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UPLIFT – Urban PoLicy Innovation to address inequality with and for Future generaTions

Urban report
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Summary

- In accordance with the Methodological Guidance and Work Plan for WP2 of the UPLIFT project, this report examines the scales and dimensions of inequality affecting the young population in the functional urban area (FUA) of Belfast in Northern Ireland, United Kingdom. National and local dynamics are analysed to explore drivers of socio-economic inequality in this context, and to understand the role of policy interventions in aggravating or reducing the impacts of inequality on the urban youth.

- The analysis is based on desk research and interviews with eight key stakeholders in employment, education and housing at the local level, as well as relevant findings presented in previous deliverables of the UPLIFT project.

- After describing the FUA, we present the main trends and policies in four thematic areas (education, employment, housing, and health), distinguishing between national and local developments. The analysis focuses on the period since the 2008 economic and financial crisis, including the subsequent post-crisis years of recovery and then the COVID-19 pandemic.

- Our analysis shows that, Northern Ireland's economy was impacted by the 2007 financial crisis although Belfast's reliance on public sector employment served as a cushion in the immediate aftermath of the crisis. Whilst the impact of austerity was less severe in Northern Ireland as spending on education and health were protected at the UK level, austerity affected national and local policies. Unique to Northern Ireland as a nation in the UK is the legacies of the 'The Troubles' which has had a lasting impact on inequalities particularly in education and housing.

- Post EU exit and in the recovery plans from the COVID-19 pandemic, macro-level policy appears to shift towards an outcomes-based programme for Government. Outcomes-based programme approach is about defining agreed outcomes which are broad and aspirational for a given population, and then driving all the work the government undertakes towards progressing these outcomes. Northern Ireland government is seeking to partner with civic society to respond to the needs of people and communities everywhere. The programme seeks to forge an inclusive society where outcomes of individual and collective wellbeing are the drivers for the government agenda.

- At the micro-level, the Belfast Agenda which consists of strategic goals for a number of areas including employment, skills, economy and health and wellbeing seeks to address inequalities. The Belfast Agenda also provides a case study for an innovative post-crisis policy. It demonstrates an alternative approach to community involvement, in particular, youth involvement in policy-making.

Introduction

This report examines the scales and dimensions of inequality affecting the young population in the functional urban area (FUA) of Belfast, in Northern Ireland, United Kingdom. Sixteen FUAs across Europe were studied at the meso-level of analysis in the UPLIFT project. As explained by Dijkstra et al. (2019), the concept of FUA goes beyond aspects of population size and density to consider also the functional and economic extent of cities.

The report begins with a description of the FUA of Belfast, highlighting key local characteristics. This section is followed by a discussion of the main trends and policies at national and local levels, based on the analysis of literature, statistics, and interviews. We then present the case of an innovative post-crisis policy. The report closes with a summary of the main findings, emphasising their contribution to understand the FUA of Belfast and to fulfil the broader goals of the UPLIFT project.

Our purpose is to understand how the drivers of socio-economic inequality operate in this local context, as well as the role of policy interventions in aggravating or reducing the impacts of inequality on the urban youth. Therefore, particular attention is paid to the room for action of local policies and the manners in which policymakers and stakeholders conceptualize inequalities and respond to the existing challenges. This corresponds to the meso-level of analysis in the UPLIFT project, i.e. between the macro-level analysis of inequality drivers (the focus of WP1) and the micro-level analysis of individual behaviour and strategy (the focus of WP3).[1] Building on previous deliverables of the UPLIFT project, this report expands data collection and analysis by bringing in additional desk research and interviewees with eight local actors.

The research was carried out between July 2020 and September 2021, with the aim of collecting and organising the relevant literature produced at the national, regional, and local levels on the four thematic areas of analysis: education, employment, housing, and health. Special attention was given to studies that scrutinise the patterns and structures of inequality affecting young people in Belfast and policies influencing urban inequality since 2008. Sources included publications from official bodies, reports of independent studies and observatories, papers in academic journals, masters', and doctoral dissertations, among others. The interviews were

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[1] The specific guidelines for the reports on the sixteen FUAs under study in the UPLIFT project can be found in the WP2 Methodological Guidance and Work Plan. As established in that document, this report draws on results from four tasks of the project: Task 1.3 - National policies and economic drivers for inequality, Task 2.1 - Statistical analysis of inequality at the local level, Task 2.2 - Analysis of the main socio-economic processes and local policies influencing inequality during and after the financial crisis and the subsequent recovery, and Task 2.3 - Innovative post-crisis policies.

conducted between January - March 2021. The interview participants were selected based upon their knowledge and experience in the FUA, as well as ensuring that views presented were varied and representative of both public and private sector workers to enable a critical assessment of social developments and policy impacts. The Covid-19 pandemic affected our ability to schedule interviews with participants. The public health measures in the UK, which included partial or full lockdowns during this period of research meant that due to personal and professional constraints, participants' availability for interviews was limited.[2]

Austerity measures in response to the 2007 financial crises, the impact of the UK's departure from the European Union ('Brexit') since the vote to leave in 2016 Brexit and most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic have all impacted on Northern Ireland's policy environment. Recovery from austerity has taken place at a slower pace in Northern Ireland because of its dependence on public sector spending which has been cut. Public sector spending has been severely impacted by austerity measures imposed at the UK level. Northern Ireland receives a block grant to cover day-to-day spending on public services, known as 'Resource DEL' and long-term expenditure known and 'Capital DEL'. DEL stands for Departmental Expenditure Limits and Resource DEL pays salaries of teachers and doctors, while Capital DEL pays for schools and hospitals to be built and maintained. Beyond the block grant there is Annually Managed Expenditure which covers most social transfers such as welfare payments and pensions (Flynn, 2015). Austerity policies let to reductions in public expenditure through these streams. Capital spending, both in Northern Ireland and the UK, has seen the largest percentage fall over five years. However, while in total the block grant to Northern Ireland has fallen by 8% in real terms since 2010, at the UK level, the equivalent reduction was almost 11% (Flynn, 2015). This is due in part to the fact that areas such as health and education have been somewhat protected from expenditure cuts at UK level and these areas form the vast majority of departmental spending within Northern Ireland.

For Northern Ireland, the Brexit situation is more complicated as the detailed implementation of the Ireland/Northern Ireland Protocol remains unsettled due to the complexity of the internal market issues and political ramifications of physical and virtual borders, both between Eire and NI, and between NI and mainland Great Britain. Concerns about the impact of Brexit include potential delays, shortages and price rises for food, medicines, medical supplies and other health-related products coming into Northern Ireland from the UK (Barry, 2020). Also, staff shortages particularly as the health and social care sector relies on European staff in the context of growing demand for services is likely to mean longer waiting lists for treatment and care services (Barry, 2020). Given that having a hard border between Ireland and Northern Ireland is agreed by all

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[2] Four of the interviewees are workers from public services, while the other four are members of NGOs. All of them perform functions at the local level. Six of them are women, which is broadly consonant with the over-representation of women working in the areas under study. One interviewee preferred to provide written answers to the questions. The other seven were interviewed. The duration of the interviews was between 60 and 90 minutes.

parties to be a negative outcome, the Internal Market Act (2020) seeks to avoid trade barriers between the nations in the UK, that is, a UK Internal Market in a post-EU context. The Northern Ireland Protocol seeks to ensure that the UK Government would continue to apply certain aspects of EU law with respect to Northern Ireland even though the same aspects of EU law are no longer applicable to the rest of the UK (Stennett, et al., 2021). The implications of this are yet to be fully realised. What we do know is that the EU was Northern Ireland's largest export market with Brexit anticipated to cause a 3% reduction in Northern Ireland's GDP and Stennett (2016) argues that this will lead to proportionate increases in unemployment. In addition, Northern Ireland will not have access to EU recovery funds that might have buffered the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

1 General description of Belfast Functional Urban Area

Belfast is the capital and largest city in Northern Ireland which is a devolved nation of the United Kingdom. Belfast is approximately 115km^2. As at the census in 2011, Belfast's population was 280,962 of which 3.57% were from an ethnic minority population and the remaining 96.43% were white (including Irish Traveller); 48.58% belong to or were brought up in the Catholic religion and 42.30% belong to or were brought up in a 'Protestant and Other Christian (including Christian related)' religion; 18.6% are children aged 0-15 years and 37.8% are people aged 16-39 years; 48.08% of the usually resident population were male and 51.92% were female (Northern Ireland Neighbourhood Information Service, 2021). As of June 2020, the estimated population of Belfast is 288,306, of which 140,692 (48.8%) were male and 147,614 (51.2%) were female. 56,079 (19.4%) are children aged 0-15 years and 103,739 (35.9%) are people aged 16-39 years (Northern Ireland Neighbourhood Information Service, 2021). Population growth continues to lag behind national rates but the past decade has seen an increase in population size driven mostly by the increase in the young population (Northern Ireland Neighbourhood Information Service, 2021).

Belfast is governed by the Northern Ireland Assembly which was established as a result of the Belfast Agreement in 1998. The Agreement was the outcome of a long process of talks between the Northern Ireland political parties and the British and Irish governments. The Northern Ireland Assembly has full legislative and executive authority for all matters that are the responsibility of the Northern Ireland government departments which have been devolved from the UK government in Westminster.

