

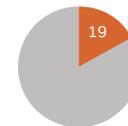
“ Country recommendation

We have been waiting nearly 25 years for an Executive Strategy to tackle poverty, social exclusion, and patterns of deprivation, despite a legal duty under the Belfast/ Good Friday Agreement and the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The people of Northern Ireland cannot afford to wait any longer.

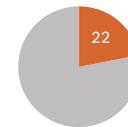
Country
Profile 2022



Northern Ireland



**child population
below 15 years old:**
365,200
(19% of total population)



**Poverty rate
(children under 16):**
22%

Source: [Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency \(2019/20\)](#)

RESPONDENT ORGANISATION(S):
[Children in Northern Ireland \(CiNI\)](#)

Poverty and Social Exclusion – experiences of children, families, and communities

Child poverty in Northern Ireland

Children in Northern Ireland are more likely to be living in poverty than any other group in society, and the gap is widening.¹ The most recent figures from 2019/20 estimate that **22%, or approximately 100,000 children, are facing severe hardship.**² Comparing each of the United Kingdom's four nations and the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland has continuously suffered the highest rate of child poverty between 2010 and 2020.

[Analysis and modelling of official statistics by Save the Children UK and the Child Poverty Action Group](#) show that **child poverty**

is set to increase in the absence of any further government intervention. An increase in families affected by the 'two-child limit' is one of the key drivers behind the projected increase. Most families with more than two children on means-tested social security payments are protected by the 2017 cut-off point for the two-child limit, meaning they remain entitled to Child Tax Credit or Universal Credit for all their dependents. However, as the number of families with three or more children grows, an increasing number will be pulled into poverty. This disproportionately affects families with new-borns. Researchers estimate that every year, the 'two-child limit' pushes an estimated 1,500 children into poverty. Removing this limit would also mean 11,000 fewer children in poverty by 2024/25, probably

ensuring Northern Ireland stays below pre-pandemic levels.³

A **widening income gap** between the lowest and highest earners could also drive up child poverty in Northern Ireland. If forecasts by the Office for Budgetary Responsibility on real earnings prove accurate and social security rates stay constant in real terms, the gap between low-income households and the median increases, therefore pulling more children into poverty.

Given the significant rise in inflation (approximately 10% in October 2022) and cost of living pressures, those in low-paid employment struggle to balance budgets. The Household Expenditure Tracker, developed by the Consumer Council Northern Ireland, in partnership with the Centre for Economics and

Business Research, has shown that those on the lowest incomes had just £29 per week left after paying bills and other living costs.⁴ Between January-March 2022, the lowest earning households saw their income grow by only £0.27; yet spending on essentials rose by 3.5%, discretionary income fell by 18.5%, and the average gross household income in Northern Ireland remained 11% lower than the rest of the UK.

Energy, food, and transport are the key drivers of the current cost of living crisis. Research from the University of York suggests that approximately 72% of people in Northern Ireland will experience **fuel poverty** in 2023, namely 551,000 households spending over 10% of their net income on fuel. Supermarkets have reported that customers are spending less, with food shop sales falling by

1 Department for Communities, *Examination of the Rates and Distribution of Poverty in Northern Ireland*, June 2022.

2 Department for Communities, *Households Below Average Income: Northern Ireland 2019/20*, August 2021.

3 Save the Children UK/Child Poverty Action Group, *Brighter Futures: The Future Path of Child Poverty in Northern Ireland*, November 2021.

4 Consumer Council NI, *Household Expenditure Tracker*, September 2022.

1.6% in May 2022 (2.4% below pre-pandemic levels). Research consistently highlights citizens skipping meals, restricting diets and changing behaviours. According to data from the Trussell Trust, the number of **children who used, or whose family used, a food bank in the UK rose** from 18,979 in 2019/20 to 31,308 in 2020/21.⁵ This represents only a portion of the total number of families who avail of emergency food support, as many more independent food banks and community-based providers also operate.

Research from the Food Standards Agency shows that 28% of families with children under 16 years old experience food insecurity compared to 13% not living with children.⁶ In addition, 31% of young people aged between 25 and 34 years old experience **food poverty** compared to 8% of

people aged 75 and over. Three-quarters of people in Northern Ireland (74%) have **modified their food behaviours** due to financial concerns, a rate that is significantly higher than the UK average of 65%. This includes eating less, skipping meals, and using food banks. Parents consistently report eating less to provide meals for their children. [An analysis of food security data by Dr Megan Blake, University of Sheffield](#), shows that **families with 3 or more children are 3 times more vulnerable** to food insecurity when compared to adults with no children.

