



A prosperous, poverty-free Northern Ireland

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation's manifesto briefing for a shared prosperity and reduced poverty in Northern Ireland.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation is an independent organisation working to inspire social change through research, policy and practice.

Our vision is for a prosperous UK without poverty where everyone can thrive and contribute. To achieve this we work in partnership with private, public and voluntary sectors, as well as with individuals and communities. Using evidence and experience, we search for the underlying causes of social problems and demonstrate practical solutions in order to influence lasting change.

Inspiring social change in Northern Ireland

Defining poverty, and inspiring social change

Poverty affects all of us, either directly as individuals or as members of society. Northern Ireland knows only too well the added toxic interaction of poverty and conflict. JRF is developing a comprehensive strategy for reducing poverty in the UK, to be published later in 2016. It will be evidence-based, costed, and will identify key choices and trade-offs. This briefing is informed by the work done so far.

Using the standard income-based measurement of poverty:

- 376,000 people (21 per cent) in Northern Ireland are living in poverty;
- the level of working-age poverty at 20 per cent is equal to the highest recorded since 2002/03;
- 101,000 of Northern Ireland's children (23 per cent) are in poverty;
- 63,000 pensioners are in poverty (21 per cent)¹.

Achieving a substantial and sustained reduction in poverty is a long-term challenge, but these figures show the urgency with which this problem must be tackled. There are a number of key actions for the next Assembly and the Executive to commit to and progress.

There are opportunities for positive intervention at every stage and major transition point in a person's life: whether in the form of high-quality care in early years; facilitating access to education and high-quality training; preparing people for the workplace and to progress in work; and support towards comfortable retirement in old age. At every age and stage of life, we want to see a Northern Ireland where everyone can play their part in the positive development of a thriving society.

Missed targets and opportunities: The need to act, and how we can help

In Northern Ireland, the Executive target of ending child poverty by 2020 looks set to be missed. There continue to be worrying achievement gaps in education, with children from poorer families leaving school with lower levels of educational attainment. Despite recent figures showing some improvement, the local labour market remains challenging. The working-age employment rate at 68.8 per cent is lower than the UK average of 74.1, while the percentage of unemployed people who have been out of work for one year or more at 51.7 per cent is well above the UK average of 29.3 per cent.

Northern Ireland also has a higher rate of youth unemployment (18-24-year-olds) – 17.5 per cent compared to 11.7 per cent for the UK.² Additionally, the employment rate of disabled people in Northern Ireland is 35 per cent, compared with 50 per cent in England and around 45 per cent in Scotland and Wales. Childcare provision is patchy and costs remain at a record high, pricing parents out of quality provision and even out of employment. The characteristics of work are also changing.

With this briefing we seek to guide the next Executive in shaping its priorities, compiling strategies and forming legislation to forge a better place to live, learn and raise a family without fear of poverty.

At JRF we measure poverty both through rigorous statistical analysis and engagement with individuals and groups who experience poverty. In Northern Ireland, poverty is evident in the

early lives of our young people, in education, the workplace, in the home and on our streets. With this briefing we seek to guide the next Executive in shaping its priorities, compiling strategies and forming legislation to forge a better place to live, learn and raise a family without fear of poverty.

Recommendations for tackling poverty in Northern Ireland

Our aims for a fairer society are ambitious, our recommendations achievable, and our solutions tangible. The reform of Northern Ireland Executive departments and 11 local councils, the Assembly elections and compilation of a new Programme for Government together provide the perfect opportunity to promote a fresh approach to poverty.

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We advise the revision, renewal and embedding of current Executive priorities and strategies on poverty, childcare provision, on how we educate our young people, prepare citizens of all ages for the workplace, and assist our ageing population with dignity. We advise the promotion of long-term shifts in the make-up, the training and resources available to several key public service providers. We reiterate the urgency to face and tackle these problems head-on today.



