

Evangelical Alliance response to the consultation on the Executive's draft Anti-Poverty Strategy (2025-2035)

Amy Scott, Public policy officer for Northern Ireland – a.scott@eauk.org
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Who We Are and Who We Represent

- The Evangelical Alliance is the oldest and largest body representing the UK's two million evangelical Christians. Since 1846, we have been uniting a diverse constituency of members, now equating to over 27,000 individual members, as well as thousands of churches and hundreds of organisations - including many based in Northern Ireland - who are united by a shared Christian faith. We exist to serve and strengthen the work of the church in our communities and throughout society.
- For over 40 years we have been actively engaged in Northern Ireland, contributing to the public discourse on, and policy development of, key public issues including education, reconciliation and poverty. Our long-standing presence here represents a deep-rooted commitment to the flourishing of all people and communities across the region.
- Throughout our history, the Evangelical Alliance has been at the forefront of campaigns for social transformation, Christian unity and freedom of belief. Today, we remain committed to working alongside policymakers and wider civil society to build a society where every person is valued, supported and empowered to thrive.
- We welcome the publication of the Executive's draft Anti-Poverty Strategy and the opportunity to respond through the consultation process. In this, our response, we aim to encourage and commend what is strong in the Strategy, while also offering constructive challenge where we believe it can be strengthened to deliver lasting impact.

Why and How We Are Engaging with this Issue

Core Belief:

- The Evangelical Alliance is engaging with this strategy because poverty is a societal concern that demands action and compassion. Our Christian faith teaches that every person possesses inalienable dignity, value, and worth (in Biblical language, we believe every person to be made in the image of God), therefore we believe that every individual deserves to be afforded dignity, opportunity, and hope. This belief underpins the work carried out by us and our members to seek justice, show compassion, and care for the most vulnerable groups in society.

- The Evangelical Alliance is a charity and we are apolitical – not left or right leaning or aligned with any political party. More widely individual evangelical Christians vote in a wide range of directions as shown in our 2024 *Thinking Faithfully About Politics* research ([Thinking faithfully about politics - Evangelical Alliance](#)). We engage because we believe that addressing poverty is a Biblical imperative that transcends political divides. In Matthew 5, 25 and many other places in the Bible Christians are directed to care for those in poverty, spiritually and materially. We acknowledge that our members will hold varying opinions and political outlooks on ways to best practically do so, from some placing importance on strengthening family values and community relationships and increasing personal reasonability and agency, to some calling for improved systems and delivery of government provision and services.
- Our approach in this response and future work on co-designing an effective Anti-Poverty Strategy for Northern Ireland will be broad and holistic, recognising the interconnected roles of the individual, families, communities, government, and mediating institutions like churches and charities. Lasting change requires collaboration across all sectors of society.

Involvement to date:

- For the last number of years, the Evangelical Alliance has consistently advocated for fairness, justice and care for the poor to be prioritised in Northern Ireland. Notably, in January 2024, we were one of the founding members of the Coalition of Christian Voices Against Poverty in Northern Ireland ([Evangelical Alliance, February 2024](#)). This group unites around 80 leaders from organisations, churches, and charities including the Salvation Army & the Society of St Vincent de Paul. We believe both practical support and community integration are essential priorities for any work taken forward to help those in need.
- We met with Minister Gordon Lyons on 4th March 2025 and felt that a really positive conversation was had around the role of faith-based organisations in community development, social cohesion and anti-poverty initiatives in Northern Ireland. In this meeting we aimed to share how faith communities can help reimagine anti-poverty efforts, inspiring long-term transformation while addressing immediate needs.

Evangelical members in action:

- The church has a long history of poverty relief action, and each year millions of pounds and numerous volunteering hours are given by churches to support those living in poverty, whether internationally or within the UK ([Tearfund: Poverty Matters - Evangelical Alliance](#)).
- Specifically, churches throughout Northern Ireland are deeply involved in poverty relief efforts. According to the 2023 report *Good News People* ([Good news people - Evangelical Alliance](#)), 67% of churches in Northern Ireland are actively engaged in initiatives that promote well-being (e.g. food banks, homeless support, mental health support), and 9 in 10 churches offer pastoral care across all socio-economic groups. 21% are actively involved in campaigns for social justice, including anti-poverty campaigns. These activities aim to address both material needs and wider wellbeing.
- For a specific example of a way in which the church is on the ground helping communities and bringing the hope of Jesus Christ to those in poverty in Northern Ireland, read pages

22-23 in our Stories of Hope publication (*Stories of Hope*), which was created to highlight the work of our members in tackling the cost of living crisis.