Historically, Belfast's location and purpose served well as a port, because it is situated on the East Coast of Ireland. It expands to the borders between the counties of Antrim and Down and the rivers Lagan and Farset. As a result of the industrial revolution and thriving engineering, cotton and shipbuilding industries, Belfast's population exploded tenfold over the 19th century. Up until the end of the Second World War, it was considered a major global industrial port.
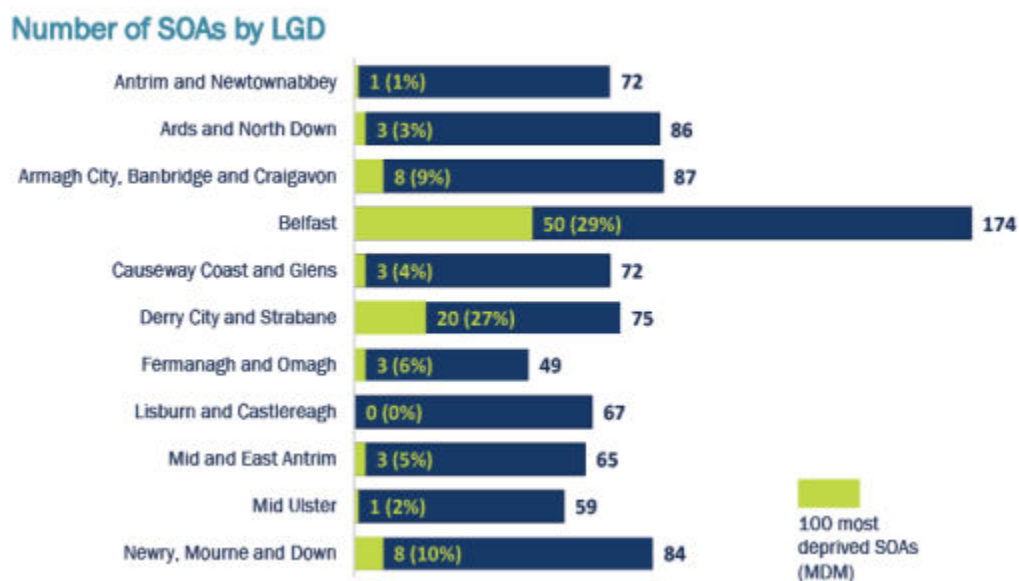
The city is traditionally divided into four main areas which form the basis of constituencies for general elections: North Belfast, East Belfast, South Belfast, and West Belfast. These four areas meet at Belfast City Centre. These areas are subdivided, reflecting the religious geography and the divided nature of Northern Ireland as a whole. Walls known as 'peace lines', originally erected by the British Army after August 1969, divide fourteen inner city neighbourhoods. Voting allegiance had been closely linked with religious identities; for instance, the Irish nationalist/republicans (mainly Roman Catholic) and unionist/loyalist (mainly Protestant).

The Northern Ireland conflict, also known as 'The Troubles', saw three decades of violent struggles resulting from ethno-national and ethno-religious divisions, ending with the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. This sectarian conflict ran from about 1968 to 1998 between the

overwhelmingly Protestant unionists (loyalists), who wished to remain part of the United Kingdom, and the overwhelmingly Roman Catholic nationalists (republicans), who wanted Northern Ireland to (re)join the Republic of Ireland. During this time, Belfast was considered one of the most dangerous cities in the world, with a homicide rate of 30 per 100,000. There is still evidence of communal segregation and conflict across the city, with occasional tensions and the building of peace lines, with the most recent evidence being youth riots in March 2021.

Northern Ireland is the most equal part of the United Kingdom, which is a relatively unequal country when compared to other European countries (Tinson et al., undated). However, Northern Ireland is less equal than most Scandinavian and central European countries. Using the 2017 Multiple Deprivation Measure to look at Belfast specifically, its local government districts (LGDs) have the highest number of the most deprived super output areas (SOAs) in Northern Ireland (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, 2017) (Figure 1). The domains of the multiple deprivation measure are income, employment, education, skills and training, health and disability, access to services, living environment and crime.

Figure 1: Proportion of deprived super output areas by local government district (LGD) in Northern Ireland (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, 2017)

Number of SOAs by LGD

LGD	100 most deprived SOAs (MDM)	Total
Antrim and Newtownabbey	1 (1%)	72
Ards and North Down	3 (3%)	86
Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon	8 (9%)	87
Belfast	50 (29%)	174
Causeway Coast and Glens	3 (4%)	72
Derry City and Strabane	20 (27%)	75
Fermanagh and Omagh	3 (6%)	49
Lisburn and Castlereagh	0 (0%)	67
Mid and East Antrim	3 (5%)	65
Mid Ulster	1 (2%)	59
Newry, Mourne and Down	8 (10%)	84

There is an awareness of the level of inequalities within Belfast and addressing these is at the heart of the Belfast Agenda, which is the framework for priorities in the city. The Belfast Agenda is an innovative policy leading change and co-operation in Belfast. The Belfast agenda is the city's community plan, put together based on periods of consultation with key city partners and residents. The Belfast Agenda, set out by the City of Belfast in 2017 and written in collaboration

with political parties, key community representatives, city partners and resident, is an innovative policy approach due to its foundations and reviews involving public consultations. It focuses on a shared vision to be achieved by 2035.

Priority areas identified within the Belfast agenda are:

- To grow the economy
- To improve the quality of living experience in the city
- To develop the city in terms of transport infrastructure and transport
- To improve working and learning opportunities
- Become a city that offers inclusive growth for all communities.

As well as this, the City Council has put an Equality Acton plan in place to help put its value and vision in place, thus they have gone beyond statutory requirement to have specific disability, gender, LGBT and race workforce action plans (Business in the Community, n.d.).

2 Findings

2.1 Education

2.1.1 National trends and policies

The structure of the education system in Northern Ireland is influenced by religion and dates back to the 19th century. Before 1921 and the partition of Ireland, almost all primary schools in Ireland, established from 1827 onwards, were denominational schools controlled by churches. In 1920, the Lynn committee was established to support and progress educational matters in Northern Ireland. Its report published in 1922-3 formed the basis of the Northern Irish Education (NI) Act 1923. The views of the Catholic Church were not represented on the Committee despite multiple invitations being issued to the Catholic authorities. Invitations were declined based on the assertion that 'the only satisfactory system of education for Catholics is one wherein Catholic children are taught in Catholic schools by Catholic teachers under Catholic auspices'. This refusal of the Catholic authorities to join the Lynn Committee has meant that officially there has been no Catholic representation in the determination of the educational policies of NI from 1920 to the present. The Lynn committee subsequently based its report and recommendations according to Protestant educational assumptions and, over the course of the following two decades, Protestant churches gradually transferred control of their schools to the state, whilst Catholic churches continued to maintain control of their schools. Consequently, state schools became 'controlled schools' and the Catholic schools became 'maintained schools'.

The 1989 Education Act introduced a new category of school: the integrated school. These schools bring children and staff together from both Catholic and Protestant traditions, as well as those of other faiths, or none. The aim is to ensure that children from diverse backgrounds are educated together and to cross traditional divides. The first integrated school was set up by a group of Catholic and Protestant parents in 1981. At present Northern Ireland has 65 integrated schools.

Schools in Northern Ireland which are free to attend include:

- Controlled – These are entirely funded by the state and run by a board of governors. The voluntary aided schools are a foundation or a trust and the board members (generally religious) contribute to the building costs and have a substantial influence in the way that these schools are run.
- Catholic maintained schools – These schools are run by a board of governors (who are mainly Roman Catholic) who are nominated by the trustees and the parents, staff, and representatives from the education authority
- Integrated schools – are not secular and do adhere to Christian ethos, however, have been set up to educate Protestant and Catholic children together.

- Voluntary Grammar schools - These are managed by a board of governors. The board are constituted in line with each school's scheme of management - usually representatives of foundation governors, parents, teachers the DE and in most cases education authority representatives.

All education policies are determined at a national level. Since devolution, one of the most important policies affecting education and education outcomes for the children of Northern Ireland has been the 'Education Reform (NI) Order, 1989'. In addition to traditional subject areas, it means the curriculum offers a skills-based approach to personal development and contribution to society.

The National Education Union (NEU) secretary Mark Langhammer suggests that "Northern Ireland's education system isn't just the most socially segregated in the UK – it is the most socially segregated education system in the developed world". The main basis for segregation in Belfast is religion and can be said to be one of the most enduring legacies of Northern Ireland's troubled past. 93% of children in Northern Ireland attend a segregated school (Schiaparelli et al., 2015).

The Transforming Education project is a project led by Ulster University, it draws light on underlying issues regarding integration and separate schooling. Its aim is to allow effective discussion and debate among teachers, educationalists, decision-makers and the wider public through publishing briefing papers focusing on policies relevant to integration and separate schooling. Integrated education continues to be a debated and perplexing for policy makers, as one of our interviewees said: "Education is political, making it hard to tackle" (Education Expert, Northern Ireland).

