

# **EAST SIDE**

**PARTNERSHIP**



**THE EXPERIENCE OF  
POVERTY AND COMMUNITY  
RESPONSES IN EAST BELFAST**



# **THE SCAFFOLDING PROJECT:**

**BRIEFING DOCUMENT**

**THE EXPERIENCE OF POVERTY AND  
COMMUNITY RESPONSES IN EAST BELFAST**







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# The Scaffolding Project

*The Scaffolding Project, part of EastSide Partnership, was established in 2017 by community and voluntary organisations who deliver support services in East Belfast, see Appendix 1 for the full list of members.*

*The project's members provide services in the area to alleviate the impact of poverty and lobby to prevent its occurrence.*

*The Scaffolding Project's partners share a commitment to equal opportunities for everyone within the community, so that they can learn, work, socialise and enjoy life to the full.*

*By taking a strategic and collaborative approach the project seeks to add value by maximising the impact of its members work in providing food, helping with fuel costs and supporting families.*

*Through a pathway of services which offers holistic support to individuals and families, the Scaffolding Project aims to equip people to move forward and out of poverty.*

*The project campaigns to raise awareness of the impact of poverty and influence change at individual, organisational and societal levels.*



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# Executive Summary

There are six Super Output Areas in the East Belfast constituency with a deprivation ranking of less than 100 which indicates it has some of the highest concentrations of poverty in Northern Ireland.

In the winter of 2020, the Scaffolding Project, part of EastSide Partnership, engaged with five community forums in East Belfast to gain a greater understanding of poverty in the area and its impact on individuals, families and communities. It also wanted to learn more about what groups are doing on the ground to address poverty and what would assist them in addressing the impacts and causes of poverty.

This briefing document captures the key findings from these conversations and recommends specific actions which organisations on the ground and other agencies can take to reduce the prevalence and impact of poverty.

## Main Findings

- Poor mental health was both a cause of poverty and affected people's ability to respond to their circumstances
- Digital poverty meant people didn't have the skills or resources to participate fully in social and economic life
- Loss of employment was resulting in lower incomes and financial insecurity
- Increases in utility costs were placing even greater burdens on those on low incomes
- Food poverty was growing and families were increasingly using foodbanks
- Fuel poverty meant people could not heat their home sufficiently particularly as much of the housing stock is very old
- Isolation was increasing, often this resulted from people not having enough money to socialise
- Navigating the benefits system was difficult meaning people are not getting the support they are eligible for.

## What the community are doing to address poverty

In responding to the immediate impacts of poverty voluntary and community groups were mainly helping to provide people with:

- goods such as food, household items and toiletries
- emotional, social and spiritual support
- advice on benefits applications and signposting them to other organisations for help.

## Policy Responses Required

Six main policy responses were identified to help reduce the prevalence of poverty and alleviate its impact, with the aim of breaking the cycle:

- Access to employment that provides a good standard of living
- Affordable and energy efficient housing
- Support for low income families
- Better benefits and a user centred approach
- Better mental health services and support to reduce isolation.
- Digital inclusion

## Service Improvements Required

The following service improvements were also identified as important in helping address the impacts of poverty:

- Central information services
- Co-ordination of services
- Improvement of communication channels with, and within, statutory agencies and departments.



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# Background to the Study

The Scaffolding Project, part of EastSide Partnership, was established in 2017 by a group of representatives from community groups and voluntary organisations operating in East Belfast. It offers a pathway of services that provide holistic support to individuals and families aimed at equipping people to move forward and out of poverty.

EastSide Partnership is committed to addressing educational disadvantage as a key means to promote pathways out of poverty. As such it believes children and young people should have access to good quality early years services and education to promote life long learning and delivers on this through its EastSide Learning project.

In late 2020, The Scaffolding Project engaged<sup>1</sup> with community groups and voluntary organisations who work with the community on a Project basis to examine the impact of poverty in East Belfast. This briefing is based on that engagement and highlights a number of priorities for tackling poverty.

