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**NICCY**  
**Policy Paper**  
March 2008



**Child Poverty**  
**Policy Paper**



## Role of Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY)

The Office of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) was established in 2003 with the principal aim of safeguarding and promoting the rights and best interests of children and young people in Northern Ireland. Article 7(3) of the Commissioner for Children and Young People (NI) Order 2003 requires the Commissioner to keep under review the adequacy and effectiveness of law, policy, practice and services provided for children and young people by relevant authorities.

NICCY has been making its views known to Government on a number of poverty related issues and has been at the forefront of highlighting the inadequate provision of resources for children's services. In March 2007 NICCY urged all candidates in the Northern Ireland Assembly elections to use existing and new resources creatively to tackle the blight of poverty affecting children and young people in Northern Ireland. NICCY 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 that of child contingent support.



## Definition of Poverty

Using Townsend's definition<sup>1</sup>, children can be said to live in poverty when they live in families which lack adequate resources to enable them to participate in activities and have the living conditions which are customary and approved in their society. In effect they are excluded from ordinary living patterns customs and activities.

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. Poverty affects every aspect of a child's life, from opportunities to access play and leisure activities through to low educational achievement and employment prospects.

'The 'double whammy' of child poverty- adverse impact on the opportunities and potential for personal and social development and adverse impact on physical strength and wellbeing is a significant, enduring and unacceptable source of inequality in our affluent society.'<sup>2</sup>

## Rights Framework

NICCY's role, as already stated, is to safeguard and promote the rights and best interests of children and young people. In doing so, NICCY follows the guiding principles of the UNCRC, its minimum

standards being the basis from which to assess the adequacy and effectiveness of law and policy. Although not enshrined in domestic legislation, in signing up to the Convention, the UK government and devolved administrations have made a clear commitment to children that they will adhere to the rights contained therein.

The following articles of the UNCRC are relevant and should underpin any policy or strategy to tackle child poverty.

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.

<sup>1</sup> Townsend, P (1979) Poverty in the United Kingdom

<sup>2</sup> McLaughlin & Monteith (2006) child and family poverty in Northern Ireland OFMDFM



Article 19 - States Parties shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental harm.

Article 23 & 24 - The right to have the highest attainable standard of health.

Article 27 - The State has a duty to assist parents in providing children with an adequate standard of living.

Article 18 & 26 - The right for additional support to be given to parents living in poverty.

The concluding observations of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child 2002 stated of the UK that *'The Committee is extremely concerned at the high proportion of children living in poverty in the State party, which limits their enjoyment of many rights under the Convention and leads to a higher incidence among those children of death, accidents, pregnancy, poor housing and homelessness, malnutrition, educational failure and suicide. The Committee welcomes the State party's commitment to eliminate child poverty and the initiatives taken in this regard, but notes the lack of an effective and coordinated poverty eradication strategy across the State party.'*

The Committee urged the State party to take all necessary measures to the *"maximum extent of ... available resources"* to accelerate the elimination of child poverty'.<sup>3</sup>

## Statistics - existing research into poverty

In 2005/06 over half of the child population in NI lived in families with incomes in the bottom two quintiles of the distribution.<sup>4</sup>

Official figures published by DSDNI (2005) show that the number of children in Northern Ireland falling below 60 per cent of median income threshold, before housing costs, is approximately 103,600. This amounts to 24 per cent of all children locally.<sup>5</sup>

There are several pockets of child poverty in Northern Ireland. One in three wards in the Derry/Londonderry City Council area have a child poverty rate of more than 70%. The fourth worst ward for child poverty is the Falls (Belfast). Seven of the 56 wards that are considered to be the worst 10% of wards for child poverty are in West Belfast. While Derry/Londonderry and West Belfast are notorious for high levels of poverty, some of the worst 10% of wards in terms of child poverty are in areas that are seen as very prosperous, for example, 72% of children in the Old Warren ward of Lisburn live in poverty.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> UNCRC (2002) Concluding Observations of the Committee of the Rights of the Child. United Kingdom, Great Britain and Northern Ireland.45-46

<sup>4</sup> DSD (2005/2006) 'Households below average income report

<sup>5</sup> ERINI 2007 An analysis of public expenditure on children in Northern Ireland

<sup>6</sup> Connolly and Keenan, 2001 cited in Kilkelly et al 2004

Thirty seven point four per cent of children are living in households that had the equivalised incomes after housing costs below 60% of the median and were lacking in three or more necessities.<sup>7</sup>

Nineteen point nine per cent of school children are known to be eligible for free meals, higher than the equivalent rates in England and Scotland. In the Belfast Education and Library Board area with high social deprivation and greater funding per pupil there remains a problem with educational attainment.<sup>8</sup>

Research into the impact of poverty on a young person's education<sup>9</sup> shows that poverty has a significant impact on a child's experience of primary school. The research concludes *'it is clear that the possibility of a child experiencing an education that is likely to produce a fully rounded individual, develop to his/her full potential, is still dependent on parental income'*.

