



Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action

NICVA's response to
the Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation
Measure 2004: Consultation Document

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1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 NICVA is pleased to have the opportunity to respond to NISRA's consultation on the Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure. NICVA has been represented on the steering group for this review and co-hosted a series of four consultation seminars with NISRA, in addition to receiving individual comments from voluntary and community organisations. We welcome the open and consultative approach which has been taken, for the second time, in developing this important statistical resource. Since many organisations will be better placed to offer advice on their areas of expertise, and since a large number of organisations have now had the opportunity to voice their views directly to NISRA through consultation, NICVA will focus on more general comments and concerns.
- 1.1 The Multiple Deprivation Measure is an important issue for the voluntary and community sector, as was evidenced by the high level of participation in the consultation seminars. The Measure is used by many funders and a large number of the remarks made in the consultation reflect how the Measure is used as much as the content of the indicators and domains themselves. NICVA recognises that this is an area-based way of measuring deprivation and can sit alongside other thematic ways of measuring deprivation and disadvantage, for example, the recent *Bare Necessities* study which looked at the types of people and families living in poverty. This combination of thematic and spatial approaches to disadvantage is very important to voluntary and community organisations since purely area-based approaches can miss the nuances of deprivation, are felt not to reflect rural deprivation well and can have equality implications, for example, most disadvantaged Protestants do not live in disadvantaged areas, so spatial targeting will not be an effective way to reach them.
- 1.2 A thread which ran through discussions with voluntary and community groups was the ability of the proposed indicators to identify rural deprivation. Rural groups have voiced the concern that if they do not feature in the top 20% of deprived wards, they might well not attract funding, and yet deprivation is just as severe among many dispersed populations as it is in other places which are more homogeneous. The low levels of benefit uptake in rural areas were also raised as a potential problem as the indicators rely heavily on benefit information. Overall it is essential that all indicators are tested for urban/rural bias.
- 1.3 The multiple deprivation measures are often used by funders to work out where to allocate money for areas of greatest need, sometimes using rather arbitrary cut-off points. In response to this, voluntary and community groups have voiced a need for training for both voluntary and community sector organisations and funders on

how to use the deprivation measures. This should include how to put them to best use in seeking funding and how to go into greater depth on specific domains and indicators. It should also preclude funders from using random cut off points on the multiple index of, for example, the top ten per cent most deprived, or the top thirty per cent most deprived areas, without considering what the funding is trying to achieve and what the specific indicators related to that are.

- 1.4 Attempts to capture the deprivation effects of conflict were also a recurring theme in the consultation. The inclusion of drugs prescribed for depression or anxiety came about from the consultation process on the previous set of indicators and further ways were sought in this consultation to build upon that. The presence of interfaces was suggested, although this could mask the fact that rural areas often have hidden interfaces. The issue of measuring travel distances which might in effect be meaningless in some areas as it might not be safe to travel the shortest distance across certain boundaries was also raised.

2.0 Domains

- 2.1 NICVA is happy with the proposed domains:

Income deprivation
Employment deprivation
Health deprivation and disability
Education, skills and training deprivation
Geographical access to services
Crime
Living environment.

Some questions were raised by voluntary and community groups regarding living environment and crime which we will refer to below under comments on the separate domains.

- 2.2 Many participants in our consultation felt that information on weak community infrastructure would be an extremely useful thing to include as an indicator within one of the domains, but that there first needs to be a consistent definition of what weak community infrastructure actually is and how it could be consistently measured across Northern Ireland. We hope that work being undertaken by DSD will contribute further to this subject. Should the use of social capital indicators become sufficiently widespread there may be merit in attempting to reflect social capital as an indicator of community 'health'.
- 2.3 One suggestion made during our consultations was that each domain should be equality-proofed.
- 2.4 We recognise that all the domains are very closely linked and that the weighting is crucial in determining the overall picture of deprivation.