There are several factors involved, one being where children live. This generally determines which school they attend. Northern Ireland does have a reputation for producing academically high-achieving students, however, the gap in achievement between learners from advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds continues to widen, with a significantly higher proportion of 17-24 year-old young people without any qualifications in comparison to other UK nations (Burns et a., 2021). High achievers in Northern Ireland outperform the UK average, but underachievers fall far behind the UK average. Underachievement and factors of underachievement are long tail and closely linked to factors beyond the education system.
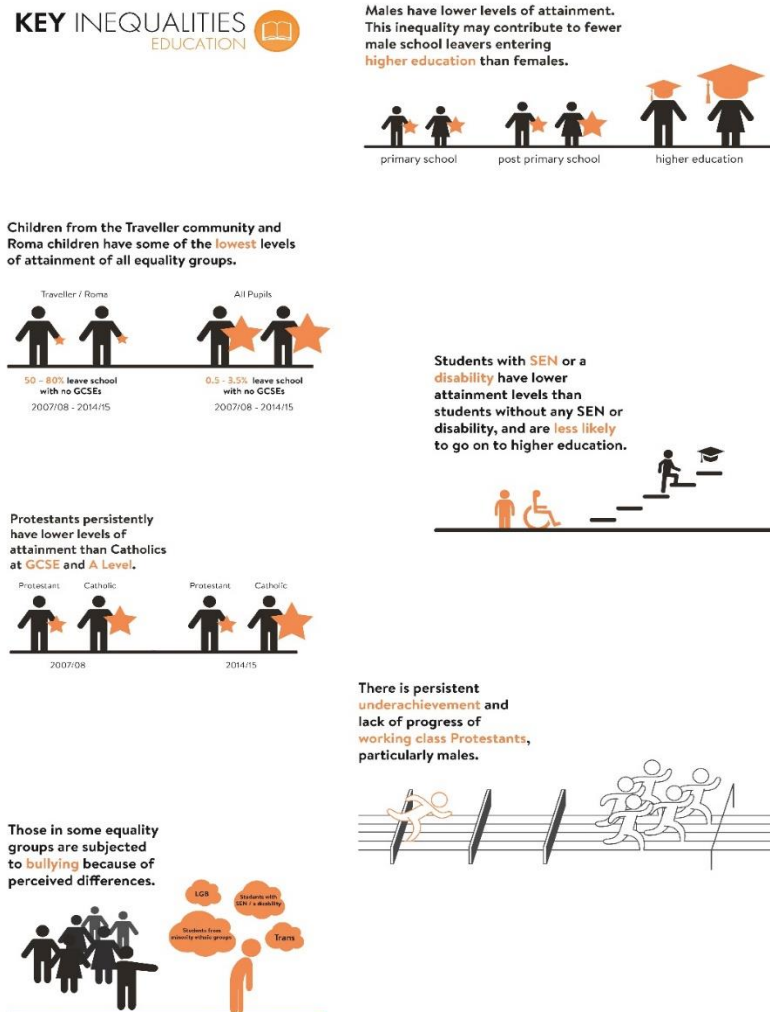
Another important policy linked to addressing gaps in educational outcomes is *Every School a Good School* (2009). This outlines priorities to support schools and teachers to raise standards and overcome barriers that some pupils may face. To achieve this, the policy focuses on six key areas: effective leadership for an ethos of aspiration; high quality teaching and learning; tackling barriers to learning; self-evaluation strategies at school level; bespoke support to schools; and a focus on improved communication between schools and parents. Promoting equality is also a policy priority, although detailed discussion exploring inequality factors appeared limited. Also, there were no clear steps outlining how they will achieve these targets.

The *Community Relations, Equality and Diversity (CRED) in Education* policy (2011) played an important role in "providing teachers and youth workers with the capacity to address what are often difficult and sensitive issues" (Department for Education, 2011). This was, however, cut in 2014 due to austerity measures. The policy aim was to embed community relations, equality and diversity work impacting 'Section 75' groups as set out within the NI Act 1998 (persons of different religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status or sexual orientation; men and women generally; persons with a disability and persons without; and persons with dependents and persons without) in the education system. A review of the policy found that it had been effective in embedding this work by providing resources and training to teachers, youth workers and schools, and that community relations were improving between students of different faiths and backgrounds. The impact of this policy as effective was reiterated in the stakeholder interviews.

For instance, one interviewee suggested that the "conversations started in this programme, have been a turning point in education" (Education Expert, Northern Ireland). They suggested that the programme took a holistic view of addressing inequality education by linking improved community relations and educational outcomes.

The themes of inequality and the intergenerational impact of inequality, as well as low achievement, were the areas most raised by interviewees. Figure 2 below also provides statistical evidence of the key inequalities in education. There is a clear perception that people from disadvantaged backgrounds have lower aspirations and less motivation to do well at school. The statistics reflect this achievement gap. Regardless of religion and gender, students eligible for free school meals (based on low household income) have lower achievement levels than those who are not. One of our interviewees highlighted this trend and suggested that more support is needed for students from disadvantaged backgrounds to support aspiration and outcomes. They spoke highly of the *'Extended Schools'* programme which provided "wrap around services in schools", such as care before and after school. In her words, this programme was "an equalizer for people facing disadvantage" but this funding was withdrawn due to austerity measures post 2008.
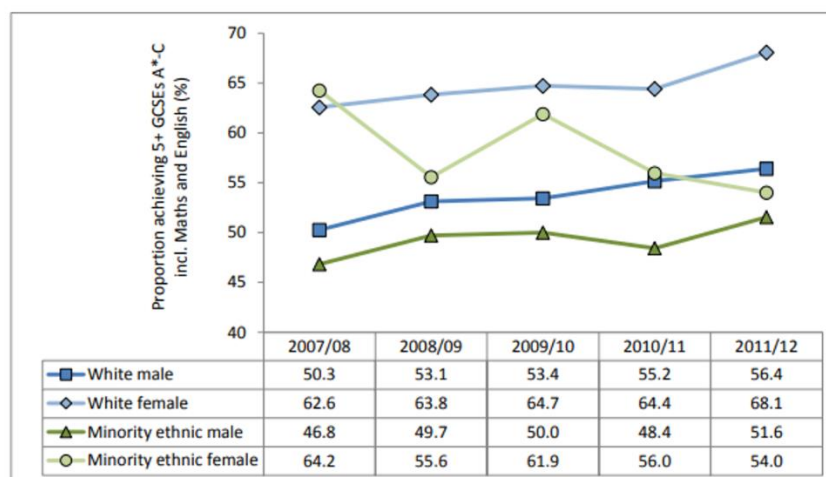
Figure 2: Key Inequalities in Education (Equality Commission Northern Ireland, 2017)

There has been a gender achievement gap between boys and girls from 1963 to 2018. Girls are on average 16 percent more likely to achieve three or more GCSEs grades A*-C including English and Maths upon leaving school than boys. We also see an achievement gap between Catholic students, Protestant students, and students from other religious backgrounds. Catholics are on average 6.5 percent more likely to achieve three or more GCSEs grades A*-C including English and Maths upon leaving school than Protestant or Other pupils who do not identify as Catholic or Protestant over this time period (Burns et al, 2015).

There is limited available data and/or research on different ethnic groups in Northern Ireland.[3] However, the literature shows that minority ethnic and newcomer children are more likely to attend non-grammar secondary schools (schools which do not require an entrance exam) and hence represent a greater share of children within the integrated school sector (Burns et al., 2015). Factors that represent barriers to accessing grammar education include a lack of knowledge of how the educational system works in Northern Ireland, as well as many grammar schools being specifically Catholic or Protestant. As shown in Figure 3 below, a high proportion of minority ethnic school leavers leave school with no GCSEs, a further, more recent emerging inequality is that they were less likely to attain 2+ A Levels or 5+ GCSEs (including Maths and English) than their white peers. The attainment gap is particularly wide when you compare the GCSE attainment of white females with minority ethnic females. (Burns et al, 2015).

Figure 3: Proportion of school leavers attaining 5+ GCSEs (A*-C) by ethnicity and Gender

	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12
White male	50.3	53.1	53.4	55.2	56.4
White female	62.6	63.8	64.7	64.4	68.1
Minority ethnic male	46.8	49.7	50.0	48.4	51.6
Minority ethnic female	64.2	55.6	61.9	56.0	54.0

Free school meal eligibility (FSME)[4] is the most common indicator of social deprivation and disadvantage. A FSM is a statutory benefit available to school-aged children from families who receive other qualifying benefits from the state. In 2017/18 32% of FSME pupils achieved 3+ GCSEs at grades A*-C including English and Maths, compared to 61% of non FSME pupils. While the overall finishing rate with 3+ GCSEs grades A*-C including English and Maths has risen over time, inequalities by gender, religion and social disadvantage have persisted, with some fluctuation (Equality Commission Northern Ireland, 2017). As majority of the population in Northern Ireland is white and the influence of the Troubles, religion is a stronger explanatory factor for inequalities than ethnicity. An intersectional approach reveals how different factors contribute to inequality in education. For example, combining three indicators of gender, religion

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[3] Over 98% of the population identifies as white which means that small numbers limit statistical analysis in many data sets
4 The Department of Education NI does not collate data on the demographics of students using FSM

and social background, in 2019/2020, 89.65% of Catholic Girls and no FSME achieved at least 5 GCSEs(2) A*-C incl. GCSE English and Maths compared to just 46.7% of Protestant Boys who have FSME (Department of Education, 2021a). While these inequalities are present year-on-year, 2019/20 saw an increase in awards attained, however, caution should be taken when drawing any conclusions about changes in student performance from these figures because of how grades were awarded in 2019/20 due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Department Of Education, 2021).

