

## “Country recommendation

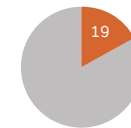
Northern Ireland should take action to properly account for the needs of children in budgetary decisions and budget-making processes.

Country  
Profile 2023



# Northern Ireland

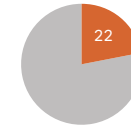
## Statistics



**Child population  
(0-14 years):**

**365,200**

19% of total population (2021)



**Poverty rate:**

**83,000**

18% (2021-2022)

▼ -4% compared 2019-2020

**RESPONDENT ORGANISATION(S):**

[Children in Northern Ireland \(CiNI\)](#)

## Children's Rights in Northern Ireland

Due to the arrangements for devolved government in Northern Ireland, responsibility for Children's Rights is complex and multi-layered. At regional level, the Northern Ireland Executive, (term for Northern Ireland's government), consists of 12 Ministers, none of whom are directly responsible for Children's Rights. The Ministers of Health and Education are directly responsible for key policies and programmes, such as children's social care, early years, and tackling disadvantage.

The Minister for Communities is responsible for social inclusion, including equality legislation and developing anti-poverty and disability strategies. The protection of human rights, under international treaty requirements, is considered 'reserved' to the UK government as the relevant

state party. [The Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People](#) (NICCY) also has a specific role to promote and safeguard Children's Rights by advising government on policies, laws, and services it provides for children and young people.

Children in Northern Ireland identified several key areas related to children's rights.

### Child participation

Children's participation in policymaking and the decisions that affect their lives remains inconsistent and patchy across government departments in Northern Ireland. There are examples of good practice, such as the role of the Experts by Experience group of young people involved in the *Independent Review of Children's Social Care Services*, facilitated by the Voice of Young People in Care.<sup>1</sup> There is also a significant amount of work

ongoing across community and voluntary sector organisations and NICCY has a Youth Panel that informs their work.

However, despite all of these initiatives, which are largely supported by charitable grants, the level of meaningful consultation with children remains limited on the part of government departments in Northern Ireland. In March 2023, the Department of Education decided to end funding for the School Holiday Food Grant. According to CiNI, the Department failed to consult any of the children and young people that would be negatively impacted by the decision to end this scheme, many of whom would be more likely to experience food insecurity as a result of this policy.

Children should be included in all decisions that impact them. CiNI highlights comments from young people involved in their [Gets Active](#) project, many of whom

would have been entitled to Food Grants ended by the Government.

### Anti-child rights movements

Northern Ireland remains heavily influenced by the teachings and ideology of conservative Catholicism and Protestantism on a wide range of rights issues. Previously, there have been strong movements – supported by political parties – against same-sex marriage, abortion rights, relationship and sexuality education (RSE), transgender rights, and equal protection (a ban on physical punishment of children).

In 2023, it became apparent that the latest manifestation of these anti-rights sentiments centred around the regulations made by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on RSE. In response to new curriculum requirements for schools, announced in June, to make age-appropriate and

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<sup>1</sup> Kilpatrick, B, Overview of the Experts by Experience Reference Group: Key Messages – January 2022 to April 2023. Children's Social Care Services Northern Ireland, 2023.

comprehensive RSE compulsory, a [wave of disinformation](#) was filtered through school governance structures and parent groups claiming that primary age pupils would be taught inappropriate material.

According to [FactCheckNI](#), an independent fact-checking service, material was circulated by lobby group Truth Behind RSE NI, which included multiple false claims regarding the changes to the curriculum. In August, the Department of Education was forced to take the unusual step of writing to all principals to make them aware of the [false information campaign](#). The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission previously found, as highlighted in its [report](#) from June 2023, that RSE in Northern Ireland is inadequate and does not meet minimum human rights standards.

There should be wider public information campaigns and

education programmes to increase awareness of children's rights and challenge the misinformation that comes from anti-rights movements.

### Child safety and well-being online

The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) and other charities in Northern Ireland have continued to highlight the significant number of online grooming offences against children and the need for legislative reform. Much of the legislative competence in this area rests with the UK government at Westminster, where regulation of the internet and online communications remains a 'reserved matter'.<sup>2</sup>

The [Online Safety Bill](#) passed its final Parliamentary debate in September 2023, and will now become law. It includes duties on companies to better protect

children and young people from harm. It is essential that the new legislation is implemented properly, and effective enforcement is in place. Online platforms must respond and stop exposing children to preventable abuse and ensure their products no longer contribute to serious harm to children.

