



# Niacro Response to the NI Executive's Anti-Poverty Strategy 2025-2035

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## Introduction:

Niacro has been working in Northern Ireland since 1971 and is committed to reducing crime and its impact on people and communities across Northern Ireland. Guided by a vision of society where the rights and needs of all people are equally respected and protected, our strategic plan is aligned to DoJ and Programme for Government priorities, and our goals are as follows:

1. **Crime reduction through support**
2. **Safer and inclusive communities**
3. **Reduction of young people entering the Criminal Justice System**
4. **Insight drive change**
5. **An effective and efficient organisation**

Niacro's diverse range of services includes mentoring, employability programmes, finance and debt advice, and family support programmes; we create meaningful change for **over 7,700 people** annually and facilitate **over 50,000 prison visits across the prison sites** each year.

More details on our service programmes and policy priorities are available: [www.niacro.co.uk](http://www.niacro.co.uk)

We work closely with the Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS) and the Probation Board (PBNI) both at a strategic and operational level and deliver a range of trauma informed programmes and services designed and delivered together with aims to reduce re-offending which focus on:

- Strengthening family ties
- Maximising opportunities for training and employment
- Supporting stability with housing, health and finances

Our approach to delivering and improving rehabilitation also involves our policy work, through which we play our part in shaping public policy and helping to make change – for the better – to the criminal justice system. We believe that the knowledge and experience we gain from our work gives us the obligation, the authority, and the responsibility to seek to influence policy makers, legislators, service providers, and the wider public.

Niacro welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Northern Ireland Executive's draft Anti-Poverty Strategy. With decades of experience reducing crime and its harms, we witness firsthand how poverty drives offending and deepens systemic disadvantage. Each year, our 27 service programmes support people, from those living with a criminal record, to families grappling with the hidden costs of imprisonment - revealing the intricate links between poverty, trauma, and justice system involvement.

This response is informed by the voices of justice-involved individuals, marginalised women, and families facing severe financial challenge, gathered through two targeted engagement sessions organised to support this response. It also draws on our June 2024 research, ‘The Financial Implications of Imprisonment on families in Northern Ireland’, **which uncovers the ‘unseen sentence’ of debt and isolation borne by families, with up to 40% of their income spent maintaining contact with incarcerated loved ones.**

We view the Strategy through the lens of our work with people and families in contact with the criminal justice system, as well as communities experiencing extreme poverty in Northern Ireland. We also highlight that victims of crime - such as those facing intimidation or requiring compensation for injury - should be considered, given the financial impacts they may endure as a result.

Acknowledging the NI Executive’s financial constraints, we assert that the draft Strategy lacks:

- **A robust, actionable framework.**
- **Detail on outcomes, actions, and accountability**

As one Niacro participant noted: ***“When everyone is responsible, no one is - what gets measured gets done, and without targets, this strategy risks falling short for people at greatest risk of poverty.”***

These details are **URGENTLY** needed to address entrenched poverty effectively.

Poverty is a well-established determinant of crime and Niacro urge that the barriers to education, employment, housing, and mental health support that exist for Niacro service users, and their families are addressed within this vital strategic initiative. Niacro is committed to partnering with the NI Executive and others to refine this Strategy into an inclusive tool that eradicates poverty for good.

### **Evidence of Poverty’s Link to Justice Involvement:**

Poverty and criminal justice involvement form a self-reinforcing cycle. Our 2024 research highlights the “unseen sentence” for justice-affected families: 40% of family income spent on prison costs, 60% reporting mental health declines, and 33–37% accruing debt due to custody.

Key statistics underscore this nexus:

- **Initial Offending:** 38% of women with convictions offend to support children; 81% were unemployed pre-custody (vs. 8% general population). Children in persistent poverty are more likely to enter the justice system<sup>i</sup>.
- **Reoffending:** 52% of short-sentenced prisoners<sup>ii</sup> and 45.8% of all released adults reoffend within 12 months; 16% lack post-release accommodation<sup>iii</sup>.
- **Employment and Income:** 74% of people in prison left school at 16 or younger<sup>iv</sup>; a third have no qualifications. Five years post-release, former prisoners earn £60 less monthly than peers<sup>v</sup>.
- **Geographical Deprivation:** Drug/alcohol harms are four times higher in deprived areas, correlating with offences<sup>vi</sup>.

- **Compound Impacts:** 66% of prisoners report lifetime drug use; 45% of probation-assessed offenders have mental health issues contributing to offending<sup>vii</sup>.