## The Profile of East Belfast

In the decade from 2009 and 2019, the population of Belfast East Assembly Area increased by 5,319 people or 5.8%, to 96,321. Of these 46,758 (48.5%) were male and 49,563 (51.5%) were female<sup>2</sup>. The Belfast East constituency contains 49 Super Output Areas, some of which are ranked as the most deprived in Northern Ireland, with 6 SOAs ranking below 100. Ballymacarrett 3, for example, is ranked 40th out of 890 on the overall measure, indicating a deep level of deprivation. In the Inner East Belfast Neighbourhood Renewal area 49% of children are living in poverty.<sup>3</sup>

Northern Ireland has higher worklessness and lower employment than elsewhere in the UK with the proportion of people in poverty in workless households continuing to increase slightly<sup>4</sup>. This suggests that the low employment rate continues to be a major factor affecting poverty levels in Northern Ireland. Raising the employment rate will therefore be an important factor in reducing poverty. This is a particular area of concern for Inner East where 30% of the working age population are employment deprived.<sup>5</sup>

More detailed information about Multiple Deprivation in East Belfast can be found in Appendix 2 and on Educational Attainment in Appendix 3.

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<sup>1</sup> The research was carried out during the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown.

<sup>2</sup> [NINIS: Northern Ireland Neighbourhood Information Service \(nisra.gov.uk\)](https://www.nisra.gov.uk)

<sup>3</sup> Inner East Belfast 2019 Neighbourhood Renewal Area Profile Report (nisra and DfC)

<sup>4</sup> [Poverty in Northern Ireland 2018 | JRF](#)

<sup>5</sup> Inner East Belfast 2019 Neighbourhood Renewal Area Profile Report (nisra and DfC)

# COVID - 19

The Covid-19 pandemic has changed the way government departments, politicians and community organisations view the way our society works. Underlying weaknesses and operation of services which, those in poverty rely on heavily, have been brought to the fore over the past year. The pandemic has highlighted pressures within health care, social security, housing and childcare and placed huge demands on the community sector to rapidly deliver essential services. Many people faced with loss of employment and income became reliant on a welfare benefits, often for the first time. They quickly became aware of the low levels of support offered, the complexity of the system and its slowness in processing claims. This led to increased reliance on food banks and food parcels. Many had to turn to community-based advice services to help navigate the complexities of the welfare and benefits system.

## **Community and government responses**

Since the beginning of the pandemic East Belfast Community Development Agency (EBCDA) has played a major role in coordinating support in the community through the East Belfast Coronavirus Community Support and more recently the East Belfast Covid Reference Group, which provides a strategic response to the continuing impact of Covid-19.

Flexibility in government and departmental responses also helped reduce the impact of the pandemic alongside better communication with the community sector. These responses point to how, post Covid-19, a more effective user centred approach to supporting those in poverty could be developed.

It is important to note that whilst this particular body of research took place during the pandemic, the level of poverty in East Belfast is not solely a consequence of Covid-19 and the subsequent lockdowns. Prior to March 2020 poverty was already at a worrying level. In recent times community groups and voluntary organisations in East Belfast have increasingly witnessed gaps in policy and funding in addressing poverty in the area. The pandemic has however made these all the more apparent.



# Poverty in East Belfast – *What's being seen, how is it being addressed and what more is needed?*

Those who participated in the engagement process deal directly with people who are experiencing poverty. In an online survey participants were asked three key questions:

- *What type of poverty are you seeing in East Belfast?*
- *What is currently happening in East Belfast to address poverty?*
- *What more is needed to address poverty?*

These questions were then used as the basis for fuller discussion in five sessions with community forums (Inner East Forum, East Belfast Youth Forum, East Belfast Community Development Cafe, East Belfast Churches Forum, Race Relations Forum) via Zoom, with 75 participants taking part. (See Appendix 4 for a full list of responses to the research questions)

These conversations enabled the Scaffolding Project to have a deeper insight into some of the main causes and impacts of poverty and helped it draw some conclusions about how the impact of poverty could be more effectively addressed.