### Child protection systems

The [Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland](#) was established in 2012 to replace the Regional Child Protection Committee and conducts regular Case Management Reviews in accordance with guidance issued by the Department of Health. It includes key member organisations from the statutory, community and voluntary sectors to improve learning and enhance practice.

Alongside other charities and children's organisations, CiNI has

long campaigned for legislative reform to ban the physical punishment of children, otherwise known as 'Equal Protection' (from assault). Unfortunately, the legal loophole of the criminal defence of 'reasonable chastisement', whereby corporeal punishment by spanking or smacking, of a child still exists in Northern Ireland, and CiNI sees this as a major impediment to improving child protection systems. [Studies](#) show that physical punishment can have long term harmful effects on children.

Northern Ireland should follow the examples of Scotland and Wales and legislate to remove the defence of 'reasonable punishment' at the earliest opportunity, in order to provide all children and young people with equal protection from assault and physical abuse.

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<sup>2</sup> In the Northern Ireland context, 'reserved matter' refers to a decision that must be reserved for Westminster - central UK government - to determine, and not for devolved regions.

## Children impacted by war and conflict

Over 2,000 Ukrainians have arrived in Northern Ireland under government assistance schemes since the war started in 2022. As highlighted by the charity Barnardo's, children have often suffered trauma and loss, and are in need of specialist support, such as therapeutic services.

All child refugees must receive the support they need: protection and safeguarding, access to food, clothing and education, support with mental and physical well-being including trauma.

## Children in migration and refugees

Like other regions in the UK, the situation for many children and families that have been living in contingency accommodation such as hotels, for extended

periods is a major concern. Non-governmental organisations have continually highlighted poor mental and physical health, issues with access to food, access to education, limited play and recreation, and social isolation as significant problems faced by children and young people seeking asylum.

## Climate change and environmental impacts

NICCY has facilitated important contributions from children and young people regarding climate change adaptation, mitigation and environmental policy. However, official climate action and policy is still in its infancy in the region, and the first proposed Carbon Budget was published in June 2023, following the passing of the Climate Change (Northern Ireland) Act in 2022, which set out clear targets and timescales.

Government departments need to do much more to involve children and young people in this work and reflect their voices and concerns in policymaking in this area. The Youth Climate Association NI is a youth-led environmental activist group that campaigns for more action from government in the region.

## Children's mental health

According to official government statistics, the presentation of young people experiencing mental health crisis continues to be particularly acute within Emergency Departments at hospitals, with annual referrals increasing year on year. As highlighted by NICCY, numbers referred from Emergency Departments has more than doubled between 2018/19 (n=484) and 2021/22 (n=1,028). Waiting lists for mental healthcare remain a significant problem. In March 2022, the overall number

of children waiting for Child Acute Mental Health Services was 2106, the highest since 2017, when the Children's Commissioner started monitoring waiting times.<sup>3</sup>

## Poverty and Social Exclusion – Experiences of children, families, and communities

### Child poverty in Northern Ireland

As of 2022<sup>4</sup> in Northern Ireland there were 83,000 (18%) children living at risk of poverty and social exclusion. The rate of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion has decreased since 2020.<sup>5</sup>

In Northern Ireland, a child is defined as an individual aged under 16. A person is also defined as a child if they are 16 to 19 years old and they are:

- Not married nor in a civil partnership nor living with a partner; and

<sup>3</sup> NICCY, *Still Waiting-Implementation* NICCY Progress Update Monitoring Report 4, 2023, p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> For child population data in Northern Ireland, only data for children 0-14 is available. Also note the different sources for Northern Ireland's child population and poverty rates, giving rise to distinctions between the data.

Source: Census 2021 Population and household estimates for Northern Ireland: Statistical bulletin.

<sup>5</sup> Source: Northern Ireland Poverty and Income Inequality Report, 2021/22.

- Living with parents / a responsible adult; and
- In full-time non-advanced education or in unwaged government training.

