This briefing outlines key information on the extent of child poverty in Northern Ireland, and the impact it has on children’s lives. It calls on the UK Government and Northern Ireland Executive to put in place a range of actions to ameliorate the impact of poverty and to meet their commitments to eradicate child poverty by 2020.

Twenty years on from the signing of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, poverty remains one of the most pressing child rights issues in Northern Ireland.

A Report Card published by UNICEF in 2007 ranked 21 of the world’s most affluent nations by child poverty rate. The UK came 18th, with only Ireland, Poland and Hungary faring worse. In contrast, countries such as Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Finland, topped the table with child poverty rates a fraction of those in the UK, demonstrating that such high levels of child poverty are not inevitable, and that they can be reduced if there is the will.

However, tackling such a deep seated and pervasive problem is a considerable challenge, not easily solved by isolated, limited interventions.

The UK Government and NI Executive must develop and deliver a detailed action plan to end child poverty designed for each stage in childhood, from before birth to 17 year olds. The plan should include the following:

1. Raising the income levels of families experiencing poverty to ensure that children’s material needs are met.
2. Ensuring better provision of accessible, affordable, high quality childcare to facilitate parents to work.
3. Tackling the particular disadvantages experienced by 16 and 17 year olds who are living independently, and/or not in education, employment or training.

The role of NICCY was established in 2003 in accordance with the provisions of The Commissioner for Children and Young People (Northern Ireland) Order 2003. The principal aim of the Commissioner, as defined in article 6 of that order, is to safeguard and promote the rights and best interests of children and young persons.
What the statistics say:

- Around 117,000 are living in poverty
- Around 91,000 are experiencing persistent poverty (ie at least 3 out of 4 years)
- Around 44,000 are experiencing severe child poverty.

What children and young people say about child poverty:

“Poor families do not have everything to help them stay healthy, safe and well.”

“...it can be kinda depressing, you know, knowing that they (parents) are depressed about bills and things.”

“Give them a better life, a better house, give them a car. That’s what I would do. Get them better clothes and all. A better house, and better clothes. Get them new houses, proper houses. Get them a doggy if they like doggies! (laughter) And give them more fun. And get them more toys. Give them more electricity for lights and other stuff that they actually need.”

“NI should not be in poverty. The Assembly should discuss raising pay and lowering rates and taxes so that everyone has enough money for basic needs and also enough to enjoy themselves.”

What the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child says:

Article 26 states that Governments should provide extra money for the children of families in need.

Article 27 states that children have a right to a standard of living that is good enough to meet their physical and mental needs. The Government should help families who cannot afford to provide this.

What the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child said to the UK Government in 2008:

The Committee expressed concern at the extent of child poverty and its impact on children. It highlighted that an adequate standard of living is essential for a child’s physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development. It recommended that the State party:

(a) Adopt and adequately implement the legislation aimed at achieving the target of ending child poverty by 2020;
(b) Give priority to those children and their families in most need of support;
(c) When necessary, besides giving full support to parents or others responsible for the child, intensify its efforts to provide material assistance and support programmes for children, particularly with regard to nutrition, clothing and housing;
(d) Reintroduce a statutory duty for local authorities to provide safe and adequate sites for Travellers.
In 2005-6, one in ten children in Northern Ireland was experiencing severe child poverty (10%). This meant that they were living in families with particularly low incomes and that both parents and children were going without basic necessities.

While these figures indicate the number of children in poverty at one point in time, persistent poverty figures measure the proportion of children who are poor over many years. A Save the Children study showed that, over a four year period, one in five children in Northern Ireland (21%) experienced persistent poverty. This means that they were experiencing poverty at least three out of the four years. This compares with 8% in Great Britain.

A recent Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) report on child poverty in Northern Ireland concluded that:

‘Overall this indicates that child poverty in Northern Ireland is more entrenched and is, therefore, likely to present greater challenges in tackling it.’

Children are at increased risk of experiencing poverty if they live in:
- Lone-parent families
- Workless households
- Large families
- Families with a disabled child or adult

More than half of children experiencing poverty live in households where at least one parent is working (56%).

The impact of poverty on children

Poverty pervades every aspect of children’s lives – particularly when it is more than a temporary experience. A lack of money results in parents having to make hard decisions between basic necessities, such as heating their home, buying healthy food, providing appropriate clothing for their children, and paying for their children’s school and leisure activities. The impact on children throughout their childhood is severe, including:
- Higher infant mortality rates
- Greater physical and mental ill-health
- Inadequate nutrition
- Unfit housing conditions
- Higher rates of both road traffic and domestic accidents
- Lack of play and leisure opportunities
- Lower educational engagement and attainment
- Worry about household finances and burden of responsibility
- Increased likelihood of teenage pregnancy, or drug or alcohol abuse
- Increased likelihood of being ‘not in education, employment or training’ at 16.

According to Government statistics, more than one in four (27%) children were experiencing poverty in 2007 - 8. Despite Government commitments to eradicate child poverty, these figures show little change over the six years they have been recorded in Northern Ireland.
Government should take action to raise the income levels of families experiencing poverty to ensure that children’s material needs are met.

Government research shows that children living in poverty regularly go without basic necessities because their parents can’t afford them. While parents cope by going without themselves, this can only provide a temporary solution. Too often children also have to go without key items, such as healthy food and warm clothes. This is particularly the case where they are experiencing severe or persistent poverty.