## **What's being seen**

In the conversations a number of themes emerged:

- Poor mental health was both a cause of poverty and affected people's ability to respond to their circumstances
- Digital poverty meant people didn't have the skills or resources to participate fully in social and economic life and was hindering educational development
- Loss of employment meant lower incomes and insecurity
- Increases in utility costs were placing even greater burdens on those on low incomes
- Food poverty was growing and families are increasingly using foodbanks
- Fuel poverty meant people could not heat their home sufficiently particularly as much of the housing stock is very old
- Isolation was resulting from people not having enough income to socialise
- Navigating the benefits system is difficult meaning people are not getting the support they are entitled to.

There were a notable number of comments about access to digital technology. Not having affordable internet connectivity, nor the necessary hardware, was having an impact on home-schooling and the ability to work from home. If not addressed this digital exclusion will reinforce the poverty cycle. Further information on Educational Attainment in East Belfast is in Appendix 4.

The basic lack of income was a constant pressure. One participant crystallised the experience;

*“Food and fuel, also meeting needs of children in relation to school uniform, stationery and school supplies, and worry of providing at Christmas. Not having money to replace white goods when they break down.”*

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The discussions with the participants demonstrated that many families are struggling to purchase the daily essentials, and on some occasions choosing between whether to heat their house or feed their family. Sometimes the choices were starker, whether to feed the children or the adults. In particular ‘holiday hunger’ had been prevalent in the community, and the lockdown regulations including home-schooling, had exacerbated this with more families feeling the effect of it.

*“Food, fuel and holiday hunger. People are having to choose between eating and heating their homes.”*  
Research participant, 2020

It was noted that Northern Ireland has higher worklessness and lower employment than elsewhere in the UK with the proportion of people in poverty in workless households continuing to increase slightly<sup>6</sup>. This suggests that the employment rate continues to be a major factor affecting poverty rates in Northern Ireland, and that raising the employment rate will be an important factor in reducing poverty.

*“Main areas are fuel poverty and food but (people not knowing) how to see their way through their difficulties.”* Research participant, 2020

*“Low income, unmanageable debt, underachievement, food, lack of local leisure facilities, lack of community cohesion.”*  
Research participant, 2020

Participants also said it is important that communities and individuals know how they can help themselves and who they can turn to. Having an effective advice service that is tailored to the needs of the community and facilitating individuals in helping to understand where they can turn to in order to get the right help.

<sup>6</sup> Poverty in Northern Ireland 2018 | JRF





## What is currently happening in East Belfast to address poverty?

There are many groups currently working within East Belfast to help alleviate the impact of poverty. They offer tangible support with fuel costs, food, toiletries, school uniforms other household items and some crisis funds. Groups also provide emotional, social and spiritual support, as well as advice on benefits applications and signposting to other organisations for help. Others are addressing educational disadvantage and in particular working to address the digital divide.

During the research engagement process, participating organisations highlighted some of the key activities that they are currently undertaking:

- *“Slow cookers with some ingredients for a particular dish”*
- *“Providing food and fuel vouchers. Food parcels and Christmas activity boxes. Regular phone calls. Buying toys for children at Christmas.”*
- *“Referral to food banks, vouchers for shops when funding available, free clothes.”*
- *“Paying for emergency fuel, food parcels and referrals to food banks etc.”*
- *“Delivery of emergency food, PPE, children’s breakfast packs.”*
- *“Food store, debt and job club, family support, furniture and white goods.”*
- *“Through funding being able to buy up a pool of laptops to support young people’s education and learning and monitoring support on how to access and use complicated online platforms like Google classroom- most of the young people who fall through the education gaps have less confidence on new learning formats.”*



## What more is needed?

### *Six Policy Responses to address the impacts of poverty*

The Scaffolding Project believes that having a welfare system that addresses the immediate impacts of poverty is vital. Equally it believes that policy responses are needed to tackle the underlying causes and help those affected to find a way out of poverty.

Following the discussions with the community groups, six policy responses to address the impacts of poverty in East Belfast were identified:

#### 1 Access to employment that provides a good standard of living

Sustainable and accessible employment is vital to help alleviate the impact of poverty. Wages going forward need to be at a level which affords a good standard of living without reliance on benefits.

#### 2 Affordable and energy efficient housing

Everyone should have access to an adequate standard of housing. There should be more low cost housing made available to those on low incomes. Housing should be energy efficient so that residents can affordably heat their homes.