Chapter 1: Childhood

Poverty in childhood has been targeted specifically by the Northern Ireland Executive over its last mandate as an area in need of critical improvement. In 2011, the Child Poverty Act came into effect with a strategy produced for 2011–2014. A consultation in 2014, 'Delivering Social Change for Children and Young People', resulted in a decision by government to engage further with stakeholders in the development of a new strategy for children and young people, whilst proposing to lay a separate child poverty strategy for 2014–2017, though this has yet to materialise. In 2015, the draft Childcare Strategy and the Children's Services Co-operation Bill were added to the list.

Despite such efforts, however, the target of ending child poverty by 2020 looks set to be missed by a considerable measure. In fact, child poverty in Northern Ireland has actually increased both in relative and absolute terms, to 23 per cent and 25 per cent respectively in 2013/14.³

One third of working-age adults with no qualifications live in relative poverty, compared to less than one-tenth of those with a qualification at degree level or above.

Meanwhile, research shows that a child from a low-income background is far more likely to achieve lower levels of attainment and be negatively affected by academic selection. The consequences of poor educational performance are clear. One-third of working-age adults with no qualifications live in relative poverty, compared to less than one-tenth of those with a qualification at degree level or above.⁴

The education system in Northern Ireland remains highly segregated, according to type of school, religion, and social class.⁵ This leads to an inefficient use of funding and contributes to poorer results for many children. Data shows the impact social deprivation has on achievement, compounding the negative effects of other inequalities including those identified for religion and gender.⁶ Political parties in Northern Ireland should commit to developing an education system that improves the prospects of all children, and in particular those from low-income backgrounds from all communities.

A combination of economic and labour market shifts and attitudinal changes have contributed to a notable transition in the choices being made by young people when leaving school. The number of school leavers seeking to advance to Further and Higher Education has risen dramatically over the last decade, from 62.7 per cent in 2003/04 to 77.2 per cent in 2013/14.

The drop in the number of school leavers entering employment and training reflects this shift – down from 12.5 per cent and 18.5 per cent, to 6.9 per cent and 10.4 per cent respectively over the same time period. However, the proportion of young people aged 16 to 24 not in employment, full-time education or training (NEET) is on the rise and is now sitting at just under a fifth of this age group.⁷

Early intervention has been shown to be essential to breaking the vicious cycle of poverty. The Northern Ireland Executive must refocus its efforts on tackling deprivation in early years and throughout the education system and beyond, helping Northern Ireland's young people to move into adulthood, free of poverty.

Early years support

The positive effects of high-quality early education are strongest for the most disadvantaged children.

The Northern Ireland Executive has previously acknowledged that early intervention is the best way to tackle poverty and inequalities amongst young people.⁸ Early years education is proven to benefit a child's capability to learn and develop; it improves his or her confidence and peer relationships, and can also help to break inter-generational cycles of child poverty. In particular, studies have also demonstrated that high-quality care, characteristically teacher-led, tends to lead to improved child outcomes, evident several years later. The positive effects of high-quality early education are strongest for the most disadvantaged children.⁹

Northern Ireland, as with all the UK regions, needs a vision for transforming childcare over the next ten years, so that fees are not a barrier to accessing good-quality childcare and all early years staff are professionally qualified and paid a wage comparable to those working in schools. Proposals developed by the Family and Childcare Trust for JRF for its UK strategy envisage a ten-year reform programme based on:

- the current plethora of schemes being replaced by a single funding system. All parents of two-to-four-year-olds would receive 15 hours of free childcare per week and use childcare accounts to pay for extra hours;
- removing fees for childcare for the lowest-income families where parents are in, or preparing for, work, education or training. Costs for extra hours should start at 50p per hour for families above the poverty line and rise as incomes rise. Costs should be capped at no more than 10 per cent of net income for families on modest incomes;

- keeping the mixed market of private, voluntary and maintained sector providers, with child-minders and centre-based care playing important roles;
- investing in a social enterprise programme to develop business models that are proven to deliver quality and flexibility;
- linking childcare providers much more closely to early intervention networks and improving their support for home learning, helping families to access services and give children the best start at home.