A 2008 study by JRF consulted widely on the items generally considered by the public as necessities. The minimum income required for a family of two adults and two children was calculated to be £349 (excluding housing costs and childcare). This was £124 above the weekly benefit level, an annual discrepancy of more than £6000.

NICCY calls on Government to take action to increase income levels, through increasing benefit levels and minimum wage levels. According to DETI, Northern Ireland wages are the lowest in the UK, with median salary only 90% of that in GB. This means that – particularly for unskilled workers – work is no route out of poverty. Economic development strategies must seek to create better paid jobs.

Other actions that should be taken to increase family income levels are to provide vocational training to parents, provide fuel payments and reduce the costs associated with school, with play and leisure activities and transport.
The Northern Ireland Executive must ensure better provision of accessible, affordable, high quality childcare to facilitate parents to work.

Improving opportunities for parents to take and remain in work is a central focus of Government strategies for tackling child poverty. As part of this, a number of policies have been developed, including New Deal, which offers subsidised work or education to long term unemployed or young people. The UK Government is currently implementing a welfare reform strategy which seeks to increase the lone parent ‘in work’ rate through a combination of support and compulsion – the ultimate sanction being a reduction in benefit levels.

In Great Britain, these developments have gone hand-in-hand with a resourced childcare strategy, including a statutory duty on local authorities to ensure adequate child care provision is in place. A Transformation Fund was established in England to invest in high quality, sustainable, affordable provision. In contrast, in Northern Ireland there is no lead Government department, no statutory duty, limited resources and – as a result – a “woefully inadequate” level of childcare provision.

NICCY calls on the NI Executive to develop a long-term, fully resourced childcare strategy to increase the level of provision, particularly in areas of disadvantage, in rural areas, and for children with disabilities. While this must be cross-departmental, one department must take the lead. A statutory duty to ensure sufficient childcare provision should also be considered.

Duty bearers: NI Executive, particularly DE, DHSSPS, DEL, DSD, DARD.

Government must tackle the particular disadvantages experienced by 16 and 17 year olds who are living independently, and/or not in education, employment or training.

Action plans to end child poverty must include a focus on the needs of 16 and 17 year olds – particularly those not in education, employment or training, or living independently.

JRF research on minimum income standards found that a single working age female in NI needed £166.40 per week to cover basic costs of living – excluding housing costs. Benefit levels for 16 or 17 year olds are a fraction of this, for example:

- If in training, and living independently, they will be entitled to housing benefit and a maximum of £50.95 EMA and IS.
- If not in education, employment or training, and living at home, they will not be entitled to any benefits or payments.

Items such as food, clothing, heating and transport cost the same for 16 year olds as for adults. Such low incomes, therefore, result in extreme hardship.

NICCY calls on government to match the provision for 16 and 17 year olds living independently to the levels provided to adults, and to pay benefits to parents for children living at home up to the age of 18.

DEL should develop and implement a strategy for supporting young people not in education, employment or training to develop skills and find decently paid employment.

Duty bearers: NI Executive, particularly DE, DHSSPS, DEL, DSD, DARD.
A timeline of political developments:

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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tr>
<td>Apr 2004</td>
<td>Secretary of State for Northern Ireland commits to develop an Anti-Poverty Strategy.</td>
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<tr>
<td>June 2006</td>
<td>Strategy for Children and Young People published includes an objective on Economic and Environmental Well-being.</td>
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<td>Nov 2006</td>
<td>Lifetime Opportunities published by Secretary of State. Children (0-16) are a key focus of the strategy.</td>
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<td>Mar 2007</td>
<td>Devolution restored. Executive states that child poverty is one of five priorities for children.</td>
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<td>Dec 2007</td>
<td>Programme for Government signs up to the commitment to halve child poverty by 2010 and eradicate it by 2020. It also establishes a target to eradicate severe child poverty by 2012.</td>
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<tr>
<td>June 2008</td>
<td>Report of Inquiry into Child Poverty by the Committee for OFMDFM.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oct 2008</td>
<td>UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, while recognising the commitment to ending child poverty, raises concern at lack of progress in lifting children out of poverty.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jan 2009</td>
<td>UK Government states its intention to introduce a Child Poverty Bill to enshrine its targets in legislation.</td>
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<tr>
<td>May 2009</td>
<td>UK Government states publicly that it is unlikely to meet its 2010 target.</td>
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Poverty issues in other briefings:

- Supporting families experiencing poverty see February: Briefing 2/12
- Support for young care leavers see March: Briefing 3/12
- Poverty and migrant children see May: Briefing 5/12
- Exclusion from play & leisure activities see June: Briefing 6/12
- Child poverty and disability see July: Briefing 7/12
- Educational inequalities of children experiencing poverty see September: Briefing 9/12

References for UNCRC Policy Briefing Child poverty (January 2010):

2. DSD, Households Below Average Income (HBAI) reports for 2005/6 to 2007/8. This is a relative income poverty measure, with the poverty line set at 60% of the median income level.
7. These points are drawn from a range of sources, and are listed in NICCY (2008), Children’s Rights: Rhetoric or Reality (Belfast: NICCY).
8. The DSD HBAI reports quantify the number of households going without a range of necessities.
13. See points 2, 3 and 4 above for references

For more copies of this briefing, or of the campaign briefing, please call us on: 028 9031 1616 email us on: uncrc@niccy.org

For more information on NICCY’s campaign please visit: www.niccy.org/childrensrights

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