Children with disabilities

Families that include a **person with disabilities** also face greater financial pressures. According to research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, employment rates for people with disabilities are much lower in Northern Ireland

compared to the rest of the UK. In addition, persons with disabilities are at greater risk of poverty due to their increased reliance on social security to meet their living costs.⁷ The Department for Communities' Anti-Poverty Strategy Expert Advisory Panel reported in 2021 that more than **1 in 3 children living in poverty lives in a household where someone with disabilities**. Further research by the Family Fund in 2022 showed that it costs 3 times more to raise a disabled child than a non-disabled child and that, due to the scale of the cost of living crisis, 9 in 10 families report struggling with or falling behind on their household bills.

This pressure is weighing down families at a time when services for disabled children have still not been restored to pre-pandemic levels, and proposed reforms to remove barriers to education have still to be implemented.

Family Fund's poll in early 2022 showed that **62% of parents and carers feel that current Special Educational Needs (SEN) services in Northern Ireland are 'poor'**.

The difficulties they highlight include access to transport, lack of specialist places, communication barriers, bureaucratic processes, lack of information and support, and lack of funding.

Previous research by the Children with Disabilities Strategic Alliance (CDSA) shows that access to short breaks and respite services is not determined based on the child's needs but it is rather a 'postcode lottery' and often depends on the ability of parents and carers to advocate on behalf of a child.⁸ Despite legal duties under the Children Order 1995, there is still no unified, robust system for collecting data on children with disabilities

⁵ The Trussell Trust, *End of Year Stats*, April 2022.

⁶ Food Standards Agency, *Food and You 2*, August 2022.

⁷ Joseph Rowntree Foundation, *Joint Submission to the NI Affairs Committee and Work and Pensions Committee joint inquiry into Welfare Policy in Northern Ireland*, 2019.

⁸ Children with Disabilities Strategic Alliance, *MANIFESTO ASKS, 2016-2020*.

in Northern Ireland. **Research consistently highlights that parents need more information and support.** The CDSA has repeatedly recommended that all children with disabilities be recognised as ‘children in need’ immediately following diagnosis to facilitate family support. They should be offered services, with signposting appropriate to the diagnosis, through an agreed services pathway. Such services should include information, peer support, advice and advocacy services. All of these recommendations have yet to be fully implemented.

Children’s Social Care

Northern Ireland has had the **highest number of children living in care** since the introduction of the Children Order 1995. The Covid-19 pandemic and the government response have highlighted the importance of Children’s Social Care Services

and the fragility of the system, which is currently undergoing an independent review. Statistics from 2020/2021 show that the **number of young people on the Child Protection Register and the number of young people in care has increased.**⁹ From 2017 to 2021, the main source of ‘children in need’ referrals shifted considerably: police referrals went up 10% (from 29% to 39% of total referrals), and social services referrals dropped 11% (from 20% to 9% of total). Southern and Western parts of Northern Ireland also have a higher rate of children on the Child Protection Register. These areas include more rural communities and historically have experienced more significant disadvantages regarding access to public services and infrastructure investment. The lead reviewer in this process has declared that there is an endemic and systemic crisis in Children’s Social Care in Northern Ireland – one that affects all services, linked

to the way they are structured, and influenced by local factors such as the legacy of the conflict, continuous political vacuums, and severe poverty. The independent review is likely to recommend a restructuring of services and a strong emphasis on improving family support, which is essential to improve outcomes for children.

