



inspire
wellbeing, ability, recovery

Response to the Northern Ireland Executive's Anti-Poverty Strategy Consultation

September 2025

POVERTY IS NOT INEVITABLE. IT IS A POLITICAL CHOICE

In 2024, Inspire submitted a response to the Northern Ireland Executive's consultation on the draft Programme for Government. That submission, *"It Doesn't Have To Be Like This. Let's Change It"*, represented and amplified the views of the people who use our services.

Co-designed with our Service User Reference Forum (comprising people from various Inspire services), and drawing on the contributions of over 300 Inspire members, residents and clients, the response identified five policy priorities for the Executive (see appendix 1). One of these was the introduction of an anti-poverty strategy.

Section 28E (1) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 prescribes the adoption of a strategy aimed at reducing poverty, social exclusion and patterns of deprivation. In January 2020, the *New Decade, New Approach* agreement committed to an anti-poverty strategy in a subsequent Programme for Government. A cross-cutting, multi-pronged blueprint for severing the ties between deprivation, mental ill health and addiction is long overdue.

Put simply, poverty is a threat to public health. Pockets of high deprivation are invariably marked by similar levels of mental and emotional distress. A mix of uncertain life prospects, physical and mental illness, educational underachievement and precarious employment patterns routinely pushes people towards alcohol and other drugs. The issue also cuts across age groups. One child in four lives in poverty and the number of pensioner-led households resorting to food banks has trebled since 2019.

The Department of Health's (DoH) 2025 Health Inequalities Annual Report underlines the dichotomies that exists with respect to mental health indicators. Prescription rates for mood and anxiety disorders in the most deprived areas are two-thirds more prevalent than in the least deprived areas. Deaths by suicide are 300% higher in poorer neighbourhoods than they are in wealthier localities.

Elsewhere, the outcomes gap for drug misuse deaths continued to widen over the analysed period. In keeping with the trends cited above, mortality in the most deprived areas is almost six times that of the least deprived.

POVERTY IS IMPACTING ON COMMUNITIES

Three years ago, Inspire, alongside Age NI and Trussell, launched a new campaign, 'Release the Pressure'. It was designed to focus on spiking inflation and it was powered by the testimonies of Trussell's staff and volunteers in Northern Ireland. They told us that poverty's reach is as long as it is wide, adversely affecting the mental health and wellbeing of every person it touches.

When people aren't able to make ends meet, to put food on their tables or keep a roof over their heads, their mental health can suffer. Personal finances, benefits and the cost of living feature regularly in conversations with people throughout our services. When we asked a member of an Inspire community wellbeing hub to outline her thoughts on this subject, she told us that ***"Poverty is not only about a lack of money for us. It is the way system fails families in crisis, the way isolation and stretched services become barriers to getting help before it's too late."***

We were initially buoyed by the Executive's renewed commitment to an anti-poverty strategy. However, the present proposals are not fit for purpose. They neither meet the moment nor set out a fresh, urgent vision of how government will provide people with the resources that they require to thrive, mentally and physically.



"Poverty is not only about a lack of money for us."

MENTAL HEALTH AFFECTS EVERYONE

At Inspire, we recognise that nobody is immune from mental ill health. However, evidence consistently shows that certain population groups are disproportionately impacted and face significant barriers to accessing appropriate assistance. As highlighted by recent data, the disparities are particularly pronounced in areas of multiple deprivation, where mental health and addiction-related inequalities are persistent and deeply entrenched.

Poverty-connected mental health and addiction challenges affect communities, families and individuals over successive generations, reflecting a failure to prioritise the structural determinants of mental wellbeing. This is statistically undeniable and socially unacceptable.

We strongly recommend that the strategy explicitly acknowledge and address the link between poverty and mental illness. This must include a clear commitment to place-based, community-led and holistic mental health interventions, specifically targeted at the most deprived areas.

While we commend the Department of Health's 'Live Better' pilot schemes, which adopt a community-based approach to tackling health inequalities in the Court (Belfast) and Moor (Derry City and Strabane) district electoral areas, it is important to note that neither programme currently deals with mental health or addiction.



Inspire urges the Executive to ensure that mental health and addiction are not only recognised as critical dimensions of poverty and deprivation but that they are addressed through sustained, locally informed and adequately resourced actions.

SOLUTIONS EXIST

Inspire is a signatory to the Northern Ireland Anti-Poverty Network's open letter to the Executive, which asks ministers to withdraw their support for the draft strategy. Indeed, the strategy fails to fulfil what oversight bodies, including the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Assembly's Public Accounts Committee, describe as the basic elements of any such initiative. The draft strategy lacks measurables, arrangements for review and oversight, timebound targets and a commitment to ring-fenced funding.