- Another member of the Evangelical Alliance, Lisburn City Church, offer a useful case study as they operate services including a foodbank and social supermarket through the LCC Community Trust. CEO Lynsey Caquea provided us with her perspective for this response: *“Faith groups are often the first to step up when communities are in crisis – offering food, support, and a safe place for people to turn. But while we give so much, we mustn’t be seen as a free safety net to be taken for granted. The faith sector needs to be valued as a professional, credible partner in tackling poverty, with a proper seat at the table where decisions are made. We bring expertise, experience, and deep connections into communities – and that deserves recognition and respect.”*
- Our members are motivated to care for their neighbours, particularly those who poor and marginalised, by their Christian faith and the teachings of Jesus Christ in the Bible. As a faith-based organisation, our approach is rooted in dignity, compassion, and hope - values we believe are essential to any serious attempt to tackle poverty. We want to ensure our members are equipped and enabled by institutional frameworks to work for a society where every person is enabled to thrive in life, not just survive.

Our Response

We commend the following:

- We welcome the publication of this draft Anti-Poverty Strategy and the opportunity to respond. It is encouraging to see that the vision set out in the draft – *“Working together, poverty and its impacts will be effectively and sustainably eradicated across our communities”* – is something the Executive will be committing to on paper, as we also wish to see a flourishing Northern Ireland with no one living in poverty.
- To achieve the vision, an effective strategy is obviously required, and we commend the three pillars: *“minimising the risk of falling into poverty,” “minimising the impacts of poverty”* and *“supporting people to exit poverty.”*
- It is great to read about the governance structures planned that keep poverty on the agenda of senior civil servants. We do, however, note the absence of a formal mechanism to incorporate the expertise of the community, voluntary and, particularly, the faith sector, those with lived experience, and other supporting organisations into these structures. At this point, it is imperative that a clear plan is agreed imminently for how voices from across the sector will be represented.

Where we feel the Strategy could be strengthened:

- The decades –long delay in agreeing and publishing this strategy is important to note. While the Executive and some Departments have clearly been working to prevent, alleviate and reduce poverty in different ways for many years, the failure to produce a

coherent strategy means that much of the vision, collaboration, legislation and policy are all behind where they could have been otherwise.

- We speak alongside others in concern that the draft Strategy, if left as is, may not drive any real change to poverty levels and impacts in Northern Ireland.

DEFINING POVERTY

- We would suggest that the Strategy's focus on material poverty is too narrow. Poverty is not only economic. It is relational, spiritual, and aspirational.
- From a Christian perspective every person is equal, and the definition of poverty should include how we treat each other and value individual lives. The Strategy lacks measurable indicators for how people feel they are accorded human dignity and how they experience fulfilment. These dimensions should be considered alongside economic metrics.

TANGIBLE COMMITMENTS AND WAYS OF MEASURING IMPACT & WELLBEING

- While the strategy speaks of ambition and intent, it lacks tangible components and clarity in its implementation plan, including timelines, a defined budget and specific plans for resource allocation. Without these, it is difficult to be confident that the Strategy, as it stands, will drive real change and it is easy to be concerned that it may in fact cause further delay in addressing the urgent and growing crisis of poverty in Northern Ireland.
- The conclusion of the Northern Ireland Audit Office in its 2024 report on child poverty noted that "the absence of a comprehensive, resourced and monitored strategy has significantly hindered progress in reducing poverty levels" since the end of the Child Poverty Strategy in 2022. We echo this sentiment and want to reiterate that without a detailed delivery plan, this strategy risks becoming another missed opportunity.
- The Strategy should review what impacts it will measure, in order to track the progress of delivery. We would strongly encourage the Department to consider incorporating quality of life and wellbeing indicators to measure progress, rather than only looking to life expectancy rates, which seems quite an outdated view to take on tracking progress (see defining poverty above).
- We also urge you to consider the impact of every budget decision on those who are most in need. We believe that a just and compassionate society is one that prioritises the wellbeing of its most vulnerable members. Please work collaboratively with communities and stakeholders like churches and faith organisations to find solutions that ensure that no one is left behind.

ADDRESSING THE STRUCTURAL DRIVERS OF POVERTY

- Poverty cannot be tackled without addressing its root causes. We ask for more thought to be given to the pressure in the housing market within the Strategy, which of course needs to be tackled in its own right, but also needs considered and targeted interventions

integrated into the Anti-Poverty Strategy. Food and heating are two other fundamental needs which require their own plans and special attention within this strategy. If these essentials are unaffordable, individuals are pushed further into hardship.

- We would love to see the recent cost of living concerns specifically tied into future action plans.