The Northern Ireland Executive needs to lead the shift to a high-quality workforce with improved access and flexibility. The experience of countries like Denmark indicates that a single, supply-side approach to funding delivers a sizeable contribution to reducing poverty. Practically speaking, this would mean increasing public funding for childcare to 0.85 per cent UK GDP (for Northern Ireland the long-term target figure would be £439 million) over ten years, alongside more demanding quality requirements and the development of better links with other services. This has greater potential to improve quality, boost children's development and the pay of childcare workers, and deliver value for money. Moving decisively in this direction would require full devolution of childcare funding, including childcare element of tax credits and childcare tax vouchers and we urge the next Executive to press the case for this.

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Turning to the short term, we note that centre-based childcare provision is less developed in Northern Ireland than elsewhere in the UK – the main form of early years provision is maintained nursery classes in schools, which often lack flexibility. The Northern Ireland Executive published a draft ten-year childcare



strategy in 2015.¹⁰ It contains many positive proposals and commitments, notably investing to develop new places to address the most pressing gaps in provision. However, the strategy is almost modest in many of its aspirations, for example, having limited commitments to quality improvement and committing to fund just 1,000 new flexible pre-school places.

In the past, Northern Ireland has invested less in free early education than other parts of the UK and therefore must prioritise extending free care to two-and-three-year-olds in order to develop sustainable early years services beyond nursery classes. Whilst in some respects childcare provision in Northern Ireland lags significantly behind elsewhere in the UK, this counter-intuitively means that, with the benefit of investment from existing devolved sources, policy-makers would have the opportunity to guide the development of services more strategically than has been possible elsewhere in the UK to date. This should include a strategy to secure a long-term shift in the make-up and training of the early years workforce towards one that is graduate-led, fairly-paid and dedicated to the continuous improvement and high quality of early years care and education.

We recommend:

- implementing a strategy to secure a long-term shift in the make-up and training of the early years workforce – one that is graduate-led, fairly-paid and dedicated to the continuous improvement and high quality of early years care and education;
- developing the Sure Start programme and facilitating the next stage in every local community, providing an integrated service that would cover anti-natal, post-natal, relationships, parenting and child development support;
- strengthening the requirements in regulations and inspection for factors that improve children's development, including support for home-learning environments;
- introducing a single, consistent, evidence-based development

assessment for children when they enter and exit early education;

- introducing a transparent statutory admission code of practice for centre-based childcare providers, similar to that in place for schools, to encourage more social mixing;
- creating a business development programme to support the development and expansion of social enterprises and providers who successfully offer high-quality care.

Educational attainment

It is well documented that children growing up in poorer families tend to emerge from school with substantially lower levels of educational attainment than those who are better-off. Such 'achievement gaps' are a major contributing factor to unflattering patterns of social mobility. Whilst students in Northern Ireland achieve the best GCSE and A-Level results in the UK, there is a continued problem of underperformance among schools in deprived areas and an ever-widening attainment gap, with 'working-class' Protestant boys continuing to be a particular concern.