These links demand integration of poverty alleviation with justice reform, including:

- Living-wage pathways.
- Trauma informed wrap-around support.
- Targeted interventions.

### **Draft Strategic Vision :**

While the Strategy’s vision does not go as far as for example, “A Northern Ireland where no one lives in poverty” the existing one of “*Working together, poverty and its impacts will be effectively and sustainably eradicated across our communities*”, does reflect the overall intent, the enormity of the work required, the context of poverty in NI and the need for collaboration. The vision aligns with our own mission to reduce crime by addressing poverty as a root driver, including the financial shocks of custodial sentences on families and helping people with criminal records obtain and sustain employment.

**To make the vision truly inclusive, it should explicitly name families affected by the justice system as a core constituency. Eradicating poverty “effectively and sustainably” requires clear, time-bound targets, ring-fenced funding, and a trauma-informed, co-designed approach that embeds lived experience from the outset.**

### **Critical Gaps in the Draft Strategy:**

At Niacro we are concerned that the draft lacks specificity in key areas:

- **Resourcing:** No clear funding commitments or staffing plans.
- **Accountability:** Absence of measurable targets and transparent reporting.
- **Lived-Experience Engagement:** Limited structured, ongoing co-production mechanisms.
- **Justice-Specific Focus:** Insufficient attention to unique needs of justice-impacted families, including single parents, kinship carers, and children affected by custody.
- **Data and Monitoring:** Inadequate disaggregation by justice-status, geography, age, gender, disability, and ethnicity.

As such, without addressing these gaps, the Strategy risks falling short for those at greatest risk of poverty.

## Overarching Recommendations for Enhancement:

To deliver transformative impact Niacro recommends the draft is reviewed to include:

1. **Clear Targets:** Establish time-bound, SMART targets; create public dashboards for quarterly reporting.
2. **Ringfenced Budgets:** Cross department collaboration and accountability and public reassurance that poverty is being directly tackled together.
3. **Lived-Experience Co-Governance:** Form an Anti-Poverty Citizens' Assembly and include justice-affected individuals to co-design, monitor, and refine interventions.
4. **Cross-Departmental Delivery:** Create a ministerial-level Anti-Poverty Delivery Board (Departments of Communities, Justice, Health, Education) with Poverty Champions for coordinated action.
5. **Legislative Framework:** Providing the enabling mechanisms for reform and underpinning accountability and delivery across departments; provide details of what existing legislation underpins the strategy and what will be required in the future to underpin the action plans.
6. **Data Transparency:** Disaggregate all indicators; include justice-status and other demographics; release annual public data.
7. **Justice-Specific Interventions:**
  - Implement bail reform and a Bail Act to reduce remand-related financial shocks (target: 25% remand reduction).
  - Consider Prisoner Family Debt Hubs and FAMM clinics in courts/visitor centres for debt support, benefit checks, and financial literacy and ensuring the most excluded have access to financial inclusion initiatives.
  - Consider increasing prisoner wages to living-wage benchmark (£40/week) to ease family burdens, link to social enterprise placements.
  - Provide digital inclusion grants.
8. **Prevention of Intergenerational Poverty:** Scale up early years, family support, and youth justice diversion programs.
9. **Welfare-System Reform:** Review Universal Credit rates; explore NI-specific benefit top-ups.

## Specific Anti-Poverty areas to be addressed to deliver the Vision:

1. **Ensure effective, accessible and independent Welfare and Debt Advice Services**

At Niacro we see debt as a symptom of poverty, as well as a determinant of criminality. In our day to day work we encounter people living with significant debt problems, sometimes these debts are to illegal money lenders and therefore the matter is further complicated in terms of risk of harm and likelihood of further indebtedness. The impact and trauma this causes people and communities can not be underestimated.

Debt can also be exacerbated by legal fees, court fines, and income loss due to imprisonment. Niacro research shows families face an “unseen sentence” of debt, with a third or people accumulating arrears during remand while supporting their family member in prison.

Our FAMM (Family and Money Matters Service) is key to supporting families to navigate the financial impact of custody and avoid further poverty. Adjacent to this there is a need for further targeted and funded welfare rights advice for people impacted by imprisonment, particularly on release from prison to access appropriate supports, including our Glasspool funded one off payment to alleviate financial stress.

People impacted by contact with the criminal justice system experience practical and systemic barriers to employment and are often reliant on benefits for long periods of time.