#### 3 Support for low income families

Improved support is needed for families on low income. Those who are considered as the 'working-poor' struggle to afford even a basic standard of living due to low wages and unsustainable jobs. It is essential that anti-poverty, employment, education and skills policies all recognise the needs of low income families and provide the platform of support required to equip people to move forward and out of poverty.

#### 4 Better benefits and a user centred approach

The benefit systems should enable those who can work gain employment. Those who cannot work should be provided with a sustainable and good standard of living. Recognition of the current economic climate, and the impact of Covid-19, should be taken into consideration. For example the increase to Universal Credit and Working Tax Credit of £20 per week introduced during the pandemic should have been made permanent.

The benefits system is complex and hard to navigate. Systems and advice services must be improved to make it easier for people to get the benefits they are eligible for.



## 5 Better mental health services and supports to reduce isolation.

Poor mental health is a cause of poverty and affects people's ability to respond to their circumstances. Lack of adequate income excludes people from participating in social and commercial life which in turn increases isolation and exacerbates mental health problems.

## 6 Digital inclusion

Reliable access to the internet is an essential component of today's society in terms of economic, social and educational inclusion. Policy is needed to ensure that those in disadvantaged communities have access to reliable broadband, the necessary hardware and digital skills training so that they can have the internet access enjoyed by the rest of society.

### Service Improvements Required

The tendency for government departments, and other organisations, to work in silos was often raised as a real problem. Participants felt that barriers to communication needed to be addressed in order to open the gates for effective and efficient collaboration. Participants commented:

- *"Collaboration is needed to help identify the issues 'upstream' so that work can be done to help address these before they flow down into the lives of individuals."*
- *"A central hub would be positive."*
- *"Some sort of "Local Needs" board that identifies areas where help may be required and met."*
- *"I think a one stop information point would be a great help for us to access."*

**The following service improvements were identified as important in helping address the impacts of poverty.**

- Centralised information services
- Co-ordination of services
- Improvement of communication channels with, and within, statutory agencies and departments.

### An example of good practice

Simply putting information into an easy to understand and accessible format can help people understand where they can turn to for assistance. As mentioned above EBCDA have managed the coordination of services in East Belfast throughout the pandemic. Part of its response has been to expand its central information provision to meet new needs in the community and produce a guide to local services. Providing easily understood and accessible information should be the aim for all services providers.

## Appendix 1: The Scaffolding Project Member Organisations

- The Larder
- East Belfast Community Development Agency
- Sure Start
- East Belfast Independent Advice Centre
- East Belfast Mission / Hosford
- Save the Children
- St Vincent de Paul
- Oasis Caring in Action
- Willowfield Parish Community Association

## Appendix 2 - Areas of Multiple Deprivation and East Belfast

Northern Ireland is divided into 890 areas known as Super Output Areas (SOAs). There are seven domains of deprivation which are weighted and combined to provide a ranking of multiple deprivation (MDM) for each of the SOAs.

### The seven domains of deprivation are:

- Income Deprivation Domain
- Employment Deprivation Domain
- Health Deprivation & Disability Domain
- Education, Skills & Training Deprivation Domain
- Access to Services Domain
- Living Environment Domain
- Crime & Disorder Domain

The Belfast East constituency contains 49 Super Output Areas. Although the area contains some of the least deprived SOAs in Northern Ireland (e.g. Belmont, Stormont, and Knock), it also contains some of the most deprived small areas with 6 SOAs ranking below 100. Ballymacarrett 3, for example, is ranked 40th out of 890 on the overall measure, indicating a level of intense deprivation.

### *Income*<sup>7</sup>

Ballymacarrett 3 is ranked 80<sup>th</sup> (out of 890), and lies within the top 10 per cent of the most deprived SOAs on this domain.

### *Employment*<sup>8</sup>

Ballymacarrett 2 and Ballymacarrett 3 (ranked 60<sup>th</sup> and 64<sup>th</sup> respectively) lie inside the top 10 per cent of the most deprived SOAs on this domain.

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<sup>7</sup> Measures the proportion (%) of the population living in households whose income is below 60 per cent of the Northern Ireland median.

