

Submission by the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People to The Office Of The First Minister And Deputy First Minister's Inquiry Into Child Poverty

The Office of Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) was created in accordance with 'The Commissioner for Children and Young People (Northern Ireland) Order' (2003) to promote and protect the rights and best interests of children and young people in Northern Ireland. Under Articles 7(2)(3), NICCY has a mandate to keep under review the adequacy and effectiveness of law, practice and services relating to the rights and welfare of children and young people by relevant authorities.

At NICCY, we have been making our views known to Government on a number of poverty related issues and have been at the forefront of highlighting the inadequate provision of resources for children's services. In March 2007 we urged all candidates in the Northern Ireland Assembly elections to use existing and new resources creatively to tackle the blight of poverty that affects children and young people in Northern Ireland. We also launched a report into expenditure on children's services making a series of recommendations to Assembly Members and Ministers to improve current service provision, including child contingent support.

From the outset NICCY would like to express concern that the report of this inquiry will not be available to inform the program for government and budget for the next three years. NICCY has noticed major policy gaps within the Program for Government and Draft budget that will have a negative impact on child poverty. We urge the committee to ensure that all recommendations from this inquiry are given due consideration when preparing the final program for government.

Examine the extent, intensity and impact of child poverty in Northern Ireland

- Extent and intensity

NICCY is aware that other organisations who have already prepared submissions to the Inquiry, have given specific and detailed statistics on the geographical breakdown child poverty rates; therefore we have decided not to repeat those statistics here.



However, it is worth noting that the Northern Ireland Executive, by its own admission¹ has stated that people living in the west of the Province have lower incomes, and that average weekly gross earnings in rural areas are below those in urban areas. Therefore, it follows that inequalities need to be addressed to ensure that regional variations in income are not leading to poverty and to an adverse impact the health and well-being of children and young people.

Research for OFMDFM in 2006² presented a series of statistics on child poverty based on various measures. Using income only, between one fifth and one quarter of all children in Northern Ireland are living in low income households. Using a consensual poverty measure (income and deprivation) almost two fifths of children is considered poor. Using the Department of Work and Pensions measures 14% of children in Northern Ireland are living in absolute low income poverty. This reinforces the need for OFMDFM to develop an agreed and comprehensive way to measure child poverty.

Horgan (2005) points that higher child poverty rates in Northern Ireland are coupled with a higher cost of bringing up children. The costs of essential services such as childcare and fuel in Northern Ireland are considerably higher than in the rest of the UK. This results in parents not having the ability to provide a nutritious diet which impacts on their health and obesity rates.

Irrespective of how poverty is measured, it is NICCY's view that the figures detailed above, are shocking and unacceptable figures, and we urge immediate action across departmental accountabilities to address the root causes and impact of poverty on children and young people.

- Impact

There are many impacts of poverty on children. It is notable that the effect of poverty on children begins even before a child is born, as can be seen by low birth weights and higher infant mortality rates. In 2006 the Infant mortality rate in deprived areas was 6.5 infant deaths per 1000 live births; this was higher than the rate of 4.9 in non deprived areas.³ Children born into poor families, begin life at a considerable disadvantage.

¹ Building a better future, Draft Budget 2008-2011

² Mc Laughlin and Montieth (2006) Child and Family Poverty in Northern Ireland OFMDFM

³ Health and Social Care Inequalities monitoring system second update bulletin 2007



It is also worth noting that the teenage pregnancy rate in deprived areas is 28.9 per 1000 live births; this is considerably higher than the rate of 12.4 in non deprived areas⁴.

Poverty can permeate every aspect of a child's life, from the opportunities they are afforded to take part in play and recreation facilities to poor health outcomes and low educational achievement and employment prospects. Given, therefore the complexities of the issues, there is a need for a multi dimensional solution focussed approach in response.

Research has shown that people living in poverty make dietary choices based on their finances. *'When you go to the supermarket you buy the cheapest loaf, you don't go for the bread that's supposed to be better for you. And fruit is dearer than biscuits, so you don't end up buying as much of it'*.⁵ The nutritional needs of children living in poverty are not being met because their parent's budget does not stretch to fresh fruit and vegetables. In addition, there needs to be a clear education approach to the benefits of healthy eating, so that the nutritional aspects of healthy food can be shared.

