

April 2022



Poverty Levels Deepen as Cost-of-living Crisis Continues

Levels of poverty and the suffering of thousands of households across the North continues to worsen as the cost of energy and other essentials continues to rise. The war in Ukraine has led to further increases in energy costs with electricity, gas, home heating oil and road fuels all rising significantly. The £20 uplift in Universal Credit which was introduced at the start of the pandemic and was providing some respite ended in October 2021. The surge in living costs has compounded the hardship caused by over a decade of cuts to the social security system which has eroded the welfare state safety net and has led to increased reliance on charity to meet people's basic needs.

The NI Executive introduced two schemes in January to help households in fuel poverty. The Emergency Fuel Support Scheme which was aimed at households who were about to run out of electricity, gas or heating oil and the Energy Payment Support Scheme which was a £200 top up to approximately 280,000 households who were in receipt of one of the qualifying benefits. The Emergency Fuel Support Scheme was criticised as being difficult to access as it limited the numbers of people who could apply per day and favoured online applicants. The Energy Payment Support Scheme made pay outs to eligible households commencing on 11th March. The delay between the announcement of the scheme at the end of January and payments in mid-March meant that the £200 payment did not go as far in meeting energy costs as prices had continued to rise.

The UK Chancellor's Spring statement was widely criticised for offering no respite for low-income households as he refused to reinstate the £20 uplift in Universal Credit and went ahead with his plans to raise National Insurance rates. He did announce a 5p per litre reduction in fuel duty, but this offers little respite to the poorest households. UK benefit rates have recently been updated by 3.1% despite the overall rate of inflation rising by 8% and much higher increases in energy costs. Many economists and forecasters are predicting the largest drop in living standards in the UK since the Second World War. As we write there is much media focus on the cost of living and the hardships faced by hundreds of thousands of people across the North in the run up to the Assembly elections. Whether an Executive will be formed post-election and what it can agree to do to address poverty is another question. The track record of the previous twenty years does not augur well.

Climate Change Bill

If you have been reading Policy Link over the past year you will know that we had two climate change bills progressing through the legislative process simultaneously. The Minister's bill, known as Climate Change Bill No 2 reached the final legislative stage before Clare Bailey's Private Members' Bill because, as an Executive Bill, it took priority. What we have ended up with though is a hybrid Bill with elements from both bills as MLAs took the opportunity to propose a series of amendments to the Minister's Bill during the final stage debate. The Bill was amended to include a target for net zero carbon by 2050 (the Minister's favoured target was an 82% reduction by 2050), a commitment to establish a Just Transition Commission, creation of a new office of Climate Commissioner and commitment to create a Climate Action Plan within 2 years of the Act becoming law. The Bill was further amended when the Assembly backed an amendment from Minister Poots to separate out methane gas from the net zero target and aim for a reduction in methane of 46% by 2050. The amendment to exclude methane from the net zero target was welcomed by the farming and agri-food sectors as they had expressed reservations about the impact of a net zero target for all greenhouse gases on food production. The Minister's amendment was heavily criticised by Green party leader Clare Bailey MLA who warned of the warming effect of methane globally. Despite her reservations over the methane target Ms. Bailey withdrew her Private Members' Bill as the Climate Change Bill No 2 had incorporated many of the elements of her Bill through the amendments passed.

Northern Ireland joins the rest of these islands in having its own climate change legislation. The challenge now will be to put the aspirations of the legislation into practice. This will require a functioning Assembly post-election and further detailed work by government departments, private sector, and the wider community to rise to the challenge of de-carbonisation of our economy and society.

The legislation passed just a few weeks before the latest International Panel on Climate Change report was released. The IPCC ([click here for the report](#)) sounded dire warnings that its 'now or never'. It warned that transition to a low carbon economy and society had to be ramped up with emissions peaking by 2025 if we are to avoid profound consequences.

Rural Policy Framework – Minister’s statement to the Assembly

Minister Edwin Poots MLA made a statement to the Assembly on progress with DAERA’s Rural Policy Framework (RPF) on 31st January. The RPF has been developed by the Department as a replacement for the EU funded Rural Development Programme. The RPF was subject to public consultation last summer (RCN’s response can be read [here](#)). The Minister reported that most respondents were supportive of the broad direction of the Framework. Additional areas raised with the Department by consultees was the challenge posed to rural communities arising from climate change and the need for additional social housing.