The most recent policy intervention in May 2021, the education minister of Northern Ireland, Peter Weir, tasked a panel of experts with creating an action plan to focus on improvement of educational achievement and chances, particularly for those from deprived backgrounds (Department of Education, 2021b). The report of the panel, *A Fair Start*, recommends 47 actions to support educational achievement which will contribute towards tackling these inequalities. Recommendations include after school extracurricular activities, early years provision, focus on emotional and mental wellbeing and self-confidence and professional development for teachers (Department of Education, 2021c). Education and skills development featured in the plan as a key area of focus. For instance, the Working and Learning priority section notes "educational inequalities and increase skills attainment" (p.40) as priorities (Department of Education, 2021c). The stretch goals within the plan more specifically aim to close the gap in education attainment between those in receipt of free school meals and those who aren't from 32 percentage points to 28 percentage points or less (Department of Education, 2021c).

However, one of the interviewees, an Education Expert at a local university, was critical of the focus on closing achievement gaps. They suggested that this focus on achievement could be a part of the problem and that the system as a whole needs to be reformed as, in their opinion, a strong focus on academic achievement continues to disadvantage students struggling at school. They suggested that a focus on individual progression, rather than grades would be more productive, especially for disadvantaged students.

2.1.2 Local trends and policies

The grammar school system is still an important aspect of the education model in Belfast; entry to grammar schools is less determined by area of residence and more by the 11+ entrance exams. The standardised national 11+ was formally abolished in 2010 thus entrance exams vary from school to school.

Many children in Belfast continue to experience persistent inequalities in education. Forty two per cent of young people entitled to free school meals achieve five GCSEs grade A Star to C, including English and Maths as compared to 74 per cent of those who are not (Belfast Agenda, 2017). Changes in the demography and diversity of Belfast's population, as well as increased pressure from grassroots organisations led by parents and educationalists, means there is more focus on educational reforms to tackle these inequalities. Raising standards so that all children,

regardless of economic background, can succeed at school remains an area of focus. At the local level, the Belfast Agenda is one of the policy interventions that are seeking to address these inequalities.

The Statement of Progress released by Belfast City Council outlines their progress towards the goals they set out for 2035 in the Belfast Agenda. Within this, community planning partners very much agreed to develop and adopt an integrated approach to address educational inequalities. Thus, working collaboratively with agencies to develop interventions which will have a meaningful impact and improve the life chances of young people. An inter-agency group has been established with these partners: Education Authority, Department of Education, Belfast Area Partnership Boards, Queen's University, Ulster University, Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, St Mary's University College, Stranmillis University College, Urban Villages, Belfast City Council and Belfast Met.

The partners have been using an evidence-based approach to identify best practice that can be used to improve educational outcomes. The statement of progress shows that the city is taking action using this collaborative approach to improve education of young people by closing the achievement gaps (Belfast City Council, 2019). An example of one joined up educational project is a citywide youth support programme. The programme 'Youth Support Programme for 14-24 year olds' targets young people who are disengaged from employment or work and works closely with them to support skills development and GCSE revision programmes, so that they set their sights on highly aspirational careers. Support offered is tailored to the individual. Young people, teachers or even their carers apply directly to the programme and the team set up with the council will tailor support for them, by working with a list of mentors based around the city. Other similar projects include a citywide GCSE revision programme, which supports 365 young people a year and an Easter School programme, which has supported 200+ students per year. These programmes specifically target and support inequality in education to raise achievement among the "long tail" of low achievement.

These programmes are reviewed as a wider review of the Belfast Agenda which is reviewed every four years. The most recent review found that past participants have raised their GCSE grades significantly and in some cases young people achieved A Star grades. In 2019, for example, 86 per cent of those attending English classes and 65 per cent of those attending Maths achieved a grade C or higher. Sixty six per cent of participating students were entitled to free school meals, which, is an indication that the programme is supporting those in most need (Belfast City Council, 2019).

2.2 Employment

2.2.1 National trends and policies

Northern Ireland was traditionally an industrial economy, with Belfast being its major port, from the latter half of the mid-nineteenth century. The key sectors of linen and shipbuilding saw a gradual decline and economic transition and transformation was prolonged and difficult, due to the outbreak of civil unrest. Public sector roles became an important part of the economy, in line with other parts of the UK. Notably, Northern Ireland had the highest share of workers (25%) employed in the public sector of all UK countries and regions as of June 2020 (Foley, 2020).

According to the Institute of Fiscal Studies, Northern Ireland was the 'hardest hit' region (BBC, 2015). Typical household income fell by 8%, compared to 2% in other parts of the UK (BBC, 2015). The *Northern Ireland Economic Strategy* (2012) was a result of the 2008 economic crash and included measures to boost and rebalance the economy (NI Executive, 2012). There is also an acknowledgement of the impact the recession had on young people, such as limiting job opportunities (NI Executive, 2012). Equality has been highlighted as one of the 'Cross Cutting Principles" (NI Executive, 2012).

The strategy is structured in two streams: *Rebuilding Themes* and *Rebalancing Themes*. Some of the *Rebuilding Themes* explicitly address inequality, such as a commitment to promote accessible employment opportunities in areas of economic disadvantage and offering training to those unemployed due to the crash, to address wider barriers to employment. Some of the more specific measures include a Social Investment Fund to tackle systemic issues such as deprivation and delivering 6000 work experience and training opportunities for young people by 2015 in priority sectors (p.14). Some of the *Rebalancing Themes* indirectly target inequality, such as improving the skills of the workforce to ensure that people can progress, productivity can grow, and social inclusion can increase. This priority is also youth focused as many of the measures target the education system and school leaving options. For instance, measures include increasing skills in subject areas important to the NI economy such as STEM and increasing the proportion of young people leaving school having achieved at least 5 GCSEs at A*-C by 2020 (p.11). Thus, this strategy also explicitly targets the skills imbalance that many of our interviewees raised, as it aims to ensure that young people are trained in areas that are in demand.

Another national programme was the *Steps to Work Initiative*. It was introduced in 2008 by the Department of Communities and designed to assist those unemployed/economically inactive to find and sustain employment. In Belfast, 31% of leavers from the program found employment and the most not to armour successful cohort of leavers of this program was youth aged 18-24 (McMichael, et al 2017). Similarly, *Pathways to Success* targeted young people in the 'Not in

Education, Employment or Training' (NEET) category and ran from 2012-2020. There was a combination of programmes within this to address the high number of youth in the NEET category and they worked across multiple angles to address this including skills building, family support, education support, and employment. This programme was found to be an overall success: this holistic approach to unemployment was helpful as well as a prevention approach for youth at risk of being in the NEET category (Wilson et al., 2015).

The overwhelming feeling from interviewees on national employment programmes was that there were plenty of programmes that had been launched over the last 10 years but that they were often rebrands of the same core programme. For example, interviewees often got the *Steps to Work Initiative* and the *Pathways to Success* programmes mixed up or used them interchangeably because they were so similar. Interviewees also felt that programmes mostly 'recycled' the same participants. This shows that while there may be high enrolment in these programmes, they are regarded as less effective than evaluations might suggest by stakeholders in the employment space, since leavers of the programmes do not remain in employment and often end up re-entering employment programmes.

One interviewee (Employment Expert, Belfast) who works directly to support youth from disadvantaged backgrounds to find employment, said that she had never heard a young person having a successful experience with *Steps to Work* programme. As well as this, another policy limitation that stakeholders highlighted was that they experienced a lack of flexibility in policy design, so the programmes often don't work for local contexts. Accessibility was another concern; an interviewee noted that policies didn't consider the difficult life experiences and challenging circumstances that young people from disadvantaged background face, so the programmes aren't inclusive or accessible to all young people.

2.2.2 Local Trends and Policies

Belfast's status as the capital city of Northern Ireland meant that the reliance on the public sector acted as some form of a 'cushion' immediately after the period of the 2008 crash (Brown, 2009). In 2007 the percentage of Belfast's employees working in the public sector (35%) was higher than that in Northern Ireland (31%) and substantially higher than the average in the United Kingdom (23%) (ONS, 2007). Stakeholders credited the large public sector as insulating Belfast from the immediate impact of the 2008 crash. In the years that followed, austerity measures in response to the economic crisis caused the public sector to shrink, which inevitably had a huge impact on the labour market in Belfast (Employment Expert, Northern Ireland). When asked about the three time periods being studied (2008 crash, subsequent years of recovery, and the COVID-19 pandemic), the interviewee said that employment issues have largely remained the same, but have been hit a little harder with each time period.

Despite economic growth before the 2008 crisis and again afterwards, unemployment has remained an issue in Belfast and is the second worst in Northern Ireland. Employment rates have improved slightly, rising from 64.3% in 2009 to 69.5% in 2019 (NISRA, n.d.). As well as this, unemployment in Belfast is not evenly spread and neither was the economic resurgence that the city was experiencing in 2008.

Central Belfast has seen vast unemployment, whilst wards around the city centre have seen rising employment opportunities (Magill, et al, 2019). In 2017, the unemployment rate of BCC residents aged 16-24 was 19%, declining from 26% in 2009 (Magill, et al, 2019). The male (16+) unemployment rate (4.4%) increased by 0.4pps over the year while the female (16+) unemployment rate (2.7%) decreased by 0.8pps over the year and is below the overall UK average rate (4.2%) (NISRA, 2021).

There is a geographically unequal spread of economic growth and unemployment which was a theme that came up consistently during the interviews with stakeholders, as well as widely discussed in the literature. Interviewees referred to this as the "prisoners of geography" dilemma. Affordable and social housing is concentrated in areas of high deprivation such as Central Belfast, which are also areas where there is little opportunity for high quality employment. Job prospects are closely linked to transport links in the city. The city's relatively high transportation costs and poor transportation network mean that many are locked-in to working near where they live (Belfast City Council, 2017).