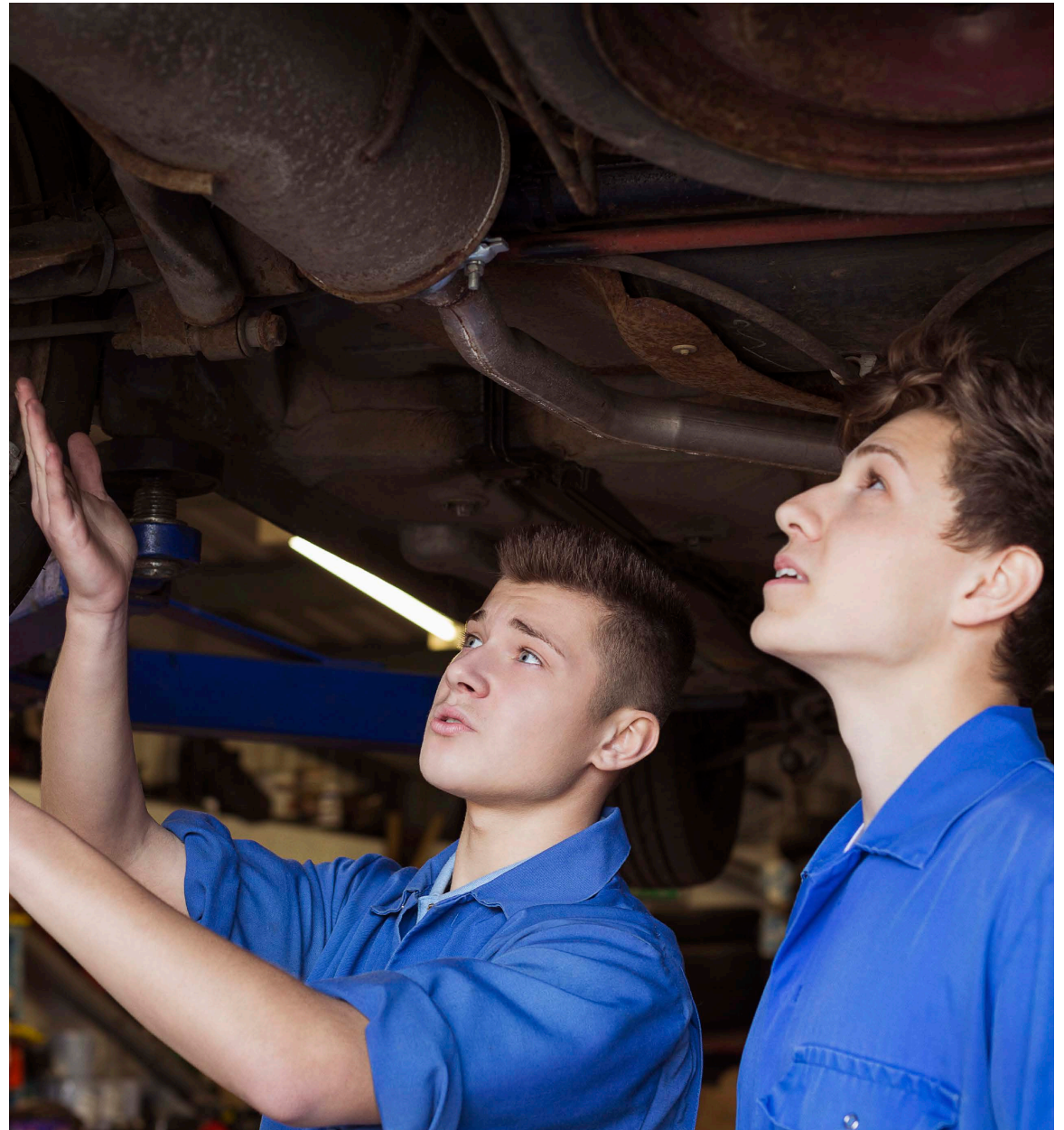
Whilst students in Northern Ireland achieve the best GCSE and A-Level results in the UK, there is a continued problem of underperformance among schools in deprived areas.

There is also strong evidence that selective systems of education, using examination methods such as the Transfer Test, have a negative impact upon the attainment of children from low-income backgrounds. Research in Northern Ireland demonstrates that its education system, highly segregated along religious and social lines, has contributed to inefficient spend of public funding as well as to poorer academic results for many children.

The Northern Ireland Government has introduced a new funding formula for schools, which is intended to support better outcomes for disadvantaged students. However, there does not appear to be a clear system for monitoring how schools are spending this funding or whether it is being used for evidence-based interventions that will raise the attainment of children from low-income backgrounds. Measures to improve early years provision, support families at risk, and to improve literacy and numeracy are all welcome. However, they do not amount to a coherent programme to substantially raise attainment for low-income children across Northern Ireland. The Northern Ireland Government should work with the Education Authority, school leaders and the Education Training Inspectorate to develop such a programme.

