

Statement to the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights the 72nd Pre-Sessional Working Group on the Examination of the United Kingdom's Compliance with the United Nations International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

8 March 2023

Northern Ireland has been without a fully functioning devolved Assembly and Executive for a total of four years within this monitoring round. The ramifications for adherence to the Covenant and the damaging effect on people in Northern Ireland are increasingly evident. The effects are exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the rising cost of living, particularly for minority groups who are often hit hardest by any rights regression. The longer the situation continues, the issues that need addressed are expanding and becoming more difficult to remedy. For example, there is no devolved government to progress the necessary legislative change to address intersectional multiple discrimination or ensure relationship and sexuality education is scientifically accurate in all schools. There is also no devolved government to guarantee the ring-fenced, long-term funding necessary for comprehensive childcare provision, consistent and permanent access to abortion services, addressing persistent inequalities in education, or ensuring support for artists in Northern Ireland.

Further, the UK Government's regressive trajectory regarding the UK's human rights framework is gravely concerning. The current Bill of Rights Bill threatens to weaken this framework by seeking to create a hierarchy of rights and protections. It also seeks to restrict access to domestic courts, contrary to the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement. It is also notable that there is no significant movement on introducing a specific Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland.

Additionally, we wish to draw your attention to three areas of particular concern in Northern Ireland.

First, cost of living. Living costs are rising at a frightening rate, particularly energy, housing and food prices. This especially affects individuals living in Northern Ireland. Reliance on foodbanks is becoming worryingly frequent and an increasing need for warm banks is emerging. It is important that such support is available as a temporary solution when needed, but the extent of reliance on a long-term basis is troubling. Debt vulnerability is increasing, with some feeling they have no choice but

to turn to illegal paramilitary lenders. Effective steps to comprehensively eradicate poverty in Northern Ireland is needed. This includes implementing an up-to-date anti-poverty strategy. It includes providing food security and support grants on an emergency and long-term basis that are proportional to costs and available when needed. It also includes providing the necessary support to ensure individuals in Northern Ireland are not reliant on illegal lenders and can be safely extracted from such scenarios.

Financial support through social security can be significantly improved. For example, by ensuring the support available is proportional to the cost of living, repealing regressive policies such as the two-child tax credit limit and addressing accessibility and assessment issues with Universal Credit and Personal Independent Payment.

Asylum financial support is insufficient, this is exacerbated by the continued prohibition on people seeking asylum from being able to work in the UK. There is an unknown number of people seeking asylum who have no recourse to public funds. Effective steps are required to ensure people seeking asylum in Northern Ireland are not destitute and are provided with financial support that is proportional to the cost of living, takes account of specific needs and is not unnecessarily restricted.

Second, housing. Rising homelessness (including hidden homelessness) and insufficient culturally appropriate Traveller-specific accommodation continue to be issues in Northern Ireland. Sufficient and appropriate long-term social housing that meets demand is required. This includes mitigating measures to address existing waiting lists and revising the housing selection scheme to ensure that it effectively considers applicants' circumstances and reflects up-to-date common challenges faced by tenants. Effective steps are also required to eradicate paramilitary and sectarian intimidation that causes families to be forced out of their homes in Northern Ireland, including actively monitoring the situation through comprehensive data.

There should be an end to the use of hotels as contingency accommodation for people seeking asylum in Northern Ireland. Accommodation provided to refugees and people seeking asylum should be adequate, fit for purpose and consider the needs of families and persons with disabilities.

Third, healthcare. The national health care system, particularly in Northern Ireland, is in unprecedented crisis which has been augmented by COVID-19. It is difficult to summarise the extent of the issues that are arising, but as an example, hospital departments are closing or subject to intermittent suspensions, patients are being treated and accommodated within ambulances or corridors for excessive periods, rural maternity

services are being centralised, GPs and dentists have become increasingly difficult to access, waiting lists for non-emergency treatments have become insurmountable, and there are dangerous delays for specialised services particularly regarding cancer treatments, mental health or support for migrants who are traumatised or have complex needs.

There is a need to build service capacity to meet demand and ensure timely and adequate access for all to health and dental care in Northern Ireland when required. Ring-fenced, long-term funding that effectively addresses objective need is required for mental health care and specialised services in Northern Ireland.

This statement highlights priority issues, but we encourage the Committee to comprehensively consider the Commission's full report to ensure that the questions posed to the UK Government recognise the Northern Ireland-specific aspects.

Thank you.