Children from Ethnic Minority Backgrounds

There is also evidence that **children and young people from ethnic minority backgrounds are more likely to experience poverty and social exclusion** in Northern Ireland. The proportion of the population from a minority ethnic background is smaller than the rest of the UK, but it has nearly doubled in the last decade from 1.8% in 2011 to 3.4% in 2021 based on Census data. According to an analysis by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, the gap in poverty rate between

those from an ethnic minority background and their white counterparts is growing up to 14%.¹⁰ Another key aspect of this growing issue is the **plight of families with no recourse to public funds**, such as those seeking asylum and awaiting a decision on their application for settled status. Many refugee children and their families are now forced to stay for very long periods, some at least 8 months, in contingency accommodation (hotels, B&Bs etc.) managed by private contractors and the number of asylum seekers living in contingency accommodation has risen dramatically, from 14 people in June 2021 to 1067 in April 2022.¹¹ However, major concerns have been reported by families and their advocates around access to food, the separation of families, and access to healthcare, clothing, and education and their living conditions have been subject to numerous reports and inquiries. At the request of

⁹ Department of Health, *Children’s Social Care Statistics for Northern Ireland 2020/21*, November 2021.

¹⁰ Joseph Rowntree Foundation, *Poverty in Northern Ireland 2022*, March 2022.

¹¹ The Detail, *Major rise in hotel use for asylum-seekers: “It feels like we are in a prison”*, June 2022.

the Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities at the Council of Europe, the Children's Law Centre in Northern Ireland and the South Tyrone Empowerment Programme submitted a joint report in April 2022 detailing a number of serious concerns around children's rights. The Executive Office in Northern Ireland has established a Strategic Planning Group to develop an action plan to address these issues and will coordinate directly with the UK Home Office.

Policy Responses

In response to the levels of child poverty and social exclusion in Northern Ireland, government departments should prioritise the development and delivery of:

- **An Anti-Poverty Strategy** that includes a Commission and a new legislative framework with binding targets.
- **A Disability Strategy** that provides for comprehensive data collection and robust packages of support for families.

- **The introduction of a Child Payment** based on the Scottish model.
- **A permanent scheme for School Holiday Food Grants** to address food insecurity.

The social inclusion strategies have been subject to extensive stakeholder engagement and co-design processes. They now need to be published for public consultation, after which the final strategies will be agreed before being adopted by the next Executive. Each strategy must include clear outcomes and an action plan for delivering these outputs. Legally binding targets to reduce poverty rates will provide a key policy framework for agreeing on future budgets and allocating resources.

In June 2022, the Minister of Education in Northern Ireland announced a funding allocation of £12.6 million to provide low-income families with £13.50 per week for each entitled child to help with food costs during the school holidays. However, given the substantial rise in the

cost of living and other financial pressures, this scheme must be extended until the Executive agrees on a long-term plan.

Example of an intervention/project demonstrating good practice where children, families, and communities have been supported, and poverty has been overcome or mitigated against

The *Gets Active Project* operates across 4 different areas in Northern Ireland through local Youth Organisations and is aimed at tackling 'Holiday Hunger'. This is a term used to denote food insecurity among children and young people throughout the school holidays. During term-time, over 100,000 children in Northern Ireland would be eligible for 'Free School Meals'. The **holidays create additional financial pressure on their parents**: youth workers and service providers consistently report children being hungry or not bringing enough food when attending programmes

outside of the school term. Therefore, the primary aim is to alleviate this pressure by providing meals and activities for young people. Another key aspect of the project is to provide opportunities for young people to develop skills and influence policy.

In 2021, over 6000 children attended *Gets Active Programmes* in Carrickfergus, Downpatrick, Portadown, and Limavady and over 7000 meals were served. Evaluations of the project show improved health (including mental health) and wellbeing, improved educational attainment, increased confidence and skills, improved employment prospects (including gaining qualifications), and higher levels of social interaction and participation. Families and communities also reported wider positive impacts, including the **potential to reduce anti-social behaviour during the summer months**.

In September 2022, Children in Northern Ireland established the Gets Active Youth Advisory Group, which **brings together**

a small group of young people (aged between 14 and 19) from each area to work on policy initiatives. This work is similar to the campaigns and research conducted by the UK-wide Food Foundation, who developed the [#Right2Food Charter](#) in conjunction with young people experiencing food insecurity. This Youth Advisory Group will discuss and lobby for longer-term policy solutions tailored to Northern Ireland. CiNI are providing key platforms for them to be heard and to engage with politicians and policymakers.

Funding for the *Gets Active Project* and the Youth Advisory Group is derived mainly from charitable grants and only covers short time periods. While some statutory bodies have supported this work and recognise the significance of the outcomes, there are currently no plans to provide long-term government funding, which is a major concern for the projects sustainability.