The RPF includes nineteen priorities for intervention under five thematic pillars:

- innovation and entrepreneurship
- sustainable tourism
- health and well-being
- employment
- connectivity

Click [here](#) to read the RPF consultation documents.

The Minister acknowledged the need to learn lessons from the LEADER programme in engaging rural communities in a bottom-up approach to rural development. He announced that a rural stakeholder oversight committee would be established to ensure the involvement of key rural stakeholders and rural communities to help shape the programme.

His statement didn’t give an indication about the budget for the Framework because the overall Executive budget has not been resolved. He did say that DAERA aims to bid to the NI Block grant budget, Peace PLUS, EU Farm Replacement funding and Green Growth funding to secure finance for the Framework. The ambition within the Department for a significant delivery programme for the Framework appears to be there and is to be welcomed. The actual level of resource that can be realised for the Framework remains to be seen.

Click [here](#) to read Minister Poots’ statement to the Assembly in full.

Assembly Election in May

The Assembly dissolved at the end of March after a 5-year term. The first three years of the mandate saw the refusal of Sinn Fein to nominate Ministers to the Executive after the 2017 Assembly election following the RHI scandal and the subsequent failure to agree on a range of issues. The Assembly was restored by the New Decade New Approach agreement in January 2020, but the Executive had barely got started again when the Covid-19 pandemic hit and the first of a series of lockdowns began at the end of March 2020. Since then, we have seen severe disruption to people's lives caused by Covid-19 and the accompanying lockdowns impacting across all parts of society. The gravest impact obviously has been the thousands of additional deaths from Covid-19 and the bereaved families left behind.

Despite the pandemic the Executive continued to function and Covid regulations were implemented differently across the UK according to decisions made by the respective devolved Assemblies. The UK Parliament provided the financial power to pay the wages of tens of thousands of workers who were put 'on furlough' and to support businesses through various grant schemes due to the disruption across many sectors of the economy. Despite the challenges the Executive and Assembly did manage to pass a series of bills – several of which are referred to through this edition of Policy Link - although many of the most pressing issues on health, education, housing, and infrastructure remain.

At the start of February, the DUP First Minister Paul Givan resigned in protest of the implementation of the NI Protocol which meant no further Executive meetings could take place as they must be jointly chaired by the First and Deputy First Minister. The Assembly continued to meet and to perform its functions and a range of Bills were able to pass through the legislative process and into law in a busy two-month period before dissolution.

What happens next?

Assembly elections take place on 5th May after which newly elected MLAs will return to Stormont. The positions of First and Deputy First Minister will then be available for the two political parties with the largest number of MLAs in each of the unionist and nationalist designations, respectively. Whichever party has the largest number of seats gets to nominate the First Minister. In practice the First Minister and Deputy First Minister positions constitute a joint office, and both must agree to work together but the post of First Minister has never been held by a Nationalist and has been seen as symbolic. Whilst Unionist protests about the implementation of the Protocol continue it is not clear whether the DUP will nominate to Executive Minister positions. Westminster legislation passed in February has extended the window of time available for the appointment of a new First and Deputy First Minister to allow space for talks

between parties where there are issues to be resolved. Political commentators predict that we are likely to be in for a prolonged period of negotiations post-election before an Executive can be re-established.

DfC Housing Supply Strategy Consultation

As discussed in our last Policy Link Minister for Communities, Deirdre Hargey MLA, draft Housing Supply Strategy consultation closed on 9th February (the consultation document is available [here](#)). The consultation's headline aim was the construction of 100,000 homes across all tenures over the next 15 years with at least one third of the 100,000 total to be social homes.

The Rural Residents' Forum response to the consultation can be read [here](#). RRF agreed with the broad direction of the vision, objectives and timeframe but stated that the Department needs to define in more detail what constitutes affordable housing. The RRF pointed out that further regulation of the Private Rented Sector to protect tenants should be included as a theme in the Strategy.