Since the Belfast Agreement was signed there has been an influx of international support to rebuild Belfast which has guided national policy priorities. There has been a strong emphasis on building skills, supported by initiatives such as the *European Social Fund (ESF) Investment for Growth & Jobs Programme* which aims to promote employment and supports labour mobility, increase social inclusion and poverty reduction, and, support education and life-long learning. The *OECD Skills Strategy NI* recommends reducing skills imbalances and transforming workplaces to make better use of skills and to create a culture of lifelong learning to strengthen skills policies (OECD, 2020).

The Belfast Agenda's "Working and Learning" ambitions are focused on developing skills and qualifications, and educational attainment in the workforce, and decreasing the unemployment rate (Belfast City Council, 2017). The strategy takes a collaborative approach to explicitly address inequality in employment. The aim is to address barriers to employment by delivering an integrated employability and skills approach, continuing the theme of using skills building to reduce inequality in employment. Locally, there is a mismatch between the qualifications and skills that people have and the skills that are in demand in the labour force. Hence, this policy's focus on skills development is useful so long as it is focused on matching the skills in demand in Belfast. The policy plans to deliver an employability and skills pathway that would help those most

deprived to enter employment, as well sustaining and progressing within employment (Belfast City Council, 2017). One interviewee highlighted the current lack of accessibility of employability programmes to youth in complex situations, so a programme specifically targeting such individual needs would be supportive (Employment Support Organisation, Belfast).

Thus, the pathway being developed through the Belfast Agenda is supporting people to access employment, by working with partners to improve the overall skills and training provision in Belfast. The pathway also engages employers by providing the added benefit of helping gain access to a talent pool with the appropriate skills, attitudes and competencies to meet their needs. So far, according to the latest statement of progress, 5,855 jobs have been created, as well supporting new business start-ups (1,315 new businesses). The sector of tourism has also evolved with investment secured to create further vacancies (Belfast City Council, 2019).

The *Local Development Plan (LDP) (2020-2035) Topic Paper: Employment and Economy* specifically highlights the high level of economic inactivity in Belfast compared to the rest of NI (Belfast City Council, 2016). It also focuses on the high levels of unemployment and income deprivation in the area. It considers how every person can access work, particularly in areas of economic deprivation. The Local Development Plan outlines specific policy aims for the area of Belfast. One specific aim is to "tackle disadvantaged areas with high deprivation by ensuring access to local jobs" (Belfast City Council, 2016, p.145). This would directly address the lack of employment options for people living in areas where there are few options for low skilled work, so are facing the "prisoner of geography" dilemma. However, within the 'Economy' section of the Local Development Plan, where specific policies are outlined, there are no precise policies that address building job opportunities in areas of deprivation.

With the Local Development Plan, there is also an aim to "support the Belfast Agenda to enhance and increase the skill levels of our residents and attract and retain even more skilled people" (Belfast City Council, 2016, p.145). Interviewees spoke of a disconnect between government policy and communities' experiences, and skills training seems to be an area in which this disconnect is evident.

The LPP is an innovative and an unprecedented opportunity to address the development challenges within Belfast in a more co-ordinated way. Its scale and timeframe mean that it is reviewed on an annual basis, currently there are no reviews available.

A policy that has come from the Belfast Agenda that specifically addresses the B*usiness and Economy* and *Working and Learning* sections of the strategy is the *Belfast Employability and Skills Framework 2015-2025*. This policy specifically highlights the gap between those who are "well qualified and those who have no qualifications or who are low skilled" (p.3). The issues they highlight as causing this gap are poor health and wellbeing, poor educational outcomes, long term economic inactivity, and low-paid jobs. This framework directly addresses some of the main

issues and concerns within the labour market, such as the impacts of generational worklessness and poor educational outcomes. One of its aims is "to increase access to employment by supporting the development of lower and entry level skills and by addressing barriers preventing access to jobs" (p.19). The intention is to achieve this by: increasing mobility to support access to employment; working with government partners to create better support to help economically inactive people back to work; creating a culture shift in aspirations of families with complex needs, create more opportunities for youth training; and providing up skilling and training to those furthest from the labour market. This policy addresses many of the concerns that were raised during stakeholder interviews. For instance, issues such as accessibility to employment and employment programmes, addressing generational worklessness and the lack of attention to root causes of employment were highlighted.

The Programme of Investment (2012-2020) further exemplifies how this policy is addressing these issues. An employability and skills package that came out of the *Belfast Employability & Skills Framework* takes an integrated approach to planning interventions focused on education, skills, and employability. Multiple approaches will run under this programme that would work together across sectors and levels of government to ensure the right skills are available in the region to create economic growth. Some of the programmes within this approach specifically target areas of inequality such as their focus on targeting groups of economically inactive people including women returners, people with disabilities and mental health issues, and young people in the NEET category.

In summary, the policies to drive economic activity and employment opportunities are closely linked with the Belfast Agenda and are directing a culture of inclusive growth, aimed at benefitting the whole community. They are not, however, without their challenges and concerns exist among stakeholders about the long-term impacts of many programmes. Policy makers and policies are supportive of the region's future growth, working in a collaborative way to deliver better future opportunities for all people living in Belfast.

2.3 Housing

2.3.1 National trends and policies

The main piece of housing law in Northern Ireland is the Housing (Northern Ireland) Order 1981 (now on its 8th amendment). This order sets out the constitution, financing, and general functions of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) and relates to the formation, administration and registration of Housing Associations as well as overseeing any related acts. The two primary pieces of legislation protecting the rights of private tenants in Northern Ireland are The Rent (Northern Ireland) Order 1978 and The Private Tenancies Order (Northern Ireland) 2006 (Housing rights, 2020). The Private Tenancies Order provides that tenants need to be given a notice to quit is required to end a tenancy for example in the case of rent arrears and The Rent Order makes it

unlawful for the owner to enforce against the occupier without due proceedings in the court, his right to recover possession of the premises (Housing rights, 2020). Where a person falls into arrears with rent due to a job loss or bereavement, they may apply for housing benefit to cover their full rent (Housing rights, n.d.). If due do job loss, he or she may be able to have their full monthly rent paid for a 13 week period if it can be proven that the tenant could afford the rent when the tenancy agreement was signed and that the household hasn't been in receipt of housing benefit in the previous 52 week period or if a member of the tenant's family, who was a part of the tenant's household dies the tenant may also be entitled to have his full rent paid by housing benefit for up to one year (Housing rights, n.d.).

The Northern Ireland Housing Executive was established in the 1960s to address housing issues and currently manages the Housing Selection Scheme which administers social housing. Social and affordable housing are separated by neighbourhood, which are separated by religion, so managing and administering housing support is complex. Housing in Northern Ireland has long been segregated into Catholic and Protestant neighbourhoods, and since the Troubles 'Peace Walls' have been built, physically separating communities to prevent violence (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Peace Wall, Belfast (Wikipedia Commons, 2011)

Although Belfast is now post-conflict, it is still mostly segregated, and few Peace Walls have been removed. Segregated housing poses a huge problem for addressing housing inequality because social and affordable housing must be offered equally to both Protestants and Catholics and housing development also must be delivered equally. Segregation along religious and political lines, particularly in working class areas remains. One interviewee explained how if someone is trying to access social housing, they would sometimes rather refuse a home in another neighbourhood and risk not being housed at all than take that home because they fear for their safety or they aren't comfortable in that community (Housing Expert, Northern Ireland). This situation of conflict between communities and segregated housing in Belfast makes housing inequality very difficult to address. This also impacts homelessness and those that may require temporary housing, due to homelessness.

Fitzpatrick et al. (2020) explains that economic inequality means that "high rents, the benefits freeze, and a lack of housing options are locking families in Northern Ireland in poverty, living in temporary accommodation or facing destitution". Rising house prices has been a contributory factor to the lack of housing options in Northern Ireland. The housing market in Northern Ireland followed a distinctive pathway in comparison to the rest of the UK, being more closely linked to the Irish economy and house market. Even so, house prices have continued to rise faster than earnings. House prices have increased by 10% across the UK and by 6% in Northern Ireland, meaning that those on lower incomes are finding it exceptionally difficult to access the housing market. However, the economic recession returned housing to a more affordable price to buy, which did help some to access housing. Between 2007 and 2015, there was a 51% drop in housing prices.

The housing boom meant that Northern Ireland housing market went from one of the most affordable in the UK to one of the least, and briefly it was only slightly more affordable than London (Davy, 2007). As in Ireland, the subsequent fall in house prices was far more severe than across the rest of the UK. This has returned the market to more traditional levels while leaving behind higher proportion of households in negative equity. Home ownership for first time buyers is also increasingly inaccessible because regulatory pressures have drastically reduced the availability of mortgage products for those with low or no deposits.

Combining the lack of affordability for home ownership with reduced funding for the social housing sector in recent years, people on lower incomes have reduced housing choice. From 2011/12 to 2014/15 social housing financial investment fell by 31 percent (Wallace, 2015). The private rented sector in Northern Ireland has experienced experiential growth over the past 20 years and is now a similar size to the social rented sector in Northern Ireland (Fitzpatrick et al., 2020).

The UK-wide welfare reforms also deepened inequalities in housing as they reduced affordability of housing. Welfare reforms to the Local Housing Allowance regime in Northern Ireland were introduced on the same basis, and to the same timetable, as the rest of the UK. These reforms have included the 'Spare Room Subsidy Limits', known as the 'Bedroom Tax',[5] and the Benefit Cap, which limits the overall amount of welfare a household can claim.