We recommend:

- giving all schools easy access to data about their own attainment gaps and how these compare to national gaps and attainment in schools with similar intakes;
- developing a 'What works' centre to compile and promote high-quality evidence of ways schools can improve attainment for low-income students;
- high-priority inspections to assess whether schools are using data and evidence to take specific steps to raise the attainment of their low-income pupils, and are evaluating how successful these are;
- introducing greater accountability for how schools use funding linked to deprivation;
- using the experience of the educational 'Challenges' initiatives in England, Scotland and Wales to inform the development of similar systems of support and challenge in Northern Ireland.



Careers and skills

Making the next step after school can be a daunting and pressurised experience for many young people, especially for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, who may lack necessary guidance and support. It has been accepted that the main danger points for young people are the transitional stages when one form of activity ends and a conscious decision needs to be made about the next stage.¹¹ The 68,500 young people not in employment, education or training in Northern Ireland is testament to this. Many of them face particular challenges as a result of poor educational experiences or because they are care leavers or young carers. As well as addressing the educational issues outlined above, there is a critical need for a system that guides young people into work, away from a life of poverty, as highlighted by the number of young people not in education, employment or training and the long-term high youth unemployment figure.

For those young people facing multiple barriers, it is important that support is highly personalised and uses a range of approaches.

We welcome the focus in the review of youth training on raising the quality and value of vocational qualifications, including access to higher-level qualifications. But for those young people facing multiple barriers, it is important that support is highly personalised and uses a range of approaches, including peer-to-peer support, volunteering and carefully targeted intermediate labour market schemes. Apprenticeships are one of the UK central Government's and devolved governments' most important policies to help young people move into good-quality jobs and career paths. We support the prioritisation of apprenticeships and recent expansions of their ambition in this area, especially the emphasis in the 2014 Apprenticeship Strategy on quality and the opportunity for progression to apprenticeships at level 3. There are still concerns

about the quality of some apprenticeships and also whether access to them is fair, particularly with regard to young women and ethnic-minority applicants, with both groups under-represented among those who start apprenticeships.¹²

We recommend:

- the Northern Ireland Executive undertakes a collaborative review of the data on educational and labour market outcomes for different groups of young people, and invests in high-quality careers advice to be delivered in school by expert advisers, whilst also developing stronger links between schools, local employers and training providers;
- establishing local hubs providing careers advice for post-16-year-olds and linking them to high-quality apprenticeships, training and employers. These should provide a personalised service and include support to maintain jobs and training courses, and help the young person consider next steps as well as an initial placement;
- a proportion of apprenticeship funding should depend on whether apprentices are employed six months after the apprenticeship and on evidence of progression to higher-level training, or more responsibility and pay at work;
- rather than focusing on any further expansion in the apprenticeships programme, the Northern Ireland Executive should focus on improving the quality of apprenticeships and access to high-quality opportunities for ethnic-minority young people and young women. Apprentice Charters should be developed as part of this; co-designed by employers and learners, to establish quality standards for each sector and level.



Chapter 2: Working age

For those in poverty, life after being a teenager up to retirement age consists of a range of new challenges: securing the first job, sustaining employment, having a house to live in, and paying for everyday goods and services – we all face these trials, but life is more difficult for those in poverty. People with little access to social networks and those with criminal records are particularly disadvantaged in the labour market; those who have left care and those without a home struggle to string together any sort of decent life.

