**Statement**

**11 March 2022**

**Cost of living crisis**

The Presbyterian Church in Ireland (PCI), through its Council for Public Affairs, has expressed its concern regarding the significant and rapid increase in the cost of living across Ireland, particularly in relation to electricity and energy supply, and has called on the Oireachtas, Northern Ireland Assembly and ministers in both jurisdictions to urgently find ways to mitigate the worst effects of this cost of living crisis.

Speaking after the Council meeting, held in Assembly Buildings, Belfast, Dr Bruce said, “While the cost of living has been rising since the end of last year, the record breaking fuel and energy prices represents for many people a very real personal crisis for them and their families, faced with the choice of either ‘eating or heating’. For others the cost of living crisis, which is having an impact across the island of Ireland, also comes with the additional potential risk of homelessness.

“Last week in Northern Ireland, for example, one leading energy supplier announced a 39 per cent increase in gas prices from next month. Northern Ireland’s Consumer Council estimates the move will impact just under 190,000 customers at a cost of around £240 (€289) a year. With increasing numbers of families struggling to afford basic essentials, especially families and individuals on Universal Credit and Social Welfare, without additional support more people will find the increase in energy costs, combined with rising food prices, difficult to cope with,” Dr Bruce said.

The Moderator also said that he was aware from statistics available from the UK’s Trussell Trust, that in 2020/2021 foodbanks in its Northern Ireland network, distributed nearly 80,000 food parcels, compared to just over 37,000 in 2018/2019. With the Department of Social Protections in Dublin estimating that one in ten people in the Republic of Ireland are living in food poverty, Dr Bruce understands that the Feed Cork Food Bank in Cork City, for example, provided nearly 6,000 food parcels last year. This month alone they have already distributed over 1,000.

“There has been a steady increase in those falling into fuel and food poverty in recent years, a situation that is being exacerbated by the global outworking of Russia’s unprovoked and unlawful invasion of Ukraine last month. Foodbanks, many of which are supported by PCI congregations across Ireland, are reporting an increase in requests for support, with one foodbank in the Greater Belfast area reporting a 25 percent increase in demand since Christmas,” Dr Bruce continued.

“I echo the concern of colleagues who have stated that governmentscan’t expect faith, charity and third sector organisations alone to meet the needs of those living in poverty today. Elected representatives must also do all they can to alleviate the growing financial pressure, due to the current cost of living crisis, that increasing numbers people in society are under, especially those who are on its margins,” he said.

The Moderator also highlighted the regrettable consequences of the current political hiatus in Northern Ireland saying, “In February, at the time of the collapsing of the Executive, I expressed concern on behalf of PCI that the most vulnerable in our society would suffer most during a period of uncertainty and lack of clear decision-making.

“I do, however, welcome recent decisions that have been made by Executive ministers including the freeze in public sector rent and public transport fares, the one-off energy support payment of £200 (€238) that is going out today, along with the passing of legislation to extend welfare mitigations in Northern Ireland. At the same time, I also welcome the Irish Government’s initiative to significantly cut the excise duty on fuel. These decisions should provide some help to those struggling to afford basic essentials, but much more needs to be done. I would urge the UK government to do the same.”

Dr Bruce concluded by saying, “Our Lord Jesus’ brother, the Apostle James said, ‘faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead […] faith without deeds is useless.’ I give thanks and commend the work of our congregations on the ground across Ireland, and everyone involved in providing support through foodbanks, debt counselling, discretionary payments and by other means, especially to those families and individuals on the brink.

“However this is merely a sticking plaster trying to alleviate symptoms rather than cause. Northern Ireland still does not have an anti-poverty strategy nearly 25 years after *The Northern Ireland Act 1998* obliged the Executive to develop one. MLAs need to find ways to support those most affected by the cost of living crisis now, and prioritise the development of an anti-poverty strategy in line with the Act and commitments given in *New Decade, New Approach,* following May’s Assembly election.

“At the same time, we call on all members of the Oireachtas to work together to develop a cross party anti-poverty strategy that will include the issue of sharply rising private sector rental prices. For those living on the brink, on fixed incomes and the ‘working poor’ across this island, much still needs to be done” Dr Bruce said.