Housing inequality in Northern Ireland is found in both inequality of accessibility of housing and inequality of adequacy of housing. Young people are more reliant on social housing than any other population in Northern Ireland. 18-25 year olds make up 19.8% of people on the social housing list (NIHE, 2020).

Northern Ireland has policies and strategies aimed at addressing the housing crisis. One of the national policies that affects housing is the *Strategic Planning Policy Statement (SPPS)* (2015) which signalled the government intention for integrated housing. This policy focuses on mixed housing development to "facilitate an adequate and available supply of quality housing to meet the needs of everyone" (Department for Infrastructure, 2015). One of the key strategies is "strengthen community cohesion", which aims to offer a varied of housing types to meet a range of housing needs, whilst also ensuring opportunities for shared spaces, such as communal parks for children (Department for Infrastructure, 2015). This move towards integrating housing is a positive step but is a slow process as it involves close engagement with communities themselves (Department for Infrastructure, 2015).

This theme of "strengthening community cohesion" is reiterated in the *Regional Development Strategy* (2012). Another goal in this strategy is to "manage housing growth to achieve sustainable patterns of residential development" (Department for Infrastructure, 2012). They aim to ensure that all housing needs are met, including needs identified in the Housing Needs Assessment/Housing Market Analysis when they are allocating housing land for development (Department for Infrastructure, 2012). This involves ensuring that all developments include social/intermediate housing and affordable housing so that the housing needs of residents are met (Department for Infrastructure, 2012).

One practical way in which the government has responded to this shortage of housing is to build more housing. The most recent 'Housing Bulletin' published by the Northern Ireland Government for April-June 2021 shows an increase in the building of houses, including social housing building, the need for social housing and waiting lists for social housing continue to increase (Department for Communities, 2021). The Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) received £162m from the Social Housing Development Programme (SHDP) in 2021/22 – an increase of around £26m from

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[5] Social tenants have to pay more towards housing costs if they have additional unused bedrooms in their homes and could see their benefit payments reduced by either 14% or 25%.

last year (Inside Housing, 2021). As such, Northern Ireland devotes a higher proportion of its public expenditure to housing relative to the rest of the UK. 2,403 new social homes were started in Northern Ireland in 2020/21, 30% more than the 1,850 target set by the government (Inside Housing, 2021). Despite this, Northern Ireland does not have a higher proportion of social housing when compared to the rest of the UK. The proportion of social sector lettings as part of overall housing offer in Northern Ireland is 16%, similar to England at 17%. As in the rest of the UK, new social housing is now being provided by housing associations. Yet housing associations only account for just over a quarter of the sector in Northern Ireland.

The Northern Ireland government has also sought additional funds to mitigate the impact of the welfare reforms on the housing sector; an agreement with the UK government has been reached to provide a funding package (Smyth, 2019). This agreement will enable Northern Ireland to mitigate the new reforms based on the recommendations of a Working Party chaired by Professor Eileen Evason. Evidence included that social tenants in Northern Ireland could be unfairly penalised by the 'bedroom tax', due to a shortage of smaller properties within the social housing stock. An analysis of Northern Ireland's social housing stock shows just 17% of homes have one bedroom (Smyth, 2019). The impact of these reforms were fully mitigated until 2020. While lower rents in Northern Ireland mean that the effects are unlikely to have been as substantial as in England, a growing gap between Local Housing Allowance rates and average rents may compound these impacts over time.

2.3.2 Local trends and policies

A strategic analysis of Belfast's housing market found that new household formation tends to be concentrated among the age groups, 16 to 34 because of their intention of having children in future years so will want to access housing that will accommodate their needs, both current and future (Northern Ireland Housing Executive, 2020). However, there are mixed projections for housing needs. On one hand, there is a projected decline in the number of children aged under 16 and with this, decreasing average household size and associated bedroom and on the other hand, multi-family households are the fastest growing household type which increase household sizes (Northern Ireland Housing Executive, 2020). The housing inequalities at the national level can therefore impact on young people's futures. This section provides a discussion on policy actions taken by Belfast City Council to address housing inequalities.

An important national policy in the housing landscape is the Planning Act (NI) (2011). The policy set out an overarching aim for housing policy to meet areas of housing need and promote house ownership from 2007-2011 but devolved most planning policy and development decisions to the local councils (Planning Act (NI), 2011, p.8). Since planning and policy development has been devolved to the local level, the most pertinent housing policies for addressing housing inequality come at the city level in strategies such as The Belfast Local Development Plan (LDP) with a 15

year framework which indirectly addresses housing inequality. The LDP is being developed in consultation with the public and stakeholders to create a clear vision for how Belfast will look in terms of economic and social growth. One of the plan's goals is to ensure that new developments offer a variety of house types, sizes, and tenures to meet a variety of housing needs. The plan goes on to outline plans for affordable housing, as well as specialized housing for example, housing for an older population showing a recognition of various housing needs and a plan to address them. One of the policy aims is developing "balanced local communities" with a variety of housing types and fostering "inclusive and cohesive communities" (Belfast City Council, 2016, fp.59).

The Belfast Agenda also addresses housing inequality by committing to a goal of building 1,800 social housing units and a creating a city target for affordable housing. They also commit to working with the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to increase tenure mix and agree on a percentage of new homes that will be affordable housing. Interviewees highlighted some issues that these policies addressed such as the inadequate social housing stock. One interviewee said that 10% of the housing stock was not fit for human habitation and that houses just aren't being built fast enough. The Council's commitment to building social housing is intended to address this issue, but Covid-19 and Brexit have caused delays in house building.

Interviewees also discussed the complexity of moving towards integrated housing. On the one hand more integrated housing would help to alleviate housing issues because it would allow the Housing Executive to allocate housing solely based on meeting people's physical housing needs but on the other hand this is difficult to carry out because people need to feel safe in their homes and, in many areas, there is still a long way to go in building community relations.

2.4 Health

2.4.1 National trends and policies

In Northern Ireland, the NHS was merged with the broader social care system in 1973 to form an integrated system called the Health and Social Care (HSC) system. Health has been a primarily devolved matter since powers were transferred from the UK government in Westminster to the Northern Ireland assembly in 1999. Responsibilities of the devolved authorities include organisational control and funding of the NHS systems, family planning, provision of health including services and public health (Institute for Government, 2020). Northern Ireland spends £2,3465 per head of population on health which is the highest of the four nations in the UK (Institute for Government, 2020). Local authorities have no public health responsibilities, which primarily rest with the Northern Ireland Department of Health and its executive agency, the Public Health Agency. The Northern Ireland Executive, through its Department of Health, is responsible for its funding, while the Public Health Agency is the executive agency responsible for the provision of public health and social care services across Northern Ireland.

Mental illness is one of the major causes of ill health and disability in Northern Ireland which has 25% higher overall prevalence compared to England. One in five adults in NI has a mental health condition at any one time (Department of Health, 2014). The persisting levels of deprivation and the legacy of Northern Ireland's 30 years of social and political unrest are major contributors to this.

The Youth Wellbeing Prevalence Survey conducted in 2020 found a range of mental health problems amongst children and young people. 1 in 10 young people aged 11 – 19 years reported having engaged in self-injurious behaviour and roughly 1 in 8 reported have thought about or attempted suicide, with 6.6% having made a plan and 3.5% having made an attempt which is higher than the other nations in the UK (Bunting et al., 2020). Childhood experiences like poverty, addiction in families and trauma experienced within families are linked to the emergence of mental health issues at a young age (Lacey et al., 2020).

Another priority health issue is the ageing population. Estimates indicate that by 2026, for the first time, there will be more over 65s than under 16s, and that one in four people will be aged 65 and over by 2039 (Department of Health, 2016). Similarly, the population aged 85 and over will increase seeing their share of the population increase from 1.9 % to 4.4% (Department of Health, 2016).

Marmot (2010) argues that health follows a 'social gradient'. People with a low socio-economic status have a greater risk of worse health than those at the top. That is, the more deprived, the greater the threat to health.

Health inequalities persist for socio-economically disadvantaged groups. For example, men and women in the least deprived areas live 7.5 years and 4 years longer respectively than men and women who live in the most deprived areas (Department of Health, 2016). In the most deprived areas, 30% of people report a mental health problem - double the rate in least deprived areas; rates of suicide are also higher in more deprived areas (Department of Health, 2016).

The Covid-19 pandemic has drawn further attention to the disparities in health outcomes for those living in deprived areas. The infection rate in the 10% most deprived areas was a fifth higher than the rate in the 10% least deprived areas (Department of Health, 2020). The hospital admission rate for Covid-19 (confirmed or suspected cases) in the 10% most deprived areas was almost double the rate in the 10% least deprived areas (Department of Health, 2020).

The restrictions put in place to limit the spread of the virus have had "a severe impact" on children and young people, particularly those living in poverty. More than half (52%) of 16-year-olds who took part in one study felt their mental and emotional health had worsened during the pandemic (Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People, 2021). Furthermore, there was a decline in play, recreational and leisure activities has had a devastating impact on many children's

physical health and mental wellbeing. However, problems with peers were substantially lower than other UK studies and rates of positive behaviours – such as giving, helping, and sharing – were higher.

The Bamford Review (2002) looked at mental health and learning disability provision in Northern Ireland. The review examined policy and service provision for people with a learning disability, and for people with mental health problems, and considered whether the Mental Health (Northern Ireland) Order 1986 was fit for purpose. The review had a total of 74 recommendations on how to reform services in this area. However, ten years later, progress was assessed as having been slow and uneven (Bamford, 2005; Ham el al., 2013).

