Mental Health Strategy 2021-2031

Early Intervention and Prevention Action Plan
Public Mental Health Learning Network

'The Connection between Poverty and Mental Health: Drivers and Solutions'

Exploring a Public Mental Health Approach to Poverty

Seminar Report

2025

Background

The Public Mental Health Learning Network is a workstream of the Mental Health Strategy Early Intervention and Prevention Action Plan. The remit of the Public Mental Health Learning Network includes:

- Collate and expand the evidence base, including building evidence and understanding how structural inequalities impact mental health.

The workstream decided that poverty would be a key theme in 2024/25. To explore this further, we hosted a seminar titled "Poverty as a Driver of Poor Mental Health" on Tuesday, November 19th, at Blackmountain Shared Space in Belfast. Over 60 individuals from various sectors attended the seminar.

The seminar aimed to enhance the Public Mental Health Learning Networks' knowledge and understanding and to examine solutions that could inform future policy in Northern Ireland.

Further information on the Mental Health Strategy Early Intervention and Prevention Action Plan is available on the following website.

Presentations

Below is a summary of the presentations delivered on the day. Given the time limitations, we had short 10-minute talks. We recognise that not all those who experience inequalities were included in the presentations, but the impact on other groups, including people seeking asylum and refugees, carers, people with disabilities, and people with long-term health conditions, did come through in the discussions.

John McCord, **from the Department for Communities, provided an update on the development of the anti-poverty strategy for Northern Ireland**. John outlined the next steps, which included establishing a Cross-Departmental Working Group, ongoing strategy development, and the requirement of an executive agreement before public consultation.

Becca Bor from the **Northern Ireland Anti-Poverty Network** provided an overview of poverty and mental health in Northern Ireland. The presentation includes quotes from individuals affected by poverty, emphasising the struggles they face, such as the inability to afford basic necessities and the impact on mental health. It provides statistics on poverty rates, housing issues, and the financial challenges those on low pay face.

Shari McDaid from the **Mental Health Foundation** summarised recent research on poverty stigma. The presentation highlighted factors such as unemployment, income decline, debt, and poverty stigma and defined different types of poverty stigma. It discussed the association between poverty stigma and mental health. It provided key findings, recommendations, and potential benefits of increasing social security income for parents and carers of children on Universal Credit.

Dr Anne-Marie McClean, Health Improvement Representative in NI for the **RCPCH**, provided a presentation on the impact of child poverty. It noted that mental health problems are common and increasing, with childhood being a critical time for intervention. The presentation also pointed out that children from low-income households have higher rates of mental health problems. Additionally, there has been an increase in emergency department attendance and admissions due to mental health issues, including suicide attempts, self-harm, and eating disorders.

Siobhan Harding from the **Women's Support Network** presented their research on the impact of poverty on women's mental health. The presentation explored the effects of poverty on women, particularly in the context of recent welfare reforms, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the current Cost-of-Living Crisis. It highlighted the financial and emotional distress caused by these factors, with findings showing significant negative impacts on physical and mental health, debt levels, and social participation.

The presentation concluded with recommendations for anti-poverty strategies and sustainable funding models to support grassroots organisations.

Deirdre O'Connor, Anti-Poverty Officer at **Fermanagh and Omagh District Council,** presented on rural poverty, exploring various aspects of poverty in the region. The presentation recommended three key themes to address poverty. The first theme focused on immediate to medium-term efforts to mitigate poverty through information, communication, signposting, targeted interventions, and community support. The second theme addressed medium to long-term strategies to prevent poverty and provide pathways out, including early intervention, income maximisation, financial education, and business practices that do not harm those at a socio-economic disadvantage. The third theme emphasises ongoing efforts to redesign and deliver services and support that reduce poverty stigma, involve communities in decision-making, sustain funding, grow the local economy, and effectively utilise local data and intelligence.

The presentation on "Poverty and Mental Health" by Kellie Turtle from **Age NI** discussed the impact of poverty on older people's mental health. It highlighted the high rates of pensioner poverty in Northern Ireland, the significant increase in foodbank usage, and the prevalence of fuel poverty. The presentation also addressed the issues of loneliness, anxiety, and depression among older people, emphasising the role of social exclusion and poor infrastructure.

Facilitated Discussions

The presentations made clear the impact of poverty on mental health and highlighted how inequalities have a considerable effect on risk and protective factors for mental health.

To further explore the impact of poverty on mental health, people were asked to choose an area of interest and were allocated to tables for a facilitated discussion.

The areas of interest were:

- Poverty
- Poverty stigma
- Children and poverty
- Women and poverty
- Rural poverty
- Older people.

The tables were asked to frame their discussion on two questions:

- What is the impact of poverty on mental health?
- How can the impact of poverty on mental health be alleviated, and who should be responsible?

The Impact of Poverty on Mental Health

The discussions across all groups highlight the pervasive and multifaceted impact of poverty on mental health and well-being, affecting individuals, families, and communities in intergenerational and intersectional ways. Poverty leads to poor mental health and well-being among at-risk groups such as children, refugees, women, older adults, and those in rural areas, often amplifying existing inequalities and creating barriers to accessing necessary support.

Poverty and its associated challenges are very clearly a driver of poor mental health. Stigma, whether around poverty, mental health, or the intersection of both, deepens isolation and prevents individuals from seeking or receiving the help they need.

While many innovative services exist, structural and systemic issues have repeatedly been identified as significant barriers to effective intervention. Across groups, there was consensus on the urgent need for coordinated, holistic approaches addressing poverty's immediate effects and root causes.