The Forum's key concern was that the Strategy should have committed to providing a larger proportion of social homes. The "at least 1/3rd commitment" of 100,000 sets a target of approximately 33,000 social homes to be provided over the next 15 years which averages out to 2,200 social homes per year. This is in a context of over 30,000 households in housing stress on the social housing waiting list and over 43,000 households on the waiting list in total. In March 2021, there were 6,491 applicants on the waiting list for a home in a rural area with 4077 of those in housing stress. Between 2016 and 2021 the number of rural applicants in housing stress on the waiting list has risen by 47.6%. The statistics show the scale of housing need in rural communities and the Housing Executive believes that social housing need in rural communities is underestimated as rural citizens often don't come forward to register for a social home.

The target for new social homes in rural communities in the Social Housing Development Programme is usually in the 10-12% range as this reflects the percentage of rural demand on the waiting list. 12% of an annual new build target of 2,200 homes delivered consistently over 15 years would result in 3,168 new social homes over the life of the Housing Supply Strategy. If delivered this would only house around 77% of the rural households on the current waiting list in housing stress and would make no allowance for future need emerging.

The target for new social homes in rural communities has been missed in six of the last seven years. The delivery of new social and affordable homes in rural areas where there is housing need is the ultimate indicator to determine whether this Strategy can deliver for rural communities.

UK Shared Prosperity Fund Prospectus Launched

The UK Shared Prosperity (UKSPF) Fund Prospectus was launched on 13 April by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. UKSPF was announced in 2017 as the UK government's programme to replace EU Structural Funds post EU exit. The Prospectus and supporting documents can be found [here](#). The prospectus states that the UKSPF will support the UK government to achieve its levelling up objectives which are:

- Boost productivity, pay, jobs and living standards by growing the private sector, especially in those places where they are lagging
- Spread opportunities and improve public services, especially in those places where they are weakest
- Restore a sense of community, local pride and belonging, especially in those places where they have been lost
- Empower local leaders and communities, especially in those places lacking local agency

The UKSPF has a total Northern Ireland budget of £126,854,145 over three financial years from 2022-2023 to 2024-2025. This is made up of £104,947,606 core UKSPF funding and £21,906,539 allocation from UK wide MULTIPLY adult numeracy programme. This equates to approximately £42M per annum in NI although spend will be lower in year one and will ramp up in years two and three. For comparison Northern Ireland received 510M Euro through EU Structural Funds in the period 2014-2020¹ equating to approximately 85M Euro per annum. The UKSPF will be delivered on a Northern Ireland-wide basis, covering all eleven local Councils.

Although we are still digesting the details as we go to publication the prospectus makes some references to involvement of the community and voluntary sector, the private sector, local authorities and Assembly departments in shaping the UKSPF Investment plan for NI but there are no details yet on structures and processes. There appears to be no reference to how the UKSPF will integrate with work the Department of Agriculture and Rural Affairs has already done in developing a Rural Policy Framework for NI. It does make reference to a range of NI Executive policies and strategies but the RPF isn't listed. There is no indication of a ring-fenced pot of funding for rural development activity post Brexit.

¹ See <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/explainers/structural-funds> for details

DfC Consultation on Intermediate Rent Outcome

RCN responded to the Department for Communities policy proposals on an Intermediate Rent scheme. Communities Minister Deirdre Hargey MLA announced that the Department was proceeding with an Intermediate Rent scheme for Northern Ireland just before the Assembly was dissolved – the Department press release is [here](#).

The Intermediate Rent Model proposed by the Department aims to offer a subsidised rent to households (approximately 80% of market rent) who cannot afford to buy a home on the private market but are ineligible for social housing. The Department summary of responses to the consultation is available [here](#).

Respondents to the consultation were largely in favour of the development of this type of scheme. RCN (and other respondents) questioned whether intermediate rent set at 80% of market rent would be affordable and might exclude a sizeable proportion of tenants. Many consultees raised the issue of ensuring the application process for Intermediate rent homes was fair and open. The consultation outcomes report states that the Department will now apply the feedback they have received. A team from the Housing Executive Research Unit and University of Ulster has been appointed to gather further information on tenant and operator perspectives on intermediate rent to inform development of the scheme. The Minister's press release indicates that the Department intend, subject to necessary approvals, to procure an organisation to deliver an Intermediate Rent scheme later this year.

