

Media Release



Child Poverty in Northern Ireland

Around one in five children in Northern Ireland are living in relative poverty (before housing costs), with little sustained reduction in levels over the last eight years. This is a key finding of a report published by Comptroller and Auditor General Dorinnia Carville today (Tuesday 12 March 2024).

Today's report on Child Poverty in Northern Ireland considers the effectiveness of the 2016-22 Child Poverty Strategy and its impact on outcomes for children. Tackling poverty is a cross-cutting issue, and therefore an Executive-wide responsibility.

The report sets out a lack of significant progress on the main child poverty indicators, with around 20 per cent of children here living in relative poverty before housing costs, and between 7 and 9 per cent living in low-income households that cannot afford basic goods and essential activities.

Existing research provides compelling evidence of the significant impact of growing up in poverty on a range of outcomes. Children who grow up in poverty are more likely to experience health inequalities, have lower levels of educational attainment and are more likely to experience poverty as adults. For example, the report highlights that children in deprived areas are expected to live 11 to 15 fewer years in good health than their more well-off peers, and that children receiving Free School Meals are twice as likely to leave school with no GCSEs. Despite these serious impacts, the report finds that the Child Poverty Strategy set no clear targets for poverty reduction, nor was there any ring-fenced budget attached to it. It also notes a lack of focus on early intervention and preventative actions.

In addition, the report highlights gaps in departments' understanding of accountability arrangements, and a lack of joined-up working between them in the delivery of the Strategy. It also identifies a lack of timely data and monitoring of outcomes, with many actions reported to have had low levels of participation or lacking a clear link to child poverty reduction. As a result, the report concludes that it is difficult to properly evaluate how effective specific interventions have been, and this could make future planning more challenging.

THIS STATEMENT IS ISSUED ON THE STRICT UNDERSTANDING THAT IT IS NOT FOR PUBLICATION OR BROADCAST BEFORE 00.01 hrs ON TUESDAY 12 MARCH 2024

Commenting on today's report, Dorinnia Carville said:

"Northern Ireland has not had a strategy to deal with child poverty for almost two years, during a cost-of-living crisis. A failure to tackle child poverty early and effectively risks lifelong impacts to children's health, education and general development. There is also a considerable cost to the public purse, with previous estimates indicating costs of child poverty to be between £825 million and £1 billion annually."

"The Executive has committed to producing a new anti-poverty strategy. Today's report offers a valuable opportunity to learn lessons for the development of this new strategy. These lessons include the need to focus on specific, long-term and preventive targets to save public money in the future. Early intervention, which reduces the number of children in poverty who become adults in poverty, could reduce future economic and social costs significantly. It is also important that the delivery of these actions is supported with clear accountability arrangements and a move away from silo working towards a truly collaborative cross-departmental approach to tackling this challenging but vitally important issue."

ENDS

Notes for Editors

1. The Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG) is Head of the Northern Ireland Audit Office (the Audit Office). She and the NIAO are totally independent of Government. The C&AG certifies the accounts of Government Departments and a range of other public sector bodies. She has statutory authority to report to the Assembly on the economy, efficiency and effectiveness with which departments and public bodies use their resources. Her reports are published as Assembly papers.
2. The report is available on the Audit Office website at www.niauditoffice.gov.uk. The report is embargoed until 00.01 hrs on Tuesday 12 March 2024.
3. Background briefing can be obtained from the Audit Office by contacting Tomas Wilkinson (028 9025 1073) or Barry Mitchell (028 9025 1072).