3.0 Income deprivation

- 3.1 The fact that the indicators being proposed rely solely on benefit figures may be a problem given varying take-up rates, particularly in rural areas. There may be major underclaiming in certain sections of society, for example, among older people. It is clear in Northern Ireland that benefit dependency does not necessarily measure income. Furthermore, many people are living just above the poverty line yet this will not be reflected. One possible way of measuring this would be to factor in information on fuel poverty or low pay/national minimum wage earners.
- 3.2 There should be exploration of an indicator to take into account actual or disposable income or possibly expenditure.
- 3.3 Spiraling levels of debt have been widely reported in the media, yet there is no attempt to quantify the amount of debt or even debt advice being sought. This might give a much clearer picture of actual deprivation than purely the amount coming into a household in benefits.
- 3.4 We recognise that the indicators can only be designed around available data that are robust and consistent across Northern Ireland and that measuring some of our suggestions may not be possible in this set of indicators. We would strongly urge that consideration be given to how some of these things might be measured and included in future.
- 3.5 NICVA agrees with the proposal to retain the Child Poverty Measure, renamed as Income Deprivation Affecting Children.

4.0 Employment

- 4.1 A major issue that voluntary and community organisation have raised is how can barriers to work be measured and taken into account, for example access to child-care. The definition of ‘involuntarily out of the labour market’ assumes that all those who want to work are able to work, whereas in reality many who face the responsibility of caring for dependents are not able to make a choice and their exclusion is indeed involuntary.
- 4.2 Concern was also raised at the use of age limits to define employment, as many people work beyond the current retirement age. This is, of course, likely to be even more of a feature of future workforces. It was also questioned why the New Deal 50+ and New Deal for Disabled People were not being included, and whether sheltered employment schemes counted as employment.
- 4.3 Economic inactivity is difficult to measure but consideration should be given to how this might be possible, given that Northern Ireland has the highest rates of

economic activity in the UK and it has emerged as a major feature of our economy.

- 4.4 It was also suggested that, if possible, economic opportunity and the wider business environment need to be taken into account, as the indicators focus on the supply side of the labour market and not on the demand side.

5.0 Health

- 5.1 Participants were concerned about the omission of dental statistics, particularly considering recent press coverage on poor dental health and the link to wider health issues. These were included in the previous set of indicators.
- 5.2 It was suggested that presentations at A&E would provide more robust statistics than admissions. However, this might skew the figures towards urban areas where there is an A&E department close by. Given the distance from casualty departments for many people living in rural areas, it was suggested that a way might be sought of measuring emergency GP call outs.
- 5.3 It was also suggested that wider statistics be taken into account such as contact with social services. Perhaps figures could be obtained on referrals to older people's, children's or mental health teams.
- 5.4 Under-recording of mental health problems can lead to a lack of accurate prescription data. The indicators which attempt to categorise this should attempt to include stress and trauma, including that caused by the conflict.
- 5.5 It is unfortunate that Low Birth Weight cannot be used as an indicator due to low numbers at ward level as this would be likely to correlate very highly with deprivation. Teenage pregnancy rates might present a suitable alternative.

6.0 Education, Skills and Training

- 6.1 NICVA supports the proposal to creating two sub domains for children/young people and working age adults as different areas might well have different patterns at school and adult level. However, voluntary and community organisations suggested that the adult sub-domain should cover not only adults of working age, but all adults. Under-achievement, illiteracy, etc are issues for older people as well and, more positively, involvement in education can promote social inclusion and wellbeing. Furthermore, participation in lifelong learning programmes should be looked at as a possible indicator.
- 6.2 Consideration should be given to how integrated, Irish language medium education and comprehensive sectors fit into the grammar/non-grammar debate if the number of pupils not gaining entry to grammar schools is to be used as an indicator.