<sup>8</sup> Refers to the proportion (%) of the working age population who are in receipt of at least one employment related benefit, plus individuals who are not in receipt of the selected benefits, nor have received income from employment

- *Health deprivation and disability*<sup>9</sup>

All three Ballymacarrett SOAs feature prominently on this domain, with ranks of 33, 43 and 52, indicating severe levels of deprivation. Likewise, Island 1 (78) and Woodstock 2 (76) feature in the top 10 per cent of most deprived SOAs in Northern Ireland on this domain.

- *Education, Skills and Training*<sup>10</sup>

Twelve of the constituency's 49 SOAs feature in the top 10 per cent of most deprived SOAs in Northern Ireland on this domain. These include Mount 2 (6), Mount 1 (8), Ballymacarrett 3 (17) and Ballymacarrett 2 (25).

- *Access to Services*<sup>11</sup>

None of the SOAs feature prominently on this domain. This is not a surprise given that Belfast East is an urban area.

- *Living Environment*<sup>12</sup>

Two of the Belfast East SOAs lie in the top 10 per cent of SOA rankings on this domain, notably Woodstock 3 (17) and The Mount 2 (61).

- *Crime and Disorder*<sup>13</sup>

Inner East Belfast features highly on this domain, with nine SOAs ranked as some of the most deprived in Northern Ireland including The Mount 1 (17), Ballymacarrett 2 (31), Ballymacarrett 3 (53), and The Mount 2 (54).

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<sup>9</sup> Comprised of eight indicators including preventable deaths, health-related welfare benefits, cancer registrations, emergency admission rates; low birth weight babies; children's dental extractions; multiple prescriptions on a regular basis; long-term health or disability issues; and a mental health indicator.

<sup>10</sup> Contains eight indicators including the proportion of primary and post-primary pupils with SEN; school absenteeism, proportion of school leavers not achieving 5 or more GCSEs A\*-C; proportion of school leavers not entering education, training or employment; proportion of 18-21 year olds not entering FE colleges or HEIs; and the proportion of working age adults with no or low-level qualifications.

<sup>11</sup> Travel time by private and public transport to a range of 16 services (including GP, dentist, Post Office, A & E hospital etc.) and the proportion of properties with slow broadband.

<sup>12</sup> Contains nine indicators, including the proportion of unfit dwellings, or require adaptations, or in need of repair; overcrowded households; road traffic collisions; and road defects; and the proportion of properties in flood risk areas.

<sup>13</sup> Comprised of seven indicators, namely: the rate of violence (including sexual offences), robbery and public order; plus the rates of burglary offences, vehicle crime, arson and criminal damage, deliberate primary and secondary fires, and anti-social behaviour incidents.

## Appendix 3: Educational Attainment

Although the achievements of school leavers in Belfast East are almost the same as the Northern Ireland average, the differences become more polarising when examined at Ward level.

In the area of Inner East Belfast, GCSE results are well below the Northern Ireland figures of 81.7% for 5 or more GCSEs at A\*-C with Cregagh at 55%, The Mount at 58%, Woodstock at 59%, Tullycarnet at 61%, Ballymacarrett at 66% and Island at 69%<sup>14</sup>. With regards to A-level attainment, the Northern Ireland percentage of school leavers achieving two or more A-levels at A\*-E grade is 57.3% compared with 20% in Woodstock, 32% in The Mount, 34% in Ballymacarrett, and 37% in Island<sup>15</sup>.

Attainment of solid qualifications at secondary education level improves job prospects, eligibility for further education, potential earnings and probability of remaining in employment during times of economic hardship<sup>16</sup>.