According to Children in Northern Ireland, long-term trends show that [children are at a higher risk of living in poverty than the overall Northern Ireland population](#), in both relative and absolute measures. While official government figures show that the percentage of children living in poverty has decreased from 22% in 2020 to 18% in 2022, these measures – based on income levels – fail to capture the impact of the extreme rise in the cost of living during that period.

Consumer price inflation rose from 1% in July 2020 to 10% in July 2022 and [remains stubbornly high at 6.8% in July 2023](#). This severe hike in living costs has put an enormous financial strain on low-income families. [In March 2023, the annual change in food prices was 19.2%](#), the highest rate seen for over 45 years. [The](#)

[Food Foundation](#) in the UK has reported that the most deprived fifth of the population would need to spend 50% of their disposable income on food to meet the cost of the government recommended healthy diet. The [Consumer Council NI](#) estimates that the discretionary income of the lowest earning households has fallen for seven consecutive quarters since 2021, and was roughly £19 a week for the last quarter of 2022.

All of these complex, interconnecting factors highlight the difficult social and economic backdrop to Northern Ireland's current political crisis and the 2023/24 Budget, which was criticised by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in June 2023. [The Committee stated](#) that the UK government should 'withdraw the budget for Northern Ireland for the period 2023-2024 and fully consider the equality and human rights implications for a new budget, taking all possible steps to mitigate any adverse impact on children's rights.'

The Northern Ireland Budget was set by the UK government in the continued absence of its regional Assembly and Executive (since February 2022), due to a boycott by the Democratic Unionist Party in protest against the Protocol on Ireland / Northern Ireland agreed between the European Union and the UK. It has led to funding cuts across departments, affecting areas such as Special Educational Needs, Food Grants, healthcare and grants to charities working with children.

It is clear that Northern Ireland urgently needs the restoration of its political institutions and locally accountable politicians to make decisions regarding budgetary allocations. However, in the continued absence of the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive, government departments should be prioritising the needs of children and young people and protecting them from any disproportionate and cumulative harm arising from the Budget, as is their duty under domestic law and according to international human rights conventions.

## Recommendations

To help tackle child poverty and social exclusion, and prevent longer-term, cumulative harm to the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children, government departments in Northern Ireland should:

- Conduct a Child Rights Impact Assessment of their budget decisions and undertake intersectional analysis to understand the cumulative harm of funding cuts on the most disadvantaged.
- Mitigate the worst impacts of the budget cuts and reallocate resources in order to reinstate funding for Special Educational Needs, the School Holiday Food Grant, children's healthcare, and grants to charities that support children and young people.

## Promising practices to address child poverty in Northern Ireland

CiNI's [Gets Active Project Youth Advisory Group](#), conducted peer research from December 2022 to May 2023, through a survey focusing on the impact of the cost

of living with 210 young people, aged 11-25, across various areas of Northern Ireland. They asked questions about issues related to poverty, financial hardship, and the cost-of-living crisis. The results indicate severe levels of deprivation experienced by some young people, with 1 in 5 saying they were hungrier and 1 in 3 experiencing feeling cold more often compared to the previous year.<sup>6</sup>

The young people then used this evidence to develop a manifesto, *[‘The Best Start in Life: The Gets Active Youth Advisory Group’s Local Government Manifesto 2023’](#)*, which included key pledges for political parties such as providing free breakfast and after-school clubs, and free holiday programmes that include food, activities and trips for children and young people.

### Recommendation

More sustainable funding and support from the government is needed to ensure that children and young people’s voices are heard, and to allow impactful projects, such as the Gets Active Project, to continue.



<sup>6</sup> The results of this survey are due to be published towards the end of 2023. Please follow our website: [www.ci-ni.org.uk](http://www.ci-ni.org.uk) for further updates on the Gets Active Youth Advisory Group project.

Eurochild advocates for children's rights and well-being to be at the heart of policymaking. We are a network of organisations working with and for children throughout Europe, striving for a society that respects the rights of children. We influence policies, build internal capacities, facilitate mutual learning and exchange practice and research. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is the foundation of all our work.



**Eurochild**

Putting children at  
the heart of Europe

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