Investment Strategy NI Consultation

The NI Executive is currently consulting on an Investment Strategy for NI. The Strategy states that *it provides a clear framework for planning and prioritising infrastructure investment, defining the outcomes required of that investment and setting out the mechanisms, including greater collaboration that will ensure its efficient and effective delivery.*

It acknowledges significant deficiencies in infrastructure here including in health, social and intermediate housing, water and wastewater, roads maintenance and the rail network. The Strategy sets out five key objectives required to achieve the Executive's vision:

- decarbonise our economy and society
- strengthen and protect our essential services
- build a strong, connected, and competitive region
- enhance our communities and places



- maximise the benefits from new technology and innovation.

RCN responded to the consultation and raised issues in relation to the provision of social housing in rural communities, the need to continue to invest in connectivity to ensure rural areas have access to services and employment and the need to address public transport issues in rural NI if one of the Executive's key objectives is to decarbonise our economy and society. The consultation closed on 20th April, but the Strategic Investment Board is still encouraging people to respond. You can find the consultation documents [here](#)

Safe Access Zones Bill (Public Health and Well Being Bill)

This Private Members' Bill brought by Clare Bailey MLA, requires the Department of Health to provide safe access to healthcare facilities including buffer zones/safe access zones around reproductive healthcare facilities. Such zones would mean anti-abortion protesting and harassment that would cause distress to those accessing healthcare would be unable to occur, and it would be a criminal offence to do so. The Bill also creates obligations on the Department of Health to liaise with police services to monitor and enforce safe access zones, alongside the requirement that the Department publish annual reporting in relation to effectiveness of the usage of safe access zones. This would enhance the ability of women and others, including the medical professionals who work within these buildings, to access healthcare services such as abortion and accessing contraception without fear of harassment and intimidation.

More information on the Bill is available [here](#).

Period Products (Free Provision) Bill

This Bill, brought as a Private Members' Bill by Pat Catney MLA was to secure the provision throughout Northern Ireland of free period products, and for connected purposes. England, Scotland, and Wales each have varying schemes in place to provide sanitary products free of charge in schools and some other public buildings. Northern Ireland has been the only place in the United Kingdom where such products are not provided free of charge in schools. This Bill strives to place a duty on the Department of Health to ensure that period products are available free of charge on a universal basis in appropriate locations; and to create regulations which specify which public service bodies have said duty to ensure access to free period products.

The Feminist Recovery Plan highlighted examples of effective, gendered governance elsewhere in the world including policies related to free period products as an example. Furthermore, WRDA and the Women's Policy Group have been vocal in their support of movement towards free period products in past consultations.

More information on the Bill is available [here](#).

Domestic Abuse (Safe Leave) Bill

Rachel Woods MLA Private Members' Bill makes provision for an entitlement to 10 days paid safe leave in each year for victims of domestic abuse: and for connected purposes. The Bill makes this a day one right to be guaranteed to all employees. Safe Leave can help mitigate some of the barriers that victims/survivors face when attempting to seek help and support. It can also help address some of the costs of domestic abuse for employers. The Feminist Recovery Plan (FRP) has highlighted the good practice of similar policies elsewhere such as in New Zealand. The FRP supports this legislation but would like to see up to 20 days paid safe leave as a day one right which should be available to take either as a block or more flexibly.

More information on the Bill is available [here](#).

Preservation of Documents (Historical Institutions) Bill

This Bill makes provision for the preservation of documents relating to certain institutions and residents of those institutions between 1922 and 1995, and to certain children of those residents. The Bill outlines the definitions of what is meant and understood by relevant documentation, relevant information, and relevant institutions. This promotes a pathway to justice for both the women and children who were abused by institutions such as the Mary Magdalene Homes by preserving information they may wish to access in the future. The keeping of historical records is also a mechanism of transitional justice to ensure non-recurrence and the potential for future truth telling projects.

The mother and baby institutions which existed across the island of Ireland perpetrated gendered abuse and trauma. They were reinforced by gendered stereotypes and assumptions in society at that time around fallen women. Victims and survivors, and their families deserve the truth of the institutional abuse that occurred; future generations deserve to be free from the repetition of similar gendered violence.

More information on the Bill is available [here](#).

