



The Executive Office's draft Programme for Government 2024 - 27: 'Our Plan: Doing What Matters Most'

Cliff Edge Coalition Working Group response

About the Cliff Edge Coalition

The Cliff Edge Coalition is made up of over one hundred organisations from across Northern Ireland, which came together in 2018 to campaign to sustain and strengthen crucial welfare reform mitigations to protect people across Northern Ireland.

The Cliff Edge Coalition Working Group supports the work of the wider Coalition and is made up of over thirteen organisations and representatives from across the voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland acting collaboratively to oversee and shape the work of the wider Coalition.

Welfare reform mitigations were first agreed by the Northern Ireland Executive in 2016 to alleviate some of the harshest impacts of the Westminster welfare reform agenda. With an impending 'cliff edge' of the mitigations in 2020, The Cliff Edge Coalition ('the Coalition') formed in 2018 to campaign to sustain and strengthen these vital measures to protect people from poverty across NI. Following campaigning by the Coalition, the Northern Ireland Assembly legislated to indefinitely retain the mitigations for the Social Sector Size Criteria (Bedroom Tax), close the loopholes which had prevented many claimants from accessing financial assistance through the mitigation scheme, and extend the benefit cap mitigations until 31st March 2025.

There remains an urgent need for the Coalition to continue its campaign to extend the current mitigations beyond 31 March 2025, and to strengthen the mitigations package in NI. The harsh impacts of new welfare challenges which have emerged since the original mitigations were introduced, and which have been exacerbated by the ongoing cost-of-living crisis, are increasingly affecting households causing financial hardship and poverty.

The Coalition is now calling for three further measures which are urgently needed to strengthen the current benefit system in Northern Ireland.

About this response

The Cliff Edge Coalition Working Group welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation.

In this response, we confront the PfG's absence of focus on poverty and call for the insertion of a new priority to address this. We encourage the Executive to adopt the Coalition's three key asks as concrete actions that can be realised within the 3 year span of the document.

The response is endorsed by the Cliff Edge Coalition Working Group Members.

The PfG Missing Priority: The Eradication of Poverty

“We are talking about childcare, housing, mental health here, but we can’t do anything about these without doing something about poverty. Of course our mental health is suffering. Just look at how things are, everything is a struggle.”¹

The draft 2024 Programme for Government (PfG) outlines nine key priorities for the Executive in a harsh economic climate, but fails to address one of the most pressing needs in our society: the eradication of poverty. This is a grave concern. Without a clear commitment to eradicating poverty, our analysis is that many of the key priorities in the PfG cannot be achieved. So, a commitment to eradicating poverty would clearly assist the Executive to realise the existing nine key priorities.

We note that the draft PfG makes scant reference to the social inclusion strategies: *“in addition to crucial policies on childcare, housing, the economy and education, we will make sure that everyone can participate through the introduction of social inclusion strategies.”²* The Executive is under a legal obligation to adopt an Anti-Poverty Strategy based on objective need. The PfG provides an opportunity to translate this obligation to a concrete commitment to *adopt* and *implement* the strategy without further delay. Further, the PfG should specifically name the other social inclusion strategies that are currently only obliquely referred to i.e. Disability, Sexual Orientation and Gender strategies.

¹ Quotation from a mother and low-waged worker at a focus group hosted by the Northern Ireland Anti-Poverty Network.

² Northern Ireland Executive, [Our Plan: Doing What Matters Most](#), p.67.

The Northern Ireland Audit Office report on the Child Poverty Strategy recommended that the 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’.³ This recommendation is clearly relevant to the PfG: the document must include concrete objectives and targets (both short and long term), and a corresponding budget to tackle poverty throughout the PfG.

