a rights-based, lifecycle, and intersectional approach, underpinned by specific, time-bound and measurable actions with clear accountability and resourcing requirements outlined.

Importantly, these recommendations address the structural and systemic causes of poverty – such as income inequality, inadequate social security, and barriers to housing and employment – rather than focusing too narrowly on individual factors. They also embed the voices of people with lived experience, ensuring policies are grounded in real, objective need. Together, the Expert Panel and Strategy Group's work presents a credible and viable framework for an

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<sup>1</sup> Represented by Pauline Leeson CBE, former Chief Executive, Children in Northern Ireland (CiNI).

effective Anti-Poverty Strategy that could deliver meaningful change and command the confidence of civil society.

**The Full Recommendations Paper from Members of the Anti-Poverty Strategy Group can be found here:** <https://www.nicva.org/article/ending-poverty-in-northern-ireland-a-civil-society-roadmap-for-real-change>

## No Child Left Behind

For just under a decade, since our first pilot programme in 2016, CiNI has played a direct role in helping to tackle child poverty and food insecurity through the Gets Active Project: a community-based programme that combines immediate support with long-term empowerment. At its core, the project provides nutritious meals, snacks, and physical activities during school holidays, directly addressing what is commonly referred to as “holiday hunger” and ensuring that children who normally rely on Free School Meals are not left without support. Alongside this, the project delivers a wide range of activities – from sports and arts to educational workshops – which improve children’s health, wellbeing, and social participation.

What makes ‘Gets Active’ distinctive is its focus on youth leadership and advocacy. Young people are engaged as Peer Mentors and Youth Leaders, co-designing programmes, running activities, and gaining accredited qualifications in areas like youth work, food hygiene, and first aid. Through the regional Youth Advisory Group (YAG), young people impacted by food insecurity conduct [peer research](#), [campaign on key issues](#), and engage directly with policymakers, building confidence, civic skills, and the ability to influence change.

The project is embedded within deprived communities and delivered in partnership with trusted local organisations, ensuring programmes meet genuine needs and connect families with wider services. It addresses immediate challenges such as hunger and social isolation, while building long-term resilience by developing young people as community leaders and advocates. Independent evaluations show outcomes including improved nutrition, better mental health, reduced stigma, stronger family support, and enhanced employability for the young people involved. Through this dual approach – practical support combined with youth empowerment – CiNI and its partners not only reduce the harmful effects of poverty but also help dismantle the structural barriers that perpetuate it, offering children and young people the tools to break the cycle of disadvantage.

However, through our delivery of support and advocacy in this area, we note significant disparities between policies in Northern Ireland and those of neighbouring jurisdictions.

**Northern Ireland is the only region in the UK without a specific government funding scheme or programme for holiday food and activities targeting children in need.**

**Northern Ireland is the only jurisdiction in the UK and Ireland with no form of universal provision of Free School Meals.**

**Northern Ireland is categorising children as 'living in poverty' while excluding these same children from key supports, such as Free School Meals, due to current eligibility criteria.**

It is unacceptable that children from low-income backgrounds in Northern Ireland are being left behind compared to their counterparts elsewhere. Since 2023, when the decision was taken by the Department of Education in Northern Ireland to cease the [School Holiday Food Grant](#):

- The Irish Government has nearly completed a phased rollout of a universal [School Meals Scheme](#) for primary schools, allocating €300 million to cover all remaining schools from 2025 and launching a 'holiday hunger' pilot.
- The Scottish Government has continued to rollout universal [Free School Meals](#) for children up to Primary 5 and widened eligibility for older children through the Scottish Child Payment.
- The Welsh Government has completed the rollout of universal [Free School Meals](#) so that every child up to and including Year 6 is now able to receive a free school meal every school day.
- The UK Government has committed £600m to extend the [Holiday Activities and Food programme](#) until 2028 and [widened eligibility for Free School Meals](#) to include every child in England whose household is in receipt of Universal Credit, supporting approximately half a million more children.

In Northern Ireland, since the Executive was reformed in February 2024, the Department of Education has increased the income threshold for families in receipt of Universal Credit, applying for free school meals and uniform grants, by £390 - taking the key eligibility criterion to annual income of below £15,390.



Analysis by Dr Nicole Gleghorne of Queen's University Belfast, [commissioned by the NI Commissioner for Children and Young People](#), shows that only 59% of children in poverty were eligible for Free School Meals between 2017 and 2020, and that increasing income thresholds while maintaining the other current criteria only marginally increases the proportion of children in poverty eligible for this key support. **It is absolutely critical that these disparities are urgently addressed, and that Free School Meal eligibility is expanded to include all children in poverty.**

Policy inertia, and a lack of specific, tailored actions targeting the most vulnerable groups of children (e.g. those with a disability, from an ethnic minority background) shows a clear disregard for the growing body of evidence highlighting the deepening levels of inequality and severe hardship faced by children and their families. Trussell now estimate that [1 in 3 children \(32%\) are growing up in food insecure households](#); and peer research conducted by our Gets Active Youth Advisory Group found that [1 in 5 children surveyed \(19%\) felt unable to concentrate in school](#) because of feeling hungry or being worried about money for food.

**You can read more about our work to tackle child food insecurity here:**

<https://www.ci-ni.org.uk/portfolio-items/holidayhunger/?portfolioCats=25%2C24%2C22>

The NI Executive Anti-Poverty Strategy represents a long-overdue opportunity to make meaningful progress in tackling poverty, but in its current form it risks entrenching existing inequalities rather than dismantling them. To be effective, it must move beyond a focus on the individual factors and current programmes, and instead adopt a rights-based, evidence-led framework with measurable targets, strong governance, and secure investment in both statutory and voluntary provision. Above all, the voices and lived experiences of children, young people, and families must be placed at the heart of policymaking. By drawing upon the clear recommendations of the Expert Panel, Anti-Poverty Strategy Group, and wider civil society, the Executive has the chance to deliver a strategy that matches the scale of the challenge and ensures that no child in Northern Ireland is left behind.