Although the employment rate in Northern Ireland is improving, it continues to sit well below the UK average and is the worst of the 12 UK regions at just 68.8 per cent. Nearly a fifth of young people are unemployed, and the numbers are slowly increasing. The long-term youth unemployment rate is particularly alarming – having increased by 13 percentage points over the year, it now sits at 64.5 per cent, which is double the UK average.¹³

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Therefore, it must be a priority to break down the barriers to employment. However, it is increasingly evident that getting a job is no longer a clear route out of poverty. Underemployment, low wages, financial problems and housing pressures all contribute to pushing households into poverty. In the five years to 2011/12, the poverty rate among adults aged 16 to 29 rose by 8 percentage points to reach 26 per cent. Poverty has also increased among those aged 30 to 59, but it has solely been among those in

working families. These numbers represent a significant portion of people in the country.¹⁴

In the 2011–2015 Programme for Government, the Northern Ireland Executive committed itself to bringing forward a string of strategies, programmes and frameworks to try and tackle these problems: the Economic Strategy, Skills Strategy, Pathways to Success and many more. We welcome these, but the new mandate and Programme for Government provides an opportunity for real change in tackling the ever-present scourge of poverty in Northern Ireland.

More and better jobs

The creation of more and better jobs must be central to Northern Ireland's efforts to reduce poverty. Developing the economy has been a priority of the Executive and local authorities for many years, and concerted efforts to create jobs across the region will continue to be needed. However, action on productivity and economic development tends to focus on high-growth areas, such as advanced manufacturing, high-skilled engineering, aerospace and science-based enterprise. These sectors can produce good opportunities for people to progress in work, but policy has to address changing patterns across the whole labour market. The risks of insecurity and being trapped in a 'low pay, no pay' cycle could increase as the decline of routine, mid-skilled, mid-paid jobs continues.

Northern Ireland (and the UK) needs a stronger focus on reducing poverty by driving up productivity across low-pay sectors, as well as pay and prospects. A significant proportion of Working Tax Credit claimants are employed in three sectors of the economy:

retail, health and care, and hotels/catering. Employers are often able to draw on large pools of labour and are willing to accept the costs of high turnover. That needs to change – improving productivity and job quality (part-time as well as full-time) is important to business success as well as poverty. These sectors are vital for the long-term – they are typically relationship-based and not easily mechanised or moved off-shore.

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Finally our research has led us to conclude that a strategy to reduce poverty must reach beyond upholding minimum standards and seek to influence the number of jobs offering security and prospects. Anchor institutions such as central government, councils, hospitals, universities and other major employers have a key role by influencing supply chains and procurement as well as their own practice as employers.

We recommend:

- industrial strategies focused on the retail, hospitality and care sectors, aimed at raising productivity and hence pay and conditions, led by the Northern Ireland Executive in conjunction with representative groups;
- using the public sector's purchasing power more creatively to generate work-with-training opportunities for young, marginalised or long-term unemployed people. JRF's 'one in a million' procurement model, for example, outlines how a meaningful targeted work opportunity could be demanded for every £1 million in contract value. It has recently been adopted by the Northern Ireland Central Procurement



Directorate and Belfast City Council.¹⁵

- the Northern Ireland Executive exploring whether it can use its new corporation tax powers to offer better incentives for training and developing low-skilled employees;
- that all major public sector bodies in Northern Ireland be required to set out a strategy and timetable for becoming an accredited Living Wage employer. This would apply not only to directly employed staff but to those working for contracted-out services too.

A social security system that incentivises work and supports people when not in work

Our forthcoming strategy will address the development of a tax and benefit system fit for the 21st century. However, in this section we concentrate on how welfare-related advice and support services provided by the third sector, community groups and public services, for instance, can play an essential role in increasing money in people's pockets (e.g. benefit checks), improving prospects (e.g. careers advice) and preventing hardship (e.g. debt advice).

People experiencing poverty can also face steep barriers to accessing services that would help them to increase their incomes. These can be related to their individual circumstances (e.g. disability or caring responsibilities), structural (e.g. opening hours or access), and cultural. Some barriers could be overcome by drawing together services related to work and income – employment support, careers, benefit checks, debt advice, and childcare advice.

A more integrated approach to skills and employment should also be a goal. JRF is arguing that across the UK, employment services and programmes should focus more on reducing poverty than simply exiting from the benefit system, and should better reflect circumstances and opportunities in the local labour market. Policy needs to address basic skills, (literacy, numeracy and

digital) as well as the delivery of training, skills, advice and support for people to progress in work and move on to a better job.