Recommendations

The Cliff Edge Coalition Working Group recommends that the draft Programme for Government is amended to include:

- ‘Eradicating Poverty’ as an additional and immediate priority.
- This commitment should be accompanied with a vision for the eradication of poverty, which spans the short to long term, and with corresponding measurables and targets.
- Within the new proposed priority of Eradicating Poverty, the PfG should also adopt the Coalition’s three key asks (see below) as new actions, specifically:
 - Resolve the five week wait in Universal Credit
 - Remove the two-child limit
 - Provide support to private renters affected by the Local Housing Allowance
- A specific commitment to adopt and implement the Anti-Poverty Strategy.

Context: Poverty in Northern Ireland

Nearly 1 in 5 people in Northern Ireland are living in poverty, as 18% (approximately 349,000) people are considered to be in relative poverty and 14% (approximately 271,000) are considered to be in absolute poverty.⁴ In relation to child poverty, 24% of children (approximately 109,000) live in relative poverty and 19% of children (approximately 86,000) live in absolute poverty.⁵ The increase of relative child poverty from 18% in 2022 to 24% in 2023 indicates a worrying trend.⁶

³ Northern Ireland Audit Office, [NI Audit Office Report - Child Poverty in Northern Ireland.pdf](#), p.14

⁴ Department for Communities, [Northern Ireland Poverty and Income Inequality Report, 2022/23 \(nisra.gov.uk\)](#).

⁵ [Ibid.](#)

⁶ [Ibid.](#)

Poverty and the slashing of public services has plagued Northern Ireland before the current cost-of-living crisis, but the stark reality for many households today is that they are reaching breaking point. According to research conducted by Inspire in 2022, 79% of adults in Northern Ireland said that their mental health and wellbeing had been adversely impacted by the rising cost of living.⁷ Although inflation has largely stabilised, prices remain high particularly for essential items like food. Rents and mortgage rates are sky-rocketing, energy prices continue to rise, childcare and school costs are out of control, and wages and benefits are nowhere near catching up. Wages and benefits continue to trail behind the cost of essentials, pushing more households into poverty and into debt. Additionally 67% of children in poverty in Northern Ireland live in working households, where at least one member of the household is in paid work.⁸ We are concerned that cuts to social security, such as the two-child limit, where households only receive the child element or Child Tax Credits for their first two children, have pushed more households and children into poverty.

The Consumer Council for Northern Ireland Q1 2024 Household Expenditure Tracker highlights those in the lowest earning households at the bottom 25% of the income distribution (Quartile 1) have just £41.73 of discretionary income per week after spending on the basics.⁹ The Consumer Council's analysis also shows that Northern Ireland's lowest earning households' gross household income per week is £277.61 per week, 7% lower than the rest of the UK, and that income from social security benefits is at 71% in Northern Ireland compared to 61% in the UK.¹⁰ An ARK Research report highlighted some issues from the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey which point to likely problems meeting any additional expenditure from low income levels.¹¹ Survey respondents were asked how their household income has changed since the first lockdown in March 2020, and while the majority (53.3%) of households reported their household income had remained the same, 26% reported a decline.¹² Respondents reporting financial hardship were asked to identify how they have been coping - 44.6% reported borrowing from friends and family and 26.6% reported increasing credit card debt.¹³

⁷ Inspire Wellbeing, [YouGov survey shows impact of cost of living on mental health of adults in Northern Ireland - Inspire Wellbeing](#), 2022.

⁸ <https://endchildpoverty.org.uk/child-poverty-2024/>

⁹ Consumer Council for Northern Ireland, [Q1 2024 Northern Ireland Household Expenditure Tracker | Consumer Council](#).

¹⁰ [Ibid.](#)

¹¹ ARK, The Other Division in Northern Ireland: public attitudes to poverty, economic hardship and social security, ARK Research Update Number 146, May 2022
<https://www.ark.ac.uk/ARK/sites/default/files/2022-05/update146.pdf>.