Twenty per cent of all households in Northern Ireland currently receive full housing benefit.<sup>10</sup>

More recent research similarly based on Northern Ireland found that:<sup>11</sup>

- 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

A recent UNICEF<sup>12</sup> report found that the UK was bottom of a league table for child well-being across 21 industrialised countries and was positioned fourth from the bottom in a table based on measures relating to relative income poverty, households without jobs and reported deprivation.

UNICEF's report is a wake-up call to the fact that, despite being a rich country, the UK is failing children and young people in a number of crucial ways. After years of welfare and education policies, children living in the UK have the lowest levels of well-being in the developed world and children living in Northern Ireland are particularly vulnerable to this poverty trap.

## Current Policy Context

### **Lifetime Opportunities- the Government's Anti Poverty and Social Inclusion Strategy for Northern Ireland.**

In response to these statistics, the Office of the First and Deputy First Minister launched 'Lifetime Opportunities', the Government's Anti Poverty and Social Inclusion Strategy for Northern Ireland.

<sup>7</sup> Hillyard et al (2003) Bare Necessities, Belfast: Democratic Dialogue

<sup>8</sup> Department of Education Northern Ireland

<sup>9</sup> Horgan G (2007) 'The impact of Poverty on young children's experience of school (2007)

<sup>10</sup> Department of Finance and Personnel 'Northern Ireland Priorities and Budget 2006-08

<sup>11</sup> New Policy Institute (2006) Monitoring poverty and social exclusion in Northern Ireland

<sup>12</sup> UNICEF (2007) Child Poverty in perspective: An overview of child well being in rich countries





This strategy defines specific goals and targets in four key stages of life. In relation to Early Years the goal is to ensure that every child should have a chance to develop his full potential in infancy regardless of social background. In relation to children and young people the goal is to allow all children and young people to experience a fulfilling childhood, equipping them with the education, skills and experience to achieve their potential to be citizens of tomorrow. The task now is to develop and implement policies to achieve the targets set out in the strategy.

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 not measurable.

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 therefore continues to see work as the best route out of poverty, ignoring the complexities of the poverty trap.

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.

#### **Our Children and Young People - Our Pledge.**

This is a ten year strategy for children and young people in Northern Ireland from 2006-2016. The strategy sets out a vision for the future and a series of objectives and measures as to how to improve the life chances for children and young people in Northern Ireland over the next ten years. An action plan for 2007-2008 has been developed to implement the strategy.

While the strategy includes the target of halving child poverty by 2010 and eradicating it by 2020, the action plan for the first two years does not set any interim targets or actions specifically aimed at tackling child poverty. If the Northern Ireland Assembly is fully committed to halving child poverty in the next three years, then it is essential that related actions are included in the children and young people's action plan.

## Children's Views on the Impact of Poverty on their lives

In research completed on behalf of NICCY by Kilkelly et al (2004), children and young people of all ages and from a range across Northern Ireland voiced their views on the impact of poverty on their lives.

*'£90 every two weeks is really really hard to live on, especially if you have to get oil.  
(Young person leaving care)*

*'Other kids our age like they can slag us all they like, saying 'You live in a hostel' but they would not be able to have, I can guarantee you that after two nights of living away from the house they'd be balling their eyes out, do you know what I mean? They think they're all hard, they don't know what it's like.'  
(Young person at risk of homelessness)*

## Children most at risk of living in Poverty

Statistics from a range of sources such as the Department for Social Development's Household's Below Average Income report identify a number of households in Northern Ireland that are most at risk of poverty.

### Families without employment

Children from homes where both parents are unemployed were worst off, with approximately seven in ten having incomes

in the bottom quintile before housing costs, rising to more than nine in ten in the bottom two quintiles of income distribution.<sup>13</sup> Well paid work would provide many families with a route out of poverty, and help them to escape the benefit trap that exists for many people dependant on benefits for their income.

### Disabled

Children living in families with at least one disabled adult were more likely to experience low-income than those living in households with no disabled adults. Further more, around 70% of children in families with one or more disabled children or one or more disabled adults also fell into the bottom two quintiles before housing costs<sup>14</sup>.

