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Civil society groups call for action to urgently address inequalities exacerbated by Covid-19 and to prevent austerity from becoming part of NI's pandemic recovery.

The Equality Coalition is a broad alliance of more than 100 civil society organisations and trade unions in Northern Ireland that collectively campaign to promote equality. The Coalition is jointly convened by UNISON and the Committee on the Administration of Justice (CAJ). It provides a forum for unity between multiple sectors when campaigning for equality, while still allowing for the diversity of its members' work and views.

In April 2020, we collectively as Equality Coalition members highlighted our serious concerns about the impact that the Covid-19 pandemic would have on the groups protected by equality law (including the nine equality categories covered by Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998), and the potential for the pandemic to exacerbate already unacceptable levels of economic inequality in our society. We called for commitments from public authorities that Section 75 obligations in policy development would be discharged to avoid increasing inequality.

Over 12 months later, some of our specific concerns about the policy response to Covid-19 may have changed, but we remain resolute that long term recovery must not be achieved through austerity measures that increase inequality.

The Impact of Covid-19

So far, at least 2,981 people have died as a result of Covid-19 in Northern Ireland.¹ Covid-19 has disproportionately affected Section 75 groups, such as older people, persons with disabilities and those who are clinically vulnerable, women, black and minority ethnic people, and those with dependents.

It has seriously impacted the health, wellbeing, and educational outcomes of children and young people due to extended periods of remote learning. The pandemic has also had a major impact on parents, particularly women, who have borne most of the caring responsibility with schools and childcare settings closed for extended periods. Women make up the majority of unpaid carers for whom the pandemic has had a huge impact, with statutory services greatly reduced.²

Public authorities in NI have adapted quickly and under great pressure, and we acknowledge the hard work and dedication in this time of turmoil. However, a strengthened commitment to reducing inequality is needed as public policy focus shifts from emergency Covid measures towards long term recovery from Covid.

¹ As reported by NISRA (2 July 2021)

² Carers UK report that 81% of carers are providing more care than before the pandemic, with less support and less opportunity to access a meaningful break (<https://www.carersweek.org/media/21zgznmn/carers-week-2021-research-report.pdf>)

It is increasingly clear that Covid-19 has disproportionately impacted the poorest and most deprived areas in our society.³ This has occurred in the context of over a decade of austerity, where instead of prioritising investments in health, education, and social protection, budgets have been cut and poverty has increased. Poverty and economic inequality may continue to deepen as the full economic effects of the pandemic are felt with emergency economic supports being withdrawn.

As a Coalition, we continue to call on the Northern Ireland Executive Departments, and all public authorities, to fully discharge their 'Section 75' obligations when developing necessary policy responses to Covid-19 to ensure they actively promote equality of opportunity and do not exacerbate inequalities. These duties are particularly important at this time as the Executive continues to develop the Programme for Government (PfG).

Coalition members are mindful that the Executive budget for the new financial year will continue to place public services under significant strain and does not provide the resources required to meet increasing levels of need or stimulate economic recovery. Nor do we have a multi-year budget, as was promised. Westminster has not restored levels of public spending in Northern Ireland to pre-austerity levels. In reality, Northern Ireland is living with the same budgetary settlement that it started out with in the teeth of the global financial crisis over a decade ago.⁴

We believe that the NI Executive must collectively call for a 'New Deal' for public spending in Northern Ireland within a framework of equality and human rights, which allows public services to be rebuilt and reformed and which addresses our sustained levels of poverty and deprivation. Given the disproportionate impact that the pandemic has had on women, we would urge the Executive to implement gender budgeting, so that the gendered impacts of decisions around resource allocations can be considered.

