



**MANIFESTO**

**2024**

## Advice NI and the independent advice network:

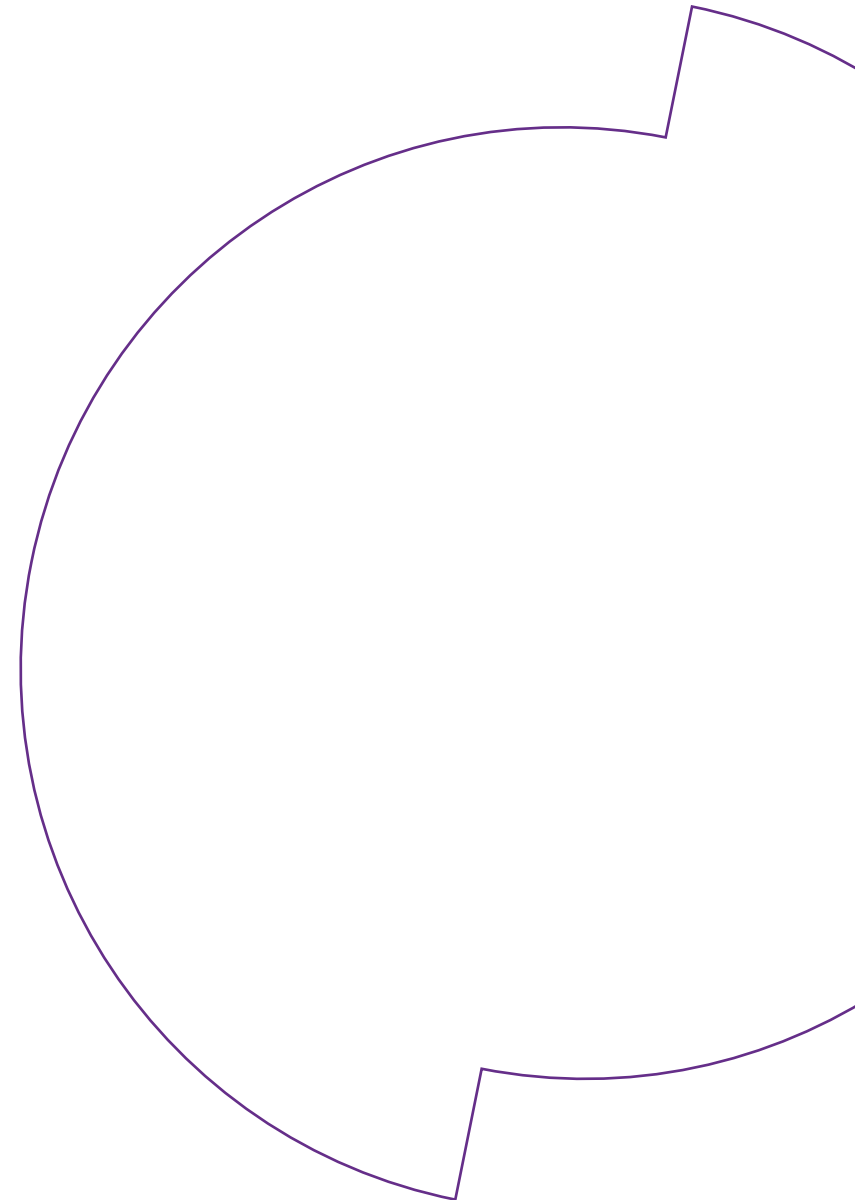
### Advice NI and the independent advice network:

- Believes in Social Justice and Equality.
- Exists to help and support the most vulnerable in Northern Ireland.
- Achieves this through helping people access their rights and entitlements; influencing and challenging Social Policy; tackling Poverty and fostering Community Development; providing support services for frontline serviceproviders

# Advice NI's vision is of a society of confident, informed, and active citizens who can access their rights and entitlements.

Advice NI aims to:

- Tackle Poverty, Debt and Income Inadequacy
- Tackle Race Discrimination
- Promote the development and implementation of the Anti-Poverty Strategy
- Enhance front-line advice services
- Advocate for operational and strategic changes to improve public services



# Advice NI is calling for:

## Independent Advice Services

- The nature, role and principle of 'independent' advice to be promoted and valued
- 3 – 5 year full cost recovery funding settlements with annual uplifts: to create a secure and stable funding mechanism; to attract, recruit and retain staff; to enhance job security and allow for long term planning, development and delivery of top quality independent advice services
- Certainty in terms of retaining current funding streams<sup>1</sup>, to enable effective, creative, strategic thinking and planning
- Putting client access at the heart of strategies for independent advice, including NI regional telephony and online channels, together with multi-channel local provision

<sup>1</sup> Community Support Programme for Advice, Welfare Reform, Debt, Appeal Representation & Regional Support Services

## Welfare Reform

- An impact analysis of 'Move to Universal Credit' including the alarming number of people not making the move
- Effective support (including independent advice) for managed migration of legacy benefit claimants on to Universal Credit
- A review of the sanctions system currently operational under Universal Credit
- A review of the social security arrears / underpayment / overpayment / repayment / deductions policies
- Address the #CliffEdge25 affecting current Benefit Cap mitigations in NI
- A commitment to action the recommendations of the Discretionary Support Independent Review Panel and the Welfare Mitigations Independent Advisory Panel – in particular the recommendation to mitigate the 2 child cap
- Increased commitment by DFC to safeguarding by adopting a Safeguarding Policy and putting in place Safeguarding Champions within all social security functional areas
- Respect and dignity as core principles in all aspects of Social Security delivery & communication