In 2011, a review of the provision of health and social care in Northern Ireland launched. It engaged widely with the public, clinical and professional leaders, health and social care organisations, and stakeholders in the voluntary, community, private and independent sectors. The review noted that Northern Ireland was experiencing a growing and ageing population, deepening of health inequalities for the most deprived populations, and increased prevalence of long-term conditions such as hypertension, diabetes, obesity and asthma (Compton et al., 2011).

These factors, which inevitably lead to higher demand for health services, combined with workforce supply difficulties and greater pressure to deliver value for money, meant the health and social care system was deemed to be unsustainable without change (Compton et al., 2011).

In October 2016, a 10-year approach to transforming health and social care was launched, *Health and Wellbeing 2026: Delivering Together* which is a person-centred care model focussed on prevention, early intervention, supporting independence and wellbeing, with care or support wherever possible provided in the community setting (Department of Health, 2016). Some of the key actions to be taken were to develop a comprehensive approach for addressing waiting lists, to make significant investment in primary care, including community pharmacy services, and to ensure there is a multidisciplinary team focused on the patient and with the right mix of skills.

Progress on actions has been hampered by the lack of sufficient government funding to support this delivery model and meet rising pressures across hospital, general practitioner (GP) practices, social care and mental health services, or to systematically tackle the growing waiting list backlog (Department of Health, 2019). However, as a result of additional non–recurrent funding, £100m was allocated to the following priority areas, with up to: £30m to help tackle elective care waiting lists, £15m to support services in primary care, £15m to support workforce development, £30m to help reform hospital and community services, and £5m to help build capacity in communities and prevention (Department of Health, 2019).

2.4.2 Local Trends and Policies

Belfast has stark differences in life outcomes between people living only a few hundred yards apart within some parts of the city and there is evidence that outcomes begin to diverge even before birth. It has some of the highest quality health services in the UK and yet among the worst outcomes within sight of major teaching hospitals (Belfast Local Commissioning Group, 2012). The Belfast Local Commissioning Group is a committee of the Health and Social Care Board that has responsibility for commissioning health and social care services that address the care needs of the Belfast population. Given the backdrop of insufficient funding for health and social care in Northern Ireland, Belfast had plans to reduce spending and improve efficiency - delivered partly by cash releasing savings and partly by efficiency improvements (Department of Health, 2019; Belfast Local Commissioning Group, 2012).

Belfast contains the highest proportion of the most deprived areas of all local government districts in Northern Ireland. Male life expectancy at birth, drug related mortality rates and alcohol specific mortality rates were higher in Belfast than across Northern Ireland (Carson et al., 2021). Even within Belfast, in its most deprived areas, male life expectancy was 4.7 years less than the Belfast average and female life expectancy in the LGD's most deprived areas was 4.0 years less than the Belfast average. The largest gaps between the least and most deprived areas in Belfast are in drug related admission and death rates, self-harm admission rates, obesity and teenage birth rates for under 20s. Mirroring the national trend, suicide rates in the 10 per cent most deprived areas are almost five times higher than those in the 10 per cent least deprived (Belfast Agenda, 2017). However, there has been an improvement in some indicators such as the gap between women from the most and least deprived areas who smoke during pregnancy (Carson et al., 2021).

Within the Belfast Agenda is the ambition for everyone to experience good health and wellbeing. The ambition is that everyone will live a healthy lifestyle and will experience the best possible physical health and emotional wellbeing. Health inequalities will be reduced and those who suffer from poor health will receive the care and support they need. The Agenda includes a plan to invest £25 million in health improvement initiatives (in addition to investment in health and social care services in general) to make progress towards the ambition to reduce the life expectancy gap between the most and least deprived neighbourhoods. To achieve this ambition, the Belfast Strategic Partnership, will ensure the design and delivery of programmes that maximise the impact of the Making Life Better Strategy within Belfast.

The Belfast Strategic Partnership (BSP) was established by the Public Health Agency (PHA), Belfast City Council (BCC), and Belfast Health and Social Care Trust (BHSCT) to provide a collaborative approach in addressing life inequalities in Belfast. The BSP is led by the three Chief Executive

Officers and has representation from a wide range of organisations, including the community, statutory, voluntary and private sectors. The aim of the BSP is to champion and lead the case for tackling life inequalities across all communities in the Belfast area. This BSP seeks to address aspects of physical health, including healthy eating, physical activity, active travel and mental wellbeing, particularly issues of social cohesion, community vulnerability and isolation.

The person-centred model of health care in Northern Ireland seeks to reduce spend on hospital services by shifting services out of hospitalised care and into primary care services, personal social services, and services provided in the community by the community & voluntary sector (Belfast Local Commissioning Group, 2012). Youth Engagement Services and Active Belfast are some case studies of specific policies to tackle health inequalities:

- Youth Engagement Services for children and young people is youth friendly, holistic health and well-being service. It caters for the health and improvement needs of children and young people aged 11-25 years old through the provision of information, education, sing-posting and, where appropriate, referral to specialist services. Range of needs include, but exclusively: substance misuse, suicide and self-harm, mental health and wellbeing.
- The Active Belfast project aims to promote healthy living and increase physical activity. A range of activities have been set up to encourage a healthier lifestyle: activities such as community gardens in locations like Whiterock Leisure Centre; cycling and walking routes have been set up to provide orienteering opportunities and eco trails; outdoor gyms throughout the city to provide access to a free fitness workout; there are also opportunities to get involved in sports activities.

3 Innovative post-crisis policies

Following the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, Belfast took on a new identity as a 'post conflict' city. As part of the integration and in its new identity, Northern Ireland policy makers have adopted innovative practices, such as community participation and dialogue when proposing, developing and finalising policies to meet the needs of all the communities within the city. The Belfast Agenda is one example of an innovative policy. It sets out to lead change and co-operation in Belfast. It works as a community plan that was written collaboratively, bringing together representatives from all communities that make up Belfast's population. Representatives included statutory community partners, political parties, further educational institutions, key community representatives, city partners and residents. It also involves quadrennial public consultations and reviews against the long-term goals.

The Belfast Agenda is an ongoing, living policy, with an end date of 2035, by when the ambition is that the goals will have been achieved. This joint agenda aims to create 'a safe, fair and inclusive for all' city, 'where everyone benefits from a thriving and prosperous economy'. It aims to create 46,000 new jobs, wants to ensure that every young person that leaves school has a destination that fulfils their potential, and aims to close the health and life expectancy gap between the more affluent and deprived areas of the city. As well as economic growth and education, the agenda prioritises social, wellness and environmental goals for the city's residents. Thus, any new commissioned development will be guided by these goals and ambitions.

Given the historical and socio-political context, the collaborative foundations and regular public consultations to review is what makes the Belfast Agenda a policy innovation. The Belfast Agenda is set apart from conventional policy making and demonstrates an innovative approach. Methods such as lived experience (ethnography) and co-design provide policy makers with insights into the lived experience of residents and add value to analysis of statistics and trends (Norman, 2020). As well as this, it is a 'living policy', which is reviewed every 4 years.

Of particular relevance to Uplift is the Belfast Youth Council which is embedded into the Agenda. Young people make up a third of the population of Belfast, making the city one of the youngest in Europe. The creation of the Belfast Youth Council has been an innovative way to get young people involved in policy creation, as well as having a say in how the city is run. It supports young people to feel valued and heard, as well as creating the conditions for learning, skills development and opportunity. The Youth Council is made up of 40 young people of all genders and is representative of the communities and needs across Belfast. All the members are aged between 13-18 (21 if disabled or have just left care). Young people remain in their roles for two years and actively lead projects in the city. The group utilises social media channels to communicate with

and update other young people and agencies throughout Belfast. The Youth Council get involved with issues that matter to young people in the city.

A recent project that the Youth Council have led and delivered is the 'Heads Up! Toolkit'. This project is part of ongoing youth mental health projects, in line with findings and recommendations from the Youth Wellbeing Survey commissioned by the Health and Social Care Board. The toolkit is designed to equip young people from any background to be able to organise a mental health project in their community and support them to campaign on local mental health issues, as well as promoting good mental health in their community and prioritising their own mental, emotional and physical wellness. Thus, this toolkit engages the positive characteristics within Belfast's community to promote better mental health in an equitable way. There is evidence for the effectiveness of such community led interventions for improving mental health. Studies indicate the importance of ongoing resources and training to maintain long-term outcomes, equitable partnerships, and policy reform to support sustainable healthcare-community collaborations (Castillo et al, 2019).

Our interviewees described the Belfast Youth Council as a forum that explores 'childhood poverty' and inequality. Our official from the Department for the Economy (which covers employability and skills) suggested that bottom-up projects do, however, need to work more collaboratively, as progress isn't uniform across different areas of the city. He also suggested that to ensure progress, funding structures could become incentivised based on timelines to measure positive outcomes.

Although the programmes prompted by the Belfast Agenda are not yet complete, Belfast's policies are increasingly adopting community-led and grassroots strategies to engage and bring reform. The principles of a having a shared vision and priorities (The Belfast Agenda), with local cross community voices in the lead, will build on local strengths (rather than a focus on divisions), is intended overall to achieve positive long-term change.

4 Discussion and conclusions

Belfast is a city of two tales with some of the most deprived areas in Northern Ireland while at the same time benefitting from foreign direct investment and many highly skilled jobs. The legacies of The Troubles have also impacted on the development of the city. However, Belfast is developing and evolving its identity as a post-conflict city.

