

STATEMENT ON CHILDREN'S RIGHTS IN NORTHERN IRELAND 2

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S RESOURCE PACK



CHILD POVERTY

What does the UNCRRC say?

Article 27: Food, clothing, a safe home

Children have the right to food, clothing and a safe place to live so they can develop in the best possible way. The government should help families and children who cannot afford this.

What does the UNCRRC Committee say?

Poverty

The government should:

- Make sure all of its agencies are working together to get rid of child poverty. This should include bringing back proper targets with a set timeframe, and targets that can be easily measured to see if they are doing a good job. Governments should check and report on how well it is doing in reducing child poverty.
- Make sure that any general poverty work has looked carefully at child poverty, and make sure all parts of the UK have plans in place to stop children living in poverty.

- Find out what effect benefits and tax credit changes have had on children in the past six years, including on children with disabilities and those from ethnic minorities.
- Always make changes to the tax and benefit system so that children's best interests always come first. This is really important to children in vulnerable situations, who are most affected.

What is Poverty?

Poverty can be measured in different ways but it means that the person in poverty does not have enough money to have a decent standard of living.

Homelessness

The government should:

- Make sure children are not living in temporary accommodation for a long period of time.
- Take action to reduce homelessness and make sure all children have a home that meets their needs and is safe, healthy and, for children with disabilities, accessible.



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What's the situation in NI?

Currently around 1 in 4 children in Northern Ireland is living in poverty – this means they and their families do not have enough money to have a decent standard of living. Children are more likely to be living in poverty than any other age group in society.

Some children are more likely to be living in poverty, but this does not mean that all children in these categories will be affected. There has been no change over the past two years in the groups of children who are likely to be living in poverty. These are; children living with just one parent, children whose parents aren't employed, those who live in a house where someone is disabled and those whose religion is catholic or another religion.

For those living in houses with three or more children the rate of poverty has increased in the past two years – this has happened since government set a cap for child benefit at two children. While living in a household where no one is employed is a risk factor, two thirds most of the children living in poverty actually live in a house with at least one parent working which shows that parents finding work is not a guarantee that they will be able to provide everything their family needs to have a decent standard of living.

For thousands of children poverty results in them being homeless – this doesn't mean they will have to live on the streets but more likely that they will have to live in temporary or unsuitable accommodation. During 2019, 3,922 families were accepted as being homeless, including 7,193 children. In January 2020, 2,413 families were living in temporary accommodation, including 2,990 children. More information on these statistics can be found in the full report.

In 2018 we asked the government to:

1. Make sure children and families have enough money to have a decent standard of living - including through decent paid jobs;
2. Make sure that the social security system is a safety net which prevents families falling into poverty and distribute resources to lessen the impact of recent changes in social security benefits; and
3. Develop an action plan to eradicate child poverty, including addressing affordable childcare, education inequalities, homelessness and make sure all communities are invested in.



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So how is NI doing at tackling child poverty?

Supporting parents to meet needs through employment

One way that government can reduce the number of children living in poverty is to support parents to find work that gives enough money for them to support their children. When this is not possible, the UNCRC is clear that it is government's responsibility to give support to parents to make sure their child's right to a decent standard of living is met.

There have been a number of employment and skills programmes running, including social enterprise hubs, work experience programmes, essential skills training and employability support. However, households in Northern Ireland continue to have less income on average compared to other parts of the UK. The cost of childcare is also a factor for many working parents and there has been no movement on this over the past 5 years. In other parts of the UK, working parents of children, aged 3-4 can get 15 hours or more free childcare per week.

Social security benefits

NICCY is concerned that changes to social security benefits have had a worse impact on children and their families than any other group. The Commissioner has met regularly with the Minister for Communities and other relevant departments to advise on the importance of prioritising children's rights when thinking about any changes to social security benefits or measures to address the impact of these. However, the impact on children was not investigated when government reviewed the impact of these changes.

The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission showed the impact of benefit and tax changes between March 2010 and May 2019 had on annual income of households with children:

- Lone parent households lost an average £2250
- Households with 3 or more children lost an average £2575
- Households with at least one disabled child lost around £2000

It is essential that social security benefits protect the most vulnerable and don't cause more hardship for children. NICCY would like to see local protection for children living in poverty by Government topping up benefits for families that are affected by changes to social security and taxes. We would also like to see grants to off-set low-income wages and costs of working (such as child care), and increased payments for low-income families with young children.



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Covid-19 Response

The Covid-19 pandemic hit Northern Ireland at a time when plans to tackle poverty and improve the economy had not yet been agreed by Government. In March and April, the number of households getting Universal Credit almost doubled, from 57,910 to 108,620. 38% of these were families with children.

A number of measures have been put in place to limit the financial impact of the pandemic both from the UK government and local arrangements, such as direct payments for children on free school meals and a fund to supply food and support to vulnerable people. Coming out of the pandemic, government has an opportunity to develop a stronger focus on working together to rebuild the economy, strengthen health and social security systems and meet the needs of everyone in society, especially the most vulnerable.

Our recommendations to Government:

1. Plans to rebuild the economy after Covid-19 should include making sure that everyone, including young people, can get a job with a decent wage that enables them to live above poverty thresholds.
2. The Department for Communities should make sure funding to lessen the impact of benefit changes focuses on reducing child poverty and supporting low income families.
3. Make sure the social security system is an effective safety net that prevents families falling in to poverty. Families should receive a guaranteed minimum income.
4. The Stormont Executive should urgently develop an Anti-Poverty Strategy. This should adopt a 'lifecycle approach' reflecting the causes and impacts of poverty at different ages throughout life. Actions relating to children should include introducing affordable childcare, tackling educational inequalities and social exclusion and addressing homelessness.