We welcome the commitments in the draft Anti-Poverty Strategy ***“to deliver a package of welfare mitigations, keeping the level of support under review as resources and evidence become available, whilst lobbying Westminster on reform as appropriate”***, but more details are required to understand what the actions will be, especially considering changes to Universal Credit and Personal Independent Payments.

We urge the Executive to continue Welfare Mitigations and Discretionary Support, as a basic provision to prevent people and families from experiencing the worst impacts of poverty and provide a platform for exiting poverty.

This strategy should also be developed in tandem with the Department for Communities current consultation on the *Support Framework for Independent Debt and Advice Services*, as the capacity and strength of a cohesive and well-resourced advice sector will be pivotal to the implementation of this strategy.

## **2. Address Child Poverty**

A stable family environment can foster resilience, but in our experience, imprisonment can disrupt “stability”. Niacro work with the Northern Ireland Prison Service to deliver the Family Links and Visitor Centre services to keep families connected while strengthening relationships to support rehabilitation. Our FAMM (Family and Money Matters Service) is key to supporting families with children to navigate the financial impact of custody and facing barriers in the community due to contact with the criminal justice system.

The draft Strategy outlines the following strategic commitment: ***“We will undertake research to understand the impact of Westminster’s two child limit on poverty indicators and call on the government to remove Westminster’s Two Child Limit. (Department for Communities).”*** Niacro view that there are sufficient research and data already available as to the impact that this rule has on families with more than 2 children and the unacceptable risk of poverty this places on them; as a member of the Cliff Edge Coalition, we have called for the removal of the two-child limit.

Niacro would also take this opportunity to call for a comprehensive and resourced childcare strategy for Northern Ireland that places the needs of children at its centre.

### 3. Address the housing shortages and support communities

Lack of housing and appropriate accommodation is one of the single biggest factors in re-offending. Many people leaving custody are homeless and are placed in temporary accommodation which can lack the environment for properly addressing their needs to prevent further criminalisation and provide the stability to change. Alternatively, people can end up living on the streets or sofa surfing, and the cycle of poverty is exacerbated by lack of a home, and indeed a poverty of hope.

At Niacro we offer mentoring support and services designed to address the needs of people at risk of offending or taking part in behaviours that could lead to loss of tenancies or housing.

We note that the general lack of affordable housing, including social housing, needs to be addressed urgently and support any initiatives from across the private, statutory and voluntary sectors to collaborate to address this and build a housing stock that can counteract the impact of poverty and provide the basis for an inclusive and safe Northern Ireland.

### 4. Address the needs of people with addictions and substance misuse

Substance misuse and poverty are interlinked, with justice system involvement amplifying financial instability. It is imperative that people in the justice system including prison and, in the community, have access to timely health care and access to prescribed medications.

It is important to highlight that people facing dual diagnosis (of substance misuse and mental health) have additional barriers to accessing timely healthcare interventions especially counselling support. This draft Anti-Poverty strategy should consider the implications of the *Mental Health Strategy 2017-27* as well as *Preventing Harm, Empowering Recovery - Substance Use Strategy 2021-31* as they relate to providing opportunities to alleviate and prevent poverty.

### 5. Ensure good quality employment is available to all

Niacro welcomes the draft strategy commitment: “***There must be high quality, suitable, and accessible job opportunities for all individuals across NI, and specific measures to protect individuals and their rights.***”

Research shows that securing employment is the most significant factor in breaking the cycle of reoffending.<sup>viii</sup> Similarly, engaging in and maintaining participation in training programmes has a proven impact on reducing reoffending.

Niacro has been delivering support programmes for individuals with convictions in the community and prisons for several decades e.g. SkillSET is our current programme to provide employability and vocational training. Funded by the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, the NIPS, PBNI and the Gallacher Trust, the delivery of this service is an excellent example of how criminal justice organisations, the voluntary and community sector, local businesses and service users collaborate to support success for people like Gary:

### **Case Study: SkillSET support to rehabilitate and overcome challenges – in custody, through the gate and into the community**

Gary is a 35-year-old man, now living in Belfast, after being displaced from his home city.

Gary was first referred to Skillset by the Prisoner Development Unit while in custody at Maghaberry prison. He had no family or friends to rely on for support due to his conviction. He had nowhere to live on release and no money or benefit support. This was his first time in prison, and he was afraid for his future.