Some of the ideas relate to measures already in place. Free school meals, uniform grants and the extended schools programme are already working well. These should be protected and expanded.

The two-child limit, meanwhile, is an established driver of child poverty – we do not consider this topic to be in need of further study. In fact, according to statistics recently published by Trussell, the limit's immediate removal would lift 18,500 people out of severe hardship by 2026/27. The Inspire member quoted above is a lone parent with five children. In her opinion, ***“Small acts of timely support can change outcomes. They can keep families in work and keep parents from falling apart.”***

Perhaps most importantly, we note that the voice of lived experience is absent from this draft strategy. If it wishes to eliminate poverty, the Executive cannot repeat this mistake going forward.

Turning the curve on poverty is achievable. Other jurisdictions have demonstrated that serious efforts to raise the wellbeing and living standards of the most vulnerable are possible. For example, the Child Poverty Act (Scotland) 2017 provides short and long-term targets within a legislative framework, one designed to produce positive results.

Small acts of timely support can change outcomes.

Inspire endorses the Anti-Poverty Strategy Group's evidence-based recommendations on the creation of an anti-poverty strategy (appendix 2). These are:

- 1. The enactment of an Anti-Poverty Act**
- 2. Working towards eradication by 2045, child poverty will be reduced by half over the lifetime of the strategy**
- 3. No working age person shall live in poverty, regardless of whether they are in work, seeking work or unable to work**
- 4. Working towards eradication by 2045, poverty among older people will be reduced by half over the lifetime of the strategy**
- 5. The most deprived areas are attractive, safe, accessible, welcoming and sustainable environments**
- 6. People experiencing poverty – or at risk of poverty – have equal access to high-quality public services that meet their needs**

We find outcomes 1 and 5 to be particularly compelling.

An Anti-Poverty Act (outcome 1) will place the rights of people experiencing or at risk of poverty on a firm legal footing. Targeted legislation can empower individuals and families, allowing them to participate fully in all aspects of community life. As noted above, Scotland has shown that when anti-poverty efforts are rooted in statute, their effect is tangible.

The Executive should understand that poverty is about more than income. Access to attractive and safe environments in deprived areas (outcome 5) is essential. As an organisation providing mental health, addiction and intellectual disability services throughout Northern Ireland, Inspire can attest to the range of complex challenges that emerge in a variety of settings.

Rural poverty is marked by isolation, unreliable access to vital support and high costs. In urban settings, it is more concentrated, defined by inadequate housing, strained public services and environmental hazards. Place-based action plans, therefore, are a key component of outcome 5.



A NEW DIRECTION IS POSSIBLE

We recognised that the Executive is under pressure to make tough choices. That said, poverty, as we have already stated, is one such choice. It sits at the nexus of a host of intertwining societal dilemmas, from declining mental health standards and economic inactivity to saturated public services, poor educational attainment and increasing incidences of physical illness. This is not acceptable in a wealthy, advanced liberal democracy. It cannot endure.

An effective strategy would be co-produced with the people who understand the realities of living in the shadow of poverty. It would work in concert with all existing Executive strategies, including those relating to mental health, substance use and suicide prevention.

We believe that this is the direction that ministers must now follow. Furthermore, in order to guarantee that these strategies – and future strategies – are successful, Inspire remains dedicated to third sector collaboration. We are ready to engage with officials and elected representatives.

In conclusion, we want to convey the insights of our community wellbeing member one final time:

I urge the Executive to take meaningful action now and produce an anti-poverty strategy that recognises rights and the value of place-based plans. It should reach into communities and services that are joined up around people, not departments. Policies must be shaped by the realities of families like mine.

WHO WE ARE

Inspire is an all-island charity and social enterprise, and our aim is wellbeing for all.

We work alongside people living with mental ill health, intellectual disability, autism and addictions, ensuring their dignity and helping them to realise their full potential.

We campaign to create a society free from stigma and a culture of compassion that focuses on individuals and their abilities.

Our Vision

Wellbeing for all

Our Values

We are Inclusive

We are Passionate

We are Determined

We are Kind

We are Honest

We are Innovative



APPENDIX 1

“It Doesn’t Have To Be Like This. Let’s Change It.” – Inspire’s response to the Northern Ireland Executive consultation on the draft Programme for Government, November 2024

APPENDIX 2

Anti-Poverty Strategy Group headline recommendations on the development of an anti-poverty strategy for Northern Ireland, August 2025



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#TeamInspire

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