- 6.3 We would also suggest trying to find a way to measure access to educational facilities, not just primary schools but also access to further education, although we recognise that this might fit better under geographical access.
- 6.4 There is no good reason why Special Educational Needs should not be covered. A certain amount of figures already exists regarding children with statements and this could be supplemented by figures for contact with learning support staff and programmes.
- 6.5 Likewise information on exclusions should be included, particularly as there are plans to rationalise policy across Northern Ireland.

7.0 Geographical Access to Services

- 7.1 It is possible that the access to transport indicator will not accurately reflect access to key services and we would urge that the time taken to travel and barriers to travelling should both be considered.
- 7.2 Concern has been voiced in our sector that the range of services to be included would be better if it remained as it was in the previous measures eg pharmacist, dentist, optician and library. However, the steering group has been assured that the DSD work on service centres will provide a suitable alternative. Since this information will be of less general use outside the multiple deprivation index, we welcome NISRA's suggestion that they would make the individual datasets on access to different services available on their website.
- 7.3 As mentioned above, no account has been taken of the sectarian geography of Northern Ireland. Travel distances may need to reflect conflict issues such as problems with crossing boundaries and peace lines.
- 7.4 The measure of number of cars as a percentage of population is weak because it can disguise families with three cars which can be vital in isolated areas and a large number who may have none. The indicator should be the number of households without cars.
- 7.5 Public transport needs to take account of real patterns of movement. Do the buses/trains run when people need them eg to get to work or shopping? Do they take a route which is actually of use eg the nearest town may be the only destination but it may not have a lot of key services in it.
- 7.6 Transport also needs to take account not just of the number of routes serving a particular area but the number of times per day when they actually run. For example, in a rural area there may be three bus routes in operation, but each may run only once a day, whereas in an urban area there may be only one route but with buses running every half hour.

- 7.7 The indicators should include access to an affordable telephone ie land line or call box.

8.0 Living Environment

- 8.1 The most common point made was that this domain does not take account of enough environmental factors – those mentioned included air, water and noise pollution, flooding, green space, quarries and illegal dumping.
- 8.2 The problems faced by many people in finding affordable housing are not reflected in the proposed indicators, for example the lack of new build social housing or people being forced into expensive private rentals. The issue was also raised of finding a way to measure decline in some areas caused by the buying of second homes which are unoccupied for much of the time.
- 8.3 We would suggest that the indicator should measure those presenting to the NIHE as homeless rather than those allocated property as homeless, as this would more accurately reflect deprivation.

9.0 Crime

- 9.1 Crime is an important issue in quality of life in Northern Ireland, but the figures are unreliable; not only is there under-reporting but there may also be differential under-reporting ie working class areas are less likely to report; and Republican areas may do likewise so long as not all political parties accept the policing arrangements. More research is needed before meaningful crime figures can be included. There might perhaps be scope for expanding the NISRA crime surveys. This would also need to factor in fear of paramilitaries.
- 9.2 Rising incidences of sectarian and race crime should be considered as an indicator.
- 9.3 Domestic violence and sexual abuse should be taken seriously by these measures – we believe it is possible that figures can be produced without jeopardising confidentiality. Figures on victims and fear of crime may be available from the voluntary sector.

10.0 Geography

- 10.1 NICVA welcomes the proposed new Super Output Areas. The output areas, where data is available at that level, should address the issue of pockets of deprivation which has been a concern. We would suggest that some indicators from all domains should be made available at Output Area level.

11.0 Weightings

11.1 There was no overall agreement on weightings at the consultation seminars we held. In general NICVA would favour the A weightings proposed as, notwithstanding the important issues of access which impact most on rural areas, we believe that indicators such as income and employment correlate most strongly with deprivation.

12.0 Conclusion

12.1 NICVA welcomes the proposed new Multiple Deprivation Measure as it forms an important part of our increasing measurement and understanding of deprivation in Northern Ireland. We appreciate that any decisions that can be made are reliant on data being available and we would stress that as this process progresses we should begin to think now about what datasets will be needed in future years to take on board the comments made in the consultation and provide an ever more accurate picture of deprivation.