The links between poverty and mental health are complex and far-reaching and can be seen through many aspects of everyday life. Poverty impacts vary at various stages of life and for different at-risk groups; however, the connection to mental health is evident throughout. While support for both poverty and mental health is

available, it can be inaccessible to those who need it due to issues with transport, location, lack of awareness and perceived stigma.

Alleviating the Impact of Poverty on Mental Health

Investment in eradicating poverty was widely recognised as having the power to address many of the drivers of poor mental health, leading to social, economic and health benefits that would be felt across Northern Ireland. Discussion groups recognised that while many changes could be enacted on a structural and policy level, much of the prevention and early intervention work to support mental health can occur at a community level and lead to immediate positive changes**.**

We have summarised the recommendations that should be considered to alleviate the impact of poverty on mental health in Northern Ireland.

Anti-Poverty Policy and the Impact on Mental Health

Across all the discussions, there was agreement that the delivery and implementation of an anti-poverty strategy for Northern Ireland, which reduces poverty, would be the biggest driver of reducing the mental health impact of poverty. The groups identified key considerations for the anti-poverty strategy that would inform its development and delivery.

- **Utilise existing evidence:** Ensure decision-makers are held accountable for using the established evidence base when developing strategy and allocating funding. This includes removing the two-child limit in welfare provision, considering a child payment to promote family well-being, and expanding Sure Start programmes to support early childhood development and mental health.
- **Adopt a cross-departmental and collaborative approach:** Foster collaboration between various departments, councils, health, the community, and the voluntary sector to co-produce holistic and person-centred local strategies that are interlinked with the overall strategy.
- **Understanding the impact on mental health:** taking a health economics approach to understand the investment in anti-poverty measures on population mental health. Consider how the data and outcome measures on population mental health, developed as part of the Early Intervention and Prevention Action Plan, could be utilized in the strategy.
- **Consider the structural barriers:** The strategy must address the structural barriers to employment participation, including discrimination, inadequate childcare provision, transport, and the availability of good jobs.
- **Addressing education costs:** The policy must tackle the impact of poverty on young people in education, including the associated stigma that can impact mental health. This includes the universality of free school meals, uniform costs, activity costs and transport.
- **Focus on prevention and early intervention**: Shift the focus downstream rather than responding to crises.

- **Focusing on inequalities**: adopting an inequalities approach to investing in interventions to ensure those most in need can access support.

Interventions to alleviate the impact of poverty

When considering what could be done to alleviate the impact of poverty on mental health, several discussions related to where to place support and how to target resources.

- **Promote stronger collaboration between community, voluntary, and statutory services:** Foster partnerships among these services, including schools and health services, to share learning, maximise partnerships, and make the best use of available resources.
- **Integrate social solutions with statutory provisions: Offer social solutions alongside clinical services, such as rolling out multidisciplinary teams (MDTs)** in primary care and implementing the social prescribing model across Northern Ireland.
- **Establish locally based services through well-being networks and family support hubs:** Develop services that are responsive to community needs and proactive in their approach. Support statutory services in aligning their offerings around the communities they intend to serve.
- **Embed welfare and debt advice within accessible places** and services, such as schools and primary care settings, to help individuals and families navigate these barriers.
- **Social Security navigation: Provide additional support to help individuals navigate the Social Security system**, particularly during times of change and crisis. Encourage a person-centred approach that fosters genuine connections and may involve an intensive one-to-one intervention to provide adequate support.
- **Access to social supports**: Ensure everyone can access social supports and services that enhance mental health, such as green spaces, heritage sites, social outlets, and leisure activities. This approach should go beyond the basics of living and promote full engagement and enjoyment of good mental health.
- **Ensure sustainable funding for community and voluntary sector programmes:** Secure long-term funding to enable these programmes to create lasting change and address the issue of short-term interaction caused by short-term funding.
- **Targeted Interventions for those most at risk:** Interventions that target those most at risk will be essential to reducing inequalities and should be the focus of any policy or intervention.

People also reiterated that where interventions and programmes are in place, they need to recognise poverty as a barrier to accessing services.

Reducing Stigma

Many discussions around the tables talked about the impact of poverty stigma on people's mental health. Alongside the effects of living with the impact of financial stress, the need to address poverty stigma was aligned with reducing the impact of poverty on mental health.

- **Reframe poverty as a societal issue**: Develop public awareness campaigns and educational programs emphasising poverty as a societal problem rather than an individual failure. Reframe the conversation about poverty to emphasize the effects of existing inequalities and social determinants. This will help reduce stigma and promote a more inclusive and supportive community.
- **Co-design anti-stigma interventions**: Collaborate with communities to co-design statutory and voluntary interventions that actively reduce stigma. This can be achieved through the use of inclusive language, empowering referral processes, and implementing uplifting programmes that challenge negative stereotypes.
- **Trauma-Informed services**: The recognition that systems to support people can be re-traumatising or trauma may be a barrier to accessing a service. The need for trauma-informed approaches across all levels is vital to reducing stigma and increasing help-seeking.

What Next?

The presentations and discussions clearly show that reducing poverty and alleviating its impact could significantly improve population mental health in Northern Ireland. The discussions demonstrated a genuine willingness to make the necessary changes to mitigate the impact of poverty. Ensuring that we keep it on the agenda across all our work will be vital to delivering the required changes.

The Public Mental Health Learning Network will share this paper with the Mental Health Strategy Early Intervention and Prevention Steering Group and its members to ensure that the valuable input from the presenters and all participants is utilised to inform our future work plans and inform our input into policy development in Northern Ireland.

Thank you

The Public Mental Health Learning Network would like to thank all the individuals who generously donated their time to present at the event and all the participants for sharing their experiences and knowledge during the discussions.