WRDA publishes a monthly Stormont and Westminster update highlighting main developments across both the Assembly and Parliament relating to women and issues within the Feminist Recovery Plan. More information on WRDA Stormont and Westminster updates are available [here](#).

Women's Policy Group Feminist Recovery Plan Election Asks

As the Assembly Election 2022 approaches, many parties are developing manifestos filled with promises and commitments they will implement if we vote them in. The Women's Policy Group NI has spent the past two years lobbying for the recommendations from our Feminist Recovery Plan to be implemented, as women are still being disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing cost of living crisis.

We have produced a report on WPG Feminist Recovery Plan Election Asks for the Assembly Election 2022. This summarises some, but not all, of the outstanding recommendations from our Feminist Recovery Plan that we would like to see all parties commit to. This includes recommendations relating to childcare, women's employment, violence against women and girls, education, healthcare and much more.

Read our Key Election Asks [here](#)

Rachel Powell Women's Sector Lobbyist, WRDA

Hospital Car Parking Charges Bill

An act has been passed at the Assembly abolishing car parking charges in hospitals in NI. The act means that car parking at all NI hospitals for staff, visitors and patients will be abolished by 2024. The Act was introduced to the Assembly as a Private Members' Bill by Sinn Fein MLA Fra McCann and when he stood down from the Assembly this was taken up by his party colleague Aisling Reilly MLA. RCN responded to the Health Committee's call for evidence on the Bill. Our response can be read [here](#). We supported the intention of the Bill to abolish hospital car parking charges as rural dwellers have less opportunity to access public transport and are more dependent on private car to meet their travel needs. Our response also highlighted the additional cost burden on rural citizens accessing specialist health services which are concentrated in fewer sites and the cost for those people with health conditions that require ongoing treatment and regular attendance at hospital.

EA Consultation on Draft Strategic Area Plan

The Education Authority has recently undertaken a consultation on its draft Strategic Area Plan 2022-2027. This is the latest version of the 'Area Planning' process which has been carried out since 2010/11 although earlier versions of Area Plans were undertaken by Education and Library Boards. The premise behind area planning was to take a broad look across schools in an area at primary and post-primary level, identify sustainability issues and develop innovative and collaborative ways to secure quality education for children and improve sustainability.

In our experience, area planning processes identified schools that were under subscribed (primarily in rural communities) as well as those schools that had financial challenges. The closure of schools with the highest numbers of empty desks was then implemented within the main controlled and maintained sectors with collaborative and innovative solutions very much the exception. This most recent Strategic Area Plan focuses on three Ministerial priorities set out by the Education Minister, Michelle McIlveen, in her statement to the Assembly in August 2021 including:

- Primary pupils being taught in composite classes of more than two-year groups.
- Post-primary schools that are failing to provide a broad and balanced curriculum for pupils in years 8-12.
- Sixth forms with fewer than one hundred pupils that cannot offer a full range of courses.

The consultation document contains a section on rural provision detailing the numbers of primary and post-primary schools below the sustainable school's policy minimum threshold. The consultation document notes the number of empty desks across schools of all types but there are no easy solutions to this issue. The proposed closure of a school in a rural community is an emotive issue and most school communities' campaign vigorously against closure proposals as they see it as a threat to their future, fearing a decline in young families remaining in the area. In many cases where schools have the potential to amalgamate the capital funding to build a new school or renovate on one site is not available.

Click [here](#) to view the consultation documents.

Department of Finance Budget Consultation paused after Executive Collapse

The Department of Finance draft budget 2022-2025 was published for public consultation in December with a closing date of March 2022. As reported in the last edition of Policy Link at the start of February this was the first time in many years that the NI Executive was able to present a three-year draft budget instead of a single year budget. In theory, this should have allowed more flexibility to award funding towards projects and services that could not be completed in a one-year cycle. In previous one year budget cycles funding could only be allocated up until the end of a particular budget year.

Political disagreement though has put plans for a three-year budget on the backburner for now. Following legal advice, the Finance Minister Conor Murphy confirmed in mid-February that the Budget consultation was being paused as the Executive was no longer in place to agree it following the resignation of First Minister Paul Givan MLA. If an Executive can be re-formed soon after the election it may decide to go ahead with a three-year budget as soon as possible but that will depend on Executive agreement.

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