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Introduction to SVP

The Society of St Vincent de Paul Northern Region (SVP) supports tens of thousands of people facing poverty and exclusion in Northern Ireland each year. Through direct support and friendship we aim to promote self-sufficiency and we work for social justice.

SVP Northern Region has seen a significant increase in demand for its services over recent years due to the combination of a pandemic, cost of living crisis affecting food, gas and electricity and cumulative social security cuts and changes. Between 2020 and 2021, calls to our local offices in Belfast doubled to 25,285, and increased by another 50% the following year with 37,599 calls logged on our system in 2022. These figures clearly show the widespread damage being done by poverty in Northern Ireland.

In this submission we call for addressing poverty to be included as a priority, we comment on some specific aspects of the draft Programme for Government, and we suggest additional actions that need to be included in the final document.

We welcome the launch of the draft Programme for Government and thank the Executive Office for the opportunity to submit our response. We would be pleased to engage further should the opportunity arise.

Reaction to the draft Programme for Government

After many years without a Programme for Government (PfG) the launch of the final document will be an important milestone for Northern Ireland. We hope it will assist the stable and sustained governance needed to address long term problems such as poverty.

There is much we are pleased to see included in the Draft PfG, but as an organisation that responds to tens of thousands of requests for assistance each year from people facing hardship and exclusion we are disappointed that poverty is not stated as one of the 9 priorities. The latest data shows that there are 349,000 people living in poverty, including 109,000 children, and that these numbers are rising.¹ We know that poverty affects some groups at very high rates, including one parent families, families who have a disabled member, and people who are renting: it is essential the PfG addresses the poverty facing these households.

We recognise the importance of each of the 9 priorities identified in the Programme for Government. In this section, we respond to the ones we feel are of particular relevance to the people we support and suggest additional actions that need to be included in the final document.

'Deliver more affordable childcare'

We agree with the inclusion of affordable childcare as a key issue for the Programme for Government, and appreciate that it is recognised as particularly important to children facing disadvantage as an early intervention measure as well as a way of supporting parents to enter and maintain employment.

In a survey of SVP members in 2023, childcare was one of the main issues impacting working households we assist.² The logistics of reaching childcare as well as

¹ [Northern Ireland Poverty and Income Inequality Report, 2022/23 \(nisra.gov.uk\)](https://www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/2022/23-nisra-pov-ineq-report)

² [Beyond-Breaking-Point.pdf](#)

affordability was identified by SVP members as a challenge, and a challenge which caused particular problems for single parents. Members stated:

“A young single parent mother with 4 children has a part time job in a cafe. She has to use taxis to get herself to and from work and her children to and from childcare.

She enjoys her job but financially she would be better off staying at home.”

“The cost of childcare actually makes it impossible for some mothers to work.”

Comment on proposed actions

We are pleased to see the Executive commit to a new Early Learning and Childcare Strategy and investing up to £25 million this year. There must be a clear focus in the new Strategy on ensuring all children in Northern Ireland are guaranteed access to the basics they need, including tackling food poverty. There are currently 109,000 children living in income poverty, and these children will not be starting school on the same footing as other children: the new strategy must recognise that and include clear actions that mean these children are able to have the same school experience as their peers.

Part of this will be ‘poverty proofing’ early learning and childcare environments, making sure they are accessible to and catering for the particular challenges of people experiencing poverty. The delivery of social security must be included in this strategy, as the interplay between working hours, Universal Credit, and childcare payments can cause parents difficulty in taking up employment.

Whilst we welcome that the Executive will be ‘supporting existing childcare and early years programmes, such as Sure Start, Pathway and Toybox, which are focused on children facing disadvantage’ we are concerned that this isn’t sufficiently detailed about the level or form of this support, and believe the final PfG should state that the Executive will support the extension of these schemes.

'Ending violence against women and girls'

It is important that violence against women and girls is a priority for the Executive, and we welcome the focus on early intervention, prevention and co-design.

At SVP we see that an outcome of violence against women and girls is far too often being pushed into poverty. Women and children who must leave their homes often leave everything they have and go into a hostel or a safe place. They face the challenges, financial and logistical, of starting over as a single parent. They must furnish new accommodation on inadequate benefit levels, which may not even cover the essentials. Discretionary grants, when given, are small and only cover a few things. People often must go into debt to make a home out of a property. While it is important that women and girls receive justice through court action against perpetrators, they also need adequate financial support so they can create a new safe home.

Comment on proposed actions

We believe the final Programme for Government needs to include a commitment to mitigating the financial impact experienced by victims of domestic violence. There is a key role for state services, including in the delivery of emergency payments as well as services like housing. This must be linked in with well-funded community services.