¹² [Ibid.](#)

¹³ [Ibid.](#)

16% of all adults in Northern Ireland (or their households) have experienced food insecurity in the 12 months to mid-2022, equating to an estimated 354,000 people.¹⁴ This means that – at some point over this period – they have run out of food and been unable to afford more, and/or reduced meal size, eaten less, gone hungry or lost weight due to lack of money. 7% of households, or an estimated 158,000 people across Northern Ireland accessed support from an ecosystem of food aid across Northern Ireland such as receiving support from a food bank or accessing low-cost food aid from a social supermarket.¹⁵ Figures from the Trussell Trust show that between April 2023 and March 2024, food banks in their network in Northern Ireland provided over 90,300 emergency food parcels, which alarmingly 38,000 were for children.¹⁶ This is the most parcels the network has ever distributed in a single year and a shocking increase compared to five years ago (143%) – a significantly higher increase than other nations across the UK.¹⁷

The Cliff Edge Coalition Working Group is concerned that without a clear strategy to eradicate poverty at the heart of the PfG, the numbers of people experiencing poverty and hardship will increase and become more persistent for those most in need of targeted support. We are particularly concerned about increasing levels of debt as a result of ongoing financial hardship and the difficulties many people are facing meeting their essential bills. This includes the very real potential for increases in dangerous forms of lending such as paramilitary lending.

Context: The Cliff Edge Coalition’s Key Three Asks

The inclusion of the Cliff Edge Coalition’s key three asks within the PfG would support the eradication of poverty. Our key three asks are to:

- *Resolve the Five Week Wait in Universal Credit:* The Cliff Edge Coalition endorses the recommendations outlined in The Mitigations Independent Review Panel Report (Review Report)¹⁸, which highlighted interim and longer-term measures to provide solutions to the five week wait. The interim measures included; amending guidance to interpret the Universal Credit Contingency Fund (UCCF) more widely; changing the name of the fund; increasing the Contingency Fund Budget to £5m; and wider promotion of the payment by the Department for Communities NI and beyond. Furthermore, the longer-term measures include

¹⁴ The Trussell Trust, [2023-The-Trussell-Trust-Hunger-in-the-UK-report-web-updated-10Aug23.pdf \(acquia-sites.com\)](#), p.28.

¹⁵ [Ibid](#), p.12

¹⁶ The Trussell Trust, [EYS-Northern-Ireland-Factsheet-2023-24.pdf \(trussell.org.uk\)](#).

¹⁷ [Ibid](#).

¹⁸ Department for Communities, [Welfare Mitigations Review](#)

scoping alternative solutions to the 5-week wait period by a dedicated working group, ensuring the inclusion of those with lived experiences and the advice sector;

- *Remove the Two-Child Limit:* The Coalition further endorses the Mitigations Review Report recommendations which called for a mitigation for the two-child limit through the introduction of a Welfare Supplementary Payment, entitled a “Better Start Larger Families Payment”. Furthermore, the removal of this limit has also been recommended in 2020 by the Expert Advisory Panel, who have been responsible for the development of recommendations for the currently unpublished Anti-Poverty Strategy. Furthermore, two of the Report’s key recommendations align with the Coalition’s asks of removing the two-child limit and benefit cap and addressing the five-week wait for income at the start of a claim. This includes the reform of backdating rules so that if there are no earnings in a previous month financial support is payable from day one;
- *Provide support to renters affected by the Local Housing Allowance:* The Review Report recommended the establishment of a Financial Inclusion Service, which would provide advice for low-income families who have been impacted by shortfalls in LHA. This would provide additional access to a grant to meet shortfalls between housing costs paid through benefit and contractual rent.

Conclusion

We welcome engagement with the PfG team to discuss our response and a draft PfG.

The PfG provides an important opportunity to set the direction of travel for progressive change. The PfG aims to give the people of NI ‘the best possible opportunity to succeed in life and can feel at home in our society’.¹⁹ Our collective expertise is that this objective cannot be delivered without a robust focus on measures to eradicate poverty.

This response is endorsed by the Cliff Edge Coalition Working Group Members. We are confirm our willingness to engage with government and share our expertise.

For further information about this response, please contact holly.knox@lawcentreni.org

Date of submission: 23/10/2024

¹⁹ Northern Ireland Executive, [Our Plan: Doing What Matters Most](#), p.7.