

PRESS STATEMENT – EMBARGOED 00.01 FRIDAY 31 JANUARY 2025

High Court to hear legal challenge against Stormont for failing to adopt anti-poverty strategy

- Hearing in High Court on 31 January 2025 in case taken by rights-group the Committee on the Administration of Justice (CAJ) with support from Public Interest Litigation Support (PILS).
- Case supported by Equality Coalition members including UNISON NI, Barnardo's NI and the Northern Ireland Anti Poverty Network.

On the 31 January 2025 the High Court of Northern Ireland will hear an application for judicial review brought by CAJ against the Department of Communities, Executive Office and First Ministers, for failing to discharge a legal obligation on the Stormont Executive to adopt an anti-poverty strategy.

The legal duty on Stormont to adopt an antipoverty strategy was inserted into S28E of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, as a result of the St Andrews Agreement.

CAJ previously took a successful judicial review against Stormont Ministers for failing to adopt the anti-poverty strategy during the 2011-2015 Assembly mandate, with the High Court finding Executive had acted unlawfully for failing to do so.

Stormont Ministers returned following the 2017-2020 collapse under the New Decade New Approach (NDNA) deal. Specific commitments to progress the anti-poverty strategy were made in NDNA and the Department of Communities (DfC) took forward significant evidence-based and expert work to produce a blueprint for the anti-poverty Strategy, including through an Expert Advisory Panel and Co-Design Group.

Whilst the collapse of the Executive in 2022 meant the strategy could not be adopted at that time, DfC officials confirmed a draft Anti-Poverty Strategy had been prepared which could be presented to incoming Ministers and taken forward accordingly.

Almost a year since the restoration of Stormont in February 2024 no Anti-Poverty Strategy has been even considered let alone adopted by the Stormont Executive.

In this context CAJ, with support from PILS, initiated the current legal challenge.

Daniel Holder, Director of CAJ, said: “The anti-poverty strategy is a key unfulfilled legal obligation from peace process agreements.”

“The preparatory work was done and strategy drafted in the last Stormont mandate. We were told it was good to go to the Executive, but we are almost a year into Ministers’ being put back in place and no anti-poverty strategy has been adopted. Moreover the draft Programme for Government does not even name the anti-poverty strategy despite it being an outstanding legal obligation.”

“We had hoped not to ever have to be back to court again on this matter – but we feel we have no choice, a timetable provided to us by the Department of Communities raises questions as whether a strategy would in fact be adopted in this mandate.”

Kate Barry, PILS Interim Director/Solicitor said:

"This case is a prime example of public interest litigation. CAJ is going to court on behalf of communities across Northern Ireland which have been left waiting for action while living costs rise and poverty gaps widen. Together, we are determined to hold the Executive accountable for the clear commitments it made over 17 years ago. We need an Anti-Poverty Strategy now, no more excuses, no more delays."

Trása Canavan of Barnardo's NI said:

"Children, families and communities in Northern Ireland have been waiting too long for an Anti-Poverty Strategy. It is unacceptable that Northern Ireland has no plan to tackle poverty, despite the detailed work undertaken by the Anti-Poverty Strategy Expert Panel and Co-Design Group. With the number of children in poverty increasing in Northern Ireland, we need an Anti-Poverty Strategy to be delivered now. Northern Ireland deserves better."

Becca Bor, Development coordinator Northern Ireland Anti-Poverty Network said: "We cannot wait any longer for an Anti-Poverty Strategy. We need one urgently to address deepening deprivation across our communities. Too many households struggle to make ends meet and the related impacts of poverty are devastating for individuals, but also our whole society."

"Well researched and experience-led recommendations have long been made to government and we cannot accept further delay to its implementation. "

John Patrick Clayton of the public sector trade union UNISON NI said: '

'Implementing a comprehensive anti-poverty strategy based on objective need is an essential action that must be taken by the Executive now.

"For many across our society, including many people in work and their families, the impacts of poverty are a daily reality. They need the Executive to deliver a strategy that will improve their lives."

Notes:

- The High Court will hear the judicial review on Friday 31 January 2025 at 1030 in the Royal Courts of Justice, Belfast.
- Representatives of the above organizations will be outside the court from 0930 and available for interview.
- The respondents are the Department for Communities (Department with lead responsibility for the strategy), Executive Office and First and deputy First Ministers.
- Further background information into the Anti-Poverty Strategy [can be read here in written evidence from the Equality Coalition to the Communities Committee](#).
- CAJ and UNISON co-convene the Equality Coalition, a network of 100+ NGOs and trade unions working collectively on equality issues. Through the Coalition joint working has taken place between CAJ, UNISON, the NI Anti-Poverty Network, Barnardo's NI and PILS in relation to the anti-poverty strategy.

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