'Provide More Social, Affordable and Sustainable Housing'

Housing stress is a constant issue amongst the people supported by SVP. This is shown in the numbers of people in NI presenting as homeless and in need of emergency accommodation, but also those living in overcrowded or poor quality housing, with no options to move into more suitable homes.

The housing crisis results from an insufficient level of housing, the affordability of housing, and the poor standards of many homes being lived in: these issues all combine to create a system that puts low income households under unbearable pressure.

We see these issues play out for private rented tenants. Private rents are soaring, and recent increases to LHA rates are quickly absorbed by rent increases. We often support people having to pay top-ups to their landlord. People we support often have so little choice in the housing market they are forced to live in unsafe conditions but fear complaining in case they are asked to leave. Reform of the private rented sector must clearly address this power imbalance, and landlords must be held accountable for the condition of their rental properties.

SVP often assists households who have moved into new social housing, and are relieved to have a permanent home, but are unable to access the furnishings they need. They find themselves having to endure without essential household items as the discretionary grants are too small to fully meet their needs.

Comment on proposed actions

It is good to see the commitment to increasing funding and delivery of new social and affordable housing through innovative funding models. This is the type of thinking that is needed to turn the tide on the housing crisis SVP is witnessing.

We welcome the commitment to work cross-departmentally to prevent homelessness amongst young people leaving care. It is essential to recognise the impact income plays in causing homelessness amongst this group. Leaving care into financial independence on a reduced under 25s Universal Credit rate means these young people are immediately put in a precarious financial position. Other challenges this group might also face include poor mental health service provision and access to secure employment or training opportunities: this is all made more difficult by meagre benefit rates. We hope this financial challenge is recognised and addressed in the cross departmental work.

Under the housing priority, we particularly welcome the focus on energy poverty and the launch of a fuel poverty strategy. People struggling with the cost of energy is a key driver of people seeking SVP's assistance, and preventing energy poverty

through retrofitting will greatly lessen the pressure people are under from heating poorly insulated, damp and draughty homes. It is important that these supports reach all people in energy poverty, and we would be particularly concerned about standards in the Private Rented Sector.

The forthcoming strategy must also include plans to support household in NI reliant on heating oil: finding enough money for a fill of oil is an impossible task for many people in poverty and means people cannot access the heating they need. Consumer Council survey research from May 2022 showed that 20% of respondents had run out of oil in the previous 12 months, with 56% of these stating it was because they were unable to pay to fill the tank. The highest risks were for fuel-poor households, younger people, people with a disability, lower income people, those in urban areas, and those in receipt of UC. Being in receipt of UC was the highest reported risk factor for both having run out of oil (49%), and of those 92% reported it was due to unaffordability.³

This winter we are particularly concerned about older people who will not receive the Winter Fuel Payment at short notice and will not have time to budget for this year's heating costs. Whilst we recognise that the decision to means test was taken at UK-government level, meaning the funding for the payment is no longer available to the Executive, the increased risk to this group must be recognised within the upcoming Fuel Strategy. This should include provision for discretionary payments to people who are ineligible for pension credit, yet unable to afford heating.

Addressing poverty must be included as a priority.

In a report published one year ago based on research amongst SVP members we showed that many people living in poverty and deprivation in Northern are beyond breaking point. After years of retrenchment in social security, many people have

³ The Consumer Council (2022) 'A review of Fuel Poverty levels in Northern Ireland' Available at: https://www.consumercouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-10/Research_Report_Review_of_Fuel_Poverty_Levels_in_NI_1.pdf

been unable to cope with the surging cost of essentials. SVP North Region has seen requests for assistance increase significantly over recent years, and the level of hardship we are seeing is simply unsustainable. It does damage to people and communities today, and sadly we know that children facing poverty will continue to feel its effects throughout their lives.

That is why we need to see the Executive show a commitment to the prevention and eradication of poverty as one of its priorities.

Whilst many of the levers to address poverty are held at the UK Government level, it is disappointing not to see the Executive outline its own perspective on what it can do within Northern Ireland as clearly stated priority. We have seen the Executive take bold steps in this area in the past through the introduction of welfare mitigations which provide very tangible support to people at risk of poverty. We would have welcomed further action of this type.

Numerous reviews that have taken place in NI in recent years, namely the Anti-Poverty Strategy Expert Advisory Panel⁴, the Welfare Mitigations Review⁵ and the Discretionary Support Review⁶, point to pragmatic steps the Executive could have committed to within this Programme for Government. Whilst we acknowledge the fiscal reality the Executive must operate within, it could have committed to actions that are achievable in the here and now, as well as plans that pave the way for more ambitious action in the future.