In addition, the Coalition urges that the NI Executive Departments and wider public authorities take the following priority actions as we continue to deal with the pandemic, roll out vaccinations and rebuild society:

- Provide simplified, easily accessible, and adequate financial supports for those required to self-isolate due to testing positive for Covid-19 or being a close contact. Supports offered thus far have been discretionary and some funds provided have been underspent. This will be of increasing importance as restrictions ease and the potential for community transmission of the virus increases.
- Ensure that the vaccinations programme is accessible to all within society and is effective by undertaking equality monitoring of those accessing Covid-19 vaccines. This monitoring should include the nine section 75 categories and socio-economic status. The

³ The infection rate in the 10% most deprived areas has been almost two-thirds higher than the rate in the 10% least deprived areas. The infection rate among those aged over 65 was four-fifths higher in the 10% most deprived areas than in the 10% least deprived. The admission rate for Covid-19 (confirmed cases) in the 10% most deprived areas was more than double the rate in the 10% least deprived area. The Covid-19 death rate in the 10% most deprived areas was almost two-fifths higher than the rate in the 10% least deprived areas (Coronavirus related health inequalities – December 2020 (Department of Health) (<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/coronavirus-related-health-inequalities-december-2020>))

⁴ 'Northern Ireland Draft Budget 2021 – 22: Northern Ireland Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions response', Briefing for Assembly Finance Committee, February 2021.

results of such monitoring should be used to develop policies and measures aimed at encouraging those groups who may be underrepresented within the vaccinations programme to avail of vaccinations. The NI Executive should commit to ensuring vaccinations will be open to everyone regardless of immigration status.

- Carefully consider the human rights implications of the development of a vaccination passport (in paper or digital form), including providing clear evidence to demonstrate that any such passport or identification is necessary and proportionate in compliance with human rights law. While a vaccination passport system confined to international travel might be acceptable, there are concerns about future compatibility with any EU developed passport, particularly in digital form, which need to be addressed.
- Make express provision to accommodate the right to protest should the Covid regulations tighten in the future (like the ‘second generation’ regulations in July 2020). Aspects of the current provisions for protest remain unclear and unpublicised. Enforcement powers throughout regulations remain vague, uncodified and reminiscent of the ‘Special Powers’ Acts.
- Urgently implement service provision for reproductive health care for people living in NI, who otherwise are forced to travel to obtain medical care.
- Commit to continuing existing welfare mitigations. Also commit to the extension of further measures against the universal credit five week wait and to measures to offset the two-child limit further to the imminent review of the existing welfare mitigations. The Department for Communities (DfC) must be provided with the resources required to meet rapidly growing levels of demand for access to social welfare as the economic impact of the pandemic continues to be felt.⁵ The uplift in Universal Credit introduced during the pandemic should be retained.
- Develop a dedicated and fully costed Childcare Strategy, as is urgently required further to the commitment made under the ‘New Decade, New Approach’ (NDNA) agreement.⁶ Childcare is key for our economic recovery, by enabling parents (particularly women) to get into and stay in work, education, or training. Coalition members engaged in the ‘Childcare for All’ campaign are calling for universal, child centred childcare that meets the needs of children, families and childcare workers.
- Further develop and adopt the strategies committed to within NDNA aimed at reducing inequality, tackling disadvantage and driving economic growth on the basis of objective need, including an anti-poverty strategy; a racial equality strategy; a disability strategy; a gender strategy; a sexual orientation strategy; an active ageing strategy; a children and young people’s strategy; a childcare strategy; a child poverty strategy; and the Irish language and Ulster Scots strategies.

⁵ “There have been significant increases experienced in demand for working age benefits as a direct result of Covid-19 related unemployment. To set this in context, prior to this pandemic, the Universal Credit caseload was 63,170 households. This has increased to just over 142,000 households since the beginning of March 2020, and is expected to increase further as the current restrictions and the potential ending of furlough impact on the local economy. In addition increased numbers of people now require employment support to help them enter employment and reduce their dependence on benefits.” DfC Draft Budget 2021 – 22, Final EQIA, s.6.6

⁶ Available in full here: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5e178b56ed915d3b06f2b795/2020-01-08_a_new_decade_a_new_approach.pdf

Conscious that the most vulnerable groups bore the brunt of the austerity invoked following banking bailout, we call on the UK government and NI Executive to take all steps possible to ensure this is not repeated in the aftermath of Covid-19. Public authorities must ensure that the equality duties form the basis for all policy initiatives that they develop to rebuild our society. In particular, the long-term running down and starving of investment of the health and social care system should be reversed to ensure it is better prepared for any future surges.

This statement has been endorsed by the members of the Equality Coalition. A full membership list is available [here](#).

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