



British Association of Social Workers  
Northern Ireland

# Committee for Communities MLA Briefing Paper

April 2024

**BASW**  
Northern Ireland

The professional association for  
social work and social workers

## Overview of social work roles

Often, when people consider social work, they think primarily of the profession's statutory functions to safeguard children and young people from harm. While this is a vital aspect of social work, it's just one of a diverse range of roles social workers undertake to improve the life opportunities of vulnerable individuals across all sections of society.

Social workers support individuals and families to overcome disadvantage rooted in social, economic, environmental and physical factors, including disability, physical and mental ill-health, poverty, abuse and neglect, immigration status, and addiction.

## What is BASW?

The British Association of Social Workers (BASW) is the largest professional body for social workers in the UK. The Association has 22,000 members employed in frontline, management, academic and research positions in all care settings.

## Poverty and Social Work

Social workers witness, first-hand, the impacts of poverty on many children, families, and individuals across our society—it is a major factor in contributing to problems which require intervention from social services. For instance, incidents of mental health problems are more prevalent in disadvantaged areas of Northern Ireland.

Children living in our most deprived areas are [six times more likely to be placed on the Child Protection Register and are four times more likely to become looked after by social services than those in the most affluent areas.](#)

The costs associated with poverty are enormous, both in human and financial terms. Taking the example of looked after children, [in 2021 the average annual cost of a foster care placement was £24,000 and the average cost of keeping a child in a residential children's home was £265,000 per year.](#)

These costs should be considered in the context of the growing number of children looked after by social services. The most recent [figures published by the Department of Health](#) indicate there are 3,941 children looked after by social services (October 2023). This represents a 17% increase since before Covid and a 35% increase since 2013/14.

Growing up in poverty also heightens the prevalence of Adverse Childhood Experiences, with associated increased long-term costs not only for social work services but also for the health service. It has impacts in terms of educational under achievement, with associated costs to the education system, social security, and economic development. It also leads to more young people becoming involved in antisocial behaviour and crime, resulting in additional costs for the criminal justice system.

## Poverty is increasing

The Department for Communities (DfC) [Northern Ireland Poverty and Income Inequality Report \(2022-23\)](#), published in March 2024, indicates rates of poverty have increased across Northern Ireland.

In 2021/22, 16% of the NI population were in relative poverty and 13% were in absolute poverty. In 2023/23 the figure for relative poverty had increased to 18% and 14% of the population were in absolute poverty.

The impact is greatest on children. The DfC statistics indicate that the percentage of children living in relative poverty in NI in 2022/23 was 24%, up from 18% in 2021/22. The percentage of

Children living in absolute poverty rose from 15% to 19% over the same period.

## Poverty costs the public purse

The recent report from the NI Audit Office, [Child Poverty in Northern Ireland](#), estimates the cost of child poverty in the region to be between £825m and £1bn per year. The Child Poverty Action group estimates that [Child Poverty costs the UK economy at least £39 billion per year](#).

[Research published in 2023](#) indicates the annual public service cost of poverty to the Republic of Ireland is almost €4.5 billion per annum and [findings published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in 2016](#) estimated that in the UK, the public service costs of poverty amount to around £78 billion per year. The charity estimates that approximately £1 in every £5 spent on public services is making up for the way that poverty damages people's lives.

**According to the Northern Ireland Comptroller and Auditor General, "an investment on reducing child poverty has the potential to result in significant long-term savings for the public purse as well as mitigating future harms caused to children as a result of growing up in poverty."**

## The need for an anti-poverty strategy and removal of the Universal Credit two-child limit

BASW NI recognises the important protection afforded to thousands of households since 2016 by the welfare reform mitigations, and the Association welcomed the work of the former Minister for Communities to extend the measures which protect against the impacts of the Bedroom Tax and Benefit Cap.

However, these measures alone will be insufficient to address the root causes of poverty. **It is vital that an anti-poverty strategy is urgently delivered by the Minister for Communities and that it is informed by the recommendations of the [Expert Advisory Panel](#) appointed by the Minister's predecessor. The strategy should be appropriately funded and it is essential it receives the support of all Ministers in the NI Executive.**

The Universal Credit two-child limit restricts the child element of Universal Credit to the first two children in a family, with exceptions in a small number of cases, for example, instances of multiple birth. The result is that families in receipt of Universal Credit affected by the limit lose out on £3,235 per child per year for third, or subsequent children born after 1 April 2017.

Information published in December 2023 by the End Child Poverty Coalition indicates [10% of children in Northern Ireland are affected by the two-child limit](#). The Coalition also highlights larger families are much more likely to experience poverty. [In 2021/22, across the UK the poverty rate for children in families with three or more children was 42%](#), compared with 23% and 22% among children in families with one or two children respectively.

The strong preference of BASW is for the removal of the Universal Credit two-child limit by the Government at Westminster. However, in the face of inaction by the UK Government, **the Association, as a lead member of the Northern Ireland Cliff Edge Coalition (CEC), supports the CEC's call for the Northern Ireland Executive to offset the two-child limit by introducing a *better start larger families payment* as recommended in the [Welfare mitigations Review Independent Advisory Panel Report](#).**

If you would like any further information, or to arrange a meeting to discuss the issues raised in this paper, please contact BASW NI Public Affairs, Policy and Communications Lead, Andy McClenaghan — [a.mcclenaghan@basw.co.uk](mailto:a.mcclenaghan@basw.co.uk) / 07702 517560.

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