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We recommend:

- creating accessible hubs for a range of services related to work and income, such as employment support, careers advice, advice on transport planning and childcare, benefit checks and debt advice;
- refocusing the skills system on employment and earnings outcomes rather than the number of qualifications gained, and create individual training budgets to make the system more responsive to the needs of individuals and employers;
- establishing a 'Citizen's Skills Entitlement' (as part of the above) that guarantees an individually-tailored, programmatic approach to basic skills training, allowing people to undertake a series of modules to develop literacy, numeracy and/or digital skills (depending on what is needed).

Chapter 3: Later life

The benefits of living longer will only be realised if we recognise and respond to both the challenges and opportunities it brings.¹⁶ Average life expectancy in Northern Ireland has increased by 11 years since 1950¹⁷ and the proportion of older people living in Northern Ireland aged 65 or over is projected to rise from 15.9 per cent to 24.8 per cent by 2041. The sharpest increase will be in the number of people aged 85 or over.¹⁸ Healthier, longer lives also mean that people are working many more years into later life than was the case with previous generations.

The benefits of living longer will only be realised if we recognise and respond to both the challenges and opportunities it brings.

In 2014, JRF's *Monitoring poverty and social exclusion* report found that in the five years following the financial crash, older people were the only group in Northern Ireland to experience a fall in the rate of poverty, from 19 per cent to 16 per cent.¹⁹ Since then, however, the Executive's own figures have put the poverty rate back up to 21 per cent in 2013-14, to approximately 63,000 people.²⁰

Some progress has been made by the Executive in recent years in introducing policy for older people. Northern Ireland's ageing population was a key consideration in the development of the health and social care reforms outlined in *Transforming Your Care* (TYC), promised by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. With the draft *Active Ageing Strategy: 2014-2020* the Executive indicated it would aim to promote "*an age friendly region in which all people, as they get older, are valued and supported to live actively to their fullest potential; with their rights and dignity protected*".

While we welcome such efforts, the continuing shifts in Northern Ireland's demographic and poverty trends mean that the Government cannot afford to become complacent. Plans that have been drafted and policies that have been agreed must be acted upon as a matter of urgency, and any such plans aimed at later life need to fully acknowledge and cater for the diversity of this age group. They should encourage and enable older people to live full and engaging lives, and protect the most vulnerable from poverty.

There is evidence from JRF's Minimum Income Standards (MIS) research programme that older people themselves agree that their basic needs and costs are slightly lower than those of younger adults in some areas of spending. This could be in part due to generational effects (where there are some genuine physiological differences by age) as well as cohort effects (where older people's reference for living standards draws partly on the past). As a result, the overall weekly budget for a single pensioner in 2015 is £183 compared with £196 for a working-age single person, a gap of only £13. For couples, the gap between pensioners and working-age is bigger at £58 a week.

More important than such differences in norms concerning living standards is the higher likelihood of disability and ill-health in later life, adding greatly to the costs of meeting basic needs for many. This includes things like transport, personal care, adaptations and equipment.

We recommend:

- a dedicated housing strategy for older people, which focuses on innovative and bespoke housing options that allow people to maintain their independence for as long as possible;
- free financial advice for retirees with mortgage debt and a low income, to help them plan their income, and restructure their mortgage if necessary;
- increased housing stock and improved access to sheltered/supported housing and retirement villages;
- the extension of the Warm Homes Discount Scheme to Northern Ireland to help alleviate fuel poverty.



Conclusion

Poverty in Northern Ireland is a problem we can solve. At every stage of a person's life, there is something that can be done to reduce poverty and create greater opportunities for everyone to play a part in – and benefit from – a shared prosperity. This manifesto briefing outlines some of the key areas where the Executive, employers, service providers and others can make a difference. We would welcome the chance to talk to you about the role you can play in shaping a prosperous, poverty-free Northern Ireland.

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