

## PPR's response to the NI Executive's draft Programme for Government 2024-2027, 'Our Plan: Doing what matters most'

With some notable exceptions – like better support for children and young people with Special Educational Needs, for instance – the language of the various 'commitments', 'missions' and 'priorities' that make up the Executive's draft Programme for Government remains safely in the hypothetical. This perhaps isn't surprising, given that for five of the last eight years we were without a functioning government: maybe best to avoid anything too concrete, right?

Except for the fact that, for that very reason – the years of being obliged to muddle through with no support, no clear leadership, no lines of accountability or transparency – the lack of specific content to address areas of need grates badly. The contrast between the welcome detail provided on how the Executive plans to address chronic deficits in support for children and young people with additional needs and childcare shortages only serves to highlight the lack of a concrete plan in other priority areas. Stormont is sitting, Ministers are in place and working, people are struggling as much as they ever were, or more – can we really not aim any higher than this? If we can't even squarely name all the issues, or formulate 'proposed action' around them, what hope is there of change?

Notably, there is not a single reference to human rights in this draft Programme for Government, despite the existence of a well-developed legal framework of human rights obligations which places duties on Ministers, departments and public bodies (in contrast, Scotland's most recently published programme for government has seventeen references to human rights and seventy-eight to equality).

PPR's response will focus predominantly on economic, social and cultural rights and the need to embed rights based approaches into the PfG - and ultimately into delivery on the ground. We know many of our colleagues across civil society will comment on the continuing failures to deliver on key civil and political rights areas, including legacy.

### Housing

To start with a positive -- naming **housing** as a priority is good. But like past PfGs, this one describes housing need via the social housing waiting list and 'housing stress' stats. The former means something; the latter has to be

defined at the bottom of the table provided. Why not give homelessness stats instead? They are just as available, and people already know what they mean.

The PfG plan proposes to 'focus on preventing **homelessness**' – as if there weren't already 29,394 households officially recognised as homeless across the north, with between them at least 18,959 kids. Based on the last census [data](#) that's about one in every 25 households in the north. (Note - these are old figures, from end of March 2024 – on recent years' form, both are now significantly higher). Some of these homeless families are in hostels or single lets; others are sofa surfing. Others are being moved from pillar to post, temporary hotel to guest house to hotel, ever further from support networks, children's schools and parents' job prospects. The plan doesn't mention how it will work to tackle the existing need; or the unprecedented [£34.4 million spent](#) by the Housing Executive on **temporary accommodation** for homeless people in 2023/24, the same year when it's only been provided with funding for [600 new social home starts](#) against a target of 2,000.

The plan also doesn't mention **evictions** (the Assembly [backed a motion](#) to ban no fault evictions in April, but the Communities Minister has repeatedly refused to follow up), or the [tripling](#) of **rough sleepers** in Belfast in the last six months, or the Housing Executive being reduced to placing desperate people with nowhere to live in [glamping pods](#) for the lack of anything more suitable.

Also absent from the PfG picture are **soaring private rents** (up an average of [10% again](#) on a year ago), and what they mean for people on the lowest quartile of income, forced to pay on average [over 45%](#) of their monthly income on even the cheapest quartile of rents. The PfG plan's 'proposed action' on co-ownership or a new 'intermediate rent operator' are aimed over the heads (and incomes) of people struggling month to month to afford **damp, mould-ridden** properties.

Housing affordability points to other gaps in the plan. In a place where one fifth of children are growing up in relative poverty ([NI Audit Office](#)) – in some constituencies identified by the [NI Anti-Poverty Network](#), the rate is over one in four – somehow, unbelievably, **child poverty** doesn't get a mention the PfG plan. Nor do **food banks**, though in May 2024 the Trussell Trust reported that [NI had the biggest increase in the number of people accessing them of all UK regions](#), more than doubling over the last five years. There are no actions proposed to directly address either issue, although fuel poverty does get a cursory mention.

In housing, the Executive must focus on the need to increase the supply of social homes (with an explicit distinction from affordable homes). Public bodies in Northern Ireland own multiple sites which would be suitable for the development of new homes and could use this position of strength to require the commissioning of high-quality and sustainable social homes. Homeless families and experts in planning, development and sustainability formed the Take Back the City coalition in 2020 to argue for the use of vacant publicly owned land to increase the supply of social housing. In 2022, the coalition launched an international competition to design a masterplan for the former Mackie's site, a 13 hectare site owned by the bodies tasked with delivering some of the commitments within the PfG. Families worked with the competition winner, Matthew Lloyd Architects, to develop a masterplan for the site which includes hundreds of homes, tens of thousands of square metres of workspace, food growing space and a small hydroelectric power station. If a small group of families and experts can formulate and develop this kind of vision in the absence of public funding or resources, imagine what they could do with a little support?