### *Educational Achievement of School Leavers in Belfast East, 2015-16<sup>17</sup>*

Level of Highest Qualifications	5 or more GCSEs at A* - C	2 or more GCE A-Levels (or equivalent)
Northern Ireland	81.7%	57.3%
Belfast East	80.4%	58.5%
Cregagh	55.0%	35.0%
The Mount	58.0%	32.0%
Woodstock	59.1%	20.5%
Tullycarnet	60.7%	32.1%
Ballymacarrett	66.1%	33.9%
Island	68.8%	37.5%
Gilnahirk	90.0%	80.0%
Orangefield	90.2%	67.2%
Cherryvalley	91.8%	80.3%
Dundonald	91.8%	81.6%
Stormont	96.2%	84.9%
Ballyhanwood	97.0%	81.8%

<sup>14</sup> NI Assembly Research and Information Service Briefing Paper: Poverty and Multiple Deprivation in Belfast East

<sup>15</sup> As above

<sup>16</sup> How Does Educational Attainment Affect Participation in the Labour Market? [48630772.pdf \(oecd.org\)](#)

<sup>17</sup> NI Assembly Research and Information Service Briefing Paper: Poverty and Multiple Deprivation in Belfast East



Focusing on education, the comparison between schools that have a larger attendance of those who receive free school meals (FSM) and those who are not in receipt of FSM paints a worrying picture of educational attainment among those who are already experiencing a level of poverty. In 2019, 99.1% of pupils attending Strathearn School achieved 5+ GCSEs grades A\*-C (including equivalents), including GCSE English and GCSE maths with only 5.14% of pupils in receipt of Free School meals. However, Dundonald High School had only 30% of pupil achieve 5+ GCSEs grades A\*-C (including equivalents), including GCSE English and GCSE maths, and had a much higher percentage (59.7%) receiving FSM<sup>18</sup>.

#### *Further Education*

In 2014/15, there were 2,940 (3.8%) students from Belfast East enrolled in higher education institutions in Northern Ireland which is a lower proportion compared to the Northern Ireland average of 4.4%. Belfast East had the joint second lowest proportion of people aged 16+ enrolled in higher education institutions in Northern Ireland<sup>19</sup>.

## **Appendix 4: Research Questions Responses**

A survey asking 3 key questions was circulated to 30 organisations in the community and voluntary sector in East Belfast. Here is a collation of the responses:

### **What type of poverty are you seeing**

- Mental Health
- Isolation/ Relationship/Social
- Food poverty
- Fuel poverty
- Financial poverty
- Debt/ Arrears
- Loss of employment/ job security
- Digital poverty
- Health
- Increase in Utility Expenses
- Access to / knowledge of information and resources
- Access to NHS Healthcare - have to go private

### **What is currently happening in East Belfast to address poverty?**

- Provision of food
- Provision of household items / toiletries
- Provision of fuel
- Financial Support
- Community Outreach
- Emotional / Social / Spiritual Support
- Counselling / Mental Health Support
- Educational Support
- Advice / Signposting
- Provision of digital technology
- Personal Skills Development
- Assistance with access to social security Delivery of medical supplies
- Provision of childcare

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<sup>18</sup> GCSE: Northern Ireland School League Table 2019 - BelfastTelegraph.co.uk

<sup>19</sup> Constituency Profile – Belfast East (niassembly.gov.uk)

## Appendix 4: Research Questions Responses

### What more is needed?

- Co-ordination of services
- Co-ordination of funding
- Mental Health Support
- Addiction Support
- Improvement of communication channels with statutory agencies / Departments
- Personal funding for those impacted by Covid / Universal Credit roll out
- Provision of digital technology
- Services to help upskill unemployed
- Financial advice and support services
- Partnership working with education providers
- Longer term funding streams
- Affordable housing
- Open space / Leisure facilities
- Police understanding / ability to sign post to services
- Educate to detoxify perceptions of poverty
- Community crisis funds / resources

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**The Scaffolding project is supported by the Urban Villages Initiative, this is a key action within the Northern Ireland Executive's 'Together: Building a United Community' Strategy. It is designed to improve good relations outcomes and to help develop thriving places where there has previously been a history of deprivation and community tension.**





# EAST SIDE PARTNERSHIP



## CONTACT

**Barbara Smith, Scaffolding Project Co-ordinator,  
EastSide Partnership  
[barbarasmith@eastsidepartnership.com](mailto:barbarasmith@eastsidepartnership.com)**

**Stevie Johnston, Neighbourhood Renewal Co-ordinator,  
EastSide Partnership  
[stevie@eastsidepartnership.com](mailto:stevie@eastsidepartnership.com)**