Gary shared with us the difference having support from Niacro made for him:

***“I met Kelly from Niacro – I was needing support with absolutely everything - with benefits, housing, banking, transport, GP and hopefully getting a job. I had never been to prison before, and I was afraid of what it was all going to be like when I DID get out. I wanted it to be that I could put everything behind me but talking to other boys I wasn’t sure how I was going to be able to do that. I have no family or friends. I am very thankful to the prison service for putting me in contact with Niacro.***

***As well as working with me herself, Kelly also put me in touch with other Niacro workers who helped me with benefits and housing referrals, and I got a place on their Transitions programme. Kelly spent a lot of time with me; she helped me get a CSR card and 360 excavator training. Before I left prison, she helped me do a CV, and to do a proper Disclosure statement – she explained that it would better to have this ready and make a fresh start right from the get to. She explained that Niacro were able to help people to do this and to be honest when applying for jobs. I needed help with getting ready for interviews too which was not a problem for Kelly.***

***Due to all this help and the fact that I had support from Niacro after I left the prison, I feel I was as prepared as I could be. It is so easy for people to relapse and be recalled to prison. I can’t believe that within 4 weeks of leaving Maghaberry I got a job as a digger driver. My employers know about my past because Niacro and the prison service were involved and supportive, so it meant that they had reassurance.***

***I am still looking for a permanent place to live and it’s so hard at the minute as there aren’t enough places. I am still getting help and SkillSET will be there for me over the next four months to make sure I stay in post.***

***I can’t believe that services like this exist. I am so grateful for all the support I have had, and part of me thinks I don’t deserve it....my own family has disowned me. I am not going back to prison under any circumstances and let Kelly down and I am going to take this as my second chance to make a difference ... for myself!”***

Each year we work with over 700 people in the SkillSET programme and to date have achieved **17.2% of participants into Employment and 36% supported in education and training**. We also work closely with Department for Communities (DfC) Work Coaches in the prison, and employers in the

community to create realistic employment opportunities; we support disclosure statements and act as a point of contact if any issues arise following a job start.

The inclusion of a cross-departmental strategy to tackle offending and reoffending within the new Programme for Government presents a unique opportunity to drive transformation. However, there is a requirement to ensure the contingency funding available to the voluntary and community sector to ameliorate for the ending of the ESF/UK Shared Prosperity Fund is in place, so Niacro can continue our programme to deliver tangible results to get people into employment, keep communities safer and prevent poverty.

These funded programmes also meet the needs of disabled people and other groups furthest removed from the employment market via bespoke employability support. This requires URGENT cross departmental attention.

In addition, and as a Living Wage accredited employer, Niacro encourages all employers to move toward these standards.

## **Conclusion and Final Comments:**

The draft Anti-Poverty Strategy offers a promising foundation, but to drive transformative change, it must integrate justice reform with poverty alleviation.

Overall, our concerns about targets and ring-fenced budgets will need to be addressed by the final strategy and associated action plans. By adopting our recommendations - clear targets, lived-experience co-governance, cross-departmental delivery, data transparency, and justice-specific interventions - the Strategy can move toward eradicating poverty, reduce reoffending, and build resilience across our community.

Niacro looks forward to partnering with the NI Executive, justice agencies, and stakeholders to refine and implement this over the next decade.

For more information: [pact@niacro.co.uk](mailto:pact@niacro.co.uk)

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<sup>i</sup> Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland's 2021 review 'How the Criminal Justice System in Northern Ireland treats Females Who Offend'

<sup>ii</sup> Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) Reducing Adult Reoffending in Northern Ireland (June 2023).

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iv</sup> Public Accounts Committee, "Report on Reducing Adult Reoffending in Northern Ireland" (June 2025). Source link: [Report on Reducing Adult Reoffending in Northern Ireland](#)

<sup>v</sup> Ministry of Justice / HM Prison & Probation Service press release, "Thousands more ex-prisoners in work following major drive to boost employment" (May 2023). Source link: [Thousands more ex-prisoners in work following major drive to boost employment - GOV.UK](#)

<sup>vi</sup> Northern Ireland Audit Office, "Addiction Services in Northern Ireland" (June 2020). Source link: [235243 NIAO Addictions Services Report\\_NEW 4.pdf](#)

<sup>vii</sup> <sup>viii</sup> Ministry of Justice Analytical Services, "Gender differences in substance misuse and mental health amongst prisoners" (2013). Source link: [Gender differences in substance misuse and mental health amongst prisoners](#)

<sup>viii</sup> "Improving Resettlement Support for Prison Leavers to Reduce Reoffending - Nao Report," National Audit Office (NAO), June 19, 2023, <https://www.nao.org.uk/reports/improving-resettlement-support-for-prison-leavers-to-reduce-reoffending/>.