## Anti-poverty

- NI Assembly to prioritise and pass an Anti-Poverty Act enshrining in law the commitment to ‘end poverty in all its forms everywhere’
- Access to independent advice should be enshrined within the Anti-Poverty Strategy, recognising that independent advice is the foundation for addressing poverty
- Community Wealth Building (CWB) to be adopted as a viable model for addressing poverty as well as climate change, and implement the model across government departments, by, for example:
  - - Becoming a real living wage employer
  - - Supporting Sustainable Energy Communities initiatives
  - - Promoting co-operative and community businesses
  - - Supporting and investing in the Northern Mutual bank campaign
- Action to address increasing energy costs, such as the development of fuel support schemes to tackle the fuel poverty crisis and improved support: for consumers to access reduced tariffs and commitment to support diversification within the sector
- Address food poverty by enabling a right to food in line with international human rights laws, ensuring it is available, affordable, and adequate to meet dietary needs.
- Design and implement a new campaign for the take-up of Pension Credit, Social Security benefits and other entitlements utilising the skills and expertise of independent advice services

## Debt & Money

- Review current insolvency measures to ensure accessibility for those who need it most
- Review and realign Debt Relief Order criteria with England and Wales so N.I. citizens are not disadvantaged
- Implement debt respite packages in NI
- Support financial resilience and well-being by creating a network of Community Champions
- Develop 'Community Access to Cash' initiatives aimed at maximising free access to cash and other financial services

## Income adequacy

- Reverse the recent trend of 'freezing' the uprating of working age in work and out of work benefit levels
- Roll out of the Living Wage across Northern Ireland as set by the Living Wage Foundation
- End the perverse disparity in Universal Credit rates for people aged under and over 25, given the 'cost of living crisis' does not distinguish between these age groups
- Initiate a pilot feasibility study to explore further the concept of a Universal Basic Income

<sup>4</sup> Income unconditionally granted to all on an individual basis, without means test or work requirement

## Economy

- Outlaw zero-hours contracts
- Greater focus on creating more opportunities & apprenticeships for young people
- Improvement of job prospects and working careers of people with disabilities and other people who are further from the labour market and face additional challenges entering the workplace, taking care not to abuse or exploit those who are sick, disabled or in any other way economically inactive
- Development of an ambitious local Green New Deal, implemented through the Community Wealth Building model
- Ensure businesses get the right advice and support as they struggle during this Cost of Living Crisis. Some businesses may find themselves struggling financially and more should be done to ensure they can access the help and support they need
- Use of the Community Wealth Building model to invest in and develop co-operative and community businesses as a means of creating more and better jobs, and of providing import-replacing products that will help N.I. become more resilient and self-reliant

<sup>5</sup> Based on the Global Green New Deal proposed by Chomsky and Pollin

## Housing

- Improved access to affordable homes, including single occupancy tenancies
- Tackle the growing shortfall between contractual rents and Social Security support
- Retention of pandemic emergency measures protecting private tenants from unfair evictions
- Greater protection for students (e.g. student leases linked to term-time, student landlord charter addressing standards of housing, costs, standard contractual terms)
- Review of homelessness strategy, to deliver better housing and support including accessing and maintaining tenancies
- Review of spiralling housing costs & precarious nature of private tenancies
- Avert the threat of repossessions by replacing the Support for Mortgage Interest scheme with a scheme that provides effective, accessible support to home owners struggling with mortgage repayments

## Health

- Improved resourcing to and increased availability of Mental Health Services
- Improved access to individual medical records (integrated record keeping processes) and support for service users to ensure safe use of their data
- Involvement and engagement of the community and voluntary sector in identifying and addressing local health care needs

## Children

- An effective, costed childcare strategy which accommodates all working patterns
- An increase in financial help for childcare costs
- Increased resources allocated towards children with Special Educational Needs
- Appropriate funding for the education sector to reverse current trend for greater parent contributions
- Tackle issue of expensive school uniforms
- Public awareness campaign to maximise take up of free school meals, with a goal of making them free for all and reducing stigma

## Immigration and Race Discrimination

- Review the New Immigration Plan
- Tackle systemic racial inequality
- Provide more resources and support within local communities to assist with the integration of refugees, asylum seekers and people from abroad to build better understanding and cohesion
- Provide adequately resourced, co-ordinated and accessible immigration advice provision, including interpretation, at all levels of specialism to meet the emerging immigration advice needs in N.I.
- Give a voice and platform to those with lived experience of the immigration system to influence change

## Digital Inclusion & Access to Services

- Publish revised digital inclusion strategies, setting out how NI Executive will build on what has already been achieved
- Further support, resources and incentives provided for public, charity and community organisations delivering digital inclusion interventions
- Government, technology providers and civil society organisations continue to work together, to explore market innovations that reduce the cost of digital access and enhance protection for those on low incomes
- Public provision of digital access through libraries, health and welfare services and community organisations should continue to be made available. This will provide a vital digital safety net to those who need it
- Promote and resource a more inclusive society by providing adequate resources to enable excluded and marginalised people to access services and thereby their rights and entitlements
  - Support opportunities for excluded and marginalised people to play an active role in the delivery of services
  - Build meaningful, enduring and respectful relationships across different cultures in NI
  - Increase opportunities for the sharing between people and communities of information, knowledge of policy and best-practice within and across these islands





For further information, please contact Advice NI:

**[www.adviceni.net](http://www.adviceni.net)**

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