### Lone Parents

Around 70% of children in lone parent families were in the bottom two quintiles of income distribution.<sup>15</sup> Lone parents continue to face many obstacles when trying to secure paid employment, most notably the lack of affordable, flexible childcare. 14% of households in Northern Ireland are headed by a lone parent.<sup>16</sup>

### Large families

Larger families are at a disproportionate risk of poverty *'the greater the number of children in a family, the increased likelihood of low income'*.<sup>17</sup>

Research by McLaughlin and Monteith (2006) showed that children living in large families (4 + children) comprise almost a third of children living in consistent poverty.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>13</sup> DSD Households below average income 2005/06

<sup>14</sup> DSD Households Below Average Incomes report 2005/06

<sup>15</sup> DSD Households Below Average Incomes report 2005/06

<sup>16</sup> www.nisra.gov.uk

<sup>17</sup> DSD Households below average income report 2005/06

<sup>18</sup> McLaughlin, E and Monteith, M (2006) Child and family poverty in Northern Ireland





### **Mental Health**

The relationship between mental ill health of parents and child poverty has been established,<sup>19</sup> with the former resulting in long term and intermittent unemployment and dependence on benefits, which impact on family poverty.

### **Conflict**

30 years of conflict has had a significant impact on child poverty with research illustrating a strong correlation between experience of conflict and experience of poverty. As Fay et al (1998)<sup>20</sup> note, a map of the areas where child poverty is most concentrated in NI will match very closely the map of areas where the conflict has been most intense. Furthermore, there is growing evidence that the interaction of conflict with poverty tends to exacerbate both.<sup>21</sup>

## **Policy Intervention and Programmes from elsewhere**

Family friendly policies such as generous maternity leave and availability of child care have been proven to reduce child poverty in other countries, such as Norway, Sweden and Finland. 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 will only be realised when the issue of low wages is also addressed.

NICCY would 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.

Research<sup>22</sup> has shown the need for and success in investment in skills development early in a young person's life, in fact from early years.

Programs that aim to improve the skills of 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.

## **Poverty: Policy Recommendations**

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, help with take-up of benefits, investments in skills development and education programmes. These should all form key parts of the anti poverty action plan.

<sup>19</sup> Nick Gould (2006) 'Mental Health and Child Poverty' Joseph Rowntree Foundation

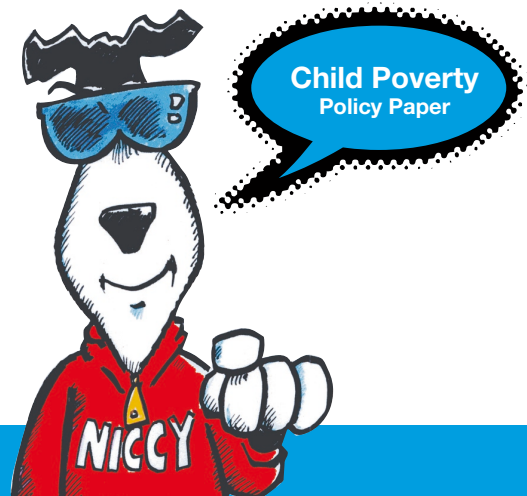
<sup>20</sup> Cited in Hengan, G (2005) The particular circumstances of children in NI

<sup>21</sup> Hengan, G (2005) The particular circumstances of children in NI

<sup>22</sup> Heckman J (200) Invest in the Very Young

## Key recommendations:

- 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 department specific, but should be joined to ensure greatest impact.
- OFMDFM need to ensure that data is collected and maintained on the poorest children so they can be identified and targeted for support.
- NICCY recommends creative management of situations where work is not always possible because of barriers such as difficulties arranging child care, the appropriateness of children being cared for outside the family and the type of work available.
- 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.
- Employment is not always a way out of poverty for low skilled people or people with a disability or a mental health illness who are dependant on benefits. There needs to be a recognition of the extent of both the benefits "in work" poverty. The Department for Social Development (DSD) should trap and commission research on the effects of unemployment, 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 17 year 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 17 year olds.
- 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.
- DSD should bring forward plans to raise awareness on money and debt management, including support for the work of the Citizen Advice.
- 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.
- The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety should bring forward plans to support parents in meeting the

nutritional needs of children living in severe poverty,

- 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.
- The Executive should bring forward a review of the specific circumstances facing families with disabled children to ensure these families do not fall into poverty.

## Message from the Commissioner for Children and Young People

Statistics are all very well for quantifying relative poverty but I find that a more meaningful way of putting poverty in context is to look at the life experiences behind the numbers - it's here that you begin to get a glimpse of what living in poverty actually means to those children who are caught in the poverty trap.

Tackling the issues around child poverty and social exclusion is a significant priority for NICCY. Poverty can impact on children and young people throughout their lifetime by adversely affecting their educational and employment opportunities. If we do not tackle this issue now, then another generation will grow up trapped in the poverty cycle with no way out.



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