In essence poverty excludes children from fully participating in society at all levels, this is shown in research in 2006 by the New Policy Institute, which found that child poverty has a negative impact on both health and educational attainment. For example

- 5-year-olds in families reliant on means-tested benefit have almost twice as many decayed, missing or filled teeth as other 5-year-olds
- 60% of school leavers in the most deprived wards *do not* go on to further or higher education compared with 40% on average
- 35% of 11 year olds in schools with the highest number of deprived children do not reach level 4 at Key Stage 2 compared with 22% on average
- 30% of 16-year-olds receiving free school meals do not get 5 GCSEs compared with 15% on average

Child poverty does not just affect a person's childhood but it has a negative impact on the life choices that are available to them, at all stages of their life.

⁴ Health and Social Care Inequalities monitoring system second update bulletin 2007

⁵ North and West Belfast Women against Poverty(1999) Living with Poverty: Personal stories of women from North and West Belfast



In research completed by Queen's University on behalf of NICCY by Kilkelly et al (2004), children and young people of *all* ages and from *all* areas across Northern Ireland voiced their views on the impact of poverty on their area.

In my area you won't go one day without seeing a stolen car and being asked if you want to buy drugs. There is an awful lot of anti-social behaviour and loads of fights. Neighbours fighting over something stupid and being left in hospital. There is graffiti, underage drinking and loads of fights and a lot of burnt out cars." (Boy aged 15)

"It is all over the news that more people - young adults – are being attacked and stabbed due to alcohol. Drugs are being sold on your street corners and you can't walk anywhere without people doing drugs and abusing aerosols etc. As a kid you would want the best for your kid and that wouldn't be on the agenda" (Boy aged 14 years)

The quotes from children and young people clearly show that children and young people want to live in a safe and clean environment. The Executive and Assembly need to acknowledge the wider effects of growing up in poverty such as crime social and economic constraints

At the beginning of this section, we referenced impact at birth, and sadly we know that suicide rates in deprived areas are substantially higher than the Northern Ireland Average.⁶

Consider the approach taken when formulating the current strategy including the extent of the engagement with key stakeholders

The current anti Poverty strategy emerged following a review of the New Targeting Social Need (NTSN) policy which aimed to tackle poverty and social exclusion. It is NICCY's view that the NTSN policy has been driven through largely separate departmental programmes, with little evidence of a joined up approach at departmental level being reflected in coordination of services at a local level. Critically strategic objectives were missing and those objectives which were set, reflected departmental priorities rather than any overall Government commitment to reducing poverty. Monitoring arrangements therefore, did not serve to adequately reflect and measure progress against the broad objective of reducing poverty and social exclusion.

⁶ Health and Social Care Inequalities monitoring system second update bulletin 2007



At consultation stage the Anti Poverty Strategy did not include any focus on child poverty and did not contain any reference to children and young people as a priority group. This was an unacceptable omission and indicated that children and young people were less of a priority. However, we are pleased to acknowledge that the final strategy did focus on early years and child and young people as two distinct groupings.

NICCY understands that some children and young people were involved via the Derry Children's Commission in the development of the strategy pre consultation. However we believe that there should have been a more co-ordinated and stratified effort to ensure children and young people from across Northern Ireland were involved in a more substantial way. We would strongly urge the Inquiry Committee to pro actively seek the views of children and young people in the course of its work. Children and young people are very capable of sharing experiences of living in poverty.

Assess whether the existing strategy is capable of delivering the key targets for 2010 and 2020

While the Anti Poverty strategy is attempting to fully address the issue of child poverty at two key stages in the lives of children and young people, in its current state NICCY does not believe that the strategy can deliver on the key targets of 2010 or 2020. It is our view that the targets set are vague and are difficult to measure; we further believe that the strategy is simply addressing the effects not the causes, and that this leads to a sticking plaster response, rather than a holistic approach addressing fundamental issues leading to child poverty.

The strategy while not as robust as it should be is a starting point for positive action. What needs to follow is a comprehensive action plan; this action plan should take each target and break it into smaller interim goals that are time bound, and can be measured at regular intervals.