The investment of the Executive into social homes is an investment in Northern Ireland's people, which would have many broader positive effects, including supporting better health and well-being and improving educational attainment. Despite the warm words of Ministers of all political stripes, there has been little progress on addressing rising homelessness and sluggish rates of social building. To continually avoid addressing this issue is to fail Northern Ireland's people. There are of course, other missing 'proposed actions', that if they were part of the plan might make a difference for homeless families, including enforcing the Decent Homes Standard, raising LHA rates, and ensuring that elected representatives who own and rent property would have to declare that before voting on any reform to legislation affecting tenants and landlords.

## **Mental health**

As a society with a recent history of violent conflict, rates of mental distress and trauma are significantly higher in Northern Ireland than other jurisdictions; some estimates put our rate at 25% higher than in neighbouring jurisdictions. Yet astoundingly, **mental health** only receives a few passing references, and even then, only in general terms. The only specific reference to mental health is to indicate a vague commitment to the continued implementation of the Mental Health Strategy, a strategy that is essentially confined to the

reconfiguration of existing services, rather than the visionary transformation that it required and which this Programme for Government offers the opportunity to provide.

A major issue for this society is the over-reliance on antidepressant prescribing. Rates of antidepressant prescribing have risen four-fold in the past 20 years, so that now around a fifth of the population has been prescribed antidepressants. In the poorest areas, 27% of the adult population was prescribed an antidepressant in 2023. These are the same areas most heavily impacted by the conflict. Inexplicably, the Department of Health is on record as saying it doesn't have any plans to address this inexorable rise in prescribing rates, despite repeated calls from campaigners, MLAs and others. Meanwhile, counselling and talking therapies are rationed resources. By way of illustration, fewer than half of GP practices in the Belfast Trust have an in-house counsellor, compared with 83% in the Northern Trust; in effect, a post-code lottery that has been allowed to continue for many years now. Talking therapy provision through the Health Trusts is deplorably underfunded and operates as a post-code lottery. For example, in the Western Trust, there is zero provision in the southern end of the Trust, in Fermanagh and Omagh.

There is no reference to Protect Life 2, the **suicide prevention** strategy. Thus far, Protect Life 2 has failed to reduce rates of suicide, with provisional data for 2023 indicating an increase in the number of deaths. Protect Life 2 does not target resources in line with objective need.

Long term, rights based, trauma-informed solutions which are to scale, already exist. **Give 5: Steps to a Wellbeing Rights Framework**, sets out what the NI Executive should do to address the deepening mental health crisis. It is a well-evidenced, human rights based and trauma-informed approach that has been endorsed by a wide range of civil society organisations, locally and internationally. These include the former UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Health, Professor Dainius Puras, as well as UNISON, the largest health union in this jurisdiction. We recommend that this framework be incorporated into the Programme for Government to support the transformation of our mental health services.

## **Anti-racism, asylum and inequality**

A final omission: NI is home to a growing **newcomer** population, but they are not named anywhere in the PfG. The Executive takes some pains to explain its role vis-à-vis this group:

it is important to be clear that the Executive does not have the power to change many matters relating to asylum and refugee policy, and that these are matters reserved to the UK Government. However, we are committed to bringing forward actions to address the issues of integration and racism.

A less than resounding welcome to newcomers to the north, who may be vulnerable to poverty, poor housing and unemployment due to the continuation of the UK Home Office's 'hostile environment' policy. This matters, not least because in August 2024 saw a surge in **race hate attacks** in South Belfast and elsewhere in the north, and such crimes continue to occur today. The PfG plan completely misses the opportunity to name and condemn the violence, and to take a stand squarely alongside the people under threat. Instead the text merely observes that racism and hate crime (alongside other types of violence) 'are more likely to be suffered by people from deprived areas', and refers vaguely to 'a strategic approach to racial equality'.

Far more could and should have been said under the 'Safer Communities' priority, both about identifying perpetrators and holding them to account, and in support of those targeted. The plan refers to '**paramilitary harm**' against young people and adults, and pledges to 'address the root causes of violence', what that may mean in practice is unclear. It addresses domestic violence, and wider violence against women and girls; but nowhere does it mention **trafficking**, which most frequently involves newcomers.

Despite the Executive's determined effort to distance itself from any responsibility – budgetary or otherwise – for this group of people, it is clear that it does have a range of responsibilities including in health, education, childcare and transport, as well as in the application of equality and non-discrimination law. A low-cost and high-impact step which could be taken would be the reintroduction of free bus and rail travel for asylum seekers and newly recognised refugees until they are able to access Universal Credit; this would assist people in attending health and education settings, especially after they

are evicted from Home Office accommodation and often have to travel around between different insecure settings.

## Summary

There are many people and communities directly impacted by the issues of poverty, homelessness and poor housing, mental health, racism and asylum who have both the expertise and the passion to develop solutions to some of these entrenched issues. They are acting now to help themselves and in solidarity with others, in ways which the NI Executive could only aspire to, but which it should listen to and engage with.

When the will is there, the PfG plan can be both specific and concrete. But its approach is piecemeal, and it skates over some of the weightiest of the issues facing NI's people today. Turning a blind eye to huge problems isn't confidence inspiring, or anything like a recipe for successful change. The Executive needs to revisit its draft.