The inequalities in Belfast are mostly socio-economic with higher poverty rates than the rest of the UK, although in many areas there are also additional divisions or inequalities, due to 'The Troubles' in the late 1960s, after mounting tensions between Catholic nationalists and Protestant loyalists. In Education, there are attainment gaps for boys, Protestants and young people living in the most deprived areas. There is also high youth unemployment. 1 in 4 children and young people live in deprived areas meaning they are more likely to be unemployed because their areas do not have employment opportunities and high transport costs make them "prisoners of geography" leading to further exclusion. Furthermore, there appears to be a mismatch between skills that employers want and the education and skills training young people receive. In housing, young people are also more likely to be reliant on social housing and with long waiting lists, young people are likely to be in precarious housing conditions. The inequalities identified are structured along religious and socio-economic lines. There are also gender differences with males experiencing more inequalities on average. Males are less likely to attain good grades from high school, more likely to be homeless and have a lesser life expectancy

Northern Ireland as a devolved nation has been able to set its own policies through the Northern Ireland Executive. However, UK wide policies of austerity and Brexit have negatively impacted the policies that Northern Ireland has been able to pursue. Despite this, Northern Ireland has placed addressing inequalities at the heart of its policies with varying degrees of success. The reflexive Belfast Agenda created by consultation and partnership of key city partners, residents, the private sector and the community organisations outlines priorities and goals with a four-year focus. This provides a framework to work collaboratively to develop policies and interventions to address inequalities. Different policies have had varying levels of success. For example, the Steps-to-Work initiative was not successful in supporting young people back into work while the Pathways to Success initiative was deemed more successful. As well as this, the Belfast City Youth Council has been successfully created, which is representative of all communities and needs that make up the population.

In 2021, the Northern Ireland Government consulted on the Programme for Government in which it recognised that it has social and economic challenges stemming from the impacts of Brexit and recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic. It is taking an outcomes-based approach to delivering public services. In essence, this means that the government partners with civic society to respond

to the needs of people and communities everywhere in an inclusive manner. The outcomes of individual and collective wellbeing become the drivers for the government agenda. One of the key priorities across multiple agendas is to tackle the issues that lead to inequality and disadvantage and provide support where it is needed.

At a local level, the Belfast Agenda is an ambitious programme which has equality goals embedded within it. Not only is it a joined vision, reviewed every four years, but it has been created in partnership with key city partners, private business, community organisations and residents, coming together, to work together. It is ambitious and inclusive. Thus, the Belfast Agenda can be viewed as a means to an end to help reduce inequalities and create opportunities for all. It has taken an inclusive growth approach which is aimed at addressing the issues of poverty, economic inactivity, unemployment and underemployment to improve the wider outcomes for people in Belfast.

What is unique in this case is that Belfast City Council have a Gender Equality Action Plan running from 2021 – 2024 with budget allocations for the actions. This plan has specific actions like identify opportunities for targeted employability outreach, ring fencing, employment academies etc. for women furthest removed from the labour market (Belfast City Council, 2021).

To conclude, there is a deep awareness of the level of inequalities that exist. There are also concrete plans on how to address this. However, the impact of Brexit and recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic are significant threats to the Northern Irish economy and thus the ability of the government to achieve their objectives.

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Annex

This table below contains data/indicators that are able to display social inequalities in a way that is the most comparable with other urban areas. Each urban report includes this data table, which is also intending to show not only the scale and dimensions of inequalities in the functional urban area of Corby, but indicate also the scale of missing data that makes any comparative research difficult to implement.

	National data (Northern Ireland, unless otherwise specified)	Regional data	FUA data	City level data (FUA core)
Population[6]				
Population in 2007	1, 761,683		656,456	275,485
Population in 2012	1, 823, 634		673,778	280,537
Population in 2017	1, 893, 667		697,638	289,070
Population aged 15-29 in 2007	375,260		144,187	70,818
Population aged 15-29 in 2012	373,125		142,550	68,779
Population aged 15-29 in 2017	350,081		135,589	65,636
Income/poverty				
Gini index 2007/08	38.6% (UK)			
Gini index 2011/12	33.8% (UK)			
Gini index 2017/18	34.4% (UK)			
Equalized personal income quintiles (mean for the 1st quintile) 2017/18	15		20	
Equalized personal income quintiles (mean for the 2nd quintile) 2017/18	24		26	
Equalized personal income quintiles (mean for the 3rd quintile) 2017/18	26		22	

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[6] Mid- year population estimates data retrieved from:
MYE19 – Age Bands, Population Change Components, Single Year Ages (used to sum up age bands) https://www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/2019-mid-year-population-estimates-northern-ireland; Gini coefficient of equivalised disposable income data retrieved from:
https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tessi190/default/table?lang=en; Quintile distribution of net equivalised disposable household income data retrieved from :
https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/households-below-average-income-northern-ireland-201718; Relative low-income or relative income poverty (proxy for at-risk of poverty rate) is defined as the proportion of the population group living in a household with income less than 60% of the UK median household income, data retrieved from: https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/northern-ireland-poverty-bulletin-2018-19

	National data (Northern Ireland, unless otherwise specified)	Regional data	FUA data	City level data (FUA core)
Equalized personal income quintiles (mean for the 4th quintile) 2017/18	23		18	
Equalized personal income quintiles (mean for the 5th quintile) 2017/18	13		14	
At risk of poverty rate 2007	20%			
At risk of poverty rate 2012	19%			
At risk of poverty rate 2017	19%			
At risk of poverty aged 15-29 2007				
At risk of poverty aged 15-29 2012				
At risk of poverty aged 15-29 2017				
Housing				
Share of housing below market rates (social housing) 2008/2009				
Share of housing below market rates (social housing) 2011/2012				
Share of housing below market rates (social housing) 2018/2019				
Average housing price/average income 2007				
Average housing price/average income 2012				
Average housing price/average income 2017				
Education[7]				
Early leavers from education and training 2007	2.8%		4.3%	

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[7] Early leavers taken as those who leave education in a given year with No formal qualification, data retrieved from: https://www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/labour-force-survey-tables-local-government-districts-2009-2018; % of 16-18 year olds enrolled in sixth form data retrieved from: https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/school-enrolments-overview

	National data (Northern Ireland, unless otherwise specified)	Regional data	FUA data	City level data (FUA core)
Early leavers from education and training 2012	1.4%			
Early leavers from education and training 2017	0.6%			
Share of inhabitants aged 16-64 with a maximum ISCED 1 (2) education 2007/2008				
Share of inhabitants aged 16-64 with a maximum ISCED 1 (2) education 2011/2012				
Share of inhabitants aged 16-64 with a maximum ISCED 1 (2) education 2018/2019				
Enrolment in upper secondary school 2007				
Enrolment in upper secondary school 2012				
Enrolment in upper secondary school 2018	61%			
Employment[8]				
NEET youth aged 16-18 2007				
NEET youth aged 16-18 2011				
NEET youth aged 16-18 2018	10.2%			
Employment rate 2007	68.0%		64.70%	
Employment rate 2012	67.1%		60.8%	
Employment rate 2017	72.4%		64.7%	
Employment rate aged 16-24 2007	55.3%			
Employment rate aged 16-24 2012	39.4%			
Employment rate aged 16-24 2017	52.3%			
Unemployment rate 2007/2008	4.3%		4.20%	

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[8] NEET data retrieved from: https://www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/quarterly-labour-force-survey-tables-august-2019; Unemployment data retrieved from: https://www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/labour-force-survey-tables-local-government-districts-2009-2018

	National data (Northern Ireland, unless otherwise specified)	Regional data	FUA data	City level data (FUA core)
Unemployment rate 2011/2012	7.8%		16.4%	
Unemployment rate 2018/2019	2.4%		12.3%	
Unemployment rate aged 16-24 2007	10.1%			
Unemployment rate aged 16-24 2012	19.2%			
Unemployment rate aged 16-24 2017	7.7%			
Share of precarious employment 2007				
Share of precarious employment 2012				
Share of precarious employment 2017				
Share of precarious employment aged 16-24 2007				
Share of precarious employment aged 16-24 2012				
Share of precarious employment aged 16-24 2017				
Health[9]				
Life expectancy 2007	Men: 76.7 Women: 81.3			
Life expectancy 2012	Men: 78.3 Women: 82.3		Men: 76 Women: 81.1	
Life expectancy 2017	Men: 78.7 Women: 82.4		Men: 76.3 Women: 81.3	

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[9] Life expectancy data retrieved from: https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/news/publication-life-expectancy-northern-ireland#:~:text=In%20addition%2C%20life%20expectancy%20estimates%20are%20presented%20for%20Local%20Government%20Districts.&text=In%202016%2D18%2C%20life%20expectancy,year%20(2015%2D17); Teenage birth data retrieved from: https://www.fpa.org.uk/sites/default/files/northern-ireland-teenage-pregnancy.pdf
https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/sites/default/files/2019-12/RUAG%20Childrens%20Health%20in%20NI%20-%202018-19%20-%20Dec%202019.pdf

	National data (Northern Ireland, unless otherwise specified)	Regional data	FUA data	City level data (FUA core)
Teenage birth rate (under 20) 2007	5.7%			
Teenage birth rate (under 20) 2012	4.3%			
Teenage birth rate (under 20) 2017	2.8%		4.0%	