We also note with regret that there is no reference to publishing the long-awaited, and legally required, Anti-Poverty Strategy. When we published our report 'Beyond

⁴ [Report from the Anti-Poverty Strategy Expert Advisory Panel | Department for Communities \(communities-ni.gov.uk\)](#)

⁵ [Welfare Mitigation Review | Department for Communities \(communities-ni.gov.uk\)](#)

⁶ [Discretionary Support Independent Review | Department for Communities \(communities-ni.gov.uk\)](#)

Breaking Point’, we said ‘the need for an Anti-Poverty Strategy has never been more profound’ due to the levels of poverty and hardship we are seeing.⁷

We wish to amplify the recommendations of the Cliff Edge Coalition,⁸ of which we are a member, and call for the eradication of poverty to be included as a priority. We call for the Executive to:

1. *Include ‘Eradicating Poverty’ as a priority in the final Programme for Government. This should detail the outcomes the Executive wishes to see for people currently facing hardship in poverty, the immediate actions it can take as well as how it will address poverty in the long term.*
2. *The priority should include the following actions:*
 - a. *Resolve the five week wait in Universal Credit*
 - b. *Remove the two-child limit*
 - c. *Provide support to private renters affected by the Local Housing Allowance*
3. *The Executive should commit to publishing an Anti-Poverty Strategy.*

In addition, we recommend

4. *The Executive uses the Wellbeing Dashboard (which we comment on below) to introduce targets on key indicators, including (but not limited to) levels of poverty, child poverty, deprivation, energy poverty, and housing stress.*

Comment on the PfG Wellbeing Dashboard

We welcome the development of a Wellbeing Dashboard which provides a comprehensive set of indicators to monitor progress for individuals and society.⁹ This has the potential to be a very useful engagement tool, and the presentation of outcomes makes it easy to navigate and an accessible way of exploring trends and changes.

⁷ [Beyond-Breaking-Point.pdf](#)

⁸ [Cliff Edge Working Group responds to the draft programme for Government 2024-27 | Law Centre Northern Ireland](#)

⁹ [PfG Wellbeing Framework -Domains](#)

We offer some broad points of feedback below:

- We query the use of a baseline year to show dis/improvements, as it can state 'improvement' when there are declines in the actual indicator which makes the dashboard somewhat confusing and at odds with the simplicity of the traffic light system. There is a risk that the dashboard becomes disconnected from current experience or an 'at first glance' understanding. It may be worth exploring how to present change from a baseline year alongside change year-to-year.
- It is good to see the dashboard allows the user to explore data by different household characteristics which often shows very different trends for different groups, however it is important these graphs are easy to navigate. Suggestions for improvement here include making sure the year is clear for each data point, and checking the clarity of each chart for different households (for example the use of Yes/No in the legend when focusing on disability status). This is important if the dashboard is to be used for communications with a wider audience.
- Some of the descriptions for 'What the indicator is telling us' and 'Why the indicator is important' are quite technical and require background knowledge to understand – if the dashboard is intended for a broader audience it may be worth ensuring these written descriptions make the same important points but with less need for specific knowledge. An example of this is the 'Homelessness' indicator, and use of language such as 'acceptances' 'statutorily homeless' 'statutory duty' 'temporary accommodation' 'placements'. It is important that further context is given, but how this is done may need to be developed. It could be that additional charts or graphics are a clearer way of sharing context.

In terms of specific outcomes, we provide feedback below:

Outcome: Happier Children

We recommend the rates of poverty and material deprivation are included as an indicator. This is a key measure of how children and young people are faring, and it is important to highlight the impact of poverty at a young age which then has impacts throughout a child's life.

We recommend including the rate of children experiencing income poverty and material deprivation.

Outcome: Equal society

We agree with the use of income poverty in this section.

Overall, we query the income poverty indicator currently marked as 'no change', considering the rate has increased over the last two years of data shown.

Outcome: Better homes

We are pleased to see the number of households in housing stress included as an indicator. It may be beneficial to highlight more clearly that this is referring to households on the social housing waiting list (though we note this is included in the full indicator description).

We query that housing costs is marked as no change when the proportion of households spending more than 30% has increased by 2 percentage point in the last year.

We recommend the inclusion of an indicator to measure energy poverty in this section. This could be done through an actual measure of the level of energy poverty or could be tied to housing quality and include a measure of, for example, damp at home. Tackling energy poverty is a clear part of the housing priority within the Programme for Government and that should be reflected in the dashboard. It is also a significant societal problem, both due to the impacts to households in light of recent energy prices and the need to move to cleaner energy sources as part of climate action, and so speaks to both social and environmental domains of wellbeing.