The anti poverty strategy states that children in lone parent households and persons with a disability are at a high risk of poverty. In other words, those most at risk of poverty are those who are unable to work or who can only work outside the home if public services such as childcare and accessible transport are greatly improved. The anti-poverty strategy however continues to see work as the best route out of poverty, ignoring the reality of situation as outlined in the strategy.



The Anti Poverty strategy needs to be amended to include actions to improve public services and higher benefit levels, and increase the uptake of benefits for those who cannot work or cannot find employment.

Examine whether the implementation mechanisms, resources and monitoring arrangements currently in place are adequate to ensure delivery of the key actions/targets

It is NICCY's view that the Draft Program for Government and Budget in its current form will not deliver on its key targets in relation to child poverty. While the Draft Program for Government includes a commitment to tackling poverty, essential actions and resources are not contained within the Draft Budget to support this action.

For example, the budget for the Department of Social Development reduces monies to the Housing Executive and Associations, therefore families will be forced to continue to pay the shortfall in their housing benefit in the private rented sector. There is also a lack of a dedicated focus on improving the economy and creating jobs in areas suffering from high unemployment and high rates of child poverty. Again we would draw the Inquiry's attention to the situation in the West of the Province, where only last weeks, announcements about the closure of Seagate, with significant job losses in the Limavady area, will have an impact on the families in that part of Northern Ireland. We would encourage creative approaches to the economies development, particularly in areas of deprivation.

The main targets of the anti poverty strategy are reflected in *Our Children and Young People- Our Pledge* strategy, to half child poverty by 2010 and eradicating it by 2020. However the action plan for the first two years of the children's strategy does not set any interim targets or actions specifically aimed at tackling child poverty, or halving the figure by 2010. It is unclear how this strategy is linked to the work of the Children and Young People Unit at OFMDFM and with the ten year strategy for children and young people. Without a shared agenda or timetable between these two strategies NICCY does not see how the 2010 can be delivered.

Identify and analyse relevant experience elsewhere in terms of policy interventions and programmes

The UNICEF report on child poverty⁷ Sweden, Norway and Finland had the lowest rates of child poverty while the UK ranked fourth. By examining the

⁷ A league table of child poverty in rich nations



policies in the Nordic Countries the report put forward the following critique explaining why their rates for child poverty are among the lowest.

'Nordic policy places emphasis on helping people into paid work. This is then complemented by a wide range of social policies aimed at redistributing that have arisen from the market. Moreover, unlike many industrialized countries that target resources towards particular problem groups, Nordic social legislation is designed to include the entire population.

All the Nordic countries provide generous maternity leave allowances that go unmatched elsewhere. In addition, Nordic countries have legislated in favour of extended parental leave schemes which allow one parent to care for a child at home until the age of three, without losing their job. Day care is universal in Denmark, Finland and Sweden where, in theory, every child is entitled to a place.

The impact of such measures is reflected in high female labour force participation rates that averaged over 70 per cent in 1997. This is a most significant aspect of Nordic policy. For research reveals both a strong link between high female employment and low child poverty, and a corresponding link between comprehensive levels of family policy and high employment among women.

Above all, it is clear that family focused social policy is deep-rooted in Nordic culture and that the principle of social entitlement is highly institutionalized, enjoying wide support among the electorate.'

Family friendly policies have proven to reduce child poverty in other countries. NICCY believes it is necessary to introduce similar policies here, which focus on the family so that employment is an option for all parents. In addition, the success of such initiatives as this will only be successful if the issue of low wages is also addressed.

NICCY would also recommend creative management of situations where work is not always possible because of barriers e.g. difficulties arranging child care, and in deed in some instances, the appropriateness of children being cared for outside the family; and the type of work available.

Research⁸ has shown the need for and success in investment in skills development early in a young person's life, in fact from early years.

⁸ Heckman J, Invest in the Very Young



Skill remediation programs for adults with severe educational disadvantages are much less efficient compared to early intervention programs; so are training programs for more mature displaced workers. At current levels of investment, cost-effective returns are highest for the young. NICCY would commend this research in terms of showing the importance of investing in early years, and skills development programmes in education.

NICCY would recommend a holistic approach is taken to reduce child poverty, this should include for example: family friendly policies, economic regeneration, simplifying of benefits systems, and help with take-up of benefits; investments in skills developments, and education programmes. These should all form key parts of the anti poverty action plan.