INCLUSION OF EXPERTISE AND INSIGHT FROM MEDIATING ORGANISATIONS & COMMUNITY GROUPS

- We want to make sure that the value of mediating organisations including faith groups is acknowledged in the Strategy. Our membership includes many faith-based organisations that bring a distinct and holistic approach to tackling poverty. As well as the practical and emotional support that any group can offer, spiritual care, relationship and a place to belong is offered to those who want it. This model reflects the Christian story of hope and compassion, values which could be more explicit and grounded within the strategy. There is also currently no real detail of how government will interact and work with the mediating organisations. When the Evangelical Alliance met with the Minister, it seemed clear that the role of charities in the Voluntary and Community Sector, including churches and faith-based organisations would be essential to the delivery of any strategy. The Evangelical Alliance would like to encourage the Department and wider Executive to prioritise partnerships with the voluntary and community sector, including faith-based organisations in delivering anti-poverty programmes.
- We also urge the Department for Communities and the Executive to incorporate the recommendations of the 2021 Expert Advisory Panel on Anti-Poverty, which outlined a clear and comprehensive roadmap for an anti-poverty strategy in Northern Ireland. This included the need for legislation, a rights-based approach (alongside rights, we would add a support to build strong family and community *relationships* and personal and corporate *responsibility*), a strong focus on structural inequalities, and an emphasis on prevention.
- Likewise, NICVA's 2022 recommendations, (which were developed by members of the original Anti-Poverty Strategy co-design group), offered detailed proposals on the structure and content of a robust strategy. These include the importance of co-design with those with lived experience, and the need for clear governance and accountability mechanisms. These important contributions are not very evident in the draft strategy and we urge the Department to re-engage with those groups to co-produce the next iteration.
- As a founding member, we further encourage you to listen to responses received from members of the *Coalition of Christian Voices Against Poverty*, and continue to engage with these bodies, who not only have years of on the ground delivery and experience in working in the area of poverty, but who could make a unique contribution in shaping the moral and ethical framework of the Strategy. The coalition can be contacted here <https://www.nicva.org/article/a-new-christian-coalition-launched-on-30th-january-2024>

COHESION, CONTEXT & CROSS-DEPARTMENTAL WORKING

- We agree with the Strategy's sentiment of needing to work together. However, we believe that the draft currently lacks reference to a truly cross-departmental approach, that which is required for the effective and sustainable reduction of poverty. Really strong cross-departmental coordination will be needed, with full buy-in from all members of the Executive made clear to the public. Under the Good Friday Agreement, the Executive is collectively responsible and accountable for delivery of this Strategy, which should be sector-wide in its commitment, and resourced accordingly.
- There is limited evidence included in the draft of learning from other jurisdictions such as Ireland, the devolved UK administrations and England. To be effective and efficient in delivery, Northern Ireland will need to listen carefully to lessons learned from work that has gone before us, for example, the Scottish Government's work on reducing child poverty.
- We have recently been reviewing the report published by the Poverty Strategy Commission for the UK and ask that you consider this work when reviewing the draft Strategy with the lessons from other jurisdictions ([The Poverty Strategy Commission - building a new consensus around tackling poverty in the UK](#)).
- At the same time, the Strategy should more specifically acknowledge and tackle the unique socio-economic context of Northern Ireland, including the legacy of conflict and the ties between the divided nature of our communities and poverty. Solutions proposed will need to be considered with the local context of each of our towns, estates and rural communities in mind.
- In many cases, the current proposed actions focus on continuation of existing work, rather than transformative change, despite acknowledging that more needs to be done to make any changes to poverty levels or the effects of poverty. Where research and evidence already exist, we encourage the Executive to ensure the Strategy moves beyond vision and begins implementing concrete actions with funding attached.
- Increasing individual agency and responsibility are important in reducing poverty. So are efficient and effective government delivery systems and appropriate and sustainable financial support. However mediating institutions work in the gaps where people require solutions which the government often cannot provide themselves, to more than just material poverty, for example, community groups and churches offer a unique fulfilment of spiritual, emotional and relational poverty.

GOVERNANCE, ACCOUNTABILITY & REVIEW MECHANISMS

- There is no clear review timeline or mechanism for assessing progress. It is not clear what would happen if targets were missed or the strategy goes off track. The draft governance structure needs strengthening to ensure transparency, accountability, and cross-sector representation.

- We also note the lack of an independent voice within the governance framework. We want to point to the recommendation of a Commission(er), as called for by the Anti-Poverty Strategy Group, which we agree could strengthen accountability and oversight. As above the Poverty Strategy Commission could be a helpful model to consider.

Conclusion

Evangelical Alliance welcomes the intention behind the Anti-Poverty Strategy and the opportunity for public engagement through this consultation process. We encourage the Department for Communities and whole Northern Ireland Executive to revise and strengthen the current draft in meaningful partnership with experts, and the community, voluntary and faith sectors.

We would be happy to meet with the Minister again and/or to facilitate a meeting with the Coalition of Christian Voices against Poverty with officials to discuss any of these proposals in more detail.