Consider what further actions could be taken to tackle child poverty with particular focus on those that would be deliverable by the devolved administration

The concluding observations of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child 2002 stated that *'the Committee urges the State party take all necessary measures to the "maximum extent of ... available resources" to accelerate the elimination of child poverty;*⁹

NICCY would urge the Committee of OFMDFM to ensure the actions outlined in any revised anti poverty are underpinned by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The following Articles should be given particular consideration in this Inquiry

Article 2- The right to protection against discrimination, the rights of the UNCRC must be respected for all children equally.

Article 3- The best interests of the child must be a primary consideration in decisions made by legislative bodies or administrative authorities

Article 4- The State has an overarching obligation to translate the rights of the Convention into reality

Article 6- The State has an obligation to ensure to the maximum extent possible the survival and development of the child

Article 12 – States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

⁹ UNCRC (2002) Concluding Observations of the Committee of the Rights of the Child. United Kingdom, Great Britain and Northern Ireland.45-46



Article 18 & 26- The right for additional support to be given to parents including social security.

In conclusion NICCY makes the following recommendations to the Committee.

- The Executive must develop a comprehensive way to measure child poverty which takes into account severe child poverty, includes the use of combined poverty measures; and adopts the 'after housing costs' in official child poverty measurement.
- The Office of the First and Deputy First Minister should develop a shared agenda and timetable on child poverty between the Children's Strategy and the Anti-Poverty Strategy. This should include clear measurable outcomes, which are tracked and monitored.
- The Executive must give direction to all Government Departments to prioritise and implement measures to tackle child poverty. Strong political commitment and leadership is needed to eradicate child poverty by 2020.

Targets set by the Government in the Anti Poverty Strategy must be reviewed and improved by all Government Departments; interim targets need to be set, that are monitored on a regular basis. The Executive must ensure that adequate resources are allocated to fully implement the Anti Poverty Strategy. All government departments must work together to develop, implement and monitor action plans in line with the strategy. These plans should be both department specific, but should be joined to ensure greatest impact.

- The Executive need to influence the distribution of opportunity across the North; there has to be focus on labour markets, low incomes and reliance on out of work benefits. The Draft Budget should have a particular focus or target to improve the economy and infrastructure in areas experiencing high levels of child poverty and deprivation.
- There is an immediate need for policy initiatives to tackle severe child poverty and support those children living in severe poverty. OFMDFM need to ensure that data is collected and maintained on the poorest children so they can be identified and targeted.
- The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety should bring forward plans to supports parents in meeting the nutritional needs of children living in severe poverty;



- Employment is not always a way out of poverty for low skilled people, people with a disability or a mental health illness who are dependant on benefits. There needs to be a recognition of the extent of “in work” poverty; therefore the Department for Social Development (DSD) must commission research on the effects of unemployment, of low paid employment and the reality of the benefit trap.
- DSD must provide sufficient safeguards for those unable to work to ensure that everyone entitled to benefits is claiming and accessing them, this can be done by simplifying benefit forms and the system of applying for benefits, including tax credits. A simple programme of ensuring that a parent is assessed for all available benefits when they make their first claim for child benefit, would have a positive effect on benefit uptake.
- The Assembly should make a recommendation to the Westminster Government, to review the current rates of benefit and minimum wage for 16 and 17year olds. NICCY would recommend these rates are increased and accessible information is provided on a range of benefit entitlements that are available to 16 and 17year olds.
- The Executive must ensure that affordable, flexible childcare is universally available to all parents including those on low incomes to enable them to participate in employment, education and/or training. This should include the provision of after schools clubs.
- DSD should bring forward plans to improve the environment of the areas in which severely poor children live.
- DSD needs to tackle the current shortage of social and affordable housing so that families are not forced into the expensive private rented sector.
- The Executive should bring forward a review of the specific circumstances facing families with disabled children is necessary to ensure these families do not fall into poverty.
- The Northern Ireland Assembly should poverty proof all legislation and policy to ensure it does not further discriminate against poor families and children.
- The Department of Education and CCEA must review the curriculum, to develop skills in children and young people, to prepare them deal with the challenges of work.



- DSD should bring forward plans to raise awareness on money and debt management, including support for the work of the Citizen Advice Bureau in assisting people with debt management and advice.

